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The McCormick House

Diane Ellis and Maureen Drost

If Michael O'Shaughnessy's involvement with Huntsville produced a grand mansion and brought new economic vigor to the city, Virginia McCormick's legacy would be largely philanthropic. The trust fund that in 1900 paid \$36,000 for the Kildare estate—one of four seasonal residences that the fund purchased for Virginia's use—provided her the means to entertain lavishly and to support many social activities and charitable causes in Huntsville.¹

One of five children born to Cyrus and Nancy Fowler McCormick,² Virginia suffered from emotional and mental instability that also plagued some of her siblings. Her mental difficulties left her, in Arthur Smith's words, "...incapable of administering her own affairs..."³ These were taken care of by Virginia's caring companion, Grace Walker. Despite what is known about Virginia's legendary largess, her passion for music, and her affection for children, the mysterious nature of her handicap renders her a shadowy figure in the history and folklore of the McCormick years. Grace Walker, on the other hand, emerges with clarity, and it seems reasonable to suppose that it was Grace who guided all of Virginia's activities and was the force behind her benevolent undertakings.

"The McCormicks introduced Huntsville to the trappings of wealth," writes architecture historian Robert Gamble.⁴ For the 30 some years that Virginia McCormick and her large household (a staff of 35; several full-time musicians; her own horses)⁵ wintered in Huntsville, she and Grace entertained like royalty, hosting elaborate parties for children and holiday celebrations on a grand scale. The fun began for the natives in autumn when the special McCormick train rolled into town for the season and "schools were dismissed to allow curious children to watch her entourage unload car after car of trunks, boxes, and other possessions."⁶ The entertainments that would follow in the coming months included Christmas parties for children, Easter egg hunts, and an annual May celebration to mark Virginia's birthday that included hundreds of excited children and featured a maypole.⁷

Other than the time she spent with children, Virginia McCormick rarely went out in public. Dorothea Snow, who grew up in Huntsville during the early 20th century, reminisced in 1980 about those days and wrote the following: “Another of our diversions was walking out into the country, now the corner of Oakwood and Meridian, and gazing in awe through the iron fence that surrounded the fabled and fabulous McCormick mansion and the deer that cavorted on its lush green grounds. To us, it was like gazing upon a real-life fairytale castle and we never tired of it. We never, however, laid our eyes on its princess, Miss Virginia McCormick . . .”⁸



*Young Mary Virginia McCormick.
Courtesy of Arthur Smith.*



Grace Walker.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

The McCormick-Walker philanthropic efforts were numerous and varied and reflected an understanding of the community and its areas of need. Social service and civic organizations in Huntsville benefited from the McCormick years as did educational institutions and social and economic groups that might have been overlooked by other sources of support. Huntsville's mill communities and YMCAs in the city were two of the McCormick's special philanthropies. "[Virginia] took a particular interest in the living conditions of the several mill villages that had grown



Children gather on the lawn of the McCormick estate for annual May celebration of Virginia McCormick's birthday.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library, Monroe Collection.

up around the town (as a result of the O'Shaughnessys' initial efforts) and coerced the mill directors into providing better health care and recreation facilities for the operatives by offering matching funds for settlement houses and YMCAs.”⁹

The mill community in West Huntsville seems to have been an early recipient of McCormick money. Arthur Smith writes that Virginia funded a 15-room social community center in 1904, which would have been soon after she and Grace began their Huntsville sojourns.¹⁰ McCormick money and Walker inspiration sparked the development of the West Huntsville (“McCormick”) YMCA. “The success of this

community enterprise during its early years was due greatly to the personal interest shown by Mrs. Emmons Blaine¹¹ and Grace Walker as representatives of Miss McCormick.”¹² The McCormick YMCA, which was located at 8th Avenue S.W. and Triana Boulevard,¹³ “served employees and their families of the textile mills of the community, the Lowe Manufacturing Company, the Huntsville Knitting Company, and the West Huntsville Cotton Mills Company as well as the business element of the community.”¹⁴ The 1915 McCormick Y was auctioned in 1983 for use as commercial property.¹⁵ Currently, it houses Huntsville Restaurant Equipment, Inc. Virginia also provided other recreational and educational buildings for West Huntsville,¹⁶ as well as money for the Central YMCA, which was opened in 1912.¹⁷

Virginia’s association with the growth of Huntsville YMCAs clearly sprang from Grace Walker’s lifelong support of the organization in Canada and America. Through Grace’s work with one Y-related project, her name became forever attached to a renowned women’s service organization in Huntsville, the Grace Club. It was the Grace Club that put on the annual Easter egg hunts at the McCormick estate.

