



Mary Eliza Mahoney

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She Saw Her Calling as Nursing

by Victoria McAfee

Mary Eliza Mahoney was the first black professional nurse in America. She was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts, around May 7, 1845, the oldest of three children. Her parents, freed slaves, relocated from North Carolina prior to the Civil War. Mahoney and her family faithfully attended People's Baptist Church in Roxbury. She attended one of the first integrated public grade schools in Boston—Phillips School. In addition to general academics, the school emphasized humanitarian efforts, sacrificial giving, integrity, ethics, truth, and love.

This kind of teaching inspired Mahoney to begin thinking about becoming a nurse. A physician whose name is not known asked for Mahoney's hand in marriage but ended the relationship after a brief courtship. This affected her deeply, and she never married.

Mahoney began working as a cook, maid, janitor, and untrained nurse's aide at the New England Hospital for Women and Children. She juggled these roles in the hospital, sometimes for 16 hours a day for over 15 years. The New England Hospital was a pioneer in the nursing field with state-of-the-art medical care given only by female physicians.

Eventually, on March 3, 1878, the hospital allowed Mahoney to enroll in a 16-month nursing program. The application required the trainee to be Caucasian, able to clear a physical fitness test, and have a reputation of faith and good character. The intensive program included 12 hours of required lectures, plus lessons and hands-on training in the hospital where she was in complete charge of a ward with six patients. The exhausting shifts ran from 5:30 A.M. until 9:30 P.M. seven days a week with no scheduled free time. The trainees were given \$1 a week for the first six months, then \$2 for the second six months, and \$3 for the last four months. That was enough, the hospital believed, for the trainees to buy a uniform, a calico dress, and slippers for their duties.

Mahoney weighed less than 100 pounds and she was only 5 feet tall. In spite of all the illnesses around, she didn't miss a single day of training. Mahoney was one of only three of the 42 students who completed the training. She received her nursing certification in 1879, the first African American to earn such an honor. This blazed the trail for other black women desiring to be nurses, including her sister.

Mahoney spent the next 30 years as a private care nurse for the nurses' directory of the Boston Medical Library, which assigned nurses to families throughout the area at a time when serious illnesses were most often treated at home, not in a hospital. Her clients repeatedly called for her, and they came from the most prominent Boston families. Though she stayed in the area, she did journey to Washington to nurse the husband of a friend who was dying of tuberculosis. Mahoney lived in an apartment with her sister Ellen so they could attend church together, and she refused to be treated by the families she served as more of a

housemaid than a nurse—she would not eat in the kitchen with the household staff. Once again, she pioneered the way for other African Americans with her hard work, efficiency, and professionalism.

According to a biography of Mahoney by Susan Muaddi Darraj, "Mahoney is said to have been quiet, competent... have a strong faith in God... [and] very likely believed her work was a religious calling. Caring for the sick was viewed as charitable, humanitarian work that complimented what it means to be a good Christian. Nursing was a way to put one's faith into action and have a direct impact on the lives of the needy and downtrodden."

Mahoney broke the color barrier when she was accepted into the all-white American Nurses Association (ANA). But when they did not show an interest in having more black nurses, she helped organize the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN) to eliminate racial discrimination in the profession. She gave the address at their first convention and urged members to push for more minorities to be trained as nurses through the New England Hospital. She was named a life-long member of the group and became their chaplain.

From 1911–1912, she relocated to Long Island, New York, to serve as director of the Howard Orphan Asylum for freed black children and the elderly, but she then returned to Boston.

After over 40 years of nursing, Mahoney retired, but she continued to fight for minority rights. In 1920, after the passage of the 19th Amendment that permitted women to vote, she lined up at the age of 76 to be among the first women to register to vote in Boston. She attended her last national NACGN conference in 1921, when she and other nurses were the guests of the Freedman's Hospital Alumnae Association and visited the White House to meet President and Mrs. Warren G. Harding.

Mahoney became ill with metastatic breast cancer in 1923. In December 1925, she was rushed to the New England Hospital with severe pain, and despite excellent care from the staff, she died there on January 4, 1926, at the age of 80.

Ten years after her death, the NACGN created a Mary Mahoney Award for women who have helped raise the status of African Americans in nursing. After the NACGN and ANA later merged, the ANA continued to present that award, and in 1976 they inducted Mahoney into the ANA's Hall of Fame. In 1973, the African-American sorority Chi Eta Phi cleaned up Mahoney's gravesite in Woodlawn Cemetery in Everett, Massachusetts, and erected a monument to this pioneering nurse.

The Jacksonville University Nursing Program describes Mary Mahoney as "not just an inspiration to African-American women, but to the entire nursing profession. Her drive and passion for nursing helped shape the standards that the profession has come to expect and continues to develop." Her efforts to promote equality in nursing were successful. In 1910, about 2,400 African-American nurses worked in the profession, but by 1930, four years after her death, that number had more than doubled.



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