Penn’s First Women Students
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*Photo credit: University Archives. These three students sewed red and blue ribbons on their laboratory aprons to show their Penn spirit!*

This year the Association of Alumnae celebrates its 100th anniversary. As part of our year-long celebration, we are bringing you interesting stories about the Association and its alumnae. Perhaps you’ve wondered, who were the first female students at Penn? Well, they were chemistry students!

Admitted to classes in chemistry in the Towne Scientific School (School of Engineering and Applied Science) in October of 1876 as “special students,” Gertrude and Anna, graduates of the Women’s Medical College, were the first two female students to enter Penn. Two years later, they were awarded certificates of proficiency in chemistry and finished second and third in their class. They continued their postgraduate studies in organic chemistry with Dr. Edgar Fahs Smith, a mentor to many of Penn’s first women students. Gertrude coauthored a paper with him on the nitration of 5-chlorosalicylic acid.

Gertrude married Francis Hoskins Easby (BS 1881) in January of 1884. She remained a dedicated alumna, and their daughter Charlotte Easby Grave was president of the Association of Alumnae from 1930-31. Gertrude was active in the settlement house and women’s rights movements. She frequently corresponded with suffragist and social reformer, Isabel Howland,
secretary of the Association for the Advancement of Women and the New York State Women Suffrage Association. Gertrude passed away in 1953.

After Penn, Anna continued her studies in chemistry at the University College London with the distinguished Scottish chemist, Sir William Ramsey who later won the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the noble gases. Anna returned to Penn to further her studies in inorganic chemistry with Dr. Edgar Fahs Smith and received her doctorate in chemistry 1906. Her thesis was entitled *The Electrolytic Precipitation of Copper from an Alkaline Cyanide Electrolyte*. She was an associate professor of chemistry at Mount Holyoke College from 1903-1910. Anna passed away in 1928 and is buried in Laurel Hill Cemetery.

Mary entered the Towne Scientific School in March of 1878 and earned a certificate of proficiency in chemistry two years later. She was very interested in the women’s rights movement and was a member of Philadelphia’s New Century Club and the New Century Guild for Working Women. Mary married William Channing Gannett, a Unitarian minister and social reformer in November of 1887. They moved to Rochester, New York, where William became pastor of the First Unitarian Church. Susan B. Anthony was a member of the church, and Mary and Susan became good friends. Mary was a suffragist and worked closely with Susan in the women’s rights movement. Recognized for her many years as a social reformer, the University of Rochester awarded her an honorary doctorate in humane letters in 1941. Mary passed away at the age of 98 in 1952.