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# Mary Edwards Walker: Trailblazing feminist, surgeon, and war veteran



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Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, the first American female surgeon, served in the military for the Union in the Civil War but treated soldiers from both sides of the conflict. She was interned as a prisoner of war. In recognition of her service she was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, today the only woman so honored. Disabled by her wartime experience, she became recognized after the war for her progressive feminism and her outspoken advocacy for women's rights.



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## Childhood and education

Walker was born on a farm in Oswego Town, NY on November 26, 1832, the youngest of seven children. Her parents, Alvah and Vesta Whitcomb Walker, were very progressive and her upbringing was unconventional. Her parents supported equality for all. They vigorously opposed slavery and believed that both genders should be granted the same rights and opportunities. They modeled non-traditional roles. Her mother often did heavy fieldwork and her father shared the housework. Her father held traditional female garb in disdain and believed that corsets impeded circulation and long trailing skirts were unsanitary. So young Mary grew up wearing "comfortable, practical clothing, instead of the corsets and dresses common in her era."<sup>1</sup>

Her parents were determined that their daughters would be educated in the same manner as their brother. They founded the first free school house in Oswego on their farm in the late 1830s.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, she attended Falley Seminary in Fulton, a school that fit her parents' expectations regarding progressive reform and gender equity in education. Her education strengthened her rebellion against stereotypical gender roles.

After graduation she became a teacher at a school in Minetto. She aspired for a career in medicine, so she saved her salary for medical school tuition. Her inspiration may have come from her father, who may have been a self-taught physician and kept medical texts in the home.

## Medical training

Walker was the only woman in her class at Syracuse Medical College (now the State University of New York Upstate Medical University), the nation's first medical school to grant a full medical degree to a woman. She graduated with honors in 1855 after completing three 13-week semesters, each at a tuition of \$55.<sup>3</sup>

After graduation she married Arthur Miller, a classmate. With an inherent feminist mindset, she wore a suit and top hat, omitted the word "obey" from her vows, and kept her own last name.<sup>1</sup> They moved to Rome, NY, and opened a private practice that was unsuccessful. Many patients were uncomfortable with a female physician. Some were openly derisive. Alleging infidelity, Walker separated from Miller around the start of the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Their divorce became final after the war in 1868.

## Civil War years

Because of her gender Walker failed in her attempt to join the Union Army at the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861. Unable to secure an active duty commission, she volunteered to serve as a surgeon but be counted as a "nurse" on military records. Her first post was at a temporary army hospital in the patent office in Washington, D.C. An advocate for patient rights,

she felt that it was her duty to counsel soldiers about their right to refuse amputation despite the risk of her own dismissal. She examined the soldiers herself. "In almost every instance," she said, "I saw amputation was not only unnecessary, but to me it seemed wickedly cruel."<sup>5</sup> During this time, she helped to establish an organization to aid women traveling to Washington to visit wounded relatives.<sup>6</sup>

She served throughout the duration of the war, including the First Battle of Bull Run (1862), and the Battles of Chickamauga (1863) and Atlanta (1864). In the field she wore bloomers or trousers. Eventually she created her own modified Union officer's uniform consisting of a calf length skirt over trousers that allowed her to follow troop movements and tend to the wounded (Figure). She purposely left her hair long and curled "so anyone could know that she was a woman."<sup>6</sup>

She never stopped petitioning for a commission as an Army surgeon. In 1863, she wrote to the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton. When he refused, she wrote directly to President Lincoln the following year. She asserted that a commission was denied "solely on the ground of sex."<sup>5</sup> Lincoln replied that he could not interfere in military matters. After more than two years of battlefield service, she was promoted to "Contract Acting Assistant Surgeon (civilian)" in the Army of Cumberland by General George Henry Thomas,<sup>1</sup> then an assignment with the 52nd Ohio Regiment when their assistant surgeon died.

She was captured by a Confederate sentry in April 1864 while crossing alone on horseback across lines to provide care to wounded civilians left behind as the Union Army withdrew. She was arrested as a spy largely because she was garbed in men's clothing. She spent four months in the Castle Thunder prison near Richmond, VA.

