Baltimore Blues: Gertrude Stein at Johns Hopkins

By Deborah Rudacille

In the spring of 1901 a group of medical students posed solemnly on the porch of Johns Hopkins Hospital. The 43 men in the group appear in the first few rows, looking sober and confident as they await the awarding of their degrees, while the seven women among them stand in the back row, clustered together. Five women admitted to the 1901 class had dropped out, but these seven have persevered to stand proudly for the graduation photo—all save for one chubby-cheeked young woman who draws back from her peers in the last row, as though trying to hide from the camera. The handwritten inscription below the photograph explains her uncharacteristic shyness on what should have been a day of triumph: “Shown in the picture but did not graduate—G. Stein.”

In later years, when she had become a celebrity in Europe and America—and a self-professed genius—Gertrude Stein downplayed the four years she spent in Baltimore as a medical student at Johns Hopkins. But during those decisive years here, the notorious avant-garde writer fell in love for the first time (and was rejected by the object of her affections), formed several key friendships (later brushing off her most ardent supporter, Etta Cone) and adopted a profession (only to abandon it). Without her Baltimore failures, Stein would have missed out on the experiences that fueled her early fiction—“Q.E.D.,” “Fernhurst” and “Three Lives”—and might never have become an expatriate and an artist. But in the spring of 1901, few could have predicted that the depressed 27-year-old in the photo, who had failed four of her nine final-year classes, would become a literary lion and a friend and mentor to two generations of ground-breaking artists and writers.
In the fall of 1897, Stein entered Johns Hopkins School of Medicine—then less than 5 years old—with confidence and enthusiasm, buoyed both by her undergraduate studies at Radcliffe and a summer course in embryology at the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory. She set up housekeeping with her brother Leo, who was soon to pursue a Ph.D. in zoology at Johns Hopkins University, at 215 E. Biddle St., near where the future Duchess of Windsor would later reside. A photograph of Stein, age 23, in her study at the house shows a human skull perched atop a tall pile of books glowing at her as she bends over a microscope, absorbed in her work.

“These first two years at the medical school Gertrude Stein liked well enough,” she wrote in the 1933 book, “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,” narrated from the perspective of her longtime companion (though Stein herself was the author). She did well in her preclinical classes, garnering 1s and 2s—the equivalent of A’s and B’s—in anatomy, pathology, bacteriology, pharmacology and toxicology. She particularly “delighted in Dr. Mall,” who supervised her dissection of the brains of various animals to compare their structures.

Unlike many of Hopkins’ founding professors, Franklin Mall, the first professor of anatomy at the school, was not opposed to female medical students; in fact, he’d married one of the three women admitted to the medical school’s first class. Though his wife, Mabel Stanley Glover, gave up her studies when she became a bride—leading physician-in-chief William Osler to quip that the admission of women to Hopkins had been a great success as “331/3 percent of them were engaged to their professors at the end of the first year”—her influence seems to have helped Mall become a supportive mentor to the school’s budding women doctors. It was a rare thing, as Stein would come to learn.

Not only was the young Stein intellectually stimulated by her scientific studies but in those first years she also enjoyed the warmth and companionship of a large extended family residing in the city.

“Baltimore is where all my people come from,” she wrote in the 1937 book “Everybody’s Autobiography.” Both the Steins and the Keysers (her mother’s family) had arrived in the great wave of German-Jewish immigration in the mid-19th century. Born in Pennsylvania and passing most of their childhood in California, Gertrude, her sister Bertha, and her brother Leo first came to Baltimore in 1892 as orphans. Their mother, Milly, had died when Stein was 14, after a long illness, and their father, Daniel, died suddenly three years later. The youngsters, who had been alternately ignored and tyrannized by their widowed father after their mother’s death, were taken in by their maternal aunt, Fanny Keyser Bachrach, and her photographer husband, David.
“It was in Baltimore that she began to lose her lonesomeness,” Stein later wrote of the months she lived with the Bachrachs at 2408 Linden Ave. in Reservoir Hill, when she and her siblings became part of a lively circle of young cousins and their friends, attending social and cultural events and parties. Bertha soon married, but Leo and Gertrude moved north to Cambridge after less than a year to pursue undergraduate studies at Harvard and Radcliffe, respectively.

