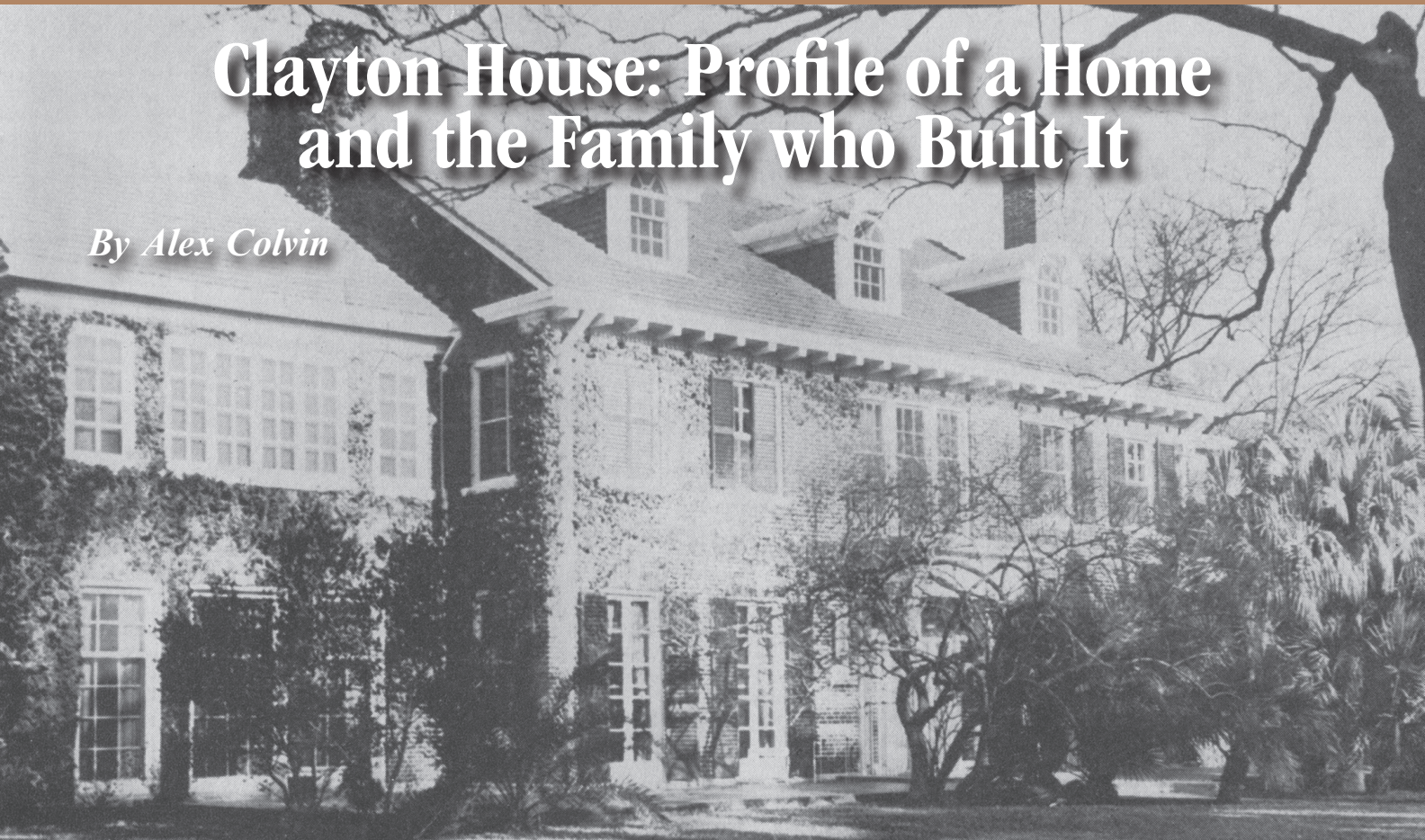


Clayton House: Profile of a Home and the Family who Built It

By Alex Colvin



The Clayton House was donated to the City of Houston in 1958 to be used exclusively as a genealogical research library.

All photos courtesy of Clayton Library.

