Farm and Family
A Hoosier Family’s Rise to Prominence
Mrs. Meredith firmly believes that farming is a vocation peculiarly adapted to women, first, because their work is not discounted on account of sex. A bushel of wheat brings market price; a cow makes as many—or more—pounds of butter when owned by a woman, as when owned by a man.”

—Interview with Virginia Meredith, Indianapolis News, 3 January 1900

Virginia Claypool’s ancestors were early pioneers in east-central Indiana at the turn of the nineteenth century. Successful, wealthy, powerful, and influential describe the early Claypool family, who established themselves and generations to follow as accomplished business owners, esteemed farmers and stock breeders, and effective politicians. The Claypools were heavily invested in railroads, banks, sawmills, taverns, and farm property. As their farms and businesses prospered, their prominence and visibility soon led to them being elected to political office at all levels of government. Virginia Claypool Meredith’s birth to this prominent family with historic roots in Indiana had a tremendous impact on her views and outlook on life.

Virginia’s grandfather, Newton Claypool (1795–1864), was born in Randolph County in western Virginia, and in 1799, at the age of four, moved with his father to Ohio.1 Little is known about Newton’s childhood, but records show that, as a young adult, he purchased a tract of land in Fayette County just months prior to Indiana’s admission into the Union on December 11, 1816.2

In order to bring his bride-to-be from her home in Ohio, Newton needed to build a cabin for her on the Indiana frontier. He rose early in the morning and worked into the evening to cut enough trees for the cabin, and early on,
he encountered a difficult problem: the only sawmill around his property was backlogged with orders. He knew that to wait his turn for his logs to be sawed at the mill would delay his dream of starting a new life in Indiana.

The imaginative Newton Claypool would not be deterred. He struck a rather simple deal with the owner of the sawmill. Newton rented the sawmill, where he “sawed at night the lumber of the house he planned to build.”

In 1818, the twenty-three-year-old Newton returned east to marry his Ohio sweetheart, Mary Kerns, on January 8. Husband and wife loaded their possessions onto their horses and set out on the journey to their new home. Together they traveled 200 miles on horseback to reach their cabin in the sparsely populated backwoods near a “little village of a few houses, called Connersville.”

Life in general was difficult for the pioneers as they tried making a living growing crops and raising livestock on land that just a few years back had been prairies, sloughs, and woodlands. Neighbors often were isolated by miles. Few physicians were available to treat sick patients, and sadly, children often failed to live through infancy. For many, going to town to purchase store-bought products required a wagon with a team of horses, leaving early in the morning and sometimes returning late at night on nearly impassable roads. But people like Newton Claypool and his wife had the grit, determination, and fortitude to overcome the countless obstacles they faced every day.

Newton quickly established himself as a successful livestock farmer and hog dealer in the region. He also worked alongside his brother, Solomon Claypool, managing a dry goods store in Connersville until 1836, where they traded with local people, including Native Americans. Newton’s hard work soon made him a prominent and highly respected man in and around Connersville.

Success in business soon led Newton to try his hand at politics. In 1819, the young Newton campaigned and was elected the first county treasurer of Fayette County, a position he held for five years. He went on to become a member of the Indiana House of Representatives, where he served from 1825 to 1828 and again from 1842 to 1845. He also served three terms in the Indiana Senate from 1828 to 1831 and another from 1836 to 1837, when he was elected to fill the seat of a state senator who had resigned his position in the legislature.

And while his political stature grew, his wealth also continued to grow. His disposable income allowed him to purchase a home in Indianapolis, the
“historic house where Lincoln stayed when he spoke in the city.”

He resided there during his work in the statehouse, rather than commuting back home to his farm. In 1836, at the end of his senate term, Newton purchased a farm just north of Connersville, where he would build Maplewood, a home that would eventually be passed down to his son, Austin, and granddaughter, Elizabeth Claypool Earl.

