



MARY REYNOLDS BABCOCK



KATHARINE SMITH REYNOLDS



BARBARA BABCOCK MILLHOUSE

The written by PHOEBE ZERWICK
Women
of **Reynolda**

Reynolda House was the realization of Katharine Smith Reynolds's vision. But as the care of the home passed into her daughter's and then granddaughter's hands, each woman added her indelible mark to the iconic estate.

photography by
 STACEY HAINES

Historical images provided by
 Reynolda House Museum of American Art

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INSIDE THE HOUSE, MUSIC floats into every room. A breeze washes in through open windows. It is the early 1900s, and milk arrives daily, fresh from the dairy. In the distance, at the end of a path through the woods, children play in the lake.

Reynolda House stands at the edge of a meadow, a white stucco bungalow with green shutters — modest in spite of its 64 rooms.

Katharine Reynolds manages the estate from an office on the first floor. She imagined much of this creation as a young college girl from small-town North Carolina. In 1899, she wrote to her college roommate: “When I marry, I shall go to Europe on my wedding trip, and I shall bring home a wonderful work of art. And then I shall buy a great estate, and I shall have a thousand cattle on a hill and flowers all around.”

Six years later, Katharine married a tobacco tycoon, a distant cousin 30 years her senior named R.J. Reynolds. She was a dark-haired beauty; he was a lifelong bachelor enthralled with his spirited young wife. As she predicted, their honeymoon took them to Europe, and when they returned, they moved into R.J.’s home in downtown Winston-Salem, not far from his growing tobacco empire. Katharine could have easily settled into a life of wealth and domestic ease. Instead, she chose a life of purpose. The year after her wedding, Katharine bought 104 acres of farmland about two miles west of town. By the time she was 31, and a mother of four, she owned 660 acres — ample space for the cattle, gardens, and comfortable country home she had imagined.

❖ KATHARINE SMITH REYNOLDS ❖

Katharine Smith was born in 1880 in Mount Airy, about 30 miles north of Winston-Salem in the foothills of the Blue Ridge. Her father, a prosperous farmer and businessman, educated his daughters as well as his sons. Katharine spent three years at a women’s college in Greensboro called the State Normal and Industrial College, where she learned the radical notion that educated women could change the world.

She brought those ideas to her marriage. She pressed her husband for better working conditions for his employees. Under her influence, he provided hot lunches and water fountains in his factories and built a nursery

where working mothers could leave their children.

And she brought those ideas to the planning of her estate. The home, she decided, would be built for healthy living; her own poor health, due to a childhood bout with rheumatic fever, inspired this focus on her family’s physical well-being. The farm would be a model for social reform.

While other wealthy American families looked to European castles and manors for inspiration, Katharine preferred the bungalow style and hired Charles Barton Keen, an architect from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to design an informal family home with an open floor plan and lots of porches. She installed stainless-steel counters in the kitchen and pantry for hygiene. She built an outdoor swimming pool for exercise. And before the family even moved into the house, she established her own dairy, ensuring that she could protect her children from milk-borne illness.

KATHARINE DEVOTED HERSELF TO THE farm, her real passion. “The farm is flourishing now,” she wrote in a letter to a friend in December 1912. “I am acting superintendent, and good management is beginning to tell.” The farm served almost as an early agricultural extension office, testing out new methods of crop rotation, soil analysis, and animal husbandry.

Katharine put her beliefs about social progress to work, too, building churches, schools, and modern housing — all in white stucco to match the family home — for farm workers. She tended to the smallest details. “Please see that the following directions are carried out to the letter,” she wrote in a memo to dairy workers in 1912. “Before commencing to milk, brush off all the cows. Milkers’ hands and cows’ udders must be washed with soap and water and rinsed before commencing to milk — one cow at a time just before milking her, of course.”

Construction on the house took eight years, with Katharine making plans as meticulously as she did for the farm. She chose arts-and-crafts-style furnishings and decor, but again, the larger ideals about landscape design and healthy living compelled her. She hired landscape architect Thomas Sears to plan the gardens and grounds. The focus was nature over formality; the house would be part of the landscape. The front porch looks out over formal gardens and a meadow, the back porch over woods and a man-made lake.

