Front: The "Friday Nights," 1879.
Above: Claribel Cone, Gertrude Stein, and Etta Cone, 1903.

the friday nights a gay lil history zine number five. by ben

The Friday Nights

The Messy Lives of the Wealthiest and Most Powerful Queer Women Baltimore Has Ever Known

(and how they changed medicine, art, & literature forever)

a gay little history zine #5

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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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Jokes aside, the messiness is part of the point. It makes these figures human. And it shows how these women struggled with the same issues that still make queer life messy today.

Maybe the mess is necessary. And maybe having to navigate a life outside of society's expectations is part of what makes queer people so strong and creative. Maybe the mess is part of what makes queer life beautiful. I think Gertrude Stein would probably agree with that sentiment. I even think Carey Thomas would agree with it.

She'd probably call me an antisemitic slur first.

But then she'd agree with me.

The Friday Nights:

The Gilded Age Sapphic Saga That Changed Baltimore, Literature, And Art

by Ben Egerman *December 2025*

This zine owes a huge debt to the work of some of my colleagues, namely Richard Oloizia and Lisa Greenhouse, who really taught me about these stories and how they're connected. Lisa, like myself, is a librarian at the Pratt, and Richard is a retired Pratt librarian who does LGBTQ+ history walking tours.

What if I told you that some of Baltimore's most prominent and prestigious institutions owe their existence to a small group of exceptionally wealthy queer women? And that they unintentionally launched the career of one of the most famous queer authors of the 20th century? And that *she* unintentionally created a world-renowned art collection that's been a part of Baltimore's cultural life ever since? Would you believe it?

Okay but what if I then told you that these women were constantly trying to get with each other's girlfriends and dealing with the fallout in the pettiest ways imaginable? Would you believe that?

Don't answer that, it's rhetorical. You already know the answer.

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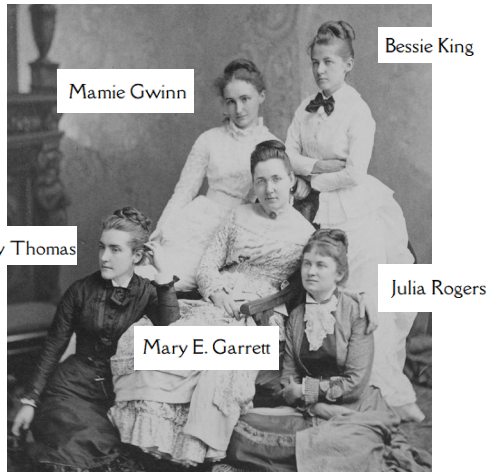
Part One: Besties for A Cause



The "Friday Nights" in 1879

In the 1870s, Baltimore had become a major center of industry and wealth, in large part due to the nation's first railroad, the B & O. To cement their legacy, the railroad's shareholders used their fortunes (generally built through ruthless exploitation and violent strikebreaking) to build institutions still bearing their names: we're talking guys like George Peabody, Henry Walters, Enoch Pratt, and especially Johns Hopkins.

> cone sisters (and etta cone's giant crush) lured those two women to paris where they met gertrude's famous artist friends and spent decades buying their work and hauling it back to baltimore where they helped popularize modern art in america and built a massive private collection which was eventually donated to the baltimore museum of art and now the cone collection is often referred to as the "crown jewels" of the museum and we're all the better for it.

See? Simple!

These women all pushed against the conservatism of what was then a very proper, very Southern city. Each of them helped drag Baltimore, kicking and screaming, into the modern world. So, the next time you're at the art museum, hearing about cutting-edge medical research, or reading 20th century queer literature: thank a Baltimore lesbian.

