

Mary Elizabeth Garrett (1854 – 1915)

Philanthropist Extraordinaire

Written by: **Mary Reisinger**

The name Garrett is familiar to people in Western Maryland. John Work Garrett, president of the B&O Railroad, was, after all, the person for whom Garrett County was named. Much less familiar is the name of his daughter, Mary Elizabeth Garrett. Mary preferred working behind the scenes, avoiding having her picture published, yet she was one of the most influential people in the country.

Born into a wealthy family, Mary led a privileged life. Her family had magnificent homes in Baltimore and a nineteen-room cottage in Western Maryland's Deer Park Resort. Her father owned hundreds of acres of land. They had their own stables. They filled many train cars when they moved between their homes, even taking horses and buggies with them. The Garretts traveled extensively in the United States and around the world. They dressed in the latest fashions, decorated their homes extravagantly, and collected many valuable artworks including china, books and paintings. John Work Garrett even began a museum attached to the family's mansion in Baltimore's exclusive Mount Vernon neighborhood—a project that Mary completed after his death.

Despite living as very few could in the 1800s, Mary faced several limitations. Because of an early injury to her ankle, she wore braces on her legs throughout her childhood and couldn't be as physically active as most children. She was lonely as the only girl in a family with three older brothers who took little interest in her. The most serious limitations arose simply from being female. She was denied the sort of rigorous education she craved. The role expected of her was to function in the home and in the community in "acceptable" ways.

Mary, a determined and resilient person, broke through many of the barriers she encountered. She read avidly and taught herself Italian, French, German, and Greek. When her parents acquired a large property with stables, she became stronger as she spent time outdoors and developed into an accomplished equestrian.

Mary and two friends formed a reading group that met every other Friday when they were schoolgirls. They called themselves the "Friday Night." Later, two more young



This 1904 painting of Mary Elizabeth Garrett by John Singer Sargent was commissioned by the trustees of the Johns Hopkins Medical School, but Mary chose the painter, traveled to London to pose, and paid half the cost.

women joined. The five members explored the question of what women should be able to do with their lives, and they vowed never to marry so as to retain their independence. Mary later claimed that this decision was reinforced by her father's disapproval of her suitors.

When Mary did take a college entrance examination, she did very poorly and thought perhaps she was "not cut out for" academic life. Her father played a role in this also, forbidding her from continuing her studies even though she "begged" him to let her go to college or to study abroad.

Mary was thwarted in following the usual path of marriage or the less usual path of college, and it would have been considered ridiculous for a woman of her status to have a career. She was completely dependent on her father for financial support. By her mid-twenties, she began to experience depression and both psychosomatic and physical



The Bryn Mawr School for Girls at the corner of Cathedral and Preston Streets, Baltimore, Maryland, circa 1890s was established to prepare girls for higher education such as the newly opened Bryn Mawr College in Philadelphia. According to a *Baltimore Sun* article, Saturday, January 12, 1889, the new school would house a gymnasium; separate rooms for French, Latin, Mathematics, History, German, Greek, English, and other classes, a teachers' room, and silent study-rooms. A dormer skylight would be used for astronomical observation.

Inset: The fully equipped gymnasium.



ailments. A British neurologist advised her to abandon any idea of studying, to drink weak tea, to avoid alcohol, to lead a simple life with ordinary recreation, and above all not to work.

Fortunately, Mary had other sources of inspiration. She was particularly interested in women physicians, including Mary Putnam Jacobi, who had an impressive practice in obstetrics and gynecology as well as a husband and children. Gradually, Mary began to establish more independence. She rented an apartment in New York City and traveled there frequently. She expanded her circle of friends and maintained extensive correspondence. She delighted in theater and music.

Her father often lamented that she was not a boy because she would have been the perfect person to take over his business interests. Even without being formally employed,

Mary experienced the demands of enterprise and of facing challenges such as the Civil War through her father's position on the board and then as president of the B&O Railroad. As an adult, she served as her father's personal assistant and learned to enjoy analyzing problems, interpreting financial data, and negotiating. From the example of her grandmother, mother, and others, she also saw the possibilities for women to act outside of the home while engaged in charitable and reform work.

Mary's mother, Rachel, died from injuries sustained in a carriage accident in October 1883, just a few days after the family's return from their annual trip to Europe.

