

Biography of Ellen Page, About 1860 to 1920

Buried in the Historic Evergreen Cemetery, Richmond, Virginia

by Mary Owens¹



Photo credit: John Shuck

There is not a wealth of information available about Ellen Page's life, except for U. S. Census listings, a few city directory listings, and her death certificate. However, even with that limited amount of data, one can conclude that Ellen was a single woman, a daughter, an aunt, and a great aunt. In addition, for much of her life she worked in a physically demanding job, as a washerwoman, to help support her family. Further, we know from her death records that Ellen was born in King George, Virginia to Daniel Page and Susan Kemp Page, both also born in King George, Virginia.² However, she lived most of her life in the Jackson Ward neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia.

¹ The author of this biography is a volunteer writer for the Enrichmond Foundation. Questions, comments, clarifications, and other information about Ellen Page and her family are welcome. The author can be reached at meo10601@gmail.com. Final edits on the biography were completed by Enrichmond Intern Kathleen Gruber.

² Virginia Department of Health; Richmond, Virginia; Virginia Deaths, 1912-2014. (Ellen Page, 1920).

The first census to include a listing for Ellen Page was the 1880 United States Federal Census³. At the time of the census, Ellen was 23 and living with her 43-year-old mother, Susan Page, described as a black widow “in service,” and her eight-year-old niece, Estelle Dalton. Ellen was listed as a washerwoman, who lived with her small family at 8 West Broad Street, Richmond, Virginia.

Several years passed before Ellen showed up again in public records. One reason for this gap is the missing 1890 United States Federal Census.⁴ Most of the 1890 census' population schedules⁵ were badly damaged by a fire in the Commerce Department Building in Washington, D.C. in January 1921. Of the schedules that remain, there was no information about Ellen.

By 1900, Ellen lived at 311 Smith Street, a small narrow street with only a few houses fronting Smith Street, at the western edge of the Jackson Ward neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia. The 1900 United States Federal Census described her as a 38-year-old laundress. She still lived with her niece, Estelle Dalton, 28, and was now joined by her niece's son, Joseph Ligon, age 10.⁶ There is no record of her mother, Susan Page, in this census.

Working as a Laundress or Washerwoman

When trying to envision what Ellen’s typical day could have been like, it might help to understand how difficult washing clothing and other household items was in the late 1800s and early 1900s. At the turn of the century, laundry was a very manual process since few automatic

³ 1880 United States Federal Census (Susan Page); Richmond, Henrico, Virginia; Roll: 1371; Page: 94B; Enumeration District: 081.

⁴ United State Census Bureau website, “Availability of 1890 Census”, <https://www.census.gov>

⁵ The schedules referred to here are the Census Population Schedules, the handwritten information sheets recorded by the census takers.

⁶ 1900 United States Federal Census (Estelle Dalton); Richmond, Clay Ward, Richmond City, Virginia; Page: 23; Enumeration District: 0060; FHL microfilm: 1241737.

washing machines were available. What would a laundress like Ellen have done each day? First, she would gather everything needed for washing. That would include several tubs, a kettle, a big



stick for stirring the laundry in the tubs, lye soap and a washboard. Next, she would sort the clothes. Delicate items would be gently hand washed, while sturdy clothing was washed by scrubbing the clothes over a washboard. If clothes were especially dirty, they would have been soaked overnight. Then, the clothing was boiled in a kettle on the stove for at least thirty minutes before being moved to rinsing tubs. After rinsing, each item had to be wrung out. Finally, the clothes were

dried until barely damp on a clothesline, after which they could be ironed. This entire process was repeated, often in a very hot room, until the wash was finished.⁷

"THE LAUNDRESS"
Robert Henri (1916), Phoenix Art Museum

The mother of Civil Rights icon, Maggie L. Walker, Elizabeth Mitchell, provides a revealing example of a laundress who turned her work into a business that benefited not only her family, but also others in her neighborhood. McNeer (2019) movingly described Mrs. Mitchell's own hard work in a recent blog post:

Elizabeth began by cleaning clothes out of the Mitchell home. She had a group of regular clients and collected laundry on Monday. With no plumbing, water had to be fetched, the clothes washed, dried, starched and ironed in time to be returned by Saturday...Working from home allowed Elizabeth to raise Maggie and her younger brother Johnnie while providing extra income. The children

⁷ Living History Farms website, "Blue Monday: Wash Day" by Lena Glaze [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.lhf.org>

took an active role in the business, by picking up clothes, helping with the washing chores, and delivering the clean laundry to clients.”⁸

Over time, Elizabeth and other women living nearby formed informal laundry collectives⁹ working together in one home. It is possible that Ellen was also involved in a laundry collective, like Elizabeth Mitchell. It would have made the work a bit easier, by reducing the individual burden, while providing some social time with other women. Perhaps Ellen’s work also allowed her to help care for her niece, Estelle Dalton, when she was a young girl and, later, to help raise Estelle’s son, Joseph, while Estelle worked outside of the home.

Ellen’s Later Life

At the time of the 1910 United States Federal Census, Ellen Page still lived at 311 Smith Street, Richmond, Virginia, with her niece (Estelle Dalton, age 40) and grandnephew (Joseph Ligon, age 20).¹⁰ Ellen was listed as being 52 at the time and still working as a washerwoman.

