

The Idealistic Realist: Mary McLeod Bethune, The National Council of Negro Women and the National Youth Administration



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Wright, Robert Brian

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Abstract

The available literature on Mary McLeod Bethune is very similar. Though it may look at various aspects of her life, it does so on the same plane. It gives an overview. In other words, it skims over her life, focusing only on the very narrow - and positive - aspects. She was the founder and president of a black college. She was head of a federal agency during the New Deal. She was head of a million member black women's organization. But what do these "highlightings" tell of Bethune and the world in which she worked?

The point of this paper is to vary a little from the present literature. By taking a closer look at two of Bethune's organizations: the National Council of Negro Women and the Nation Youth Administration's Division of Negro Affairs, perhaps we can tell a little more of who Bethune really was and how important her work was to her. By "humanizing" Bethune, we may get a better understanding of what it meant to be a minority in a racist nation during a trying time.

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Equal parts educator, politician, and social visionary, Mary McLeod Bethune was one of the most prominent African American women of the first half of the twentieth century--and one of the most powerful. Between 1936 and 1944 Bethune was director of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration (NYA) and chair of an informal Black Cabinet, a group of federally appointed black officials who met regularly to plan strategy and set black priorities for social change. Using her clout as a top-ranking African American administrator in the Roosevelt administration, Bethune lobbied for African American concerns and was instrumental in seeing that African Americans received help from the federal government. Bethune founded the National Council for Negro Women in 1935, established the organization's flagship journal *African American Women's Journal*,^{[3][4]} and resided as president or leader for myriad African American women's organizations including the National Association for Colored Women and the National Youth Administration's Negro Division.^[5] She also was appointed as a national adviser to president. Marian Anderson celebrated contralto and Mary McLeod Bethune, Director of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration at the launching of the SS Booker T. Washington with unidentified workers who helped construct the first Liberty ship named for an African American at the California Shipbuilding Corporation's yards by Alfred T. Palmer. Mary McLeod Bethune was an educator and activist, serving as president of the National Association of Colored Women and founding the National Council of Negro Women. She founded the National Council of Negro Women in 1935. Bethune died in 1955. Early Life. Born Mary Jane McLeod on July 10, 1875, in Mayesville, South Carolina, Mary McLeod Bethune was a leading educator and civil rights activist. In 1936, she became the director of the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration. One of her main concerns in this position was helping young people find job opportunities. In addition to her official role in the Roosevelt administration, Bethune became a trusted friend and adviser to both the president and his wife Eleanor Roosevelt.