

Madam CJ Walker
By Brooklyn Nelson

Madam CJ Walker was not only the first female self-made millionaire in the United States, but the first black woman to take up this label as well. She is quite often described as “self made” such as in the Netflix film “Self Made” that plays out Walker's road to success in the African-American hair care industry.

In September of 1867, Walker, initially named Sarah Breedlove, was born in Louisiana. Walker was the first out of her five siblings to be born into freedom with the creation of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. After her parents, Owen and Minerva Anderson Breedlove, passed away while Walker was only five, Walker was raised by her older sister Louvenia.

Over the course of Madam CJ's life, she faced many challenges from working as a domestic servant at an extremely young age to getting married at 14 and becoming a widow at 20. Nevertheless, Walker grew out of almost nothing. As she worked as a laundress in 1888, earning very little and supporting her daughter, Walker joined Annie Malone's haircare business by acting as a commissions agent to help other women in her community relive their brittle hair and dry scalps.

In time, Walker developed her own product after a great amount of experimenting, and began building an empire famously known as Madam CJ Walker's Manufacturing Company. Walker would come to be her previous employer's Malone's biggest competitor. Controversy arose around the thievery Malone's “secret” recipe, yet the Walker business continued to expand into a full line of products.

Indianapolis became the new location of Walker's headquarters in 1910, with it including a hair salon, beauty school, factory, and even a laboratory to conduct research for new products. Moreover, Walker recruited thousands of women of all ages to help sell her product and take up positions among her team who became known as “beauty culturalists”. These women became a key component of Walker's advertising plans and their inclusion in African-American magazines and newspapers was vital to the company's fortune.

Walker was not only smart in business, but she was an activist for racial equality. She fought against segregation, advocated for civil and human rights, and donated to the black community. WI

Though Madam C.J. Walker passed away in 1919, her legacy lives on through the lectures, books, photographs, and more that her family still shares and inspires the public with.



<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/-h-our-history-lesson-madam-c-j-walker-african-american-millionaire-pilanthropist-activist.htm>



(50 cents in 1900 is about \$16 today)

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-business-executive-madam-c-j-walker-became-powerful-influencer-early-20th-century-180971628/>

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