*Mary Elizabeth Garrett (1854-1915):*

*Quiet Revolutionary*

[kathleen.w.sander@gmail.com](mailto:kathleen.w.sander@gmail.com)

* She was a remarkable, complex and unfortunately, often unheralded champion of women’s advancement.
* She personified Gilded Age opulence, with her great wealth and grand lifestyle.  But, as important, she represented the societal barriers that women wanted to overcome.  She used her wealth to break down some of those barriers.
* A century ago, her name routinely appeared in the headlines.  She was hailed as one of the country’s great reformers and philanthropists.
* Her name was associated with all the great women’s movements of the day—education, medicine, and suffrage.
* Her name was often used in the same context as the great male philanthropists--Carnegie, Drexel, Sage, and Peabody.
* But she was no ordinary philanthropist.  She fine-tuned what has become known as **coercive philanthropy**.  She gave away vast sums of money with strings attached—big strings.
* But what transformed a shy, quiet young woman to become one of the great reformers of her day?
* It’s probably not surprising that Mary had such big dreams for women’s place in society.  She came from a family of great movers and shakers, men who had great vision for commerce and railroads.

**I. Childhood**

* By the time she was born in 1854, her family had been shaping the new United States for half a century, through railroads and commerce.
* Mary, too, had a bold vision. But her vision was not for railroad expansion.  Her vision was to expand women’s place in American society.
* As a young woman, she learned early what men had known for a long time:  that “money talks.”
* Mary’s grandfather, Robert Garrett, was one of the first merchants on the East Coast in the early 19th century to open trade with the hinterlands of the new nation.  He had sailed to this country at age 7 as an impoverished Irish immigrant and came to Baltimore as an adolescent around 1800 to seek his fortune in commerce.  He started a business: Robert Garrett and Company.
* He joined a dynamic group of men who were also striking it rich in Baltimore, men such as Johns Hopkins, George Peabody, Enoch Pratt.
* Mary’s father, John W. Garrett, proved even more powerful as the president of the country’s first major railroad, the Baltimore & Ohio.  It was said that “no one could commence a business venture from New York to Washington without his approval.”
* Mary’s father was Johns Hopkins’s protégé.  Hopkins had no children and took Mary’s father under his wing. Nominated him as B&O president.
* The Garrett and Hopkins families developed a close relationship by the early decades of the 19th century.
* By many accounts, Mary was her father’s favored child.  He was a great influence on her life. He often said that she wished Mary had been born a boy.  His regret was not that he had no sons—he had three.  Rather, his regret was that his bright and capable daughter was prohibited by social convention from following in his footsteps in commerce and railroading.
* As president of the B&O, Mary’s father was a pivotal player in the Civil War. The B&O straddled North and South and became essential to Lincoln in military strategies. Garrett became a close advisor to Abraham Lincoln, assuring that the critical state of Maryland did not secede from the Union on the eve of the Civil War.
* During the war, Mary and her family lived across the street from the Peabody Institute—at #16 East Mount Vernon Place.  After the Civil War they moved to the family mansion where the Peabody Court Hotel is today. Her grandparents built the mansion in 1857.
* Civil War years must have been an exhilarating and terrifying time in the Garrett home.  Mary was 7-11 years old during the war.
* Each day, generals and politicians came to the Garrett house to strategize about the war—troop movements from battle to battle, moving supplies, and equipment and horses in record time around the country.
* She adored her father and through a young girl’s eyes, he was the most important person in the world. “There was a good deal of excitement about my childhood, for it was Civil War time and my father was in the thick of the struggle.”
* She later wrote how, during his meetings in their home, she would sneak into the room where her father was meeting and sit inconspicuously curl up in a big overstuffed chair, pretending to read one of her beloved books, and hanging on to every word her father was saying.
* She attended Miss Kummer’s School for Young Ladies, right across the street from the GJM.
* She grew disillusioned and bored with her formal schooling and far preferred to be with her father, the astute railroad tycoon, listening to him strike deals with his competitors in the cut-throat railroad business.