Inside, Katharine installed a pipe organ so that her



HOUSE





home would be filled with music. And every bedroom had its own bathroom, not so much for luxury as for hygiene.

Even when she and R.J. still lived in town, Katharine often brought their children — Dick, Mary, Nancy, and Smith — to the farm to play. And the family spent part of the summer camping at the estate. They would pitch a tent and cook over a fire, their father seated in a camp chair, stroking his beard. He was a doting father, yet old enough to be their grandfather. In 1917, the year the house was completed, R.J. became gravely ill with what was later believed to be pancreatic cancer. He spent most of the year in hospitals, often far from home, and returned just in time for the move into Reynolda for Christmas. He died seven months later.

THERE WAS NO QUESTION OF WHETHER Katharine and the children would stay at Reynolda: It was her house, her farm, her vision. After her husband's death, Katharine expanded the school and continued to buy land for polo grounds, stables, fields, and orchards. She organized elaborate outdoor plays for the children. In the summer, there was swimming and in the winter,

during rare snows, sledding. And she played host to regular Sunday evening parties and dances for the school's teachers and its dashing headmaster, J. Edward Johnston. He was much younger than Katharine, but a romance soon flowered.

They married in June 1921. Her eldest daughter Mary, then 12, wrote about the wedding in her diary: "At about 7:15, Mother was married to Mr. Johnston. The affair was very quiet. Smith was ring bearer, and Nancy and myself were flower girls. We are trying to keep it quiet, but about the [whole] town knows it."

Katharine understood well that her husband needed a more lucrative occupation than teaching so he wouldn't be dependent on his wealthy wife. She moved her family briefly to New York, where her husband trained to be a banker. He also wanted his own child. The first baby, a daughter, was born premature and died a day later. Katharine became pregnant again in 1924. The pregnancy was risky for Katharine because of her age and poor health. She moved back to New York to be near better doctors, once again leaving Reynolda. The baby, a boy, was healthy, but three days after his birth, in May, Katharine died of an



Katharine Smith (top left and above center) knew as a young woman what she wanted in life — a family, a grand home, and the chance to make a difference. In 1905, she married R.J. Reynolds (seated above), the wealthy tobacco tycoon. Soon after, she planned and oversaw construction of Reynolda House, the centerpiece of her model farm. In an unusual move for the time, only her name appears on the deed. Thirty years her senior, R.J. died in 1918. In 1921, Katharine married J. Edward Johnston (bottom left), the headmaster of the school Katharine established on the estate.

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Left: Katharine's daughter Mary (seated), was the last Reynolds to live in Reynolda House. When her husband, Charles, joined the Army during World War II, she brought her children to Winston-Salem to live. Her younger daughter, Barbara (pictured at her mother's knee), continues to look after the home today as a member of the Reynolda House Board of Directors.



Right: Smith Reynolds, Katharine and R.J.'s younger son, quit school as a teenager to spend more time flying. He lived for a short while at Reynolda with his wife, Broadway actress Libby Holman, before his death in 1932. Winston-Salem's Smith Reynolds Airport is named for him.

embolism. She was 44. Mary was 15 at the time. She was away at school and met the train carrying her mother's body in Philadelphia for the trip home.

WITH KATHARINE'S DEATH, THE TRUSTEES would manage the finances, but who would care for the landscape, the farm, and the village as she had? Her husband and baby moved away. The four orphaned children were left in the care of their uncle Will Reynolds, who hired cousin-in-law Robert E. Lassiter and his wife to care for them at Reynolda.

Will Reynolds indulged the girls, sending them to art school in France, with the expectation that both would soon marry. They did, both in 1929, and they settled in Greenwich, Connecticut.

The brothers had little interest in formal education and took up flying airplanes. With the girls settled up North, the boys made occasional use of the estate. In 1931, Smith, the youngest, married a Broadway singer and brought his bride to live with him at Reynolda. But

the marriage only brought more uncertainty — and pain — to Reynolda. One July night, after a party, Smith was shot to death in an upstairs bedroom. His wife and a friend were indicted for murder, but the charges were dropped, leaving a scandal and an unsolved mystery.

