



Mary Walker wearing her Congressional Medal of Honor

Yankee Bloomer Doctor

by Elizabeth Steger Trindal

In her youth she would have been characterized as a spirited, pretty little thing. But in time resolution firmed her mouth and her once soft, brown, eyes became dagger sharp. She spent most of her life defying custom. The laughter and scorn of others only

made her more defiant. She was well ahead of her time.

Dr. Mary Edwards Walker was awarded the highest military tribute that America confers. Not one woman since has received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

On January 24, 1866, Dr. Walker received the award from President Andrew Johnson for her meritorious work as a surgeon during the Civil War. But, on February 15, 1919, shortly before her death, Congress revoked the honor. According to the Board of Military Medal Awards, *“the occasion for its giving was not of record in the War Department Archives”*. Still rebellious, even at the age of 86, the sprightly lady refused to return the medal. She wore it until she died.

Nearly sixty years later, Anne Walker, Dr. Walker’s great grand niece, mounted a campaign to have the medal posthumously restored to her aunt on the grounds of sex discrimination.

The campaign met with success. On July 10, 1977, the Army Board of Corrections of Military Records ruled that the decision to revoke the medal had been “unjust”. Had it not been for Dr. Walker’s gender, she would have been a commissioned officer. Her outstanding service would have been that of a U.S. Army Officer. Currently, the medal is in the possession of the Orange County New York Historical Society.

The original order for the Congressional Medal of Honor reads :

“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, she 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 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 service 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

Who was this woman ? Mary Walker was one of six children born to Alvah and Vista Walker. She was born November 26, 1832, on a thirty-three acre farm near Oswego, New York.

Since there was only one son, the daughters were expected to do the kind of work on the farm that was normally done by boys. Mary was a lovely looking child. Her brown hair fell in waves down her back, and her brown eyes darted with restless energy. That same energy would sustain her through a wild and reckless life.

If Mary Walker was unorthodox for her times, then so were her parents. They believed that girls should be as well educated as boys. That girls should pursue professional careers and not be impaired by tight fitting garments. According to Mary’s father such dress was unhealthy. His daughters were not allowed to wear tight fitting corsets under work-a-day apparel. This belief stayed with Mary for the rest of her life.

The Walker children received an average education in a one-room building next to the farmhouse. Mary Walker was only twelve years old when she was studying natural philosophy, orthography, arithmetic and grammar.

Mary became a teacher at the age of sixteen. Her father’s medical books intrigued her. At the age of eighteen, she was studying at Folby Seminary, where she remained for two winters. In 1852, at the age of nineteen, she took a teaching position. The position helped to finance the medical career that she was determined to achieve.

At twenty-one, the aspiring physician was admitted to Syracuse Medical College. She was the only woman at the college at the time. The course of instruction consisted of three, thirteen-week terms. Between the terms, she worked with practicing physicians in order to obtain her practical experience.

The college was identified as an Eclectic institution. It taught that no medical procedure should be used that would bring injury to the patient. Later, Doctor Walker would object to many of the amputations performed during the Civil War.

In medical college, Mary studied anatomy, the practice of medicine and medical pathology, obstetrics, surgery, and diseases of children and women. In addition she studied physiology, materia medica, therapeutics, chemistry, pharmacy, and medical jurisprudence. Tuition was \$55.00 a term, with a \$5.00 fee to enroll. In addition she paid \$1.50 a week for board and room. Despite Mary’s problems relating to her finances and her gender, she would become one of only a few female practitioners of the time.

But other things were influencing the young woman’s life. In 1848, the first Woman’s Rights Convention met at Seneca Falls, New York. The so-called Bloomer Movement was inaugurated by Amelia Jenks Bloomer. The famed French authoress, George Sand, had cast her dresses aside for male attire. And the famous actress, Lola Montez, was on the lecture circuit advocating women’s rights.

