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## **Ahead of Their Time: The Story of Alice Berry Graham and Katharine Berry Richardson, the Founders of Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City**

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## The Sisters

Alice Berry Graham was born in 1850 in Warren, Pa. Her sister, Katharine Berry Richardson, was born 8 years later. Their mother, Harriet, died when Katharine was 3-years old, and the sisters were raised by their father, Stephen. He believed in education for women and instilled in them a sense of community advocacy, teaching that "The truly charitable woman is big enough to help children other than her own" and "The responsibility of an American extends beyond his own family. Wherever you go, it is your duty to make good citizens of your neighbors."

Katharine graduated from Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, in 1882. Alice taught school to pay for the cost of Katharine's medical education at the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia where she graduated in 1887. Katharine later reciprocated by paying Alice's expenses at Philadelphia Dental College. Both sisters married during their years of schooling, but were widowed at an early age.

Alice and Katharine decided that their practice should be somewhere West. They made the decision of where to move by casting a coin on pieces of paper listing various localities. The coin landed on La Crosse, Wis., and the move was made.



## A New Start in Kansas City

For whatever reason, the sisters moved to Kansas City to build a new practice in the mid 1890s. They were less than welcome. The local medical and dental societies and professional community excluded women. There were no referrals to women doctors and dentists. Alice installed her dental equipment in the living room of their home. Katharine, having no office, made house calls among the sick in the neighborhood. One evening, Alice found an abandoned, ill, and crippled 5-year old girl on the street. She brought the waif home, and the sisters nursed her to health in a rented hospital bed. With this simple act, they recognized that their calling was to fill the gap that existed in the health care of poor children. In 1897, Alice and Katharine founded the Free Bed Association for Crippled, Deformed and Ruptured Children.

The Berry sisters were members of a popular group called The Bands of Mercy, which was formed to protect children and to promote kindness to animals. During a Bands of Mercy meeting, Alice asked whether she could use the name of the association for her new hospital. She was told that it would be a compliment to the group, and the hospital became Mercy Hospital in 1904, and in 1916, Children's Mercy Hospital.



Alice Berry Graham  
1850 - 1913



Katharine Berry Richardson  
1858 - 1933

## Mercy's Messenger.

Published by The Mercy  
The Hospital of the Little People.

Business Manager: Mrs. Frank K. Bostick.

Editor for January, 1913.  
Dr. Alice A. Graham,

121 Clinton Place. Kansas City, Mo.



Alice and Katharine established a nursing school. They wrote an inspiring pledge for the nurses, defined the uniform, and even got Florence Nightingale to design the nurses cap. They built a nurses residence and remained devoted to their nurses throughout their lives.

Photographs courtesy of the Children's Mercy archives

## Growth

There was no shortage of poor, sick, and injured children in Kansas City, so the hospital began to grow. The sisters had differing personalities, but a devotion to each other and complementary skills that kept the hospital afloat during hard financial times. Alice became a tireless fundraiser, appealing to the community for support. She saw the dental patients and ran the business of the hospital. She started "Mercy's Messenger," the hospital's newsletter, which described the needs of the children and the importance of the hospital's work. A blackboard on the front lawn listed the daily needs of milk, food, linens, and supplies. Hundreds of grassroots women's clubs were established to raise money for special clinics and causes, supply blankets and clothes for the patients, and keep the children fed. The sisters always found ways to expand the hospital while avoiding debt – a principle that was never broken.

Katharine attended to the medical care of the children. She was a surgeon of considerable skill who was especially known for cleft lip and palate repair. She often talked with physician colleagues about the specialty of plastic surgery, which she felt was ideal for women because "...a woman) must draw a model of what she wants to cut just like she was making a dress from a pattern, and she must be able to use the needle swiftly and expertly, clipping a piece out here and putting a piece in there." As the hospital grew, the medical staff grew with like-minded physicians who were willing to donate their time and talent.



Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig donated an electric refrigerator on October 15, 1927, during their national "Home Run Tour"



Katharine coaxed reluctant Mercy Hospital physicians to train black doctors in Pediatrics. In 1924, the first 3 black pediatricians in Kansas City graduated her program. After having difficulties bringing African-American children into the white hospital for care, she also established a "no color line" bed.

## Katharine Carries On

Alice died in 1913, and Katharine carried on. She became the social conscience of the city, writing commentary on the plight of children in the Messenger. In the 1920s, she fought segregation by training African American pediatricians and nurses as well as funding beds for the care of African-American children, saying "I have not served children unless I have served them all." She planned for a research laboratory for children's diseases. Katharine worked until her death in 1933. On June 12 of that year, the hospital's Board adopted a resolution, concluding "As members of the Central Board and the Board of Trustees, and as her loyal friends, we pledge to our dead leader that we will keep the faith." Today, Children's Mercy has 354 beds in 2 hospitals and 460,000 annual outpatient visits in 11 locations.