

Mary Edwards Walker, MD: Civil War Physician and Advocate for Women's Rights

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Fifty years ago, an article in the March 1976 issue of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* unravels the story of a pioneering woman physician and suffragette, with family roots in Rhode Island, who volunteered and was taken prisoner during the Civil War.

Titled "Mary Edwards Walker, M.D., 1832–1919,"¹ it was written by the Journal's then editor-in-chief, the late **SEEBERT GOLDOWSKY, MD**. An avid historian, the article recounts that while he was combing through old newspaper files of the *Newport Mercury*, he came across an article from its Nov. 7, 1863 edition which intrigued him. It began:

"Dr. Mary E. Walker, a patriotic lady, who has conferred innumerable blessings on the sick and wounded in the army of the Potomac, was last week subjected to considerable annoyance in Pittsburgh, on account of the singularity of her dress. She wore pants, a military overcoat and cape, underneath which was a tunic reaching below the knees. She had on a white turndown collar, and a necktie neatly adjusted. In this eccentric garb, it is not strange that she became the object of much curiosity; and among the thousand and one surmises as to who she was, it was rumored that she was a rebel spy! But as soon as it became known as to who she was, and that she had adopted this style of dress because it

Figure 1. Photo of Mary E. Walker, MD, taken by Matthew Brady, circa 1865, resides in the National Archives, and appeared in the March 1976 article in the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*. She is wearing her Army uniform.

better suited the noble work in which she was engaged, she was treated with all the courtesy and respect which were due to a person of her character and mission." [Figures 1,2.]

Rhode Island Roots

Dr. Goldowsky's research found that Dr. Walker's roots stemmed from America's earliest days. She was born in Oswego, NY, on Nov. 26, 1832, the fifth daughter of Alvah and Vesta Whitcomb Walker, originally from Massachusetts. She and her siblings were eighth-generation direct descendants of the



Figure 2. Assistant Surgeon Mary E. Walker, MD, of Medical Staff U.S. Volunteers Infantry Regiment in skirt and trousers with Congressional Medal of Honor badge.

[LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/
M.B. BRADY & CO., 1865]

Dr. Mary E. Walker's Congressional Medal Commendation

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., under 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 endured hardships as a prisoner 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 suffers 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

By the President: Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War



Figure 3. One of the earlier images of the Walker Family Homestead, also referred to as the Philip Walker House, on Massasoit Avenue in East Providence. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

[[HTTPS://WWW.PRESERVERI.ORG/WALKER-HOUSE](https://www.preserveri.org/walker-house)]

"Widow Walker," who came to Plymouth Colony before 1643 and settled in Rehoboth, MA. Widow Walker's son, Philip, built a home in 1676, and due to subsequent boundary relocations, is now the Rumford section of East Providence. Known as the Deacon Walker House, it is extant and on the National Register of Historic Places [Figure 3].

Mary's father spent most of his time running a "free open" school on the Oswego family farm. He is described as a "self-taught physician" in the Mary Walker collection of papers at Syracuse University. The collections states, "her parents were what was termed 'free thinkers.'" She and her siblings were "raised to question everything. Helping on the farm, Mary often wore trousers and shirts because they were more comfortable. She was a non-conformist throughout her life."² The farm was also a stop on the Underground Railway.

Her father, seeing Mary's interest in science and medicine, encouraged his daughter to study medicine. Dr. Goldowsky's article states that "she amused herself by reading coroners' reports and medical books borrowed from their family doctor."

Medical School

In 1853, she was admitted to the Syracuse Medical College (no relation to Syracuse University), described as an "Eclectic" school. It welcomed women and advocated for co-education. Chartered by the State of New York, it was one of several similar Eclectic medical schools in the nation.

The papers of Abraham Lincoln at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Ill., state that, "At Syracuse Medical College, Mary E. Walker studied pathology, obstetrics, diseases of women and children, pharmacy, anatomy, physiology, principles of surgery, medical law, and more...She advocated against the practices of bleeding, blistering and giving patients heavy doses of mercury."³

Mary graduated, in 1855, at the age of 23. Shortly thereafter she married fellow graduate **ALBERT MILLER, MD**, and the couple opened a practice in Rome, NY, where she practiced pediatrics and saw mostly women patients. Their one child died in infancy. The marriage ended in divorce several years later.

Civil War

When the Civil War broke out, Dr. Walker volunteered her services in field hospitals near the Union front lines, including at the Battle of Fredericksburg and in Chattanooga after the Battle of Chickamauga. Various accounts of her life report that she requested to join the Union Army as a surgeon but was rejected because she was a woman. Officially allowed to serve only as a nurse, she worked as an unpaid field surgeon. But in September 1863 she was formally employed as a civilian surgeon by the Army of the Cumberland, becoming the first female surgeon employed by the US Army. She was later appointed assistant surgeon of the 52nd Ohio Infantry.

