

MARY EDWARDS WALKER

b. November 26, 1832 – d. February 21, 1919

*“You men are not our protectors
... If you were, who would there
be to protect us from?”*



A steadfast feminist, Mary Edwards Walker defied 19th century patriarchal society by refusing to live within the confines of gender-based roles. As a student, physician and activist, Walker defined her place in society while paving the way for future generations of women.

Diverging from the norm, Walker's liberal parents encouraged her and her five sisters to attend college and pursue careers. Her father, a self-taught doctor and advocate of women's dress reform, largely influenced Walker.

In 1855, Walker graduated from Syracuse Medical College, becoming one of only a few female physicians in the country. She married fellow student and physician Albert Miller in an unconventional ceremony. Walker wore trousers and a man's coat and chose to keep her last name. The marriage ended four years later.

At the onset of the Civil War, having been denied the position of Army medical officer, Walker volunteered as a nurse for the Union Army. During the next few years she served in several battles, including the First Battle of Bull Run and the Battle of Fredericksburg. Despite her service, Walker often found herself at the scrutiny of male superiors who questioned her credentials.

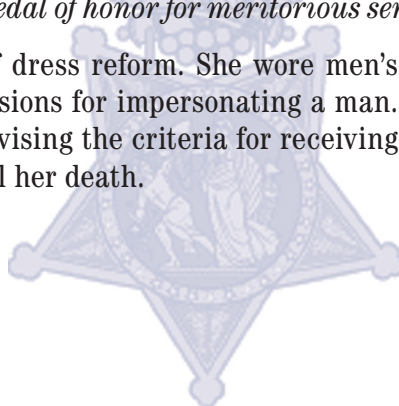
The Confederate Army captured Walker in 1864 and held her captive for four months. The imprisonment proved to be a turning point in her career, winning her both respect and credibility. Later that year, she became the first woman commissioned as an Army surgeon, earning a monthly salary of \$100.

The following year, Walker became the only woman in history to receive a Medal of Honor, the highest military honor in the United States. The bill, signed by President Andrew Johnson, reads:

For her service during the Civil War, Mary Edwards Walker became the only woman in history to receive a Medal of Honor, the highest military decoration awarded in the United States.

Whereas it appears from official reports that Dr. Mary E. Walker, a graduate of medicine, has rendered valuable service to the Government, and ... has devoted herself with much patriotic zeal to the sick and wounded soldiers ... to the detriment of her own health, and has also endured hardships as a prisoner of war four months in Southern prison while acting as contract surgeon ... It is ordered, that a testimonial thereof shall be hereby made and given to the said Dr. Mary E. Walker, and that the actual medal of honor for meritorious services be given her.

After the war, Walker remained a strong advocate of dress reform. She wore men's clothing exclusively and was arrested on several occasions for impersonating a man. In 1917, Congress revoked her Medal of Honor after revising the criteria for receiving it. Walker refused to return the medal, wearing it until her death.



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