Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, 1832-1919

How did Dr. Walker’s Civil War service as surgeon for the Union affect her post-war reputation?

Resources


History of Women Physicians timeline: http://archives.drexelmed.edu/timeline.php

DR. MARY WALKER.—The following letter has been published:—“Surgeon-General’s Office, Washington City, Jan 2, 1867.—In the winter of 1863, Mary E. Walker was furnished with transportation to Louisville, Kentucky, to report to Assistant-Surgeon General Wood, who stated he could give her employment as a nurse. She was sent by him to Medical Director Perin, who ordered an examination as to her professional qualifications, and reported her incompetent for any higher position than female nurse. She was subsequently put on duty with the wounded, taken prisoner, and carried to Richmond, and released receiving the pay of a contract physician from the time of her capture until her release.—By order of the Surgeon General, C. H. CRANE, Assistant-Surgeon-General, United States Army.”

Newcastle-on-Tyne Chronicle (UK); April 2, 1867
DR. MARY WALKER IN DURHAM.

On Tuesday evening, Dr. Mary Walker—an American lady, who has been for some time past before the notice of the English public—gave a lecture in the Town-ball on "The Various Incidents and Adventures of Four Years in the American Campaign." The audience was composed of about sixty persons, who were kept waiting for upwards of a quarter of an hour before the fair lecturer made her debut. There is much that is novel in Miss Walker's appearance. Her dress consists of a black cloth tunic, reaching to the knee, and black pantaloons of the same material. The tunic has a gimp trimming down the front and round the bottom of the skirt. On her left breast she wears the medal of honour for special services of about sixty persons, who were kept waiting for upwards of a quarter of an hour before the fair lecturer made her debut. There are as many as twelve men confined in a cell in the kitchen, an aperture one foot square being the only sort of ventilation, so that the place was very foul and unbearable. Whilst she was one day sitting at her cell door, a guard fired, and the shot well-nigh struck her head. The affair was said to be an accident, but it transpired that accidents of that kind were of frequent occurrence. She offered to render any assistance that she could to the wounded in the hospital, either Union or rebel, but the authorities would not give her credit for her motive being honest. There was a sham insurrectionary movement set on foot, so that it might be seen who would be likely to join in such a plot. When she was on the stage, and the audience was not large enough to fill the room, the lecture continued, and the audience was not heard to express any dissatisfaction. The ladies and gentlemen present appeared to be very much interested in the subject, and the lecture was highly appreciated. The lecture which was read from manuscript, occupied about one hour and a half. Miss Walker, it may be remarked, fails to impress the audience with the sacredness of her mission, or with the veracity of her narrative, which is marked by much of the exaggeration which figures so prominently in the character of our American cousins.
MARY E. WALKER, M. D.

FEBRUARY 21, 1888.—Committed to the Committee of the Whole House and ordered to be printed.

Mr. O'NEALL, of Indiana, from the Committee on War Claims, submitted the following

REPORT:
[To accompany bill H. R. 4265.]

The Committee on War Claims, to whom was referred the bill (H. R. 4265) for the relief of Mary E. Walker, M. D., report as follows:

The facts out of which this bill for relief arises will be found stated in House report from the Committee on War Claims of the Forty-ninth Congress, a copy of which is hereto appended and made a part of this report.

Your committee adopt the said report as their own, and report back the bill, and recommend its passage, with the following amendment:

In line 8 strike out the words "ten thousand" and insert in lieu thereof the words "two thousand."

[House report No. 4150, Forty-ninth Congress, second session.]

The Committee on War Claims, to whom was referred the bill (H. R. 5086) for the relief of Dr. Mary E. Walker, submit the following report:

The Committee find the facts to be as stated in House report No. 820, first session Forty-fourth Congress, which report is hereto annexed and made a part of this report, and as follows:

That they find the facts are as found in a report from the Committee on War Claims of the Forty-third Congress, which report is as follows:

"That Dr. Walker claims that she practiced medicine in the State of New York prior to the breaking out of the war of the rebellion; that soon after the commencement of the war she volunteered her services to take care of the sick, wounded, and disabled soldiers of the United States, and the Army had the benefit of her labors and her skill, and seemed to hold them in high esteem.

"She served as an assistant surgeon in the hospital in November and December, 1861, and received commendation from the surgeon in charge as 'an intelligent and judicious physician.' She served in hospitals in the field, in the manner mentioned, through the war, except such period of time as she was a prisoner under the Confederate authority.

"In April, 1864, she was taken prisoner, and remained such prisoner for about four months. She complains and insists that by reason of her exposure incident to the hardships of campaigns, she has suffered in her general health, and also in an atrophy of the optic nerves, which has impaired her powers of endurance, and has to a great extent deprived her of the power to earn her livelihood.

"She has submitted papers to the committee from General Thomas, General Whipple, and Surgeon-General Barnes, which show various positions held by her.
MARY E. WALKER, M. D.

