

**MADAM C.J. WALKER AND THE
RISE AND FALL OF INDIANA AVENUE**

S02 E04 EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

BECOMING MADAM C.J. WALKER

A'LELIA: Madam Walker is very much a part of the telling of the history of Indianapolis, so she is woven into the narrative.

DEQAH: That's A'Lelia Bundles.

A'LELIA: I am a journalist. I am a former network, television news, executive and producer, and I'm also Madam C.J. Walker's a great great-granddaughter and biographer.

VANESSA: Ms. Bundles has written the authoritative biography of Madam C.J. Walker. If your school ever taught about famous African Americans, you may remember learning about her. She was born Sarah Breedlove in 1867.

A'LELIA: She was orphaned at seven, married at 14. She said to get away from a cruel brother-in-law, who abused her, had a child at 17 and her first husband, Moses McWilliams died when she was 20.

DEQAH: Sarah Breedlove's life was full of challenges, big and small.

A'LELIA: it's hard for us to think about just what life was like in the late 18 hundreds, early 19 hundreds. When most Americans didn't have indoor plumbing, which meant hygiene was very different. People might bathe only once a week. They might not wash their hair except once a month, sometimes not at all during the winter. And as a result, many people had very bad scalp infections. And that was what was plaguing Sarah Breedlove, Mick Williams.

VANESSA: Her hair began to fall out...but Sarah quickly came up with a solution. Literally.

*****FADE IN OLD TIMEY MUSIC*****

A'LELIA: She developed a hair care product, a formula that restored her hair healed scalp disease, began selling it. / She moved from St. Louis to Denver, / worked for a pharmacist as a cook and got some ideas for perfecting her formula.

DEQAH: While in Denver, Sarah Breedlove McWilliams became Madam C. J. Walker. She founded her company and got to work.

A'LELIA: And she would have said, the first thing you have to have is a really great product, and then you have to market it. She marketed it with advertisements with training people, and then began to sell it, and began to travel all over the United States.

VANESSA: She wasn't just selling her products, she was spreading the word about Black excellence to Black Americans.

A'LELIA: She even had an early version of PowerPoint. It was a stereo-opticon, glass slides with a projector. She was showing pictures of successful Black businesses and colleges and schools, and she would draw a crowd, and maybe 10 or 12 women would meet later with her because they were interested in becoming her agents.

DEQAH: She briefly relocated to Pittsburgh.

A'LELIA: And then moved their headquarters to Indianapolis in 1910,

****FADE OUT OLD TIMEY MUSIC****

VANESSA: Madam Walker set up her factory along Indiana Avenue, the main street of Indianapolis' biggest Black neighborhood, and bought a home about a block away.

DEQAH: From her headquarters, Madam Walker presided over a veritable haircare empire, employing thousands and making millions.

VANESSA: By the time she died in 1919, she'd become America's FIRST self-made woman millionaire. Her success established Madam Walker as a big deal in her adopted city.

DEQAH: The Indianapolis historical society has one of the biggest Madam C.J. Walker collections in the world, and it frequently hosts exhibits about her. So I went to Indianapolis to check one out.

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): All right. I'm at the Historical society The Indianapolis historical society.

DEQAH: Once there, I saw maps, descriptive texts , and a recreation of her office, complete with a big desk, mirror, and a safe for all of Madam's money. I even ran into an actor portraying a Walker Company sales agent from back in the day.

MADAM WALKER AGENT (ACTOR): I don't have to go door to door because Mme. Walker knows so many people here in Indianapolis

DEQAH: after the exhibit, I walked upstairs to the office of Susan Hall Dotson, who curates the historical society's African-American collections.

SUSAN: Hey, DEQAH. Welcome.

DEQAH: Susan had a lot to show me: newspaper clippings, postcards, and advertisements from the archives covered her desk.

SUSAN: Walker newsletter from 1928 and it talks about how she got to Indianapolis.

DEQAH: Susan helped to put together the exhibit that I had seen. So I asked her how she and her colleagues had decided what to display.

