Landmark Report (Vol. 30, no. 1)

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The Landmark Association invites you to its

Annual Dinner Meeting

Thursday, May 24th
Shaker Tavern at South Union

Reception 5:30 p.m. on the expansive verandah
Dinner 6:15 at the Tavern • Presentation and Awards 7:00

SEATING LIMITED • INVITATIONS MAILED AT THE END OF APRIL

Calendar of Events

April 15  Deadline for Landmark Grant Applications
April 24  Deadline for Landmark Awards Nominations
April 27  Ramble to New Harmony, IN (for details, see page 2)
April 28  Work day at Pump House
          To volunteer contact Jason@hildabrandinteriors.com
May 17   Preservation Conference • 601 State Street
          For information contact Miranda Clements, 842-1953
May 24   Annual Dinner Meeting
September 9 Annual Picnic
December 1 Christmas Tour of Homes
Virginia’s Journey

By Lynn Niedermeyer

The home of Davis’s great-grandparents, Meredith and Sarah Cox, Main Street, Smiths Grove, Kentucky. Courtesy of Special Collections Library, WKU.

If Bowling Green’s Park City Daily News had hired her in 1944, Virginia Wood Davis might have taken up a long and respectable career in hometown journalism. Heeding the advice of a namesake, her high school English teacher Virginia Stone Proffitt, the 25-year-old native of Smiths Grove had directed her studies at Western Kentucky State Teachers College (now WKU) toward employment as a newspaperwoman. Her credits already included an editorial post at Smiths Grove High’s Campus Chatter, reporting for Western’s College Heights Herald, contributions to the Park City Progress in Horse Cave, and a four-month stint with The Gleaner in Henderson, Kentucky. Being female, Davis was still something of a curiosity in the profession, but was ready to spend more time paying her dues in its junior ranks, especially after learning from her sojourn in Henderson that “a college graduate did not a reporter make.” She was also determined to support both herself and the woman she termed “my companion”—yet another Virginia, nicknamed “Jennie” and better known to outsiders as her possessive, domineering, increasingly deaf, widowed mother.

Instead, the Daily News judged Davis overqualified for the $18-per-week opening on its advertising desk, so she turned to office work and bookkeeping. A year later, resolving to give journalism another try, she looked southward for the first available job. Presenting herself in Greer, South Carolina, she quickly discovered that her new employer’s assurances of suitable postwar housing had been a mirage. Davis and her mother landed in a hotel, where she divided her time between reporting for the Greer Citizen and washing dishes in the restaurant downstairs to earn enough for their board.

Her six months in Greer were part of a journey that, over the next four decades, took Virginia Wood Davis to reporting and editorial jobs at fourteen newspapers in seven Southern states. Her longest stretch with a single newspaper was nine years, the shortest three months; she stayed with half of them for less than a year. To some, her existence seemed rootless and lonely, especially after the death of her mother in 1950, but on the eve of her retirement in 1985 Davis had no regrets. “My life,” she told The McCracken County Record, the southeastern Kentucky weekly where she had served as managing editor since 1977, “has been a pleasure. I wouldn’t trade places with anyone.”

Davis’s satisfaction with her life’s journey is evident in the memoir she wrote during the years between a diagnosis of colon cancer in 1987 and her death in 1990. Composed in the small-town journalistic style she favored, the narrative is meandering, laden with “every single available fact,” and in need of a sympathetic editor. But Out of Virginia’s Woods—its title a play on Walt Whitman’s Civil War poem (“As I wandered Virginia’s woods”) about a soldier’s grave and its haunting inscription—was, at necassity, a meditation on many other life journeys. In particular, Davis recognized her debt to those forebears who helped to shape her quirky brand of independence even as they finally drew her back to her native state.

The migratory trails leading out of Virginia’s woods early in the nineteenth century had brought Davis’s ancestors to homesteads near the junction of Barren, Warren and Edmonson counties in Kentucky. In 1811, Revolutionary War veteran William J. “Buck” Wood arrived with his family in the Goodnight community north of Glasgow, while Hise and Arabella Davis would later settle close by, in the Coral (continued on page 4).

