

# DR. ESTHER JANE HAWKS

Born: Aug. 4, 1833 in Hooksett, NH

Died: May 6, 1906 in Lynn, MA



**1833-1906**



## Appointment(s):

New York Freedmen's Aid Society  
Methodist Church – Beaufort, SC  
1862

1<sup>st</sup> USCT – Camp Saxton  
Jun. 1863

21<sup>st</sup> USCT Camp Teacher  
Nurse in Hospital  
Hilton Head, SC  
Oct 1863

21<sup>st</sup> USCT (transfer)  
Jacksonville, FL  
Feb. – Jul. 1864

Mitchelville (sub for A. Pillsbury)  
Hilton Head, SC  
Nov. – Dec. 1864

Jacksonville, FL  
Dec. – Feb. 1865

Normal School Administrator  
Gen. Superintendent of Schools  
Est. Shaw Orphanage  
Charleston, SC  
Mar. – Jul. 1865

Hilton Head, SC  
Sep. – Dec. 1855

Jacksonville, FL  
Dec. 1865 – Jan. 1866

Supervisor of Teachers – Hilton Head, SC  
Jan. – Mar. 1866

Quartermaster Storehouse Clerk  
Charleston, SC  
Mar. – Aug. 1866

New England Freedmen's Aid Society  
Odd Fellows' House – 1<sup>st</sup> interracial school  
Port Orange, FL  
Mar. 1868 – Sep. 1870

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Esther was born on August 4, 1833 in Hooksett, New Hampshire, the fifth child of Parmenas Hill (1799-1853) and Jane E. Kimball (1798-1885). Esther's paternal grandfather served in the American Revolution and in the War of 1812.<sup>1</sup> She attended public schools in Hooksett and the academy at Kingston, New Hampshire to become a teacher. She worked as a teacher in Kingston, Merrimack and Thornton's Ferry, New Hampshire<sup>2</sup>. On October 5, 1854, she married Dr. John Milton Hawks (1826-1910).<sup>3</sup> They never had any children. During the winter of 1854-55, the couple travelled to Manatee, Florida where her husband set up a medical practice and she assisted him by visiting his patients and working in his drug store.<sup>4</sup> She also taught black children in a small school she started, but faced jail time for violating the law, and the school was closed.<sup>5</sup>

Esther studied medicine at the New England Female Medical College, Boston, for two seventeen- week sessions and graduated in 1857.<sup>6</sup> She was a fully qualified physician before the Civil War, but the U.S. Army Surgeon General rejected her application to serve as a doctor to the troops because women were not even permitted to visit the Department of the South except in the capacity as a teacher.<sup>7</sup> The excuse that he gave Dr. Hawks though was an administrative one: there was no precedent for investing women with a military rank!<sup>8</sup> She then applied to Dorothea Dix, Superintendent of Army nurses, to serve in the nursing corps but Ms. Dix was concerned that Ms. Hill's youth and beauty would be a distraction and also rejected her application. She would only appoint "middle-aged women of plain appearance".<sup>9</sup> So she volunteered at hospitals in Washington, D.C. until another opportunity could be found.

Esther's husband had been one of the first arrivals in South Carolina, sponsored by the National Freedmen's Aid Association of New York, reaching South Carolina aboard the 'Oriental' on April 13, 1862. He wrote to Esther in May of 1862 encouraging her to join him after appealing to his supervisor, Edward L. Pierce to persuade either

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<sup>1</sup> *The Register*. "Esther Hill Hawks M.D. Lynn, Massachusetts: Lynn Historical Society, 1906, p 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Schwartz, Gerald, ed. *A Woman Doctor's Civil War: Esther Hill Hawks' Diary*.

Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, fifth Printing, 1994. [Note: for interesting story of their courtship, read pp 3-5].

<sup>4</sup> *The Register*, p 40.

<sup>5</sup> Schwartz, p 26.

<sup>6</sup> Schwartz, p 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p 41.

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz, p 368.

<sup>9</sup> US Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. "Esther Hill Hawks papers", 2 Vols 1856-1876.

