

Madam C. J. Walker



Madam C. J. **Walker** overcame enormous obstacles to create a profitable beauty and haircare products business that employed thousands of women in manufacturing, beauty services, and sales. **Walker** once said, "I promoted myself. I had to make my own opportunity.... Don't sit down and wait for the opportunities to come." She explained her success this way: "If I have accomplished anything in life, it is because I have been willing to work hard."

Sarah Breedlove was born on December 23, 1867, in Delta, Louisiana, to a family of poor sharecroppers who had once been slaves. The fifth of six children, Sarah was the first one born after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, ending slavery. As a child, she worked in the cotton fields with her sister Louvenia. At age seven, she was orphaned, and four years later, she went to live with Louvenia in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Louvenia's husband, Jesse Powell, treated Sarah cruelly, and she left their home at age 14 when she married Moses "Jeff" McWilliams, with whom she had a daughter, Lelia (later known as A'Lelia), in 1885.

Widowed at 20, Sarah McWilliams had to support herself and her child. She moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where three of her four brothers were working as barbers. There, she worked hard doing laundry, earning only about \$1.50 per day, and later said she attended public night schools to further her education. She also saved as much money as possible to educate her daughter. To meet other African-American women who were striving to better themselves and the community, McWilliams joined the National Association of Colored Women and the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. For about six years during the 1890s, she was married to John Davis, whom she divorced.

During the 1890s, she had suffered from dandruff and scalp problems that caused hair loss, and she tried various homemade remedies that were supposed to restore hair or help it grow. Some of these hair products were made by Annie Turnbo Malone, a successful African-American hair products entrepreneur. In 1904 Sarah McWilliams began selling Malone's products as a commissioned sales agent. She

learned more about hair care and hair products from Malone as well as her barber brothers. McWilliams continued trying to make her own formula, experimenting with different combinations of ingredients. She finally came up with a conditioning salve that improved her hair. Later, she told people that the idea for this formula, which may have contained sulfur, had come to her in a dream. Friends who tried the mixture praised its effectiveness, and McWilliams began selling it door to door.

In 1905 McWilliams moved to Denver, Colorado, where she continued to sell her hair products while also working as a cook. The next year, she married newspaperman Charles Joseph Walker and began using the name Madam C. J. Walker as she sold her hair salve, under the label Madam Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower, door to door in black neighborhoods. Her husband helped her to advertise and promote the products, which expanded to include a coconut oil shampoo and other cleansing products, a salve for ringworm and eczema, and a product called Glossine, which helped to smooth the hair so it could be styled in different ways. Glossine was used with a special pressing comb that was heated beforehand.

As the business grew, Walker hired more and more saleswomen, called Walker agents, who were trained to give people at-home hair treatments and demonstrate how to use her products. She also started a mail-order business by placing ads in magazines and newspapers. African-American newspapers promoted Walker products, which grew to include skin cleansers. In 1906 her daughter Lelia took charge of the mail order business while her mother and Charles Walker traveled to build the business.

In addition to creating and selling products, Walker influenced ideas about beauty and personal grooming. She claimed that cleanliness, good grooming, and pride in one's appearance were the essence of beauty, and these were available to any people who properly cared for their hair and skin. Walker strongly encouraged black women to appreciate their own beauty, challenging old biases based on a Caucasian standard of beauty. Walker worked to improve her mind as well. She hired a former teacher to be her tutor since she had not had access to much formal education during her childhood. By 1908, Walker had opened an office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where her daughter had moved in 1903. There, she founded Lelia College, which offered a \$25 correspondence course for Walker "hair culturists." Two years later, Walker opened another training school and larger factory, the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she built her new headquarters in 1910. During a speech Walker later made to the National Negro Business League, she said proudly, "I have built my own factory on my own ground."

At the factory, several thousand African-American women produced cleansers, shampoos, salves, pressing oil, and skin cream, which were packaged in tins that showed a picture of Madam C. J. Walker. These employees enjoyed better wages and working conditions than most African Americans of that era. Sales agents, who wore white blouses and dark skirts and carried a black satchel of products, had the chance to earn wages that made them self-supporting. Walker's company provided jobs that improved the lives of thousands of families.

