



History of the Walker Center

After Madam Walker's death, her daughter A'Lelia erected the Walker Building to continue her mother's legacy of hope. Located at 617 Indiana Avenue, the Walker Building originally contained the Walker Manufacturing Company, the Walker College of Beauty Culture, a beauty salon, a barber shop, a pharmacy, a grocery store, professional offices and the Coffee Pot Restaurant (famous as meeting place for black intellectuals), and of course the majestic Walker Theatre.

The Walker Building was the first black owned, and operated building of its kind in the country. As Madam put it earlier, when the factory was built, "I have built my own factory on my own ground."

The Madame Walker Building, and its neighbors, nurtured Indianapolis' network of black professionals and entrepreneurs and became the lifeline of the black community, providing a dignified alternative for interaction and entertainment.

The Indianapolis Recorder, a black owned newspaper, described its interior and proclaimed, "let us hope that it will provide yet another reason why those of us who have been doing so, should no longer find it necessary to climb back stairs and use alley entrances to see a show." When the theatre formally opened in December 1927, a local white newspaper reported that it was "the finest for colored persons in the country." Actually, it was one of the finest for anybody in the country!

Despite the catastrophic stock market crash of 1929, and the resulting economic depression of the 1930's, the Company maintained its mission. Throughout this decade, it seemed as if the Walker Building would remain the focal point of African-American business, civic, social and entertainment life in Indianapolis. But by the 1950's urban renewal, suburban settlement, unforeseen forces of desegregation and the deterioration of the downtown area had an adverse effect on the Building.

From the 1950's to the 1970's tenants systematically vacated the building. By 1979, the Walker Manufacturing Company was the only remaining tenant. In that year the Walker Building was purchased by the Madame Walker Theatre Center, a non-for-profit organization conceived by Charles M. Blair at the urging of Robert B. Ransom and with the cooperation of the Madam C. J. Walker Co., trustees which included Henry Bundles, Mike Ransom, W.T. Ray, A'Lelia Bundles and others with the commitment to maintaining the facility as a symbol of cultural expression and economic enterprise.

IN 1988, the City of Indianapolis celebrated the opening of the fully restored Madame Walker Theatre Center. Today, The Madame Walker Building is on both the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Under the leadership of Charles M. Blair, President, dedicated Board of Directors and Staff, the Madame Walker Theatre Center continues to perpetuate arts and cultural programming for adults and children, and honor entrepreneurs who have excelled in fields involving women and people of color who have demonstrated success in business through personal efforts and demonstrated commitment to the creation of opportunities for others. These awards focus attention on the Madame Walker Theatre Center and its mission of providing education and preserving the legacy of its namesake.

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Madame
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