

A SMALL COINCIDENCE?

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Often I have wondered what is the proper  
pronunciation, as well as the proper definition of

coincidence. Is it "coincidence" with the accent on the "in" and the syllables run together, or coincidence pronounced so that the hyphen is expressed and understood if not stated, and, is there even a difference? Webster's New World Dictionary and popular understanding, defines coincidence as the involvement of two or more random, probably thought-to-be-unrelated, unforeseen and within the understanding of the context of its time, relatively unremarkable events, one in which planning appears to be totally absent.

On the other hand, co-incidence has more of a directional cast to it: two actors who are steering their courses with purpose, knowledge and forethought, probably as part of some grand scheme, perhaps one grand authority directing events. While recognizing that these definitions may be extreme, and maybe even a stretch, nevertheless the remarkability of what previously had been considered unremarkable, and the impact that these events have had, indeed reveal and make interesting, in a rather grand way, several actions that might otherwise not have been remarkable at all. That would be co-incidence. Enough of this!

There was a day, at the same time both unique, and yet like all other days. This was just one of that sort of day. An American colonel dispatched by his general was leading his forces on an ordinary mission, but in the context of a grander scheme, as all military engagements, especially in times of active military duty and especially in areas of combat, inevitably are, there was destiny in the air. Aim was taken by a combatant, an individual even now still unidentified, and perhaps not even specifically intended to accomplish its exact effect, although undoubtedly it does not matter that the shot was taken with general intent, or particular intent, nevertheless it found its mark that September day of both warmth and cold, and just as surely as if it had been divinely ordered, it took the life of that American colonel. Those with him on his side prevailed that day while those on the side

which had defeated him personally, were eventually defeated themselves, but they had done their damage; and so the colonel among his men and the natives that he had with him, met his maker, while those he had led so well and bravely, continued on with their mission and accomplished it, as well those further missions. His comrades completed the larger picture and prevailed in the war, leaving as meaningless in that context, the ambush that took the life of the individual colonel. This particular colonel lived only 41 years. He had attained his captain's rank in his 30<sup>th</sup> year, and had been commissioned a colonel only months before his death.

His great grandfather had come to this country almost 80 years before his birth and over that time, the family line grew and prospered, and achieved great recognition from their peers, rising in prominence in the areas of commerce, military service, church hierarchy and public office in their communities. Our colonel was the oldest of the eight children in his family, one full brother and six later-arriving half-brothers and sisters. Fortunately as we will see, our Colonel proved a better fighter than a lover, although neither characteristic would survive as his most noteworthy trait or accomplishment.

Eleven years before as a 30-year old captain in command of his own forces, he began to burnish his talents and experience as he engaged with his men in various skirmishes and attacks, but peace eventually was secured and our colonel resumed his commercial and business interests, including management of family estates and ventures. At the outbreak of new hostilities, there was a call to resume his military career, this time with a colonel's commission and off he went to protect his country once again. In July of his 41<sup>st</sup> year, our colonel acknowledged at least his dangerous circumstances, if not his premonition of impending doom. He had no wife, and no children and was in the midst of a very tenuous situation. After much thought and consideration, he wrote a new will and

dispatched it to his brother back home for safekeeping with instructions that he do all he could to see its terms were carried out and that "it not be broken". The will provided numerous specific bequests of real property, personalty of various kinds, and monetary distributions to his many brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews, and after providing for the care of his aging stepmother, he left the residuary portion of his estate for the establishment and maintenance of a benefit to others and to posterity. In less than two months from its execution, that will was presented to the Probate Court of his community, the body of our colonel having been interred on the field of battle where he was ambushed in the year 1755.