**II. Adolescence**

* Mary’s father continued his great influence upon his bright and capable daughter.  When she was in her late teens, her father began including her in his business travels.
* She became “papa’s secretary”—sitting in on railroad meetings, drafting correspondence. She was receiving an education unlike what most young girls –learning the masculine side of life: railroads, commerce, war, and deal-making.
* She learned to be a shrewd business negotiator, a skill that would serve her well as a philanthropist. She learned about deal-making from the master, her father.
* Mary lived a life of opulence and privilege that few Americans enjoyed in the nineteenth century.  Through her family connections, she socialized with interesting people in the United States and Europe.
* But her life began to unravel in the 1870s and 1880s, when Mary was in her 20s.
* The post-Civil War era provided many opportunities for other young women. The Civil War, which had depleted a whole generation of marriageable men, allowed women to break free of traditional expectations of motherhood and marriage.
* Young women reinvented themselves in highly creative ways—they became muckraking journalists, interior designers, and theatrical agents, social workers, lawyers—non-traditional jobs never dreamed of in an earlier generation.
* Broke from expectations.  The late 19th century witnessed one of the highest rate of unmarried women in the country’s history.
* For Mary, though, there were no such adventures.  To her, everyone around her was enjoying the high life, while she was still closely tethered to her parents.
* At every turn, she met a familiar obstacle:  her father.
* During this time she thought of many options.
* She thought of marriage, leaving behind documents in which she contemplated the pros and cons.  She was unenthused—writing that the idea of spending her whole life with one person would be boring.
* She thought of studying in Europe.  Surely this, she thought, would meet her father’s approval, given the Garretts’ many connections there.  Her father nixed the idea.
* She also wanted to go to college. Enrollment doubled from 11,000 to 22,000 in the decade of the 18970s.
* She studied for college entrance exam, which she failed miserably.  This surprised her
* All of these failed experiences deflated and depressed her.
* She began to spiral down, sinking into despair and despondency.  She couldn’t sleep.  She was anxious about everything. She gained weight.  She lost interest in hiking and walking and horseback riding.  She was an expert equestrian, riding through the hills of the family’s 1600-acre estate, Montebello, in Northeast Baltimore.
* She went to one doctor after another, who all prescribed the same cure: cease and desist with all physical activity and mental exertion.  This was the prevailing remedy at the time for women.

**III. Young Adulthood**

* But all was not lost during her 20s.  It actually became one of the most important periods of her life.  Pivotal,  Through her failings, her missed opportunities, she began to catalog the traits of womanhood that she thought important to success and power.
* A great influence on Mary during this time was Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi, one of the most well known physicians in the country.
* Mary had sought her advice and treatment during and after her failure at the college entrance exam.
* Jacobi was a leading proponent of women’s strengths and abilities, during an era that generally emphasized women’s mental and physical deficiencies.  An excellent writer—from the Putnum Publishing family.
* Jacobi became an important influence in helping Mary to get back on her feet—and also in shaping her philanthropies.  Mary thought Jacobi was businesslike and uncompromising in attaining her goals.
* Mary also found inspiration from other sources. When reading Jane Austen’s Emma—whose protagonist is a high-spirited young woman who eventually succumbs to expectations for women, Mary wrote of the importance of “women rising above the commonplace of life.”
* To add to her misery at this time, by her late 20s, she became increasingly concerned about her financial future.  She was still completely dependent upon her father for all aspects of her life.  He was becoming increasingly ill.
* She implored him to give her at least $1,000 a year to live on.  Her brothers had been given plum jobs—in the B&O and the family business started by her grandfather.
* She was afraid she would fall under the control of her brothers and worse—their wives.
* Her father died in September, 1884, in Oakland MD, the area he had developed before the CW.
* His funeral was the largest ever seen in Maryland. Thousands of people lined the funeral route.  He was credited with getting Baltimore back on its feet after the CW.

**IV. Adulthood**

* His greatest impact on his daughter was after his death.
* He left her 1/3 of his $16 million estate, plus three beautiful estates: Montebello, the Mount Vernon Place mansion that her grandfather had built in 1857—one of the most beautiful in the city (now where the Peabody Court Hotel stands),  And the 19-room Deer Park cottage.
* With this magnificent inheritance, Mary became one of the wealthiest women in the United States and one of the largest female land owners—no small feat at a time when in many states women were restricted by state law from owning property.
* Most important—he put her on equal footing with her brothers by making her a co-executor of his vast, complicated estate.
* For Mary, this gesture meant that her father had validated her worth as a woman.  John Work Garrett equated money with power.
* She vowed at that moment to “help women” overcome the obstacles she had faced—discrimination, inferior education, and not being able to take her place in the public world of business.
* She drew from all those traits of womanhood that she had cataloged during her 20s:  strength, self-confidence, to be businesslike and uncompromising –to rise above the commonplace of life.
* Luckily, during this time, Mary had the good fortune to count among her friends a dynamic group of activist, prominent young women in Baltimore. Their names are now largely familiar to us:  Elizabeth King, M. Carey Thomas, Mamie Gwinn, and Julia Rogers. They nicknamed their little group the “Friday Night” for their bi-weekly meetings in each other’s homes.
* She called the “Friday Night” group her “intellectual machine,” as they spent endless hours talking about literature, philosophy, and the perplexities of their budding sexuality.  Most important, they debated women’s place in the new world order of post-Civil War America.

