

# Mary Church Terrell

**“A leader in the fight for political enfranchisement alongside civil rights”**

September 23, 1863 – July 24, 1954



Mary Church Terrell was born September 23, 1863 in Memphis, Tennessee. Though formerly enslaved, her parents were successful business owners and consequently could afford to send Terrell to college. Terrell received a bachelor's and master's degree from Oberlin College in Ohio, becoming one of the first black women to earn a college degree.

In 1887, Terrell moved to Washington, DC where she taught at the M Street School. She became involved in the early civil rights movement in 1892 after the lynching of a friend by a white mob in Memphis, bringing national attention to the atrocities of lynching alongside Ida B. Wells. Terrell was especially dedicated to racial uplift, and she advocated that blacks would be accepted in white society if they received education and vocational training, being seen as successful. She helped in providing this education, and served as president of the National Association of Colored Women. In that role, Terrell was also involved in the women's suffrage movement, advocating for the right of black women to vote. Terrell even participated in pickets of the White House in support of women's suffrage. She was especially involved in the fight for

political enfranchisement alongside civil rights as she concluded that the female black community was “the only group in this country that has two such huge obstacles to surmount...both sex and race.”

After the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, Terrell focused on other areas of civil rights. She fought against discriminatory practices, publishing an autobiography of her experiences with racism in 1940 titled *A Colored Woman in a White World*. Terrell became the first black member of the American Association of University Women in 1948 after emerging victorious from an anti-discrimination lawsuit. In 1950, Terrell, aged eighty-six, challenged segregation in public facilities by participating in a sit-in in the John R. Thompson Restaurant in Washington, DC. She again emerged victorious when the Supreme Court ruled segregated eating facilities unconstitutional in 1953. Terrell died four years later at the age of ninety, leaving behind an inspiring legacy of fighting for civil rights and women's suffrage, all while embodying the idea of racial uplift.

## Sources

<https://www.nps.gov/people/mary-church-terrell.htm>

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/mary-church-terrell>