This colonel is Ephriam Williams, Jr. of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and his opponents were the dreaded French and their Indian allies and his will stipulated that upon naming of the westernmost township in the state, Williamstown, funds from his estate would be made available for the establishment and maintenance of a free school in that community. Accordingly, ten years after his death, that township was granted upon application of its residents, by the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, the name of Williamstown. No longer would it be known as West Hoosak, thus seeming to fulfill the first predicate for the establishment of a free school as specified in his will. Five more years passed by but no funds were bestowed, when the residents of Williamstown in 1770 sought payment from the estate. The executors of the will refused to release the funds until New York and Massachusetts had resolved their boundary dispute. The executors pointed out funds were to be provided only to establish and maintain a school in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and that the newly named town while admittedly one step completed, that area might yet wind up in New York. Three years later in 1773, New York and Massachusetts agreed to their mutual boundary thus establishing the western boundary of Massachusetts, and thereby confirmed the location of Williamstown to be within Massachusetts.

Ten years later the legislature granted a charter to a free school and in 1790 after petitioning Massachusetts for a lottery to fund the additional capital required for the necessary school building, construction commenced. In 1791 a free school for lower grades opened in its new all-purpose quarters, and in 1793 a charter was granted to incorporate Williams College. It opened that fall with an undergraduate enrollment of twenty and an academy student body of approximately 60 (which was phased out as those classes reached college age). Among the overall reasons given to encourage the Massachusetts officials to authorize the establishment of the college in Williamstown, was included the importance of keeping the college bound Massachusetts students from leaving the state, while the prime reason for its particular location in Williamstown was the rural location and accompanying "lack of allurements". Also included was the reasonableness and affordability of the education to be provided in Williamstown which it was asserted would bring it "more within the power of the middling and lower class of citizens". The initial funding for the college consisted of \$11,000 from the estate of Ephriam Williams, \$2,400 from its building lottery and a grant of \$1,200 payable at a rate of \$300 per year from the Massachusetts Legislature.

Today Williams College is still located in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and while it does not still so vociferously tout its "lack of allurements" quality, it has nevertheless retained that characteristic in abundance for its undergraduate student body, which has now grown one hundred fold to 2,000. There are also small masters degree granting programs in developmental economics, and in art history, both highly respected internationally known programs. And the college mascot is a cow, albeit a purpose one, but a cow nevertheless.

That single 1791 building, West College, still is in use today, and the college facilities have also grown one hundred fold, with the campus comprising 100

buildings on 450 acres and 2,500 outlying acres. That \$11,000 bequest from Ephriam Williams now stands at over \$1.3 billion. Williams College is among the most academically competitive colleges in the country and it has enjoyed considerable success in the annual U.S. News and World Report survey of colleges and universities in the United States, in which it often ranks 1<sup>st</sup> and never lower than 3<sup>rd</sup> among the liberal arts colleges. It has enjoyed similar success in athletics and has won Sears trophies for overall athletics program excellence more times than any other Division III college; while the loyalty of its alumni is legendary as well might be expected for the oldest college alumni association in the country.

It completed a \$175,000,000 capital fund drive to mark the start of its 3<sup>rd</sup> century, a decade ago; while the most recent and typical annual alumni contribution fund drive netted \$7,000,000 from 14,000 of its 23,000 alumni.

With its \$1.3 billion endowment, its admissions policy is need-blind and its scholarship largess seeks still to offer its educational facilities so as to be "within the power of the middling and lower class of citizens" even if it has dropped that exact phraseology from its brochures and catalogues sent to prospective students.

All of this resulted from one French bullet that could as easily have been a few inches to the side, or preceded by an accurate American bullet and never even been discharged.

## PART TWO

Almost a century and a half after the Battle of Lake George in which Colonel Williams lost his life, we find another American military force on a frontier so far West that it has become East, in a conflict known as the Boxer Rebellion. With bullets flying and men dying, Sterling Clark then in the ranks, also was

promoted and recognized as a result of his bravery and leading his men through that battle to safety. During this service he was engaged in battles leading to the capture of Tientsin and the siege and capture of Peiking (now Beijing). So distinguished was his bravery, that he was commissioned a first lieutenant after Tientsin, and medals were also bestowed upon him by the U.S. Army. But for Lieutenant Clark there was not a bullet with his name on it during those battles and he lived to enjoy another day, and another two years in military service although in Washington D.C. before returning to Peking in 1903. By 1905 with his military service at an end, he traveled to the West Indies to begin preparations for an expedition to map and explore a remote area of Northern China. Clark set out with thirty six men, as he led a zoological and ethnological research mission between 1908 and 1909, making the first map of that all but unknown area of China.

