

Lassiter, Rena Bingham ^[1]

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by Frances P. Woodard, 1991

10 Oct. 1886–17 Feb. 1960

Rena Bingham Lassiter, editor, columnist, and community leader, was born in Smithfield, the daughter of James Carroll and Isabelle Grantham Bingham. Her father and a brother, C. Elbert Bingham, served as mayor of Smithfield. An uncle, George K. Grantham, was a state legislator in the 1920s.

Rena Bingham was graduated in 1904 with the first class from Turlington Graded School (later Smithfield High School), which evolved from Turlington Institute, a leading college preparatory school in the eastern part of the state. She attended State Normal and Industrial College (now the [University of North Carolina at Greensboro](#) ^[2]) for a year and continued her education through regular lifelong reading, including as a member of the early Chatauqua reading circles. After leaving the State Normal and Industrial College, she taught for a year near Benson and for two years in Smithfield. In 1908 she married Thomas James Lassiter, half owner and editor of the *Smithfield Herald* ^[3], a leading semiweekly. He too was a native of [Johnston County](#) ^[4]. During [World War I](#) ^[5] she taught school again for two years, but when her husband died suddenly in 1920, she entered journalism "to keep the paper for the boys." It was a momentous decision, for the *Herald*—with Rena Lassiter a vital member of the enterprise for forty years—thereby continued to be a significant voice in North Carolina journalism.

Thereafter, until the week of her death, Mrs. Lassiter was editor (senior editor beginning in 1932) of the *Herald* in its role of community voice, conscience, and bellwether. In 1932 she was joined by one of her sons, Thomas J., Jr., who became junior editor following his graduation from [Duke University](#) ^[6]. The paper became a wholly family enterprise beginning in 1934, when the young editor bought the outstanding half interest. In the early 1930s, her older son, William Carroll, a Duke University Law School graduate and [Raleigh](#) ^[7] lawyer, joined the staff as legal counsel and business partner. Under Rena Lassiter's guidance the *Herald* maintained its reputation, acquired during her husband's twenty-four-year editorship, as one of the best nondaily newspapers in the state. Two years after she became editor, it won the Savory Loving Cup for "general excellence." Other awards through the years have been for "news coverage, editorial work, and community service." The "top flight" *Herald* exhibited "editorial courage" and "editorial responsibility," wrote fellow newspaper-woman Margaret Smethurst in 1947.

Rena Lassiter and her sons also continued the tradition established by T. J. Lassiter, Sr., of leadership in the [North Carolina Press Association](#) ^[8]. (He had been its president in 1906.) She served as second vice-president and first vice-president during the twenties and remained an active member throughout her career. T. J. Lassiter, Jr., was president of the association in 1951–52, and William Lassiter was general counsel for well over forty years.

After more than a decade at the helm of the paper, Mrs. Lassiter assigned chief responsibility for editorial writing to the junior editor. She used her news space, her editorials, and her column to complement and underscore her innumerable endeavors to improve the community. For approximately thirty years her "Personal Slants" column appeared in every issue. Wide ranging in subjects and clearly and simply expressing her personality and views of life, it was always popular with readers. She described Smithfield as she was growing up, interesting people and interesting books, community projects, her grandchildren, and often people in need of community help.

In community work, nothing was closer to her heart than library development. A public library for the town and then for the county were projects she helped initiate and bring to reality. As early as 1914, the year of its formation, the Smithfield Woman's Club began sponsoring a public library as a club project. While Mrs. Lassiter was president, the library was provided a home in the new club building. She served as chairman of the first board of trustees when the town began to support the library in 1940. During her tenure, which lasted more than a decade, the board obtained a library building. In 1941 she presented plans for countywide library service to representatives of five other towns. The same year she chaired and spoke for the steering committee that asked for and received money from the county commissioners for support of a county library system. She also provided space in her paper for a weekly library column. In 1947, as spokeswoman for the board before the county commissioners, she requested money for African American library service. In her annual report for 1950, she noted that in nine years of operation, circulation had increased from 5,329 to 146,717; book stock, from 6,406 to 26,688; and expenditures, from \$4,298 to \$29,653. She was the author of "The Development of Public Library Service in Johnston County," a typewritten account.

A charter member of the Smithfield Woman's Club and of the Business and Professional Women's Club, begun in 1924, she served in many offices of both, including the presidency. In 1924 the *Herald* issued a special edition featuring the work of the Smithfield Woman's Club in [Johnston County](#) ^[4]. Then in its tenth year, the club boasted a membership of 117. Highlights of her presidency (1931–33) were constructing a new club facility (the only building erected in Smithfield during that depression year of 1932), sponsoring a new club for juniors, conducting a night school at the local cotton mill, and

serving as the club's welfare council representative. At the state convention in 1938, she won first prize for the best piece of club reporting. In 1954, sponsored by her local club, she was named North Carolina Mother of the Year and accorded a parade welcome in her hometown when she returned.

Mrs. Lassiter was also active in other civic areas. During her earlier years as editor, she served on township, congressional district, and state executive committees of the Democratic party. For nine years she was a member of the Smithfield School Board, serving as secretary-treasurer. She helped organize the modern chamber of commerce in the 1930s and was a member of its board of directors. In addition, she was a charter member of the Johnston County Historical Society. She was one of the organizers of the Johnston County Tuberculosis Association in 1943 and was on its board of directors at the time of her death.

From her youth on, Rena Lassiter was a church leader. She joined Centenary Methodist Church when she was sixteen and for more than twenty-five years was active in Sunday school work as teacher and superintendent. She served as chairman of the Board of Stewards and as president of the Wesleyan Service Guild. She was the author of *Brief History of Centenary Methodist Church, 1939–1956*, a forty-two-page narrative.

Rena Lassiter died one week after suffering a heart attack and was buried in Riverside Cemetery, Smithfield. Her portrait hangs in the public library of Johnston County and Smithfield. The likeness was a gift from the Johnston County Home Demonstration Clubs, another beneficiary of her strong support.

References:

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"Personal Slants" Folder (Public Library of Johnston County and Smithfield).

Raleigh *News and Observer*, 2 Feb. 1947.

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Additional Resources:

Entry on [Smithfield Herald](#) ^[9] in NCpedia.

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From:

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