

Britton, Mary E.

(1855–1925)

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Mary E. Britton, educator, social activist journalist, physician, and ardent believer was born during the antebellum era in Lexington, Kentucky, on April 16, 1855.¹ Lexington was the “epicenter of the slave trade in Kentucky.”² Thus, as black residents of Lexington, Britton and her family would have recognized the thin, sometimes indistinguishable, line between bondage and freedom. Her parents, Henry Harrison and Laura Marshall Britton, were free blacks who had ten children. Mary Britton was the third.³

Relatively little is known about Britton's paternal grandparents. Britton's father was born free in the 1820s. Despite the limited labor options available to most black men at the time, Henry H. Britton was a skilled tradesman working with his hands as a barber and carpenter.

More is known about Britton's maternal grandparents. Most notably, her maternal grandfather was Thomas F. Marshall, a prominent attorney, politician and slave owner.⁴ Her maternal grandmother was an enslaved woman, known only as Mary, and owned by Thomas Marshall and his wife. While most of the scholarship on Mary Britton's life is decidedly mum about the nature of the relationship between Thomas Marshall and Mary, the woman he owned, the power differential that existed between them or any master and slave is telling and challenges the notion that any aspect of their physical relationship was consensual.⁵ Laura Marshall was born in 1832. She was emancipated in 1848. Until her untimely death in 1874, she worked as a matron at Berea College,



Mary E. Britton.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

some 40 miles south of Lexington.

Henry Harrison and Laura Britton are credited with instilling in their children a desire for education. Perhaps it was Henry's limited schooling and Laura's early exposure to reading and writing that informed their perspectives on the value of a more expansive education for their children.⁶ Given the racially segregated culture of the South, Britton's early education occurred in private schools for African Americans operated by the American Missionary Association. From 1871 until 1874, Britton, along with her sister Julia, attended Berea College. They were the "first two African American graduates of Berea College." However, circumstances actually caused them to leave the school a month before the 1874 graduation ceremony.⁷

In 1874, both of Britton's parents died. This dual loss altered the course of her life. The exigencies of a life without the support of her parents, according to Karen Cotton McDaniel, "forced her to leave Berea College without graduating and to seek employment as a teacher." In order to sustain herself, Britton began teaching in the segregated public school system in central Kentucky and joined the Kentucky Negro Education Association founded in 1877.⁸

Britton had been a member of the Episcopal church when she joined the Seventh-day Adventist church in 1893, one of eighteen charter members of the black church in Lexington. At that time, the Adventist church had only just begun efforts to evangelize black Americans and had only two full-time black ministers. It was through the preaching and witnessing of one of these men, Alonzo Barry, and his wife that Britton came to accept the Adventist message.⁹ Britton's involvement in the life of her church as a clerk and fundraiser demonstrated her desire to advance its local mission and global outreach projects, and the financial reports in the *Southern Union Worker* suggest that she was faithful in her giving.¹⁰

In 1897, Britton retired from teaching in order to pursue her interest in medicine at the American Medical Missionary College in Battle Creek, Michigan, headed by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg. She also studied at the school's Chicago campus, and graduated in 1902.¹¹ She furthered her studies at Howard Medical School in Washington, D.C. and Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee.¹²

The first black woman to become a licensed physician in Lexington, Britton focused on addressing the healthcare needs of black Americans who were refused care by hospitals and physicians bound by the dictates of "separate but equal."¹³ In a photograph taken at a 1910 meeting of the Medical Society of Negro Physicians in Kentucky, Britton is the only woman visible. Indeed, black female physicians were rare. Working from her home, Britton provided a range of services for her patients, including hydrotherapy, electrotherapy, and massage.¹⁴ In 1923, she retired from her work as a physician.¹⁵

