



- *Activist*
- *Educator*
- *Founder*

## *Sarah McLendon Murphy*

1892–1954

### ***Inducted 2004***

Born in 1892 to former slaves, Gabriel and Huldah McLendon, Sarah was the tenth of 11 children of this poor family in rural Seney in northwest Georgia. At age 4, Sarah's mother died and she took on the role of mother for her younger sibling James, a nurturing role that would encompass Sarah's future. Sarah was bright and a fast learner and by age 12 was earning money for her family by selling mail-order flavorings, helping her father and stepmother purchase a 20-acre tract of land.

Though this was a time when African-American women were not encouraged to pursue an education, Sarah had a hunger for knowledge – to learn and to teach – and went as far as she could in a nearby country school before leaving for Rome to attend an industrial school for blacks. During the summers she traveled Polk County, teaching as many as 100 pupils at a time and helping to establish four schools. Sarah wanted to attend what she called the “big Negro University complex,” Spelman Seminary, later called Spelman College, and her brother James worked on the railroad to help her get there.

***“They are a happy well-mannered group, learning to do a great many useful things from Sarah and her husband .... Their achievement seems nothing short of a miracle of love.”***

– from The Atlanta Journal; April 19, 1939

Sarah loved Spelman because life was so much easier there for her with no brothers and sisters to care for and she could take advantage of the many opportunities the school offered. But one night she had a vision that she was walking by a canal surrounded by a fence and someone was digging the ground out from under her as she walked. When she came to a gate, a voice called out to her, “Go through the gate, Sarah, and help your people.” She knew that “her people” were poor blacks in rural Georgia so she returned home to start a school in a church building in Grady, an iron-ore mining settlement. As an “independent” school, there was no public funding and parents were expected to pay 50 cents a month for their children's education though few had the money.

At age 28 Sarah married Marion "Shug" Murphy and they saved enough money to buy an old five-room house on an acre of land where they built a one-room frame building to serve as a school for grades K-12. Because the nearby land was hilly and not fertile, they were able to purchase additional parcels. Sarah loved the children she taught and her greatest joy was when she gave birth to a daughter in 1925 and named her Divinia, to acknowledge the divine gift bestowed upon her and Shug.

Never one to turn down a student whose parents couldn't pay, Sarah soon found herself taking on much more when she took in an orphaned newborn and five siblings and in a short time Sarah and Shug had 18 children to feed on her salary of \$25 a month. Tragically, in 1934, Divinia died at the age of 9 of blood poisoning, leaving Sarah inconsolable with grief. That same year she applied to incorporate her home, naming it the Sarah Divinia Murphy Home and in 1935 it received a state charter.

Now called Mama Sarah, her home became known as a place where children with no other alternative would be welcome. She decided her original vision from that fateful night at Spelman was too narrow and that she would not just teach but also feed, clothe and shelter "her people." With a motto of "we'll make room," she and Shug cared for approximately 50 children at a time.

In 1946 Sarah won a \$1,000 "Good Neighbor" award on a national radio show and the exposure brought in donations, enabling them to add a new building to the compound. In 1950 a wood stove started a fire which completely destroyed Mama Sarah's home. Sarah, Shug and the children moved into the original one-room school building. Resources started coming in from Polk County, the state, the country and even the world. Several months before groundbreaking on the new building, Shug died, and eight months later, as the new building was about to be occupied, Sarah died.

Without Sarah's leadership and vision, the home floundered after her death. In 1961 the Women's Division of the Methodist Church took over the property and in 1984 it merged with the Ethel Harpst Home to form the Murphy-Harpst Children's Centers, Inc. which offers early education, intervention and prevention programs in addition to residential treatment and therapeutic foster care. Through the Murphy campus, this amazing Georgia woman of achievement continues to help children, families and "Sarah's people."

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## **Additional Resources**

**Murphy-Harpst Children's Centers, Inc.**  
[www.murphyharpst.org](http://www.murphyharpst.org)