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Ignorance Is Bliss: History of the Ignorance Club

A history with personal observations

By Laura Moore Stearns

The only thing I have ever known about ignorance (besides possessing a large quantity of it) is that it is reputed to be bliss. Anticipating that at least one of our members would ask me the source of this familiar quotation, and not wishing to appear ignorant on the matter, I rushed to *Bartlett's Quotations* and had the pleasure of rediscovering a poem I once knew but had forgotten, "On a Distant Prospect of Eton College," by the English poet Thomas Gray (1716–71). In that poem Gray proposed that ". . .where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise."

Not in *Bartlett's* is a quotation attributed to Benjamin Franklin that "Being ignorant is not so much a shame as being unwilling to learn." I found this in the Ignorance Club files on a yellowed newspaper clipping, an advertisement for real estate information, which was tucked securely into the back of a 1934–35 club program. It touched me somehow to imagine a lady, a member of Ignorance Club more than 50 years ago, when the country was sunk deep in the Great Depression, carefully saving Franklin's words as an expression of what this club meant to her. Indeed, the pursuit of learning, the inquiring spirit, has been at the heart of the Ignorance Club since its inception.

Laura Moore Stearns originally presented this paper at an October 1989 Ignorance Club meeting. She reprised the presentation in October 2004 on the occasion of the club's 100th anniversary.

Ms. Stearns, a descendant of the well-known Moore family which was instrumental in establishing Rockbridge County and Lexington, taught history at Southern Seminary Junior College for many years.

Above: Elizabeth Randolph Preston (Mrs. William) Allan, founder of the Ignorance Club.

Miley Collection, Washington and Lee University

Elizabeth Randolph Preston Allan, 1881, club founder, with son William

Miss Nettie Stuart, the Club's first secretary, recorded as her opening entry in the minutes book: "The Women's Club was organized in the Fall of 1904. Mrs. Elizabeth Preston Allan conceived the idea of forming a neighborhood study and social club and called it 'The Ignorance Club.' It was to meet once a week in the home of Mrs. W. C. Stuart." Miss Nettie listed the names of the 19 women Mrs. Allan invited to join her in establishing the club, an undertaking which we, their successors sitting here exactly 85 years later this fall, can say was truly a great beginning.

It is not too hard to picture the lives of those ladies 85 years ago. The community that was Lexington in 1904 numbered less than half its present size, and only three of the town's streets were paved: Main, Nelson and Washington. There was, of course, no urgent need for paving, for the era of the automobile was not yet here. If they traveled any distance, they rode in horse-drawn carriages or buggies. Probably though they walked to that first meeting of the Ignorance, since Miss Nettie's minutes indicate

Miley Collection, Washington and Lee University

Photo believed to be of Nettie Stuart, 1881, first club secretary

ELIZABETH RANDOLPH PRESTON ALLAN

By 1904, when Elizabeth Randolph Preston Allan (1848–1933) formed the Ignorance Club, she was a widow in her 50s and had given birth to nine children. Perhaps most of all, she had witnessed a land and a people riven by a deadly civil war. Little wonder that she sought to create a women's study and social group "in a spirit of fun."

Elizabeth was born and grew up in Lexington in a large brick house on what is now Preston Street. She was one of seven children born to Sarah Lyle Carruthers (1811–56) and J. T. L. Preston (1811–90). Her father was a founder, in 1839, of the Virginia Military Institute and a professor there. He was assigned to accompany the cadet corps to the scene of John Brown's execution in 1859. Preston served in the Confederate army and wrote a textbook, *Jackson's Campaign Through Virginia.* While Elizabeth was still a child, her mother died, and her father then married Margaret Junkin (1820–97), the "Poetess of the South" and sister-in-law of T. J. (later Stonewall) Jackson.

In 1874, when Elizabeth was 25 years old, she married Col. William Allan (1837–89), who had served on Stonewall's staff and, after the Civil War, at the invitation of Robrt E. Lee, had taught mathematics at Washington College. He also wrote and lectured about the war.

