



PRESERVING  
a LEGACY:

**THE  
MADAME  
WALKER  
THEATRE  
CENTER**

## *The* **EMPIRE BUILDER**



MADAM C. J. WALKER

In 1910, **MADAM C. J. WALKER** relocated her booming hair-care products company to Indianapolis, Indiana, attracted by the city's central location, transportation system, and thriving community of successful African Americans. Founded after her marriage to Denver newspaperman Charles Joseph Walker, the four-year-old company had grown thanks to its founder's ceaseless travels to introduce her products and add new representatives to her growing legions of female sales agents.

Madam Walker was a dynamic woman with a force of personality and persuasion to match, but her origins were far more humble than her aspirations or her success. Born Sarah Breedlove on December 23, 1867, on a plantation in the small Louisiana town of Delta, this daughter of former slaves was orphaned at 7, married at 14, became a mother at 17, a widow at 20, and then set out to

reinvent herself in the context of making a life—and a living. When the partial loss of her hair challenged her self esteem, she created the product that cured her problem, basing it on a formula she sometimes claimed to have seen in her dreams. Her self-guided transformation into the United States' first self-made female millionaire took her to St. Louis, Denver, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, and finally to New York, where she built a mansion on the Hudson River and became a pillar of African American society and success. She devoted much of her wealth to philanthropy and much of her business life to providing opportunities for others.

Madam Walker had vision, and what she saw, she built. Her chosen headquarters city labored in the political and social grasp of overt racists. When an Indianapolis movie theatre tried to surcharge her ticket price because of her race, she vowed to build a first-class theatre for African Americans. She soon bought a triangular plot of land at 617 Indiana Avenue, and began planning a facility to



**INTERIOR DETAIL,** *Madame Walker Theatre Center*

combine her business operations with room to meet cultural, social, and business needs in a segregated society.

Unfortunately, she succumbed to kidney failure on May 25, 1919, before the building she envisioned could be built. Her daughter, A'Lelia, and her attorney, F. B. Ransom, brought Madam Walker's plans into reality. The resulting African Art Deco edifice opened to the public in 1927. It remains one of the only facilities of its kind, unique not just for its architecture and the combinations of enterprises it has sheltered over the span of eight decades, but also for its status as a building originally built and owned solely by African Americans.

Known today as the **MADAME WALKER THEATRE CENTER**, the building has survived economic downturns and neighborhood decline to emerge as the centerpiece of the Indiana Avenue Cultural District.

## *A Cultural* **CENTERPIECE**

The Madame Walker Theatre Center presents programming for people of all ages and cultural interests. Music, dance, motion pictures, theatre: This stage and these walls have filled with exciting performances for nearly a century.

The facility's opulent décor and glittering lineup of cultural and social events continued for decades after its grand opening in 1927. In the 1950s, as its neighborhood withered, the building's profitability waned, and it began to fall into disrepair. By the 1970s, it seemed doomed to be demolished.

Determined to save this landmark of historic Indiana Avenue, a group of African American community leaders banded together with the Lilly Endowment and the City of Indianapolis. The not-for-profit Madame Walker Urban Life Center began the push to revitalize the building, gaining momentum and funding from foundations and individuals. By the late 1980s, the restored building

reopened with a triumphant rededication that rivaled the star power of its inaugural gala.

Today, the Center's arts calendar includes local, regional, national, and international performers representing virtually every form of music, dance, comedy, and theatre, as well as motion-picture premieres. Many artists remain in residence at the Center for several days of community and educational programming. This combination of diverse events and performers with the community impact of unique educational outreach makes the Center an equally unique destination on the Indianapolis arts landscape.

A performing arts venue is a challenging physical plant to maintain, let alone to prepare for increased flexibility, a greater variety of events, and larger audiences. The Center's historic location is part of its authenticity as a cultural landmark. At the same time, maintaining and upgrading a building with nearly a century of history requires specialized attention and constant care.



**THE ARTS:** *Madame Walker Theatre Center*

## *A Community* **DESTINATION**

From private events to public receptions, the Madame Walker Theatre Center has welcomed generations to celebrate and convene within its walls. Today, it hosts gatherings of every conceivable kind, from receptions to onstage showcases and business seminars.

