



Notorious Woman: The Celebrated Case of Myra Clark Gaines (Southern Biography)

Elizabeth Urban Alexander

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The legal crusade of Myra Clark Gaines (1804?-1885) has all the trappings of classical melodrama--a lost heir, a missing will, an illicit relationship, a questionable marriage, a bigamous husband, and a murder. For half a century the daughter of New Orleans millionaire Daniel Clark struggled to justify her claim to his enormous fortune in a case that captivated the nineteenth-century public. Elizabeth Urban Alexander taps voluminous court records and letters to unravel the twists and turns of Gaines's litigation and reveal the truth behind the mysterious saga of this notorious woman.

Myra, the daughter of real estate heir Clark and Zulume Carriere, a beautiful young Frenchwoman, was raised by friends of Clark and kept ignorant of her real parentage until 1832, when she discovered her true lineage in letters among her foster father's papers. She thereupon returned to Louisiana with tales of a lost will and a secret marriage between Clark and Carriere and claimed to be Clark's missing heir. Was Myra the legitimate daughter of the prominent merchant, or the "fruit of an adulterous union?" The courts would decide.

The great Gaines Case wound its tortuous path through the United States legal system from 1834 until 1891. It was considered by the U.S. Supreme Court seventeen times and pursued even after Gaines's death by lawyers trying to recoup fees. By courageously bringing her case to the courtroom and doggedly keeping it there, Alexander asserts, Gaines helped instigate a new type of family law that provided special protection of women, children, and marriages.

Though Gaines never recovered more than a tiny fraction of the rumored millions, this riveting chronicle of her struggle for legitimacy and legacy as told by Elizabeth Urban Alexander is a goldmine for anyone interested in legal history, women's studies, or a good yarn superbly spun.

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