



## Mary Drinkard Key

October 19, 2020

Mary Drinkard Key, the matriarch of a large and extended family, died Oct. 19 at home in Salisbury, NC, after an apparent heart failure. She was 91.

Her family and friends long marveled at her energy, care for others, and boundless interest in the world around her. Her life was a constant stream of invention and re-invention -- from the loss of both parents at age 13, through boarding schools and college to marriage to a husband who was an attorney-turned-Presbyterian minister.

That led to 30 years of moves to churches spread across Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee, each one a new adaptation and an opportunity for new friends. But it didn't stop there.

After losing her husband, James E. Drinkard, to cancer in 1996, she began attending a grief support group at church with another congregation member, Jesse A. Key, who had lost his wife, Jane. They were married a year later, moving to Farragut, TN, and their merged family grew even larger.

It all started with an American Army artillery officer, Marion Penn, who deployed to France in WWI and returned to marry a French wife, Françoise Renée Appoline Besnard. Mary was the first of their four children. When both parents died within six months of each other in 1942, Mary went to Knoxville to live with an uncle and aunt, while her three siblings moved to live with family in Texas.

Mary grew up hearing French spoken at home, and as a child she spent a year with family in France, going to school there. It started a language "bug" that lasted a lifetime.

At Randolph Macon Women's College in Lynchburg, VA, she was called on because of her language skills to help host French intellectual and writer Simone de Beauvoir on a 1947 campus visit and lecture tour.

As a beloved high-school French teacher in Greensboro, her commuting vehicle was a Renault "Le Car," and she organized trips to France for her students. In Knoxville, she decided to take up Italian to add to her language portfolio. And at her last home at the Trinity Oaks retirement community in Salisbury, she started conversational language groups for speakers of French and Spanish.

She had met husband Jim, a law student at the University of Virginia, on a blind date while in college. They married in 1950 and moved to Bristol, VA, where he started a law practice

and they started a family. But after five years the couple felt a different call, and moved to Richmond where Jim attended Union Theological Seminary.

He was called to pastorates at Presbyterian churches in Woodstock and Glade Spring, VA; Greensboro, NC, and Strawberry Plains, TN. In each, Mary played key roles as a hostess, a musician, a Sunday School teacher and a consummate gatherer of people. That gathering instinct was perhaps best represented by her attention to her now far-flung family. She started a periodic family reunion for her clan that persists to this day, continued by her children.

She was herself a voracious student and reader. While in Glade Spring, she earned a Master's Degree by commuting to Appalachian State University in North Carolina. She seemed to always be in motion, whether taking vacations in the woods with six children in a three-room tent, handing out loaves of homemade banana bread to church members or filling a freezer and a pantry with vegetables from the family garden. She taught line-dancing classes into her 80s.

In Farragut with husband Jess, a mark of Mary's lasting devotion to the church was her election as a member of the its governing body, where she was in charge of welcoming new members, among other duties. Moving to Salisbury and Trinity Oaks, she quickly made new friends and started a weekly sing-along around a piano. And even then, she continued to out-dance far-younger guests at grandchildren's weddings.

Husband Jess died in 2019. Mary leaves a big family in her wake: her children and their spouses, Jim and Kathy Drinkard of Springfield, VA; Deborah and Harold Houghton, of Richmond, VA; Steve and Lina Drinkard and Mike and Gail Drinkard, all of Salisbury, NC; Kathy and Scott McIndoe, of Bowie, MD; and Carol and Gerry O'Loughlin, of Stoneham, MA. Her expanded family includes Jess' children and spouses: Carol and Tim Brown of Marshall, NC; Susan and Scott Conrad, of Asheville, NC; Kenneth and Robin Key, of Kona, HI; Steven Key, of Carrollton, TX. All told, there are 18 grandchildren and eight (soon to be nine) great-grandchildren, as well as a "brother", Dick Ince, and his wife Ann of Knoxville, sister-in-law Elaine Wilcox of Stuarts Draft, VA, and many nieces, nephews and cousins on two continents.

Memorial gifts in Mary's memory may be made to John Calvin Presbyterian Church, 1620 Brenner Ave., Salisbury, NC 28144. Summersett Funeral Home in Salisbury is in charge of arrangements, and online condolences may be made at [www.summersettfuneralhome.com](http://www.summersettfuneralhome.com).

A virtual memorial service through ZOOM will be held Saturday, November 14, 2020 at 11:00 AM. To participate please request an invitation from John Calvin Presbyterian Church at [jcprevc@gmail.com](mailto:jcprevc@gmail.com).

# Comments

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“ Sharon & Tom Gonzalez and the extended Penn Family purchased the Divine Peace Bouquet for the family of Mary Drinkard Key.



