

Katharine Berry Richardson

Founder and First Director of Children's Mercy Hospital
1860-1933

by Daniel Coleman

In a posthumous tribute to the life of Katharine Berry Richardson, the *Kansas City Times* editorialized that in an earlier age, her life "might have been officially described as saintly." Richardson's heightened sense of mission gives her life a transcendent quality, in which the milestones and definitions we use to chronicle normal lives seem insufficient. For instance, to say that Richardson never retired would not be quite accurate, for although she performed surgery just two days before she died in her mid-70s, so complete was her dedication to the hospital that she never drew a salary. While she and her husband had no children of their own, she was a mother to thousands.

Richardson was born in Kentucky around 1860, the second daughter of grain miller Stephen P. Berry. Her mother, Harriett Benson Berry, died in 1861, and Katharine spent most of her childhood in the care of her sister Alice, who was eight years older, and her widower father. Stephen Berry taught his daughters by example to put principals before public opinion; he had been forced to flee Kentucky during the Civil War for his pro-Union stance, and both of his girls completed high school at a time when education for women was not generally emphasized.

After high school, Alice used her salary from teaching to send Katharine to Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, then Pennsylvania Women's College in Philadelphia, where she received a medical degree. Katharine then helped fund Alice's course of study at the Philadelphia Dental College.

The pair practiced for a time in Wisconsin and moved to Kansas City in the late 1890s. It was a city with few female doctors. Marginalized by a male medical establishment, the Berry sisters struggled to find patients, often treating those overlooked by other physicians. Many patients had difficulty paying.

A defining moment came in 1897, when a barkeeper from a West Bottoms tavern came to them with the case of a woman he knew who had been trying to give away her sick and starving child. The



Berrys, recognizing that the little girl would require hospitalization to survive, rented a bed and treated her themselves at a maternity hospital. Within several years the maternity hospital folded and the sisters began leasing the facility, which was located in a ramshackle house near Cleveland Avenue and today's Truman Road. Here, with help from donors, they established their first hospital for children in need.

Frequent fundraising efforts garnered the interest of generous Kansas Citians, and their work gathered momentum. In 1904, they moved to an improved location at 414 Highland. A new hospital building at 1710 Independence Avenue became home to Children's Mercy in 1917, and there it operated until 1970. The construction of the Independence Avenue building came in the years following two of Katharine's greatest personal losses. Her husband, James Ira Richardson, died in 1908, and in 1913 her sister and partner Alice succumbed to cancer. To the latter, Richardson credited the founding of Children's Mercy Hospital in its new cornerstone inscription: "In 1897, Dr. Alice Berry Graham founded this hospital for sick and crippled children—to be forever nonsectarian, non-local, and for those who cannot pay."

As a clinician, Richardson was known for her total commitment to her patients. Technically, she was among the region's most skilled surgeons in the area of facial reconstruction for children born with cleft lip and palate. But she also emphasized the importance of sympathy and understanding, tending to her patients' emotional needs as well as physical ailments. To this end she encouraged hospital designs integrating light and fresh air, filled the wards with toys, and recruited comedians and circus clowns visiting Kansas City to perform for the children.

Away from the hospital, Richardson sometimes appeared unyielding and brusque. Alice had been a diplomatic fundraiser with a softer approach, and Richardson's outspokenness about the hospital's needs, coupled with her unwillingness to dilute her mission, were disagreeable to some. But none questioned the depth of her compassion, nor her success in providing health care for the children she loved. She died June 3, 1933, leaving a legacy that keeps her mission alive into the twenty-first century—Children's Mercy Hospitals and Clinics.

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