In 2006 a \$6.8 million private-public funding project formed to restore and renovate the aging Georgian Revival-style Clayton House in the Houston Museum District. Today the structure serves as a library and meeting space for the Houston Public Library's Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research (CLCGR).¹ Visitors to the home are immediately struck by its polished entryway exhibiting artifacts and family mementos, and its museum-quality display serving as testimony to the family who built the home in the early twentieth century. Many of these items praise William "Will" Lockhart Clayton, the cotton magnet who redefined how the United States conducted cotton trade and who became a key architect of the Marshall Plan following World War II. Yet the home, a symbol of the Claytons' prosperity, represents neither the beginning nor the end of their family narrative. This profile places Clayton House within the larger framework of the Clayton family's history, a trajectory that established their place in Houston's historic identity.

In 1917 Houston boosters trumpeted that an amazing "17 railroad lines meet the sea" at Houston. They also boasted that some half-dozen depots around town – the largest being Grand Central Station on Washington

Avenue – served a full twenty-five rail lines.² Visitors unaccustomed to Houston weather who arrived by train noticed something the minute they stepped onto the rail platform – the heat. Yet, by the time they reached their destination, they realized it was not the heat so much as it was the humidity they felt. One could find partial refuge inside the terminal or a downtown skyscraper.

Along the streets, women still used parasols; indoors electric pedestal and ceiling fans offered the latest cooling technology. Folks made steady use of stiff hand-held fans bearing the ads of local merchants. With smoking considered both fashionable and harmless, cigarette smoke swirled in every part of every building – even hospital rooms.

To get around town or to the suburbs, people could hail a rattling, privately-owned jitney or try their luck on five-cent trolleys. The trolleys competed with increasing traffic from personal and commercial vehicles as well as pedestrians, all jamming downtown streets that bore neither traffic lights, stop signs, nor roadway markings.³

Before climbing into the jitney, a visitor could purchase a copy of the *Houston Chronicle* or the *Houston Post*, for two cents from paperboys, some as young as five years old.⁴ On the ride to the new Southmore Addition neighbor-

hood, inner-city brick streets gave way to clouds of dust on oyster shell. At then 5300 Carolina Street (later changed to Caroline) sat a splendid two-story, double-winged Georgian-Revival style estate, home to Will Clayton — Houston's reigning cotton king — and his family. Stately rather than opulent, the site surrounded by a waist-high white picket fence commanded an entire city block, most of it for the gardens, none of which obscured the home's view. No other home in the suburb occupied such a huge lot.

Henry F. MacGregor, former manager of the financially troubled Houston City Street Railway Company, and F. J. DeMeritt, formerly of Galveston Street Railway Company, developed the Southmore Addition in two sections consisting of just over twenty-one city blocks divided into ten lots each.⁵ Clayton House was built in Section One. A quiet, upper middle-class enclave near the city's southernmost boundary, tree-lined and picturesque, Southmore was far from the bustle of downtown but within a few minutes' drive to Rice Institute.⁶ To the suburb's immediate south within walking distance lay hundreds of acres of land formerly owned by George Hermann who bequeathed it to the city for Houston's first major public park in 1914.⁷

Southmore Addition was bounded by Fannin Street to the west, Calumet to the south, Southmore Avenue to the north, and the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks to the east. Built on a site two blocks in from the suburb's western boundary, Clayton House fronted Caroline Street and the rising sun, and was bounded north and south by Prospect and Oakdale Avenues respectively. San Jacinto Street ran behind it.⁸

Prior to 1914 the Southmore Addition land was part of the Obedience Smith survey, a land grant given to a pioneer woman who came to Texas just weeks prior to the Texas Revolution in 1836. Nevertheless, because she resided here prior to Texas independence, she received from the impresario head rights of a league and a labor (more than 5,000 acres), and she resettled in Harris County. City officials and developers carved suburbs such as Montrose, Southampton, Westmoreland, Mandell Place, parts of River Oaks, and what became the Museum District from this grant.⁹

The home's exclusive location was not its only outstanding feature; its designer was a locally born architect, Birdsall Briscoe, whose devotion to historically accurate details earned him favor among Houston's blue-chip families such as the Blaffers, Andersons, and Paddocks, in neighborhoods like Courtlandt Place and, later, River Oaks. Briscoe came with his own distinguished pedigree, being the grandson of John Richardson Harris, the founder of Harrisburg.¹⁰

Briscoe's original drawings of Clayton House make it easy to see why he was so highly esteemed.¹¹ His designs show an exquisite simplicity and straightforward Colonial style with classical flourishes such as an entablature over the front door, paneled pilasters, a corniced roofline complete with dentils, and a green clay tile roof with three



William and Susan Vaughan Clayton.

evenly spaced fan-lit dormers. The front façade was enhanced with the standard Georgian-Revival complement of five ranked windows evenly spaced and double hung. Overall it resurrected the original Colonial style but paid homage to the Roman. It embodied that time-honored maxim, which has guided all great architecture: less is more. It had nothing phony about it, nothing superficial. The interior exhibited the same careful attention.

