

REAL STORIES - REAL PEOPLE IN THE SPOTLIGHT!



Arthur Watts Clark, Sr., 97, has lived a long and varied life in the military, business, politics, outdoor adventures, and in devoted service to our church and its members. Although born in Seattle, Washington, Arthur has deep roots in North Carolina. He traces his ancestry to Gerard Snowden Watts and Ann Elizabeth Wolvington Watts, parents of George Washington Watts who became our church's foremost benefactor.



PHOTOS: Gerard S. Watts (1825-1906} and Ann E. Wolvington Watts (1830-1914)]

They were also the grandparents of Arthur's mother, Nell Snowden Watts Clark. She met her future husband in France during World War I (1914-1918) where she was a Red Cross worker and he was a military ambulance driver. Their romance flourished but the Spanish Flu Pandemic left them stranded in postwar France, delaying their return and marriage. The wedding finally took place in 1919 at the South Duke Street mansion of John Sprunt Hill, a

prominent Elder in our church, who had married Annie Louise Watts, the daughter of Nell's uncle, George Washington Watts.

From his home in Seattle, Arthur travelled across the country to enroll in 1939 as an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. There, he distinguished himself for his academic prowess, served as President of the Alpha Chapter of North Carolina Phi Beta Kappa, and graduated at the top of his class in three years as a member of the Class of 1942. At Chapel Hill, his enduring curiosity about the earth combined with an active lifestyle led him to major in Geology, a subject that he later studied at the University of California, Berkeley where he earned an M. A. degree.

Following graduation from Chapel Hill, Arthur married the love of his life, the former Mary Cannon (1919-2018), then pursuing a graduate degree in Theater and who later became a talented artist. He thereafter reported for service in the Army Air Forces early in World War II. Military training took him to Boca Raton, Florida, then to Yale University where he received his commission as a 2nd Lieutenant, to Oklahoma City (3rd Air Force), and then to intelligence school in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, prior to deployment to China in 1944 as a combat intelligence officer. Thus began a long and distinguished career with the air forces in China, as an air Intelligence officer, later with the Air Force Reserve and periodic active duty beginning during the Korean War (1950-1953), before retiring in the 1970s as a Major General.

Arthur's globe-trotting days began when his family resided in Europe. At age 4, he was in Paris in 1927 when that city gave a tumultuous welcome to Charles A. Lindbergh, who had landed his monoplane, the "Spirit of St. Louis," in the historic first non-stop transatlantic flight. Thereafter, he would travel, courtesy of the U. S. Army, initially aboard a Liberty ship in an 88-ship convoy from Hampton Roads, Virginia east to China via the Mediterranean Sea, Suez Canal, Red Sea, to torrid Bombay, by train to Calcutta, over the Himalayan range ("The Hump") by air to bases in southwest China (Kunming, Yunnan Province) and eventually to Shanghai. His journey home involved a Navy transport to the States, and by rail to North Carolina thereby having circled the globe. Retirement found Arthur exploring the "ends of the earth": the Alaskan Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Canadian arctic, the North Pole from the Russian arctic aboard a nuclear-powered Russian ice breaker, the Northwest Passage, and the Antarctic Peninsula as well as the South Pole. His travels combined with his interest in geology intensified his appreciation of the earth and for one of

his favorite hymns, “for the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies.”

Arthur’s deployment in 1944 to the Asian Pacific (China-Burma-India) Theater reflected support for ally China in its Second Sino-Japanese War {1937-1945} and to pin down Japanese forces from deployment elsewhere in the Pacific Theater. His 35th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron equipped with converted Lockheed P-38s known as F-5 planes (“Spies in the Skies”) was attached to famed General Claire Chennault’s 14th Air Force (“Flying Tigers”). Travelling with a camera satisfied one of his life-long interests, but his duties were many on airborne missions, and as an intelligence officer, photographer, photo interpreter, mail censor, administrator, organizer, foreman, and even longshoreman whenever the unit moved to new locations. Even as distant from the front lines as were the air bases danger existed: Japanese bombings, spies, collaborators, saboteurs, thieves, profiteers, rodents, disease, mechanical problems with the aircraft, and, late in the war, fratricidal war among the Chinese. Never did his favorite scriptural passage, the 23rd Psalm, seem more relevant to his risky situation.

V-J Day came and went 75 years ago, but Arthur remained in China. Not until December 15, 1945 did he bid farewell to Shanghai aboard the transport “General H. L. Scott.” The two-week transpacific crossing to Seattle turned out to be an adventure. His vessel bore the same name as another transport which hit a mine and suffered serious casualties. Word of the disaster caused his distraught parents to suffer what turned out to be short-lived anxiety. Arrival Stateside did not end the drama because Arthur was placed in charge of a Pullman car on a troop train bound for Fort Bragg. The car was filled with 35 black and white enlistees each of whom Arthur alphabetically assigned to seats and berths, effectively integrating the car destined for the then Jim Crow South. No sooner had he made the assignments than the train came to a sudden stop, An avalanche of snow blocked the rails. The tracks cleared, the train steamed eastward via Chicago for four nights before reaching its destination.

