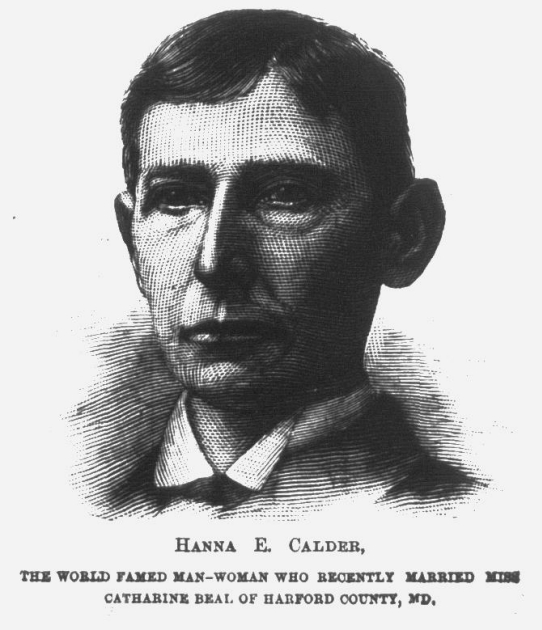
Queer Characters:

Defying Gender Norms in 19th Century Maryland

By Ben Egerman



National Police Gazette (New York, NY), 20 Apr. 1889, p. 5

Sex and gender deviance have always been a part of Maryland's story: for as long as there have been people in Maryland, there have been people living outside their expected sexual and gender norms. Prior to European colonization and genocide, this area was primarily inhabited by Algonqian-speaking indigenous nations such as the Piscataway, Nanticoke, Patuxent, and many more, as well as by the Iriquoian-speaking Sesquahannock. These cultures were all of the large grouping called the Eastern Woodlands Tribes, and generally had very different understandings of gender and sexuality than the European invaders. By the 1720s, French missionaries had commented on an "alternative gender" among several Iriquoian peoples.[1] Among many Algonqian tribes, including the Piscataway, people who didn't fit into normal gender roles often occupied specific and valued roles as healers and in ritual and religious celebrations.[2]

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[1] Roscoe, William. *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. pp. 250-251

[2] (Roscoe, 2000, p. 13); Proctor, Cryz Nkechehosi. "The Benefit of Piscataway People to Maryland: It's Time for Reciprocity." *Accokeek Foundation at Piscataway Park*, 19 Nov 2015, https://www.accokeek.org/post/the-benefit-of-piscataway-people-to-maryland-it-s-time-for-reciprocity. Accessed 16 January 2024.

In colonial Maryland, there are scattered cases of sexual or gender transgressions, including in 1681 when colonial authorities executed a man named William Sewick for engaging in sex with men.[3] Later, the biography of Deborah Sampson, who fought as a male soldier in the Revolutionary War, has a strange scene in which she falls in love with another woman in Baltimore and promises to return and marry her after the war.[4] But it's not until the 1800s that we start seeing sexual and gender deviance show up much more often in Maryland's historical record. The reason is twofold: first, the effects of industrialization and second, the advent of the newspaper.

The first is probably fairly easy to understand: the industrial revolution caused cities to grow exponentially. In the years between 1800 and 1850, Baltimore's population grew from roughly 26,500 to just under 170,000, and it had become one of the major industrial centers of the nation. By the end of the century, the city would have half a million residents.[5] Drawing so many people together allowed all manners of people on the margins who would have been isolated in small towns and settlements to find one another and eventually gather. And the constant influx of newcomers to the city offered an anonymity that wasn't possible in smaller towns. For people who wished to live outside of gender norms, moving from rural areas to big cities could offer a chance to get away from the judgments of family, church, or community. That said, having a concentration of such people also made it much easier for outsiders to notice.[6]

The relationship between newspapers and LGBTQ+ identities in Maryland is perhaps a little less obvious. Newspapers offered two forms of visibility–one to their readers, and one to later researchers: with the explosive growth of newspapers in the first half of the 19th century (accompanying a similar growth in literacy), a vast historical record was created at the same time that new parts of society became the subject of public discussion.[7] Editors looking for sensational stories to attract readers showed a marked curiosity about people at the margins. Today, the digitization of many newspapers and creation of large databases from commercial sources and academic or public libraries allows us not only to find individuals at the margins, but also to track their lives and how they were written about as they travelled throughout the United States.

Something else that can be seen is a form of recognition developing as the readers of these newspapers could perhaps see the ways different stories reflected each other and start to recognize the subjects of these articles not just as individuals, but as examples of a certain *type* of person. Importantly, as we will see, some readers might see something of themselves in these stories and understand that they weren't the only ones like them–that they too were the same type of person.

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[3]Browne, William Hand, et al. *Archives of Maryland*. Maryland Historical Society, 1889. pp. 393

[4]Mann, Herman. *The Female Review: Life of Deborah Sampson, the Female Soldier in the War of Revolution*. Nathaniel & Benjamin Heaton, 1797. pp. 225-227

[5] "Historical Census Browser". University of Virginia Library. Accessed December 13, 2024

[6]Robb, G. (2004). *Strangers: Homosexual love in the nineteenth century.* W. W. Norton & Company. p. 8. It is worth noting that there is evidence of the opposite as well–specifically of trans men seeking anonymity in small cities and rural communities–see for example Skidmore, Emily. *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. NYU Press, 2019.

[7]It's necessary to say that relying heavily on newspapers as a primary source that this potentially skews our understanding of history towards those subjects who were likely to show up in newsprint, namely criminals and the subjects of scandals. Most people living outside the norms of gender and sexuality were lucky not to find themselves exposed in this way, and it is necessary to find other ways of researching them.

