

Lady Nancy Langhorne Astor 1879-1964

Lady Nancy Langhorne Astor was born in Danville, Virginia on May 19, 1879 to Chiswell Dabney Langhorne, better known as “Chillie” of Lynchburg, and Nancy Witcher Keene of Danville. Always known to her family and friends as Nannie, she rose to fortune as the wife of Waldorf Astor, and to fame as the first woman to sit in the British House of Commons.

When Nancy Astor was six, her father was forced to leave Danville to seek financial stability, and in Richmond he was awarded contracts for the construction of railroads; on each one he turned a handsome profit. Soon the Langhorne family became part of the quiet, post-bellum South, moving into the handsome “Mirador,” a fine brick house in Albermarle County. But life at “Mirador” was far from quiet: emotions ran high, with quarrels, tears, reconciliations, and in the end, laughter. As a result, Nancy Astor, at an early age, learned to hold up her end in a fight, a trait that held her in good stead, especially in politics.

Nancy Astor’s father would not hear of a young girl getting an education; he considered it worthless. So she attached herself to Frederick William Neve, the rector of a little Episcopal Church at Ivy, who soon had her longing to become one of his missionaries to the mountain poor. Nancy Astor’s visions came to an end when she was 18 and her engagement to Robert Gould Shaw was announced. The marriage was dissolved, because of Robert’s drinking, three years later in 1900, and she and their little daughter returned to “Mirador.”

The death of her mother in 1903 sent Nancy Astor into emotional turmoil, and her father sent her to England with her younger sister for a season of hunting. In England came the second phase of her life; she found a true marriage to a young man of great charm and enormous wealth – Waldorf Astor. After the wedding in 1906, Nancy Astor served as hostess for Waldorf and was his most devoted supporter as he began building his parliamentary career. But when Waldorf inherited a title, and became ineligible to sit in the House of Commons, precedent was shattered as Nancy Astor, now Lady Astor, stood for her husband’s seat in Parliament.

The year was 1919; World War I had ended; Lloyd George advocated a world fit for heroes to live in; Lady Astor offered a world fit for women and children, and her victory was overwhelming. It began what was to become a long fight, for both Lady Astor and her husband, for social legislation: shorter working hours, a higher age for leaving school, and health insurance. During their 35 years in political life, the Astors saw most of their advocated reforms put into practice.

After her election, Lady Astor carried her cause back to the land of her birth. America loved her frankness, and she appealed primarily to women. “There are things bigger than politics, even bigger than countries,” Lady Nancy said, “though neither party nor country likes to think that anything is bigger than itself. If only we, the newcomers to political life, can keep that greater vision... The world is already entangled.” Lady Astor was welcomed in her native Virginia, and in Danville, Lady Astor returned to her birthplace, which stood at the corner of Broad and Main Streets, and there from the

upstairs porch she addressed hundreds on conservation and the importance of maintaining natural beauty and gave a rose bush to each child attending.

The peace of the 1920's soon fell under the approaching shadow of World War II, and a campaign of vilification was begun against the Astors who were accused of being pro-German and pro-Hitler. History, however, has since removed these myths, proving there were no pro-Nazi plots on the Astors' behalf. Admittedly they had argued for a revision of the harsh terms of the treaty of Versailles, but they were not, as was widely alleged, in favor of delivering Europe into the hands of Nazi Germany.

Lady Nancy Astor was Mayoress of Plymouth, then in the front line of the Battle of Britain, and she fought her own war against Hitler. As her town filled with G.I.'s preparing for the D-Day invasion of Normandy, Lady Astor wrote to her old friend and mentor, Mr. Neve, "You don't what it means to me to hear that southern accent on the corner of every street. Plymouth is my Virginia in England."

After her retirement, Lady Astor's thoughts turned again to Virginia. Only a month before Mr. Neve died in 1948, she had written to him thanking him for the inspiration he gave her over 50 years ago. "True friendship," wrote Lady Astor, "never fades."

News of Lady Astor's death reached Virginia in May of 1964. It was noted as the passing of a Virginia tradition, a tradition that was dear to her as she once remarked, "If I lived away from my country a hundred years, I would still be a Virginian."