



Mary E. Walker, MD

"Let the generations know that women in uniform also guaranteed their freedom." ~ Dr. Mary Edwards Walkerⁱ

In honor of Women's History Month the Friends of the Medal of Honor Grove celebrate the life of an exceptional American: Dr. Mary E. Walker, *the only woman ever to receive the Medal of Honor*.



*"I will always be somebody."*ⁱⁱ

This assertion, a startling one from a nineteenth-century woman, drove the life of Dr. Mary Edwards Walker.

President Andrew Johnson issued the award in 1865 in recognition of the incomparable medical service Walker rendered during the Civil War. Yet few people today know anything about the woman so well-known--even notorious--in her own lifetime.

A pioneering Civil War surgeon, POW and Medal of Honor recipient, women's rights advocate and abolitionist who helped change the face of medicine during the Civil War. She overcame rampant prejudice to save countless soldiers' lives.

Walker was born in Oswego, New York, to abolitionist parents who encouraged her to pursue an education. As a child, she was distinguished for her strength of mind and her decision of

character. She grew up an independent young woman.

In 1853 Mary enrolled in Syracuse Medical College (now the State University of New York Upstate Medical University), six years after Elizabeth Blackwell's medical education. This school was part of a movement towards eclectic medicine, another part of the health reform movement and conceived of as a more democratic approach to medicine than the traditional conventional medical training. Her education included traditional lectures and also interning with an experienced and licensed physician.

She graduated as a Doctor of Medicine in 1855, qualified as both a medical doctor and as a surgeon. Walker went into private practice for a few years; then the Civil War broke out in 1861.

This proved to be Dr. Walker's challenge and opportunity. In July 1861, just after the first Battle of Bull Run, Mary went to Washington, D.C., to join the Army as a medical officer. She was denied, so she volunteered.



The unexpected onslaught of injured soldiers necessitated the Washington, D.C. Patent Office be hastily converted into a temporary hospital. Dr. Mary Walker served there as acting assistant surgeon for the Union Army. In a letter home to her family, Dr. Walker describes her experience working at the hospital: "I suppose you all expected me to go to war and I thought it would be too cruel to dissappoint [sic] you...Every soul in the hospital has to abide by my orders as much as though Dr. Green gave them. And not a soldier can go out of the building after stated hours without a pass from him or myself."ⁱⁱⁱ

Within the confines of the Patent Office Hospital, Dr. Walker's competency was undeniable. Though a woman, the overcrowded and understaffed Hospital allowed her to demonstrate her abilities. Despite possessing the utmost respect among her fellows at the Patent Office, Dr. Walker's frequent requests for a working wage were denied. In a letter to the Surgeon General Clement Finley, Dr. J. N. Green, the chief surgeon at the hospital, requested that Dr. Walker receive a wage, writing: "I need and desire her assistance here very much...If there is any way of securing to her compensation, you would confer a favor by lending her your influence."^{iv}

Her authority during this time grew to be comparable to Green's. With her volunteer status, Mary could move about freely; she accompanied a severely wounded soldier home to Rhode Island. She also helped organize the Women's Relief Association for lodging for wives, mothers and children of soldiers in Washington. On occasion, she brought these women to her home.^v



She continued her work in 1862, with time off for visits to Oswego and to New York City, where she stayed long enough to earn a second degree from the New York Hygeio-Therapeutic College.



Medical kit used by Dr. Mary Walker.
Courtesy of the National Museum of
Health and Medicine

^{vi}That autumn in November 1862, Dr. Walker presented herself at the Virginia headquarters of Major General Ambrose Burnside and was taken on as a field surgeon, although still on a volunteer basis. She treated the wounded in tent hospitals at Fredericksburg in December 1862 and the Warrenton Junction Raid in May 1863. Almost a year later, she was in Chattanooga, tending the casualties of the battle of Chickamauga. After the battle, she again requested a commission as an Army doctor.

