



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandria's invincible woman

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Image: Constance Fairfax Cary Harrison.

We continue our celebration of Women's History Month this week with the story of Alexandria's first "invincible:" Constance Fairfax Cary Harrison. Born in 1843 to Archibald Cary and his wife, Monimia, Constance Cary was related through her mother to Virginia's legendary Fairfax family, with a proud dash of Pochahontas thrown in from a link to John Randolph. Her early years were spent in Cumberland, Md., where her father was a newspaper editor. But when he died suddenly at the age of 40, her beloved Grandmama — "the sweetest and gentlest of mortals" — a widow of Thomas, Ninth Lord of Fairfax, collected her daughter, grandsons Falkland and Clarence, and granddaughter Constance, and brought them back to her home.

Known as Vaucluse, the property was just off of Seminary Road — where the Alexandria Hospital stands today. Monimia Cary's widowed sister and her six children later joined the family at Vaucluse. For nearly a decade the gracious stucco homestead sheltered three generations.

With the onset of the Civil War, Constance's mother and aunt decided to leave Vaucluse and offer their service as battlefield nurses. But within weeks Vaucluse lay directly in the path of the advancing Union Army and the sisters quickly dispatched their children to safer ground, first at Bristoe and later to Richmond. Within days of their departure, Vaucluse and its beautiful gardens and trees were leveled by federal troops for the construction of Fort Worth.

Like many southern women before the outbreak of the Civil War, Constance had little understanding of the complex issues revolving around secession. A Union-supporting uncle earlier had taken her to meet newly inaugurated President Abraham Lincoln, and she was proud to say her family had always paid their servants, claiming that her grandfather was the first man in Virginia to manumit his slaves.

But coming face-to-face with the war changed all of that. A week after the first battle of Manassas, Constance rode to the battlefield to personally inspect the massive scene of carnage. Afterward, she committed herself to the Confederate cause.

With cousins Jenny and Hetty Cary, Constance established the "Cary Invincibles." Together the teenagers sewed the first examples of the Confederate battle flag, presenting one each to Generals P.G.T. Beauregard, Edward Johnston and Earl Van Dorn. Then Constance began publishing a series of writings promoting southern secession under the nom de plume "Refugitta," a name acquired from a mare owned by Gen. Fitzhugh Lee that she often rode.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Despite her young age, her influence grew quickly. She moved in the same circles as the noted author Mary Chestnut and Varina Davis, wife of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. She later married Davis's private secretary, Burton Harrison.

After the war, and with Virginia in ruins, Constance moved to New York where, in 1867, she wedded Harrison at the estate of her uncle, Gouverneur Morris. Thereafter, she maintained a Manhattan residence, with a summer home in Bar Harbor, Maine. She remained a prolific writer throughout her life, documenting her illustrious family and the thrilling events of her time.

After her death in 1920, she was buried in Alexandria's Ivy Hill Cemetery.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.