Come join members of Landmark as we tour Historic New Harmony, Indiana on Friday, May 24. This community has a fascinating mix of nineteenth and twenty-first century architecture and an even more unusual history. New Harmony is the site of two of America’s great utopian communities. The first, Harmony on the Wabash (1814-1824), was founded by the Harmony Society, a group of Separatists from the German Lutheran Church. In 1814, led by their charismatic leader Johann Georg Rapp, they left their first American home, Harmony, PA. Indiana’s lower Wabash Valley on the western frontier gave them the opportunity to acquire a much larger tract of land. In 1825, the Harmonists moved back to Pennsylvania and built the town of Economy near Pittsburgh. Robert Owen, Welsh-born industrialist and social philosopher, bought their Indiana town and the surrounding lands for his communal experiment.

We’ll arrive at New Harmony in time for a delightful lunch at the highly acclaimed Red Geranium restaurant. Afterwards, we’ll take a two-hour tour of the community. We’ll also take time to walk the labyrinth, see the roofless church, and visit the quaint shops. After a delightful day of touring, we’ll stop for a light supper on the way back to Bowling Green. The $50 fee will include everything but your shopping. ▲

The Landmark Association of Bowling Green-Warren County
A non-profit organization established in 1976 as a community advocate for preservation, protection and maintenance of architectural, cultural and archaeological resources in Bowling Green and Warren County.

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for a year), Jennie Arabella Davis’ son, Elmore Wood Davis. The two distant
(Virginia’s Journey, continued from page 3)

and Main Streets that Elmore, the
consigning her to the nuns at Bardstown’s Nazareth Academy
Cox moved with his wife Sarah to Smiths Grove following its

the handlebars of her father’s bicycle for his short commute
around Adairland, the farm west of Buck Wood’s
plac e

grim understanding of the financial purgatory confronting

began to wish for a child of her own. They took up residence

but her mother, perhaps, did not cast as grim a shadow over

her mother, the small-town girl with the slow Kentucky walk
and defy stereotypes became apparent only after her death.

What, they asked, could she have left? Throughout her

She was not. Like her mother, Davis had inherited, saved and
invested. Excluding the sizeable sums she was rumored to have
given away just prior to her death, her estate consisted of cash, certificates of deposit and stock valued at $336,782;
her house and personal effects brought the total to just under
$400,000. Davis directed that 80% of it be given to the
journalism department of her alma mater, WKU.

her grandmother Meredith Cox and an uncle who

other day after his marriage, on December 7, 1919, their only child, Virginia, was born.

Elmore’s death on April 23, 1925 was a watershed in the

Left: Davis at work at The McCreary County Record. Courtesy of Special Collections Library, WKU. Right: Davis at the time of her retirement in 1985. Courtesy of Special Collections Library, WKU.

(Virginia’s Journey, continued from page 4)

workers in Florida, victims of racial violence in Alabama,
and rural folk in eastern Kentucky. Her harmless-seeming
demeanor and unprepossessing appearance—“She was just
as plain as an old soup bowl,” said a friend—loosened the
tongues of her subjects, while her aggressive honesty and
fondness for profanity signaled an unwillingness to defer to
male competitors. Though she affably described herself as a
“hillbilly to hillbillies,” Davis forthrightly claimed pioneer status in journalism and credited the independence of her Virginia
and Kentucky ancestors with nurturing her “free spirit to grow
in a different direction.”

The extent to which Davis used her freedom both to serve
daily stereotypes became apparent only after her death.
Friends in McCreary County and in Tampa, where she had
spent the last sixteen months of her life, cast each other neuf

she ate peanut butter sandwiches,

on herself.

Depression, fear of indigence, and the influence of her unhappy
and unprepared wife by expiring in a Louisville infirmary. From then on, wrote
Davis, her mother’s sole objective was to save her child from
the curse of dependency, from spending her life bobbing like a
cork upon waters churned by the selfish whims of men.

already accustomed to the “discipline of making ends meet
up to the last.” Jennie now sacrificed her needs to a higher
purpose, that of giving her daughter the means to make her
own way in the world.

