

Explore Article 4--Madam C. J. Walker: From Washerwoman to Businesswoman

I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. From there I was promoted to the washtub. From there I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations.... I have built my own factory on my own ground. ~Madam CJ Walker (July 1912)

Sarah Breedlove was born on December 23, 1867. Her parents, Owen and Minerva, were Louisiana sharecroppers who had been born into slavery. Sharecroppers were the poorest of the poor. They worked the landowner's land and gave him a share of the crop to pay rent. Then they used the remainder of their income to pay their debt to the landowner for the use of the land.



Owen and Minerva's fifth child, Sarah, was the first in her family to be born free after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Sarah's older siblings and her parents had been owned by Robert W. Burney on his plantation in Madison Parish, Louisiana. When she was around six years old, her mother died from cholera. Her father passed away about a year later. She was left to her own devices when she was only a child.

After the deaths of her parents, she went to live with her older sister in St. Louis, Missouri. There she was forced to pick cotton and do laundry. She learned to read at the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, where she sang in the choir. She had less than a year of formal education. When she was fourteen in 1882, she was forced to marry Moses McWilliams. She gave birth to her only daughter, A'Lelia, when she was eighteen. By the time she was twenty, her husband had died from unknown causes.

When A'Lelia was two, Sarah moved them to St. Louis, where her four brothers had established themselves as barbers. In 1905, she moved to Denver with just \$1.05 in her pocket. She worked as a cook for a pharmacist and learned basic chemistry, which enabled her to create an ointment that healed dandruff and other hygiene-related conditions that were common during the times when indoor plumbing was scarce. Walker was inspired to create haircare products for Black women after a scalp disorder caused her to lose much of her own hair. She developed a treatment that would completely change the Black hair care industry.

In 1906, Sarah married Charles Joseph Walker and changed her name to "Madam" C.J. Walker. Madam Walker attributed the formula for her healing cream to a revelation that came to her in a dream. Walker's method, known as the "Walker system," involved scalp preparation, lotions, and iron combs. She sold her homemade products directly to Black women. She went on to hire a fleet of saleswomen to sell the product. She called these women "beauty culturalists."

Sarah began training female employees in the "Walker Method" or the "Walker System of Beauty" to sell the scalp conditioning and healing formula—Madam Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower. She demonstrated her scalp treatments in churches and lodges, using a variety of marketing strategies. She continued to develop her business, and her distribution provided opportunities and economic independence for thousands of African American women who, in those times, could not hope to be more than a cook, a cleaner, or a farmworker.

She made \$1,000 in income during her first year. At first, her husband helped her with marketing, advertising, and mail orders, but as the business grew, they grew apart, and the two divorced. By 1910, the company grossed over \$10,000, and she moved to Indianapolis where she built a factory, a hair and manicure salon, and another training school. In 1913, with her company bringing in \$3,000 a month,

Explore Article 4--Madam C. J. Walker: From Washerwoman to Businesswoman

Walker traveled to Central America and the Caribbean to grow her business. Her success enabled her to move into a townhouse in Harlem connected to her famous Walker Salon. In 1917, she held the Madam CJ Walker Hair Culturists Union of America convention in Philadelphia, one of the first national meetings of businesswomen in the country.

Tenacity and perseverance, faith in herself and in God, quality products, and “honest business dealings” were the elements and strategies she prescribed for aspiring entrepreneurs who requested the secret to her rags-to-riches ascent. “There is no royal flower-strewn path to success,” she commented. “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.”

Her business strategies were quite innovative for the time. She incorporated her company in 1911 and put \$10,000 of her own money into it as an investment. She was the sole holder of 1,000 shares. She promoted her business as a way of life, not just a job. She hosted national conventions and encouraged the employees to be “the Walker Type . . . the Way to Beauty and Success.” Even though she preceded television, radio, and the internet, Sarah was a clever advertiser: she used self-promotion to make her products known to the public. Her “from the washtub to the boardroom” story legitimized her product and endeared her to her employees and her clients. She also made herself a role model for women to emulate. She lived in a mansion. She drove luxury cars. She dressed well. She made sure to share her wealth with African American causes and institutions.

Walker’s reputation as an entrepreneur was equal to her reputation for philanthropy. She established clubs for her employees; she encouraged them to give back to their communities; she rewarded them with bonuses when they did. At a time when jobs for Black women were limited, she promoted female talent, even stipulating in her company’s charter that only a woman could serve as president. She donated generously to educational causes and Black charities. She funded scholarships for women at the Tuskegee Institute. She donated to the NAACP, the Black YMCA, and dozens of other organizations that helped make Black history. Her will stipulated that two-thirds of her company’s net proceeds should be designated to the “benefit of worthy charities.” Her hair and skin products are still available today under the name Madam C.J. Walker Beauty Culture.

By the time of her death, the Madame C.J. Walker Company had employed some 40,000 people, largely Black women who sold Walker’s products. Walker had invested in real estate, jewels, antiques, and art. Her personal assets were worth close to \$660,000 or \$17.07 million in 2021.

Madam Walker died at her country home in Irvington-on-Hudson on May 25, 1919, at the age of fifty-one, of hypertension. Her plans for her Indianapolis headquarters, the Walker Building, were carried out after her death and completed in 1927. Today, she is remembered as a pioneering Black female entrepreneur who inspired many with her financial independence, business acumen and philanthropy.

Sources

Bundles, A’Lelia. (25 June 2024). Madam C.J. Walker. American businesswoman and philanthropist. Britannica Money.

<https://www.britannica.com/money/Madam-C-J-Walker>

Bundles, A’Lelia. (2020). Madam C. J. Walker: A brief biographical essay. <https://madamcjwalker.com/about/>

Desta, Yohana. (29 March 2020). “Self-Made:” Inside Madam C. J. Walker’s tumultuous marriages. Vanity Fair.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/03/self-made-netflix-madam-cj-walker-marriages-business>

New York Historical Society. (n.d.). “Life story: Sarah “Madam C.J.” Breedlove Walker (1867-1919). Women & the American story.

<https://wams.nyhistory.org/modernizing-america/modern-womanhood/madam-cj-walker/>