

Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954)

Mary Church Terrell was an educator, speaker, writer, and activist. Close friends with Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, Terrell tirelessly worked to end discrimination. She became the first black woman on the Washington, D.C. Board of Education and founder and first president of the National Association of Colored Women. Her greatest accomplishments occurred later in life. While in her eighties, she aggressively pushed to integrate eateries, theaters, and public lodgings in Washington, D.C.

Mary Eliza Church was born in 1863 in Memphis, Tennessee to Robert Church and Louisa Ayers, both former slaves. Robert Church moved from Mississippi to Memphis where he gained wealth as a real estate investor, allowing Terrell and her brother to live a life of privilege. At the age of eight, Terrell left home to attend primary school at Antioch College Model School in Yellow Springs, Ohio. The prejudice experienced at the Model School marked a pivotal point in her life. On one occasion Terrell approached a small group of older white female students who were admiring their appearances in a mirror. Terrell interjected and began complementing her appearance. The older girls responded by hurling racist insults. Terrell stood boldly before the group of white female students and asserted that she was proud to be black and would not want to be any other race. The treatment she received by the older girls made the young Terrell reflect on her own behavior toward other minorities. She realized that offensive language and insults toward people were wrong regardless of their race, gender, or nationality. From that moment forward she vowed not to embrace the prejudices exhibited by society.

In 1875 at the age of twelve, Terrell moved to Oberlin, Ohio to begin her high school education. After graduating high school in 1879, Terrell enrolled in Oberlin College where she developed an interest in writing. She chose not to take the light course loads designed for females but instead chose the rigorous course of study taken by male students. After completing Oberlin College, Terrell was hired at Wilberforce University where she taught reading, writing, French, and geology. After two years at Wilberforce, she accepted a position to teach Latin at the top ranked M Street Colored High School in Washington, D.C. While working at the school she met Robert Terrell, whom she eventually married.

In 1895 she became the first black woman appointed to the Washington D.C. Board of Education which she held for eleven years. During her tenure as board member, she visited schools and worked to increase funding. As board member she pushed for Washington, D.C. schools to celebrate Douglass Day in honor of Frederick Douglass. Douglass Day may have inspired her friend Carter G. Woodson to create Negro History Week (later to become Black History Month).

As an opponent to injustice, Terrell became a spokeswoman for global peace. She traveled the world advocating the end to discrimination, emphasizing that it affected all races. She promoted the idea that all humans should be treated fairly. She was friends with Susan B. Anthony and participated in the National American Woman Suffrage Association. In 1904 Terrell accepted an invitation to speak at the International Congress of Women in Berlin, Germany. She was the only black woman present at the International Congress. Terrell surprised the audience by delivering the address in German, French, and English and received a rousing ovation.

Her passion for activism was further fueled by the deaths of her children and childhood friend. Out of four births only one child, a daughter, survived past infancy. Terrell strongly believed that if she had access to better medical facilities her children would have survived.

Adding to her grief was the 1892 death of her childhood friend Tom Moss and two of his acquaintances by a mob of white vigilantes. The deaths of her children and childhood friend moved Terrell to push for an end to discrimination and lynching. In 1892 she and other African-American women founded the Colored Woman's League of Washington, D.C. It was organized to help African Americans by creating night classes, a nursery to help working women, two kindergarten classes, and cooking classes. In 1896 she became the first president of the newly organized National Association of Colored Women. In the years following 1898, Terrell became more vocal as she began a career as a lecturer, speaking to crowds as large as 4000. In 1909 she became a charter member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and established a branch in Washington, D.C.

At age eighty-six Terrell's fight against segregation escalated, and her approach to ending Jim Crow laws became more aggressive. Moved to end discrimination in all its forms, Terrell diligently worked to end segregation in Washington, D.C. She became chair of the Coordinating Committee for the Enforcement of the Washington, D.C. Anti-Discrimination Laws (CCEAD). The CCEAD was organized to fight discrimination and enforce the Anti-Discrimination Laws of 1872 and 1873. The laws were labeled as the "lost" laws because they were ignored and not enforced.

The first mission of the CCEAD was to end discrimination in Washington, D.C. eateries. The CCEAD worked to integrate the lunch counter at Hecht's, the largest department store in Washington, D.C. Terrell organized picket lines of 100 people that marched three days a week for six months, resulting in the integration of the lunch counter at Hecht's. Eventually the eateries at Lansburgh Department Store and Murphy's Dime Store were integrated after weeks of protesting. Terrell was proud of her victories with the CCEAD; however, the integration of Thompson's Cafeteria was met with legal resistance. In a show of opposition to segregation, Terrell and other members of the CCEAD went to Thompson's Cafeteria. The African-American members of the group were denied service. They went a second time and were denied service again. Both times complaints were made resulting in the case going before a court of law. In 1950 a judge ruled that even though the Anti-Discrimination Laws of 1872 and 1873 had not been repealed, they were invalid because of non-use and therefore not recognized as law. The matter went before the U.S. Court of Appeals where the 1950 decision was upheld. The decisions of the both courts saddened Terrell and the CCEAD, but they continued to emphasize the legal validity of the Anti-Discrimination Laws. The matter was heard before the U.S. Supreme Court where it was decided that the Anti-Discrimination Laws had to be enforced. The decisive ruling stipulated that Washington, D.C. eateries were given two days to comply after which time they would be breaking the law.

Continuing the momentum set by the integration of restaurants, Terrell and the CCEAD moved to break the next barrier in the fight against discrimination—the integration of theaters and hotels. On September 23, 1953, on her ninetieth birthday, Terrell and a few members of the CCEAD entered a movie theater to watch a film. Terrell and the others were expecting to face resistance; however, they were not harassed and had a peaceful time at the theater. Her visit to the movie theater was the most enjoyable event and the best birthday gift she could have ever received. In the days that followed, all the theaters were open to integrated audiences. Like the theaters across Washington, D.C., hotels and other public lodgings were integrated. Thanks to the efforts of Terrell and the CCEAD, a message of change was echoed throughout Washington, D.C.

On October 10, 1953 a celebration luncheon was held in honor of Terrell. The event was held at a Washington, D.C. hotel that had recently begun the process of integration. Over 700 were in attendance, including family, friends, and political officials including representatives of the Eisenhower administration. At the luncheon the Mary Church Terrell Fund was unveiled. The mission of the Fund was to raise and use funds to fight discrimination in the Washington, D.C. area and eradicate all Jim Crow statutes in the D.C. area by 1963.

Not showing signs of slowing down, Terrell began work on the next barrier—the integration of public schools. Her wish came true with the 1954 landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* which ruled against segregation in public schools. Shortly following the Brown decision, Terrell’s health began to worsen. Even though she was battling heart disease and cancer, Terrell started work on her next project to end employment discrimination. Before Terrell could implement her strategy against job discrimination, she died in July 1954, two months before she was to turn ninety-one years old.

Roshunda L. Belton

See also:

Further Reading

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