Mary McLeod Bethune

By Justin Woychowski

“Africans in America needed Christ and school just as much as Negroes in Africa... My life work lay not in Africa but in my own country.” Mary McLeod Bethune was born free on July 10, 1875, in Maysville, South Carolina. She was the fifteenth of seventeen children of Samuel and Patsy McIntosh McLeod. Mary passed away on May 18, 1955, in Daytona Beach, Florida.

Mary discovered the importance of education very quickly as a child. She was formally educated at Maysville School, which was a Presbyterian Mission School for African Americans. After she graduated from Maysville School in 1886, she continued her education on a scholarship at Scotia Seminary for Girls in Concord, North Carolina. Mary graduated from Scotia Seminary in 1894 and planned to become a Christian missionary in Africa. After working among South Carolina blacks, Mary realized “Africans in America needed Christ and school just as much as Negroes in Africa... My life work lay not in Africa but my own country.”

She was married in 1898 to a man named Albertus Bethune at 23 years old, but the marriage ended within a decade when Albertus deserted the family in 1907. They had one son, Albert McLeod Bethune. Mary juggled between family and work as she taught in Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, and Illinois between 1895 and 1903 before finally settling in Daytona, Florida.

Starting in 1904, Mary McLeod Bethune opened a high school, hospital, and the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls. Beforehand, Negro girls were unable to be educated. Due to popularity, the Daytona Normal eventually merged with the Methodist-run Cookman Institute for Men in Jacksonville in 1923. The merged school became known as the Bethune-Cookman College. Mary was the college’s first president from 1923-1942, and again from 1946-1947. She was one of the very few female college presidents in the country at that time.

Mary also began many years of leadership among women’s groups beginning in 1917 when she became the President of the Florida Federation of Colored Women. She also became President of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1924. Mary left the NACW in 1935 due to the difficulty of getting rid of Jim Crow in the U.S. government and internal politics of the NACW, and later founded the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). The NCNW was an organization with a more direct civil rights agenda.