

This Day in History... September 23, 1863

Birth of Mary Church Terrell

Mary Church Terrell was born on September 23, 1863, in Memphis, Tennessee. Over the next nine decades, she used education, writing, public speaking, and direct protest to challenge racial discrimination and support women's voting rights.

Terrell was born free during the Civil War to Robert Reed Church and Louisa Ayers Church, both formerly enslaved. Her father became a successful businessman, real-estate investor, and banker in Memphis. He was often described as the South's first African American millionaire. Her mother operated a hair salon. Their financial success gave Mary opportunities that were denied to most Black children in the postwar South.

Her mother distrusted the quality of Memphis schools and sent her to the Model School connected with Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Terrell later entered Oberlin College, one of the relatively few institutions then open to Black women. She chose the demanding "gentleman's course," rather than the shorter women's curriculum, and studied Classics. At Oberlin, she was class poet, joined literary societies, and helped edit the college newspaper. She earned a bachelor's degree in 1884 and a master's degree in education in 1888, becoming one of the first African American women to receive college degrees.

After college, Terrell taught at Wilberforce University in Ohio. In 1887, she moved to Washington, DC, to teach Latin at the M Street School, later known as Dunbar High School. She also spent two years traveling and studying in Europe, building fluency in French, German, and Italian. Her education and travel gave her unusual access to audiences in the United States and abroad.

Terrell's activism grew out of both personal connections and national events. Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and other Black leaders knew her father. Douglass became a mentor and encouraged her to continue public work. In 1892, the lynching of her friend Thomas Moss in Memphis sharpened her opposition to racial violence. Terrell appealed unsuccessfully for President Benjamin Harrison to condemn lynching. She also wrote newspaper articles under the pen name Euphemia Kirk, arguing for the civil rights of Black Americans and women.

From the Prominent Americans Series



That same year, Terrell became the first woman elected president of Washington's Bethel Literary and Historical Association. In 1895, she became the first African American woman appointed to the District of Columbia Board of Education. She served from 1895 to 1901 and again from 1906 to 1911. She pressed for better educational opportunities for Black students in the segregated city.

In 1896, Terrell helped found the National Association of Colored Women and became its first president. Under its motto, "Lifting as We Climb," the organization united Black women's clubs around education, child welfare, employment, and civil rights. Local clubs supported kindergartens, nurseries, homes for girls, and other community programs. Terrell was also a charter member of the NAACP. Her work for women's suffrage stressed that Black women faced discrimination based on both race and sex. She supported the Nineteenth Amendment, although its ratification in 1920 did not end the barriers that kept many Black women from voting.



Stamp issued for the 50th anniversary of the 19th Amendment.

Terrell remained active in later life. During World War I, she worked with the War Camp Community Service. In 1919, she attended the International Congress of Women in Zurich, Switzerland. In 1940, she published her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, describing the discrimination she had encountered despite her education and prominence.

Her final major campaign began in Washington, DC. In 1949, Terrell helped organize a committee to enforce the city's long-neglected equal-service laws. In January 1950, she and three companions were refused service at Thompson's Restaurant because they were Black. The group picketed, organized protests, and pressed officials to enforce the laws. On June 8, 1953, the US Supreme Court ruled in *District of Columbia v. John R. Thompson Co.* that the old laws remained valid. The decision did not rest on a new constitutional ruling; it revived District laws that prohibited racial discrimination in public accommodations.

Terrell died on July 24, 1954, at age 90. Her Washington home is a National Historic Landmark, preserving a place from which she carried on decades of work for equal rights.



From the Civil Rights Pioneers Sheet



This stamp honored the creation of the US Department of Education.

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