Dr John Milton Hawks. 'Tenth Wedding Anniversary Reminiscences'. Oct 4, 1864.

Washington, D.C. 1910. <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm79025304>. [Note: He described his wife as having an abundance of flowing, curly black hair and hazel eyes. She also possessed quiet, serene and good looks and was 5' 7 1/2" tall].

- Schwartz, p 10.

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Boston or New York chapter to sponsor his wife.<sup>10</sup> Esther and John were both ardent abolitionists before the War and Esther would not be deterred from her desire to serve the Union's cause, so she applied to the New York Freedmen's Aid Society to be a teacher to the freedmen in South Carolina. They accepted her application and sent her in 1862 to Beaufort, South Carolina where she first taught three hundred Negroes of all ages in the Beaufort Methodist Church.<sup>11</sup> At the time, her husband was the Assistant Surgeon on the staff of General Rufus Saxton in Beaufort. He was the first surgeon attached to a black regiment in the Civil War, the 1<sup>st</sup> USCT.<sup>12</sup> Dr. John Milton Hawks led the newly established hospital for freedmen and colored soldiers in Beaufort and Esther helped her husband as a physician's assistant and nurse.

By June 1863, Esther began teaching the soldiers of the 1st SC Regiment of US Colored Troops of the Union Army.<sup>13</sup> This was the first regiment of former slaves organized for the Union Army by Gen. David Hunter of the Department of the South after the Union captured Port Royal in November 1861. She is also recorded as working with her husband at General Hospital #10 in Beaufort by April 1863.<sup>14</sup> The hospital, built by Union soldiers to treat colored soldiers opened in March 1863. There Esther treated the survivors of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Colored Regiment after the Battle at Fort Wagner. This is the regiment whose story is told in the movie "Glory". When her husband was sent to Georgia on a government mission, Esther took charge of the hospital for about three weeks and worked as a surgeon, which she admits probably would not have been possible if she were working in a hospital for white people. Also, she was fortunate to have the help of her youngest brother, Edward O. Hill, who was acting as Hospital Steward at the time.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. John Milton Hawks was promoted as the surgeon of the 21<sup>st</sup> Regt. USCT under Lt. Col. A.G. Bennett at Hilton Head in October 1863. Esther accompanied him and taught the soldiers of the 21<sup>st</sup> USCT for several months in Hilton Head until the regiment was transferred to Jacksonville, Florida in February 1864.<sup>16</sup> The Drs. Hawks followed the Regiment to their new post.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p 15.

<sup>11</sup> *The Register*, p 41

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "List of Superintendents and Teachers Under Brig General Rufus Saxton, Military Governor of the Department of the South, June 1863".

<https://www.drbronsontours.com>

<sup>14</sup> Smith, Janel Janiczek, "From A Northern Home to a Southern School: Cultural Imperialists or Just Stubborn Yankees", p 293. Statesboro, GA: Georgia Southern University, Jack N. Averitt College of Graduate Studies, electronic theses and dissertations 2013.

<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/58>, p 17 accessed Sep 12, 2018

<sup>15</sup> Schwartz, pp 49050.

- *The Register*, p 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

- Freedmen's Aid Society. *Freedmen's Record*, Vol I, No 12 Dec 1863 Hilton Head.

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In 1865, after Charleston fell to Union forces, she joined her husband in that city.<sup>17</sup> Almost right away, she organized the Colonel Shaw Orphan Home for black children and also began supervising the Normal School's 600 students<sup>18</sup> Esther was appointed by the Freedmen's Bureau as the General Superintendent of city schools so she also had the responsibility of visiting schools and teachers in Georgetown, Summerville, Edisto and other islands and providing for the needs of the teachers.<sup>19</sup>

After her service in Charleston, her husband was transferred to Jacksonville, Florida but she returned home for rest. He persuaded her to join him in Florida in December 1865, but by January 23, 1866 Esther was back in Hilton Head. She rejoined her husband in Jacksonville by November 1866. The couple returned home at some point for much needed rest and recuperation. However, by March 1868, she was listed as a teacher for the New England Freedmen's Aid Society in Port Orange, Florida under the sponsorship of the Second Church in Boston.<sup>20</sup> Port Orange was the headquarters of the Florida Land & Lumber Co., established by her husband to provide homesteads to 500 freedmen. Her school there was the first to accept both black and white children successfully. But it was torched and destroyed in 1870 by whites so she gave up her work there.

