



Maggie Lena Walker

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A Gift for Serving

by Daphne Myers

"If you can read and write, you can do anything and go anywhere. You can ride the wind."

God certainly wants us to use the gifts and talents He has given us in our churches, but we are also to use them as we go about our daily business, in our schools and workplaces. That is what Maggie Lena Walker did—the first woman in the United States to found a bank and be its president. She always believed that the key to advancement in life is having opportunities, and she used her God-given gifts to provide opportunities for others, especially women, so that, as she said, they could be “exercising...every talent that God had given them.”

Maggie was born July 15, 1864, in Richmond, Virginia. Her parents, Elizabeth Draper and William Mitchell, were former slaves who worked in the mansion of Elizabeth Van Lew, an abolitionist and Union spy during the Civil War. Sadly, Maggie’s father was found drowned in the James River in 1876. Maggie always believed he was murdered. Her mother provided for her two children, Maggie and her brother Johnnie, by operating a laundry business. Maggie did what she could to help by delivering the clothing to the customers.

Maggie’s early education came at the Lancaster School, then the Armstrong Normal School, where she graduated in 1883. After graduation, Maggie taught at her alma mater for three years while studying accounting at night until she met a building contractor at church named Armstead Walker, Jr. They were married in September, 1886. Shortly after, for the second time in her life, Maggie suffered significant loss when one of her sons died in infancy the same year her brother Johnnie died.

Maggie’s business and spiritual development ran parallel. She was raised in the First African Baptist Church, where she was saved and baptized in 1878. At 14, Maggie joined the Independent Order of Saint Luke, a mutual aid society that provided insurance, proper health care, and burial services for its African-American members. Those who joined vowed to “be true and faithful to the Christian religion” and “search the Holy Scriptures, so that I may become useful and true to all mankind.” Maggie worked for the society’s founder, Mary Prout, until 1899, when she became the executive secretary-treasurer of the organization.

In 1902, Maggie began publishing *The St. Luke Herald* newsletter to promote the organization’s various services and also to speak out against the slander of black women, who were portrayed in many writings of the time as promiscuous, immoral, and good only for house cleaning jobs. She gave emotional speeches about the good St. Luke’s was doing for the black community. One person who described her speaking said, “For fifteen minutes or more, such a speech,

persuasive, musical, and eloquent, fell from her lips, as she called upon the black men of Virginia to stand up for their rights, to fight slavery, to live for their children and for hers, [that it] caused old men and young men to weep.”

In 1903, she opened the St. Luke’s Penny Savings Bank, where she served as president. Under Maggie’s leadership, the bank helped purchase approximately 600 homes for African Americans. By 1924, St. Luke’s had grown to 50,000 members in 20 states, had a staff of 50, and managed nearly \$400,000 in assets. In the Great Depression, the financial strength of the Penny Savings Bank allowed it to absorb all other black-owned banks in Richmond. It was renamed the Consolidated Bank and Trust Company and Maggie served as its chairman of the board until her death.

St. Luke’s also started an African-American department store called the Emporium, particularly to provide jobs for black women, but it failed due to the influence of white store owners. Maggie was always proud that at least at St. Luke’s and the bank she could provide women jobs and “a chance in the race of life.”

“Every woman,” she said, “was by Divine Providence created for some man; not for some man to marry, take home and support, but for the purpose of using her powers, ability, health and strength, to forward the financial...success of the partnership into which she may go.”

Maggie’s tireless work included helping found the Richmond Council of Colored Women, where she served as the president. She was also an early member of the Women’s Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention and joined the International Council of Women of the Darker Race, the National Association of Wage Earners, and the National Urban League. Maggie’s service was not in title only; she raised money for the Community House for Colored People, the African-American Old Folks Home, and the Friends Orphan Asylum.

Though her professional accomplishments were impressive, her personal tragedies continued through her life. In 1915, her husband died after their son Russell shot him, having mistaken him for a prowler. Maggie had developed several health problems over the years and by 1928, she was confined to a wheelchair. But she continued her work—she had an elevator put in her house and a car customized to accommodate her wheelchair. Maggie died on December 15, 1934, from complications associated with diabetes. Her family home in Richmond is now a National Historic Site, and two public schools memorialize her.

In the life of Maggie Walker, God’s gifts of service, administration, and leadership were obvious, but the grace of God also helped her endure the many personal trials she faced.

Maggie Walker (front row, second from left) with her staff in front of the St. Luke’s Penny Savings Bank in Richmond, Virginia.



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