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Madam C. J. Walker
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Walker, C. J., Madam, 1867-1919

Madame C. J. Walker was born into poverty in Delta, Louisiana, in 1867. By the time she died in 1919, she had become the first African American woman to become a millionaire by establishing a line of beauty and hair care products sold nationwide. She was also a leader in the black community, known...

Walker, Madam C. J.

From The Columbia Encyclopedia
1867-1919. African-American entrepreneur, b. Delta, La., as Sarah Breedlove. Thought to be America’s first black female millionaire, this daughter of ex-slaves was orphaned at 7, working at 10, married at 14, and a widow with an infant daughter at 20. She worked as a domestic and laundress and later...

273 words from Columbia University Press

Walker, Madam C.J.

From Britannica Concise Encyclopedia
(born Dec. 23, 1867, near Delta, La., U.S.—died May 25, 1919, Irvington, N.Y.) U.S. businesswoman and philanthropist, often considered to be the first self-made African American woman millionaire. She was a widowed washerwoman with a daughter to support in 1905 when she developed a method for...

212 words from Britannica Digital Learning

Key concepts: Villa Lewaro, Madame C. J. Walker, Corretta, Lanston Hughes, Harlem Renaissance
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Summary Article: Walker, Madame C. J. (1867–1919) from Oiling and Fashion: American Fashion from Head to Toe

Madame C. J. Walker was born into poverty in Delta, Louisiana, in 1867. By the turn of the century, she had become the first African American woman to become a millionaire by selling beauty and hair care products nationwide. She was also a leader in the early 20th century in the fight against lynching, known for her philanthropy and dedication to antilynching campaigns, world peace, and providing business opportunities for black women.

Walker was born Sarah Breedlove, the daughter of former slaves who died when she was a child. Like many blacks in the late 19th century she moved north to St. Louis, where she worked as a laundress and housekeeper to support her daughter, Lelia (Peiss 1998, 69).

Breedlove's life changed when she began to lose her hair. She developed a formula to treat the problem that contained sulfur and capsaicin, combined this with a hot comb treatment that put less strain on the scalp than earlier treatments, and used hot tongs.

Breedlove moved to Denver in 1905, but drugstores run by white pharmacists would not carry her product, Wonderful Hair Grower, so she began selling it door-to-door in black neighborhoods. She then married newspaperman Charles Walker, who assisted her in developing a mail-order business and an advertising strategy. At this time she also changed her name to “Madame C.J. Walker,” which added to her charisma and appeal. She toured the country relentlessly to promote her products, taking advantage of African American social contacts established through the church. She moved to Pittsburgh, where she established a school to train black women, called “hair culturists,” to use her products and open their own businesses. By 1911 when she incorporated her company, she had expanded her business to the South and the Midwest and had moved to Indianapolis. Here she built a factory to manufacture her products. By this time her marriage to Charles Walker had ended, but the name with her new persona remained. Madame C. J. Walker developed a system that empowered black women to be entrepreneurs at a time of increasing racial tension, which enabled her empire to grow in a market virtually ignored by white businesses.
Topic Page: Walker, C. J., Madam, 1867-1919

Summary Article: Walker, Madame C. J. (1867-1919) from Clothing and Fashion. American Fashion from 1890 to 1918

Madame C. J. Walker was born into poverty in Dibble, Louisiana, in 1867. By the time she died in 1919, she had become the first African American woman to become a millionaire by establishing a line of beauty and hair care products sold nationwide. She was also a leader in the black community, known for her philanthropy and dedication to improving the lives of African Americans.

Walker's life changed when she began to lose her hair. She developed a formula to treat the problem, containing a hot comb treatment that put less strain on the hair, and sold hot tongs. She approached white pharmacists who would not carry her line, setting it door-to-door in black neighborhoods. She sold the product, which she later changed her name to "Madame C. J. Walker," which added to her chances and appeal. She toured the country tirelessly to promote her products, taking advantage of African American social contacts established through the church. She moved to Pittsburgh, where she established a school to train black women, called "her culture," to use her products and open their own businesses. By 1918, when she incorporated her company, she had expanded her business to the South and Midwest, and had moved to Indianapolis. Here she built a factory to manufacture her products. By this time her marriage to Charles Walker had ended, but the name with her new partner remained. Madame C. J. Walker developed a system that empowered black women to be entrepreneurs at a time of increasing racial tension, which enabled her company to grow in a market that ignored by white businesses.

Walker also opened a beauty parlor and school to train black women in the beauty business. In 1912 she founded the Black Women's Business League. In the 1920s she became a prominent leader of the black community. In 1917 Walker co-founded the National Negro Business League. The next year she was a featured speaker and showed that she was not ashamed of her humble roots by declaring, "Don't think because you have to go down in the wash tub that you are any less a lady!" (Parr 139, 158).

Walker believed that black women should cultivate their own natural beauty. She never sold hair straighteners or skin-lightening creams. By 1917 the Madame C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company was the largest black-owned business in the nation, bringing in $500,000 a year. In 1919 Walker added to her list by developing a series of hair care products specifically for black women (Parr 139, 158).

In 1916 Walker moved to Harlem, where she became active in political causes. She was a leader in the NAACP's campaign against lynching. Walker also campaigned for the treatment of black soldiers.

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