

Hello everyone, I am thrilled to be here with you today to speak about a physician whom I have come to greatly respect and admire through my admittedly limited time in getting to know her life and work. I moved to Omaha in 2008 and came to know the name Susan La Flesche Picotte only in passing through my position as Chief Curator at The Durham Museum and through some interactions with students who came from the school that is in the Omaha Public School district that is named for her. And when I say, “passing knowledge”, I mean just that. I knew her name and that was it.

When I came to McGoogan Library in 2019 and was co-curating the exhibitions, I took on the exhibit focusing on her because of my past experiences working with the Seminole Tribe of Florida (2007-2008) and given that experience knew that we wanted to make sure the Tribe was engaged to the extent that they wanted to be. Discovering Dr. Picotte’s story has been a true pleasure and I’m very honored to be able to come to you today to tell it again. There are several brilliant resources that are the basis of my talk and I have those for you at the end, and I give all credit to those scholars for enlightening me to this topic and I hope through this presentation this audience will be as inspired by Dr. Picotte and that you’ll pick up these interesting sources as well to find out more.

The exhibition about her life is physically on UNMC's Omaha campus until August 2024 but there is also an online exhibition as well, and perhaps Teri could put that into the chat for

you all. It will mirror a lot of my talk today, but I can't go into everything as much as I would like so this is here for your viewing pleasure as well, and it will be available even after the physical exhibition closes.

I want to say as well, that while I am not a native Umonhon speaker, I will use, wherever possible, the traditional names of the individuals today. Some are not known, some did not participate in the Umonhon rituals to be given their name and so there I will use their English name. Still I think it is important to honor and respect the Umonhon and the legacy of these historical figures as members of that nation and people and so I will do my best to respectfully use their tribal name.

THE UMONHON



But, before we get to Susan's story, I want to take us back a little bit to understand how the Umonhon tribe came to be in the area where they were when Susan comes on the scene.....

Beginning as a large Eastern Woodland tribe, the western tracing of the Umonhon's history starts in about 1600. There was a division sometime after that where the Quapaw broke off from this larger group and settled in Arkansas while the Umonhon settled "upstream" along the Missouri. Another division happened and the Ponca became a third independent tribe but tended to settle near the Umonhon.

The first reference to the Umonhon tribe is in 1700 by Pierre-Charles Le Sueur in which the tribe is described as a village of 400 dwellings and about 4,000 people located near present day Sioux City, Iowa.

By the 1750s Umonhon were interacting with French fur-traders on the western side of the Missouri – French fur-traders will feature later on in our story as you will see. And the tribe was considered as "wandering" by the Europeans and were thought to range from the Cheyenne River in South Dakota to the Platte River in Nebraska. It is thought that the first Umonhon village in Nebraska was near Bow Creek, in present day Cedar County, Nebraska.

By about 1795, the Umonhon controlled majority of the fur trade on Missouri River and the

population of the "Big Village" near present day Homer, Nebraska was about 1,100. Traditionally villages would last 8-15 years and consist of sod houses for winter dwellings

Smallpox killed about 1/3 of the tribe around 1800 and the chiefs sought to establish continuing good relations with the French and Spanish as protection for the Tribe.

After the Louisiana Purchase (1803), more European goods made their way into the traditional lives of the Umonhon. Lewis and Clark visited the main Umonhon village in 1804 but majority of the tribe was gone on the annual buffalo hunt in Kansas area during that time.

The first treaty "of friendship and peace" was made with the US in 1815. No land was relinquished at that time.

Still from 1819-1856, disease and aggression from the Sioux forced the Umonhon south and they established new villages near Bellevue, Nebraska and the Papillion Creek.

1831 is the first treaty that the Umonhon ceded lands to the federal government. They gave up rights to land in Iowa and then in 1836, another treaty ceded lands in northern Missouri

1846, the Mormons were allowed to settle on Umonhon land (Florence, NE), but they were detrimental to the game and wood resources and only stayed for two years.

In 1854, elders of the Umonhon signed a treaty with the federal government ceding their hunting grounds north of the Platte River. In exchange, the Umonhon received 300,000 acres of land 70 miles north of Omaha City in what is today, Thurston County. And THAT is the reservation on to which Susan La Flesche is....

JUNE 17, 1866
SUSAN LA FLESCHÉ IS BORN



.... born on June 17, 1866 (for perspective, this is one year after the American Civil War ended).

She is the fourth and youngest daughter of:

E-sta-mah-za “Iron Eye” (Joseph) La Flesche

Dr. Picotte's father, E-sta-mah-za “Iron Eye” (Joseph) La Flesche, was the last recognized chief of the Umoⁿhoⁿ. His father was a French fur-trader and his mother was Umonhon-Ponca. He was adopted by the Umonhon chief, **On-to-pan-ga** (Big Elk), and became chief upon **On-to-pan-ga's** death. **E-sta-mah-za** was part of the delegation that signed over Umonhon land to the federal government in 1854 for the Nebraska territory, and oversaw the Tribe's transition to more sedentary lives. He also signed the last treaty that ceded tribal lands in the northern part of the established reservation to the federal government to establish the Winnebago Tribal reservation.

