



Author Willa Cather's Virginia Birthplace on Verge of Collapse

A Cather family member and the National Willa Cather Center, in Nebraska, are organizing an effort to purchase and restore the property

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- As American Author Willa Cather's 150th birthday approaches, her birth home, a rural farmhouse in Northern Virginia, is at risk of collapse. The original wooden structure, which is in disrepair, requires significant restoration in order to be saved; the estimated cost to purchase the house, and five surrounding acres, is \$200,000. Cather enthusiasts are working hard to make sure it's purchased and saved.

"We've had a lot of calls and emails over the years from concerned citizens who want to see the home preserved," said Ashley Olson, executive director of the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud, Nebraska.



The Willa Cather birthplace will soon be for sale in Gore, Virginia

After several years of attempts to purchase the site near Gore, Virginia, where Cather was born on December 7, 1873, a Cather family member has set up a [GoFundMe account](#) that aims to raise \$300,000 for the acquisition and immediate stabilization.

Supporters who wish to give a charitable donation can also give a designated gift to the "Willa Cather Birthplace Fund," established by the National Willa Cather Center, at willacather.org/birthplace. One generous donor has already pledged \$20,000!

Donors can also mail a contribution marked “Cather Birthplace Fund” to the National Willa Cather Center, 413 N. Webster Street, Red Cloud, NE 68970

The National Willa Cather Center, in Red Cloud, Nebraska, where Cather and her family moved when the author was 9 years old, in 1883, is actively working to restore her childhood home there, too.

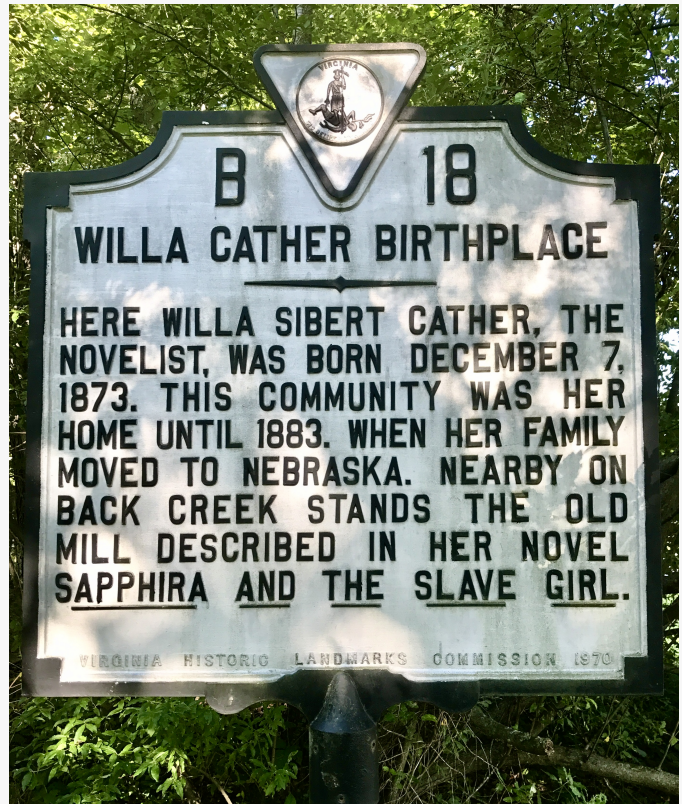
Fundraising on the Nebraska project is still active. A Save America’s Treasures grant from the National Park Service has been matched with private donations, and the Center is working with conservators and preservationists to complete an extensive restoration.

Olsen said the National Willa Cather Center fully supports the grassroots effort to save the Virginia property and noted they are working closely with Cather family members and other stakeholders.

“We will do all we can to share the word,” Olson said. “It pains me because historic preservation is a huge part of our mission, and we already own and maintain twelve sites related to the author in and near Red Cloud. Without significant charitable gifts to support the acquisition, preservation, and ongoing maintenance, we don’t as an organization have the capacity to purchase the birthplace.”

About Willa Cather and her birthplace

Cather, a fifth generation Virginian, was born near Gore on December 7, 1873, in the two-story

