



Myrtle Foster
Back Row-Middle

Myrtle Foster Cook

(b. 1871-d.1951)

Myrtle Foster was born on April 17, 1871 in Amherstburg, Ontario, Canada to James William Foster and Elizabeth Butler Foster. James Foster's father, Levi, became a successful businessman in Amherstburg, Ontario, where he operated a livery business, stage line and hotel. Levi also owned numerous properties and land in Amherstburg, using his finances to move to the United States and settle in Monroe, Michigan in the late 1880s. She was raised in Monroe where her father continued the family's business enterprises first operating another livery business and later, establishing a 23-acre fruit and dairy farm while two of her sisters ran a successful candy business.

After earning a degree from the University of Michigan, Cook taught part-time for a while, then left Michigan in the late 1890s to teach at a black high school in Frankfort, Kentucky, where she met her first husband, Dr. Louis G. Dodd. Cook's social and charitable activities began in Monroe, but when the couple settled in Muskogee, Oklahoma in the early 1900s so Dodd could establish a medical practice, this is where Cook's activist career is reported to have begun. While teaching at a government-funded school, Cook became concerned about the health of the Black community. She organized the Dorcas Club and worked to establish a hospital. In Oklahoma, she organized a series of lectures, recitals, and statewide tours with the help of the State Teachers' Association. Five Years after her husband's death, Cook moved to Kansas City, Missouri in 1916 to head Lincoln High School's English Department.

After arriving in Kansas City, Cook's activism reached a national level. She joined several organizations, including the NAACP, the YWCA, the City Federation and the Women's League. It was in Kansas City that she met her second husband, Hugh O. Cook, head of the mathematics department at Lincoln High School. Cook also was the principle organizer and major stockholder in two Kansas City-based financial institutions – the Peoples Finance Corporation and the Home Seekers Savings and Loan Company (the latter started in 1926). Along with her husband and their friend, W.E.B. DuBois, Cook established the Home Seekers Savings and Loan Association in the late 1920s, which was a financial institution for African Americans. In Kansas City, She got her start working with the National Association of colored Women (NACW). She served in a variety of roles during her years with the organization, serving as editor-manager of the NACW's paper, *National Notes*, succeeding Margaret Murray Washington and frequently corresponding with Mary Church Terrell, the first NACW President. She also was the chairperson of the western division, elected in 1924, and as president of the central district in 1934. Her work and dedication to the NACW and other Black civil rights organizations made her a major name in the Republican party organization. She served as a member of the National Republican Executive Committee in 1928.

Much of Cook's suffrage-related work happened in the context of Republican politics, for example, as chairman of the Republican Negro Women's Division of Jackson County. Recognized as a powerful voice to encourage women's participation in electoral politics, Cook served - on a national level - as chairman of the Western division of Colored Women Voters for the Republican National Committee for three election cycles: 1924, 1926, and 1928. She was appointed to the RNC's executive committee of the Colored Voters division, working to encourage not just African American women but also men to engage in the electoral process.

Cook argued for women's involvement in public affairs through the ballot box. She wrote in the *Western Messenger* as Missouri debated ratification of the nineteenth amendment, "it is no longer a question of whether women want to vote or no; the responsibility is ours, and we must exercise it or fall in the list of slackers. Already the women are organizing into clubs to study government and to prepare to vote intelligently. The women's vote will be a great factor in improving conditions everywhere, if we use it wisely."

Cook fought for the civil rights, wellbeing, and economic independence of African American women wherever she lived, but notably in Kansas City and the Midwest.

Myrtle Foster Cook died on August 31, 1951 in Los Angeles, California.

Note: The 1880 Federal Census lists Myrtle Foster as age 9 at the time the census was taken in June, 1880 which would make her birth year, 1871. However, the tombstone of Myrtle Foster Cook located in Angelus Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles, California shows her birth year as 1870 as found in most publications about her.