Is there a moral to this story? I guess you could say that it makes an extremely good argument for polyamory. Really could've saved everyone a lot of heartbreak. But then again, maybe if they'd all lived happily ever after, nothing groundbreaking would have happened. Maybe instead of starting the Bryn Mawr School, the Friday Night Polycule would have gone off to live in one of Mary Garrett's mansions and had epic

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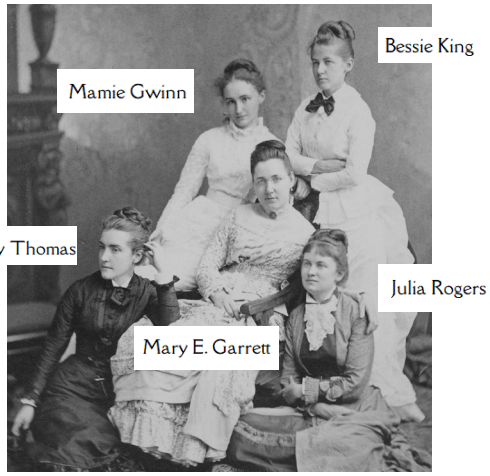

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Today, the Cone Collection is one of the most well-known and popular parts of the Baltimore Museum of Art's holdings. The museum has one of the largest collections of artwork by Matisse in the world, and a substantial amount of work from other artists of the modernist movement. It's valued at over a billion dollars, for whatever that's worth.

Tying It Together

The story is less complicated than it sounds. In fact, it can be summed up in one sentence:

> in the 1870s, five women started meeting to vent about baltimore's lack of educational opportunities for girls and despite soap-opera-level interpersonal drama and several ugly affairs and scandals they built women's schools and women's colleges and johns hopkins medical school which they forced to accept women which brought gertrude stein back to baltimore where she had a doomed lesbian love triangle with a classmate and her girlfriend then dropped out and fled to paris where she befriended picasso and matisse and alice b. toklas who was so pissed off by gertrude's earlier writing about that doomed lesbian love triangle that gertrude had to write her most famous book as an apology and became a global celebrity and while this was happening her friendship with the

These men decided it might be better to be remembered as "the museum guy" than "the guy who shot railroad workers dead when they asked for higher wages." If any of this is new information, guess what, it worked.

Many of these institutions (especially Hopkins) were built to educate and enlighten upper-class *men,* but for upper-class women, there was nothing comparable. But in the 1880s and 1890s, that began to change, largely because of five women from powerful families who together created leading girls' schools, launched women's colleges, and forced an all-male Johns Hopkins University to accept female medical students "on the same terms as men."

They called themselves the Friday Nights or Friday Evenings, after their weekly meetings. The women were mostly in their early 20s when they first met in 1878, and they discussed their frustrations with the lack of educational opportunities available to them in Baltimore. They would spend the next two decades working to provide the next generation of women the opportunities they were denied.

Now, when the five talked about women's education and rights, they did not mean *all* women. These women were interested in elite institutions serving women like themselves: White Anglo-Saxon Protestants from wealthy, well-educated families. This was sometimes implicit, but often really, really explicit. One in particular complained that none of her friends shared her lifelong passion for antisemitism. Don't you just *hate* it when that happens?

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Since this is a gay little history zine, you can probably guess that these women were more than just friends. Various members dated one another, and they struggled with jealousy, shifting relationships, and well, drama, all of which eventually ended the women's work together.

Romantic language between upper-class female friends was common then, but these relationships went well beyond that. These women described their relationships as marriages, lived together, shared beds, had pet names like "bunnykins," and professed their everlasting love for each other (until they didn't).

Were these relationships sexual? There's no direct evidence, and we're unlikely to ever find a letter that reads, "My Dearest Cousin Hannah, Mary did the most *amazing* thing with her fingers last night..." Plus, the Friday Nights deliberately erased whatever evidence there was, with partners or exes agreeing to destroy some or all of their letters. The ones they kept already talk about yearning for kisses and deep embraces. You can imagine what was being yearned for in the ones they destroyed.

And if these relationships *weren't* sexual, so what? Plenty of lesbians don't have sex with their partners. At least that's what my saddest lesbian friends keep telling me.

