

The GCV and World War II Relief Efforts

by Judy Perry, GCV Historian
The Elizabeth River Garden Club

The Garden Club of Virginia has a rich and varied history that goes beyond our shores and connects with both Britain and France.

In 1940 the GCV, led by GCV President Mildred Hayes (Mrs. John G.), had concern for the British people, when World War II was raging in Europe. At a restoration committee meeting that year, the minutes read, "This October the radio and newspaper tell us of burning cities across the sea..., the world the last months of 1940 are days written in blood and pain. We cannot turn aside from the destruction of ancient and beautiful cities and landmarks rich in history and association for us all.... We want to help them in every way that we can, materially and financially, and we want to do all in our power to keep alive democracy and freedom...." The restoration committee approved the appropriation from the reserve fund (\$1,000) to go to England immediately for civilian relief. It was submitted in the form of a resolution to the GCV board of directors and was approved. The donation was sent to Virginia native Nancy Lancaster (Mrs. Ronald Tree) for the mobile canteen unit.

On Jan. 15, 1941, at a called joint meeting of the restoration committee, the board of directors and club presidents, a recommendation was approved that the entire proceeds from the 1941 Historic Garden Week in Virginia go to relief of Britain. An editorial in the Richmond News Leader by Dr. Douglas Southall Freeman said, "From Britain came the gardens that have glorified Virginia; back to England now will go the money visitors pay to see these gardens in the vernal glory of 1941. This is the decision reached today by the executive committee of The Garden Club of Virginia. A more appealing, a more appropriate decision scarcely could have been reached...." (*Follow the Green Arrow*, Vol. I, pg. 76.)

The final returns for the 1941 Historic Garden Week tour were nearly \$20,000, and a check was sent to Lady Astor (another Virginian, the former Nancy Langhorne, first woman Member of Parliament), who had volunteered to assist the garden club in facilitating this war relief effort.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, GCV members became involved with the war effort both in the United States and overseas. The garden club members volunteered many forms of service, from financially supporting the USO, to turning their flower gardens into Victory Gardens. Susa Stanton Snider (Mrs. Warner) from Fauquier and Loudoun Garden Club was tireless in her part of the war relief effort. On behalf of the GCV, she raised \$4,000 from the design and sale of Christmas cards, collaborated on a GCV cookbook for funds for famine relief, and sent clothing and goods to Britain weighing more than 10,000 pounds.

After the June 6, 1944, Allied invasion of Normandy, the ladies of the club were aware of the devastation to the coastal communes in the region. They had a particular interest in Ver-sur-Mer, a village where, in June 1927, Virginia's own Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd crash landed his airplane in the surf during a historic trans-Atlantic flight. Monsieur Joseph Coiffier rescued him from the wreckage, brought him to his home and tended his injuries. In October 1946 at the GCV Board of Governors meeting in Fredericksburg, the GCV officially adopted the entire village, which had been decimated as collateral damage during the Allied bombing.

Mrs. Snider was appointed head of the relief effort for Ver-sur-Mer. At the next meeting of the board, she reported that 14,000 pounds of clothing, shoes, blankets, food, coats, boots, pablum, flour and peanut oil were sent to this adopted city. She read a letter from Mayor Coiffier – the same man who rescued Admiral Byrd – saying that a monument had been placed on the beach inscribed: “In gratitude to the troops, who in course of liberating the world, freed our commune at dawn of 6th June, 1944.” He continued that his people “were learning to smile again, thanks to the Ladies of the Garden Club” and “a street has been named Rue de Garden Club of Virginia in mind of thankfulness for your help.” The official declaration from Ver-sur-Mer is in the GCV files at the Kent-Valentine House.

Mrs. Snider reported that an additional effort was being made to raise money to replace 10 windows in the nave of the village’s 12th-century church of St. Martin built in the time of William the Conqueror. The church windows were indeed replaced, signed by G. Answer, master glassmaker in Bayeux. In the 1949 *Garden Gossip* there is an account of two Fauquier and Loudoun Garden Club members who visited Ver-sur-Mer, “had tea with the Coiffiers and prayed before the marble plaque in the old church on which is inscribed the names of the sons and husbands of the GCV members who were killed during this war.”



A window in the 12th-century church of St. Martin that the GCV helped restore.

In May 1949, GCV President Louise Gilliam (Mrs. Frank J.) presented an illuminated scroll to Mrs. Snider “for her outstanding work as chairman and moving spirit of the Famine Relief Committee.” In August of that year, the *Médaille d’Argent de la Reconnaissance Française* was presented to Mrs. Snider. It was extended in the name of the French government, “For devoted and exceptional services rendered to the cause of France.”

Seventy years later, the GCV voted at its 2019 annual meeting in Portsmouth to contribute \$20,000 in support of a new memorial to the British soldiers who died on Gold Beach at Ver-sur-Mer on June 6, 1944.

The foundation for this British Normandy Memorial was laid on June 6, 2019, the 75th anniversary of D-Day. The unveiling will take place June 6, 2020. The memorial has been designed by London architect Liam O’Connor. He wrote, “While undertaking research for the project I was taken by the plaque in the 12th-century church of St. Martin in Ver-sur-Mer commemorating the gift from the Garden Club of Virginia for the restoration of the beautiful stone Romanesque church following military action on D-Day.” With further



Kathleen Vance, the Blue Ridge Garden Club, next to the plaque at Ver-Sur-Mer inscribed with the names of the sons and husbands of the GCV members who were killed during World War II.

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inquiry in the village, the correspondence from Mrs. Snider to the mayor in 1946 was brought to light. Mr. O'Connor contacted GCV Executive Director Lynn McCashin and GCV Historian Judy Perry. Correspondence ensued and the results are our financial support of the memorial. 🌸



A GCV trip, Châteaux & Gardens,
Food & History of Normandy is planned for
June 2-10, 2020.

Participants will see the highlights of Normandy:
outstanding private gardens, the D-Day historic sites,
the Bayeux tapestry and Ver-sur-Mer to see the plaque in the church
of St. Martin and witness the dedication of the new monument.

For information, visit gcvirginia.org.
The number of participants is limited.

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