

THE WENDELS :: A FABULOUS FA
Shadow Falls on All as Cloud Darkens Georgiana'

's Infirmity Brings
stress to Others
Over Period of
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Wendels, all without inten-
gathered an air of mystery
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mansion at Fifth Ave.
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souls with little taste for
and change. Out of the
grew legend upon legend,
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World-Telegram set out to
the truth about the family.
en reporters gathered in-
tion in half a dozen cities,
their data and from aged
ents Forrest Davis, World-
staff writer, has written
of articles, of which the
is the seventh.

by FORREST DAVIS.
World-Telegram Staff Writer.
March 25, 1909, by The New York
Telegram Corp.

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THE FABULOUS WENDELS

A MADCAP TALE OF THE
WILDLY ECCENTRIC, INSANELY
WEALTHY FAMILY THAT DROPPED
A SMALL FORTUNE ON DREW

BY LORI CHAMBERS



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DURING NEW YORK'S GILDED AGE, THE ASTORS MAY HAVE RULED THE SOCIETY PAGES, BUT THE WENDELS FILLED THE GOSSIP COLUMNS.

The public clamored for news of this wealthy family—celebrated as much for its celibacy as its eccentricity—and the press obliged. Despite a fortune built on fur and real estate, the eight Wendel siblings shunned high society, ensconcing themselves in an antiquated house of mystery amid

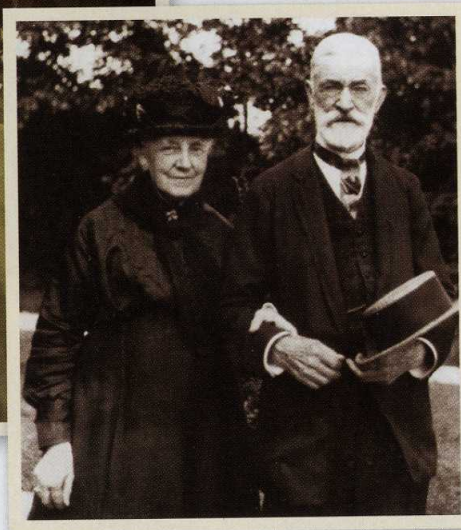
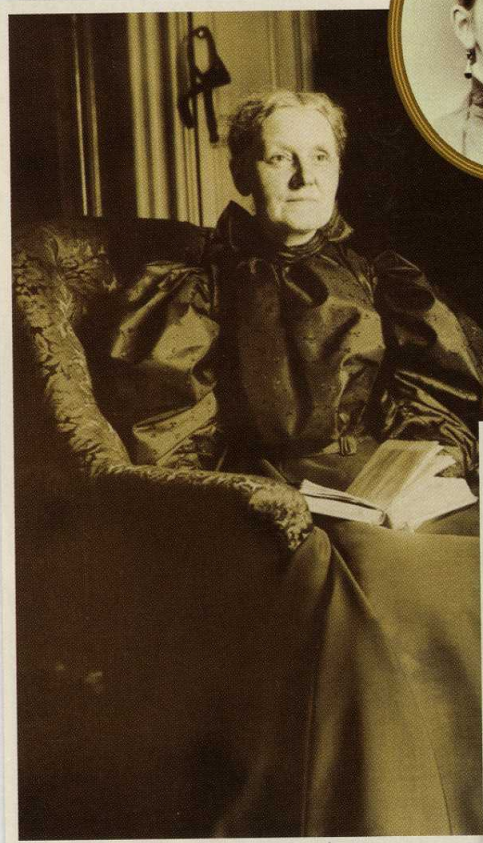
the cacophonous commerce of midtown Manhattan. There, starved of society by a tyrannical brother, the seven sisters cuddled lapdogs instead of sweethearts. With stingy allowances and shabby clothes, they slipped into spinsterhood—and perhaps, it was whispered, insanity.

The older the Wendels grew, the more seldom they were seen. The tabloids, deprived of glimpsing the peculiar heiresses clambering into a carriage or sunning in the side-yard, settled for speculating on the dynasty's demise.

Who would inherit the fruitless family's millions? When the last Wendel finally breathed her last breath, Gotham was agog to learn she had bequeathed millions of dollars to Drew in the depths of the Depression.

"You would have to go back to the works of Dickens to find a tale as curious and fascinating as that of this old mansion and its occupants," rhapsodized one reporter in 1926. We, however, need go only as far as

the 70 boxes of family papers held in Drew's archives to piece together the strange saga—told here in five parts—of the fabulous Wendels.



