



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and applicants are urged to prepare a proposal that reflects their unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/public-scholar-program> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

The application format has been changed since this application was submitted. You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see above link).

Project Title: The Doctors Blackwell: How Two Pioneering Sisters Brought Medicine to Women and Women to Medicine

Institution: None (Independent Scholar)

Project Director: Janice P. Nimura

Grant Program: Public Scholars

SISTER DOCTORS: Narrative

Significance and contribution

Surprisingly few people can identify Elizabeth Blackwell as the first woman in America to receive a medical degree. She graduated from Geneva Medical College in 1849. 1849! Eliza Hamilton was still telling Alexander's story. Abraham Lincoln was a prairie lawyer in Illinois. A cholera epidemic in New York killed thousands. Vassar, the first of the Seven Sisters to receive a charter as a women's college, would not admit its first student for another decade and a half.

Elizabeth Blackwell isn't hard to find in the children's biography section of the library: "Elizabeth Blackwell: First Woman Doctor." I had no use for those books as a child. They felt bloodless and contrived, disconnected from anyone real. It wasn't until I wrote my first book that I discovered the time-traveling thrill of archival research, reading words that came straight from the minds and pens of real people, with the ragged emotions and unconscious biases that are smoothed away by the time they are canonized as secular saints.

Real people don't exist in saintly niches, and every biography is a group biography. You can't tell Elizabeth's story without her sister, Emily, whom no one remembers as the third woman in America to receive a medical degree: five years younger, permanently eclipsed, but actually a more dedicated physician, with a legacy comparable to Elizabeth's. Like her sister, Emily eschewed a husband and adopted a daughter; unlike Elizabeth, she shared the last three decades of her life with a female partner. Together, Elizabeth and Emily founded the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children in 1857, which expanded to include a women's medical college a decade later.

The story of these two is intriguing enough, but it can't be told without the stories of many others: their eccentric oldest sister Anna, a writer who dreamed of utopia; their brothers Henry and Samuel, who chose iconoclastic feminists as their wives. Those wives, Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown, were crusaders for abolition and woman suffrage, intimate friends long before they were in-laws. They became, respectively, the editor of *Woman's Journal* and the first female ordained minister in the U.S.

Outside of the Blackwell clan is a cast of characters from Florence Nightingale and Horace Greeley to Lady Byron and Madame Restell, the notorious Fifth Avenue abortionist. Equally vivid are the locations, which range from Bristol and London, to Paris and Edinburgh, to provincial Cincinnati, to gaslit, gritty New York. Running through all this is the dawning of a new consciousness for women, both ideological and physical. Female doctors and medical students from the Blackwells' institution fanned out into the poor communities of the Lower East Side, teaching hygiene and parenting skills; Elizabeth Blackwell's writings on the moral and physical education of girls became bestsellers. One of the Blackwells' students, Rebecca Cole, was one of the first black female doctors in this country. Other medical pioneers, like Marie Zakrzewska, Sophia Jex-Blake, and Mary Putnam Jacobi, trace their origins to the Infirmary as well. The Blackwell story as previously told tends to focus mostly on Elizabeth's accomplishments and writings; I will dig more deeply into the community of women surrounding Elizabeth and Emily—two sisters who helped create a larger sisterhood.

This is not just a tidy story of empowerment, easily packaged in a schoolroom picture book. Yes, Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell were pioneering women doctors, but their convictions and motivations reflect their moment, not ours. Their opinions can sound startlingly dissonant to 21st-century feminists. Here is Elizabeth, age 27, writing to Emily in 1848:

[O]h Milly, what is to be done with the women...it is not her intellectual inferiority I lament—I believe as a rule, an intellectual difference will always be—but if she were only grand in those qualities attributed to her, all might be well, but the petty, trifling,

priest-ridden, gossiping, stupid, inane, women of our day—what can we do with them!
(4/16/48; Schlesinger Library MC411 fol 45 item 16-17)

There are powerful contradictions here, as relevant in 2017 as they were 170 years ago. Now more than ever, we need to tell the stories of accomplished women who weren't crowd-pleasing martyr-heroines. Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell were real women trying to improve upon a world that was appalled by their ambitions. They weren't saints, and that's why they're worth knowing.

