

Van Landingham, Mary Oates Spratt ^[1]

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By William S. Powell, 1996

14 Sept. 1852–24 Dec. 1937

Mary Oates Spratt Van Landingham, cultural leader, speaker, and author, was born in [Charlotte](#) ^[2], the daughter of Charles E. and Margaret Lowery Oates Spratt. On 18 Dec. 1873 she married John Van Landingham, a young hardware merchant, and they established their home at 500 East Avenue, where she resided until her death sixty-four years later. They had four children, three of whom survived: Ralph, Norma (Mrs. Jacob Binder), and John Henry.

A descendant of colonial and Revolutionary [Mecklenburg County](#) ^[3] ancestors, Mary Oates Van Landingham became active in a number of patriotic organizations. A member of the National Society of the [Daughters of the American Revolution](#) ^[4], she was elected vice-president general in 1913. On three occasions she declined to be a candidate for president general. She frequently held office in the local chapter, however, and was state regent three times. She was also a member of the [North Carolina Society of Colonial Dames](#) ^[5], of which she was vice-president. On 6 Mar. 1900 she became the first woman invited to address the [Mecklenburg Historical Society](#) ^[6]. Speaking on "The Native Literature of North Carolina," she compared the literary production of the state with that of its neighbors, Virginia and South Carolina. North Carolina's record was not impressive, Mrs. Van Landingham concluded. "Could it be," she asked, "that being located between Virginia and South Carolina, our people for so long have been furnished such conspicuous illustrations of self-appreciation that they have, by contrast, learned modesty and silence? Where there are mountains of conceit, there are apt to be valleys of humility." Widely reported in the press, her words became a popular characterization of the state's cultural status.

She also was the first woman to address the [State Literary and Historical Association](#) ^[7] when, in 1900, she presented a paper entitled "The Encouragement of Art as an Aid to History and Literature." She took an interest in the [North Carolina Folklore Society](#) ^[8] and attended meetings in Raleigh on its behalf. As an active member of these and other organizations, Mrs. Van Landingham took the lead in the erection of markers and otherwise publicizing a number of historic places and people in the state. Reared in the Episcopal church, she held offices at the parish and diocesan levels and was especially effective in raising funds for St. Peter's Hospital.

Writing on topics of both current and historical interest, her contributions to state and regional newspapers were well received, with mention made of her "unusual literary accomplishment, of smooth style and wise judgment." At a time when it was considered complimentary, she was described as having "the mind of a man" and a "mind that can grasp the political and economic conditions of the country." As a memorial to her husband, who died in 1915, she published a selection of her writings under the title [Glowing Embers \(1922\)](#) ^[9]. Included were pieces she had written for newspaper publication, reviews read to book clubs, addresses to literary societies and church organizations, and comments at the unveiling of historical markers. She dealt with an impressive variety of subjects—among them the responsibilities of women, architecture, treaties with Japan, the ethics of politics, and government ownership of railroads.

Mrs. Van Landingham died two weeks after suffering a stroke of paralysis. Funeral services were held at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, [Charlotte](#) ^[2], and she was buried in Elmwood Cemetery.

References:

Charlotte Observer , 25 June 1933 (portrait), 26 Dec. 1937 (portrait)

Margaret Wootten Collier, ed., *Biographies of Representative Women of the South, 1861–1925*, vol. 3 (1925)

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