

The Clerk's Black History Series



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Fanny Jackson-Coppin

African-American Educator, Missionary, and Advocate for Black Female Higher Education
First African-American Woman School Principal
(October 15, 1837 - January 21, 1913)



Frances (Fanny) Marion Jackson Coppin was born into slavery in Washington, D.C., October 15, 1837 and when she was just twelve-years-old, her aunt purchased her freedom. Soon after, she was sent to live with another aunt in New Bedford, MA, where she worked as a domestic servant for George Henry Calvert, an American editor, essayist, dramatist, poet, and biographer. With his influence, Fanny learned to read and write. At the age of 14, Fanny moved to Newport, Rhode Island alone. She continued her desire for education stating, "It was in me to get an education and to teach my people. This idea was deep in my soul." She briefly attended the segregated Rhode Island State Normal School and then in 1860, she relocated to Oberlin, Ohio, where she enrolled in Oberlin College, the first college to accept both black and female students. She was the first black person chosen to be a pupil-teacher there. In her senior year, she organized evening classes to teach freedmen reading and writing. In 1865, at the age of 28, Fanny graduated with a bachelor's degree. That same year, she accepted a position as Principal of the Ladies Department at the Institute for Colored Youth, a Quaker school in Philadelphia, now known as Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, teaching Greek, Latin and mathematics. After only four years, Fanny was appointed to Head Principal of ICY becoming the First African-American woman to become a school principal. With her new position, Fanny was able to influence and improve opportunities for young African-American women. She expanded the curriculum to include an Industrial Department, established a women's industrial exchange to display the artistic work of young women and founded a home for girls and young women.

In December 1881, at the age of forty-four, Fanny married Reverend Levi Jenkins Coppin, a prominent leader and minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.). She continued to work at ICY, but missionary work became her primary focus. In 1902, at the age of 56, Fanny retired from ICY and began to focus all of her efforts on missionary work. She accompanied her husband, now a bishop, to Cape Town, South Africa, where they continued their missionary work counseling African women. While in South Africa, Fanny and her husband founded the Bethel Institute. Fanny returned to the United States in 1907 and settled back in Philadelphia. After almost a decade of missionary work Fanny's health began to decline. In her last years, she completed her autobiography, *Reminiscences of School Life, and Hints on Teaching*, which remains a record of a remarkable life. Fanny Jackson Coppin passed away on January 21, 1913, at the age 76. In 1926, Baltimore, Maryland Teacher Training School was named the Fanny Jackson Coppin Normal School, now Coppin State University, in her honor.

