

## Mary Ellen Britton: A Potent Agent for Public Reform

by

Karen Cotton McDaniel

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Unlike most American born blacks prior to Emancipation, Mary Ellen Britton was born free in Lexington, Kentucky on April 16, 1855 to Laura Marshall and Henry Harrison Britton. Her father Henry, who was of Spanish/Indian heritage, was a free born carpenter and barber. Her mother, Laura was born a slave yet unlike most slaves she was taught to read and write and was freed by her mistress in 1848 at the age of 16. Also Laura, being the daughter of this prominent white slave owner the Honorable Thomas Francis Marshall and his slave Mary, enjoyed many privileges. She was a talented singer and since she could pass for white, toured the United States free of racial discrimination.<sup>1</sup> The Brittons produced ten offspring – Susan J. (1850), Julia (1852), Mary Elizabeth (1855), Joseph aka Josiah (1856), Robert H. (1857), Martha (1860), William (1867) and Hattie (1868), Lucy (ca.1872) and Thomas Marshall (1873). At least one of the Britton children possibly died before reaching the age of ten years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Laura often traveled with her daughter Julia, a musical child prodigy who accompanied her mother on the piano. Because Laura was biracial she was able to pass for white but because Julia was much darker in complexion, she posed as her mother's servant so they could stay together in hotel rooms while traveling.

<sup>2</sup>The names and birth years of Henry and Laura Britton's children was retrieved through the 1860 Census of the United States for Fayette County, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward of Lexington which listed six children initially. In the 1870 Census for Glade, Madison County, Kentucky with Berea as the post office, the record for Henry and Laura Brittain [sic] again lists six children, two new children William age three and Hattie age one with Joseph and Martha no longer listed among the family members. Lexington newspaper articles about Mary Britton further reveal brother Tom, a well known jockey, and sister Lucy who were born between 1870 and 1874 since both parents die in 1874. Lucy is listed on the 1880 Fayette County census as age 7 on June 4, 1880 and was born in either 1873 if she had already had her birthday that year or in 1872 if her birthday in 1880 was after June 4. Tom is listed in newspaper articles as being born in 1873.

Given their mother's educational background the children were all encouraged to pursue educational opportunities. As a child Mary's parents recognized her love of books and learning and sought educational opportunities for developing her intellectual capacity. Initially she attended local schools run by the American Missionary Association.<sup>3</sup> Both Mary and an older sister Julia also attended the William Gibson School on the corner of Green and Fourth Streets in Louisville, Kentucky. The Gibson School which was established in 1847 in the Colored Methodist Church operated with the approval of the city's white authorities as did several other black schools. These schools served not only the free black population but also many slaves whose owners were progressive enough to seek an education for their servants.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the onset of the Civil War, the sisters returned to their Frankfort home where Julia assisted her mother in teaching slaves to read and write, which was never illegal in Kentucky. In 1860, the Brittons lived in Lexington where Henry was a barber and in addition to her musical endeavors, Laura worked as a seamstress.<sup>5</sup> After the war around 1869 the Britton family moved to Berea where Mary and her sister Julia, a musical child prodigy, enrolled in the interracial program at Berea College. Mary attended the school from 1871-1874 during which time Julia also taught classes while attending the school.<sup>6</sup> Many of the Britton

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<sup>3</sup>W.D. Johnson. *Biographical Sketches of Prominent Negro Men and Women of Kentucky*. Lexington, KY: The Standard Print, 1897, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>H.C. Weeden. *Weeden's History of the Colored People of Louisville* (Louisville: Weeden, 1897), 31.

<sup>5</sup>1860 *United States Federal Census*, Lexington, Fayette County, Kentucky, p. 422.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Sears. "Early Berea History: Berea's First Black Teacher." *The Pinnacle*, February 20, 1988. Berea College Archives. Julia Britton Hooks' student file. Julia Britton is listed among the Berea College faculty teaching instrumental music from 1870-1872. As such she was not only one of the first black women to attend college but also the first black to teach white students in Kentucky. College records also indicate that their mother Laura was employed as the school's matron (a position comparable to Dean of Women) for a short time. Julia Britton Hooks was later the Founder of the Hooks Conservatory of Music on Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee.

children attended Berea College with most of them attending before their parents' deaths in 1874.