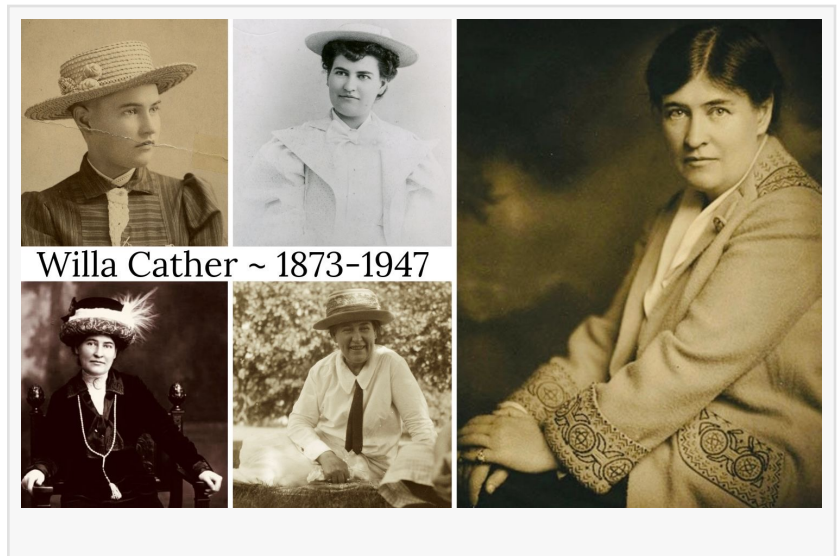


The historic site sign from the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission was added in 1970



The Willa Cather Childhood Home, a National Historic Landmark, is undergoing an extensive restoration during the author's 150th birthday year. It will reopen later in 2023.

house which belonged to her maternal grandmother, Rachel Seibert Boak. A few months later, Willa, her young parents and Grandmother Boak moved into the larger house and farm of Willa's paternal grandparents nearby, "Willow Shade," restored as a private home. Willa's father raised sheep for the Baltimore and Washington market and Grandmother Boak oversaw the education and much of the care of Willa and her siblings. For almost a decade, the family lived and farmed there before also moving to Nebraska



in 1882. The family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska in 1882, when Willa Cather was nine, but her early childhood in Virginia resonated throughout her life and writing.

The birthplace has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1978. Cather visited the site in the 1930s while doing research for *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, her last novel published in 1940, which she described as the most difficult book she ever wrote.

"Her family stories and memories of the region are entangled in the book, which was an attempt to confront slaveholding realities in her family's past." Olson said.

As a child of Virginia's difficult post-Civil War Reconstruction, young Willa was surrounded by family members who, in her father's family, had supported the Union army and, in her mother's family, had fought in the Confederate army. Cather's grandmother, Rachel Seibert Boak, was the inspiration for Rachel Blake in *Sapphira*, who assists a young enslaved woman escape captivity.

Cather's distinguished stature as an author of several novels and many stories set in Nebraska helped to define her career. But Cather also identified as a Virginian throughout her lifetime, which included nearly forty years living and working in New York.

The Cather birthplace remains as testament to the humble, rural origins of a great writer who, to the end of her life, struggled to write the story of her home state. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is today of increasing interest to contemporary Cather scholars, and the preservation of this birthplace could attract more visitors—scholars, readers, and future readers—to explore the beauty and complexity of Cather's Shenandoah Valley home.

Ann Romines, a Cather scholar from Alexandria, Virginia, and on the Center's board of governors, emphasized that the site is also a memorial to Cather's grandmother, Rachel Seibert Boak. "She embodied the conflicting love and loyalties that many Virginians—both black and white—struggled with during Reconstruction," Romines said. "Cather's efforts to write these

complexities of her native state are a major reason why she is an invaluable American writer.”

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Cather's 150th Birthday

The National Willa Cather Center is celebrating Cather's 150th birthday year with events in Red Cloud, Nebraska and throughout the country. For more information: www.WillaCather.org/150

The 68th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference in Red Cloud will honor the centenary of *A Lost Lady* and the 18th International Seminar in New York, in partnership with The New School, will focus on Cather's years living and working in the city. Registration is now open for both events which will be held in June: www.WillaCather.org/Events.

A statue of Willa Cather will be installed in the U.S. Capitol's National Statuary Hall Collection (date TBD). Cather will be one of less than a dozen women represented while Nebraska sculptor and Washington, D.C. native, Littleton Alston, will be the first African American to have a piece in the collection.

About The National Willa Cather Center

The National Willa Cather Center is an archive, museum, and study center that works to advance Willa Cather's legacy through education, preservation, and the arts. Located in Cather's hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska, the Center's programs include guided historic site tours, conservation of the 612-acre Willa Cather Memorial Prairie, and cultural programs and exhibits at the restored Red Cloud Opera House. The Center houses the earliest Cather collections and preserves ten properties that make up the largest collection of nationally-designated historic sites related to an American author. Additional programs include conferences, seminars, scholarships, an author series, teacher institute, and artist residency. The Center also publishes the Willa Cather Review, a leading source for Cather-related news, features, and scholarship. In 2023, the Center is celebrating the author's 150th birthday with events around the country. For more information visit www.WillaCather.org and follow the organization on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter [@WillaCatherFdn], and on YouTube [@NationalWillaCatherCenter].

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