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## Dr. Mary Edwards Walker

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## Dr. Mary Edwards Walker

### Women of the Mayflower Series

Laurie Sutherland

*“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. Her personal achievements, as much as her vocal support, significantly contributed to the struggle for women’s rights”* (from the citation by the U.S. Postal Service at the issuance of a 20¢ commemorative stamp honoring Dr. Mary Edwards Walker on June 10, 1982).

Dr. Mary Edwards Walker is America’s first and only woman to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service for her contributions to the American Civil War as a field surgeon. This fascinating Woman of the Mayflower—who was viewed as a nonconformist and an eccentric during her lifetime—was a feminist, abolitionist, prohibitionist, social reformer, an advocate of women’s suffrage, a women’s dress reformer, an alleged spy, and a prisoner of war.

Mary was born on November 26, 1832 on Bunker Road in the Town of Oswego, New York to an abolitionist family whose home was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Her parents, Alvah and Vesta (Whitcomb) Walker, were descendants of early New England families and were originally from Greenwich, Massachusetts. Mary and her father were descended from eight *Mayflower* passengers. She had one younger brother, Alvah Walker Jr., and four older sisters: Aurora, Luna, Vesta, and Cynthia. Her mother was cousin to Robert G. Ingersoll, a renowned lecturer and friend to Walt Whitman.

Alvah Walker Sr. was a self-taught doctor and a farmer, and his daughter Mary spent hours with his collection of medical books. He participated in many of the reform movements during the mid-1800s that had their roots in central Upstate New York. He felt that current women’s fashion was too constricted and unhealthy at the time, and so he encouraged his daughters to dress alternatively.

During the early 1850s, Mary wore “bloomers” and was a supporter of Amelia Bloomer and the women’s dress reform movement. In 1857, Mary’s first of several articles and letters were published in the official publication of the Dress Reform Association, *The Sibyl*, and Amelia Bloomer’s dress reform journal, *The Lily*. She was a frequent lecturer and convention speaker on the topic of women’s dress reform and advocated for women’s freedom of movement—all of which became aligned with other reform movements of the day: temperance, health, and suffrage. By the late 1850s, Mary was well known to Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone. In 1866, she became the elected president of the National Dress Reform Association and chose to wear men’s attire throughout the rest of her life.



### **DR. MARY EDWARDS WALKER**

*Town of Oswego Historical Society • <http://www.townofoswego.com/dr.html>*

Mary's parents strongly supported equal rights and equal education for their five daughters. From 1850-52, she attended the Falley Seminary in Fulton, New York before matriculating at Syracuse Medical College, which accepted women on an equal basis with men. She studied anatomy, surgery, pharmacy, pathology, and therapeutics with its focus on hydrotherapy, diet, and hygiene. Near the end of her studies and perhaps inspired by Florence Nightingale, Mary was so moved by the plight of the wounded British soldiers during the Crimean War that she attempted an appointment as a physician with the British military forces—but clearly not as a nurse. She graduated from Syracuse Medical College in 1855 and then practiced medicine briefly in Columbus, Ohio.

On November 16, 1855, Mary married a classmate, Albert E. Miller, and because she advocated women keeping their surnames, she retained her maiden name. Together they struggled to establish a joint private medical practice in Rome, New York, but the marriage and practice floundered. The public was not yet receptive to being treated by a female physician. The couple separated after two years and eventually divorced ten years later. Mary moved to Delhi, Iowa for a fresh start and stayed at the home of a family friend from Oswego, New York. She enrolled at the Bowen Collegiate Institute in Hopkinton, Iowa to study German in fall 1860, but was suspended for refusing to resign from the all-male debating society.

Mary relocated to New York and earned a degree from the Hygeio-Therapeutic College before heading to Washington, D.C. at the time of the Civil

War. Her intention was to enlist as an army surgeon on the side of the Union. Her request was not granted and she was declined a commission as an army surgeon. "As the Civil War began, Dr. Mary Walker would reject the musket, but she would shoulder her medical bag and 'go to the battle field' with an ardent commitment to the Union cause and an insistence on her right to serve her country as a physician—not as a nurse, which the military would have preferred. It was a daunting challenge to the gendered code of the nation, and it was an act that would forever put her in the public consciousness" (Kim-Brown).

Undaunted, she worked as a volunteer assistant surgeon in the U.S. Patent Office Hospital. During this time, she responded to the struggles of the women who had traveled to the Capitol in search of their male relatives—the Civil War soldiers, now hospitalized, who were fathers, sons, brothers, and husbands. Mary was an organizer and co-founder of the Women's Relief Association that assisted women with finding a safe place to stay in Washington, D.C.

She was transferred to the Union Army lines where she witnessed intense fighting and worked alongside male field surgeons. Mary "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" (Tan).

Standing at just five feet tall and weighing one hundred pounds, Mary carried two pistols and wore a modified man's uniform jacket with pants—making her as controversial as her reported manner: brash, hysterical, and difficult with which to get along. However, her work was exceptional, and yet the Army refused to promote her above volunteer status. Regardless, her commitment to service was resolute. She served at the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861 and then traveled to Virginia to assist at the tent hospitals in Warrenton and Fredericksburg during the fall of 1862—continuing as a volunteer without an official standing.

In 1863 Mary became the first-ever female Army surgeon when she was briefly appointed as assistant surgeon of the Army of the Cumberland. She moved on to Tennessee in September 1863 and General George H. Thomas appointed her as an assistant surgeon—much to the chagrin of the medical director. "She was to replace a surgeon—a man, of course—killed in the battle of Chickamauga. Although her medical superiors questioned her credentials and competency, she stayed with the unit, riding daily by horseback through the picket lines to attend to the sick—soldier and civilian alike—around war-ravaged Chattanooga" (Goodno). She was present at the Battles of Chickamauga and Atlanta, and was transferred to the 52<sup>nd</sup> Ohio Infantry—while all along wearing the same uniform as her fellow officers and maintaining that, "corsets are coffins!"

