


Winthrop Rockefeller: A Biography

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My biography of Winthrop Rockefeller will be the first book-length study to examine his life in its entirety from his birth in 1912 to his death in 1973. Born in New York on May 1, 1912, Winthrop spent the first forty years of his life based there. After being educated in New York and Connecticut, Winthrop worked in the oil fields of Texas, Louisiana and New Mexico for three years before returning to New York. Starting in 1940, he began six years in the military, serving in the Pacific theatre during World War II. Upon his return, Winthrop once again attempted to make a permanent career and life in New York. In 1948 he married his first wife, Barbara “Bobo” Sears, and soon after the couple had Winthrop’s only biological offspring, Winthrop Paul Rockefeller. In 1949, the couple separated, finally divorcing in 1954. The contested and protracted divorce, played out in the popular press and public eye, led to Winthrop making a life-changing decision in June 1953 when he moved to Arkansas. The move gave Winthrop a newfound sense of purpose and focus, away from the pressures attached to his family name and the responsibilities that came with it. Setting up home on a mountain farm, Winthrop worked in earnest to use his talents and resources to make Arkansas a better place. As part of his new life, he remarried in 1956 to Jeannette Edris, who was from a prominent Seattle family. In 1966, Winthrop was elected governor of Arkansas, the first Republican to hold that office in the state in almost a century. After two terms in which he tried to push through an agenda for reform with mixed success in a still heavily dominated Democratic state, Winthrop lost the office in 1970 to political newcomer Dale Bumpers. Shortly after, Winthrop was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer and died on February 22, 1973. Winthrop’s time in Arkansas and his time as governor had a profound impact on the state that is still evident today.

Three books have already been written about Winthrop. The first to appear was John Ward’s *The Arkansas Rockefeller*, followed by Cathy Kunzinger Urwin’s *Agenda for Reform: Winthrop Rockefeller as Governor of Arkansas, 1967-71*, and finally Ward’s second book, *Winthrop Rockefeller, Philanthropist: A Life of Change*.¹ Ward’s *Arkansas Rockefeller* provides an overview of Winthrop’s life in

Arkansas from his arrival there in June 1953 until his death in February 1973; Urwin's *Agenda for Reform* focuses intently on Winthrop's record as governor of Arkansas between 1967 and 1971; and Ward's *Winthrop Rockefeller, Philanthropist*, focuses on Winthrop's philanthropy, again mainly centred on his life in Arkansas. Each book has its strengths and limitations. John Ward was an employee who knew Winthrop and offers first-hand details and observations about his boss's life in Arkansas although, particularly in his first book, he does not deeply mine the available archival sources. Cathy Kunzinger Urwin offers a more scholarly and archives-based account of Winthrop as governor, but this shines a light only on a tiny sliver of his life during his four-year period in office.

My biography seeks to do three principal things to improve on these existing works. Firstly, it is based on a thorough and comprehensive examination of all available archival and other primary materials, along with all existing secondary works, that cover the entirety of Winthrop's life. Secondly, this more holistic approach allows Winthrop's story to be more thoroughly integrated into the wider history of the Rockefeller family in general and the Rockefeller brothers' generation in particular. It also allows for that story to be located within the wider political, social and cultural developments of the times. Thirdly, my book will locate Winthrop within the outpouring of scholarship on conservative and Republican politics in the past few decades that appeared after the publication of Urwin's and Ward's principal works and that provide an important new perspective and context for understanding Winthrop's political career in Arkansas.

My grant-supported time spent at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in July 2016 focused primarily on Record Group 2 Office of Messrs Rockefeller, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, that relate directly to Winthrop, as well as references to Winthrop in other family materials and collections such as the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Papers. In addition, the RAC is home to the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation Archives that also contain some relevant biographical

and historical materials related to Winthrop's life. Using these records I was able to begin to piece together and to flesh out the details of Winthrop's life with a specific purpose during this archival visit of focusing on his much overlooked and neglected years in New York that were foundational to his later life and work in Arkansas.

Winthrop Rockefeller was the fifth child of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the sole male heir to the Standard Oil fortune, and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. Winthrop's siblings were older sister Abby Rockefeller, and older brothers John D. III, Nelson, and Laurance, along with Winthrop's younger brother, David.² Winthrop attended Lincoln School in New York, which was part of the Teachers College of Columbia University. Lincoln pioneered progressive new educational ideas that focused on experiential learning. Although Winthrop enjoyed Lincoln, his parents felt that it was not equipping him adequately in his academic studies.³ He was transferred to Loomis School in Windsor, Connecticut, which was a more traditional boarding school. There, Winthrop flunked all of his classes in his first semester and faced an uphill struggle to get into university.⁴ He did eventually get accepted into Yale in fall 1931, but still struggling academically he quit in the spring semester of 1934 to pursue a career in the oil industry.⁵