During school breaks, and after she returned to Baltimore as a medical student, Stein continued to spend a great deal of time with the Bachrachs, who hosted Saturday night receptions that drew the city’s Jewish artists and intellectuals. A Linden Avenue neighbor described Stein “as a young woman who loved to lounge, usually in a somewhat awkward supine position in our backyard and flower garden, often with her feet propped above her head, reciting poetry.”

By the time she began her Johns Hopkins studies, the aspiring physician had also formed a deep friendship with Dr. Claribel Cone. Stein had met Claribel and her younger sister Etta before she left for Radcliffe. At first, she was friendlier with Etta, who was closer to her own age and still living at home, but as a medical student she idolized the 30-something Claribel, admiring her independence. Against the wishes of her traditional family, Claribel Cone had attended the Women’s Medical College of Baltimore, then interned at Blockley Hospital for the Insane in Philadelphia. When Stein began her studies in medicine, Claribel Cone was teaching at the Women’s Medical College and carrying out pathology research in the laboratory of William Henry Welch at Johns Hopkins. Stein, too, worked in the pathology lab during her first years at Hopkins, spending one to two hours each day tracing the development of the cerebrum in embryonic brains.

Every weekday morning, Claribel Cone would board the trolley near her home on Eutaw Place and Stein would hop aboard at Biddle Street. The two women would carry on a lively conversation as the trolley lumbered down Broadway to the medical school, and as they disembarked and walked several blocks from the end of the line to campus. Residents of East Baltimore later recalled sitting on their stoops watching the two walk past each day. They were, as former Baltimore Museum of Art deputy director Brenda Richardson noted in her 1985 study of the Cone sisters, “a pair of women already known as daring individualists within the Baltimore community.”

Daring, indeed. When Claribel Cone invited her young friend to deliver an address to a group of Baltimore women on the topic of “The Value of a College Education for Women” in 1899, Stein provoked her audience by declaring that the average middle-class woman, supported by “some male relative, a husband or father or a brother,” is “not worth her keep economically considered.” A woman’s economic dependence led her to become “oversexed,” the young medical student alleged, “adapting herself to the abnormal sex desire of the male” in order to survive, and turning “a creature that should have been first a human being and then a woman into one that is a woman first and always.”
This was strong stuff for a turn-of-the-century audience in a conservative Southern city, but Stein relished her role as provocateur, one she shared with many of the young women she befriended during her first two years at Hopkins—Grace Lounsbery, Edith Hooker, Emma Erving, Mabel Haynes, Marion Walker, Dorothy Reed. They were “New Women,” in the parlance of the day, modernists who had graduated from women’s colleges such as Smith, Bryn Mawr and Radcliffe, and saw no reason why a woman should not succeed in life on her own terms.

During her second year of medical school, Stein began spending more time with this new group of friends, attending afternoon teas at the homes of these privileged gentile women who were so very different from her Stein and Keyser aunts and their friends, respectable matrons who urged her to follow the example of her older sister, Bertha, and marry one of the many eligible young men of Baltimore’s German-Jewish community. Rather than relying on male family members to escort them about town, the feisty New Women flaunted their independence.

One day, Stein and her friends rented rowboats to ferry themselves to a private picnic, having convinced the incredulous proprietor of the boats that they were capable of rowing themselves out and back again safely. Once docked, they built a fire and prepared their dinner. “Though medical students we objected to roasting them [the crabs] alive,” Stein later recalled, “and so we neatly severed their brains from their spinal cords not that we had ever heard of that performance preliminary to crab cooking and then we roasted and ate our crabs.” (The author’s approach to punctuation was as idiosyncratic as her point of view.)

In 1899, Stein’s ever-restless brother Leo decided to quit his doctoral studies and, after spending a year shuttling between Baltimore and New York, decamped for Europe in June 1900. With more than a year left to go in her own studies, Stein rented a house at 220 E. Eager St. with her friend and fellow medical student Emma Lootz, a woman who later recalled the prejudice against women medical students at Hopkins as so severe that the only way she made it through was by wearing her best hat. “It had roses on it,” she tartly informed Stein’s first biographer Elizabeth Sprigge. Stein, however, was not of the rose-hat-wearing persuasion. Later described by one of the men in her medical school class as “the old battle-ax,” she was apparently far from fastidious about her appearance. “Big and floppy and sandled and not caring a damn,” another told Sprigge. “She went flopping around the place.”