Like her father, stepmother and husband, Elizabeth was a writer, although not as well known. She prepared "Reminiscences of an Ordinary Life" for her children, painting a vivid picture of growing up in Lexington before, during and immediately after the Civil War. In 1938, after her death, her daughter, Janet Allan Bryan, used the text to publish *A March Past: Reminiscences of Elizabeth Randolph Preston Allan.*

Elizabeth died in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she had gone to live with her son William. Her obituary called her a "devoted Christian woman whose life exemplified the highest ideals of the Old South" and a "gifted speaker and author." Perhaps in keeping with the Ignorance Club's reticence about publicity, however, no mention was made that she founded — and named — the group. — *Suzanne Barksdale Rice*

Miley Collection, Washington and Lee University

Margaret Ann Kinnier Stuart, 1881, first Ignorance Club hostess

it was to be a "neighborhood" club. And most likely it was a neighborhood with some rather grand residences, for the members were the mothers, wives and daughters of some of Lexington's most prominent gentlemen, a number of whom were connected to one or the other of the two colleges. When the women first gathered that fall day of 1904 to organize the club, George Patton (later General) had just started his second year at Virginia Military Institute, and about 450 students had recently enrolled at Washington and Lee. In those days nearly all of them lived in the homes of the townspeople, and undoubtedly at least some of them went home from that first meeting to greet a W&L student among their family members.

But the 20th century had dawned, and our ladies, as cultured and intelligent as we know they were, were surely forward-looking. As they arrived at the first meeting that autumn day in 1904, wearing ankle-length skirts and bonnets, we can imagine their excitement and curiosity about Mrs. Allan's proposal for this "study and social club." What a splendid idea to establish a group in which these widely read women, who had few outlets for their intellectual interests, could share their knowledge and creativity!

And so it came to be.

I fretted much about how Mrs. Allan conceived this "splendid idea," and at one point speculated that it had been inspired by the men's Fortnightly Club, which had been founded just four years earlier. A number of the women were wives of Fortnightly members, and there were parallels between the format of the Fortnightly and that of the early Ignorance Club. In both, the person we would call the president was referred to simply as the "Leader"; the purpose of both was for discussion and social intercourse; membership in each was limited to 25, though each selected honorary members in the early years; and the presentation of papers was the vehicle for discussion in both. However, though the Fortnightly may have provided the organizational model for Ignorance, the inspiration seems to have come to Mrs. Allan independently.[1]

In reading through all these minutes for the entire 85 years, three distinct phases in our Ignorance Club's development seemed to emerge:

- The first eight years, from its inception in 1904 to the opening of its 1912–13 season: A period of simple fun and pleasure with the programs, with little concern about direction for the future.
- The next 28 years, from 1912 to about 1940: A period of intense ferment and business activity during which the majority of the Club's present forms and traditions came into being.
- The years since 1940: A less yeasty period, but an era of confidence and self-assurance about the club's purpose, form and identity.

PHASE I: NASCENCE

If maintaining records is evidence of concern for the future, as I assume it is, then the ladies must not have had that concern in that first phase, from 1904 until 1912, since Miss Nettie's minutes for those years are not dated and do not, in fact, read like the minutes of meetings. Their flavor is that of having been written in retrospect, and I speculate that those who attended originally saw no need to and so did not keep regular minutes. Furthermore, Miss Nettie specifically wrote in her opening entry that it was "The Women's Club" which was organized in the fall of 1904, and Mrs. Allan called it "The Ignorance Club." Interestingly enough, the ladies

1 Members' first names were not used in Ignorance programs until 1985–86. At the time of founding, the ladies, except for teachers or librarians, certainly did not work outside their homes. The first Ignorance Club member who worked in public may have been Miss Annie Jo White, the Washington and Lee University librarian.

Official portrait, Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University

Annie Jo White

of Ignorance did change their name to "The Women's Club" in 1912, and so Miss Nettie's opening reference to the Club by this name could have only been written later, in hindsight.

Even if they were not interested in keeping records, however, the women were enormously involved with their programs. The 1906 program shows the tremendous scope of topics (French, English, *and* German literature) and in the number of members making presentations at each meeting (always two and sometimes three, for a total of 38 in this one year alone). This was the practice up into the 1920s.

The earliest programs also show the establishment of our motto and colors. In 1906 the club took its motto from Thomas Carlyle, probably selected by Mrs. Allan: "The love of reading is a fire-proof possession." Mrs. Allan moved to Charlotte, N.C., in 1907, a year for which we have no program. Nor could I find a program for 1908, though Mary Coulling says she has seen one. But the 1909 program displays our present motto from Benjamin Disraeli: "The secret of success is constancy of purpose." And the 1906 program shows that blue and white were already the colors for the club. Though that program itself was gray, every single program afterwards has been blue and white except for Betty (Mrs. Robert) Munger's passionate purple (fuchsia?) program in 1982. Mrs. Munger was program chairman that year, and as she remarked to me, "Boy, did that [the program color] hit the fan!"