The changes in Mary's financial situation as a result of her parents' deaths forced her to leave Berea College without graduating and to seek employment as a teacher. She first secured a teaching position in Chilesburg, Kentucky before finding a similar position in Lexington, her hometown, in 1876. Mary initially rented a room on Mill Street, then later moved to Lexington Avenue before sharing living quarters with her older sister Susan and brother-in-law Benjamin Franklin at 328 North Limestone.<sup>7</sup> Ben, who ran a barber shop also on North Limestone, was a well known businessman in Lexington maintaining his shop in the same location for thirty two years before moving to a more spacious and handsomely decorated shop on Short Street.<sup>8</sup>

Mary Britton was among the first members of the State Association of Colored Teachers, which was established in 1877. From the Association beginnings, she was actively engaged in the group's work, presenting an essay entitled "Literary Culture of the Teacher" at the initial meeting in Danville on August 7, 1878. As the state association concluded its business meeting and the election of officers, Britton was named to the Program Committee. At the Eight Annual Convention, which convened in Louisville at the Fifth Street Church on July 5, 1886, Britton served as the Association's secretary.<sup>9</sup> When the Association met the following year in Danville's St. James Methodist Church, Mary Britton was visibly occupied in association business delivering a speech after the

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<sup>7</sup>1880 *U.S. Census of Population* Fayette County, Lexington, Kentucky p. 272 ; *Lexington City Directory*, 1890; *Prather's Lexington City Directory*, 1895.

<sup>8</sup>"Ben Franklin: Pioneer Barber Removes Shop From Place He Occupied For 32 Years." *Lexington Leader*, December 12, 1905, p. 8, col. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Atwood S. Wilson. *Proceedings of the Kentucky Negro Education Association, 1877-1913*. Kentucky State University Archives. p.3, 4, 29.

president's annual address on the first day's evening session and a speech the following evening on woman's suffrage. The speech on woman's suffrage was so well received that it was subsequently published on the front page of a Cincinnati, Ohio newspaper, the *American Catholic Tribune*.<sup>10</sup> Britton began her speech on suffrage by acknowledging that Kentucky was not a state that supported women's voting rights and thus her initial feelings and comments on the subject were formulated from hearing only one side of the issue. She said "From my early youth I was a strong advocate of human rights....not woman's rights...I wish to retract so much as was said to deprive them of the liberty to follow freely their own natural gifts, and the reluctant recognition of the right to do whatever they can do well." She further expounded on women's gifts by evoking her Christian upbringing to say that people who strive to keep women oppressed often rely on Paul's teachings while ignoring Jesus Christ who applied equal justice to both sexes and thus inaugurated the process to remove laws "made in the sole interests of men, and denying to wives and mothers their just rights."<sup>11</sup> Britton argued that woman's suffrage was based on the premise that everyone had a right to define their own fate within the laws of society and that those laws should be equally applied to women as well as men. She believed that the vote would not only give women a voice but also insisted that women deserved representation referring to "taxation without representation" as tyranny. She argued that "If woman is the same as man then she has the same rights, if she is distinct from man then she has a right to the ballot to help make laws for her government." She encouraged those opposed to suffrage to examine Christ's golden rule

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<sup>10</sup>Mary E. Britton. "Woman's Suffrage: A Potent Agency in Public Reforms." *The American Catholic Tribune*, July 22, 1887, p.1, cols. 3-5. Britton's published paper on suffrage was originally read before the State Association of Colored Teachers in Danville, Kentucky on July 7, 1887.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, p.1, col. 3

and “come down from your high perches of superiority and give to women what is justly hers.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout her discourse Britton defined the qualities that women possess that make their voice in government necessary. Stating that “No one is better for being ignorant, no one is a better companion for being weak and helpless” Britton argued that women decide issues based on morality which works well when combined with men’s decision-making which comes from the “physical and passional [sic] standpoint.” In her plea she pointed to successful men who publicly relied on their wives intelligence in combination with their own to achieve success. Britton professed that “as woman is made to be worth more to society at large, and in public interests, she becomes richer at home and is capable of building it better” without losing her tenderness and love. Britton proclaimed that men are not the “true fruit of the human race” and that men and women are expected to work together to govern with each bringing different traits to the mixture for the betterment of human kind. Women, she argued from an historic viewpoint, have consistently progressed and learned not only the alphabet but science, technology, law, medicine and other disciplines and trades and is then discriminated against by receiving less wages although she has excelled in these endeavors. Britton maintained that granting suffrage for women would protect young men and boys from ruin because women would help elect moral leaders and enact better laws including temperance legislation. To gain the approval of the male audience, she offered quotations from nationally recognized men including Henry Ward Beecher and Frederick Douglass who both supported women’s suffrage. Miss Britton concluded her remarks by saying, “No movement of any great importance has ever taken place in the world, in which woman has not taken a prominent part as a worker, -- most assuredly is Woman Suffrage a Potent Agency in Public

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid. p.1, col. 4.

Reforms.”<sup>13</sup> The suffrage speech was one of the earliest records of her activism on public issues confronting women and blacks. Mary Britton was very politically active throughout her lifetime and used her writing skills as well as her verbal abilities to voice her opinion on many issues confronting women and African Americans in Kentucky.

On the topic of the Separate Coach Movement, which prevented people of different races from occupying seats on the same coach on passenger trains, Britton’s eloquent and organized speech to the joint railroad Committee of the Kentucky Senate and House of Representatives on April 15, 1892 as part of the delegation of black women was so well executed that numerous persons both black and white requested that it be printed in the local newspaper where it appeared in its entirety four days after she spoke. Britton was one of more than five black women who appealed to the General Assembly to reject the Separate Coach Law. Among the other women were Mrs. L. B. Sneed, Misses Lena B. Tibbs, Mary Elizabeth Green, and Mary V. Cook.<sup>14</sup> In her speech, Britton called for bipartisan vote to refuse the passage of the separate coach legislation by invoking the words from the Constitution and everyone’s right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. She elucidated black progress toward social respectability and socially progressive efforts toward a new way of life and upward mobility. She questioned white privilege and the assumption that whiteness is “virtuous, intelligent, and aesthetic in taste” by reminding the Assembly of the horrors of slavery and the atrocities that were perpetrated against blacks during enslavement to call for “reparation for the wrongs done the ancestors” and fairness. Britton talked about the injustice of punishing all blacks for the disgraceful behavior of one black man toward a white woman on a train.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., col. 5.

<sup>14</sup>S.E. Smith, editor. *History of the Anti-Separate Coach Movement of Kentucky*. (Evansville, IN: National Afro-American Journal and Directory Publishing Co., 1895.), 35, 41.

She explained that generally only the offending person is punished for his crime and not the whole race. Britton further championed black women by protesting white people's disrespectful treatment of black women by arguing that had a similar incident occurred against a black woman, the entire incident would have been ignored altogether. She maintained that she understood the law was designed to protect "ladies from ruffians" and surmised that if a black man was "sober, clean, and intelligent" his rights as a citizen should not be arbitrarily denied. Britton further argued that a law based solely on race was not only unjust but also un-American. In conclusion, she reminded the Assembly that the governed people gave them their power and as such the people were opposed to the bill. She said, "The 272,981 Afro-Americans of the state together with the friends of right and liberty of other nationalities, most strenuously revolt against the passage of a measure so unjust as the Separate Coach Bill."<sup>15</sup>