With the house usually unoccupied and expenses rising, the trustees talked about breaking up the estate and selling it.

✿ MARY REYNOLDS BABCOCK ✿

Mary was accustomed to wealth and fit in easily with the life of a Greenwich socialite. She and her sister won prizes for flower arranging, and when there was time, she painted at her home studio.

To her children, she was elegant if reserved, perfectly groomed in a linen dress and flats. To her friends, and there were many, she was the life of the party, serving up gin martinis and dancing the hula, her long arms and legs flying.

But Greenwich was never home. In 1934, when

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Now a nationally renowned gallery exhibiting the works of such masters as Mary Cassatt, Frederic Church, and Georgia O'Keeffe, Reynolda's rooms look much as they did when Katharine Reynolds lived here 100 years ago.

she was 26, Mary and her husband, Charles Babcock, agreed to buy out the other heirs' interests in Reynolda. "My father would have gone to that meeting. And he would have heard everyone out," Barbara, their second daughter, says today. "He would have heard Dick say, 'I don't want this house.' He would have heard Henry, Nancy's husband, say, 'We're happy in Greenwich.' He would have let them all talk. When he said, 'Mary is willing to acquire this for such and such,' they were really surprised."

Mary managed the estate from a distance. She redecorated, changed the front-porch entrance into a more formal hallway, and transformed the home into a holiday retreat, with an indoor bowling alley, squash court, pool, and mirrored Art Deco bar. Mary and her family spent vacations at Reynolda and entertained family and friends.

WHEN THE UNITED STATES ENTERED World War II, Charles enlisted in the Army, and Mary moved her young children, ages 4 to 10, home to North Carolina. The main house was too large to run under wartime rationing, so Mary and the children lived in a smaller house on the estate. She volunteered as a nurse's aide and canteen worker, tended a victory garden, and for

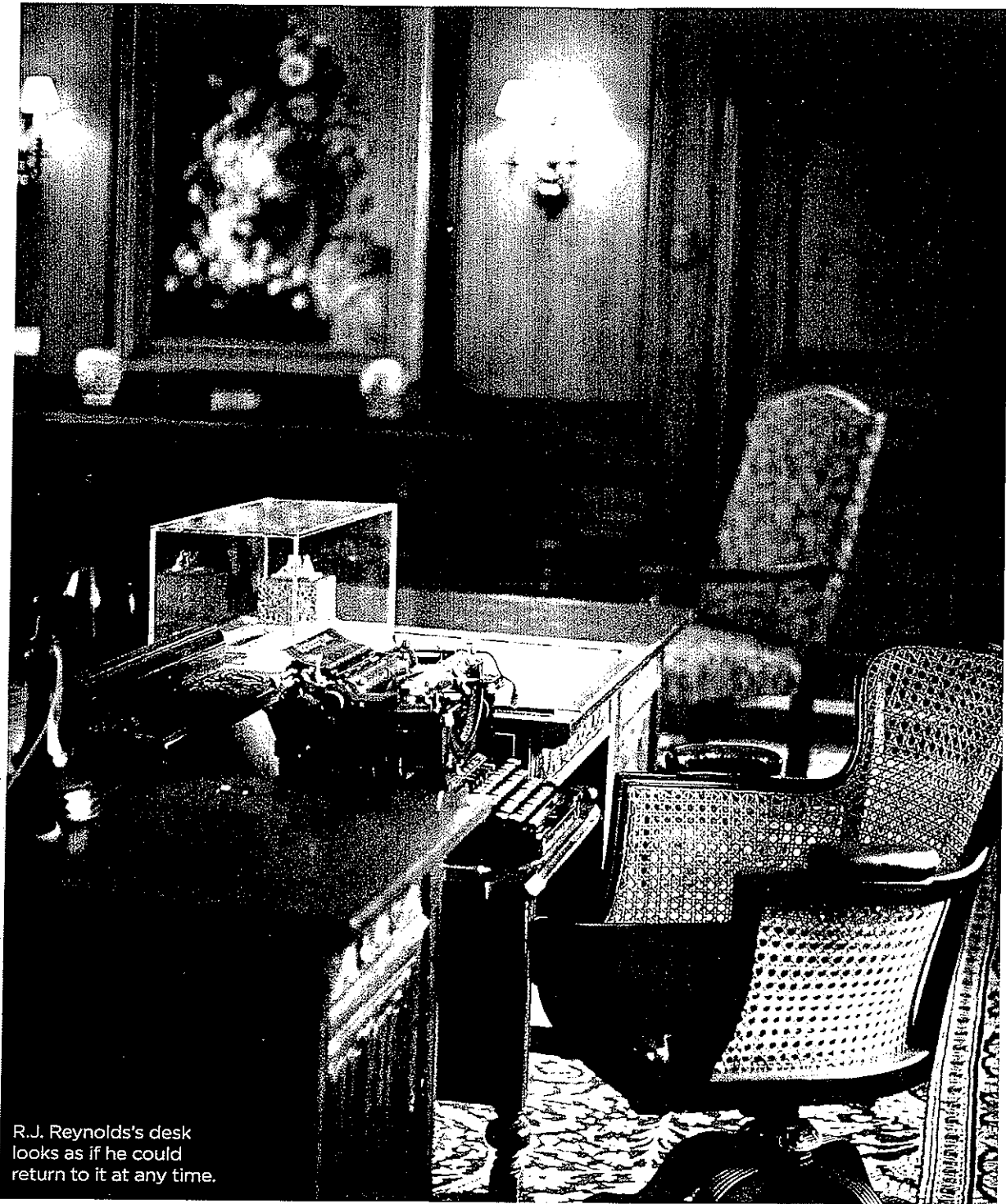
the first time handled the financial details of the estate without her husband. The expenses worried her.