News of the strange and different drove much of the content found in 19th century newspapers. This was the period that saw the rise of P.T. Barnum, circuses and sideshows, each exploiting the same public desire for the odd, grotesque and novel. Newspapers routinely ran articles about the inexplicable, strange habits of less 'civilized' (which is to say, non-Western European) peoples and encouraged their readers to gawk and be amazed at the difference from their understanding of what was normal and natural. The world was strange and wild, and stories worked to remind readers that they were civilized and normal. Domestically, this was often addressed in articles about what I call "queer characters."

These articles–often titled things like "A Queer Character," "A Singular Case," "A Very Strange Figure," "an Odd Delusion," or similar–were generally brief stories of the weird and unusual that were usually intended as amusement for readers. These stories focused on all sorts of people who might be found strange by readers, including a broad range of people with rare physical deformities, odd compulsions, or whose behavior was otherwise seen as unexplainable. Some of these people are unrelated to the subject of gender and sexuality–for example, the queerness of a wealthy lawyer reported on in 1886 was that he dressed in rags and never wore a shirt.[8] But in many of these stories, you can catch a glimpse of something familiar. Something that looks like a person rebelling against the gender or sexual behavior expected of them.

Looking at these stories offers us a chance to see how gender and sexual difference was treated at different points in Maryland's history. The stories are too few and far between to establish much in the way of trends, but broad similarities and differences can be noted. Taken together, we get a sense of the types of responses 19th-century newspaper writers and authorities showed when faced with gender transgressions. Perhaps more importantly, we are able to not only show that Maryland's history is not so 'straight and narrow' as one might think, but we can also populate that history with actual examples of how people outside sex and gender norms lived their lives, presented themselves, and in some cases, explained or understood their difference.

George Wilson

An early example of a Queer Character can be found in the discussions of the 1838 arrest of George Wilson in Baltimore. George's story was a common one for such cases: he was arrested for trying to sell a horse he had stolen and brought to the police station, where he gave his information. When it was time to bring him to the men's jail and fit him with inmate's clothing it was "discovered" he was what we'd today consider a trans man. At the jail, he said that he had spent the last several years working as a manual laborer on canals, although he later tells authorities he has mostly been a sailor since leaving his native England many years prior.[9]

There are plenty of examples of women who have temporarily lived as men for economic or other reasons, and this was often assumed to be the case by reporters facing cases that could fit, but there's ample evidence that George's story goes well beyond this. Even while housed in a women's jail, he refused to provide or respond to any other name, which is why he is in the records of the Maryland

[8] "A QUEER CHARACTER." *The Baltimore Sun*, Mar 18, 1886, p. 1.

[9] "Influence of a Bad Example." *The Baltimore Sun*, 19 Feb. 1838, p. 4,

Penitentiary in Baltimore as "George Wilson (a female)."[10] He frustrated prison authorities by refusing to do 'women's work,' and was seen as too hardened to corporal punishment due to his life as a laborer and sailor. Far from being temporary, authorities stated that he had been "acting as a man, and for the most part as a sailor, for seven or eight years."[11] Indeed, he had been arrested two years prior in New York City for public intoxication, where a similar story of "discovery" played out in the press. There was one difference between the encounters, however, and it's one that again demonstrates the extent to which George took on traditionally male roles full-time: after his New York arrest, he was bailed out by Elizabeth Wilson, his wife.[12]

Prison authorities were at a loss for what to do with a prisoner like George. He was seen as a bad influence on the women of the prison and stubbornly refused to do most of the work assigned him. Wilson's trans existence was something of a paradox for them: as a man accustomed to life on ships, he seemed to be unafraid of the corporal punishment meted out in the women's prison. But seeing him as a woman, they were uncomfortable with the level of punishment being meted out. Finding him too much of a nuisance and more trouble than he was worth, a petition was sent to the governor to pardon George on one condition: that he go back to England and never return to Maryland again.[13]

Their petition was granted, and George pardoned. But this was not quite the end for his story: although passage on a ship to England had been obtained for him, he never showed up and never got on the boat. According to the Baltimore Sun, despite someone buying him a ticket to Europe and giving him money for new clothes, he never showed up to the ship and instead took the money and left town. The author speculated that Wilson most likely immediately bought a new suit, ditched the dress he had been released from prison in, and either bought or stole a horse to ride out of Maryland.[14] He may have been right–a Sun article just over a year later reports another trans male horse thief matching Wilson's description who had been sentenced to prison in Kentucky.[15]

Charlotte Waters

Looking ahead to the Civil War, we meet another queer character called "the Lady in Black" by the writers at the Baltimore Sun. She was arrested in the city several times during the summer of 1862, each time in the process of trying to attract the attention, company, and money of soldiers and other young men near a Union Army camp. Her outfit was that of a war widow–something familiar to anyone in America at the time–along with a parasol, fan, and other accessories.[16] She was eventually recognized to be a person from Albany, NY who had gotten in trouble elsewhere and whose name is often given as Charlotte, Caroline, or Charley Waters, although their last name is sometimes listed as Walker, Wilson, Williams, and so on.

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[10] MARYLAND PENITENTIARY (Prisoner Record), 1830-1840. *3133: George Wilson (a female)*. MSA SE65-3. Courtesy of the Maryland State Archives.

[11] SECRETARY OF STATE (Pardon Papers), 1838. George Wilson. MSA S1031-2. MdHR 5401-40. Courtesy of the Maryland State Archives.

[12] Manion, Jen. *Female Husbands: A Trans History*. Cambridge University Press, 2020. pp 140-151

[13] SECRETARY OF STATE (Pardon Papers), 1838. George Wilson.

