Standing boldly on the corner of James and Baker Streets, St. Luke Hall remains a testament to the hard work of Maggie L. Walker and the Independent Order of St. Luke, its halls echo their cries for justice, its very foundation supports their undertakings.

900 St. James Street Richmond, VA 23219

The St. Luke Hall

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The Independent Order of St. Luke

Realizing that white-owned businesses would not provide it for them, the Independent Order of St. Luke and other African American fraternal organizations took the initiative to provide insurance for its members. Moving from providing basic care and burials, to “industrial” disability and life insurance, available policies eventually became based on life expectancies, much like modern life insurance policies.

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Maggie Lena Walker

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Maggie Lena Walker, early 20th Century

The St. Luke Hall

The St. Luke Hall

constructed as the national headquarters for the Independent Order of St. Luke, St. Luke Hall, located at 900 St. James Street, provided refuge for African Americans during the challenging era of Jim Crow. The building served as a social, business, manufacturing, and cultural center for the African American community. Ornamental cast-iron staircases, radiators, wainscoting, and elaborately pressed-tin ceilings characterize the building. The first floor once housed the bank and printing press; the large auditorium on the second floor seated over five hundred people for community functions and rallies. Maple roll-down doors allowed for small group meetings on the third floor. The fourth floor included an iron teller’s cage for the protection of insurance and banking assets and Maggie Walker’s personal corner office and conference room.

While John H. White originally designed the St. Luke Hall in 1902, Charles T. Russell renovated the building in 1919, adding the fourth floor. Russell was the first black licensed architect in Virginia and one of many blacks and whites who helped build the St. Luke Building. In addition to housing the headquarters of the Order, other groups utilized the building’s meeting spaces. Several parades and protest marches began at the building, and it served as a collection site for World War I relief supplies. The Order sold the building.

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Maggie Lena Walker, early 20th Century
Jackson Ward, Richmond, Virginia

As Jim Crow politics tightened its hold, African Americans in Richmond created their own “city within a city” to provide for their unmet needs. For nearly a century, Jackson Ward thrived as a home and economic district for its residents until the 1950s construction of today’s I-95 split the community, forcing hundreds to relocate.

Today, Jackson Ward remains the center of Richmond’s African American history and culture with over 600 historic structures including the St. Luke Building, Maggie Lena Walker’s home, Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, and the Hippodrome Theatre.

Partnerships

A number of organizations and individuals continue working to preserve the St. Luke Hall. In cooperation with the National Park Service, the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA), and Walker Row Partnerships, Inc., students in the Sharpe Community Scholars Program at the College of William and Mary are working to find a 21st century use for it. RRHA plans call for reconnecting North Jackson Ward to greater Richmond by improving current infrastructure. These groups continue to build on Walker’s message of economic empowerment and racial pride to preserve the St. Luke Hall and revitalize all of Jackson Ward.

This bulletin was developed by the College of William and Mary, 2009 Sharpe Community Scholars, Morgan Barker, Jason Gangwer, Emily Martin, Carolyn Mayfield, and Caroline Yates.

All pictures courtesy of the National Park Service, Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site.

Map of Jackson Ward and Fun Facts

- Maggie Walker’s favorite color was green!
- The St. Luke Hall contained an elevator at a time when very few buildings in Richmond had them.
- The St. Luke Herald was actually printed in the St. Luke Hall’s basement.
- Maggie Walker’s favorite hymns were “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and “All the Way My Savior Leads Me.”
- After the headquarters of the Order moved out of the building, the St. Luke Hall served as a discotheque and a daycare center.