Lida Poynter collection on Dr. Mary E. Walker
SC.126

Last updated on November 17, 2011.
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Summary Information

Repository
Drexel University: College of Medicine Legacy Center

Creator
Poynter, Lida

Title
Lida Poynter collection on Dr. Mary E. Walker

Call number
SC.126

Date
circa 1850-1946

Extent
30 linear feet

Language
English

Abstract
The Lida Poynter collection on Dr. Mary E. Walker consists of Poynter’s unpublished manuscript and research notes on the life of Dr. Mary E. Walker. Mary E. Walker (1832-1919) was a physician who served as a surgeon during the Civil War. She was awarded the Medal of Honor for her service and remains the only woman to have received the Medal. Throughout her life, she wrote, lectured and taught on medicine, dress reform, suffrage, and women’s rights, in general. In addition to Poynter's manuscript and research notes, this collection features correspondence to and from Mary Walker, correspondence to and from Lida Poynter, and photographs of Mary Walker.

Cite as:
Lida Poynter collection on Dr. Mary E. Walker, circa 1850-1946. Drexel University College of Medicine, Legacy Center: Archives and Special Collections on Women in Medicine and Homeopathy
The Lida Poynter collection on Dr. Mary E. Walker consists of Poynter’s unpublished manuscript and research notes on the life of Dr. Mary E. Walker. Mary E. Walker (1832-1919) was a physician who served as a surgeon during the Civil War. She was awarded the Medal of Honor for her service and remains the only woman to have received the Medal. Throughout her life, she wrote, lectured and taught on medicine, dress reform, suffrage, and women’s rights.

Lida Poynter, in the forward to her manuscript (housed in Box 5), states that "this volume is not offered as a resume of the history of abolition or temperance, dress reform or sumptuary laws, politics or spiritualism, woman suffrage or philanthropy, but each and all of these factors [which] helped to form the environment and wield the influences in the midst of which Mary Walker was born and lived." While it is unclear when Poynter began her research, she began in part because she "came to feel a strong resentment that the real Mary Walker should be practically unknown to history because she was so obscured and, to all intents and purposes, concealed by the one thing which the world has mocked and censured and for the most part, misunderstood." The manuscript appears to have been completed in 1946, and the last page of the document reads, "there sleeps Dr. Mary Walker, pioneer woman physician, pioneer suffragist, comforter and helper of the soldiers and their dependents, friend of the destitute and abused, philanthropist ... a woman entitled to burial in Arlington, the forgotten woman."

Mary Edwards Walker was born on November 26, 1832 in Oswego, New York, the daughter of Alvah, a physician, and Vesta Whitcomb Walker. Her family was abolitionist and progressive, and therefore, “much of Dr. Walker’s tendency towards non-conformity may be attributed to her parents who, among other things, believed their daughters should receive a professional education” (Gleason, page 1). Thus encouraged, Walker received her degree in medicine from the eclectic Syracuse Medical College, graduating as the only woman in her class in 1855.

Following her graduation, Walker moved to Columbus, Ohio to practice medicine, but returned to Oswego, New York the same year. On November 19, 1855, Walker married Albert E. Miller, also a physician and a former classmate at Syracuse Medical College. Together, they moved to Rome, New York where they began practicing medicine. By 1859, Walker had discovered “her husband’s philandering ways [and] the couple separated,” (Rutkow, page 489). Walker moved to Iowa in order to obtain a divorce. Even though she did not receive the divorce, she did practice medicine in that state until 1861. During this time, she began lecturing on medical topics, temperance, and dress reform, as well as other topics. She also wrote for the magazine Sybil.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Walker was denied a commission as a medical officer as the “Surgeon General [was] reluctant to break with an ‘all male’ tradition,” (Rutkow, page 489). Despite this, in 1861, Walker volunteered, working as a nurse at the Indiana Hospital in Washington, DC; and while there, helped found the Women’s Relief Association. However, since she was “lacking official duties in Washington, she eventually enrolled at New York City’s Hygeia Therapeutic College, where she obtained another medical degree in March 1862,” (Rutkow, page 489). When she returned to Washington, DC in 1862, she worked for the Union Army in Virginia, as a volunteer physician. Between 1862 and 1864, she served in Tennessee, was taken as a Confederate prisoner of war, imprisoned in Richmond, Virginia, and
released in August 1864. Finally in late 1864, General George H. Thomas appointed Walker as contract surgeon to the Ohio 52nd Infantry, but “her request for field duty was denied [and instead] she was named surgeon to the Female Military Prison [in] Louisville, Kentucky,” (Rutkow, page 489). Although there is no documentation, many believe that Walker served as a spy for the North. On January 24, 1866, Mary Edwards Walker received the Congressional Medal of Honor. Today, she is still the only woman to receive this award.

