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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

Mattie E. Coleman

Mattie E. Coleman, physician, missionary, school administrator, activist, lecturer, feminist, and suffragist was born in Sumner County near Gallatin, Tennessee, on July 3, 1870 as Mattie Eliza Howard. The oldest of four children, at age fifteen she was graduated from high school. She continued her studies at Central Tennessee College in Nashville, which was renamed Walden University in 1900; she later entered Meharry Medical College, where she earned her medical degree. In 1902 she married the Reverend P. J. Coleman, a minister in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, now known as the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME). Later, in 1932, she became the first graduate of Meharry's dental hygiene program.

As a 1906 graduate of Meharry Medical College, Coleman was one of the first African American women in Tennessee to become a physician. Soon after graduating from Meharry, she established a medical practice in Clarksville, Tennessee, where her husband had been sent to pastor the Wesley Chapel CME church. In Clarksville, Coleman inculcated her concern for the poor into her practice. Because she combined medicine and missionary work, Dr. Coleman was elected president of the Clarksville District Missionary Society. She was an activist within the CME denomination and became an ardent supporter of women's rights. Coleman and other women fought to change denominational polity that excluded women from helping in the formulation of its national program. This struggle extended beyond the absence of a Connectional Women's Missionary Society, as the organization became known, and into women being licensed to preach and carry on evangelistic work.

Coleman and other women of like mind in the denomination campaigned for the formation of a national women's missionary society. Twice, in 1906 and 1910, they were unsuccessful in their appeals to change the minds of those attending the sessions of the General Conference. Refusing to acquiesce to defeat, they requested another hearing before the General Conference at its 1916 meeting. When Helena B. Cobb, who had been asked to serve as spokesperson, became ill, Coleman became the leader of the women's committee for petition. Two years later, they were successful and the Women's Connectional Missionary Society of the CME church came into being.

The Women's Connectional Missionary Society, which was composed of forty-one women, held its first meeting in Nashville and elected Dr. Mattie E. Coleman as president and Helena B. Cobb as first vice-president. In addition to the office of president and first vice-president, other offices included a second vice-president, secretary, treasurer, community director, chair of literature, chair of the art department, editor, and chaplain. On September 3, 1918, at Capers Chapel CME Church in Nashville, Coleman called the group to action in which she set forth the various ways that they aided in the advancement of the women's movement within the church. The Women's Connectional Missionary Society also drew up a constitution and by-laws for the organization's governance. Coleman held the position of president of the Women's Connectional Missionary Society from 1918 to 1939. Not only was Coleman interested in the rights of women in the church, she also was concerned about women gaining the right to vote.

In 1920 she collaborated with J. Frankie Pierce, founder of the City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, and joined forces with white women suffragists to aid in making Tennessee the thirty-sixth state to ratify the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution that gave women the right of the franchise. Earlier in 1919, the Tennessee General Assembly passed a limited suffrage act, which Governor Albert H. Roberts signed into law on April 17, 1919. According to historian Anita Goodstein, Coleman and Pierce's efforts as organizers of black women voters bore fruit in that year's election when twenty-five hundred black women voted for the first time in Nashville's municipal elections.

Coleman not only was a physician, missionary, activist, and suffragist, she was also a school administrator. In 1909 she became the first dean of women and medical advisor, as well as a lecturer at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. In April 1921, through the efforts of Coleman and Pierce, the Tennessee General Assembly enacted legislation for the creation of the Tennessee Vocational School for Colored Girls. Pierce became the school's first superintendent serving from 1921 to 1939. Dr. Coleman followed Pierce as superintendent and served from 1939 until her death in 1942. She was also appointed medical examiner of the Court of Calanthe, an appointment she held for more than twenty years. Dr. Coleman was the first American Black women physician to serve as a state tuberculosis advisor and counselor.

A trailblazer, Dr. Mattie E. Coleman cleared the path for black women not only in the medical profession but also in the male-dominated sanctuary of the black church and society in general. She provided medical attention to children and those less fortunate. She assisted Mother Sallie Sawyer and Estelle Haskins in founding Bethlehem Center in Nashville.

A significant leader in the history of Nashville and the state of Tennessee, in 1993, when the Missionary Council celebrated the 75th Anniversary of the Women's Missionary Council of the CME denomination, they placed a monument on Coleman's grave in Nashville's Greenwood Cemetery.

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