

HUMAN PILGRIMAGE: THE CIVIL WAR ACTIVITIES OF DRS. JOHN MILTON
AND ESTHER HILL HAWKS

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The Sea Islands, stretching along the Atlantic Coast from Charleston to Jacksonville, were famous throughout the world during the nineteenth century for the cultivation of the finest, silkiest, long-fiber cotton grown anywhere. They were also well known throughout the cotton belt as the home of fire-eating secessionists who, when they conjectured about the possibility of a Union assault early in the Civil War, assumed that Charleston would be its target.¹ But in November, 1861, Commodore Samuel F. Du Pont's federal fleet attacked not Charleston, but Port Royal Sound. After four hours of devastating naval bombardment, the Confederates were forced to abandon Fort Walker, and shortly thereafter, Fort Beauregard.

When Northern forces reached shore, they found that virtually the entire white population of the Port Royal area had fled to the mainland, leaving behind an enormous, unpicked crop of valuable long-staple Sea Island cotton, and thousands of Black slaves. Soon cotton agents began arriving from the North to arrange for the harvesting, baling, and shipping of the cotton, their efforts being directed by a special agent of the Treasury Department, Edward L. Pierce of Massachusetts. Pierce was concerned not only with the unharvested cotton, but also with seeing to it that another crop was planted for the ensuing year. Furthermore, he was concerned implicitly with the well-being of Blacks in the region, Blacks who, while no longer enslaved, were not yet legally "free." Designated as "contrabands," these Blacks were overjoyed to be rid of their masters' rule. However, they had many desperate needs including clothing, general supplies, and the rudiments of education. Accordingly, Edwards Pierce urged friends in New England to proffer assistance. These acquaintances promptly organized the Educational Commission for Freedmen in Boston. Similar organizations were created in Philadelphia and New York. They recruited and paid plantation superintendents, teachers, doctors and the like, while the Federal Government paid such personnel a supplementary allowance for transportation, subsistence, and housing.

One of the earliest arrivals among those sent out to aid South Carolina Blacks by the Natinoal Freedmen's Aid Association of New York was Dr. John Milton Hawks,² a New Hampshire-born graduate of the Eclectic Medical College of Cincinnati.³ Hawks was a veteran crusader for reform causes, one of which was abolitionism. It was an ecstatic Milton Hawks who stepped ashore

at Hilton Head in April, 1862, for he had been laid up in his berth, violently seasick throughout the voyage.

Ordered to "take care of the persons of color under authority of the Treasury Department"⁴, Dr. Hawks was assigned to Otter Island which was outside of Union military lines and located on the north side of St. Helena Sound. He crossed soon to Edisto Island where he administered drugs to ailing Blacks in their cabins.⁵ Hawks also delivered a pep talk to a group of twenty-two Blacks. He urged them to plant all the corn they could. The Blacks had planted three acres of sweet potatoes and were already planting corn with the aid of a wild colt they had caught and broken for plowing.⁶

By May, Hawks' achievements included his organization of a school for over thirty freedmen, only one of whom, a woman, knew the alphabet. Milton appointed her as teacher.⁷ He also laid plans to organize a normal school for training Black teachers,⁸ and was increasingly active as a physician. In this latter capacity, he delivered several babies and began giving new mothers cards which contained the child's name and date of birth. "In this way the next generation of negroes will be able to tell how old they are," Hawks proudly explained.⁹

Other medical labors were less prone to induce joy in the doctor. He encountered one case of complete prolapsus, the woman's uterus protruding as large as Milton's fist. Prescribing ointment and tonic he was horrified to learn the cause of this condition: the woman's master had forced her to work in the fields until she dropped from exhaustion.¹⁰ Another former slave had burned his feet off to the ankle years earlier. No doctor had been called, and the stumps had never healed properly. Dr. Hawks applied ointment and castile soap to the raw sores, and planned to "bring Mother's snuff and test its virtues."¹¹

Dr. John Milton Hawks was no saint. He sometimes engaged in less noble labors. Among these was the confiscation of furniture, including a piano, which belonged to departed rebel residents.¹² He also spent a great deal of time hustling personnally concocted and largely worthless bottled panaceas¹³ to recently paid northern troops, and reaping large profits from the over-priced sale of personal possessions such as his gold watch. Happy with his earnings, he was literally elated by the observation that freed Blacks were willing to work hard, and that what he called the "experiment of freedom" was a great success.¹⁴