Stein’s refusal to wear a corset was the least of her gender-busting behaviors. At the Eager Street house, she hired a boxing instructor to spar with her. “The chandelier would swing to shouts of ‘Now give me one in the kidney,’” Emma Lootz recalled. One of her biographers believes that the boxing lessons were Stein’s attempt to boost her health and her spirits, which were worn down by the hostile environment she faced at Hopkins.

Though women were admitted to the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, it’s fair to say they weren’t welcomed. Their presence was due entirely to the insistence of the group of socially
well-connected Baltimore women who had raised the money to found the school. The members of the Women’s Fund for Medical Education, including Bryn Mawr College president M. Carey Thomas, Mamie Gwinn, Bessie King and railroad heiress Mary Elizabeth Garrett—all daughters of Johns Hopkins trustees—had raised the money to fund a school to be affiliated with the hospital created through the philanthropy of Johns Hopkins. But their gift came with a caveat: women must be admitted on equal terms with men.

Women were by that time gaining admittance to a few formerly all-male institutions, but most still attended women’s medical colleges. None of the nation’s other medical schools—male or female—were particularly admired by the founders of Johns Hopkins, who aspired to a higher standard. Garrett, in particular, insisted on rigorous criteria for admission that went well beyond what was required by most medical schools of the time: all students must have earned an undergraduate degree, with coursework in biology, physics and chemistry and a working knowledge of French, German and Latin.

These high standards would ensure, Bessie King wrote, that women would “participate in full in the intellectual aspect of medicine, and... follow it to the highest plane of intellectual development.” The founding fathers of the institution grudgingly agreed, mostly because they desperately needed the women’s money—Garrett alone contributed more than $300,000. But they made no secret of their disdain for the women they were forced to accept.

Dorothy Reed Mendenhall, who was one year ahead of Stein at Hopkins and went on to have a successful research career, recalled physician-in-chief Osler telling her at their first meeting to “go home.” Osler was also famous for saying that there were three kinds of human beings—men, women and women physicians. Another professor “used many a gibe to indicate how heinous and fundamental a crime it really is to be a woman,” recalled Florence Sabin, later to become the first female professor at the school. Many of the male students were no better, referring to their female colleagues as “hen medics.” When Sabin and Mendenhall, who graduated in 1900 ranked near the top of their class, became the first women eligible for medical internships, there was great “agitation” among their peers. While an intern, Mendenhall said, she rested in the nurses’ lounge, “as she wasn’t wanted” in the doctors’ lounge.

As the preclinical laboratory work of the first two years gave way to clinical studies in the third and fourth year, Stein began battling this poisonous sexism. She had a particularly nasty spat with obstetrics professor John Whitridge Williams. Nicknamed “the Bull” by his students, Whitridge Williams gave “a justly celebrated course on anecdotal midwifery,” according to his former student Alan Guttmacher, who was later to become an esteemed professor himself. “His supply of stories was inexhaustible and he told them in a rare Rabelaisian vein completely unmindful that half a dozen women medical students were present.”

According to Guttmacher, Stein challenged Whitridge Williams on the ribald content of his lectures, which caused the men in the class to “roar with laughter” but made her and the other women uncomfortable. The professor responded by telling Stein that since his lectures were part of the curriculum and “since he was free to teach them as he wished he was forced to require her presence or ask that she withdraw from the school.”
Whitridge Williams was no doubt being purposely provocative in his lectures—or at least refusing to make concessions to the female students by censoring his dirty stories. “He never approved of women in medicine…,” commented another of his former students, John W. Harris. “He often stated that a woman could never hope to attain an economic parity with men because for at least four days a month she was below standard mentally if not physically.”

Jews, too, were only reluctantly tolerated by Whitridge Williams and many of his peers. Expressing a view considered progressive at the time, he once told Guttmacher that “if a Jew and a gentile have equal merit, I prefer the gentile, but if the Jew is the better man, I’ll take him.” Stein was clearly not “the better man” in any sense and Whitridge Williams apparently detested her. “He was an aristocrat and a snob,” wrote Mendenhall, “who couldn’t stand her [Stein’s] marked Hebrew looks, her sloppy work and her intolerance.”