Although this project which he had conceived, prepared and funded himself would result in the mapping of thousands of square miles of essentially wilderness land in China, including routes over which Marco Polo himself had traveled, and the surveying and analyzing the regional geology as well as compiling systematic meteorological records and collecting thousands of animal specimens and cataloging and photographing large numbers of monuments, temples and artifacts, Lieutenant Clark and his party of forty, were certainly not out of harm's way. The expedition came to an abrupt end in 1909 when the Indian surveyor and interpreter was murdered by Chinese locals. Although Clark himself escaped harm and lived to write about his adventures in a book he published with an Englishman on the expedition, this and his military service were not to be the events for which he is remembered.

More than a century and a half later after Ephriam Williams was born, Robert Sterling Clark was born in 1877 in New York City, the son of Alfred Corning and Elizabeth Scriven Clark. His grandfather Edward Clark

had been a member of the Williams College Class of 1831. In addition to becoming a distinguished attorney, Edward Clark also happened to be a partner of Isaac Singer, the partner who donated his name to a certain well-known product used in many American homes of the time, as well as those all over the world. The Singer Sewing machine was the product in what became the family business, which also was headed by his son, Alfred Clark. By the time Sterling Clark and his three brothers came along, others were running the company and the Clark family members simply enjoyed the benefits flowing therefrom.

Following his military service and mapping expedition to China, Sterling Clark returned to the United States in 1911 before he settled in Paris and began his lifelong quest. His parents over the years had become art collectors and patrons. The Clark sons inherited that taste and inclination. Starting in 1912 in London, Sterling Clark began to purchase paintings, primarily old masters and then expanded his interests and purchases into silver, prints, illustrated books and drawings.

By 1919 Sterling Clark had met and married Francine Clary, a French actress who was to be his lifelong companion and as he referred to her, "his touchstone" in the formation of their collection in which acquisitions accelerated and began to acquire a definite flavor as Sterling's taste and that of his "touchstone" sharpened.

Commencing with an inherited interest in art and an inheritance that allowed him to pursue that interest, Sterling Clark first leaned toward old Masters, so prevalent in the collections of those in the social circles in which he traveled. More precisely those ancient paintings, including a Woodland Farm Landscape, in the style of Hobbema, a seashore scene by a following of Van Ruisdael, and a portrait by Hyacinte Rigaud were his first purchases before beginning to buy works by the masters themselves. He

then progressed through various Italian, Dutch and Flemish painters to Rembrandt etchings before expanding to other masters and to silver. As the years passed and his tastes and confidence in his purchases matured, original oil paintings became the subjects of choice by those who were to become his favorites, Sargent, Homer, Degas, Renoir, Monet, and Pissarro, in addition to his Barbizon School paintings by Corot, Courbet, and Daubigny and other impressionist painters, as well as paintings by Alma-Tadema, Gerome, Bouguereau, Tisot, Alfred Stevens and other favorites. The collections continued to grow with silver and porcelain additions, as well as drawings, prints and engravings and all soon were scattered throughout the French residence and residences in New York City, and Upperville, Virginia as well as in gallery-provided-storage space and several warehouses, including one in Montreal which was filled with the treasures from the Paris residence just barely gotten out of France in the late 1930's ahead of Nazi invaders.

Sterling Clark, in addition to the previously mentioned family example which led him in his art collecting, also followed his father's addiction to privacy. He did not associate himself with any particular museums and he did not rely upon experts to help him select paintings. He allowed only friends to view his collection and the occasional and rare lending of any work was always done anonymously. He did associate with other collectors, and with dealers and established long-term relationships with several dealers. He particularly enjoyed the chase but his selections were his own choices, buying what he liked as opposed to what others deemed important. As he said of the professionals:

A funny lot these art historians - they know art history, the stories of painters, study their special manners of painting but for an eye which appreciates all kinds of artists who are craftsmen, they lack that entirely in many cases.

