



Global Ministries

Celebrating 200 Years in Mission



Photo: General Commission on Archives and History

BELLE HARRIS BENNETT

Mission Organization Leader and Champion for Women's Rights

Belle Harris Bennett was born in 1852 to a wealthy and prominent family in Richmond, Kentucky. She was one of two sisters and six brothers. All were devout Methodists. Her sister Sue Bennett, was also a leader in women's mission organizations.

Belle Bennett became the most influential Methodist woman of her time. A profoundly spiritual person and a born leader, she was the founder of Scarritt College for Christian Workers, a training school for women who aspired to be missionaries. Bennett traveled more than 20,000 miles over two years to raise funds to begin the school. Despite last-minute opposition, she persevered, and Scarritt opened in 1892. She was chosen president of the Woman's Parsonage and Home Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South from 1896 to 1910, then she was president of the merged Woman's Missionary Council from 1910 to 1922.

Bennett became the first woman ever to address a General Conference of MECS when the 1910 conference invited her to speak on women's rights. Though unsuccessful in gaining parity for women in the new board structure at that time, she had the patience and vision to continue to campaign to a successful conclusion in 1918, when General Conference approved the election of women delegates for the 1922 General Conference.

An elected delegate to the General Conference of 1922, Bennett was unable to attend because of illness and died in her native Richmond, Kentucky, soon after its adjournment. Buildings bore her name at Paine College in Georgia, Scarritt College in Nashville and the Women's Christian Medical College in Shanghai. She was also the namesake for Bennett College in Rio de Janeiro.

Source: Robert W. Sledge, *Five Dollars and Myself: The History of Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1845-1939*, with modifications.