

An Academic Pioneer: Studying Our Unsung Heroines

By SUZANNE R. SPRING

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The walls of Professor Virginia Walcott Beauchamp's whitewashed University of Maryland basement office are bare — understandably. No one sells paintings or posters of detective story author Zenith Jones or of Civil War military strategist Anna Ella Carroll. Yet these are two of the women to whom the professor has dedicated her scholarly career.

America's unsung, all-but-forgotten female authors, poets, historians, former slaves, diary keepers, reporters, social workers and politicians are Beauchamp's business. They have been since the petite 61-year-old professor pioneered the national effort — started by a handful of academics in the 1960s — to make the study of women a standard part of college curriculums.

From the time she joined the University of Maryland teaching staff in 1965 until a Women's Studies Program was established in 1973, Beauchamp worked and fought to make stories by and about women an accepted part of academia.

Today, a University of Maryland degree program devoted to women's history, writing, politics and social issues — the fruits of Beauchamp's labor — is one of the most active and respected in the country, serving as a research base for scholars from California to Maine.

But Beauchamp's specialty lies remarkably close to home. Since the early 1970s, she has focused her energies on teaching and researching Maryland's forgotten women, both great and ordinary.

"Of course there's a good deal of variety among Maryland's women," said the Michigan-born Beauchamp (pronounced Beecham). "But if one strand ties them together it's their strength and resourcefulness. They were in leadership positions quite early.

"Take Margaret Brent," Beauchamp continued. "She practically ran the colonial government." A mid-17th century landholder and entrepreneur, Brent took over the colonial governorship for several years when the British-appointed official died in 1746.

Beauchamp's research has also uncovered the Preston family of Towson, in Baltimore County. The mother, Madge, and daughter, May, recorded their lives and the history of the times in carefully detailed letters and diaries.



BY GARY A. CAMERON—THE WASHINGTON POST

University of Maryland Professor Virginia Beauchamp has dedicated her career to studying many of the women whose history has been neglected.

"Madge was a battered wife. There can be no question," Beauchamp said, shaking her head. "Here we are studying the 19th century and learning about the reaction to Lincoln's assassination, and discovering the texture of the ordinary woman's life."

From a filing cabinet, Beauchamp pulled out a box filled with the first 480 pages of her book on the Prestons. It has nine chapters to go. "Look at this," she said, holding one of Madge Preston's journal entries.

Saturday, February 25, 1867
During this afternoon we all have been as unhappy as well could be, owing to Mr. Preston's humor which unfortunately for me, culminated this evening and ended by Mr. Preston striking me to the floor senseless. . . . Theodosia [her niece] was there, but of course said nothing!

Although she uses the Preston diaries as part of her course syllabus, Beauchamp said she will be teaching in the upcoming semester from books that describe mainly the lives of working women.

Shifting through the papers piled a half-foot deep on her desk, Beauchamp pulled out one such book, entitled "Bread Givers." Written by a poor Jewish immigrant named Anzia Yezierska, the book about the hardships of New York City laborers was a best-seller in 1920.

"Of course you haven't heard of it," Beauchamp said, smiling, in response to a question.

Ignorance about women's literature is nothing new to the professor. And neither is academic derision of the subject.

Beauchamp said that students cannot count her course, "Women in Literature," for credit toward an English degree — even though the class is almost always overenrolled.

"Why? Well, because the entire academic establishment is run by men, and they are interested in their experience," Beauchamp said matter-of-factly. "In their minds, the stories and lives of women are peripheral. That's why you've never heard of half of the books I teach."

Beauchamp, born and raised in

Ann Arbor, Mich., earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in English from the University of Michigan. She earned her doctorate from the University of Chicago in the early 1960s.

"I didn't have one female professor until I went to Chicago," Beauchamp remembered, "and believe me, no one was teaching women's literature."

Her doctoral dissertation, a discussion of eight versions of the Antony and Cleopatra story, indirectly sparked her interest in women's studies. While doing research for the thesis, she read about the Countess of Pembroke, a 17th century translator.

"I decided I wanted to write a biography of the countess," Beauchamp said. "But when I sat down to start it, I realized I didn't know a single fact about the lives of women during the Renaissance."

She set about educating herself by digging out little-known books and records by and about women, finding many in the University of

Maryland's McKeldin Library. A few years later she started telling her students about her discoveries, and in 1972 she was appointed to a university committee considering establishment of a Women's Studies Program.

When the program was approved, Beauchamp — who has yet to write the countess' biography — was made the first coordinator. "I blazed a trail into the wild blue yonder, as it were," she said.

For the past two years, the professor has led students through intensive semesters of original research about Maryland women. Under her direction, students have discovered 82-year-old Grace Yaukey, sister of Pearl Buck and an author in her own right until she retired to a Quaker community in Sandy Spring several years ago; Baltimore Evening Sun reporter Carol Wharton, who covered World War II for the paper until peace returned her to the society page; and Nebraska-born Adele Stamp, the first dean of women at the university's College Park cam-

pus, who retired shortly before her death in the 1960s.

"The point of the course is to define women's culture" by analyzing forms of writing and verbal expression often overlooked by traditional scholars," Beauchamp said, adding that she directs her students — most of whom are women — toward different genres of literature because "many women were not writers, but speakers."

As an example, Beauchamp cited Anna Ella Carroll, a woman from Maryland's eastern shore who served as a military strategist for the Union forces during the Civil War.

And Henrietta Szold, a rabbi's daughter from Baltimore who founded Hadassah, the international Jewish women's organization, in 1910.

And Harriet Tubman, the famous black woman from the state's eastern shore who guided many slaves to safety in the North before and during the Civil War.

And Zenith Jones, a 20th century author of 60 best-selling detective novels, most of which bore male pen names. Under the names Leslie Ford and David Frome, the Annapolis-based Jones wrote "All for the Love of a Lady" (1944), "Date with Death" (1949), "Murder in Maryland" (1960) and dozens of others.

While her students uncover previously unrecognized Maryland women like Yaukey, Wharton and Jones every semester, Beauchamp is busy chronicling the Prestons. A New York literary agent is looking at the first eight chapters of her book about the family. Fortunately for the professor, the Preston women recorded almost every aspect of their lives for three decades.

Beauchamp selected one of her favorite passages from Madge Preston's diary and read it out loud:

April 16, 1865: The news of Lincoln's assassination was confirmed together with that of Seward and his son. The Secretary is not dead, but it is thought that he cannot live long. There seems to be a wonderful excitement in the city and elsewhere — I fear it will lead to great troubles and misery. There and I reached home just at sundown. There and I played chess. I beat.

The discussion of Lincoln's death beside that of a chess game, Beauchamp said, is what teaches us about the lives of Maryland's "real" women.

"They were remarkable," she said. "Of course they were all different. And yet they all had so much courage."