

AN
Absorbing
OCCUPATION

BY CHARLES F. HOWLETT

ELIZABETH BLACKWELL WAS A PIONEER
FOR WOMEN IN THE MEDICAL PROFESSION.

Elizabeth Blackwell trained women as doctors at the Women's Medical College in New York City.



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In 1845, a terminally ill friend confided to a 24-year-old Elizabeth Blackwell that she felt embarrassed by male doctors, the only option for women at that time in the nineteenth century. The friend expressed hope that someday there would be female physicians who could relate to women's personal feelings, and suggested that Blackwell pursue medicine instead of her career as a teacher. Blackwell took it to heart and began reading medical books under the direction of Dr. John Dickson of Asheville, North Carolina, and his brother, Dr. Henry Dickson of Charleston, South Carolina. Blackwell went on to become the nation's first female physician.

During her career, Blackwell was a pioneer in fostering the role of women in medicine, both in the United States and Great Britain. She founded a New York City infirmary for poor women and children. During the American Civil War, she provided invaluable assistance combatting infectious diseases and treating the sick and wounded for the Union cause under the jurisdiction of the United States Sanitary Commission. Prior to returning to her birthplace, England, she established a medical college for the training of female physicians. In Great Britain she duplicated these efforts, leading the way with the formation of the

National Health Society, as well as the London School of Medicine for Women, where she served as professor of gynecology from 1875 to 1907.



Elizabeth Blackwell

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Quaker Upbringing

Blackwell was born on February 3, 1821, in Bristol, England, the third of nine children. Her father, Samuel, was a devout Quaker and one of the founders of the Bristol Abolition Society. Her subsequent social activism while younger, especially her anti-slavery views and commitment to impoverished women and children, was greatly influenced by her father's belief that service to others was, indeed, living the "inner light."

During the Bristol Riots of 1831, Samuel's small sugar business was destroyed by fire. Disillusioned and nearly destitute, he relocated his family

to the United States, where he established a new refinery in New York City. However, the Panic of 1837 hit his business hard, and in 1838, he moved his family to Cincinnati in order to re-establish his business. Three months after arriving in the Queen City, Samuel died, leaving his family impoverished.

Determined to survive, Blackwell, along with her mother and two older sisters, started a small private school. Later, Blackwell also taught in Kentucky and North Carolina, eventually applying those teaching skills to the art of medicine.

Moral Sensibilities

At first, Blackwell was hesitant to pursue medical studies. As she recounted in her memoirs, her "favourite studies were history and metaphysics, and the very thought of dwelling in the physical structure of the body and its various ailments filled me with disgust." However, her moral sensibilities and Quaker commitment to community tugged at her heartstrings. In 1846, determined to learn more about the medical treatment for women, she applied to medical schools in New York City and Philadelphia, only to be rejected because of her gender.

But that only made her even more determined to pursue a career in medicine in order to help others, especially ailing women and children. In her major work, *Pioneering*

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Geneva Medical College

HOBART AND WILLIAM SMITH COLLEGES ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

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Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women, she reflected that “I have not the slightest hesitation on the subject; the thorough study of medicine. ... As to the opinion of people I don’t care one straw personally; though I take so much pains, as a matter of policy to propitiate it, and shall always strive to do so; for I see continually how the highest good is eclipsed by the violent or disagreeable forms which contain it.” Finally, in 1847, Geneva Medical College, a small medical school in Upstate New York, gave her a chance. She did not disappoint, finishing at the top of her otherwise all-male graduating class. Of course, she continually had to prove herself amongst her skeptical and doubting classmates. “I later learned,” she recollected, “that some of them had been inclined to think my application a hoax, perpetrated at their expense by a rival college.”

Receiving her medical degree in January 1849, she officially became the country’s first woman doctor.