As a teacher and later as a physician, Mary E. Britton was one of the Lexington's most respected women and her opinion on political issues was sought over the years and often highly publicized. Britton's first speech was delivered at the end of her school year in 1876 and published in the *American Citizen*, an early Lexington weekly newspaper. The speech explained the relationship between teacher, student, and parents. Subsequent publications appeared in *The Cincinnati Commercial* in 1877, *The Daily Transcript*, which was another Lexington paper and *The Lexington Herald*, where Mary wrote a woman's column. Britton contributed articles to several other publications among them *The Ivy* in Baltimore, Maryland; *The Courant* in Louisville, Kentucky; *The Indianapolis World* in Indiana; *The Cleveland Gazette* in Ohio and *Our Women and Children*, a

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<sup>15</sup>Mary E. Britton. "A Woman's Appeal: To Members of the Kentucky General Assembly." *Lexington Leader*, April 19, 1892, p.3, cols. 3-4.

publication of the Baptist Church.<sup>16</sup> Spokespersons for the *Lexington Herald* found her compositions to be “equal to any of her sex, white or black.” From her articulation of issues of fairness, education and morality in the changing racial climate, the journalists compared her public speaking abilities to those of Hallie Q. Brown.<sup>17</sup>

Ideas expressed by Britton in the *Lexington Herald* include “reformation in society, total abstinence from alcoholic liquors and tobacco, and the importance of active work and the influence of example upon the part of teachers and preachers.”<sup>18</sup> When writing for the *Lexington Herald* her nom de plume was “Meb” and “Aunt Peggy” for *The Ivy*.<sup>19</sup> The public opinion of Britton was very favorable not only in Lexington and central Kentucky but also in larger cities of Louisville, Indianapolis, and Cincinnati. One employee of the *Cincinnati Commercial* commented, “She has an excellent talent for comparing, explaining, expounding and criticizing, and has made no small stir among the city officials and others for their unjust discriminations against worthy citizens.”<sup>20</sup>

Two weeks after her speech before the legislature, Mary Britton and nineteen other black Lexington women met in the Chapel of the St. Paul A.M.E. Church and established the Ladies Orphans’ Home Society. The Society’s purpose was to establish a home to provide food, housing and educational training for poor orphans and needy

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<sup>16</sup> I. Garland Penn, *Afro-American Press, and its Editors*. (Springfield, MA: Willery & Co. Publishers, 1891.), 415-416. All of these papers with the exception of the *Lexington Herald* are no longer available. Articles by Britton in the *Lexington Herald* have not been located although some articles have been found in the *Lexington Leader* appearing as “Colored Notes.”

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 418; Hallie Q. Brown was a nationally and internationally recognized elocutionist, professor at Wilberforce University and club leader in both the state and national arenas. She served as president of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (1920-24) and they named a scholarship in her honor.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 415.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 416.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 415.

elderly women.<sup>21</sup> The Orphan's home was of particular interest to Britton as she understood the needs of orphans, having been orphaned at the age of nineteen. She undoubtedly remembered the trauma of losing her parents and having to fend for herself and seek assistance to insure the care of her five younger siblings, who were eventually raised by her sisters, an aunt, and other relatives. Britton, a charter member of the Society, served as secretary of the Home's Board of Managers and worked with the orphanage until she retired in 1923. The Colored Orphan Industrial Home served hundreds of black orphans almost a century until it closed in 1988. It became the Robert H. Williams Cultural Center and continues to provide a variety of programs supporting the community's social, educational and cultural needs.<sup>22</sup>

The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 provided Britton the opportunity to challenge some of the racist practices that were allowed at this international event. Chicago served as the host city and had spared no expense to make the event grand and expose the city's economic eminence. It was dubbed as "White City" not only because all the buildings were painted white but also because organizers had severely limited black participation in the exhibits which resulted in a major controversy in the black community. Curious as to whether the Kentucky building was open to blacks, and whether she would be treated differently at the Exposition by Kentuckians than at home Britton attempted to enter the facility and was publicly refused entrance. One reporter witnessed the "humiliation, indignation and other strains she experienced"<sup>23</sup> and reported it. Britton responded to his query about the motivation for her action, and stated that she

