The Pocomoke Tragedy:

The Sapphic Murder Trial that Shocked the Eastern Shore, 1878-1879

a gay little history zine #3

pocomoke tragedy

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by ben

These stories come from research I did for a statewide LGBTQ+ history study with the organization Preservation Maryland, and the presentations I've been doing with some amazing colleagues ever since. This **gay little history zine** is my attempt to provide an accessible way to read and learn about the history of LGBTQ+ people in Maryland and occasionally in other, less interesting places.

People in our community rarely get an opportunity to learn our history, so I want it to be as available as I can make it. I also want to make it fun, a lot of this history is really ridiculous in a sort of melodramatic, campy way.

If you want to get into the nitty-gritty, if you want nuance, and you don't mind reading something a little more serious and dry, you should check out my website at www.mdhistory.gay, it has longer, boringer, more academic articles I adapt these from. If you like it, please let me know! If you don't, well, you can't say I didn't warn you

If you have questions about these stories or queer history in general, I can be reached through my history Instagram:

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The Pocomoke Tragedy:

The Sapphic Murder Trial that Shocked the Eastern Shore, 1878-1879

By Ben Egerman August 2025

It's time for gay little history zine #3! I figured for this one we'd talk about something nice and cheery: my favorite lesbian murder trial. But not just that. There's also a bonus story about a shooting involving two boyfriends.

You might notice that a lot of these stories involve courtrooms or crimes. It's not surprising: because queerness was both taboo and illegal, one of the few places queer people reliably show up in newspapers is in the sordid, sensational, "most shocking crime ever committed" type of crime reporting.

And frankly? I love that shit. Everyone's obsessed with true crime these days, and all that melodrama makes for some excellent high camp. Of course, it can also be super gross: these types of articles often stood out as particularly racist, sexist, and generally fucked up in newspapers already chock full of racism, sexism, and general fucked-upedness.

Luckily, mocking society's shitty assumptions about gender, masculinity, and femininity and turning them on

their head is the core of camp, our sarcastic secret weapon and superpower as queer people. I tend to find it helpful when reading this stuff to imagine that I'm a Victorian lady who is frantically looking for a fainting couch. "My heavens! Women who love other women? I must find somewhere to lie down at once. Butler, quick, bring me a cocaine tonic and a bottle of room odorizer."

That said, at the core of this story is a very real tragedy: the shooting and death of an 18-year-old woman by her partner. But we can acknowledge the victim while still enjoying just how wild the coverage of it was. Just how wild was it? You're about to find out.

Because this is a tale of the shooting of one Totally Normal Girl, Ella Hearn, by her Extremely Really Good Friend, Lillian Duer, and of the army of reporters who flocked to rural Maryland on an epic quest to ignore the obvious.

The Tragedy

The shooting happened in Pocomoke City, in Worcester County on the Eastern Shore. These days, the county is mostly known for Ocean City, famous for its beaches and boardwalks, where college kids go to get blackout drunk and seagulls go to live like kings on discarded french fries. But this was before any of that-before Ocean City was much of anything. In the 1870s,

Worcester County was entirely rural, dotted with small towns like Pocomoke City.

There lived 20-year old Lillian Duer and her "intimate friend," 18-year-old Ella Hearn. Both were well-liked, young, middle-class white women, and they were well known to be *extremely* close. Ever since the Hearn's had moved to town four years prior, the two had been seen together nearly every day, walking arm-in-arm or hand-in-hand. And it was there that on November 5, 1878, in the entryway to the Hearn family home, Lillian raised her pistol, aimed at Ella, and shot.

The bullet lodged in Ella's upper jaw. The Hearn's family doctor, David Truitt, arrived, but could not remove the bullet because it caused Ella immense pain and the doctor was concerned over sedating a frail young girl with a delicate constitution. (Ella was 18, described as "slightly stout," and in good health. Well, other than having just been shot). Instead, Truitt cleaned the wound and stitched it up without removing the bullet.

