

Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte

Imagine a teenage Omaha Indian girl leaving her isolated Nebraska reservation for Hampton, Va., where she studied alongside the sons and daughters of recently freed slaves, eventually graduating No. 2 in her class.

Imagine this same girl somehow getting into the only medical school in the world that trained women to become doctors, a Philadelphia college where she graduated No. 1 in her class on March 14, 1889. And in doing so, she became the first Native American doctor, male or female, in the 113-year history of the United States – 31 years before women could vote, 35 years before people who looked like her were considered citizens in their own country, lands they had lived upon for 10,000 years.

The story of Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte (c.1865 - c.1915) is the saga of one of Nebraska's most important and enduring figures. It's the story of a young woman who rebuffed numerous offers to stay on the East Coast to return instead to her Nebraska reservation homeland, where she gave her life for her beloved Omaha Indian people. It's the story of a woman who could quote Shakespeare at length, spoke five languages fluently, taught Sunday school, danced at traditional pow-wows, presided at graveside ceremonies and begged state legislators to crack down on the whiskey peddlers poisoning her people.

It's the story of a woman who arose at 5 a.m., taking off alone in her buggy through the dark and the cold and the snow to try and save a young girl lying on a dirt floor dying of tuberculosis. A woman who often went to bed hungry because she was too exhausted to eat. A woman who started a library for children, a quilting circle for elders, kept a lantern in her window so the poor and sick could find her on stormy nights and eventually built the first and only reservation hospital in American history – without using a penny of tax dollars.

The story of Dr. La Flesche Picotte is one of courage, perseverance, honesty, integrity, sacrifice and selflessness – of always putting the needs of others ahead of her own. It's the story of a woman who crashed through formidable racial, ethnic and gender barriers to treat both her white and Native patients with the same loving care. The story of a woman who understood that the key to achieving racial justice and harmony was to take the best of all cultures and treat each of them with equal respect and consideration.

Today, a gleaming new statue of Susan La Flesche Picotte occupies a prominent place along Lincoln's Centennial Mall – a spot where thousands of school children, office workers, university students, judges, lawyers, state senators, visitors and football fans pass by annually.

It's an ideal location for strangers to get to know one of Nebraska's most compelling, courageous and inspirational women.