



Pushing the Limits of the Color Line: Mary McLeod Bethune & the New Deal (A Passion for Social Equality) (Volume 1)

gy williams

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“Unless the people have vision, they perish,” speaking to an interracial audience in 1935, Mary McLeod Bethune challenged them to “make way for social and political justice.” This political biography examines Bethune's activist leadership from the early 1900s to the New Deal era. An African-American educator born in the South in 1875, Bethune's educational and social activism was unique. As founding president of Bethune-Cookman College, she also served as president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Appointed in 1936 as national director of the “Division of Negro Affairs,” Bethune became an influential insider on the New Deal's response to Black youth and a political force on Capitol Hill. She pushed for affirmative action policy, for funding Black college students, and for Black representation in state and federal positions. Because of her Progressive era experience as an NACW president, she came to Capitol Hill with organizational leadership experience. Believing that “equality of opportunity” and political coalitions were key to Black empowerment, Bethune mobilized Black women in 1935 to form the National Council of Negro Women. Their goals included monitoring and protesting against discriminatory practices in New Deal and government programs. Her political friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt developed during this period and lasted until her demise in 1955. Characterized in her lifetime as “First Lady of the Struggle” and after her death as the “prototype of the rising social consciousness” of Black people, Bethune left a significant legacy of leadership to Black America. A charismatically focused leader and a passionate public lecturer, she portrayed a self-determinist ideology to Black youth, women, and men; and she was committed to advancing social and political integration of the race. This historical inquiry into Bethune's public career illustrates that her activism reflected and transformed the protracted and ongoing African-American struggle for equality and justice.

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