



Dr. Mary Edwards Walker: Physician, Civil War surgeon, activist

Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, 1832-1919, circa 1911. The Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection, LC-USZ62-48794

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Recently, Harvard Medical School diversified its “dude wall” to include photographs of female and African American physician-scientists. This change at Harvard brings to mind the contributions of several pioneering women in medicine, including Mary Edwards Walker, one of the first formally-educated U.S. female physicians, the first woman Civil War surgeon, an outspoken feminist, and the only female Medal of Honor recipient.

Early years

Walker was born in 1832 in the small town of Oswego, New York to parents who emphasized the importance of education. Growing up, she helped with farm work and the rural medical care that her father provided.^{1,2} In the 1850s, a time when few women were able to obtain higher education, Walker attended Syracuse Medical College as the only woman in her class.²

Walker's formal medical training consisted of three 13-week semesters, with tuition of \$55 per semester.² Syracuse Medical College, now SUNY Upstate Medical University, had a curriculum focused on combining allopathic and homeopathic teachings, including physiology, pathology, hygiene, pharmacy, hydrotherapy, and homeopathy. It emphasized an avoidance of chemical compounds and a preference for vegetable substitutes. This curriculum laid the foundation for Walker's rejection of common medical practices of the day such as cupping, leeches, instant amputations, and purgatives.³

Following graduation from Syracuse Medical College, Walker opened a medical practice with her husband, who was one of her medical school classmates. Initially, she treated only women and children, but gradually expanded her practice to include men.² In 1861, Walker and her husband divorced.² The Civil War was just starting, and after the first Battle of Bull Run in 1861, Walker traveled to Washington, DC, thinking that there would be a great need for physicians in the wake of war.⁴

Civil War surgeon

Walker became the first female surgeon employed by the United States Army Surgeon.² Walker initially inquired about working for the military as a commissioned surgeon, however, because of her gender, she was not allowed to be hired for this work.⁵ Walker then volunteered as a civilian surgeon for the Union Army, serving at a temporary hospital located in the U.S. Patent Office in Washington, D.C.⁵ and later at Chattanooga Hospital under General George Thomas.² During her time with the Army, she undertook many roles, even working as a nurse at times.⁶

Walker had a progressive approach to medical care. She disdained amputations, a commonly performed procedure with a high mortality rate during the Civil War.² She evaluated each patient awaiting amputation and educated him of his right to refuse surgery.³

Predating Pasteur's proof of germ theory, Walker boiled surgical instruments to reduce the risk of infection, used clean bandages, sometimes cut from her own clothing, and insisted on regular bathing by patients.³ By minimizing rates of infection, she was able to salvage many limbs, a service for which many soldiers later thanked her.³

While volunteering for the Army, Walker continuously inquired about earning an Army commission but was dismissed each time.² She even wrote to President Lincoln asking for support.⁷ Lincoln responded:

The Medical Department of the army is an organized system in the hands of men supposed to be learned in that profession and I am sure it would injure the service for me, with strong hand, to thrust among them anyone, male or female, against their consent.⁷

Walker persevered in her quest for a commission. With the support of Brigadier General Franklin Farnsworth, she convinced Assistant Surgeon General Wood to allow her to appear before the Medical Board.² While this appearance motivated Walker to continue in her quest, the Board responded by saying her skills were "no greater than what most housewives possess."² General Thomas, Walker's mentor from Chattanooga Hospital, intervened to help overturn the Board's initial ruling, allowing Walker to become employed as a Contract Acting Assistant Surgeon (civilian) by the Army of the Cumberland for her work in the country's war efforts.^{5,8} On March 14, 1864, Walker was assigned to the 52nd Ohio Volunteers.^{2,6} She arrived dressed in men's attire which she said was necessary for mobility and the high demands of her work.⁵

Stories regarding this period of her life, notably that she might have been a Union Army spy who allowed herself to be captured, are unclear and uncorroborated.^{6,9} Walker provided medical care for injured civilians on both the Union and Confederate side, repeatedly crossing alone into enemy territory on horseback.¹⁰ During the Civil War, few women worked as spies as this work was deemed too dangerous for women. Some sources say that Walker was denied her request to work as a spy, while others argue that she performed this work but was refused an increase in pension.² After the war, Walker, although outspoken, never publicly mentioned having served as a spy.