Papers treated it as a tragic accident, making sure to give all the gory details. Articles described the bloody aftermath, underlining what the writers all saw as a fatal mistake: letting women have guns. Newspapers poked fun at how, in what they thought of as the rural South, people

loved their guns so much that they even let young girls (Lillian was 20) carry pistols.

Ella Hearn survived for a surprising 31 days following the shooting. At first, she seemed to be recovering, but after about a week, her condition began to deteriorate. She wavered between being awake and lucid, while other times wild and delirious. She frequently complained of the pain in her jaw-the bullet was never removed-and to help, Truitt had prescribed chloral hydrate, a painkiller and sedative. This helped alleviate the pain, but her condition continued to decline.

As Ella's condition deteriorated, her father, Jason Hearn, made a shocking disclosure: Ella had told him that Lillian had shot her intentionally, jealous that she was getting close to another young woman named Ella Foster. What he didn't mention was that his daughter had handed her family a stack of Lillian's love letters proposing marriage, which were so scandalous she begged them to burn the messages after reading (which they did, much to the chagrin of both prosecutors and future queer historians).

After Ella passed on December 6, Jason Hearn asked town officials to convene a 'coroner's jury,' an assembly of doctors who would determine whether Lillian could be held liable for Ella's death. They convened and held that Ella was killed by "nervous depression" caused by the

shooting (more on that later). Lillian was put under $2500 bail and the case went to the Worcester County courthouse in Snow Hill to be heard by the grand jury the following May.

In Baltimore, a newspaper had caught notice of all this and sent a journalist to town, and on December 12, 1878, the *Baltimore Evening Bulletin* ran the story alongside interviews with Jason Hearn and Lillian. The next day, it was published in four major New York papers. Within a week, it was covered by most major newspapers in the country.

All About Ella:

Descriptions of Ella Hearn, unfortunately, were all extremely short on details. Those that were provided usually focused on her most virtuous qualities to remind readers of the tragedy of her death. It doesn't mean it was inaccurate, but it was definitely sanitized, and any "unladylike" qualities she had would have been left out.

Ella was the oldest of her siblings, and reportedly the closest of any of the Hearn children to their father, who was said to have idolized her. An anonymous eulogy in the local paper described her as loyal, humble, affectionate, and forgiving. She was lighthearted and had an infectious smile, and was well-liked throughout the region.

In stories revealed at the trial, Ella seemed to have a certain mischievous side to her humor. In one, she initiated a food fight with Lillian after sneaking several berries down the back of her dress. In another, she playfully poked Lillian with a sewing needle to surprise her.

She spent time with Lillian nearly every day for the 3 or 4 years that they knew each other. Although she was slightly taller and heavier than Lillian, friends frequently saw her sitting on Lillian's lap, with the two whispering jokes and comments back and forth to each other and kissing.

You know, like really good friends.

A Portrait of the Shooter as a Young Butch

As coverage snowballed, reporters obsessed over Lillian's "eccentricities" and offered different ways to interpret them. These induded how she dressed and looked: she wore a men's coat over her dress, a jaunty men's hat, cut her skirts scandalously above her ankles, and cropped her hair short. It was said she even did the unthinkable: she sewed pockets into her dresses (for her gun and her cigarettes, another of her masculine pursuits).

Her intelligence and self-confidence were also seen as too masculine. She was a talented writer who wrote for local newspapers and was studying medicine. She was a vora-

cious reader, her favorite author being the British Romantic poet Lord Byron, which was notable because his 'immoral' works were the 19th-century equivalent of the 90s's "violent video games corrupting our youth." Journalists were impressed by her confidence and knowledge of literature. Maybe too impressed: some writers claimed she spoke with "a masculine authority."

The weapon received plenty of attention, too. It was said that Lillian had the gun-a small "Prairie King" revolver-with her at all times. Newspapers played up claims of her marksmanship, although this wasn't too hard; in court, she described how she regularly took Ella and some of their closest female friends out to practice their aim in the woods. Interpret that one however you want.