When Dr. Walker received her medical degree she started her professional career in Columbus, Ohio. After only a few months, she returned to New York convinced that women physicians would never be accepted in Ohio. By now, she had traded her dress for bloomer attire. No doubt, her unorthodox manner of dress was found just as objectionable as the gender of the young, female doctor.

For whatever reason, Mary Walker decided to marry and go into partnership with Dr. Albert Miller. Dr. Miller had been a fellow student at Syracuse Medical College. Even at the occasion of her marriage, she refused to shed her bloomer-dress for the fluff of a wedding gown. However, she did deign to wear white. But change her name, or pledge to obey her husband ? Never !

The union of the two physicians worked to Mary's advantage. She cared for the women and children while Albert cared for the men.

Mary had scarcely settled into married life when she became caught up in the Bloomer Movement. Thousands of women had changed their dress from bouncing hoops to bloomer dress. Probably the most dynamic of them all was Dr. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouch. Not only was she a physician but the editor of *Sibyl*, a woman's magazine. It was in this publication that Mary and her sister Bloomers found their voice.

Before long, Dr. Walker became a contributor to the magazine. She extolled the dress reform movement. She educated her readers that tight, cumbersome clothing with skirts that dragged in mud and filth was unhealthy.

But with Dr. Walker's preoccupation with doctoring and women's rights, Albert had strayed. No doubt he had found a more feminine type. When Mary learned of his unfaithfulness, she ordered him out of the house. It wasn't until 1869 that she was able to acquire legal freedom from her long-estranged husband.

Mary Walker grew more disenchanted with men and continued her feminist crusade with unswerving devotion. She urged women to "*throw aside their embroidery and read Mental Philosophy, Moral Science and Physiology and then get to the smith's and have their dressical and dieletical chains severed that they may go forth free, sensible women*".

Dr. Walker believed in abortion in cases of rape, incest, or when the mother's life was in danger. She shouted about the unfairness of the difference in the treatment of an errant woman compared to a man who shared in the same guilt. She vocalized against smoking, drinking, and all else she considered evil. The little lady had a big voice, and a willing pen.

Suddenly, the Bloomer Women turned their minds and energy to things patriotic. The country had split, and gone to war. The campaign for women's right had to be postponed.

When the Civil War generated a need for physicians and surgeons, Mary, dressed in her bloomer apparel, left New York, and headed for Washington, D.C. It was soon after the Battle of Bull Run that she applied for a commission as a surgeon in the United States Army. While she waited for an answer, she attended the sick and wounded soldiers. She didn't have to wait long for Surgeon General Clement Finley to deny her request for the commission she sought.

Dr. Walker was not deterred. The coming years were probably the most fulfilling of her life. Wherever she went, her medical expertise was needed by the wounded. But, not always by fellow physicians and others.

She volunteered her services at the temporary hospital at the United States Patent Office in Washington, D.C. It was not long before Dr. J.N. Green, the surgeon in charge, became impressed with the female doctor. He made her his administrative assistant. In addition to her duties as a physician and administrative assistant, she served as a therapist, counselor, secretary, expeditor, and surrogate mother to the soldiers.

But Dr. Walker had additional concerns. Hundreds of women, often with children, had flocked to Washington to visit their sons and husbands. The capital city was

crowded and many were forced to spend nights in parks and on the streets. Anxious for their safety, the doctor became instrumental in organizing the Women's Relief Association. She helped in raising funds to obtain a shelter in a house on Tenth Street. When the Tenth Street house was filled, she threw open the doors of her home at 374 Ninth Street.

Since Dr. Walker was an unsalaried physician, she could go and come as she chose. Dressed in a self-styled blue officer's uniform, she traveled to Warrenton, Virginia. There she found a woefully undermanned and exhausted medical staff.

She became convinced that the sick would receive better care in Washington. With permission of General Ambrose Burnside, she crowded the wounded on a train and took them to the capital city.

