

Marguerite Neel Williams



Marguerite Neel Williams was born in Thomasville, Georgia on October 31, 1917, the youngest of four children born to Lee and Ethel Flowers Neel. She attended and graduated from Thomasville public schools and enrolled at Duke University. There she met a fellow student, Thomas Lyle Williams, Jr. of Kentucky, and in 1936 they were married. Following their marriage the young couple moved to Chicago where Tom ran his family business. In 1969, after retirement, they returned to Thomasville. Mr. Williams passed away in 1978.

Marguerite's achievements, interests and civic engagement were far-reaching and diverse. The selflessness with which she shared her vision, energy and resources with a wide range of civic, community and cultural organizations on the local, state and national level was truly exemplary. Many organizations benefited greatly from her years of service as Advisor, Trustee and Advocate—positions to which she brought an invaluable mix of thoughtfulness, fairness, business acumen, grassroots preservation experience, common sense and graciousness.

Her passion for preservation began upon her return to Thomasville. Marguerite was instrumental in making historic preservation a vital force in enhancing the livability of Georgia. She was tireless and creative in spearheading preservation activity in her own hometown. A firm believer in the adage, "Think globally, act locally," she translated her philosophical commitment to preservation into a series of innovative projects that have made Thomasville a showplace of historic buildings and neighborhoods, all given vibrant new life. Among the many efforts she led, supported and inspired are: the acquisition of the Lapham-Patterson House as a state-owned historic site; the revitalization of the historic Tockwotton neighborhood and the rescue of an abandoned church as the neighborhood's centerpiece; the installation of a highly successful Main Street program that has transformed the downtown business district from quiet shabbiness to bustling vitality; the conversion of the East Side School into a community cultural center; and the rehabilitation of an old post office, c.1915, as the home of the Thomasville Genealogical, History and Fine Arts Library, the Southwest Georgia Community Foundation, and the Antiques Show Foundation (all organizations that she was instrumental in establishing).

Williams's influence in preservation reached far beyond Thomas County. She was a Founding Trustee of the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, which became the largest statewide preservation organization in the country. As a trustee to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, she became a driving force in the restoration and renovation of the Diplomatic Reception Rooms at the United States Department of State in Washington D.C. Because of Marguerite's influence, these rooms, used by the Secretary of State when

receiving foreign dignitaries, where designed by Georgia architect Edward V. Jones and the millwork and wood materials used in the rooms were milled by a Georgia Lumber Company.

Marguerite's energy, talent and philanthropy also focused on children and education. Her entrepreneurial spirit and tenacity were responsible for the establishment of many organizations that positively touch the lives of children in Thomas County, including the Boys and Girls Club of Thomas County, Thomasville Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and the Thomasville Cultural Center.

Marguerite's commitment and hard work were honored during her life. Some of her notable awards were: The National Trust for Historic Preservation's highest honor, The Louise du Pont Crowninshield Award; Care's Humanitarian Award for generosity of spirit and commitment to better the lives of the world's less fortunate people; Georgia Court Appointed Special Advocates' Voice of the Child Award for advocating for the children of Thomas County; Thomas County's Women of the Year; and an honorary Doctorate of Humanities from Florida State University.

A lasting legacy of her philanthropy was the establishment, at her death, of the Marguerite Neel Williams Fund of the Williams Family Foundation of Georgia. Marguerite always spoke of money like manure; "if you spread it around it can do a lot of good, but if you just let it pile up, it stinks." Her legacy continues to positively impact the lives of Georgians.

Above all of the achievements and awards, and there are far more than those noted here, is the fact that Marguerite Neel Williams was a person who loved her family fiercely and had a curiosity for and love of life.