

A Life of “*Great Personal Constancy and Achievement*” Eulogy: *Katherine Lee Judkins Clark*—April 1993



Katherine Lee Judkins Clark, known to her family and friends throughout her life as “Kass”, died on April 24, 1993, on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, in the fullness of her ninety-fifth year. She was born in Danville, Virginia, on September 17, 1897, the daughter and third child of William Duncan Judkins and Kate Lee Holland. Through her mother, she was descended from some of the earliest families of Virginia, including the Lees, Balls and Corbins.

When Kass was very young, her mother developed Bright’s Disease and it was necessary for her father to take the family, including the three children, to Lausanne, Switzerland, for Mrs. Judkins’ health. As a consequence, educated by governesses, Kass learned French before she spoke English. Unfortunately, her mother died within a fairly short time and Mr. Judkins brought the family back to the United States to live. Kass always fondly remembered her mother, referring to her as a woman of strong character and loving disposition. Her father was of a more reserved character and undemonstrative nature, but Kass always spoke of him with great respect and appreciation. Clearly, both left an imprint on her life.

After returning to the United States, Mr. Judkins entered the aircraft engine business and was much involved with commercial affairs, although always an attentive father. He maintained an apartment in New York City, but much of the responsibility for raising young Katherine devolved on her father’s sister, Mrs. Mark Jenkins. Her beloved “Aunt

Mary”, a surrogate mother, provided her with the affection and direction that the young girl needed. Dividing her time between New York and Norfolk, Kass was educated at several private schools before entering Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia. A strikingly handsome but quite serious young person, she did well at Hollins, where she was class president, captain of the basketball team and Queen of the May. While at Hollins, she first met her husband-to-be at dances at the University of Virginia.

On graduation from Hollins in 1917, the United States having declared war on Germany, Kass, barely twenty years old, entered the American Red Cross as a Nursing Volunteer. Thus began a loyalty to the Red Cross and to nursing which she retained all her life. Her entire war service was spent at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC. In 1918, she was on the point of being sent to France as a nurse but her father objected and, to comply with his wishes, she remained at Walter Reed.

Following the war, in 1921, she married Reuben Grove Clark, Jr., of Savannah, Georgia and they began a life together in that city (theirs was an extremely happy marriage that lasted until his death in 1968). She and Reuben had three sons and early in their married lives lived successively in Florida, Savannah, Virginia and eventually, in Albany, New York, where they settled in 1928. Mr. Clark first went to Albany as an associate of Dillon Reed and Co. (the well known investment banking house) but later became the

Cashier and finally a senior Vice President of the New York State National Bank. Life in upstate New York was, for her, far distant from the warmer and more accustomed climes of Virginia and Georgia; but they were happy years for her and her family.

Their time in Albany was mostly spent during the Depression and World War II years. Kass, with her usual energy and determination, was actively engaged not only in raising her family but in many community activities. During the depths of the Depression, she helped the family finances by going on the road to sell tomato juice to restaurants and clubs. She was particularly active in the PTA of the three room public school which her boys attended. Notwithstanding its small size, the school was at that time deep in the throes of what was then called “progressive education”. Typically, Kass was a suspicious but constructive critic. She was also a devoted choir mother at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church (in Albany) where the boy’s choir was world famous and in which sang two of her sons. When World War II succeeded the Depression years, she again became an active Red Cross Volunteer, working in Albany Hospital on a regular basis as a Nurse’s Aide. She was an excellent nurse, never afraid to dirty her hands with whatever task she was called to perform, and she was also proud of her undoubted professionalism. During World War II, when her sons were serving overseas, she and Reuben wrote each of them every other day, so that each received a letter a day from home.



In 1948, Reuben Clark returned to Savannah to become President, and then Chairman, of the Savannah Bank and Trust Co. He and Kass settled into a house on Gaston Street, where both entered fully into the life of the community (later they moved to the Odingsell house on St. Julian Street – the oldest house in Savannah). Kass soon became one of the great preservationists in Savannah’s history. In the early `50s, the Owens-Thomas House, previously in private hands, was left to the Telfair Museum and the question of how to restore and preserve it was presented. Kass took over as Chairman of the Telfair’s Owens-Thomas Committee, and devoted much of the rest of her life to raising money for and directing the restoration of the Regency house. With a willingness to surmount any difficulty and with an impeccable sense of taste, she badgered and cajoled rich donors, temperamental architects, lethargic workmen and a multitude of others eventually making the great Regency house one of the finest house museums in the country. Today, the Owens-Thomas house, gives both instruction and pleasure to dozens, maybe hundreds, of visitors daily, and stands as a personal tribute to her.

In 1955, when the wrecker’s ball was doing its destructive work in Savannah, when the beautiful Old City Market had recently been razed for a parking lot and when the City was faced with the imminent de-



struction of the magnificent old Davenport house, Kass

Clark and six other ladies of Savannah – Mrs. Lucy McIntyre, Mrs. Eleanor Adler Dillard, Mrs. Anna Hunter, Miss Jane Wright, Mrs. Nola Roos, and Mrs. R. C. Roebing – came together, and said “enough is enough.” The ladies founded the Historic Savannah Foundation with the purpose of reclaiming for the City its great Regency and Victorian heritage. The Davenport House was shortly acquired and restored. The subsequent accomplishments of the Historic Savannah Foundation proved to be one of the great preservation achievements in the country, resulting, among other things, in the creation of a several hundred million dollar tourist industry for Savannah. A devoted church woman, Kass Clark was one of those who founded the tour of homes for the benefit of Christ Church in Savannah and of St. Luke’s on Hilton Head. Not totally immersed in preservation or church work, she was also instrumental in helping create an American Red Cross Chapter in Savannah. In 1955, she was honored with the Hillyer Award as Savannah’s “Woman of the Year” and, later, in acknowledgement of her years of dedicated service to preservation, was elected both a Life Member of the Historic Savannah Foundation and a Life Trustee of the Telfair Museum.

Kass Clark is survived by three sons, Reuben Grove Clark, III of Albemarle County, Virginia, William Judkins Clark of Pawley’s Island, SC, and Rev. Holland Ball Clark of Hilton Head Island, nine grandchildren and eighteen great-grandchildren. She was a beau-

tiful woman, always intensely feminine but one who never lost an inch of her commanding presence. She had a consummate sense of style, which always conditioned her actions whether she was dressing to leave the house or choosing the draperies to be placed in the Regency elegance of the Owens-Thomas House. True to the nineteenth century principles which she inherited from her



mother and father, she was stern in her condemnation of lapses in personal behavior. She regarded slovenliness

– certainly bad table manners on the part of her grandchildren – as very far from Godliness. She held herself to the highest standards of rectitude and loyalty and expected others to do the same. For her, the artifacts and traditions of the past – which, conspicuously included the urban design and housing inventory of her cherished Savannah – were things not to be mindlessly thrown away, at least not if personal effort could prevent it. And, always, she was a leader, prepared, when she saw what needed to be accomplished, to proceed personally to get the job done, notwithstanding the difficulties and risks that often daunted those about her. In doing so she inspired others to go forward. Hers was a life of great personal constancy and achievement.

Written by her son Reuben Grove Clark III