

THE PROMISE OF COMMON WEALTH

By Kalela Williams

How does a Black-owned bank fulfill the true promise of a commonwealth? To explore this question, *Philadelphia Contemporary*, with the help of local writer Kalela Williams, sought to discover the history of the United Bank of Philadelphia.

The rise and fall of water—that is the name, in a long-gone language, of a river that flows through the childhood memories of Emma Chappell. The Rappahannock, an Algonquin word, was spoken in the rhythmic language of the Powatans, a people who lived and thrived along the Virginia tidewater. The land through which this body of water coursed was called, correspondingly, Tappahannock, meaning “on the rise and fall of water.” The Powatans may have named this river not for the properties of liquid but for the land it interrupts. If you’ve ever traveled along the length of the Rappahannock River, you know that at its mouth it is a wide swath of blue-grey water drawn from the Chesapeake Bay. A neck of land separates it from the Potomac River to the north. Other fringes of land, thick and soft with expanses of swamp and forest, divide this body of water from the York and the James rivers to the south. As the Rappahannock reaches further inland, and as the flat tidewater landscape lifts into piedmont, the path of water narrows and climbs. You could say Virginia’s rivers

are the landscape's gesture to a lost promise of a commonwealth. And you could say the Rappahannock in particular was the backdrop of a childhood, that of a young girl who one day sparked a change-making institution.

Emma Chappell, who was born Emma Carolyn Bayton, lived in Philadelphia. But she spent her summers in the small, everybody-knows-everybody town of Tappahannock. With her father's family homestead on a seventy-acre farm near the river's banks, many hot-weather days saw Emma and her two siblings racing across the road to play and splash in the river. Sometimes they cavorted with cousins after church or tucked dimes into linty pockets to redeem for movie tickets at the Daw Theater. The children would have scrambled up the stairs to reach the balcony, the Colored section.

In Philadelphia, Emma's father was a chef at Horn & Hardart, a landmark restaurant. He and his wife's patience may have been tried by Emma, a mischievous girl who disrupted class by chewing gum and giggling with girlfriends. But school was a sanctuary for her, as she had a capacious and endlessly curious mind. So was Zion Baptist Church, where she spent Sundays leaning into the words of Reverend Leon Sullivan, a beloved Philadelphia pastor and civil rights activist.

Her mother, who suffered from heart disease and diabetes, had been bedridden for years. She knew she couldn't shepherd her eldest daughter past girlhood. When Emma was fourteen, her mother died as she lay in bed beside her. "She used to tell me . . . how she wanted me to grow up, and the things she wanted me to do, and how she believed in me," Emma recalled decades later. These were words she tucked into a safe place, like the dimes she once slipped into her pockets

Like the waters of the Rappahannock climbing the higher and higher altitudes of Virginia's landscape, Emma found a way

to rise. Her father, supporting the children on his own, was strict, a “tough taskmaster.” But aside from the loss of her mother, Emma’s young life “was like out of a storybook,” she said. “Things were just kind of placed in my path.” A West Philadelphia High School yearbook shows an oval-faced girl with tightly curled bangs and smooth black hair neatly tucked behind the collar of a striped blouse. Her smile is magnetic, and indeed the caption of her photograph reads “smiling, cute, ‘Em’ plans to center her career in Medical Research. Emma is fond of Latin, music, and dancing. In her spare time she finds pleasure in making clothes.”

With her mother’s illness indelible in her memory, Emma did imagine becoming a doctor. But her pastor insisted she take an aptitude test, and it suggested math was her calling. Reverend Sullivan encouraged her to go into banking, as there weren’t enough Black bankers. She decided to walk this road set before her.

As a young woman, Emma learned to draw all that she needed from the community around her. She learned to follow some, though not all, of the guidance given generations before by activist Booker T. Washington. A trade was not enough for her. But she realized that to make water rise, she must cast down her bucket where she was.

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Emma’s young life was framed by two commonwealths, as named by their constitutions: the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, where she shaped a vital institution, and the Commonwealth of Virginia, her ancestral home. The word “commonwealth” is meant to define an idea of public wealth, of general good, and a state in which power is vested in the people.

We like to think of the United States as the people’s

republic. But this country was never built upon the people; rather, it was built on the bones and backs of peoples. We can look to the Rappahannock and her sister rivers, the Potomac, the York, and the James, along which the English sought to stake a territory. Their Virginia Company was the 17th-century version of a corporation: wealthy English gentlemen bought shares in hopes that a colony would return their investment. But the land withheld its generosity. White settlers were felled by disease, resorting to eating rats during what they called “the starving times.” Later, any trust forged by the marriage of the Powatan chief’s daughter Pocahontas—we’ll call her Matoaka, which may have been her preferred name—to Englishman John Rolfe dissolved. Perhaps it was because their relationship was built on distrust, with Matoaka meeting Rolfe after she’d been kidnapped by the English as a political pawn. Perhaps it was because she did not live long. Either way, the Powatan confederacy attacked the English settlement in 1622, killing hundreds. They, like Native communities up and down the continent’s coast, had been decimated by European disease over the century, with thousands upon untold thousands dying.

It was around this time that John Rolfe began planting in earnest a new strain of tobacco that “smoked pleasant, sweete and strong,” holding promise for export. But raising it was arduous work, and the English eventually turned to the transatlantic slave trade that had been made lucrative by the Dutch and the Portuguese. Over the centuries, nearly 400,000 people, brutally abducted from their African homelands, would arrive on the shores of the United States, with millions more in Europe’s other New World colonies.