Early on, the club had only two committees, an Executive Committee and a Committee on Entertainment (what we today call the Social Committee). In 1910 a Music Committee was added. This interested me considerably, for it seems to have been the special province of Sarah (Mrs. Harrington) Waddell. This notable member was, more often than not, the only person listed on this committee, and the minutes testify to how often she provided music as part of the programs, either performing herself (she played the piano) or arranging for someone else to perform. She also introduced Musicales as entire programs in themselves, and these appeared on the programs almost annually until 1928. Thereafter a Music Committee no longer existed, but Mrs. Waddell continued to perform as part of some programs until she resigned as an active member in 1941–42. When the Club celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1955, tribute was paid to the importance of Mrs. Waddell's music in the early years.

Apart from the very elaborate programs, the club in most other respects remained rather simple between 1904 and 1912. Members called their leader just that: "the Leader." And what we think of as bylaws were listed under the artless heading of "Rules."

These rules underwent several changes during the first eight years. A new rule appeared on the 1911 program: "The election of officers and new members shall be by ballot." Inferring from this new rule that previous elections were probably more informal, I interpreted this introduction of structure into the club's electoral process to foreshadow new developments, and the members did not disappoint me, for the 1912–13 season ushered in a period of ferment.

EXPLORING THE ARCHIVES OF IGNORANCE

As I waded through year after year of Ignorance minutes [housed now at Washington and Lee Special Collections], I was astonished to find attached to the minutes of 1937–38 two typed pages of Ignorance history. The president that year was Flora Miller. It struck me that Mrs. Miller must have been the Winifred Hadsel of the 1930s, for she had an equal passion for preserving records and documents. In the Ignorance archives is more material for this one year than for any year before Mrs. Hadsel joined the Club — a whole envelope stuffed with newspaper clippings of the papers which some of that year's members had contributed for printing, even one of the original papers itself. And of course, the two-page history.

Miss Nettie Stuart's minutes were also found and are in the archives, for which I am supremely grateful. Miss Nettie was secretary until 1923, and without her notes covering the first 19 years of the Ignorance Club, our picture would be incomplete. — *Laura Moore Stearns*

The ladies' tone, their sense of position, suddenly seemed markedly different from the earlier days when their programs consumed most of their time and attention. Though continuing to devote considerable energy to elaborate programs, they now became extensively concerned with great numbers of business matters and with the club's identity. This shift in tone was reflected most profoundly, I think, in the membership's decision to change the name of the club.

Ignorance Club archives, Washington and Lee Special Collections

The first Ignorance Club printed program, 1906–07

Miss Nettie's minutes record that Mrs. Allan had named it the Ignorance Club "in a spirit of fun," but the members felt it had grown "so important" in the community that Ignorance was no longer appropriate. The new name which appeared on the 1912–13 program was "The Women's Club." The Club would not be called Ignorance again until 1933, an interim of 21 years.

PHASE II: THE CLUB TAKES FORM

Between 1912 and 1926, changes in bylaws, the creation of program and nominating committees, and the election of officers signaled a more well-organized club, one more suited to the ladies' growing sense of their importance.

Miss Nettie Stuart's minutes were growing in importance, too. After seeming to have been written in retrospect and being rather skimpy, her notes dramatically increased in volume and detail. By 1914–15, Miss Nettie was keeping minutes for every meeting. This remained her practice and that of her successors up to 1940.

The minutes indicate that the club members were now appointing committees for a wide variety of tasks, including one to keep absent members informed. Sometimes there were summaries of the members' papers.

One particular notation in 1918 captured my attention. At the January 21 meeting, the ladies discussed whether or not to "suspend" the club for the spring. I wondered why on earth they would consider this in the midst of the vigorous momentum they now displayed. Then I remembered, 1918–19 was the year the great epidemic of Spanish Influenza swept the world, killing some 20,000,000 people, including 500,000 Americans. John Letcher in his book, *Only Yesterday in Lexington, Virginia,* remembered the constant funerals to bury the dead in Rockbridge County, and he observed that the authorities closed the schools and forbade assemblies of people, and the churches ceased holding services.

Perhaps, then, our ladies were considering similar action. The minutes do not say, and the club continued to meet on schedule, though the minutes do report much illness among the members that spring.

