

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry

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Mary Burnett Talbert

(September 17, 1866 - October 15, 1923)

“Phenomenal Civil Rights Leader”



Mary Morris Burnett Talbert was born in Oberlin, Ohio on September 17, 1866, to Cornelius and Caroline Nichols Burnett. A diligent learner, Mary graduated from High School at the age of 16 and completed her degree in Literature from Oberlin College in 1886. She accepted a position teaching history, mathematics, Latin, science and geography - the position took her over 800 miles away from her family, in Little Rock Arkansas, at Bethel University. Despite the Jim Crow segregated educational climate, Mary's professionalism and competence paved the way for her to be hired as the Assistant Principal at Bethel, the first woman to do so. The next year, she was named the Principal of Union High School - the first black woman to hold the position. She held the position for four years, until she married in 1891 and relocated to Buffalo, New York. She had one daughter, named Sarah May, in 1892.

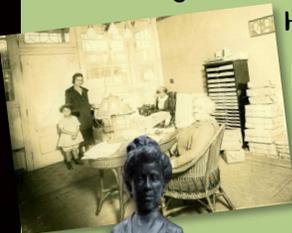
Mary began to establish her legacy as a public leader and a civil rights activist in Buffalo. She co-founded the Phyllis Wheatley Club of Colored Women - Buffalo's first affiliate of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). In 1905, she opened her home to host a series of secret black political activists meetings with civil rights pioneers, including W.E.B. Dubois, John Hope, Monroe Trotter, Frederick McGhee, C. E. Bentley and others. This was the beginning of what would become the Niagara Movement - a precursor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). At the turn of the 20th century, she protested the exclusion of African Americans from the 1901 Pan-American Exposition Planning Commissions to the all-white board of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, calling for the appointment of an African American board member and an exhibit on the lives of African Americans. In 1905, Mary was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. During her tenure as NACW President, Mary was instrumental in the preservation and restoration of the Frederick Douglass Home in Anacostia.



Phyllis Wheatley Club of Buffalo, 1905

In 1916, Mary was elected President of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and vice president of the NAACP. The next year, she became one of a handful of Black Red Cross nurses who served on the Western Front of Europe after the United States entered World War I. After World War I, Mary returned to Europe to lecture on the importance of women's rights and race relations. She often lectured across the U.S. and abroad on the oppression of Black Americans and became a major factor in bringing Black women into international women's organizations. As a suffragist, Mary advocated for women of all races to work together for the cause. She worked to raise awareness among prominent white feminists on the importance of supporting women who were marginalized and less privileged.

Mary became a dedicated advocate of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, introduced in 1919 by Missouri Congressman Leonidas Dyer. In 1921, she became chair of the NAACP's Anti-Lynching Committee. She was a national and international public figure who was a sought-after speaker for her lectures on race relations, anti-lynching and women's rights. The following year, Mary became the first Black Woman to receive the NAACP's Spingarn Award. Mary Burnett Talbert died in Buffalo, New York, on October 15, 1923, at the age of 57.



In 1998, a marker honoring Talbert, who served as the church's treasurer, was installed in front of the Michigan Avenue Baptist Church, by the New York State Governor's Commission Honoring the Achievements of Women. On August 24, 2024, a statue honoring Mary Burnett Talbert was unveiled in front of Old Erie County City Hall.

Mary Burnett Talbert, 1917. (Courtesy of The Crisis, Vol. 13, No. 4, February 1917)