



Picture location--[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/4c/Madame\\_CJ\\_Walker.gif](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/4c/Madame_CJ_Walker.gif)

## Madame C. J. Walker

*-There is no royal flower-strewn path to success. And if there is, I have not found it for if I have accomplished anything in life it is because I have been willing to work hard.-*

The *Guinness Book of Records* cites Madame C.J. Walker as the first female, black or white, who became a millionaire by her own achievements. What is most remarkable about this achievement is that her successes occurred during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when very few women of any race were entrepreneurs.

Walker (nee Sarah Breedlove) was born on a plantation in Delta Louisiana where her parents were former slaves. By the time she was seven years old, her parents had died, and she and her older sister supported themselves by picking cotton. As a means of escaping the abuse of her brother-in-law, at age 14, she married Moses McWilliams.<sup>1</sup> Her only daughter was born in 1885, and Walker was widowed at the young age of 20. Her husband was lynched by a White mob.

After her husband's death she traveled to St. Louis to join her four brothers who had established themselves as barbers. Working as a laundrywoman, cook and housecleaner, she managed to save enough money to educate her daughter, and she became involved in activities with the National Association of Colored Women and very active in her church.

When she was in her late 30's, she developed a scalp condition that caused her to begin losing her hair. She tried various hair products to treat the condition but was not satisfied with them and began to create her own. She claims to have built her company on an actual dream where a large black man appeared to her and gave her a formula for curing baldness. When confronted with the idea that she was trying to make black women's hair the same as that of whites, she stressed that her products were simply an attempt to help black women take proper care of their hair and promote its growth.<sup>2</sup> She mixed the ingredients in her washtub and began to sell mixtures, such as her, "Wonderful Hair Grower", door to door. By 1905 she employed fifty people in her factory.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.madamcjwalker.com/madam-cj-walker>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/walk-mad.htm>

In July of 1905, Walker moved to Denver, Colorado with her daughter and married Charles Joseph Walker, a newspaper sales agent. Together, they established a hair-care business. In September of 1906, Walker left Denver and began traveling throughout the south promoting her various hair products. Walker gave lectures and demonstrations of her hair products in homes, clubs and churches throughout the south. Black Americans would often receive house calls from "Walker Agents," hairdresser workers of Walker, who came to their homes to dress their hair and sell Madame Walker products. By 1908, Walker's business was booming and she opened a second office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. By 1910, Walker transferred operations from her Denver and Pittsburgh offices to a new headquarters in Indianapolis.

Walker saw her personal wealth not as an end in itself, but as a means to promote economic opportunities for others, especially black people. She took great pride in the profitable employment — and alternative to domestic labor — that her company afforded many thousands of black women who worked as commissioned agents. Her agents could earn from \$5 to \$15 per day in an era when unskilled white laborers were making about \$11 per week. Marjorie Joyner, who started work as one of her employees, went on to lead the next generation of African-American beauty entrepreneurs.<sup>3</sup>

Walker was also a generous philanthropist. She donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to black charities. She also funded the construction of the black YMCA in Indianapolis and the restoration of Frederick Douglass's home in Washington, D.C. Walker also established several scholarships for young women and men at Tuskegee Institute.

Walker was also an activist. After a white mob murdered more than three dozen Blacks in East St. Louis, Illinois, she helped lead a protest against lynching by contributing \$5,000 to the NAACP's anti lynching movement and traveled to the White House to present a civil rights petition to President Woodrow Wilson. As her business continued to grow, Walker organized her agents into local and state clubs. Her Madam C. J. Walker Hair Culturists Union of America convention in Philadelphia in 1917 must have been one of the first national meetings of businesswomen in the country. Walker used the gathering not only to reward her agents for their business success, but to encourage their political activism as well. "This is the greatest country under the sun," she told them. "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. We should protest until the American sense of justice is so aroused that such affairs as the East St. Louis riot be forever impossible."<sup>4</sup>

Walker followed her daughter to New York in 1917. She purchased an estate she called, Villa Lewaro, in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, where she died at the age of 51.

### **Other Resources**

<http://inventors.about.com/od/wstartinventors/a/MadameWalker.htm>

<http://www.blackinventor.com/pages/madamewalker.html>

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madame\\_C.\\_J.\\_Walker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madame_C._J._Walker)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.madamcjwalker.com/madam-cj-walker>

<http://www.gibbsmagazine.com/MadameCJWalker.htm>

<http://udel.edu/~tnreed/webpage.html>