Arthur’s civilian career was as varied as was his military career: forest ranger in the Pacific Northwest, boilermaker on a Navy seaplane tender in a West Coast shipyard, world traveler, and author of books on his experiences, corporate executive. Life in business took him to Durham and Home Security Life Insurance Company where he joined his cousin, Board Chairman George Watts Hill, Jr. to become the company’s chief executive officer and board chairman. Arthur steered the company and its policy-holders, many of whom were

African-Americans, into the civil rights headwinds of the 1960s by actively promoting racial integration of the then initially all-white salesforce. At the same time, a brief foray into state politics developed when the Hills, Jr. and Sr. supported moderate gubernatorial candidate Daniel K. Moore whose pro-business platform included development of Research Triangle Park. Prior to Moore's successful candidacy (Governor: 1965-1969), Arthur piloted planes flying the candidate to campaign stops across the Old North State.

For 70 years Arthur has been a devoted lay leader of our church having joined First Presbyterian Church on September 10, 1950 by his profession of faith in Christian beliefs. Thereafter beginning in January 1959, the congregation elected him to a phenomenal five terms as Active Elder stretching over 32 years to 1991. No sooner had he been ordained and installed as a church officer than he went to work as a member of the historic Long Range Study and Planning Committee established in 1958 by the Session to determine the church's future. Together with Hill, Jr. he co-authored the influential "Report of the Long-Range Planning Committee" (Clark-Hill Report), which carefully assessed the pros and cons of relocating the church from its then deteriorating downtown location to the growing suburban southwest quadrant of the city.

The Clark-Hill Report emphasized deficiencies in the Church's physical plant and the need for improvements while the minister, Rev. Kelsey Regen, Granville Presbytery, and the General Assembly's (PCUS) consultant all stressed the urban church's disadvantages and emphasized the ongoing exodus from the city of the white population, members and potential members, toward the Hope Valley area. The Report offered four choices for the decision-makers on the large Planning Committee and the Session. Choice #1 called for remaining at the historic downtown site while making far-reaching improvements in the physical plant. Choices #2-#4 all involved total or partial (congregational division) relocation of the church to southwest Durham. The Session eventually adopted a variant of Choices #2-#4 involving abandonment of the urban center. The congregation endorsed the recommendation in a landslide 207-139 vote. However, a caveat in the Clark-Hill Report had sagely insisted upon an "overwhelming majority" vote. Second thoughts soon clouded the congregational decision. Rev. Regen's sudden retirement, and a survey of the congregation showing only one-third actually favored relocation preceded a congregational vote on December 17, 1961 that unanimously rescinded the decision made a year earlier. The vote endorsed what had been the first choice of the Clark-Hill Report: remain, enlarge and improve the physical plant.

Thereafter, the church claimed as its motto, “Downtown by History and by Choice.”

Arthur continued to enrich the church with his time, talents and generosity. The elapse of two decades since the decision to remain downtown had taken its toll on the physical plant. The Session in 1988 consequently authorized a 3-year \$400,000 capital campaign, “Preserving our Heritage, Strengthening our Future.” Leading the ambitious campaign was Arthur who in his characteristic style bluntly told the congregation that their poor stewardship of the church plant had “left undone many things we should have done,” and now the consequences had become manifest including the falling plaster in the sanctuary which he humorously remarked had last been painted “not too long after they painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.” The successful campaign ultimately exceeded its target and facilitated vital repairs to the sanctuary, roof, floors, kitchen, and Christian Education building.



Arthur’s generosity continued in ways often little recognized by the beneficiaries. As teachers, he and Mary taught the church youths and continued the Advent tradition previously undertaken by George Watts Hill, Jr. in memory of John Sprunt Hill of providing red poinsettias to adorn the Chancel steps. Sharing a love of music, he and Mary joined the choir led in the 1950s by choirmaster Earl Franklin, “Mr. B,” Bentel. He also generously supported our music program by underwriting the purchase of a fine Yamaha grand piano.

It was that program that enabled Arthur to sing another of his favorite hymns, “Amazing Grace” offering assurance that a gracious God’s “grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”

Birthdate: November 28

Address: 100 Cedar Berry Lane
Chapel Hill NC 27517

Telephone: 919-259-7398

Interviewed by Peter Fish with help from Arthur's son, Claiborne.

