

Pioneers in Professional Dietetics – Seventh in a Series: Dr. Esther Hill-Hawks: On Call in Trying Times

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Dr. Esther Hill Hawks' diary, *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, is a remarkable and detailed account of her activities and contributions as a medical doctor and educator of newly freed men, women, and children of the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida from 1862 to 1866. Originally from New Hampshire, Esther Hill (1833-1906) was a school teacher when she met Dr. John Milton (JM) Hawks at his medical practice in Manchester, NH. They married in 1854; both shared a passion for education, health, advancement of women, and the growing anti-slavery movement. Esther also found herself eagerly reading her husband's medical books and successfully completed her medical training, graduating from the New England Female Medical College in 1857. Her studies included "lectures and clinics in... chemistry, toxicology, physiology, hygiene, materia medica and therapeutics, anatomy, and surgery, as well as obstetrics, and diseases of women and children" (1, p 7). By the time the Civil War began in 1861, both Hawks were experienced teachers and physicians, owned a pharmacy – and for additional income, JM had developed a formula containing herbs, alcohol, and syrup he sold to US soldiers as a remedy for "colds, diarrhea, and rheumatism" (1, pp 11-12).

Esther's new directive: Union forces in November 1861 re-claimed the Sea Islands, setting in motion a new mission which required skilled professionals (doctors and teachers) and supplies to support their work (medicine, food, clothing, books and school supplies). From the Carolinas to Florida coastal areas, as slave-owners fled inland, thousands of newly liberated black families

were left behind, many of whom were starving and in need of medical attention, food, clothing, and education. In May of 1862, JM was appointed as a physician in a new hospital in Beaufort, S.C. to serve the needs of one of the first black regiments in the Union Army (1, pp 18-19). Later in October Esther arrived in Beaufort with the Freedman's Aid Society as a teacher (1, p 20). While she is listed as "Mrs. E.H. Hawkes" [note misspelling] on the roster of teachers sent to South Carolina by the New England Freedman's Association (2) with no indication of her medical credentials, her diary indicates she provided regular medical care and made important observations related to food supply and effects of starvation and lack of sanitation throughout her diary. Selected examples follow in Esther's own words.

When JM was sent away on assignment to Florida, Esther wrote, "Meanwhile no Surgeon being sent to take charge of the hospital, I am left manager of not only the affairs of the Hospital, but have to attend Surgeons' call...for three weeks I performed the duties of hospital and Regimental Surg. doing the work so well that the neglect to supply a regular officers was not discovered at Hd. Qtrs." (1, p 49).

Belief in preventive health care was shared by both Esther and her husband. While in one letter to him, she admonished him about diet and exercise (1, p 19), the diary's editor included the following statement from Dr. JM Hawks: "In all of my professional life, it has been my conviction that in nine-tenths of the cases where people recover from acute disease under various systems of medical practice, they would recover anyhow



without any medicine whatever, if they only had proper nursing, attendance, and dieting. Consequently, the true mission of the medical fraternity is to prevent disease by the timely teaching of the laws of health" (1, p 28).

This preventive health education philosophy was reflected in Esther's medical practice and rapport with patients. It appeared very important to her not just to provide medical care but to provide for the whole person (on this occasion the soldier) by empowering him to ultimately provide for his own care and hygiene. "I circulated among them with the greatest freedom – prescribing for them, ministering to their wants, teaching them, and making myself conversant with their inner lives as I could" (1, p 49).

She gained considerable experience in economy and distributing limited rations to poor civilians both black and white (1, p 77,109) – and at the same time witnessed the selfless generosity of many poor civilians who along with the Sanitary Commission and local aid societies

brought in food donations to assist in care of the 500 wounded of the famous 54th Massachusetts commanded by Col. Shaw at Fort Wagner (1, pp 50-51). Having actively tended these wounded and experienced their sacrifice and courage, her anger was evident when food and clothing donations sent for the 54th – including poultry she had procured for them – “disappeared” (1, p 55). It was some consolation to her that the officer in charge “soon ran his course in the hospital” (1, p 55). On a lighter note, the nutritional adequacy of hardtack bread (infamous as hard enough to break teeth) as a ration was doubtful to Dr. Hawkes when she observed its preparation – she declared that if it were “worn as armor, it would make the men invulnerable!” (1, p 62).

The end of the war in April 1865 did not end Esther and JM’s work improving the food, health and living conditions of military and civilian populations of coastal South Carolina and Florida. In May 1865, Esther wrote from Charleston: “There are over 300 people now at this place, and it would take a stout heart to ride unmoved, among them – dirty, ragged, *starving* expresses their condition... a little more food is all that is necessary to render them well and happy... the rations now allowed is not sufficient to sustain life” (1, p 141). Many had been living on rice and blackberries, some for days, others for a month. An elderly woman was found “sitting on the ground, because her poor swollen feet and legs could no longer carry her...” (1, p 141). Esther calculated that the per-family ration of salt pork and hominy for a week was only enough to feed them for a day. While it was important to plant

corn crops, Esther believed that it was challenging for new farmers to plant the same seed corn they were so hungry to eat (1, p 143).

The Hawks spent several years investing their resources and services in Florida to establish a school and community eventually known as Hawks Park. Eventually Esther returned to New England in 1870 to re-establish a successful medical practice in Lynn, Massachusetts. She remained an active force and inspiration in charitable causes till her death in 1906.

To do further research on Dr EH Hawks:
For those interested in examining actual documents, 515 items are physically housed at the Library of Congress which are accessible and described by LOC as: “Correspondence and other papers relating to the work of physicians, Esther Hill Hawks and her husband, J.M. Hawks, in caring for sick and wounded soldiers, including African Americans, in South Carolina during the Civil War.” (3) Online documents related to the network of Freedmen’s Bureaus who sent aid to Port Royal and other areas of the South can be found at Dr. Bronson Tours (4).

REFERENCES

A Woman Doctor’s Civil War – Esther Hill Hawks’ Diary. Edited by Gerald Schwartz. Women’s Diaries and Letters of the Nineteenth Century South Series. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994 (5th printing). Current USC Press webpage for this diary: <http://sc.edu/uscpress/books/pre1993/9622.html> Accessed June 12, 2016.

“Teachers sent to South Carolina in 1864-65 and All Teachers 1862-63 from the New England Freedman’s Association.” St. Augustine, FL: Dr. Bronson Tours. <http://www.drbronsontours.com/teachersent-newenglandfreedmansassoc186465.html> Accessed June 12, 2016.

Esther Hill Hawks Papers, 1856-1867. Library of Congress Online Catalog. <https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=6990&recCount=25&recPointer=0&biId=5806939> Accessed June 12, 2016.

“Freedmen Aid Societies Teacher Recruiters and Supporters for the Freedmen with Division of Canvassing Area and Location of Schools.” (Table with additional research document links.) St. Augustine, FL: Dr. Bronson Tours. <http://www.drbronsontours.com/bronsonfreedmenaid Societies.html> Accessed June 12, 2016.