

MONTHLY MUSINGS

SHARON VIRTIS

America the Beautiful

Instead of allowing mainstream and social media to drag me down with the continuous reporting of all that is wrong in the US, I've decided to focus instead on all that is **right**. Americans are famously patriotic and passionate people. We are blessed with a rich, diverse culture and a country of geographical beauty.



You could spend a lifetime exploring the sites of the United States, all as beautiful as they are diverse. Hawaii's vertical Na'Pali Coast is easily one of the most beautiful coastlines on the planet. A visit to Denali National Park in Alaska is worth braving the extreme low temperatures.

And while flying to Hawaii or Alaska is out of the question for me right now, there is no place aside from those two great states that I can't reach by car. Perhaps you've heard of a charming little tourist destination known as the Grand Canyon? Or the magnificent Rockies? There are great caves and Great Lakes, and stunning mountain ranges like the Appalachian, Ozark and Catskills.

We've got deserts, buttes and plains, grasslands and badlands, forests and fields, rivers and waterfalls, and miles and miles of coastline. Whether you're looking for nature's greatest hits or hidden gems that take a little digging to find, you don't have to go too far to discover them.

One of the happy accidents of this pandemic is that it has taken me off airplanes, forcing me to see the beauty of this country that is everywhere. Let's find some sanity (and a bit of soul searching) in that! Happy exploring!



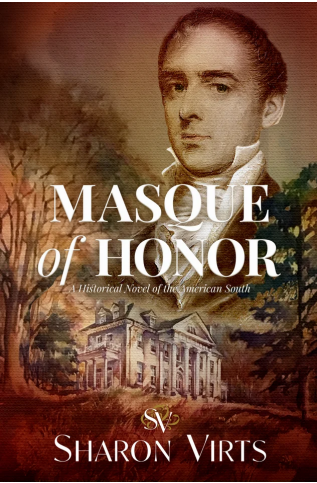
MASQUE OF HONOR

Update: E-book and Galleys

The Kindle version (e-book) of Masque of Honor is now available for [preorder](#) and will be released worldwide on **February 9, 2021**.

My wonderful team at [RosettaBooks](#) has been working overtime finalizing the galleys so that Advanced Reader Copies can be sent to all of those reviewers and book clubs for incorporation in their 2021 line-up.

If you are a member of a large book club, please [contact me](#) to see if your club qualifies to receive an ARC to review in advance of the release date!



Selma's Summer Glory

After four years of restoration to the house and property, my gardens are finally beginning to look like they've been here forever. Follow the [LINK](#) to enjoy 40+ photographs of the inspiring beauty of Selma's gardens.



This Month in History: British Invasion of 1814

Did you know that when the British invaded Washington DC in August 1814 their occupation of the city lasted only for 26 hours? It wasn't a storm of American troops that sent the British running out of the city, but a storm of another kind.

The night when the British invaded, they burned both the White House and the Capitol building. The next morning British soldiers moved through Washington, lighting fires and setting the city ablaze, but they failed to notice the darkening skies, the thunder, and lightning.

City residents knew a bad storm was on its way and quickly took shelter. Clouds began to swirl and a tornado formed, heading straight for the British on Capitol Hill. The twister ripped buildings from their foundations and trees up by the roots. British cannons were tossed around by the winds.

The British broke ranks and scattered like paper soldiers under the strength of the cyclone. Hours later, when the winds died, most of the fires had been doused and the British had fled. For an interesting depiction of the Burning of Washington, [check out this video](#).





Sharon's Southern Cooking Series

August brings us **Goodness from the Garden!** Chef Thomas Harvey has graced our kitchen at Selma with some fabulous recipes to share.

- This month, he has prepared three fabulous dishes including:
- Watermelon Gazpacho with Strawberry Relish
- Curry Grilled Rockfish, Jicama Melon Salad, Lime Oil
- Plum and Marzipan Tarte Tatin

Scott and I got to sample all of these and they were delicious.

[Download the recipe cards and watch step-by-step video instructions](#) as Thomas cooks these garden delights.

“My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece.”

— **Claude Monet**



Jane Lampton Clemons: The Mother behind Mark Twain.

The lazy dog-days of August so often take me back to my summers growing up on the Catoctin Ridge in Lucketts, reading the adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer on the back-porch swing while the cicadas sang from the tops of maple trees that surrounded our house.

I still love reading Samuel Clemons, aka Mark Twain, and admire his unique ability to use embellishment, hyperbole, satire, caricature, parody, mock-flattery, and ridicule to flay bare essential truth.

There's an old adage that behind every good man is a good woman - and in Samuel Clemons case, that good woman was his mother. Jane Lampton was deemed the handsomest and the wittiest of girls, as well as the best dancer, in all of Kentucky.

She married John Clemens in 1823, in part to spite a former suitor. Jane also had a great gift of storytelling. A skill her son, Samuel, learned from her. Jane and her husband had seven children, but only four (Orion, Pamela, Samuel, and Henry) survived at the time of her husband's death in 1847. Once he died, Jane was responsible for raising the children on her own.

"Sam was always full of mischief," said a neighbor of Samuel as a child, "and liked to tease his mother. For this Jane often reprimanded him. She never knew what he was going to do next. However, he must have been a child after her own heart, for she, too, was a great lover of fun.

She preferred folks who were full of life, liked anything gay, and hated the solemn and morbid. Red was her favorite color and she would have worn it had not her family dissuaded her."

In an autobiographical sketch, Samuel commented that his mother had "come handy to me several times in my books, where she figures as Tom Sawyer's Aunt Polly." Her Hannibal pastor called her "a woman of the sunniest temperament, lively, affable, a general favorite."

And as for the pseudonym Mark Twain, while Samuel claimed the name was given to him by a riverboat captain, there are others who claim [the name was given to him from time spent in a bar](#). While "mark twain" may have meant "mark two fathoms of water" on the Mississippi River, but in the Old City Bar in Virginia City, it meant "bring me two blasts of whiskey!" From what I've learned about Jane, I don't think the nickname came as a surprise to her at all.

“My mother had a great deal of trouble with me, but I think she enjoyed it.”

— Mark Twain

The Great Southwest

Scott and I are heading across the country again, but this time we are taking a southern route through the Tennessee Valley across Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas to the deserts of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. Come with us on Instagram and Facebook!



Don't forget to check my [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#) page for details on our September reading selection.



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