Clockwise, from left: Ella, whose funeral service was led by the Rev. Ezra Squier Tipple, Drew Theological Seminary's fifth president; Henrietta; Augusta; Rebecca Wendel and Luther Swope, married by President Henry Anson Buttz. Previous page: siblings Ella, John, Henrietta and Rebecca.



The family's mansion at Fifth Avenue and 39th Street, bequeathed to Drew in the early 1930s

The House of Mystery

MIDTOWN FIFTH AVENUE HAD ONCE BEEN NEW YORK'S most fashionable residential address; but as the Gilded Age tarnished, commerce moved in and the Astors, Goulds and Vanderbilts moved out. Their palatial mansions were replaced with hotels, department stores and office buildings. By the 1910s, the only private residence remaining in this bustling business district was an elegant but austere red-brick 1850s mansion built by John Daniel Wendel, the family's patriarch, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 39th Street. New Yorkers (obsessed with real estate even then) were flummoxed: Why did the Wendels hold out, when an easy sale would reap millions?

"Real estate dealers can hardly look at that plot without tears coming to their eyes," marveled a 1926 magazine article. Even the family lawyer chided their folly: In property taxes and lost interest alone, the Wendels were throwing \$1,000 a day out the windows of a house still lit by gas lamps and furnished with horsehair sofas. Townies and tourists alike literally pressed their noses against the glass of the anachronism the press had dubbed "The House of Mystery." Because the mansion's front wall had been

built flush with the sidewalk, the nosy could peep in at the windows to catch a glimpse of "the ancient, decaying spinsters" and their controlling brother, "the hermit Croesus of Fifth Avenue." Gawkers wouldn't see much: The shutters were shut and the draperies were drawn, and this understandable defense against prying eyes somehow became another proof of the family's peculiarity.

The siblings died off one by one, leaving youngest sister Ella in sole possession of the house and the family fortune. Barely 80 pounds, dressed in the long black skirts of a bygone era, the shabby heiress rarely ventured outside the house's rear yard. Here, in a vacant lot celebrated as "the million-dollar dog run," Ella exercised her pet—the last of a long succession of poodles, all named Toby—while office workers, crowding the windows of adjacent skyscrapers, wondered: What would become of "the gloomy red pile" when the last Wendel went?

**THE WENDELS
WERE THROWING
\$1,000 A DAY OUT
THE WINDOWS
OF A HOUSE STILL
LIT BY GAS LAMPS.**

Rumors of Seclusion

SPOUSES MEANT DISPERSAL OF THE FAMILY FORTUNE, so gossiped the gossips, and thus the seven Wendel sisters were kept moldering in the upper stories of their mansion, as brother John pinched their pennies. Nonsense, objected Ezra Squier Tipple, family friend and fifth president of Drew Theological Seminary, who made regular visits to the Fifth Avenue mansion. The sisters, he wrote, were “individualists, as independent and determined as [their brother] was.”

True, the girls moved freely between their city house and their country homes in Irvington-on-Hudson and Quogue, New York. They took grand tours of Europe and rough passages through exotic lands: Egypt and India, Alaska and Hawaii. Their letters and diaries are full of the comings and goings of relatives, friends and even beaus. And, of course, there was also the incontrovertible fact that Rebecca had indeed married —albeit at the unfruitful age of 61.

Still, if the sisters were free, why did Beckie elope with her churchgoing tutor without telling John of her intentions? And why did 31-year-



Rebecca, front, and Mary at their Irvington, N.Y., home. Left, the Wendel beach house in Quogue.



old Ella feel compelled to scrawl “Tear this up! Don’t fail!” across a letter confessing that her love affair with a younger man was doomed because “I could not marry anyone unless John consented”? Apparently, neither that suitor nor a second one, who closed his billets-doux with tantalizing promises of “billions and billions of k_____,” passed muster with Wendel fils.

Of the other sisters, perhaps Georgiana was too flighty, Mary and Henrietta too meek and Augusta and Josephine too unstable to hold out much hope of matrimony. Or perhaps their brother had set them a bad example of male honor: John was depicted as a bit of a bounder in the papers—and by his own sister. Georgiana once charged him with absconding to Niagara Falls with Beckie’s teenage maid, where, she wrote, he passed himself off as the girl’s “rich uncle.”

