

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

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Dr. Emma Culbertson, Surgeon and Gynecologist

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This research will explore the importance and influence of “Boston Marriages” on women in the medical profession during the Late Victorian Era thru the turn of the century. This will be done by examining the life of Dr. Emma Culbertson, a female Surgeon and Gynecologist of the Late Victorian Era, born in New Albany, Indiana. Dr. Culbertson was the epitome of what we would call a pioneer in her field. Though her professional practice was located primarily in Massachusetts, the barriers that she would break down, the glass ceilings that she would shatter would reverberate across the United States clearing the way for countless Hoosier women, and women across the country to take their rightful place in the professional world. In fact, she would actively write and lecture on women’s education and workplace rights throughout her life

After growing up and spending her formative years in Indiana, Dr. Culbertson would receive her education at Vassar College, the Women’s Medical College of Philadelphia, and Zurich, Switzerland. Upon completion of her Medical Degree in 1881, she would return to the United States where she would become a pioneer in the field of Women’s Health. She would also help establish the New England Hospital for Women and Children, become an advocate for nurses and teachers rights, and be the first woman admitted into American Academy of Medicine (what would later become the American Medical Association).

As powerful and brilliant a woman as Dr. Culbertson was, it is unlikely that she would have been so successful had she participated in a traditional marriage. Gender Roles of the Victorian Era were such that a married woman would have never been expected to be part of the professional sphere; they remained in the domestic sphere while their husbands lived in the professional world. However, should a Victorian lady remain unmarried they would typically be considered a spinster, or some other undesirable connotation. It appears that some women, particularly in the medical field found a way to circumvent both of these issues by participating in what became known as a Boston Marriage. Boston Marriages were (and are) seen as a business arrangement between two women who agree to rely on each other for financial, emotional, and professional support. They become each other’s husbands, for all intents and purposes.

For whatever reason, these arrangements were deemed acceptable by Victorian Society. This is mostly likely due to Victorian theories on sexuality. At that point, women were still seen as non-sexual beings. So, if a woman chose to live life without a man, she would have been seen as a “Sexual Invert” what we would consider A-Sexual today. Certainly, some Boston Marriages were romantic in nature, but there were also those that were strictly just for the benefit of female advancement in the professional world.

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