**V. Bryn Mawr School**

* But just talking about issues was not enough for this highly charged group of young women. Reform and activism were in their blood.  In 1885, they dreamed the first of their daring dreams. With Mary's financial backing, the group started the Bryn Mawr School for Girls in rented rooms next to an old Quaker Meeting House on Eutaw Street in downtown Baltimore. Their next-door neighbor was the new Johns Hopkins University, which had opened in its humble quarters in 1876.
* Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president of Hopkins, was on the board of the BM school.  From the start, Gilman represented the kindly, but interfering father figure that the five dynamic women hoped to rebel against.
* They dreamed big.  Their school would be unlike any other. Its mission flew in the face of all ideas of female education at the time.  The five young women wanted to discredit old notions of women’s intellectual and physical inferiority. Young female students would for the first time be prepared—as young men were—to go on to college and to take their place in the public sphere.
* Many people at the time felt that women should not be educated, that they were not up to the task.   They felt for women education “would produce monstrous brains and puny bodies …weak digestion and constipated bowels.”
* Within five years, the Bryn Mawr School became such a success that it required far more than the old rented schoolhouse on Eutaw Street, with its cramped classrooms and basement gymnasium.
* Mary financed a trailblazing new school building at the corner of Cathedral and Preston Streets for $500,000, which drew attention from coast to coast as “Miss Garrett’s School.”  The Garrett name was highly recognizable.
* But, by the time the new school building opened in 1890, Mary and her “Friday Night” friends were soon involved in a much bigger project. They set their sights on the Johns Hopkins University, an institution of long-standing, personal importance to the Garrett family.

