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Alabama's Favorite Southern Belle

By Marjorie Ann Reeves

Alabama has produced many leaders during its two hundred years. A lady of her times, Virginia Carolina Tunstall was groomed with politics being a substantial part her life. She was born during 1825 in Nash County, North Carolina, being the only child of Anne Arrington and Dr. Peyton Randolph Tunstall. Her name came from the two states of her parents' birth. At the age of three, she lost her mother then at six years old, her father sent her to stay with her mother's sister in Tuscaloosa, which was the capital of Alabama at that time. Her Aunt's husband was Henry Collier who was a young lawyer at the time and later became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama.

She lived with them until her aunt became ill then she was sent to her mother's brother, Alfred Battle's plantation to live for several years. Turning twelve the family moved to Tuscaloosa where her primary education began. Her father's brother, Thomas B. Tunstall who became Secretary of State of Alabama also took part in her education, teaching her poetry, music, letters, philosophy, and politics. He instilled in her pride of family by teaching her the heritage of her family name by reading Scotts tribute to

Brian Tunstall, a knight, and told stories of Sir Cuthbert Tunstall, Knight of the Tarter. Her father and his brother Thomas took her to plays and balls. When she completed her studies in Tuscaloosa, she was sent to the Female Academy in Nashville.



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Virginia met her future husband, Clement Claiborne Clay Jr, before she left Tuscaloosa and when she returned. Clay Jr worked for his father the Governor of Alabama, Clement Clay Sr.

Due to her family being so involved in politics, she and Clay Jr. ran into each other often becoming romantically

involved over time. She and Clay Jr. were married at her Uncle Henry Collier's home with many members of the legislature attending on February 1, 1843. Afterwards they moved to Huntsville to live in the "Clay Castle" with the Clay family. During the 1853 election, Virginia campaigned with her husband when he ran for Senator and won. Soon they were living in Washington where Virginia became the belle of the ball in demand at social events. She spent her life with men in charge of the affairs of this country being close to President Pierce and President Buchanan. During this time, she and her husband became close friends with Jefferson Davis and his wife Varina.

Sadly, the states' politicians escalated their disputes splitting the country. When the states began seceding, the Southern politicians left Washington to go back to their home state. Clay Jr. resigned giving a beautiful speech to the senate and left for Alabama. When the Confederacy organized, Clay Jr. ran for senate in the Confederacy and they moved to Montgomery then Richmond where Virginia continued to be the belle of the balls. She knew and understood the language of politics and was able to communicate with all the leaders and their wives. She supported her husband's work and the South. After service in the senate for one term, he was sent to Canada by President Davis and Virginia when back to Huntsville visiting family and friends in other parts of the South as well. When Huntsville, Alabama, was captured by the Yankees in 1862 she was a refuge for the rest of the war.

After General Lee surrendered to General Grant, Clay Jr. along with Virginia surrendered to the Federal soldiers in Georgia where from there they were sent to Fort Monroe along with the Davis family. Virginia and Varina were released but their husbands were held prisoners without trial. Being so well known in Washington, she did not hesitate to call on politicians to get her husband released. She would call on anyone whom she thought could help with the release. She kept asking President Johnson not to allow Clay Jr. or Davis to be tried in a military court for she was very afraid they would not receive a fair trial and be

hung as others had experienced. After a year of campaigning Clay Jr. was release but Davis continued to be held. Having nothing left after the war, Virginia borrowed money for material to have a new dress made to receive her husband from Fort Monroe. Clay Jr came back in grave health and while nursing him she continued to work on getting Mr. Davis released. Clay Jr. was able to petition the government to get some property back and they moved out to their home in Gurley, Alabama, called Wildwood. Mr. Davis was so gratefully for the Clays work in getting his release that he arrived at their home late at night in a storm to thank them. "I'll never forget the rejoicing that went on when the Clays saw Davis," stated a Confederate Veteran that lead Mr. Davis to Wildwood.

Her husband Clay Jr. died January 3, 1882. As a widow, she took two nieces on a trip around Europe. On November 29, 1887, she wed Judge David Clopton. The announcement in a newspaper Huntsville Independent stated "Marriage of a Distinguished Gentleman to a Brilliant and Gifted Lady," tells of the wedding at the Church of the Nativity of the Hon. David Clopton of Montgomery to Mrs. Clement C. Clay of Wildwood, Madison County. Judge Clopton's family and the Clays were friends in Washington in earlier days. They were married five years before David Clopton passed away in 1892.

Over the years, Virginia attended Confederate Veterans gathering being acknowledge with standing ovations, often the veterans would stand in line to shake her hand. She was much loved by everyone she met because she was always a gracious lady and extremely entertaining. She served as a Huntsville and Gurley community leader. In her seventies, she began working on her book, *Belle of the Fifties* with Ms. Ada Sterling. Virginia was a suffragist long before it was



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organized into a national move. She was president of the Alabama Equal Rights Association for four years from 1896. At 91-year-old, delivered the welcoming speech as past President to the Equal Suffrage Association of Alabama meeting in Huntsville in 1914. Virginia was an organizer of “Ladies Memorial Society” which joined with the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1898. At a May meeting of 1905, there was a motion made to change the name of the chapter to Virginia Clay-Clopton which was chartered in 1907. The chapter contributed to students, Confederate Veterans, knitted sweaters for Madison County soldiers and served their community in any way the ladies could. In Oct Of 2020, the Virginia Clay-Clopton chapter will celebrate its 113 years anniversary of serving the community.

Katherine Glover, Atlanta Journal reporter, wrote “She had a remarkable vividness in her choice of words, picturesqueness that brings an event before one and her quick expressive gestures that greatly heighten the effect.” Virginia was described as: she never, ever gave into defeat. She responded with intelligence, good judgement, faith, flexibility, creativity and a powerful will to live a good life while helping others less fortunate than herself. She was known as an unusual conversationalist endowed with natural wit. According to Edward Betts she was the most brilliant and distinguished woman in the whole South during her time. Ada Sterling said, “I have come upon no record of any other woman of her time who has filled so prominent a place politically or whose belleship has been so long sustained,” Everywhere she went she was well-honored, she was a leader in society to help others. She passed away at her closest friend Mrs. Milton Humes’ home in Huntsville on January 23, 1915.



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