SUSAN: Initially a discussion was had about, well, maybe we should do it in the kitchen where she was making her product, and I go, no. That's not the story for Indiana./ When she moved here, she was building and buying a small factory. She had trucks with her name on it. Why should we keep being in the kitchen as women, as Black women, particularly when we don't have to?

VANESSA: by the time Madam Walker arrived in Indianapolis, she had already succeeded — she had money, power, and friends in high places.

DEQAH: It would be easy to assume that it was Madam's wealth and energy that made Indiana Avenue the vibrant, prosperous community it once was in the early nineteen hundreds.

VANESSA: It turns out, though, that Indiana Avenue was thriving way before Madam Walker made it her home. It was the equivalent of New York City's Harlem or Tulsa's Greenwood.

DEQAH: Few people alive today know that. Because, Over decades, government planners and private developers slowly and systematically erased Indiana Avenue's history.

****FADE IN CREDITS MUSIC****

VANESSA: But some Black Hoosiers are working to uncover - and reclaim - what almost disappeared without a trace.

INTRO CREDITS

DEQAH: Welcome to Urban Roots, a podcast from Urbanist Media that dives into little known stories from urban history.

VANESSA: We're your hosts, I'm cities journalist Vanessa Quirk.

DEQAH: And I'm historic preservationist Deqah Hussein-Wetzel. Today we're in Indianapolis.

VANESSA: In this first of two episodes, we'll tell you more about Madam C.J. Walker and her journey to Indy, and we'll share the fuller story of the place that helped buoy her prosperity and cement her legacy.

DEQAH: The rise and fall of Indiana Avenue.

****FADE OUT CREDITS MUSIC****

THE EARLY DAYS OF INDIANA AVENUE

WILDSTYLE: Let's not wait until these neighborhoods are dead and gone to start valuing them.

VANESSA: That's artist, historian, and activist Wildstyle Paschelle. He has a personal connection to Indiana Avenue.

WILDSTYLE: Both sides of my family, my mom and dad's side, either lived there or worked there, or owned businesses there.

DEQAH: And this is Claudia

CLAUDIA: Claudia Polley, born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana,

VANESSA: Claudia and Wildstyle know a lot about the history of 19th and 20th century Indianapolis - especially along Indiana Avenue.

CLAUDIA: Indianapolis has four arms, if you will, the spokes coming out from the center of town. Indiana avenue is one of them. Virginia avenue Kentucky avenue. and then Massachusetts avenue is the other. So two Southern states, two Northern. That's Indiana.

WILDSTYLE: It was not a slave state, but for many years it was a Sundown state where Blacks were not allowed to actually live by constitutional decree for a long time.

DEQAH: That changed with the Emancipation Proclamation.

CLAUDIA: After the civil war, Blacks were allowed to have businesses and homes

WILDSTYLE: The first Black business opened around 1865 or 1866 on Indiana avenue.

VANESSA: City officials allowed African Americans and Eastern Europeans to settle and open businesses along Indiana Avenue because, well, it wasn't pleasant.

CLAUDIA: It was very swampy. It was filled with mosquitoes. It was not the preferred place to live. So the non-preferred people lived here.

WILDSTYLE: Indiana avenue was actually called the Negro Meridian street because that was the center, like literally the center of Black culture in in Indianapolis.

DEQAH: From that point on, through the early nineteen hundreds, Indiana Avenue attracted more and more Black folks - and grew into its own as a community.

VANESSA: Before and after Madam Walker arrived in 1910, African Americans could spend money, earn money, and create a good life in this neighborhood. So let's now unpack why Madam chose Indianapolis as her company's home - and explore how it changed Indiana history.

