

Mary Opal Thomas was the oldest daughter of eleven children born in Salem, VA. “Mother Marshall,” a strong Methodist and neighbor on the street where the Thomas family lived, moved to Richmond as one of the first residents of The Hermitage and encouraged Opal to follow her to Richmond. She did just that. In the summer of 1951, Opal left her job as the secretary/treasurer at Greene Memorial Methodist Church in Roanoke and started to work at The Hermitage in Richmond. Single young women like Opal didn’t move to big cities like Richmond alone in those days, so she lived in a single room in the first dormitory built at The Hermitage. In her free time, she volunteered at the nearby Sheltering Arms Hospital.

Elaine Lavinder, Opal’s niece and former Executive Director of the Hermitage in Roanoke, recalls that more than anything else, Opal wanted to be a missionary. Her father would not allow it, though, telling her that being a missionary was not safe. Yet in her unique way, Opal Thomas became a missionary, working for 27 years to promote the mission and ministry of providing facilities, services, and programs to enhance the quality of life for older persons.

When the Virginia Methodist Homes Corporation issued Builder’s Bonds as a means of raising money to construct the Hermitage in Northern Virginia, Opal Thomas bought the very first bond sold on September 28, 1961. She was the first and only executive secretary of the Hermitage Guild, appointed to that role in 1963. Miss Thomas spent 15 years traveling all over the Virginia Conference visiting with the Key Women in every district to share the story of the Homes Corporation. The Key Women would become what today is known as the Hermitage Guild. When she reached her 16 year service milestone, Opal became the longest serving employee in the young history of the organization. As a token of their appreciation and love, the Richmond Hermitage family provided contributions for an air-conditioner for her car – “cool cash” as it was affectionately called to make her travels across the state easier.

Opal retired in 1978 and transitioned from employee living at The Hermitage to resident. She later moved to the Hermitage in Roanoke to be closer to family. Stories continue to be passed down about Opal’s compassion for residents when she worked at The Hermitage. Her “Christian way of doing everything” continues to be an example for friends and family. People still remember her dedication to the church and especially the vision of the Virginia Conference in establishing what we know today as Virginia United Methodist Homes, Inc.

In the end, the Samaritan Program was able to support this amazing missionary who gave her entire life to serving older adults. Opal Thomas worked hard, lived simply, saved all she could, but it was not enough to cover the cost of her care in the last years of her life. She began receiving benevolent care support in 2003. The support continued until Opal’s death at the age of 95. She didn’t have the resources to last her whole life, but she never knew that. Opal never wanted to be on the receiving end of assistance, so the family did not tell her that the Samaritan Program was providing support.

Opal Thomas was driven to help others. It’s our turn to do the same.



Opal Thomas purchasing the first of the Builder's Bonds that were offered by the Corporation to raise money for the Northern Virginia Hermitage Building project from Dr. Bernard S. Via, 1961.