[14] [George Wilson]. *The Baltimore Sun*, 27 Nov. 1838, p. 2,

[15] "At Her Old Tricks." *The Baltimore Sun,* 14 Feb. 1840, p. 2

[16] "A Rich Scene." *Baltimore Clipper*, 7 June 1862, p. 1.

On June 7 of that year, the Sun ran an article about Waters' arrival in town and first arrest. According to the article, Waters had arrived on a train from Washington, DC, and was "frequently heard of in other cities." She managed to pick up a "bold soldier boy" from New York who accompanied her back to her hotel room. Later, the soldier told his commanding officer of his exploits. That officer was suspicious, however, as he was taking leave from his civilian job as a high-ranking police official in New York City, where Waters had previously been arrested. Acting on that suspicion, the officer approached the Baltimore Police Department and together with them arrested her. The article also relays that Waters had visited several weeks prior and 'fascinated' another soldier in East Baltimore, and the two became engaged. After asking for and receiving that soldier's life savings to plan the wedding, somehow the soldier realized that something was amiss, called the police, and Waters was forced to return the money but was not arrested.[17]

After the first June arrest, Waters was released after promising to leave town on the first train the next morning. Whether she did or not is unclear, but she was arrested again in Baltimore several weeks later. This time, she was arrested while trying to check into a hotel with a young man, claiming to be husband and wife. Once again, Waters is arrested, and once again, she is released under the promise to make her way out of the city on the first train the next morning.[18] And once again, she did not, and was caught (once again) the following day.[19] This third apprehension by police marks the end of Waters' 1862 stay in Baltimore. Interestingly, after this she appears to have crossed lines into the Confederacy, as a newspaper in Augusta, Georgia described her arrest there a little more than two months after her last appearance in Baltimore.[20]

But this was not Waters' first gender-bending tour of the East Coast. As one of the Sun articles notes, they were previously the subject of an exceptionally strange arrest in the city six years prior:

In January of 1856, Waters arrived in Baltimore on a train from Philadelphia and checked into a hotel wearing a suit. But due to the effeminacy of their appearance and voice, suspicions were aroused among staff that something was amiss. When a member of the cleaning staff noticed corsets in Waters' luggage, the hotel manager came to the conclusion that Waters was *obviously* a woman in men's clothing. The police were called, and Waters was brought to the station. Told about the corsets and the charge, Waters did something interesting: rather than challenge them, they confessed. Giving her name as Caroline Walter, she spun a tale that seems straight from the popular melodramas of the age: she ran away from home to search for her lost suitor who her overbearing father did not approve of, and had disguised herself as a man to safely travel on her mission to find her true love. It paid off– rather than being jailed, the police took pity on this romantic young woman and procured for her a new set of women's clothes and a personal escort back to Albany.[21]

This was only the beginning of an eventful year for Waters. In April, she was arrested again for being a woman in men's clothing at a train station in Rochester, New York, where a similar scene played out. According to the Rochester Daily American, when police went through her luggage they found makeup powder, and when "an inspection seemed inevitable" she confessed to being Catherine Waters. The paper correctly noted that this is the same person who was arrested earlier in the year in

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[17] "The Lady in Black." *The Baltimore Sun*, 7 June 1862, p. 1.

[18] "The Lady in Black Again -- She Finds a Husband." *The Baltimore Sun*, 24 June 1862, p. 1.

[19] "Getting His Desserts." *The Baltimore Sun*, 25 June 1862, p. 1.

[20] "The 'What Is It' In Town!" *Augusta Chronicle*, 9 Sept. 1862, p. 3.

[21] "Female in Male Attire." *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, 25 Jan. 1856, p. 1.

Baltimore, and that she was given a dress and sent to spend the night in jail.[22] The next day, however, the newspaper reported that "the person arrested on Tuesday evening in male attire, charged with being a woman, and who was sent to the Jail, was actually a masculine after all." With some confusion, it noted that Waters had already put on women's clothing and confessed to being a woman.[23] She was released on the agreement that she would return immediately to Albany, where the confusion continued. Believing her to be a "girl in men's clothes" still, a newspaper there commented that she was sent back wearing women's clothes, "which is certainly more becoming" than the suit she left in.[24]

In August, Waters was arrested again, this time in New York City, and this time for being a 'man in woman's clothing.' According to one report, Waters said, "he very often travelled abroad as a woman, as he liked the dress and felt more at home in it than in the male costume."[25] Another says that she arrived in town "fashionably dressed" and states that neither the Chief of Police, nor the arresting officer, nor anyone else in attendance at the police station could believe that Waters was not, in their eyes, a woman. Finally, it tells what is now a familiar theme in this story: pleading that she wished to stay with a sister in Buffalo, but not having the money to get there the Chief of Police, "with his kindness of heart," paid for her train ticket there.[26]

By the following month, Waters had made her way south, where once again she was arrested, this time with another similarly dressed companion in Washington, under suspicion of being a woman in men's clothing. There was something of a spectacle when they were brought to the courtroom, the newspaper describing people crowding around to try and catch a glimpse of Waters.[27] That evening, however, they were brought to the jail for an 'inspection,' and were immediately released, leading the paper to crow, "they are of the MASCULINE GENDER!" The same article notes that they left the city for Baltimore, where they were again briefly arrested under the same suspicion before being released after learning of the events in Washington.[28] Newspapers noted the embarrassment of the Baltimore police having to admit they had gotten it all wrong earlier in the year.