Jokes aside, asexuality is obviously a thing, and a romantic

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Eventually, the Cones and Alice made peace, and the sisters remained friends with Gertrude and Alice for years. They also remained friends with Henri Matisse, becoming some of the artist's most significant patrons. Over many years of visits, the Cones became some of the most significant collectors of modern art in the country. Museum curators traveled to Baltimore just to see their apartments.

Claribel died in 1929, leaving Etta to decide the fate of their collection. She wanted it to stay in Baltimore but feared the city was too conservative to appreciate modern art. At the time, Baltimore's art museum was small, operating in the former Garrett mansion while their new building was under construction, and had only been open for a few years. Most of its collection was traditional landscapes and portraits—nothing like the radical modernism covering the Cone apartments' walls

Museums in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago all tried to get Etta to donate the collection to them. But Etta and Claribel both wanted it to stay in their hometown, so once Etta was convinced that the new art museum was committed to elevating modern art, she bequeathed more than 3,000 pieces of art to the BMA.

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Etta was particularly taken with Gertrude. She wrote long, yearning letters; she traveled with her whenever possible. Her journal hints that her feelings weren't strictly platonic: on a trip together to Europe, she described flirty and suggestive conversations with Gertrude and slipping away from their friends to spend private hours with Stein. Claribel teased her sister about her crush.

The feelings seem to have been mutual: Stein opened *Q.E.D.* with a sexually charged boat scene that seems lifted from her voyage with Etta—a voyage she never shared with Mabel or May.

Etta began spending more time in Paris. Gertrude was slow on a typewriter and asked her to type out her manuscript for her first published work, *Three Lives*. Etta was firmly dedicated to Gertrude, copying it letter-by-letter since Gertrude hadn't yet given her permission to read the work.

Etta planned to permanently move to Paris. But when she next visited, she discovered there was someone new in Gertrude's life: a woman named Alice B. Toklas, who was now the one lovingly typing up her manuscripts. Alice, who would live with Gertrude for the remainder of Gertrude's life, was fiercely protective and jealous, and didn't take well to Etta's desire to be closer.

Etta's feelings towards Alice weren't subtle either. She asked Gertrude in a letter whether her "usurper" typed as

relationship between two women that doesn't involve sex is something we would recognize today as an asexual lesbian relationship. So were they lesbians or bi or queer or ace? Yes, probably. At least one of the Friday Nights indicated that she recognized herself as a lesbian later in life. Others, it's hard to tell. One thing I'm confident in saying is that they sure weren't what passed for straight in those days.

The Friday Nights were Mary Elizabeth Garrett, M. Carey Thomas, Mamie Gwinn, Bessie King, and Julia Rogers—the first four all daughters of Hopkins trustees. All were wealthy, but none quite like Mary, whose father John W. Garrett was the president of the B & O and one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in America.

The five shared their frustration with the lack of educational opportunities for women in Baltimore. It was personal: all had watched their brothers go to elite schools and on to university (generally Johns Hopkins), their experiences had been completely different. Two had gone to a finishing school which told girls to "strive for cultivation, not college," while others had to go out of state to go to a school that challenged them. There were no colleges admitting women in Baltimore; two had petitioned Johns Hopkins to allow them to attend and, big shock, were turned down.

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in the city's wealthy Quaker community, her father as a highly regarded doctor and her mother as a religious and social reformer. From a young age, Carey was driven, self-assured, and uncompromising; all qualities she would be known for her entire life.

After attending a Quaker girls' school in upstate New York, Carey graduated with high marks from Cornell University, but wanted to continue her studies. Since no American university would grant PhDs to women, she went to study at universities in Germany and Switzerland that would (with Mamie Gwinn, to ease her parents' concerns for her safety). She earned a Ph.D. from the University of Zurich, becoming one of only a handful of women in America with one.

