



# Foundation Document Overview

## Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site

District of Columbia



### Contact Information

For more information about the *Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site Foundation Document*, contact: [anac\\_superintendent@nps.gov](mailto:anac_superintendent@nps.gov) or (202) 472-3884 or write to:

Anacostia Park and Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens, 1900 Anacostia Drive SE, Washington, DC 20020

## Purpose



*MARY McLEOD BETHUNE COUNCIL HOUSE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE preserves and interprets the life, legacy, and home of Mary McLeod Bethune and her pioneering work in establishing the National Council of Negro Women. The site also preserves and manages the National Archives for Black Women's History, a living repository that allows for the continued interpretation of the history and influence of African American women in America.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The Mary McLeod Bethune Council House was the residence in Washington, DC, of Mary McLeod Bethune, internationally renowned educator, political leader, and founder of the National Council of Negro Women.
- It was at this location that Mary McLeod Bethune, as the president of the National Council of Negro Women, received heads of state, government officials, and leaders from around the world.
- The Mary McLeod Bethune Council House was the first national headquarters of the National Council of Negro Women, an organization founded on the principle of social justice that continues to empower African American women to work toward racial and gender equality.
- The National Archives for Black Women's History includes the largest extant manuscript collection of materials pertaining to African American women and their organizations, and also contains extensive correspondence, photographs, and memorabilia relating to Mary McLeod Bethune.
- The National Park Service stewards artifacts and other materials related to the history of African American women and the African American community. These materials are added to the existing collections.



## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **The Council House and Carriage House**
- **National Archives for Black Women’s History**
- **Museum Collection**
- **Education and Scholarship**
- **Recreational Opportunities**

Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Connections to the Logan Circle Neighborhood**



## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- Mary McLeod Bethune’s accomplishments as an internationally renowned educator and political leader in the fight for equality, social justice, and religious freedom encourage us to view civil rights as a universal issue and inspire us to struggle for human rights here and abroad.
- At this site, the National Council of Negro Women carried out planning and implementation of critical and decisive components of the civil rights movement. Not only was this the center of leadership for the organization, but it was also a safe haven for women who were able to board in the house when alternative lodgings were scarce or unsafe.
- The site stewards the National Archives for Black Women’s History. The archives provide opportunities for education and scholarship, and motivate political action in the continuing struggle for social justice and equality.
- Through her work with the National Council of Negro Women and various political and educational groups, Mary McLeod Bethune encouraged respect and social justice not only for African American women, but also for American society as a whole.
- Mary McLeod Bethune was an influential figure in the civil rights movement, and her life and legacy embodied at this national historic site are important for helping visitors understand the early struggles and victories in the long, difficult battle for civil rights in the United States.



## Description

Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site was established by Congress on October 15, 1982, through Public Law 97-329. This site recognizes Mary McLeod Bethune's accomplishments as a renowned educator, national political leader, and founder of the National Council of Negro Women.

Mary McLeod Bethune was an influential figure in the civil rights movement, and her life and legacy embodied at this national historic site are important for helping visitors understand the early struggles and victories in the long, difficult battle for civil rights in the United States. The site was the first headquarters of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). Through the preservation and restoration of the site, visitors to the Council House and researchers are engaged through experiential interpretive experiences, focusing on enlightened programming, interactive media, and changing exhibitions. The park envisions the site as a center for leadership studies to empower audiences and engage visitors to strive for freedom and equality in the spirit of Mrs. Bethune's legacy.

The site also stewards the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial Museum and the National Archives for Black Women's History. The archives include the largest extant manuscript collection of materials pertaining to African American women and their organizations and contain extensive correspondence, photographs, and memorabilia relating to Mary McLeod Bethune. The museum and archives stewards artifacts, clothing, artwork, and other materials that document the history of African American women and their struggle for civil rights and equality. The park is undertaking a massive cataloging and digitization effort to preserve the archives in perpetuity, with the goal that they be available to a broader audience.

By her own words and example, Mary McLeod Bethune demonstrated the value of education, a philosophy of universal love, and the wise and consistent use of political power in striving for racial and gender equality. This historic site was the location at which Mary McLeod Bethune directed the activities that brought her national and international recognition, including serving as the president of the National Council of Negro Women and receiving heads of state, government officials, and leaders from across the world. The house, as the first NCNW headquarters, was a center for the development of strategies and programs that advanced the interests of African American women and the African American community.

The 15th of 17 children of former slaves, Bethune grew up amidst the poverty and oppression of the Reconstruction South, yet rose to prominence as an educator, presidential advisor, and political activist. Through her own schooling by missionaries in South Carolina, Bethune recognized the importance of education in the emerging struggle for civil rights. In 1904 she founded the Daytona Educational and Industrial School for Negro Girls in Daytona Beach, Florida, which later merged with the Cookman Institute to become Bethune-Cookman College (in 2007, the school became Bethune-Cookman University). Mary McLeod Bethune worked tirelessly to influence legislation affecting African Americans and women and continued to be an important voice for human rights until her death in 1955 at the age of 79.

