

OXFORD AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES CENTER

Maude B. Coleman

Politician, clubwoman, and welfare worker, was born in the Piedmont region of Virginia to Frances Dearing in approximately 1879. During her youth, the Dearing family moved to Harrisburg, where Maude was educated in the Harrisburg school system. Later in life she attended the University of Pennsylvania. On 5 September 1897 Maude B. Dearing married John W. Coleman in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They had one child, Priscilla Coleman, who died in infancy.

Throughout her adult life, Coleman was a driving force in Harrisburg's African American community. During World War I she worked tirelessly in support of African American troops and received a commendation from General Cornelius Vanderbilt for her service. This success in community organizing encouraged Coleman to become a founding member of the Phyllis Wheatley Colored Harrisburg Branch of the Young Women's Christian Association in 1920. Coleman participated in and led a variety of social reform organizations, including the Dauphin County Tuberculosis Society, the Rebecca Aldridge Civic Club of Harrisburg, and the Pennsylvania State Organization of Social Workers.

Maude Coleman's influence spread beyond Harrisburg during the 1920s due to her outspoken political activism and leadership of the Pennsylvania State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. In 1922, Coleman vigorously campaigned throughout the state in an effort to gain passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in the United States Congress. She skillfully utilized her position as state organizer for the Federation of Colored Women's Club to build a strong political following. Coleman was later elected district vice president and president of the organization. Coleman also played an active role in local and state politics. She was a charter member of the Pennsylvania State Council of Republican Women and the Dauphin County Council of Republican Women.

Coleman's prominence in the African American community and loyalty to the Republican Party was rewarded by the Republican governor Gifford Pinchot in 1925 with her appointment as an Interracial Consultant in the Bureau of Social Work. As one of the first African Americans appointed to a state patronage position, Coleman worked to secure jobs for African Americans in the state Department of Welfare and served as a consultant in all areas of interracial concern. During a 1937 fight to integrate steel mills in western Pennsylvania,

Coleman was brought in to negotiate with executives and successfully secured jobs for African American workers. Though difficult to quantify, the impact of her appointment cannot be discounted. In her autobiography, [Dorothy Height](#) the president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) remembered the thrill of hearing Coleman speak to a meeting of the State Federation and her pride in seeing an African American woman as a member of the state government. Though Height did not remember Coleman's position, she recalled that her speech "kept me awake most of the night. The words haunted me." Coleman retained her patronage job until her death, serving for over thirty-five years and under eight different governors.

By the 1930s Maude Coleman was a well-known figure throughout the eastern United States. Still active in local issues, during 1936 she led a group of African American leaders in forming a disaster committee when Harrisburg was inundated by heavy flooding, and was president of the auxiliary to the Harrisburg branch of the NAACP. On the national stage she was named the director of the Colored Women's Eastern Division of the Republican Party. During the campaign she traveled throughout the eastern seaboard as part of a "flying squadron" of speakers who spoke in support of the Alf Landon/Frank Knox ticket. As a lifelong Republican, Coleman consistently pressured the party to be more inclusive and actively campaigned for increased representation for African Americans in party leadership.

From the 1940s Coleman remained a prominent voice in statewide and national social reform and civil rights activities. During World War II, Coleman renewed her efforts on behalf of the armed services by participating in protests against the segregation of the National Guard and worked to improve African American access to defense jobs. In an effort to build on the gains made by African Americans during the war, she authored a book, *The History of the Negro in Pennsylvania*, published by the Department of Welfare in 1947, and became an outspoken advocate of desegregation. In an impassioned appeal to the readers of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, Coleman invoked the participation of African American soldiers and reminded readers that segregation voided democratic principles. Though Coleman had contemplated retirement in the early 1950s, she remained employed as Interracial Consultant to the Department of Welfare until her death on 25 February 1953. (A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*)

