

GENTRY, Ruth. February 22, 1862–October 18, 1917.

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (PhB 1890), BRYN MAWR COLLEGE (PhD 1894).

Ruth Ellen Gentry was born in Stilesville, Indiana, the daughter of Lucretia (1830–1909), born in Indiana, and Jeremiah Gentry (1827–1906), from Kentucky. Her father was a farmer and stock trader, and later dry goods merchant, in Stilesville, southwest of Indianapolis. She had at least two older siblings: a brother, Oliver (1853–1878), and a sister, Sarah F. (b. ca 1855).

Ruth Gentry attended the public schools of Stilesville. According to the Gentry family genealogy, she began teaching school at age sixteen and later used her savings to pay her way through college. She graduated from the Indiana State Normal School in Terre Haute in 1880 and “spent the next ten years in preparatory and college teaching, and in study in the University of Michigan” (PhD dissertation “Life”). She was formally admitted to the University of Michigan in October 1885. In a history of women at Michigan, a fellow student is quoted as describing the atmosphere for women taking mathematics classes with engineering students: “Ruth Gentry and I were the only girls in a large class of engineers. We had front seats and left the room first. I never did see the faces of those young men in class” (Bordin, 19). Before completing her undergraduate work she taught for two years. In 1886–88, she was Preceptress and Teacher of Mathematics and Mathematical Sciences in Deland, Florida. The school was called DeLand Academy and College her first year, and college preparatory classes were the highest level taught. Her second year there the school was called Deland University, and three students were enrolled in the college department. It became John B. Stetson University a year later. Gentry graduated from the University of Michigan with the PhB degree in 1890.

That fall Ruth Gentry began her graduate studies at Bryn Mawr College and held the fellowship in mathematics 1890–91. She was awarded the European Fellowship of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae for the year 1891–92. She first went to Berlin, where she knew people. She described her situation in a June 1892 article as follows:

In America, I had heard that a woman was occasionally permitted, as an exceptional favor, to become a sort of supposed-to-be-invisible guest in lectures in some universities of Germany; *that in Berlin, however, all effort to secure such exceptional privilege would be utterly useless*. . . . I made inquiries of various prominent Professors of Mathematics elsewhere than in Berlin; result, a collection of letters now treasured as *souvenirs*, no show of hope for me except in Leipzig, where the work in Mathematics was not exactly suited to my purpose, and a state of mind well adapted to lead to suicide.

Having nursed my despair till the University [of Berlin] had officially opened, I concluded to seek a long-desired interview with Prof. Fuchs and “view the prospect o’er” for myself. Prof. Fuchs did not politely “thank me for the honor, etc., while regretting to be unable to admit a woman to his lectures;” he did not assure me Mathematics was a difficult subject which women, for the most part, could not comprehend (as one Professor had written); he did not, as the Rector of one University did, advise me to apply to the Ministerium, and accompany his advice with the assurance that

my request would not be granted; he did not make me feel that a woman possessed of an interest in Mathematics was a sort of natural curiosity, whose existence demanded explanation. He asked me in his quiet, restful way, what I had done in Mathematics and under whose instruction, talked a minute or two about Briot and Bouquet's *Fonctions Elliptiques*, and told me to ask the Rector of the University whether a way could not be found to favor my petition. (1892, 45–46)

With the backing of Professor Lazarus Immanuel Fuchs, Rector Förster approved her request as long as the lecturers did not object. A month later that approval was revoked when it was discovered that in 1884, despite approval of a similar request by the University Senate, “the *Ministerium* had strictly, specifically forbidden” such arrangements (1892, 46). Nonetheless, the Rector allowed her to continue attending the lectures of Fuchs and Dr. Ludwig Schlesinger until the end of the semester. She remained in Europe through the first semester of 1892–93 and attended lectures by Professors Émile Picard, Gaston Darboux, and Louis Raffy at the Sorbonne, before returning to the United States in February 1893.

James C. Albisetti claims that Gentry may have had more impact on the admission of women to German universities than any other American woman. Although she studied one semester at Berlin, Albisetti claims that she applied first to the University of Heidelberg and was turned down on October 20, 1891. Just nine days later, however, “influenced by her application and that of Marie Gernet from Karlsruhe, five members of the mathematics-sciences faculty proposed that women should be allowed to study at Heidelberg with any professors who would have them. The university senate rejected this idea but was overridden by Baden’s Ministry of Education, which . . . gave them permission to audit courses in the mathematics-sciences faculty” (Albisetti, 225).

