

Medicine Woman

Susan La Flesche, 1865-1915

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A woman seeking training at a medical school in the United States in the late nineteenth century had to be exceptional—extremely intelligent, hard-working, and impervious to the jibes and discrimination she was bound to face.¹ That an American Indian woman successfully achieved this feat then makes the accomplishment even more outstanding. The education of Susan La Flesche, daughter of an Omaha Indian chief, exemplifies the persistence and extraordinary courage that was required then to attain such noteworthy goals. It also reveals the importance of American Indians educated in eastern schools and their unique role, their deep commitment, and their significant contributions to their tribal societies on their return to the reservations.

Educated at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia from 1886 to 1889, Susan La Flesche became the first American Indian woman to be graduated from medical school in the United States (Fig. 1). Susan was a member of one of the most remarkable families in American Indian history. She was the daughter of Mary Gale, part Omaha-Otoe-Iowa, and Joseph "Iron Eye" La Flesche, the son of a French trapper and an Indian woman, who had risen to the position of principal chief of the Omahas. Susan's maternal grandfather was John Gale, M.D., an army surgeon and one of the earliest white physicians in the trans-Mississippi West. Her brother Francis became a distinguished anthropologist for the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution and was active in reform and religious Pan-Indian movements until his death in 1933. Three of Susan's sisters also achieved prominence: Susette, popularly known as "Bright Eyes" on the lecture circuit, became a leading reformer of Indian policy in the period; Marguerite became a teacher and missionary among the Omahas; while Rosalie became a successful businesswoman in the livestock industry.²



FIGURE 1. Susan La Flesche, first American Indian woman graduate from medical school in United States. (Courtesy Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives, Washington, D.C.)

The Omahas, who numbered almost 1,200 in 1884, were faced with unprecedented change in the mid- and late nineteenth century.³ The period was marked by vigorous missionary activity, by the wholesale destruction of the buffalo, by the coming of the railroad, and, with it, massive white agricultural settlement. Realizing that the ultimate future of his people required some sort of adjustment to the white man's world, Iron Eye became the leader of a faction that favored this path. Some tribal traditionalists were frequently at odds with his policies, and labeled his part of the reservation "Make-Believe-White-Man's Village."⁴ Despite the criticism leveled at Iron Eye, his emphasis on achievement in both the Indian and non-Indian worlds had a tremendous influence on his people and on his children's careers.

Early education

Susan, as was true of many other American Indians of the period, was sent to boarding school in the east where she studied under the guidance of assimilationist-minded teachers. After spending two and one-half years at Elizabeth Institute in New Jersey, Susan was admitted to Hampton Institute. From

1884 to 1886, she was inculcated with the educational values of Hampton's principal, Gen. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the well-known mentor of Booker T. Washington. Armstrong, the son of missionary parents in service in Hawaii, taught his students, both black and Indian, male and female, that labor was "a spiritual force, that physical work not only increased wage-earning capacity, but promoted fidelity, accuracy, honesty, persistence and intelligence."⁵ He taught the importance of acquiring manual skills, land, and homes. Besides basic English language and mathematical skills, students were instructed in vocational trades that included carpentry, shoemaking, locksmithing, blacksmithing, farming, cooking, sewing, and housekeeping.

Armstrong's Hampton was run much like an army boot camp. In Spartan-like fashion, students rose at 5:00 A.M. and filled a full 12-hour day of work. American Indian and black students, under strict discipline, dressed in military uniforms and drilled on the parade grounds. While being indoctrinated in the Puritan work ethic, the Indians were not permitted to speak their tribal tongues and were housed in separate dormitories. Armstrong's goal in this harshly regimented education was neatly summarized at a reform gathering at Lake Mohonk, New York, in 1889: "The Indian, like you and me, should be taught—and that is what I teach him—to go where he can make his life count for the most."⁶

Awards

After two years of this training, Susan was graduated in 1886 as the salutatorian of her class, receiving the Demorest Prize for the best examination in her junior year. Unlike her classmates who were encouraged to develop vocational skills, Susan, set apart by her keen intelligence and well liked by her peers and teachers, was encouraged to study medicine. Although Hampton did not provide the premedical training to match the academic quality of the colleges of the time, Armstrong and Martha M. Waldron, M.D., the boarding school's resident physician, believed that Susan was capable of the challenge because of her unparalleled success at Hampton. However, to gain admission to medical school and to secure the necessary funds for tuition and room and board at first seemed to be insurmountable problems. Only through the efforts of two energetic women—Alice Cunningham Fletcher and Sara Thomson Kinney—was Susan able to meet the admission and expense requirements for the study of medicine.

