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**Susan La Flesche Picotte**

**An Arrow of the Future**

by Patricia Morris Buckley

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# Susan La Flesche Picotte

## An Arrow of the Future

by

*Patricia Morris Buckley*

# VOICES IN HISTORY: BIOGRAPHY SERIES™

ISBN 978-1-68380-941-8

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PRINTED IN CANADA

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801 EAST HIGH STREET

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA 22902

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# 1

## Giving Up the Land

**T**he story of how Susan La Flesche Picotte became the first Native American doctor in the United States did not begin with her birth. No, it all started with her father. Here's how that story began. One day in 1854, Susan's father, Joseph La Flesche, whose last name meant "arrow," traveled by train to Washington, D.C., as part of an important delegation of seven Omaha chiefs. They were going there to sign a life-altering treaty.

The Omaha tribe hoped that if they gave away a portion of their traditional territory, the U.S. government would allow them to stay on the remaining Omaha tribal land. Many other tribes had been forcibly moved off their traditional lands to cramped, undesirable plots thousands of miles away. The Omaha tribe dreaded the same thing happening to them.

For generation after generation, long before settlers came to America, the Omaha tribe didn't believe that it was possible to actually possess land. They said the earth couldn't be owned by a person any more than the rain could be owned. So when the settlers began claiming tribal areas for themselves, members of the Omaha tribe were puzzled. Then the settlers began hunting the bison, a crucial food source for Natives, and the Omaha tribe began to starve.

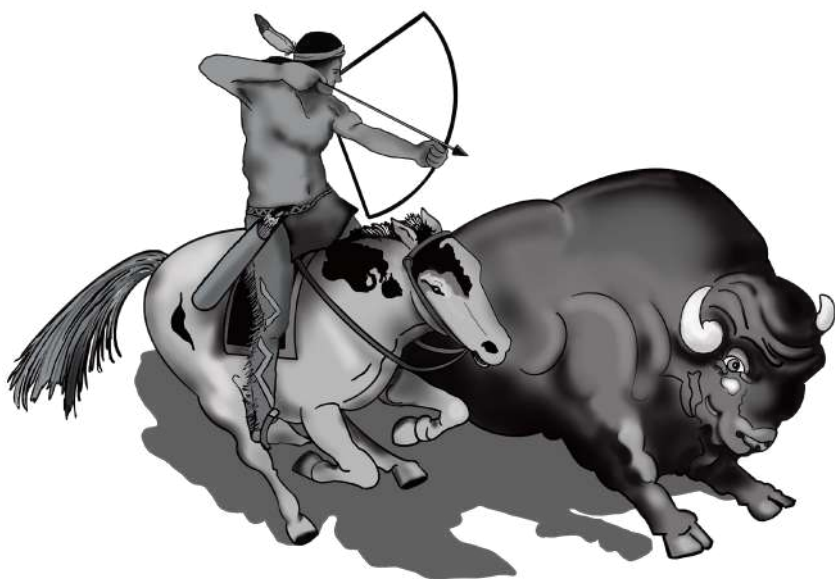
Something had to be done.

Once Joseph reached Washington, D.C., he couldn't believe the huge scope of the city. Exiting the train station, he felt overwhelmed by the wide cobblestone streets and the tall brick buildings. The city was not what made the biggest impression on him, though. It was the people!

Years later, in a letter to his brother, he warned, "Look ahead and you will see nothing but the white man."

Joseph, whose Native name was Iron Eye, and the Omaha tribe had decided on a plan to embrace the white man's ways without giving up too many of the tribe's traditions and language. When they signed the new treaty, they handed over almost six million acres to the U.S. government. In return, they would get to keep three hundred thousand acres. That left an area thirty miles long by fifteen miles wide in the Blackbird region of northeast Nebraska.





But the deal was not without compromises. Big ones. The Omaha tribe would have to change many of their traditional ways.

For instance, they could no longer hunt bison outside of Omaha territory. Instead, they were required to make a living as farmers, which would be a departure from their protein-heavy bison diet. And a plot of land would be given to each family. Instead of community land that they worked for the good of the whole tribe, landowners would live and work on allotted plots. There would be no more tepees or earth lodges, which were vital to the traditions of the Omaha tribe.

In return, the Omaha tribe would be paid \$40,000 annually for thirty years, but the money would go into a trust to maintain various services the government felt were necessary. Tribal members who wanted to access the funds, for anything from farming equipment to a new blanket, would have to make a formal request to the Omaha Indian Agency. Permission was often a long time coming, if it came at all.

When the Omaha tribe delegation signed the treaty, they saved the tribe from having to leave Nebraska. They would be able to keep some traditions and even their language. But they lost the ability to govern themselves. From then on, the U.S. government would control most aspects of their lives.

Susan's father, Joseph, and the Omaha tribe chief, Big Elk II, also known as Young Elk, found that they held common beliefs about how best to navigate their future and protect their people and their land. Young Elk's father, the first Chief Big Elk, had been the first one to understand that in order to hold on to some of their land, they would have to accommodate a great many of the incoming settlers. Chief Big Elk had visited Washington, D.C., in 1837 and had returned to his people with the

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**trust:** financial relationship in which one group manages property to benefit another group

**accommodate:** make space for

view that it would be impossible to stop the coming flood of settlers.

But Young Elk had another problem besides trying to hold on to some of his people's land. His young son had always been sickly, and he knew his boy would never live to be chief. Young Elk wanted the next leader to be able to guide his people and protect them. He admired Joseph, who had grown up traveling with his French father, a fur trader. Joseph spoke French as well as Omaha and several other Native languages, and he had dealt with different people all his life.

But Young Elk and Joseph weren't related by blood. And leadership among the Omaha tribe passed down from father to son.

So Young Elk adopted Joseph in a public ceremony, even though Joseph was already twenty-eight years old and married. When Young Elk passed away in 1853, Joseph took over as chief of the Elk clan. He became the principal chief of the tribe in 1855.

Joseph continued the work of Big Elk. He built the first plaster-and-wood-frame house, complete with two stories, on Plains tribal land. He had already adopted Euro-American clothing and instituted a ban on alcohol, with drunkenness being punishable by public flogging.

---

**instituted:** established

He even invited the Presbyterian community to build a church and a school on their reservation.