It is important to acknowledge that there is a divided opinion about **E-sta-mah-za** and whether what he did for the Tribe was really in their best interests, did he sell out his own people? As I am not a member of the Umonhon Tribe, I can't say definitively anything about that. Based on the information I have read, it appears that his intentions were for the betterment and preservation of the Umonhon and their identity as a tribe. However, the

alternative can and has been argued that he partook of the "white" ways to better himself, and so I will leave the discussion there and not attempt to make any pronouncement about it. I think it's important to acknowledge there are two opinions.

What I do know is that Joseph was married to his first/primary wife and Susan's mother

Hin-nu-ags-nun "The One Woman" (Mary) Gale La Flesche

She was the daughter of Army physician, Dr. John Gale and his wife **Nicomi**, who was Umonhon-Oto-Iowa. When Gale was transferred away from the Nebraska territory, there was some "drama" and Nicomi and **Hin-nu-ags-nun** hid to avoid moving with him. Later, after the death of Gale, **Nicomi** married Peter Sarpy, a local trader. Sarpy paid for **Hin-nu-ags-nun**'s education and she spoke both French and English.

As I said Susan was the fourth daughter in her family, and it was very important to her parents and particularly to her father that she be raised in "both worlds". E-sta-mah-za only allowed his eldest daughter (who we will meet in a moment) to participate in the traditional rites of the Tribe, but he forbade any facial tattoos or other markings that would have been traditionally worn by high ranking members of the Tribe. He wanted his family to be able to blend into the white world that he saw continuing to encroach into the reservation. I believe he described it as a "white wave coming across the land". He also insisted that his family dress as whites and learn English as well as the Umonhon language. They also lived in what was known in some parts of the Tribe as the "Make Believe White Man's Village" which consisted of European style housing. He also encourage education and sent all his children away from the reservation after primary school to the East Coast for secondary schooling.

However, not all "white" ways were welcomed by **E-sta-mah-za**. He was **STAUNCHLY** opposed to alcohol consumption and had harsh penalties of any tribal members who were found to be drunk. This had a profound influence on Susan (as we will see) and she is a great temperance advocate throughout her life and opposes any liquor sales on the reservation.



So these are Susan's siblings, and you will quickly see that Susan was not the only accomplished member of the family

In-sha-ta The-um-ba “Bright Eyes” (Susette) La Flesche Tibbles

Susan's eldest sister, Susette “Bright Eyes” La Flesche Tibbles, was the first Native American teacher on the Umonhon reservation; she worked with **E-sta-mah-za** to advocate for improved conditions for the Ponca Tribe in Oklahoma; her greatest claim to fame was when served as court translator to (**Ma choo nah zee**) Ma-chu-na-zhe (Chief Standing Bear) during his Omaha trial concerning the removal of the Ponca Tribe to Oklahoma. With her half-brother, Francis, and future husband, Thomas H. Tibbles, Susette traveled the eastern United States advocating for Native American citizenship.

Rosalie La Flesche Farley

Susan's second eldest sister, Rosalie La Flesche Farley, spent her life on the Omaha reservation, married Irish immigrant Edward Farley, and had ten children. She and her husband operated a stock feeding business on the reservation, with Rosalie keeping the books and serving as the “business head” of the operation. Their home served as a hub for the extended and ever-growing La Flesche family. Also, if you

know the village of Rosalie, NE....it's named for her.

Marguerite La Flesche Picotte Diddock

Susan's third eldest sister, Marguerite La Flesche Picotte Diddock. They were EXTREMELY close throughout their lives, even living across the street from each other. Marguerite was a teacher and interpreter at the Omaha reservation school. She married Charles Picotte in 1888 (I'll come back to him in a minute!), and after his death, married Walter J. Diddock, a farmer and teacher at the reservation school. She was the longest lived of the sisters and became a second mother to Susan's two sons after she passed away.

So I earlier made the distinction that **E-sta-mah-za** had two wives (common in the traditional ways of chiefs of the Umonhon), and with his second wife **Ta-in-ne** (Elizabeth Esau) and with her

Francis La Flesche

Susan's half-brother, Francis La Flesche, was the eldest son of Joseph La Flesche and his second wife, Tainne (Elizabeth) Esau La Flesche. Holding two degrees (bachelor's and master's) from George Washington University, Francis became the first professional Native American ethnologist. He worked with the Smithsonian Institution to study the Omaha and Osage cultures, documenting traditional songs and chants.

(No click!!)