In her third year of medical school, Stein’s grades began to plummet. She barely passed neurology, obstetrics and clinical microscopy, doing slightly better in medicine and surgery. Neither her friendship with Claribel Cone, nor the feminist lectures of her friends who begged her to “remember the cause of women,” were able to prevent her rapid slide into mediocrity. She was the only student in her class with a grade lower than a 3 in any subject.

“As a thinker, she was tops but she could do nothing with her hands, was very untidy and careless in her technique and very irritating in her attitude of intellectual superiority, which was marked even in her youth,” Mendenhall later remarked. Though she had found a second supportive mentor in neuroscientist Lewellys F. Barker, who encouraged a research project that would have helped her win her medical degree, Stein seemingly began to plot her escape from Baltimore by the fall of her senior year, after returning from a summer trip abroad.

On the surface she remained committed to finishing her degree, and she fulfilled the obstetric duties required of all fourth-year students, including delivering babies in the African-American neighborhoods surrounding the East Baltimore campus. Her marks in gynecology (2) and surgery (2.5) were passable. But when a faculty committee met in early June to review each student’s performance, Osler moved that “Gertrude Stein be not recommended for the degree of Doctor of Medicine” with the rest of her class. The committee agreed. “We women felt pretty badly, but Gertrude did not seem to care a rap,” commented Florence Sabin.

In “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,” published some 30 years later, Stein blamed simple boredom for her medical school failure—“It was fairly well-known among all her teachers that she was bored,” she wrote. But in that book, she failed to mention a critical self-discovery that indelibly altered her last two years in Baltimore, and indeed shaped the course of her future life. In “Baltimore, sunny Baltimore,” she fell in love for the first time—and the object of her confusing, tormenting desire was a woman.

In late 1899 or early 1900, Stein became enmeshed in a tortured love triangle, falling in love with a Bryn Mawr College graduate, May Bookstaver, who was romantically involved with one of Gertrude’s fellow medical students, Mabel Haynes. Bookstaver was the daughter of a New York Supreme Court justice. She had majored in history and political science at Bryn Mawr and moved to Baltimore after her 1898 graduation with Haynes, who enrolled at Johns Hopkins.
While in the city, Bookstaver worked as a tutor and an activist in the birth control and women’s suffrage movements. A scene written by Stein a few years later describes Bookstaver and Haynes as she may have first glimpsed them at a Baltimore tea—a Bookstaver-like character called Helen, “an upright figure, she was the American version of the English handsome girl” and her lover, Mabel Neathe, who “had the angular body of a spinster” lying with “her head in Helen’s lap.”

Though in her mid-20s, Stein was fairly naïve and seems to have taken quite a while to grasp the nature of Bookstaver and Haynes’ relationship. In the late 19th century, so-called “Boston marriages” or “white marriages” between women were common yet the idea that these relationships might include a sexual element was all but inconceivable to the Victorian mind. Decades later, Etta Cone would profess shock at the suggestion that there was “something between Gertrude and Alice [Toklas]. After all, what can two women do?” she asked an amused niece.

Though it is impossible to know for certain, many such intimate female friendships of the era probably were platonic. Most of Gertrude’s medical school friends had attended women’s colleges where romantic friendships between students (called “smashings”) were common. At a time when the word “homosexual” was just beginning to be used in medical discourse, physical signs of affection between women—embraces, kisses, even sleeping in the same bed—weren’t considered deviant. But Stein’s relationship with Bookstaver (like Bookstaver’s liaison with Haynes) clearly crossed a line that she herself feared. She would compulsively re-create the trauma of that erotic initiation in her early fiction.

Stein left fairly detailed accounts of her infatuation with Bookstaver in her novels “Q.E.D.” and “Melanctha,” both written in the decade following her departure from Baltimore and both set in the city. “Q.E.D.” is explicitly based on the Stein-Bookstaver-Haynes love triangle, while “Melanctha” describes a love affair between a young bi-racial woman and a black doctor. However, the emotional dynamic of the relationships is identical—a naïve Stein-like character is seduced by a more experienced partner, who leads the sexually and emotionally immature lover into a confusing and painful erotic web.