But Joseph also respected and carried on some of the old ways, such as traditional ceremonies and religious customs. He did not interfere with Omaha tribal members who still dressed in bison robes or worshipped Wakonda, the great creator.



Though some firmly rejected assimilation, for the most part, Joseph had the support of his people. They saw the tragedy of other tribes forced to move off ancestral grounds and understood that their way of life had to change or they would face the same fate.

This was the world that Susan, later known as Dr. Sue, came into.

# 2

## Growing Up on the Plains

It's possible that Susan La Flesche was born on June 17, 1865. But we cannot say for sure. That's the date on her tombstone, but in the mid-1800s, people didn't always keep accurate records. Most historians agree she was born in 1865.

But the circumstances of her birth were certainly dramatic. Her family had packed up their buckskin tepee and Susan's three older sisters to follow the annual summer bison hunt along the Missouri River. The Omaha tribe looked forward to this trip every year. Think of it as a large camping trip with friends and family, out under the stars, collecting the food needed to survive along the way.

One morning, in the new light of dawn, baby Susan joined her family.

This particular bison hunt turned out to be one of the last in Omaha history. The last Omaha bison hunt was in the winter of 1876–77. Not long after, Congress outlawed the killing of any wild animals in Yellowstone National Park, where the only remaining bison lived.



Natives could no longer hunt the large woolly creatures that had provided the means to make shelters, essential meat, warm hides, and bones for tools.

### **The Importance of Bison in Native Life and Culture**

*Until the late 1800s, bison were the main food source for The Omaha tribe and other Plains peoples. Millions of bison, called the "Thunder of the Plains," dotted the landscape, and tribes spent their summers—and, in some cases, winters—following a herd's path to hunt them. Native peoples used almost every part of the bison, not just the flesh for meat.*

*They took the hides, bones, horns, and blood to make shelters, clothing, medicines, jewelry, bowstrings, ceremonial regalia, needles, and thread. Because bison sustained their tribes, the people of the Plains felt a spiritual connection with the animals. They performed ceremonies after successful hunts to offer a prayer of thanks to the bison for giving up its life. Today, many reservations have returned the almost extinct animal to tribal lands, and again, Natives report that they feel a spiritual and cultural connection with this majestic creature.*

Susan, who would grow up to become a cross-cultural interpreter for both Natives and settlers, experienced this ancient tradition before it disappeared forever. Not long after this hunting trip, the bison population began to drastically decline. Tens of millions of bison still roamed the Plains in 1850. By 1883, less than three hundred remained. They were hunted, often for fun, almost to extinction.

By the time Susan was born, her father had become the principal chief of the Omaha tribe, and Susan had three sisters. Her mother, Mary Gale La Flesche, whose Native name was One Woman, had given birth to Susette, then eleven years old; Rosalie, four; and Marguerite, three. They all lived in the wood-frame home that Joseph had built for them.

But then, out of the blue, trouble struck! Joseph lost his position as principal chief of the Omaha tribe.

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**regalia:** special, dressy clothes

**cross-cultural:** across two or more cultures



He had done his best to go along with outside government expectations, but there was a limit to how much additional control he would accept. Robert W. Furnas, the Indian agent for the Omaha tribe who was charged with controlling Joseph and his people, had him fired as the official Omaha leader. The government would no longer do business with him. Furnas even made up a false scandal, saying Joseph had stolen money from his own people. Then he found a replacement, a “paper chief,” who was willing to do his bidding

Even though Joseph no longer had the title of chief, many members of the Omaha tribe still considered him the tribe’s leader and did so until his death.

Joseph continued to try to balance both ways of life. He allowed Susette to go through the Omaha “turning of the child” ceremony, which involved receiving an Omaha tribal name and being formally admitted into the tribe. Susette’s Native name was Bright Eyes. But as Joseph’s views shifted, he decided that Rosalie, Marguerite, and Susan wouldn’t be part of the child ceremony or have Omaha names.

Nor did his children participate in the “mark of honor” ceremony. At this ceremony, the daughters of men who had achieved a certain status in the tribe were given tattoos on the forehead and throat. The tattoos consisted of a small round spot on the forehead, representing the

sun, and a circle with four projecting points on the throat and upper chest, symbolizing the four life-giving winds. The La Flesché girls, as daughters of a tribal leader, were eligible for this honor. But Joseph reasoned that these immediately noticeable tattoos would make their assimilation into white society more difficult.

Joseph also had rules about language. His daughters could speak Omaha or French to their parents but only English to each other. In addition to dressing them in nontraditional clothing, he placed a high value on formal education. Susan respected her father's views.

Susan learned early about the Native philosophy of working for the greater good of the tribe. She foraged for wood, carried water, unpacked horses returning from hunts, and learned to erect a tepee, dress skins, and dry meat.

In Omaha society, the work of women was considered equal to that of men. Women's roles were just as important to everyone's survival, and they were just as valued.

When she had free time, Susan loved to ride her pony, make toys out of clay, and play with cornhusk dolls with her sisters.

Susan began her formal education at age three, attending a Presbyterian mission school on the reservation. But the school closed a year later. Then she

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**foraged:** searched for

and her sisters walked to a Quaker day school three miles away in Macy, where the Omaha Agency was located. There, she really began her education. She loved learning and did quite well in her studies.

In 1875, Susan's eldest sister, Susette, graduated from the Elizabeth Institute for Young Ladies in Elizabeth, New Jersey. When she arrived home, Susette began teaching at the Macy school. Susette moved into a small home near the school, and her sisters, who attended the same school, came to live with her. They all had regular chores, and Susette helped them with their schoolwork. Susette also bought a small organ for her students, which Susan loved to play. They continued to honor their father's wishes by speaking only English to each other.

"I am a little Indian girl twelve years old," Susan wrote in a letter to *St. Nicholas* magazine, published in the September 1880 issue. "I go to school at the Omaha Agency. I study geography, history, grammar, arithmetic and spelling. I read in the Fifth Reader. I have three older sisters and two [half] brothers. Sometimes father, mother and grandmother come to see us." Susan was learning to balance her life in two quite different worlds.

Susette had a growing reputation as a speaker who advocated for Native rights. When Susan turned fourteen, Joseph decided to send her and Marguerite to the same

school Susette had attended—the Elizabeth Institute for Young Ladies in New Jersey. And so off they went.