Throughout his career, Newton stayed involved with local agricultural issues that impacted the farming community in the Fayette County area, and following his time at the statehouse, he was elected president of the Fayette County Agricultural Society in 1854. During the mid-1800s and well into the early 1900s, a person’s political prominence in agriculture was linked to membership and involvement in county agricultural associations such as this, and those who rose within the ranks of the local societies often became elected delegates to the politically powerful and influential Indiana State Board of Agriculture. For a brief period in 1852, Newton Claypool became a delegate to this board, which was composed of leading farmers from around the state. Board members worked with politicians to advance the cause of farming within the state through conferences and meetings designed to address the concerns of the farming community.

Newton “was reasonably successful, leaving at his death, which occurred May 14, 1864, a very considerable estate.” By all indications, Newton Claypool had become rather wealthy through shrewd investments in taverns, stores, and the turnpike from Connersville to Milton, and as the founder of the First National Bank of Connersville.

Newton Claypool, in many ways, linked the past to the future. Newton, like his father, Abraham Claypool (1762–1845), set the benchmark for future generations of Claypools by becoming politically involved and seeking public office. However, Newton paved the way for his family to become business owners as well as politicians. Newton’s wealth propelled the Claypool family, including granddaughter Virginia, into the upper social echelons of important families.

Austin Claypool (1823–1906), Virginia Meredith’s father, was one of ten children born to Newton and Mary Claypool. By the time of Austin’s birth, Newton had already established himself as a success in the Connersville community and in politics. Growing up, Austin benefited greatly from his father’s wealth and influence as well as from his accomplishments.
Growing up in a home of culture and refinement, ... Mr. [Austin] Claypool was not only a well educated man for his day but he was rich in the experiences with intimate contacts with men of important affairs throughout a long and busy life had brought him.12

It was only natural that Austin would follow in his father’s footsteps. As a young man, Austin soon became responsible for buying cattle and selling them for profit in the markets in and around Cincinnati, Ohio.13

On May 20, 1846, Austin married Hannah Ann Petty, the daughter of a well-known pork trader and packer, Williams Petty, and his wife, Elizabeth. Eight children were born to Hannah and Austin Claypool, but only four—two boys and two girls—survived to adulthood: Virginia, Frank, Elizabeth, and Marcus.

Austin’s business accomplishments grew along with his family. By all accounts, he greatly profited from buying and selling farmland. Records show he seldom made a bad investment or lost money in a business transaction. Indeed, Austin had learned well from his father.

The greater portion of the decade succeeding his marriage Mr. Claypool resided in Wayne County, Ind., and up to its close he had speculated quite extensively in land, having in 1845 purchased 240 acres in Fayette County, which were not held long. Subsequently he made a purchase of 560 acres in Wayne County at $30 per acre, which he disposed of at $70 per acre.

... During the [Civil] war his business life was again marked by another extensive land purchase and sale which involved considerable money and none the less business judgment and foresight, yet he was not wanting in the latter nor in nerve for so great an investment, for time proved the success of the speculation, which was the purchase of 900 acres of land in Fayette County for $52,000 and its disposal for $72,000.14

His financial success in farming provided the capital to invest in banks and other ventures such as paper mills, railroads, and turnpikes.15 Austin and Hannah provided a very comfortable lifestyle for their children. In fact, all of Austin’s children “graduated from good institutions of learning.”16

Austin achieved local renown as a grain farmer, eventually acquiring several “large farm operations in Wayne and Fayette counties.”17 As his operation grew, so did his reputation. At the age of 35, he won the Best Ten Acres of Oats at the 1858 Indiana State Fair, a prestigious and much coveted award from his peers.18 His involvement with the state fair continued when he was
invited to be a judge in 1866. Judging a state fair—then, as today—signified one’s prominence and expertise in agriculture. He was responsible for choosing the farmer who had grown the best field crops for that year’s competition. \(^{19}\)

In 1871, he was the “‘attending member’ of the Board at the Breeding Cattle competition,” which meant he was responsible for ensuring that the cattle judging at the Indiana State Fair was conducted honestly. \(^{20}\)