"I feel that perhaps it would be better to sell the place instead of having it torn down for tax reasons someday," she wrote in a letter to her sister. There was talk of turning the house into a veteran's hospital. But neighbors objected, and Mary hated the idea of losing the family home. "So I guess Reynolda will go on as is to live a longer life and end as an ancient ruin but with the charm of its homey atmosphere still there," she wrote to her sister in 1945.

After the war, Mary and her family returned to Greenwich. Mary and her husband soon found a way to relieve some of the tax burden from the estate. They offered 350 acres to Wake Forest College, a small Baptist college near Raleigh, if the college would move to Winston-Salem. The gift kept the house and gardens intact.

In 1948, once Charles realized he could run his business from North Carolina, the family settled full-time in Reynolda. The children were away at school during these years but came home for holidays, celebrated with parties.

In 1953, Mary died of cancer. She was 44, the same age as her mother at her death.



R.J. Reynolds's desk looks as if he could return to it at any time.

✿ BARBARA BABCOCK MILLHOUSE ✿

Barbara, whose full name is now Barbara Babcock Millhouse, was a college student when her mother died. The loss was great, but Barbara imagines not as terrible as when Mary lost her mother at 15. "When mother died, I was fairly independent in my life," she says.

She studied art history at Smith College, a women's college in Massachusetts where students learned intellectual independence and a sense of duty to serve others. It was a path her grandmother would have recognized. After graduating from Smith, Barbara moved to New York, studied design, and began collecting art with the idea that

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by living with art, she would come to understand it.

Barbara's father remarried and lived at Reynolda. But he knew that the house's long-term welfare would depend on the family, at some point, finding a public purpose for the estate. In 1964, they arrived at that purpose — Charles established Reynolda House Inc. as a nonprofit organization that would build a collection of American art. The collection started with a \$300,000 contribution from three family foundations. Barbara led the effort.

She consulted often with one of the curators of American art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. They looked for paintings that were the best examples of works by significant American artists — even when those artists had long gone out of fashion. The first nine paintings included one titled *The Andes of Ecuador*, by Frederic Church, and one called the *The Sierra Nevada*, by Albert Bierstadt. Both are landscapes by artists of the Hudson River School, which by the 1960s

was considered an old-fashioned, even embarrassing, period in American art. But Barbara saw more. She went on to publish a history of the period, *American Wilderness: The Story of the Hudson River School of Painting*. Eventually, the rest of the art world revised its opinion about these romantic painters who made the continent's vast wilderness a subject of art.

