

General Welfare

The great African-American educator and orator Booker T. Washington once observed, “Remember that everyone’s life is measured by the power that individual has to make the world better.” Individuals who make a meaningful contribution to the general welfare of their community and country have shaped our nation’s character. America’s lifeblood is found in the story of its people...we, the people...

Esther Deberdt Reed, like many people of her day, was born in England. She came to the colonies in 1770 as the wife of Joseph Reed, a man famous as a signer of the Articles of Confederation, a governor of Philadelphia, and one of the first men to uncover Benedict Arnold’s betrayal. Mrs. Reed successfully converted from Loyalist to Patriot, as evidenced by letters written to her family in London and by actions to support the rebel cause. An epistle to her brother Dennis written in 1774 acknowledges the determination of the colonists in their pursuit of independence. “The people of New England,” Reed wrote, “have such ideas of their injured liberty, and so much enthusiasm in the cause, that I do not think that any power on earth could take it from them but with their lives.”

In May of 1780, George Washington reported to Congress the lack of food and rations for the Revolutionary soldiers. Reed, hearing the news from her husband, responded by publishing the *Sentiments of An American Woman* a month later. Her writing inspired the women of her society to take action in helping the soldiers, citing the example of many famous female activists including Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I, and Catherine the Great.

Friend of Esther Reed:

Well, at first, I thought she had gone mad, suggesting we give up buying new things like clothes or books, or perhaps wigs, so that we could use the money to help support the troops. ‘But Esther,’ I told her, ‘I already support the troops,’ to which she replied, ‘Words mean nothing without action.’ She believed it was our Christian duty to be doers of the Word and her prayer was always, ‘God, grant wisdom.’ And, I know He answered her prayers, for she was the wisest, most compassionate woman I’ve ever known.

Just three days after her essay was published, a group of thirty-six women met to organize a door-to-door fundraising campaign for the troops. The Ladies Association of Philadelphia, as the group was called, raised over \$300,000 in cash and donated goods from 1,645 contributors. Men and women in every level of society, from African-American servants to aristocrats, with even a few British loyalists thrown in, contributed to the cause. The effort was so successful that Reed collaborated with Martha Washington to establish similar campaigns in Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia.

It was Reed’s hope to provide money to the soldiers. She wrote in a letter to General Washington that, “I am persuaded the money will be received as proof of our zeal for the great cause of America and our esteem and gratitude for those who so bravely defend it.” The General had a different plan. He suggested that Reed and her relief workers could best serve the men by providing a shirt for each soldier.

“A Shirt...will be of more service,” he said, “and do more to preserve his health than any other thing that could be procured him; while it is not intended, nor shall exclude him, from the usual supply which he draws from the public. This appears to me, to be the best mode for its application, and provided it is approved by the Ladies...”

Reed sent a second letter to the General, asking him to reconsider and pay two dollars to each soldier. Washington replied politely, but firmly, that supplies including shirts were needed most. Disappointed but obedient, Esther began purchasing linen for the work.

Unfortunately, sickness descended upon the city of Philadelphia and Esther DeBerdt Reed died of a fever brought on by dysentery on September 18, 1780 at only thirty-four years of age.

It would be another famous woman of the city, Sarah Franklin Bache, who would continue the work. Bache, the daughter of Benjamin Franklin, coordinated the sewing effort and was able to deliver two thousand shirts, each embroidered with the sewer’s name inside, to General Washington for delivery to his men. “May they be worn with as much pleasure as they were made,” Bache told Washington.

Many Revolutionary soldiers proudly wore them, indeed, as they fought to victory. One idea and 2,000 shirts later, the legacy of Esther Deberdt Reed proved one small act could make a big difference.

The early to mid 1800’s proved to be a fruitful time for American innovation as well as the Industrial Revolution. Some of the inventions from this period include the industrial reaper, the stapler, the typewriter, the telegraph, the revolver, and much to the

dismay of many people, the dentist's chair, followed thankfully by the first use of anesthesia for tooth extraction. The time was ripe for a new inventor named Margaret Knight to make her mark on the world. Maggie, as she was called, was born in 1838 and began her inventing career when she was just a child, using a notebook to scribble designs for wooden toys, kites, and sleds.

As Maggie grew older, she began to hang around a cotton mill near her home in Maine. The mill was not a safe place for the child or adult laborers who worked there. Each time a thread broke on one of the weaving looms, the shuttle, which was the handle for carrying cross threads back and forth the long threads on a loom, would slip, often wounding the worker. Some even died as a result of their injuries.