Sometime between the 1910 and 1920 censuses, Ellen moved from the home on Smith Street to a boarding house at 514 ½ Catherine Street. The 1920 U. S. Federal Census shows Ellen as a lodger living with three other unrelated adults at the Catherine Street address.¹¹ Her age is given as 65 although that does not match other records. No occupation information was provided. Ellen’s other family members were not recorded at the Catherine Street address. However, city directories indicate that her niece, Estelle, also lived at 514 ½ Catherine Street during this time. Estelle’s son, Joseph, had married and moved to Philadelphia.

⁸ History Arch website, “Maggie Walker, Civil Rights Icon and Advocate for Women’s Rights” by John McNeer [Blog post, March 16, 2019]. Retrieved from: <https://historyarch.com>

⁹ According to the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus*, a collective is defined as an organization or business that is owned and controlled by the people who work in it.

¹⁰ 1910 United States Federal Census (Estelle Dalton), Richmond Lee Ward, Richmond (Independent City), Virginia; Roll T624_1644; Page 1A; Enumeration District 0103; FHL microfilm: 1375657.

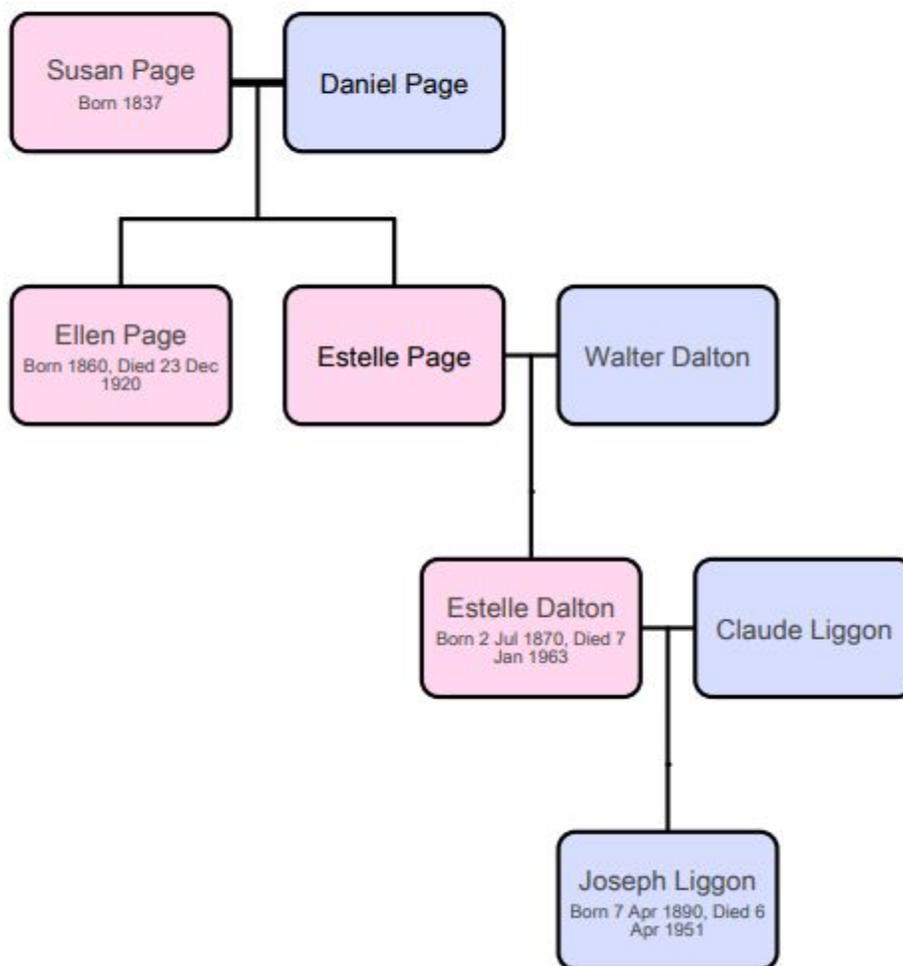
¹¹ 1920 United States Federal Census (Eddie Mickins), Richmond Lee Ward, Richmond (Independent City), Virginia; Roll: T625_1910; Page: 25A; Enumeration District: 86.

Ellen Page died of cardiovascular and renal diseases on December 23, 1920, after seven days in doctors' care.¹² She was still living at 514 ½ Catherine Street and her final occupation was given as housekeeper. Her niece, Estelle Dalton (Mrs. E. R. Dalton on the death record), was the informant and provided several facts, such as Ellen's parent's names, not otherwise uncovered in researching for this biography. Ellen's burial was handled by W. I. Johnson & Sons at 10 W. Leigh Street with interment in section Y, Plot 35 at Evergreen Cemetery. No obituary or other announcement of the death was found.

This biography is intended as a tribute to Ellen and a way to connect her gravestone in Evergreen Cemetery to the person that she was. There's not enough available information to reveal personal aspects about Ellen - who her friends were, whether she had hobbies, or if she had dreams or ambitions beyond what she accomplished in her life - but the reader can conclude that Ellen was a good, strong woman. She was a devoted aunt and a hard worker.

¹². Virginia Department of Health; Richmond, Virginia; Virginia Deaths, 1912-2014. (Ellen Page, 1920). Accessed on Ancestry.com.

Page - Dalton - Liggon Family Tree



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