THE WENDEL SIBLINGS

Two Wendel sisters—Henrietta Dorothea (who died young) and Mary Elizabeth (who always did as she was told)—never drew any media attention. To their relief, no doubt. The six others, you’ll find, didn’t fare as well.



JOHN
(1835–1914)
The Only Brother

Marital Status: Single

Mental Status: Probable personality disorder (narcissism, perhaps?)

Likes: Foreign

languages, family loyalty, amassing vast holdings in New York City real estate

Dislikes: Suitors for his sisters; neon signs for tenants; telephones, electricity and other modern conveniences

Tabloid Tattle: Although himself fond of the opera and a fine vintage, this biggest landlord in New York refused to let his stores for theaters or saloons.

REBECCA
(1842–1930)
The Worldly Sister

Marital Status: Married (at age 61!)

Mental Status: Undoubtedly sane

Likes: Adventures in exotic foreign lands and quiet evenings at home with hubby, Professor Luther A. Swope

Dislikes: Taking a taxi when the L train will do

Tabloid Tattle: After John’s death, this 72-year-old matron shocked proper society by taking over the family real-estate empire.



The Spinster with 2,303 Heirs

ONE UNDISPUTED
WENDEL WOUND
UP PENNILESS:
ELLA'S BELOVED
TOBY.

WHEN ELLA DIED IN 1931 AT AGE 78, THE GOSSIP columnists' lament that "the last branch has fallen from an unfruitful family tree" failed to account for the nuts. The fact that the wealthy spinster named no living relatives didn't dissuade 2,303 ersatz heirs from challenging her will, which had left the bulk of her estate to charity. The Wendel wannabes included the supposed love child of an incestuous union between brother John and one of his sisters, a German village well-stocked with Wendels and the purported descendants of a mésalliance between Grandfather Wendel and the daughter of a Shinnecock Indian chief.

Settling the lawsuits would take 10 years, 250 lawyers and \$2 million from the estate, but, eventually, about 60 many-times-removed relatives reaped payouts from \$2,725 to \$275,000. Less fortunate was the Scottish housepainter who produced multiple documents proving he was John's only child by a secret marriage: All he got for his trouble was a three-year jail sentence for fraud.

One undisputed Wendel intimate wound up penniless: Ella's beloved Toby. The pampered poodle regularly appears on modern-day lists of history's wealthiest animals (in 2004, the *Mirror of London* credited him with a \$30 million inheritance), but the pooch's final days were more pauper than prince: Left out of the will entirely, suffering a bad case of eczema and confined to the kitchen, he outlived his mistress by mere months.



Ella Wendel



AUGUSTA (1845-1912)

The Unfortunate Sister

Marital Status: Single

Mental Status: Undoubtedly insane

Likes: Going for drives, playing with dolls and strolling the veranda at the Easton Sanitarium

Dislikes: Tomatoes and baked apples

Tabloid Tattle: Account books show that her 32 years in asylums shaved a mere \$93,941.56 off the family fortune.

JOSEPHINE (1849-1914)

The Harmless Sister

Marital Status: Single

Mental Status: Deluded

Likes: A solitary life sequestered in the family's Quogue country home

Dislikes: Servants' whispers about the children ("Imaginary," indeed!)

Tabloid Tattle:

She'd have the lunch table set for six, then sit at each empty chair in turn, taking on the character of its supposed occupant.



GEORGIANA (1850-1929)

The Rebellious Sister

Marital Status: Single

Mental Status: Litigated

Likes: Riding bicycles, capturing alligators, dancing on tables in New York hotels, leading anxious relatives on a merry chase across Europe

Dislikes: Male nurses, involuntary commitments, the treatment of women in Hindoostan

Tabloid Tattle: Lawsuits, jury trials and insanity inquisitions wrestled with the question: Was her case one of dangerous lunacy or comical eccentricity?

ELLA (1853-1931)

The Last Sister

Marital Status: Single

Mental Status: Disputed

Likes: Dogs, dog shows and dog-beneficence societies

Dislikes: Restaurants that charge "Saratoga prices," grocers who skimp on the asparagus, servants who are elderly, are married or wear eyeglasses

Tabloid Tattle: Her poodle, Toby, dined at a brass table, complete with velvet tablecloth and napkins, and slept in a miniature four-poster bed that was an exact replica of her own.