She returned to Lynn, Massachusetts where she practiced medicine at first in a partnership with a former medical school classmate, Dr. Lizzie Breed Welch. The two of them were the first female physicians in Lynn.<sup>21</sup> Then after a return trip to Florida in 1874, Esther set up her own medical practice at 81 Broad Street in Lynn where she remained for the rest of her life. She also was active in many charitable organizations; an officer of the Woman's Rights or Suffrage Club, a founder and office of the Associated Charities, as well as a charter member of the Lynn Historical Society and the Civic League. She was elected to the Lynn School Board on the ballots of both political parties.<sup>22</sup>

Dr. Esther Hill Hawks died May 6, 1906 in Lynn, Essex, Massachusetts and is buried in Pine Grove Cemetery, Lot 207, Sect 18, the family plot of her parents in Manchester, New Hampshire.<sup>23</sup> At her funeral service it was said that Dr. Hawks "has been doing God's work in the World".<sup>24</sup>

In 1899, the New Hampshire Association of Military Surgeons elected Esther Hawks as an honorary member.<sup>25</sup> While her work with wounded soldiers was

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Vol I, No 3. March 1865, pp 31-3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Vol I, Nos 5,6,7,8,10,11 May-Nov 1865

<sup>19</sup> *The Register*, p 42.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p 43.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p 42.

<sup>23</sup> Findagrave.com Memorial ID #26563739 created 2 May 2008 by Lynda S Wise.

Tombstone photo added by Rob A on 13 Nov 2008.

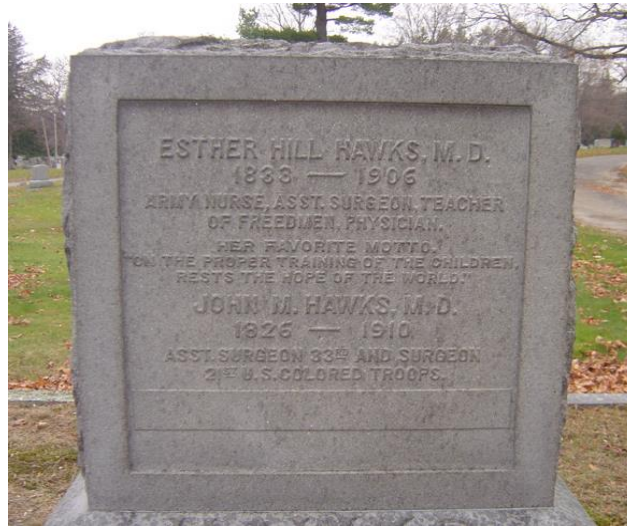
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/26563739>

<sup>24</sup> *The Register*, p 44.

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courageous and heroic, it was her work as a teacher that provided the most enduring influence on the lives of black soldiers and civilians alike. It seems like Dr. Esther Hill Hawks realized this herself when she claimed: “Freed Blacks are all eager to go to school, books being the one thing denied them, they have a frantic desire to get possession of them...the enthusiasm [of my pupils] would inspire even the dullest of teachers.”<sup>26</sup>

[A Woman Doctor's Civil War edited by Gerald Schwartz is the compilation of Dr. Esther Hill Hawks' diary entries until 1866.]



**Pine Grove Cemetery  
Lot 207, Section 18  
Manchester, NH**

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<sup>25</sup> Schwartz, p 26.

<sup>26</sup> Schwartz, Gerald. “Human Pilgrimage: The Civil War Activities of Drs. John Milton and Esther Hill Hawks”.

Cullowhee, SC:” Western Carolina University, .p 28.