



As No Other

Woman

BY LILLIAN SERECE WILLIAMS



Mary Burnett Talbert unwaveringly fought for justice.

Mary Burnett Talbert believed Black women should fight for justice and never waiver where matters of principle were concerned. In 1922, she demonstrated that conviction by uniting both Black and white women in a campaign to seek federal legislation outlawing lynching. Her actions, in part, were a response to the atrocities that Blacks experienced in the aftermath of World War I, especially the Rosewood massacre and the Tulsa riots. She organized NAACP “Antilynching Crusaders” to raise funds to help stamp out the vicious crime of murdering innocent women and men who had defied Southern-style apartheid that relegated Blacks to second class citizenship. In 1922, Missouri representative Leonidas Dyer introduced an antilynching bill, but Congress failed to ratify. Talbert subsequently urged women to use the power of their ballot to defeat representatives who did not support it.

Mary Burnett Talbert, who moved to Buffalo in 1891, would later be characterized as “the best known colored woman” by her colleague Mary White Ovington. She was born on September 17, 1866, into an Ohio community that provided unusually advanced opportunities for African Americans. Philo Stewart and the Reverend John Shipherd founded Oberlin Colony and Oberlin Collegiate Institute, later called Oberlin College, in 1833. It was devoted to educating teachers and ministers, especially as a

pipeline for the westward bound settlers. But it also provided a welcoming environment for African Americans. As early as 1835, free-born Blacks and escaped slaves arrived in the town. They joined the Congregational Church and attended Oberlin’s schools and college on a non-discriminatory basis at a time when African Americans comprised about one-third of the town’s population.

Talbert’s parents, Cornelius and Caroline Burnett, moved to Oberlin after the Civil War, where Cornelius was actively involved in the Republican Party. He was a delegate to several Republican conventions where the major issue centered on the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, which would grant African American men the right to vote. In her youth Talbert, like her father, was a member of the Congregational Church and was the pianist for the Methodist Church.

Like her siblings, young Talbert (then Burnett) attended Oberlin high school, graduated at age sixteen, and enrolled in the College. There, she honed her oratorical and debating skills. She joined the Aeolian Society and delivered an address at her commencement three years after enrolling into the College.

Seeking Justice

Talbert felt a keen sense of responsibility to seek justice and fairness for oppressed peoples in the United States and around the globe. These interests led her to work for penal reform, especially as it impacted Black youths, anti-lynching legislation, woman suffrage, education reform, human rights and anti-poverty programs. They also took her into the international arena, where she worked for peace and freedom for oppressed peoples around the globe, for she believed their fate and that of African Americans were inextricably intertwined.

After graduation, Talbert began a successful teaching career in Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1887, she became the state’s first African American woman to be promoted to assistant principal and was assigned to Bethel University. By 1888, she was principal of Union High School. In 1891, she married William Herbert Hilbert Talbert, a wealthy Buffalo city clerk and realtor, whose prominent family had resided in the Buffalo region for nearly a century. The Talberts were renowned in reform circles, as abolitionists and advocates for dismantling the notoriously underfunded and understaffed African school which effectively had relegated Black students to an inferior education.

Buffalo Platform

Mary Burnett Talbert was Oberlin’s daughter, but it would be in Buffalo where she would establish her plat-



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MRS. MARY B. TALBERT

Of Buffalo, N. Y., Life Member, Trustee Board,
Douglass Home. Under her administration and di-
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form. She became actively involved in the public sector at the turn of the twentieth century, after the birth of her only child Sarah May. Talbert trained over 300 area Sunday school teachers at her Michigan Avenue Baptist Church. She fought police-sanctioned vice in the African American community. She also founded the Christian Culture Congress, a literary club at her church that sponsored prominent speakers such as educator and religious leader Nannie Helen Burroughs, artist Meta Warrick Fuller, and political figures W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. She was a charter member of the Phyllis [sic] Wheatley Club, founded in 1899, one of the most effective catalysts for change in the Buffalo Black community. The club later became an affiliate of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) that was founded in Washington, DC, in 1896 and that would become the chief vehicle through which Black women articulated their

