

Portraits of Character

from the National Portrait Gallery

Mary McLeod Bethune Education Advocate and Activist

“Invest in the human soul. Who knows, it may be a diamond in the rough.” These are the words of African American education advocate and activist Mary McLeod Bethune. She earned national prominence for her lifelong devotion to improving educational opportunities for blacks in the United States. Bethune believed that education offered African Americans the best route out of poverty. This remarkable woman set the wheels in motion for realizing her dream in 1904, when she established the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls in Daytona Beach, Florida, on “faith and a dollar and a half.” The fifteenth of seventeen children born in South Carolina to former slaves a decade after the end of the Civil War, Bethune was accustomed to making something from nothing. She and her siblings used the charred splinters from burned logs as pencils and mashed elderberries for ink. Bethune searched through the city dump and trash piles behind hotels for discarded items that could be recycled for use by her family. She applied this same ingenuity to beginning her first school for two young African American girls in a run-down old house by using packing crates for furniture and meat-wrapping paper from a butcher shop for paper. Tuition was fifty cents a week when Bethune first



Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955) by Betsy Graves Reyneau (1888–1964), oil on canvas, 1943. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Harmon Foundation

opened the Daytona Literary and Industrial School as an elementary school with just five pupils; however, she never refused to educate a child whose parents could not afford to pay. From its humble beginnings, Bethune’s school for girls began to accept boys as well. It eventually grew into a secondary school, then a junior college, and in 1923 it merged with the Cookman Institute of Jacksonville. Renamed Bethune-Cookman College in 1929, its first four-year degrees in teacher education were conferred in 1943.

Taking a Closer Look

Hanging in the background of Bethune’s portrait is a picture of Faith Hall, the first major building erected at the college. This portrait is part of a series created by Betsy Graves Reyneau to call attention to

African American leaders’ contributions to American life. Describe what else you see in the painting that provides clues about Bethune’s interest in education.

Learn more about the life of Mary McLeod Bethune and Bethune-Cookman College at the following Web site:

<http://www.bethune.cookman.edu/Welcome/Founder/founder.html>



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