

Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune Honored with Statue in the U.S. Capitol

By Dr. Valerie Wardlaw, Contributing Writer
Los Angeles Sentinel
Published July 21, 2022

Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, an educator, civil rights activist, founder of Bethune-Cookman University, the founding President of the National Council of Negro Women, founder of the United Negro College Fund, and daughter of formerly enslaved parents, became the first African American honored with a state-commissioned statue in the U.S. Capitol National Statuary Hall.

Bethune's statue was formally unveiled on July 13, in a ceremony attended by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, U.S. Representatives Val Demings (D-Fla.) and Kathy Castor (D-Fla.), Majority Whip Jim Clyburn (D-SC), NCNW President Dr. Thelma Daley, and its Executive Director Janis T. Mathis, Esq., as well as other community leaders and lawmakers.

"I am proud that Dr. Bethune will be Florida's new face in the U.S. Capitol and know that her lifelong commitment to education and civil rights will continue to inspire all Americans for years to come," Demings said.

The National Statuary Hall collection consists of two statues from each state who can select accomplished persons to represent it in the U.S. Capitol. The state of Florida chose Bethune to replace Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith. Bethune's state statue is the only African American in the collection. It is the first time a state has selected an African American as its representative.

Sculptor Nilda M. Comas won the honor of creating the marble statue of Bethune over 1,600 applicants. Of her depiction of Bethune, Comas said, "The statue reflects three important symbols from her life: a black rose, a stack of seven books, and President Roosevelt's cane. Comas depicts Bethune as a 70-year-old accomplished, confident woman wearing academic regalia, holding a walking stick in her right hand and a black

marble rose in her left. Bethune's wearing of regalia honors her educational tributes as she was awarded nine honorary degrees during her lifetime."



The National Council of Negro Women, circa 1940. (Courtesy photo)

The black rose "symbolizes her belief that loving thy neighbor means interracial, inter-religious and international brotherhood," according to the Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune Statuary Project. A confidant of President Theodore Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor, Bethune's hand is placed on a walking stick once owned by the President.

Of the walking stick, Comas said, "It is meant to symbolize her tremendous role in the Roosevelt government and what was then called the 'Black Cabinet.'" The pedestal's base is inscribed with one of her most famous quotes, "Invest in the human soul. Who knows, it may be a diamond in the rough."

Bethune's commitment to the political empowerment of African American women is seen through the organization she founded in 1935, the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW).

Janis T. Mathis, Esq., said, "Dr. Bethune was an exemplary visionary leader. She founded NCNW with a clear mission to uplift Black women. By doing so she uplifted the entire nation and the world. The true measure of her legacy is the continued relevance and vitality of the institutions she built. In her writing and speeches, Dr. Bethune provided a guide that continues to inspire hope and progress."

Reflecting on this honor of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, Dr. Thelma T. Daley, president of NCNW, voiced the sentiments of many, stating, "The unveiling of Dr. Bethune's statue is a testament to her life's vision in founding the National Council of Negro Women where she always wanted women of African descent to have a presence in the nation's capital.