

Dr. Mary Walker: Fighting for Work, Fighting for Women

The date was February 14th, 1912 and Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, now seventy-nine years old, could be seen stepping out of the White House, having just testified before the House Judiciary Committee on the matter of women's suffrage. A tall black top-hat adorned thinning hair; she wore a medium-length black coat, accentuated by the presence of crisp, white gloves, and a tight wingtip collar around her neck. Most striking, of course, was the star emblem glinting on her chest. Dr. Walker was the image of austerity and respect, though, in fact, a radical of her time. She was a former Civil War surgeon, a momentary prisoner, and a women's rights activist whose commitment to her work and patriotism to her country awarded her the title of America's first and only female Medal of Honor recipient.

The breakout of the Civil War in 1861 proved to be Dr. Walker's jumping-off point. Just as the unexpected onslaught of injured soldiers necessitated the Washington, D.C. Patent Office be hastily converted into a make-shift hospital, so too did it allow for Dr. Mary Walker to serve there as a volunteer assistant physician for the Union Army without much scrutiny. 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 dissapoint [*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."¹ 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.

¹Box 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>.

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."² When these requests were met with rejection on the basis of sex, he even went so far as to offer a portion of his own salary to Dr. Walker, who declined out of concern for the needs of his family. It was clear that Dr. Walker would accept no less than what she deserved for her services. Still, she continued to work with relatively little pay, offering her expertise in areas where it was most needed.

Dr. Walker's career as a war-surgeon brought her to Tennessee, where she was assigned as an acting assistant surgeon for the 52nd Ohio Regiment. In April of 1864, Dr. Walker was captured and imprisoned at the Confederate prison Castle Thunder in Richmond, Virginia. She remained there for around four months before returning to Union forces in a captive-swap with a Confederate physician. 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. As a show of recognition of her devotion to her post, President Andrew Johnson awarded her the Medal of Honor for her services on November 11th, 1865.

Relieved of her services and distinguished by her success as a war figure, Dr. Walker would soon become closely acquainted with the heads of the suffragette movement. Yet, even among the suffragettes, Dr. Walker found herself and her views to strike an odd chord among her peers. In

² Leonard, Elizabeth. *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1995. p. 116.

particular, she opposed with a singular vehemence Susan B. Anthony's voting rights amendment, arguing that a woman's right to vote was already guaranteed by the Constitution. Dr. Walker viewed it as an insult to American women for them to *ask* for a right that was already given to them by the Constitution, once going so far as to say: "We do not want any amendment to the Constitution. We do not want any such sort of trash as that."³ Her argument itself was logical and semantic: in her mind, the Constitution simply did not forbid women from voting because it refers to its citizens as "people" or "persons" and avoided the use of gendered nouns.⁴

What triggered Dr. Walker's intense opposition to the 19th amendment may be attributable to her experiences on the field. Perhaps she took offense to the way in which the suffragettes disdained the principles of the Constitution that Dr. Walker had watched men fight for, and die for, time and time again. In a closing line before the House of Representatives, Dr. Walker addressed the enthusiasm shared among her fellow suffragettes over what would become the 19th amendment with a counter-argument deeply embedded in her patriotic values, stating that, "[h]owever they differ on some minor points, they can not differ upon the Constitution of the United States. That stands forever."⁵ Taking into consideration all the various scenes into which Dr. Walker has been painted—a crowded hospital, a chaotic battlefield, a prison, the White House; one sadly concludes that Dr. Walker never found true acceptance anywhere. She was an oddity among war-surgeons, an outcast among suffragettes, whose unique blend of pragmatism and patriotically inspired activism precluded company. Yet, she persisted, adamant in her belief that

³ United States. Cong. House. *Woman Suffrage. Hearings, 14 Feb. 1912*. 62nd Cong. Retrieved from Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/womansuffrageno00unkngoog/page/n16/mode/2up/search/walker>.

⁴ *United States Constitution*. Pmbl. Retrieved from Constitute, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_States_of_America_1992.