Austin Claypool did not hold any local, state, or national political office. Nevertheless, he was active in political campaigns, becoming an outspoken supporter of Abraham Lincoln when he campaigned in Indiana for the presidency. \(^{21}\) Austin’s political influence came through his affiliation with the county agricultural society and the Indiana State Board of Agriculture. Like his father before him, Austin was an energetic supporter of his county’s agricultural society, then called the Fayette County Joint Stock Agricultural and Mechanical Society. In 1866 and 1867, he was elected president of the society, just as his father had been years before. \(^{22}\) He would serve brief stints as secretary as well. \(^{23}\)

His rise within statewide agricultural circles began in 1869, when he was elected as the Fayette County delegate to the Indiana State Board of Agriculture. This brought him into contact with the most influential farmers and politicians of the day. In 1871, forty-eight-year-old Austin Claypool became a member of the board as an elected representative from the board’s tenth district, which included Fayette, Union, Wayne, and Henry Counties. \(^{24}\) A total of sixteen districts comprised the main decision-making body of the board. \(^{25}\) In 1877, Claypool served on the executive committee of the Indiana State Board of Agriculture. \(^{26}\)

Austin’s popularity among the delegates earned him a choice position when he was appointed by the Indiana State Board of Agriculture to serve as its delegate to the National Agricultural Congress, which opened its convention in Chicago, Illinois, on September 25, 1877. \(^{27}\) He remained a district representative until 1879, when Henry C. Meredith—his son-in-law and Virginia’s husband—replaced him as the representative for the tenth district. \(^{28}\)
Governor Thomas Hendricks appointed fifty-year-old Austin Claypool to the Purdue University Board of Trustees in March 1874. His fifteen-month tenure happened during a critical juncture for the institution. At that time, Purdue was a university in name only. While the land had been acquired by 1869, no classes had been held yet. Policies had to be written and professors hired as the first steps toward getting the school up and running.

Austin listened attentively as the board discussed which courses would be offered to the first students, what criteria and admission requirements the students would have to meet, how the trustees would manage the financial affairs of the school, and other matters related to the operation of the Purdue University farm. He participated in hiring the second university president, hiring the first faculty members, and designing degree programs. As a trustee, he would help decide what campus buildings were needed, manage the design and construction of the university barns, and determine where to sink wells. It must have been exciting for the trustees to see their efforts establish the campus infrastructure.

By necessity, the first trustees would micromanage the affairs of the university. Not only did they have to agree among themselves on which breeds of cows, horses, and hogs to stock on the Purdue farm and which crops the farm manager should grow, as this June 1874 record shows, they even had to approve the livestock purchase: “On motion Superintendent was authorized to buy four cows for the use of the Boardinghouse, the same to be paid by the Treasurer, upon bills approved by the Secretary.”

Austin was in attendance when the board of trustees agreed to accept the resignation of Richard Owen, who was the first president of Purdue (1872–74). Owen elected to step down as a result of negative press criticizing him for developing a lengthy plan to build the physical structures at Purdue while ignoring other facets of operating a school, such as plans for classes, courses, and teaching. He returned to Indiana University, where he resumed work as a geology professor, a position that he had formerly held there.

On June 12, 1874, the board voted to replace Owen with Abraham Shortridge, an Indiana native born in Richmond. His professional association with colleges included teaching positions at Milton College, Dublin College, and Whitewater College. At the time of his hiring at Purdue University, he had been working as the first superintendent of the schools in Indianapolis.

Just a few months later—on September 16, 1874—Purdue University held its first official class, with six faculty members teaching thirty-nine students.
Indiana’s land-grant school was now operational. Austin Claypool was still a trustee when the first Purdue University degree was awarded in May 1875 to John B. Harper in chemistry.

