

A Mansion for Madam C.J. Walker

The daughter of freed slaves, America's first black millionaires built Villa Lewaro, her "dream of dreams," right next door to the Carnegies and Rockefellers- by Beverly Lowry

In December 1916, just after her 49th birthday, the woman known as Madam C.J. Walker made an announcement so shocking it caused certain people to "gasp in astonishment" and exclaim, "Impossible!" At least, that's how *The New York Times Magazine* described their response. Walker had, she proclaimed, just purchased a four-and-a-quarter-acre estate in Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y. And she was planning to erect on it "a home that will cost me no less than \$100,000, and it is going to be very swell."



Indeed. And so what? So, for one thing, Irvington at that time was pretty much infested with robber barons and Gilded Age millionaires, making it one of the swankiest addresses in the country. So, for another, it was an adorable little village, located an easy 19 miles from Manhattan, a snap for the Messrs. Carnegie, Rockefeller, Tiffany, Biddle, et al. to rush out after work, play golf at the Ardsley Club, make ice cream, and plan ways to make more money. So, Madam Walker's property was located in a choice spot in that exclusive Westchester County community, overlooking the Hudson River from a high point on Broadway, hard by the Presbyterian Church and maybe half a mile from Sunnyside, Washington Irvin's home. So, the package was, as she said, swell.

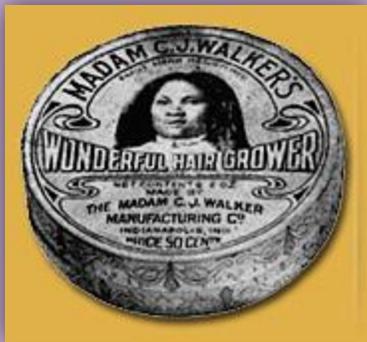
So, women didn't jump up and announce they were building mansions at the drop of a hat back then, and rarely even now, and there was that. But the real shocker was Madam Walker's skin color. "No woman of her race could afford such a place," Irvingtonians harrumphed, even though she was often called America's first black female millionaire. But what could they do? While in 1916 many neighborhoods and social clubs had made rules to exclude the Irish, Jews, and Italians, very few had given a thought to keeping out African Americans- not having had the tiniest idea there was any reason to fret on this score.

So, they hadn't reckoned on Madam C.J. Walker.

Her birth name was Sarah Breedlove, and she was born in 1867, a long way from Sleepy Hollow on a sliver of Louisiana that reached like a lifted pinky finger into the Mississippi. Her parents were freed slaves and sharecroppers, and she grew up in a swampy little plantation town called Delta, where snakes and malaria and the rising river were constant threats to life and livelihood. After her parents died, young Sarah crossed the Mississippi with her sister and began a life of washing clothes. Laundresses were in demand all over the Reconstruction South, and while the work was grueling, it was the best way for a black girl to maintain some semblance of independence. And that's what Sarah Breedlove did, for the next 20 years. "When I was a washerwoman," she told *The New York Times* around the time she bought the Westchester property and was consulting with decorators and antiques dealers, "I was considered a good washerwoman and laundress. I am proud of that fact."

She married, had a child, was widowed, moved to St. Louis. Still washing clothes to support herself and her daughter, Lelia, she began conducting after-hours experiments, using her washtubs to mix chemical concoctions. After moving to Denver in 1905, she finally found the formula she was after: a hair-care product that softened and strengthened black women's hair. She began bottling and selling the tonic, at first door to door and then, when the orders piled up, by mail order. She had married again by then, and her husband, an advertising agent named Charles J. Walker, suggested her professional name. There were a lot of "Madam"s in the cosmetics industry at that time. It was a title conferring distinction, authority, and air of European panache.

In no time, Sarah Walker became Madam C.J. Walker and then, as she grew more successful, simply Madam. She and Charles moved from Denver to Pittsburgh to Indianapolis. By 1910, only five years beyond the washtubs, she had established a full cosmetics factory, beauty school, and mail-order business, completely staffed by black people, mostly women. Carrying her square black sample bag and her little kerosene stove,



she traveled the rails nonstop in those early days: from Seattle to Oakland and from Xenia, Ohio to Greenwood, Miss. Jim Crow accommodations were the rule of the day, so Madam Walker sat in the car closest to the engine, where the cinders whirled through and soiled her clothes. There were no hotels for her, so she arranged through churches to stay in people's homes. But nothing slowed her down. A brilliant marketing strategist, Walker created nationwide advertising and promotional tours, pitching not her tonics and lotions but herself and her story. When Charles J. Walker cautioned her to settle for local success, she rebuked him for his lack of vision and divorced him in 1912. As soon as she could afford one (and maybe before), she bought an

electric runabout automobile to take her around Indianapolis and soon after *that*, a seven-passenger touring car. No more Jim Crow railroad cars. Madam Walker had a chauffeur.