⁵ United States. Cong. House. *Woman Suffrage. Hearings, 14 Feb. 1912*. 62nd Cong. Retrieved from Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/womansuffrageno00unkngoog/page/n16/mode/2up/search/walker>.

she was just as needed on the battlefield as any man, just as well as she was secure in her belief that her right to vote was already guaranteed to her by the Constitution. Despite what these values of patriotism and commitment wrought her towards the end of her life, they most certainly awarded her the privilege of being the country's first and only female Medal of Honor recipient.

Annotated Bibliography

Alexander, Elizabeth. "Dr. Mary Edwards Walker's 'Crowning Constitutional Argument'."

The Conference on Susan B. Anthony and the Struggle for Equal Rights, Mar. 2006.

In an article titled "Crowning Constitutional Argument", Dr. Mary Walker makes her case as to why a woman's right to vote was already guaranteed by the Constitution and why the 19th amendment was unnecessary. Elizabeth Alexander analyzes Dr. Walker's argument and how it influenced her relationship with mainstream suffragettes. This was of particular relevance to my essay. Though, Alexander also provided another reason which ultimately led to Dr. Walker breaking off from the suffragettes. Namely, her choice to wear men's clothing. This detail, which plays a more passing role in my essay, was viewed as trivial and distracting from the suffragette movement's main purpose and widened the divide between Dr. Walker and the suffragettes.

Bain News Service. *Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, 1832-1919, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing*

left, wearing man's top hat and coat. Ca. 1911, retrieved from the Library of Congress,

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2005685497/>.

This photo of Dr. Walker, taken towards the end of her life, was consulted less for the benefit of the reader and more for my personal understanding of Dr. Walker's character. Before getting into the concrete details of Dr. Walker's life, I thought it best to include a brief physical description of her. The stern expression in this particular image inspired my illustration of her as "the image of austerity and respect".

Bell. *Walker, Dr. Mary*. Ca. 1916, retrieved from the Library of Congress,

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2016713273/>.

C. M. Bell's photograph of Dr. Walker informed my description of Dr. Walker seen in my introductory paragraph. In consultation with a style guide of era-appropriate men's fashion, I used this image to write my description of Dr. Walker as seen in her later years. Even today, most descriptions of Dr. Walker depict her in the bloomer-costume of her Civil War years. Therefore, I was fortunate to find an image of her in full men's wear.

Box 9, Folder "Walker, Dr. Mary-Congressional-Medal of Honor, 1974-77". Bobbie Greene

Kilberg Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library,

<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0234/1509914.pdf>.

This archive consists largely of letters to and from Anne Walker, a descendant of Dr. Walker, which illustrate her attempts to get Dr. Walker's Medal of Honor reinstated after it was rescinded in 1917. However, I considered this effort to be unrelated to the essay prompt at hand, albeit admirable. One article of particular use in this archive was a newspaper article entitled "Dr. Mary E. Walker" by Fred Wright, published in 1953. Though it was written after Dr. Walker's death, Wright was able to get in touch with a number of people who were either connected with Dr. Walker or had known her personally. The newspaper also presented a letter written from Dr. Walker to her family while she was working at the Patent Office Hospital. Parts of this letter were included in my essay in order to illustrate how much respect Dr. Walker was given at the hospital.

"Dr. Mary E. Walker." *Association of the United States Army*,

<https://www.ausa.org/dr-mary-e-walker>.

Dr. Walker's profile in the *Association of the United States Army* provides an overview of her Civil War years, as well as a brief reference to her work as a women's rights activist after the war. Though the article references few specific details, it was incredibly straightforward and enabled me to map out a general timeline of where Dr. Walker traveled during her time as a surgeon.

"Elements of Edwardian Style." *Historical Emporium*,

<https://www.historicalemporium.com/mens-edwardian-clothing.php>.

This article helped to inform the descriptive elements of the essay. Taken alongside photos of Dr. Walker in her later years, I produced a brief description of Dr. Walker's clothing by identifying certain aspects of her outfit, for instance, her "wingtip" collar, and used this guide to identify the terminology behind it.