**VI. Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine**

* The university was in dire financial straits.
* By 1887, the university faced financial catastrophe. Founder Johns Hopkins had bequeathed $7 million, primarily in B&O stocks, to finance the university and hospital in his name.
* But the B&O was in receivership and had stopped paying its lucrative cash dividends, causing the university to lose nearly 75 percent of its income—from $200,000 to 50,000.  This meant that not only that the university, itself, was threatened, but also, the 13-building state-of-the-art hospital, then under construction in East Baltimore, was in financial jeopardy.
* As significantly, the proposed medical school, which founder John Hopkins had insisted upon before his death in 1873, still had not opened.
* University President Daniel Coit Gilman faced a dilemma.  He had to look for an outside donor to fund the medical school.  He put forth a national and very desperate plea for a benefactor “a man of large means and of large views” --to provide the endowment.
* But, no one stepped forward.  Medical education was not a priority for major philanthropists in the late nineteenth century.  Philanthropists in the nineteenth century preferred to support museums, libraries, or charities for the needy.  They wanted to support programs that could help change society for the better.
* But academic medicine, still in its infancy, was not of much interest at the time.  There was little optimism that medicine could improve life.  At the time, medicine was a profession “most people held in the greatest contempt.”
* Gilman and the Hopkins trustees faced a financial catastrophe.  Newspapers reported that the university might have to shut its doors.
* For Mary, the university’s financial predicament and its failure to open the medical school had special meaning.  First, there was her family’s long association with Johns Hopkins, dating back three generations.
* Her father had been a founding trustee of the university, but had quit the board in 1880 because the trustees could not get organized enough to open the medical school.
* Also her brother, Robert, had been elected president of the B&O after their father’s death in 1884 and it was under his watch that the railroad failed.  Its once lucrative 10 percent dividend was stopped because of falling profits.
* For all these reasons, she wanted to see the medical school open and the university’s finances once again in the black.
* The race to open the Johns Hopkins medical school. Is a true David and Goliath story, pitting a group of determined, angry women against the powerful trustees of one of the most respected universities in the country. And it was a race between two oppositional, often acrimonious forces. The women won!  This was one of the great stories in American women’s history.
* Mary and her compatriots of the “Friday Night” seized the moment.  They took a risky step.  In 1888, they announced that they would undertake a national fund raising campaign on their own to raise the $100,000 endowment to open the much-anticipated medical school.  But they would require one major condition. If they raised the money, the medical school would have to be coeducational.
* This was a radical idea—to educate men and women together in the same medical classroom.  Many people at the time thought women would not be able to withstand the “ghastly rituals and blood and agony of the dissecting room.”
* Mary and “The Friday Night” initiated the Women’s Medical School Fund. Mary took charge of the letter writing campaign.  She organized 15 regional chapters around the country and recruited more than 400 prominent women across the country.
* The national roster of the Women’s Medical School Fund represented a powerhouse of women and read like a national Who’s Who. Every female mover and shaker from New York to San Francisco wanted to be affiliated with this important cause.
* But, there was a problem.  Despite the enormous family wealth and name recognition represented on the Women’s Medical School Fund roster, the women raised a little more than $50,000.   PROBLEM:  Most women did not control money and could not make large gifts.  The average gift to the fund was about $25, with a few $1000 gifts.
* Mary stepped in to complete the $100,000 goal.   In 1891, three years after announcing their campaign, the Women’s Medical School Fund offered to hand over the $100,000 endowment the trustees had originally wanted.
* But, the trustees up the ante.  They now insisted on $500,000—an absolutely impossible goal to raise.
* But, Mary added another enticement.  She offered another $100,000, if the trustees would agree to raise the balance with 10 months.
* And, with this enticing offered, Mary promptly left town.  She sailed for Europe, where she stayed for 18 months.  She was distraught over the failure of the campaign and the embarrassment it brought to her family name and the university that the Fund had dragged into the national spotlight.
* Her offer languished on the table.  Gilman and the trustees could not find that “man of large means” to complete the endowment.
* She returned to Baltimore in the fall of 1892—a year and a half after she had made her offer.  The issue was still unresolved.  The race between Gilman and the trustees and the Women’s medical school fund had been underway for 4 years.  Still no resolution.
* Mary decided to act.  She marched off to her attorney and announced that she was going to end this endless debacle.  It had been 19 years since Johns Hopkins had died.  It was time to start the medical school that he envisioned.
* Who better to do it than the daughter of his protégé?
* It was not “the man of large means” President Gilman had hoped for.
* On December 22, 1892, Mary offered to pay the exact amount due—and not one penny more.  She did not want the credit for herself—she said she was acting on behalf of all the women of the Medical School Fund.
* Gave $306,977—the exact amount due and not a penny more.
* Her letter of conveyance Of December 22 listed six terms that revolutionized American medicine.
* The first term –before all the others--was that a building be built. She knew the importance of buildings in memorializing events and accomplishments.  Having a bricks and mortar reminder to let future generations know of the struggles that the Women’s Medical School Fund overcame.  The Women’s Fund Memorial Building.
* She then went on to list the terms that would forever elevate American medicine from its then-low standards to what we know today:

1.  That women be admitted on the same terms as men.

2.  That applicants hold a bachelor’s degree.

3.  That students be fluent in French and Germans.

4.  That they have a background in the sciences.

5.  That the terms of her letter be printed each year in the school’s catalog.

6.  A committee of six women shall be appointed to watch over the fund in perpetuity.

7.  That the medical school be opened by the next fall, 1893.

* President Gilman was mortified that the trustees accepted the gift.  He had been in New York when the trustees notified him.  He dashed home.  He was concerned about decreasing revenues.  The University of Pennsylvania Medical School had tried to elevate its academic standards and revenues had dropped off.  Hopkins was still in precarious financial health.
* Also, years earlier there had been some agitation to make Harvard coeducation and the faculty nearly rioted and walked off the job.
* Gilman could not risk having these things happen at his new medical school.
* For the next six weeks, an endless stream of trustees and Gilman paraded over Mary’s house on MVP—begging her to lower he standards.  She wouldn’t budge.  All those years of sitting in on railroad meetings paid off.
* Finally, she agreed to modify one requirement.  Everyone was finally happy—Gilman, Mary, the trustees and the faculty.  The deal was finally struck.
* The next day, February 22, the university celebrated its 17th anniversary at the Peabody Institute.  It was a joyful occasion.  Finally, all three components of Johns Hopkins great dream—a university, a hospital and a medical school.
* The building Mary insisted on—the Women’s Fund Memorial Building—was completed in time for the 1894 school year and was the second classroom building on the East Baltimore campus.
* Once again, Mary’s trailblazing philanthropy made headlines from coast to coast.  This was the largest gift ever given by a woman.  The *San Francisco Examiner* called her gift “princely.”  The *Baltimore American* summed up the two-decade effort to open the much-anticipated medical school: “Miss Garrett’s Gift Solved the Problem.”  The amount of her total gift--$354,000—would have been incomprehensible to the average American.  Most workers at that time earned about $500 a year.
* Ten months later, in a historic moment in October, 1893, the new medical school opened.  Three women students took their places beside 15 men in the first medical class at Hopkins.
* Gilman misstepped not once, but twice:

1.  Placed plaque inside.

2.  Name of building listed in the catalog as Anatomy Building.

3. Forgot to include Mary’s name on the catalog.

Mary was furious.

