

MARY McLEOD BETHUNE

Bernice Anderson Poole

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Friend of Presidents

IT WAS A COLD November evening in 1949, when Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune arrived in Washington, D.C., for the last evening of a three-day convention of the National Council of Negro Women. She had founded this organization in New York on December 5, 1935, and tonight she was retiring as acting head. Her speech would be broadcast over television, and she would be speaking to the world as the voice of America.

She was seventy-four years old now, and her snow-white hair was swept up in a pompadour. She was *Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune* because several universities had bestowed honorary degrees upon her. On her long black gown she wore the

Mary McLeod Bethune, born the daughter of former slaves in South Carolina in 1875, rose to become one of the foremost and best known educators in the country.

brilliant gold Cross of Haiti, awarded to her by the Republic of Haiti for her work on behalf of blacks.

The National Council of Negro Women's stated purpose was to make articulate the action of African-American women in a federation of national women's organizations and their integration into the political, economic, cultural, and social life of their communities.

Even when Mrs. Bethune might seem to be deeply immersed in her school, at no time did she lose sight of her longtime dedication to the cause of African-American women. Her twin obsessions were the progress of women and of children. These were intertwined and inseparable. She knew that to have power one must have organization. Their efforts toward united strength were earnest but were not yet centralized enough. Mrs. Bethune walked with her eyes wide open, and she "could see things before they happened." She could now look ahead to an era of African-American women becoming an irresistible force.

The National Council of Negro Women would serve also as a clearing house for any federal government departments affecting women and children. And, finally, it would prepare the ground for eventual expansion into a comprehensive international program.

The first Council office was located in Mrs. Bethune's living room at 1812 Ninth Street N.W., Washington, D.C.

During the rest of that decade her own time was largely taken up by demanding federal positions on a presidential advisory board, as an organizer of the Federal Council of Negro Affairs, and by the great number of duties in the unprecedented assignment of Director of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration.

By 1941, the National Council of Negro Women had expanded to such an extent that a headquarters had become imperative. A house was found in a mixed neighborhood at 1318 Vermont Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C.

There, the Council had sponsored a collection of archives, starting with a historical library, collating and preserving for posterity the evidences of a rich cultural heritage that had hitherto been neglected. From many sources were gathered books, letters, pictures, mementos, medals, and awards of the African-American women who had made history.

Tonight Mrs. Bethune was retiring from the Council as acting head with the altered title of "president emeritus." By now the Council was capable of reaching 850,000 women through its twenty-one affiliated organizations and its ninety local councils, its annual membership, and nine hundred life members. People all across the country would be looking and listening while Dr. Bethune spoke tonight.

The theme of the convention was "World Citizenship through Human Understanding." Dr.



Mary McLeod Bethune (center) and Mary Church Terrell (to the right of Mrs. Bethune) and others from the National Council of Negro Women went to the White House in 1942. The NCNW was



founded by Mrs. Bethune in New York on December 5, 1935, with a stated purpose to make articulate to the nation the actions of African-American women.

Bethune had decided to speak on the Declaration of Human Rights. She had helped formulate this declaration four years before when she had been a delegate to the United Nations conference in San Francisco.

A large audience had assembled in the auditorium, eagerly awaiting her arrival tonight. When she entered the great auditorium, the audience burst into applause. Mrs. Bethune, walking in a sprightly manner, carried a beautiful carved cane—not that she needed the cane; it barely touched the carpet. It was her trademark. Through the years she had formed the habit of carrying a cane; she owned a large collection. Tonight she wielded the prize of them all, a polished oak stick, intricately carved and surmounted by a silver plate engraved with the initials “F.D.R.” It was a thing of beauty in itself but the more to be valued for its association. It once belonged to Franklin D. Roosevelt, given to him when he was Assistant Secretary of the Navy by his uncle Theodore. Franklin D. Roosevelt had carried it during his tragic infirmity and at his last inauguration. After his death, Mrs. Roosevelt had presented it to Mrs. Bethune.

When President Roosevelt came into office, his desire was not merely to build roads, bridges, and post offices through the Works Project Administration (WPA), but also to build human beings as well.

In December of 1933, Mrs. Bethune was

included in a planning committee formed by the Federal Office of Education. This planning committee was to conduct a National Conference on the Education of Negroes in the spring of 1934. At that time, of the twenty-one million youths between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four in the United States, an estimated five million were out of school and unemployed, and two million were on relief. Nearly twice as many blacks were on relief as whites.

President Roosevelt recognized the responsibility of the nation to rebuild the dreams and aspirations killed by the depression and help these young men and women keep their own sense of responsibility alive.

In 1934 President Roosevelt called a conference of outstanding Americans holding the same ideals and, by Executive Order No. 7086, the National Youth Administration was inaugurated under the direction of Aubrey Williams: "an administration set up by President Roosevelt to prevent human erosion among America's young citizens who are on the fringe of economic and social security."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Bethune had long been receiving academic honors—an honorary MA degree from Wilberforce University (1915) and an LLD from Lincoln University (1935). Now she was tendered an honor of national significance: the Joel E. Springarn medal "for the highest and noblest achievement of an American Negro,"

awarded annually by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The Joel E. Spingarn medal was presented to Mrs. Bethune in St. Louis on June 23, 1935, by Josephine Roche, who at the time was Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and was also close to the President, was chairman of the executive committee of the NYA, and knew what was impending. After the presentation and Mrs. Bethune's overwhelmingly stirring speech of acceptance, Miss Roche took Mrs. Bethune aside. Up until then, the public had taken little notice of the NYA. Miss Roche told Mrs. Bethune that Roosevelt was looking for just what she herself had found in Mrs. Bethune and she would recommend her to become a member of his advisory board.