Though she was only 12 years old, Maggie was determined to do something to help. She set out to invent a safer machine. First, she made drawings of her idea. Then, she built a model, screwing a small piece of wood into the frame near the spring where the thread would break. The wood bar kept the shuttle from moving, thus avoiding an injury to the worker running the loom.

Maggie showed her invention to the shop assistant and soon her invention was added to all 600 looms in the factory, and to looms in other mills across the country. Maggie did not receive money or a patent for her work, but she did earn the satisfaction of knowing she saved lives as a result of her efforts.

But Margaret Knight's inventing career did not end at the mill. She went on to earn the nickname "Lady Edison" by creating new products including a window frame, and her most famous invention, the folded paper bag. She started the Eastern Paper Bag Company, and by her death in 1914, she had been awarded 87 patents. She may not have

been the first female patent holder, but her work was a great contribution to the common good.

As Maggie's inventing career was blossoming, an African-American girl was born in the cotton fields of Delta, Louisiana two days before Christmas in 1867. The baby was the first in her family to be born free. Her early life, though, was a struggle as she was orphaned at seven, married at fourteen, became a mother at seventeen, and a widow at twenty. So how did this young woman go on to become an inventor and one of the most successful women entrepreneurs of the 20th century? For Sarah Breedlove, it began with a simple revelation.

“I was at my washtubs one morning with a heavy wash before me. As I bent over the washboard and look at my arms buried in soapsuds, I said to myself, ‘What are you going to do when you grow old and your back gets stiff? Who is going to take care of your little girl?’ This set me to thinking, but with all my thinking I couldn't see how I, a poor washerwoman, was going to better my condition.”

During the next few years, Sarah prayed for an answer to this question. Meanwhile, Sarah's hair began to fall out. Many women experienced the same problem. At this time, most African Americans used cornmeal or kerosene to clean their scalps and bacon grease or butter to oil their scalp. They used lye to help straighten their hair, which burned their scalp.

The solution to this problem appeared in a dream. After testing the results, Breedlove decided to sell her hair grower. As she built her business, Breedlove also continued her spiritual formation. She had been baptized as a child in Louisiana and joined the St. Paul AME Church in St. Louis during the 1880s. After relocating to

Denver in 1905, she became a member of the Shorter Chapel AME Church. C.J. Walker, a friend from St. Louis, joined her and the two married on January 4, 1906. From then on, Sarah referred to herself as Madam C.J. Walker.

The market was limited in Denver, where she was living at the time, as there was a small population of African-Americans, so Madam and C.J. took their product on the road, canvassing the south with great success. By 1907, she was making as much as most corporate executives and well above the \$10 - \$20 a month earned by most domestic servants.

Madam Walker then moved to Pittsburgh and set up the Walker Hair Parlor and Lelia College in her home. The next step was to open a factory in Indianapolis in 1910. It was a city that was ripe for black entrepreneurs, and according to the organizer of the National Negro Business League, Indianapolis had more African-American businesses than any other northern city. By the end of 1910, Madam's income skyrocketed to almost \$11,000, or \$200,000 in today's dollars.

Wilma Moore (Indiana Historical Society):

There were so many women who wanted to do something other than be a domestic, and Madam Walker afforded that opportunity for those women. And not only those women, but she also allowed other people to see what they could do, what men and women could do, in terms of business, and to just go out and be your own businessperson, be your own boss, so to speak. And this was during a period of racial uplift, so it meant a lot.

Her success and her faith gave Madam Walker the strength to endure the end of her marriage to C.J. Walker in late 1912. Despite her personal circumstances, once again Madam Walker endured, and by 1918, her company was earning \$250,000 a year.

Madam Walker was also generous to the greater community.

Wilma Moore:

Madam Walker was a woman who really believed in her community. She believed in God. She was a woman who really put efforts, in not just what she did, but also her finances behind what she believed, and she very much believed in the church.

After her move to New York City in 1916, Madam Walker began organizing her agents into state and local chapters and began planning the first national gathering of her hair culturists. She also organized the 200 New York sales agents into the first chapter of the Madam C.J. Walker Benevolent Association, demonstrating her lifelong commitment to justice and social accountability. She was a social activist who became a crusader in the anti-lynching movement and took up the cause of war relief for African-American soldiers.

Lifelong friend Jessie Robinson was with Madam Walker as her life neared its end on Good Friday, April 25, 1919.