In “Q.E.D.,” two women share a kiss “that seemed to scale the very walls of chastity,” and the Stein character, Adele, breaks away “filled with battle and revulsion.” Many years later, Stein admitted to an interviewer that after writing the book (which remained unpublished until after her death) she simply stuffed it into a drawer and forgot about it, because “it was too early to write about such things in our civilization.”

Instead, she “took it and changed it and made a man out of one of the women” and it became “Melanctha,” a novella that was admired by some for its language and its supposedly accurate depiction of African-American life when it was published before the first World War. In the story, part of a trilogy of tales published as “Three Lives,” a young doctor, Jeff Campbell, struggles against the “real hot love” his beloved Melanctha stirs in him—a love that comes to feel “like a religion”—and wonders if it can win out over his doubts and hesitations.
In both “Q.E.D.” and “Melanctha,” the lovers endure a protracted power struggle before finally parting. “I’m afraid it comes very near being a dead-lock,” Adele groans on the final page of “Q.E.D.” The same might be said for Gertrude Stein’s years in Baltimore. She left the city in the summer of 1901, returning briefly that fall and winter to finish some research and submit the final draft of a paper (which no journal accepted for publication) that spring.

The bruising memory of her Baltimore humiliations would haunt Gertrude Stein for many years. In “Everybody’s Autobiography,” she wrote, “I used to be fond of saying that America, which was supposed to be a land of success, was a land of failure. Most of the great men in America had a long life of early failure and a long life of later failure.”

This passage reveals a truth artfully concealed in her discussion of her medical school career in the earlier “Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,” in which she insisted that “the big men [at Johns Hopkins] like Halstead, Osler et cetera knowing her reputation for original scientific work made the medical examinations merely a matter of form and passed her.” In fact, “the big men” not only failed her but also recommended that friends in other institutions not accept her into their residency programs should she somehow manage to complete her requirements the following year.

Unsurprisingly, Stein harbored resentments about this experience for many years. In a scathing denunciation of patriarchal social structures likely inspired not only by her experience with her own father but also by her time among the great men of Johns Hopkins, she wrote: “Fathers are depressing… The periods of the world’s history that have always been the most dismal ones are the ones where fathers were looming and filling up everything.”

Her dislike was heartily returned. As late as 1960, Johns Hopkins declined to co-sponsor a Gertrude Stein lecture series for students suggested by the president of the Peale Museum. When a 1903 graduate of the school wrote to Dean Alan Mason Chesney in 1946 inquiring whether the writer “who made the World’s Front Page” was the young medical student he remembered, Chesney replied curtly, “it is the same Gertrude Stein who was able to make the front page by writing what to me was gibberish.”

Gertrude Stein did not return to Baltimore for more than 30 years after the medical school debacle. When she next visited at the age of 60, it was as an international celebrity on a lecture tour speaking to packed houses around the country. Disembarking in New York City, she literally saw her name in lights—the news trailer in Times Square declaring repeatedly, “Gertrude Stein has arrived in New York. Gertrude Stein has arrived in New York.” She was accompanied by Toklas, whom she had met four years after her arrival in Paris.

Toklas was a devoted “wife” and their relationship was acknowledged by all who knew them, though, as Stein’s nephew Julian Stein Jr. points out, “back then, you couldn’t say the word cancer, much less lesbian.” During the Christmas holidays of 1934, the couple stayed with Stein’s uncle Julian Stein Sr. and his wife, Rose Ellen, at their home in Pikesville. Julian Jr., then 16, now 80, remembers the visit—and Stein—well. “I liked her,” says Stein, who lives in a Tuscany Canterbury home surrounded by Stein family portraits, books and memorabilia. “She laughed easily and was a good kind of girl.” His mother corresponded with Stein from 1912 till
the latter’s death in 1946 and the family always visited with Stein and Toklas on their trips to Europe.

By the time of the 1934 Baltimore visit, Gertrude’s old friend Claribel Cone had died, and her friendship with Etta Cone had faded, reputedly due to the jealousy of Alice Toklas. Etta Cone offered to host a dinner in Stein’s honor during her Baltimore stay, but Stein’s reply—“I am seeing no one but a few very dear friends”—cut her to the quick. The two old friends never saw each other again. But their early intimacy had created a precious gift—the Cone Collection, which had its genesis in the sisters’ visits to Stein in Paris, where she and her brothers Leo and Michael introduced them to the artists whose works would form the core of their collection. Some of the most famous paintings now hanging in the Baltimore Museum of Art were first owned by various Steins, who sold them to the Cone sisters when they needed money.

