

Life Story: Maggie Walker

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Studio Portrait of Maggie L. Walker, early 20th century.

Courtesy of National Park Service, Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site.

Maggie Lena Draper was born in Richmond, Virginia, during the Civil War. Her mother, Elizabeth Draper, was formerly enslaved. Elizabeth married William Mitchell after emancipation. William was a butler for a white family and later the headwaiter at one of Richmond's best hotels. The family enjoyed modest financial security until William Mitchell died. Facing dire poverty, Elizabeth started a laundry business with the help of Maggie, then 9 years old. Maggie later described her early life by saying, "I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth, but with a laundry basket on my head."

Maggie and her younger brother attended one of the city's public primary schools for Black students. At 16, she graduated from the Richmond Colored Normal School, a high school that also trained teachers. After graduating, she joined other students to protest the city's policy of holding separate graduation ceremonies for white and Black students. "Our parents pay taxes just the same as you white folks," they argued. Within a few months, she was a teacher at one of the African American

schools in the city.

Building Community During Jim Crow

Maggie taught until 1886, when she married Armstead Walker Jr. The Richmond school district did not permit married women to teach, so she had to give up her precious job. By then, Reconstruction had been over for nearly a decade. Without Reconstruction governments in place to protect the rights of Southern Black people, a new system of segregation and discrimination was reestablishing white control. This system was known as Jim Crow. Through laws, customs, and threats, the Jim Crow system narrowed nearly every aspect of Black Americans' lives.

In the face of Jim Crow, Black Americans had to figure out how to stay safe, support themselves, educate their children, and fight for their rights. Strategies varied. Some people brought legal suits in court. Some wrote books and editorials. Some left the South in search of better lives in the North or West. But most, including Maggie, sought the power of community and self-reliance. Maggie's communities were the historic Richmond First African Baptist Church and the Independent Order of Saint Luke (IOSL). After she left her teaching job, she became seriously committed to the IOSL, and later led the organization for many years.

Founded in 1867, IOSL was a national association of African Americans. There were many "fraternal organizations" like this in American cities and towns. Most were dedicated to doing good works for their members or to doing broader charitable activities. These organizations also had secret rituals that bound members together.

The group cohesion offered by IOSL was especially important for African Americans in Richmond because of what was happening around them. Richmond's white leaders were building memorials to Confederate heroes along Monument Avenue. These memorials represented their belief in the mythology of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. The monuments kept the champions and values of the old South in the foreground of the city's life. They also reinforced racial bias and justified Jim Crow. Nearly 40% of Richmond's population were African Americans, many of whom lived within an easy walk of the monuments. For them, the Lost Cause ideology meant increasingly difficult lives and a discriminatory, abusive environment.

Entrepreneur and Leader

The IOSL offered a way for Black Americans to find strength by banding together. Maggie spoke frequently to Black audiences around the country. She used inspiring biblical references to describe clearly what unity and progress could look like. She worked to expand IOSL's reach and provide important services to Black Americans. She started a newspaper, the St. Luke Herald, to spread the word about IOSL and speak out against racial injustice. Maggie led the IOSL for thirty-five years. In this time, she increased its membership from 3,400 in 1890 to more than 70,000 in 1924.

Maggie also started her own businesses to strengthen Black communities. In 1903, she chartered the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank. With this move, she became the first African American woman to start

a bank in the United States and the first to serve as a bank president. Because the bank was staffed by African Americans, customers could manage their money without the unending mistreatment they encountered in white-run banks.

In 1905, Maggie opened a department store called the St. Luke Emporium. At the time, Black women faced everyday aggressions when they shopped in white-owned stores, such as being required to cover their hair with wax paper when they tried on hats. The Emporium was a welcome relief from these aggressions. Like Maggie's bank, the Emporium gave people a way to do everyday activities without facing white prejudice. All of these institutions employed and served local Black residents in Jackson Ward, the center of Richmond's Black business and social life.

Maggie did not speak out directly against Monument Avenue, but she made her feelings about Jim Crow more than clear. In 1907, a few months before statues to Confederates J.E.B. Stuart and Jefferson Davis were unveiled, she delivered a speech in Richmond. In her speech, she denounced segregation: Jackson Ward was always Maggie's home turf and primary focus. But she also provided leadership in Richmond more broadly. Prominent American women were expected to spearhead fund-raising efforts for civic projects. In this capacity, she helped solicit funds for a Black ward for the local hospital, located a block away from where white patients were treated. She was also on the executive committee of the Community House for Colored People. The Community House provided shelter, health care, food, and economic assistance.

Maggie was also involved in nation-wide efforts to fight racism and improve opportunities for Black Americans, especially Black women. She served on the boards of the National Association of Colored Women, the Virginia Industrial School for Girls, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

In 2017, as Americans debated the future of Confederate memorials, a bronze statue of Maggie Walker was unveiled in Jackson Ward.

Life Story: Sarah "Madam C.J." Breedlove Walker

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Addison N. Scurlock, Madam C.J. Walker, c. 1914.

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of A'Lelia Bundles/Walker Family.

Sarah Breedlove was born on December 23, 1867 in Delta, Louisiana. Sarah's parents and her four older siblings had been enslaved on a cotton plantation until the end of the Civil War. Sarah was the first member of her family to be born into freedom. The family lived and worked together as sharecroppers.

Sarah learned to look out for herself at a young age. She had lost both of her parents by the time she was seven years old, and lived with her older sister. Later in life, Sarah would describe her sister's husband as a cruel man. He forced her to make money picking cotton and doing laundry, and may have been abusive to her. At the age of 14, Sarah ran away from home and married a man named Moses McWilliams. Before her seventeenth birthday, she gave birth to her only child, a daughter named Lelia. Three years later, Moses died and Sarah was a young, widowed mother.

