

Alice's Last Will and Sad Testament

By Phyllis Makuck

HISTORY STORIES

Reflections of Pine Knoll Shores

A slightly longer version of the following article with graphics appears in the Pine Knoll Shores history blog at pineknollshistory.blogspot.com.

Alice Hoffman, owner of a large section of Bogue Banks including land that became Pine Knoll Shores, left us many documents, including an unpublished autobiography, stacks of ledgers and budgets, shopping lists, remodeling blueprints, inventories of her possessions, letters, legal papers and, finally, a Last Will and Testament. Unlike most modern-day wills, Alice's is more typical of an earlier age when writing a will was a final opportunity to right perceived wrongs. Hers went through several revisions.

Alice began writing her final will or, at least, the version preserved by her attorney, Frank Wooten of Greenville (NC), about five years before her death. The document is dated February 21, 1948. She was 86 years old.

The will has 15 numbered subsections and six codicils, revisions that took place over a three-year period. The last one is dated June 6, 1951, less than two years before her death.

The very first two sentences of the first section reveal her state of mind, her obsessive sense that she had been a victim of injustice. They also suggest her financial state of indebtedness. She said: "I hereby revoke all former wills by me made and direct the payment of my just debts and funeral expenses. I use the word just advisedly, for none of the debts which have been collected through litigation have been owed by me."



Alice Hoffman around the time she was writing her will (c. 1950). The portrait behind her is of her goddaughter, Mrs. Frank Stephens.—Photo from the Pine Knoll Shores History Blog

The second section reveals three other obsessions—returning to France, reclaiming her Chateau des Landes property in Suresnes and identifying herself with those who fought in France during World War I. It had been over 15 years since Alice had been in France, but she imagined the possibility that she might be buried there in the American Veterans Cemetery. She was, of course, not a veteran.

This delusional train of thought continues. She could not seem to control herself from recounting events that led to the French government's acquisition of her property. Actually, all evidence suggests the legal battle had been lost long before. Alice, according to her own financial accounts, had accepted a settlement payment of about \$80,000 for this property, which she had bought for about \$20,000. She, of course, had remodeled at a cost of about \$20,000, but claimed in her will that the Chateau des Landes estate was worth \$160,000. She had no chance of reclaiming it. That fact did not, however, keep her from willing that one of her French lawyers, Maitre J.J. Retouret, build a house for his family on the land and that "Eugene Millington-Drake and his sister," Jessie, whom she identified as "my very dear friends," inherit the Chateau des Landes estate.

With her mind still very much in France, she began to think about all the personal property she had left behind, some dating back to the house she had rented for 27 years on the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. She thought of her precious jewelry, some diamond pieces, a "cabachon emerald pendant, my wedding present from Ellis, and various other precious family stones"; her silver, stored in "an old sea captain's chest"; her wine from various cellars around Paris; furniture stored in a Paris garage, which, she said, "is stuffed to bursting."

But, again this was property she no longer had. She had used part of the \$80,000 she had received for her Suresnes property to pay Boris Lepkowski to take her Bois de Boulogne treasures out of the Credit Municipal in Paris and secure them at his Paris home. Fearing a German invasion, he left Paris and brought some of her jewels with him to Monte Carlo. She also had paid him to remove wine from her wine cellar and store it in his Paris cellar. All she had from him were receipts—no real assets to give to heirs.

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