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Cassandra Pickett Durham

1824–1885

Inducted 1993

Imagine the scene. A woman, age 46, stands before an audience, largely male, to make a speech. It is 1870, and the place is Macon, Georgia, at the corner of Mulberry Street and Broadway, next to the Federal Building. The students and faculty of the Reform Medical College are gathered for the awarding of degrees. The speaker is Cassandra Pickett Durham.

“Ladies and Gentlemen: ... In order to properly appreciate the difficulties that surround me, you have but to view me as a woman, alone and helpless, but determined to inaugurate a New Era in the medical profession for the benefit of my sex. From time immemorial we have by the powers that be, and the prejudice of man, been denied the right to minister to the wants of our own sex as practicing physicians. ...The female sex has, in the past, from false notions of propriety and refinement, been denied their rightful privilege of entering the medical profession. ...”

Cassandra Pickett Durham is about to be the first woman in Georgia to receive the degree of Doctor of Medicine. How did she come to this point? Hailing originally from South Carolina, where she was born in 1824, she moved to Georgia well before the Civil War. We don't know when or why. By the time she was thirty, she had lost two husbands to illness. Then in 1855, she married Dr. John Tapley Durham in Preston, Georgia. He was a successful physician with an extensive practice in Sumter, Dooly and Webster Counties. The Durhams had five children. In the last years of the Civil War, Cassandra experienced the wrenching hunger and deprivation that afflicted the land. She was most affected by the plight of women and their lack of adequate health care.

“The thousands of emaciated forms of womanhood that today are breathing out a lingering existence on earth is no evidence of incompetency on the part of male physicians. It does prove, however, that the refined and long cultivated modesty that adorns a woman must be blunted, or a physician of her own sex must be supplied — a physician whose sympathy for her patient will ensure that degree of confidence that will enable her to arrive at a true diagnosis of the disease to be treated. ...”

Something else she had seen in those terrible times was the part that women could play in emergency treatment of the sick.

“I call your attention to the results achieved by the Sisters of Charity. Without the right to practice as physicians, they have, as mere attendants upon the sick, and through the sympathy existing for other women, been able to learn acts which, when imparted to the attending physician, gave him the power to diagnose and treat successfully the disease.”

In the terribly lean years that followed the war, Cassandra's life was to become more difficult. She lost her husband, Dr. Durham, in 1869. His estate was a trunk full of Confederate money, completely useless as a resource for feeding her children, but she also had \$200 in gold, inherited from an ancestor. Only a woman who has known widowhood can appreciate the courage of the decision she made then. She sent her children to live with relatives and friends, and she moved to Macon to live in a boarding house and attend the Reform Medical College. She received support and encouragement from churches in Americus. Now she stands ready to receive her medical degree, the first woman in Georgia to do so. She has no illusions about the difficulty of the task that awaits her.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, such are the facts which prompt me willingly to encounter the trials and difficulties which I know must follow my feeble efforts to inaugurate a new era in the medical profession. Even a failure on my part will not call forth one regret in regard to this undertaking. Success may not bring forth one approving smile to encourage me in my lone labors. Yet I have the greatest encouragement in a pure and exalted desire to confer a benefit upon my own sex. My failure would not be the last effort made in this great reform. More brilliant intellects, with superior advantages, will rise up in the future and consummate the great and noble work commenced in 1870."

She returned to Americus and practiced from home, next door to Brown's Shoe Store. She offered all that was in her power in prenatal care, safe delivery, and nutrition to the women she could reach. She was a woman with a mission.

"God has not made women to live lives of ease, but has endowed them with powers and capabilities which, when fully developed and properly directed, present them to the world as women of full stature in knowledge and wisdom, and capable of discharging the many duties which devolve upon them as helpmeets of men."

We honor Cassandra Pickett Durham as a Georgia

Woman of Achievement.

Additional Resources

Georgia Women of Achievement Archives

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