Lucy La Flesche (no known image)

Susan's half-sister, Lucy La Flesche, attended the Hampton Institute with her husband, Noah, and graduated in 1886. She and Noah farmed their homestead on the reservation, where she hosted a night school for some of the young men of the Tribe. Lucy opened her home to her brother, Francis, and his partner, Alice C. Fletcher, for recording songs and chants of the Tribe for the Smithsonian Institution. Because Lucy's family was of a higher status than Noah's, he took her name upon their marriage and so she remained "Lucy La Flesche"

Carey La Flesche

Susan's half-brother, Carey La Flesche, was the youngest of the siblings. He was not as scholarly as the rest of his family and after school returned to the reservation, married La-da-we (Phoebe Cain), and had six children. Carey was assistant clerk at the Omaha Agency, a notary public, an assistant teacher at the government school, and served on the police force.

1882

Graduates from Elizabeth Institute for Young
Ladies, Elizabeth, New Jersey

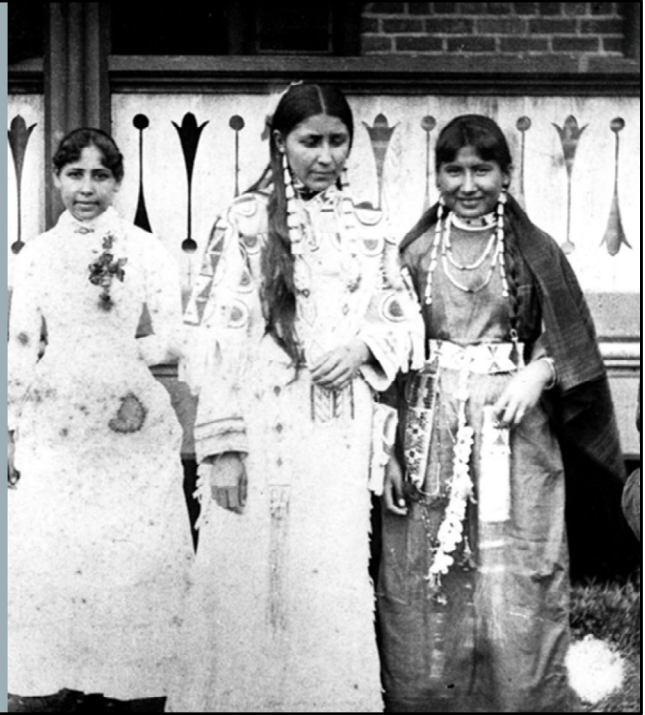


So now that you know a bit about the family and her upbringing, let's talk about Susan herself.

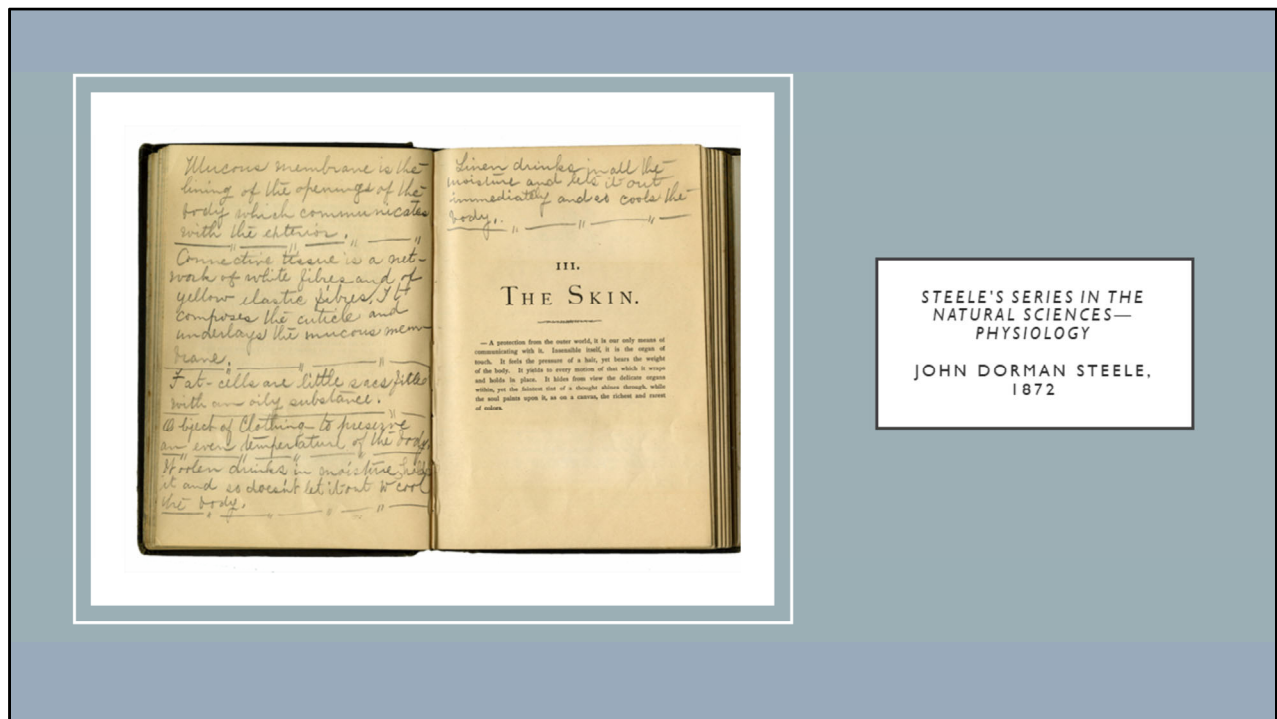
Having studied at the reservation school in early childhood, Susan (standing) and her sister, Marguerite (seated right) attended the Elizabeth Institute for Young Ladies in Elizabeth, New Jersey from 1879-1882. Her elder sisters had attended as well. The coursework included arithmetic, reading, writing, spelling, composition, philosophy, literature, and physiology. Because there was no money to bring the girls home during breaks, Susan and Marguerite spent 36 months in the white world, away from the reservation and their family.