By 1913, she had moved to Harlem, where her daughter, Lelia, lived and where the two set up a beauty school. Madam built a fabulously extravagant townhouse, and then decided to build herself a country home, a mansion- not just for herself but as an example to her race. For both houses she engaged an African American architect, Vertner W. Tandy, who had designed St. Phillip's Episcopal Church in Harlem and was the first licensed black architect in New York State. And Tandy designed for Walker exactly the home she wanted: a show place where she could rest and listen to music and fill up the rooms with her friends and give mixed-race parties. She could hold significant meetings there to be attended by prominent people from the worlds of politics, business, and the arts. In February 1917, ground was broken, and by the time Walker moved in the next summer, the estate had been given a name by her friend the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso- Villa Lewaro, for the first two letters of each of her daughter Lelia Walker Robinson's names.

So, the laundress and daughter of freed black slaves builds a 35-room Italian Renaissance Revival mansion in Irvington-on-Hudson and furnishes it with tapestries and paintings and antiques. Her chauffeur drives her four cars into the garage, and she hires a staff of eight and moves in. And while many locals are aghast, and a St. Louis newspaper wails, "Negro Woman Gets in Society Addition," other people, to whom Madam Walker is a legend and a hero, read the news in the *Indianapolis Freeman*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, or the *New York Age* and cheer.

Walker attributed her success to pure hard work: “Perseverance is my motto. It laid the Atlantic cable; it gave us the telegraph, telephone, and wireless. It gave to the world an Abraham Lincoln, and to a race freedom.” And on the subject of her beginnings she said simply, “I got my start by giving myself a start.”

From the street, Villa Lewaro has an open, airy look, in welcome counterpoint to the darkly turreted and shrub-cosseted castles up and down Broadway. Made of white stucco, flaunting a great many balconies, balustrades, and arched windows, it exudes a warm sensuality that cozies to the light. It’s too bad that Tandy’s original red-clay tile roof has been replaced with composition shingles. Given its proper crowning touch, the house might still appear to have floated up the Hudson from a seaside perch on the Mediterranean, as it must have in 1917. Villa Lewaro is close the street, not hidden away from the prying eyes of the uninvited like most Westchester mansions. Madam wanted people to *know* she was there, otherwise why bother?



A circular drive sweeps past magnificent old trees- a 300-year-old American beechnut, an ancient Chinese ginkgo- to a columned portico framing two-story-high French doors. It’s impressive but not daunting, grand without trying too hard. Around back are three terraced and tiled verandas, leading down to a fountain-fed swimming pool and overlooking a wide sweep of the Hudson Valley. In the winter you can see the river.

There used to be a pergola behind the pool, but it’s been gone for at least 20 years. The pool itself, filled with leaves, has a seepage problem that can’t be fixed. The combination garage and servant’s quarters is in disrepair. But the current owners of Villa Lewaro, Harold and Helena Doley, are amazingly even-tempered about the kind of problems a homeowner faces when managing an 80-year-old, 35-room mansion without a staff of eight.

Buying Villa Lewaro was Harold Doley’s idea. When his wife heard what he had in mind, she cried. When she saw the size of the house and assessed the task of taking care of it, she cried again. An investment banker and the first African American to buy an individual seat on the New York Stock Exchange, Doley first saw Villa Lewaro in 1968, when he was 21 years old. He had come to New York from his New Orleans home to attend brokerage school and, having heard about the house, decided to go see it. Doley was taken with Madam Walker’s story, and while the connection between himself and Walker is easy to make- both black entrepreneurs, self-made, from Louisiana, both heavily involved in African American service organizations- he doesn’t push it, perhaps finding it too obvious to be interesting. “I got on the train, alone, and came up here,” Doley recalls. “I walked around, looking at the house. I didn’t ring the bell. I just looked. I was *fascinated*.”

At that time the house was owned by a fraternal organization called the Companions of the Forest (the ladies’ auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Foresters), which had bought Villa Lewaro as a home for “tired mothers, convalescents, and the aged of the Companions of the Forest of America.” Renamed for the local chapter’s founder, “the Annie E. Poth Home” introduced itself to passersby by means of a sign stretched across the front columns. All the residents who lived there were white women, but Harold Doley didn’t see any of them, and he didn’t know much of anything about the Companions of the Forest or why Annie Poth’s

name was out front. He just knew this was the house built by Madam C.J. Walker. Doley went back to New Orleans and lived his increasingly busy life: He established his own securities firm, raised money for the Republican Party, and in 1983 served as ambassador and executive director of the African Development Bank in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Helena Doley, the oldest of 12 siblings and also a native Louisianian, is a guidance counselor for emotionally disturbed youngsters. She worked, they raised their son.