Hawks confided, in an especially poignant letter to his wife, Esther Hill Hawks, "I pray for the chance to stay at a good salary, so I can afford to live away from other business, then I will get you here, and we will have a fine time, [not] because it is all pleasure and no trouble, but because notwithstanding the heat, the sand, the insects, the lassitude produced by the

climate, we can do a vast amount of good." Later he wrote, "it is a growing conviction with me that the enjoyment of mortals is in proportion to the good they do their fellows."¹⁵

Dr. Milton Hawks was ambivalent about the prospect of his wife joining him on the Sea Islands. he warned her of miseries like heat, mosquitoes, and the attendant threat of malaria. He also cautioned her concerning the dangers of steamship travel through stormy seas. Additionally, there were rumors of an impending Confederate counterattack on Federally occupied ocastal areas, perhaps by "a formidable iron clad" sailing out of Savannah in conjunction with a rebel land assault.¹⁶ But the enthusiasm with which he described his good works among freedmen whose "minds are blank, and readily receive such impressions as you see fit to make,"¹⁷ greatly impressed Esther when she read his letters in far-off New Hampshire.

Dr. Esther Hawks, an 1857 graduate of the New England Female Medical College,¹⁸ was as devoted an abolitionist as her husband. Early in the Civil War, she had gone to Washington, hoping to be employed as a physician, or failing that, as a nurse.¹⁹ The Federal government was not hiring female physicians, however. And Dorothea Dix, the reformer of insane asylums and prisons who had been commissioned as the first Superintendent of Army Nurses, perfunctorily rejected Esther's application for appointment as a nurse. Miss Dix, in true Victorian fashion, would approve for such service only middle-aged women of plain appearance.²⁰ Dr. Esther Hill Hawks was neither. Nonetheless, Esther remained in Washington for several months as a volunteer hospital worker.²¹ Enroute home to Manchester, New Hampshire, she paused in New York to seek a teaching appointment with the National Freedmen's Relief Association, which had earlier sent a small group of women to Sea Islands.²² In October, 1862, Esther Hawks arrived at Beaufort, South Carolina, to join that group's efforts to educate freedmen.²³

Dr. J. Milton Hawks, prior to his wife's arrival in Beaufort, abandoned his civilian status to accept a commission as U.S. Army Acting Assistant Surgeon on the staff of General Rufus Saxton. As such, he administered medical examinations to men enlisting in what became the first officially authorized Black regiment ever mustered into federal service: the First South Carolina Infantry Regiment.

Dr. Esther Hill Hawks was destined to have several experiences which were unique for women of the Civil War era during her long stay in the Department of the South. At one point, Milton was ordered to forego temporarily his command of the Balck troops' General Hospital in Beaufort so that he might accompany a secret mission to the coast of Florida. Since a Surgeon was not sent to replace him, Dr. Esther Hawks took charge. Esther wrote:

I am left manager of not only the affairs of the Hospital, but have to attend Surgeons' call for the 2nd [S.C. Volunteers], so every morning at 9 o'clock the disabled are marched down to the hospital in charge of a Sergeant and I hold surgeons call, for hospital and Regt. and with great success; on the back piazza sending some to duty and taking into the hospital such as need extra care. An occasional chronic 'shirk' will complain to the Col. that, "dat woman cant do me no gud, she ca'nt see my pain" but he gets no sympathy from the Col. and is obliged to go on duty if I so mark him. So for three weeks I performed the duties of hospital and Regimental Surg. doing work so well that the neglect to supply a regular officer was not discovered at Head Quarters. I suppose I could not have done this if my brother [Edward O. Hill] - had not been hospital steward - or if the patients had been white men - but these negroes are so like children that I feel no hesitancy in serving them.²⁵

Dr. Esther Hawks' condescending attitude toward Blacks yielded to one of appreciation, particularly when she treated wounded survivors of the unsuccessful July, 1863, charge by troops of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry on Fort Wagner, which guarded the entrance of Charleston Harbor. At that time, Esther worked tirelessly without sleep or rest, along with two surgeons. "The only thing that sustained us was the patient endurance of those stricken heroes lying before us, with their ghastly wounds cheerful & courageous," she later recorded.²⁶ Following the battle of Olustee, or Ocean Pond, the only major engagement fought in Florida during the war, Dr. Esther Hawks performed similarly arduous but vital medical functions on behalf of wounded survivors.²⁷