Wherever a wrong could be righted, or a need filled, Dr. Walker was ready to make a difference. Whenever a sharp tongue or a haughty attitude was needed, it was readily available. However, crusaders make enemies.

Even though patient care was better in Washington, Dr. Walker was convinced it could improve. She felt that some of the surgeons were amputating unnecessarily. Some soldiers, she was sure, were being practiced on. She knew that protesting to higher command would anger those surgeons and she would be discharged. In secret, she told the soldiers involved to refuse the amputation in question. If this did not suffice, to actually threaten bodily harm to the physician. Needless to say, she didn't last very long at Patent Office hospital.

Early in 1862, she served for a short time at Forest Hall Prison in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. But for some reason, her duties in Washington came to an end.

Mary Walker returned to New York where, three months later, she received a diploma at the Hygeia Therapeutic College. But she was not to stay in the North.

Her destination was Warrenton, Virginia. By now, Dr. Walker was dressed as a full fledged, medical officer. There the secessionists were as curious about her as she was about them. But she too, like the Virginians, was a Rebel. By now, she had seceded entirely from female attire.

It wasn't until March 1864 that she returned to the war front. The town of Chattanooga, Tennessee, had become a vast hospital. The casualties from Chickamauga were streaming in, and the medical staff was undermanned. Dr. Perin, the Medical Director, was convinced that a woman could not be trusted to care for the wounded. He ordered the medical board to examine Dr. Walker's qualifications. The board found her inadequate, "*as to render it doubtful whether she has pursued the study of medicine*".

Years later a reporter asked Dr. Walker about the report. Her answer was that she was not in Georgia, Tennessee, or Kentucky at the time of the investigation. She said she had never seen Dr. Perin nor was she examined by any board that the doctor had appointed.

In spite of the adverse report, she remained on duty. Colonel Dan McCook assigned her as assistant surgeon of the 52^d Ohio. By some accounts she became overbearing, and some of the men actually hated her. Consequently, she extended her medical ministrations to include the civilians in the area. In so doing, many of the Union soldiers believed her to be a spy. Their accusations did not deter her. The Southerners were in desperate straits. The war had devastated them. In time, she was welcomed to spend the nights when the civilians accepted the curious female doctor. According to Mary, it was her kindness that won the destitute people of Tennessee over to the Union.

On April 10, 1864, while on a civilian medical mission, Dr. Walker took a wrong road and encountered a Confederate sentry. The soldier took her into custody.

Eventually she was incarcerated at Castle Thunder at Richmond, Virginia. The prison was a converted tobacco warehouse located on the banks of the James River.

During her four-month stay, the Richmond Examiner ran a story about their female prisoner of war. The paper complained that Mary Walker had refused to wear clothing more befitting her gender. But it was always a source of pride that when she was released in 1864, she was exchanged for a Confederate officer.

The prison was typical of all prisons of the day. Vermin infested the filthy mattresses. Rats, roaches, flies, and bed bugs reigned supreme. In an article that appeared in the National Republican, August 25, 1865, Dr. Walker gave her appraisal of the Southern prison. She said that the food was as good and abundant as the prison could afford. She continued by saying that food prices were fantastically high in Richmond. That there were plenty of civilians in the city who would have been glad to have had as much food as the prisoners. She added that she was even given the part-time services of a woman to prepare her food. Dr. Walker was released on August 12, 1864.

While a prisoner of war, Dr. Walker was far from submissive to her captors. On one occasion a prison physician visited Mary for the purpose of vaccinating her against small pox. She was not convinced that the vaccination didn't cause more harm than good. She knew of cases where serious complications had risen from the inoculation. At first she tried to persuade the doctor against using the vaccine. However, when her arguments were to no avail, and the doctor continued to insist, she grabbed her medical case and announced that if she wanted the inoculation, she would give it to herself. The physician left and went to the other prisoners.

The heat in the prison was stifling. A prisoner once saw her standing in front of an open window. With one hand she fanned herself ; with the other hand, she waved the American flag.