So the 1862 arrests of the "Lady in Black" were not the first encounter Waters had in Maryland–and they weren't the last, either. In 1871, Waters was once again arrested, in female attire, in the town of Westminster, Maryland. The article states that she was en route to the small city of Frederick, and notes that Waters had been going door to door begging for food and money. It gives us two more important facts: first, that she claimed to have been living for four years in Baltimore. And second, that she stated her 'reason' for dressing in women's clothing as being how frequently she had been arrested on suspicions of being a woman in men's clothes.[29]

Every article written about Waters makes a point of how effeminate they look, how feminine their voice is, and how difficult policemen found it to believe she could be anything other than a cisgender woman, and you get the sense that Waters was damned no matter what their presentation was. Too feminine to pass as male but too conspicuous to pass as female, their arrest record from 1856 to 1862

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[22] "A Girl in Male Attire Arrested." *Rochester Daily American*, 17 Apr. 1856. p. 2.

[23] "Police." *Rochester Daily American,* 18 Apr. 1856, p. 2.

[24] "The Girl Has Departed." *Albany Evening Journal*, 19 Apr. 1856, p. 2.

[25] "A Male in Petticoats." *The Evening Mirror (New York, NY)*, 20 Aug. 1856, p. 3.

[26] "A Remarkable Youth Dressed in Female Attire." *New York Tribune*, 20 Aug. 1856, p. 7.

[27] "The Two Charleys." *Evening Star (Washington, DC)*, 11 Sept. 1856, p. 3.

[28] "The 'Female-Men' Again." *Evening Star (Washington, DC)*, 12 Sept. 1856, p. 4.

[29] "Letter from Carroll County." *The Baltimore Sun*, 17 Jan. 1871, p. 4.

spanned at least seven cities. But what was it that made Waters so effeminate? Each article about her notes how much she 'looked like a woman,' generally describing the delicacy of her features and voice, and sometimes the choice of clothing and makeup. But several articles give further hints: describing the scene of the courtroom in 1856, the Washington Evening Star noted that rather than the buttoned up, starched collars of most men's outfits, Waters wore a shirt in the style of British romantic poet (and famed libertine) Lord Byron, with a large, floppy collar spread wide.[30] As for their appearance, during the last 1856 stop in Baltimore an article states that they were believed to be female due to their lack of a beard or mustache and their "long, fine, and soft hair."[31] Fifteen years later, the letter from Westminster describes her as having "long auburn hair which fell gracefully in flowing ringlets over [her] shoulders."[32]

It seems that Waters shared something with the earlier case of George Wilson: police and jailers in much of the 19th century were unsure how to handle people who didn't conform to gender expectations, and in some cases seemed more interested in getting them to leave town than any attempt at lengthy detention or reforming their behavior. Even with her long history of saying she would leave Baltimore only to be caught later, Waters was time after time released with the demand that she simply move along to the next city. And much like George, you can see the discomfort of authorities in how to deal with Waters: despite being seen as a man in women's clothes, we are told many times of the police still treating her 'like a lady' who had fallen on hard times and providing her with assistance.

Waters' ability to navigate these situations was often underpinned by markers of privilege. Her fashionable attire and polite demeanor drew sympathy rather than hostility from officials, allowing her to sidestep harsher consequences that might have befallen others. Unlike George Wilson, who navigated life as a laborer and sailor, Waters' circumstances were shaped by a veneer of middle-class respectability. In multiple cities, she was taken to meet high-ranking officers and elected officials to try and determine her 'true sex' and what should be done. In this she seems to be treated with a kind of strange reverence, with the New York Herald describing how she was taken to City Hall to be introduced to the mayor and other high-ranking officials, and "was pronounced by all hands a most wonderful counterfeit woman."[33]

Waters' story hints at the evolving understanding—and persistent discomfort—around gender nonconformity in the mid-19th century. Time and again, authorities' uncertainty over her gender led to her being released rather than incarcerated. But in order to garner the sympathy required for this, Waters needed to fulfill some basic requirements: she was rich enough to be travelling with luggage and fashionably dressed, she wasn't an immigrant, and most importantly, she was white.

Mary Davis

Mary Davis was a Black prisoner brought to Baltimore's prison in a dress from a jail in rural Centreville, Maryland in 1900. While awareness of queer communities was slowly emerging in Baltimore and Washington, authorities remained uncertain about how to handle someone like Davis.

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[30](*Evening Star,* "The Two Charleys." 3)

[31] "Singular Case of Arrest of Two Young Men on the Charge of Being Female." *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, 12 Sept. 1856, p. 1.

[32] (*The Baltimore Sun*, "Letter from Carroll County." 4)

[33] "A Girl Man–A Curious Case." *New York Herald*, 20 Aug 1856, p. 1

An inverse of George Wilson's case 60 years earlier, Davis' troubles began when she was escorted to the women's section of the prison for a wash and a change into prisoner's clothing. It was then that the prison superintendent, upon seeing her, reportedly called for the "female assistant" and declared, "That woman is a man!" Davis' response, as reported, was striking: "I am neither man nor woman."[34]

One thing that sets this case apart is the inclusion of Davis' own words in contemporary newspaper accounts. It needs to be stressed: these quotes were mediated by prison officials and may not really reflect her voice or phrasing. Still, they are notably sympathetic and humanizing—an unusual detail, given the racial and gender biases of the time. This lends some credibility to the possibility that the officials attempted, however imperfectly, to convey Davis' perspective.