Gentry again held the fellowship in mathematics at Bryn Mawr in 1892–93 and was a fellow by courtesy there in 1893–94. In February 1894 she was elected to membership in the New York Mathematical Society, which became the American Mathematical Society a few months later. Gentry passed her examinations for the PhD degree in June 1894. In 1895 she was made a member of the academic council at Bryn Mawr College. Her dissertation, which appeared in printed form in 1896, was written under the direction of Charlotte A. Scott, whom she acknowledged by noting that, “I find it hard adequately to express my indebtedness and my gratitude for the inspiration derived from her unfailing interest in my work.” Gentry was Scott’s first PhD student; however, because of the delay in the printing of her dissertation, she is often listed as sharing that honor with [Isabel Maddison](#) who received her degree in 1896.

Gentry began teaching at Vassar College in 1894. She was instructor 1894–1900 and associate professor 1900–02. In her earliest years there, she taught courses in solid and spherical geometry, plane trigonometry, determinants and theory of equations, curve tracing, analytic geometry of three dimensions, modern methods in analytic geometry, and analytic mechanics, among possibly others. In 1901–02 she played cornet in the Vassar symphony orchestra.

She left Vassar in 1902 and took a position as associate principal and head teacher of mathematics at Miss Gleim’s School for Girls, a private school in Pittsburgh, where she remained until 1905. In December 1905, Gentry reported to the Michigan

alumni office that her address was Stilesville, and in December 1909 and October 1910, she reported an Indianapolis address. In 1910 she also gave her occupation as unsalaried nursing. A later note indicated that she was doing charity work in Stilesville. From 1911 to 1914, she travelled in the United States and Europe and arrived back in the United States from Europe in February 1914. In August 1916, she reported that she was living in Indianapolis.

A vita published in 1929 by the AAUW reports that “Dr. Gentry was increasingly ill from the time she left Vassar until her death” (Maltby, 13). Obituaries indicate that she came from the East three weeks before her death to enter the Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis, where she died at age fifty-five in October 1917. The death certificate gives the cause of death as “Acute Melancholia” with contributor “Mental Status following Operation for Cancer of Breast.” Ruth Gentry was buried in the family plot in Stilesville.

Organizational affiliations: AMS, ACA, Phi Beta Kappa.

Dissertation:

1894 On the forms of plane quartic curves. PhD dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, directed by Charlotte Angas Scott. Printed, 1896, by Press of Robert Drummond, New York City. Review: *JFM* 27.0490.04 (O. Toeplitz); Summary: *Bull. sci. math.* 2nd ser., 21:231–32. Review of summary: *Rev. semestr. publ. math.* 6, pt. 1: 43 (G. Manndery).

Publication:

1892 A winter in Berlin. *The Lantern (Bryn Mawr)* (June): 45–49.

References to: [BioWMath](#), [MacTutor](#), NotMat, NotSci 2, NotTwCS 1S.

Obituary. *Indianapolis News*, 19 Oct 1917.

Obituary. Unidentified newspaper clipping.

Edington, Will E. “Biographical sketches of Indiana scientists IV.” *Proc. Indiana Acad. Sci.* 77 (1967): 336–37.

Other sources: PhD dissertation life 1896; Williams Papers; AAUW fellows file; Bryn Mawr College Archives; Center for Research Libraries College Catalog Collection; Universitätsarchiv Göttingen, Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek; University of Michigan Alumni Records Office; Vassar College Archives; Stilesville (IN) Cemetery; communication with Stetson University Archives; Albisetti, *Schooling German Girls and Women*; Ruth Bordin, *Women at Michigan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Maltby, *History of the Fellowships*; Singer, *Adventures Abroad: North American Women at German-Speaking Universities*; Whitman, “Women in the American Mathematical Society before 1900,” pt. 2; Richard Gentry, *The Gentry Family in America 1676 to 1909* (New York: The Grafton Press, 1909); US Census 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900 IN; Indiana death certificate.

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