While Carey studied and lived with Mamie abroad, she fell for Mary Garrett hard, becoming infatuated with Mary's charm and life of luxury. She began writing intense letters to Mary begging for time alone to share her true feelings. Which was awkward for two reasons:

1. Mary was already in a relationship and living with Julia Rogers, and the two shared their letters with each other. Julia did not love reading Carey's repeated emotional essays about wanting to steal her girlfriend. She confronted Carey several times, but ultimately Mary had to tell her to stop.

Part 3: The Cone Connection

Ok, let's go back to Gertrude's med school years again. Now, Gertrude and her brother had lived in Baltimore as teenagers, so returning meant reconnecting with some of her friends from the German-Jewish community she grew up in, especially sisters Etta and Dr. Claribel Cone. Claribel worked as a researcher at Hopkins, and she and Gertrude commuted together to campus each day. And when she wasn't getting her heart broken by Mabel and May, Gertrude had a vibrant social life with Etta and other women from the community.

After Gertrude and Leo moved to Paris, the Cones visited regularly. There they met the Steins' new Parisian friends-young artists like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. The Cones were a wealthy family and the sisters had cash to spend, so they turned their visits into art-buying expeditions, bringing home to Baltimore canvases bought directly from these up and coming artists. They also bought art from the Steins whenever Gertrude and Leo were out of cash. Which was often.

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How did Alice handle this? Well, she destroyed all Gertrude's letters from May and removed every instance of the word "may" from the poetry manuscript she was typing up for Gertrude. The month of May and "maybe" were also removed for good measure. So, not great.

Gertrude panicked. Fearing their 20-year partnership was over, she stopped working on the book of poetry (the one that no longer had the word 'may' in it), and picked up a project that would make it clear that Alice was completely central to her life, no one else. She called it "The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas," and it was an instant hit. It became both Stein's most successful book and a foundational text of queer modernism.

Stein became a celebrity overnight. When she and Alice toured the US in 1934, they were greeted by a giant electric sign in Times Square announcing, "GERTRUDE STEIN HAS ARRIVED!" What had begun as a way to process a messy Baltimore love triangle (made possible by the Friday Evenings forcing Hopkins to admit women) wound up unintentionally defining the career of one of the 20th century's most iconic writers.

2. Carey was *also* in a relationship and living with Mamie Gwinn. Starting with their years studying in Europe, the two would spend 25 years living together. Throughout that time, Carey tried to hide her feelings for Mary. She wasn't terribly successful.

Carey Thomas returned with her Ph.D. in 1882, and soon afterwards became dean of a new women's college being built in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania that her father was on the board of. She and Mamie (who became a literature professor) moved into the dean's residence-called the Deanery-and Carey quickly built the school into one of the country's most elite women's colleges and became a leading voice for women's higher education.

In 1884, Mary Garrett's father died and left her one-third of his massive fortune, making her one of the richest women in the world (or as papers called her, "America's Wealthiest Spinster"). She inherited $2 million in cash (about $70 million today) plus several mansions, bringing her net worth to upwards of $100 million today. Depending on how

How did Alice handle this? Well, she destroyed all Gertrude's letters from May and removed every instance of the word "may" from the poetry manuscript she was typing up for Gertrude. The month of May and "maybe" were also removed for good measure. So, not great.

Gertrude panicked. Fearing their 20-year partnership was over, she stopped working on the book of poetry (the one that no longer had the word 'may' in it), and picked up a project that would make it clear that Alice was completely central to her life, no one else. She called it "The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas," and it was an instant hit. It became both Stein's most successful book and a foundational text of queer modernism.

Stein became a celebrity overnight. When she and Alice toured the US in 1934, they were greeted by a giant electric sign in Times Square announcing, "GERTRUDE STEIN HAS ARRIVED!" What had begun as a way to process a messy Baltimore love triangle (made possible by the Friday Evenings forcing Hopkins to admit women) wound up unintentionally defining the career of one of the 20th century's most iconic writers.

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2. Carey was *also* in a relationship and living with Mamie Gwinn. Starting with their years studying in Europe, the two would spend 25 years living together. Throughout that time, Carey tried to hide her feelings for Mary. She wasn't terribly successful.

