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In the end though, the stories of these Queer Characters can serve as reminders that gender nonconformity isn't some new phenomenon invented by the internet or the modern world. We can find it going back centuries, despite what the media or the right wing might have you believe. These individuals existed, lived real lives, spoke real words, weathered real oppression—and our understanding of Baltimore's history is incomplete without them.

So, next time someone tries to claim that trans folks are a modern invention, you can tell them about a transmasculine horse thief from the 1830s. You can tell them about Howard, or Mary, or Charlotte. And if they still don't believe you, you can punch them in the face and shout "eat shit, transphobe!" That last part is optional. But if you get in trouble for it, you can tell people a librarian told you it was alright. I'd appreciate it if you try not to mention me by name, though.

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## **Queer Characters: Defying Gender Norms in 19th Century Baltimore**

*By Ben Egerman*

*March 2025*

If you've been anywhere near a screen in the last few decades, you'd get the sense that trans identity is a brand new phenomenon that came out of nowhere. People claim that trans folks have only existed since the internet age, or since hormone replacement therapy or gender-confirmation surgeries have been available, or that it was the first time a Tumblr user ever posted "trans people: you are seen" and caused millions of previously invisible trans people to materialize. OK, maybe not exactly the last one, but that general vibe.

This is all, to use the technical term, total bullshit.

And to prove it I am about to tell you four fascinating stories of people we'd now recognize as trans. Right here in Baltimore. Well over 100 years ago.

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This is all, to use the technical term, total bullshit.

And to prove it I am about to tell you four fascinating stories of people we'd now recognize as trans. Right here in Baltimore. Well over 100 years ago.

Now when I say that they were trans, I don't mean they trans in the exact same way as modern trans folks like Laverne Cox or Laura Jane Grace or that hot ACLU lawyer (you know the one). These people thought of themselves through the lens of their own time's ideas around gender. So recognizing that it's a modern term, I'm using trans to indicate that they were people who society saw as men who then dressed as and lived as women, or people who society saw as women who then dressed as and lived as men.

But before we tell their stories, let's set the stage:

It's important to remember that as long as Maryland has been inhabited, there have been people here who have defied sexual and gender norms. Long before European colonization, Algonquian-speaking tribes like the Piscataway and Nanticoke, as well as the Iroquoian Susquehannock, had very different approaches to gender and sexuality than the European invaders. French missionaries in the 1720s noted alternative genders among Iroquoian peoples. Among many Al-

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evading detection and blending into their communities.

Although the press and authorities often reacted with more nuance than we might expect (or that we would see from today's media and police), mixing bemusement, disgust, pity, and sympathy, our Queer Characters' and many others' lives were repeatedly upended by arrest and detection. Charlotte Waters's 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's brutal treatment was the harsher reality faced by many more.

Throughout the 19th century, as cities grew and sensationalist newspapers sought stories of the unusual, stories of Queer Characters demonstrate that people defying gender norms—people we'd likely see as trans today—have always existed in Maryland's history. These stories reveal that, despite constraints, some people found ways to live beyond traditional roles. Importantly, they also show us that 19th-century

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Of course, these tensions were always interpreted through the era's politics: by the 1910s, his death prompted nearly every report to note with shock that Calder had exercised a power still highly debated for women: as one paper put it, "as a man, she registered and voted in Orlando a number of times."

### **Queer Characters and Queer Histories**

These stories give us a glimpse into the wide variety of Queer Characters in Maryland's history and how they navigated society while defying traditional ideas about gender and sex. But they are just a fraction of the lives led by people who lived outside gender norms during this time. Many more lived quietly,

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Throughout their genocide of millions of Native people Europeans and their descendants generally believed their own views on gender to be the only civilized and godly ones, and took it upon themselves to violently suppress any practice that differed from those views. Missionaries in particular were very keen to stamp out anything that looked different from the patriarchal Christian family. Despite this, some Native groups retained these practices, or at least some elements of them. In the past few decades, Native people who don't conform to norms around sexuality or gender have worked to celebrate and reclaim this history through the term **Two-Spirit**, a pan-tribal identity celebrating and centering indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality.