From these quotes, we learn that Mary had been born in West Virginia and had worn women's clothes since childhood. She claimed to have worked as a cook and house servant for "many prominent families" in Washington and elsewhere. She described herself as always being in the company of other women, "with the exception of times when I have had steady company with gentlemen," which is to say, romantic partners. In an expression that sounds something like gender dysphoria, Mary complained, "I never wear male attire, and really I am ashamed at myself when I look down and see these trousers."[35]

But we also see a certain defiance underlying all of this. She chided her jailers with how feminine she is, holding out her hands and demanding to know, "Do these hands look like they ever worked in a harvest field?" She talked about her custom-made gowns and said she had a hat at home to match each one, and expressed her belief that she was only in prison because of the jealousy of other women of her community. And finally, she said, "I think it is a shame I have been treated this way for wearing women's clothes. I don't know any other kind, as I have worn them for so many years."[36]

But unlike our last queer character, Mary Davis was afforded no sympathy or charity by the white jailors. The articles go on to describe a deeply upsetting scene as she is outfitted for the men's prison and her hair is forcibly cut–a moment that underscores the harsh reality of how race shaped the treatment of queer individuals in the early 20th century.

Howard Calder

In 1889, Howard Calder made headlines by publicly declaring himself a trans man in the pages of the Baltimore Sun. His case was remarkable for several reasons: Howard's ability to navigate the public spotlight, his willingness to advocate for himself, and the unusual involvement of a Catholic priest in rural Maryland who re-baptized him as a man.

The case gained national attention when 36-year-old Howard tried to elope with the 18-year-old Catherine Beall, the daughter of a neighbor in Harford County. Together, they travelled the 30 miles from rural Jarrettsville to Baltimore, but as soon as they disappeared their families–both described as well-off–hired detectives and started looking into what had happened. The search quickly revealed

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[34] "A Puzzling Prisoner: Officials Did Not Know If It Was a Man or Woman." *The Baltimore Sun*, 4 May 1900, p. 10.

[35] "Puzzled the Officers: He or She Was Sent First One Way, Then Another." *Hagerstown Mail*, 11 May 1900, p. 4.

[36] "Silas Saul Lived for Years Dressed in Woman's Attire." *The Sun (Wilmington, DE)*, 21 May 1900, p. 1.

that the couple had been married by a priest at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Pylesville and had then headed south.[37]

It would only be a few days between the story first being reported and it being reprinted by multiple major newspapers in New York City, and from there, across the country. Meanwhile, the *Baltimore Sun* sent a reporter to interview the priest who married the two. His remarks reveal the period's complex and often perplexing attitudes toward gender.

According to Father J.A. Frederick, he had always known Calder as "an eccentric old maid," but he noted, "he never really affected female ways; on the contrary, he kept his hair cut short and walked with a masculine step." However, the spring before the elopement, Calder had shown the priest a newspaper clipping about the case of Lawrence Payne that had occurred several years prior in Winchester, Virginia, saying "this is my case exactly, Father."[38]

Payne was likely an intersex person. Assumed to be female since birth, Payne had been described as a "masculine girl." After the death of their parents, he took on the role of head of the household and ran the family store–both seen as male pursuits. In his late thirties (the same age as Howard), on some kind of hunch he went to see two doctors in town. These doctors conducted an investigation then "performed a simple and painless operation, and announced to the patient there could be no doubt as to the perfect masculinity." Armed with a letter from the doctors saying as much, he legally changed his name to Lawrence, then married a young woman working at the store.[39]

At the time this was described as a "case of mistaken sex." The notion that individuals might not fit neatly into the gender binary clashed with the predominant 19th-century mindset, which assumed that if someone appeared to be a man and behaved in ways associated with masculinity, they were inherently meant to be a man, and similarly, if someone appeared to be a woman and conformed to feminine expectations, they were naturally meant to be a woman. Payne's masculine habits, therefore, were interpreted as evidence that he had effectively been misgendered at birth; that the issue was not that he changed sex or that his sex was indeterminate so much as that he had always been a male and had been falsely told he was female since birth.

After seeing the article about Payne, Father Frederick determined that this made perfect sense for Howard's case. Howard, too, had masculine features: short hair, a deep voice, and a butch demeanor. Father Frederick told the *Baltimore Sun* reporter, "I read the scrap and immediately comprehended the situation. Calder's previous masculine manners were at once made plain to me." Ultimately, he was convinced that much like Payne, Calder's gender was mistaken at birth, he had always been a man. With Calder not yet having chosen a name for himself, the priest took his middle initial and moved it to the front of his name and re-baptized him as E. Hanna Calder. A few months later, he married Calder and Beall.[40]

A month after their elopement, detectives located Howard and Catherine outside of Baltimore, and Catherine was returned to her family. At this, Howard displayed a surprising level of media savvy, inviting reporters to the home the couple had been staying at and giving interviews about himself and

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[37] "A Sensational Marriage." *The Harford Democrat (Bel Air, Md.)*, 22 Feb. 1889, p. 2.

[38] "Deer Creek Elopement: Father Frederick's Story." *The Baltimore Sun*, 20 Feb. 1889, p. 4.

