A Rough and Rugged Road
By Libby Wilson
2015

Maggie Lena Walker (1864-1934) was an African American teacher and businesswoman. In this informational text, Libby Wilson discusses Walker’s life and accomplishments and the difficulties she overcame. As you read, take notes on how events in Walker’s early life impacted her life’s work.

[1] Richmond, Virginia, 1877. Sweat trickled down young Maggie Lena Mitchell’s face as she tooted the heavy basket of laundry throughout the steamy morning. She could hear laughter from children playing tag, and she wished she could play, too.

But Maggie didn’t feel sorry for herself. She shifted the basket to the top of her head and stepped around a man sleeping on the sidewalk. At least she had a house to sleep in and usually something to eat.

Everywhere Maggie looked were black people who were worse off than she. When the American Civil War ended in 1865, newly freed black slaves streamed into the city looking for work. But jobs were scarce,¹ and many people lived and died in the city’s streets.

That night at prayer meeting, Maggie would pray for the less fortunate. Her bare feet picked up their pace, lest her chores make her late for church.

Learning a Sense of Pride

[5] The first time Maggie had entered the First African Baptist Church, she’d been filled with reverence² and awe. “Prayer became as bread to hunger and water to thirst. Sunday School and prayer meeting set my foot upon solid rock,” Maggie said as an adult.

Maggie’s church taught her pride in her race, despite the fact that most white people in the South treated blacks as inferior. Her church’s three-thousand-member congregation included a large number of black professionals — politicians, business owners, doctors, and skilled craftsmen — many of whom had been free before the Civil War. They were a confident, successful, and proud group.

¹ Scarcé (adjective): not enough
² Reverence (noun): deep respect for something or someone
Maggie's school also taught her racial pride. Although black children did not attend the better-equipped schools with white children, Maggie was fortunate to have an exceptional teacher. Miss Lizzie Knowles was one of thousands of Northern professional educators who came south after the Civil War to give newly freed blacks the schooling that slavery had denied them. "Miss Lizzie" taught her students that they could make history just like the famous people they studied. Intelligent and hard-working, Maggie graduated from normal school, a two-year program after high school.

Learning to Help Others

After graduation, Maggie put her energies into a fraternal organization, the Independent Order of Saint Luke (I.O.S.L.), which she had joined when she was fourteen. Members of the I.O.S.L. helped one another in times of sickness and were present at each member's burial. The organization also worked to lift blacks out of poverty by teaching members to work hard, to save pennies, to improve themselves, and to stick together against prejudice. At this time, blacks in the South did not have the same rights as whites.

Finding Her Life's Work

In 1899, Maggie was the first woman to be elected Right Worthy Grand Secretary of the I.O.S.L. The organization was on the verge of bankruptcy, so Maggie held rally after rally and was such an inspirational speaker that thousands of people would often attend. Sometimes a thousand people would join at one time. "It's in me to build this Order and teach my people the power of unity," Maggie said. Because of her work, over the years the treasury increased from $31.61 to $3,480,540.19, largely because of initiation fees and monthly dues. Membership rose from 1,080 to 100,000.

Maggie also helped the black community to establish a sanitarium for tuberculosis patients and a home for delinquent girls. She was the major force behind the founding of a community center, an educational loan fund, and many other humanitarian projects. Maggie's most famous achievement was becoming America's first woman founder and president of a chartered bank when she opened the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank in 1903.

Never Letting Up

Although Maggie accomplished so much and met with great success, her life wasn't easy. "I started from a most lowly place in life, from an alley rather than a street; I started with my arms filled with laundered clothes rather than armfuls of trinkets and toys, with feet that have been well acquainted with the rough and rugged road of life. I have worked all day and away into the night. And whatever has come to me in these days has come because I worked from a child; worked before I married, worked after I married, and I am working harder now than ever in my life."

3. Exceptional (adjective): unusually good
4. made up of members who share the same interest or purpose
5. the quality or state of being unable to pay one's debts
6. the funds of an organization
7. a place where someone can receive treatment for a long-term illness
8. a highly infectious disease that mostly affects the lungs
9. showing a tendency to commit crimes, usually youth
Maggie never let up, not even when she became partially paralyzed in 1928. She had an elevator installed in her home and had her car remodeled to accommodate her wheelchair. Maggie continued to work until her death in 1934.

She received many honors for her efforts. But acclaim was not what motivated Maggie Lena Mitchell Walker. "I have never taken one step with a design to raise myself up or to gain applause. What I have done has been done with an eye single to the glory of God and to promote the good of our race."

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence identifies the author's main claim about Maggie L. Walker in the text?
   A. The discrimination that Maggie received for her race and gender prevented her from accomplishing all she wanted.
   B. Maggie's accomplishments as a businesswoman can be attributed to the good education she received.
   C. Maggie was driven to help improve the lives of other African Americans, rather than receive fame or fortune.
   D. As someone who suffered through poverty, Maggie was better prepared to help others avoid similar struggles.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. "She shifted the basket to the top of her head and stepped around a man sleeping on the sidewalk. At least she had a house to sleep in and usually something to eat." (Paragraph 2)
   B. "Although black children did not attend the better-equipped schools with white children, Maggie was fortunate to have an exceptional teacher." (Paragraph 7)
   C. "Maggie's most famous achievement was becoming America's first woman founder and president of a chartered bank when she opened the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank in 1903." (Paragraph 10)
   D. "I have never taken one step with a design to raise myself up or to gain applause. What I have done has been done with an eye single to the glory of God and to promote the good of our race." (Paragraph 13)

3. How did Maggie's church and education influence her?
   A. They helped her develop the confidence that she could do great things.
   B. They encouraged her to pursue a career in banking.
   C. They prepared her for the unfair treatment she would receive in the world.
   D. They taught her to stick with things even when they got difficult.

4. How does paragraph 12 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
   A. It reveals how much Maggie was able to accomplish at a young age.
   B. It shows how tired Maggie was of working nonstop.
   C. It emphasizes how hard Maggie worked her entire life.
   D. It stresses how unhappy Maggie was as a child.
5. How did Maggie contribute to the wellbeing of African Americans in her community?


Journal Question. Answer in 5 or more complete sentences.

2. Maggie L. Walker's goal was to help improve the lives of African Americans. Can you think of someone alive today who is like Maggie L. Walker? What do they do to help others?