

Former head of Pilgrim Insurance Solomon William Walker II dies at 76

By [Jenna Martin](#)
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The former CEO and chairman of what once was one of the nation's largest black-owned insurance companies died Saturday.

Solomon William Walker II, who headed The Pilgrim Health and Life Insurance Co. for a decade, was 76.

Walker, who would have turned 77 on Thursday, was surrounded by family and loved ones, said his wife of 29 years, Pat Walker. The couple have four adult children. "As a husband and as a father, he was the best," Walker said. "He was my gentle giant. He was the love of my life."

Walker worked his way up in the company from a field trainee in 1958 to the acting CEO in 1979. He served as CEO until Pilgrim was bought by Atlanta Life Insurance Co. in 1989. Walker's grandfather, Solomon W. Walker, founded the company in 1898 as a benevolent society with three other young men, according to an *Augusta Chronicle* story that ran February 2006.

"It was a bitter pill to swallow," Walker said about the buyout. "And yet I know we did the right thing, We had to preserve the integrity of the business and protect our policy holders in the long run."

Pilgrim was Georgia's first black-owned insurance company, and by the mid 1910s, the headquarters was on Laney-Walker Boulevard.

The company provided white-collar jobs for young black workers and offered mortgage services.

By the time Walker joined the business in the 1950s, Pilgrim had started to lose its market as white-owned insurance operators added black families to their clientele. "During the early years, our forefathers pretty much had a captive market," Walker said in the 2006 story. "As integration began to change the face of the marketplace,

(white-owned companies) were able to cross over and begin to write more business in our community. We didn't have that luxury in the white community. They didn't find us as good people to do business with."

Pat Walker said young men looked up to her husband for his advice and counseling. "He was a man that didn't meet a stranger," she said.

After the company was sold, Walker took a position at Medical College of Georgia, where he worked in human resources and later as affirmative action director. Dr. Michael Ash, who has since retired as MCG's vice president of administration, said Walker was a natural in both settings.

Referencing Walker's 6-foot-9-inch stature, Ash said his former colleague was a big man who left a significant impact that is still evident today.

Beverly Peltier also remembers Walker as a tall man with a warm, welcoming heart. Peltier first developed a professional relationship with Walker in the late 1980s while he was with Pilgrim and she was an assistant marketing director at a bank.

"I was just impressed with how gracious and attentive he was," said Peltier, who is now the director of institutional advancement at Augusta Technical College.

Years later, she was reunited with Walker when Pat Walker joined the Augusta Technical College Foundation board.

"Every time you saw him, he just made you feel very welcome," Peltier said. "He always remembered me."

Walker also was active in the community.

In the late 1990s, Walker was listed in *Chronicle* stories as serving on the Paine College Board of Trustees and also acting as chairman of the Augusta Complete Count Commission, which ensured U.S. census forms were returned and helped counters tally the homeless.

"He was always involved," his wife said. "He was in it to serve and no other reason but to serve the community."

Funeral services for Walker will begin at 11 a.m. Friday at Tabernacle Baptist Church, 1223 Laney-Walker Blvd.. Visitation will be held at Tabernacle Baptist from 6-8 p.m. Thursday.