1886

Graduates from the Hampton Normal and
Agricultural Institute, Hampton, Virginia



After graduating from the Elizabeth Institute, Susan and Marguerite enrolled in the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia. The institution was established as a historically Black college following the Civil War and then also opened its doors to Native Americans. Susan, Marguerite, half-brother Carey, and 10 other Umonhon children attended from 1884-1886. Susan graduated as Salutatorian in May 20, 1886 and received the Demorest prize, which was given to the graduating senior with the highest examination scores during their junior year.



This textbook shows the notes Susan took during her physiology class at The Hampton Institute at age 18. This introduction served her well at the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania two years later.

But why did she want to be a physician? Well, it seems that when she was about 8 or so, she was helping tend to a member of the tribe who was very ill. The white doctor was sent for but had refused to treat the woman and Susan watched her die. In recounting this story throughout her life, Susan indicated this was the moment she decided she would become a physician and provide care for her people.

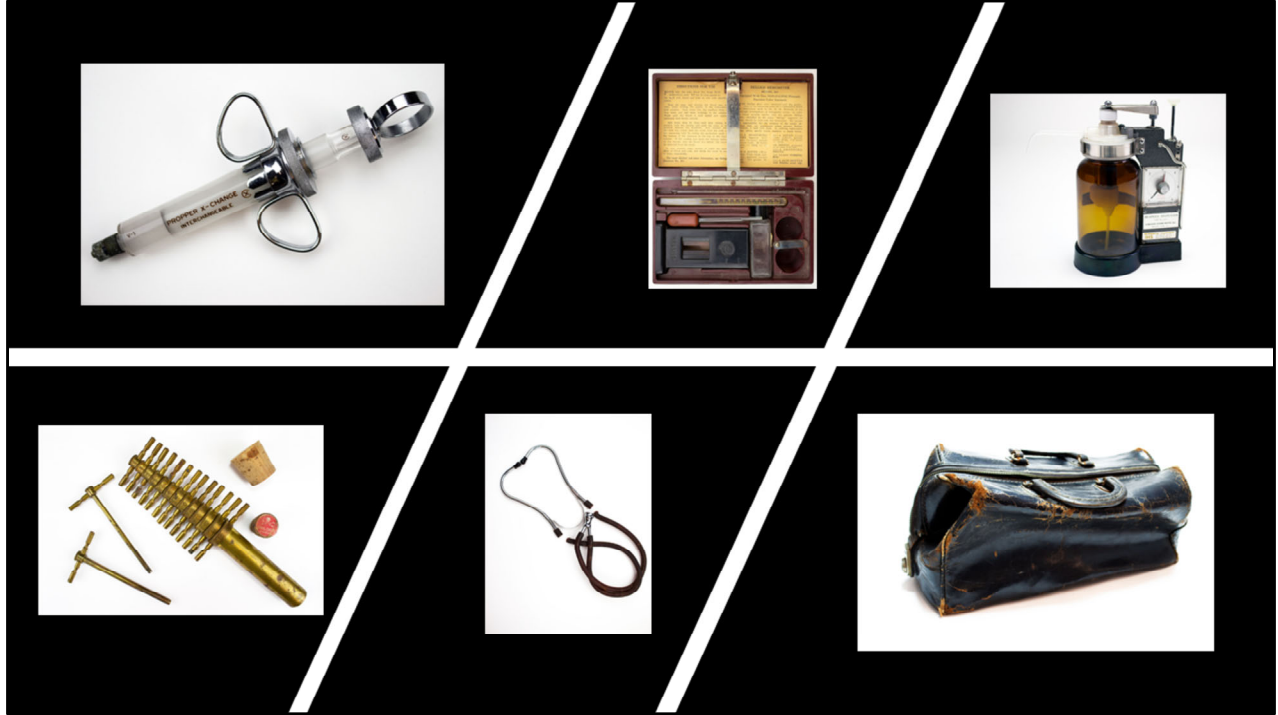
1889

Graduates from the Women's
Medical College of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