On October 5, 1864, Dr. Walker was awarded a contract as Acting Assistant Surgeon with the United States Army. Her salary was \$100.00 a month. She was given a short assignment at the Woman's Prison Hospital at Louisville, Kentucky. There she was accused of undue harshness.

To justify her treatment she said that the prisoners under her ministrations received better care than she had received at Castle Thunder. A direct contradiction of what she had related earlier in the National Republican. In addition, she boasted she allowed no Rebel songs at the woman's prison. Any offenders were often hand cuffed and put into confinement. A woman prisoner even complained that Dr. Walker had scratched and slapped some of the women in the face. And that she had even kicked a baby down the stairs.

Finding she could please neither friend nor foe, Dr. Walker requested a transfer to the front lines. Her request was denied. Instead, on March 22, 1865, she was assigned to an orphan asylum in Clarksville, Tennessee.

Later, in spite of Dr. Walker's problems at the women's prison, she received a good report from Dr. Edward Phelps at the orphan asylum. He said that she was more efficient than many male, competent commissioned officers that he had known in his past.

Nonetheless, the female doctor managed to outrage the citizenry at Clarksville. Dressed in the attire of a major, she disrupted an Easter service that was being held at the Episcopal church. There she denounced the parishioners for having red and white flowers on the alter without any blue ones. She defiantly pranced down the isle and pinned a blue ribbon to one of the flowers.

That evening, according to some critics, she returned to the church. Wearing pistols and carrying a small American flag, she sauntered back down the aisle and placed the flag on the chancel rail. During the offertory, the minister set the flag aside. When Mary saw what had happened she boldly returned to the front of the church and replaced the flag.

Dr. Walker was at Clarksville when General Lee surrendered and President Lincoln was assassinated. She had always admired the president. No doubt his death caused her great anxiety.

On June 15, 1865, Mary Walker was ordered back to Washington. There her contract as an army surgeon was ended. Without hesitation, she launched a campaign to obtain the proper recognition that she felt appropriate for her services. But Major James Taylor Homes, commander of the 52^d Ohio, repeatedly stated that Dr. Walker had never practiced medicine with his regiment as an assistant surgeon. It seems there would have been muster records to substantiate his allegations.

Dr. Walker's persistence was rewarded. On November 11, 1865, President Andrew Johnson conferred the Congressional Medal of Honor on her. She received the award two months later.

When Dr. Walker appeared in Washington, the military trial of the alleged conspirators in the plot to kill President Lincoln was underway. One day in June, Mary Walker appeared in court. The Washington Evening Star described the visit. *"Among the visitors in the courtroom this afternoon was The Bloomer Doctor (or Doctress) Walker, who took a position near the prisoners' dock. The prisoners appeared considerably interested and amused by the appearance of The Bloomer. Powell grinned, Atzerodt grinned, and Herold snickered right out loud"*.

Dr. Walker gave the men their last opportunity for hilarity. The following month they were hanged, along with a woman by the name of Mary Elizabeth Surratt.

It was on a very hot day, on July 7, that the two Mary's faced each other again. Mary Surratt was about to be the first woman to be hanged by the United States Government. The other Mary would be the first woman to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by that same government.

Dr. Walker did not rest on her laurels after receiving the Medal of Honor. Dressed in mannish attire, she traveled the lecture circuit in her country and abroad. She was both cheered and jeered when she spoke of her war time experiences. She was especially derided when she spoke of women's rights and dress reform.

Eventually she joined the Woman Suffrage Association. Before long she became a "general" in the movement. She lobbied and marched with Susan B. Anthony, Dr. Susan Edson, and attorney Belva Lockwood, who ran for President of the United States in 1884 and 1888. Even Frederick A. Douglass, the famed Negro orator, joined forces with the women when they began to lobby for home rule for Washington, D.C. That home rule is still being fought for in 2002.