THE MADAM WALKER COMPANY IN INDIANAPOLIS

*****FADE IN OLD TIMEY PIANO MUSIC*****

DEQAH: As her company grew, Madam needed a strategic location. Indianapolis, the crossroads of America, was the perfect choice. Walker descendant and historian A'Lelia Bundles:

A'LELIA: Thousands of train cars, freight cars and passenger cars went through its train station each week. And so for somebody like Mme. Walker, who had a primarily mail order business, it was a great location. And she saw that the Black community was progressive with newspapers and businesses. So, with these newspapers and with these trains, she could take out advertisements in the Indianapolis Freeman, and she could be assured that the Pullman porters who came through the city every day could pick up a stack of the newspapers and sell them. And her ads would be wherever they went, whether it was Boston or San Francisco or Detroit or Atlanta.

VANESSA: Plus, Madam Walker had a deep well of Black talent she could tap into in her new hometown.

A'LELIA: Her bookkeeper was a Black woman who had had the highest score on the civil service exam in Indiana who wanted to work in Washington at the war department, but when the war department discovered that she was Black, they weren't interested in hiring her. Mme. Walker was delighted to hire this very smart young woman.

DEQAH: Her brain trust also included a brilliant attorney named F.B. Ransom. Alice Kelly, who had worked as dean of girls at a private Black boarding school, managed her factory.

A'LELIA: she could trust that the t's would be crossed and the i's would be dotted at home at the factory, at the headquarters while she traveled around.

****FADE OUT OLD TIMEY PIANO MUSIC****

VANESSA: The people who worked for Madam Walker knew they were making history; so they were conscientious about maintaining the reputation - and preserving the legacy of - the company and its leader after her death in 1919.

A'LELIA: Today we have more than 40,000 documents, business records, personal letters, photographs, advertisements that really tell us what was going on with the company./ And we're able to tell her story in detail.

VANESSA: Can you see her impact on the physical landscape of Indianapolis?

A'LELIA: So fortunately the Madam Walker Legacy Center, which was the headquarters of Madam CJ Walker manufacturing company is still standing. It was built in 1927 after Madam Walker's death, but there is very little along Indiana Avenue of those original buildings.

DEQAH: The Theater is the only building connected to Madam that remains. So I knew I had to go see it - and the Avenue - for myself.

TOURING THE WALKER THEATRE

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): Thank you for letting me come check this building out.

DEVIN: Yeah, absolutely.

DEQAH: I knocked on the door and was greeted by a smiling Devin Ginn, the manager of outreach and programs for the Walker Legacy Center.

DEVIN: Welcome, Welcome, Welcome.

DEQAH: Devin walked me toward the main stage.

DEVIN: Follow me this way into the theater. Careful, let me get these lights.

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): Wow. It's gorgeous.

DEQAH: The theater was spacious, filled with lush red velvet seats. African art covered the walls.

DEVIN: Authentic east African art deco, hand-carved terracotta, with Yorba and Egyptian motifs. A'Lelia Walker, who was known as the joy goddess of the Harlem Renaissance back in the day, she wanted to really honor her mom's legacy and, you know, the connection to Pan-African history.

DEQAH: Devin told me that plans for this structure started when Madam was still alive. Originally, the building wasn't meant to be a theater at all.

DEVIN: The original intent was for this to be a factory.

VANESSA: But then something happened to Madam Walker that made her think twice.

DEVIN: There's a now defunct theater; Isis theater, 10 cents to see a film, to get a ticket, she had her 10 cents ready, made it to the ticket booth, and the ticket teller said, you know, "it's an N-word tax", it's a Black tax. So you've got to pay 25 cents, which is more than double what she was anticipating paying. So from then on she endeavored to build something for

her people by her people. She decided to add the component of, you know, the large stage and let this be a place where Black folk can come and view films as well.

****ENTER SAD MUSIC****

VANESSA: The kind of discrimination that Madam experienced was commonplace at that time. In fact, Throughout the early nineteen hundreds and into the twenties, the Ku Klux Klan became a potent force in Indianapolis. Historian Wildstyle Paschelle.

WILDSTYLE: The Ku Klux Klan actually ran the city and the state of Indiana at that time. I've heard from several elders that talk about the Klan marching down Indiana Avenue basically, you know, letting people know who's really in charge of the city.

