

*Celebrating Women's History Month*

# Mary Burnett Talbert

(1866 — 1923)



**Buffalo and Erie County  
Historical Society**

Mary Burnett Talbert enjoyed more opportunities than most young Black women of the late 19th century, but being both Black and female limited her career choices. As an adult, she dedicated her life to increasing opportunities for everyone, especially Blacks and women.

Burnett was born in Oberlin, Ohio, on Sept. 17, 1866, one year after the end of the Civil War. Her parents came from North Carolina, but had never been slaves. They moved to Oberlin because of the town's reputation for tolerance. Burnett's father was active in the local Republican Party and ran businesses catering to the students of Oberlin College.

Oberlin College was famous as a progressive school where men and women took classes together. Black students were also welcome, and Burnett attended both Oberlin and the University of Buffalo. She moved to Little Rock, Ark., to become a schoolteacher in 1886, but was only allowed to teach Black students. Miss Burnett taught many subjects, including math, history, and Latin. She was promoted to assistant principal and later a high school

principal before marrying William Herbert Talbert and moving to Buffalo in 1891.

William Talbert was a successful realtor, an active Republican, and a clerk for the city of Buffalo. Mary Talbert wanted to continue teaching, but learned that married women couldn't work in Buffalo's public schools. Instead, she taught Sunday school at the Michigan Avenue Baptist Church and became active in her husband's social circle.

Mary Talbert believed that people working together could expand their rights as individuals in society. In 1899, she helped found Buffalo's Phyllis Wheatley Club, named after America's first famous Black poet. The Wheatley Club was itself part of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), which was formed in 1896. Through these organizations, Talbert lobbied for the inclusion of an exhibit on Black Americans at Buffalo's Pan-American Exposition of 1901 and helped showcase her people's history by purchasing and restoring the home of Frederick Douglass, the famous anti-slavery activist.

In 1910, as president of the Wheatley Club, Talbert invited the new National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to organize a chapter in Buffalo. She rose through the ranks of the fast-growing NAACP, helped set up chapters in southern states, and became its vice president in 1918. She also served as president of the NACW from 1916 to 1920.

For Talbert, the struggle for human rights was an international movement. She allied the NACW with the International Conference of Women (ICW) and attended an ICW convention in Norway in 1920. As she defended civil rights for Blacks in America, she spoke for the rights of women and children throughout Europe, and helped form the International Council of Women of the Darker Races to support the liberation of nations ruled by European empires.

Mary Burnett Talbert died in Buffalo on Oct. 15, 1923. She had already been honored with the NAACP's Springarm Medal, but the greatest tribute to her memory was the continuation of her work for human rights by the organizations she helped create.

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*For more information about Mary Burnett Talbert read, "Like No Other Woman" by Lillian Serece Williams, available online at <https://tinyurl.com/TalbertNYArchivesTrust>.*

*This is one of a series of four Celebrating Women's History Month profiles, written by Kevin Gilbert for the New York Newspapers Foundation's News Media Literacy/Newspaper In Education Program.*

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