

Medicine in Stamps

Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919): surgeon, feminist and war heroine

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In her colourful life of 86 years, Dr Mary Edwards Walker wore many hats. Arguably, it was the top hat she often wore as part of her masculine attire that raised the most eyebrows. Intent on paving the way for gender equality during the mid-1800s, she became a champion for women's rights and dress reform. Eager to break free from the tight-fitting clothing that "shackled and enfeebled" women, Dr Walker often donned full men's evening dress complete with bow-tie, trousers, coat and top hat. But she was more than a feminist ahead of her time. She served as a patriot and surgeon in the Union Army during the Civil War, and for her heroism, Congress awarded her the Medal of Honor, the first ever for a woman.

Mary Walker was born in the town of Oswego, New York, on November 26, 1832. In addition to working on the family farm, she assisted her father in his rural medical practice, and spent countless hours poring over his medical texts. At age of 21 years, she enrolled in Syracuse Medical College, the only woman in her class. Her formal medical training consisted of three 13-week semesters with tuition of USD 55 for each semester and USD 1.50 per week for room and board. After marrying fellow classmate Albert Miller, the newlyweds settled down to establish a joint practice in Rome, New York. Unfortunately, both practice and marriage failed.

ARMY SURGEON In 1861, the Civil War broke out and with it came the call for doctors to treat the wounded. Dr Walker tried to enlist, but the Union Army denied her commission. Her fight to gain acceptance as a woman doctor was repeatedly rebuffed by the old-fashioned, male-dominated military establishment, and she never became a *bona fide* military officer. Undeterred, she volunteered as an unpaid nurse at the US Patent Office Hospital in Washington, DC, and later moved to the front lines in Fredericksburg and Chattanooga. There, General George Thomas, an innovator who modified railroad cars

into mobile field hospitals, spotted her spirit and drive. In September 1863, the general, ignoring gender barriers, appointed her to the position of assistant civilian contract field surgeon for the Army of the Cumberland.

Dr Walker proved worthy of the promotion, and became a strong advocate for hygienic conditions during surgery and an outspoken critic of unnecessary limb amputations that were too readily performed under unsanitary conditions in the battlefield. The Union Army lost nearly 30,000 amputated limbs, which came with a staggering mortality rate of 25% from wound infections. She also disagreed with bleeding and leeching, which were common medical practices of her day. To withstand the rigors of battlefield travel and operating in makeshift field hospitals, Dr Walker discarded the traditional women's dress of the time, and instead wore a modified Army uniform that consisted of trousers, jacket, cavalry boots and a brace of pistols.



HEROISM During her stint in the battlefield, the "shocking female surgeon in trousers" repeatedly crossed enemy lines on horseback to treat fallen soldiers and sick civilians. In dodging Confederate troops and braving the elements, she put her own life in danger as she delivered supplies and medical care to women and children overwhelmed by cholera, typhoid and dysentery. Her luck ran out in April of 1864 when she was captured as a spy by Confederate sentries at the Georgia-Tennessee border. Shipped to Richmond by rail, she was imprisoned in the notorious Castle Thunder Prison for four months. Dr Walker was later freed as part of a prisoner swap, delighted to have been exchanged "man for man" for a tall Confederate major. After being released from Confederate hands, she spent the remainder of the war providing care at a women's prison in Louisville and an orphan asylum in Tennessee. For her efforts during the Civil War, she received the paltry sum of USD 766.16 and a monthly pension of USD 8.50.

The Civil War over, Generals William Sherman and George Thomas recommended Dr Walker for military recognition, and on November 11, 1865, President Andrew Johnson awarded her the Congressional Medal of Honor for having “*faithfully served as contract surgeon in the service of the United States, and [devoting] herself with much patriotic zeal to the sick and wounded soldiers, both in the field and hospitals, to the detriment of her own health.*” Her formal military title was contract acting assistant surgeon (civilian), US Army, and she became the first and, to date, only woman to ever receive this highest of military honours.

However, in 1917, just two years before her death, the military convened a panel of five retired Civil War generals to re-evaluate the criteria for awarding the Medal of Honor, purportedly to “. . . *increase the prestige of the grant.*” Medals awarded to Dr Walker and 909 others were revoked for insufficient evidence of “*distinguished gallantry*” during the war. Predictably, Dr Walker stubbornly refused to turn in her medal, and continued to wear it proudly to her dying day.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS ACTIVIST Mary Walker’s fight for women’s rights may have been sparked by her father, Alvah Walker, a self-taught country doctor, abolitionist and an active reformist in upstate New York during the early 1800s. The father of five daughters and one son, the elder Walker was a freethinker who instilled the same sense of fierce open-mindedness among his children. Mary Walker worked on the family farm in baggy pants, a precursor of her fondness for masculine attire and determined disdain for the uncomfortable constrictive clothing that women wore. She even showed up on her wedding day dressed in trousers and a frock coat, earning the sobriquet, “*the little lady in pants.*”

Her unorthodox attire was matched by her mannerisms. Various described as brash, hysterical, and hard to get along with, Mary Walker was the subject of much scrutiny and public ridicule. For example, in a letter to the editor of the Religio-Philosophical Journal in 1880, J Murray Case recounted the following observations: “*She was clad in bloomers, had on a neatly fitting frock coat, and upon her ‘shingled’ head, artistically rested a ‘jockey hat.’ She sported a gold-headed cane, which she handled with the dexterity of a city dandy. Her step was quick and elastic, and her head bobbed from side to side, in perfect time with the patter of her pretty little boots. Her every action and movement was that of a fast young man . . . Nature never designed that a woman should be a man, nor a man a woman, and these efforts at transposition, especially on the part of the male sex who seek to appear as feminine as possible, is an evidence of a weak, unbalanced or disordered mind.*”

Dr Walker firmly believed that “*It is my motto to live*

by my principles,” and she devoted herself to the women’s rights movement as a writer, lecturer and activist after the war was over. This phase of her career took her on travels across the United States and Europe in her advocacy for equality, the right to vote, and dress reform. She also wrote numerous articles and gave many lectures on the hazards of tobacco, alcohol and tight-fitting garments. She was not without supporters, and her appeal among men and women alike was evident by the crowds that gathered at her lectures, as well as by her eventual election as the president of the Dress Reform Association.

On February 21, 1919, at the age of 86 years, Mary Walker died—alone and penniless, in her hometown of Oswego, New York. She was buried according to her wishes, dressed in a black suit with an American flag draped over the casket. A white picket fence reportedly surrounds the family gravesite in the Rural Cemetery near Bunker Hill, New York. Her life’s work was not in vain. Shortly after her death, on August 26, 1920, Congress enacted the 19th Amendment giving all American women the right to vote. Women would eventually take full control over their clothing preferences, and the wearing of slacks would become common place. Mary Walker would be pleased to learn that in 1977, some 58 years after her death, President Jimmy Carter would posthumously reinstate her Medal of Honor. She would have been just as pleased that on June 10, 1982, the US Postal Service issued a twenty-cent commemorative stamp honouring her heroism, its citation reading, in part: “*Dr Mary Walker was a humanitarian devoted to the care and treatment of the sick and wounded during the Civil War, often at the risk of her own life. A patriot dedicated and loyal to her country, she successfully fought against the sex discrimination of her time.*”

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