It was not uncommon for Mary to cross the Confederate lines to attend to the medical needs of Southern war-weary women and children. She delivered babies and treated cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. During one of these unarmed ventures at the Georgia-Tennessee border in April 1864, she was captured as a spy—which remains a matter of debate and lacks solid evidence—and held as prisoner of war by Confederate troops. She was transported by rail to the notorious Castle Thunder Prison in Richmond, Virginia where she was imprisoned from April 10 – August 12, 1864 during the Atlanta Campaign. Her arrest brought this comment from Confederate Captain B.J. Semmes, “This morning we were all amused and disgusted too at the sight of a thing that nothing but the debased and the depraved Yankee nation could produce—a female doctor. She was dressed in full uniform of a Federal Surgeon, boots, hat and all, and wore a cloak. She was about 28 years old fair, but not good looking and of course had a tongue enough for a regiment of men. I was in hopes the General would have her dressed in homespun frock and bonnet and sent back to the Yankee lines, or put in a lunatic asylum...” (Largent-Christopher).

While imprisoned for four months, she treated Union prisoners and Confederate guards and insisted that grains and vegetables be added to their diets. She was freed during a prisoner of war exchange between 17 Confederate surgeons and 24 Union physicians. “Researcher Jean Gillette wrote that for Mary, “it was always a source of pride that she was exchanged ‘man for man.’ After being released, she received the grand sum of \$436.36 for her work and time in captivity” (Goodno). Her monthly pension was \$8.50, which was less than a widow’s pension.

Once freed, Mary returned to Washington, D.C. She accepted the post of “surgeon-in-charge” and served briefly as head of a hospital for female Confederate prisoners in Louisville, Kentucky and then headed a home for orphans and refugees in Clarkson, Tennessee. In June 1865, she left government service. After the Civil War, Generals William T. Sherman and George Thomas recommended Mary for the Congressional Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service, the country’s highest military award. It was awarded on November 11, 1865 by President Andrew Johnson.

Beginning in 1867, Mary’s involvement with supporting women’s causes and suffrage became increasingly political. For a while she lived with Belva Lockwood, a women’s suffrage activist, in Washington, D.C. She briefly worked as a journalist for a New York newspaper, then tried to open a medical practice. She petitioned Congress to secure pensions and the right to vote for Civil War nurses. Mary was vocal about her opposition to alcohol and tobacco, expressed progressive ideas about marriage and divorce, but did not support the suffragists’ initiative for a Constitutional Amendment giving women the right to vote—she interpreted the Constitution as having already given this right to women—and felt the suffragists’ efforts were pointless. The suffragist organizations that initially praised Mary’s service to the Civil War eventually distanced themselves from her because they perceived her as an extremist.

Mary was arrested numerous times for “masquerading in men’s clothes” because she wore a wing collar, bow tie, top hat, and pants, which she believed to be more sanitary and practical than long skirts that prevented movement and dragged across the ground. Mary published an autobiography titled *Hit* in 1871 and a book about infidelity titled *Unmasked or The Science of Immortality* in 1878. In 1890, Mary inherited the Walker family homestead in Oswego, New York. She returned there to live and work on issues related to women’s rights. She ran a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients and in 1897 founded “Adamless Eve,” a women’s commune. Mary’s challenging financial situation necessitated her to lecture at dime museums, which were little less than carnival sideshows. In April 1917 she offered Kaiser Wilhelm II her land as the site for a World War I German-American peace conference.

During a visit to Washington, D.C. in 1917, Mary suffered injuries when she fell on the Capitol steps. She would never fully recover and would die just two years later. It was also in 1917 that the U.S. Congress revised the standards for awarding the Congressional Medal of Honor so that it could only be awarded to those involved in combat duty. “The War Department reviewed all previous Medal of Honor awards with the intent of undoing decades of abuse. At the time the medal could be freely copied and sold and legally worn by anyone. Past awards would be rescinded and future ones would be rejected if supporting evidence didn’t clearly, convincingly show combat valor above and beyond the call of duty” (Williams). A total of 910 previously awarded Medals were revoked, including Mary’s. However, she would not relinquish hers. “In keeping with her spirit, dignity and decorum, she refused to return the medal and instead wore it proudly every day for the remainder of her life” (Largent-Christopher).

While some critics maintain that she lost her Medal because of her involvement in the suffrage movement, Mary challenged the views of the Victorian era and, “outraged the sensibilities even of those who believed themselves tolerant and progressive” (Leonard). A few months before the 20<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified, Dr. Mary Edwards Walker died on February 21, 1919 at age 86, alone and nearly penniless. She was buried according to her wishes—dressed in a man’s black suit, an American flag draped over her coffin, and buried in the Walker family plot in Oswego’s Rural Cemetery.

In the late 1960s Mary’s great niece, Ann Walker, began to work tirelessly for 10 years to restore Mary’s Medal of Honor. A letter written on Thanksgiving Day 1974 from the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee read, “It’s clear your great-grand-aunt was not only courageous during the term she served as a contract doctor in the Union Army, but also as an outspoken proponent of feminine rights. Both as a doctor and feminist, she was much ahead of her time and, as is usual, she was not regarded kindly by many of her contemporaries. Today she appears prophetic” (Williams).

Three years later, President Jimmy Carter posthumously reinstated Mary’s Congressional Medal of Honor on June 11, 1977.

***“Let the generations know that women in uniform  
also guaranteed their freedom.”***

– Dr. Mary Edwards Walker

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