I want to introduce the Blackwells to everyone who's never met them, evoke the world that shaped them, and try to feel how it is similar to and different from ours. I want to attract the reader who might otherwise steer clear of history or science, and capture the interest of someone who's never looked for treasure in a library. In addition to archival material, I want to immerse myself in the physical world these women inhabited: tenement Manhattan, early hospitals and public health efforts, the crude realities of 19th-century medicine.

This is the approach I took with my first book, *Daughters of the Samurai: A Journey from East to West and Back*, a sample of which is included with this application. It is another forgotten story of border-crossing 19th-century women, aimed at readers without special expertise. I believe in the power of storytelling to illuminate the past, and in the Blackwells I believe I have found another extraordinary story.

Work plan

I stand at the beginning of my journey with the Blackwells: W.W. Norton has just accepted my proposal. The Public Scholar grant would support the completion of my research and the beginning of the writing phase full-time from September 2017 to August 2018, including time at the Schlesinger Library in Boston, at the Library of Congress in Washington DC, and also in Paris and Edinburgh, where Elizabeth and Emily completed their respective medical training. The projected chapter outline for the book is as follows:

1. Origins

The Blackwell story begins in Bristol, England, with a paradoxical patriarch, Samuel Blackwell, a Dissenter and an abolitionist who has made his fortune as a sugar refiner, dependent on slave labor. He believes in educating his five daughters to the same level as his four sons. Financial troubles and political unrest convince him to seek a better future in New York in 1832, with a second move to Cincinnati in 1838. Three months later, Samuel is dead. He leaves his family an estate of \$20.

2. Influences

The Blackwells become an island unto themselves, struggling to remain afloat. Elizabeth lands a teaching job in Henderson, KY, confronts the reality of slavery for the first time, reads Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, and yearns for a purpose larger than herself. A friend suggests she consider medicine, and she finds the audacious physical and intellectual challenge of the idea deeply attractive.

3. Studies

Elizabeth seeks medical training from sympathetic physicians in Asheville, NC, Charleston, SC, and Philadelphia. After many rejections, she is granted admission to Geneva College in upstate New York, though the students at first think her application is a prank. She receives her degree in 1849 and departs for study in Paris, returning in 1851, richer in experience and allies including Lady Byron and Florence Nightingale, but blinded in one eye, any hope of practicing surgery dashed.

4. Enter Emily

Once embarked on her training Elizabeth begins to think of her younger sister Emily as a potential partner. Emily suffers the same string of rejections from medical schools but at last finishes her studies at Western Reserve Medical School in Cleveland. After graduation in 1854 she leaves for Edinburgh to study with the eminent obstetrician James Simpson.

5. Meanwhile in New York

In 1850, “woman doctor” means Madame Restell, the infamous abortionist. While Elizabeth publishes lectures emphasizing physical and spiritual hygiene, Madame Restell caters to women desperate to prevent or end pregnancies. In the absence of patients, Elizabeth and Emily open a dispensary for the poor. Meanwhile, Elizabeth adopts an orphan girl, and brother Henry marries suffragette Lucy Stone. The following year brother Samuel marries Antoinette Brown, America’s first female minister.

6. Establishment

In 1857 the Blackwells open the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children. It is an immediate success, providing inpatient and outpatient care, nursing training, and a place for female medical students to intern. But suspicion persists. The slightest mishap brings violent mobs to the door.

7. Civil War

In 1860 the Infirmary expands, and a year later the Civil War begins. Elizabeth becomes active in the Women’s Central Relief Agency, a tributary to the United States Sanitary Commission. But the government passes her over in favor of the medically untrained Dorothea Dix as superintendent of nurses. Elizabeth’s disappointment spurs her to her next goal: the establishment of a women’s medical college in 1868.

8. Younger Pioneers

The New York Infirmary becomes a crucible in which several pioneers of women’s medicine are formed: Marie Zakrzewska, Mary Putnam Jacobi, Sophia Jex-Blake, Rebecca Cole (one of the first black woman doctors), and Annie Sturgis Daniel.

