



The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Mary Jane Patterson

(September 12, 1840 – September 24, 1894)

“First African American Woman to Receive a Recorded B.A. Degree”



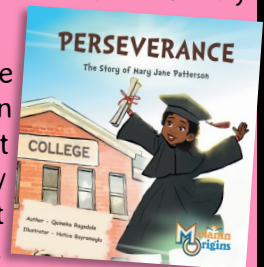
Mary Jane Patterson was born on September 12, 1840, in Raleigh, North Carolina to Henry Irving Patterson and Emmeline Taylor Patterson. Mary Jane was the oldest of seven children. Her father was reportedly a boyhood friend of Andrew Johnson (who would go on to become the 17th President after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln). Both men were born in Raleigh, NC, just two years apart. It is believed that the Pattersons were part of a very small community of freed slaves in the area.

When the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850, essentially allowing the kidnapping and selling of free blacks back into slavery, the Patterson family moved north and settled in Oberlin, Ohio.

Mary Jane's father prospered as a mason and was able to provide very well for his family. Oberlin was home to a growing population of free black families, many of whom hoped to send their children to college. Oberlin College admitted its first black student in 1835 and became the nation's first coeducational institution of higher education in 1837. The Patterson family opened their home to board black students that attended the college.

Mary Jane's brother followed in the footsteps of their father and became a brick mason. Mary Jane and her three younger siblings attended Oberlin college. By 1857, Mary Jane had completed a one-year preparatory course at Oberlin College. Traditionally, women would transition into Oberlin's two-year diploma program for women after completing the prep classes. Mary Jane, however, enrolled in the school's "gentlemen's course," a four-year program of classical studies including the subjects of Latin, Greek and mathematics - courses not pursued by women at that time. In 1862, Mary Jane graduated with high honors and became the first African American woman in the country to receive a recorded Bachelor of Arts degree.

After graduation, Mary Jane began teaching in the southern Ohio town of Chillicothe. In 1865, she moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she became an assistant to Fanny Jackson Coppin in the Female Department at the Institute for Colored Youth, later Cheyney University (the first HBCU). In 1869 Mary Jane moved to Washington, D.C. to teach at the newly founded Preparatory High School for Colored Youth (now Paul Laurence Dunbar High School). This school was the first U.S. public high school for African Americans, and the first public high school in Washington, D.C. In 1871 Mary Jane became principal of the school.



When the school's enrollment increased under her leadership, the administrators elected to hire Richard Theodore Greener, the first black graduate of Harvard University, to replace her as principal. When Greener quit just one year later, Mary Jane was asked to return as principal. In 1877. The school had its first high school commencement ceremony under her leadership. In 1884, Mary Jane retired from being an educator. She remained in Washington D.C.

In addition to educational responsibilities, Mary Jane immersed herself within the women's rights movements. She, along with Josephine Beall Bruce, Anna Julia Cooper, Charlotte Forten Grimke, and Mary Church Terrell, founded the Colored Women's League of Washington, D.C., in 1892. The League, a predecessor of the National Association of Colored Women, focused on training for kindergarten teachers and homemaking skills for working-class women. She also devoted time and money to Black institutions in Washington, D. C., as well as to the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People.

Mary Jane Patterson died September 24, 1894, in Washington, D. C. She was 54 years old. She never married, instead, dedicated her life to educating the descendants of ex-slaves.



THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORED WOMEN WAS FOUNDED IN WASHINGTON, DC, ON THIS DATE IN 1896. DR. MARY CHURCH TERRELL WAS ELECTED AS ITS FIRST PRESIDENT.

