

Metis Woman Becomes MD in 1889

Susan LaFlesche (1865-1915)

In 1889, Susan LaFlesche gained the distinction of being the first Native American woman to become a doctor of medicine. Susan was born on the Omaha Reservation, the Metis daughter of Joseph LaFlesche and Mary Gale. Joseph LaFlesche was the son of a Ponca mother and a French trapper-trader father. His mother was the sister of Ponca chief Standing Grizzly Bear.

Susan's mother, Mary Gale was the daughter of military officer and surgeon, Dr. John Gale and his Omaha wife, Nicomi (Voice of the Waters). It is interesting to note that Susan's father, Joseph, became a chief of the Omahas. As Metis, his children were all given land grants on the Great Nemaha Half Breed Tract; however, most of them sold this land and lived on the Omaha reserve.

Susan Laflesche was educated at the reservation school after which she and Marguerite followed their elder sister Susette to the Elizabeth Institute for Young Ladies in New Jersey. She studied for three years there then returned to teach at the Presbyterian Mission school. In 1884, Marguerite and Susan returned to the East and enrolled in the Hampton (Virginia) Normal and Agricultural Institute, a school set up for Blacks and American Indians. She graduated with honours in 1886 and the following October entered the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia. She again excelled and graduated at the top of her class in 1889. She thus earned the distinction of being the first Native American woman to become a doctor of medicine.

Upon completion of a four-month internship she returned to the Omaha Reservation and worked as a physician at the local school. Shortly thereafter she was appointed as doctor for the entire Omaha Agency (1889-1893). The work included advising, teaching and interpreting and was overwhelming. In 1893 she took leave to care for her infirm mother. Additionally, she was in ill health herself. In spite of this she announced that she intended to marry Henry Picotte, the brother of Charles Picotte, her sister's husband. They married in 1894 and settled at Bancroft, Nebraska, where he farmed and she practiced medicine. They had two sons, Carl and Pierre. Her husband died in 1905 and she took a subsequent appointment as missionary to the Omaha on behalf of the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, in addition to her medical practice.

Susan became politically active and in 1910 headed a delegation to Washington to address the Secretary of the Interior on citizenship for the Omaha Indians. Meanwhile she advocated for better health practices and preventive health care. She campaigned for a hospital and the facility opened in 1913. Until her death in 1915 she was an inspiration and role model to countless young Omaha Indian women.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute