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Martha Louisa Cocke

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Martha Louisa Cocke, (9 October 1855–15 August 1938), president of Hollins College (later Hollins University), was born in Roanoke County and was the daughter of Charles Lewis Cocke and Susanna Virginia Pleasants Cocke. Her father had been superintendent since 1846 of the Valley Union Seminary, which became the Female Seminary at Botetourt Springs in 1852 and in the year of her birth Hollins Institute. Matty Cocke, as she was always known, lived at Hollins for her entire life and received her education there. An older sister was her first tutor, and at age ten she began taking classes in the seminary's preparatory department. In 1866 Cocke entered the collegiate department, from which she earned departmental diplomas in English language and literature, French, history, Latin, mathematics, and natural science. She and one other student received full diplomas in 1874.

After graduating, Cocke, who never married, provided secretarial assistance to her father, and beginning in 1876 she also taught English, French, German, and mathematics. In 1884 she became registrar and school librarian. The years 1899 and 1900 were a turning point for Cocke. Three of her siblings died unexpectedly during that time, including her elder brother Charles Henry Cocke, who was business manager of the institute and the obvious choice to succeed their father as superintendent. In his will, dated 16 June 1900, Charles Lewis Cocke named Matty Cocke, her brother Lucian Howard Cocke, and two of her nephews as trustees of his estate, including Hollins, which the school trustees had deeded to him earlier that year to cover money they owed him. He left it to his heirs to choose the institute's new president. After her father's death on 4 May 1901, they elected Cocke.

Miss Matty, as she was known on campus, did not fit the image of college

president. Born and educated on the campus, she was somewhat insulated from the world and also a modest and retiring person who initially found it difficult to preside over faculty meetings. Not comfortable in public, Cocke made few speeches and seldom attended academic functions. Although she overcame her initial difficulties, she continued to rely heavily on the advice of her brother and nephews in decision-making. After assuming the presidency, Cocke announced that Hollins would continue to operate "upon the same lines of conservative progress that have characterized its history for more than half a century," by which she meant that she would insist on retaining the school's traditional high academic standards.

Cocke was the first woman college president in Virginia, preceding Mary Kendrick Benedict, who became president of Sweet Briar College later that decade. Hollins experienced tremendous growth during Cocke's thirty-two-year tenure, not in the number of students, which averaged about 250 each term (the largest proportion from Virginia but with about two dozen other states represented in 1933), but in faculty and facilities. The faculty and staff increased from about forty (three with doctorates) in 1901 to more than sixty (seven with doctorates) in 1933, and the school erected at least a dozen new buildings and renovated and enlarged others. Artists, musicians, and writers of note visited the campus to enrich the students' educational experience. In 1903 Hollins began awarding the A.B. degree, and in February 1911 the school changed its name to Hollins College, Incorporated. At the end of the 1918–1919 academic year it discontinued the preparatory department, and by the time of Cocke's retirement it had adopted a four-year college curriculum. On 1 August 1932 Cocke transferred ownership of the college to a public board of overseers.

At the end of that year the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools fully accredited Hollins.

Conservative progress required a successful balancing of traditions with the changing social climate. Students took advantage of Cocke's willingness to allow change, and initiatives flourished. A theater and gymnasium ranked low among the administration's priorities, but the students wanted them and helped raise much of the money to erect the necessary new buildings. A student government association began functioning during the 1910–1911 academic year, and a campus newspaper began publishing in 1928. Believing that such organizations divided the campus, the students voted in 1929 to disband sororities. Hollins students named a short-lived literary society for Cocke and in 1930 began a tradition of singing to her every year on her birthday.

Roanoke College awarded Cocke an honorary LL.D. in 1926. Once Hollins became a fully accredited college, she retired in 1933 at age seventy-eight. Martha Louisa Cocke died in her sleep at her residence at Hollins College on 15 August 1938 and was buried in the family cemetery on the campus. In tribute, an alumna wrote, "So closely was she to be identified with the

school that as the years went by she was to become for Hollins girls all over the country the living symbol of their Alma Mater and the personal actuality of their ideals for educated womanhood."

Biography in *NCAB*, 29:453–454 (por.); birth date and middle name provided by nephew Charles Francis Cocke on BVS Death Certificate, Roanoke Co.; Charles Lewis Cocke Papers and Matty L. Cocke Papers, both Hollins University Archives; oral history interview, 20 May 1938, Virginia Works Projects Administration Files, UVA; WPA Biographies; Hollins Institute *Annual Register* (1900–1901), 3 (first quotation); Dorothy Scovil Vickery, *Hollins College, 1842–1942: An Historical Sketch* (1942), 43–67; Frances J. Niederer, *Hollins College: An Illustrated History*, 2d ed. (1985), 56–62 (several pors.); obituaries in *Richmond News Leader*, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, *Roanoke Times*, and *Roanoke World-News*, all 16 Aug. 1938; editorial tributes in *Richmond News Leader* and *Roanoke World-News*, both 16 Aug. 1938, and *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *Roanoke Times*, both 17 Aug. 1938; memorials in *Hollins Alumnae Quarterly* 13 (fall 1938): 4–14 (second quotation on 4), 18.

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