

## **Mary Church Terrell (1863 -1965)**

*Compiled by the Center for American Women and Politics – August 2014*

Mary Eliza Church Terrell (1863 -1965) was born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1863. She was the daughter of two former slaves who were prominent members of Memphis' growing black community. They provided Mary and her brother with advantages that few other African-American children of her time enjoyed.

Mary received a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College in Ohio. She taught languages at Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio, and at a black secondary school in Washington, D.C. After a two-year tour of Europe, she completed a master's degree from Oberlin (1888) and married Robert Heberton Terrell, a lawyer who would be the first black municipal court judge in the nation's capital.

An early advocate of women's rights, Terrell was an active member of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, addressing in particular the concerns of black women. In 1896 she became the first president of the newly formed National Association of Colored Women, an organization which under her leadership worked to achieve educational and social reform and an end to discriminatory practices.

Appointed to the District of Columbia Board of Education in 1895, Terrell was the first black woman to hold such a position. An eloquent spokeswoman, adept political organizer, and prolific writer, Terrell addressed a wide range of social issues in her long career, including the Jim Crow laws, lynching, and the convict lease system.

In the 1920s, Mary Church Terrell worked with the Republican National Committee on behalf of women and African Americans.

Her last act as an activist was to lead a successful three-year struggle against segregation in public eating places and hotels in the nation's capital.

She died in 1954, just two months after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, a fitting "bookend" to her life which began just after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.