

Introduction

Welcome to the Mary Church Terrell Unit Plan! We are so glad you are taking the time to read and learn about Mary Church Terrell using this resource. We hope that you and your students will enjoy what we present and will be spurred to learn more about Terrell, her connection to Frederick Douglass, and the work of other nineteenth century Black women who were her contemporaries in organizing, teaching, writing and speaking about equity, access, justice and freedom in America.

Honoring Terrell's Life and Legacies

We are honoring Mary Eliza Church Terrell (1863-1954) in this document, aware that she keeps company with women like Maria Stewart (1803-1879), Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931), Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879-1961), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) and many, many more. We believe that reading and thinking deeply about Terrell's life, and especially her written and spoken work, has much to offer in this contemporary moment.

We are also bringing forward the story of Terrell's inception of Douglass Day, a special day to honour her good friend and mentor, Frederick Douglass. Through the last fifteen years of his long, international fight for African-American liberation, Douglass had been an elder to Terrell. Born into slavery a generation before her, self-emancipated by age twenty, an author, orator and advocate of extraordinary stature, Douglass passed the mantle of leadership to Terrell and her peers as they brought the liberation struggle into the next era.

Mary Church Terrell's life was full of paradoxes. In 1863, she was born free in Tennessee to parents who were formerly enslaved, and her father later became among the first African American millionaires of the South. She grew up during the Civil War and Reconstruction and benefited from both their affluence and influence, securing a full education, attaining a Masters degree and becoming a teacher. In one way, Terrell's trailblazing achievements could have set her apart. But she also lived under Jim Crow segregation, and as it dominated most of her adult life, she poured her higher learning and privilege into her unwavering determination to lift up her people. Terrell became instrumental in the birth of the modern Civil Rights movement, helping found and shape the NAACP and the National Association of Colored Women, two of the many enduring contributions of her 91 years.

"The Changing Same"

Though Terrell lived and worked from the time of slavery into the early twentieth century, much of what organized and animated Terrell's life continues into the twenty-first century--namely, the fight for justice for Black people in America. Studying Mary Church Terrell's life and legacy gives us the chance to explore and discuss one of the most important philosophies of the Black experience, "the changing same." This well-known African American proverb was transported into broader popular use and scholarly knowledge when the late poet and activist Amiri Baraka referenced it in his 1967 essay on the Black Arts Movement. The changing same offers a framing for what Terrell faced and for this curriculum, *Mary Church Terrell and her Quest for Social Justice*.

As a thoughtful commentary *the changing same* reminds us that though some things do change-- the singular experiences and conditions-- the structures which give rise to those experiences and

conditions often do not. In other words, the same problem surfaces in a different guise, or from a different direction sometimes just wearing a new face or different clothes.

When dealing with a society or a nation, structural change is necessary to create meaningful differences in the majority of people's lives. This kind of deep change requires long and determined work over time in order to produce the results. Many of the problems Terrell confronted in her activism are as relevant today as they were in the eighteen hundreds: securing the vote for African Americans, especially women; removing segregation in education and socially; health disparities; the politics of Black women in public discourse, especially visual media; the importance of learning and celebrating Black history and equity. The *changing same* is, however, the backdrop to Terrell's life. The through-line of her work is an indefatigable dedicated activism.

Our Possibilities for good in the future are unlimited

When Mary Eliza Church Terrell wrote, "our possibilities for good in the future are unlimited"¹ it was a declaration of a defiant hope which her lived experiences pressed hard to deny. She witnessed the rising hopes of Reconstruction, the shambles and ashes of the American Jim Crow era into the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Terrell would have been justified to declare that the American experiment in creating a nation that promised freedom and justice for all was a lie. Instead, Terrell fought to define and shape America to assume the form of her highest ideals. Her life and work reveal a relentless faith in America and American people as good, kind, intelligent and capable of becoming the very best version of our aspirational ideals.

It is for this reason that we chose to center the **Essential Question** of *hope* as the idea driving this Unit plan and consequently each lesson. Mary Church Terrell's life is a study of activism grounded in hope that in turn created lasting change and institutions that bear the prints of her hands, the timbre of her voice, the dedication of her heart and the integrity of her thoughts. We hope you discover Mary Church Terrell and in that discovery find that hope - in the face of disappointment, hard facts and setbacks - can and does endure.

Tracking the Arc of Social Justice Through the Generations

In the following set of lessons students will participate in a variety of activities that will spark a connection between twentieth and twenty-first century social justice initiatives led by Mary Church Terrell.

Terrell dedicated herself to suffrage, equal rights and a lifetime of activism following the lynching of her good friend, Mr. Thomas Moss, a businessman and postman who was killed by white business owners because they wanted to eliminate the competition of his store, The People's Grocery in Memphis, Tennessee. Terrell responded to this violence and sadness by choosing to act. She never turned back.

As the students analyze and synthesize a variety of primary sources about Terrell's life and works, they will gain a better understanding of the reasons for the success and failure of social justice movements and campaigns during her lifetime.

¹ (An Especial Appeal From The President Of The Association written by Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863-1954, in National Association Notes, Vol. 3, no. 1, June 1899, p. 2, 1 page(s))

Throughout the unit students will discuss equity, suffrage, Black femme style, Black maternal health, state sanctioned violence, and the importance of education and organizing. The overall unit plan is anchored by a mini-biography of Terrell’s life. Each lesson plan has a set of key words and terms with definitions, a framing, resources, discussion question and proprietary activities. Students will engage in critical inquiry as they learn how the topics relate to historical events and their own lives. When students feel empowered to contribute honestly in a safe space where they wrestle with multiple perspectives in addition to their own, such discussions can be positive and life-changing.

Lesson Plan: Inquiry

We encourage teachers to begin each lesson explaining to students that they are about to begin a unit exploring *Mary Church Terrell and her Quest for Social Justice*.

Describe and explain the idea of the changing same and the activist through-line of “our possibilities for good in the future are limitless” cuts through and re-shapes this by creating endless places and opportunities for change, growth and transformation.

Ask the students the **Essential Question**: Does hope always triumph over despair?

Explain that you want them to think about this idea in the back of their minds as they learn about Terrell and her activism. **Distribute or display** the mini biography of Mary Church Terrell. You might choose to adapt this narrative instead of using the one we have provided. Either way, **read aloud as a group**, as students highlight or note any words or phrases that stand out to them and help them to understand her life and its import.

Lesson Plan: Methodology

Introduce the concept of transcribing by telling the students what is involved, and explaining to the students that they will actually be doing the work of historians in this lesson!

Take them collectively **or direct them** individually to the collections on the Library of Congress (LOC) website--the links are located within each lesson and on the resource page. The video links are from the LOC site and will explain the differences between primary and secondary documents and the values that this work of transcribing will offer. This is a useful way to help students understand why using primary and secondary sources to unveil moments in the past and present allows them to analyze and write up their own understanding of the past for themselves, just like grown-up historians.

Note: Prior to exploring the historical case study of this unit—*Mary Church Terrell and her Quest for Social Justice*—it is important that students and teachers spend some time establishing and nurturing classroom rules and expectations of mutual respect and open-mindedness. Building a culture and setting expectations will equip students with the skills to engage with each other in important and sometimes uncomfortable conversations.