

Mary Church Terrell

1863-1954

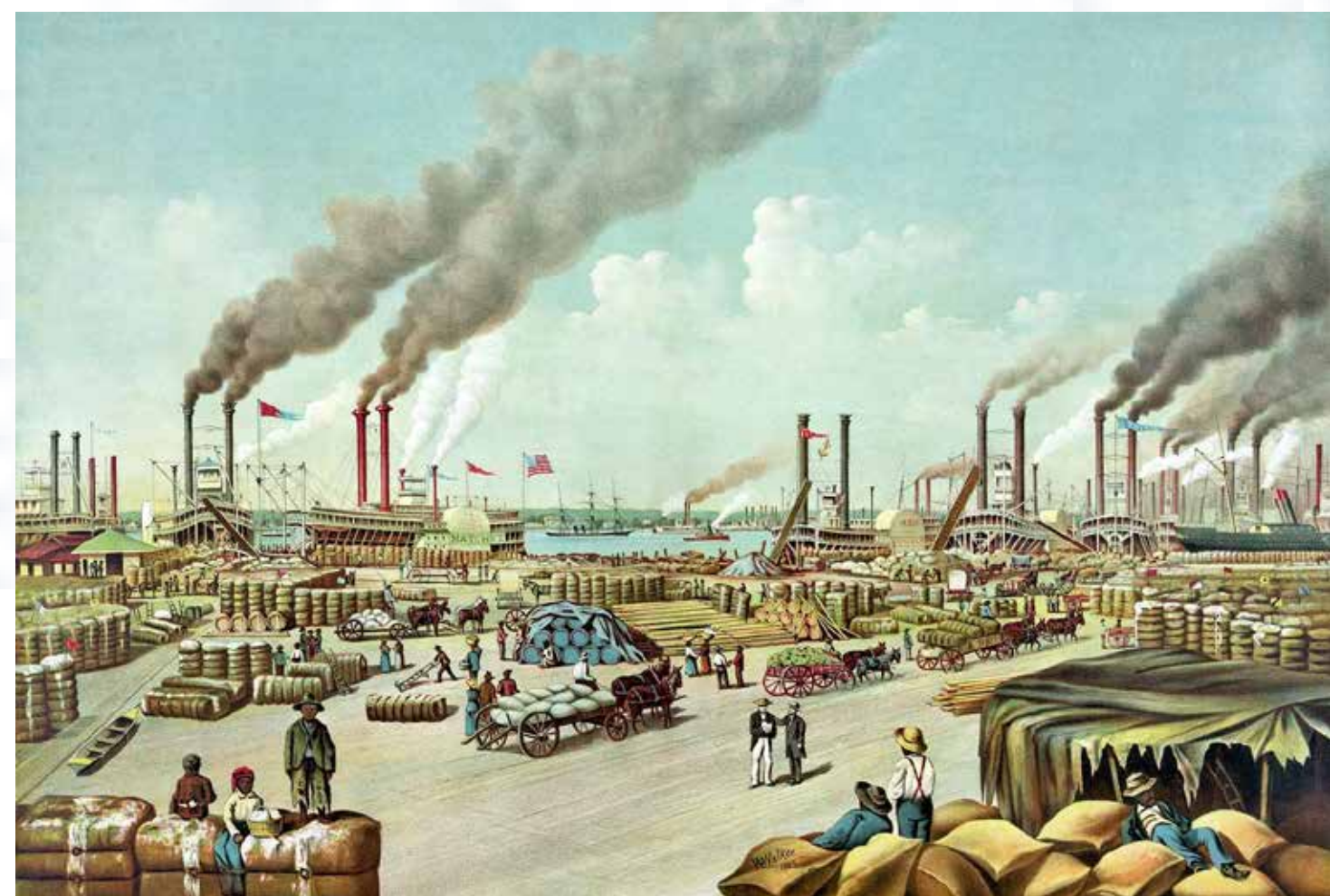


An upper middle class black woman, Mary Church Terrell campaigned for equal rights, economic uplift, and suffrage for all.