Walker was the sole shareholder of the company when it was incorporated in 1911. The next year, she and Charles Walker were divorced. She continued to expand her company and built beauty schools in Indianapolis and other cities, and her large network of sales agents and representatives grew. Walker traveled throughout the East and South, lecturing on beauty products and the Walker methods. In 1913 she visited Central America and the Caribbean, demonstrating and selling her products. In 1916 Walker moved to New York City, where she bought two adjoining homes in Harlem. Part of this space was turned into living quarters; the rest became a Walkerschool and a beauty salon. Her daughter, who now used the name A'Lelia, also lived in Harlem in the stunning townhouse that black architect Vertner Woodson Tandy had designed for the Walkers.

The company continued to prosper. Between 1911 and 1919, the business grossed more than \$100,000 a year. In 1917 Walker earned about \$276,000 from sales, speaking fees, and other business activities. She offered women entrepreneurs guidance in money management, grooming, and other areas that could help them succeed. Walker was also a popular speaker at conferences where black Americans discussed serious political, economic, and social issues.

Madam C. J. Walker donated money and time to numerous humanitarian causes both in the United States and abroad. Among the recipients were the YMCA built for African Americans in Indianapolis, black churches and schools, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Tuskegee Institute. She personally worked for social causes, such as the antilynching movement. In 1917 she joined a group of black leaders who took a petition to the White House seeking federal antilynching laws. She once said, "This is the greatest country under the sun. But we must not let our love of country, our patriotic loyalty cause us to abate one whit in our protest against wrong and injustice."

Walker organized her sales agents into local and state clubs. She held her first annual Conference of the Madam Walker Beauty Culturists in Philadelphia in 1917. At the annual conferences, Walker honored agents for their achievements, including high sales and bringing new agents into the company. She also gave special prizes and awards to Walker employees who engaged in community service and educational and charitable work. Walker encouraged her agents to donate to charities and take part in politics and other community activities. Training programs emphasized ways agents could benefit their communities. Once, after Walker finished a speech, a woman from the audience told her, "Your talk inspired me so that I was determined to see what good I could do in this world and for my people." The clubs helped her agent-operators help themselves and each other, as well as plan leisure and charitable activities. Members paid dues of 25 cents a month and received various services, as well as a \$50 death benefit payable to their beneficiaries.

As the company thrived, Walker became a wealthy woman. While maintaining a home in New York City, she also built a 34-room Italian Renaissance style mansion called Villa Lewaro in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. Once again, she sought the talents of architect Vertner Woodson Tandy, the first black architect to be licensed in

New York State. The mansion, which cost about \$350,000, included a swimming pool and formal gardens. She moved into the home in 1918.

Madam C. J. Walker died at Villa Lewaro on May 25, 1919, at age 51 from kidney failure associated with hypertension (high blood pressure). During her lifetime, she had become a successful entrepreneur, businesswoman, philanthropist, and civil rights leader. **Walker** had disputed the rumors that she was a millionaire, and when she died, the value of her estate was estimated at about \$509,000. She bequeathed about \$100,000 to charities and assigned two-thirds of her future profits from the company to charities as well. When her mother died, A'Lelia became president of the **Walker** Company.

After her death, **Walker** was inducted into the National Business Hall of Fame and the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. In 1998 the U.S. Post Office issued a commemorative stamp in her honor as part of its Black Heritage series. Her former home in Irvington and the factory complex in Indianapolis have been designated as National Historic Landmarks. The Guinness Book of World Records cites **Walker** as the first female self-made millionaire in the United States.

References and Further Information

Bundles, A'Lelia Perry. **Madam C. J. Walker**, *Entrepreneur*. New York: Chelsea House, 1991.

———. *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C. J. Walker*. New York: Scribners, 2001.

Indiana Historical Society, Manuscripts & Archives: Madame C. J. **Walker** Collection, 1910–1980.

Lowry, Beverly. *Her Dream of Dreams: The Rise and Triumph of Madam C. J. Walker*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Madam C.J. Walker, 1867-1919. Official Website. URL:
<http://www.madamcjwalker.com>. Downloaded on September 12, 2015.

Peiss, Kathy L. "American Women and the Making of Modern Consumer Culture," *The Journal for MultiMedia History*, Fall 1998 reprinted at
<http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol1no1/peiss-text.html>. Downloaded in May 2000.