Austin Claypool’s tenure as a trustee totaled just a little more than one year, lasting from March 10, 1874, to July 1, 1875. On March 9, 1875, a state law reorganized the board of trustees, slimming it down to six members, two of which would come from the Indiana State Board of Agriculture and one from the Indiana State Board of Horticulture. Governor Thomas A. Hendricks’s picks were reduced to three members of his choosing. Austin lost his seat when the governor failed to reappoint him to the board. Nearly fifty years later, his daughter, Virginia, would make history when she was appointed to the very same board.

Austin and Hannah Claypool’s first child arrived on November 5, 1848, at their home on Maplewood Farm near Connersville, Indiana. She was named Virginia to honor the birthplace of her grandfather, Newton Claypool.

Virginia was born to progressive and prosperous parents. Her twenty-five-year-old father took a much different view than other men of the time when it came to raising his girls. His daughters would be afforded all of the advantages and training given to his boys.

...Austin B. Claypool...believed in educating his girls just as he educated his boys, and in giving both the best to be had. He made companions of his children, and little Virginia he took with him on countless drives to pastures and fields, talking with her meanwhile on farm subjects.

She obtained her education as a young girl in Fayette County, Indiana, while she was taught the principles of successful farming and business management by a father who excelled in these professions. In addition, the active and boisterous involvement of Virginia’s grandfather and father would bring men of importance and power to her childhood home. Virginia learned to be comfortable around such guests—political leaders, businessmen, and agriculturists—while helping her mother entertain them when they came to do business with the Claypool men.

The Civil War broke out when Virginia was twelve years old. Years later, she recalled three memories from those days:

- My father always talked of public affairs to us children. He was a supporter of Lincoln, and was active in the Wide Awakes, a political organization
with a military flavor. There was no way to transport men except by farm wagons drawn by horses. We lived in a neighborhood of Quakers, whose religion made them conscientious objectors. One day father asked Aaron White, a prominent Quaker, if he could lend his horses to draw the men to a meeting. “Austin,” he answered, “Thee knows I am opposed to war. But my horses are in the stable and the harness hangs beside them.”

I recall clearly that day when the news came that Fort Sumter had been fired on; I recall how hearts were heavy, and the world looked black. And wherever there were young men—in college, in factory or on farm—patriotic fervor mounted high. It has been said that all wars are fought by boys and that the sorrows of war are borne by women; always, however, there are groups of mature men—patriots—who do the hard thinking and planning that belong to the actualities of war . . .

At the time of the War of the Rebellion organization was lacking, pitifully lacking, in the care of our soldiers at the front, and upon home folk fell a heavy burden; there was work for all. I myself, a young girl [at twelve years old], rose to heights of heroism—at least I felt that I was rising to such heights. At the time when Morgan’s army invaded our state, I loaned my own riding horse to one who was going with the mounted company to repel the invasion. Well, my horse came back safely, as did the gallant volunteer who rode him!

In 1863, when Virginia was nearly fifteen, her father sent her to Glendale Female College in Glendale, Ohio. This religious-based institution was twelve miles north of Cincinnati. The college opened its doors to the first class in 1854 as American Female College and was renamed as Glendale Female College soon after. It continued under that name until it ceased operations in 1929. During its seventy-five years, Glendale would be known as one of the premier colleges of higher education for women in the Midwest.

Glendale College was situated on approximately two acres. The main building was a three-story structure of fifty rooms, including a dining room, six recitation rooms, nine music rooms, a main hall, and a chapel. The library contained two thousand volumes, which students could access “without extra charge,” and the college prided itself on its well-equipped science department.

Glendale was an expensive private school that attracted students from families of wealth. Virginia’s family would have been required to pay the following costs in advance:
Expenses.
Board in the Institution, room furnished, tuition in all the branches
of the regular course, fuel, light, and washing (one doz. pieces weekly),
per session .............................................................. $150
Tuition for day scholars in the collegiate department, per session ...... $25
Tuition for day scholars in the preparatory department, per session ......$20

The highest branches pursued will ordinarily determine the price of tuition.