But Harold Doley is a man with a long memory and a lusty appetite for impossible projects. While he didn't exactly become obsessive about Villa Lewaro-yet-he never forgot it. "I knew I had to have it," he says, and shrugs.

A handsome and warm couple, the Doleys both speak in the liquid intonations of the true New Orleanian. When I visit them on a steamy summer day, they welcome me in for homemade lemonade, Helena's specialty. There's no air-conditioning in Villa Lowera, and floor fans serve only to move the hot air through the rooms. The lemonade is indeed the perfect sour-sweet combination, and I down two glasses before we set off on a tour of the house.

The front doors open directly into a long, narrow, marble-floored living room with a hand-painted coffered ceiling. Beyond is a drop-dead dining room [right], its vaulted ceiling also hand painted in soft shades of rose and tan and mossy green. And through another living room archway is what's sometimes called the Gold Room, a palatial 18-by-45-foot space overlooking the Hudson, with gold leaf trim, gorgeous wood floors, a ceiling painted like the sky, and a built-in



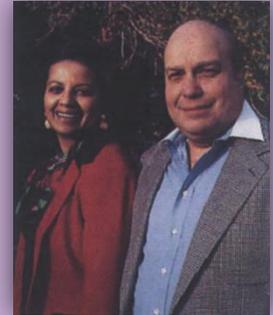
Estey pipe organ [below]. In a way, Sarah Walker's home was built around that organ. Two chunks of a whole *wall* are devoted to the organ's grilles and pipes, and two whole *rooms* in the basement hold the powering mechanisms. The Estey cost \$25,000 before installation, and according to some accounts it never did work right. But Madam, it is said, loved music. And she adored the organ.



The first floor also has a solarium, a fully equipped butler's pantry, a working dumbwaiter, a little library, and a matching conservatory or breakfast room. The basement holds, besides the organ rooms, a huge kitchen, a walk-in vault, a large room originally meant to be a gymnasium, and, through the kitchen and courtyard, a laundry room. In all likelihood, Walker never set foot in that laundry room, but considering her past it's an interesting room to visit. The period washing

machine is gone, but a massive, built-in wooden ironing board survives, as does a giant clothes dryer that pumps hot air across clothes hanging on an enclosed line. Upstairs there are many, many bedrooms, bathrooms, sitting rooms, and sun porches. There's a billiards room with built-in racks for cue sticks and a more casual living room with a fireplace. Madam Walker's stand-up shower still works, shooting jets of water from all directions, like a Jacuzzi.

The Doleys bought Villa Lewaro in 1993, moving in with their teenage son, Aaron. The family had moved to New York City five years before and while he didn't exactly clue Helena in on his plans, Harold began pursuing the Madam Walker house pretty much from the day they arrived. It's a lot of house for three people, especially since Aaron is now away at college. And because of its history and their great admiration for Madam Walker, the Doleys wrestle every day with questions of authenticity and taste. In her will, Walker requested that Villa Lewaro be maintained as a monument to her memory. It's not too hard to live in a monument, but making a life in one can be tricky.



The Doleys seem to relish the challenge

"New Orleans," says Harold, "teaches you to appreciate history. We can trace our history back a very long way. But Villa Lewaro is our *home*." And so the questions persist. Should they restore it to the way Walker wanted it or suit their own tastes? Allow a decorator to make suggestions or consult a preservationist?

Helena Doley reserves the right to make her own decisions about her home. "I hear there were black velvet curtains over the windows during Madam's time," she says with a wince, "and lots of red and black." Would she paint a room red and black if she found out for certain that's the way Madam like it? Helena Doley shakes her head. All she says is, "No."

Madam Walker died at Villa Lewaro in May 1919, after having lived there less than a year. Ill with kidney disease and high blood pressure, she expired in her custom-made canopy bed surrounded by doctors and friends. One final request was that the organ be switched on so that music would play throughout the house.

By then, she had become a major philanthropist, endowing orphanages, black colleges, the YMCA, and the NAACP. Her will, which also established full scholarships for black students, left Villa Lewaro to her daughter, who soon added an A' to her name and became A'Lelia Walker, a major social player in the Harlem Renaissance.

But A'Lelia was a city girl, and she didn't use the villa much, except for the occasional weekend party. And so it sat there. The gardens were kept and the furniture was dusted, but repairs were sometimes overlooked. Madam Walker's daughter spent money with abandon, and she liked to make sure her friends had a good time. The beauty business suffered, and when the Depression hit, the Walker Co. began divesting itself of its holdings.

