



Photo by Lona on Unsplash

# Women Make History:

## Stories we should have learned in school

### ***“The Arrow of the Future Shot from the Bow of the Past.”***

**Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte  
First Native American Physician  
described by her friend**



### **Against the Current: Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte First Native American Physician**

In 1865, Susan La Flesche Picotte was born on the wind-scorched prairie of Nebraska, during what would be the Omaha tribe's last buffalo hunt. The word, Omaha, means against the current, and Picotte would live her life accordingly. Defying social and political norms, she became the [first](#) Native American physician in the U.S. and the first person to open a non-government hospital on tribal land.

Picotte grew up on the Omaha reservation in the crosshairs of time, straddling two distinct worlds: those of her tribe and those of the white settlers who governed their lives. Deeply concerned for his tribe's survival, Picotte's father, Chief Iron Eye, insisted that his children attend a missionary school to learn English and convert to Christianity. He even built and lived in a cabin instead of a tipi, in an area of the reservation some described as "the pretend white man's village."



Picotte, center, with her family. Photo: U Nebraska

Picotte also embraced the Omaha way of life. As a young girl, she witnessed the death of a Native woman who had waited in agony through the night for a white doctor. He never arrived. The experience haunted Picotte, and became her motivation. "I saw the need of my people for a good physician."

In 1879, at age 14, she and her older sister boarded a train to travel more than 1,000 miles to a school for young ladies in New Jersey. Two years later, she earned a scholarship to the [Hampton School](#) in Virginia, (now Hampton University), founded to educate freed slaves and Native Americans. By graduation, Picotte spoke fluent French, had a passion for music and art, and could quote Shakespeare.

Picotte remembered both the death she had witnessed and her father's [admonition](#): "Do you...want to be simply called those Indians, or do you want to go to school and be somebody in the world?" She decided to become a doctor, an ambition that was next to impossible to fulfill. Women couldn't vote and they had few economic or educational opportunities. Women were also discouraged from attending medical school and told that the stress would make them infertile. Some people even believed that women had smaller brains than men making them less competent as doctors.

Native Americans were also denied U.S. citizenship. When it came to what whites called the "Indian problem," the prevailing philosophy was summed up by Captain Richard Henry Pratt. He [said](#), "Kill the Indian...save the man."

Yet, Picotte prevailed. At age 19, she was accepted to the [Woman's Medical College of Philadelphia](#). A group of wealthy, white feminists paid her tuition and mentored her. In return, she promised not to marry until after graduating and working for two years as a doctor. Picotte completed her studies a year early and graduated valedictorian at age 26. She returned to the reservation and became the only doctor for the more than 1,300 people living in the 1,200 square mile tribal community. Smallpox, tuberculosis, and alcoholism were rampant.

Picotte waited to [marry](#) until 1894. Afterwards, she continued to work, even when her two children were born, often bundling them into her wagon to ride along on house calls. Picotte's father died before her return, and without a chief, the tribe often turned to her for advice on non-medical issues. In 1913, without government funding, Picotte built the first



[hospital](#) on the reservation by raising the money herself. Its doors were open to all regardless of ethnicity.

Picotte's life was cut short in 1915 when she [died](#) from bone cancer. She was 50 years old. At her funeral, three priests delivered eulogies in English and a member of the

Omaha tribe offered final prayers in her Native language. Picotte's hospital served the community into the 1940s, before falling into disrepair. In 1989, the building was [restored](#), and renamed the [Susan La Flesche Picotte Center](#). Today it is a community center and houses artifacts from her life. It became a National Historic Landmark in 1993.

Picotte's story remained unknown beyond the Omaha tribe until the early 1990s when the first biography was written about her life. In 2016, the [documentary](#), *Medicine Woman*, was made for PBS by Christine M. Lesiak and Princella P.

Redcorn. The film chronicles Picotte's profound legacy on other Native women. In 2021, the City of Lincoln, Nebraska, erected a public [statue](#) in her honor.



The City of Lincoln, NE, erected a statue in honor of Dr. Susan LaFlesche Picotte in 2021.

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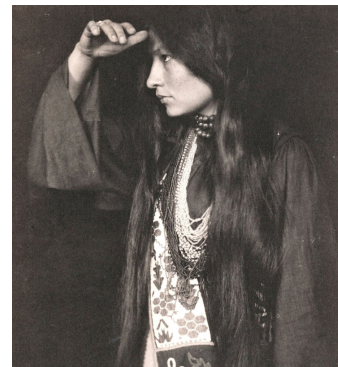
## Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

**Ask Yourself:** Have you ever witnessed something that compelled you to make a commitment to benefit others?

**Ask a Friend:** Have you ever had to straddle two worlds? What advice do you have for anyone else who must do this?

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**Update on Zitkála-Šá** If you've recently seen the movie, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, or read the book, you may recall my [newsletter](#) about this groundbreaking Native American woman. Zitkála-Šá uncovered the atrocities that were happening to Osage tribe and others yet sadly receives no credit for her report to the U.S. government filed in 1924. On a happier note, next year she will be honored with her image on a U.S. quarter.



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**Heartfelt gratitude to Sherry Brit** for having me speak at a chapter meeting of PEO, [Philanthropic Educational Organization](#), a nonprofit that celebrates and helps women reach for the stars. This group of phenomenal women have been supporting women since 1865.



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## Coming Soon: Women Make History Merch!

You asked and we are making it happen! (Hopefully) in time for the holidays, coffee / soup mugs and more will be available in the new **Women Make History** online store. Be watching for an email!



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.

Subscribe

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Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Please share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. [www.SharonSpaulding.com](http://www.SharonSpaulding.com)

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