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Interpreting the Life and Times of Maggie Walker

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Interpreting the Life and Times of Maggie Walker

Abstract

As a part of my orientation as an intern at Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, I was told that 90% of visitors who come into the site have a very limited knowledge of who Maggie L. Walker was and what she had accomplished in her 70 years of life. Equipped with that information I felt a heightened sense of responsibility for the overall quality and accuracy of my tour of her home. In my opinion, Mrs. Walker is one of the most extraordinary people in history, a big claim to make, but this claim speaks for itself even in the smallest of details within her home. Mrs. Walker once fell down the stairs and broken her kneecap, a very painful injury with a drawn-out healing process. To prevent future injury, she had a skylight added to the stairwell to illuminate the staircase for safer travel. While this is a comparatively small change to her home, I think it speaks volumes about who she is and how she addressed obstacles in her life. Mrs. Walker lived in Richmond, Virginia during the height of the Jim Crow era. Mrs. Walker faced laws and restrictions that limited her not only as an African American, but as a woman. She didn't just fight these laws; rather she sought creative solutions to benefit herself and others.

Keywords

African American History, Interpretation, Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, Pohanka Internship

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Interpreting the Life and Times of Maggie Walker

By Lucy Marks '19

As a part of my orientation as an intern at Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, I was told that 90% of visitors who come into the site have a very limited knowledge of who Maggie L. Walker was and what she had accomplished in her 70 years of life. Equipped with that information I felt a heightened sense of responsibility for the overall quality and accuracy of my tour of her home. In my opinion, Mrs. Walker is one of the most extraordinary people in history, a big claim to make, but this claim speaks for itself even in the smallest of details within her home. Mrs. Walker once fell down the stairs and broken her kneecap, a very painful injury with a drawn-out healing process. To prevent future injury, she had a skylight added to the stairwell to illuminate the staircase for safer travel. While this is a comparatively small change to her home, I think it speaks volumes about who she is and how she addressed obstacles in her life. Mrs. Walker lived in Richmond, Virginia during the height of the Jim Crow era. Mrs. Walker faced laws and restrictions that limited her not only as an African American, but as a woman. She didn't just fight these laws; rather she sought creative solutions to benefit herself and others.



Provoking people to think of Mrs. Walker as more than just the first African American female bank president was a relatively easy part of my job, as she had many different roles. When Virginia law prohibited Mrs. Walker from continuing to teach after she was married, she took that obstacle as an opportunity. She became a leader in the Independent Order of Saint Luke

(IOSL), a fraternal order and mutual aid society created to aid African Americans. With the influence and experience she gained in the IOSL Mrs. Walker was able to mobilize her community and eventually open a bank in 1903. She took the darkness of losing her job and fashioned her life into a beacon of economic empowerment for her community. She encouraged African Americans to “turn [their] nickels into dollars” through community support and savings. In 1913, Mrs. Walker opened the St. Luke Emporium, a department store not fettered by the restrictions of Jim Crow. In white-owned stores, black patrons could not try on clothes and had to enter through the back. Mrs. Walker took this humiliating restriction and made her own solution promoting dignity—lifting the entire community up with her.

With a human being so dedicated to helping others through innovation, it usually isn't difficult to provoke people to change their limited understanding of who Mrs. Walker was beyond the surface. Yes, her claim to fame is that she was the first African American female bank president, but her home shows us that she was so much more—an innovator, a leader, a visionary.

The biggest obstacle of provocation for this site is promoting an understanding of what everyday life was like for citizens of Jackson Ward in the early 1900s. In terms of technology alone there are many features of the home that visitors might not be familiar with that necessitate further explanation, like steam powered radiators and a radio. Larger concepts like racism, sexism, and slavery also prove challenging to promote understanding, as not everyone can relate to these experiences and they can be more abstract. These larger concepts are arguably more important to stress, however, as they continue to be issues in the world today. When explaining these larger concepts, the house and its many features aid in connecting Mrs. Walker's whole story to a variety of larger themes: the skylight to perseverance, and the home in its entirety to the fight against oppression. If visitors can start to understand who Mrs. Walker was, her home and its peculiarities begin to speak for themselves.