But she wasn't just a great shot with her pistol; she was also extremely reckless and aggressive with it. According to Jason Hearn, Lillian had once fired warning shots at Ella after an argument in the woods. The local paper said *in her defense* that she frequently would aim her gun at friends "as a joke." And then there was the story from some of Lillian's friends that once, when Lillian was showing off her aim outside at a party where the older hostess scolded her that "shooting was in no way becoming a woman." Lillian declared that "the insult should be wiped out in blood" and had to be talked out of challenging the woman to a fucking duel.

Beyond her clothing, intelligence, and terrible firearm safety practices, there were other signs of her "eccentricities." Vague things, like the letters to Ella asking to run away and live together in Philadelphia or Baltimore, saying she could make enough money as a writer to take care of them in their new life. Or her friends saying she frequently shared her opinion that "two women had a right to marry as though one of them was a man, all that was required was the purest love and affection."

Gee, I wonder what that all could be about.

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Writers were split on how to interpret all these cryptic, vague clues.

Local papers usually went with what I call the "silly, quirky girl defense." To them the shooting was accidental and Lillian was simply a girl with an overactive imagination, one article calling her "a madcap, independent sort of girl, a good shot, and exceedingly eccentric." Another described her wearing men's clothing as simply an odd practical joke, one of her "frequent and strange... eccentricities of character."

And the gun? Well, the town's local paper explained that of course it was accidental, stating-and I cannot stress enough that this was written in her *defense*-"she has frequently drawn her pistol at friends and jokingly threatened to shoot them."

There was also the "brilliant, brooding girl" approach, where Lillian was seen a brilliant young woman who was corrupted by reading too many dark and immoral books. One reporter said she read too much Lord Byron and wanted to emulate his characters' lives of adventure and passion. Another said she had read a biography of Napoleon and began acting with the same masculine vigor the French emperor had used to conquer most of Europe.

Some were simpler, laughing off the concept as something unbelievable or crazy. One rural paper said, "we seldom hear of one woman wishing to marry another. We cannot refrain from a smile at the thought... what will some girls do next?"

But big city papers-especially in Baltimore and New York City-saw something they recognized in Lillian. The *New York Herald* called Lillian one of the "strange freaks of human nature which give us womanly men and manly women." Another asserted, "there are women who love women in every community. In New York... [there] are hundreds of such female monstrosities."

A paper in Brooklyn was particularly vicious, warning that "there are women, and men too, of this [poisonous] kind at large, destroying and blighting lives and robbing homes of peace and contentment." One of their articles invented a boarding-school backstory to warn that women's schools and colleges were breeding grounds of "unnatural friendships."

These articles often played up Lillian's masculinity to absurd levels, turning her into a sort of superlesbian who could outrun and outshoot any man, smoked more cigarettes than a longshoreman and cigars "with the gusto of a Cuban," who struck fear in the hearts of the town's young men and mesmerized the town's young women.

Superlesbian or not, it seems that in the biggest cities in the country, there was enough of a lesbian presence that journalists recognized what this was all about, but also found it far more threatening than rural papers did. Plenty of places fell somewhere in between, like a Hartford paper that admitted women loving women wasn't unheard of but reassured readers that Lillian was "one of the girls of a sort we do not have about here."

You heard it here first, folks: in the 1870s, lesbians were everywhere, except for Connecticut.

MISS LILLIE DUER, THE ALLEGED MURDERESS.

How it went down, accordi

g to one New York tabloid.

MISS ELLA HEARN, THE VICTIM OF THE TRAGEDY.

The State of Maryland Vs. Lillian Duer

After the initial press, there was a lull. But it picked right back up again in May 1879 when the grand jury met. They called numerous young people from the town to talk about Lillian and Ella's relationship and were shocked by what they heard, but papers said that most of it would be inadmissible at trial, and no one would tell reporters what it was that was so shocking. The grand jury didn't waste time, and after a short session, Lillian was indicted for first-degree murder.