In the following months, Mary and her father moved frequently between health spas in New Jersey, their homes in Baltimore, and their cottage in Deer Park. In addition to caring for her father, Mary supervised all aspects of their



Members of the “Friday Night”— five Baltimore friends dedicated to what women should be able to do with their lives — M. Carey Thomas, Mary Garrett (center), Julia Rogers, Mamie Gwinn and Bessie King.

lives. As her biographer observes, this could be as varied as “the digging of a well at 101 West Monument, the care of her father’s thoroughbreds at Montebello, the interior decorating at the Deer Park cottage, or the needs of his business correspondence.”

Mary’s father’s health declined rapidly; he died in 1884 while staying in the peaceful surroundings of his cottage in Deer Park, surrounded by all his family. Unusual for the time and to Mary’s surprise, her father left Mary one third of his estate, worth about two million dollars, making her one of the wealthiest women in the United States. Furthermore, he stipulated that this property would be Mary’s and not under the control of “any husband she may have.”

Mary used some of her funds to maintain the extensive holdings she had inherited—two homes in Baltimore and the cottage in Deer Park, a total of twenty-five hundred acres in Western Maryland and Baltimore, B&O Railroad stock shares, and many income-producing rental properties. She continued her lifestyle of traveling and socializing. She helped in the transition of the railroad to her brother’s leadership. Later, with one invalid brother, one whose health collapsed, and one who died in a boating accident,



The Garrett cottage at Deer Park, MD, one of the properties Mary inherited in her father’s will.

PHOTO COURTESY GARRETT COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM, OAKLAND, MD

Mary took over management of her father’s business interests.

John Work Garrett had given generously to many good causes including the YMCA, the Peabody Institute, the Baltimore Zoo, Lafayette College (his alma mater), and Washington and Lee College. He donated land for a school in Oakland, Maryland. He underwrote lectures and exhibitions. After his death, Mary received numerous requests for funds, which an assistant helped her to evaluate.

Mary began to narrow the focus of her charitable work to her deepest concern, the welfare of women. Having learned from her father’s methods, Mary planned her charity carefully. She became part of a class of donors sometimes called “coercive philanthropists,” giving to causes she cared about, but attaching conditions that had to be met. Many of her gifts have had long-lasting effects.

In 1885, the Friday Night launched an ambitious plan for a school in Baltimore that would prepare young women for higher education. The girls would study classical languages, mathematics, and science, and they would have physical education. To graduate, students would have to pass Bryn Mawr College’s rigorous entrance exam. As most remaining members of the Friday Night turned attention elsewhere, Mary continued to lead the effort. She oversaw the construction and furnishing of a new building for the school. She included a fully equipped gymnasium and a pool, despite warnings from some that women should be prepared



Above: Mary Garrett along with M. Carey Thomas, raised money to keep Bryn Mawr College in Philadelphia afloat. Mary made a commitment to donate annually to the college as long as Carey remained president. Mary had a room at the college and spent several months of each year there until the end of her life.

Inset: Women's Fund Memorial Building (left) of Johns Hopkins Medical School (1912). Through Mary's efforts to organize women all over the country to raise money, the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine opened in the Fall of 1893 to welcome both female and male students.



solely for “housekeeping and homemaking” and that climbing the stairs in the new building would “affect future childbearing.” After five years in rented space, Bryn Mawr School opened in 1890 in the new building. Now at a much larger campus, the school continues to educate girls in Baltimore today.

President Grover Cleveland and his wife Frances, and President Benjamin Harrison and his wife Caroline vacationed in cottages in Deer Park, next to the Garrett Cottage. Mary got to know both first ladies. Acquaintances such as these were vital to the next project upon which the Friday Night group embarked—to fund the Johns Hopkins Medical School.

Johns Hopkins, with the help of Mary's father, had planned that his estate should be used for a university, hospital, and medical school. The university opened on February 22, 1876, but construction problems and the need for additional fundraising (to which Mary contributed \$5000) delayed the hospital until 1889. Next, Hopkins President Daniel Coit Gilman began searching for a wealthy man who could supply the \$100,000 needed to proceed with creation of a medical school.

Members of the Friday Night formed a bold scheme—to organize women all over the country to raise this money and thus ensure that the medical school would be coeducational. Frances Cleveland joined in New York. Caroline Harrison headed the committee in Washington, D.C. Mary contributed nearly half the total, and the money was offered to the Hopkins board with the condition that women be admitted on an equal basis with men.

The board then increased the amount needed to \$500,000. Ultimately, Mary donated most of the additional money, but she increased the conditions. Among these were stipulations that the medical school must be a graduate school, students must pass exams for entrance and for graduation, and women would be included in all aspects of medical education. The medical school's first classes were held in 1893. In commemoration, Mary arranged for two portraits—of herself and of the four founding doctors of Hopkins—to be painted by John Singer Sargent.