When the two nervous girls stepped off the train, they entered a world that was nothing like their world in Nebraska. They were greeted by tall buildings, streetcars, and sidewalks filled with rushing people, none of whom looked like their family, friends, and neighbors back home. Nothing looked familiar.

Still, Susan was determined to make her father proud. She spent three years at the boarding school, learning reading, writing, and math, as well as how to live like the city dwellers. Susan found that she not only liked learning but excelled at it.



Nevertheless, Susan and her sister felt homesick, especially as they couldn't afford to go home during the summers. Instead, they stayed with school friends. Susan concentrated extra hard on her schoolwork, and over time, living away from home became a little easier.

When Susan finally returned to Nebraska at the age of seventeen, she began teaching at the Presbyterian mission school, which had since reopened. However, even then Susan knew that there was so much more she needed to learn. She wasn't exactly sure what she wanted to do with her life, but being a doctor was one of the possibilities she dreamed of.

That dream may have begun after an experience she'd had as a young girl. One night, when she was eight years old, Susan tended to a sick woman who was in terrible pain. Susan sat with her, giving her sips of water and words of comfort, but could do nothing more for her.

Four times the white doctor was called that night, and four times he sent a message saying that he'd come. But the night was dark, and he didn't arrive. He thought that the woman was only an Indian and didn't matter. The woman died early that morning, leaving behind a heartbroken family. Susan never forgot the doctor's words.

During her time teaching, Susan once again nursed someone, and it changed her life. Alice Cunningham Fletcher, a white ethnologist, had been studying the history and customs of the Omaha tribe. She lived in a canvas tent on the reservation. During a particularly rainy season, she became ill, then so sick that she almost died. Fletcher suffered from inflammatory rheumatism, a term used to describe various medical conditions that cause swollen joints, and she could barely move due to intense pain. Susan took care of her for several months, making Alice's meals and giving her medicine.

A recovered and grateful Alice felt that Susan had great potential as a healer. When she heard of Susan's dream to go into medicine, Alice started writing letters. She helped Susan get accepted into the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, along the shores of Chesapeake Bay in Virginia.

Once again, Susan would be leaving the reservation and venturing into the outside world. Could she handle college?

Susan was determined to try.

### **Tribal Healers and Their Roles**

*Before modern medicine, tribes relied on medicine men to heal a wide variety of ailments. These healers would use local plants, animals, and minerals, as well as prayer, songs, and massage, to help people return to health. The Omaha tribe also used the hallucinogenic plant drug peyote, sometimes in a sweat lodge, to heal. Most healers before modern medicine were male, but women could be healers after their childbearing years had passed. Today, many Natives visit doctors for healing, but some traditions are part of their core beliefs, so they visit a healer as well.*

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**hallucinogenic:** causing a person to experience something with their senses that is not real

# 3

## The College Years

**I**n most Plains tribes, men served as the healers. A woman could only be a healer later in life. But a determined Susan decided to challenge that tradition. Her training at the Hampton Institute would help her do that.

General Samuel Chapman Armstrong had opened the Hampton Institute in 1868, after the Civil War. The college began as a school for the industrial education of newly freed Black students, male and female. Soon after, the school expanded to include Native Americans.

In August 1884, Susan, Marguerite, their half brother Carey, and ten other members of the Omaha tribe traveled to the school. The girls all lived in the newly built Winona Lodge, a dorm paid for by funds partially raised by Susette.

Students had to dress in Euro-American clothes, something Susan and Marguerite already did. They wore Victorian-style dresses and stiff leather shoes. Even though she'd worn clothes like this before, Susan yearned to wear a pair of comfy moccasins made by her mother.





The sisters also changed their hairstyles, tucking their traditional braids into a bun at the base of the neck.

Every day, Susan woke at 5:15 a.m. and began her day with chores, then breakfast. Classes began at 8:40 a.m.

She studied biology, physiology, literature, math, general sciences, and writing, among other subjects.

On Fridays and Saturdays, female students worked in the laundry rooms, kitchen, and other facilities, such as the sewing room. They could also tutor struggling students. In exchange for her work, Susan received token wages. She spent her money on piano lessons.

Susan joined several clubs. The temperance committee educated people about the dangers of alcohol, something that had destroyed the lives of many Native Americans. Always ready to help people in need, Susan also joined the Lend-a-Hand charity club.

Two-fifths of Hampton's students were girls. But it was a coeducational school. During her second year at Hampton, Susan noticed a boy.

Thomas Ikinicapi, a full-blooded Sioux, had trouble keeping up with his classwork. Susan began tutoring him, and they soon became friends. Susan thought he was very handsome. In the end, their romance would not last.

Susan continued to focus on her dream. A doctor at Hampton, Martha M. Waldron, admired Susan and wrote to her former medical school, the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, suggesting Susan as a student.

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**physiology:** study of the activities and processes of the body and its parts  
**temperance:** drinking only a little alcohol or none at all

As graduation from Hampton neared, Susan learned the happy news that she was the salutatorian of her class. A salutatorian is the student with the second-highest grades in a graduating class. As the salutatorian, Susan was invited to make a speech at the graduation ceremony. What a huge honor to be singled out!

Although shy and soft-spoken, Susan had learned from her sister Susette how to use her voice to advocate for her people. In her speech, she spoke about growing up on the Omaha Reservation, pointing out that Native people had much to contribute. Wearing a simple striped dress, she spoke about her dreams of serving the Native community as a physician.

“We [Natives] are only beginning; so do not try to put us down, but help us to climb higher,” she told the audience. Natives could only succeed if white people offered a helping hand, she added.

Susan also spoke about the value of higher education for Native Americans. “We have to prepare our people to live in the white man’s way, to use the white man’s books, and to use his laws,” she said.

After her speech, a wonderful surprise awaited her. Michigan state representative General Byron M. Cutcheon came forward and gave her a prize. The

Demorest Prize was a gold medal awarded to the graduate with the highest exam scores in junior year.

Cutcheon addressed Susan and the audience. “It is a great thing to be one of the first women of your race to lay this foundation,” he said. He concluded his speech by telling her, “I charge you to regard it as your duty to live for your people. To devote yourself to them.”