In September 1863, her medical credentials were finally accepted. Major General George H. Thomas appointed her as an assistant surgeon in the Army of the Cumberland, assigning her to the 52d Ohio Regiment despite sharp protests from the medical director of the Army of the Cumberland and from the men of the 52nd Ohio Regiment, encamped near Gordon's Mills, Tenn., to which she was assigned.

Regardless, in 1863 she moved to Tennessee. Her position was paid, and it was the equivalent of a lieutenant or captain. She wore the same uniform as that of her fellow officers.

After the Battle of Fredericksburg, Mary worked as a field surgeon near the Union front lines in a tent hospital. She tried to increase positive outcomes by advising stretcher-bearers to not carry wounded soldiers downhill with the head below the feet. Although she probably did not perform amputations, she felt many were unnecessary and encouraged several soldiers to refuse them.

Walker served for four years on the battlefields of the Civil War, and spent four months as a prisoner of war.

On April 10, 1864, wearing her uniform, she walked into a band of Confederate soldiers just south of the Georgia-Tennessee border and was taken hostage. For four months Mary was imprisoned in the Castle Thunder, near Richmond, Virginia. In service from August 1862 until April 1865, the facility was established for political prisoners, Unionists, and deserters, but its use quickly expanded to include women, spies, and African Americans.^{vii}

The details of her capture were reported in the *Richmond Sentinel* on April 22, 1864:

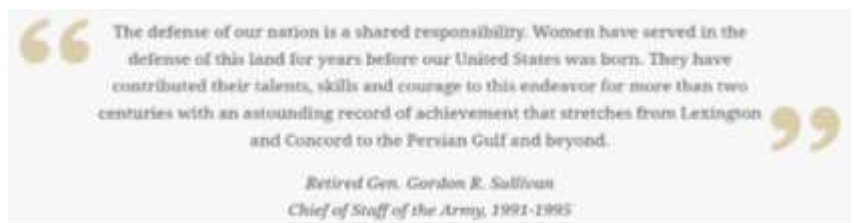
“The female Yankee surgeon captured by our pickets a short time since, in the neighborhood of the army of Tennessee, was received in this city yesterday evening, and sent to the Castle in charge of a detective. Her appearance on the street in full male costume, with the exception of a gipsy hat, created quite an excitement amongst the idle negroes (sic) and boys who followed and surrounded her.

She gave her name as Dr. Mary E. Walker, and declared that she had been captured on neutral ground. She was dressed in black pants and black or dark talma or paletot (loose fitted jacket)^{viii}. She was consigned to the female ward of Castle Thunder, there being no accommodations at the Libby for prisoners of her sex. We must not omit to add that she is ugly and skinny, and apparently above thirty years of age.”^{ix}

She complained about the lack of grain and vegetables for prisoners and the Confederates added wheat bread and cabbage to the rations. On August 12, 1864, she was exchanged, along with 24 other Union doctors, for 17 Confederate doctors. She was proud that her exchange was for a Confederate surgeon of the rank of major – Dr. Lightfoot of Tennessee^x.

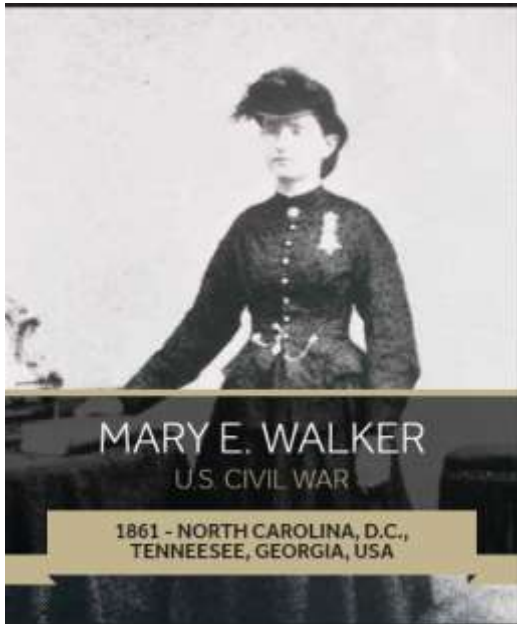
However, by this point, the squalid conditions of the prison left her with an optic atrophy which impaired her ability to continue working as a surgeon. After being released from prison, Dr. Walker applied for relief from her duties^{xi} Mary returned to the Ohio 52nd as a contract surgeon (apparently the men had grown to respect her; she even visited the regiment after the war ended.) And she continued her appeal for a commission, which went all the way to President Lincoln, but was refused.