Was it the Spanish Flu? We do not know, but they carried on, and as had become habit, they conducted formal business at every meeting — planning future programs, discussing the nomination of new members, changing the bylaws frequently, and making more motions than I cared to keep up with. My reading would have been juicier had they spoken more personally about themselves, but why should they? After all, sophisticated clubwomen, as they obviously were becoming, do not include gossipy asides in their minutes.

Though revealing little of a personal nature about any individual, it is evident from the minutes that the ladies back then were a much more social group than we are now. Refreshments were served frequently, and guests were almost always present, to the point that the issue of guest attendance was raised several times. On

Miley Collection, Washington and Lee University

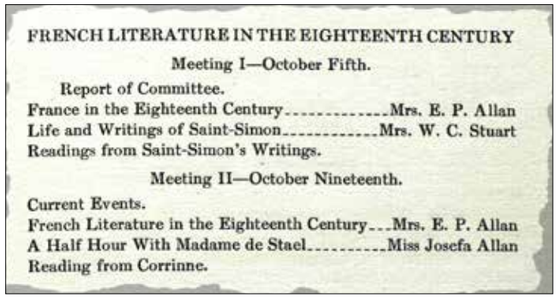
Flora McElwee Miller, 1881

December 10, 1923, they voted to keep the number of guests to one for each member because, so the minutes say, there was not enough space in private homes to accommodate the many guests who always attended. Eventually of course, it became our unwritten tradition to invite guests only to the opening and closing teas.

Along with frequent refreshments and an abundance of guests, the club during the 1920s held an annual reception in addition to Mrs. Waddell's Musicales and the regular meetings. This event was not often listed on the programs and seems to have been a very elegant occasion set apart from the ordinary gatherings each year. The minutes indicate the ladies spent a good bit of time planning this affair, and the treasurer's report for 1925–26 recorded a payment of $3.50 for "servants" (plural) at the reception that year.

The 1925 annual reception on March 26 even drew publicity. A newspaper clipping glued in the minutes announced that Mrs. Frances Parkinson Keyes, a noted writer, spoke before the Club on a Thursday evening about her trip to Puerto Rico. Mrs. Keyes came to Lexington from the Washington area because of her interest in Robert E. Lee, and the club paid her $30.00 for this appearance, which I imagine was a princely honorarium in 1925. I was curious to know if the public, or at least their husbands, had been invited, for I had the sense that this, like Mrs. Waddell's Musicales, was definitely a social function as much as an intellectual one, but the minutes do not say.

The annual receptions, the Musicales and the refreshments (except for those served at the opening and closing teas) disappeared during the 1930s without any apparent discussion. Perhaps because of the Depression? If so, the ladies did not mention the reason. Minutes were still recorded for every meeting but became more perfunctory.



FRENCH LITERATURE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Meeting I—October Fifth.

Report of Committee.

France in the Eighteenth Century.....Mrs. E. P. Allan
Life and Writings of Saint-Simon.....Mrs. W. C. Stuart
Readings from Saint-Simon's Writings.

Meeting II—October Nineteenth.

Current Events.
French Literature in the Eighteenth Century...Mrs. E. P. Allan
A Half Hour With Madame de Stael.....Miss Josefa Allan
Reading from Corrinne.

Excerpt from the Ignorance Club program, 1906–07

During these yeasty years after 1912, there was great variety in the programs, and the practice of having two or more people involved with each program continued. The year the club studied Shakespeare (1917–18) they held a formal roll call every time they began a new play, and each member responded with a quotation from that play.

Guest speakers were common throughout each year. More often than not these were the members' own husbands, though others were occasionally engaged, a few even coming from a distance to address the group. On January 10, 1924, Professor Allen W. Porterfield from Randolph-Macon Woman's College spoke about Leif Ericson, and we know about Mrs. Keyes coming from Washington in 1925. At the Musicale on November 22, 1926, listeners were treated to a phonograph recording of the music from Wagner's *Gotterdammerung*. So say the minutes: "The afternoon was delicious with this delightful music and a cheering cup of tea with tiny cakes." The club's secretaries were liberal in their use of the words "delicious," "delightful," "charming" and "gracious."

Guest artists sometimes entertained the ladies: for instance, the music director from Hollins College, with a violinist and a pianist, on January 10, 1933. And they read plays, poetry and significant articles at some of their meetings. On October 1, 1934, Flora (Mrs. Henry) Miller talked about her air flight from Persia, now Iran.

For their research the ladies naturally used the W&L and the VMI libraries; they frequented the Virginia State Traveling Library; sometimes they ordered specific textbooks in preparation for a topic.

