**Mary Church Terrell**

Mary Church Terrell was born September 23, 1863 in Memphis, Tennessee. Her parents were recently emancipated slaves. According to her father, Mary’s great-grandmother had been a young Malagasy girl captured during a revolution. She became a seamstress to the owner’s family - however, the owner sold her child, Mary’s grandmother, when she was just a small child. Mary’s own mother never discussed her owner, only saying her owner taught her to read and write in French and her wedding trousseau was bought in New York for a nice wedding.

When Mary was young, her parents separated. Her mother moved to New York and her father remained in Memphis, becoming a business entrepreneur and millionaire. At the recommendation of some friends whose daughters were attending Antioch College the Churchs’ sent Mary to Antioch College’s Model (kindergarten) School. After the seventh grade, Mary moved to Oberlin and attended high school. She went on to earn a bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Oberlin College in mostly male dominated courses.

Despite her father’s objections, Mary began teaching at Wilberforce College and in Washington D.C. She traveled to study in Europe, becoming fluent in French, German and Italian. In 1891, Mary married Robert Heberton Terrell who became the first Black municipal court judge in Washington D.C. Mary continued teaching, and eventually became a principal. Mary continued to be successful in education, and she was appointed to the District of Columbia Board of Education and president of the National Association of Colored Women. In 1906, as president of the National Association of Colored Women she established kindergartens and day nurseries for families. In the same year she also founded the National Association of University Women.

Mary met Booker T. Washington and befriended Fredrick Douglass, and became more involved in civil rights. By 1895, she was involved with the National American Woman [Suffrage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffrage) Association. She was a founding member of the Federation of Afro-American Women. In 1909 she was invited to join the organizing of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Association_for_the_Advancement_of_Colored_People).

Continuing for equal rights, Mary fought for women’s suffrage, their right to vote, and for jobs needed for the Black servicemen coming home from World War I. She fought for segregation throughout her life. The fight against segregation would last her into her 80’s. Terrell wrote an autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940) describing the sudden awareness as a child of being different and adult’s life beyond Yellow Springs. A copy is at the Antioch Library.

Mary died July 24, 1954. Her house in Washington D.C. has been declared a National Historic Landmark.

*Jean Payne*