Prisoner of war

The collection of her papers at Syracuse University reported that, "On April 10, 1864, she was captured by Confederate troops, and arrested as a spy, just after she finished helping a Confederate doctor perform an amputation. She was sent to Castle Thunder in Richmond, Virginia, and remained there until August 12, 1864, when she was released as part of a prisoner exchange."²

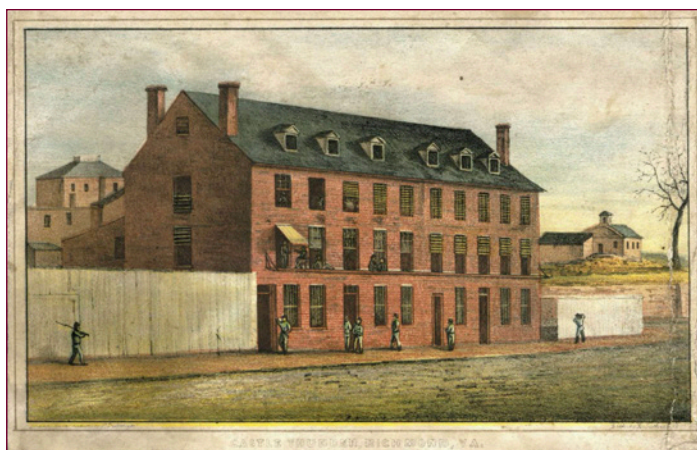


Figure 4. Castle Thunder, Richmond, VA, where Mary E. Walker, MD, was imprisoned by the Confederates during the Civil War.

[[HTTPS://ENCYCLOPEDIAVIRGINIA.ORG/ENTRIES/CASTLE-THUNDER-PRISON](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/castle-thunder-prison)]

According to the Uncommon Wealth, Voices from the Library of Virginia, she wrote from Castle Thunder in a letter to her mother: "I hope you are not grieving about me...I am living in a three-story brick 'castle' [Figure 4] with plenty to eat and a clean bed to sleep in." The reality however, was quite different. Living in a rat-infested room and fed a diet of moldy bread and rice, she weighed only 60 pounds when she left the castle. She continued to serve as an Army doctor throughout the rest of the Civil War."⁴

Congressional Medal of Honor

She was presented with the Congressional Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service in 1865, signed by President Andrew Johnson. [See sidebar.] The award was rescinded in 1917, along with 900 others, due to reappraisals by a medals' committee which

stated a recipient had to be in active combat. She refused to surrender her bronze medal, and wore it for the rest of her life. At the request of a great-niece, it was reinstated in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter.

For most of her life she lived in Washington, D.C., where she had opened a medical practice. But while imprisoned at Castle Thunder, she suffered permanent partial vision loss, which ultimately led her to stop practicing medicine. She also spent much of her post-war years writing several books and on the lecture tour in this country and in Europe. Her most notable book, *Hit: Essays on Women's Rights*, was published in 1870.

According to her biography in the series "Changing the Face of Medicine" at the National Library of Medicine, "Despite the controversy surrounding her career and her politics, Dr. Mary Walker was proud of her accomplishments as a physician and an advocate for women's rights. As she concluded in 1897, '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.'"⁵

Dr. Walker took to dressing in a top hat and black suit in her middle and later years, always wearing her Medal of Honor pinned to the jacket [Figure 5]. In her 80s, she suffered a fall at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., and after recovering,

returned to the family homestead in Oswego, NY. She died at a neighbor's home there at the age of 87, on Feb. 21, 1919.

In March 1919, *Providence Magazine* published an article titled "Dr. Mary E. Walker of Rhode Island Family," and described her as a frequent visitor to the East Side of Providence in the prior six years, where she had numerous personal friends.



Figure 5. Mary Edwards Walker, MD, in 1911, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing left, wearing top hat and coat.

[LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PHOTO BY BAIN NEWS SERVICE]

The article lauded her as a "valued Army doctor during the Civil War. After the war she was authorized by Congress to wear male apparel. She was of fine character and extremely modest."

As in life, her death made headlines nationally as well. The *New York Times* edition of Feb. 23, 1919 termed her a "Crusader" [Figure 6]. It stated her "livelihood was earned during all these years by her medical practice and by writing, which were supplemented by an Army pension."

By all accounts, Dr. Walker never walked the straight and narrow, but was a trailblazer. The symbol of what she considered the greatest recognition of her life's work as a physician is depicted on her tombstone: the Congressional Medal of Honor [Figure 7]. ❖

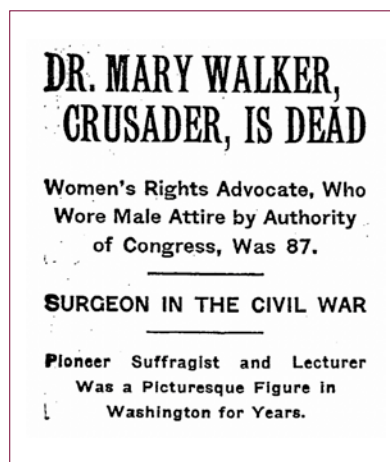


Figure 6. Headline in the *New York Times* on her death in 1919.



Figure 7. Gravestone in Rural Cemetery, Oswego, NY.

[[HTTPS://WWW.FINDAGRAVE.COM/MEMORIAL/23089/MARY-EDWARDS-WALKER](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/23089/MARY-EDWARDS-WALKER)]

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