Programs with the early club names:

1920–21
(The Woman's Club)

1928–29
(The Monday Literary Club)

1937–38
(Ignorance Club again)

Ignorance Club archives, Washington and Lee Special Collections

Early on the membership dealt with what has become an unwritten policy, that of *not* contributing to civic causes as a club. On October 4, 1920, a representative of the Florence Crittenton Home [of New York, established to support unwed mothers and their families] presented the program, citing the dreadful conditions in that home, and asked the club for support in correcting this situation. The club decided to turn the matter over to the Civic League, as most of the members of Ignorance belonged to that organization too. That the ladies even scheduled such a program seems curious, but undoubtedly it reflects their uncertainty as to where to draw the boundaries for their activities in those early years when the club was growing more "important." There was no uncertainty, however, by 1937. The minutes for the February 1 meeting note that they had been asked to contribute to the Boys' Club, and the members did not hesitate to vote to "set a precedent not to contribute as a club, but as individuals, since we are not a civic club, but purely literary."

Then as now though, the women felt differently about libraries, and during World War I, the club made its first contribution to something called the Soldiers' Library. Throughout the years there have been other contributions to libraries, most often as memorial books, and as of the 1970s contributing accumulated funds to area libraries has become regular practice.

Program length presented problems early on, and in 1923 the ladies voted to begin at 4:00 (rather than at 4:30) and end the presentation promptly at 5:00 in order to have time for discussion and, of course, the ubiquitous business matters of those years. Those meetings ran on for an hour and a half to two hours. Unlike us today, most of the members then probably had cooks, so did not have to concern themselves with dinner preparations.

Over five months beginning in October 1924, the matter of changing the name from The Women's Club (to avoid confusion with another club of similar name) claimed constant attention. No fewer than 12 names were proposed and discussed: The Focus, The Outlook Club, The Twentieth Century Club, The Women's Fortnightly, The Elizabeth Preston Allan Literary Club, The Ignorance Club, The Athene Club, The Entre Nous (meaning between ourselves, confidentially), The Dilettante Club, The Monday Literary Club, The Lexington Literary Club and The Margaret Junkin Preston Club. On March 16, 1925, after two ballots, the ladies settled on The Monday Literary Club, and this name appeared on the program covers for the next eight seasons, until the name of Ignorance Club was restored in 1933. Three name changes since 1912!

But nothing tells as much about the rapid development of the Club between 1912 and 1940 as the number of times the bylaws were altered. For those who think nothing has ever changed in the

Winifred Hadsel, 1989

Ignorance Club, take note that there were 20 additions and deletions in the bylaws during these 28 years (as opposed to only six changes in the 50 years since). No wonder the ladies were conducting business at every meeting in those years.

By the decade of the 1930s, the members' sense of the club's importance was quite refined. They possessed a well-developed image of who they were, and we see them going about their business with close to serenity.

THERE WAS, it seems to me, certainly a serenity in the way the club returned to its original name. On February 27, 1933, with no fanfare, it decided to become the Ignorance once more. The minutes do not indicate the basis for this decision. The secretary wrote simply, in a single sentence, that it was done by a vote of 14 to 1, and the club went on with its business for the day. How different this seems from the tone in Miss Nettie Stuart's minutes when the ladies decided to become "The Women's Club" in 1912 and the club's era of self-importance and self-definition began.

Two decades of development had brought greater self-assurance, and it is probable the members of the 1930s, unlike those of 1912, no longer felt the name Ignorance reflected poorly on the club's image. I have thought much about why Mrs. Allan originally chose the name Ignorance, and at one point had decided it might have been a self-deprecatory signature for Southern ladies who thought it was not genteel to know more than men. But after reading in Miss Nettie Stuart's minutes that Mrs. Allan had named it Ignorance in a "spirit of fun," I changed my mind. Rather than self-deprecation, I now believe the name manifested Mrs. Allan's great confidence in the members' intellectual abilities.

Winifred (Mrs. Fred) Hadsel said it best: "The name of the club sprang out of an enormous certainty on the part of the founders that they were anything but ignorant, and that everyone would recognize them as clever and well-informed women. Had anyone else called them ignorant, they would have been furious." I suggest that what we are witnessing here with the return to Ignorance is a restoration of the 1904 founders' "enormous certainty" that they were far from ignorant.