Susan couldn’t have ended her college career any better. And later that summer, after she returned home, she received some more great news—she’d been accepted at the Woman’s Medical College. But looking at her finances, she realized that she didn’t have enough money to attend the school.

Would all her dreams be dashed?

# 4

## The Road to Becoming a Doctor

The Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania opened its doors in 1850. It was only the second medical college in the country to train women to be doctors.

Once Alice and Martha heard that Susan didn't have the funds to attend the medical school, they started writing letters to their many contacts. Unfortunately, all the school's scholarships had already been awarded.

But that didn't stop Susan's mentors. Alice had success with the women of the Connecticut Indian Association. They helped raise much of the money Susan needed for lodging, food, and school supplies.

The president of the Connecticut Indian Association, Sara Kinney, also persuaded the Bureau of Indian Affairs to help Susan financially.

For the first time, in October 1886, Susan started school without her sister Marguerite or any of her friends from back home. But she found a wonderful boardinghouse close to the college, run by a woman

named Mrs. Smith. Her roommate immediately became a close friend. It didn't take her long to begin attending concerts, museums, and plays in the bustling Philadelphia arts community. To Susan, Wanamaker's Department Store looked like a castle.

Most of all, Susan loved her schoolwork. There were thirty-five other women of various races in her class. She studied under some of the best doctors in the country, including Clara Marshall and William H. Keen.

The students learned chemistry, anatomy, physiology, history, therapeutics, and obstetrics. They also enrolled in gymnastics and weight-lifting courses to make their bodies stronger for the work. Susan particularly enjoyed studying anatomy.

In November, the students began practicing with and learning from cadavers. For the first time, Susan began to feel like a real doctor. While there were a few queasy stomachs as they cut through skin, Susan found the process enlightening.

Then she learned that after Christmas, they would be observing their first surgery. Susan couldn't wait.

When the day arrived, Susan was excited. Male students from the nearby Jefferson Medical College

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**therapeutics:** medical science concerning how to treat diseases

**obstetrics:** medical science concerning pregnancy and childbirth

were also attending the surgery. They started to tease the women, saying that they were too delicate and would probably faint at the first cut. But Susan wasn't fazed. Instead, Susan leaned in further to see every bit of the surgery. She imagined being the one making that first cut. As Susan focused on what was happening, she heard a loud crash. Ironically, the student who had teased the women the most had dropped to the floor, unconscious at the first sight of blood. His classmates helped him out of the operating room.

Susan and her classmates had to stifle their laughter so they could focus on the operation. She later wrote a letter to her sister Rosalie, detailing how the man passed out. "I wasn't even thinking of fainting," she wrote.

As much as she enjoyed the college, Susan felt guilty that she couldn't be on the reservation anytime she heard of the health problems of her family or their neighbors. She would often send medical advice in her letters, and sometimes even a package of soothing salve.

During Susan's second year, she assisted with a few surgeries. Her studies continued to go well, and she enjoyed spending time with her friends. But she also looked forward to returning home that summer for the first time since beginning medical school. It was likely that during this time her relationship with Thomas ended.

Once she made it home, Susan helped out on the family farm. While Susan could be quite brave when it came to cutting up cadavers, she could not overcome her fear of cows! But that summer, Susan got a chance to put her medical training to work when the reservation suffered a huge measles epidemic. Measles was just one of the many diseases that had devastated Native American populations when Europeans first arrived.

**European Diseases and How They Devastated the Native Population**

*When European settlers came to the Americas, they brought with them a deadly weapon they didn't even realize they had—disease. The Europeans had spent generations building up immunity to such illnesses as smallpox, the flu, and measles, among others. Experts believe that these diseases killed off up to 90 percent of the Native populations in both North and South America. That means that as few as one out of ten Natives may have survived the introduction of these new illnesses due to lack of previous contact with the new germs. While Native peoples have been helped with modern medicine and education, their numbers have never returned to what they were before these diseases were introduced.*

Susan immediately started to help people as much as she could. Many members of the Omaha tribe didn't trust "white medicine," so Susan would take a spoonful first to show them that it was safe. That summer, Susan took



care of hundreds of people. Sometimes she had to travel as much as twenty-five miles to reach a family in need. Because she had to travel such distances, the number of people Susan could treat was limited. In the end, eighty-seven members of the Omaha tribe died that summer.


Then death touched Susan's life as well. In September, her father passed away unexpectedly. He had struggled with a cold for two weeks. Then his illness suddenly developed into something more serious.

Susan had a hard time keeping up her spirits after the death of her father. He'd been the one to encourage her studies and challenge her to do her best, as well as motivating her to give back to their people.

Joseph's funeral was attended by Natives from all over Nebraska as well as many white leaders. The funeral procession was the longest that had ever been seen in that part of the state.

Both her experience with the measles outbreak and losing her father convinced Susan that the reservation needed a doctor—a doctor her people trusted, one they considered to be a neighbor, perhaps the daughter of a former chief. And a doctor who spoke their language as well as English and French. A doctor who had the knowledge to really help people get better when they were unwell. But would that happen?.

On March 14, 1889, Susan made history as the first Native person in the United States, male or female, to receive a medical degree. Not only that, but she graduated as the valedictorian, the top student in her class.



**DR. SUSAN LA FLESCHÉ, daughter of the late chief of the Omaha Indians, has completed her medical studies in the East and has gone to the agency to accept the appointment as physician to the Omaha Indians.**

In his remarks during the ceremony, James Walker, a doctor and professor at the college, praised Susan. He said her courage, constancy, and ability would help her people be independent from the inefficient and uncaring Omaha Agency services.

She'd done it! The one dark spot on the day was the absence of her father. He would never see what she had achieved. Susan missed his sunny smile, warm brown eyes, and long, dark hair. He was the kind of man who gave people food from his supplies if they had nothing to eat. He would have been so proud of her.

“You don't know how it felt to receive my degree and

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**constancy:** manner of remaining loyal and unchanged

**inefficient:** not capable

not to have him there,” she wrote to one of her Hampton teachers.

Susan could have returned to the reservation, but first she decided to spend time learning more in a hospital. She took a competitive exam with ten other students, all of them competing for six internship spots at the Woman’s Hospital of Philadelphia. She easily made the cut.