Taken as a POW

On April 10, 1864, Walker was captured by Confederate forces and became a prisoner of war at Castle Thunder, a Richmond, Virginia prison known for its brutality.^{5,11} Richmond newspapers reported Walker's arrival, describing her odd dress: "We must not omit to add that she is ugly and skinny and apparently above thirty years of age."¹¹

As a prisoner of war for four months,⁵ Dr. Walker wrote numerous letters about the living conditions. The maltreatment and starvation she experienced in prison haunted her.¹¹

In August 1864, Walker was released from Castle Thunder in a prisoner exchange involving approximately three dozen Confederate and Union physicians.^{5,10} Walker later stated she was delighted to have been part of a "man for man" swap.¹⁰



Dr. Mary Edwards Walker's Medal of Honor, presented to her November 11, 1865 for her bravery in the Civil War. ©2018. Oswego County Historical Society, Oswego, NY.

Walker continued pursuing a commission, writing this time to General Sherman.¹⁴ She requested the rank of Major and to be positioned as the surgeon of the Louisville Female Military Prison in Kentucky.¹² This time, her requests were honored; she was paid as a Major and placed at the Louisville prison.

After four months there, Walker became frustrated with the inmates and officials constantly questioning her work.¹² She relocated to the Refugee Home in Tennessee, where she worked until the end of the war.¹²

Activist

After the war, Walker expanded her fight for equal rights for women, and also advocated for alcohol and

tobacco abstinence.¹³ She traveled across the U.S. and Europe and published two books on women's rights. She advocated for women to receive fair pay, and for them to keep their maiden name after marriage.¹³ In her book, *Unmasked*, Walker writes, "If men would only reason, they would very soon understand that the true position of women is always one of equality with themselves in all the relations of life."¹⁴ She dedicated *Unmasked* "To Gentlemen" stating that men could benefit from "women physicians writing 'private treatises' to men."¹⁴

In her book *Hit*, Walker discussed love, marriage, dress reform, labor, religion, and other controversial topics.¹⁵ She argued that women's rights are God-given, and that oppressing women caused the oppressors (often men) to also be harmed. She wrote, "Women cannot be deprived of God-given rights, or of Republican rights, without men being sufferers as well as women."¹⁵ She fervently believed in parity for all, declaring "let men and women stand as equals."¹⁵

Walker continued to don her war-time attire of bloomers and men's clothing despite criticism, ridicule, and arrests. An active member of the National Dress Reform Association, Walker defended her views stating, "I don't wear men's clothes, I wear my own clothes."¹²

After justifying that she had the right to dress as she pleased in the free America she had served for several years, the judge in her trial dismissed her case and reprimanded the police suggesting they not arrest her again for her attire.¹²

Walker was also an enthusiastic suffragette.¹³ In 1868, she sued the federal elections board on the premise that women already had the right to vote. She ran for seats in both the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate but was ultimately unsuccessful.¹³

Medal of Honor recipient

Even though she was a civilian surgeon who was never a commissioned officer,⁵ Walker was nominated by Generals Sherman and Thomas¹⁰ for the Medal of Honor for her wartime service as an assistant surgeon with the 52nd Ohio Infantry.¹⁶ When President Andrew Johnson signed her Congressional Medal of Honor citation on November 11, 1865,¹⁶ Walker became the first woman to ever receive the honor.⁶

However, in 1916, Congress revised the Medal of Honor standards to include a requirement of enemy combat,¹⁷ and past awards were rescinded if they did not meet this criteria.¹⁶ In 1917, the Board of Medal Awards ruled that Walker's medal should be revoked,¹⁷ due to ambiguities in

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her Army status, and because her services did not involve “actual conflict with an enemy, by gallantry or intrepidity, at the risk of life, above and beyond the call of duty.”¹⁸

Walker refused to return her Medal of Honor, telling the government, “you will receive it over my dead body.”¹¹ She continued to wear the medal daily,¹¹ giving feminist lectures with it on her left lapel⁴ until her death at 87-years-old in 1919.¹⁶ Dr. Walker’s Medal of Honor was never reclaimed by the Army and is now located in the Oswego Historical Society.⁴