Pioneering Women

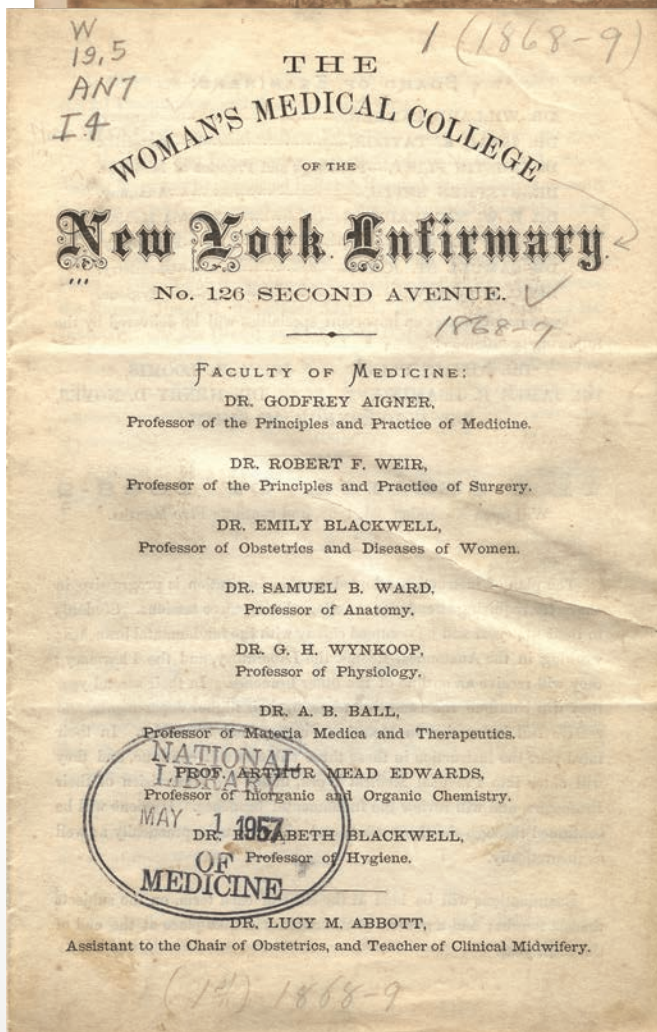
Perhaps because of her own family struggles, she chose to work briefly with patients at a Philadelphia alms house, an experience that provided her with a considerable amount of knowledge in the study of epidemiology. Curious to learn more about this field, she moved back to England in April of that year, where she worked under Dr. James Paget in London. There, she also developed a close relationship with Florence Nightingale and Elizabeth Anderson, pioneers in professional nursing and women’s health care in Great Britain. Paget became a leader in the study of women’s breast cancer (a form of the disease is named after him). Nightingale and Anderson were attracted to Blackwell because of her work with Paget and her interest in larger medical issues such as childbirth (she briefly went to Paris and studied at La Maternité) and infectious or communicable diseases.

Returning to America in the summer of 1851, she was denied positions in New York City’s hospitals. This was, in part, because she contracted a disease that led to blindness in one eye during a procedure on an infant she performed while studying midwifery in Europe. Her career as a surgeon was over, but why she was not hired to teach at one of these hospitals is troubling.



Nonetheless, by this time her sister Emily also had a medical degree, and the Blackwell sisters, together with Dr. Marie Zakrzewska, established the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children. This infirmary took the lead in presenting important lectures on hygiene and preventive medicine, including the training and placement of sanitary workers in the city’s poor areas. As a former schoolteacher, Blackwell was well suited for the job.

To cast a wider net regarding health care for women, she also published her own account on such matters, one aimed specifically at youth. *The Laws of Life, with Special Reference to the Physical Education of Girls* (1859) called attention to the importance of healthy living and proper exercise of girls, who were now confronted by the growing complexities of a developing industrialized society. It was important for women to be both strong and healthy as contributors to this new way of life. “In practical



Elizabeth Blackwell served as the first female Professor of Medicine in the US at the Women's Medical College, which she founded in 1868.

Top: During the Civil War, Blackwell worked with the United States Sanitary Commission to build and run hospitals and soldiers' lodging houses like this one near Alexandria, Virginia.

life, in the education of children, in the construction of cities, and this arrangements [sic] of society," she wrote in her introduction to this book, "we neglect the body, we treat it as an inferior dependent, subject to our caprices and depraved appetites, and quite ignore the fact, that it is a complex living being, full of our humanity." She would also publish two other important works encouraging the need for women to enter the medical profession as physicians: *Medicine as a Profession for Women* (1860) and *Address on the Medical Education of Women* (1864).