That she succeeded was evident from Davis’s own self-willed
voyage: to Owensboro in 1942, where she answered the call of
a steady wage and spent a few months assembling television
tubes before returning to college; through WKU, where a
classmate remembered her as detailless and uninterested
in anything but her grades; to Henderson, where she chafed at
the Social Security and “Victory tax” deductions from her
$25 weekly check; to the hotel in Greer, South Carolina; and
beyond, to Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Florida,
back to South Carolina, back to Florida, and finally back to
Kentucky. When Davis retired from her $325-per-week
post at The McCreary County Record, there were few weeks
unaccounted for in her typewritten list of every paycheck she
had ever received.

But her mother, perhaps, did not cast as grim a shadow over
Davis as some of her colleagues later maintained. By all
accounts, the small-town girl with the slow Kentucky walk
and slower Kentucky drawl was well suited to

investigative reporting. Just as her mother had taken a meager inheritance
and invested it with local farmers who could not qualify for
bank loans. Davis cost her lot with the underdog, writing highly
regarded stories about Indians in South Carolina, migrant
(continued on page 5)

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When you strip away the rhetoric, preservation is simply having the good sense to hold on to things that are well
designed, that link us with our past in a meaningful way, and that have plenty of good use left in them.”
—Richard Moe, Former executive director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation

April 2012
Landmark Report 5
A Cursive Timeline of Bowling Green’s Oldest Women’s Literary Club

By Jean E. Nehrn

The Ladies Literary Club met with Mrs. Anna L. Armitage on Tuesday, April 23, 1886. The minutes of the previous meeting were read and accepted. Then members responded to the roll call. A motion was made and carried to change the time of meeting from 2:30 to 4:30 and the business meeting began.

A small excerpt from the 3 April 1888 minutes highlighting the attractive cursive handwriting found in the early minute books. Courtesy of Special Collections Library, WKU.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, secretaries of the Ladies Literary Club of Bowling Green began keeping detailed minutes of their meetings, using an elegant, formal writing style. Samples of their lovely penmanship in leather-bound volumes can be seen at the Kentucky Library and Museum, where they have been donated and archived. The gently curving strokes of ink suggest a flowing timeline, inviting readers to travel across the years from 1880 to the present.

In doing so, we not only learn about the activities of the club and its intelligent, caring members, but we also witness the unfolding, interesting history of our community.

Early in 1880, Mrs. J.D. Hines was sitting at her sewing machine in her home on State Street, when her friend Mrs. T.S. Stevens came to call. It was Mrs. Stevens who suggested that several women form a literary club in Bowling Green. Several months earlier, fifteen men had formed a club (the XV Club), and she felt strongly that women too ought to have a club. She was also adamant about not including refreshments, suggesting that the women in this new club would be superior to the men, who centered their meetings around a meal.

In March, twelve women met at the Girls’ College to found the Ladies Literary Club. Highly organized, they elected a president, vice president, and secretary. A program committee divided the members into “classes” of three, to present assigned programs on the first and third Tuesday afternoons of each month. Some of the topics seem quite daunting. For example, one class was responsible for discussing Epictetus, Woes, and Sarcasm. Other assignments included Heat and Ventilation (“subjects of vital and practical interest to us at this season of the year,” according to the January 6, 1886 minutes); Reason, Imagination, and Will; Arctic Regions, Congo Regions, and Turkestan; and Currents and Inhabitants of the Oceans. Looking back in 1905, Mrs. Hines reminisced, “We were young then and full of courage, and stood unshaken in the presence of any subject however vast.”

The population of Bowling Green in the 1800s was not much larger than 5,000, and the city did not yet have a library at which to do research for these topics. It is not surprising, then, to learn that some of the women were “delinquent” in coming to the meeting without a paper to read. They were still expected to perform their duty, however, so once in a while there were more than the three scheduled programs in one afternoon. Mrs. Hines recalls, “Ah, the struggle we had to keep our eyes open and listen to this accumulation of learning!”

Over the years, members began to choose their own topics, which often focused on literature, and the delinquency problem disappeared. Later still, the three-member classes were replaced by a single member presenting a program, either as a written scholarly paper or told in a more informal manner.