In the 1960s, Walker’s niece, Ann Walker, began to lobby for the official restoration of the medal.⁴ After Congressional reappraisal of her achievements, President Jimmy Carter restored Walker’s Medal of Honor on June 11, 1977.^{5,6,16}

The Army Board for Corrections of Military Records ruled (with one dissent) that the decision to rescind the medal was “unjust.”¹⁸ The board noted that if it had not been for her gender, she would have been given a commission and her actions would have been those of a soldier.¹⁸ The re-issued medal is on display in the Pentagon’s women’s corridor.⁶

The text of Walker’s Medal of Honor Award Citation reads:⁸

Rank and organization: Contract Acting Assistant Surgeon (civilian), U. S. Army.

Places and dates: Battle of Bull Run, July 21, 1861; Patent Office Hospital, Washington, D.C., October 1861; Chattanooga, Tenn., following Battle of Chickomauga, September 1863; Prisoner of War, April 10, 1864-August 12, 1864, Richmond, Va.; Battle of Atlanta, September 1864. Entered service at: Louisville, Ky.

Born: 26 November 1832, Oswego County, N.Y.

Citation: Whereas it appears from official reports that Dr. Mary E. Walker, a graduate of medicine, “has rendered valuable service to the Government, and her efforts have been earnest and untiring in a variety of ways,” and that she was assigned to duty and served as an assistant surgeon in charge of female prisoners at Louisville, Ky., upon the recommendation of Major-Generals Sherman and Thomas, and faithfully served as contract surgeon in the service of the United States, and has devoted herself with much patriotic zeal to the sick and wounded soldiers, both in the field and hospitals, to the detriment of her own health, and has also endured hardships as a prisoner



Dr. Mary Edwards Walker’s Medal of Honor and artifacts.
Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Washington, DC.

of war four months in a Southern prison while acting as contract surgeon; and Whereas by reason of her not being a commissioned officer in the military service, a brevet or honorary rank cannot, under existing laws, be conferred upon her; and

Whereas in the opinion of the President an honorable recognition of her services and sufferings should be made:

It is ordered, That a testimonial thereof shall be hereby made and given to the said Dr. Mary E. Walker, and that the usual medal of honor for meritorious services be given her.

Given under my hand in the city of Washington, D.C., this 11th day of November, A.D. 1865.

Andrew Johnson,
President

(Medal rescinded 1917 along with 910 others, restored by President Carter 10 June 1977.)

In a letter to Ann, the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee noted “It’s clear your great-grandaunt was not only courageous during the term she served as a contract doctor in the Union Army, but also as an outspoken proponent of feminine rights. Both as a doctor and feminist, she was much ahead of her time and, as is usual, she was not regarded kindly by many of her contemporaries. Today, she appears a legend.”¹⁶

“Dr. Mary lost the medal,” Ann Walker said, “simply because she was a hundred years ahead of her time and no one could stomach it.”⁴

Legacy

Walker understood her impact, stating:

I am the original new woman...Why, before Lucy Stone, Mrs. Bloomer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony were—before they were, I am. In the early '40's, when they began their work in dress reform, I was already wearing pants...I have made it possible for the bicycle girl to wear the abbreviated skirt, and I have prepared the way for the girl in knickerbockers.⁶

Walker is a monumental figure in history. She was not afraid of taking risks for her deep-rooted beliefs, and was never dissuaded by barriers or rejections. Rather, she emboldened herself with education and hard work.

The legacy of Dr. Mary Edwards Walker continues. In 2016, the American College of Surgeons Women in Surgery Committee established the Mary Edwards Walker Inspiring Women in Surgery Award.¹⁹ This award represents what is, perhaps, Walker's most important legacy, providing a path for those women who followed her into medicine. Walker was a pioneering woman in medicine who crashed through glass ceilings so that females could rise up as physicians.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the Oswego Historical Society and the Office of Secretary of Defense of the United States for their assistance in confirming the Medal of Honor locations, graciously sharing images relating to Dr. Walker, and providing permission to use those images.

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