The Swiss-born master woodcarver based in Austin, Texas, Peter Mansbendel, was later hired to sculpt a mantel and fireplace motif for the family library on the first floor. The living room was well-appointed with decor and finely carved wood paneling, courtesy of the New York galleries of Charles of London, the preferred decorator of Will Clayton's wife Susan Vaughan Clayton, who was enamored of Mansbendel's tastefully-arranged rooms full of antiques and furnishings salvaged from aristocratic manor houses of Europe.¹²

No hard figures exist on the costs involved, but when completed, the Clayton's home reflected a design that came with a sizeable price tag. Most rooms, for example, were paneled, if not fully then with wainscoting, and finished with heavy crown molding. It had two fireplaces on the first floor and electricity throughout. On the northwest corner of the lot stood a two-stall garage that the family converted to a guest house facing Oakdale in 1928. The three-stall carriage house was added in 1932. First used as a livery, it later served as the garage for Will Clayton's

fleet of cars, including a Maxwell, a Pierce Arrow, and a black Cadillac limousine.¹³

The first floor of the main house's northern wing served as the porte-cochere where one entered the kitchen and pantry, which had a coal chute on the back wall. The solid maple staircase in the front hall led to a matching upstairs hall flanked by four evenly spaced bedrooms, each pair sharing a bath. A back hall stairwell led to the kitchen. The third floor attic contained the gymnasium and a separate bedroom and bath.

In 1936 a rear second-story porch was added to the main house. During this period Susan V. Clayton surprised her husband by expanding the home's southern patio and creating a library with paneling, a fireplace mantel, and carved relief by Mansbendel.¹⁴ When completed, in quarter-sewn oak, the relief featured the intricate life of the cotton plant, its sinews and vine unwinding, blossoming in places, from the floor to the ceiling along a nine-foot path, then downward again on the other side of the fireplace.

Research materials available to Clayton House documents give insight into how the family used the rooms. For example, the Claytons served dinners, complete with Baccarat crystal, in the formal dining room, which featured not only a portrait of Susan V. Clayton standing on a hillside but also a small parrot-shaped bell she used to summon the serving staff. Though the staff did not live on the property, the second floor of the carriage house was their break and changing area.¹⁵

Over the next four years the Claytons raised four daughters and hosted innumerable family visits. In 1958, two years before her death, Susan V. Clayton deeded the home to the City of Houston for a library following the death of Will Clayton in 1966.



The Claytons served countless dinners in this beautiful blue dining room. Tours are available for guests wanting to view the dining room, as well as learn about the house.

In 1968 the building underwent extensive remodeling to become the first home of the Clayton Library, which housed the burgeoning collection of family histories and genealogical research materials and represented Houston's first stand-alone genealogy library. It remained Houston's epicenter for family history research until 1988, when the Houston Public Library (HPL) constructed the Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research, a new two-story brick facility, on an adjacent lot. Prospect Street was converted into its parking lot. This expansion paralleled the emergence of genealogy as a hugely-popular national pastime thanks to books like Alex Haley's *Roots* published in 1976.

By 2006 the Clayton House (nearing its ninetieth birthday) had begun to show its age. Interest in genealogy skyrocketed across the country giving birth to related industries and causing massive amounts of new research materials to become accessible, thanks in part to the Internet and the digitization of millions of records. Clayton House needed to stay relevant in this new era.

Clayton Library Friends, a non-profit support group, which had played an integral role in material acquisition and fundraising for the Clayton House library since 1987, was tapped to marshal the fundraising efforts along with the City of Houston and the Clayton family to combine forward-thinking expansion with respectful preservation. Susan Clayton Garwood, a great-granddaughter of Will Clayton headed the list for the private-public partnership to bring about the project. Garwood held fundraising events, and also contributed generously, as did the City of Houston, to gain approximately \$4 million.