[39]" A Strange Story." *News and Advocate (Lynchburg, VA)*, 29 Jan. 1884, p. 3

[40] (*The Baltimore Sun,* "Deer Creek Elopement: Father Frederick's Story," 4)

the situation. The coverage from the Baltimore Sun and elsewhere was remarkably sympathetic– correctly gendering Howard, saying the two had been "rudely torn from each other's arms by parental decree," and referring to Catherine as "Mrs. Calder." Calder stated his intention to get back Catherine through the courts, promising to "exercise his right as a legally married man." He described his anguish over the separation, saying "I am greatly worried about my troubles, and I feel now that I must come out and assert myself and take my proper place in the world as a man, which I certainly am."[41]

But the most remarkable part of the interview is where Howard decided to explain what the reporters call "the wonderful change of sex." He told them, "I will tell you why I left home. I was a girl until I was about twenty-five years old. Then I noticed a change coming in my sex. I was becoming a man. I certainly have been one for over ten years."[42] This is not the same explanation for Calder's manhood as that of Payne's–and the one he had provided to his priest. Although he again stated his similarity to that case, this was not in Calder's own words a case of mistaken sex from birth, it was something that had changed about his gender as an adult. Howard was claiming his identity as a man—this was his coming out.[43]

The publicity did not end in anticipation of the trial. Most of the articles were sympathetic but condescending, viewing Calder as some tragic forlorn creature who had been cursed by his difference, but accepting his newly declared gender. Several newspapers in Baltimore and a tabloid in New York City ran illustrations of Howard for their readers, sometimes in both a dress and a suit side-by-side. Meanwhile, Howard used his newfound fame to raise funds for his legal costs by exhibiting himself as "the Mysterious Bridegroom" to audiences in Baltimore.[44] At the trial, Howard was told he would only be considered Catherine's husband if a doctor could inspect their body. It's unclear whether Howard agreed to this or simply dropped the suit, either way he walked away without his bride.

Not all reactions were positive, mind you. The *National Police Gazette*, one of the first 'scandal sheets,' only refers to Howard as "it."[45] Several articles describe him as a "man-woman," or as a freak. A *New York World* article calls him a monster and a demon, and states that his life was "a long, black record of immorality and crime against the public… it is unnatural and horrible."[46] An article in the Sun notes that during the masquerade ball for the Jewish holiday of Purim, one male reveler dressed in a gown with a sign identifying himself as Calder and announcing, "I Defy You All," attracting laughter from the crowd.[47]

After losing his case, Howard spent several months continuing his public exhibitions before relocating to Virginia. There, he married again, this time to a woman named Sara, before they moved south once again. The blurb from Richmond, Virginia stating as much treats them as any other respected community member, saying, "Mr. and Mrs. Howard Calder, who have sold their beautiful little

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[41] "Hanna and His Bride: They Are Rudely Torn from Each Other's Arms." *The Baltimore Sun*, 18 Mar. 1889, 4.

[42] Ibid.

[43] The few times Howard Calder has been discussed at any length, he is viewed as a butch lesbian reluctantly passing as a man. However, given his explicit self-description of transitioning from female to male, his stated desire to affirm his identity as a man, and the fact that he lived the rest of his life as one, this interpretation seems silly.

[44] [Advertisement]. *The Baltimore Sun*, 29 Mar. 1889, p. 1.

[45] "Hanna E Calder (With Portrait)." *National Police Gazette (New York, NY)*, 20 Apr. 1889, pp. 5–6

[46] Raymond, Harold. "The Man-Woman [From the New York Sun]." *The Sunday Truth (Buffalo, NY)*, 3 Mar. 1889, p. 3.

[47] "The Purim Carnival." *The Baltimore Sun*, 19 Mar. 1889, p. 4. Purim is a raucous holiday involving dressing up and (drunkenly) revelling. At the time, Baltimore's large Jewish community evidently threw a sizeable celebration.

cottage, will leave on Monday next for Winter Park, Florida, where Mr. Calder goes in quest of better health." Another note states, "Mr. and Mrs. Calder regret leaving the home, to which they are much attached, and their many friends wish them God-speed."[48]

Calder once again made headlines in 1914, when his transgender status was again 'discovered' and revealed to the world after he was admitted to an Orlando hospital before passing away. By that time, he was going by Hiram Calder, although a letter from a friend claims that his wife, Sara, had always called him Howard at home. Newspapers reported that Howard and Sara had lived a modest life, first moving to Orlando and then to Tampa, where they operated a small grocery store. After Sara's death in 1910, Howard returned to Orlando. Once again, the articles are surprisingly sympathetic; one describes both Howard and Sarah as "highly educated and of business turn of mind," saying he was a "genius in most anything he undertook," and saying during their time in Florida, Calder "made a heroic attempt to provide for [himself] and companion and both showed distinct marks of refinement."[49]

And once again, Calder is seen as a strange, tragic figure. Readers were told that he was hopelessly devoted to his wife, and that after her death he spent what seems like most of his money to buy a beautiful cemetery plot and memorial for her and a space for him next to it. A keeper at the graveyard described him spending hours simply sitting inconsolably by her grave, stating "he used to say that no one in the world could realize how much he loved his wife and that he was ready to be placed by her side any time." Finding out that Howard died penniless and had been interred in a potter's field in Orlando, the keeper goes on to say he thinks "some charitable institution ought to take the matter up and have the remains sent here for interment in the lot that the poor 'man-woman' bought and paid for."[50] This call for sympathy and aid was heeded, and a week later it is reported that "charitable Orlando people" had donated the money needed to exhume the body, relocate it to the cemetery in Tampa, and rebury Howard next to his wife.[51]

Just as in the earlier cases, the contradictions between ideas of gender and sex and the reality of trans lives loomed large in the coverage of Calder. Seeing him as too morally upstanding and sympathetic to have truly been a trans man married to a woman, several newspapers jumped to provide more respectable explanations, usually by inventing a new relationship between Howard and Sara Calder. One article said that upon discovering Howard's transness, it was immediately assumed that Sara was his sister.[52] Another announces with confidence that Sara must have been Howard's illegitimate daughter who he cared for well into adulthood.[53] It was simply unthinkable that someone like Howard would live the life he did unless he was visibly insane or cartoonishly evil.