VANESSA: The Klan enforced segregation by building the all-Black Crispus Attucks high school, half a mile north of Indiana Avenue.

WILDSTYLE: Before that, schools weren't, I'm not going to say they were integrated, but there were Blacks that went to other schools, but the day they opened that high school, it didn't matter where you lived in the city. You were expected to go there.

DEQAH: Preservationist Claudia Polley remembers that, for many kids, getting to Crispus Attucks involved hardship every day. Most walked because they couldn't afford bus fare.

****FADE OUT SAD MUSIC****

VANESSA: But the quality of the education they received was far from poor.

CLAUDIA: Crispus Attucks , was pretty well known throughout the country because all of the teachers there had been recruited specifically by the inaugural principal. My grandmother was one of the teachers in that extraordinary music department, the only woman. So, you know, how good she had to be. Wes Montgomery, JJ Johnson. They all studied classical music at Crispus Attucks high school long before they went into jazz.

DEQAH: With its high quality teachers, Crispus Attucks produced not just musicians, but lawyers, accountants, and businesspeople.

VANESSA: In other words, Indianapolis' Black residents turned an injustice into an opportunity to thrive. And they did the same on Indiana Avenue.

MR. RIDLEY: A lot of people would think it was all jazz. No, there was business. We had many doctors and lawyers and photographers and there were artists and there were teachers all over the area.

DEQAH: Devon Ginn of the Walker Theater told me that If I really wanted to understand what the Avenue was like in its heyday, there was one man I HAD to talk to. His name...

MR. RIDLEY: Thomas Hart Ridley.

THE HEYDAY OF INDIANA AVENUE

MR. RIDLEY: I was born and raised a block and a half from Indiana Avenue. That was back in 1922.

DEQAH: Mr. Ridley knows a lot about Indiana Avenue, in fact, he wrote the book on it.

MR. RIDLEY: And it's called from the avenue. / I was on the avenue back in the thirties and forties and fifties and sixties and seventies.

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): Did you ever go to the Walker theater?

MR. RIDLEY: Go to it? I was there when they opened.

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): Wow.

*****ENTER JAZZ MUSIC*****

MR. RIDLEY: When I was a teenager, we liked to get dressed up and go down to the Walker corner and look at the girls and they would come down, dressed in their little dresses. I remember catching the street car on Northwestern avenue and riding down to the Walker, and they'd be half a dozen friends of mine was on that street car with me.

VANESSA: The Walker Theater wasn't the only entertainment venue in the area; but it was the classiest.

MR. RIDLEY: There was a need for a theater, a nice theater like that. There was a need for a nice restaurant, like the coffee pot lounge, which was in the basement. / There was a need for offices for some of the doctors and lawyers that moved into the building.

DEQAH: According to Mr. Ridley, the Avenue was THE place to see and be seen.

MR. RIDLEY: Coming to the avenue was a big thing to do. You came down and went to the theaters and restaurants and the bars and the dance halls. That's what you did. You went to the Avenue.

VANESSA: During this time, Indianapolis became known for its music scene, thanks in big part to the Sunset Lounge.

DEQAH: Just about every jazz great in history played there. It was so popular, among Blacks and whites, that the Indianapolis chief of police had to issue a warning that he'd bust up all that integration if it continued.

MR. RIDLEY: Even though we were segregated, we had the good life! The fact that we couldn't go and shop downtown, or sit at some restaurant downtown, didn't make any difference. We had a life.

****END JAZZ MUSIC****

VANESSA: But in the thirties, things started to change on the Avenue. Slowly at first.

MR. RIDLEY: Where Lockfield Gardens, the apartments down here, where they are, / that was one of the first areas that was torn out, more or less, because it was more ancient (laughs) and there was a outdoor toilet places and all that sort of thing.

DEQAH: After talking to Mr. Ridley, I started digging into this history, and came across the work of Dr. Olon Dotson, a professor at Ball State University.

VANESSA: and Susan Dotson's husband?