The architect firm of Glassman, Shoemake, and



Will Clayton's library was a surprise from Susan Clayton to her husband in 1936. This room still has the original paneling and Peter Mansbendel mantel carving.

Maldonado designed the project, which took three years to complete. The grounds blossomed with period flora and each building realized new life and new purpose, while maintaining its historical integrity. The Carriage House became a new meeting area with modern lighting and interiors to accommodate large events. Glazed white brick, a homage to Briscoe's original design, replaced the stall doors. The garage-turned-guest-house was modernized with equipment and lighting to serve as offices for various HPL-related functions. The main house underwent the most extensive overhaul, removing the dark paneled walls and floor rugs in many rooms and replacing them with lighter colors and recessed lighting and bookshelves to hold the library's voluminous collections. The entry hall became a welcoming panoply of displays showcasing Clayton family documents and images. The old library, with its Charles of London paneled walls and Mansbendel mantel, however, remained the most intimate room, dutifully preserved as a comfortable reading room or meeting space, with upgraded lighting.

Those involved with the restoration say none of it could have happened without the passion and financial support of Susan Clayton Garwood, who lives in the Briscoe-designed Clayton summer home in River Oaks which she inherited. Living in a home imbued with "so much history" that is "unique in many ways," Garwood explains ultimately inspired her to become active in Clayton House's preservation.¹⁶

Along the way, Garwood appeared on the news to advocate for historic structures. In 2010, when a 1936-era Briscoe-designed home in her River Oaks neighborhood was razed by its new property owners, someone called local

television station, KTRK Channel 13, which sent Debra Wrigley and the station's helicopter to film the event. As backhoes ate away the structure, Garwood told Wrigley in a segment that aired during the evening's broadcast, "My friends told me it was being torn down so I raced over with my camera and ran up the driveway ... and started taking pictures and yelling at the contractors." She admitted to Wrigley that watching the demolition was emotionally difficult because the home had been built for her great-great-aunt, Dessie Burdine Clayton. It had been kept in good condition during its seventy-five years, but was never protected as a historic site. In retrospect, says Garwood, "It was important for the public to see that people do that [destroy historic homes] willy-nilly without giving it a second thought. So I'm pleased it was on the news. Hopefully it sent a message to buyers down the road."¹⁷

Garwood has more immediate family ties to Clayton House, however. Her grandmother, Ellen Burdine Clayton (1903-1993), was Will Clayton's eldest daughter and grew up in the home. Garwood clearly remembers her childhood visits to her great-grandfather's home. Snapshots of one of those visits are among the Clayton House's research materials. In most images she is very small, perhaps four or five years old, holding her great-grandfather's hand, and both are smiling. She is wearing a fancy dress. Asked about the images, Garwood explains it was during a period soon after Will Clayton was widowed but still involved with the European affairs for which he became so famous. "[He] ...was in Paris a lot, and he would often buy these little dresses for me and bring them back from Paris. I was the first great-granddaughter and I was named for his late wife so he really did dote on me even



From the right side, spectators get a view of the home's porte-cochere.



This plaque greets the library visitors, explaining the significance of the house that was designated as a Texas Historic Landmark in 1988.

though he did have some great-grandsons at the time. He would come home from Paris with all these exquisite little dresses. So, often, my mother would put me in these dresses when I would come over and visit with him... we called him Daddy Will. ... I definitely remember being here in this house when I was little.”¹⁸

She also remembers other events, such as regular family dinners: “We would have dinner here every Friday night, with my parents and my brother ... it was just the four of us, and we would have dinner with him [Will Clayton]. I was around three, four, five years old [when] ... he would come visit us in our house in Briargrove. ... It was great fun. It was a formal dinner served in the dining room. And amazingly, he [Will Clayton] was happy to have the little-bitties join at the dinner table. I would sit on telephone books ... so I could reach the table. [After dinner] we would retire to the living room ... and have coffee. And he just let me run around. I have very happy memories of being here. Nobody was admonishing me or telling me to stop it or don’t touch that.”¹⁹

Memories like those are largely what caused Garwood to become so deeply involved in the home’s renovation. Its garden restoration was her personal research project. The Clayton House gardens have always served as its floral foil, setting it off, but no original designs or photos had survived. Garwood explains, “We didn’t have much to go on at all. And of course the whole field of landscape architecture was just [getting] underway [in 1917.] Having nothing to go on, ... one idea I came up with was to use plantings that would have been found in the nursery trade at the time the house was built ... and plant those things.