In many ways, the coverage of Calder's life mirrored that of other trans men of the time period. Discussing an individual whose "true sex" was discovered at his death in 1902 in Virginia, historian Emily Skidmore writes,

> "Richmond's *Times* and *Dispatch* both emphasized how well Green played the part of a man… Additionally, both papers emphasized how devoted Green's wife had been. The first article

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[48] "East Richmond Items," 10 Aug. 1902, p. 23; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 17 Aug. 1902, p. 5.

[49] "Woman Who Masqueraded as Man for Ten Years Dies." *The Tampa Times*, 15 July 1914, p. 3

[50] "Calder Had Fine Lot in Cemetery." *The Tampa Times*, 23 July 1914, p. 9.

[51] "Will Move Calder Body to This City." *The Tampa Times*, 30 July 1914, p. 3.

[52] (*The Tampa Times*, "Woman Who Masqueraded as Man for Ten Years Dies." 3)

[53] "Calder's Alleged Wife Was in Reality Her Daughter. This Is the Latest Theory." *The Orlando Sentinel*, 19 July 1914, p. 1.

> published in the *Richmond Dispatch* reported, "'Mrs. Green is overcome with grief and her sorrow at parting with her husband is as sincere and genuine as has ever been witnessed.'"[54]

In other ways, coverage of Calder's life showed that, as one contemporary case of a trans man in Wisconsin is said to, "there was, in fact, no single coherent national narrative that explained gender and/or sexual deviance."[55]

Some things about the way Howard's gender was reported on had changed from his first foray with notoriety, while others remained the same. While early reports focus on Howard's seeming comfort as a man, the posthumous articles make repeated note of how well he provided and filled the traditional role of a husband, finding this a testament to his virtue. His dedication to his wife, in both instances, is a defining feature of how Howard was perceived. In both cases, there is a certain unease with how Howard's existence challenges ideas about a woman's 'natural' behavior and place, although this was filtered through the different politics of the day. To that point, at his death in the 1910s, nearly every article made a point to note with horror that Calder had used a power whose extension to women was a hotly contested issue–that as one Florida paper stated, "As a man she registered and voted in Orlando a number of times."[56]

Queer Characters, Queer Cultures

These stories are a sample of the broad variety of Queer Characters who you can find in Maryland's history–although they are admittedly some of the more well-documented among them. heir stories provide fascinating glimpses into the ways in which individuals navigated the constraints of society while defying conventional understandings of gender and sex. Each case also highlights the profound societal discomfort with nonconformity, as well as the varying levels of compassion, misunderstanding, or outright hostility with which individuals expressing gender variance were met.

George Wilson's case reveals the harshness with which gender nonconformity was punished, particularly when it intersected with working-class status, while showing how the confusion of jailors could somehow work to the benefit of trans figures. Wilson's arrest and subsequent ordeal in a society that demanded conformity show how class and gender played crucial roles in shaping public responses to those who did not fit neatly into prescribed roles. On the other hand, Charlotte Waters's story exemplifies the ways in which class and racial privilege could provide some degree of leniency, as her experience was handled with surprising compassion by authorities who could not quite fathom her gender presentation but ultimately did not see fit to imprison her. These contrasting cases reveal the complex ways in which gender nonconformity was understood through the lens of class and privilege.

Mary Davis's story, however, highlights the brutal consequences faced by many gender-nonconforming individuals, particularly those who were Black. Although prison authorities still show a certain sympathetic interest in her, the harsh treatment she is subjected to contrasts sharply with the responses of authorities to individuals like Waters, reflecting the ways in which race clearly determined the level of violence or punishment meted out in Maryland's prisons. Her story is a

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[54] (Skidmore 48)

[55] (Skidmore 16)

[56] "Mysterious Calder Woman Died Yesterday Morning." *The Orlando Sentinel*, 14 July 1914, p. 5.

poignant reminder of the dangers of encountering the carceral system faced by Black people who existed outside of the dominant gender norms.

Howard Calder's case, on the other hand, serves as a striking example of how a person could navigate and negotiate their gender identity in the media spotlight, achieving a level of public recognition and even sympathy despite the societal discomfort with his transgender status. His public assertion of his masculinity, his ability to garner media attention, and the sympathetic coverage he received underscores that some Queer Characters were able to shape their own perception, if only in small ways. However, the contradictory nature of this coverage—portraying him as a tragic figure, a strange freak, and as a man deserving of respect—further highlights the discomfort that society felt toward those who did not fit into the expected gender roles.

Though these cases are among the more well-documented of Maryland's Queer Characters, they represent only a small portion of the lives led by people defying gender expectations at the time. They highlight the existence of spaces where queer and trans people could live outside the boundaries of their assigned gender roles, suggesting that many others likely lived quietly, evading detection while peacefully blending into their communities. They show that the attitude of the press and officials could be quite different from the condemnation and revulsion we might expect (or that we might see in the press of our own time), instead often waffling between bemusement, disgust, pity, and sympathy; all with a heavy side of confusion. Still, in most of these stories we see people whose lives were repeatedly upended by arrest and detection. Charlotte Waters' experience of being detained and arrested over and over again in cities across the East Coast probably indicates a significant part of the experience of being trans, queer, or otherwise not conforming to gender roles for many. Mary Davis' horrible treatment was the experience for many more.

Waters' case (and to a lesser extent, Wilson's) shows that for some gender outlaws, the discomfort and confusion of cops and jailers could work to their advantage. Viewing them as too much of a headache to deal with, instead of seeking their lengthy incarceration or reforming their behavior, authorities simply wanted to get them to leave and become someone else's problem to deal with. Although this became less common as time went on, this pattern still cropped up within many of our lifetimes: in 1989, some nine decades after sending Mary Davis to Baltimore, Centreville prison officials told a judge that trans prisoner Elizabeth Michelle Ward could not be held in either a male or female prison wing and asked for permission to release her. The judge agreed and allowed Ward to complete her sentence under house arrest instead.[57] However, as mass incarceration has expanded, as trans prisoners become more common, and as prison administration become more profit-driven, these small benefits once offered to trans people like Ward have vanished.

