

## She Wanted to Do Something Important

Elizabeth **Blackwell**



Imagine this: You are a young woman who really wants to be a doctor, but there is a big problem. There are no women doctors because women are not admitted to medical schools. So what do you do?

Your name is Elizabeth Blackwell, and this is the situation you face in the 1800s. You don't want to give up your dream, so you apply to twenty-nine medical schools. You are turned down by twenty-eight of them, but the twenty-ninth accepts you, and you are on your way to fulfilling your dream. You become the first woman to receive a medical degree from a medical school in America, and you prepare the way for the women doctors who come after you.

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"If Society will not admit of woman's free development, then society must be remodeled."

—Elizabeth Blackwell  
(1821–1910)



## They Stood Alone!

Elizabeth was born in Bristol, England, in 1821, one of nine children. The Blackwells were a most unusual family because the principle of equality was a guiding rule in the Blackwell home. Elizabeth's parents, Samuel and Hannah, believed strongly in civil liberties and supported social reforms which included the abolition of slavery.

Unlike most English parents in the 1800s, Samuel and Hannah Blackwell believed that girls should be as well educated as boys and insisted that their sons and daughters be taught the same subjects. This meant that Elizabeth and her sisters studied the same subjects as their brothers, including history, astronomy, mathematics, and foreign languages.

When hard times came to England in 1831 and people lost their jobs, rioting broke out in Bristol. People were killed, buildings were set on fire, and the Blackwell family was deeply upset by the violence. Samuel saw little hope of saving his sugar refinery business without borrowing money, so he decided to make a fresh start in America where there were more opportunities.

Elizabeth was eleven when her family moved to America. They settled in New York City where her father built another sugar refinery, refusing to use slave labor.

As her father began to rebuild his business, the Blackwell family was faced with some of the same social problems they had back home, especially the problem of slavery. Elizabeth's family had always been opposed to slavery, and they opened their home to the abolitionists.

The Blackwell sisters were also drawn to another reform movement gaining strength in the United States during the 1800s—the Women's Movement for Equal Rights.

When Samuel suffered great losses during the financial depression of 1837, he moved his family from New York City to Cincinnati, Ohio, on the advice of a cousin.

Only three months after the move, Samuel became sick and died in August 1838, leaving the family destitute.

Elizabeth and her mother opened a boarding school in their home while Elizabeth's brothers and sisters also worked to help provide income for the family.

At age twenty-three Elizabeth was asked to take charge of a girls' school in Henderson, Kentucky. While in Kentucky, she was so upset by the treatment of the slaves and the proslavery attitudes of the South that she returned to Ohio within the year.

By age twenty-four she was longing for a purpose in life. She wanted to do something important. But she was a girl. What could she do?

Mary Donaldson, a family friend who was dying of cancer, finally convinced her that she could become a doctor. Somebody had to be the first woman doctor. Why not Elizabeth?

But when Elizabeth consulted several physicians, they were unanimous in their response: they all warned her that for a woman to become a doctor was impossible to accomplish.

Refusing to be discouraged by all the arguments against her becoming a doctor, she applied for admission to twenty-nine medical schools. She was turned down by twenty-eight of them.

Then finally, when she was twenty-six, little Geneva College in upstate New York, the twenty-ninth school, said yes!

She found out later that the Geneva medical students had been given the final say on her admission because everyone thought her application was a joke. No one had even taken it seriously.

When she arrived for classes in November 1847, everyone was most surprised! The students learned to like and respect her, but it was not so easy with the townspeople. They avoided her because they believed she was either crazy or "bad."

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Curious strangers even visited her class lecture room just to stare at her.

In her own words, "I had not the slightest idea of the commotion created by my appearance as a medical student in the little town. Very slowly I perceived that a doctor's wife at the table avoided any communication with me, and that as I walked backwards and forwards to college, the ladies stopped to stare at me, as at a curious animal."<sup>22</sup>

As a female medical student, she felt a special commitment to her women patients. The more she saw how women patients were treated, the stronger her mission to help women became.

She graduated first in her class in 1849. She was now Dr. Blackwell, the first woman to receive a medical degree from a medical school in America. January 23, 1849, was a day that would forever change the world of medicine: Elizabeth Blackwell was about to become the very first woman doctor of modern times.

She then moved to Paris to continue her medical education, but while there, her dream of becoming a surgeon was shattered after she contracted a severe eye infection from an infected baby she was treating. Eventually her damaged left eye had to be replaced with a glass eye.

She then returned to England, but realizing that there were more opportunities for her in America, she returned to New York City in 1851.

At first, people did not want to go to a woman doctor. But she knew who really needed her—poor women and children. She opened a one-room clinic to serve women in 1853, and she did much more than treat sickness. She was a strong believer in preventive medicine and taught her patients the importance of good hygiene and nutrition. She believed that prevention was better than cure.

She worked very hard and by 1857 her clinic had grown into a hospital: The New York Infirmary for Women and Children. Elizabeth served as the director, her sister Emily was the clinic's surgeon, and Dr. Marie Zakrzewska was the resident physician. They ran a hospital for women and staffed entirely by women. At the time, male doctors and nurses made up 99 percent of the medical profession,<sup>23</sup> so this represented an extraordinary step in the history of medicine.

Women had been waiting for just such an opportunity, and within a month, all the beds were filled and dozens of patients showed up at the outpatient clinic. Other women could study to be nurses at her hospital, and in 1868 Elizabeth added a medical college for women which became known as the New York Infirmary for Women and Children and the Women's Medical College. Now other women could become doctors as well as nurses.

She continued to stress the importance of good personal hygiene because back then conditions in hospitals were very unsanitary. Doctors wore their street clothes, they didn't wash their hands between seeing patients, and rats even ran over patients' bodies at some hospitals.

In 1869 Elizabeth returned to London to help open the field of medicine for women there and helped found the London School of Medicine for Women. And in 1871 she started the National Health Society which helped people learn how to stay healthy.

When Elizabeth Blackwell earned her medical degree, this was a historic moment in modern medicine and women's liberation. She had challenged the medical world—and society's ideas about women—to become America's first female physician. The shy little girl had indeed done something important with her life.

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By the time she died on May 31, 1910, at the age of eighty-nine, Elizabeth Blackwell had left a legacy that paved the way for countless generations of female physicians.

Physician, educator, reformer, and women's rights activist, Elizabeth Blackwell was a woman of vision who not only fulfilled her own impossible dream, but also made possible the dreams of the women who followed her.