Before Susan’s hospital internship began in May, the Connecticut Indian Association asked her to conduct a speaking tour to share with others how Native people could be helped by receiving an education. It was a great opportunity to show her gratitude to those who had helped pay for her schooling as well as creating a path for other Native Americans who wanted a higher education.

“I feel that as a physician I can do a great deal more than as a mere teacher,” she wrote in a letter to Sara Kinney.

After her tour, Susan began her four-month internship. She spent her days working in the hospital, assisting the main doctor in charge, and her evenings making house calls to poor areas along with the resident doctor. She visited homes where people had little to eat and no money for a doctor when they were sick. Treating the poor once again reaffirmed her belief that being a doctor was her true calling.

---

**reaffirmed:** confirmed

Then she heard some joyous news. The Omaha Agency boarding school in Macy would be adding a doctor. Susan immediately picked up a pen and wrote to the U.S. government's commissioner of Indian affairs, who would be selecting the doctor for the position. She explained that she knew the language and the people, making her uniquely qualified. The commissioner agreed with her.

Susan would be going home as a fully licensed physician. She couldn't wait!

# 5

## A New Beginning

Susan stepped inside her office, a one-story building next to the school, and couldn't believe its horrible condition. Filthy with old storage boxes and furniture, it would take weeks to turn it into a place to treat patients. But she didn't let this discourage her. She got to scrubbing, sweeping, and painting.

She turned the waiting room into a meeting area, complete with magazines, games, children's books, and plants. When she wasn't treating the students, her main job involved teaching them about hygiene and taking care of their bodies. But some tribal members came to see her as well.

One woman brought in her eight-year-old boy with a common childhood ailment. Susan gave him medicine and sent him home. All night long she fretted. Would he recover? What if he didn't? The next day, she nervously rode out to his home eight miles away, only to see him playing with his friends outside. Whew! She felt a big rush of relief.

Word about the boy's quick recovery spread, and soon many adults were also coming to see her for medical advice. Others came to her little office because she could understand the official letters that they received from government agencies. Many of them didn't speak English or couldn't read at all. They also asked for advice about money, marriage, and raising healthy children.

Susan opened a reading room, a sewing circle, a night school, a Sunday school, and clubs for young people. Her office, which was on the same floor as her apartment, would stay open late into the evening.

Another doctor practiced on the reservation, but he only spoke English and wasn't Native. Three months after Susan returned, that doctor quit, which meant Susan was now the only doctor caring for more than 1,200 people on the reservation. They started calling her "Dr. Sue."

Her workdays expanded from sunup to long past sundown. She would teach students preventive care, then take care of their parents in the evenings. She always rode to the rescue when someone asked for help, no matter the time or the weather conditions.

Susan made less money than other doctors. At that time, the average doctor earned around \$1,200 a year.

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**preventive:** holding back or preventing sickness

She made \$500. The Women's National Indian Association also gave her \$250 a year to serve as a medical missionary. Still, Susan often spent her own money on medicine and equipment.

None of this deterred Susan. Her dream had come true. "I have not a single thing to complain of," she wrote in a letter, adding, "My life here is a very happy one."

If she did have one complaint, it had to do with the difficulty of reaching patients who lived up to twenty-five miles away. Although she had a horse, there was just one problem. The medical equipment, bottles, and thermometers that she carried in her bags would often be broken by the time she arrived at a patient's house. That wasted not only medical supplies but her own money as well.



**deterred:** kept from acting

She scrimped and saved until she had enough to pay for a buggy with a two-pony team. The ponies were named Pat and Pudge. In the winter, Susan would ride through the night to reach a patient. Temperatures could be as low as twenty degrees below zero during a snowstorm. She only had a shawl and mufflers to keep herself from freezing. As more people experienced illness in the winters, this became the toughest part of her year.

Susan treated patients for influenza, malaria, dysentery, cholera, and smallpox. But the disease that proved to be her greatest enemy was tuberculosis (TB), a highly contagious illness of the lungs. Native Americans had little generational immunity against TB. In fact, her sister Marguerite's husband, Charles Picotte, died from TB early in 1892, and Thomas Ikinicapi had also died from this illness.

Susan spent a huge amount of her time convincing people of the existence of certain diseases and showing them how to stop them from spreading. But many of the tribe didn't believe in something they couldn't see, so they wouldn't isolate sick family members. Whole families would become infected, often with tragic results. Susan also campaigned against alcohol consumption.

By now, nearly four years into being a doctor, Susan was



starting to experience her own health issues. Whether it came from lack of sleep or from the bitter cold, her head, neck, and ears hurt so badly that in December 1892, she had to stop working. In the new year, she started making rounds again, but she still felt weak.

Worst of all, that spring, she was flung from her buggy. Once again, she had to take time off work to recover. She'd planned to travel to the Chicago World's Fair with her friend Alice in the summer, but those plans were canceled. At the same time, Susan's mother became ill and required more of her attention.

Would she have to give up practicing medicine? All that hard-fought-for schooling. So many dreams of making a difference. Seeing patient after patient. Yet Susan sensed that her days of being a doctor were coming to a close. After all, how could she treat patients if getting out bed caused her so much pain? And who else could take care of her mother? Susette and Marguerite were busy with their work, and Rosalie had children to care for.

One day in late fall, Susan went to her mother's house after a long day of work. She found her mother lying on the floor, near death. Susan knew now what she had to do, even though the thought brought her so much grief.

In November 1893, Susan sent in her letter of resignation to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. She was only twenty-eight years old and could barely walk. Her doctoring days seemed to be over.

# 6

## A Little Bit of Happiness

When Susan told her family and friends that she would be getting married to Henry Picotte, they were shocked. They certainly didn't think that Henry was an ideal match.

Born in 1859, Henry had already been married and had three children. For several years before coming to the Omaha Reservation, he had performed in Wild West shows and circus sideshows. Natives in these shows dressed in robes and feathers, playing their roles for laughs and thrills in a degrading way.

But Susan insisted she loved the handsome Henry Picotte, who was the son of a Sioux woman and a white Bureau of Indian Affairs interpreter. He was also the brother of Charles Picotte, Marguerite's late husband. Susan had first met him when she was caring for Charles before his death. She liked his friendly personality and his ability to make her laugh. Nothing her family or friends said would change her mind. Nothing.