Journalists from across the country swarmed the Worcester County Courthouse in Snow Hill, expecting shocking details and scandalous revelations. They were sorely disappointed. Several reporters' articles read like they were, well, bored.

Why the disappointment? Well, first off, the prosecution struggled to get any evidence or witnesses who could talk about the case's more scandalous details. The letters from Lillian to Ella had been burnt, and any statements about them were ruled inadmissible. Their main witness, the alleged other woman, Ella Foster, skipped town right before the trial and locked herself in a friend's home hours away to avoid a subpoena. Other young women who had spoken to the grand jury also mysteriously disappeared as soon as prosecutors tried to get them to testify. Without

them, prosecutors could only prove Lillian and Ella were very, very cuddly.

Second, the defense almost immediately shifted attention away from the shooting and its motives. Instead, as Ella's caregivers were brought up to say what she had told them, the defense began asking questions like, "how often did Ella receive a dose of chloral hydrate?" "How much was she given?" "Was she able to take the medicine on her own?" The answers showed that no one was keeping track of Ella's medicine, and the local pharmacist presented evidence of large amounts going to the Hearn house.

They asked her doctor how a bullet the size of a pencil eraser could possibly cause Ella to die over the course of a full month. Dr. Truitt explained that Ella had died of "nervous depression," giving a lecture on medical knowledge from a time when they knew what the nervous system was, and knew it involved electricity, but didn't really understand a whole lot about either.

As Dr. Truitt explained, it was simple: the brain is like a battery for the nervous system, but it only has so much electricity in it. Every time Ella felt pain in her jaw, it reminded her of the terrible event and the physical and emotional distress drained some of that brain energy and kept the battery from recharging. Eventually, there wasn't

enough electricity left in her brain to keep her internal organs running, and she died. Simple as that.

But the defense got him to admit that chloral hydrate, a depressant, also saps this vital brain energy. They brought doctors from around the Eastern Shore to the stand to say that the amount of chloral probably had more effect on Ella's all-important brain energy than the bullet, and nearly all of them questioned Truitt's decision not to remove it.

And here is the actual tragedy at the core of this story: Chloral hydrate started to get phased out in the 1940s because at high dosages it can cause delirium and other cognitive and neurological issues, and serious damage to the kidneys and liver. After first getting better, Ella Hearn started exhibiting symptoms of chloral toxicity, which caused them to up the dosage, which in turn made things even worse. By the end, her family had started to notice her hands and the whites of her eyes starting to turn yellow, indicating a failing liver. She died slowly, not because of Lillian's jealousy but because of a 19th-century doctor's toxic mix of ignorance and patriarchy.

In their closing arguments, both sides referred to the queer subtext of the case. The defense scoffed at a "preposterous" motive, while the prosecutor countered

that "unnatural love" and jealousy between women had existed "from the days of Judea down to the present."

The prosecution claimed Lillian had intentionally shot Ella. The defense said that it was Ella's care afterwards that killed her. The jury thought they were both right: deciding they couldn't acquit her, but couldn't convict her of murder, they found Lillian guilty of manslaughter and recommended a lenient sentence. The judge agreed, and her sentence was to pay the maximum fine of $500, with no jail time.

Reactions were mixed. Reporters claimed most local observers were upset that Lillian had been convicted of anything at all, while the out-of-town journalists were generally satisfied with the result. But papers from far afield, who hadn't covered the trial and only knew it from earlier coverage, were up in arms and many condemned "the low price of a girl's life" in Maryland.

One journalist from New York notes that while the prosecution didn't directly allege Lillian's relationship with Ella was sexual, "this Lesbian theory has given the case much interest in Baltimore, New York, and other great cities." Although the writer doesn't agree with this theory, this is the earliest usage in an American newspaper I've ever found of the word "lesbian" to mean a queer woman.

Does this make Lillian Duer America's First Lesbian? No, definitely not. People put way too much emphasis on this kind of thing, anyway.