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<sup>21</sup>Lauretta Flynn Byars. *Lexington's Colored Orphan Industrial Home: Building for the Future*. Lexington: I.B. Bold Publications, 1995. pp. 54-55.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>23</sup>*Indianapolis Freeman*. August 12, 1893, Page 1, col 1-2.

wanted to see how she would be treated. Prior knowledge of the racially negative climate at the Chicago Exposition suggests that Britton knew how she would be treated but wanted to challenge her home state publicly. Mary Britton's ill-treatment is the only reported incident of public accommodation discrimination at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.<sup>24</sup>

Britton remained professionally active in education circles, giving presentations at state and national meetings such as the American Association of Educators of Colored Youth where she delivered a paper titled "History and Science of Teaching".<sup>25</sup> The segregated schools of Lexington engaged her services until she publicly resigned from teaching in 1897 to study medicine at Chicago's American Missionary College of Medicine.<sup>26</sup> The reason for her career change was not listed in her resignation letter but it could have been triggered by her sister Hattie's suicide a few years before or because of the problems she experienced with the school principal G. P. (Green Pickney) Russell. Five years later after completing her course of study at the Illinois school and also studying at the Sanatorium in Battle Creek, Michigan<sup>27</sup> she returned to Lexington and applied for a license to practice medicine in Fayette County. She was described as "well equipped for her life's work, and is a young woman of marked intelligence and ability."<sup>28</sup> Approximately three months later she received her medical license and opened her

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<sup>24</sup>Elliott M Rudwick and August Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City': Negroes and the Columbian Exposition, 1893,"*26:4 Phylon* (1965):357.

<sup>25</sup>Johnson, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup>Many sources on Dr. Britton's medical education list it as the American Missionary College but the 1927 edition of *Who' Who in Colored American* gives the name as American Maternity Missionary College. The American Missionary College of Medicine merged with the University of Illinois in 1910; Joseph J. Boris, ed. *Who' Who in Colored American*. (New York: Who' Who in Colored American Corp., 1927), 236.

<sup>27</sup>"Resolutions." *Lexington Leader*, August 30, 1925, p. 7, col. 5.

<sup>28</sup>"Colored Circles." *Lexington Leader*, August 26, 1902, p. 2, col.6.

practice in her Lexington.<sup>29</sup> In addition to her medical practice in Lexington, Dr. Britton traveled to Georgetown, Kentucky twice weekly for professional business.<sup>30</sup> When Kentucky passed the Day Law forcing Berea College to remove black students from its campus, Mary Britton and several other former students of the college co-authored a pamphlet entitled *President Frost's BETRAYAL of the Colored People in his Administration of Berea College*, criticizing the college's president William Goodell Frost's policies and treatment of black students.<sup>31</sup>

After being in practice for a year Dr. Mary Britton began the construction of a "handsome cottage on North Limestone Street fronting Rand Avenue,"<sup>32</sup> which would also serve as her medical office for the next twenty two years.<sup>33</sup> She involved herself in the local black professional association, the Kentucky Medical Association of Colored Physicians, Dentists, and Pharmacists, and often spoke or presided at the annual state meeting.<sup>34</sup> Dr. Britton was also actively involved in national professional organizations and attended their annual meetings.<sup>35</sup> Britton's professional colleagues valued her expertise and leadership skills and in February 1911 the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the National Medical Association of Negro Physicians, Dentists, and Pharmacists appointed her State Vice President representing Kentucky to the

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<sup>29</sup>"Colored Female Doctor." *Lexington Herald*, November 12, 1902, p. 8, col. 5

<sup>30</sup>"Colored Circles." *Lexington Leader*, July 19, 1903, sec. 1, p.2, col. 5

<sup>31</sup>Richard D. Sears. *A Utopian Experiment in Kentucky: Integration and Social Equality at Berea, 1866-1904*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 1996), 148; *Kentucky Journal of House of Representatives* 201, 1904, p. 523; The "Day Law" was introduced by Democratic Representative Carl Day, from Breathitt County and entitled "an Act to Prohibit white and colored persons from attending the same school" on January 12, 1904.