political views. By 1901, Talbert had become known across the country because she challenged the Pan American Exposition organizers that met in Buffalo in 1901. She hosted an interracial forum, "Why the American Negro Should Be at the 1901 Pan American Exhibition," to protest the exclusion of Blacks and the negative stereotypical depictions of them in the "The Old Plantation" and "Darkest Africa" live displays on the midway. Talbert emphasized the positive impact previous world fairs had on challenging the negative stereotypes of Blacks. During the Pan American Exposition, she hosted the second biennial conference of the NACW in 1901. The media gave unprecedented coverage to this convention and highlighted the accomplishments of its distinguished women. During Talbert's presidency, the Phyllis Wheatley Club invited the NAACP to organize a chapter in Buffalo in 1910.

Talbert came to prominence in

Buffalo by using the local media to address racial disparities and social concerns. She, Robert Bagnall of the NAACP, and local NAACP representatives met with the editors of Buffalo's newspapers to challenge their use of yellow journalism when writing about African Americans. The delegation also urged the editors to discontinue publishing Ku Klux Klan recruitment ads and other incendiary tropes.

The Nation and Beyond

After its biennial meeting in Buffalo, Talbert assumed several administrative positions in the NACW and its affiliates. New York clubs formed the Empire Federation of Colored Women's Clubs in 1909 and elected her president in 1911, a position she held until 1916. Talbert became NACW parliamentarian, executive committee chair, and in 1914, vice-president-at-large. At the Baltimore convention in 1916, she became president of the NACW and served two terms, ending in 1920.

Talbert engaged the NACW membership in two national projects during her presidency. One was the purchase of the Frederick Douglass Cedar Hill estate in Anacostia, Washington, DC, to highlight the importance of Black achievement and empower Black youths.

But this was not the first such project, for during Talbert's presidency, the Empire State Federation of Colored

Women's Clubs also had placed a marker at the Auburn gravesite of Harriet Tubman, whom Talbert previously had interviewed.

In 1922, the NAACP awarded Talbert the Spingarn Medal for her efforts to preserve the Douglass estate and her efforts to fight oppression. She was the first woman to receive this coveted award.

Talbert, the NACW and its local and state affiliates also pursued penal reforms, especially in the South where Black youths often were targeted, arrested for minor offenses, and incarcerated with hardened criminals. The club women's observations docu-

mented the relationship between the arrest of Black youths and the local municipalities' convict-leasing policies. The NACW advocated for these youths by lobbying state and federal legislators and building reformatories and other institutions to provide education and a wholesome environment for them. Talbert announced several of their successes at the Denver convention of 1920.

Talbert called upon "the women of my race to pursue self-development and to engage in unselfish service." She promoted education, woman's suffrage, and programs and policies to alleviate poverty. She hosted the



Frederick Douglass House



Empire State Federation's 1913 interracial suffrage convention at the Michigan Avenue Baptist Church. Talbert participated in "Votes for Women: A Symposium by Leading Thinkers of Colored Women," held in Washington, DC, in 1915, in which she reinforced this message of service and called for the ratification of the suffrage amendment.

Joel Spingarn, Chairman of the Board of the NAACP, included Talbert among the sixty Black and white delegates whom he invited to attend the 1916 Amenia Conference at Troutbeck, his upstate New York estate. Their agenda was to initiate a dialogue on racism in America and practical ways to redress it. Under NAACP auspices, she traveled on Jim Crow trains throughout the South to establish a number of branches in the

critical states of Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana, areas where Blacks had experienced unprecedented violence and hostility. These bases of support were crucial in strengthening and expanding the organization's influence.

Just as the responsibilities for Black women were great, Talbert saw the twentieth century as one that offered them great opportunities. She contended that the oppression of people of color around the globe was connected and that their struggle for self-determination was Black Americans' struggle too. She joined the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, whose beliefs governed Talbert's life and politics.