Indeed, at the renamed Ignorance Club's opening meeting on September 18, 1933, the president, Ruth Anderson (Mrs. Charles) McCulloch, spoke of Mrs. Allan's defining "the blossom of a wild grape as the 'suggestion of a fragrance.'" Mrs. McCulloch said: "This is expressive of the life of Mrs. Allan, our founder." And the program that day, presented by Mr. John W. Gray, was on Margaret Junkin Preston, the same Margaret Preston of Mary Coulling's paper "Supermom."

Ruth McCulloch, undated

Perhaps also symbolic of the restored Ignorance name is that the program for this 1933–34 year was the first pasted into the minutes to be saved for posterity, a practice we continue today.

To borrow (and rephrase) Mrs. Allan's "blossom of a wild grape" expression, the fragrance emanating from the Ignorance Club in 1937–38 was well beyond a mere suggestion. Never had the club had a more vigorous year. This was due in part to the energies of Flora (Mrs. Henry) Miller — the president that season who was so ardent in preserving records. But the vigor of this year may also have grown out of the topic, "The Bicentennial of the Settlement of the Valley and the Sesquicentennial of Rockbridge County." It was a topic ideally suited for local publicity, and two members did have their papers printed in the *Rockbridge County News,* with notation that these had been presented before the Ignorance Club. And following the May 1, 1938, meeting, the *County News* ran this headline: "Ignorance Club Hears Talk on Rockbridge Flora and Fauna." The article noted that Major Robert Carroll, VMI biology professor, informed the club that (among other things) "the narcotic weed, marijuana, grew in great quantities in the Buffalo and South River districts." I wonder what the ladies thought of that.

The glare of publicity faded thereafter. In the spirit of restoring the original name, the membership also seemed to desire a return to something of the club's original focus, making the presentations the centerpiece of their gatherings. They ceased doing business at every meeting, and instead of the lengthy minutes read every time, they voted on March 20, 1939, to read only short notes at each meeting. And in the minutes for the September 23, 1940, this note was penned by the secretary: "Upon second thought, I think that it is superfluous to write reports of the meetings as we have our programs filed." After this the minutes for every single meeting vanished. Henceforth minutes would be written only once a year, as we do today. I thought this a fitting culmination for the froth and ferment that had characterized the club over the past 28 years.

PHASE III: PERSEVERANCE AND PERSONALITY

THE LADIES of Ignorance sailed into the 1940s as fully mature clubwomen, large in confidence and self-assurance. The minutes were kept with perfect business tone and rhythm, and apart from the programs, most matters with which the ladies concerned themselves were small.

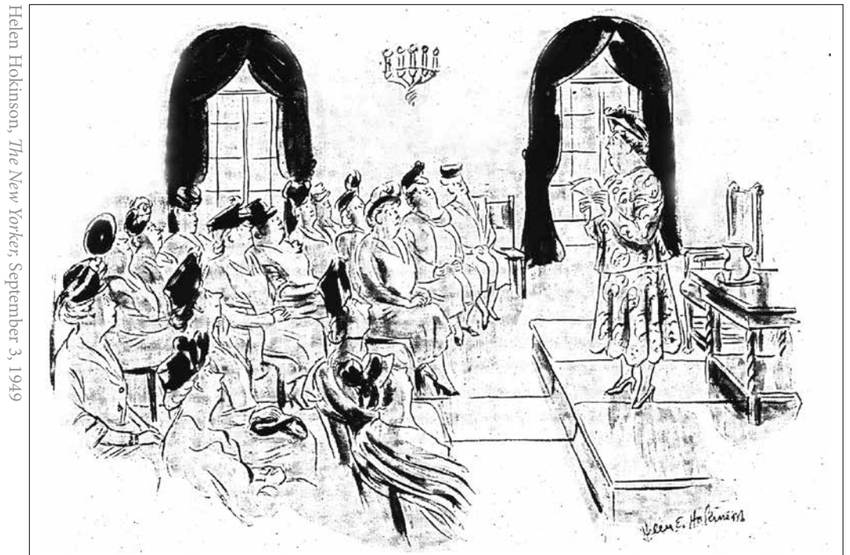
Betty Munger joined the Ignorance Club in November 1942, amid these years of confidence and self-assurance. She described her fellow members back then, many of whom were native to Rockbridge County as representing a certain class of highly educated, brilliant Southern women starved for intellectual stimulation, and in those days the Ignorance Club was one of the very few outlets for their creativity. Miss Betts Sale, who was really Mrs. Ernest Sale but was never addressed except as "Miss Betts" because she had married late in life, could read Latin and Greek. Flora Miller personally educated her sons until they entered Washington and Lee, and one son, Francis Pickens Miller, ran for governor a couple of times. And oh, how proper these ladies were, wearing their hats and gloves to every Ignorance meeting.