The Grace Club began in 1914 when a group of young women from Huntsville’s downtown churches formed the “Young Ladies Auxiliary to



The McCormick YMCA at 8th Avenue S.W. and Triana Boulevard, side view, photographed from Triana Boulevard.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

the YMCA No. 2” to raise money for the Y and increase interest in the organization. As charter member Elizabeth Doak recalled for the *Huntsville Times* in 1979, the auxiliary gave these sheltered young women who lived at home an opportunity for community service they hadn’t had. As time went on, the women expanded their service to other areas of the city¹⁸ and eventually adopted the name Grace Club in honor of Grace Walker. The club grew to include a Junior Grace Club for high school girls and later an auxiliary club for charter members of the original group. Eventually the Grace Club became Huntsville’s Junior League.¹⁹

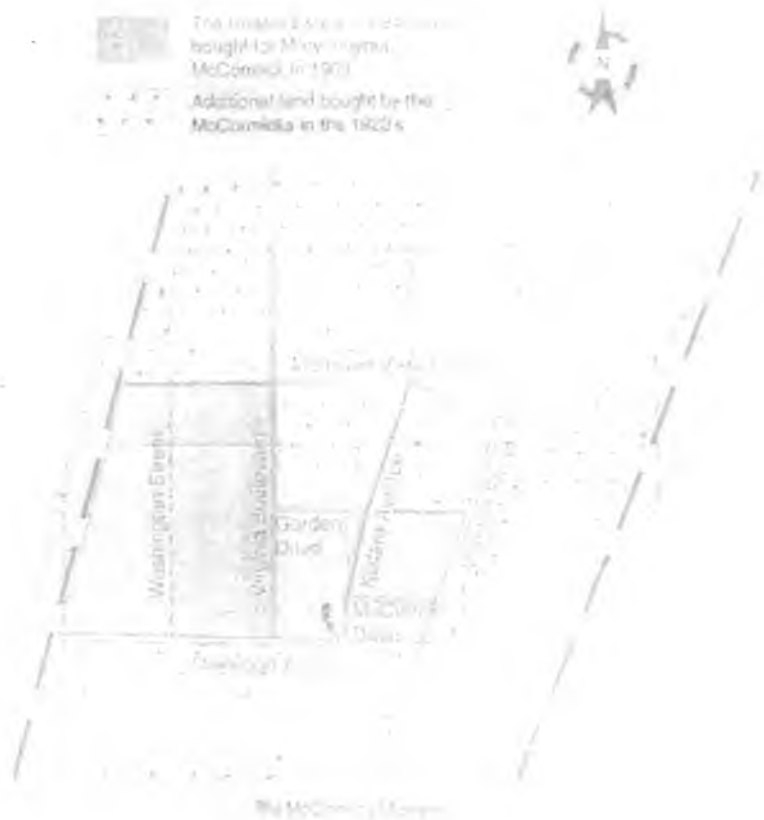
Virginia’s charitable giving also aided enterprises important to the city’s black citizens. She gave generously to what is now Alabama A&M University, financing a hospital on the campus, at a cost of \$10,000, and funding the school’s home economics building (\$19,000).²⁰ A *Huntsville Times* article says she built the “colored” wing of Huntsville Hospital and established a fund to aid blacks who were hospitalized.²¹

In its notice of Virginia’s death, the *Huntsville Times* wrote that “during her ownership of the *Kildare* estate, a fine dairy was maintained there, and the greater portion of milk from it was distributed free to underprivileged children.”²² She is said to have provided silver to the Episcopal Church of the Nativity for communion service.²³ According to former church historian, Mavis Daniell, the McCormick family donated an organ to the First Presbyterian Church. Virginia and Grace are credited with many other acts of generosity over the years.

As to *Kildare* itself, Arthur Smith asserts that “it was during Mary Virginia’s tenure that the house reached its zenith.”²⁴ Certainly it was the locus of many social events and an object of interest and fascination for years. Architecturally, Virginia appears to have made minimal changes to the O’Shaughnessy mansion. She added a one-story music conservatory to the large ballroom, as well as a porch, and possibly the north wing, and altered decorative elements of mantels and moldings in the ballroom and dining room.²⁵ The 71-acre “lush deer park”²⁶ that O’Shaughnessy purchased as the setting for *Kildare* was expanded by the McCormicks through land purchases they made during the 1920s.²⁷

Virginia ended her years of seasonal residency in Huntsville in 1931 and moved to California where she kept several houses.²⁸ She died at one of these estates—*Quelindo*, in Santa Monica—May 24, 1941.²⁹ The *Huntsville Times*’s notice of her death gave her age as 80.³⁰

The Estate bought for Mary Virginia McCormick & adjacent lands subsequently purchased by the McCormick Family.



Schematic of the O'Shaughnessy/McCormick estate at the time of sale in 1932.