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had to direct some of their violence against their own, such as in 1681 when colonial officials executed William Sewick for having sex with men. Less violent or dramatic traces of gender and sexual diversity appear in records throughout colonial Maryland. But in the 1800s, industrialization and the rise of newspapers made these traces much more visible. Baltimore's population exploded, becoming a haven where people on the fringes of society could hide in plain sight, away from the watchful eyes of family, church, or community. Meanwhile, newspapers, hungry for sensational stories, began documenting the lives of those defying norms.

These papers thrived on the strange and novel, often running short pieces covering what I call *Queer Characters*—these were “weird news” segments of the day, often about people challenging gender or sexual expectations—under headlines like “A Queer Figure” or “An Odd Delusion.” These articles were usually short and written for readers to be entertained by gawking at people they thought were shocking or strange. But through these sensationalized stories, we

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Discovering that Howard died penniless and was buried in a pauper's graveyard in Orlando, the cemetery keeper called for compassion, urging that “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.” The plea resonated, and within a week, Orlando residents raised funds to exhume and rebury him next to Sara in Tampa, fulfilling his final wish.

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Howard resurfaced again in headlines in 1914 when his transness was exposed after a hospital admission in Florida shortly before his death. Newspapers recounted the Calders' modest but respectable life, first in Orlando, then Tampa, where they ran a small grocery store. Again, coverage was remarkably sympathetic as articles emphasized their education, resourcefulness, and determination to maintain a stable life. Howard was described as "a genius in most anything he undertook," with coverage noting the couple displayed "marks of refinement" during their time in Florida. (After all, the only thing more trans-

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Although historical records are patchy, common themes emerge in how newspapers and authorities responded. Most importantly, they remind us that Maryland's history was far from straight-laced. These snapshots reveal how people living outside traditional norms navigated, expressed, and sometimes explained their differences.

## George Wilson

One of Maryland's earliest Queer Characters was George Wilson, arrested in 1838 in Baltimore for trying to sell a stolen horse. At first, everything seemed routine, until authorities discovered George was trans at the jailhouse.

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Prison authorities didn't know what to do with George. He refused "women's work" and shrugged off punishments. He was something of a paradox to them: he was too hardened to treat like other prisoners in the women's jail, but they hesitated to punish him like a man because, in their eyes, he wasn't one. Frustrated and concerned he was a bad influence on the other prisoners (which he probably was), they asked the governor to pardon George on one condition... he had to head back to England and never return. The governor agreed, and George was released—with a ship ticket and money for a new dress.

But George had other plans. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, he ditched the ship, bought a fresh suit, and disappeared. The paper speculated he either bought or stole a horse and rode off for his next adventure. They may have been right: a year later,

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As Howard's story gained national attention, he became both a curiosity and a target. Howard embraced the publicity, exhibiting himself as "the Mysterious Bridegroom" in Baltimore to raise legal funds. However, during the trial, he was told he could only be recognized as Catherine's husband if he submitted to a medical inspection. It's unclear whether Howard agreed to this or simply dropped the suit, either way he walked away without his bride.

Reactions weren't all sympathetic. The *National Police Gazette* referred to him as "it," while other papers mocked him as a "man-woman" or freak. The *New York World* went further, calling him a "monster with a long, black record of immorality." So, room for improvement on that front.

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A month later detectives found Howard and Catherine near Baltimore, returning Catherine to her family. Howard embraced his newfound fame, inviting reporters into their temporary home for interviews. Coverage in the *Baltimore Sun* was unusually sympathetic, correctly gendering Howard, calling Catherine "Mrs. Calder," and lamenting how they were "rudely separated by parental decree." Howard vowed to fight for his rights as a legally married man, stating, "I must come out and assert myself and take my proper place in the world as a man, which I certainly am." (After all, the only thing more trans-friendly than the Catholic Church is the news media, especially major newspapers).