**Sharon & Tom Gonzalez and the extended Penn Family** - November 13, 2020 at 12:11 PM

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“ With Love from Dick and Ann Ince purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of Mary Drinkard Key.



**With Love from Dick and Ann Ince** - November 10, 2020 at 12:39 PM

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“ Mary became big part of my teenage years, when Carol and I became friends upon their move to Greensboro. I spent many afternoons and nights at the Drinkard home.

Like my own home, the door was always open. Mary made sure I felt at home, and happily gave me household chores when she wanted help. The one I remember most was shining the silver.

I will also forever remember Mary as Mrs. Drinkard, my French teacher. She loved teaching, and her love of the language and teaching others never ceased.

I enjoyed spending a bit of time with her and meeting Jess for the first time, once they moved to NC. Carol and I enjoyed an afternoon sing-along with Mary as she led us all on the piano.

Mary touched many lives, and I am happy I was one of the people blessed to know her.

To Carol, Kathy, Mike, Steve, Debbie, Jim, and families, you are all in my thoughts and prayers. Love, Laura Goncharow Hannon

**Laura G. Hannon** - October 27, 2020 at 05:29 PM

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“ If anyone every deserved a Thanatopsis-like departure from this life, it was Mary. She could and did “wrap the drapery of her couch about her and lie down to pleasant dreams.”

But this world feels smaller and grayer without her. We send our loving sympathy to the family she loved so dearly. You know what she would want you to do.

Bimal and Annette Pal  
Farragut neighbors

**Annette Pal** - October 26, 2020 at 03:15 PM

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“ We haven't known Mary all that long, maybe 12 years, but at the Holidays, we were usually able to have a quick visit. Mary was always smiling and having fun, she had that way about her to always make you feel great. She will definitely be missed, by such a big and extended family. Our condolences to her family and "Bonsoir" Mary, you were a pleasure to know, and we will see each other again, one fine day. Sandie & Kit Conrad

**Sandie & Kit Conrad** - October 25, 2020 at 06:28 PM

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“ Mary was my best friend Carol’s mother. Carol was the youngest of their six children. We were 10 when we became friends, and I spent many hours at the Drinkard’s home, where I recall Mary’s gracious way of making me feel at home. Carol’s birthday was on Christmas Day, and it was a treat when Mary would take us to a movie in Bristol and then to Uncle Dan’s Peter Pan Bakery for a wonderful treat! After the Drinkard’s moved to Greensboro I visited them there while Carol and I continued our friendship through college. Later when Mary and Jess were in Knoxville visits again with memories of how gracious and lovely Mary always was. I’m so sorry for the loss and pray for peace and comfort for that wonderful family. Wendy Moore Martindale

Wendy Moore Martindale - October 25, 2020 at 09:51 AM

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“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



steve - October 24, 2020 at 08:43 PM



“ your mother was a beautiful woman living life to the fullest! I know you will miss her. My condolences to the whole family

Lindsay Wineka - October 26, 2020 at 01:35 PM

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“ Our hearts go out to Mary's children Jim, Deborah, Steve, Mark, Kathy and Carol and their families as they say goodbye to a very special person who is irreplaceable, their mother Mary. We were blessed to be a part of this amazing family, and treasured a rare friendship with Mary and Jim, Mary and Jess, and the entire family through the family reunions for which Mary was the organizer and driving force. We will not say goodbye, because Mary's vibrant spirit will be with us always. So much love to all. Dick and Ann Ince

Richard and Ann Ince - October 24, 2020 at 02:46 PM

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“ Country Basket Blooms was purchased for the family of Mary Drinkard Key.



October 23, 2020 at 09:56 PM

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“ I never personally met Mary , but getting to daughter Deborah, and grandson Ben ; I knew they had to have a great DNA line .  
What a remarkable woman she was were my thoughts as I read her story.  
She was a true matriarch to her family and will continue yes to be in their hearts.  
Sorry for the tremendous lost.  
Gina

**Gina Sein** - October 23, 2020 at 10:51 AM

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“ We met Mary and Jim and the family in Woodstock Virginia attending the Presbyterian Church. We kept up with them over the years and introduced them to my brother Jesse and his wife in Knoxville Tennessee on a visit to the Presbyterian Church there. The obituary indicated they were in a grief group together after both lost their spouses and eventually were married. Mary has always been a matriarch to our family and to all of the Key clan. We will miss her greatly and pray the Lord's comfort for all the family. Love, Jim Key

**Jim Key** - October 23, 2020 at 12:26 AM

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“ Sunny Memories was purchased for the family of Mary Drinkard Key.



October 22, 2020 at 02:15 PM

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“ Love and prayers. Your Mother was such a sweet person. I always enjoyed the times spent at your home. Great memories.

Joy Smith Gobble

**Joy Gobble** - October 22, 2020 at 11:20 AM