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**degrading:** causing someone to feel inferior and not respected

Susan and Henry married at a Presbyterian church in Bancroft, on the reservation's southern border, on June 30, 1894. She was twenty-nine, nearly six years his junior.

The newlyweds soon moved to Bancroft, and Susan's health began to improve. Feeling better, she opened a private practice in their home. At night, she hung a lantern in the windows so patients could find the house. On days Susan felt better, she would ride or drive her buggy to see patients across the reservation. As she was on the border of the reservation, white patients also began seeking her out.



Susan had always wanted to be a mother, and in December 1895, she realized her wish after giving birth to a son, Caryl. She didn't want to give up her medical practice, so she often brought the baby with her on sick calls, where the patient's relatives would make a fuss of him. When she couldn't bring him, Henry would stay with him.

"Henry worships the baby," she wrote in a letter to one of her former teachers. "They are the greatest of friends."

But in 1897, Susan got sick again. Her ears were so painful that she couldn't leave her bed. Her neck and head also hurt. This was the sickest she'd ever been. Several family members feared that she would die. Even Susan realized how serious her condition had become.

Susan had always wondered if people appreciated the sacrifices she made to help others. Often, she thought they didn't. But during this illness, many people showed up at her home with food, flowers, and gifts. They also prayed for her. Now she knew how much her work meant to her patients, and this helped her recover as much as the medicine.

"Whenever I felt a little depressed, I would think there was not much use in trying to help people, that

they did not seem to appreciate it,” she later recalled, “but this summer taught me a lesson I hope I’ll never forget.”

She slowly returned to her patients, and in 1898, Susan and Henry welcomed a second son, naming him Pierre. The next five years were happy ones. Susan’s practice was steady and rewarding. They enjoyed watching their boys grow.

Susan became involved in advocating for her people so that they would have more control over decisions about their land.

Then tragedy struck. Henry had taken to drinking alcohol. When he contracted TB, his body was too weak to fight it. Henry died in 1905, only forty-five years old.

Susan wrote to a school friend that she could “almost go wild” with missing him. Adding to her misery was her own worsening health. At forty, she was deaf in one ear. Now a widow with two children, ages seven and nine, she moved back to Macy to figure out what she would do next.

# 7

## Life Without Henry

**A**fter a brief stay in Macy with family, Susan decided to move to Walthill, a new town on the reservation. She bought an allotment of land to build a home on.

She asked the builder for lots of windows to let in the light and the breezes of the Plains. She also had one of the first indoor bathrooms on the reservation, plus a furnace, a wide front porch, modern furniture, and a generous number of bookshelves. The engraved brass plaque she hung on the mantel of the living room fireplace said it best: “East, West, Hame’s [Home’s] Best.” Construction on the house finished in March 1908.

She raised her two boys in the house, and her mother lived with them until her death in 1909. Susan loved to have dinner parties for family, neighbors, and friends. She found that keeping busy left her less lonely.

She helped organize a county medical society and served as chair of the state health committee. She often talked about the reservation needing a hospital, but she couldn’t raise enough money.



When the pastor of the Blackbird Hills Presbyterian Church left, Susan was asked to fill in. At first, only a few people came to services. But Susan, a lifelong devoted Presbyterian, began preaching in Omaha and translating hymns for attendees. The number of people coming to the services grew and grew.

In 1909, an outbreak of diphtheria spread though the reservation like a great and deadly flood. Diphtheria clogs the throat, making it difficult to breathe, and can lead to



death. It spreads through coughing and sneezing. At the time, there was no vaccine for the disease. Susan took a bold stand and suggested that people on the reservation quarantine themselves when someone in their household came down with it.

Then something other than her medical knowledge was requested of Susan. One night in 1910, a number of members of the Omaha tribe visited her. They wanted her to join them on a trip to Washington, D.C., to speak to U.S. government officials about gaining more control over their lives and their land.

Under the Omaha Allotment Act of 1882, the land allotments that the U.S. government had distributed among the tribe did not actually belong to them—yet. The act said that the government would hold the allotments in a trust for twenty-five years, at which time the people would finally hold the titles to their own land. Similar acts had been passed for other Native peoples throughout the country. The last Omaha allotment was in 1884, so the trust was supposed to expire in 1909. But in 1909, the government decided that Native Americans couldn't be trusted to own their own land yet. So it extended the trust period for another ten years.

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**titles:** legal ownership

But at the same time, the government had decided to close the Omaha Agency office in Nebraska. The Omaha Agency was joining with the agency for the Winnebago people—and the combined agency would operate from the Winnebago Reservation, ten miles away from Macy. Not only would the Omaha tribe be dependent on government services for ten more years, but they would have to travel even farther to get them.

So the Omaha tribe was sending a delegation to Washington, and they wanted Susan to be one of the delegates. The delegation would try to convince the government not to merge the two agencies—or, failing that, to lessen its supervision of the Omaha Reservation. After all, if the government didn't think that they could govern themselves, then why were they closing the Omaha Indian Agency office and moving it farther away?

At first Susan refused. She explained that she had been diagnosed with a severe case of neurasthenia, a nervous disorder caused by physical and mental exhaustion. It gave her headaches, heart palpitations, insomnia, and spinal irritation.

But they insisted, offering to pick her up and carry her onto the train. What could she do but agree to go?

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**lessen:** decrease

**palpitations:** irregular beats

**insomnia:** inability to sleep enough

At the government hearing, Susan had strong words for the agency. She told the story of a woman who needed surgery to survive but wasn't allowed to use her own money to pay her own medical bills because she was told that she didn't have the correct paperwork. So she had to borrow the money at a high interest rate—money she probably would never be able to pay back.

“We are not stones,” she told the government officials. “We are not driftwood. We have feelings, thoughts, hopes, ambitions, aspirations.” She added, “We have suffered enough from your experiments.”

The government agreed to keep the Omaha Agency open. It also agreed to create a competency commission to evaluate whether individual Omaha tribal members should be given ownership of their land. Unfortunately, the commission didn't do a very good job figuring things out. One of the criteria was to have strong English language skills, for example, but the commission ended up approving many members of the Omaha tribe who had no understanding of English. The vast majority of tribal members who were granted their own titles ended up losing their land in unfair deals.