Winthrop entered the oil industry on the ground floor, working the oil fields of Texas and Louisiana from 1934 to 1937. For the next few years he pursued various interests, briefly working as a student management trainee at Chase Bank in New York in 1937, playing a major role in the Greater New York Fund charitable campaign in the first six months of 1938, and becoming a founder member of Air Youth Corps, Inc., an organization dedicated to youths interested in all things aeronautical, in 1939. In early 1939, he went back into the oil industry, working in Socony-Vacuum's (now part of Exxonmobil) foreign trade department.⁶

World events intervened in the next phase of Winthrop's life. With war breaking out in Europe, in July 1940 he enrolled at Plattsburg Businessmen's Training Camp in upstate New York. Plattsburg, as it had done in World War I, provided a volunteer pre- enlistment training program for private citizens. On January 22, 1941, Winthrop enlisted in the U.S. Army. It was the beginning of a peripatetic six-year tour of duty that initially took him from postings coast-to-coast in the United States, and then overseas to Honolulu, Hawaii, in April 1944, having risen to the rank of major.⁷

Winthrop was involved in three campaigns in the Pacific, in Guam and Leyte in 1944, and in Okinawa in 1945. On his way to Okinawa in April 1945, a Japanese kamikaze pilot attacked his battleship the USS Henrico resulting in a significant number of deaths and casualties, and leaving Winthrop as the only surviving officer on board. He suffered flash burns on his face and hands and was sent back to Guam for a short period of treatment and recuperation, returning to Okinawa in May 1945. A few months later he was back in hospital again with his second attack of infectious hepatitis of the war. While in his hospital bed, Japan surrendered, bringing an end to the hostilities. Since it was clear that Winthrop would need an extended period of recovery, he was shipped back to the United States for treatment and convalescence. He eventually ended up in the Rockefeller Institute Hospital in New York for a number of months.⁸

Even before getting out of hospital, Winthrop was planning his next project. Since it was clear that on his doctor's advice he would not be fit for anything too strenuous, Winthrop suggested to the War Department that he work on a study to make policy recommendations about the resettlement of returning veterans. After being released from hospital he travelled extensively to complete his "Report on Veterans Adjustment" in July 1946. Soon after delivering the report he was discharged from the army as a lieutenant colonel and started work again at Socony-Vacuum where he travelled overseas in Europe and the Middle East.⁹

When he was not working, Winthrop was out enjoying the nightlife of New York's "café society." He enjoyed socializing on the party circuit and after six years of military service he was more than ready to live a carefree life for a while. Earning the title "the most eligible bachelor in America" in the press, Winthrop was featured in the society pages on a regular basis and he was romantically linked with a long string of starlets. One of these was Barbara Sears, known more popularly as "Bobo." Born Jievute Paulekiute to Lithuanian immigrant parents, Bobo grew up in Noblestown, Pennsylvania and in Chicago in modest circumstances. She caught a break in 1933 by being named "Miss Lithuania" at the Century of Progress exhibition in Chicago, launching a modeling and minor acting career on the back of it. On a theater tour production of Erskien Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, she met and married prominent Boston socialite Richard Sears. The couple were estranged and headed for divorce when Bobo met Winthrop in New York in 1947.¹⁰

As the clock struck midnight on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1948, Winthrop and Bobo were married in Palm Beach, Florida. The press hailed it a "Cinderella wedding" and the couple received a good deal of attention, capturing the public imagination.¹¹ Seven months later, Winthrop's only biological son, Winthrop Paul Rockefeller, was born on September 17. Win Paul would later also find his home in Arkansas, and follow his father into political office there as lieutenant governor from 1996 to 2006.¹²

Winthrop and Bobo's marriage was short-lived. Barely a year after the birth of Win Paul the couple separated. A contentious and protracted divorce followed. Much of it was covered in painful detail by the popular press.¹³ The divorce caused a great deal of trauma and disruption in Winthrop's life. He spent extended stays in Venezuela working for Socony-Vacuum to escape unwelcome publicity. In 1951, he left the oil industry to join the International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC), a company set up by his brother Nelson to focus on private

investment in economies in developing countries, with a particular focus on Latin America.¹⁴

With a continuing focus on his private life in the press, in June 1953 Winthrop decided to move from New York and relocate to a new life Arkansas. Army friend and Little Rock insurance man Frank Newell had opined about the beauty of his native state to Winthrop for many years. Winthrop visited Newell and became likewise enthralled. The press claimed that it would only be a temporary stay and that Winthrop was moving there simply to take advantage of Arkansas's more liberal divorce laws. In fact, Winthrop spent the remaining twenty years of his life based in the state, founding a homestead that he named Winrock Farm atop Petit Jean Mountain, sixty miles northwest of Little Rock. He and Bobo were divorced in Reno, Nevada in August 1954.¹⁵ Winthrop remarried in June 1956 to Jeannette Edris, daughter of a prominent Seattle family, who lived with him at Winrock along with her son and daughter, Bruce and Anne, from a previous marriage.¹⁶