And so, she went to the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. Founded in 1850 it was one of the few medical schools in the US willing to admit women. Susan was able to obtain a scholarship through the Connecticut Indian Association to pay for her tuition, housing, books, and supplies. Their only request was she remain single during her studies and for a few years following graduation to focus on her work. (At the time it would have been typical for women to stop working outside the home following marriage and that was the reason for the Association's request)

And there is Susan, fourth row, fourth from the right. On March 14, 1889, she graduated as valedictorian of her class and became the first Native American physician in the United States.



After graduation she completed a one year internship in Philadelphia and then embarked on a speaking tour for the Connecticut Indian Association. Following this, the Association appointed her as a "medical missionary" to the Umonhon and funded the purchase of medical instruments and books for her practice.

While these artifacts are likely not THE ones purchased by the Connecticut Indian Association for Susan, they are all items that she used in her practice.

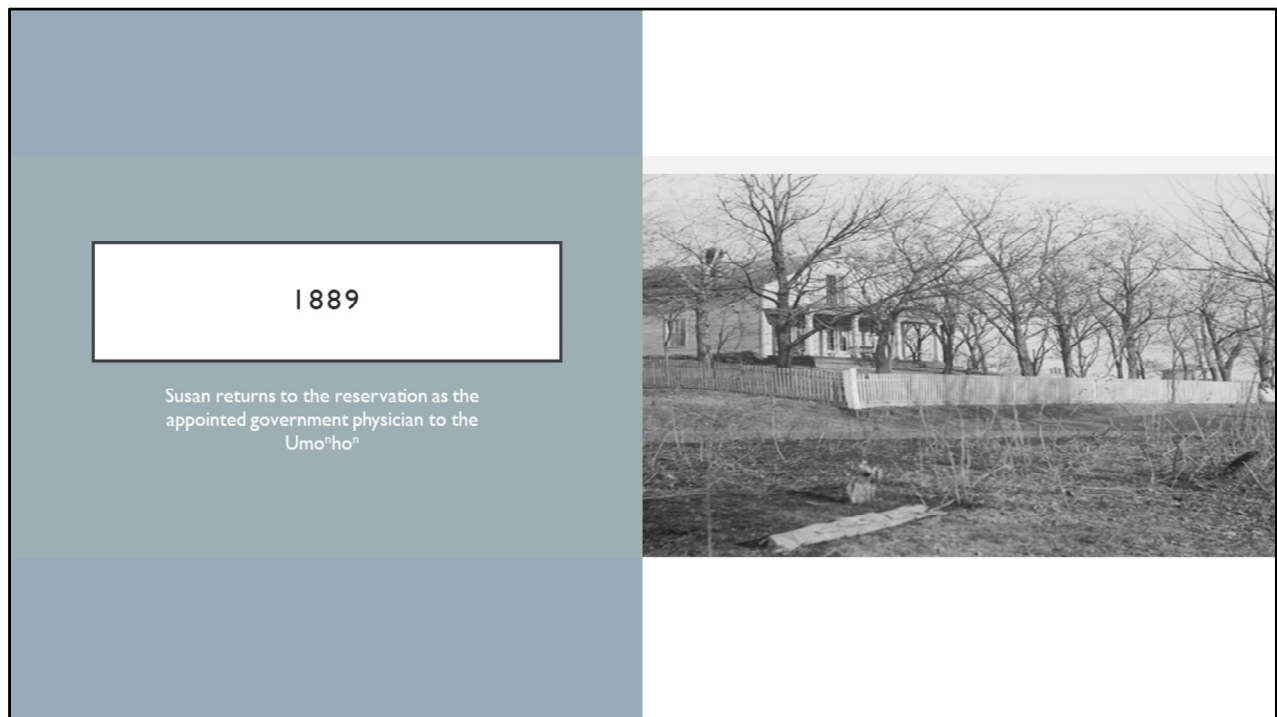
**“I HAVE AN ADVANTAGE IN
KNOWING THE LANGUAGE AND
CUSTOMS OF MY PEOPLE AND AS A
PHYSICIAN CAN DO A GREAT
DEAL TO HELP THEM.”**

To the commissioner of Indian Affairs asking for appointment as the Omaha
Agency boarding school's physician, June 13, 1889

In late 1889, she returned to the reservation and had to petition the federal government via the Umonhon's Indian Agent to be appointed as the Tribe's physician. Her status with the Connecticut Indian Association helped in this regard and she was appointed. She served in this capacity until 1893.