Like her predecessors Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Ida B. Wells, Talbert traveled to Europe and used her experience and

stature to win support for what might be thought of as an early Black Lives Matter campaign. She went to France during WWI to work as a nurse in Romagne under the auspices of the YMCA. Talbert joined Addie Hunton, Helen Curtis, and other NACW club women whose mission was to improve living conditions and boost the morale of Black soldiers. The women offered courses on reading and writing to the Black recruits. They contributed \$1,000 toward the purchase of the Frederick Douglass estate in Washington. In the aftermath of the war, Talbert was appointed to the ill-fated League of Nations committee on international relations.

During the Talbert NACW administration, the International Council of Women (ICW) recognized it as a full-fledged member and invited the

NACW to send an official delegate to the quinquennial conference that met in Christiana, Norway in 1920. Observers noted that delegates came from China, Eastern Europe, South Africa, and that the US delegation included a “colored” woman. Talbert addressed the conferees in the House of Storting, the Norwegian parliament building, in an impassioned speech in which she discussed colonialism and its impact upon African peoples. She challenged the delegates to address racism and she concluded by arguing that “the greatness of nations is shown by their strict regard for human rights, rigid enforcement of the law without bias, and a just administration of the affairs of life.”

Talbert was an active participant in the deliberations of the ICW, where she advocated for children’s rights. The ICW approved the Talbert resolution that protected children born out of wedlock, and upon her return home, Minnesota and Wisconsin delegates successfully lobbied their legislators to approve a bill securing rights for these children.

In 1922, Talbert and other former NACW officers established the International Council of Women of the Darker Races in Washington, DC. This progressive group was designed to bring together women from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America, as well as American Indigenous women, to use their collective voices and actions to dismantle racism. Women from Korea, India, Cuba, West Africa, Haiti, the Middle East, and the United States were represented. Mary Talbert served on the important Education Committee that prepared the syllabi and other instruments needed to facilitate their work.

Talbert died of coronary thrombosis in Buffalo on October 15, 1923, and tributes came from far and near.

“Mrs. Talbert was a dean at diplomacy,” Buffalo businessman and activist James A. Ross said in his eulogy. “With her there was no Race problem that could not be overcome. ... She had the confidence of the outside world as no other woman regardless of Race. Her armor of defense was at all times buckled tight.”

Projects such as the restoration of Douglass’s Cedar Hill estate in the Anacostia neighborhood in Washington, DC, are a tribute to her vision and tenacity. The NACW established in her memory a \$10,000 fund to restore the Douglass estate and later deeded it to the National Park Service. Several NACW clubs and schools across the country were named to celebrate Talbert’s life. Booth Memorial Hospital for mothers and babies in Cleveland was renamed in her honor. (The Talbert hospital and Booth Memorial later merged into the Cleveland Metropolitan Hospital.) The University at Buffalo, the State University of New York, named its student services building in honor of Mary Burnett Talbert and recently renamed a campus road Mary Talbert Way.

Nearly a century after Talbert fought for anti-lynching laws, Congress passed an anti-lynching law in February 2020, but the measure did not pass the Senate. ■



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THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

There is no extant body of Mary Burnett Talbert papers. The records of the NAACP in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, includes her committee reports, correspondence, branch records, travel itineraries, and photographs. The New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture houses African American newspapers, including the *New York Age* and *The Colored American* that recounted Talbert’s lectures and meetings. *The Buffalo American*, an important source for understanding the political activities of African Americans and Talbert speeches are in the Buffalo History Museum, as are Talbert’s Spingarn medal and family portraits. Manuscript census records for 1905-1925 that provide biographical information on the Talbert family are in the New York State Library. The Pan American Exposition files that document Talbert’s advocacy are in the Buffalo and Erie County Library. Further information on Mary Burnett Talbert’s travel, lectures, and organizational activities can be found in the Nash correspondence files in the Monroe Fordham Research Center at SUNY Buffalo State University and in *Records of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs*, (University Publications of America: Bethesda, 1993, 1994) edited by Lillian S. Williams. Readers may also find of interest Williams’ “Mary Morris Burnett Talbert” in *Black Women in America*, (New York: Ralph Carlson Publishers, 1993) edited by Darlene Clark Hine.