COMMONLIT

Name: _____ Class: _____

Trailblazing surgeon Mary Walker still one of a kind

She received Medal of Honor for Civil War service, and she's still the only female recipient.

By Marylou Tousignant
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Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919) was an American abolitionist, prisoner of war, and surgeon. She received the highest medal one can receive in the military, the Medal of Honor, for her role as a surgeon during the Civil War. In this informational text, Marylou Tousignant discusses Walker's life, accomplishments, and beliefs. As you read, take notes on how Walker was treated for her actions and beliefs.

[1] In 1865, Mary Walker was awarded the Medal of Honor for "valuable service" during the Civil War. The first female surgeon in the country was now the first woman to receive its highest military award.

In 1917, after a rules change on who could receive the award, her medal was taken away. But Walker, then 84 years old, refused to give it back. She had worn it every day for half a century and would keep wearing it until her death two years later. It was the last stubborn act in a life built on defying people's expectations.



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Early days

Mary Edwards Walker was born in 1832 in north-central New York, the youngest of five sisters. A little brother arrived a year later. Her parents were teachers and had a farm. Her father was also a self-taught doctor. The couple believed that girls and boys should be treated equally. They gave their children good educations and encouraged them to be curious and independent thinkers.

From a young age, Walker was interested in medicine. She graduated from Syracuse Medical College in 1855, the only woman in her class.

[5] She stood out in other ways, too. Like her mother, she believed that the clothes women wore — the tight corsets[1] and long, heavy dresses — were unhealthful and designed to limit activity. Walker wanted to be comfortable and active. So she wore a coat and trousers, sometimes with a skirt over the pants.

Because she looked different, "boys chased her and threw rocks at her," biographer Sharon Harris told an NBC reporter in 2014. "She once said that nobody would ever know what she had to go through just to step out the door each morning" and face the jeers.[2]

But that didn't stop her. She didn't think women should be judged by their appearance, so when she married, both bride and groom wore suits and top hats. Walker also omitted the word "obey" from her marriage vows and kept her last name — highly unusual for brides at that time.

Wartime service

When the war erupted in 1861, Walker traveled to Washington and tried to join the U.S. Army, which was fighting the rebellious Southern states. But although the Army badly needed doctors, it didn't want a female surgeon officially in its ranks. So Walker volunteered, spending nearly two years as an unpaid field surgeon near the front lines.

In April 1864, she was captured by Confederate forces and sent to a prison in Richmond, Virginia, where she stayed for four months until she was freed in a prisoner swap. One Confederate officer described his men as "amused and disgusted at the sight" of a woman in the uniform of an Army surgeon.

[10] After her release, Walker was hired by the Army as a civilian[3] surgeon and put in charge of a hospital for women prisoners in Kentucky.

The end of the war in 1865 did not put an end to Walker's efforts to get formally recognized as an officer. She was turned down yet again but was given the Medal of Honor instead for her "patriotic zeal[4] to the sick and wounded" and the "hardships" she faced in prison.

Walker spent the rest of her life promoting women's rights. She was arrested repeatedly — for dressing like a man.

"Dr. Mary lost the medal simply because she was a hundred years ahead of her time and no one could stomach it," a relative told the New York Times in 1977, when her name was put back on the list of those who have received the medal.

That list continues to grow. Navy SEAL Edward Byers Jr. received the award last week for helping to free an American hostage in Afghanistan. But of the more than 3,500 Medals of Honor given out since the prize was created in 1861, only one has gone to a woman: Mary Walker.

1. a tightly fitting laced or stiffened outer dress
2. **Jeer** ***(noun):*** a rude and mocking remark
3. refers to a person who is not part of the armed services
4. **Zeal** ***(noun):*** great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of a cause

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement expresses the central idea of the text?
    A. Walker's accomplishments and views on women's rights were beyond what many people could accept during her time.
    B. Walker's refusal to give up the Medal of Honor encouraged the revision of the requirements for the award.
    C. Walker's actions as a military surgeon changed how the United States Army viewed women's participation during times of war.
    D. Walker's active role in women's rights prompted other women to challenge women's clothing and gender roles.

2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
    A. "But Walker, then 84 years old, refused to give it back. She had worn it every day for half a century and would keep wearing it until her death two years later." (Paragraph 2)
    B. "Walker wanted to be comfortable and active. So she wore a coat and trousers, sometimes with a skirt over the pants." (Paragraph 5)
    C. "One Confederate officer described his men as 'amused and disgusted at the sight' of a woman in the uniform of an Army surgeon." (Paragraph 9)
    D. "Walker was hired by the Army as a civilian surgeon and put in charge of a hospital for women prisoners in Kentucky." (Paragraph 10)
    E. "Walker spent the rest of her life promoting women's rights. She was arrested repeatedly — for dressing like a man." (Paragraph 12)
    F. "'Dr. Mary lost the medal simply because she was a hundred years ahead of her time and no one could stomach it,' a relative told the New York Times in 1977" (Paragraph 13)

3. PART A: How do the choices that Walker made help readers understand her character?
    A. They emphasize how strong and resilient Walker was in the face of adversity.
    B. They show how disrespect towards women and girls was taught to children.
    C. They prove that even Walker was not immune to the hurtful words of others.
    D. They demonstrate how unaffected Walker was by the opinions of others.

4. PART B: Which TWO quotes from the text best support the answer to Part A?
    A. "In 1865, Mary Walker was awarded the Medal of Honor for 'valuable service' during the Civil War." (Paragraph 1)
    B. "She stood out in other ways, too. Like her mother, she believed that the clothes women wore… were unhealthful and designed to limit activity." (Paragraph 5)
    C. "'She once said that nobody would ever know what she had to go through just to step out the door each morning'" (Paragraph 6)
    D. "When the war erupted in 1861, Walker traveled to Washington and tried to join the U.S. Army, which was fighting the rebellious Southern states." (Paragraph 8)
    E. "although the Army badly needed doctors, it didn't want a female surgeon officially in its ranks. So Walker volunteered" (Paragraph 8)
    F. "After her release, Walker was hired by the Army as a civilian surgeon and put in charge of a hospital for women prisoners in Kentucky." (Paragraph 10)

5. How does the author's introduction of Walker in the text contribute to the text as a whole? Cite evidence from the text in your response.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In your experience, what makes a hero? How were Mary Walker's actions heroic during the Civil War? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

2. Why do you think people had a hard time accepting Walker as a hero during her time? Are there heroes that society overlooks today?

3. In the context of the text, how does a person overcome adversity? How did Mary Walker face adversity due to her gender? Have you ever been treated differently because of your gender?