



# Mary Church Terrell

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*The world is indebted more to the square inch to meddlers than any other species of the genus homo. Instead of being an oasis in a desert of uninhabitable planets, the earth would be a howling wilderness today if the desire to meddle had not been strongly implanted in man. Man is used here in the generic sense, of course, though it is a fact not generally known, that the bump of meddlesomeness is more highly developed on the male side of the human family than upon the female. As much as meddlers have contributed to the progress, comfort and happiness of mankind, they have never been appreciated at their true worth. They have been despised and rejected by a set of ingrates, who have greedily devoured the gifts, while they have denounced and kicked the giver. . .*

— *The Mission of Meddlers*

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## Quick Facts

- \* 1863-1954
- \* African American writer, activist, and lecturer
- \* A founder of the Colored Women’s League

## Biography

Mary Eliza Church was born in Memphis, Tennessee on September 23, 1863 to Louisa (Ayres) Church and Robert Church, both former slaves. The Church family, however, soon settled into the black middle-class. Her father, Robert, son of Charles Church, his master, and Emmeline, a housemaid, worked on one of his father’s ships as a dishwasher, gaining increasing responsibilities until he was promoted to procurement steward.

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# Mary Church Terrell

## Biography continued

After the Civil War, Robert opened a prosperous saloon and during the yellow fever epidemic of 1878-79 he, unlike many of Memphis residents, did not abandon his property. Rather, he bought as much land and property as he could and became the first black Memphis millionaire. Louisa Church owned a successful hair salon, the monies from which provided the family with its first home and carriage. When Church Terrell was about three years old her parents divorced. Her mother was granted custody of the two children, Mary and Thomas. Her father continued to see and support his family and ensured that Mary obtained the best education available to a black woman in the nineteenth century. In 1891 Church married Robert Terrell, a young lawyer she had met while working at the Colored High School in Washington, DC. Robert Terrell worked for many years in education and law and became the first black judge for the District of Columbia, a post he held for over twenty years (1902-25), through Republican and Democratic presidents. Terrell and Church had one child, Phillis, named after the eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley. In addition to Phillis, the couple adopted the daughter, Mary, of Church Terrell's brother Thomas. After both Robert Terrell's and Thomas Church's death, Church Terrell also raised her brother's son, Robert.

Church Terrell attended Antioch University's Model School, where she excelled. She, like many other young black women of this era, obtained a Bachelor's degree in 1884 from Oberlin College, which was run by abolitionists and had admitted blacks in 1835. Instead of taking the Literary or "ladies' course," a two-year degree, Mary chose the more intensive Classical or "gentlemen's course," a four-year degree. While teaching at the Colored High School, Church Terrell also completed the Masters of Arts degree requirements for Oberlin College, and was granted the degree in 1888. To round out her degrees, after teaching for several years, Mary went on a two-year (1888-90) European tour, a common course for well-to-do women and men of the eighteenth century. The "Grand Tour," as it was called, consisted of visits to the European capitals to see first-hand their cultural treasures. It was in Europe that Church Terrell became fluent in French and German, skills that helped her immensely when speaking at suffrage meetings in Europe.



# Mary Church Terrell

## Biography continued

Church Terrell was an indefatigable activist and prolific writer. In 1940 her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, was published. However, this work was a culmination of years of journals and writing about social ills in America. She had been galvanized into activism by the lynching in 1892 of her childhood friend, Thomas Moss, and dedicated the rest of her life to uncovering and eradicating injustices. She was involved for many years in the women's suffrage movement and was a founder of the Colored Women's league and, later, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

During the nineteenth century, professional lecturers covered the country and Church Terrell became one of their number when, in 1892, she accepted a job as lecturer for the Slayton Lyceum Bureau. During this period and up to her death, Church Terrell published extensively in magazines and newspapers of the day. In the latter years of her life, Church Terrell fought tirelessly to uphold the equality laws of Washington, DC, to put an end to Jim Crow.

Church Terrell and her fluent, conversational, measured writings and lectures helped define the era between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of desegregation. Her strong and fair personality permeates all of her writing. Church Terrell, the consummate meddler, was given honorary doctorates from Howard University, and Wilberforce and Oberlin Colleges. A school in Washington, DC was named for her and several black women's clubs are named in her memory. Church Terrell died on July 24, 1954, just two months after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court decision which ended segregation in America's schools.



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