Winthrop's unlikely move to Arkansas paired one of the richest men in the country with one of its poorest states. He looked to put his wealth and experience gained from his New York years to good effect in his newly adopted home. Not long after locating to Arkansas, Rockefeller was called into service by Gov. Orval E. Faubus. In 1955, Faubus declared a state of emergency. Arkansas was hemorrhaging population at an alarming rate. With the state still wedded to its dwindling cotton economy, people were leaving Arkansas for expanding industrial jobs elsewhere. Faubus set up the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission (AIDC) to lure industry to Arkansas and to stem the flow of people. He knew that Rockefeller, with national business connections and acumen, was exactly the person to lead the campaign. Winthrop was happy to help. He ran a tremendously successful operation that increased his popularity and profile in the state.¹⁷

Faubus had unwittingly created a political rival. From a strong Republican Party family, Winthrop found himself in what political scientist V. O. Key labeled in 1949 the “purest one-party” Democratic stronghold in the South.¹⁸ Winthrop was initially happy to work along nonpartisan lines, but there were some things he was not willing to tolerate. When Faubus called out the National Guard to prevent the desegregation of Central High School in September 1957, it offended Winthrop’s long-standing commitment to racial equality and threatened to undo all of his good work in economic development. It drove a wedge between the two former allies and Faubus was increasingly wary of Winthrop’s political potential. These tensions grew when Winthrop met the residency requirements for governor in 1960 after living seven years in the state.¹⁹

Rumors abounded that a political challenge was on the cards. Winthrop did nothing to dispel them. Indeed, he added fuel to the fire by holding a “Party for Two Parties” at Winrock in an effort to revive the largely moribund Republican Party in the state. Rockefeller provided the funding and leadership to resuscitate the Republican Party in Arkansas. After resigning as chair of the AIDC in early 1964, Winthrop challenged Faubus for the governorship later that year. Faubus was the record-breaking five-term Democratic Party incumbent and the Republican Party was still cranking back into life through rusty gears. Winthrop knew he had little chance of victory and was beaten handily by Faubus. But he received far more votes in the election than any other Arkansas Republican candidate had in many years. Without skipping a beat, he kept on running for office with an eye on 1966.²⁰

In a surprise development, Faubus declined to run for governor again in 1966, leaving the Democratic field wide open. The Democrats nominated former Arkansas Supreme Court justice James D. Johnson. Johnson was a leading segregationist and former head of the White Citizen’s Council in Arkansas, which had led opposition to school desegregation in the state. In an unlikely match-up, Winthrop, the New York Yankee from a family background of wealth and

privilege took on the self-styled “Justice” Jim Johnson, the homegrown good old boy segregationist from Crossett, Arkansas. The voters chose Winthrop, but only narrowly. On white votes alone, Winthrop lost the election. Black votes carried the day for him, boosted by the civil rights movement and voter registration campaigns in the 1960s.²¹

Winning the election was one thing; governing was another. The Arkansas General Assembly contained only three fellow Republicans out of a total of 135 seats. Winthrop battled valiantly to get his progressive agenda for reform passed, albeit with mixed success. He did use the office to improve race relations by employing more black state employees and appointing more blacks to state boards, many of which were desegregated for the first time. He tried to reform the state’s archaic criminal justice and penal system, and, notably, in his last act in office, he commuted the sentences of all men on death row to life in prison in an act driven by his own personal opposition to the death penalty. Arkansas did not execute anyone else for over twenty years. Finally, he campaigned with some success for more transparency in state government.²²

Winthrop was re-elected to office in 1968, but lost to political newcomer, Democrat Dale Bumpers, two years later in 1970. Bumpers offered what Arkansas voters still truly hankered for: a Winthrop Rockefeller in Democratic Party clothing. As testimony to Winthrop’s impact in the state, the Democratic Party had gone through a profound transformation during his time in office and would no longer countenance an old-guard segregationist candidate. Although Dale Bumpers took office in 1971, Winthrop’s influence was still palpable in state politics, not least since Bumper’s legislative program borrowed heavily from his Republican predecessor.²³ Sadly, Winthrop lived a tragically short life after leaving office. He and Jeannette divorced in 1971, due in part to the strains his time in office had placed on their marriage. In September 1972, he was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer and died in Palm Springs, California, seeking to escape the Arkansas winter, on February 22, 1973.²⁴

Winthrop Rockefeller led a life divided between his first forty years in New York and his final twenty years in Arkansas. That divide has grown further since his death. For New Yorkers, Winthrop was largely out of sight and out of mind after his move to Arkansas. Arkansans embraced Winthrop as one of their own and never seriously inquired about what he did before he arrived in the state. Yet only by understanding the entirety of Winthrop's life can we truly understand both halves of his existence, not least since the first act profoundly shaped, influenced and informed the second. My biography will piece together the two halves of Winthrop's life for the first time. In so doing, it will fill a major gap in the historiography of the Rockefeller brothers' generation, and in the wider history of the Rockefeller family as a whole.