Following the Civil War, Walker focused on topics relating to women’s rights and traveled throughout the United States and England lecturing. She was an active citizen and petitioned both the New York and United States governments for improvements on issues of concern to her. According to Gleason, “Walker had very progressive opinions regarding marriage and divorce [and] was an outspoken opponent of alcohol and tobacco use but very tolerant in her religion,” (page 2). In 1866, she was elected president of the National Dress Reform Association and eventually dressed entirely in men’s clothing. Walker authored two books, Hit, published in 1871, and Unmasked or the Science of Immortality, published in 1878. Over the years, she was increasingly seen as eccentric.

In 1917, her Congressional Medal of Honor was rescinded along with 910 others when the requirements for receiving the Medal of Honor were changed; however, she refused to return it to the government. She died on February 21, 1919 at the age of 86. The Congressional Medal of Honor was restored to her on June 10, 1977.

**Bibliography:**


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**Scope and Contents**

Lida Poynter devoted a great deal of time writing a biography of Dr. Mary Edwards Walker. This collection consists of her unpublished manuscript, her research notes, newspaper clippings, and correspondence (which includes original letters to and from Mary E. Walker).

The unpublished manuscript is typed and totals 436 pages. The manuscript contains no citations. The bulk of the collection consists of Poynter's research notes, of which there are approximately 12,000 sheets. Some these notes refer to journal citations, but most of the notes have newspaper clippings affixed to them. These newspaper clippings include articles on women which appeared in several newspapers from New York, Omaha, Georgia and Boston during the period from 1928 to 1931. In addition, correspondence is sometimes affixed to the notes. This correspondence includes letters to and from Mary Walker (19th century) and to and from Lida Poynter (1930s). The notes are arranged numerically as they were taken,
however, since the manuscript is not footnoted and no draft of the manuscript is available, there is no
direct reference between the manuscript and the notes.

Forty-two photographs of Mary Walker which Poynter collected “from various sources” are also part of
this collection.

Since the collection contains many original Walker letters, it is a valuable resource for primary source
material on Mary Walker. It is also an interesting collection of newspaper articles which reflect the
press’s representation of women during the late 1920s and early 1930s. It is important to state, however,
that it is impossible to know which particular notes Poynter used to write any given passage or state any
particular fact in the manuscript since the manuscript is not footnoted and the “notes” are not arranged
chronologically or by subject.

Administrative Information

Drexel University, College of Medicine Legacy Center

2010.05.17

Sponsor

The creation of the electronic guide for this collection was made possible through generous funding
from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, administered through the Council on Library and Information
Resources’ “Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives” Project. Finding aid entered into the
Archivists' Toolkit by Garrett Boos.

Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research use.

Use Restrictions

Copyright restrictions may apply. Please contact the Archives with requests for copying and for
authorization to publish, quote or reproduce the material.

Custodial History note

The material was given by Lida Poynter to Dr. Bertha Van Hoosen, and arrived at the College as part of
the American Medical Women’s Association Historical Collection.
Processing Information note

The creation of the electronic guide for this collection was made possible through generous funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, administered through the Council on Library and Information Resources’ “Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives” Project.

Finding aid entered into the Archivists' Toolkit by Garrett Boos.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

Oswego County Historical Society: Mary E. Walker papers, 1855-1980

Oswego State University Penfield Library Special Collections: Mary E. Walker records, 1916-1919 (MS 030); and Dr. Mary E. Walker letters, 1915 (MS 055)

Syracuse University George Arents Research Library: Mary Edwards Walker papers, 1799-1919 (bulk 1860-1919)

Controlled Access Headings

Form/Genre(s)

- Clippings
- Correspondence
- Manuscripts
- Photographs
- Research notes

Geographic Name(s)

- Oswego (N.Y.)
- Rome (N.Y.)
Personal Name(s)

- Walker, Mary Edwards, 1832-1919

Subject(s)

- Feminism
- Medal of Honor
- Medicine
- Nurses
- Physicians
- United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865
- War work
- Women in medicine
- Women physicians
- Women's rights
- Women--Suffrage
# Collection Inventory

## Series I. Manuscript, 1946.

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<th>Box</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>1 typed copy (forward and 25 chapters, 436 pages; chapters XVIII and XIX are missing), 1946.</td>
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## Series II. Correspondence, Notes, and Clippings, 1800s-1930s.

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<td>Walker Correspondence.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Clippings.</td>
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<td>Clippings.</td>
</tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Notes, pages 1-900.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Notes, pages 901-1,800.</td>
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<td>8</td>
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Series II. Correspondence, Notes, and Clippings
### Series III. Photographs

| Notes, pages 10,475-10,569. | 30 |
| Notes, pages 10,570-10,849. | 31 |
| Notes, pages 10,850-10,974. | 32 |
| Notes, pages 10,975-11,174. | 33 |
| Notes, pages 11,175-11,299. | 34 |
| Notes, pages 11,300-11,399. | 35 |
| Notes, pages 11,400-11,528. | 36 |
| Notes, pages 11,529-11,579. | 37 |

### Series III. Photographs, 1800s-1900s.

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<td>Photographs and drawings of Mary Walker. Several relating to the manuscript and created especially for the manuscript. From various sources, circa 1800s-1900s.</td>
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