The minutes in springtime sometimes mention low attendance because “the annual monic known as Spring Cleaning” had consumed their time. But all members were present for a special ceremony at Reservoir Park on Saturday afternoon, March 5, 1887. In celebration of Arbor Day, the club planted a tree—“the Society forming a circle. Each member in turn throwing in a shovelful of earth.” Deposited under the tree was a sealed glass jar containing a brief history of the club, a list of members, and a poem written by one of them, Elizabeth Thomas.

Nine years later, the club sadly met again to bury a jar containing their club’s yearbook and a memorial to Miss Carpenter in whose memory they planted fifteen mountain ash trees at the old fort of Potter College. Miss Carpenter had given her program on October 20, 1896 and died just days later. The growing fondness of members is clear in this excerpt of their memorial which was published in The Evening Journal: “Just as the last lingering rays of an October sunset had faded from the hilltops, an unwelcome guest entered the classic halls of Potter College and laid his cold, icy hand upon the gentle, refined, intellectual Miss Carpenter, and the white soul of our friend went out in the starlight never to return.”

In 1898, the Ladies Literary Club collaborated with the Current Topic Club (a new women’s literary club) to establish a library. They assessed $1.00 dues per year for the purchase of books on Russia, their next course of study. For years, business meetings were filled with much discussion on the collection of books, location of the library (Mrs. McClary offered a room in her home, times (open from 4:00 to 5:00), rotating turns to serve as librarian, and a certificate to be used when checking out books. The library became known as the Women’s Literary and was moved to a room in the McCormack Building. By 1910, over one thousand books had been accumulated in the library collection; the L.L.C. was concerned, though, about the increasing number of fictional works ("a very bad effect on the morals of this library") and felt that their club money should be used solely for "study books." By 1911, the word "burdenome" appeared in the minutes in regard to all the demanding work required by the two clubs in maintaining the library. Even though the Y.M.C.A. offered a "lighted, heated room and a librarian who would keep the room open several times during the week," discussions leaned toward donating the library either to the State Normal School or to the city Board of Education. Finally, a decision was made. A typed statement by the Board of Education was inserted into the minutes in 1913 accepting the "absolute gift" from "the ladies of this City, who have the interests of the children of this City, at heart.

(continued on page 8)

The L.L.C. celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1930. Members in the photograph include: seated: Mrs. B.F. Peckster (right) and Mrs. J.H. McCormack; standing (from left): Mrs. Bradford Mutchler, Mrs. William Miller Ross, Mrs. Lucian Graham, Mrs. H.B. Cross, Mrs. Carl Harding, Mrs. L.G. Walz, Mary Armitage, Mrs. John B. Rodes, Mrs. W.J. Potter, Florence Rugland, Elizabeth Wood, Mrs. E.T. Bory, Mrs. Miss B. Nahlman, and Sally Rodes. Courtesy of the Special Collections Library, WKU.
The LLC crest was designed by member Dionne Howerton.

(Ladies Literary Club, continued from page 7)

The minutes for a November 1914 meeting record that the topic was Molière and that there was an unusual absence of three loyal members. There had been an announced exchange of meeting places that Tuesday, but apparently some members were confused. A humorous postscript in Mrs. L.W. Thomas’ hand explains what happened and also exemplifies the wit of the writer and the good humor of the club. At the club meeting, she writes, members were wondering about the absentees: "Where are they now, and why their neglect of Club duties? After a long, interval of tiresome but patient waiting on the part of the Club, these wandering daughters of the Club-fold were finally located on a hilltop and safely protected in the beautiful home of Mrs. Proctor. The hostess of the house had not welcomed them with the usual graciousness she generally manifested, for unfortunately they were in another city, but the dauntless trio of wonderers were not dismayed but fully determined to be present at the meeting of the Club. The custodian of the premises who had politely informed them that Mrs. Proctor was not at home, was commanded to open the doors and let them in, overawed in the presence of the Club-women, he let them in. What this bewildered trio thought, said or did before they were located, rescued and brought back to the proper place of meeting is all unknown to the Club, except for some quixotic and anonymous messages sent over the phone. . . . The trio certainly enacted for the Club a Comedy of Errors, equaling any of Molière’s or Shakespeare’s noted Comedies. Their thoughtless Comedy consisting of only two acts and three actors, called forth as much wholesome laughter and joyous merriment, as Mark Twain’s innocents Abroad."

