

## Dr. Mary Edward Walker

Mary Edward Walker was an early activist for the right of women to wear comfortable clothing. Walker always tried to make a case that women should be allowed to wear trousers just like men. Walker said pants were easier to work in than the long flowing dresses of the day. On more than one occasion, she was arrested for impersonating a man because she wore trousers. She always wore her hair in curls so no one could mistake her for a man. During her military stint, however, she wore the same uniform as male officers. The uniform consisted of regulation trousers, an overcoat, and a round felt cap decorated with a gold cord.

Walker was a physician like her father. She graduated from Syracuse Medical College and earned her doctor's certificate in 1855. When the Civil War began, she wanted to put her medical skills to use on the battlefield. She wasn't accepted until 1864, when military officials commissioned her as an assistant surgeon with the rank of major. When the Civil War ended, Walker was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor for her work as a physician. She was the first woman to receive this award. Although it was later revoked, as were hundreds at the time, she continued to wear the medal on her coat.

Although Walker gained some notoriety as a physician, she was best known for her efforts to reform dress codes for women. Whenever she heard about accidents caused by women's clothing, such as a long skirt catching fire, Walker took note of it. She wrote many letters to newspaper editors to make her case for women to have a choice in the clothing they wore.

Walker was true to her beliefs. She created and wore outfits that included men's frock coats and bloomers. Bloomers were loose trousers that were supposed to be worn under women's skirts. Walker even wore trousers to her wedding, much to the chagrin of her family and her fiancé. And when she died in 1919, she was buried in the black frock coat she always wore.

## Unit 12

- A common saying is “She wears the pants in that family.” This is usually said to diminish the man. Explain how this is meant to be offensive.
  
- “We've come a long way, baby” is a popular phrase for the women's rights cause. In what other ways have women's roles been altered?
  
- Many schools are implementing dress codes. Do you think that making this concession will improve schools?