As Jim Crow discrimination and violence tightened its grip on Southern society, black leaders in Memphis looked not down, but up and ahead, as they continued traditions of collectivism and community uplift throughout the 20th century. Born out of the vision and audacity of founders Dr. Joseph E. Walker, Archie W. Willis Sr., and Mark William Bonner with the support of Dr. John Thomas Wilson, Dr. R.S. Fields, and B.F. Booth, the Universal Life Insurance Co. (ULICO) became one of the largest African American-owned insurance companies in the nation, but it was always much more than a business.

Walker sought to build a black-owned business that would give people of color a hand up by helping them accumulate wealth, creating opportunities for professional employment, supporting education, and pushing for civil rights. His dream began taking shape in 1923 when ULICO opened on Beale Street, a vibrant African American business district. As the company grew, Walker became an economic, political, and civic force who demanded change, and ULICO quickly evolved into an organization whose impact on the lives of black Memphians is largely immeasurable.

In 1946, Walker and his son, A. Maceo, founded Tri-State Bank to make loaning money to African Americans easier. In the bank’s first 10 years, it provided mortgage loans for more than 2,000 families. When African American farmers in surrounding rural areas suffered economic reprisals for their outspokenness on civil rights, Tri-State Bank and Universal Life worked with the NAACP to provide emergency aid. ULICO office buildings also served as an operation base for the Memphis Branch of the NAACP, providing safe spaces for activists to plan and strategize during the city’s struggle for civil rights.

As the company achieved success, Walker looked to McKissack and McKissack, an African American architectural firm with a history as old as the black freedom struggle, to build a space that exuded the importance of Universal Life. The McKissacks designed the company’s first headquarters at 234 Hernando Street, but one of their most architecturally significant buildings was the 1929 Egyptian Revival-style ULICO building located at 480 Linden Avenue. This building not only spoke to the power and independence of black business, its Egyptian imagery recalled the achievements of ancient African cultures during an era in which state-sanctioned racial discrimination and violence relied on the supposed inferiority of African Americans.

As Universal Life expanded into 11 states, the firm created a thriving community for its employees. The company newsletter celebrated “Universalities” with stories of employee achievements and announcements about family milestones such as births and graduations. Outreach to local high schools brought in students for job shadowing and office takeover days. Company-sponsored activities such as bowling teams and pageants, as well as designated community meeting spaces and a public cafeteria, nurtured relationships and enabled a rich culture to develop within the company.

Today, the Universal Life Insurance Building stands as a testament to the successes not of one man or family, but of African Americans across Tennessee. The building exudes the bold vision of the founders, and represents the resilience, power, and culture that have characterized African American communities for centuries.

**For a Humble Beginning to a “Tower of Strength”**

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Patricia Walker Shaw, daughter of A. Maceo Walker, became the president of Universal Life in 1983, becoming the first woman in the country to lead a major insurance company. Her son, Harold Shaw Jr., also worked for the company.

Photo courtesy of the Walker Shaw Family Archives.
McKissack and McKissack designed Universal Life’s first home office building at 234 Hernando Street (pictured above). When the company sought a larger building some 20 years later, Dr. Joseph E. Walker and Moses McKissack III planned to renovate the First Baptist Church Linden and Lauderdale building (currently the Mt. Olive Cathedral CME Church), the former home of a white congregation that relocated after African Americans moved into the immediate area. Walker soon abandoned these plans and had McKissack design a new, visually stunning Egyptian Revival building just down the road.

Photo taken by Hooks Brothers Photography; courtesy of Memphis and Shelby County Room at the Memphis Public Library.

“The black citizens have supported us. We, in turn, have shouldered our responsibility by helping to make the black world a meaningful and beautiful world.”

—A. Maceo Walker

The home of Dr. Walker and wife Lelia O’Neal Walker still stands at 1109 Mississippi Boulevard in what is known as the Soulsville neighborhood. Today, the Soulsville Neighborhood Association and other Memphis nonprofit organizations are based in the house, a fitting use for the former home of two of the city’s most influential community leaders.

Photo courtesy of Self + Tucker Architects.

Rendering of the Universal Life Insurance Building and iconic sign on a mid-20th-century postcard.

Photo is courtesy of Memphis and Shelby County Room at the Memphis Public Library.

Mid-20th-century photograph of the Egyptian Revival-style Universal Life Insurance Building with portraits of some of the most influential leaders of the company: J.A. Swayze, Mark W. Bonner, A.W. Willis, Dr. Joseph E. Walker, B.G. Olive Jr., Dr. J.W. Kelso, and A. Maceo Walker.

Photo courtesy of the Walker Shaw Family Archives.