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Women in History

Dr. Susan LaFlesche Picotte: American Physician and Heroine

Bernita L. Krumm

Susan LaFlesche, youngest child in a family of one son and four daughters of Mary and Joseph LaFlesche, was born in 1865 on the Omaha reservation near Macy in northeastern Nebraska. LaFlesche was of mixed cultures, French and Native American. Her mother, Mary (One Woman), was a daughter of Dr. John Gale and Ni-co-mi of the Iowa tribe; Joseph, also known as Iron Eye (E-sta-mah-za), was a son of Joseph LaFlesche, a French trader and his wife, a woman of the Ponca tribe. Iron Eye was the last recognized chief of the Omaha and the last to become chief under the old Omaha rituals; he was the adopted son of Chief Big Elk, the First, of the Omahas.

Iron Eyes believed American culture would overwhelm Omaha culture; he encouraged education for all tribal members and peaceful cohabitation with the white peoples. LaFlesche learned from her father, gaining an eagerness to learn and a desire to help others. As a child, she rode her pony over the rolling prairie hills by the Missouri River and helped with family chores. Between 1870 and 1879 she attended the mission and government schools on the reservation; prior to attending school, LaFlesche did not speak English.

Several accounts record that at a very young age LaFlesche witnessed an incident involving a Caucasian doctor who refused to care for a dying Native American woman. She was inspired by that incident to become a physician, ultimately becoming the first Native American woman to earn a medical degree. LaFlesche recognized the difficulties of being part of both cultures and sought a way to help the Omaha people.

In 1879 LaFlesche and her sister, Marguerite, went to the Elizabeth Institute for Young Ladies in New Jersey where their older sister Susette had previously attended. Picotte attended the institute for three years, studying philosophy, physiology, and literature. She graduated in 1882 at age 17, and taught at the Quaker Mission School on the Omaha Reservation from 1882 to 1884.

About the Author

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While at the Quaker Mission School, LaFlesche attended to the health of Alice Fletcher, an anthropologist and Native American advocate who also worked at the school. Susan expressed her desire to learn the skills necessary to help people medically. Fletcher suggested she go to college at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), known for its Native American outreach agenda. Along with two of her sisters, LaFlesche attended Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia from 1884 to 1886. She graduated as salutatorian of her class in May of 1886 and received a gold medal for high scholastic achievement.

With the help of Dr. Martha M. Waldron, the school doctor at Hampton Institute, LaFlesche entered the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia in 1886. The Women's National Indian Association, founded in 1880, had begun a program of financing professional training for talented Indians. This program provided financial aid for Susan to attend the Women's Medical College. She completed the three-year course in two years and graduated in 1889 at the top of her class of 36 students. Not quite 24 years of age, LaFlesche became the first formally educated Native American woman physician.

After interning for one year at Women's Hospital in Philadelphia, Dr. LaFlesche returned to the reservation to become a physician for the government school at the Omaha Agency. Later her medical services were extended to the rest of the tribe. This was a daunting task, for the Omaha population of over 1200 was scattered throughout the reservation lands and horseback was the principal means of transportation. Dr. LaFlesche often served as health teacher and nurse as well as physician, treating patients who suffered from cholera, dysentery, and influenza. She was committed and conscientious in her labors, but the work was difficult. In 1893, after four years she resigned her position as the government doctor.

In the summer of 1894, LaFlesche married Henry Picotte who was half Sioux and half French in ancestry, and added the Picotte name to her own.

They moved to Bancroft, Nebraska, where she started a private practice treating Native and non-Native patients and cared for her ailing mother. Although she suffered from a painful, degenerative bone disease, Dr. Picotte traveled to her patients by day and received them in her home at night, treating all who needed help, regardless of their race. She adopted Christianity, and became a missionary of the Omaha Blackbird Hills Presbyterian Church. The Picottes had two sons, Caryl and Pierre. In 1905 Henry died of complications related to alcoholism; Dr. Picotte, along with her sons and her mother, moved to the newly formed community of Walthill to live near her sister, Marguerite Diddock.

Picotte was active in the Walthill community, involved in community and church affairs and the women's club. She helped found the Thurston County Medical Association and became the county health officer and a member of the State Medical Association. She lobbied the state legislature for better public health laws, worked to fight alcoholism on the Omaha reservation, and lectured in favor of temperance. In 1906 Dr. Picotte headed a delegation to Washington, DC, to fight against the sale of liquor in Nebraska. The delegation succeeded in gaining the stipulation that every deed for property in towns established on the Omaha and Winnebago reservations should forever prohibit the sale of liquor.

In addition to her medical career, Dr. Picotte was a public health advocate and a civil rights activist. She became a spokesperson for her people, battling government bureaucracy and working for economic, social, and spiritual advancement of Native Americans. She lectured in the United States and Europe with her sister Suzette to provide information about the problems that confronted Indian people. Dr. Picotte campaigned against the trust system, which held tribal property in trust by the federal government; she believed the trust system was detrimental to Indian self determination.

Dr. Picotte was the only Indian ever appointed as a medical missionary by the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions. Under its sponsorship in January of 1913, Dr. Picotte used grants and donations to open a new hospital on the reservation in Walthill. However, her involvement with the hospital was cut short when she underwent surgery to alleviate pain from bone disease (an infection of her facial bones); she died due to complications on September 18, 1915, at 50 years of age. She was buried in Bancroft, Nebraska.

After Dr. Picotte's death, the hospital was renamed in her honor; it continued to serve patients until the late 1940s and for a time thereafter it served as a care center for the elderly. In 1989 the building was restored and in 1993 it was designated as a National Historic Landmark. The Susan

LaFlesche Picotte Center now houses a museum dedicated to Dr. Picotte's work and the history of the Omaha and Winnebago tribes.

Susan LaFlesche Picotte walked in two cultures and, by any measure, served as a model for both. She overcame incredible obstacles to become the first Native American woman doctor in the United States. Most estimates agree that in 25 years she treated every member of the Omaha tribe. She dedicated her life to the service of others; she is without a doubt the true American heroine.

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