Sarah and her daughter moved to St. Louis so that they could live near her three older brothers. Her brothers had all left the South at a young age to escape racial violence and find jobs. Sarah worked as a laundress for \$1.50 a day and went to night school when she was able. In 1906, she married Charles Joseph "C.J." Walker.

Throughout her life, Sarah had struggled with hair loss. It was likely caused by poor nutrition and stress. Like most Black women of the time, Sarah used harsh soap and heavy oil and grease on her head, which would have only made her condition worse. Although new technology had led to the expansion of the beauty industry in the late 1800s, most products were designed for and sold to white women.

Sarah took a job with a small company selling beauty products for Black women when she was in her early 20s. At the same time, she experimented at home with her own formulas. She worked to create healthy products that softened her hair and eased her irritated scalp. Little by little, Sarah's hair began to grow-as did her idea for a business of her own.

Once Sarah had created products that she felt worked well for her, she began to sell them. She renamed herself Madam C.J. Walker and began to advertise her products in Black publications. She was so happy with how her hair had grown that she put pictures of herself on the packaging. She held lectures and demonstrations of what she called the "Walker Method": washing hair with gentle shampoo, brushing hair, massaging the scalp, and then treating hair with a healing pomade. By 1910, business was booming. She moved to Indianapolis to build a factory and establish a permanent company headquarters.

When Madam Walker was expanding her company, beauty in the Black community was a controversial issue. White racists pointed to Black hair as evidence that Black people were inferior. They argued that Black women who could not smooth out their kinky hair were unclean and messy. For many Black women, using beauty products to smooth out their hair was a way of fighting back against racism and demonstrating their equality to white women. On the other hand, some advocates believed that by mimicking white hair fashions, Black women were catering to racism. Although Madam Walker did sell products that helped straighten and smooth hair, she argued that her products were also about health. Because she had personally struggled with hair and scalp issues, she promoted healthy hair over a certain style of hair.

Madam Walker also worked to rise above the controversy by using her business to empower Black women financially. She founded several beauty training schools. She employed hundreds of women across the country to serve as Walker Agents. These saleswomen were trained in the Walker Method and were the face of the Walker brand. Madam Walker organized national conventions for agents. At these conventions, agents could share selling strategies, learn about new products, and receive rewards for outstanding sales. For many women, being a Walker Agent and working for a Black woman-owned business was a welcome alternative to low-paying domestic work.

In 1913, Madam Walker and Charles Walker divorced. Madam Walker focused on extending her company to the Caribbean and Latin America. In 1916, she followed her daughter to New York City and moved into a grand townhouse in Harlem. Although she continued to run the business, she allowed employees to handle the day-to-day operations while she focused on new projects.

As Madam Walker's business grew, so did her wealth. In addition to her Harlem townhouse, she also owned a Model T Ford. She even had plans to build a mansion in upstate New York called Villa Lewaro. (She created the name using letters from her beloved daughter's name: Lelia Walker Robinson.) But Madam Walker did not spend all of her money on luxury. She was as famous for her philanthropy as she was for her beauty business. Madam Walker donated money to scholarships, homes for the elderly, anti-lynching efforts, and other initiatives within the local and national Black community. She was committed to helping Black men and women escape poverty, just as she had.

Madam Walker died from complications of high blood pressure on May 25, 1919 at the age of 51. At the time of her death, it was estimated that her estate was worth \$1 to \$2 million. That's the equivalent of \$14 to \$30 million in 2018. She was the first self-made Black female millionaire in America. Her daughter, Lelia, continued in her mother's footsteps. She took over the still-growing company and used her mother's fortune to support artists, writers, and other luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance.

Vocabulary

inferior

adjective

definition: of less value, importance, or quality.

The apples from the grocery store are inferior to the ones we picked ourselves.

Spanish: inferior

mimic

verb

definition: to copy or imitate.

The chimp mimicked our movements.

Our French teacher told us to mimic his pronunciation.

Spanish: imitar, arremedar, remedar

forms: mimicked, mimicking, mimics

promote

verb

definition: to support the growth of or help move forward.

Eating well promotes health.

Spanish: promover

forms: promoted, promotes, promoting

1. Before you start reading...

Here are the vocabulary words that will be in this reading. Let's see how well you already know them.

Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
memorial				
mimic				
promote				

2. Word Matcher

Every word has other words that have similar meanings or even the exact same meaning (these are called synonyms!). Draw a line from each similar word or synonym to the vocabulary word that it matches!

monument

tribute

tombstone

imitate

copy

memorial

mimic

promote

impersonate

foster

cultivate

further

3. After reading and exploring the words through some activities...

Do you know these words better? Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
memorial				
mimic				
promote				

Name: _____ Date: _____

Use the article "Life Story: Maggie Walker" to answer questions 1 to 2.

1. What are three positions that Maggie Walker held over the course of her career?
2. How did Maggie Walker support the Black community through her work? Use at least two details from the text to support your answer.

Use the article "Life Story: Sarah "Madam C.J." Breedlove Walker" to answer questions 3 to 4.

3. Describe the company that Madam Walker created.
4. How did Madam Walker support the Black community through her work? Use at least two details from the text to support your answer.

Use the articles "Life Story: Sarah "Madam C.J." Breedlove Walker" and "Life Story: Maggie Walker" to answer questions 5 to 6.

5. Contrast the ways that Maggie Walker and Sarah "Madam C.J." Breedlove Walker supported the Black community through their work.
6. How did Maggie Walker and Sarah "Madam C.J." Breedlove Walker each use their unique strengths to support their communities?