Influential sponsors

Fletcher, a groundbreaking ethnologist and reformer of Indian policy, had worked with the Omahas as a missionary, teacher, and U.S. government official since the early 1880s. Francis La Flesche, Susan's brother, had become her major Omaha informant, and later jointly collaborated on the classic study of these Indians, *The Omaha Tribe* (1911). As a result

of her friendship with Francis and her contact with Iron Eye and his children, Fletcher took special note of their problems and also took pride in her efforts on behalf of the family. A frequent visitor to Indian policy-reform gatherings at Lake Mohonk, she came in contact with the very rich and very influential, individuals capable of both formulating changes in Indian affairs and of providing philanthropically for the medical education of a bright, aspiring young Indian woman.

Among the people Fletcher met at Lake Mohonk was Sara Thomson Kinney, president of the Connecticut Indian Association and wife of the editor of the *Hartford Courant*. Fletcher informed Kinney of Susan's interest and potential in the field of medicine. Thereupon, Kinney approached General Armstrong and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs about the possibility of sponsoring Susan's education. In June of 1886, Armstrong replied that Susan was the "finest, strongest Indian character we have had at the school. She is a level-headed, earnest, capable Christian woman," deserving of every chance to study medicine. He added that as a physician, "she can do much for her people. She is clear-headed and independent; naturally, a deep, but not a sentimental woman." He emphatically urged the Connecticut Indian Association to "take her up."⁷ Convinced of the worthiness of the undertaking, Kinney and her associates became the financial sponsors of Susan's medical training.

As a result of Kinney's efforts, Susan affectionately referred to the Hartford reformer as "mother-in-chief," and considered herself the adopted or foster daughter of the Connecticut Indian Association.⁸ In her letter thanking Kinney for her support, Susan expressed the reason for her decision to study medicine⁷:

I was very glad to get your letter, and it made me very happy to think I had so many mothers, who were going to take care of and help me. I cannot tell you how thankful I feel to all of you, and how glad to think that through me you will be helping so many people. It has always been a desire of mine to study medicine ever since I was a small girl, for even then I saw the need of my people for a good physician.

Sex discrimination

A major stumbling block involved Susan's gaining admission to medical school. Women in the medical profession in the 1880s were just beginning to attack the problem of sex discrimination. Although women had had a place in medicine prior to the American Revolution, that position had virtually disappeared by 1840. Elizabeth Blackwell was the first woman to receive a "regular" medical degree from Geneva Medical College in 1849. However, not until the founding of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1850 did women begin to re-establish their place in the profession (Fig. 2). Although certain medical schools in the west granted degrees to women



FIGURE 2. Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, 1875-1920, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Courtesy Medical College of Pennsylvania Archives)

as early as the 1850s and 1860s, most notably Western Reserve and the University of Michigan, eastern colleges, except for Boston University, lingered far behind. Even where women were admitted to previously all-male institutions, they were viewed, well into the twentieth century, as less than equal to men. Hospital internships and residencies were refused to "doctoring ladies," as they were derogatorily called; many state and county medical societies excluded them from admission.^{1,9,10}

Because of Philadelphia's early and central role in women's medical education and the city's reputation as a bastion of Indian policy-reform activity—the seat of the Indian Rights Association (1882) to this day—Susan's sponsors attempted to secure admission to the Woman's Medical College. Through the efforts of Dr. Waldron, a graduate of the school, and Alfred Jones, a member of the executive committee of the college, Susan was admitted as a "beneficiary student" in the late summer of 1886.¹¹ A final hitch occurred when the Department of the Interior refused to pay Susan's transportation costs to Philadelphia. In typical fashion, Kinney stepped into the situation by paying the costs, thereby averting a potential disaster. Besides tuition, room, board, and transportation costs, the Connecticut reformer and her associates also provided for clothing and books, prepared the transportation schedule, and made sure that a representative of the medical school met Susan at the train depot.^{12,13}