The most incredible part of the interview was Howard's explanation of his gender identity, referred to by reporters as "the wonderful change of sex." He explained, "I was a girl until I was about twenty-five years old. Then I noticed a change coming in my

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So either George kept up his one-man crime spree, or horse thievery was a surprisingly common occupation for trans men at the time. It's probably the former, but I prefer to think the standard 1830s trans-masculine experience to be:

1. Take a new name
2. Buy a suit
3. Steal some horses.

I also prefer to think of this as a practice that should be revived so that someday I can hear someone say "I didn't know he was trans until he stole all those horses."

### **The Lady in Black (Charlotte Waters)**

One of Baltimore's most intriguing Queer Characters was the so-called "Lady in Black," who was arrested multiple times in the city during the summer of

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1862. Taking the attire of a war widow—along with an elegant parasol and fan—she was repeatedly arrested as a “man in women’s clothing” while she was ‘charming’ soldiers and young men near Union Army camps. Her name changes slightly from story to story, but is most often Charlotte Waters. Originally from Albany, New York, her story saw her detained numerous times in multiple cities.

That June, Waters found herself in trouble after seducing a “bold soldier boy from New York.” Unfortunately for her, the soldier later bragged about his conquest to his commanding officer—who it turns out was a former high-ranking NYPD official, and who recognized Waters from a prior arrest in NYC for wearing women’s clothing. Arrested again, she promised to leave town and was released—only to be caught days later checking into another hotel with a different man. Despite repeated arrests, she charmed her way out each time before heading south (across the Civil War’s front lines) and being arrested in Augusta, Georgia later in the year.

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Howard’s ability to navigate the public spotlight, and the unusual involvement of a Catholic priest in rural Maryland who re-baptized him as a man.

While the couple was on the run, the *Baltimore Sun* interviewed Father J.A. Frederick, the priest who married Howard and Catherine. Frederick described that he had seen Howard as “an eccentric old maid,” but noted his short hair, “masculine step,” and lack of feminine traits. Months before the elopement, Howard had shown the priest a newspaper clipping about Lawrence Payne, a possibly intersex person initially assumed female but later confirmed as male by doctors. Payne’s story was called “a case of mistaken sex.”

Inspired by Payne’s story, Howard told the priest, “This is my case exactly.” The priest said, ‘ah, it all makes sense now,’ and was convinced that Howard’s masculine habits and his manly walk (no woman could ever walk like that!) meant he had also been misgendered at birth. So he re-baptized him as a man and later officiated his marriage to Catherine. (After all, if there’s one thing the Cath-

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But unlike the "Lady in Black," despite whatever charms she might have had, Davis found no sympathy or leniency from her white jailers. The narrative takes a deeply troubling turn as Davis was forcibly outfitted for the men's prison and forced to cut her hair, a demonstration of how white supremacy shaped the treatment of queer and trans people in the 19th and early 20th century.

### Howard Calder

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When confronted, rather than correct her accusers, Waters "confessed," spinning a melodramatic tale about being a young woman disguising herself as a man to search for a forbidden suitor who her father didn't approve of. The story worked: police released her with a new dress and an escort all the way back to Albany. But this was just the beginning of a year-long journey through cities in the Northeast, where she was repeatedly arrested—sometimes as a "woman in men's clothing" and other times as a "man in women's clothing."

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Waters' privilege as a white, seemingly middle-class individual played a critical role in her ability to avoid harsher treatment. She was clever and her charms got her out of trouble, but that required authorities to see her as respectable enough to gain their sympathy. Her story and the way authorities responded to her show how race and class interacted with the mid-19th century's evolving discomfort with gender nonconformity.

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## Mary Davis

In 1900, Mary Davis, a Black prisoner brought to Baltimore from rural Centreville, Maryland, made headlines when prison officials discovered she was trans. Wearing a dress, Davis was sent to the women's section for a wash and change, but when the prison superintendent declared, "That woman is a man!" Davis gave a startling response: "I am neither man nor woman."

Though filtered through the reports of prison officials, Davis's words offered rare insight into her perspective. Davis shared that she had worn women's clothing through most of her adult life, and worked as a cook and house servant for prominent families in Washington, DC and elsewhere. She lamented being forced into men's clothes, saying, "I never wear male attire, and really I am ashamed at myself when I look down and see these trousers."

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