



Photo by Lona on Unsplash

# Women Make History:

## Stories we should have learned in school

***When it comes to success  
the choice is simple.  
You can...stand up and  
be counted, or lie down  
and be counted out.***

From a **speech** by Maggie Lena Walker



Maggie Lena Walker, Courtesy of the National Park Service

### Maggie Lena Walker: Queen of Black Enterprise



Maggie Lena Walker, c. 1885-1890, Richmond Photo Co

Maggie Lena Walker was [born](#) into slavery in 1864 in Richmond, VA, the capital of the Confederacy. A brilliant entrepreneur, Walker became the first woman in the U.S. to found a bank. She launched many successful businesses and was a celebrated philanthropist and civil rights activist. Walker's business acumen brought her national fame which she used to educate and empower African Americans.

After the Civil War, Walker's mother took in laundry and her father worked at a hotel enabling Walker to attend school. She excelled at math, but when her father died unexpectedly, Walker had to help support the family.



Delivering laundry to her mother's wealthy White clients, she was troubled by the social, economic, and educational disparity she witnessed. Determined to bridge that gap, in 1883 she [became](#) a teacher after graduation. Three years later, Walker married a wealthy brick mason, but a school policy against employing married women, forced her to quit. Undaunted, Walker channeled her energy into philanthropic endeavors and building community-based businesses.

When Walker was 14 years-old, she joined the Richmond chapter of the [Independent Order of St. Luke's](#), an African-American fraternal organization dedicated to improving the lives of Black people. Walker took its mission to heart. In 1899, she became Grand Secretary, or national chair. Against a backdrop of ever expanding Jim Crow laws intended to dehumanize and disempower former slaves, St. Luke's teetered on the precipice of bankruptcy. But Walker had a plan to make it thrive. Her approach was simple: bring people together by pooling resources. She [said](#): "The pennies, dimes and dollars of a thousand individuals, change the weak-word, 'few,' into the powerful word 'many.'"



Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site

Walker set a powerful [example](#). Under the umbrella of St. Luke's, she launched a series of Black-owned businesses. In 1902, she began publishing [The St. Luke Herald](#) newspaper, a means of building community pride, and a vehicle to encourage African Americans to join together in harnessing their economic power.

One year later, Walker became the first woman in the U.S. to apply for a bank charter and soon after, she opened the [St. Luke Penny Savings Bank](#). She remained President until 1929. The bank quickly became a powerful symbol of racial pride. Ever the educator, Walker could often be seen handing out small piggy banks to children, a device intended to encourage young people to save their money. Each bank held up to 100 pennies, the sum needed to open an account.



Lena Walker, seated third from right. Courtesy – National Park Service.

But Walker wasn't finished. In 1905, she opened the [St. Luke's Emporium](#), a department store to provide jobs for Black women while also offering quality, less expensive products to the African American community. Unlike stores owned by White merchants, the Emporium allowed Black people to try on clothes before purchasing and it didn't charge higher prices to those of color.

Walker was an active feminist who believed that the future of her race lay in educating and empowering Black women. She held leadership positions with the [National Association of Colored Women](#), served on the board of the [Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls](#), and held key roles with the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#). A powerful [orator](#), Walker was a frequent speaker at civic, business, and educational events in major cities across the country. A devout Christian, her themes



invoked Biblical references intended to inspire self-reliance and racial pride.

Walker was a strong Civil Rights activist and not afraid to flex her financial muscle. In 1904 she helped to organize a [boycott](#) against Richmond's newly segregated streetcars. Urging others to "preserve their dignity by walking," she marshaled the resources of the newspaper and the bank in calling for the creation of an alternative streetcar company. Within a year, the offending company failed and a new one was formed.

Although St. Luke's Emporium folded after a few years, in part because vendors refused to sell to the Black-owned store, Walker's other ventures were long-lived. She remained President of the Penny Savings Bank for nearly 30 years. By 1924 it had offices throughout Virginia and more than 50,000 clients. When the Great Depression toppled the economy in 1930, Walker orchestrated the bank's [merger](#) with two other Black-owned banks and renamed it the [Consolidated Bank & Trust](#). Walker became the new entity's board chairman. Today, Consolidated remains in operation and is "the oldest continuously operated African-American-owned bank in the United States."



*Maggie Lena Walker, Courtesy of the National Park Service*

Walker remained at the helm of the Order of St. Luke's until her death. Under her aegis, it grew to include 100,000 members with chapters in twenty-four states.



*Photo by Calder Loth 2019*

Later in life, Walker began to suffer health issues from a long struggle with diabetes and by 1928, she was confined to a wheelchair. Rather than retreat, Walker remained an active public figure. She [died](#) in 1934 from complications of the disease. She was 70 years-old.

In 1979, the National Park Service helped to secure Walker's legacy when it [purchased](#) her home in Richmond and designated it a National Historic Site. Today the house is a museum and a

tribute to her many contributions to Black enterprise. Located in the historic district of Richmond known as [Jackson Ward](#), the area is regarded as "the birthplace of African-American entrepreneurship." Walker once [referred](#) to Richmond as "...the Athens of the Negro race in America."

For a virtual tour of Walker's home, click [here](#).

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## Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Friends were important to Maggie Walker. She once [said](#), "No person is your friend who demands your silence and denies your growth."

**Ask Yourself:** Have you had a similar experience? If so, did you remain friends?



**Ask a Friend:** Have you ever demanded a friend's silence or growth?

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## **(Still) Coming Soon: Women Make History Merch!**

You asked and we are making it happen but want to get it right! In time for Women's History month in March, coffee / soup mugs and more will be available in the new **Women Make History** online store. An email will be coming!

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[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.

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Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Please share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. [www.SharonSpaulding.com](http://www.SharonSpaulding.com)

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