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you count it, possibly several times more. She became exceptionally rich. Like Scrooge McDuck levels of rich. But instead of diving into swimming pools of gold, she dove into... supporting in women's education and other women's causes.

Her first project was building a girls' school unlike any in Baltimore at the time, the school she and her friends never had: one that challenged students and encouraged them to go to college. The Friday Nights got together (calling themselves "the Committee"), hired staff, and Carey convinced Bryn Mawr College's board to let the school be called the Bryn Mawr School and use the college's entrance exam as a graduation requirement. That said, the school and the college were not formally affiliated with one another.

Pretty much immediately, the Committee began fighting about, well, everything. Julia said Mary didn't back her ideas; Carey said Mary backed Julia *too much;* Mary and Mamie worried Bessie was acting unilaterally; and Carey was upset no one wanted to talk about the important stuff, like keeping all the damn Jews out.

Mary called her bluff on that one: if Carey wanted a ban, they'd announce it publicly and forward all complaints directly to her. As a compromise, they instituted a quota capping the number of Jews attending at 2 or 3. But when the headmistress-on Carey Thomas's direct

years as a top student, Gertrude Stein lost interest, started failing her classes and dropped out.

Heartbroken and with nothing keeping her in Baltimore, she left to join her brother Leo in Europe. Leo wanted to be an art critic; Gertrude decided she would be the greatest author alive (she was very humble.) In Paris, she processed the Baltimore saga in her first attempt at a novel: *Q.E.D.*, a lesbian coming-out story that retold the Mabel-May-Gertrude triangle almost word-for-word. But she realized it was too scandalous to publish, so she stuffed it away in a drawer and forgot all about it.

Her next try, *Fernhurst,* fictionalized the Bryn Mawr scandal, focusing on Mamie Gwinn and Carey Thomas's toxic dynamic as an echo of Mabel and May. It was less explicitly gay and Gertrude tucked it into a 900-page novel. Yes, 900 pages. Restraint was not her strong suit.

That could have been the end of it, but decades later in 1930, Gertrude found *Q.E.D.* again and thinking it maybe could be published, handed it to her partner Alice B. Toklas for her to type, as she did all of Stein's work. But when she read it, Alice was furious.

Gertrude had never told her about her relationship with May Bookstaver despite promises to be transparent about their pasts, and Alice felt betrayed.

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There was one tiny issue: May was already seeing and eventually living with someone else... Mabel Haynes. The two had met at Bryn Mawr college (and yes, they told Gertrude all about the scandal there).

May was financially dependent on Mabel, since May's parents opposed women going to college and cut her off. Gertrude didn't have that kind of cash and sensed that the relationship was doomed. She was right: once Mabel discovered the affair, she forced May to choose. The next time Gertrude saw them, May barely said a word to her. Gertrude was crushed.

She commiserated with new friend Alfred Hodder, the man at the center of the Bryn Mawr drama. Her description of women like Mabel as hypocritical and controlling echoed Alfred's feelings about Carey Thomas. Stein definitely noticed the parallels, too.

Meanwhile, Stein's medical career was unraveling. She thrived in labs but hated clinical work. She clashed with sexist professors and antisemitic classmates. After three

orders-told a reporter posing as a parent, "sorry, we're not taking any more Jews this year," Baltimore's Jewish community protested, and Carey bravely responded by outright lying and claiming the quota she had demanded the headmistress enforce a week prior didn't exist.

This was a theme in Carey Thomas's career. At Bryn Mawr College, she would try to suss out job applicants' ethnicity and if they were Jewish, preferring "a faculty made up as far as possible of our own good Anglo-Saxon stock." When a Black student qualified for a Bryn Mawr scholarship, Carey quietly paid Cornell to give her a full ride instead. Later she warned her students of the dangers of racial integration and immigration to white women like them.