In September she was granted \$432.36 for her services from March 11, although she'd been imprisoned most of it. On October 5, 1864, Mary finally was commissioned, as acting assistant surgeon, with \$100 monthly salary – becoming the first female surgeon commissioned in the Army. (See attached *Contract with a Private Physician*)





Despite her requests for battlefield duty, she was not again sent into the field. She served six months administering patients at the Louisville Women’s Prison Hospital and then finished out the war serving at an orphan asylum in Clarksville, Tennessee. She was discharged on June 15, 1865.



Her official service record reads:^{xii}

Dr. Mary E. Walker (1832 - 1919)

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

Following Battle of Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Tennessee September 1863

Prisoner of War, Richmond, Virginia, April 10, 1864 - August 12, 1864

Battle of Atlanta, September 1864.

Entered service at: Louisville, Kentucky

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

For all her wartime service, Mary was paid \$766.16, and later received a monthly pension of \$8.50 (later raised to \$20) – less than some widows’ pensions. The injury to her eye sustained during her time at Castle Thunder prison led to partial muscular atrophy, which earned her the \$8.50 pension. Believing the problem to be temporary, Mary had refused an earlier offer of \$25 a month. As the problem intensified and interfered with her medical practice, in 1872, she asked for \$24 a month, or a \$100,000 lump sum. Her petition was rejected (reportedly because of her unorthodox wardrobe). In 1890, she finally was granted the \$20 a month pension.

After her discharge, Dr. Walker lobbied for a brevet promotion to major for her services. Secretary of War Stanton would not grant the request. President Andrew Johnson asked for another way to recognize her service.

Upon recommendation of Major Generals William T. Sherman and George H. Thomas, on November 11, 1865, President Andrew Johnson signed a bill to present Dr. Mary Edwards Walker with the Congressional Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service. A Medal of Honor was presented to Dr. Walker in January 1866. She wore it every day for the rest of her life.

After the war ended, Mary worked to get relief bills for war nurses, but the Congressional bills died in committee. She also began writing and lecturing throughout the U.S. and abroad on women’s rights, dress reform, health and temperance issues. She argued that tobacco resulted in paralysis and insanity, and women’s clothing was immodest and inconvenient.

From 1866-67, she toured Great Britain. In 1866, she was elected president of the National Dress Reform Association. She was proud that she was arrested several times for ‘impersonating a man’ – she had taken to fully wearing men’s clothing, from the top hat, wing collar and bow tie to the pants and shoes.

Her taste in clothes caused frequent arrests on such charges as impersonating a man. At one trial, she asserted her 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.” The judge dismissed the case and ordered the police never to arrest Dr. Walker on that charge again. She left the courtroom to hearty applause.



Her legacy has been celebrated across the country, and in 2012 Walker’s hometown unveiled a 900-pound bronze statue in honor of her contributions.

The statue’s left hand points to Dr. Walker’s Medal of Honor.



In September 1866, she helped Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone organize the Women’s Suffrage Association for Ohio.

In 1880, Mary’s father passed away, leaving her the Bunker Hill Farm. She lived here until she passed away, traveling from Oswego to Washington when necessary. She planned to use the farm as a colony to teach young single women farming and domestic skills before marriage.



In 1890, Mary declared herself a candidate for Congress in Oswego. The next year, she campaigned for a U.S. Senate seat and, the following year, paid her way to the Democratic National Convention.