<sup>32</sup>"Colored People: Personal Notes." *Lexington Leader*, July 26, 1903, sec. 1, p. 2, col5.

<sup>33</sup>*Lexington City Directory*. (R. L. Polk and Company, 1906-07), viii, University of Kentucky Special Collections.

<sup>34</sup>"Lexington Doctors on Program of Paris Meeting." *Lexington Leader*, May 3, 1905, p.3, col.7; "General Notes." *Lexington Leader*, May 17, 1908, sec. 2, p. 6, col. 4.; "Blue Grass Medical Society." *Lexington Leader*, January 9, 1910, p.5, col. 5.

<sup>35</sup>"Colored Notes." *Lexington Leader*. August 21, 1910, p. 6, col. 4.

Association.<sup>36</sup> Dr. Britton not only attended the three day annual sessions of the National Association at Hampton, Virginia but was also on the program presenting a paper on the subject of “auto-intoxication.”<sup>37</sup>

Often Britton was asked to provide her medical expertise at various lay organizational club meetings such as the Colored Woman’s Club or mothers’ groups on such topics as hygiene.<sup>38</sup> A lover of poetry, she often gave presentations on local literary programs.<sup>39</sup> Still other presentations focused on religious topics and scriptural texts and were presented at church programs for the Main Street Baptist Church, the Christian Church and others.<sup>40</sup>

Britton was proud of the work and interest that women had in racial uplift efforts in her home community and in 1905<sup>41</sup> she publicly announced the “Woman’s Club” which had been established two years earlier by a group of “earnest Christian women, for the purpose of operating a Day Nursery to care for babies and young children of working parents.”<sup>42</sup> She describes the women’s goal, “In addition to self improvement, it is our aim to be of service in the community by assisting to ameliorate the condition of the unfortunate.”<sup>43</sup> Her description of the unfortunate was “many self-respecting, well disposed, honest, laboring people who have the good will of the best thinking people,

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<sup>36</sup>“Colored Notes.” *Lexington Leader*, February 22, 1911, p. 9, col. 6-7.

<sup>37</sup>“Colored Notes.” *Lexington Leader*, August 20, 1911, p.3, col. 6-7.

<sup>38</sup>“Colored Womans Club.” *Lexington Leader*, May 23, 1905, p. 4, col. 6.;“Mothers’ Meeting.” *Lexington Leader*, December 9, 1906, sec. 1, p. 2, col. 5.;“Colored Notes.” *Lexington Leader*, April 23, 1911, p. 16, col. 2-3.

<sup>39</sup>Penn, 418.; Lawrence Harris, *Negro Population of Lexington in Professions, Business, Education and Religion*, 1907, facing page 2.

<sup>40</sup>“Colored.” *Lexington Leader*, June 14, 1905, p. 3, col. 6.

“General Colored Notes.” *Lexington Leader*, December 9, 1906, sec. 1, p. 2, col. 5.

<sup>41</sup>“Colored Woman’s Club.” *Lexington Leader*, October 22, 1905, Section 2, p.5. col. 3-4.

<sup>42</sup>Lucy Harth Smith, editor. *Pictorial Directory of the Kentucky Association of Colored Women*, Lexington: the Association, ca. 1947. p.49.

<sup>43</sup>“Colored Woman’s Club.” *Lexington Leader*, October 22, 1905, Section 2, p.5. col. 3.

both black and white.”<sup>44</sup> She went on to talk about the women laborers who must leave their children alone at home because they have no one to care for them. The attention of the Women’s Club was to be directed on these working mothers and a day nursery became the primary project of the club. The curriculum for the children included lessons in “politeness, good table manners, love of God and obedience to the laws of society and government,”<sup>45</sup> and “habits of order and cleanliness as a preparation for systematic living.”<sup>46</sup> To encourage other women to assist them and to consider the possibility of joining the group of benevolent women, Britton explained that the membership of the club was limited to thirty members who met in each others’ homes but when a larger meeting space was secured, other women could join the organization. The announcement of a social, “the Sock Social” to help fund the nursery was included in the article and everyone was asked to contribute whether attending the social or not. Britton emphasized that the use of all receipts would be for the nursery and would be publicly explained. The name of the club was eventually changed to become the Woman’s Improvement Club. The club successfully raised enough money for the nursery and by 1945 the Day Nursery which was being supported by the Community Chest and the Lexington government, employed a housekeeper and two matrons and had nurtured thousands of children. In addition to the nursery, the club owned an additional building<sup>47</sup>

