

Highlights in Black History



Mrs. Fanny Jackson Coppin

Fanny Jackson Coppin: An Education for Everyone

by Daphne Myers

When you are born a slave, service is demanded; when you are born again, service comes naturally as the desire of your heart. For Fanny Jackson, that service for the Lord came in her tremendous desire for education, both for herself and for all African-Americans. She wrote in her autobiography, “It was in me to get an education and to teach my people. This idea was deep in my soul. Where it came from I cannot tell. It must have been born in me.”

Born a slave in Washington, D.C., on October 15, 1837, Fanny Jackson was 12 years old before her aunt, Sarah Orr Clark, was able to purchase her freedom for \$125. Although her grandfather managed to purchase his freedom and the freedom of four of his children, Fannie’s mother, Lucy, remained a slave. Her grandmother, Fanny

remembered, “would ask God to bless her offspring.” Though Fanny did not know what “offspring” were, her grandmother’s prayer request would be answered.

Fanny worked as a paid servant for famed author George Henry Calvert. The Calverts loved her like their own daughter, and seeing her passion for education, enrolled her in the Rhode Island Normal School.

In 1860 Fanny enrolled at Oberlin College in Ohio and excelled in men’s studies. At that time, no other institutions in the United States allowed African Americans, male or female, to pursue higher education. She attended on a scholarship from Bishop Daniel Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, who was extremely impressed with her passion for education at a time when even white women often did not attend college.

The school soon appointed her the first African-American student to teach in the college’s preparatory department, and her classes filled to capacity. On Sundays she sang in the Oberlin Church choir and she was elected to the prestigious Young Ladies Literary Society.

She passed on her knowledge in an evening school she founded to teach reading and writing to freed slaves. “It was deeply touching to me to see old men painfully following the simple words of spelling, so intensely eager to learn,” she wrote. “I felt that for such people to have been kept in the darkness of ignorance was an unpardonable sin.”

In 1865, Fanny graduated from Oberlin as the second black woman in the United States to earn

a Bachelor's degree. She immediately accepted a position as a high school teacher at the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) in Philadelphia, a school established by the Quakers. Today, that school is known as Cheney State University. Fanny taught Greek, Latin, and Mathematics and within a year was promoted to principal of the Ladies Department. By 1869, Fannie was the principal of the entire school, making her the first African-American woman to become a school principal in the United States. Her improvements included sending progress reports to parents, an idea soon adopted by the entire Philadelphia school system.

But her Christian service extended beyond the school—she founded The Women's Exchange and Girls' Home to teach skills to working and poor women, served on the board of a home for the colored aged, and wrote a newspaper column on topics such as the rights of women and blacks.

Fanny gave lectures in literary societies and churches to raise money for a new Industrial Department at the school, where the boys were taught bricklaying, plastering, carpentry, shoemaking, printing and tailoring; and the girls were taught dressmaking, millinery, typewriting, and stenography. But in addition to knowledge and skills, Fanny believed in teaching Christian values: "Whatever we do, the first thing is to have the child know about his Heavenly Father, and that we must all do what will please Him."

In 1881, at age 44, Fannie Jackson married Reverend Levi Jenkins Coppin, the pastor of Baltimore's Bethel AME Church. In 1900, her husband was elected an AME bishop, and in 1902, the couple traveled to Cape Town, South Africa, where

they served as missionary workers and founded the Bethel Institute, a missionary school with self-help programs for black South Africans.

In 1906, due to failing health, Fanny retired from the Institute after 37 years and returned to organizing mission societies with her husband in South Africa. As her health declined further, Fanny returned to Philadelphia, where she died on January 21, 1913.

Her commitment to education is memorialized in Coppin State University in Baltimore, Maryland. Established in 1900 as the Colored High School, it became the Fanny Jackson Coppin Normal School in 1926 and a Maryland state university in 1988.

Her life's passion for everyone to have an equal chance for an education is summed up in this message of equal opportunity she promoted throughout her life:

"We do not ask that any one of our people shall be put in a position because he is a colored person, but we do ask that he shall not be kept out of a position because he is a colored person. 'An open field and no favors' is all that is requested."



A classroom in the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia, where Fanny was a teacher and principal for 37 years.