

## Dr. Mary Edwards Walker

**“The only woman to ever receive the Medal of Honor”**

November 26, 1832—February 21, 1919



Dr. Mary Edwards Walker was born in Oswego, New York on November 26, 1832. Her parents were progressive, raising Dr. Walker and her six siblings to be free thinkers and question everything. From a young age, Dr. Walker was a nonconformist, often wearing trousers and shirts because they were far more comfortable than the clothing choices expected of women at the time. In 1855, Dr. Walker graduated with a doctorate of medicine degree from Syracuse Medical College. Upon graduation, Dr. Walker married her colleague, Albert Miller, and they set up a practice together in Rome, New York, but the practice failed as the public on the whole refused to accept a female doctor. Their marriage was also fraught, ending in divorce.

Throughout her whole life, Dr. Walker opposed traditional women’s clothing and typically refused to wear them, making the argument that they were uncomfortable and inhibited mobility. Instead, she usually wore trousers with suspenders under a knee-length dress, an outfit that regularly earned her ridicule and

scorn.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Dr. Walker went to Washington to join the Union Army. She was denied commission as a medical officer but chose to serve as an unpaid volunteer surgeon at the U.S. Patent Office’s Hospital. In 1862, Dr. Walker served as a field surgeon close to the front lines at Fredericksburg and Chattanooga. Throughout her entire experience with the war, Dr. Walker wore men’s clothing, citing that it made her job easier. In September of 1863, Dr. Walker became the first woman U.S. Army surgeon after her commission as a Contract Acting Assistant Surgeon by the Army of the Cumberland. Serving as an assistant surgeon with the 52<sup>nd</sup> Ohio Infantry, Dr. Walker routinely crossed enemy lines to treat civilians, but on one such occasion in 1864, Confederate troops arrested her for spying. Even in her imprisonment, Dr. Walker refused traditionally female clothing. After four months in the infamous Castle Thunder prison near Richmond, Dr. Walker was freed in a prisoner exchange. For the remainder of the war, Dr. Walker served at the Louisville Women’s Prison hospital and at an orphan asylum in Tennessee.

Following the war, President Andrew Johnson signed a bill on November 11, 1865 to present Dr. Walker with the Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service. The medal was stripped from her and others by the government in the period of 1916 to 1917 after reviewing eligibility requirements, but reinstated long after her death in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter. Despite this, Dr. Walker wore her medal proudly until her death in 1919, and she remains the only woman to have ever received the Medal of Honor.

For the rest of her life, Dr. Walker worked to advance the cause of women’s rights, becoming an active member in the fight for suffrage. Dr. Walker attempted to register to vote in 1871, but was denied. As such, she was among the early groups of women who were advocating for women’s suffrage. Dr. Walker then tried campaigning for the United States Senate in 1881 and as a Democratic candidate for Congress in 1890, losing both times. Dr. Walker testified before the United States House of Representatives in 1912 and 1914 in support of granting women the right to vote.

As the fight continued, Dr. Walker grew isolated from the movement as women began to argue for a constitutional amendment recognizing the right to vote, as she was part of a subset of women who believed the Constitution already gave women suffrage and that Congress only needed to pass legislation to enable its enforcement. As such, she disagreed with the idea of pursuing a constitutional amendment.

Throughout the rest of her life, Dr. Walker faced considerable ridicule and strife for her clothing choices, and in her later years, she opened her home to those who also faced isolation, harassment, and arrest for their nonconformist actions when it came to traditional ideas of dress. Dr. Mary Walker died on February 21, 1919, and was buried in a black suit in her home town of Oswego, New York.

### Sources

<https://www.nps.gov/people/mary-walker.htm>

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/mary-edwards-walker>