As she says here.....

READ THE QUOTE



As the only physician on the reservation, she was responsible for the care of over 1,300 individuals across a 450 square mile area. She had a small 12x16 foot office within the government boarding school building where she treated everything from tuberculosis, influenza, cholera, dysentery, to broken bones. But this space also doubled as a meeting and community space where she educated people about good hygiene and health practices as well as helping them write letters and translating official documents.

Her official salary was \$500/year from the government and \$250/year from the Connecticut Indian Association. This equals about \$24,088 in 2023. <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1889?amount=720>

Plagued with breathing issues in medical school, it was in 1892 that Susan battled the first debilitating illness of her life. For the rest of her life, she struggled with chronic head, neck and ear pain, but did recover enough to care for her dying mother. This family need and a fall from her horse lead her to resign her official government appointment in 1893.

1894

Susan marries Henry Picotte



True to her commitment to the Connecticut Indian Association, Susan remained focused solely on her work for several years following her graduation. Until she met Henry Picotte.

If you'll recall, I mentioned that Susan's sister Marguerite had married Charles Picotte (French and Yankton Sioux) in 1888. Henry was Charles's brother. In 1893 Charles fell ill with tuberculosis and Henry traveled from South Dakota to help tend his brother's farm. Susan was tending to Charles during his illness. The two surprised their family and friends by marrying in June 1894. They soon moved to Bancroft, NE where Susan opened a private practice, but she still continued to care for members of the Tribe as well.

This is the only known picture of Henry (bottom right). He sits here with Susan (left) and Marguerite (center) with her second husband, Walter Diddock, in the background.

Unfortunately Henry would battle most of his life with alcoholism and also died of tuberculosis in 1905.

1895 AND 1898

Susan and Henry have two sons, Caryl and Pierre



Susan and Henry had two sons, Caryl (1895) and Pierre (1898). Contrary to the societal norms of the time Susan continued to work and care for patients, traveling long miles on horseback or by buggy. Often she would bring her new babies along. Henry took care of the homefront and the children as they got older.

Caryl attended the Nebraska Military Academy and graduated from Bellevue College. He served the US in both World Wars, survived the "Bataan Death March", and achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He eventually settled in El Cajon, California.

Pierre graduated from the Nebraska Military Academy and served in WWI. He returned to the reservation in Walthill, NE, and raised three children.

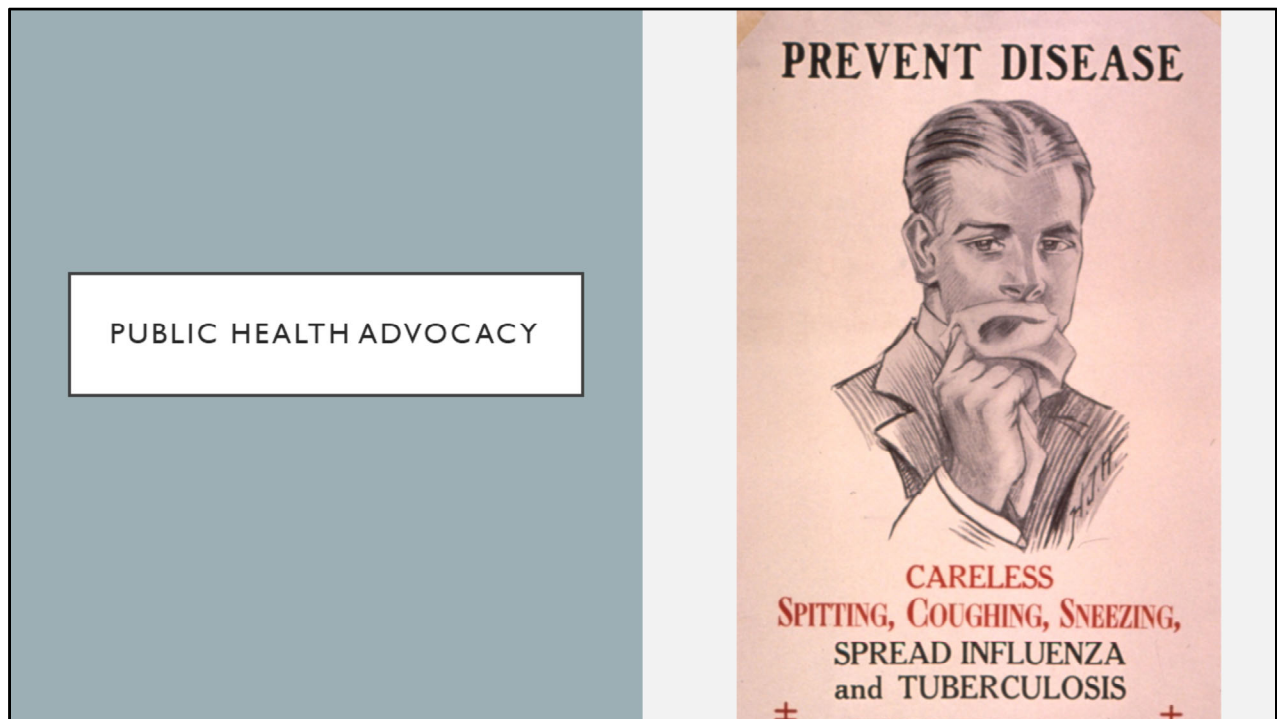
“I BELIEVE IN PREVENTION OF
DISEASE AND HYGIENE CARE
MORE THAN I DO IN GIVING OR
PRESCRIBING MEDICINE, AND MY
CONSTANT AIM IS TO TEACH
THESE TWO THINGS.”