She devoted the remainder of her life against all that she considered oppressive. According to her, and other reformers of the time, female bondage in the 19th century took two forms : constricting "unhygienic" clothing and the prohibition of the female vote.

Her style of dress was seldom appreciated. She was arrested in New York for "impersonating a man". She defended herself by calling the female corset "a coffin" fashioned of "iron band". The swaying, leg revealing hoopskirt, she claimed had been

invented by Paris prostitutes. She continued that it was her right to dress as she saw fit in free America. On hearing her case, the judge advised the New York policeman “*never to arrest her again*”. According to the New York Times, Mary Walker departed the courtroom “*under a storm of applause*”.

A New York Times reporter referred to Dr. Walker as “*that curious anthropoid*” when she was bitten by a dog. She was blamed for the affair for exposing her legs in trousers. Consequently, it was the dog who received the writer’s sympathy, not the doctor.

Being harassed was almost a daily occurrence. But Mary Walker could retaliate in kind if need be. When she was eighty years old, she was introduced to Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin Roosevelt, who later became president. Without hesitation, she let the secretary know of her low regard for his cousin, “Teddy” Roosevelt.

In her 1907 speech that Dr. Walker referred to as her Crowning Constitutional Argument, she cited cases in New Jersey and Maryland to illustrate that women who met local property qualifications had sometimes voted during colonial times. She reminded her listeners that the Federal Constitution was written on behalf of “We the People”, which included women ! Consequently, she argued, there was no need for an amendment to be added to the Constitution. This statement flew in the faces of the suffragists who believed that success depended upon an amendment. Dr. Walker was banished to the radical fringe movement, and dropped from the Woman Suffrage Association.

In essence Dr. Walker was right. In 1915, at the age of eighty-three, she appeared before the New York State Constitutional Convention. After repeating her Crowning Constitution Argument, she insisted that the legislature pass an act nullifying all laws and court decisions, which discriminated against women. There was no need to meddle with the Constitution. She added that she was against granting white men, or blacks the right to vote while denying that same right to women. She said that it was an “*unconstitutional usurpation of power*”.

By the time Dr. Mary Walker had died, the Congressional Medal of Honor had been revoked, and women still did not have the vote. Mary Edwards Walker died penniless on February 21, 1919, at the home of a friend in Oswego, New York. She was eighty-six years old.

The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was made law in August 1920. Interestingly, the following countries had predated the United States in granting women’s suffrage : New Zealand in 1893, Finland in 1906, Norway in 1907, Australia in 1908, Denmark and Iceland in 1915, Russia in 1917. Canada, Germany, Luxembourg, and Poland in 1918. India, Austria, Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia), and The Netherlands did so in 1919. Great Britain did not grant complete women’s suffrage until 1928.

In the strictest sense, Dr. Walker may not have deserved the Congressional Medal of Honor. But she was a fighter. She fought for what she believed when her country was at war, and when it was at peace. She was controversial then, as she is today. Indeed, she was a woman before her time.

Bibliography

- Fay Casper, *Dr. Walker's Medal of Honor restored*. The Pentagon News, 23 June 1977.
- Lockwood Allison. *Pantsuited Pioneer of Women's Lib, Dr. Mary Walker*. Smithsonian Magazine Vol. 7, No. 12, March 1977.
- Snider Charles McCool, *Dr. Mary Walker The Little Lady in Pants*. Ayer Company 1985, Salem, NH.
- Trindal Elizabeth Steger, *Mary Surratt : An American Tragedy*. Pelican Publishing Company 1996, Gretna, LA.
- Warren Brown, *Feminist's Medal of Honor at Stake*, The Washington Post, 13 April 1976.
- *Medal of Honor Is Restored To Civil War Woman Doctor*, The Washington Post, 11 June 1977.



Women gather at the Ohio headquarters of the Woman Suffrage Association in 1912
(Ohio State Archives)



Suffragists march to Washington's capitol on April 7, 1913 (National Archives)