In the fall of 1917, the Red Cross requested that the club help make hospital supplies and offered them a room in which to work. Rather than meeting there, Mrs. McElroy again offered a room in her home, and Miss Rodes and Mrs. Barr offered the use of their sewing machines for war work every Tuesday afternoon. The October 16, 1917 minutes close thusly: "With a feeling of sadness that our delightful meetings would be interrupted for a time, yet with a realization of the importance of giving our patriotic service to the work of the Red Cross, the club adjourned." The faithful, handwritten minutes did not resume until April 25, 1919.

In October 1924, the ladies of the Episcopal Church requested that three members represent the club at their fundraising spelling contest. Mrs. Potter, Mrs. Carson, and Mrs. Herman were drafted. To the absolute delight of the club, Mrs. Potter won, and her silver loving cup trophy was duly admired at the next meeting. In their excitement and pride, the club purchased a perennial for Mrs. Potter’s garden and also wrote a clever acrostic using the letters of Mrs. Potter’s full name:

HER GIFTS

Mirth, on a summer’s day,
Ardently plays golf, they say;
Runs the scales, and wields the bow;
Trains the choir, dulcissimo;
Half her gifts I can’t relate
And one we wish to celebrate.

When Club members meet to vie —
On a platform wide and high —
Of the number who would spell,
Dauntless, she alone can quell
"Scoticanius" ‘s awful spell.

Please, dear Pattie, let us tell
Others that we love you well;
Through your garden’s magic voice
Take our thanks: with us rejoice;
Every season when these flowers
Repeat to you "We’re glad you’re ours!"

And so the seasons passed, often noted poetically in the cursive penmanship of the day’s secretary. An entry for October stated, "The weather was beautiful, as if a belated summer’s day had wandered on into the realms of Indian Summer glory and bewildered, lost its careless way, amidst dear friends. On November 28, 1933, members received a "basket of beautiful flowers which Mr. Proctor had sent to the club in memory of his beloved wife, the last charter member of this club who passed from our midst on this date one year ago."

Through the years, vacancies were filled with women of all ages, so that membership was always active. The remaining decades in the 20th century brought an array of new personalities and eclectic topics. Some members discussed current bestsellers (Gone With the Wind, Silent Spring, The Feminine Mystique, Lang Walk to Freedom, Front Row at the White House); others discussed works of Kentucky authors Wendell Berry, Jesse Stuart, Robert Penn Warren, and Eliza Calvert Hall (the pen name of Mrs. Obenchain, one of the charter members of the club). Sometimes, rather than discussing a specific book, a member spoke on a broader topic, including atomic energy (a 1945 meeting), the computer (1985), hummingbirds, Kentucky ballads, identical twins, preservation efforts in downtown Bowling Green, the Shakers, quilt patterns used to communicate with escaping slaves, and a lively impersonation called "Mary Breckenridge: Angel on Horseback," performed by the authentically-costumed Carol Crowe-Corcoran.

(Ladies Literary Club, continued from page 8)
Bowling Green Native Survived the 1900 Galveston Hurricane

Editor's note: What follows is a transcription of a letter in the Temple Family Collection in the Special Collections Library at WKU. The letter was written by Ellen Parker to her sister Mary Temple shortly after the Galveston, Texas hurricane of September 1900. Mary Temple was the mother of longtime Landmark Association member Ruth Hines Temple.

My Dear Sister:

Your sweet letter came this morning. You know we appreciate your kindness towards us, but we are all right and consider that we lost very little, compared to the majority of people in Galveston. John and I think that our loss won’t be over fifteen hundred dollars and that is so little when we know we have plenty left to live on. Yes, we lost lots of our clothes, but you know the children had too many anyhow so I shared we could well afford to lose some. I lost one weekly washing. The women had not got the clothes home and her house and everything went so fast we couldn’t do anything. I do want to thank all the good many of my clothes away before I left Galveston—to people who did not have one thing in the world. Oh! there are thousands of people there without one penny.