The Friday Night disintegrated during the protracted struggle to raise money for the medical school, but Mary and another member of this group, M. Carey Thomas, continued to work together on another goal that arose—

to keep Bryn Mawr College afloat. Carey, who had earned a Ph.D. in Europe, was dean at the college. When the president announced his retirement, Mary saw an opportunity to ease the school's financial problems and gain the presidency for her friend. She made a commitment to donate annually so long as Carey was president. Mary had a room at the college and spent several months of each year there until the end of her life.

Throughout the time she spent improving educational opportunities for women, Mary had been an enthusiastic suffragist. When Susan B. Anthony and Rev. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw came to visit at Bryn Mawr College, Mary discovered a concrete way she could aid in the cause. The women proposed having a convention in Baltimore, a city which had grown conservative following the Civil War. Mary supported the convention with her organizational skills, social standing, and money. She hosted the luminaries of the group in her home, and she spearheaded a

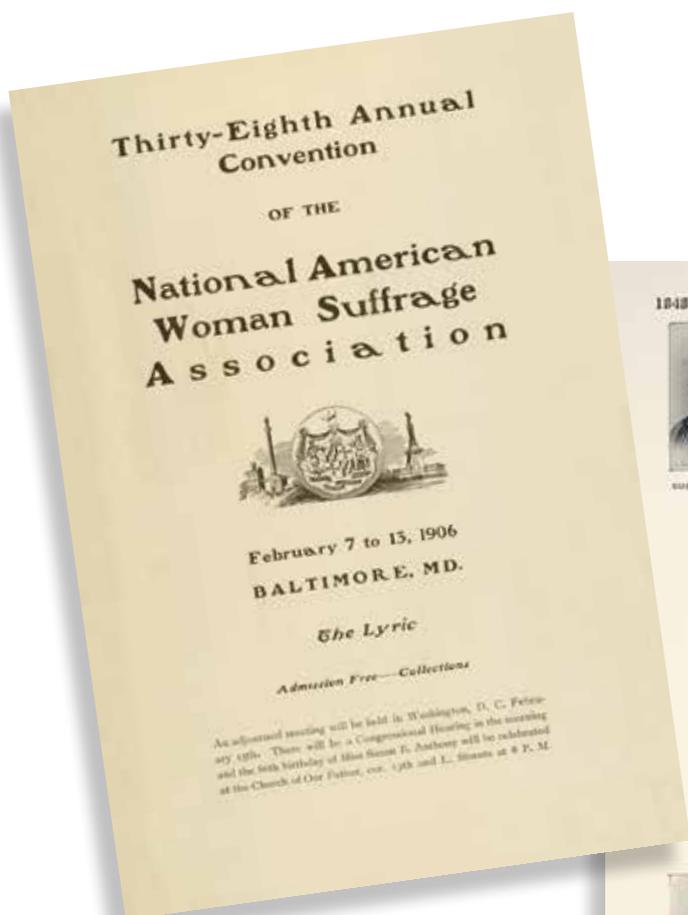
fundraising effort to raise \$60,000 to underwrite the future expenses of the movement.

Mary died at 61 of leukemia. Her will released Bryn Mawr Girls School from any indebtedness and provided for her invalid brother, but the bulk of her holdings—including homes in Baltimore and her cottage in Deer Park—went to her longtime friend M. Carey Thomas. Had Mary outlived Carey, other causes would have benefited, particularly the Hopkins medical school. True to form, she made that gift conditional on the school including females among the faculty. Her controversial will was contested by her relatives, but eventually upheld by the courts.

The little girl who lived with physical and academic limitations made it possible for other girls and women to receive the highest quality academic and physical education. The woman who could not officially assume her father's business leadership opened the way for other women to vote, to enter the medical profession, and to achieve whatever goals they set for themselves.

Mary Elizabeth Garrett is memorialized with these words: "A woman of quiet realized enthusiasms, she served her day and generation well and will be long remembered by those for whom she laboured." She has *not* been remembered

as well as she should have been, but a century after Mary's death, biographer Kathleen Waters Sander (*Mary Elizabeth Garrett: Society and Philanthropy in the Gilded Age*, 2008) and others are bringing well-deserved attention to her remarkable accomplishments.



Mary Garrett supported the suffragist movement, especially the 1906 convention in Baltimore. Shown here is the program booklet front cover and a page showing the keynote speakers.