DEQAH: Yes he is! Dr. Dotson uncovered some aerial photos — which I've put on the website by the way so if you're curious and want to follow along you can check that out — that basically create a time lapse view of what happened to the neighborhood over half a century. Let me show you...

****ENTER PROJECTOR SOUNDS****

VANESSA: Cool so what am I looking at?

DEQAH: So this is Indiana Avenue of the mid nineteen thirties - when Mr. Ridley was a young teenager enjoying all that night life. You can see it's a highly dense residential and commercial district.

VANESSA: Yeah yeah, I see lots of buildings all along the avenue.

DEQAH: Yeah, so now this is the late thirties.

VANESSA: Woah, totally different! it's like a bomb was dropped.

DEQAH: Yeah, the land was razed by the city of Indianapolis to expand a hospital.

****END PROJECTOR SOUNDS****

DEQAH: Around the same time, the federal government cleared more land to install Lockefield Gardens, the public housing apartments that Mr. Ridley mentioned earlier in the episode. It might have been the first area to be demolished, but it wasn't the last.

****ENTER SAD PIZZICATO MUSIC****

Thomas Ridley: After world war two, a lot of things changed pretty fast. Everybody started getting cars and they weren't riding street cars. People started moving away from the Avenue. And most of the places like the Sunset and places like that, they closed down. They weren't going to keep staying open, there wasn't nobody in it.

DEQAH: If you look at Dr. Dotson's maps of the forties and fifties, you can see the neighborhood totally thinning out.

MR. RIDLEY: They tore all the houses down. On the avenue. Now you don't see, but two buildings that were there when I was a kid coming up. So everything just changed.

VANESSA: So what happened? We asked historian Wildstyle Paschelle to break down the history for us.

THE ERASURE OF INDIANA AVENUE

WILDSTYLE: We're not talking about a couple of blocks . We're talking about 400 acres of neighborhoods that ran on both sides of the street. All the churches, all the buildings, all the manufacturing, retail...at least a dozen different streets don't exist anywhere in Indianapolis anymore, that were all there.

VANESSA: Wildstyle traces the roots of this transformation to the fifties.

WILDSTYLE: The 1950s destroyed Indiana Avenue. You had redlining, which denied Black businesses, and Black homeowners, and anybody there access to the financial system to build anything, to repair anything, to upgrade anything. And so by the 1950s, things were physically falling apart. There were fires, one fire at the duplex my great-grandparents and my grandparents were living in killed three, three toddlers. Because there was no better housing available.

DEQAH: As the properties in the neighborhood rapidly lost value, Indiana University saw an opportunity to consolidate operations that had been scattered throughout the city.

WILDSTYLE: They started buying up everything on the near west side, / at the same time Indiana state government decided that they wanted to run a highway around there

****END SAD PIZZICATO MUSIC****

VANESSA: Eminent domain laws allowed the state to build the highways. After they were done.

CLAUDIA: That university and the City of Indianapolis worked hand in hand to erase Indiana Avenue, the near west side, because they wanted the land for development.

DEQAH: That's Preservationist Claudia Polley. I asked Claudia to meet me on Indiana Avenue to help me paint a picture of how this collaboration between the city and university has left the Avenue today.

****SOUNDS OF AVENUE BEGIN****

DEQAH: I met her on a loud, hectic intersection: Indiana Avenue and MLK Boulevard, just across the street from the Madam Walker Legacy Center.

CLAUDIA: This is one of the few buildings that are still, on Indiana avenue looking a bit like it used to, back in the day. People lived right along these blocks, where there's now a law school and trees and parking lots.

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): So I'm imagining it as. A very dense area with lots of people, less wide streets. So I, because I'm assuming this, you know, Martin Luther king street here was not four lanes wide.

CLAUDIA: No, no...it's an urban interstate; it's really horrible. And it is very dangerous to cross it. No one wants to attempt like this poor woman. Who's about to go this way and you have to look every second. You're in that street, cuz you never know who's gonna come whipping around the corner cuz they're not paying any attention.

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): Oh, look what's happening there.

