

Who was ... Madam C. J. Walker?

**Madam C. J. Walker: entrepreneur,
philanthropist, activist,
Born Sarah Breedlove: 1867 in Delta, LA
Died: 1919 in Irvington-on- Hudson, NY**

Why is she important?

Ms. Walker developed a line of cosmetics and hair care products designed specifically for Black women and sold her products, first as an independent retailer working door-to-door and via mail-order. She then founded the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company and built a factory in Indianapolis, Indiana. As the owner of the business, Ms. Walker eventually became the first female self-made millionaire in America, an accomplishment noted in *The Guinness Book of World Records*. [First Self Made Millionaire](#). She was also a forceful advocate for other Black businesswomen and a prominent philanthropist, promoting African American political causes along with African American arts and culture.



Highlights and Honors

As you read about Ms. Walker, consider the era in which she was developing her business. The period 1890 to 1920 is often referred to as the “nadir” of Black history in the U.S. [National Humanities Center](#) The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), made “separate but equal” the law of the land, providing legal support for the Jim Crow laws passed by many state legislatures. And most well-known entrepreneurs were white men – as examples, Thomas Alva Edison, Wilbur and Orville Wright, Henry Ford, William Boeing, and George Westinghouse.

- 1910: Incorporated as the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company of Indiana.
- 1917: Established the National Beauty Culturists and Benevolent Society of Madam C. J. Walker Agents, which first met in Philadelphia.
- 1927: The building housing the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company was built in Indianapolis. The building is still in use as the Madam Walker Legacy Center, hosting a variety of cultural and educational programs. It was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1991. [Madam Walker Legacy Center - Wikipedia](#)
- 2006: Ms. Walker was the subject of a play titled *The Dreams of Sarah Breedlove*. The play opened at Chicago’s Goodman Theater.
- 2017: Ms. Walker was the subject of a Netflix mini-series titled *Self-made: Inspired by the life of Madam C. J. Walker*.

- 2016: Ms. Walker's company was sold by the Walker estate trustees in 1986; however, Sundial Brands revived the brand as *Madam C. J. Walker Beauty Culture* and still sells the products today through Sephora.

To learn more about Madam C. J. Walker

Here are links to several biographies, each with slightly different details from her life and work.

- Madam C. J. Walker. [History online](#).
- Madam C. J. Walker. [Biography online](#).
- How business executive Madam C. J. Walker became a powerful influencer of the early 20th century, [The Smithsonian Magazine online](#).
- How Madam CJ Walker pioneered success as the first self-made millionaires. *The Guinness Book of World Records* online. [Black History Month](#).