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VIRGINIA CLAY-CLOPTON

By PAT W. RICHARDSON

The Virginia Clay-Clopton Chapter of United Daughters of the Confederacy voted in October, 1915 to erect this marker at Mrs. Clopton's home, "Wildwood", and also a marker at the spot where Union forces determined to hang Captain Frank B. Gurley.¹

To make a dedicatory address concerning so prominent a personage is ordinarily difficult. When before an audience, many of whom qualify eminently as local historians and with special interests about the personage concerned, it is extraordinarily difficult. Because it would hardly be possible to delve out facts of the remarkable life of Virginia Clay-Clopton which would not already be known to many of you, I have not attempted that. Rather, I shall only note some of the more outstanding events of her ninety full years. Those of you who are relative strangers to her memory may gain therefrom some insight of the genius of this great lady. Those who know better than I of the events I relate may feel again inspiration in the re-telling.

Born in Nash County, North Carolina, January 17, 1825, Virginia Tunstall was the daughter of a physician, Dr. Peyton Randolph Tunstall. Dr. Tunstall moved his family to Mount Vernon, Alabama, shortly after her birth; and, on being left a widower, soon sent his small daughter to Tuscaloosa where she was reared in the home of her mother's half-sister, Mrs. Henry W. Collier. Miss Tunstall was educated in Tuscaloosa and Nashville, Tennessee, and enjoyed in both charming cities the delights of growing up in

the South of the late 1830's, truly a Golden Age! Hunt breakfasts, family luncheon parties, and elaborate balls filled her carefully chaperoned days and nights. Miss Tunstall was a Southern Belle when the term came into use, and it might well have been created especially for her.

In 1842 at Tuscaloosa, Virginia Tunstall became the bride of Clement Claiborne Clay, son of Governor Clement Comer Clay, and came to Huntsville with her husband to live and to begin their political career. It was indeed "their political career" as this anecdote will illustrate: Clay determined to win a seat in the State Legislature; and, following local custom, he set out to shake the hand of every voter in Madison County. He was a brilliant man and proved it when he forsook the saddle horse for his traveling, packed his beautiful bride into a buggy behind a thoroughbred mare and started on "their political campaign." On one occasion during the campaign when the Clays dined in a rural home, Mrs. Clay wore a pink satin bonnet, a favorite of her husband. The bonnet was duly removed on their arrival and at departure Mr. Clay noticed that it had been replaced on his bride's head by a faded gingham sunbonnet. As soon as they were out of earshot, Mrs. Clay explained what had happened. The pretty teen-age daughter of the farmer had admired the bonnet, and had been surprised by its owner as the barefooted young girl was trying it on her own head. The embarrassed child was "swapped" the pink satin bonnet for her sunbonnet. Whereupon, the anecdote continues, the farmer switched sides in the campaign and helped win the election for Clay.

In 1853 Virginia Tunstall Clay accompanied her husband to Washington, D. C. after his election to the United States Senate. Presidents Franklin

Pierce and James Buchanan headed the list of distinguished guests who enjoyed her brilliant entertainments. In her memoirs, published in 1904 under the title A Belle of the Fifties, Mrs. Clay tells of those times--fascinating and dangerous. It was Senator Clay who in January, 1861, read to the United States Senate Alabama's Ordinance of Secession. He resigned his seat to take one later in the Senate of the noble, new Confederate States of America. The Clays spent the early war years in Richmond. Mrs. Clay was fond of relating tales of those days and of the men who made their stirring history--President Jefferson Davis and his wife were old friends of their Washington days. The dashing Confederate general, J. E. B. Stuart, returned from a cavalry raid to dance with Mrs. Clay at one great ball. Times and the tides of war changed quickly, however, and Mrs. Clay soon fled from Richmond to the plantation of Senator J. H. Hammond in South Carolina.

When news of the Confederate surrender reached Senator Clay he immediately set forth on horseback for a new life in Texas. While enroute he learned that he was charged with conspiracy in the plot on President Lincoln's life and returned immediately to Macon, Georgia, where he surrendered to the Federal Government and was imprisoned at Fort Monroe with Jefferson Davis and other distinguished Confederate patriots. Mrs. Clay was determined that her husband should be released and that the groundless charges against him should be dropped. Her efforts to secure the release of the man she loved, whose health was at best precarious, culminated in a trip to Washington and an audience with President Andrew Johnson. The charm, wit and audacity of Virginia Tunstall Clay are illustrated by the following incident of the interview. President Johnson asked his

caller, "How is it that I have been in Washington so long and failed to meet such a beautiful and charming lady?" Whereupon Mrs. Clay answered, "Mr. President, you just do not move in the right circles!" On April 17, 1866, President Davis and Senator Clay were ordered released from their imprisonment.

During the War the Clay family home on Clinton Street in Huntsville was burned. Thus, the Clays, on their return to Madison County, came to reside at "Wildwood." Here they were visited by Jefferson Davis and on one occasion he met and personally thanked Captain Frank B. Gurley for his services as a Confederate cavalry leader during the War. Senator Clay's always fragile health had been further broken during his imprisonment and on January 3, 1882, he died at "Wildwood."

After three years of widowhood, Mrs. Clay chaperoned two young ladies on a tour of Europe, adding international renown to her reputation for intelligence and charm. Her personal assets un fading, Virginia Tunstall Clay in 1887 married Judge David Clopton of the Alabama Supreme Court. He was 67; she was 62. Her second husband was a distinguished man, having served in the United States Congress before secession and in the Confederate Congress and having had an active part in bringing about an end to Reconstruction. He was elected to the Legislature in 1878, appointed to the judgeship in 1884 and he held the latter until his death in 1892.

Returning to Huntsville from Montgomery, twice-widowed at 67 years of age, Mrs. Clay began one of the most active and remarkable periods of her life. Ever proud of her husband of 40 years, to whom she dedicated the memoirs then begun, referring to him as "the husband of my youth." Mrs. Clopton re-adopted his name, using for herself a hyphenated

surname, "Clay-Clopton." Virginia Tunstall Clay-Clopton was instrumental in the formation of the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the group which now carries her name and is dedicating to her this memorial. She helped organize the Village Improvement Society, which saw to the paving of the Court House Square. She was active in various groups which worked for women's suffrage. Mrs. Milton Humes, who lived with her sister in the present Boswell home on McClung Street, was one of her dearest friends. Mrs. Humes and her sister set aside a room in their home for her frequent visits. There, in 1915, Mrs. Clay-Clopton ended her ninety years. She had possessed the best traits of Southern womanhood--courage, constancy and charm.

Her beloved home, "Wildwood," where we are gathered here today, is still owned by members of the family of Virginia Clay-Clopton. A niece she reared here returned after being widowed to live with her foster mother. Mrs. Forest Bell is the only granddaughter of the niece, and is named for Virginia Clay-Clopton.

In Madison County, Alabama, blood runs thick and we love our own. In the particular case of Virginia Tunstall Clay-Clopton we stand united in the reverence of her memory--not only as a distinguished daughter, but also as a symbol of all that has been and always will be fine and worthy in Southern womanhood.

¹This paper was read on September 10, 1958, upon the dedication of a historical marker by the Virginia Clay-Clopton Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy at "Wildwood," the home of Mrs. Clay-Clopton.