Virginia’s rivers frame colonization’s landmarks. The banks of the York on which Matoaka once played are adjacent to the colonial capital of Williamsburg, built from the profits

of tobacco and the sweat of black backs. The James River winds through Richmond, capital of the Confederacy, a city once made fat-rich by the sale of human flesh. The Rappahannock passes by Ferry Farm, boyhood home of George Washington and the land of a mythic cherry tree. The Potomac stretches inland, its waters reflecting pools to the marble, slave-built skyline of Washington, DC, perhaps the most fraught US city in the ongoing story of oppression. These are not places of common wealth.

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The young woman handled dollar bills with the speed of a poker dealer. She was the only Black teller standing behind the tall, polished wood counter. She finished counting the twenty-dollar bills, shaping them into a neat stack that she pushed into a narrow envelope. Smiling, she passed the envelope to a customer, thanking him by name. She took this time, even though her line was the longest. Customers, Black and white, chose her as their teller when they walked into the chandeliered lobby. They knew her as being quick and efficient but warm and personable, just as she'd once been with her classmates. This meant that in the breakroom, colleagues would sniff and say things like, "fine, let her work herself to death, then." But they did not feel threatened. They saw Emma as a young woman working a minor job, although she'd already been moving up when she became a teller; her career at Continental Bank had begun in 1959, when she earned \$45 a week photostatting checks—that is, photographing them for deposit. With Emma being newly married, her colleagues reasoned she'd eventually quit her job. But many didn't know she was enrolled in night school at Temple University. To get ahead, she knew she'd need a college degree, and Emma had dreams of being a CEO.

Emma Chappell made long strides. After receiving her degree, she secured a place in an executive training program, which allowed her to work in every department at Continental Bank. In 1971, she was promoted to assistant treasurer. As she moved higher and higher, she met with resentment. How dare a woman, and a Black woman at that, be in control of loans especially? some asked. They understood the power of loans in shaping the promise and distribution of wealth. So did Emma. She became the company's first female and first Black vice president in 1977, heading a division she founded, the Community Business Loan and Development Department, which dispersed commercial loans to minority and women-owned businesses. During this time, she granted more than \$30 million in loans to Black enterprises. Recalling the hostility she faced, Emma cited the adage, "The higher you get up the ladder, the tighter it gets at the top." Corporate ladders for Black women then were like the rivers of lost promises. But other people recognized Emma's talent and reached out an oar. Later, she remembered, "Somebody was always marshalling me along."

In the early 1980s, Emma's respect among city leaders won her the attention of activist Jesse Jackson. She was floored when he asked her to join his presidential campaign as national treasurer. Taking a leave of absence from Continental Bank, Emma traveled with Jesse Jackson across much of the country. And as she visited one city after another, she came to intimately know the value of Black-owned banks: how they uplifted communities, how they extended loans and credit to areas marked untouchable with boundaries drawn in red ink.

In 1987, Black leaders in Philadelphia mounted their own campaign: they wanted Emma to open a bank. Though she'd always dreamed of being a CEO, she never imagined actually founding an institution. But she rose to the challenge. She, along

with business and community leaders, turned out their own pockets to raise \$600,000 in start-up money to cover a business plan and feasibility study. And then Emma Chappell set out to raise millions more.

She started with big banks, which had historically helped other small banks boost capital. She acquired a million dollars from institutions like PNC, Mellon Bank, and of course Continental. She thought she was on a roll, that perhaps her entire six-million-dollar venture could be funded by a fistful of national banks. But the 1987 stock market crash sent that vision falling to the floor. Emma realized that to raise the needed five million dollars, she would have to cast down her bucket where she was.

And so she walked. She went from church to church, talking with pastors and congregations. At one point, she held a Black Bank Sunday. Three hundred pastors around the city announced from their pulpits that her bank needed funding, and almost half a million was raised in just a day. Emma pounded more pavement, wore out more shoes. She went from business to business, speaking with owners. Eventually fourteen institutions gave a total of \$2.7 million. Emma soaked her feet in bath salts. She trekked from door to door, talking with friends and family, the natural charm that won her friends in high school radiating as she shared her dream. Three thousand individuals raised \$3.3 million in a true grassroots feat. This was a commonwealth.

On March 23, 1992, United Bank of Philadelphia welcomed the community. An article in the Black-owned *Philadelphia Tribune* highlighted the presence of Jesse Jackson and the state governor, its headline announcing “United Bank’s Opening Draws Jackson, Casey, and the People.” The piece went on to say, “Eloquent words were used to describe Philadelphia’s only Black-owned bank, hailed as ‘the people’s bank,’ but perhaps the most

important word used to describe United Bank Monday morning was ‘open.’”

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United Bank’s beginning is a story of the power of community, gathered into the dreams of a woman who returned what she’d been given with generous and unending interest. It is the story of power vested in the people, a power that must and will grow. The US Black-white wealth divide is as wide as it was in 1968, the year the world lost Martin Luther King Jr. The COVID-19 crisis has attacked Black communities with a ferocity fed by centuries of oppression. The United Bank of Philadelphia, or “the Bank” as it is known, with its B-shaped logo that is also the image of a raised fist, is more vital than it ever was in the evolving future of Black Americans. It is a Black-owned bank that can fulfill the true promise and premise of a commonwealth: to cast down buckets and draw up talent from the community, to tilt those buckets earthwards in libations of wisdom, in offerings of collective wealth.

Commonwealth is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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