*“Lifting as we climb,”
Mary Church Terrell on the
obligation of prosperous black
women to help others.*



Mary Church Terrell. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

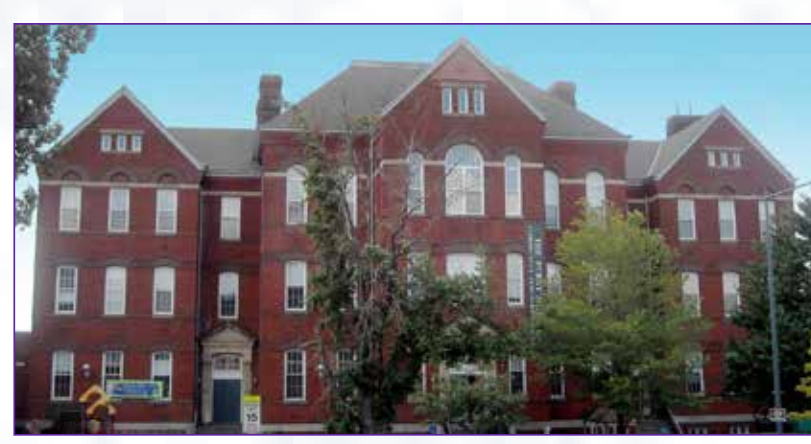


Mary Church Terrell's father earned money as a steamship steward. He made a fortune investing in depressed Memphis real estate during a yellow fever epidemic. CURRIER AND IVES

Economic Security

Mary Church Terrell's parents were born into slavery in Tennessee. Her father, Robert Reed Church, was the son of a white businessman who owned steamships on the Mississippi River and young Robert worked on board. This business experience eventually led to successful real estate investments. He became one of the first African-American millionaires.

Mary Church met her future husband Robert H. Terrell when both taught at the segregated M Street High School in Washington, D. C. A Harvard graduate, he later became the district's first African-American municipal judge. AGNOSTICPREACHERSKID



The Importance of Education

Mary attended school in Ohio, later graduating from Oberlin College. Her father expected her return to Tennessee to enjoy the life-style of a wealthy Southern woman. She preferred a more active role. “Most girls run away from home to marry, I ran away to teach,” she wrote. Eventually she taught at the “M Street High School” in Washington, D. C., and later served on the D.C. school board, the first African-American to do so.

Terrell, fourth from the left, was a founding member of the NAACP. At the age of 86 she participated in a suit to desegregate restaurants in Washington D. C. after being refused service at Thompson's Restaurant. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the case and struck down restaurant segregation in the nation's capital in 1953. WASHINGTON POST



Turning Point

She was a childhood friend of Thomas Moss, a black businessman who was lynched after competing with a white owned grocery store near Memphis. Like Ida B. Wells this outrage inspired her to write and speak out about lynching. She would become a prolific writer and lecturer on equal rights and black women's suffrage. Many decades before it was common, Terrell advocated use of the phrase “African-American.”

Suffrage and Opportunity for Black Women

As a student at Oberlin College, Mary developed a commitment to women's suffrage. In the 1890's she met Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and was Anthony's house guest. Attending a conference in Boston, she agreed to join with Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin to form the National Association of Colored Women. The organization's motto was “Lifting as We Climb.” Both Ruffin and Terrell were upper middle class women who hoped to help others though suffrage, education and job training.



A renowned speaker, Mary Church Terrell was fluent in several languages. In 1904 she spoke at the International Congress of Women in Berlin and delighted the hosts by delivering her lecture in German, later repeating it in French and English. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Equal Rights for All?

Mary Church Terrell picketed the White House during the final phase of the campaign for ratification of the 19th Amendment. Alice Paul had organized dramatic protests but seemed reluctant to alienate Southern white women. She was cool toward Terrell and at one point refused to answer whether she thought the Nineteenth Amendment should be enforced for all women.

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