Many at 2 o’clock Saturday Sept 8, I looked out and saw the gulf water backing up 32 Street. I did not feel afraid at all as we did not have one bit of wind to speak of. But in an hour Frances came back in the house and wanted her bathing suit on so she might wade in the water in the street. When I went to the door and the water was backing up in my front steps. Well yes telephoned John and he said there were no signs of water over Market St. But said he would come home as soon as he could. Well about the time the wind sprung up and the waves were up several feet. Then Mr. P. could not get home and could not get a carriage or horse for no price. He offered a man $20 dollars for the loan of a horse to ride home. Would not take him home for no price. Well the result was he did not get home until half past three Sunday morning. I was entirely alone with the children until the worst of the flow was over and did not know what second our house would go and I wish the lakes would recede. We were at the mercy of the water and flying timbers. While I had that fear I did not believe once that we would be lost. I read the Bible and prayed as I never have before. I read out to the children and it was the only thing that kept me quiet when I would look the Bible down and look out I would almost scream with fear for Mr. Parker. So afraid he might have started home on foot—which if he had no doubt he would not be living today. And too I was afraid for many of the folks in the neighborhood. So when I began to walk the floor and look troubled my poor little boy would take me by the hand and say—don’t cry [cry] don’t cry [cry] mama. I not let the house fall on you—I will stay [stay] with you. Then he would say ‘read’ [read] this book mama and bring me the Bible. No Mary, I don’t believe anything saved us but Providence. Our house stood but of course several windows were blown out and a good deal of the roof off. The front steps taken clear off somewhere and our water tank can’t be found.

After the storm was most over the Taylor family of which there are seven come over and at 2 o’clock in the morning four more of another family came. So you see we then had fifteen, that is after Mr. P. came which was half past three Sunday morning. Oh! I suffered death those long hours. Even after the storm was over I listened all this time for someone to tell me John was lost and he was in a worse condition than I was. I was here, but he could not get home and did not know what to do. He was in the gulf the whole time. He kept all the way from the store in water up to his chin over roofs of houses, dead people and animals, thinking or almost thinking that he would never find us when he got home Mary I can’t describe this storm. What you see in the papers is not overdone if anything it was even worse than the papers put it. I am glad my friends were so interested in me but if this storm and destruction would not melt a heart of stone I don’t know what it would take. However I believe they were interested and are glad to know that I have so many friends. Tell them we were saved through prayer and John and I believe that is all that saved us. The Lord saved us, Mr. Parker downtown, and I at home praying.

As to as knowing Galveston, I don’t know what we will do. You know John can’t just leave the store and run—for there is where we get food and clothes. But really I can’t say just yet. Will tell you as soon as I find out. Bob came to Galveston and brought us to Ft. Worth, and poor mother was most wild about me and the children. She said she almost knew John was at the store and that we were alone. I will go back to Galveston as soon as the city is clear or as soon as it is safe for us to go. Mary it is sweet of you and Addie to offer us a home but we are alright now. We have one we want to dispose of now. True you know John can’t do too much and we will have to buy something for ourselves and think we will as there are lots of people in Galveston who have no homes and have to stay and have to buy a place to live in. Our house is rented now for twenty dollars a month in the condition it is. Tell Mr. K. that I appreciate his interest in us. People were so grieved that they lost all they had in the world but thankful that they had their families saved. Mary I am so nervously I am hardly well but try to get over that part of it and get to be myself. I could write all day but must stop as I have to work Mr. Parker. Will be the first I will see you all—but the trip is too far and we are all right here. Yours E.

April 1900

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Perhaps you could pass this newsletter along to someone you think would be interested in supporting Landmark's efforts in historic preservation advocacy.

I (we) want to support the Historic Preservation efforts in Bowling Green and Warren County.

Name ____________________________________________

Mailing Address ________________________________________

City __________________________ State __________ Zip ___________

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