To a friend who asked what to read and how to learn about art, he advised:

I told her to look, look, and look again and not let herself be influenced by anyone in her likes and dislikes! That there was no book on art which was not biased, and experts were so many "bluffs", that they only liked pictures which were in fashion.

Despite this philosophy, he did rely upon dealers, particularly Knoedler Galleries and Durand-Ruel both in Paris and New York City. From Knoedler he bought nearly all of his paintings by Sargent, Homer, Remington, Stevens and Boldinni. Another quarter of his paintings including twenty-four Renoirs and three works of Degas came from Durand-Ruel. These were the only experts to assist in his collection, although his wide-ranging individual searches were equally responsible. He never retreated from his view of buying only what he liked and ignoring completely what he did not like. While he was particularly fond of the collector and industrialist Henry Clay Frick and his New York City residence museum, he did not agree with his choice of furnishings:

I would not have given over \$10,000 for the two Whistler portraits that Frick bought at such an enormous price and if I had, I should have sold them the day after.

After his parents died in 1910, the family paintings were distributed among the brothers while Sterling was out of the country. His brother Stephen Clark in particular ended up with more of what Sterling viewed as an unfair share of his parents' paintings and the two of them in particular continued the argument to the point of eventually not speaking and family schism and spite. Accordingly, when Stephen decided to sell a few of the inherited paintings, Sterling bought them from Knoedler with the proviso that Knoedler not reveal the purchaser until after the payment had been

accepted, knowing Stephen would refuse the sale to him. Throughout his collecting life, Clark refused to acknowledge any of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century painters, for whom he had no use. He did not believe in that abstract interpretive painting style and was not interested in their thought processes.

I don't care a damn about painters dreams, what I want is paint. For instance I don't care what Cezanne, Matise and Gaugin thought or what they wanted to express. I could not give tuppence for all the pictures they ever painted or hoped to paint. The rules of painting cannot be broken. Renoir would have painted just as well in Titian's time. He, Degas, Manet at his best, Corot, etc. are brothers of Titian, VanDyck, and Reubens. The others are just bad painters.

To that end the Clarks collected thirty-eight Renoirs, seven Pissarros, six Monets, forty paintings, drawings and sculptures by Degas, eight Corots, three by Manet, and a dozen or so by Sargent and a similar number by Homer, and three Remingtons among their other important American paintings.

As can easily be seen from the recitation of the scope of the painting collection, without going into the vast amount of silver, including cases full of examples by Paul Revere, as well as examples of all important English silversmiths and other Colonial American silversmiths, vast quantities of prints, engravings, drawings and other works on paper and very rare porcelains, it is easily seen that even with three residences, one could not begin to contain, let alone display and enjoy this quantity of fine art works.

By post World War II United States, the Clarks had amassed one of the best collections worldwide of significant French and American art as well as old master paintings. Over the years the Clarks refined their collecting and of course continuing to add to it, so too did their thoughts change about what to do with

the collection. As custodians of such a collection, the Clarks considered many options, including delivery of the collection to a museum in Richmond, Virginia, to bequeath everything to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with restrictions that it always be maintained together as the Sterling Clark collection of art, and even leaving the collection to the Louvre.

Sterling Clark also considered what others had done. The Barnes collection in Philadelphia was being formed about the same time and Dr. Barnes was competing, often successfully, for the same paintings sought by the Clarks, particularly those by Renoir, although Dr. Barnes favored many more current artists including Cezanne, Gauguin, Miro and of course, Picasso, than did Sterling Clark, all of these latter whom Clark refused even to acknowledge as artists. But the facilities he most admired were those like the museum established by his close friend, Henry Frick and that facility in addition to its potential for visitors in New York City, began to reorient Clark's thinking.

Also at that time in the late 1940's, the Clarks feared that an atomic bomb would be dropped in one or more of the most populated areas of the country and accordingly wanted to locate their collections where they could be exhibited, and at a location that would not be subject to the likelihood of nuclear attack.