¹ John Ward, *The Arkansas Rockefeller* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Cathy Kunzinger Urwin, *Agenda for Reform: Winthrop Rockefeller as Governor of Arkansas, 1967-71* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991); John Ward, *Winthrop Rockefeller, Philanthropist: A Life of Change* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2004).

² On Winthrop Rockefeller's early life see Winthrop Rockefeller, "Letter to My Son," n.d., Frames 960-1105, Reel 14, Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation Archives 1956-(1978-1999)-2005 (Microfilm), Rockefeller Archive Center.

³ Letter from John D. Rockefeller Jr. to Jesse H. Newlon, September 12, 1928, Folder 33, "Winthrop Rockefeller, General, 1912-1968," Box 4, Series AD, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, FA403, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records (OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁴ See letters in Folder 5, "Correspondence, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller to Winthrop Rockefeller, 1921-1946," Box 1, and Folder 6, "Correspondence, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Winthrop Rockefeller, 1930-1940," Box 1, both in *ibid*.

⁵ See materials in Folder 4, "College, 1931-1933," Box 1, and letters in Folder 6, "Correspondence, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Winthrop Rockefeller, 1930-1940," Box 1, and Folder 11, "Correspondence, Winthrop Rockefeller to Abby and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1933-1945," Box 1, all in *ibid*.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ See letters in Folder 67, "Rockefeller, Winthrop, 1935-41," Box 5, Series 1, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Correspondence, 1882-(1920-1948)-1957, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Personal

Papers, 1858-1957, and Folder 7, "Correspondence, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Winthrop Rockefeller, 1941-1945," Box 1, Series AD, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, FA403, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records (OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁸ See materials in Folder 21, "Winthrop Rockefeller, Army Service, 1941-1948," Box 3, and letters in Folder 22, "Winthrop Rockefeller, Army Service, Letters re: Injury, 1945," Box 3, Series AD, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, FA403, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records (OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁹ See letters in Folder 8, "Correspondence, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Winthrop Rockefeller, 1946-1959," Box 1, *ibid.*

¹⁰ See materials in Folder 42, "Mrs. Winthrop Rockefeller (Bobo), Publicity, 1948-1958," Box 5, *ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See materials in Folder 45, "Winthrop Paul Rockefeller, 1948-1971," Box 5, *ibid.*

¹³ See materials in Folder 40, "Winthrop Rockefeller, Separation and Divorce, 1951-1953," Box 5, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Letter from Winthrop Rockefeller to Robert W. Gumbel, August 9, 1950, Folder 34, "Winthrop Rockefeller, General, 1939-1944," Box 4, *ibid.*

¹⁵ On Winthrop Rockefeller's move to Arkansas and subsequent political career see, John A. Kirk, "A Southern Road Less Travelled: The 1966 Arkansas Gubernatorial Election and (Winthrop) Rockefeller Republicanism in Dixie," in *Painting Dixie Red: When, Where, Why, and How the South Became Republican*, edited by Glenn Feldman, 172-197 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011). The research for this essay was conducted with the assistance of a 2009 research grant from the Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁶ See materials in Folder 43, "Mrs. Winthrop Rockefeller (2nd) (Jeannette), 1959-1960," Box 5, Series AD, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, FA403, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records (OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁷ See John A. Kirk, "The Politics of Southern Industrialization: Winthrop Rockefeller, Orval Faubus, and the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission." This manuscript won the 2016 Violet B. Gingles award for best article on state history from the Arkansas Historical Association. Forthcoming in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*. The research for this manuscript was conducted with the assistance of a 2009 research grant from the Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁸ V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 183-204.

¹⁹ Kirk, "A Southern Road Less Travelled," 177-182.

²⁰ See materials in Folder 65, "1966 Campaign for Governor," Box 8, Series AD, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, FA403, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records (OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center.

²¹ On the 1966 campaign see Kirk, "A Southern Road Less Travelled."

²² On Winthrop Rockefeller's record as governor see Urwin, *Agenda for Reform*.

²³ Kirk, "A Southern Road Less Travelled," 188-193.

²⁴ See materials in Folder 24, "Winthrop Rockefeller, Death, 1973," Box 4, Series AD, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, FA403, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records (OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center.