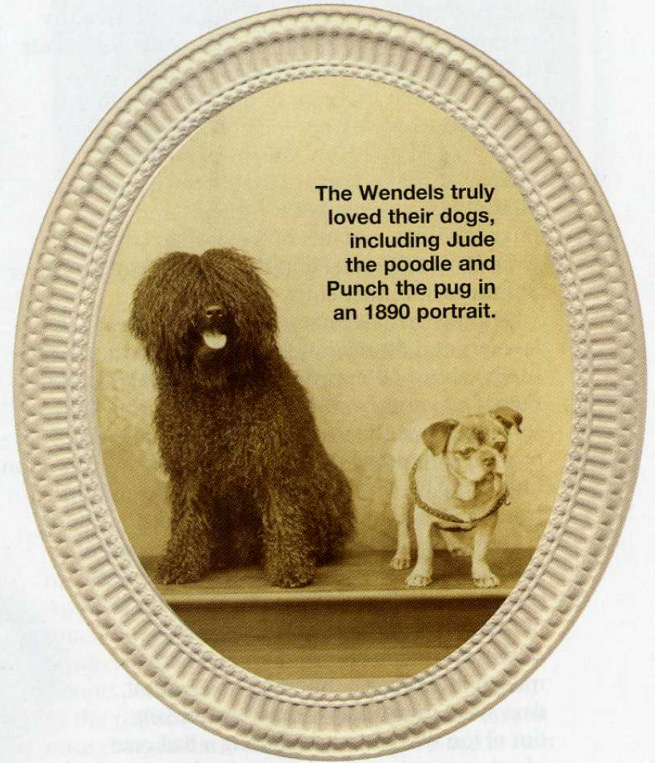
Wealth Beyond Reckoning

THE BIG BENEFICIARY OF THE WENDEL WILL? NEWLY named Drew University, one of five charitable institutions to split the \$35 million estate. Newspapers from Summit to Spokane brayed that Drew was “rolling in wealth,” but it would be years before the school saw a dime. The Wendel assets were in real estate, not cash, so the properties had to be sold and the proceeds divvied up. Meanwhile, Drew was borrowing money just to pay the taxman.

Eventually, the cash did start coming in, but the supposed windfall was closer to a sporadic breeze: \$70,000 here, \$14,000 there and so on. Perhaps more lucrative for Drew would prove the estate’s bonus prize: The school had bagged the Wendels’ Fifth Avenue mansion, worth about \$4.5 million on the tax books. Ella’s will requested (but did not require) that the house be maintained as a memorial to her father. Not likely: The outmoded abode and its adjacent vacant lot had once drawn an offer of a \$400,000-a-year lease.

But that was in the flush times, and this was the Great Depression. The House of Mystery was demolished in 1934—*The New York Times* called the event “a happy omen”—to make way for a nine-story S. H. Kress department store, but the agreed-upon lease was a comparatively paltry \$50,000 a year. Drew eventually sold that building, which was flattened in 1986 despite a fight by preservationists. An HSBC bank now straddles the block where once stood “the conspicuous dwelling of the inconspicuous Wendels.”

Today’s New Yorkers needn’t miss out on Wendel watching: Poke around the west side of Fifth Avenue between 39th and 40th streets (side-stepping the bank’s security guards) and get a gander at the ornate, door-sized bronze plaque—placed by Drew to commemorate the gift and its givers. Or pay homage on campus: Visit Wendel Hall (which, ironically, houses married graduate students and their children) and Mead Hall’s elegant Wendel Room.



The Wendels truly loved their dogs, including Jude the poodle and Punch the pug in an 1890 portrait.

4 Reasons to Remember Drew

JOHN MCCLINTOCK. RANDOLPH SINKS FOSTER. Henry Anson Buttz. Ezra Squier Tipple. These four presidents of Drew Theological Seminary baptized, ministered to, married and buried the Wendels; the family reciprocated by making small donations to the school at the death of each member. Although Tipple may have had his eye on an even bigger prize, no hat-in-hand supplicant was he: On his many visits to the Wendels, the reverend never stopped by without a small, thoughtful gift such as a book or a basket of garden-fresh veggies.

Freelance writer Lori Chambers wishes she could have taken the Grand Tour with Georgiana Wendel. Special thanks to former University Archivist Cheryl Oestreicher G'09 for her research assistance.



The Drew plaque on Fifth Avenue between 39th and 40th streets