

The Impact the Richmond Voter Registrations Had Statewide

The newspapers of Richmond repeatedly reported that Black women outnumbered White women in voter registration numbers, stoking racist fear and spreading disinformation such as White women being “kept out” (Hewitt & Lebsock, 1993, p. 84). In coordination with the newspapers’ reporting and further burrowing into Virginia’s White Supremacist narrative was the Democratic party, whose leaders “suddenly discovered the virtues of women suffrage” (Hewitt & Lebsock, 1993, p. 85).

“As the chairman of the Richmond City Democratic Committee phrased it, ‘It is the duty of every woman who regards the domination of the white race as essential to the welfare of the Southland to qualify for the ballot...’ A comparable call went out from Rorer James, chairman of the state central committee, who instructed the chairmen of all county and city committees to get white women registered in response to the ‘desperate efforts’ of the black women of Richmond to register. The officials of the party were assisted by the Virginia Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, whose president called for conservative women to qualify ‘in view of the fact that colored women are registering in large numbers...’ (Hewitt & Lebsock, 1993, p. 85)

The Democratic Party had opposed women’s suffrage, using racist narratives to justify their position. Now, afraid of losing the women constituents they had only alienated, they returned to such a racist narrative. “After registration was complete, some Democrats went further and tried to discipline the new voters by suggesting that women would not be able to vote in the 1921 Democratic primary unless they voted a straight ticket in November” (Hewitt & Lebsock, 1993, p. 85).

“Everywhere in Virginia, white women were able to register in greater numbers than black women, both absolutely and relatively. Male dominance proved almost as durable. Nowhere did women emerge as the majority of registered voters, even though women were a numerical majority in many Virginia cities...In most rural counties the proportion of black women registered was 5 percent or less of the black adult female population; the comparable figure for white women was anywhere from about 8 percent to 20 percent.” (Hewitt & Lebsock, 1993, p. 85)

“Of 260,000 Black Virginians over the age of twenty-one in 1920, less than 20,000 were eligible to vote in that year’s elections. Poll taxes and literacy tests disenfranchised many; white democratic election officials turned many others away from the polls; still others had given up their efforts to vote, realizing that even if they successfully cast their ballots, they were playing in ‘a political game which they stood no chance of winning’. The high proportion of female voters resulted from whites’ successful efforts to disenfranchise the majority of Black male voters, as well as the enthusiasm of women to exercise this new right...In Richmond, however, Black women soon found themselves facing the same obstacles to political rights as confronted Black men.” (Jacqueline, Cynthia, & Claudine, 2004, Endnote 15, p. 60) (citations omitted)

Maggie still voted in that Presidential election, and from Maggie’s 1918-1922 diaries, in addition to noting the election’s winners, her diary entry for November 2nd stated “Election Day – Holiday – 1st voting day for Women” (Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, 2015, para. 2). “In the 1920 elections in Richmond, fully 80 percent of the eligible Black voters were women. The increased Black political strength represented by the female voters gave incentive to the growing movement for independent Black political action and led to the formation of the Virginia Lily-Black Republican Party” (Jacqueline, Cynthia, & Claudine, 2004, p. 60).

Maggie Walker's Historic Run on the Lily Black Ticket in 1921

Maggie Lena Walker (1864 – 1934), #VRABlackHistory

Factors contributing to the forming of an independent Black political party were the history of racism and disenfranchisement from both parties in Virginia. The Republicans were trying to move away from the narrative of a party aligned with Black people, and so the party excluded Black voters from Virginia's Republican Convention in 1920 and refused Black people as spectators at the 1921 convention. In addition, the party didn't seat some Black delegates. (Library of Virginia, N.D., para 2) "The party's nominee for governor Henry W. Anderson was committed to promoting a 'lily-white' image" (Library of Virginia, N.D., para. 2). "Independent Black political parties developed in several southern states where the lily-white Republican faction has successfully purged Blacks from leadership positions in that party" (Jacqueline, Cynthia, & Claudine, 2004, Endnote 15, p. 60) (citations omitted).

In response to this "lily-white" ticket, John Mitchell Jr. led the way for Black people in Virginia to nominate their own candidate to the Republican ticket (Library of Virginia, N.D., para 3).

