

Laura Nelson Kirkwood

February 14, 1883 – February 27, 1926

--submitted by Todi Hughes

Laura was the daughter of William Rockhill Nelson and Ida Houston Nelson. Nelson, founder of the Kansas City Star and the Nelson Gallery of Art, became a powerful leader in the early development of Kansas City. He lent the strong support of this paper to those things that made Kansas City unique—the boulevards, parks, and residential areas. A man of strong convictions and determination, Nelson felt that Kansas City should develop a beautiful city with cultural advantages and turned his efforts to achieve them.

Laura was born February 14, 1889 at 218 West 11th Street, and then known as Quality Hill. While Laura was still a small child, the Nelson's acquired the land two miles from the limits of the city and in 1887 built Oak Hall, now the site of the Nelson Gallery of Art.

Nelson adored his daughter and gave her every advantage. Laura was a small, attractive young lady and very close to her father, sharing his interest in the arts. She attended Barstow school for only a few years, being educated in private boarding schools in the East and traveling extensively in Europe.

Laura was an interesting personality and a strong individualist, once taking a steamer on impulse and with her teacher traveling to Egypt. Upon her return to Spain, and without funds, she wired her father for money to return to Paris. While in Paris, it was the responsibility of the Star's Paris editor to keep an eye on Laura and provide whatever help she might need.

When she returned from Europe, Laura met Irwin Kirkwood, Kirkwood, whose home was in Baltimore, was in Kansas City working as a realtor and developing the area south of Rockhill, what is now the University of Missouri at Kansas City. Kirkwood was a very handsome and charming man and Laura fell in love and accepted his proposal of marriage. Her father did not approve of the match and again Laura was sent to Europe hoping to discourage the romance. Upon her return to New York, Laura wired her father that she and Kirkwood were to be married there and that she would never return to Kansas City, Nelson relented and wired her, "Come home, Baby".

In 1905 Nelson had established the Rockhill Realty District and built a number of homes rented to mostly Star employees, it was to one of these homes that Laura and Irwin Kirkwood returned.

Upon the completion of this house, known as the "Stone House", the Kirkwoods moved here and were active in many affairs of Kansas City, but they and the Nelsons kept a low profile. Laura was the first president of the Kansas City Chapter of the American Red Cross and during one bitterly cold winter she established a soup kitchen for the poor. Kirkwood was interested in cattle breeding, thorough-bred horses and the American Legion. Many visiting dignitaries were entertained by the Kirkwoods.

After the death of Nelson in 1915, Laura often visited the Star and joined in meetings to determine policy, a very unusual procedure for a woman in those days. It was at Laura's direction that the Star magazine was published and the cover each Sunday was a reproduction of a famous work of art.

Laura's health was poor and after her mother's death in 1921, the Kirkwoods moved across the street to Oak Hall and Stone House was sold. Laura became more of a recluse and was seldom seen out in society. In February 1926, Laura returned to Baltimore for medical treatment and there on February 27, 1926 she died alone in a hotel.

Laura left her estate to her husband, stating in her will her personal property and that of Oak Hall were to be sold at least 250 miles from Kansas City. Laura was buried in the Nelson Mausoleum in Mt. Washington cemetery.

Very little personal history can be found about Laura, the Nelson's records having been either lost or destroyed. But even the little to be found paints a picture of an interesting personality—a gifted and intelligent woman—Laura Nelson Kirkwood.