The interesting role played by newspapers is shown in the case of Howard Calder. It is not until Calder reads about the Payne case in Virginia that he comes to the conclusion that this could also describe him, and not until he hands it to his priest that the priest agrees with his assessment. This is a pattern that becomes more common as time goes on and journalists too begin referring to prior cases that they view as similar. Calder reminds them of the Payne case, and a case of two women living as a couple in Colorado reminds Baltimore papers of Calder's. The same year, the double shooting of two young men planning their wedding together on Virginia's Eastern Shore reminds writers of a nearby

[57] "Transsexual gets jail at home" *The Evening Sun (Baltimore, MD),* 9 Nov. 1989 p. F10

shooting of a young woman by her girlfriend in Maryland.[58] These things that we maybe take for granted–that intersex and trans people, queer men and queer women are different varieties of the same category of person–show a growing understanding and recognition during the 19th century that queerness and transness were shared experiences, not isolated cases. As Calder shows us, this was not simply understood by journalists and authorities, but by queer and trans characters themselves.

Each of these stories provides us glimpses of various forms of expression, self-conception or activity that are reminiscent of cultural trademarks of LGBTQ+ people today. It may be tempting to view these as an unbroken tradition–that things we might recognize of ourselves in these Queer Characters were 'passed down' over the years. Certainly, there exist such traditions in the LGBTQ+ community, gay communities have passed down slang that can be traced back to the 1700s. But none of the subjects in this article seem to have been members of any community of other queer or trans people. So while there's a certain grain of truth in thinking that here–Calder's coming-out narrative was clearly shaped by Lawrence Payne's, and likely shaped the way future trans men looked at themselves, and so on–this cannot alone explain why certain themes and attributes keep appearing and reappearing in these Queer Characters over such long expanses of time.

I would argue that what we are looking at are survival methods for those rebelling against gender and sexual norms. These ways of acting, understanding oneself and challenging authority were discovered by our Queer Characters and rediscovered by subsequent generations, many of them eventually being expanded on and understood as parts of modern LGBTQ+ culture and community. The incredible image of Mary Davis defiantly asserting her femininity by thrusting her hands at her jailers and demanding to know if it looked like she worked in the fields is not necessarily something that she had to be taught or that she taught someone else. It was one of the clearest ways for someone like her to respond to an authority figure challenging her gender, and over time this scene was likely repeated by many more who found themselves facing similar challenges. Speaking similarly about homosexuality among sailors during the 19th century, William Benemann observes "that familiar features of gay American culture are not solely modern phenomena, but they are part of a long heritage of behaviors developed as coping mechanisms by men who had to find one another while continuing to mask their identities."[59] Although our Queer Characters faced different struggles–they were not, as urban gay men were, seeking one another out discreetly, but trying to live without being detected–the trajectory of coping mechanisms turning into cultural hallmarks is the same.

As more communities started forming, people were able to notice this and celebrate that defiance, elevating it from a common practice to a part of a shared culture and encouraging its continuance. Eventually, as more people began to live openly, some of these expressions of rebellion evolved into defining features of modern LGBTQ+ culture. When these past acts of defiance seem outdated or strange to contemporary readers, it often points to ways that ideas about gender and sexuality have shifted. In contrast, the places where we see acts of defiance that are familiar hint at certain aspects of modern LGBTQ+ identity being based in these repeated older rebellions.

Just because these Queer Characters weren't parts of a queer community to speak of doesn't mean such communities didn't exist at this time. Already by the 1880s, drag parties in Baltimore and DC (most notably, those hosted by William Dorsey Swann, the first person to be described as a drag queen in

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[58] "Another Hannah Calder." *Baltimore American*, Jul 13, 1889, pp. 5; "An Eastern Shore Man Imagines Himself a Woman." *Weekly Virginian and Carolinian (Norfolk, VA)*, 24 Jan. 1889, p. 2.

[59] Benemann, W. (2019). *Unruly desires: American sailors and homosexualities in the age of sail*. xxiv.

American print) served as an early gathering space for a nascent gay community. By the 1910s, the work of the Maryland Vice Commission captured the language and mannerisms of groups of gay men who spent their time in the Mount Vernon neighborhood of Baltimore, which is still considered the city's 'gayborhood.'

Throughout the 19th century, as cities grew and sensationalist newspapers sought out stories of strange and different people, articles about Queer Characters show us that there always existed people who were willing to defy gender norms in Maryland's history, and that there were opportunities–if only a few–for them to live their lives as they chose. They show us that press and official attitudes towards gender deviance varied more than might be expected and importantly, that readers at many points in the 19th century were well-aware that there were people who we'd now see as queer or trans.

These stories show that viewing this as an era marked by strict Victorian morality, by prim and proper social codes, and by deep antagonism towards difference is incomplete. Certainly, the 19th century saw an intensification of ideas about what was and wasn't proper sexual behavior and of the different 'natural' roles of men and women. And it is absolutely true that in many fields, writers attempted to cast those who were different as moral monsters separated from humanity, or as pathologically degenerate or subhuman. But these ideas were never fully accepted, and there were many who rejected them in one way or another. Without challenging this, we see a vision of the 19th century that was strict, sanitized, and drab. It is only by reintroducing our Queer Characters to our understanding that we can paint a more nuanced–and more colorful–picture of this part of Maryland's history.