

**Margaret Walker Alexander**  
**and the Study of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century African American**

As a professor of English at Jackson State University (JSU) in 1968, Margaret Walker Alexander founded the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People. Inspired “to write the songs of her people” from a diverse group of authors ranging from Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and William Blake to William Faulkner and the prophets of Hebrew scripture, Alexander was an already accomplished essayist, poet, and novelist. At the forefront of a nascent Black Studies movement, Alexander had had the unique opportunity both to be mentored by the likes of W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Sterling A. Brown and to be a mentor to writers such as Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Sonia Sanchez. Thus, the Institute and its mission reflected her complete immersion in 20<sup>th</sup> Century African-American history and culture.

Born in Birmingham on July 7, 1915, Margaret Abigail Walker was the daughter of a Methodist minister and an educator and musician. Sigismund Walker and Marion Dozier Walker had high expectations for their four children and encouraged each of them to fulfill his or her individual potential. By the time she was five years old, Margaret was reading and writing, and, at age fourteen, she started a journal, which she kept for the rest of her life. Recognizing her gifts, her parents supported her studies, and, one day, her father gave her a datebook and challenged her to write some piece of creative writing every day for a calendar year—a task into which Margaret threw herself.

Leaving Alabama, the family moved to New Orleans in 1925. Once settled, Margaret attended Gilbert Academy, where she was an honor student and where her writing flourished. She published an essay, “What Is to Become of Us?,” and also penned her first national piece, a poem entitled “I Want to Write,” which appeared in the NAACP’s official organ, the *Crisis*, in 1934. Her talent led her to New Orleans University (now Dillard University). There, she met the famous poet, Langston Hughes, who nurtured her love of literature but encouraged her to leave the South to complete her education. She promptly enrolled at her father’s alma mater, Northwestern University, and received her bachelor’s degree in English in 1935.

After her graduation, Margaret Walker stayed in Chicago and worked with the Federal Writers’ Project. That gave her the chance to meet authors such as Richard Wright, Sterling A. Brown, Horace Cayton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Frank Yerby, and others. She developed a close friendship with Richard Wright and joined his Southside Writers Group, eventually taking over as group leader when Wright moved to New York City. Her tumultuous relationship with him led to a biography, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius*, in 1988.

In a 1937 issue of *Poetry* magazine, Walker published her seminal work, “For My People,” and her former Federal Writers’ Project boss, Sterling A. Brown, anthologized the poem in his important work, *The Negro Caravan*. After she left Chicago in 1939, she entered graduate school at the State University of Iowa’s competitive and highly respected Writers’ Workshop. For her master’s thesis, she refined “For My People” and published it in her first book of poetry by the same name in 1942. For that book, she became the first African-American woman to receive the Yale University Younger Poets Award.

One year after her book of poetry was released, Walker married Firnist James Alexander in North Carolina, where she was teaching at Livingstone College. By 1949, she and her

husband had moved their three children to Mississippi, so she could join the faculty of Jackson College (now Jackson State University). Using her married name of Alexander, she taught English, composition, creative writing, African-American literature, and Bible as literature on the Language Arts faculty. Whenever possible, she brought writers to the campus such as Arna Bontemps, Owen Dodson, Robert Hayden, and Langston Hughes to discuss and recite poetry.

While at JSU, Alexander returned to the Iowa Writers' Workshop and completed her doctoral dissertation, a neo-slave narrative inspired by the memories of her maternal grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier. Published under her maiden name and penname "Margaret Walker" in 1966, *Jubilee* represented thirty years of research and reflection. Never since out of print, *Jubilee* won the Houghton Mifflin Literary Award in 1968, and has been translated into Dutch, French, German, Japanese, as well as several other languages.

Upon her return, Dr. Alexander developed and coordinated the first humanities program at JSU, but her lasting achievement was the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People. As director of the Institute, she organized several conferences that were the first of their kind, including the 1971 National Evaluative Conference on Black Studies. The event brought renowned scholars, actors, activists, and public officials to the JSU campus to analyze this new field of scholarship. In 1973, she invited leading African-American women writers such as Margaret Burroughs, Lucille Clifton, Mari Evans, Paula Giddings, Nikki Giovanni, and Alice Walker to celebrate Phillis Wheatley's bicentennial. She even spearheaded a conference to discuss the status of newly independent African countries and the problem of apartheid in South Africa.

After thirty years of teaching, Alexander retired as Professor Emerita of English and donated her literary and administrative papers to the Institute that she had founded and that was

named in her honor: the Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center for the Study of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century African American. The Alexander Papers at JSU include that well-worn datebook given to her by her father with 365 creative writing pieces in it as well as more than 130 of her personal journals dating from the 1930s to the 1990s. There are also a few unpublished works such as her epic poem, *Jean Lafitte*; novels, *Goose Island* and *Mother Beulah*; and numerous essays. In all, the Alexander Papers constitute the single largest collection of a modern black, female writer anywhere in the world.

Both an archive and a museum today, the Alexander Center is dedicated to the preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of the 20th Century African-American experience. The Center seeks to honor Alexander's artistic and academic legacy by expanding and promoting its manuscript holdings and oral history collections, interpreting African-American history and culture through its museum and exhibits, coordinating public programs on campus and throughout the community, preserving historic structures central to the African-American experience, and advocating Black Studies at JSU.

Over the course of the 2010 academic year, the Alexander Center has hosted the likes of Ellis Marsalis and Andrew Young for events and co-sponsored a student conference on campus: the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Creative Arts Festival: *The Sit-in Movement and Student Activism Fifty Years Later*. The Center's staff is also engaged in two major grants from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. These grants will result in the digitization of approximately 50% of the Alexander Papers, greatly expanding the reach and impact of the collection through its website: [www.jsu.edu/margaretwalkercenter](http://www.jsu.edu/margaretwalkercenter).

Open to the public in historic Ayer Hall, the Alexander Center houses more than thirty significant manuscript collections like the papers of the former U.S. Secretary of Education,

Roderick Paige, and a large oral history repository that includes the official collection of the Veterans of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. The Center continues to assemble living memories, archival records, and personal papers for scholarly use and welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with other organizations, such as its partners at JSU: the Fannie Lou Hamer National Institute on Citizenship and Democracy, the Afro-Cuban Research Institute, and the Veterans of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement.

With six honorary degrees and numerous honors for her writings, Margaret Walker Alexander was inducted into the African-American Literary Hall of Fame at the Gwendolyn Brooks Writers' Conference at Chicago State University in 1998. One month later, on November 30, she succumbed to a long bout with breast cancer at the age of 83 in her daughter's Chicago home. She was survived by four children, nine grandchildren, and other descendants but also by a legacy that lives on through her poetry and other works as well as an Institute that she had founded thirty years earlier at JSU.



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