Stein did make time to see F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, then living in Bolton Hill, during her 1934 visit. “Both of them were in pretty bad shape then,” Julian Stein recalls, with Scott suffering from a monstrous Christmas hangover and Zelda in an emotionally fragile state. Julian’s stepsister Ellen Bloom, who served as chauffeur for Gertrude and Alice during their visit, recalled the occasion in a 1970 article in The Texas Quarterly.

“There was a Christmas tree in the small living room, his wife Zelda was home from the hospital for a few days, and his little daughter Scottie was playing on the floor. They chatted for some time about old times and had tea. When we left Fitzgerald came out into the slushy snow to help her [Stein] into the car. As he closed the door, he said with emotion, ‘Thank you. Having you come to the house was like—it was as if Jesus Christ had stopped in’.”

Despite Stein’s Baltimore connections, the city has never claimed her as one of its heroes in the way that it has claimed Edgar Allan Poe, Billie Holiday and Fitzgerald—or the many other artists who spent portions of their lives here. Maybe it’s because her time in the city raises uncomfortable memories of a no-longer-acceptable institutional sexism and anti-Semitism. Maybe it’s because her years here were tainted by failure. Or maybe it’s because, even today, Gertrude Stein remains, as she was in her lifetime, a bit too queer—in all senses of the word—to be adopted as a native daughter. In any case, Stein’s Baltimore history has been, if not erased, at least discreetly veiled.

Perhaps it’s time for Baltimore to lift the veil and celebrate its connection to one of the most groundbreaking—and maddening—writers of the 20th century?

At the end of her life, Stein herself acknowledged the tie. Her will, probated in Orphan’s Court here, lists Baltimore as her “place of domicile” though she hadn’t lived in the city for decades. A kind of psychological umbilical cord seems to have tethered her to the city. “We were all born in Pittsburgh or in Allegheny,” as Stein once wrote of herself and her siblings, “but naturally it was in Baltimore where we were born longer because after all everybody has to come from somewhere.”

A Complicated Friendship

Were they or weren’t they? That’s the question on many people’s minds when they consider the unique—and tumultuous—relationship between Gertrude Stein and Etta Cone. Were they or weren’t they lovers?

“It’s very likely,” says Nancy Hirschland Ramage, who is the author, along with her mother Ellen B. Hirschland, of the new biography, “The Cone Sisters of Baltimore: Collecting at Full Tilt.” While acknowledging the rumored intimacy between Stein and Cone, Hirschland and Ramage, who are Cone descendants as well as art historians, seek to correct what they view as an overstatement of Stein’s influence on the Cone Collection. “I think Stein’s influence has been overestimated by art historians,” says Ramage, an emerita art history professor at Ithaca College.

“They don’t give the Cone sisters credit for having their own taste.” Ramage, who completed the book after her mother passed away in 1999, argues that while Stein was instrumental in exposing the Cones to artists such as Picasso and Matisse, she didn’t influence what the sisters bought from them. In fact, says Ramage, Etta “was a much more sensitive collector than Gertrude.” Some of Stein’s collection did become part of the Cone Collection, however, because Stein asked the sisters to buy it when she and Alice Toklas needed money.

“Gertrude thought the Cones were patsies, and it’s sort of sad because not only did they buy things from her when she needed money, they gave her money,” says Ramage. “Instead of being grateful, she thought they were stupid, pushovers.”

In 1934, when Stein visited Baltimore as part of her lecture tour throughout the United States, Etta Cone offered to house her and Toklas and host a dinner for them. Stein snubbed her so blatantly that Cone fled town, leaving her ticket for Stein’s lecture in the hands of her great-niece, Hirschland, who describes that unforgettable experience—and other fascinating personal recollections of the Cone sisters—in the book. —laura wexler

Nancy Hirschland Ramage will discuss and sign her book at the Baltimore Museum of Art on Nov. 2 at 1 p.m.