

# UCC ROOTS

## *Remembering our History*

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November 2015

### A Woman Who Does the Unthinkable

It is a dark night in the 1840's in Hampton, Virginia. A young woman, Mary Peake, finds herself in a cemetery garden. She is wrestling with a call to do the unthinkable—to defy the law of the land; the law that forbids the education of colored people.

Mary's mother was a free African American and her father an Englishman. They valued education so highly that they found a way around Virginia law and sent Mary to live with an aunt and uncle in Alexandria—part of the District of Columbia—for her education. As a free woman of privilege she carved out a good life as a dressmaker.

However, the call to teach does not let her go. God's Spirit calls her to share her love of learning and her favorite book—the Holy Bible—with her people. She knows that there might be a cost for embarking on this course. She struggles to overcome her fears. In that cemetery something happens. A light breaks through the darkness and she finds herself in communion with God. A song fills her soul—a Watts hymn—“Stand Up My Soul, Shake Off Thy Fears.”

Mary has her answer! She devotes the rest of her life to the education and betterment of African Americans. She creates an organization called the Daughters of Zion to aid the poor and the sick. She works as a seamstress by day, but defies the law of Virginia by teaching at night.

Eventually Mary is able to teach openly at Fort Monroe, a place of safety for former slaves near Hampton, Virginia. In 1861, sponsored by the American Missionary Association, she founds the first Black school in Hampton VA, a forerunner of Hampton University. Mary Peake, guided by her love of learning and led by the Holy Spirit, is a remarkable woman who did the unthinkable.

*Contributor: Yvonne Delk*

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