



Wes-Kaapse Provinsiale Parlement
Western Cape Provincial Parliament
IPalamente yePhondo IeNtshona Koloni

CHARLOTTE MAXEKE (1874–1939)
THE MOTHER OF BLACK FREEDOM IN SA

FACT SHEET 25

March 2021



Charlotte Manny Maxeke, who came to be known as the “Mother of Black Freedom in South Africa”, was a wife, educationist, visionary, leader, social and political activist and advocate for women’s rights in South Africa.

She was also the first black South African woman to graduate with a university degree.

In this fact sheet we explore the life and legacy of Charlotte Manny Maxeke from her birth in 1874 until her passing in 1939.

- Charlotte Makgomo Manny was born on 7 April 1874 in the Polokwane area where her parents lived, but moved to the Eastern Cape at a young age.
- Charlotte attended primary school in Uitenhage and high school in Port Elizabeth.
- She received a missionary education at Edwards Memorial School in the Eastern Cape in the early 1880s.
- In 1885, after the discovery of diamonds, Charlotte moved to Kimberley with her family, where she became a teacher.
- Her true joy, however, was music. Charlotte and her sister, Katie, joined the African Jubilee Choir in 1891, and toured England for two years. During this tour, Charlotte performed for Queen Victoria, allegedly in Victorian costume.
- After returning home, Charlotte went on tour to the United States of America (USA) with the McAdoo singers in 1894. When the tour collapsed, Maxeke stayed in the USA and studied at the Wilberforce University in Cleveland, Ohio, which was run by the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC). At the university she was studied under the Pan-Africanist, W.E.B. Du Bois and received an education that was focused on developing her as a future missionary in Africa.

- She graduated with a B.Sc. degree from the Wilberforce University in 1901 and became the first black South African woman to earn a university degree.
- At Wilberforce, Charlotte also met her husband, Marshall Maxeke, who came to the university from South Africa in 1896.
- Upon her return to South Africa in 1901, she took up a post as the first African teacher at Pietersburg in the Transvaal, while opening the local missionary field for the AMEC among the African communities. As one of the pioneers of the South African AMEC, she served on the missionary committee and was invited to give talks at the AMEC conferences.
- In 1903 Charlotte Mannyia married Marshall Maxeke. They worked together as missionaries for the AMEC, first in Pietersburg (today Polokwane) and then in Idutywa in the Eastern Cape.
- Education became a priority for the Maxeke couple and in 1908 they established the Wilberforce Institute for the AMEC at Evaton in the Transvaal.
- In 1912 Charlotte and her husband attended the launch of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), the forerunner of the African National Congress (ANC), in Bloemfontein and she became one of its first women members.
- Although her main concerns were church-linked social issues, Charlotte also wrote to newspapers about the social and political position of women. As an early opponent of passes for black women, Charlotte was politically active throughout her adult life. She helped organise the anti-pass movement in Bloemfontein in 1913 and founded the Bantu Women's League (BWL) of the SANNC in 1918.
- As leader of the Bantu Women's League, the forerunner to the ANC's Women's League, she led a delegation to Prime Minister Louis Botha in 1918 to discuss the issue of passes for women, and this was followed up by a protest the following year.
- She was also involved in protests on the Witwatersrand about low wages and participated in the formation of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) in 1920.
- Charlotte was also involved in multiracial movements. She addressed the Women's Reform Club in Pretoria, which was an organisation for the voting rights of women, and joined the Joint Council of Europeans and Bantus.
- She was elected as president of the Women's Missionary Society (WMS) in 1924.
- In 1926 the church called the Maxeke couple to Idutywa, Eastern Cape where Marshall was appointed pastor and principal of the Lota High School. Charlotte was appointed as head teacher and there they both continued their outstanding work on behalf of the church and for learners.
- During their stay in the Eastern Cape, the Maxeke couple went on to teach and evangelise in other places, including Thembuland in the Transkei under King Sabata Dalindyebo. It was here that Maxeke participated in the king's court, a privilege unheard of for a woman. However, they finally settled in Johannesburg where they continued their involvement in political movements, until the death of Marshall in 1928.
- After a period of mourning, Charlotte responded to a call by the South African Ministry of Education to testify before several government commissions in Johannesburg on matters concerning African education, another "first" for an African of any gender.
- In 1928 she attended an AMEC conference in the USA and became increasingly concerned about the welfare of Africans.
- In 1935 she addressed the All-African Convention in Bloemfontein where she played a leading role in the establishment of the National Council of African Women (NCAW).
- In the early 1930s she was increasingly becoming concerned about the plight of young black people. She duly accepted a position to be the first black woman to become a probation officer and court welfare officer to Johannesburg's juvenile magistrate.
- Charlotte Mannyia Maxeke passed away on 16 October 1939 at the age of 65.
- The memory of Charlotte is honoured by way of the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital and the renaming of Beatrice Street in Durban. The main street of Bloemfontein, Maitland Street, was also recently renamed Charlotte Maxeke Street in her honour.