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Out of the Attic

Alexandria's other labor titan

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Writing about the history of organized labor in Alexandria often begins and ends with a discussion of John L. Lewis, President of the United Mine Workers, and the Congress of Industrialized Organizations, who lived in the Lee-Fendall House at 614 Oronoco St. Lewis was undoubtedly a towering figure in American organized labor, but Alexandria was also the birthplace of another prominent union organizer, Lucy Randolph Mason.

Mason's family had deep roots in Virginia, and she was related to George Mason, John Marshall and Robert E. Lee. Despite her aristocratic pedigree, Lucy Randolph Mason dedicated herself to a progressive vision of the United States and the South, with improved lives for both white and Black women.

Born in Alexandria in 1882, Mason started working for the Richmond Young Women's Christian Association as a stenographer in 1914. In 1923, the Richmond YWCA appointed her its general secretary. Her work there caught the attention of other prominent reformers, leading to her appointment as the secretary of the National Consumers League in New York. It was the only time she moved out of the South.

While at the National Consumers League, Mason became a fervent believer in collective bargaining and labor rights. Her work attracted the attention of Lewis, who recruited her to lead the newly formed CIO public relations efforts in the South in 1937. Although based in Atlanta, Mason traveled all over the Southeast, often into territory hostile to union organizing. Her storied lineage and genteel manner opened doors for the CIO, and in several instances, prevented violence against strikers.

Mason's convictions led her to oppose the white supremacy that she saw so often. A close friend of Virginia and Clifford Durr – who also lived in Alexandria for many years, and later paid the bail for Rosa Parks – Mason helped found the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. One of her ideological allies and best friends, Eleanor Roosevelt, paid tribute to Lucy Randolph Mason in the forward to Mason's autobiography, noting Mason's fighting spirit contrasting with her mild-mannered, genteel appearance. This Labor Day, let's remember Lucy Randolph Mason, the other titan of American organized labor from Alexandria.



Lucy Randolph Mason. Photo/Encyclopedia Virginia



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.