Medical education

In September, 1886, Susan, suffering from train sickness, reached Philadelphia, and was greeted by Elizabeth Bundy, an instructor of anatomy. On her arrival at the Woman's Medical College, Rachel Bodley, M.D., the dean of the school, welcomed Susan warmly before the audience of new medical students. Susan, appreciative of the cordiality of Bodley's reception, wrote home: "She is very nice

and kind to me and always asks if I am happy here. I like her very much."¹⁴

Susan's three-year program of study was clearly outlined in the annual catalogue of the medical school. It described the first-year ordeal¹⁵:

Students are expected to attend, during their first winter in college, the lectures on Chemistry, Anatomy, Physiology, Histology, Materia Medica and General Therapeutics, and Obstetrics; to dissect one or two of the usual divisions of the cadaver, to attend the daily clinics of the Woman's Hospital and the weekly examinations in Chemistry, Anatomy and Physiology. All students are examined at the end of their first winter term on the lectures upon Inorganic Chemistry, in Anatomy on the osseous system and the articulations, in Physiology on the first half of the course, and in Histology.

In contrast with the strict regulations at Hampton, students at the medical school were not required to attend class, although all did so in fear of missing important lectures on which they would be tested weekly.¹⁶

At the Woman's Medical College, Susan studied under several nationally recognized physicians, including Clara Marshall, M.D., professor of materia medica and general therapeutics, William H. Paris, M.D., professor of anatomy, and William W. Keen, M.D., professor of the principles and practice of surgery. Dr. Keen, who later became the leader of the surgical team that secretly and successfully removed a sarcoma from the mandible of President Grover Cleveland,^{16,17} was delighted to hear that Susan planned to return to the Omahas to practice medicine after graduation. He gave her a surgery-room ticket to watch him perform two operations. She described Dr. Keen's skill with a scalpel to her sister Rosalie. In the first procedure taking 10 minutes, Keen "took a tumour as big as a small apple from the neck or below the ear of a colored girl." In the second operation, which lasted two and a half minutes, he removed a needle from the thigh of a young girl after etherizing, making a perfect half-inch incision and probing the wound. Susan was ecstatic: "It was wonderful. They (students) clapped, but he stopped them."¹⁸

Anatomy appeared to interest Susan more than any other class. Her sense of humor was constantly reflected in her letters to Rosalie describing her experiences in the dissecting room. She joked: "I don't mind it at all in any way . . . I am going to wield the knife tonight—not the scalping knife, though."¹⁹ Her enjoyment of school was also revealed in her letters²⁰:

I like my studies very much indeed and don't mind the dissecting room at all. We laugh and talk up there just as we do anywhere. Six students take one body . . . the whole body lies there . . . and is divided into 6 parts. Two take the head . . . 2 the chest . . . 2 the abdomen and legs. Then we take off little by little . . .

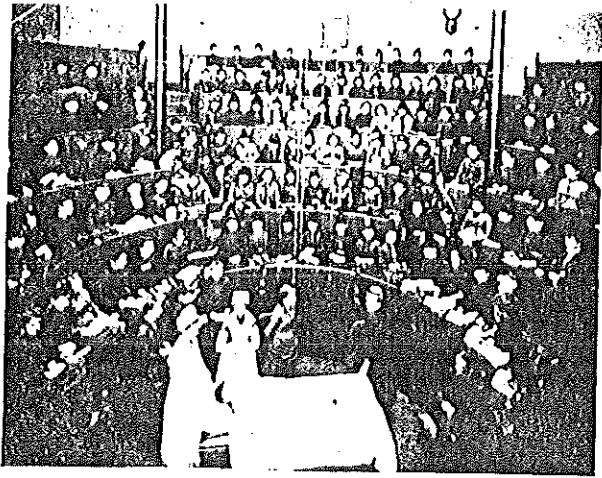


FIGURE 3. Class lecture, Woman's Hospital, 1890, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Courtesy Medical College of Pennsylvania Archives)

Ist the skin . . . then the tissue . . . then one muscle is lifted showing arteries . . . veins . . . nerves, etc. It is interesting to get all the arteries and the branches . . . everything has a name from the little tiny holes in the bones. It is splendid.