Her appearance as a female military prisoner caused a commotion that was recorded in many diaries of the time. One Confederate captain wrote

*[The crowd was] both amused and disgusted... at the sight of a thing that nothing but the debased and depraved Yankee nation could produce....[She] was dressed in the full uniform of a Federal surgeon...not good-looking and of course had tongue enough for a regiment of men.*<sup>5</sup>

She was eventually freed as part of a prisoner exchange that returned at least fourteen physicians to their respective armies. A later biography noted that she later said she was delighted to have been part of a "man for man" swap.<sup>1</sup>

After her release she was assigned at her request to be the surgeon for female prisoners of war in Louisville, KY, with the title Acting Assistant Surgeon. She thus became the first female surgeon commissioned in the Army at a salary of \$100 per month plus \$434.66 in back pay. After only four months, however, frustrated with both prison officials and prisoners

that questioned her care, she transferred to the Refugee Home in Clarksville, Tenn., where she returned to treating wounded soldiers. At war's end she returned home to upstate New York.

In November 1865 Walker was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Andrew Johnson. The citation said

*[Dr Walker] 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 of war.*<sup>7</sup>

Her award was among 910 others that were rescinded in 1917 when the criteria for the honor were restricted to only those who had engaged in "actual combat with the enemy." She refused to surrender the medal and proudly affixed it to her clothes daily for the rest of her life. After extensive lobbying by her relatives and supporters long after her death, the honor was restored by President Jimmy Carter in 1977. Once more her heroism was recognized for her "distinguished gallantry, self-sacrifice, patriotism, dedication and unflinching loyalty to her country, despite the apparent discrimination because of her sex."<sup>7</sup> Walker remains the only woman recipient of the Medal of Honor.

## Social activism

Walker's wartime experience, especially the time spent in a Confederate prison, physically diminished her and her eyesight started to fail. She took up the causes of equal rights for women's and abstinence from alcohol and tobacco in lectures throughout the United States and Europe. She published two books that advocated for women's rights that drew on her own experiences: *Hit: Essays on Women's Rights (1871)*, and *Unmasked, or the Science of Immorality: To Gentlemen by a Women Physician and Surgeon (1878)*. Women should not be subservient to men, she argued. She had positions that were forerunners of the modern women's movement: Compensation for domestic labor, equal rights in divorce, and retention of maiden names after marriage.

She was a member of the National Dress Reform Association and often wore the dress and trouser combination ("bloomers") popularized by her friend and fellow activist Amelia Jenks Bloomer. Walker said

*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.*<sup>8</sup>

Walker was often criticized, ridiculed and even arrested for wearing men's clothes, but in keeping with her unique point of view, she proclaimed, "I don't wear men's clothes, I wear my



own clothes.”<sup>5</sup> At one trial for impersonating a man, she said that she had the right “to dress as I please in free America on whose tented fields I have served for four years in the cause of human freedom.”<sup>6</sup> The judge dismissed the case and freed Walker, admonishing the police to never arrest her again.

Not surprisingly she was active in the women’s suffrage movement. In 1868, she sued the Election Board in Washington and asserted that as an American she was entitled to the right to vote. She served the cause throughout her life, testifying before Congress in 1912.<sup>9</sup> She unsuccessfully ran for Congress in 1890 and for the Senate in 1892.

She died in 1919 at the age of 86 just one year before the 19th Amendment was ratified giving women the right to vote. She was buried in her black suit and tie.

## Legacy

In World War II, the Liberty ship *SS Mary Walker* was commissioned. The U.S. Postal Service issued a twenty-cent stamp to commemorate the anniversary of her birth in 1982. She is honored in the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Dedicated in 1997. A number of medical facilities are named in her honor, including the Whitman-Walker Clinic in Washington, DC, and the Mary Walker Health Center at SUNY Oswego. AUS Army Reserve Center in Walker, Mich., bears her name. The American College of Surgeons, Women in Surgery Committee created the Mary Edwards Walker Inspiring Women in Surgery Award in 2016 to be given to a surgeon in recognition of an individual’s significant contributions to the advancement of women in the field of surgery.

One of her descendants provided a succinct and insightful into Walker’s life. While appealing to get Walker’s Congressional Medal of Honor restored she said, “Dr. Mary lost the medal simply because she was a hundred years ahead of her time and no one could stomach it.”<sup>10</sup>

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## Legend

Mary Edwards Walker wearing her Congressional Medal of Honor. Image from the National Library of Medicine.