Mary Francis Berry

Mary Francis Berry, ’70, has long been one of the most visible activists in the cause of civil rights, gender equality, and social injustice in our nation. As chairperson of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, Berry demanded equal rights and liberties for all Americans during four presidential administrations. She also became the first woman to head a major research university, serving as chancellor of the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Berry also served as the principal education in the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, working to improve access and quality education in our schools. Berry’s publications include such subjects as the history of constitutional racism in America and childcare and women’s rights. She offers insight into and provides historical context for Presidents Obama’s memorable speeches in Power in Words: The Stories Behind Barack Obama’s Speeches, from the State House to the White House. Her latest book, Five Dollars and a Pork Chop Sandwich: Vote Buying and the Corruption of Democracy, explains that some campaign voter turnout activities are just another form of voter suppression. In addition, she wrote We Are Who We Say We Are: A Black Family’s Search for Home Across the Atlantic World, which offers a new angle of vision for looking at racial identity, demography, and migration as themes of our national history.

In 2013, Berry received the Nelson Mandela award from the South African government for her role in organizing the Free South Africa Movement to help end apartheid. She is a fellow of the Society of American Historians and the National Academy of Public Administration. She also is a Distinguished Fellow of the American Society for Legal History, the high honor the Society can award. Since 1988, she has been the Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought, History, and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She earned a bachelor’s degree from Howard University and holds a PhD in history from the University of Michigan, in addition to her JD.