

# REMEMBERING HER

". . . what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."  
Matthew 26:13



Article 22

## Retrieving Women's Histories

### Mary Peake and the American Missionary Association

One of the most amazing organizations in the history of the Christian churches in the United States is the American Missionary Association (AMA). Founded in 1846 by Northern abolitionists it became a major force for education and justice among Blacks, women, Chinese, Japanese and American Indians for the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, as the conflict over slavery escalated during the decades leading up to the Civil War, the AMA stayed the course, enabling many women to perform memorable acts of service.

Mary Smith Kelsey Peake (1823-1862) was born in Norfolk, VA the daughter of a free mulatto woman and an Englishman. She was sent to a private school in Alexandria, Virginia where she lived with her aunt and uncle who were freed slaves. She did extremely well with classical subjects, and also learned the marketable skills of needlework and dressmaking. Unfortunately Mary's education came to an abrupt end in 1839 when Virginia passed a law closing all "colored schools." At age 16 she returned home, lived with her mother and stepfather in Hampton, Virginia, found employment as a dressmaker, and became active in her church.

As agitation about the issue of slavery increased Mary became deeply concerned about the future of her race. She established a benevolent society (the Daughters of Zion) "to deal with the needs of poor and sick Negroes and to supply food, clothing and shelter to the many fugitives" who flocked to the predominantly black village of Hampton. In her home she ran an illegal school for adults and children seeking basic education.

In 1851 Mary married Thomas Peake, a former slave, and they continued to live in Hampton. At the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, when Union troops occupied the village of Hampton, there was confusion about the status of former slaves. Confederate

states considered slaves to be chattel or "property," so when Union forces gained control over these individuals they initially classified them as "contrabands." Becoming contraband did not mean full freedom, but after Hampton was burned to the ground by the Confederates many blacks flocked to nearby Fort Monroe and requested contraband status. By the end of the war in April 1865 their so-called "Grand Contraband Camp" housed an estimated 10,000 former slaves.

Not surprisingly, the American Missionary Association sent a missionary, the Reverend Lewis C. Lockwood, to Fort Monroe "to look after the moral, physical and religious interests of the contrabands." Upon his arrival Lockwood reported that the freed slaves had "a great thirst for knowledge" and he promptly hired Mary Peake, who was already well known in the Hampton area, to open a day school and run an evening educational program. The response was dramatic. Mary Peake, a "black" woman became the teacher of the first school of its kind in the South opened by the AMA. Her school became a model for the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). The Christmas concert at Mrs. Peake's AMA sponsored school in December 1861 was the first time black children had ever performed in Virginia in a public demonstration of their talents. It was a new day.

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