* Rather than limiting applicants, as many had feared, the new academic standards that Mary Garrett had insisted upon attracted a far higher caliber of students.  Once Johns Hopkins University established the precedent, gender barriers at medical schools across the country began to fall and academic quality began to rise.
* The Hopkins medical school quickly became the model of medical education in the United States.  In 1910, the Flexner Report, which analyzed 150 medical schools in the United States and Canada, found Hopkins to be the best.
* The Hopkins medical school produced some of the most outstanding women physicians and scientists in the country for generations to come.
* It developed a new model of higher education relationship, bridging hospital clinical care with academic coursework and merging science and research—the bench to bedside method now familiar to all medical schools.
* Also—Mary’s endowment helped the medical school to operate in the black.

**VII. Bryn Mawr College**

* Ink was not yet dried on her gift to Hopkins when she again used her wealth to leverage the position of women--this time by offering $10,000 a year to the financially strapped Bryn Mawr College if the trustees would appoint her lifelong friend and companion, Martha Carey Thomas, as president of the women’s college.  It was a deal the Bryn Mawr trustees could not refuse.

**VIII. Suffrage**

* In the last years of her life, Mary turned her full attention to the suffrage movement-- traveling and serving on committees to help win the vote for women.  In 1906, she helped to arrange the national suffrage convention in Baltimore.  It was a great success.  The great suffrage leader, Susan B. Anthony, stayed at Mary’s house on Monument Street, where Mary entertained lavishly through the week-long convention.  Mary gave $10,00-$20,000 to the suffrage movement annually for the last decade of her life.
* Unfortunately, she did not live to see the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 giving women the right to vote-- died of leukemia in 1915 at Bryn Mawr College at age 61
* Today, most physical traces of Mary Elizabeth Garrett’s life are gone.

1.  **Monument Street** house demolished in the 1929s and the Peabody Court Hotel is now there. Before it was demolished it served as the first venue for the Baltimore Museum of Art.

2. **Montebello:**  The Garretts’ 1600 acre country estate was dismantled and subdivided years ago. It was adjacent to Johns Hopkins’s Clifton estate.

3.  The **Bryn Mawr School building** at Cathedral and Preston, the nation’s most advanced school building in its day, has been torn down. Meyerhoff Hall is there now.

4.  Most tragically, the **Women’s Fund Memorial Building** on the Hopkins East Baltimore medical campus—the building Mary insisted be erected to commemorate women’s role in revolutionizing American medicine--was torn down thirty years ago.  And there is nothing, no monument, on the campus to commemorate MEG

There are no tangible monuments to Mary Elizabeth Garrett as there are to the great men who built Baltimore and helped to change American culture

**VII. Her legacy endures:**

Although her name is no longer recognizable, her legacy pervades our lives.

1.  Today, more than 50 percent of American medical students are women.

2.  Young women attend college preparatory schools that hold high scholastic requirements—thanks to the innovative thinking of Mary Elizabeth Garrett and the other founders of the Bryn Mawr School.

3.  The only doctoral degree-granting women’s college, Bryn Mawr College, continues to educate women leaders for the future--thanks to the largess of Mary Elizabeth Garrett a century ago.

4. And women have the right to walk into a voting booth and enjoy other advancements that evolved from the suffrage movement.

**Conclusion:** Perhaps Mary Elizabeth Garrett’s greatest legacy to us is her generosity of spirit to give other women what she had been denied.

* Her life’s story is one of choice and sacrifice.  She might have kept her great wealth for herself.  Yet she chose to share her good fortune for generations to come, to turn her bold vision for women’s place in society into reality.
* In her 20s, when she was trying to find her central commitment in life, she wrote that she wanted women to “rise above the commonplace of life.”
* Her philanthropies did just that—opened the doors of opportunity to allow women to rise above the commonplace.