9. Parting of the Ways

In 1869, with the infirmary and medical college running smoothly, Elizabeth leaves permanently for England, devoting herself to a crusade against prostitution. In her absence, Emily comes into her own as a leader and a gifted physician. She too adopts a daughter, and for the last three decades of her life lives with her partner, Dr. Elizabeth Cushier. She dies in 1910, within a few months of her sister.

Competencies, skills, and access

This is an unusually good moment to study the Blackwell family. In addition to the troves of Blackwell material housed at the Library of Congress and at Columbia University, a vast quantity of their papers are held by the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, part of the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard. The Schlesinger has just completed the Herculean task of digitizing their Blackwell holdings, which I’ve begun to work with both online and in Boston. My article “Meet the Blackwells,” on exploring the Blackwell collection in both its virtual and analog forms, appeared in the Schlesinger’s newsletter this fall. I am also visiting medical archives—the New York Academy of Medicine, and the libraries at Weill Cornell and NYU Downtown hospitals, among others—for materials that shed light on Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell’s New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children, and the Women’s Medical

College that grew from it. In addition, I have been offered introductions to Blackwell descendants which I am eager to pursue.

This work will build upon the experience I gained in the research phase of my first book, *Daughters of the Samurai*, which included work in the archives and special collections of Vassar College, Yale University, Rutgers University, the New Haven Museum, and Tsuda College in Tokyo, extensive work with 19th-century newspapers, as well as correspondence and interviews with descendants of the figures in the book.

As a student, I considered medicine and chose a different path; now, alongside my archival research, I plan to engage with physicians and surgeons in order to understand at a truly visceral level what the work of the Blackwells entailed. My great-grandparents were immigrants to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, settling in the very neighborhood the New York Infirmary served. My experiences may not be part of the story per se, but they will inform how I tell it.

Final product and dissemination

Sister Doctors has obvious areas of broad appeal: to feminists of both genders, to medical communities, to American history buffs, and beyond those categories to any reader who enjoys a triumphant story of progress in the face of daunting challenges. My goal, as in *Daughters of the Samurai*, is to remain absolutely faithful to my deep research while propelling the narrative forward with vivid storytelling. I want my readers to see and feel the scenes I describe, and to forget, occasionally, that they are not reading a novel.

Like my first book, this project is under contract to Alane Salierno Mason at W.W. Norton & Company, an illustrious independent house with a unique position as both a trade publisher and the producer of Norton Anthologies and Critical Editions. It is an unusually good home for writers of deeply researched nonfiction aimed at mainstream readers. With hardcover, paperback, and electronic editions, Norton will bring the work to the general public and simultaneously promote it through their College Department for course adoption on campuses, thereby extending the book's reach to a younger demographic than most biographies achieve. Norton was enthusiastic about my proposal, and has tentatively scheduled the book for publication in 2020. In addition, they have permitted me to enlist the help of Michael Taeckens and Whitney Peeling of Broadside PR, talented publicists whose expertise will help the book receive the widest possible exposure in print, online, and on the air. I will supplement their efforts with my own activity on social media and my boundless willingness to tour and speak.

Sharing *Daughters of the Samurai* with live audiences has been at least as rewarding as writing it. I have given illustrated talks to audiences across the country in venues as varied as Vroman's Bookstore in Pasadena, the Seattle Asian Art Museum, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the New York Society Library, the Prologue Society in Miami, and the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville. I have visited dozens of book groups in person and via Skype both in the U.S. and abroad. I've been featured on NPR's Leonard Lopate and Diane Rehm shows, as well as CSPAN's BookTV. *Daughters* was widely reviewed, named a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2015, and included in BuzzFeed's Best Nonfiction 2015. It has been the privilege of a lifetime to engage with so many readers, each of whom found something surprisingly resonant in an ostensibly exotic tale. I am eager to write the Blackwells' story, and equally eager to share it.

SISTER DOCTORS: Bibliography

Archives

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