Betty Munger, 1970s

Mary Flournoy, 1929

I suppose this could have been intimidating, but our Betty [Munger] was quick to spot the humor amidst all this brilliance and propriety. She told me that the Ignorance Club of the 1940s reminded her of Helen Hokinson's cartoons, which appeared regularly in the *New Yorker* in those years, portraying "bosomy, dowager-y ladies in club scenes."

Betty vividly recalled her first Ignorance Club meeting: "The paper was by Mrs. [W. C.] Flournoy, who was the perfect dowager, and she had on a gorgeous big hat . . . and she stood to give her paper, and she was large and bosomy. She had been president of the U.D.C. and I think state president or state something. Anyway, there she was in all her glory standing in Miss Nettie Dunlap's living room. She gave a paper on Erasmus which was simply mind-boggling. It was superb, and I came home to rave, and I've been raving ever since."



Helen Hokinson, *The New Yorker*, September 3, 1949

"The nominating committee recommends that we reëlect all of the present officers, as we still have on hand a very large quantity of stationery with their names on it."

But raving with a sense of humor. Betty told me she suspected some of the ladies back then viewed her as a carpetbagger. She had this story about when she became program chairman in 1945. It seems that shortly after her appointment, her good friend, Dickson (Mrs. James) Murray, also an Ignorance member, encountered Miss Ellen Anderson in downtown Lexington one afternoon. Mrs. Murray reported later to Betty that Miss Ellen had allowed that she was awfully upset about Betty's becoming chairman of the Program Committee. Miss Ellen snorted, "That little Betty Munger, she comes from Massachusetts. What is she going to know about United States history from the Virginia point of view!"

History Museum of Western Virginia

Ellen Anderson, undated

That elitism seems to have remained the hallmark of that generation of Ignorance ladies. Mary (Mrs. Sydney) Coulling talked about joining in 1961, and echoed Betty's observation about a class of brilliant Southern women "desperate for disciplined intellectual challenge." Apparently in the early 1960s the Ignorance Club was still one of their very few channels for mental stimulation. Mary remembers that hats and gloves were still de rigueur at every meeting, and that the formal mode of addressing each other as Miss or Mrs. was still employed.

Mary Coulling recalls this about her induction into the Ignorance Club. She was in Baltimore when the invitation first arrived, and her husband called, saying he hoped she would join. He said he would babysit every Monday afternoon. (Mary followed that with a big "ho, ho, ho.") Anyway, Mary was coming up the walk to attend her very first meeting when the above-mentioned Mrs. Flournoy arrived at the same moment, and demanded of Mary, "What are you doing here!" Mary explained that she had just been invited to join and was there for her first meeting. According to Mary, Mrs. Flournoy puffed up her heavy, very regal self and said, "I didn't vote for you!"

Patrick Hinely

Mary Coulling, 1993

I am certainly glad that Mary did not resign right at that moment and is still with us today. She remembers a similar story about Miss Ellen Anderson, who, Mary says, wore huge hats. The first time Mary served as hostess for the Club, Miss Ellen arrived 45 minutes early. Mary was still in her dressing gown with her hair in curlers, moving chairs around (and I imagine was quite horrified to find Miss Ellen on her doorstep). However, she said to Miss Ellen, "I'm not quite ready, you know how it is when you have children, but do come in." Well, Miss Ellen, a tall woman who seemed even taller in her hats, stood up to her full height, and informed Mary, "This, my dear, is why young women should not be members of the Ignorance Club."

Miley Collection, Washington and Lee University

Ethel Ruffner, 1885

Yes, they were confident. (Shall we say even at times overbearing?) They were quite aware that they were ladies of character, though I expect they were less aware of being ladies who *were* characters. For example, Miss Ethel Ruffner, according to Betty Munger, never drove her car in anything but second gear and wrote superb, brilliant papers on brown grocery bags.

This touch of eccentricity seems appropriate, however, for the old and venerable institution which the Ignorance Club had by now become. Had she been around when the club celebrated its 50th anniversary on May 9, 1955, I am sure Elizabeth Preston Allan would have been delighted and proud to see that what she had established in a "spirit of fun" had endured with so much vitality. That 50th anniversary celebration was, according to the minutes, a memorable occasion with reminiscences of days past and tributes to the founders.