At this same time Williams College alumni who happened to be aware of the Clarks' thinking and their fabulous art collection, began to set into motion a trip to Williamstown, Massachusetts for Sterling and Francine Clark. With an extremely well regarded art history department and a family history of previous contributions to Williams College, college officials undertook to assist the Clarks in focusing where to locate their collection.

Edward Clark, the pater familias, after all had been a member of the Class of 1831, and had been a trustee of Williams College from 1878 to 1882 while his

son, Sterling Clark's father, Alfred Corning Clark, had succeeded him as a trustee from 1882 to 1886. Edward Clark had donated Clark Hall, as a geology building and museum to house his donated mineral collection on the Williams College campus, and in 1908 Sterling Clark, his three brothers and his mother had donated funds for another Clark Hall, which building stands to this day on the Williams College campus. It seemed that old phraseology from the application for the Williams College Charter touting the location as "removed from distractions" and its "lack of allurements" was never so appropriate or so valuable. That fall 1949 meeting on the Williams College Campus went well. Old ties were relived, potential locations for a museum were suggested, enthusiastic support and opportunity for collaboration between the proposed museum and Williams College were explored. The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute located in Williamstown, Massachusetts was chartered only six months later.

And thus was born one of the world's great museums, all as a coincidence of one soldier whose life was ended in battle before he had an opportunity to start a family and after he had an opportunity to consider what to do with his assets, and another soldier who while he survived his defense of his country, nevertheless also did not have children and also chose to leave his wealth for the benefit of others.

### PART THREE

The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute opened in 1955 in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Its founders Sterling Clark and Francine Clark were there, from their New York City home on East 71<sup>st</sup> Street. In fact the museum incorporated an apartment for Sterling and Francine Clark to use whenever they wished. Sterling Clark lived an additional year and his wife Francine four years beyond that day they first saw their collection housed in the white marble 1950s style Roman temple. That building was complete with central

atrium, a room glassed over for protection and control of light, and perhaps, the most restful, inspiring and just plain beautiful room in America. It displays the Degas bronze dancer in a crinoline tutu and four bronze ballerinas demonstrating the five ballerina positions. On the atrium walls are most of the 38 Renoirs in the Clark collection. Sprinkled among those paintings are complimentary paintings by Sissley, Pissarro, Monet, Tourlouse-Lautrec, Cassat, Morisot and Degas. While there are other impressionist paintings outside the main atrium room, the assemblage in one room totally open, and unobstructed with all visible from any direction, is truly breathtaking and awe-inspiring.

Along the way into this room one encounters a room full of Homers, another of Sargents, and Remingtons and other works in sufficient quality and quantity, that a trip to see just those paintings would prove satisfying. A separate garden room houses Alfred Stevens ladies, while the more precise paintings of Bouguereau, Alma-Tadema and Gerome are displayed near the restful Barbizon School landscapes of Corot, Daubigny and Corbet. Examples from every important silversmith fill cabinet after cabinet, and magnificent porcelains fill those cabinets that the silver does not take up.

Other rooms display the old masters collected early in Sterling and Francine Clark's efforts, while magnificent religious theme examples from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries are spectacularly displayed as well.

That single white marble 1950 temple building on its 100 acres has grown to 140 acres and over 160,000 square feet of gallery, library, lecture and office space, with one of the largest art history libraries in North America. It now offers a graduate degree granting program in conjunction with Williams College. Currently in the works is an expansion of the building space by 50%, with further educational facilities for the art history program and laboratories for support of

the Art Conservation Center and an additional permanent wing for the American paintings collections.

#### PROLOGUE

On a personal note as an undergraduate at Williams College, I discovered the museum my freshman year, and on many occasions when the cold gray days characteristic of the Berkshire Mountains and what seemed like never-ending winter snows pervaded that northwest corner of Massachusetts, a trip to the Clark served to disprove the original description of the area's delights as being characterized by "a lack of allurements".

So here we have two great institutions, created because of the generosity of two soldiers, and their thoughts of others and posterity and leaving something behind.

Two soldiers, two wills, one bullet, no children.

Coincidence? I think not.

Co-incident.

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