The board comprised a large group, since representatives of all the states had been asked to serve. But there was also a smaller group within, who were to act as special consultants. Of these, Mrs. Bethune was made the expert on education in the South, with vision as to its potentialities.

The first year was spent primarily in trying to get organized. Then, in 1935, when a meeting was called at the White House to appraise the achievements of that year, Mrs. Bethune met Franklin Roosevelt for the first time. He received her with his warm smile as though they were old friends. "How do you do, Mrs. Bethune. I know you." And she felt as if she had known him

always.

The committee members were passionately dedicated to making the NYA work, yet they had difficulty communicating their needs. Mrs. Bethune knew it was necessary to be dramatic in order to loosen the purse strings of the government; and she, with the avowed intent to "make them cry," provided the drama.

When she was called upon, speaking directly to the President, she made her report on what the NYA meant to minority groups. She told him that the fifteen-dollar or twenty-dollar checks—cigarette money at Harvard—spelled real salvation for African-American young people in many parts of the South: paying doctors' bills, seeing an occasional movie, having accessibility to books. She described, also, how they were working with the WPA authorities in providing adult education facilities for parents.

"We are bringing life and spirit to those many thousands who, for so long, have lived in darkness!" she exclaimed. "They have been living for so long in the alleys and back streets and woods!

"Now I speak, Mr. President, not as Mrs. Bethune but as the voice of fourteen million Americans who seek to achieve full citizenship. We have been taking the crumbs for a long time. We have been eating the feet and head of the chicken long enough. The time has come when we want some white meat. There is no place in business, no other place in government where we can

go where we feel we really belong, really have a contribution to make. The further an individual is down, the more chance he may have to come up. But the Negro cannot find his way to the opportunities that are opening unless he has someone guide him!"

Mrs. Bethune pleaded with the President to continue to exert his influence to let down barriers and to continue to open more doors. "Because they already have a reassuring and hopeful belief that there is somebody in the White House who cares!"

President Roosevelt had been visibly touched. Tears were in his eyes. He leaned across his desk and grasped her hands in both of his. "Mrs. Bethune," he said, "thank you for the informal knowledge you have placed at our disposal in these important days of beginnings in a new field. I'm glad that I'm able to contribute something to help make a better life for your people. I want to assure you that I shall continue to do my best for them in every way."

A week or so later, after Mrs. Bethune had returned to her school duties in Daytona, she received a letter from the White House informing her that the President wished to see her. She hurried back to Washington, making her first call at the office of Aubrey Williams.

Aubrey Williams was smiling broadly. "I have wonderful news for you." He told her that the President had been so impressed with her appeal



*Mary Bethune entering the White House, early 1940s.
When a white guard addressed her as "Auntie," she asked
him, "Which one of my brother's children are you?"*

that he had decided to set up a new department within the NYA, an office of minority affairs and that she was to be its administrator.

In his office, Roosevelt said to Mrs. Bethune, "I have thought over very carefully the message you brought me some time ago, and we have decided to open a department which Aubrey here has chosen to call the Office of Minority Affairs. We have appointed you to administer the office. I want you to know that I do not believe anybody can do this more acceptably than you."

Deeply moved, Mrs. Bethune replied, "Thank you, Mr. President, for your concern over my people and all minorities that need help. You have been most gracious in permitting me to share in such a great cause. In accepting this appointment, I assure you that I shall give it the best I have and shall follow very closely the guiding hand of our administrator, Aubrey Williams, who is giving so fully of himself to this cause which is so dear to your own heart."

"Aubrey," said President Roosevelt, but looking in Mrs. Bethune's direction, "Mrs. Bethune is a great woman. I believe in her because she has her feet on the ground—not only on the ground but in the deep, plowed soil."

Mrs. Bethune could never forget such a tribute, and she became a good friend of President Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor. She told her friends, "I never walk through the White House door without wondering how all this happened to

a child from the cotton field.”

So now, as Dr. Bethune mounted the steps of the platform, proudly carrying the Roosevelt cane, several distinguished individuals immediately came over to greet her, including President Harry S. Truman and other leaders of the political, social, and economic world.

Dr. Bethune was the main speaker of the evening. When everybody was seated on the platform and the meeting was ready to begin, a man stepped forward to introduce her.

It was a long introduction as he tried to outline the years of service Dr. Bethune had given her country and her people. First he explained her educational contributions. She had started a school with only a dollar and fifty cents in her pocket. By sheer determination and hard work she had built this school into one of the finest colleges of the country, now known as the Bethune-Cookman Institute. When it came to helping her people, she was not too proud to work hard to earn money, to beg from the wealthy visitors who came to the city. Dr. Bethune had helped hundreds, yes thousands of young Negroes to lead successful lives. Her life epitomized for Negro youth the strength of spirit and the power of will to overcome handicaps.

The speaker went on to explain the services that Dr. Bethune had rendered her country. He spoke of several government positions she had held, of how she had traveled thousands of miles