After that, the minutes returned to business as usual, until I found this entry for February 10, 1958: "Mrs. Velte [Marguerite; Mrs. Mowbray Velte], a former member of the club, gave a most enlightening talk on women in Pakistan. She illustrated her talk with dolls in national costumes, with jewelry, and with saris which were modeled most effectively by Mrs. [George] Pickral and Mrs. [Arthur] Lipscomb." Let us contemplate the image of Edna and Sue doing this.

Throughout all our 85 years, I discovered only four in which the Ignorance Club received publicity: 1925 when Mrs. Keyes came from Washington to speak at the annual reception; 1937–38 when the topic was Rockbridge history, which lent itself so well to local public interest; 1938 when Maj. Robert Carroll and Dr. James Murray spoke to the club about flora and fauna; and, more recently, in 1972–73. Into the minutes for that year is pasted a picture, clipped from the *News-Gazette*, of Mrs. Murray presenting $75 to the Regional Library. The minutes indicate some concern over the implications of this public display, but the cause was worthy. State support had been withdrawn from the library, and as the library was in dire financial straits, the members decided the publicity might focus the community's attention on the library's plight. This seems to me quite in accord with the club's first contribution to the Soldiers Library 55 years earlier, in 1917–18.

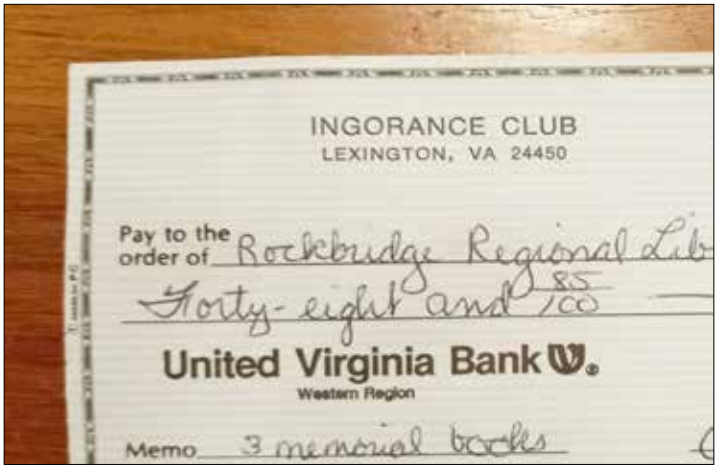
Adelaide Simpson, undated

In general though, the lack of concern for publicity has been consistent. The common opinion I have gathered from our current members is one of relief in belonging to at least one organization which is not in the spotlight's glare, but I am certain our predecessors earlier in the century established this tradition because they felt publicity was a bit vulgar. We all know the adage that a lady's name should appear in the papers only three times in her life.

Another connection with the past appeared in the minutes for 1976–77. Winifred Hadsel was secretary that year, and she noted it as "the

longest, coldest winter on record." And in 1978–79 Ruth (Mrs. George) Roth wrote that bad weather had twice postponed Betty Munger's paper on "The Long March," which "caused considerable movement of chairs in the home of Adelaide (Mrs. George H.) Simpson, the hostess." I do not know what that was about, but I remembered various ladies commenting about the weather in the pre-1940s minutes, and I think this is rather a nice custom. It certainly puts a bit of sparkle in the dry reading about business matters.

And I note Winifred's proposal in the 1978–79 minutes that we place summaries of our papers in our archives. That idea was soundly voted down then but was passed in 1985–86 when Winifred Hadsel reintroduced the proposal. She followed that victory by asking a year later if we would be brave enough to place copies of our complete papers on file, a suggestion worthy of Flora Miller back in the 1930s. I thought to myself, wouldn't it be grand if we had Miss Ethel Ruffner's papers written on the brown grocery bags!



Another change will appear on the Club's new checks which, I believe, we will have to order soon. This time the club's name will, one hopes, be spelled correctly. When I was secretary-treasurer in 1986–87, Adelaide [Simpson] confessed to me that when she was secretary-treasurer in 1968–69, she had ordered our present checks, and spelled the name of the Club "Ingorance" instead of Ignorance. I confess now that, even after making out all those Ignorance Club checks, I never once noticed this error. Brilliant as we all are, we cannot be bothered with such small details.

Southern Seminary

Laura Moore Stearns, left in 1984, gave permission for "Ignorance Is Bliss" to be printed in *Rockbridge Epilogues*. The club, with its penchant for eschewing publicity, deliberated, fretted, and then affirmed the article's publication.

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