She was for a part of the time a contract-surgeon under the Government of the United States, and received pay from August 6, 1864, to June 12, 1865.

The sacrifices of women as nurses in the field, and in attendance upon the sick and wounded in the field were of the highest value to the army of the United States, encouraging the depressed, dressing the wounds of the combatants, and assuring the fevers engendered by hardships and exposures. The Government and people of the United States should always hold in high esteem such services, and the inhabitants of those States which were loyal to the Union cannot, in justice to the cause which was so dear to them, fail to render appropriate rewards to such ministers in times of distress.

"The claimant acted in the capacity of a female physician, and, when officially recognized by the Government, was so treated."

The committee concur with the committee of the last House in recommending the payment to the claimant of the sum of $2,000 for the services rendered by her during the late war, but the allowance in this case is exceptional and is not to be considered a precedent. They therefore report the accompanying substitute for the original bill, and recommend its passage.

Your committee therefore adopt said House report as the report of this committee, and report a substitute for said House bill, and recommend that it do pass.
Mrs. C.W.M. Poynter,  
1306, South 35th Ave.,  
Omaha, Neb.  

Dear Madam,  

Your inquiry in the Times Literary Supplement of March 2 recalled to my memory a story that I once heard my father, Major J.W. Ratchford, of the Confederate Army, tell of the capture of Dr. Walker. I have hunted it up for you in a small volume of privately printed memoirs that my father left, hoping that it may give you a moment's interest.  

Sincerely,  

Fannie Ratchford
While our army was fighting Rosecrans in Georgia, we took a prisoner who proved pretty much of a white elephant on our hands.

Dr. Mary Walker, who was an assistant surgeon in the Federal Army, presuming on her connection with the medical fraternity and her sex, rode boldly up to our picket and asked if he would take some letters which she wished delivered within our lines. The soldier very gallantly replied that he would take them and her too. She was indignant and protested against being taken prisoner. Her indignation was still in evidence when she was brought into camp, and her protestation was repeated to General Hill, Gen. D.H. Hill, who was much amused, replying that she was probably giving her as much inconvenience as she was giving her, for he could neither keep her nor turn her loose. He sent her to General Bragg, who sent her to Richmond, where she was shortly paroled or exchanged.

Her appearance excited a good deal of curiosity in our camp, as she was the first American woman to wear publically bloomers, yet her patent leather boots and plumed hat gave her a very dainty appearance. She was not pretty, but she was far from being ugly.

WAR DEPARTMENT
THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE
WASHINGTON

March 2, 1933.

Mrs. C.W.M. Poynter,
1306 South 35th Ave.,
Omaha, Nebraska.

Dear Madam:

Receipt is acknowledged of your letter of February 19th concerning the publication listing awards of the Congressional Medal of Honor in which the name of Dr. Mary E. Walker does not appear.

The records of this office show that Dr. Mary E. Walker was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor January 24, 1866, for services rendered during the war from 1861, to 1865. The award of the Medal of Honor to Dr. Walker was, however, cancelled by a board of general officers convened by the Secretary of War, pursuant to the requirements of Section 122, of the Act of Congress approved June 3, 1916, and Dr. Walker's name was stricken permanently from the Medal of Honor list. The board of officers, which cancelled the award to Dr. Walker and certain others mentioned in its report, found that the medals in question were not issued for the cause specified in the law, viz: "distinguished conduct by an officer or enlisted man in action involving actual conflict with an enemy by such officer or enlisted man or by troops with which he was serving at the time of such action."

Very truly yours,

[Signature]

Brigadier General,
Acting The Adjutant General.
March 18, 1933.

Mrs. C. W. M. Poynter,
1306 South 35th Avenue,
Omaha, Nebraska.

Dear Madam:

Receipt is acknowledged of your letter of the 12th instant in further reference to the award of the Medal of Honor to Dr. Mary E. Walker which award was later cancelled.

The Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to Dr. Mary E. Walker on January 24, 1866, "for services rendered during the war from 1861 to 1865", but nothing has been found of record to show the specific act or acts for which the medal was awarded. The award of the Medal of Honor was cancelled "pursuant to the requirements of Section 122, of the Act of Congress approved June 3, 1916."

It appears from the records that Dr. Walker rendered service in the Civil War as an Acting Assistant Surgeon, known also as a contract surgeon.

Very truly yours,

[Signature]

Brigadier General,
Acting The Adjutant General.

By
Feb. 15, 1933

Mrs. C.W.N. Poynter
1306 South 35th Avenue
Omaha, Nebraska.

Dear Mrs. Poynter:-

I received your check for $10.00 same being payment in full for the 10 DR. MARY E. WALKER ITEMS quoted to you in my letter of Feb. 6/33. I will endeavor to mail these to you by insured parcel post tomorrow Feb. 16th. if the bad storm subsides so it is fit to get about.

I trust that you will be pleased with the material as be satisfied that you got value received, as that is what I tried to give you.