In 1930, there was a huge auction at Villa Lewaro. Madam Walker's furniture and paintings, her fine china and Aubusson tapestries, her Persian rugs, and her gold Weber grand piano were sold. Police had to be hired to control the sightseers and bargain hunters jamming Broadway. Mostly white people came, among them neighbors who had once cried, "Impossible!" at the thought of a black woman building a house in tony Irvington.

The lavish furnishings went at Depression prices. Bessye Bearden, mother of Harlem artist Romare Bearden and a columnist for the *Chicago Defender*, looked around at the mob scene at her friend's house and, as she listened to the catty remarks of the white socialites and watched as the gilt phonograph went for \$45 and the grand piano for close to nothing, wistfully remembered Madam calling the villa her "dream of dreams." When it was over, reports varied as to the auction's final take. None was above \$78,000. All agreed that originally the goods had cost in the neighborhood of \$350,000.

The next year, after a blowout birthday party, A'Lelia Walker died. The coroner pronounced the cause of death apoplexy. There was another auction. As Madam Walker had stipulated in her will, Villa Lewaro passed into the hands of the NAACP, and then that organization had to let it go. For a year and a half it sat there, until the Companions of the Forest bought it for \$47,500 and moved the aging ladies in. They held on to the house for more than 50 years, but as residents died and membership dwindled, the house began to sink into disrepair. The roof of the portico fell in, allowing rainwater to run down the columns. The stucco bubbled up and flaked away. In time, all the residents except one died, and for a while that one woman rattled around Villa Lewaro, and then she was gone, too.

Harlem preservationist Michael Adams says the Companions were a godsend to Villa Lewaro, precisely because they left it alone. They put in the requisite sprinklers and fire escapes, then went about their business. No dogs, no drunken parties. No makeovers.

Over the years, a number of African American organizations tried to buy Villa Lewaro and turn it into a museum. None made much headway, and at one point a speculator planned to tear down the house and put up condominiums. But then somebody cited Irvington's arboreal restrictions, which forbade the removal of valued trees. So, because of the ginkgo and the beechnut, Villa Lewaro was saved.

There were no other offers until the mid-1980s, when a couple named Ingo and Darlene Appel put in a low bid and got the place. They moved in with their four children and began fixing the porch, repairing the plaster moldings, and taking up the linoleum. Never intending to live in Villa Lewaro, the Appels' plan was to fix up the house and sell it.

Harold and Helena Doley were living in New York by then, and in early 1990 Harold saw the interior of Villa Lewaro for the first time. A shrewd businessman, he asked a friend to make an appointment to see the house and went along disguised as a video cameraman. He didn't want Appel to know that a black man was the potential buyer and, because the house had been Madam Walker's, up the price. It took two and a half years for buyer and seller to agree on terms, but as Doley says, "I know how to wait things out."

Though she still voices reservations about the house and calls it "Harold's project" – waving all discussion in his direction – it's Helena Doley who knows Villa Lewaro's corners and imagines its potential secrets. She looks up at the broken and locked skylights on the third floor and imagines how, when they worked, a breeze came down through the overhanging trees, joined an intersecting breeze from the next skylight, and cooled the hallways and guest rooms. Running her hand over Walker's built-in cue racks, she looks across the pool table into the third-floor living room and wonders if A'Lelia didn't have her card parties in this part of the house, which is cozier and more private, perfect for the endless poker games she preferred to the fancier social do's downstairs.

Helena Doley doesn't think about Walker dying in their bedroom, but she and Harold often imagine her walking the halls. "She was a genius," he says. "Her marketing skills were nothing short of brilliant. And I admired her for her tenacity, against all odds imaginable... To walk the halls that she once walked and to sleep in the room where she once slept is a feeling that is indescribable."

The Doleys use their home. A family of current and casual tastes, they spend most of their evenings in the nestlike third-floor living room. They have installed a six-burner Imperial stove in the kitchen, as well as a 10-foot solid oak farm table. Here, in the heart of the house, they often gather with friends, to cook and

to eat. Recently, they hosted an art auction to benefit a local minority-operated teaching hospital. Sometimes Aaron and his friends end a late night by playing Ping-Pong in Madam's gymnasium.

Villa Lewaro hasn't had much opportunity to be a real home until now. But the Doleys can't just do an *abracadabra* and shuck off the past. History and Madam Walker are givens at Villa Lewaro, as concrete as the Estey organ and as much a part of life there as the gingko and the beechnut.

Sources: 1998 May/June issue of *Preservation Magazine*; Image of Villa Lewaro from intrepidtravelor.com; Image of hair product from greatfemaleinventors.com;