



Nancy Langhorne Astor
1879-1964,
Albemarle County

Nancy Witcher Langhorne was the eighth child born to Chiswell Dabney Langhorne and Nancy Witcher Keene Langhorne in 1879 in Danville. Impoverished by the Civil War, the family struggled first in Danville and then in Richmond. Mr. Langhorne remade his fortune by collaborating with northerners to build railroads in Virginia. Nancy was eleven when the family relocated to an old plantation, Mirador, eighteen miles outside of Charlottesville. There she had an idyllic adolescence, well-known as a beautiful southern belle. Unfortunately, her first marriage to wealthy Bostonian Robert Gould Shaw was a disaster. After the divorce, she returned to Mirador, and served as its mistress upon her mother's death in 1903.

While at Mirador, Mr. Langhorne's business connections piqued Nancy's interest in visiting England. On one of her visits, she met Waldorf Astor, the son of an American multimillionaire. Waldorf and Nancy were married in 1906. By then, the elder, widowed Astor had been made an English lord. Nancy served as his hostess at his home, Cliveden, where great literary figures and political leaders often gathered.

In 1910, the young Astors moved to Plymouth, England, when he was elected as a member of Parliament (M.P.) from the Tory Party. Nancy worked with her husband on behalf of his constituents and raised six children until 1919 when Astor became Viscount and vacated his place in the House of Commons. At that juncture, she decided to run for her husband's seat in Parliament. Her flamboyant campaign style won over her constituents, and she became the first woman M.P. in British history. She served from 1919 to 1945 as a member of the Conservative Party. She was known for her sharp tongue in debate, her passionate regard for temperance, and her dedicated advocacy of women's rights and child welfare legislation. A Christian Scientist, her reforms were often marked by religious conservatism. She once again came to international attention during the debates over German appeasement prior to World War II. She was often at odds with Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Despite her years in England, she once declared that she was always a Virginian. After her retirement, she led a quiet country life until her death in 1964.