

MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE

Written by: Kristin Appert Camiolo | Koinonia Academy | Plainfield, New Jersey

BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955) was born in South Carolina to parents who were former slaves. From childhood Bethune realized that education held the key for African American advancement. In 1904, she founded the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls. Her school grew rapidly, and in the 1920s merged with the all-male Cookman Institute; Mary McLeod Bethune served as the first president of the new Bethune-Cookman College. Bethune worked tirelessly for civil rights, women’s rights, and social justice. She served on commissions under Presidents Coolidge and Hoover, and in 1936 Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her the Director of the Division of Negro Affairs, part of the National Youth Administration, a New Deal program designed to help young people find jobs. Bethune became the first African American woman to serve as head of a federal agency and used her position to persistently lobby for African American issues. She founded the National Council for Negro Women in 1935, co-founded the United Negro College Fund in 1944, and attended the founding conference of the United Nations in 1949. Before her death in 1955, Bethune wrote a last will and testament that expressed her hope for a “world of Peace, Progress, Brotherhood, and Love.”

KEY EVENTS

New Deal, National Youth Administration, “Black Cabinet,” United Negro College Fund, National Council of Negro Women

KEY PEOPLE

Booker T. Washington, Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By 1942, Mary McLeod Bethune established herself as an important part of Franklin Roosevelt’s “Black Cabinet,” the unofficial group of high-ranking African Americans who advised the president during the New Deal. During this time she and Eleanor Roosevelt became close friends and allies, and Bethune frequently corresponded with the first lady about a variety of civil rights and education initiatives. This letter, written only nine weeks after the bombing at Pearl Harbor, shows Bethune’s ongoing concern about funding for Bethune-Cookman College as well as how she swiftly shifted from finding work opportunities for black youth to addressing war related needs for African American youth on the homefront.

FUN FACT

Mary McLeod Bethune started the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in 1904 with \$1.50



January 1943, Library of Congress (2017843210)
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017843210/>

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Make one copy of the letter for each pair of students.
- Divide students into pairs.
- Distribute one copy of Mary McLeod Bethune’s letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from February 19, 1942, to each of the pairs.
- Ask students to read the letter out loud as Mary McLeod Bethune, taking turns reading each paragraph, and answer the prompt questions together.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Tell students, *Imagine you are Eleanor Roosevelt, and write a short note to answer Mary McLeod Bethune’s letter. Would you address all of her concerns? If so how, and if not, why?*
- Allow students time to write. When complete, ask students to read their letter to their partner, and compare responses. Each partner should take one minute to explain the choices they made in crafting Eleanor’s response, and why they did or did not address all of Mary’s requests.



Gordon Parks, Daytona Beach, Florida. Bethune-Cookman College. Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, founder and former president, walks to Sunday afternoon chapel, January 1943, Library of Congress (2017843188), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c28948/>

and five students. She made all the desks herself and students used elderberry juice as ink. This little school grew to become what is now Bethune-Cookman University. To learn more, check out this video: <https://www.biography.com/people/mary-mcleod-bethune-9211266>.

LOCAL CONNECTION

You can visit Mary McLeod Bethune's home (a National Historic Landmark) on the campus of Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida. Learn more here: http://www.cookman.edu/foundation/plan_your_visit.html. In Washington, D.C. you can visit the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, which served as Bethune's home and the headquarters of the National Council of Negro Women. To learn more about the exhibits and archives preserved at this National Historic Site visit: <https://www.nps.gov/mamc/index.htm>.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

"Dr. Bethune's Last Will and Testament"
Bethune-Cookman University
https://www.cookman.edu/about_bcu/history/lastwill_testament.html

Mary McLeod Bethune, Selected Digitized Correspondence of Eleanor Roosevelt 1933-1945
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum
<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/franklin/?p=collections/findingaid&id=504>

SECONDARY SOURCES

History
Bethune-Cookman University
https://www.cookman.edu/about_BCU/history/our_founder.html

Mary McLeod Bethune
The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project,
George Washington University,
<https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/glossary/bethune-mary.cfm>

Mary McLeod Bethune
National Women's History Museum
<https://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/biographies/mary-mcleod-bethune>

Bethune-Cookman College

Daytona Beach, Florida

February 19, 1942

MARY McLEOD BETHUNE, PRESIDENT
BERTHA L. MITCHELL, SECRETARY-TREASURER
ATTY. THOMAS T. COBB, ENDOWMENT TREASURER

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt,
The White House,
Washington, D.C.

My dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Thanks for your recent letter.

I am sending this note to inform you that I am not well. I have been here about ten days and most of the time has been spent in bed. My doctor ordered me to bed for about ten days of complete rest and relaxation. I am feeling better already. I hope that within a few days I will be myself again.

I am so happy to know that you have written Mr. Baruch and Mr. Field. I pray earnestly that they may do something to help our work. The load is so very heavy and I must get some financial assistance to meet our daily needs. My faith has never failed me and it will not fail me now. You were gracious enough to send us some help from your fund last year - I hope this can be done again this year. Our need for funds is urgent and immediate.

I am so sorry that you cannot come down for the Trustees Meeting. Please send your proxy.

A group of Negro citizens of New York City are putting forth an effort to secure a Cabin in the upper Berkshires to be used for Negro children in case bombing is started in that section. They have in mind a lovely Cabin with spacious grounds located near the Herald Tribune Camp. I have visited the place and I think it is beautiful and ideal for such a site for children.

They are desirous of having the government take it over and make whatever changes necessary so that it could be set-up for the purpose they have in mind. They have written me that they plan to contact you concerning it and to solicit your cooperation in making this possible. Please give this matter your favorable consideration.

You know how grateful I am always for all you do. My thoughts are of you and my prayers are for you. You are a great symbol in this world for the spirit of good. Please don't over-tax yourself. When you are through organizing Defense programs, retire from its leadership and continue to do the world-wide general things

Mr. Baruch was a philanthropist and member of Roosevelt's "brain trust."

Mr. Field was Marshall Field, Jr., the son of the entrepreneur and founder of a very successful chain of stores. Field had previously donated to the college.

en
2-17

#2 - Mrs. Roosevelt
February 19, 1942

you have been doing that have been such a blessing to all of us.

Please, Mrs. Roosevelt, I would like to make another request of you. Please send us a letter or a telegram to be read at the dedication of the Harrison Rhodes Memorial Library on March first. We have just received a letter from Mr. McLeish of the Library of Congress, which will be read on this occasion. We will be honored to have a communication from you.

Jan 1 1942
W. L. ...

With best wishes, I am

Sincerely, gratefully

Mary McLeod Bethune

Mary McLeod Bethune.

Letter from Mary McLeod Bethune to Eleanor Roosevelt, February 19, 1942, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum
http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/ersel/ersel007.pdf

Why do you think Mary McLeod Bethune used formal letterhead for her correspondence with Eleanor Roosevelt?

What specific requests does Bethune make?

Why would Bethune have asked Roosevelt to write to “Mr. Baruch and Mr. Field” instead of just writing her own letter to them?

By this time Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt had been friends for many years. Cite several quotes from the text that show their friendship.

Why would this friendship be so important for the African American community in the 1940s?