

This Day in History... August 10, 1858

Birth of Anna Julia Cooper

Author and activist Anna Julia Haywood Cooper was born on August 10, 1858, in Raleigh, North Carolina. She fought for education for women and African Americans and is often called the “Mother of Black Feminism.”

Cooper was born into slavery, and grew up in the home of George Washington Haywood, the state attorney for Wake County. At the age of nine, Cooper received a scholarship to Saint Augustine’s Normal School and Collegiate Institute, which had been founded to train teachers to educate former slaves. Cooper attended the school for 14 years, during which time she excelled in all her fields of study – literature, math, science, and three different languages. Early on, she insisted on the right to take courses reserved only for men.



Cooper was the 32nd honoree in the Black Heritage Series.



Terrell received her Masters the same year as Cooper and was also part of the Colored Women’s League.

While still a student, Cooper worked tutoring younger children, to help pay for her education. After she graduated, she remained for a time to work as an instructor, teaching history, English, music, and more. She went on to attend Oberlin College, where she again insisted on taking courses designated for men. She graduated in 1884 and then went on to earn a Master’s degree in Math, making her one of the first two Black women to earn a Masters.

After moving to Washington, DC, Cooper helped found the Colored Women’s League with Helen Appo Cook, Ida B. Wells, Charlotte Forten Grimké, Mary Jane Peterson, Mary Church Terrell, and Evelyn Shaw. The league’s goals were to encourage unity and social progress

for the African American community.

While in Washington, Cooper also taught at M Street High School, later becoming principal in 1901. She worked tirelessly to add advanced classes and raise money for scholarships. She also fought against a congressional bill that would reduce the education of African Americans to vocational training. Her activism helped defeat the bill, but it also got her fired.

While working at M Street High School, Cooper finished writing her first book, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South*. Considered the first work on African-American feminism, the book promoted the dream of uplifting African American women through education and self-determination. Cooper toured the country delivering speeches about her book and its ideas. A skilled and persuasive speaker, Cooper used her gift to fight discrimination and to advocate higher education for women.



Wells was one of the co-founders of the Colored Women’s League with Cooper.



Cooper called for equal education for African Americans and women.

Cooper spoke at the 1893 World’s Congress of Representative Women in Chicago and the First Pan-African Conference in London in 1900. Cooper earned a PhD from the University of Paris in 1924, making her the fourth African American woman to earn a doctoral degree. She retired from Washington Colored High School in 1930. Cooper then served as president and later registrar of Frelinghuysen University for a total of 20 years. Cooper died on February 27, 1964, at the age of 105. There’s a tuition-free private school in Virginia named in her honor as well as a center on gender, race, and politics in the South at Wake Forest University and a professorship at Spelman College.

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