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**competency:** having enough skill or knowledge

**criteria:** something used to make a decision

Susan was hugely disappointed. Then she made the difficult decision to send her boys to a military academy in Lincoln, Nebraska, as secondary education on the reservation wasn't readily available and they were too young for Hampton. She often took the train to visit her children, but Lincoln was one hundred miles away. With her mother gone, Susan felt more alone than ever.

All she had left was the fight to help her people, to serve as a bridge to the outside world. And fight she did.

# 8

## Making Her Voice Heard

Over many years, Susan had discovered and practiced the power of the written word. Many persuasive letters had been written on her behalf by her good friends Alice and Martha. Susan herself developed the ability to write powerful letters too. In addition to writing, Susan knew that it was important to connect with various organizations and influential people.

Susan penned many articles for newspapers and magazines. She wrote about preventive health care, educating readers about how germs spread. She wrote about the Omaha people, their proud traditions and customs, so that people outside the reservation would come to understand her people more.

But the role that she had developed the most over several decades was writing letters to government officials, for tribal members who needed help or money. She kept financial records, explained legal issues, and settled arguments among her people.

Years later, the *New York Sun* called Susan a “virtual chief, without having the title,” and added, “Her word was higher law in the tribe than that of the Indian agent.”

She once vowed, “I shall always fight good and hard against . . . anything that is to the tribe’s detriment, even if I have to fight alone, for before my God I owe my people a responsibility.” In her later years, she selected four major battles to fight.

One was alcohol abuse, which continued to be the monster she could never conquer, but Susan tried her best. Alcohol abuse caused tremendous hardship and despair in her community. Those in its grips were easily exploited and cheated. Susan sensed that her people turned to alcohol because their very identity was being stripped away from them.

Susan’s second cause was preventive care. Susan believed that giving people medicine was not enough. Preventive care could possibly stop an illness before it even began.

For instance, windows in reservation homes rarely had screens, and doors were often left open. It was like putting out a doormat that read “Flies welcome here.”

Susan knew that some flying insects carried germs that could make someone ill, but how best to make people understand? Then one day, she had a flash of inspiration.

Although Susan didn't think of herself as an artist, she sat down and drew up a poster that stated "War Declared on the Fly." The houseflies she had drawn looked evil and menacing. She then sent copies of the poster to women's clubs and local newspapers. The newspapers reprinted the poster. Below the picture, Susan had added ways to fight flies and prevent them from spreading germs. These included covering food, using a flyswatter and flytraps, and putting screens on windows. She followed that up with instructions for making homemade flyswatters and fly strips.

The poster did the trick, and flies became less of a health threat.

Susan also turned her attention to the tin cups that were attached by chains to public water faucets. The cups were used by lots of people, a sure way of spreading germs. So Susan worked to get these cups eliminated in public areas. Susan's campaign worked, and eventually the state government passed a law prohibiting common drinking cups. Many communities began installing the more sanitary water fountains or making disposable cups available instead.

To further advance the community's understanding of preventive measures, Susan promoted vaccines. In 1911, a smallpox epidemic made the rounds of the reservation. Susan had the foresight to vaccinate all the students. Only seven died, compared to fifty the year before.

The third cause Susan focused on was tuberculosis. The Omaha Indian Agency ranked tuberculosis as the disease with the highest social cost among the Omaha tribe. The death rate for Native people was three and a half times higher than that of white people. Susan had written, "The spread of Tuberculosis among my people is something terrible. So many, many of the young children are marked with it in some form."

Susan's final push was for a hospital on the reservation.

"We need a hospital more than anything else," she wrote. Susan wrote letters to newspapers and friends from school, as well as speaking at various organizations. Finally, by 1912, she had raised enough money to start building.

The reservation hospital opened on January 8, 1913. It boasted thirty-nine rooms—two general wards with six beds each, five private wards, and a maternity ward. It also had an operating room, a kitchen, two indoor bathrooms, and a reception area. Each room had its



own window. Susan established classes on dietary and preventive health.

Best of all, the hospital was open to everyone, Native or not. Susan's dream had become a reality that would provide excellent medical care for her tribe.

The opening ceremony on January 10, 1913, included a large banquet, as well as speeches and prayers in the Omaha language.

As joyous as the occasion must have been, it had been delayed due to Susan's failing health. Now, she was fighting for her life.

# 9

## Dr. Sue, Marie Curie, and a Lasting Legacy

Unfortunately, while Susan's hospital dream had come true, she only worked there a short time.

While the hospital was being built, Susan had surgery elsewhere to ease the pain in her ears and to help with the paralysis of her facial muscles. Her recovery took many long and painful months. Once again, her family feared for her life.

While she rallied for the hospital's opening celebration, she quickly went downhill again. Experts today believe she suffered from bone cancer, which would explain the pains she experienced in her head and spine. By the summer of 1915, Susan couldn't even get out of bed and was often unconscious.

Marguerite's second husband, Walter Diddock, decided to try one last possible cure. So he wrote a letter and sent it to Paris. He didn't know if the great scientist he'd addressed the letter to would even read it. But Susan's family hoped that if his plea proved successful, a newly discovered element would make a positive difference.

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**rallied:** gathered strength

The new element was called radium. Marie Curie and her husband, Pierre, had discovered radium, which gives off invisible energy called radiation, in 1898. The Curies' research into radiation won them the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1903. They shared the prize with Henri Becquerel, who had discovered spontaneous radioactivity.

### **Marie and Pierre Curie**

*Born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1867, the painfully shy Marie Sklodowska loved science from the beginning, and her parents encouraged her to study the field. But women of that time were discouraged from studying at a higher level, so she worked to put her sister through college, and then her sister did the same for her.*

*When she met physicist Pierre Curie and married him, they continued their research together. As a team, they discovered a new periodic element that they named radium. This element is still used today for treating cancer and for X-rays. When the Curies' research on radiation was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Physics, Marie's name was not listed, but her husband demanded that she be given credit.*

*Marie was also the first woman in France to earn a PhD in physics. The couple both experienced health issues due to radiation poisoning. Pierre died in 1906 after being run over by a horse-drawn carriage. Marie continued her work, and in*

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**spontaneous radioactivity:** process by which part of an atom gives off energy while changing its arrangement

*1911, she won a second Nobel Prize, this time in chemistry, for the discovery of both radium and the element polonium. She died from cancer in 1934 at the age of sixty-six, just shy of witnessing her daughter Irène also win a Nobel Prize in Chemistry.*

One of the uses for radium involved its cancer-fighting properties. That's why Walter had written, begging for help. Would Marie be willing to send him a small amount of the element to see if it would help Susan?