Jessie Robinson:

She said it was because of divine providence that she accomplished so much. All good and perfect gifts come from above, you know. I remember Madam saying that she wanted to keep going, that she wanted to help her race. I remember her saying that if there was a flowery path to success, she'd never found it. What she achieved came from many sleepless nights and hard work.

Madam Walker died on May 25, 1919. Her last words, spoken just before she lost consciousness, were "I want to live to help my race."

Wilma Moore:

Madam Walker's life suggests that perseverance really matters, that if you have stick-to-it-ness and if you do those things that are necessary to achieve your goals, then you'll make it. You can matter in this life.

Madam Walker is often called America's first female self-made millionaire.

According to research by A'Lelia Bundles, great-great-granddaughter of Madam Walker and author of *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*, the facts prove that Walker was in fact a multi-millionaire when the value of her estate and business are included in her net worth.

Of course, the strength of Madam Walker and her story is not in the final ledger total, but in her indomitable spirit and courage for future generations.

The enterprising spirit born in the Industrial Revolution continued into the 1900's, when a pair of brothers from Dayton, Ohio made aviation history. What many people do not know is the story of the man of faith who inspired their efforts.

Milton Wright was born in Rush County, Indiana, and even as a young boy, he would preach in his father's cornfields, practicing his craft. He grew to become a plainspoken frontier preacher in the United Brethren Church, a denomination he chose for its absolute views on slavery, temperance and opposition to secret societies

Wright pastored several churches and served as a missionary in Oregon and as a professor of theology at his alma mater Hartsville College. A job as editor of the United Brethren's newspaper, *The Religious Telescope*, gave Wright the influence he needed to be elected a bishop in 1877. He also worked to further the ministerial profession.

Katharine Wright (portrayed by Living Historian Betty Darst):

He felt strongly about education for ministers, and this led to establishing the Union Seminary just a few blocks away from our home so that the needs of the churches could be satisfied having trained clergy for them.

Wright clung to his fundamental core of beliefs, even as the denomination grew more liberal. His unyielding beliefs cost him reelection of the office of bishop and involved him in the denomination's split, with the majority of its members beginning a new church that would eventually merge with the United Methodists. Milton Wright formed his own church, which exists today as the Church of the United Brethren in

Christ. The Wright brothers played an important part in this new venture, using their print shop to provide written materials for the new denomination.

Though his career in ministry changed the course of religious history in America, perhaps Milton Wright's greatest contribution to history was his unwavering support and the encouragement of his children.

Katharine Wright:

Dad did a lot of his traveling throughout the country, and he would speak in various organizations and churches. He kept a diary so I can refer to where he had spoken on a Sunday morning. He also included my brothers in keeping a diary, and it helped Orville many years later when they were referring to the events that happened that related to first flight.

In fact, Orville commented on his father's encouragement in his diary, noting that, "we were lucky enough to grow up in a home environment where there was always much encouragement to children to pursue intellectual interests: to investigate whatever aroused their curiosity."

Milton and wife Susan maintained two libraries at home, one for theological works and the other for a variety of reference and educational works. It was important to Milton Wright that his children receive a well-rounded education, and so he encouraged his children to read and investigate all things. Wright, for example, kept a volume of Darwin's published works in his library, even though he disagreed with its theories. And contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence that Milton Wright once told his sons that,

“If man were meant to fly, God would have given him wings.” Such a statement would have been out of character for Wright, who wholly supported his sons’ efforts and believed science to be important.

Orville and Wilbur Wright, along with their two brothers and sister Katharine, respected the faith of their father and mother. Orville and Wilbur abstained from using alcohol and refused to give demonstrations of the flyer on Sundays. They practiced a quiet faith, unlike their father’s outspoken religion.

Their siblings also benefited from their father’s advice and encouragement. Katharine Wright graduated from Oberlin College, a rare achievement for a woman of her time, and the history records that Milton joined both his daughter and son, Lorin, at a march for women’s rights.

Still, it must have been Milton Wright’s finest moment to fly for the first and only time at age 81, shouting to his son “Higher, Orville, higher!”

Katharine Wright:

My dad had an opportunity to fly with my brothers. And as he looked out, he just believed deeply that you should continue to touch the sky in every thing that you did. And, so he was one of the greater supporters of my brothers. And as the years went by, he would sit often times on the rocker, out here on the porch and look out, and watch the people as they would stop by on the street to talk with him. And as he lived to just short of his eighty-ninth birthday, on the eve that the United States entered World War One. It’s a good thing he didn’t live further, because he did not believe that our country should solve its issues through war.

