

Maria Baldwin Stands Center Stage

in Boston Civil Rights



by C. KALIMAH REDD KNIGHT

Kalimah Redd Knight is president of the League of Women for Community Service, Inc., and a 2022 recipient of Historic New England's Prize for Collecting Works on Paper, recognizing the League's commitment to preserving its important collection of books, letters, correspondences, ephemera, photos, ledgers, newspapers, magazines, minutes, and other materials dating back to 1827.

It was February 22, 1897, and Maria Baldwin stood center stage before a crowd at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences in New York, ready to deliver the organization's annual Washington's Birthday address.

Baldwin's appearance was highly anticipated. A Black woman

from Cambridge, Massachusetts, she had already made a name for herself in New England for her unusual ability to navigate Black intellectual and activist spaces—she hosted a literary group in her Cambridge home featuring Harvard students W.E.B. Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter—and

her educational leadership within white progressive environments. In 1889, she made her mark as the first Black person in New England appointed principal of a large majority white school—including an entirely white staff—at the Agassiz Elementary School in Cambridge.

Now she was making history

again, as not only the first Black person but also as the first woman invited to speak at one of the most prestigious cultural venues in the country.

Whatever emotions she may have been experiencing in that moment, they were taken over by her masterful elocution and resolve to humanize Black people and laud those courageous enough to speak likewise. To make her point, she extolled the virtue of recently deceased abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an anti-slavery novel, and condemned the horror of slavery. "Mrs. Stowe must often have seen some poor fugitive passing from one station to another of the underground railroad," she told her audience. "Scarcely a week passed that some fresh outrage was not reported, and letters from a brother in New Orleans revealed the horrors of chattel slavery in the far South."

Her presentation received a thunderous response. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* described her that day as "a colored woman...a type quite as extraordinary in one way as Booker T. Washington is in another. Her English is pure and felicitous, her manner reposeful, and her thoughts and sympathies strong and deep."

From that point on, Baldwin became a regular on the New England lecture circuit promoting suffrage, anti-lynching, and civil rights advancement.

Fast forward more than twenty years, and Maria (pronounced "muh-RYE-yuh") Baldwin was leading a small group of African American women to purchase a five-story brownstone in the South End neighborhood of Boston at 558 Massachusetts Avenue in 1920. No doubt Baldwin's standing in the community, and likely her financial support, enabled the group—a women's club known as the League of Women for Community Service—to acquire the space.

The building owned by "the League," as it is less formally known, would go on to become a hub and a de facto cultural repository for the archives and objects of Boston's Black community for decades. It also would play a small but key role in the civil rights movement, serving as the home to civil rights icon Coretta Scott King, who stayed in the building while attending New England Conservatory of Music School, which had severely

PAGE 2 Maria Baldwin, the first president of LWCS and the first Black person appointed principal of an integrated school in New England when she was named head of the Agassiz Elementary School (now the Maria Baldwin Elementary School) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1889. The LWCS headquarters located at 558 Massachusetts Avenue in Boston's South End. Construction on the front façade is set to begin this summer. (Image by Craig Bailey) **THIS PAGE** Young women gathered outside the headquarters in the 1940s. The grand staircase at LWCS's headquarters. (Image by Craig Bailey)





A portrait of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, publisher, civil rights activist, suffragist, and editor of *The Women's Era*, the first national newspaper published by and for African American women. St. Pierre Ruffin was among the co-founders of the LWCS.

restricted access for Black female students to its dorms. Scott King would famously meet Martin Luther King Jr., who also lived on Massachusetts Avenue while he attended graduate school at Boston University.

Today, the League, which still owns the historic brownstone at 558 Massachusetts Avenue, is one of the longest continuously running Black women's clubs in the United States. The organization is actively seeking to renovate the building and revitalize the legacy of Baldwin and her co-founders through its collections and educational programming.

The League is at the beginning of a more than \$5 million capital campaign to restore the building, and thanks to the support of several major funders, including the City of Boston Community Preservation Act, the Massachusetts Historical Commission, The National Trust for Historic Preservation through the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund supported by The Klareman Foundation, the History of Equal Rights Grant, and the Henderson Foundation, \$1.2 million has already been raised. These funds will support Phase 1 of the project, focusing on restoration

of the brick and mortar, the mansard roof, and refurbishment of its historic windows.

Built in 1857 by wealthy wood importer William Carnes, the brownstone was used as a showcase for his business. The house includes several remarkable features, such as a solid mahogany wood staircase with banisters and a newel post featuring a wood carving of Carnes's dog, twelve-foot doors imported from Honduras, more than a dozen fireplace mantels made of marble imported from Italy, and ornate gold-finished chandeliers imported from Paris.

A Remarkable Collection

In addition to its affiliation with this historic space, the League also possesses a collection of community archival materials that it amassed over the years.

Among the key pieces within the collection is a commemorative book of the first-hand, personal accounts of members of the Robert A. Bell Post No. 134, Grand Army of the Republic—all Civil War veterans who served in the 54th and 55th Massachusetts regiments and the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry, units composed of Black soldiers recruited to take up arms in the fight against slavery. Published in 1892, this book was assembled and written by Pauline Hopkins, a noted African American writer. Harvard Radcliffe Institute's Schlesinger Library has recently begun a project to preserve, transcribe, and digitize the book. The League's collection also includes a rare copy of journalist

Ida B. Wells's first anti-lynching pamphlet, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), a work of major historical importance. Only three copies are recorded as being held in libraries (New York Public Library, Howard University, Washington, DC, and East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina) and no copies are recorded in auction sales.