In April 1917, while World War I raged on, she offered Kaiser Wilhelm II her land as a site for a German-American peace conference.

In 1917, while in Washington, Mary fell on the Capitol steps. She was 85 years old and never fully recovered. She died two years later, on February 21, 1919, while staying at a neighbor’s home in Oswego. She was buried in her black frock suit in the family plot in the Oswego Town rural cemetery^{xiii}.

With immense courage and bravery rarely matched, Dr. Walker demonstrated her dedication to the American cause at great personal risk. She consistently discounted personal injuries and great hardships to care for others. Through her actions, Dr. Mary E. Walker set the standards for helping to improve soldiers’ quality of life for generations.

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These are some of the many ways Dr. Walker’s life and work has been honored:



In 1943, Liberty Ship the *SS Mary Walker* (the standard-design merchant cargo ships built by American shipyards during World War II.) launched^{xiv}.

In 1982, the U.S. Post Office issued a 20-cent stamp honoring Dr. Mary Walker as the first woman to have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and as the second woman to graduate from a medical school in the U.S.^{xv}

In 1996 the US Army created the “Dr. Mary E. Walker Award (DMEW)”^{xvi}

In 2000, Mary Edwards Walker was inducted into the Women’s Hall of Fame at Seneca Falls, New York.

19 June 1977, Nearly 60 years after her death, at the urging of a descendent, the Army Board for Correction of Military Records reviewed the case. On 19 June 1977, Army Secretary Clifford L. Alexander approved the recommendation by the board to restore the Medal of Honor to Dr. Mary E. Walker. She remains the sole female recipient of the Medal of Honor.



Please take a few minutes to hear more about Dr. Mary E. Walker

Dr. Mary E. Walker: A Life Well Lived: <https://vimeo.com/470758471>

Video produced by the Congressional Medal of Honor Society (CMOHS)

ⁱ Women in History. Mary Edwards Walker biography. Last Updated: 2/27/2013. Women In History Ohio. <<http://www.womeninhistoryohio.com/mary-edwards-walker.html>>

ⁱⁱ Kaminski, Theresa. Dr. Mary Walker’s Civil War: One Woman’s Journey to the Medal of Honor and the Fight for Women’s Rights Hardcover – June 1, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Box 9, Folder “Walker, Dr. Mary-Congressional-Medal of Honor, 1974-77”. Bobbie Greene Kilberg Files, Gerald Ford Presidential Library, p. 14. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0234/1509914.pdf>

^{iv} Leonard, Elizabeth. Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1995. p. 116.

^v <http://www.womeninhistoryohio.com/mary-edwards-walker.html>

^{vi} National Museum of Health and Medicine via National Museum of Civil War Medicine; <https://www.civilwarmed.org/>

^{vii} <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/castle-thunder-prison/>



^{viii} <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/paletot>

^{ix} <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/newspapers-in-virginia-during-the-civil-war-confederate/>

^x <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/31430745/daily-news/>; CLIPPED FROM Daily News New York, New York 02 Mar 1976, Tue • Page 38, Woods, Brenda

^{xi} <https://www.mohhc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Chloe-Newman-Dr.-Mary-Walker-Essay.pdf>; Newman, Chloe

^{xii} Lewis, Jone Johnson. "Dr. Mary E. Walker." ThoughtCo, Feb. 16, 2021, [thoughtco.com/dr-mary-e-walker-3529947](https://www.thoughtco.com/dr-mary-e-walker-3529947).

^{xiii} Biographical sketch taken from Notable American Women (1971)

^{xiv} Maritime Administration- Ship History Database Vessel Status Card. U.S. Department of Transportation, Maritime Administration. Retrieved 1 July 2019.

^{xv} <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/13/arts/stamps-commemorative-for-civil-war-surgeon.html>

^{xvi} http://www.forthoodsentinel.com/living/mary-e-walker-award-named-for-nation-s-only-female-medal-of-honor-recipient/article_edc502e3-f3bd-5f39-93d0-3cbadeb88c7a.html