The Center features four discrete areas in which to hold community events. The theatre itself seats 935 for any staged event, including pageants, concerts, rehearsals, lectures, and award ceremonies. The Grand Casino Ballroom seats a maximum of 300 persons. At 4,800 square feet, it is ideal for seminars, banquets, parties, receptions, meetings, reunions, galas, and balls. The Walker Memorial Boardroom and A'Lelia Bundles Conference Room host smaller groups for meetings and presentations. Both feature A/V and datalink capabilities.

The Center upholds the traditions of days past, when the Indiana Avenue corridor was a bustling

cultural, commercial, and community destination. At the same time, it enables today's businesses, civic groups, and families, to add the Art Deco glamour of the past to today's events. The Center's facilities must be maintained and updated so it can continue offering these vital gathering-place functions to the community.





**THE COMMUNITY:** *Madame Walker Theatre Center*

## *A Career* **RESOURCE**

Madam Walker's legacy includes her business empire, her philanthropy, and the careers she launched for countless women of color. Her ability to inspire (and willingness to promote) the best in others was integral to her success. She built an empire on endless hard work, strong ideas, and an unwillingness to accept the prejudices of her day, which favored neither her race nor her gender.

Madam Walker chose Indianapolis for the benefits it offered her business, but she took an active interest in the city's affairs, especially as they concerned the lives of its citizens of color. In 1912, she gave \$1,000 toward the building fund for the Senate Avenue YMCA. She made her pledge at a rally attended by civic leaders from the city's leading business and financial institutions. For a woman of her era, a gift of that size was an unprecedented commitment. Her largesse was all the more remarkable in light of the poverty of her youth.

In honor of Madam Walker's business leadership and in the spirit of her efforts to help African Americans launch careers and livelihoods, the Madame Walker Theatre Center is inaugurating an entrepreneurship program targeting youth and young adults of color who are interested in the preservation of the Center and the efforts underlying its cultural calendar. Applicants will be selected from Central Indiana on the basis of academic performance, a personal essay, and an interview at the Center. Successful candidates will gain insight into the demands of a working landmark and the needs of a performing arts center.





### SENATE AVENUE YMCA CIVIC GATHERING

① Madam C. J. Walker; ② George Knox, publisher, *The Indianapolis Freeman*; ③ Julius Rosenwald, president, Sears Roebuck

## *Meeting* **THE NEED**

The Madame Walker Theatre Center last underwent significant renovation and restoration in the late 1980s. Since then, age has taken its toll again and new needs have arisen. In response, the Center is embarking on a capital campaign designed to help meet the needs of this historic structure.

Specifically, the campaign has been established to fund renovations including new wiring, updated plumbing, and modern theatrical sound and lighting systems. The relatively small stage will be expanded by repurposing the now-closed orchestra pit and adding 40 feet of backstage space. The fourth-floor Grand Casino Ballroom will be upgraded with ADA-compliant restrooms. Along with these upgrades, the campaign is designed to establish an endowment fund for the Center.

In a challenging economy, the arts are all the more important to individual and civic quality of life. The Madame Walker Theatre Center has a

proven track record of presenting the finest in cultural and artistic events. It serves as a celebrated venue for community gatherings, and its unique history and architecture give Indianapolis a distinction no other American city can claim. Along with that history, and the stature a landmark confers on its community, the Center is stepping into the future with plans for an entrepreneurship program.

All these advantages and opportunities are tied to the building Madam Walker envisioned as the centerpiece of her efforts as a businesswoman. Keeping that landmark in peak condition requires a constant process of restoration and renewal. Both these needs have been postponed; both are pressing.

As Madam Walker's visionary building nears its centennial, it seeks its community's support once again. Please join us in helping the Madame Walker Theatre Center remain a proud, vital symbol of its founder and its community. Your gift or pledge is tax deductible to the fullest extent allowed by law.



**EXTERIOR PROFILE,** *Madame Walker Theatre Center*



**ON-STAGE VIEW,** *Madame Walker Theatre*

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