His sons not only touched the sky. They mastered it, and to this day, the legacy of a plainspoken preacher and his famous sons live on.

The last half of the twentieth century saw great industrial and technological advances, and for much of society, progress became a way of life. But not everyone was swept up into the winds of change. Midwest historian Rick Sowash tells the story of one man and his lifelong struggle to eliminate substandard living and working conditions for migrant farmers in the heartland and beyond.

Little Baldemar Velasquez and his brother were sleeping on a couch, their heads at opposite ends, their legs and feet all tangled up, and they had a blanket which they shared, one holding either end. They were sleeping on this couch in a little shack along with their nine brothers and sisters and their mother and their father, all of them crowded into this little shack. They were migrant workers. They had come up from Texas to pick the crops in Ohio: tomatoes, cucumbers. And they were trying to get some sleep after a long, hard day of picking crops.

The brothers heard a rat crawling across the floor. The brothers watched as the rat crawled up onto the blanket, and then when the rat was right in the center, each of the brothers gave their end of the blanket a yank, and that blanket was like a trampoline. It sent that rat screaming right up into the air and back down again and taking off running. The brothers were laughing so hard. They thought this was so funny. Their mother said, "What are you doing? We're supposed to be sleeping. We need out rest to do that hard work tomorrow. Now, you be quiet and go back to sleep." And so, the brothers went back to sleep and they thought it was funny, and maybe you think it was funny, too. But

think about the life that they were living. That whole family crowded into a rat infested shelter. Picking the crops is hard work. Bending over in the hot sun and there's bees and wasps and mosquitoes and they had to work seven days a week. You know, cucumbers and tomatoes don't stop growing on the weekends. They have to be picked then, too.

Well, it's true that the family would sometimes go to church. And when they went to church, well, think what it was like for them. I mean, here they were, a Mexican family. They didn't have a lot of chance to wash their clothes, and they were still pretty dirty from working out in the soil all week. They crowded into the back corner of the church, and little Baldemar told me how he would sit there sometimes and wonder, "What must God think of us? Coming to church like this?"

The family continued and life was hard. They didn't get paid much money for the hard work that they did. And things got worse. The parents became sick and sometimes the men who helped them find work would end up keeping some of the money that they should have given to the family for doing that work. Baldemar kept thinking, "Why doesn't somebody do something? Why can't there be some way to make our lives better?"

He got bigger, and older, and smarter. And then, one day, a thought came to him, a thought that changed his life. He was remembering the times they had gone to church. He was remembering what he had heard about God. And suddenly he told me, he said, "From the inside, it just came to him. Boom! Like that! The thought, God belongs to me, also." And with that thought encouraging him, well, he got to work.

He began to organize the migrant workers into a union, a club, a kind of organization to see if they couldn't make things better. And he led the union, and they went on strike. They said they wouldn't work anymore. They wouldn't pick any more crops until they had better pay and better working conditions. The bosses were not happy. The bosses got the police involved. The bosses tried to force those workers to get back into those fields and pick those crops. And they arrested and sent to jail Baldemar Velasquez and some of the other leaders. They hadn't done anything wrong. But the bosses were trying to hassle them, and harass them, and force them to get back to work. They would not give up.

Baldemar organized a march. He led a bunch of the other workers 600 miles to Washington D.C. and they did that to try to show that they wanted to have better pay and better working conditions and a day off and a chance for the kids to go to school if they're going to do the hard work of the migrant workers. Finally, after eight years, they won their strike. And nowadays, things are still rough for migrant workers, but they're better than they used to be. Nowadays, a day off, better pay, the kids can go to school, and the shelters too. That's right. The shelters where the migrant workers sometimes have to stay, well Baldemar Velasquez and the others cleaned up those shelters as best they could, and there are now no longer rats running free in the shelters where the migrant workers sleep.

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee organized by Baldemar Velasquez in 1967 continues its work today to further the cause of human rights and self-determination for its members.

From the handmade shirts of the Revolution conceived by Esther Deberdt Reed to the pioneering spirit of entrepreneurs and inventors such as Maggie Knight, Madam C. J Walker, and Milton, Wilbur, and Orville Wright, to the rural farmlands of America harvested by hardworking men and women with a united voice thanks to the efforts of Baldemar Velasquez, the story of America endures as a story of cooperation, sacrifice, and perseverance in promoting the general welfare of all its citizens. It is a story worth repeating to future generations.