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The Political Pen: Alice Dunbar-Nelson

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Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

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One College Avenue | Mechanicsburg PA 17055

THE POLITICAL PEN

Alice Dunbar-Nelson

1875-1935

ALICE: BEFORE DUNBAR-NELSON

Alice Ruth Moore was born in Louisiana in 1875. She received her undergraduate degree, became an educator, and continued her education at Cornell University, Columbia University, and the University of Pennsylvania.

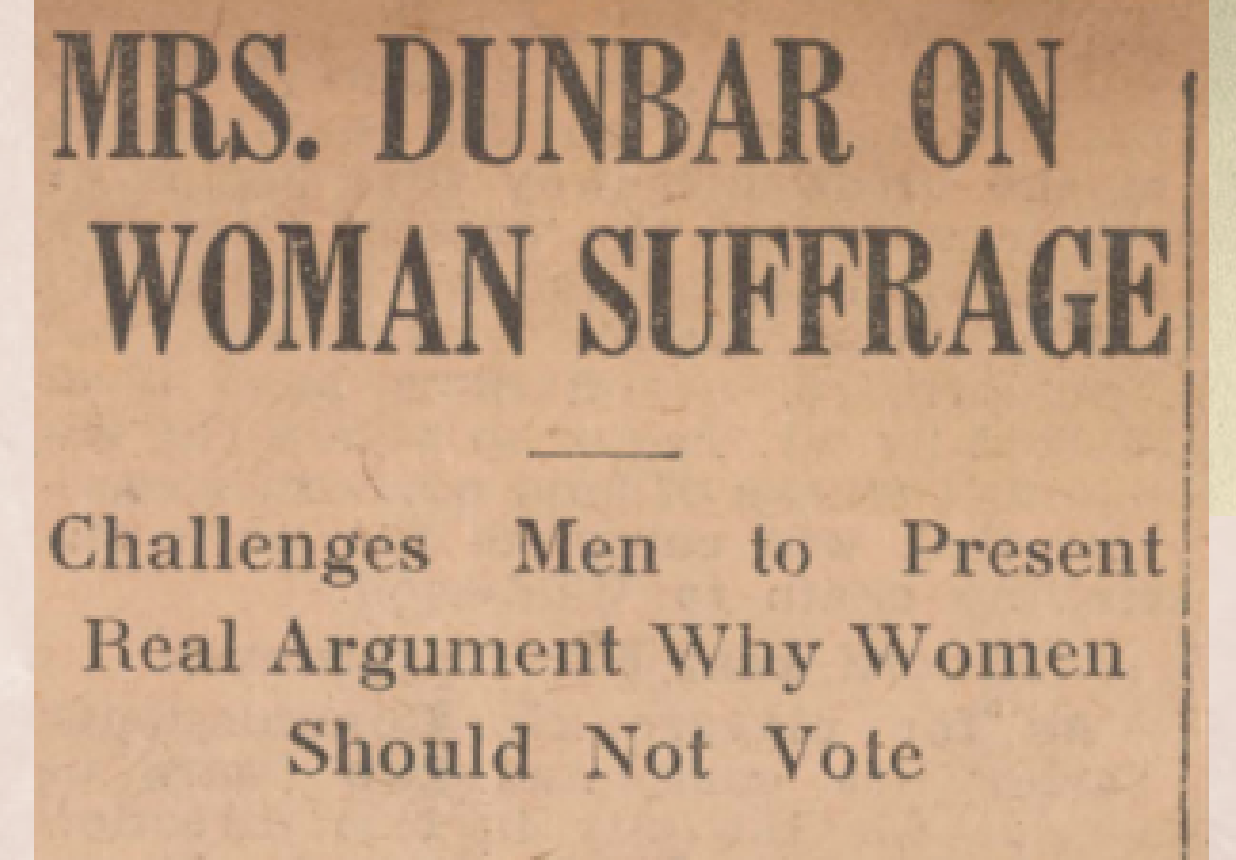
Alice married world-renowned African-American poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar in 1898. Dunbar died in 1906. Ten years later, Alice married Robert Nelson, a publisher and beloved leader in Harrisburg. For the next few years, they divided their time between his home in Harrisburg and her home in Wilmington, Delaware. Together, they published *Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence*.

BRINGING HER LIFE INTO LITERATURE

In 1895, Alice Dunbar-Nelson published her first collection of short stories and poems, *Violets and Other Tales*. She also published a few plays, such as *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People.

Dunbar-Nelson often used her creative works to address racism and limitations placed on women. Her poem "I Sit and Sew" expresses anguish about the way that society prevented African-American military nurses from serving in World War I. In her poem "Memoriam," Dunbar-Nelson critiques the ways that society belittles women.

A woman's tribute, 'tis a tiny dot,
A merest flower from a frail, small hand,
To lay among the many petaled wreaths
About thy form, — a tribute soon forgot.
-An excerpt from "Memoriam,"
from *Violets and other Tales*



TURNING THE PEN TO THE POLL

Dunbar-Nelson used her writing to champion the rights of all women - both African-American and white. She also added an editorial voice to conversations about human rights and international peace in numerous newspapers. In 1915, she traveled across Pennsylvania, speaking "three and four times a day for equal suffrage," according to her own scrapbook. In one of those Pennsylvania tours, she addressed more than 1,000 people at the Wesley Union African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Harrisburg.

ALICE'S TRIBUTE

As an African-American woman advocating for change, Dunbar-Nelson risked much. Her society remained stained by discrimination and lynching. However, Dunbar-Nelson's voice calling for change made an important difference. In 1920, the ratification of the 19th Amendment allowed for all women to at last enjoy the vote.

In 1935, Dunbar-Nelson died at the age of 60. Despite being a successful writer, educator, speaker, and activist throughout her lifetime, her death certificate listed "housewife" as her occupation. Although this final, official document failed to capture her legacy, Dunbar-Nelson's important work lives on, 100 years after women gained suffrage.

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Any man or woman in attendance, who, prior to hearing Mrs. Dunbar, entertained any ideas antagonistic to the cause of women, surely must have experienced a change of heart.

-Dunbar-Nelson's scrapbook, published in *The Pittsburgh Courier* on October 22, 1915.

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What do you want your legacy to be?



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