I ... went to Teas Nursery, and they had lots of wonderful archives, all their catalogues from their early years. ... I came up with a big list of plant choices. So we worked from that list. For instance, today we all have Saint Augustine grass, and azaleas and [wax leaf] ligustrum hedges. Well, in 1917, nobody [had those]. Instead we used Bermuda grass, and privet hedges and ... fruit trees.”²⁰

The painstaking care Garwood took to restore the early twentieth-century landscape design, stems from her desire to continue a gardening tradition, which earned her great-grandmother accolades from The Garden Club of America. In 1939 members chose Houston to hold their annual convention, and after judges visited Clayton House, Susan Vaughan Clayton was awarded top honors. This raises the question, with such high standards, does Garwood think her great-grandmother would be pleased with her efforts? Susan brightens as she answers, “Oh I do! Absolutely. ... I think she would be pleased.”

With the Clayton House fully restored and protected by its historic status, generations of patrons will be able to enjoy its exterior grounds and its classic interiors that also serve as historic settings for state-of-the-art meeting facilities. Because CLCGR is now a full participant in the LDS Microfilm Affiliate Program, researchers can access the Family History Library’s vast genealogy holdings in Salt Lake City, Utah, directly through Clayton House, saving time and money.²¹ Patrons can also do research in the Clayton family related books, documents, and images, which highlight the socio-economic aspects of U.S. culture that played out in microcosm throughout the family’s history.

The Claytons were instrumental, for example, in the development of Burdines, which eventually became Macy’s, one of the nation’s most popular department stores. This same family took part in an agrarian tradition that typified the underpinnings of the U.S. economy for several generations. Likewise, the choice of décor by Susan Vaughan Clayton for Clayton House, and by women like her in other such homes, reflected the aspiring taste of the upwardly mobile, and its application helped an embryonic antiquities salvage trade blossom during the early twentieth century. Finally, the Claytons cared so deeply about the cultural health of their hometown that they donated an entire estate to the City of Houston. Protected today both as a Texas Historic Landmark, and a City of Houston Protected Historic Landmark, the Clayton’s donation will undoubtedly continue to enrich Houstonians and visitors well into the future. 🍷

Alex Colvin is a senior history major, minoring in anthropology at the University of Houston. He initiated the Walter Prescott Webb Historical Society chapter, Webb UH Main, and served as its first president from 2014 to 2015. Alex is also an experienced genealogist and retired freelance investigative journalist.

Please see the next page for more information on Clayton House; Clayton Library, Center for Genealogical Research; and Clayton Library Friends.

CLAYTON HOUSE UPDATE

Clayton House, guest house and carriage house were restored meeting the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) gold certification, the second-highest ranking obtainable under the system. The project was voted "Best Historic Renovation" by *Houston Business Journal* in 2009. Moreover, the Clayton family was honored by Preservation Houston with their "President's Award" in 2009 for their long support and public service. The three historic buildings have been designated as a Protected Landmark of the City of Houston, and Clayton House has been recognized as a Recorded Texas Historical Landmark. The historic buildings as well as a newer, two-story research library building comprise the campus today for Clayton Library, Center for Genealogical Research, Houston, Texas, which is one of the top three genealogical research libraries in the United States. Clayton Library is part of the Houston Public Library system, but it is also supported by Clayton Library Friends (CLF), a not-for-profit organization whose sole mission is to provide volunteer as well as generous financial support for the library. Last year, CLF headed up a campaign to promote national visibility for Clayton Library when they were able to entice *Genealogy Roadshow* (GR) to come to Houston where the program was filmed at Clayton House as well as the Julia Ideson Library, Downtown Houston. The Houston segment of GR was broadcast on local PBS Houston Channel 8 on May 31, 2016. To watch, please go to www.pbs.org/show/genealogy-roadshow/. Furthermore, CLF is also sponsoring a Genealogy Symposium on August 6, 2016, at Rice University Campus, featuring speaker, D. Joshua Taylor, who is co-host of *Genealogy Roadshow*.

More information about Clayton Library and Clayton Library Friends can be found at www.claytonlibraryfriends.org and www.houstonlibrary.org/clayton/about_history.html. Or you may contact Randy Pace, Executive Board Director, Public Relations, CLF at grandypace@aol.com.

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