Terrell, Mary Eliza Church

(b. Sept. 23, 1863, Memphis, Tenn., U.S.—d. July 24, 1954, Annapolis, Md.), American social activist who was cofounder and first president of the National Association of Colored Women. She was an early civil-rights advocate, an educator, an author, and a lecturer on woman suffrage and black rights.

Terrell was born into a middle-class family in Memphis, and she received a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College, Ohio (1884). She taught languages at Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio, and at the M Street High School, a black secondary school in Washington, D.C. After a two-year tour of Europe, she completed a master's degree from Oberlin (1888) and married Robert Heberton Terrell, a lawyer who would be the first black municipal court judge in the nation's capital.

An early advocate of women's rights, Terrell was an active member of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, addressing in particular the concerns of black women. In 1896 she became the first president of the newly formed National Association of Colored Women, an organization which under her leadership worked to achieve educational and social reform and an end to discriminatory practices. Appointed to the District of Columbia Board of Education in 1895, Terrell was the first black woman to hold such a position. At the suggestion of W.E.B. Du Bois, she was made a charter member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and in 1949 she gained entrance to the Washington chapter of the American Association of University Women, bringing to an end its policy of excluding blacks.

An articulate spokeswoman, adept political organizer, and prolific writer, Terrell addressed a wide range of social issues in her long career, including the Jim Crow Law, lynching, and the convict lease system. Her last act as an activist was to lead a successful three-year struggle against segregation in public eating places and hotels in the nation's capital. Her autobiography, A Colored Woman in a White World, appeared in 1940.