

The legacy of Daisy Maude Orleman-Robinson: the first woman dermatologist in the United States

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To the Editor:

Daisy Maude Orleman was born on November 6, 1869 in Kansas after her parents immigrated from Germany. With two years of teaching and her high school degree, Orleman earned her medical degree from National Medical College of Columbian University in 1890. Orleman, the only woman in her medical class, created a path for women to ascend the ranks in the conventionally male-dominated field of medicine. She went on to become the first woman dermatologist in the United States, the first woman to hold an academic position in America, and the first woman to present scholarly work at an academic dermatological meeting. She was lauded with honors for her selfless service to the community, including the title of Médecin Major Première Classe in dermatology by the Minister of War of France. She dedicated her life after World War I to promoting public health both nationally and internationally. Orleman was a pioneer in medicine until her death on March 12, 1942. Despite a lack of mentorship and the societal norms of her time, she broke the proverbial glass ceiling, laying a foundation upon which future generations of women have built to accomplish their professional and personal goals. Daisy Maude Orleman became the first woman dermatologist in America, living an accomplished life driven by a passion for knowledge and dedication to service. **Figure 1** depicts Orleman's major life events and many achievements.

Orleman attended the National Medical College of Columbian University (now George Washington University) as the only woman of 20 students [1,2].

She was an outspoken advocate for women. Per Pariser's cornerstone 2015 biography, Orleman wrote to the editor of the Street Louis Globe-Democrat criticizing their perspective that women ought to attend banquets escorted by men. That year, she attended her medical school's banquet unescorted [2]. In 1893, she boldly spoke up regarding her medical school's policy of accepting women only if too few men applied [2].

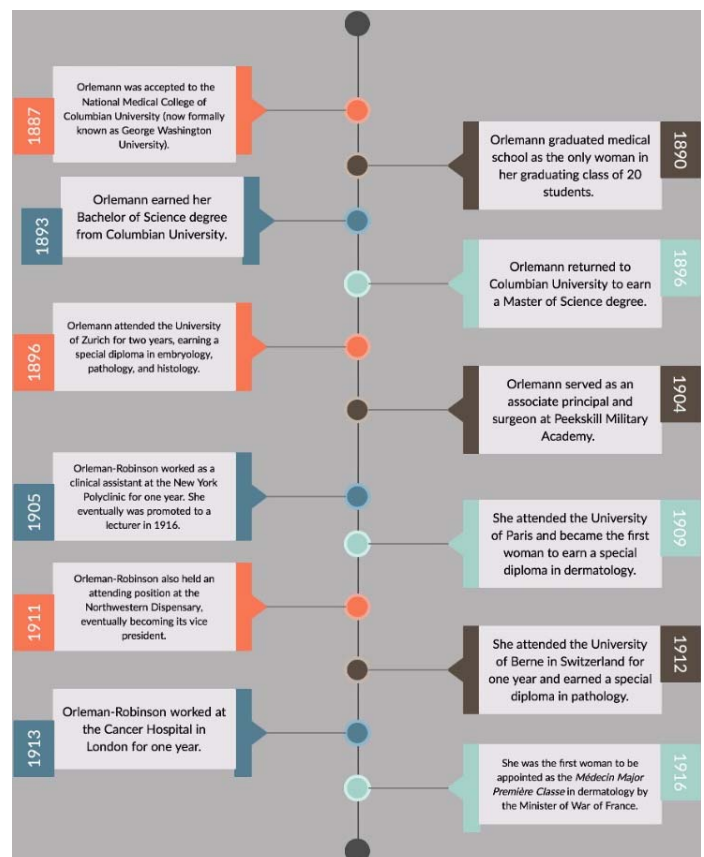


Figure 1. Timeline depicting the major life events and achievements of Dr. Daisy Maude Orleman-Robinson.

Dr. Orleman (later Orleman-Robinson) was a woman of many firsts. She was the first woman dermatologist to hold an academic position in the U.S. [1], the first woman to present at dermatologic meetings nationally and internationally, the first to publish on the negative impact of X-ray radiation [1-3], the first woman awarded the Gold Palms award [1,2], and the first woman to publish an academic paper in a dermatological journal [1,2]. Orleman ran both a successful dermatologic practice with her husband in New York [1,2] and continuously honed her knowledge base through pursuit of higher education. She also contributed immensely to the scientific literature with an unprecedented 14 presentations of scholarly work [2].

In 1916, during the height of her successful Manhattan medical practice, Orleman-Robinson went to France to offer her skills during the World War I effort. She ultimately earned several awards of recognition for her selfless dedication to the health of soldiers [2].

After the war, Orleman-Robinson redirected her career towards sex education and women's health. She became a founder of the International Women's Association and traveled throughout the 1920s to educate populations on syphilis and promote general public hygiene [2]. Even after her husband's death in 1924, Orleman-Robinson dedicated the remainder of her life to public service [2].

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The extent of Orleman-Robinson's perseverance and courage cannot be overstated. Even in 2021, recruiting women into academic medicine and surgery remains difficult. In 2008, only 32% of general surgical interns were women despite the fact that women comprise half of U.S. medical students [4]. Women are more likely to enter a field when they have women mentors [5] who have accomplished their goals despite conscious and subconscious biases that permeate clinical environments. Orleman-Robinson had no such role models. Notwithstanding these obstacles, she achieved immeasurable clinical, scientific, and advocacy feats for any person of her time. Orleman-Robinson broke the proverbial glass ceiling, giving moment to future women. In 1973, Dr. Wilma Bergfeld became the first president of the Women's Dermatologic Society and in 1992, the first woman president of the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD). Since then, four women have earned the presidency of the AAD: Drs. Lynn Drake, Diane Baker, Boni Elewski, and Suzanne Olbricht.

Orleman-Robinson's life as a dermatologist, researcher, and advocate paved the way for future generations of women to pursue new opportunities in the traditionally male-dominated field of medicine and dermatology.

Potential conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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