Garden Drive is now called Swanson Drive. The extension of Washington through the Kildare estate occurred after 1932. Streets south of Oakwood are not shown.

Courtesy of Arthur Smith.

Grace Walker lived another 11 years. She died at her home in Pasadena, California, on her birthday, June 18, 1952. She was 86.³¹ The fragments of information we have about Grace Walker's life make one year for a full biography. Details about her connection with Huntsville are naturally more easily found for the local researcher, but Grace seems to have had an impressive life before and after her Huntsville

years. Materials at hand provide a few facts. She was a native of Canada and the daughter of a minister. She served on the national board of the YWCA of Canada for 25 years, and was a long-time member of the Housing Board of the City of Toronto.³² During her later years in Pasadena, in addition to participating in several women's clubs and civic organizations, she helped organize the Western Personnel Institute, and she supported the YWCA, the Neighborhood church, and a chapter of the American Association for the United Nations.

Regarding her Huntsville association, we find her referred to as a business manager, a business secretary for the wealthy McCormick family,³³ secretary of McCormick Estates in Chicago,³⁴ a caretaker, a companion. An undated newspaper scrap in the Heritage Room of the public library calls her a pioneer in the use of music therapy who "used her nurse's training and a gentle, loving nature to care for her mistress most of their lives." The *Huntsville Times* said she was "keenly interested in young people and was instrumental in assisting a number of them through college."³⁵

By all accounts, Grace Walker was an exceptionally inspiring and able woman whose life was an exemplar of service to others.

Curiously, although Grace Walker and Virginia McCormick's lives were inextricably linked, Grace is not mentioned in the newspaper article about Virginia's death and Virginia is not mentioned in the story about Grace.

When Virginia and Grace's winter stays in Huntsville came to an end, the fortunes of *Kildare*/McCormick House and its magnificent grounds took a turn for the worse. The McCormicks no longer used the residence, and family members overseeing the trust petitioned the circuit court of Madison County for permission to sell the estate.³⁶ Somehow it was decided to divide the property and sell it off in individual lots, a move that spelled the end of *Kildare*'s large lawn, the mature trees that Michael O'Shaughnessy planted and nurtured, and Virginia's beautiful gardens. Thus *Kildare* lost most of the grounds that provided an important setting for the mansion as well as a verdant buffer against encroaching residential and commercial development.³⁷ The breakup of the estate ushered in 40 years of misuse and abuse of the house that came to an end in 1975 when James Reeves bought the property and began the long task of restoring it to its original grandeur.

Endnotes

- 1 A.E. Smith, *The Lives, & Times of the McCormick Mansion, A Celebration of the Warmth, Charm, Hospitality & History, 1996-1999, of Southern Folks in Rocket City Alabama*, unpublished ms., p.110.
- 2 Ibid, p. 92.
- 3 Ibid, p. 110.
- 4 Chip Cooper, Harry Knopke, and Robert Gamble, *Silent in the Land* (Tuscaloosa: CKM Press, 1993), p.72.
- 5 Smith, p. 111.
- 6 Cooper, Knopke and Gamble, p.72.
- 7 *Huntsville Times*, May 26, 1941.
- 8 Dorothea Snow, *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* (Winter 1980), p.7.
- 9 Linda Bayer Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.
- 10 Smith, p. 114.
- 11 Presumably Virginia's sister Anita Blaine.
- 12 West Huntsville Y.M.C.A., "Virginia McCormick Memorial Branch," James Record and Tom McDonald, editors and co-chairmen, "Commemorative Album" Celebrating our City's Sesquicentennial Progress (Huntsville Ala.), 1955, p.115.
- 13 *Huntsville Times*, 1983, no date.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Smith, p. 114.
- 17 Record and McDonald, p.107.
- 18 *Huntsville Times*, April 22, 1979. The article says that "Grace Club money usually went to projects recommended by cotton mill owners, most of whom were members' parents."
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Smith, p. 117.
- 21 *Huntsville Times*, May 26, 1941.
- 22 Smith, p. 118.
- 23 Ibid, p. 112.
- 24 Ibid, p. 120.
- 25 Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.
- 26 Cooper, Knopke and Gamble, p.183.
- 27 Smith, p. 123.
- 28 *Huntsville Times*, May 26, 1941.
- 29 Jeremy Brett, Wisconsin Historical Society, personal communication.
- 30 *Huntsville Times*, May 26, 1941.
- 31 *Huntsville Times*, June 22, 1952.
- 32 Ibid.

Endnotes continued

33 *Huntsville Times*, April 22, 1979.

34 *Memories, History of the Grace Club Auxiliary*, April 1989, p. 18.

35 *Huntsville Times*, June 22, 1952.

36 Smith, p. 122.

37 Smith, p. 126.