Lange, Katie. "Meet Dr. Mary Walker: The only female Medal of Honor recipient." *U.S.*

Army, 7 Mar. 2017,

https://www.army.mil/article/183800/meet_dr_mary_walker_the_only_female_medal_of_honor_recipient.

Lange succinctly lays out a series of Dr. Walker's notable achievements in chronological order. Unlike several of the other authors I consulted for this essay, Lange either excludes or only briefly addresses the details of Dr. Walker's life that are often discussed at length in other sources: Her relationship with Dr. Green, her Crowning Constitutional Argument, or suspicions that her imprisonment was a staged spying operation. For the purpose of quickly supplying the reader with

a basic overview of Dr. Walker's life, this article proved to be very helpful. Particularly in the beginning stages of my research when I had not quite created a timeline of Dr. Walker's life, it was a source to which I kept returning to ensure that I had all of my facts straight.

Leonard, Elizabeth. *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1995.

Elizabeth Leonard's *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* presents the reader the stories of three women who were integral to the Union war effort: Sophronia Bucklin, Annie Wittenmyer, and Mary Walker. Leonard's account of Dr. Walker's life, particularly her Civil War years, is the most diligently researched and detailed source that I have referenced. Leonard was able to narrate Dr. Walker's life with an almost day-to-day precision, describing in detail the prejudice that Dr. Walker faced when taking pre-contract examinations, or her dedicated work with the 52nd Ohio Regiment. Certain details, such as the instance in which Dr. Green offered a portion of his own salary to Dr. Walker, were included in the essay to further build up a sense of character for Dr. Walker in the way she was viewed by others.

Public Acts of The Thirty-Seventh Congress of the United States. City of Washington, District of Columbia, 4 Jul. 1861 through 6 Aug. 1861, retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/37th-congress/c37.pdf>.

This archive was consulted as part of a passage about the history of the Medal of Honor. It was ultimately excluded from the essay, though the information was still crucial to my understanding of what exactly Dr. Walker was receiving when she was awarded the Medal of Honor and what that said about her. This particular source dealt with the creation of the Medal of Honor. In chapter

one, section seven of the Public Acts of the thirty-seventh Congress, the Secretary of the Navy was authorized to create two hundred Medals of Honor to be awarded to members of the Navy exclusively. This was later expanded upon to affect more members of the military.

“Surgeon and Medal of Honor Recipient.” *The Women’s Memorial*,

<https://www.womensmemorial.org/history/detail/?s=surgeon-and-medal-of-honor-recipient>.

This article itself is not unlike several of the others I have consulted: a relatively brief description of Dr. Walker’s achievements as a war-surgeon and suffragette. However, it offered me useful insight into the exact nature of the affliction which Dr. Walker sustained at Castle Thunder that ultimately forced her to halt her practice as a surgeon: her vision had deteriorated. Additionally, the article elaborates on some of the activities to which Dr. Walker was assigned in the period after her release from prison and before she left her service, such as caring for the inmates of a female Confederate prison. Though notable in that Dr. Walker was being paid for this work, I ultimately decided that this information did not sufficiently address the essay prompt.

“The Drama of the Civil War at the Patent Office.” *Streets of Washington*, 10 Jun. 2015,

<http://www.streetsofwashington.com/2015/06/the-drama-of-civil-war-at-patent-office.html>.

Streets of Washington is a website managed by John DeFerrari, a preservationist native to Washington, D.C. who writes about the conditions of the Indiana Patent Office Hospital in great detail. The article describes the layout of the Patent Office and which rooms were devoted to particular parts of the hospital. Based on the descriptions of how hastily the Office was converted,

it became evident to me how such a woman as Dr. Walker would be permitted to serve there without being questioned.

United States. Cong. House. *Joint resolution restoring the Congressional Medal of Honor to Dr.*

Mary Edwards Walker. 95th Cong. H.J.Res.346. 23 Mar. 1977.

