

The Unstoppable

Lera Millard Thomas

Life

August 3, 1900

Born in Nacogdoches, Texas to Jesse Waldington and Annie Donnell *Watkins* Millard.



Lera's high school senior picture, 1918. Courtesy of the Millard's Crossing Collection.

May 1918

Graduated from Nacogdoches High School.

Fall 1918

Attended The Ward-Belmont School for Girls and Young Women in Nashville, Tennessee.



Nacogdoches High School Glee Club, 1917. Lera is on the bottom row, second from left. Courtesy of the Millard's Crossing Collection.

Spring 1919 - Spring 1920

Attended Brenau College in Gainesville, Georgia. Member of Alpha Epsilon Chapter of Delta Delta Delta Sorority.

Fall 1920 - Fall 1921

Attended the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Founding member of the Delta Delta Delta Sorority chapter.



Lera circa 1932. Courtesy of Albert & Tracie Lasater.

October 2, 1922

Married Albert Thomas in Dallas, Texas.

August 30, 1923

Son: James "Jimmy" Nelson Thomas born in Nacogdoches, Texas.

June 22, 1934

Son: James "Jimmy" Nelson Thomas died at Memorial Hospital in Houston, Texas.

October 7, 1938

Daughter: Anne Thomas born in Houston, Texas.



Lera's daughters, Lera & Anne with her parents Annie & Jesse in Nacogdoches, Texas. Circa mid-late 1950's. Courtesy of the Millard's Crossing Collection.

September 21, 1942

Daughter: Lera Thomas born in Houston, Texas.

February 15, 1966

Husband: Albert Thomas died of cancer in Washington, D.C.

March 26, 1966 - January 3, 1967

Elected as a Democratic Representative to the Eighty-ninth Congress to fill the vacancy caused by the death of her husband.

February - August 1967

Served as a consultant in the Vietnam Bureau of the U. S. State Department.



Interment in Oak Grove Cemetery in Nacogdoches, Texas. Courtesy of Pamela Temple.

1969

Opened Millard's Crossing.

July 23, 1993

Died of cancer in Nacogdoches, Texas.



Politics

Lera began her informal political activity in 1936 when she helped Albert win a seat in the U.S House of Representatives. Following his death in 1966, Lera ran in the March 26 special election to fill Albert's seat at the request of Democratic Party leaders. On March 30, Lera was sworn into office having won 74% of the vote and even her Republican opponent's, Louis Leman, vote of favor.



Lera Millard Thomas with President Lyndon B. Johnson.
Courtesy of the LBJ Library, National Archives and
Records Administration.

In the House, Lera served on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee and continued her husband's support for NASA by petitioning Congress to fund the construction of the administration's lunar sample receiving laboratory in Houston.

As Lera prepared to leave office in December 1966, she traveled to Vietnam, Korea, and Southeast Asia on a Congressional junket to give letters to soldiers from her district. After her junket expired, Lera remained in Vietnam for a total of six weeks as a journalist for the *Houston Chronicle*. When Lera returned to the United States in February 1967, she served for six months as a consultant in the Vietnam Bureau of the U.S. State Department's agency for International Development. In this position, Lera promoted U.S. funded aid programs for the South Vietnamese.



Soldier from Abilene, Texas, Lera, & U.S.
Congressman Graham Purcell at the Freedom
House at the Demarcation Zone (DMZ) in Korea
in December 1966.
Courtesy of the Millard's Crossing Collection.



Lera at the White House
with First Lady Betty Ford.
Courtesy of the Millard's
Crossing Collection.



Preservation

In 1968, Lera and her two daughters retired to this thirty-seven acre plot of land, which included the last portion of the old Millard homestead. When the family returned, Nacogdoches businesses and Stephen F. Austin State University were destroying many of the old buildings to accomplish economic and physical growth. Distraught over this demolition of local and family history, Lera bought several of these historic houses that lay in the pathway of the destruction.

Lera first bought two small Victorian houses in Nacogdoches. She moved them to her property and combined the houses into one residence. Next, Lera saved the Millard-Lee House from demolition and used it as her private antique gallery.



The completed Thomas House after reconstruction.
Courtesy of the Millard's Crossing Collection.



The Millard-Lee House in its original location.
Courtesy of the Millard's Crossing Collection.

Built in 1837 by Lera's great-grandfather, this two-story double house originally stood behind the Stone Fort (Regions) Bank in downtown Nacogdoches. When bank managers planned to destroy the house for the bank's parking lot expansion in 1969, Lera bought the structure and moved it to her property. That same year, Lera opened Millard's Crossing to the public as a historic village and operating antique store. She continued collecting local structures, ranging in construction dates from 1837 to the 1910s, until her death.

During her efforts to save the buildings, Lera altered many of their original appearances by using inaccurate reconstruction techniques. She also decorated them with antiques she collected from her world travels. Over the past two decades, the board members and directors of Millard's Crossing have attempted to correct these inaccuracies. Their work presents a more authentic representation of early East Texas. Although partially inaccurate, Lera's efforts preserved a valuable portion of East Texas history.



The restored Millard-Lee House.
Courtesy of the Millard's Crossing Collection.



Legacy

Nacogdoches did not always preserve its history as well as it does now. One of the first major losses to the town was the Old Stone Fort. After it had fallen into disrepair, the owner tore down one of the oldest structures in Texas despite the best efforts of the local people.

In more recent times, the town has lost historic houses and landmarks as people raced to update their properties during the 1960s. Like the women of Nacogdoches before her, Lera argued to the town fathers that it would be insane to destroy so much history for the sake of modernizing. So, while others were tearing down the old, Lera began a preservation project that eventually became the Millard's Crossing we know today. Her work inspired the rest of the town and motivated them to save the history in their own backyards. Since then, the Nacogdoches Historic Landmark Preservation Committee has worked to preserve the town and its heritage.



1902 photograph of the Old Stone Fort one year before its demolition.
Courtesy of the East Texas Research Center.



Lera Millard Thomas leading a Nacogdoches senior hostel tour group.
Courtesy of the Millard's Crossing collection.

When she first opened Millard's Crossing, Lera offered personal tours to visitors. They often said this was their favorite part of the visit, commenting on how welcome she made them feel. Visitors believed the hands-on experience Millard's Crossing offered made it a valuable asset for the education of future generations.

Furthermore, Lera established the Stephen F. Austin State University Albert Thomas Scholarship in memory of her late husband. Students from the university often volunteer at or research Millard's Crossing as part of their educational experience.

The influence of Millard's Crossing and its collections have steadily grown since it first opened. The community appreciates its children's day camps, holiday festivities, tours led by community volunteers, and, most importantly, the preservation of architectural history in East Texas. In hopes of protecting the site even longer, Lera donated her buildings to the Communities Foundation of Texas Inc. in 1985. In 2008, Millard's Crossing Historic Village Inc. took full ownership of the site thanks to a donation from the city of Nacogdoches.

Since its founding, Millard's Crossing has received several awards and medallions from the Texas Historical Commission and other organizations for its educational programs and structures.



Children's camp at Millard's Crossing.
Courtesy of the Millard's Crossing website.

