African American Leaders in the PC(USA)

Mary McLeod Bethune

Born on July 10, 1875 in South Carolina, Mary McLeod Bethune was the fifteenth of seventeen children. At the age of 13, she enrolled at Scotia Seminary, a boarding school that is now Barber-Scotia College, on a scholarship. After graduating, she went to the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, hoping to become a missionary to Africa. However, she was told there was no place for her. While devastating at the time, this was the beginning of her illustrious work as one of America's most important educators.

For a year, Mary taught at Haines Normal and Industrial Institute in Georgia. The school was founded by Lucy Craft Laney, whose educational philosophies and focus on Christianity influenced Mary's teaching style. Mary then transferred to a school in Sumter, SC, where she met her husband, Albertus Bethune. On October 3, 1904, after moving to Daytona, FL, Mary established the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls. The school had six students: five girls and one boy, Mary's son. Eventually it enrolled 400 students and employed more than 30 teachers on the faculty. The school's social mission extended beyond just education. After one of her students fell ill and was unable to receive treatment because no local hospitals would take Black patients, Mary started McLeod Hospital, which operated for around 20 years.

From 1936 to 1942, Mary served on the Advisory Committee for the National Youth Administration (NYA) under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. She was promoted to Director of the Division of Negro Affairs, making her the first Black female division head. Mary returned to Daytona after the NYA was abolished in 1943, formally resigning as President of her school due to her failing health. She died of a heart attack on May 18, 1955 in Daytona, leaving behind a strong legacy. Beyond being an educator, Bethune advocated for black voting rights, founded the National Council of Negro Women in 1935, and co-founded the United Negro College Fund. Her school in Daytona merged with the Cookman College for Men and exists today as Bethune-Cookman University. Schools have been named in her honor in over 13 states, including the Mary McLeod Bethune School in Philadelphia.

Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt. It was during her time in D.C. that Mary strengthened her close friendship with Mrs. Roosevelt.

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