

## Short biography Mary Church Terrell

Mary Eliza Church Terrell was a prominent African American activist and social justice leader. Born into the Black elite of Memphis on September 23, 1863, she was the oldest child of Mr Robert Reed Church and Mrs. Louisa Ayers-Church. Mary Church Terrell excelled in school. She attended Antioch College laboratory school and Oberlin College in Ohio. After graduating from Oberlin in 1884 she took a teaching position at Wilberforce University in Ohio. The following year Mary Church Terrell took a teaching position at M Street High School in Washington, D.C. It was there that she met her future husband, Robert H. Terrell.

In 1892, her childhood friend Thomas Moss was lynched in Memphis. Moss was the owner of the People's Grocery, a successful wholesale grocery outside the city. He, like Terrell, represented progress, which many whites at the time felt was a direct threat to their own commerce and livelihood. Marcy Church Terrell, along with journalist Ida B. Wells, who also knew Moss, organized anti-lynching campaigns to mobilize advocates and generate awareness.

Mary Church Terrell helped found the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and became its first President in 1896. This self-help organization offered support for its members and created programs that addressed racial problems through the elevation of Black women. Terrell's advocacy of African American women led to opportunities to comment on broader issues facing her race. She made many speeches on the living conditions of African Americans and highlighted their progress in spite of discrimination. In a stirring address delivered in 1904 at the International Congress of Women in Berlin, she vividly described the numerous contributions of African Americans. She delivered the speech in German (she spoke three languages fluently), receiving accolades for her depictions of African American life and her intellectual abilities. Her speeches boosted African American morale during this era. Terrell would later protest President Theodore Roosevelt's 1906 discharge of 167 African American soldiers for unfounded conspiracy claims in Brownsville, Texas. She wrote columns and essays espousing the importance of dignity and respect for the soldiers and demanded a fair trial.

Mary Church Terrell continued to fight for social justice well into her eighties and nineties, even engaging in an act of "civil disobedience" at the age of 83. On February 28, 1950, Mary Church Terrell, accompanied by one white and two black collaborators, entered Thompson Restaurant in Washington D.C. They were refused service. Immediately afterward Terrell and her friends filed affidavits with the federal court, and the *District of Columbia v. John Thompson* became a national symbol against segregation in the United States. Her direct-action tactics of picketing, boycotting, and sit-ins proved successful, because on June 8, 1953, the court ruled that segregated eating establishments in Washington, D.C. were unconstitutional. Mary Church Terrell continued to see civil rights legislation successfully change in the United States for another year after the desegregation of public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Two months later, on July 24, 1954, she died.