At the Walthill Hospital dedication ceremony, January 8, 1913

Susan was devoted to several public health causes in her life.

READ THE QUOTE

Her father's commitment to keeping alcohol off the reservation and her own husband's struggle with alcoholism pushed her to carry on the cause. In 1906 (the year after Henry's death), she led a delegation to Washington, DC and successfully lobbied for legislation that every property deed in Walthill or any community established within the reservation be forever prohibited from selling liquor. Unfortunately, there was nothing the legislation could do to stop tribal members from journeying to other towns to buy alcohol.



Tuberculosis was a scourge for many, many years, and Susan saw so much of what the disease wrought within her own family through the late 1890s and early 1900s. By 1911, it was estimated that 200,000 people were killed each year from the disease.

Susan worked to educate about the benefits for opening windows for fresh air, having those who were sick cover their coughs with handkerchiefs or paper, and using individual rather than communal drinking cups, which were common in many areas at the time.

Because of her recommendations for fresh air, she also advocated for screens over windows and doors, so people could benefit from the fresh air and sunshine without inviting the disease carrying housefly indoors.

THE WALTHILL HOSPITAL OPENS JANUARY 8, 1913



For years, Susan had dreamed of providing a single source of health care for the community—both Indian and White, in both the Umonhon and English languages.

The Walthill Hospital opened on January 8, 1913 as the first modern hospital in Thurston County. Susan raised \$10,000 in private donations to finance the building. In addition to treatments and operations, the hospital hosted classes to teach people the benefits of personal care so they would not need a doctor. After her death, it was named in her honor.

In 1993, the hospital was listed as a National Historic Landmark and in 2018 it was added to the National Historic Trust's list of the Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places. However...



...I'm very pleased to report that there has been a restoration effort on going and the newly renovated Susan La Flesche Picotte Center will reopen next year housing a medical clinic, mental health and substance abuse clinic, youth programming, historical museum, and cultural and educational spaces. Outdoor spaces will also include parking areas, amphitheater, and community garden.

“I SHALL ALWAYS FIGHT GOOD AND
HARD AGAINST [ANYTHING] THAT IS
TO THE TRIBE’S DETRIMENT, EVEN IF I
HAVE TO FIGHT ALONE, FOR BEFORE
MY GOD I OWE MY PEOPLE A
RESPONSIBILITY.”

In a telegram to Washington, D.C., asking that the Umo'ho have the right to
make decisions about the use of their reservation land, September 1909

And I’ve included this quote here as I think it really sums up Dr. Picotte's life mission,
and is appropriate as we speak about her last chapter.

READ QUOTE

It shows her commitment to her people and their betterment, her faith in God that
sustained her throughout her life, and also her mindset of service and leadership of the
Tribe that was passed down from particularly her father and that was a hallmark of her
family.



After the great achievement of opening the hospital that she had long dreamed of, Susan was unfortunately too ill to oversee the administration of the facility by herself. She persisted for two more years battling through constant pain and having lost most of her hearing, yet still treating patients. She even journeyed to Omaha to seek treatment from Dr. Harold Gifford, Sr., but there was nothing that could be done. Her condition was mastoiditis. It typically starts with a middle ear infection that spreads to the mastoid bone behind the ear, toward the back of the skull. This honeycomb-like structure fills with infection and proceeds to break down. Today, it is treated with antibiotics, but for Susan there was no such hope.

Hearing of her predicament, Madam Marie Curie sent a radium pill to place in the ear in hopes of providing some relief. Sadly, it likely made Susan's pain even worse.

On September 18, 1915, she died in her home on the Walthill reservation, a building that she had designed and built for herself in 1907. She was only 50 years old.

