

# THE KNOX COUNTIAN

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## Susan Arthur (1914 - 2005)

**S**usan Arthur, president and one of the leading founders of the Knox Historical Museum, passed away Tuesday morning, 15 November 2005 at Central Baptist Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky. Her illness was mentioned in the previous issue of *The Knox Countian*, which featured Connie Danner's essay "The Storied Life of Edward Fletcher Arthur," in many ways as much a portrait of Susan as it was of the Knox County Confederate soldier. Susan Arthur was 91, the same age as E.F. Arthur when he died in 1921.

Her only living brother, James M. Arthur, was by her side during most of her days at hospitals in Corbin and Lexington, as were James's wife, Lois, and daughter, Susan Arthur, named after her aunt. Her faithful friends, Dorothy and Bill Oxendine, Peggy and Mayme Wallace, and Jimmy Middleton, made frequent hundred mile trips to Lexington to visit and encourage Susan.

Faced with an operation for blocked heart arteries and a defective aortic valve, on top of surgery for a broken hip, Susan elected to endure what the doctors promised would be dangerous surgeries rather than give up, go home and die. "I'm a fighter," she told her doctors. She struggled bravely, but in the end, her frail body was not adequate to the task.

Susan served as president of the museum longer than any other officer, through most of the museum's eighteen years (which includes a year of formation before the organization opened its doors on 9 October 1988). David Cole and Charles Reed Mitchell each served a couple of years as



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museum president, but Susan Arthur was official president for the remainder of the time. Her passing spells the end of an era for the museum.

Susan Arthur was the leader at the museum longer than any other individual. Of those in her generation who were active in the museum's earliest days, only K.S. Warren remains, but we have lost Sherman

Oxendine, Marie Croley, Ethel Hampton, and Allie Mays, to mention some of the most active members. We also lost young Carlos Morris in 1993. Janice Trent, one of our writer-editors for the family history book, lost her battle with cancer earlier in 2005. An organization cannot sustain such losses without profound adjustments.

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# Susan Arthur dies

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Connie Danner's previously mentioned piece on Edward Fletcher Arthur is essential reading for anyone who wants to know who Susan was and how her life fit into the history and community life of Knox County. Rather than reprint her obituary, which can be read in the *Barbourville Mountain Advocate* (24 November 2005, 5-B) or her autobiographical sketch from *Knox County, Kentucky: History and Families*, we have invited several of her friends to write a few memoirs of Susan.

## Michael C. Mills

My introduction to Susan Arthur came in 1976 with the formation of the Knox County Historical Society. While men like Sol Warren, Charlie Dibble, myself and others saw the need for a historical society in Knox County, we lacked the know-how of where to begin. The ladies of our community were quick to volunteer their help. Susan Arthur, Sonya Burnette, Alana Henson, Billie North and Jakalyn Jackson were among the first interested in the new project.

We needed a leader and Susan Arthur came to our aid. She chaired our meetings in the Bacon Room at Union College and shared her knowledge of Knox County history. Once established and through growing support over the years, the Historical Society has been a valued asset to our community.

When time came to form the Knox Historical Museum, again it was Susan Arthur who played a pivotal role. She was dedicated to the preservation of Knox County history and an inspiration to the present staff of the museum.

As our work at the museum continues, we will never forget this great lady who truly personified the history of Knox County.

## Syd Robbins

Susan could do everything that needed to be done to run a museum. She knew something about everything and could talk to any group about anything.

We were an odd mixed group at the museum. People couldn't be much more different than Susan, Charles Reed and I. But we got things done.

## Margaret Jean Owens

How can I describe Susan Arthur? I met her eleven years ago when my cousin Charles S. Owens brought me to the Knox Historical Museum, and in the course of the conversation I mentioned I would be retiring in December 1994 and I *might* be interested in helping out in the museum. I forgot all about coming to B'ville but Susan didn't and called me in January 1995 as they needed help selling the Knox County history books. So I came. We worked together for all these many years.

Susan was a very intelligent person and very knowledgeable in history, especially Knox County. I always relied on her expertise when directing people through the museum as she always had the answers.

Susan would laugh and tell me stories of things happening in her church, such as the "Unholy Three," of which she was one. The other two in that "club" were Jimmy Middleton and Mayme Wallace. Those three sat together in church every Sunday. Susan didn't tell me *everything* the Unholy Three did, but they must have been a Hoot!

Well, goodbye Susan. We miss you and we will see you later.

Love,  
Margaret Jean

## Connie Danner

Susan and I were neighbors for a good many years. When we first moved to town she brought us a pretty box of her homemade cookies. We worked together at the museum and she often brought treats there too. But this morning when I looked out my living room window, all was quiet at her house. She is gone. I thought about the very large oil portrait of her father in the living room and the wallpaper with colorful birds on it that she and her mother hung together in the dining room years ago. Susan loved her large family home, and her dearest friends knew that. When she was ill toward the end, they spent many, many hours fixing everything up so all would be safe and comfortable for her to spend her days at home. They even planted bright, fall mums in the containers on her porch steps. It was truly a labor of love.

As I stood thinking and looking at her house, my eyes fell on her little gray car parked beside the house. Susan was independent! We all knew she drove all over town in the car. One day my daughter Sue came home and said she had been just behind her going down Johnson Lane. Sue said it was like magic—like the car was driv-

ing itself. She couldn't even see anyone driving it because Susan was so tiny.