Akin to her contemporaries, Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931) and Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954), Britton was deeply concerned with the conditions affecting black men and women. In her analysis of Britton's role as an intrepid journalist, Laretta Flynn Byars asserts that her writings "provide insight into the social, cultural, educational, and religious activities of African Americans, particularly in Lexington, around the turn of the

century.”¹⁶ Britton’s opinions were published in a variety of local and regional newspapers including the *Lexington American Citizen*, the *Lexington Daily Transcript*, the *Lexington Herald*, the *Lexington Leader*, the *Cleveland Gazette*, the *Indianapolis World*, Baltimore’s *Ivy*, and Cincinnati’s the *American Catholic Tribune*.¹⁷ As a social activist, Britton vehemently challenged the legitimacy of the Separate Coach Law passed by the Kentucky legislature in 1892. Her concern with the welfare of the youth and elderly is illustrated through her work as cofounder of the Colored Orphan Industrial Home in Lexington in 1892.¹⁸

Despite Britton’s exposure to patriarchal culture in which dominant gender norms relegated women to the private sphere of domesticity and men to the public realm, examining her professional trajectory reveals that Britton knowingly transgressed societal norms and cultural dictates. In the accounts of Britton’s life, there is no record of her marrying or bearing children. In her decision to assume alternative roles that pushed back against tradition, Britton deliberately challenged dominant perspectives regarding a black woman’s place. Her narrative reflects her refusal to be constrained by cultural dictates related to her race, gender, or class status.

Mary E. Britton died in 1925 when she was seventy years old. At the end of her life, Britton left her library, perhaps one of her greatest worldly possessions, to her church.¹⁹

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NOTES

1. 1900 United States census, Battle Creek Ward 3, Calhoun, Michigan, enumeration district: 0135; FHL microfilm: 1240704, page 2, "Britton, Mary E.," Ancestry.com, accessed December 23, 2018, <http://ancestry.com>.
2. Benjamin Baker, "Hidden Figures: Black Adventist Women Who Made a Difference (Part I)," *Spectrum*, February 22, 2018, accessed December 23, 2018, <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2018/02/22/hidden-figures-black-adventist-women-who-made-difference-part-1>.
3. Karen Cotton McDaniel, "Mary Ellen Britton: A Potent Agent for Public Reform," *The Griot: The Journal of African American Studies*, 32, no.1 (Spring 2013): 52; Laretta Flynn Byars, "Mary Elizabeth Britton," in *Notable Black American Women*, vol. 2, ed. by Jessie Carney Smith (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992), 55. McDaniels concludes from multiple sources that Henry and Laura produced ten offspring, though Byars states that there were seven.
4. Baker, "Hidden Figures."
5. Byars refers to Britton's maternal grandmother as a "slave mistress" (55), and Baker describes her as "violated" by Thomas Marshall.
6. See Baker on the relative educational advantages Laura experienced as an enslaved person because of her father's prominence.
7. Sona Apbasovas, "Mary E. Britton," *Hutchins Library Highlights: The Official Blog for Hutchins Library at Berea College*, February 23, 2014, accessed December 23, 2018, hutchinslibrary.wordpress.com/2014/02/23/marybritton/; Emily Applebaum, "The Noble Soul of Mary Britton,"

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<http://www.bereamag.com/archives/2012/summer/features/strategic-planning-at-berea-college/>; Baker, Hidden Figures.”

8. McDaniel, 54.
9. R. Steven Norman III, “Fighting for Justice: Mary Britton, Adventist Pioneer and Community Leader,” *Southern Tidings*, February 2006, 4.
10. Baker, “Hidden Figures.”
11. “American Medical Missionary College Collection,” Digital Archives, Loma Linda University Libraries, accessed December 24, 2018, <https://cdm.llu.edu/digital/collection/ammc>. The “Class of 1902” photograph in the collection includes Mary Britton.
12. Apbasova, “Mary E. Britton.”
13. Byars, 55-56.
14. Tom Eblen, “Lexington Physician was an Activist Far Ahead of Her Time,” *Lexington-Herald Leader*, February 15, 2012, accessed December 24, 2018, www.kentucky.com/news/local/community/article44154993.html.
15. Baker, “Hidden Figures.”
16. Byars, 55.
17. Byars, 56.
18. McDaniel, 54-56.
19. Byars, 56.

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