

Madam C.J. Walker

Delta, Louisiana · St. Louis · Denver · Indianapolis · Irvington, NY

In Sixty Seconds

Origins. Sarah Breedlove, born December 23, 1867, on the plantation in Delta, Louisiana where her parents had been enslaved. She was the first member of her family born free. Orphaned at seven. Married at fourteen to escape her brother-in-law's home. Widowed at twenty. A washerwoman in St. Louis raising a daughter alone.

Work. A hair care empire that, at its peak, employed 40,000 women as "Walker Agents" selling her products door to door and in salons she established. The Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company was the largest Black-owned business in America by the time of her death in 1919.

Impact. She did not build a business. She built an economic infrastructure. The Walker Agents were women who had been domestic workers and washerwomen. Working for Walker, they became financially independent. Many of them became wealthy. The system she designed moved tens of thousands of Black women out of poverty in a single generation.

Legacy. The Madam Walker Legacy Center in Indianapolis still operates. Her great-great-granddaughter A'Lelia Bundles is the primary scholar of her life. Her methods are used by the Sundial Brands product line MADAM. Netflix produced a scripted series about her life. Her estate, Villa Lewaro, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Network

A'Lelia Walker

Daughter. Expanded the business into Harlem and New York society, bankrolled the Harlem Renaissance, hosted the Dark Tower literary salon, and inherited the company on her mother's death.

Vertner Tandy

Architect. One of the first licensed Black architects in America. Designed Villa Lewaro, Walker's 34-acre estate in Irvington, New York, commissioned in 1917 to host the Harlem Renaissance's leading figures.

Annie Malone

First employer, then rival. Creator of the Poro Company hair-care line. Walker began her career selling Malone's Wonderful Hair Grower before founding her own system in 1906. Malone became one of the first self-made Black female millionaires in her own right.

Freeman B. Ransom

General counsel. Attorney who served as the company's general counsel and business manager for more than a decade. Ran day-to-day operations after Walker's death in 1919 and guided the company's transition through the 1920s.

For Discussion

1. Madam Walker's one dollar and twenty-five cents of starting capital grew into a one-million-dollar estate in thirteen years. What conditions of the early twentieth-century American economy made that velocity possible for her specifically, and how do the current rates of Black-owned small-business growth compare?
2. The Walker Agents were a forty-thousand-strong direct-sales network of Black women at a time when Black women's wage options were dominated by domestic service. What does direct sales offer a workforce that wage labor cannot, and what risks does it displace onto those workers in the process?
3. Walker funded Tuskegee, the NAACP anti-lynching campaign, and Palmer Memorial Institute out of the same revenue stream that built her hair-care business. What does it mean when philanthropy is powered by the same P and L as the business itself, and which contemporary Black founders operate on a comparable fund-as-you-earn model?
4. Walker's daughter A'Lelia inherited the company and its public profile but not her mother's operational discipline; the company declined within two decades. What patterns of succession in closely-held family businesses tend to preserve or dissipate wealth across a single generation, and what structures can buy a second generation time?
5. Villa Lewaro, her Irvington estate designed by Black architect Vertner Tandy, is a National Historic Landmark. Why was the visible grandeur of that house strategically important in 1917, and which Black-owned properties today serve a comparable public-facing function?

Primary Sources

1. Bundles, A'Lelia. *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*. Scribner, 2001.
2. Bundles, A'Lelia. *Madam C.J. Walker: Entrepreneur*. Chelsea House, 1991.
3. Madam Walker Legacy Center. Archival records and historical documentation. Indianapolis, Indiana.
4. Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Madam C.J. Walker collection.
5. U.S. Department of the Interior. National Register of Historic Places, Villa Lewaro nomination documentation, 1976.

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