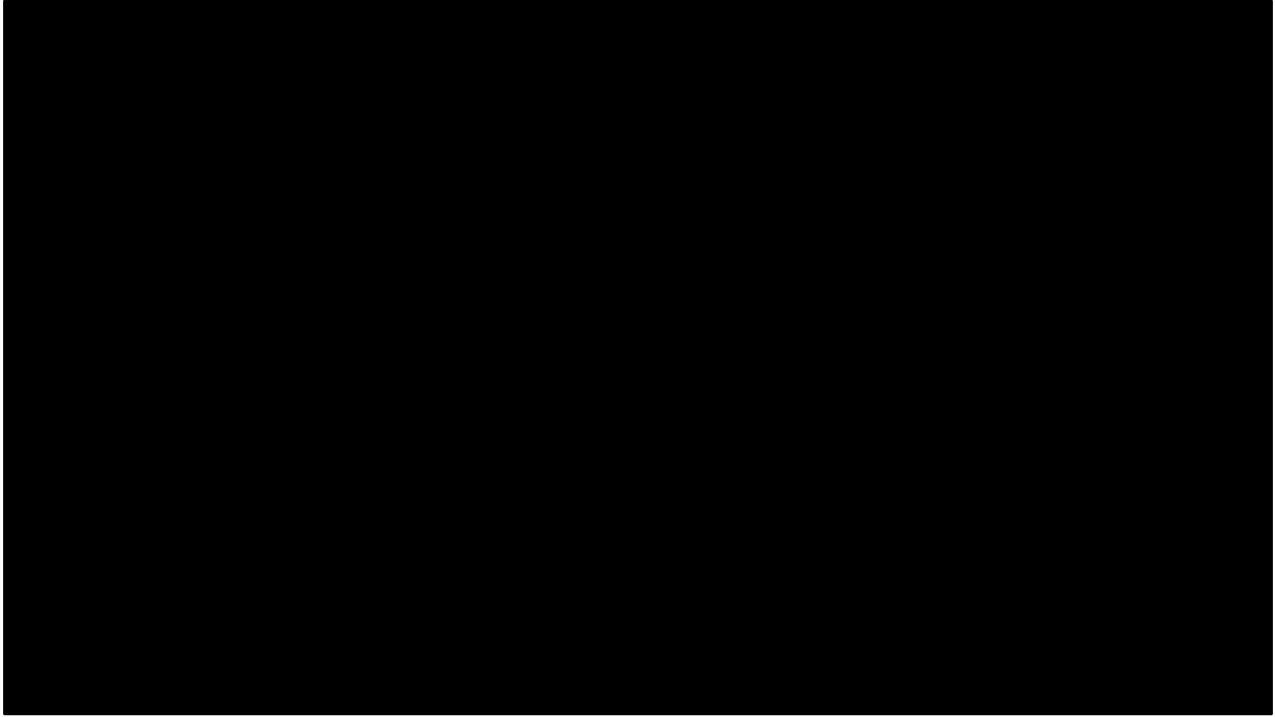
Her death certificate lists her cause of death as "brain abscess involving right temporal lobe, secondary carcinoma of right mastoid region."

"We are confronted here with a character rising to greatness and to great deeds out of conditions which seldom produce more than mediocre men and women, achieving great and beneficent ends over obstacles almost insurmountable...In her death the Indians lose their best and truest friend; the community and the state sustains an irreparable loss; and there is ended one of the most fruitful, unselfish, and useful lives."

Harry Keefe, Lawyer, Walthill, Nebraska

The many accomplishments of Susan La Flesche Picotte, MD, and her family continue to inspire people of many nationalities and cultural heritages. Her legacy of advocacy and healing are echoed by many in the health sciences professions today. Her friend, Harry Keefe, a lawyer in Walthill, Nebraska, published a eulogy in the local paper upon her death:

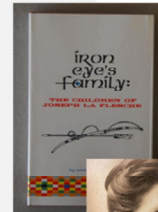
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Pause for effect.....

HOW CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

- 2020 PBS Series: *Unladylike – The First American Indian Doctor*
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/meet-first-american-indian-woman-physician-ienwy3/14818/>
- PBS Documentary: *Medicine Woman...It's Love that Heals* <https://www.pbs.org/show/medicine-woman/>
- History Nebraska Collection of photographs and documents
<https://nebraska.access.preservica.com/?s=Picotte>
- The Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte Center
<https://picottecenter.org/>
- Wigton Heritage Center Exhibition <https://exhibits.unmc.edu/whc/Picotte>
- *The Tribal Crona Comix* (2021)
https://worldofviruses.unl.edu/covid-19/?comix_3=true
- *Iron Eye's Family: The Children of Joseph La Flesche, Norma Kidd Green* (1969)
- *A Warrior of the People: How Susan La Flesche Overcame Racial and Gender Inequality to Become America's First Indian Doctor*, Joe Starita (2016)
- *Healer*, Nancy Waltman (2023)



So with that I thank you so much for joining me today to learn more about Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte. As promised, here is a listing of the various books, collections, and other resources related to Dr. Picotte, and I highly encourage you to investigate them and to support the scholarly pursuits of these historians.

I'm happy to take any questions you have and will do my best to answer them. :)