[CAR HONK]

CLAUDIA: See?

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): Yeah.

CLAUDIA: What happens if we sit here a lot longer? How many near accidents do we get to see?

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): Yeah. Wow.

DEQAH: After she recovered from the fright, Claudia pulled out a photo to show me what the neighborhood used to look like in the early fifties. In the background, I could see a row of family homes on people-friendly, suburban streets. In the foreground was a white man and a Black woman.

CLAUDIA: This is a picture of a woman who lived in this area and the man's telling her that she has to move. And this is in the early 1950s. just before they started tearing down everything

DEQAH (INTERVIEW): There is a white man with this like stance of like, I am powerful and he's got a top hat on, and he's talking to this African American woman who clearly is like Leave, get off my stoop. Like, you can't come in here and talk to me like that. Cuz just, just for the simple fact that her arms are crossed in this photograph, that is how I see that.

CLAUDIA: Right. Exactly. And he's telling her that she's gotta move. And that's not that long ago. I was alive then. And, there were, as many as 5,000 residences and businesses that were leveled, erased in between 1958 and 2000 in this area. **5,000!** That's mind blowing.

VANESSA: Wildstyle Paschelle's family members were some of those thousands. While he acknowledges that the old neighborhood was in bad shape, he believes the disrepair didn't justify displacing everyone who lived there. That's what he tells students in his African American studies courses at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

WILDSTYLE: Incidentally they meet in a building. That sits on top of where my great grandparents used to live at one point. It shocks people to hear dat.

DEQAH: Most of the destruction made way for parking lots. In one of his lectures, Olon Dotson of Ball State displays a photo of a house, with a white picket fence, in the middle of a parking lot. The lady who owned it was the lone holdout.

VANESSA: Wow. So while she would sweep her porch or sit on the stoop, Students would literally park their cars around her?

DEQAH: Yeah. It's really sad, actually. And when I walked down Indiana Avenue, I saw no evidence of the thriving, vibrant neighborhood of Black homes, businesses, and clubs that once was.

VANESSA: Right, the only remnant of that Black history is the Madam Walker Legacy Center. A'Lelia Bundles, the guardian of Madam Walkers' story, worries deeply about the fate of Indiana Avenue's story

****ENTER SAD PIANO CREDITS MUSIC****

A'LELIA: while the Mme. Walker building in the 600 block is a national historic landmark. Everything else in that block was torn down.

DEQAH: Everything else may not have been rich or famous, she said, but it counted for something.

A'LELIA: And so to recreate the fabric of that community and to honor those ancestors, is what I think is very important to tell

****ENTER CREDITS MUSIC****

VANESSA: The stories of a crew of folks working to reclaim not just Indiana Avenue, but the histories of Black neighborhoods throughout Indianapolis - in part two.

OUTRO CREDITS

DEQAH: Thank you for listening to urban roots, brought to you by Urbanist Media. Your hosts are me, Deqah Hussein-Wetzel and Vanessa Quirk

VANESSA: Big thanks to Indiana Humanities for providing funding for this series.

DEQAH: Thanks to all the folks that made this episode possible – A'Lelia Bundles, Susan Hall Dotson, Wildstyle Paschelle, Claudia Polley, Devin Ginn, Mr. Thomas Ridley, and Dr. Olon Dotson. If you're curious, you can find a link to the aerial photos from Dr. Dotson's research in our show notes.

VANESSA: Connor Lynch edited and Andrew Callaway mixed this episode. Our music is by Adaam James Levin-Areddy. You can check out Adaam's band, Lost Amsterdam at AmsterdamLost.com

DEQAH: If you like this episode, make sure to subscribe to us on apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. You can also find us on Instagram at Urban Roots Culture. And to support Urban Roots and help us tell more little known stories of urban history. donate to us via Venmo or PayPal at Urbanist Media.

VANESSA: Hit the good people with our tagline Deqah!

DEQAH: Urban Roots. Looking back so we can move forward.

****END CREDITS MUSIC****