Over the years, the Woman’s Improvement Club met monthly at 5:00 p.m. on Thursday afternoons at various members’ homes. Meeting notices regularly appeared in the Lexington Leader providing the location of each meeting. In 1914, Dr. Britton

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid, col. 4.

<sup>45</sup>Smith, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup>“Colored Woman’s Club.” *Lexington Leader*, October 22, 1905, Section 2, p.5. col. 4.

<sup>47</sup>Smith, p. 49.

became President of the Woman's Improvement Club and the newspaper notices included an additional note. As Britton was very conscious of time management she requested that "All members will please come on time as plans are to be given for the year's work."<sup>48</sup> When notice was made for another meeting in that year scheduled at her home, she again requested prompt attendance.<sup>49</sup> Britton was also a member of the Phantasma or Fantasma Club No. 9 and served as its secretary in 1905.<sup>50</sup> Phantasma was a social club which catered to the better educated, elite African American population in Lexington and Louisville.<sup>51</sup>

Britton's personal family life was marred with several tragedies beginning with the early death of both parents within four months of each other in 1874.<sup>52</sup> Two of Mary's younger siblings Martha, and Joseph, possibly died between 1860 and 1870 as both children are unaccounted for after the year 1860. Joseph was one year younger than Mary and Martha was five years younger than her. As an adult, two other younger siblings died tragically. On Sunday morning May 31, 1891 her younger sister Hattie, who lived in Memphis with their married sister Julia Hooks, shot herself in the head with a pistol following an argument with her brother-in-law. Hattie, "a single woman, twenty three years old and quite good-looking,"<sup>53</sup> died within three minutes of the shooting. The shooting was investigated by Memphis authorities to determine if it was indeed a suicide and not murder. Almost ten years later Britton's youngest brother and well known jockey Thomas committed suicide by swallowing carbolic acid. Tommy like his sister

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<sup>48</sup>"Colored Notes," *Lexington Leader* September 22, 1914. page 5, col. 3.

<sup>49</sup>"Colored Notes", *Lexington Leader*, November 16, 1914, p. 12, col. 4.

<sup>50</sup>"Colored." *Lexington Leader*, June 14, 1905, p. 3, col. 6.

<sup>51</sup>Marion B. Lucas. *History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891*, (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1992.), 322.

<sup>52</sup>Sears, "Early History".

<sup>53</sup>"Killed Herself: Hattie Britton Kills Herself With A Pistol." *Lexington Leader*, June 1, 1891, p. 4, col. 4.

Hattie was in his twenties when he died. Death from suicide is often the result of mental illness, generally depression and often runs in families. As one of the older siblings in the family it was undoubtedly difficult to bury younger brothers and sisters when their deaths result from accidents and illness. The loss of siblings through suicide is considerably more difficult for family members to tolerate as it is both unexpected and generally unexplained.

A third sibling, Lucy, wife of well-known jockey Will F. "Monk" Overton, died in 1905 at the age of thirty two or thirty three from acute nephritis.<sup>54</sup> In 1914, her oldest sister Susan died after being ill for three years. Susan was the wife of prominent barber and chiropodist, Benjamin Franklin.<sup>55</sup> Until 1893 Britton was a strict Episcopalian but converted to the Seventh Day Adventist Church.<sup>56</sup> She strictly adhered to the church teachings and was committed to maintaining a healthy lifestyle by refraining from alcohol and tobacco and meats. Her fervent religious faith and marked sense of self-worth possibly allowed her to cope with these family losses and to remain focused on her community work and professional position. She remained a faithful member of the church for twenty five years.