It was primarily as an educator, though, that Mrs. Hawks served both Black troops and civilian freedmen. And what enthusiasm for learning her pupils displayed! Freed Blacks, Esther observed, "are all eager to go to school, books being the one thing denied them, they have a frantic desire to get possession of them."²⁸ And she later maintained that the enthusiasm of her pupils "would inspire even the dullest of teachers."²⁹

Dr. Esther Hill Hawks had the distinction in the last year of the war of founding and operating Florida's, and perhaps the entire South's, first racially integrated free public school during the Federal occupation of Jacksonville.³⁰ Not long after, Charleston, that impregnable bastion of secession, fell to the Union forces. The Drs. Hawks were among the first northerners to

enter the city.³¹ Both Milton and Esther continued the good works, primarily among freedmen, that they had begun during the early occupation of Port Royal.³²

In conclusion, it should be noted that the diaries left by Dr. Esther Hill hawks long gathered dust in an Essex County, Massachusetts, attic. They were salvaged in 1975 literally moments before being carried to the dump to be destroyed, and were published in 1984 by the University of South Carolina Press under the title, A Woman Doctor's Civil War: Esther Hill Hawks' Diary.

NOTES

1. George Linton Hendricks, "Union Occupation of the Southern Seaboard, 1861-1865" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Political Science, Columbia University, 1954); Guion G. Johnson, A Social History of the Sea Islands (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930); Willie Lee Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1964).

2. Dr. John Milton Hawks to Dr. Esther Hill Hawks, April 12, 1862, Hawks Papers, Library of Congress. Unless otherwise noted, all letters to and from the Drs. Hawks, regardless of salutation, will be henceforth identified solely by EHH and/or JMH and will be from the Hawks Papers, Library of Congress.

3. Unpublished and untitled tenth wedding anniversary reminiscences of Dr. John Milton Hawks, October 4, 1864, Milton and Esther Hawks Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

4. Directive from Edward L. Pierce, Special Agent of the Treasury Department, Port Royal, April 17, 1862 (Library of Congress, Hawks Papers).

5. JMH to EHH, April 23, 1862.

6. Ibid.

7. JMH to EHH, May 9, 1862.

8. JMH to EHH, May 17, 1862.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid. Another medication used by the eclectic Dr. Hawks was a linament made of prickly ash bark in vinegar. JMH to EHH, May 1862.

12. JMH to EHH, May 17, 1862.

13. Dr. J. M. Hawks concocted his stimulant, which he sometimes preferred to label a relaxant, out of rum or other distilled alcohol, bitters, and pulverized lobelia seed. These ingredients were permitted to stand for fourteen days. They were shaken with regularity, the dregs poured off, and an equal quantity of simple syrup of sugar and water added. JMH to EHH, June 6, 1862. The stimulant was advertised as "the best remedy that can be carried into camp for the colds, diarrhea and rheumatism which occur there in consequence of sleeping on the ground." The Daily American (Manchester, N.H.), August 27, 1861.

14. JMH to EHH, April 23, 1862.
15. JMH to EHH, August 3, 1862.
16. JMH to EHH, August 3, 1862; JMH to EHH, August 27, 1862.
17. JMH to EHH, June 15, 1862.
18. Eighth Annual Report of the New-England Female Medical College (1857): 4.
19. Esther Hill Hawks, "War Reminiscences - 1862," unpublished journal.
20. Ibid. See also Richard Harrison Skyrock, "A Medical Perspective on the Civil War," Medicine in America: Historical Essays (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1966), pp. 103-4.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Esther Hawks suffered severely from seasickness during her voyage aboard the Delaware, a small, unseaworthy coastal vessel. (EHH to Mrs. Secretary and Ladies of the Soldiers Aid Society), November 25, 1862. Milton and Esther Hawks Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D>C> Seasickness and close-calls at sea would remain her lot during the frequent coastal voyages she made in the Department of the South throughout the war.
24. Military Service Record of John M. Hawks (National Archives).
25. Gerald Schwartz, (ed.), A Woman Doctor's Civil War: Esther Hill Hawks' Diary (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 49-50.
26. Ibid., p.51.
27. Ibid., pp.62-64.
28. Ibid., p.38.
29. School Record of Jacksonville; Hawks Papers; Esther H. Hawks, "Freedmen's School in Florida", The Commonwealth, (Boston, September 9, 1864, pp.1,2.
30. Schwartz, (ed.), A Woman Doctor's Civil War, p. 79.
31. Ibid., pp. 117, 125.