Regarding your ??? Any association items that were once in her possession are of course hard to now find after these years. A great amount of course was not considered of value and was destroyed as waste stuff as is often the case. It is too bad that the New York State Library did not come here and buy the entire contents of her home and save all the material that had to do with her life, which was unique without a counterpart in history. She had much of historical interest about herself and very many noted people of the world.

I note that you would be willing to buy more material if prices were nominal. I suppose that you would like any and all pictures of her; newspaper accounts of her, anything she wrote, or that was written to her viz:- any association material. Regarding paying something for this material, there is no doubt but what if you make any investment large or small in such material that after you have used it to compile your book that you can sell the collection of material reg. her complete to the N.Y. State Library or the Library of Congress. There is no doubt in my mind also that if you edit a good work on her life XXX and understand how to put it on the market and sell it to librarians that many thousand copies could be sold not only in this country but in Europe where she was known. I lately noted that a big Suffragette library is being assembled in Paris.

Reg. your statement that you would like to procure her MILITARY PAPERS. Do you mean original papers or her MILITARY HISTORY?

Reg. photo that I am selling you taken in Wash. D.C. Note that she is wearing THE MEDAL OF HONOR (Congressional Medal) said to be the first women that ever received it. It is the design known as the OLD DESIGN. I infer you know her Military History so hesitate to suggest how you can get it all not having much idea how thorough your research has been in this line.
Fred P. Wright
26 WEST CAYUGA ST.
TEL. 750
OSWEGO, NEW YORK
Feb. 15, 1933.

Page 2. Mrs Poynter.

If you do not have this and desire suggestions how to get it let me know. Reg. special act of Congress giving her right to wear mens attire. Suppose you have that. I mean particulars regarding it.

I think I would be a good person for you to employ to endeavor to get more material for you, however the problem would be for me to spend money to try to secure it, with more or less success? and if you were not interested in it, it would be loves labor lost.

I would be interested in hearing from you a list of what you want to know about her that you have not been able to find out. Also if you want items about her such as photos-clippings etc- no matter what they were.

In genealogical research work the way researchers do is as follows. The client pays $10. as an initial fee. The researcher goes to work to search and does work up to that amount, with more or less results? Of course the time is spent in the service of the client. If the client does not want to spend any more money the matter is closed. If the client wants more research done, a further payment of money is advanced to be used up as was the first amount. (I use $10. as an example it might of course be any amount.) The first essential is confidence by the client in the good will and honest intention of the re-searcher to give time to the search. I suggest that I might be of service to you in some such way. If the idea interests you let me know, and say what you would be willing to advance for time, postage, advertising, and to buy pictures etc with if same could be had.

Otherwise I will just keep my eyes open and if I discover anything I will report it to you.

Yours truly,

Fred P. Wright.

Notes:- Alvah Walker full page advt. in book "Hit" was her brother.

Alvah Walker Quarterly Meeting ticket was her Father. The minister signing this was in charge at Hannibal, Oswego Co, N.Y M.E. Church at that time. Hannibal was just a few miles from Bunker Hill where Walkers lived. Oswego Center was the Walkers P.O. address. P.O. there discontinued with advent of R.F.D. some years ago.
No doubt you know Dr. Walker was in the show business being a Side Show attraction and in I think it was the Eden Musee of N.Y.City and had a wide acquaintance with show people including P.T. Barnum- Tom Thumb- no doubt knew Jennie Lind and many famous. No doubt you know she was in Europe.

Was a perennial nuisance at all local, county, congressional state and national conventions pf the Democratic party. A prolific writer for local, state and national newspapers; lived in Washington D.C. many Winters, haunted the halls of Congress. Knew most pf the famous people in Washington, was invited to many inaugural balls and receptions; etc. in her manner was kind mild and feminine AT TIMES- other times she was deceitful; quarrelsome and a Devil.

Got various people to come to her imaginary Sanitorium on Bunker Hill through misleading advertising and mis statements and after she got them there tried to prevent their leaving. etc.

Note in feminine styles today SHADES OF DR. MARY WALKER TAKE NOTICE - Strictly mens attire for women on sdisplay in Syracuse yesterday, mannnish shirt, collar, tie; hat; coat and trousers. Oh if Dr. Mary could only see them now.

the 1933 styles.

Ps

12 Nov Thrus, Feb 16/33

Marked Wrlr insurce Parcel Rptd
Her Rumored Engagement to Astor Denied. Donna Cristiana Torlonia, whose mother, the Duchess Torlonia, New York, has scouted
the report that she is to marry John Jacob Astor, 3d. She is shown
at the races at Miami with Beverley Bogert, New York.

She Beat Marlene Dietrich by Two Decades. Dr. Mary E. Walker,
noted feminist, a surgeon in the Civil War and the first woman in the
United States to study law, as she appeared out for a stroll nearly
90 years ago. She went the "trouserites" of today one better with
her frock coat and top hat.