

Mary McLeod Bethune

Mary McLeod Bethune was born to former slaves in 1875, a decade after the Civil War. An educator, organizer, and political activist, Bethune devoted her life to fighting for the right to an education for African Americans. Believing education was key to their earning a living in a country still rife with racial inequality, Bethune would not rest, she said, while there was “a single Negro boy or girl without a chance to prove her worth”.

On October 3, 1904, Bethune opened one of the very first schools for African American girls, Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School, in Daytona Beach, Florida. Five girls attended when it opened. Because of a lack of funds, Bethune used boxes and crates for desks. Tuition was \$0.50 per week, though Bethune never turned away a child whose parents couldn't pay. Later, Bethune opened enrollment at the school to boys. Today the school is called Bethune-Cookman College. Bethune also opened a hospital for African Americans.

Bethune also became involved in politics, advising four different presidents to various degrees from 1904 on. Among her accomplishments were helping convince the Red Cross to integrate, becoming president of the Florida Federation of Colored Women (1917), president of the National Association of Colored Women (1924), helping found the National Council of Negro Women (1935), becoming director of the National Youth Administration's Division of Negro Affairs (1936) and serving as vice-president of the NAACP (beginning in 1940). She worked under Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover on child welfare, housing, employment, and education.

In June of 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt made her director of the Division of Negro Affairs, where she became the first black woman to serve as head of the federal agency as well as part of what Roosevelt called his “Black Cabinet”. In 1951, she served on President Truman's Committee of Twelve for National Defense. Bethune also worked with various other organizations, such as the National Urban League, the Association of American Colleges, and the League of Women Voters.

Today Bethune is remembered for her tireless work on behalf of racial equality for African Americans. In addition to the college that she founded and bears her name, Bethune was also honored with a United States Postal Stamp in 1985, thirty years after her death.