At a coed clinic at the Pennsylvania Hospital with Jefferson Medical College students, she was overjoyed to see one of the male students, part of a group who teased the allegedly faint-hearted "doctoring ladies," keel over during an amputation.²¹

In sharp contrast to the levity and enjoyment, Susan also faced the realities of patients' illnesses and death. The clinical lectures at the Woman's Hospital, held in a giant amphitheater, brought her in contact with the tremendous suffering of female patients from diseases, as she wrote, that she could never have imagined before (Fig. 3). Her letter to Rosalie elaborating on the clinic ended abruptly when Susan realized she was describing a chamber of horrors.²²

Susan's colleagues at the Woman's Medical College included students from all parts of the United States and from Australia, India, and Japan. She was aided in her studies by Sarah Lockrey, an intelligent second-year student, who lent Susan her notebook every morning after chemistry lecture. Susan's two closest friends were Jane Reid and Martha Emily Garner. Reid, who was interested in American Indians and whose favorite pastime was reading Dickens, studied physiology with Susan; Garner, a missionary who had worked with the Cherokees in North Carolina, shared her nonstudying time with Susan, singing "Lorena," and snacking cookies or candies. During examination week, the harried medical students studied together, trying to anticipate the questions. Susan, fearing the worst on her chemistry and anatomy examinations, found them easier than she thought they would be.²³

Indian heritage

Despite the rigors of medical school, Susan did not lose sight of her American Indian heritage. The Omaha woman periodically paid visits to the Indian boarding-school students at Carlisle, Hampton, and Lincoln Institutes. She was proud of the Omahas' high standing at the schools and delighted at the attention she was accorded.²⁴ It is clear that she served as a role-model for many of the younger boarding-school students. In August, 1889, in Hampton's student body publication, *Talks and Thoughts*, she was praised for her accomplishments. The author of that article recalled Susan's work at Hampton and her success in medical school and insisted that, although it was impossible for any other student to do as well, "it wouldn't hurt us to try and be as good."²⁵ Susan's strong commitment to these students was never more apparent than in a letter she sent to her sister Rosalie on January 26, 1887. She had just secured a summer position, undoubtedly through the efforts of one of her sponsors, to wait on tables at a seaside resort. In the letter, she insisted that she "would rather go down to Hampton since I can't go home. It is so hard but it can't be helped and so next to going home I would rather go down and teach or do some hospital work."²⁶

Sacrificing love

In one of the major crises of her days in medical school, Susan fell in love with Thomas Ikinicapi, a full-blooded Sioux from South Dakota and a student at Hampton. A sickly boy, suffering from tuberculosis, and eventually dying from that disease at an early age, Thomas was described in a history of Hampton Institute as "an unusually gentlemanly fellow, kind and thoughtful, and made many friends wherever he was thrown."²⁷ Thomas, with little formal education, had been tutored in his studies by Susan while she was a student at Hampton. Later, she wrote to Rosalie that he was "*without exception*, the handsomest Indian I ever saw."²⁸ After seeing him during her Christmas recess from medical school on one of her visits back to Hampton, she anxiously wrote Rosalie that she wanted to help him in his studies but was afraid of "how our Platonic Friendship will end."²⁹ In part, the crisis stemmed from her agreement, in accepting her scholarship, not to marry before the end of her medical training. Moreover, the disparity in their educational levels worked against marriage. Under family pressure, she eventually and reluctantly broke off the relationship, although she continued to receive reports about Thomas's education progress.^{30,31} Thomas, to no avail, wrote Susan that he missed her and that he wanted to sing to her.³² Susan's frustration in the matter was apparent; on March 2, 1887, she wrote Rosalie: "So I will be the dear little old maid we read about in books."³³

Responsibilities and commitments

Susan's concern for her family's welfare did not waver because of their opposition to Thomas. Throughout her medical training, she "doctored" them by mail and urged Rosalie to "always send me as many cases as you can."³⁴ Very much worried about Rosalie's pregnancy, "Dr. Sue," as she called herself in her letters, gave advice on nutrition to combat her sister's frequent colds and toothaches. When her mother complained of a sore hand and foot, Susan sent her petroleum jelly (carbonated Vaseline) to spread over the troubled areas of her body because it had done "a great deal of good for my sore."³⁵ She also recommended that her mother eat meat or chicken more frequently. On another occasion, she ordered a new artificial leg for her father.³⁶

