

CLARA BARRETT STRAIT

Louise Pettus

Clara Barrett Strait died in July 1948 in Columbia, S. C. Her birthdate is not known. There is not a single photograph or painting of her. Yet, she was an artist of great talent. She was a much sought after portrait painter.

Clara Barrett Strait studied at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D. C., in 1894. Her foster father, Dr. Thomas Jefferson Strait of Lancaster, S. C. had been elected to the U. S. Congress and took Clara with him to be his secretary.

Clara met an internationally famous artist, Elliott Dangerfield, who tutored her first in Blowing Rock, N. C. and later in Philadelphia. When she heard that the United Daughters of the Confederacy had commissioned a portrait of Gen. Micah Jenkins to be placed in the State House, she applied for the task. (Jenkins with Asbury Coward, before the Civil War had founded the Kings Mountain Military Academy in Yorkville.)

Clara studied painting in England, Germany, Spain, Austria and Holland as well as in the famed Carlo Rossi school in Paris. She returned to the United States and opened a studio in New York City. She later opened studios and taught art in Black Mountain, N. C., Washington, D. C., Rock Hill, S. C.

In Rock Hill, Clara lived with the W. J. Roddey family and privately taught Winthrop students. She lived in the Selwyn Hotel in Charlotte for a time and at the time of her death was living in the Davis Hotel in Columbia.

One of Clara's portraits hangs just inside the front door of Winthrop's Tillman Hall—a life-size oil of Benjamin Ryan Tillman, then U. S. Senator. There

had been a previous painting of Tillman that he hated, calling it a “monstrosity.” She also painted a portrait of Winthrop’s founder, D. B. Johnson.

Because Clara kept no records of her paintings, we have no way of knowing exactly how many paintings she did. Some say at least 200. Four of the paintings are of U. S. presidents—Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Clara’s early life is shrouded in mystery. The story is told that she was discovered by T. J. and Kate Lathrop Strait not long after they married. Then living in Mississippi, the couple was out for a walk when they met a charming child swinging on a gate. The mother, sitting on the porch, said, “If you like her, take her.” And they did. It is thought that Barrett was likely the name of the woman who gave her away.

When still quite small in Lancaster, Clara contracted malaria and had to stay in bed all summer. She was given crayons and soon displayed ability and a love for art. Her mother read her stories about artists. This laid the groundwork for her to eventually develop into an artist whose work would be displayed in the National Academy of Arts in New York and in the Philadelphia Academy.

Many of her portraits were commissioned by South Carolinians and are still owned by families in Lancaster, Chester, Rock Hill, Columbia, Darlington and other South Carolina towns.

When Miss Strait was working on a portrait of Wade Hampton she had his actual uniform. Seeking someone who would be an exact fit, she found that fit in James C. Dozier of Rock Hill, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor in

World War I and later general. The Hampton portrait is in Battle Abbey, Richmond, Virginia, a gallery of portraits of state heroes of the Confederacy.

In her will, Clara Barrett Strait left her estate to the state of South Carolina—\$12,000 and 48 paintings. Of two other paintings she gave one to her friend Mrs. A. C. Hammond, who was administrator of her estate and the other was given to the Lancaster Public Library, a copy of Reubens' "Flight out of Egypt.

On April 14, 1949 the General Assembly of South Carolina gave the paintings to Winthrop College and the money was designated to be used as scholarships for Winthrop students gifted in art.