Britton retired from her practice in 1923 at the age of sixty eight. On August 27, 1925, she was admitted to St. Joseph's Hospital and was gravely ill at the time of admittance. As a doctor, she undoubtedly knew her condition and had her last will draw up either shortly before going to the hospital or sometime after arriving at the hospital as

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<sup>54</sup>"Burial of Monk Overton's Wife Will Be In Lexington." *Lexington Leader*, December 21, 1905, p. 1, col. 4. "Vital Statistics." *Lexington Leader*, December 24, 1905, sec. 2, p. 1, col. 6. This article lists Lucy's age as 27 but that would make her birth be in 1878 which is four years after her parents died. Lucy is listed on the 1880 Fayette County census as age 7 on June 4, 1880 making her born in 1872 or 1873.

<sup>55</sup> "Colored Notes." *Lexington Leader*, February 9, 1914, p. 9, cols. 6-7.

<sup>56</sup>Johnson, p. 19.

she died the same afternoon. Britton left her library to the Seventh Day Adventist Church with the bulk of her estate going to her sister Julia Hooks and her nephews Robert and Henry Hooks, all of Memphis.<sup>57</sup> Newspaper accounts indicated that she was also survived by her brother-in-law Benjamin Franklin and other family members but they were not listed.<sup>58</sup>

Following Britton's death, the Blue Grass Medical Society issued an official proclamation acknowledging her as a gifted woman and as an expression of their "esteem and admiration for her ability and character"<sup>59</sup> they vowed to send a floral arrangement and to attend the funeral as a group. Her funeral was held at her home on North Limestone and she was buried in Greenwood cemetery although her will specified that she wanted to be buried in the family plot in Berea, Kentucky.

As an early feminist Mary Britton was one of the women who openly challenged the status of women and blacks in a white male dominated world. Early in her life she assumed a feminist stance through her articulation of expectations regarding woman's suffrage and women's equality to men. Britton defied Jim and Jane Crow status and attempted entry into arenas that few women or blacks dared. She further defied the traditional female occupations leaving the teaching profession and becoming a medical doctor, the first female doctor of any race in Lexington. Britton never shied away from asserting her ideas and never allowed others to intimidate her into submission on an issue. Mary Ellen Britton worked continuously for racial equality, gender rights, and her personal and religious beliefs throughout her life helping to transform Kentucky's black communities for five decades.

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<sup>57</sup>State of Kentucky. Fayette County Clerk. Will Book 13, Type W, p. 581

<sup>58</sup>"Colored Notes." *Lexington Herald*, August 29, 1925

<sup>59</sup>"Colored Notes: Resolutions." *Lexington Leader*, August 30, 1925, p. 7.col. 5.

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Mary Ellen Britton (1855–1925) was an African-American physician, educator, journalist and civil rights activist from Lexington, Kentucky. Britton was an original member of the Kentucky Negro Education Association, which formed in 1877. She was president of the Lexington Woman's Improvement Club, and later served as a charter member of the Ladies Orphan Society which founded the Colored Orphan Industrial Home in Lexington, in 1892. During her lifetime she accomplished many things through the obstacles she faced. After teaching black children in Lexington public schools, she worked as a doctor from her home in Lexington. She specialized in hydrotherapy, electrotherapy and massage; and, she was officially granted her license to practice medicine in Lexington, Kentucky in 1902. Mary Ellen is very personable and a pleasure to deal with as well as her assistant Patti. I wouldn't trust anyone else to handle I signed up with Mary Ellen Roth over three years ago after being with an agent that only sent me increasing bills year after year for my cars, home and motorcycle. Not only was I quoted several hundreds of dollars less, but the service was very personable by her and her staff. Additionally, they ask me to come in for a review every year to ensure I am getting the best value and right products for my money. When I had an accident Mary Ellen called me in and took the time to sit with me to assure me everything would be handled and to put any concerns I had to rest. I couldn't be happier with her service.

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