Extra Studies and Charges.
Music on the piano, melodeon, or guitar, per session ....................... $30
Use of instruments for the two former, per session ...................... $5
Drawing and Painting, per session ....................................... $15 and 25
French and German, each, per session .................................. $10

Classes were demanding, and students were examined on many subjects.
Virginia’s school year lasted forty weeks and was divided into two sessions. 40
Her four-year program consisted of the following classes:

Freshman Class.
First Term. Second Term.
Arithmetic, finished. Elementary Algebra.
Watts on the Mind. Latin Reader.

Sophomore Class.
First Term. Second Term.
University Algebra. Algebra, finished.
Natural Philosophy. Physiology.
Geology. Astronomy.
History of Greece. Physical Geography.

Junior Class.
First Term. Second Term.
Geometry. Geometry, finished.
Rhetoric. Botany.
History of France. Evidences of Christianity.
Greek Grammar. Greek Reader.
Chemistry. Caesar.
**Senior Class.**

*First Term.*
- Natural Theology.
- Trigonometry.
- Logic.
- Virgil.
- Greek Reader.
- Moral Science.

*Second Term.*
- Butler’s Analogy.
- Story on the Constitution.
- Virgil, continued.
- Mental Philosophy.
- Greek Testament.
- English Literature.

In addition, students attending Glendale were required to uphold the strict standards set forth by the college: “…the regulations involving such restrictions only as are necessary to secure correct deportment, the formation of good habits and manners, a just appropriation of the hours of each day, and the attainment of high moral and virtuous principles.”

The college stipulated who could visit students and when students could leave the premises:

- Pupils, in coming to the Institution, should be provided with a sufficient wardrobe and other necessaries, or supplied from home. They will not be permitted to spend money, or leave the College, except under the guidance of teachers or parents.

First and foremost, students were not allowed to receive visitors on Sunday, nor could they leave or return on that day. The young women were expected to attend religious services that day and prepare a lesson plan for what was being studied in Bible class.

The college staff was very proud of the institution’s strict moral code and reassured worried parents of their daughters’ safety, noting, “[N]o death having occurred among the inmates of the Institution since its establishment.” Families were told that their daughters would be living in an area absent “of the various excitements and temptations that attend female institutions located in cities, or in the immediate vicinity of institutions for young men…”

Virginia proved to be a dedicated student who excelled in her studies both in and outside of class. While at Glendale, she developed a keen interest in public affairs at the urging of her father.

Father’s chief demand was that we should be public-spirited. He insisted that I should read the Cincinnati Gazette and other daily papers. So I spent my time in the college reading room, devouring the editorials and dispatches of three or four papers a day. In this way I formed a taste of keeping up with current news which has stayed with me.
In 1866, Virginia graduated with honors from Glendale Female College, having earned a bachelor of arts degree. Her graduating class totaled five students, with fellow graduates representing Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and Minnesota. After graduation, Virginia returned to her parent’s home to help with the farm and entertain guests.

Four years later, on April 28, 1870, she married Henry Clay Meredith, the only living son of Civil War General Solomon Meredith. Through her upbringing and education, Virginia Claypool Meredith was well groomed to begin her new role as a wife and daughter-in-law to this very influential family.

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**The Claypool Family Tree**

**Abraham Claypool** (1762–1845) m. **Ann Elizabeth Wilson** (1766–1849)

*Children*

Solomon, Jacob, Ann, Wilson, Abel, Isaac, Sarah, Maria, and

**Newton Claypool** (1795–1866) m. **Mary Kerns** (1798–1864)

*Children*

Benjamin, Abraham, Edward, Jefferson, Sara, Elizabeth, Mary, Maria, Newton, and

**Austin Bingley Claypool** (1823–1906) m. **Hannah Ann Petty** (1828–1923)

*Children*

Frank, Elizabeth, Marcus, and

**Virginia Claypool** (1848–1936) m. **Henry Clay Meredith** (1843–1882)

*Children*

Adopted **Mary Lockwood Matthews** (1882–1968) and

**Meredith Matthews** (1887–1962)