"On September 5, 1921, a convention of about 600 black delegates in Richmond officially nominated an all-black Republican ticket. John Mitchell Jr. was the nominee for governor, Theodore Nash of Portsmouth for lieutenant governor, Maggie L. Walker of Richmond for the superintendent of public instruction, Joseph Thomas Newsome of Newport News for attorney general, Thomas E. Jackson of Staunton for treasurer, F. V. Bacchus of Lynchburg for secretary of the commonwealth, J. L Reed of Roanoke for State Corporation Commissioner, and A. P. Brickhouse of Northampton County for commissioner of agriculture. At the convention, Mitchell refused the label 'lily-black,' to describe the ticket, and sought support from Republicans from both races. He insisted that he, not Anderson, was the true candidate for the Republican Party.

Not all black Virginians supported the ticket. P. B. Young, editor of the Norfolk Guide and Journal, refused the nomination for lieutenant governor, spoke out against the third party, and criticized his old rival, Mitchell, during the campaign. Young feared that an all-black ticket could result in as much racial strife as an all-white one. Young publicly supported Trinkle. As his candidacy was a largely symbolic move, Mitchell did little campaigning and finished a distant third in the election. Following the loss, Mitchell sent Trinkle a congratulatory telegram, and subsequently, Trinkle had a good working relationship with both Mitchell and Maggie Walker." (Library of Virginia, N.D., para 3 - 4)

Maggie L. Walker was the only woman to receive a nomination from the Lily Black party. Although the Lily Black ticket was more of a protest than a serious bid, Maggie was very qualified for the position of state superintendent of public instruction, starting in her early childhood. Maggie attended the Lancaster School and then the Richmond Colored Normal School, teaching for three years after her graduation and stopping when she married, as the law prohibited women from teaching when they got married. However, this didn't stop Maggie's love of teaching and the duty she felt towards educating young Black children. Maggie "had joined the independent Order of Saint Luke at the age of fourteen, rose through the ranks to hold several important positions in the order, and, in 1895, [organized] the juvenile branch of the order" (Jacqueline, Cynthia, & Claudine, 2004, p. 49).

"Founded in Maryland in 1867 by Mary Prout, the Independent Order of Saint Luke began as women's sickness and death mutual benefit association. By the 1880's it had admitted men and had expanded to New York and Virginia. At the 1899 annual meeting William M. T. Forrester who had served as Grand Secretary since 1869, refused to accept reappointment, stating that the order was in decline, having only 1,080 members in fifty-seven councils, \$31.61 in the treasury, and \$400.00 in outstanding debts. Maggie Lena walker took over the duties of the Grand Worthy Secretary at one-third of the position's previous salary.

According to Walker, her 'first work was to draw around me *women*.' In fact, after the executive board elections in 1901, six of the nine members were women: walker, Patsie K. Anderson,

Maggie Lena Walker (1864 – 1934), #VRABlackHistory

Frances Cox, Abigail Dawley, Lillian H. Payne, and Ella O. Waller. Under their leadership the order and its affiliates flourished, the order's ventures included a juvenile department, an educational loan fund for young people, a department store, and a weekly newspaper. Growing to include over 100,000 members in 2,010 councils and circles in twenty-eight states, the order demonstrated a special commitment to expanding economic opportunities within the Black community, especially those for women." (Jacqueline, Cynthia, & Claudine, 2004, p. 50)

"In addition to her Saint Luke activities, Walker was a founder or leading supporter of the Richmond Council of Colored Women, the Virginia State Federation of Colored Women, the National Association of Wage Earners, the International Council of Women of the Darker Races, the National Training School for Girls, and the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls. She also helped direct the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Richmond Urban League, and the Negro Organization Society of Virginia." (Jacqueline, Cynthia, & Claudine, 2004, p.49)

"As an advocate of African American women's rights, she served on the board of trustees for several women's groups...To assist race relations she helped to organize and served locally as vice president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was a member of the national NAACP board. She also served as a member of the Virginia Interracial Commission." (Maggie L. Walker National Historical Site, 2019, Achievements section, para. 4)

Maggie and the women of the Order of Saint Luke "were role models for other Black women in their community activities as well as their occupations" (Jacqueline, Cynthia, & Claudine, 2004, p. 50). "The women of Saint Luke expanded the role of women in the community to the political sphere through their leadership in the 1904 streetcar boycott and through the *St. Luke Herald's* pronouncements against segregation, lynching, and lack of equal education opportunities for Black children" (Jacqueline, Cynthia, & Claudine, 2004, p. 50).

