

**“No Ordinary Daughter: Clara I. Cox’s Many Ministries”**  
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Clara I. Cox was no ordinary daughter. Southern debutante, Quaker pastor, anti-racist white woman, intersex Christian. Her ministries to the community extended beyond the members of her own Quaker faith as benefactor, confidant, and ally to local and national African American leaders.

Born in 1879 at what is now Guilford College, Clara’s parents moved soon after her birth to nearby High Point, North Carolina, just as it began to grow into a major manufacturing center. Her mother, Bertha, was noted for her involvement in High Point’s garden club and beautification projects -- typical pursuits of a wife and daughter of certain financial means. Clara’s father engaged in business pursuits as a well-regarded businessman and banker, Republican politician, and trustees for numerous organizations.

Clara grew up in the optimism of a growing New South city with rising fortunes. She also came of age at a crucial point of political insurrection and entrenchment of racial injustices. In 1898 North Carolina faced a white supremacist insurrection which led to single party control and implementation of massive voter disenfranchisement and implementation and entrenchment of segregationist Jim Crow legislation.

In addition to her Quaker family, an individual who must be highlighted as an important presence in Clara’s daily life is African American Annie Pitts. She worked for the Cox family for decades, having worked at North Carolina Friends’ New Garden Boarding School prior to working for Clara’s parents and their move to High Point. Did Annie Pitts influence Clara’s passion for interracial work? Clara was only in her twenties when Annie Pitts died so the two women did not have opportunity to discuss Clara’s interactions with known regional and national African American leaders in later decades.

Clara graduated from Guilford College in 1902 and traveled beyond North Carolina to pursue advanced studies at White Bible Institute and Columbia University. At this point one might expect Clara to settle down with marriage or devote her life to her mother’s societally approved civic pursuits. Clara did neither.

Clara was no ordinary daughter in multiple ways. Clara was born intersex, meaning she had both male and female characteristics. Her condition was apparently a known and an accepted fact noted as explanation for her remaining unmarried. It is unknown what Clara personally thought of it all or how she processed her identity in relation to binary assumptions.

Clara prepared herself for her calling and way opened. While Quaker meetings recognized when particular members had gifts of ministry, the option of a professional paid ministerial staff was a new phenomenon among North Carolina Friends and still evolving. Springfield Meeting, dating back to the 1700s, hired their first pastor in 1913 and in 1918 were seeking to hire his

replacement. While most paid pastors were male (and increasingly so as professionalization of the pastorate continued), North Carolina Friends had a long tradition of women serving in the ministry. Clara continued as Springfield's pastor for over thirty years.

Based on published remembrances at the time of her death, Clara was a selfless individual giving all of herself through pastoral service, including outreach with volunteer work on local social services boards. What is not as clear in these tributes was her inclusion of the entire community in those efforts -- an act not to take for granted in the segregated South of the early twentieth century. In 1926 Clara presented a report to the North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends as the committee member responsible for managing funds designated to support the "Welfare of Negroes." Following her official report, she "made a plea that Friends adhere to their historic position of goodwill towards all races and peoples" and recommended a new committee be established as a yearly meeting committee to focus on interracial work. Clara Cox actively led the committee until her death fourteen years later.

Among the projects she encouraged was a designated "Interracial Sunday" for individual Quaker congregations throughout the state to educate themselves and to promote "justice in all dealings with the Negro." Clara's few surviving files include copies of poetry by Langston Hughes and the lyrics of "Lift Every Voice and Sing." In 1937 she reported conducting "a survey of Negro slums in High Point," giving talks at African American schools, and speaking to white women's groups about current racial justice problems. This appears to have been a typical year for her in the 1930s.

Clara Cox was not working alone but she was an outlier and reached beyond family and those Quakers nearest her. She connected to regional and national organizations, both within the Society of Friends and beyond. One example is a letter from National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader Walter White regarding President Herbert Hoover's nomination of North Carolina Judge John J. Parker to the Supreme Court -- a nomination strongly opposed by the NAACP. Following a meeting which included Philadelphia Quaker Helen Bryan, Walter White wrote to Clara Cox, "I mentioned the fact that we did not know any white person in North Carolina who would be likely to add their word of protest against the confirmation of Judge Parker or who could give us a picture of just what is going on there. I was told that I might write you frankly..." Clara was an ideal contact -- someone with state political connections and a passion for interracial equity and justice.

During this same period, Clara headed up the state branch of an exclusively white women's organization -- the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). Many of the women in this group were simultaneously active in interracial work as they consciously organized and spoke out against the fear tactic of "protecting white womanhood" as a reason to terrorize Black men. Clara maintained regular correspondence with the founding national leader, Jesse Daniels Ames, and led a campaign to encourage North Carolina sheriffs and state leaders to take a stand against lynching.

Clara I. Cox also connected directly to prominent African American leaders in North Carolina to support and listen and learn from local African Americans directly. Another of her correspondents was educator Charlotte Hawkins Brown. The two were both active in North Carolina's Commission on Interracial Cooperation and Clara personally provide financial support to initiatives led by the Federation of Colored Women's Club. While not documented in Clara's papers, intervisitation went both ways. Clara invited African Americans to speak and sing to white groups in an act of improving interracial understanding and she also actively attended African American events. She was well remembered as a participant in High Point African American women's club activities and her car readily recognized in neighborhoods across the color line.

In addition to support she generated for the African American community through her Quaker interracial committee efforts and her leadership in other organizations, Clara also provided direct assistance. It is still unknown how many young people were educated through her efforts. Several cases are documented in her surviving papers and share insights into the extraordinary challenges faced by African American families striving for better opportunities. She kept in close contact with deans at several historically Black colleges and universities, continuing to offer assistance to several students in the 1930s when her own finances had taken a significant downturn.

Clara writes in a 1929 article published in Philadelphia-based *The Friend* of the potential for North Carolina to be a place "that the white man and black man live together in peace and mutual good-will, each working for the upbuilding of the commonwealth" and for white people of the state to have a unified desire "to give the Negro his share of all the benefits of our civilization." One cannot tell from her surviving documents if she was simply messaging to specific audiences with her optimistic attitude for public relation purposes or if she truly believed the tide was turning.

Unfortunately, most of Clara Cox's papers did not survive and efforts thus far to locate her writings in the papers of her correspondents has not yielded results at this time. Those documents that do exist provide tantalizing clues and food for thought. Were there tensions between Clara and others in the North Carolina Quaker community less progressive on racial matters? What challenges, conflicts, and barriers did she face? What steps did she take to negotiate societal expectations and her leadings for justice? Were there missteps we might learn from today? What has survived are breadcrumbs to clues beyond the stereotypical memorial reflecting upon a beloved pastor. Clara appears to have functioned in multiple worlds -- worlds strictly segregated and potentially at odds during her lifetime and still in tension today.

Images portray a steady and forthright person. Informal stories describe Clara Cox as someone deep in faith and committed to her calling. She was respected and constructive in her community work, engaging in needs that remain ever present today: equitable access to quality education and social services, valuing Black lives, seeking justice, and recognizing that of God in everyone and the ability to learn from one another.