While Carey's rampant bigotry did cause a temporary falling out between her and several other Friday Nights, it mostly exposed a rift between Carey and Mamie, living in isolated Bryn Mawr, and the other women who had to deal with the realities of running a school in Baltimore-realities like the city's large and politically active Jewish community.

But a bigger rift was developing: with Carey's expertise in running a school and Mary's ridiculous wealth, the two dominated the conversations and the others were pushed aside more and more. Julia Rogers tried to object to Carey's increasing closeness with Mary. But by that time Mary was far more committed to the girl's school than she was to Julia, and in 1890 the two broke up and Julia left the Com-

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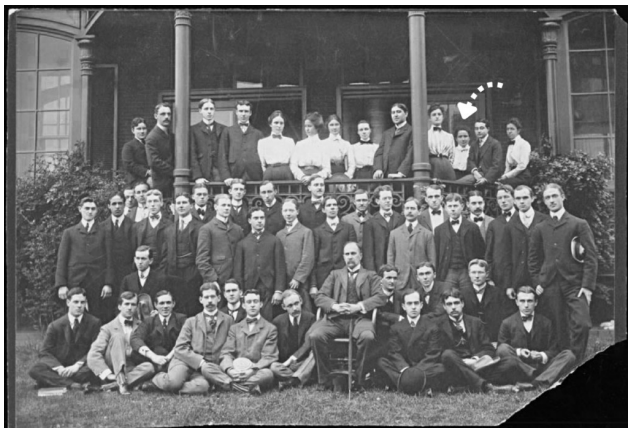
mittee. Mamie also watched Mary and Carey's growing intimacy with concern. The group was fracturing—but not before taking on their biggest project.

It's hard to imagine now, but in 1889, Johns Hopkins University was broke. They'd burned through their endowment building the school and hospital and struggled to pay basic operating expenses. They wanted to build a medical school to pioneer a revolutionary new model of medical research, but couldn't find funding.

Hopkins' president wrote to trustees saying they were at a dead end and their only hope to fund the med school was to find "a man of large means" (relatable). Trustee Charles Gwinn forwarded the letter to his daughter Mamie.

Hopkins only admitted men, as two of the Friday Nights had already found out. But Mamie shared the letter, and the Friday Nights devised a scheme which they called, wait for it, "The Scheme." First, Mary wrote to the trustees offering to raise the massive sum needed for the med school, but with a major condition: women must be accepted and educated on the same terms as men. Having no other options, the trustees reluctantly agreed, *if* the women could raise $500,000 (about $18 million today).

Next, the Friday Nights launched an organization called



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While studying at Hopkins, most of Stein's social life revolved around weekend gatherings at the home of classmate Mabel Haynes. Mabel's friends were well-educated, well-polished, upper-class women from elite colleges. Gertrude was everything these women were not: brash, Jewish, a nonconformist who smoked cigars and learned to box. Gertrude was awed by these women, who seemed to view her as a novelty.

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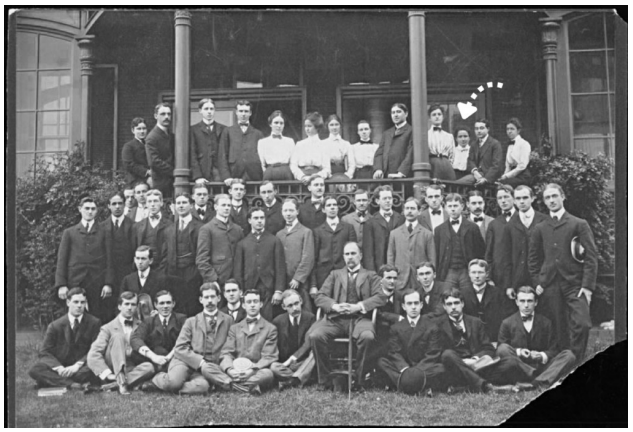

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supporters of the Women's College of Baltimore (now called Goucher).

