



## Mary Cooke Branch Munford

1865-1938

Richmond, Education Activist

Mary Munford was born in Richmond, within months of the cessation of the Civil War, to James Read Branch and Martha Louise Patterson Branch. As a member of this distinguished old Virginia family dating back to 1620, Mary was educated in Richmond and New York at the finest schools. As it was unthinkable at that time for a Virginia lady to be educated beyond finishing school, Mary was denied higher education by her widowed mother. Determined to quench her thirst for knowledge, she became an avid reader of philosophy and economics. She soon developed an active social conscience and began working to reform local and state education, especially for women. In 1893, she married Beverly Bland Munford, a lawyer and eventual state senator who shared her social concerns. Together they attended conferences of

the Southern Education Board, a progressive group dedicated to the improvement of public education in the South.

At the time, the woman's club movement was growing nationally as a means to culturally stimulate women. Within a year of her marriage, Mary helped to found the Woman's Club of Richmond as a vehicle to provide education and development programs for intellectually starved women. With Munford as president, it quickly took on special projects such as suffrage and public affairs.

With a passion for education, Munford served in leadership positions for several local and state education associations. In 1910, she waged a campaign in the General Assembly to establish a college for women in conjunction with the University of Virginia. At the time, the state supported four men's colleges but for women they only provided normal schools that were not fully accredited and fell far below collegiate standards. The bill was voted down but Munford pursued her cause. In 1918, the College of William and Mary quietly began to admit women and in 1920 Munford became the first woman to serve on its Board of Visitors. Continuing a tradition of firsts, in the same year she became the first woman to serve on the Democratic National Committee.

From 1920 to 1931 Munford served as the first woman on the Richmond School Board. Concurrently, on a statewide level, she worked for nine-month school terms, improved rural high schools, teacher training, and vocational education. Dedicated to the idea of quality education for every child, she worked to help Janie Porter Barrett establish the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls and served as a board trustee.

The majority of Munford's life was dedicated to working to alleviate significant social problems and advancing education, especially for women. She served as a trustee for the National Urban League and Fisk University, worked on the Southern Interracial Commission and organized the Virginia Inter-Racial Committee. She held positions with the National Consumers' League and the National Child Labor Committee, both of which advocated shorter hours and better working conditions for women and children. Today numerous landmarks, including a Richmond elementary school, carry her name as a reminder of her dedication to improving lives through education and social reform.