Susan's letters reveal that she was torn with guilt feelings about her absence from familial responsibilities. She was given the opportunity to study medicine and visit another part of the country while Rosalie, an equally bright woman, was left behind to manage family affairs and take care of her parents.³⁷ Whenever Susan was able to send money back to Nebraska, she immediately forwarded it to Rosalie. One way she raised money was by writing an article on the buffalo hunt for a third-grade schoolbook reader.³⁸ Furthermore, it is evident by the detailed descriptions in her letters that she wanted to share her adventures in the "City of Brotherly Love" with her family. She carefully described her visits to the Academy of Music and to the Academy of Fine Arts to hear concerts, experience *The Mikado*, and to see "Miss Frances E. Willard, the great temperance lecturer."³⁹ She wrote vividly about her visits to the military drill parades at Girard College, Old Swede's Church, Independence Hall, Philadelphia City Hall, and Fairmount Park.⁴⁰ On New Year's Day, 1888, she witnessed the Mummies' Parade, where some white marchers wore black-face makeup. Susan commented sarcastically: "We saw some of the parade—they dressed up as Indians too and they looked pretty well for Indians."⁴¹

Her commitment to return to the Omahas was reaffirmed in 1888. During summer recess after completing her second year in medical school, she spent several months back on the reservation. On reaching home, Susan found her people ravished by an outbreak of measles with "almost every family . . . in mourning for one, two or three little ones."⁴² She was appalled at the general level of public health, nutrition, and sanitation. She wrote about her experiences to Mrs. Kinney and indicated her renewed desire to return after the completion of her medical studies: . . . "I want to do so much because there is so much to be done."⁴²

Her connection to Kinney and other reformers of Indian policy continued throughout her days in Philadelphia. Susan was sought after to speak on behalf of Indian policy reform in the city as well as

in other parts of the east. She was invited to teas to talk about American Indians, or received letters from "do-gooders" asking her how they might help her people. Susan's responses included sending a lengthy letter to the president of the Indian Association of Burlington, Vermont, to secure funds for house construction projects among the Omahas.⁴³

Medical degree

On March 14, 1889, Susan was graduated from the Woman's Medical College at the head of her class of 36 students. In his graduation address, James Walker, M.D., professor of the principles and practice of medicine, lauded Susan for "her courage, constancy, and ability."^{44, 45} After taking competitive examinations, Susan was one of six medical graduates selected to intern at the Woman's Hospital.⁴⁶ After her internship, she returned to her tribe to serve as the resident physician at the government school. In her application for a medical position among the Omahas, she recounted her background and education, adding: "I feel that I have an advantage in knowing the language and customs of my people, and as a physician can do a great deal to help them."⁴⁷ Until her death in 1915, she remained committed to that pledge.

Medicine woman

Within a short time, Susan was appointed Omaha agency physician. The new "medicine woman" made house calls on horseback, treating diseases ranging from influenza to tuberculosis. After four years in the position, she resigned and soon after married Henry Picotte, half Sioux and half French in ancestry. They settled in Bancroft, Nebraska, where they reared two children and attended to the medical needs of Indians and non-Indians. When her husband died in 1905, Susan moved to the new town of Walthill, Nebraska, where she served as a medical missionary for the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions; she helped establish the county medical society and a hospital that was subsequently renamed for her after her death.⁴⁸

Despite Susan's early life in the "Make-Believe-White-Man's Village," her assimilationist schooling in the east, and her status as a white-trained physician, Susan never lost touch with her Omaha tribesmen. She spoke Omaha and was well acquainted with the tribe's traditional ceremonies and songs. Her interest in tribal affairs was reflected by her leadership of the temperance movement, her constant championing of Indian self-determination, and her criticism of the bureaucratic trust relationship that the U.S. government had imposed on her people. Susan's Omaha roots were reaffirmed in death. At her funeral in 1915, after a Presbyterian minister delivered the official eulogy, an Omaha elder, speaking the tribal tongue, recited a closing prayer. A product of two very different cultures, Susan La Flesche had achieved a seemingly unattainable goal:

success in two worlds. To Indian and non-Indian alike, she had become *the* medicine woman.

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