More often than not when we closed the museum, Susan drove to the plaza for cat food. She, like the rest of us, was uneasy about that hazardous intersection, but her pets were terribly important to her. One day as we left the museum some of the firemen were standing outside. "Hello, Miss Arthur," they said and then a couple of them walked over to her little car and noticed her muffler hanging by a thread. It had been that way for some time. "You shouldn't be driving with it that way," they said. "Just a minute." They got some wire from somewhere and crawled down on the ground where they could reach it and fixed it up safe and sound on the spot. Off she drove to Wal-Mart to get her cat food.

She was a part of the growing-up lives of many of the adults in town who now have shouldered the responsibilities that make Barbourville our home, a good place to live. Even though they are grown up, they were still cherished by Susan, who called them her children. One of them is Hope Morris in Dr. Collins's office who told me that the library was her favorite place to be when she was a young child. "Miss Arthur would gather us around her and tell us stories. It was so warm and secure." Peggy Wallace called her an amazing person. She too worked for the librarian at City School. "She taught me so much. We had to do it right. I really learned the Dewey Decimal System," she said with admiration in her voice. Yes, as Charles Mitchell said to me, "Susan Arthur gave a lot to this community."

## Charles Reed Mitchell

My first memory of Susan Arthur is of her as librarian at Barbourville High School back in the early to mid 1950s, probably before I was in the seventh grade. She made the impression of a firm task master, stern wrinkled forehead topped by gray hair tied in a tight bun even back then, frowning down at us (that is, if we happened to be sitting down) from her cubbyhole of a library office without walls. She was more bark than bite, at least for my group. One of my sister Paula Zipp's early school memories is of being spanked by Miss Arthur for some infraction of school rules about which section of the library she was supposed to use. You could do that in those days. And it didn't do her any harm; my sister hasn't taken an axe to anyone lately.

Susan wouldn't let us get away with any mischief in her library, although I found her less severe than Bertha (Mrs. J.J.) Tye, the other librarian at BHS in my time. Funny thing was, if you had a legitimate question



Susan Arthur addressing the Sons of Confederate Veterans organization named for her grandfather, Edward Fletcher Arthur

or needed help locating a book, that friend vanished instantly and then she was all helpfulness and generosity. And her advice was always right on target.

After those BHS days, I didn't see her for some twenty-five years, not until David Cole roped me into helping with the Knox Historical Museum. I did my Mitchell Local Newsreel show, showed up for board meetings and then went home. I didn't become active with the day-to-day operation of the museum until about 1990. By that time, Susan, David, Sol Warren, Marie Croley, and the Jackson family had the museum set up in such a good design that it has needed very little alteration to this day.

The more time I spent at the museum, the more I appreciated Susan's depth of knowledge, not only of library matters, sources of information, and cultural backgrounds, but detailed, nitty-gritty southeastern Kentucky history, warts and all. Sometimes I doubted the veracity of her stories; surely a big movie star like Pearl White never made a feature film in Flat Lick! A dozen years later I published an article on that movie her father, John M. Arthur, witnessed being filmed in that community. Then there were all of those stories about

her grandfather fighting in the Civil War. Her *grandfather!* Even if Susan remained unmarried, the Arthur family tended to marry late (or multiple times), sire children late, and live most adventurous lives. Those stories were finally gathered up last issue, and now Edward Fletcher Arthur's adventures are a matter of written history. And yes, E.F. Arthur not only fought in the Civil War but also in the Mexican War about a decade and a half earlier.

Susan Arthur ran the museum. She paid the bills, kept the books, did the paperwork on donations and loans, cleaned and arranged the exhibit items, scheduled school tours and helped with grunge work, such as the countless hours she spent collating *The Knox Countian*. She had a great eye for detail. Only Syd Robbins had more of the artist's touch when it came to setting up "Spotlight Showcase" exhibits each quarter. Susan was always dependable. If she said she would do something, it would be done on time and correctly.

No one was better with children than Susan. That old stern library persona dissolved by the time she was in charge of the museum. Generations of children knew her as the "Story Lady." Just about every year

she drove herself out to Walker Park to tell little Boone Festival mini-queen and mini-king candidates all about Daniel Boone. Several other times a year, she would visit schools or organizations to tell children the Kentucky story. Third graders visiting the museum for the first time were captivated by her manner of story telling, as recently as this year's fall semester.

Susan was always ready to go on a trip, like the late Margaret "Marg" Riley, another great source for local history. She went with us to all of the museum lecture series, Chautauqua dramatic shows, community concert series, school and college choral concerts, anything the Daniel Boone Festival Committee was sponsoring, as well as to business and training sessions held by the Kentucky Historical Society or Historical Confederation of Kentucky (HCK). As a group, we visited our neighboring historical sites and organizations, and Susan was one of the reasons why budding historical organizations, such as the Farragut Folklife Museum in Tennessee or the Cumberland County Historical Society, sent officers to Barbourville to see how a museum should

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# Susan Arthur dies

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be run. During her years of guidance HCK gave the museum awards for outstanding exhibits, named the museum the best of its economic class in the state, and awarded *The Knox Countian* as best in its class four years running.

The last couple of years found Susan slowing down, spending more time on the reception room couch than in the office. "What's the gossip?" I'd ask and she'd regale us with humor and droll stories. The steps to the museum became more of a struggle. "You all go on ahead of me so I can fall on you," she'd joke, knowing she would have to take her time on the stairwell.

She missed several museum days near the end. But most Wednesdays, unless on those wet days when Margaret Jean picked her up, there was her little car in the handicap parking space next to the Municipal Building. Even if she didn't do much work those last few months she was able to climb the stairs, she made things seem right just by being there. Whatever was wrong we could ask her about it.

She gave us confidence. Whenever she was sitting in the reception room, we all thought, "Everything is all right. Susan is here." □□□