Susan's family never heard directly from Marie, but in September, a package arrived at the front door of their home. Inside was a lead-lined box containing a small lump of radium. They immediately called a doctor to insert the tiny ball in Susan's ear.

The process didn't go very well at first. The doctor dropped the small pellet of radium too far down Susan's ear canal, and it had to be retrieved before being inserted in the correct part of her ear.

While everyone had high hopes for the radium, Susan's illness was too far advanced. Early in the morning of September 18, 1915, she passed away with her family surrounding her. She was fifty years old.

Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte had arrived in this world in the morning hours, and she departed at the same time.

The timing was fitting for someone who brought the future to her people. On her gravestone are the words “Until the day dawns.”

Later that day, many people gathered at Susan’s home to mourn her passing. Her funeral brought in even larger crowds of both Native and white guests. Three Presbyterian ministers spoke. Then an elder of the Omaha tribe walked to the front of the church and gave a prayer in Susan’s first language.

The combination of speakers might have struck attendees as a visual affirmation of Susan’s mission in life. The Hampton newspaper called her an “Arrow of the Future [shot] from the bow of the Past.”

Shortly after Susan’s death, the hospital board renamed the hospital in her honor. The Dr. Susan Picotte Memorial Hospital remained in operation until 1944. It then became a nursing home and a series of businesses.

In 1988, the building returned to its roots as the Susan La Flesche Picotte Center, a multiuse facility. A decade later, a permanent exhibit about Susan and her work was added. The building is now a National Historic Landmark and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Other honors have marked Susan's legacy. These include an elementary school in Omaha, Nebraska, named after her in 1993, and a bronze statue of her that stands near the steps of Nebraska's state capitol building.

And yet today, few people know Susan's name or of her many contributions to her people. Articles will inaccurately call her the first female Native American doctor, ignoring that she was the first Native of any gender to receive a medical degree.

When her hospital received the honor of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Congressman Doug Bereuter of Nebraska spoke about her in the U.S. House of Representatives.

He said her "accomplishments were the means to bridge the cultural and economic gulf that threatened to divide" Native and non-Native peoples, adding, "Her lifetime of achievement and public accomplishments is a reminder that color and culture are no barriers to success and respect."

When Susan knew she might die, she shunned any accolades that people wanted to shower on her and her achievements. She told them, "I cannot see how any credit is due me. I am only thankful that I have been called and

permitted to serve. I feel blessed for that privilege beyond measure.”

Susan did more than just serve her people. She healed, helped, and fought for them. She showed them the value of their ways as well as the ways of white people. Through her, both sides learned how collaboration between the two peoples could be beneficial to both.

She was indeed an arrow to the future.

### *The Omaha Tribe Today*

*While life on the Omaha Reservation has many similarities to life outside the reservation, with modern-day clothes, daily school attendance, access to the Internet, youth sports, and modern homes, there is still a strong connection with ancient traditions and culture. The language spoken by the Omaha tribe almost died, but now it's taught in schools on the Omaha Reservation so that every child can have a chance to learn their native language. Every fall, the reservation holds a major powwow with traditional dress, dancing, and foods that draws thousands of visitors. While almost half of the enrolled Omaha citizens no longer live on the reservation, more than half continue to. In addition to farming and various other jobs, a casino and a resort provide income for the tribe.*

## Discussion Questions

1. Susan worked hard to get into medical school and was admitted. But then she faced another huge obstacle that threatened her ability to attend. What was the obstacle, and how did she overcome it?
2. In elementary school, Susan lived three miles away. How did her family solve this problem?
3. Why did Susan work so hard on her schooling as a child?
4. When Susan earned money, what did she spend it on? Why do you think this was important to her?
5. Whose words made Susan want to do her very best?
6. Why did Susan want to bridge the gap between the Native culture and the white people's ways? Why was this important to each race?
7. Why would Susan visit patients no matter the time of the day or the temperature?
8. Susan experienced all kinds of health issues, but she kept seeing patients. Why do you think she did this?



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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9. Why do you think Susan was so devoted to educating her people about germs?
10. Why did Susan send her sons away to high school?
11. Opposing alcohol abuse made Susan unpopular with liquor peddlers and some of her own people. Why do you think she persisted?

## Meet the Author



**Patricia Morris Buckley** likes to say she grew up in a library because she spent so much time there while her mother earned her master's in library science. She attended Wells College and received a BFA in theater, but after few seasons in New York City, she followed her family to sunny San Diego. There, she worked as a reporter for two decades before becoming, of course, an elementary school librarian. She is the regional advisor emeritus for the San Diego chapter of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators and taught "Writing for Children" for the University of San Diego Extension program. She runs the website [NativeAmericanKidLit.com](http://NativeAmericanKidLit.com), featuring Indigenous authors and illustrators, and

is happiest when writing about her Native background (she is Mohawk from the Kahnawá:ke Reserve, outside of Montreal, Canada). She grew up in Syracuse, New York, and now lives in San Diego with her witty husband, their three children, one good cat, and one that's just nasty.

## Meet the Illustrator



**Leslie Stall Widener** is an author and illustrator who is passionate about drawing, painting, and writing stories for children. The first picture book she illustrated, *Chukfi Rabbit's Big, Bad Bellyache*, is a Choctaw trickster tale about a very naughty rabbit. Animals are always her number-one favorite subject to illustrate. Leslie enjoys reading and writing about historical people, places, and events. She finds that researching one subject often takes her in unexpected directions, giving her new ideas for stories.

Leslie lives in McKinney, Texas, with her artist husband, Terry Widener. She serves as the Native Fund Chair for We Need Diverse Books ([diversebooks.org](http://diversebooks.org)) and belongs to the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She is a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and a registered Choctaw artist. Find her at [www.lesliestallwidener.com](http://www.lesliestallwidener.com).

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