"November 6, 1921 was two days before Virginia's Gubernatorial election, but voting fever had already gripped the capital city. That night, a mass meeting was held at Richmond's Moore St. Baptist Church (pictured) to rally voters in support of an all-Black ticket (known as the "Lily Black" ticket) which featured John Mitchell, Jr. for Governor, and Maggie L. Walker for Superintendent of Public Instruction, among others. Walker and Mitchell were two of the event's featured speakers, sharing stage space with devotionals and various musical selections." (Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, 2018, para. 1) "Walker was able to connect with prospective voters by tirelessly campaigning using her oratory eloquence across Virginia. While she did not win, she received 20,000 votes" (Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, 2011). In comparison, Mitchell received 5,000 votes (Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, 2013). "Though the 'Lily Black' ticket didn't win in 1921, it's hard not to think about the history they would have made if they had. Mitchell, for one, would have become the state's first African American Governor a full 70 years before Douglas Wilder. Walker, on the other hand, would have become the first African American woman elected to a statewide office, a feat that still has yet to occur in Virginia" (Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, 2018, para. 2)!

Maggie Walker's Disinterest in Democrats and Republicans

"After Trinkle's term, there were rumors that the 'lily-black' ticket had been a Democratic invention, motivated by a feared renewal of the Republican Party, but there is no firm evidence of Democratic connivance to split black and white Republicans. The split within the Republican Party created divisions among African American voters. The lily-white stance of the Republican Party forced these voters to reevaluate their traditional party loyalty. As a result, throughout the 1920s African Americans began to align themselves with the Democrats." (Library of Virginia, N.D., para 3 - 4)

Maggie Lena Walker (1864 – 1934), #VRABlackHistory

Around 1925, Maggie came to the realization that neither party had African American's best interests at heart.

“Walker, like many African Americans at the time, was traditionally a supporter of the Republican party and was likely pleased that Republican Warren G. Harding had won. Just weeks before the election, Walker was one of many women who traveled to Ohio and visited Harding at his home to express her support.

Walker's support of Harding in 1920, however, marked a change from her alleged support of Democrat Woodrow Wilson during his re-election campaign in 1916, and wouldn't be the last time Walker would change party affiliations during Presidential elections, let alone come into contact with a President. Though Harding won the Presidency in 1920, the vice-presidential nominee on the Democratic ticket that year was Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt would later be elected President in 1932 with the help of Walker's vote and even invite her to his inaugural speech in 1933.” (Maggie L. Walker National Historical Site, 2015, para. 3-4)

“On election day, 1925, Maggie Walker noted the following in her diary: ‘Our early today. – voted an entire Democratic ticket. Why – no reason. – just voted the ticket. – One party is as good as the other’” (Green, W., 1997, p. 176).

Maggie Walker's Death: The Beginning of Her Legacy

Maggie Walker died in 1934 from complications associated with her diabetes. Up until her death, immediately after, and even today, her legacy inspires political action.

“[Maggie] developed type-2 diabetes by the mid 1920s and by the late 1920s, was confined to a wheel chair [due to an injury from a fall]. Again, Maggie Walker rose to meet the challenges of her life. She continued to work in a custom-designed wheelchair that was fitted with a writing desk. And, unlike other prominent figures who attempted to conceal their disabilities from the public, Walker purposefully allowed the full view of herself in a wheelchair to be photographed and distributed in print media, setting an admirable example for others with disabilities.

As she pushed doggedly on through every challenge — organizing the Consolidated Bank and Trust Company through a merger with two other banks after the financial crash in 1929 — Walker was coping with a diabetic sore on her leg that would not heal and was becoming infected with gangrene.” (Harris, J., N.D., Into the 20th Century section, para. 23-26)

A *Times-Dispatch* article about her death says she was “honored by white race”, and that in October 1934, Black people and all Black organizations nationwide during “Maggie L. Walker Month” with a thousand statuettes of her placed in homes, schools, and business (Jeannette's take on life, 2016, Honored by white race section, para 1).

“[Maggie Walker] argued, ‘Who is so helpless as the Negro woman? Who is so circumscribed and hemmed in, in the race of life, in the struggle for bread, meat and clothing as the Negro woman?’...Furthermore, she insisted that organization and expansion of women's roles economically and politically were essential ingredients without which the community, the race, and even Black men could not achieve their full potential. The way in which Walker described Black women's relationship to society, combined with the collective activities in which she engaged, give us some insight into her understanding of the relationship between women's struggle and race struggle” (Jacqueline, Cynthia, & Claudine, 2004, p.51-52).

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