Civil War

With the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, Blackwell rallied other female reformers to establish the Women's Central Relief Association in New York City to train nurses for the Union Army. Her motivation and

commitment to the Union cause grew out of her own anti-slavery beliefs. Providing medical aid and comfort was her way of upholding her Quaker beliefs while sustaining her support for the Union. The association quickly became part of the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), a private relief agency to assist the sick and wounded. With Blackwell in the forefront, many women were trained and began serving on hospital ships and as army nurses and sanitary relief workers. Working closely with the USSC, Blackwell orchestrated the building and running of hospitals and soldiers' lodging houses and devised a communication system that delivered letters and telegrams to men in the field.

In 1868, she and her sister Emily established the Women's Medical College of the New York Infirmary where she served as a professor of hygiene, the

Elizabeth (left) lived out her later years with her daughter Kitty (right), whom she had adopted in 1856.



SCHLESINGER LIBRARY, RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

HER DEVOTION TO MEDICINE WAS AN "ABSORBING OCCUPATION. ... A COURSE OF JUSTICE AND COMMON SENSE, AND IT MUST BE PURSUED IN THE LIGHT OF DAY AND WITH PUBLIC SANCTION, IN ORDER TO ACCOMPLISH ITS END."

first female professor of medicine in the United States. The next year, she decided to return to England where she would reside permanently. In large measure, this was due to previous conversations she had with Nightingale, who had expressed to her the need to establish a medical college for women like she had done in the United States. Given that England was now a mature urban-industrialized society, whereas the United States was just beginning to experience the transition from agrarian to industrial, England offered Blackwell more opportunities to explore national health issues on a grander scale. Upon her return, she helped form the National Health Society, designed to educate citizens on the importance of health and hygiene issues, and founded the London School of Medicine for Women.

During her remaining years, Blackwell extended her outreach to promoting municipal reform co-op communities, prisoner rehabilitation, and

the Garden City movement—a method of urban planning begun by Sir Ebenezer Howard designed as planned, self-contained communities surrounded by lush "green-belts that provided for areas of residences, industry workplaces, and agriculture." Her humanitarian reform efforts went beyond medical treatment and education, although it is fair to state that she considered these attempts part of her professional obligation. She died at her home in Hastings in Sussex on May 31, 1910.

Blackwell remains a heroine for her pioneering research into female health issues, for her work as a teacher, for establishing medical schools for women in the United States and Great Britain, and for risking her own health and welfare when volunteering her services to assist sick and wounded Union soldiers. As a humanitarian, she also deployed her medical expertise to help indigent women and children by building infirmaries and developing local and national health agencies associated with the growing complexities confronting nineteenth century urban-industrialized societies.

In her own words, her devotion to medicine was an "absorbing occupation," one that "was to my mind a moral crusade in which I had entered, a course of justice and common sense, and it must be pursued in the light of day and with public sanction, in order to accomplish its end." ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

There are three excellent archival collections researchers can consult. The Warren Hunting Smith Library at Hobart and William Smith Colleges contains articles written by and about Blackwell, newspaper clippings, correspondence and pamphlets covering the years 1846-2003. Columbia University's Butler Library houses her letters from 1850-1884. A very extensive collection is the *Blackwell Family Papers, 1831-1981*, at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. This collection has materials describing her medical education and practice in letters penned by Elizabeth and Emily. Elizabeth Blackwell's Pioneering Work in *Opening the Medical Profession to Women* (London: Longmans, Green, 1895) details her life's experiences in the world of medicine. Scholarly works about her are: Rachel Baker, *The First Woman Doctor: The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell, M.D.* (New York: J. Messner, 1944); Dorothy Clarke Wilson, *Lone Woman: The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell, the First Female Doctor* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1920); and Mary Wright, *Elizabeth Blackwell of Bristol: The First Female Doctor* (Bristol, U.K.: Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, 1995).