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Stories from the Catalog: Dr. Mary Walker, Civil War Surgeon

Few women became physicians in the 1850s; fewer still served in the Civil War; and only one was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Dr. Mary E. Walker was born in 1832 in Oswego, New York, to an abolitionist family and graduated from Syracuse Medical College with a doctor of medicine degree in 1855. At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the Union Army did not commission women surgeons, only nurses. Wanting to serve her country, but still wanting to work to her full capacity, Walker volunteered as an unpaid surgeon.



Portrait photograph of Dr. Mary Walker, taken by Mathew Brady and Associates. [National Archives Identifier 526275](#)

She began working as an assistant surgeon at the Indiana Hospital, an improvised hospital inside the U.S. Patent Office. In 1862 she treated the wounded at various field hospitals throughout Virginia. She was captured by Confederate soldiers in April of 1864 and released in a prisoner swap. It wasn't until later that October that she became a paid contracted private physician with the Ohio 52nd Infantry with a salary of \$100 a month. She ended this contract in June of 1865. The remainder of her life was devoted to the medical profession and the advancement of women's rights.

In addition to her many accomplishments as a surgeon, Dr. Mary Walker was a pioneer in women's dress reform. Dr. Walker opposed long skirts and petticoats, particularly due to the dust and dirt they spread as women walked about, so she experimented with shorter skirts layered with trousers and often skipped the skirts entirely in favor of wearing pants. By the 1860s, while a surgeon during the Civil War, Dr. Walker typically wore a knee-length dress with trousers underneath, as pictured here with her Medal of Honor.



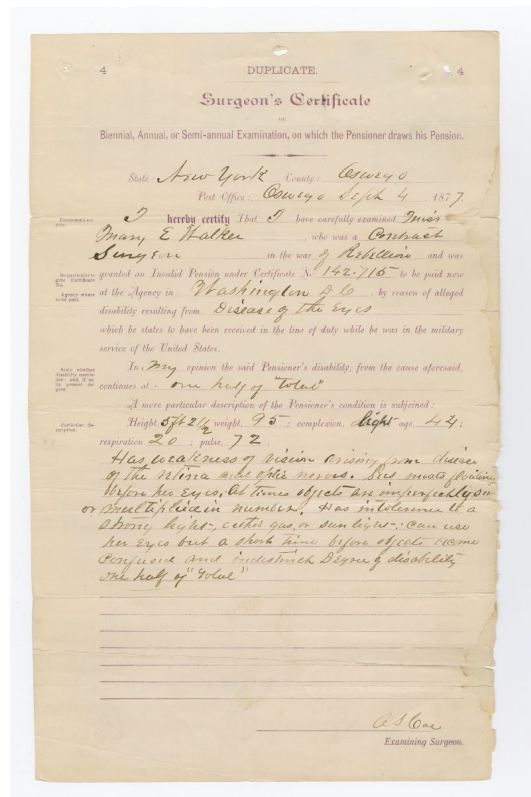
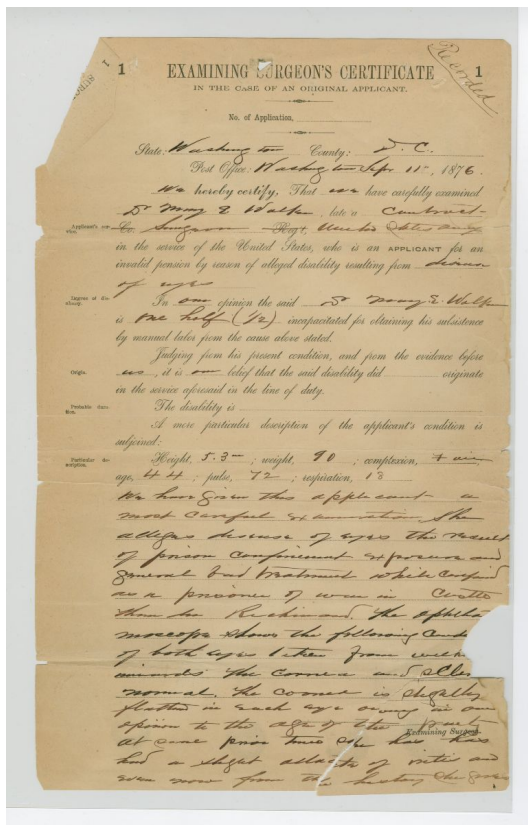
Doctor Mary Walker. [National Archives Identifier 526308](#)

On January 24, 1866, she was awarded the Medal of Honor by the Executive Order of

Andrew Johnson. In 1917 Congress requested a review of cases of Medal of Honor recipients and rescinded 912, including Dr. Mary Walker's. It was restored to her posthumously in 1977 at the behest of the Army Board of Correction of Military Records.

Today's post comes from Holly Rivet, archives technician at the National Archives at St. Louis, and originally appeared on the [Prologue blog](#).

You can view the approved pension application for Dr. Mary Walker, scanned by citizen archivists in our Innovation Hub, in the [National Archives Catalog](#).



Approved Pension File for Dr. Mary E. Walker (SC-142715). [National Archives Identifier 20848640](#)

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