Unless you're from a publishing company and looking for an angle, in which case, of course it means that, and I'm very open to writing a book titled *Lillian Duer: The Life of America's First Lesbian.*

Miss Duer At Home

After the trial, Lillian went back to Pocomoke, where she "was received with demonstrations of joy by her friends" at her home. A few years later, a Wilmington paper noted she had "gained the respect of all" and that "no one seems to think any the less of her because of the strange tragedy." By 1900 she had settled in Cape Charles, in the Virginia portion of the Eastern Shore, living with her sister, brother-in-law, and their children, though she returned to Pocomoke often.

Annie Elillian Duer (yes, Lillian was short for *Elillian*) died in 1929 in Cape Charles, age 72. She never married and spent three decades in her sister's household. Her body was returned to Pocomoke to be buried close to family.

The case lingered in local memory, and for years afterward, queer crimes elsewhere were described as "another Duer-Hearn case." Even fifteen years later, a well-

publicized lesbian murder in Memphis, TN, brought the case back into print. But the most intriguing echo came a little before then, and a little closer by...

Craddockville, Virginia, 1889

Halfway between Pocomoke, where Lillian was born, and Cape Charles, where she died, sits the tiny village of Craddockville. In 1889, a shooting there instantly reminded locals of the Duer-Hearn case a decade earlier.

24-year-old Andrew Ashmead was a tailor who, like Lillian, was known for his "eccentric" habits. He put on his fanciest coat whenever around men he took a liking to. He had sent love letters to men around town. He loved making and often wearing dresses.

Andrew was said to be "attentive" to several of the other young men of Craddockville, but none more than 21-year-old John Kellam. Unlike Andrew, John was not seen as "eccentric," which is to say, he was masc. Because he was seen as 'normal,' newspapers claimed he was simply leading Andrew on, or playing into Andrew's infatuation as a sort of hoax or practical joke.

This hoax included regularly taking long walks through the woods at night together (as a joke), saving up to rent a room and live together (another joke), and fixing up a

shack outside town so they could have more privacy (for joking). But most remarkable was that John had proposed marriage to Andrew, and when he accepted, they set a date and invited their friends (he was really committed to the bit).

One night, as they were walking through the woods, they discussed the details of their upcoming wedding, and the all-important question: what was the bride going to wear? Andrew already had his answer: a high-necked, bright red Mother Hubbard dress he made just for the occasion. But John insisted that Andrew wear a dress in a more demure green (as was the fashion at the time). They both dug in and the conversation got heated.

So John did what anyone would do in such a situation: he took out his pistol and threatened to shoot Andrew unless he agreed to wear green. But Andrew wasn't going to be intimidated. Instead, he took out *his* pistol and threatened to shoot John unless *he* backed down. Each said the other shot first, but by the end of their stroll, John was shot in the arm, Andrew in the leg and side. They each went home and tried to keep things hush-hush, but their families knew something was up. Probably because of all the blood.

Two theories emerged from neighbors: in one, John had called off the wedding and Andrew was so upset he

went into a murderous rage. In the other, John had *wanted* to call off the wedding, but knowing Andrew might shoot him if he did, decided he'd shoot Andrew first. But when the boys were brought before a judge, neither would testify against the other and no charges were filed. Afterwards, the two shook hands, embraced, and went arm-in-arm to the nearest bar, where they proceeded to get drunk before leaving for the woods together for... reasons.

But even if that was the end of the newspaper coverage, it's not the end of this story. Neither man ever married. John lived with his brother and family, and across several moves, Andrew always lived nearby. When John died in 1920, Andrew, though poor, paid for a memorial in the paper. Calling John "my treasure," it read, "I miss your pleasant smiles. I miss your kind and pleasant voice... I [will] miss you all the way through this lonely life."

It was a love letter. For 33 years, Andrew and John had kept up their love for each other. A love strong enough to withstand gossip, scandal, and multiple gunshot wounds.