TODAY, THE ART COLLECTION AT REYNOLDA is considered one of the best in the country, with works of 18th- and 19th-century painters and modern artists such as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Alexander Calder. Most of the artwork hangs in rooms furnished as they were in Katharine's day. Interpretive exhibits explain Katharine's utopian vision for the farm and village — now converted into shops and restaurants. The gardens are open to the public, and the grounds are part of the campus of Wake Forest University.

Barbara knows her mother would have appreciated the art collection. Mary was not a collector, but early in her marriage, on a trip to Berlin, she and her husband bought two paintings by an abstract expressionist named Lyonel Feininger. Today,



Barbara Babcock Millhouse (above), who founded the art museum in her family's estate, stands in front of Frederic Church's *The Andes of Ecuador*, one of the museum's first acquisitions. *Mrs. Harrison Gray Otis* (left) is by Gilbert Stuart, a foremost American portraitist famous for his paintings of George Washington.

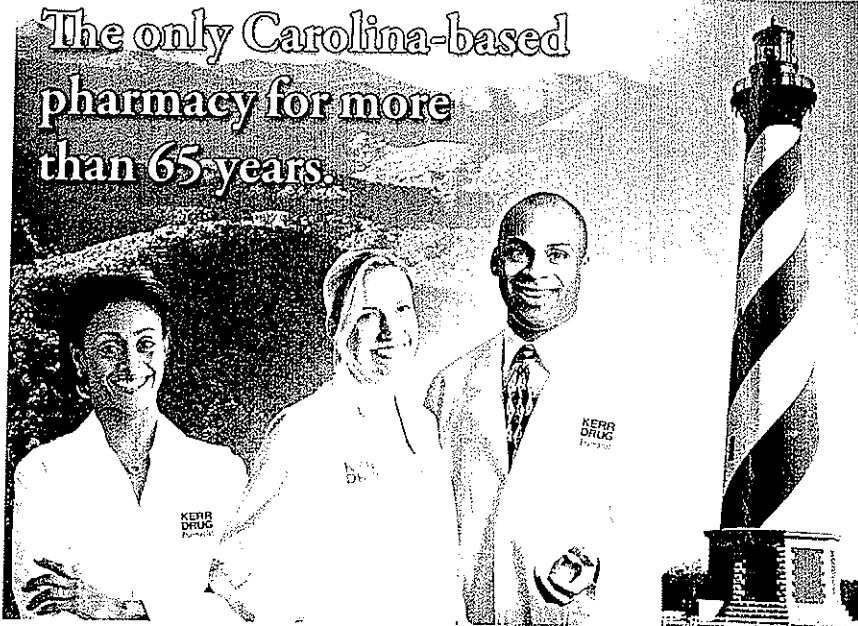
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one hangs over the mantel in the library at Reynolda.

Barbara made art and collecting her life's work. One of her latest additions to the collection, a painting titled *For Internal Use Only*, by the abstract artist Stuart Davis, hangs in a gallery on the second floor. The painting is bright and jazzy, in yellow, pink, orange, and red, and suggests a pianist at an upright piano. Several years after Barbara bought the painting, the museum archivist was looking through a box of Mary's papers. One clipping, from *Life* magazine, caught his attention.

It was an article about Stuart Davis and included a full-page reproduction of *For Internal Use Only*. The painting, with its playful mood and bright colors, must have spoken to Mary as it did to her daughter.

The thought still gives Barbara chills. "Did I buy that painting, or did my mother?"

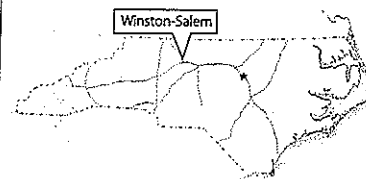
At Reynolda, the character of which has been shaped by three generations of women, it's hard to say.

Phoebe Zerwick is a freelance journalist and a lecturer in the English Department at Wake Forest University, where she teaches writing and journalism.

Visit

Reynolda House

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