Mary and Carey lived together until Mary died in 1915, leaving her entire estate to Carey. Carey lived lavishly until the money ran out, then started selling Garrett properties piece by piece. Mary's Mount Vernon mansion became the first home of the Baltimore Museum of Art. When money got tight, Carey's prejudice suddenly disappeared, and she wrote to one of the best-known funders of Black schools in the country, Jewish philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, saying that she would be simply *honored* if he would buy some of the Garrett estate that bordered Morgan College (now Morgan State, Maryland's largest HBCU) for its campus. It's always so heartwarming to see such a change of heart. Truly, a Hannukah miracle!

Part Two: Q.E.D.

For the next part, let's back up a bit, to 1897. Because of the Friday Nights, Hopkins medical school was in its fourth year and accepted women, and seven were studying there alongside about sixty men. We're going to focus on one in particular: a short, eccentric Jewish student named **Gertrude Stein.**

Stein is generally remembered today more as a literary icon than as a med school dropout, but the two are di-

the *Women's Medical School Fund* and worked to make women's medical education at Hopkins a nationwide issue. They set up regional committees across the country made up of prominent and wealthy women to raise funds. Multiple First Ladies were spokeswomen. Articles described the campaign as the next front in women's equality.

It was inspiring. Thousands of women participated. Also, it didn't work. The women were successful at raising awareness and making women's medical education a national cause, but they were only able to raise a fraction of the goal. But Mary Garrett had deep enough pockets, so when the campaign came up $300,000 short, she just covered it herself. Being America's Wealthiest Spinster has its perks.

Thanks to Mary and her friends (but mostly Mary), when Johns Hopkins School of Medicine opened in 1893, it did so as the first coed, graduate-level medical school in the world.

The same dynamic from Bryn Mawr School only intensified with their Johns Hopkins work. While each of the women worked their networks to build the fund, Carey and Mary took the lead and worked closer with each other than with any of the other women—especially after Julia quit. It only got clearer as Mary increasingly funded Carey's work at Bryn Mawr College.

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Mamie Gwinn, who had lived together with Carey for years, clearly saw things were changing, although Carey tried to keep the full extent of her relationship with Mary under wraps: in 1893, Mary took an apartment in Philadelphia where they would secretly meet on weekends when Mamie was visiting family in Baltimore. Eventually, though, they dropped the pretense and Mary started staying at the Deanery whenever Mamie left town.

As Carey got more distant, Mamie started asserting herself more. She had written large parts of Carey's lectures and wanted credit; Carey said she didn't think that was a good idea. Then came Alfred Hodder, a married English professor hired in 1895. His instant chemistry with Mamie alarmed Carey, who wanted to fire him, but Mamie threatened to quit and move out if she did. Besides, she insisted, there was nothing between Hodder and her beyond a friendship built around a shared passion for literature.

Carey thought the issue had been resolved when Hodder resigned and moved to New York in 1898. But in 1900 she found a letter from Alfred to Mamie that made it clear that the affair had continued all along. Once again, Mamie managed to convince Carey (somehow) that her relationship with Hodder was totally platonic and was only really infrequent meetings where they discussed literature.

This was absolute, complete, and total bullshit. Mamie and Hodder had been meeting in secret for years; and Mamie's "family visits" often doubled as trips to see Alfred. Oh, and Hodder and his wife had separated.

In 1904, Carey's worst fears came true when Mamie informed her that she and Alfred Hodder were engaged and she would be moving out shortly.

How did Carey handle the breakup? Well, while Alfred and Mamie were on their honeymoon in Europe, without telling them, Carey hired a moving company to take all of Mamie's stuff out of their home and dump it in a storage locker. She then sent Mamie the bill. So, not great.

By the time the newlyweds returned, Mary Garrett had already moved into the Deanery... and had begun transforming the 7-room house into a 43-room mansion. Because she was just that rich. I cannot stress enough how rich Mary Garrett was.

The Friday Nights never worked together as a group again, but they all remained influential. Mary and Carey became national leaders in the women's suffrage movement. Bessie King and Julia Rogers were influential early

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