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# Exploring family history yields journey of discovery

BY E.J. SCHULTZ  
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They couldn't find the key so they had to call a locksmith.

It was the early 1980s and A'Leia Bundles wanted to know what was inside a trunk her grandfather kept at his Arkansas apartment.

The trunk, once open, gave clues to Bundles' past — old photographs, marriage licenses and clothing.

"I would show him something, and he would tell me a story," said Bundles, referring to her grandfather, who in between naps spent that night unloading family memories.

Bundles does not come from just any family. She is the great-great-granddaughter of Madam C.J. Walker, a daughter of slaves who went on to become one of the 20th century's most successful businesswomen and some say the country's first woman millionaire.

Bundles, whose book "On Her Own

**Author A'Leia Bundles' great-great-grandmother Madam C.J. Walker rose from washerwoman to millionaire.**

Ground" chronicles Walker's rise from washerwoman to millionaire, is the keynote speaker at this weekend's family reunion planner workshop, which is being held at Hilton Head Island's Hilton Oceanfront Resort and is sponsored by Pathfinders Travel Magazine for People of Color.

Researching family history is often a big part of family reunions, and Bundles, director of talent development for ABC News, said in a phone interview this week that she would discuss at the conference methods used to gather facts for her award-winning book about Walker, who founded a hair products company in the early 1900s.

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Special to The Packet

A'Leia Bundles, the keynote speaker at the family reunion planners workshop, tells the story of her great-great-grandmother in "On Her Own Ground."

## History

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"It involved years and years of research," she said.

Bundles visited at least a dozen cities, retracing Walker's route from a Louisiana plantation to St. Louis, Denver, Pittsburgh and Indianapolis, where Walker built a factory, hair and manicure salon, and training school.

### ON A MISSION

To get insights into her great-great-grandmother's life, Bundles pored through city records, death certificates and census data. She listened to family stories and read old newspapers.

"It really became my mission to write this book," said Bundles, who in 1999 left her job as a deputy bureau chief for ABC News to concentrate fully on the research.

She said she was driven by a passion to "set the record straight" about Walker, who spent her later years promoting federal anti-lynching legislation.

Bundles, 51, became interested in her family's history at an early age.

She vividly recalls visiting her grandfather's apartment as a child growing up in Indianapolis. The apartment was stocked with artifacts, including the desk that

Walker once used and the white shawl she once wore. The lingering smell of sweet perfume mingled with her grandfather's "old man must," Bundles recalled.

"I'm sure the spirits were drawing me in," she said about her fascination with the items.

Bundles wrote papers about Walker in high school and again at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. She said her book, which came out in 2001, is "in many ways a social history of American between the Civil War and World War I."

Born Sarah Breedlove in 1867, Walker was orphaned at the age of seven. In the 1880s, she moved to



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St. Louis to be near three brothers, each of whom were barbers. It was around that time she created a shampoo that treated a scalp disease that plagued thousands of women. The product's formula, Walker had said, was revealed to her in a dream.

In the early 1900s, Walker became engaged in Harlem's social and political scene. In 1917, after a white mob murdered more than three dozen blacks in East St. Louis, Walker visited the White House to lend support to anti-lynching legislation.

At the time of her death, Walker's estate was valued at more than a million dollars.

It was not Walker's business acumen that left the greatest impression on Bundles. It was her philanthropy.

"That to me made her a much more interesting and complete

person," she said.

When asked what advice she would give to others researching family history, Bundles said you should never give up, not get caught up in small details and, per-

haps most importantly, pass the information to someone in the next generation.

For Bundles, that moment occurred during her 1980s visit to her grandfather's apartment and

his late-night stories about the items in the trunk.

"That was the moment when the torch was passed," she said. Contact E.J. Schultz at 706-8137 or [eschultz@islandpacket.com](mailto:eschultz@islandpacket.com).