"Since the LWCS [The League of Women for Community Service] has occupied the same spacious quarters for its entire existence, the paper records were simply stored on site," wrote James Goldwasser, president of Locus Solus Rare Books, which assessed the collection in 2022. "While they have been shuttled from room to room to closet to basement, and not kept in ideal archival condition, they nonetheless survive and thus offer an important opportunity for research in a number of important and often underrepresented areas of scholarship, including the role of Black women in social change during the years between Reconstruction and the modern civil rights movement and Black life in Boston during those same years."

The League's collection is currently housed at Simmons University, the only women's college remaining in the city of Boston, where it is being archived, and portions will be digitized.

The League is seeking to embrace its rich history and share its story. Through a collaboration with Embrace Boston (formerly King Boston), Simmons professor Dr. Johnnie Hamilton-Mason is conducting an ethnographic,

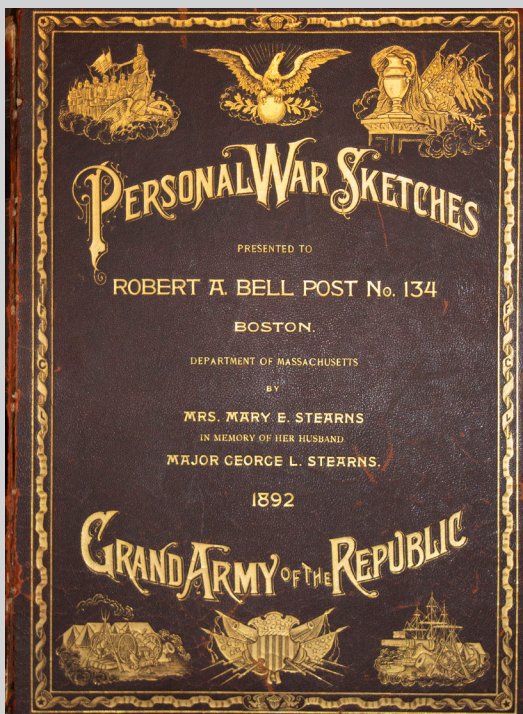
qualitative study on the organization. Her goal is to illuminate the experiences of Black women who boarded at the League's headquarters from 1940 to 1950, including a young Coretta Scott King. The project will highlight reasons why an autonomous Black women's organization was both necessary and useful. It will also provide information about the limits of normative feminism and how women ought to be viewed and treated during this era and how Black women framed their lives with an awareness of multiple oppressions and strategies for surviving and flourishing.

The restoration of the building highlights the League as a living piece of history that was forged by Baldwin and her co-founders, individuals who toiled under the most challenging of circumstances and yet achieved so much. These women, including Baldwin's close friends Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Florida Ruffin Ridley, organized the first colored women's national conference in Boston in 1895. St. Pierre Ruffin, Ruffin Ridley, and Baldwin were also co-founders of the Women's Era Club, a club considered the predecessor to the League that existed from 1892 to 1894. The Women's Era Club, led by St. Pierre Ruffin, published a newspaper—the first and only one for and by Black women—from 1893 to 1897.

Not surprisingly, Baldwin's life also contained its share of hardship. As Kathleen Weiler's biography *Maria Baldwin's Worlds* (University of Massachusetts

Press, 2019) details, Baldwin lost her family home in Cambridge at the same time her brother went bankrupt in 1905, leading to the conclusion that the two incidents were related. This forced Baldwin to move into a rooming house for professional women in Boston's South End, where she was the only African American resident and endured racial discrimination from some of the other residents. She also experienced a number of health challenges, including heart disease that was exacerbated by her packed work and speaking schedule. She died suddenly, moments after speaking at a Robert Gould Shaw House Association meeting on January 9, 1922.

Baldwin's legacy lives on. The school she headed for forty years, the Agassiz Elementary School, was renamed in her honor in 2002. Her overwhelming contributions to the causes of justice and equality, while also playing a major role in establishing a safe and culturally nourishing space for the Black community, especially Black women, may never be fully recognized. Her life symbolizes the potential of an oppressed community and the iterative nature of a liberation struggle to persist amid overwhelming odds. Just like Baldwin's conviction to stand before a crowd that day in New York and be heard, the League endeavors to uplift the example she and her co-founders embodied for the coming generations. Visit LWCSBoston.org for more information. 🐾



Historic New England Prize for Collecting Works on Paper

Kalimah Redd Knight, president, and the League of Women for Community Service, Inc. (LWCS), received Historic New England's 2022 Prize for Collecting Works on Paper at the Historic New England Summit in Worcester, Massachusetts, last fall. Knight and the LWCS were recognized for their work preserving and making accessible the organization's extraordinary archives. Margaret L. Winslow, curator of Historical Collections & Archives at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, also received the 2022 Collector's Prize for her work overseeing and making accessible the cemetery's collection of records and objects relating to the history of Mount Auburn and the rural cemetery movement.

The Collector's Prize, which is awarded annually, honors those who have assembled or helped save significant collections of books, manuscripts, photographs, prints, drawings, and ephemera related to New England and its diverse communities or to the nation as a whole. Nominations for the 2023 prize are now being accepted.