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Two things stand out to me about these stories. First: in two rural towns in the late 1800s, there were young queer couples who were more or less openly dating. Lillian defended her desire to shack up with another woman; Andrew and John were not-so-secretly planning a gay wed-

ding. Their neighbors certainly thought they were odd, but mostly dismissed it as one of the many strange things about people in their towns. While their troubles with the law were seen as embarrassments, they wound up being respected members of their communities.

Second is the big city papers. They were much more explicit about recognizing Lillian's queerness than rural ones, but much more negative as well. It was clear that in those cities, there was a lesbian subculture visible enough that newspaper editors and writers were aware of it. And it was clear that they were **not** happy about this.

These papers used the case and Lillian as a blank slate to write their own fears about men's diminishing control over women onto. One changed the story to prove that women's schools and colleges were corrupting girls. Elsewhere, she was lumped in with clothing reformers or branded a "strong-minded woman" and suffragist. Each version twisted her story into whatever moral panic the writer thought most pressing. One constant is that her gender transgressions were seen as proof that the modern world was too liberal around gender, sex, and sexuality and was "confusing" young people, in similar ways to more modern right-wing panics about trans youth.

All of this tied Lillian's queerness to broader concerns by male authors about the decline of the traditional patriar-

chal order. And why shouldn't it? A major part of this order depends on policing women's sex lives, keeping them tied to men, and enforcing heterosexual marriage as "natural." Another part of the order involves making sure women's lives and bodies are controlled by male authority figures. The idea of women having active romantic and sexual lives with other women *should* have terrified them. It undermined the entire idea that patriarchy and heterosexuality were the natural order of things or the only option. Queerness still does. At least, it should, if you're doing it right.

So there you have it, the stories of Lillian and Ella, and John and Andrew. They were queers who lived openly over 130 years ago in one of the most rural and isolated parts of the mid-Atlantic. They were young, they were messy, and they definitely shouldn't have had access to firearms. And they were just the ones who made the papers. In towns across the region, there were plenty more people like them that we'll never know about, because they didn't make news.

Because those people never shot each other.

So there.

If you have any questions about these stories or queer history, hit up my history insta:

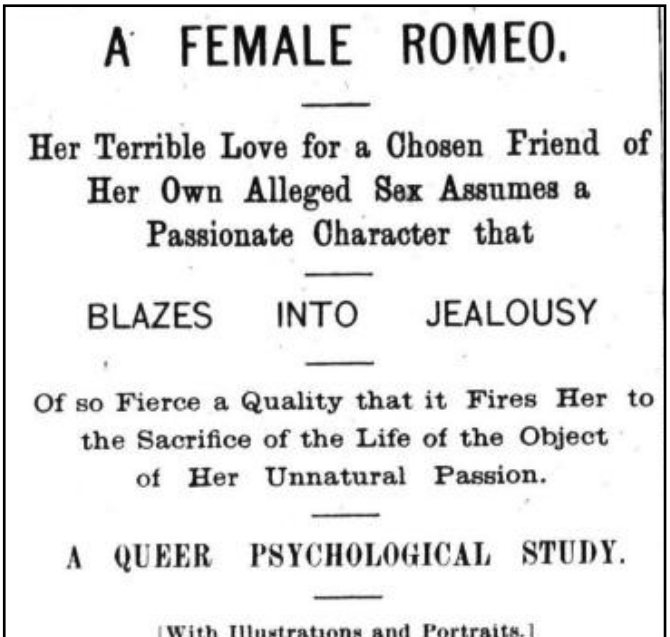
@mdhistory.gay

The article this zine is based on and other resources can be found at

www.mdhistory.gay/zines

about me:

Ben Egerman is a librarian in Baltimore. That's it. That's all you're getting.



A FEMALE ROMEO.

Her Terrible Love for a Chosen Friend of Her Own Alleged Sex Assumes a Passionate Character that

BLAZES INTO JEALOUSY

Of so Fierce a Quality that it Fires Her to the Sacrifice of the Life of the Object of Her Unnatural Passion.

A QUEER PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY.

[With Illustrations and Portraits.]

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