This congressional resolution was consulted as part of a separate storyline which occurred after Dr. Walker's death and was ultimately excluded from the essay. Two years before Dr. Walker died, her medal was rescinded along with roughly nine hundred others due to her status as a civilian. Though, she continued to wear it until her death. In 1977, her medal was restored with the help of this resolution, which directed President Jimmy Carter to reinstate Dr. Walker's status as a Medal of Honor recipient. Though the rescission did occur in Dr. Walker's lifetime, it was part of a structural change in the Medal of Honor guidelines, and not an explicit attack on Dr. Walker's status as a war-surgeon. Therefore, I decided that it did not need to be included in the essay.

United States. Cong. House. *Woman Suffrage. Hearings, 14 Feb. 1912*. 62nd Cong. Retrieved

from Internet Archive,

<https://archive.org/details/womansuffrageno00unkngoog/page/n16/mode/2up>.

My essay begins with, and ultimately circles back to, the defense that Dr. Walker presented before Congress in 1912 about her belief that her right to vote was protected by the Constitution. Not only did this testimony further inform my understanding of Dr. Walker's views on the possibility of the 19th amendment, it enabled me to begin to recognize Dr. Walker as more than

a list of achievements. Being exposed to her rhetoric allows the reader to begin understanding Dr. Walker on a personal level and, for that reason, references to this particular encounter with Congress are featured prominently in the essay.

United States Constitution. Retrieved from Constitute,

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_States_of_America_1992.

The root of Dr. Walker's *Crowning Constitutional Argument* is based on the choice of words within the Constitution: if the founding fathers intended for women to be excluded from the voting process, they would have begun the Preamble with "We the men". Upon examining the Constitution to see how well this linguistic argument held up, I was left with mixed results. Yes, the Constitution most generally referred to American voters as "people" or "persons". However, it uses male pronouns when discussing who can and cannot run for a position in Congress, suggesting that the use of gender-neutral subjects was a mere formality.

U.S. Department of Defense. *Manual of Military Decorations and Awards: Medal of Honor*

(*MOH*), https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/134833_Vol1.PDF?ver=2019-06-20-104940-063.

This Department of Defense Manual represents one of the most up-to-date explanations of the Medal of Honor. Initially, I had consulted this manual with the intention of describing how the Medal of Honor had adapted and changed over the course of time. However, this analysis was excluded from the essay because it did not directly relate to Dr. Walker, nor did it strengthen my response to the essay prompt.

“Walker, Dr., Mary E.” *Congressional Medal of Honor Society*,

<http://www.cmoHS.org/recipient-detail/1428/walker-dr-mary-e.php>.

Dr. Walker’s official profile can be found at the *Congressional Medal of Honor Society*, which includes a note from President Andrew Johnson that justifies his decision to award her the Medal of Honor.

Walker, Mary. *Crowning Constitutional Argument*. Washington, D.C., 1898.

<https://www.betweenThecovers.com/pages/books/420377/mary-e-walker/broadside-crowning-constitutional-argument>.

Between the Covers is an archive and bookstore which stocks antique writings of various subjects. An image of Dr. Walker’s *Crowning Constitutional Argument*, now sold, can be found there. In her argument, Dr. Walker elaborates on her belief that a woman’s right to vote is guaranteed to her in the Constitution. This article was integral to my essay, particularly where her post-war years are concerned. While, on one hand, it is important to place Dr. Walker’s work in the context of public opinion, it was of equal importance to me that I could see her work outside of how it was perceived by the suffragette movement and take it at face value.

“52nd Regiment, Ohio Infantry.” *National Park Service*,

<https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battle-units-detail.htm?battleUnitCode=UOH0052RI02>.

Dr. Walker was assigned to the 52nd Ohio Regiment after providing her services at the Battle of Chickamauga. While none of the specific details about the regiment’s actions are listed in the

essay, a record of the regiment's movements provided me with a general sense of Dr. Walker's progression through Tennessee.