



Netflix drama *Self Made* was released in 2020 and tells the story of Madam CJ Walker's remarkable life

MADAM CJ WALKER

Before Oprah there was Madam CJ Walker, the first self-made businesswoman and millionaire in America

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Born into freedom, Madam CJ Walker rose out of poverty to start her own successful business empire. No mean feat for a Black woman from the United States' Deep South in the 19th century.

She was born Sarah Breedlove in Delta, Louisiana, on 23 December 1867, the first child in her family to arrive into the world after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1862. She had one older sister and four older brothers, all of whom had been enslaved by Robert W Burney on the Madison Parish plantation in Louisiana. Her mother died in 1872 from suspected cholera, and while her father remarried not long afterwards, just a year later he passed away too, leaving Sarah an orphan at just seven years old.

At the age of ten, Sarah moved to Vicksburg, Mississippi, to live with her older sister Louvenia and her brother-in-law. She began working as a domestic servant. What little education she received was picked up during Sunday school literacy lessons at her local church, a common occurrence for poor, Black children in America's South at the time. She worked extremely hard as a young girl, but often suffered abuse at the hands of her sister's husband.

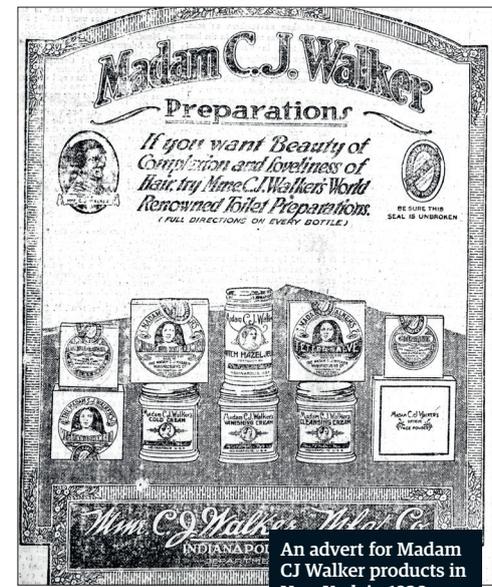
To escape the toxic environment and oppressive working conditions, at the age of 14 she married Moses McWilliams and four years later gave birth to her daughter A'Lelia. Moses died two years later and Sarah decided to move



The Madam CJ Walker Beauty Culture range was launched in 2016 and focuses on the use of natural ingredients



A Madam CJ Walker mural created by artist Fabian 'Occasional Superstar' Williams in Atlanta



An advert for Madam CJ Walker products in New York in 1920

to St Louis, Missouri, where her brothers had set up as barbers.

Widely known as the first self-made female millionaire in the United States, Sarah made her fortune through the development of cosmetics and hair-care products for Black women. Like many Black women at the time, she suffered from dandruff and other scalp ailments. One such condition caused her to lose much of her hair, leading her to try various store-bought products to try to improve the condition. When nothing worked, she began experimenting with different ingredients, to create her own treatments. She was soon hired to sell products for successful hair-care entrepreneur Annie Malone and in 1905, she moved to Denver, Colorado, where she continued to develop her own range of products.

Her husband Charles helped her to market her products within the African American community and convinced her to use the more

recognisable name of Madam CJ Walker. After creating her own hair-care treatment process, which became known as the 'Walker Method' and involved her own formula for pomade, brushing and the use of heated combs, she and Charles travelled around the South promoting her products and offering demonstrations. The business went from strength to strength, and profits began to soar after Walker transferred business operations to Indianapolis in 1910.

As well as opening factories to manufacture her products, she also established beauty schools and salons where she trained Black 'hair culturists' and 'Walker Agents' - sales beauticians who would promote her idea of 'cleanliness and loveliness' throughout Black communities.

As her empire continued to grow, community and philanthropy remained at the heart of her business. She contributed \$1,000 to the building fund of a YMCA for Indianapolis's Black community, helping to revive the area. She gave

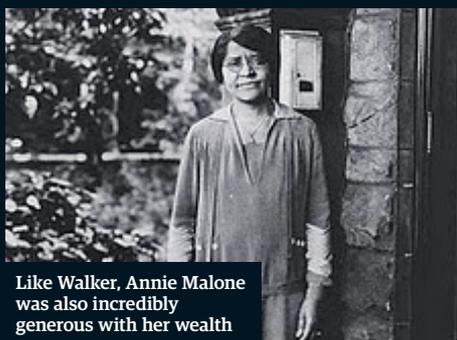
back in the form of education too, contributing scholarship funds to the Tuskegee Institute, a Black university founded by Booker T Washington, while her training schools helped equip Black women with vital skills.

Not content with looking for good causes to pump her money into, Walker was also a passionate political and social activist. During World War I, she called for the creation of a training camp for Black American army officers and, in 1917, she joined the New York branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), helping to organise a peaceful march in the city to protest the violence directed towards African Americans.

Walker passed away on 25 May 1919, but not before she'd laid the foundations for generations of Black women to follow in her footsteps - a poor Black girl from America's South who proved that anything is possible.

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A BITTER RIVALRY



Like Walker, Annie Malone was also incredibly generous with her wealth

<http://blackhistoryheroes.blogspot.com/2010/09/annie-turnbo.html>

Madam CJ Walker wasn't the only successful African American businesswoman in the beauty and hair-care industry in the early 20th century. In fact, her one-time boss would go on to become her biggest business rival.

Born ten years after Walker, in 1877, Annie Turnbo Malone grew up in Illinois. As a child, she was fascinated by hair and hair care, and used to spend hours practising hairdressing on her sister. Like Walker, she started out by trying to create her own remedies and formulas using various natural ingredients. She sold her products door to

door and offered free treatments to attract new customers.

Around the turn of the 20th century, Madam CJ Walker, then known as Sarah Breedlove, joined Malone's expanding business as a salesperson. However, she soon left the company after a bitter falling out with Malone, who is said to have accused Walker of stealing her formula.

Walker soon set up her own rival company, but the competition proved good for business, with both women going on to be hugely successful businesswomen and self-made millionaires.