

John Volney Allcott, 1905 – 1989

Second President of the Chapel Hill Historical Society, 1968 – 1969



John V. Allcott was born May 30, 1905 in Saint Paul, Minnesota, the son of John Volney Allcott Sr., a salesman, and Elinor (Weiss) Allcott. John grew up in Wisconsin and received his Bachelor of Philosophy degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1928 and a diploma from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1932. He was awarded a certificate from the Royal Academy of Art in Florence, Italy, in 1934 and a Master's degree from the University of Chicago in 1936. John taught at the Art Institute in Chicago and at Hunter College in New York before coming to Chapel Hill. When John came to the University of North Carolina in 1940, as founder and first chairman of the Art Department, he was excited about developing the school's small art department. He wanted to make art come to life and to be part of the lives of young people. One of his first converts was June Chloupek, a former student of John's at the University of Chicago. They were married in Evanston, Illinois, on January 1, 1942. Soon they had four children: Elizabeth (Sharp) of New York, Dr. John Allcott III of Eugene, Oregon, Elinor (Griffith)

of Connecticut, and Gene A. Allcott of Atlanta.

John taught courses in modern art, architecture and studio art for 34 years. He loved to share UNC's architecture and lead tours of the campus. "The country's oldest state university is a little treasure," he said. "A lot of people think it's the most beautiful campus in the country." During his career he nurtured students with his lively vision of art. Given half a moment, he'd whip out his sketchbook and become fully engaged; with each sketch — seascapes, landscapes, faces, people — he savored the moment with his pen. His legacy at UNC continues through travel scholarships in the Art Department which enrich the lives of students and the University. In the years until his retirement in 1974, he left the UNC staff only once, from 1943-1945, first to serve as an artist-writer for the U.S. Navy and then to teach art and architecture to homeward bound American soldiers in the U.S. sponsored GI University of Florence, Italy.

During his time teaching at UNC, he shaped both campus and students in many ways. He welcomed art luminaries as guest speakers, and he led bus trips to museums in Washington and New York so students could analyze great works in person. He became an expert on the university's architecture and helped to plan the renovations of a number of its historic buildings such as the Playmakers Theater and Person Hall. Perhaps his greatest contribution during this time was his spirit. Known for teaching courses in the Quad, baking hundreds of loaves of bread for random distribution and sketching everything he saw only to give his drawings away, his warm presence became an artistic iteration of The Carolina Way. He was not only an art historian, but also an accomplished pianist (from Scarlatti to Scott Joplin), a rock wall builder, and a world traveler.

In 1986, the Chapel Hill Historical Society published his book, *The Campus at Chapel Hill: Two Hundred Years of Architecture*, and in 1993 his whimsical *UNC Coloring Book* depicted campus architecture through his drawings. In addition John also authored and illustrated his book *Colonial Homes in North Carolina* (1963); he published articles in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* and *The Magazine Antiques*.

"John Allcott was one of those wonderful teachers and an individual who brought a new appreciation of the importance of art in our lives to thousands of students," said former UNC System President William C. Friday. "He was a man of real influence in art circles in this region of the United States."

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This whimsical self-portrait by John Allcott was likely drawn in the late 1970s and was part of an ongoing humorous exchange with his sister, also a professional artist. It was displayed previously at UNC's Art Department, in 1997, at the dedication of the John and June Allcott Galleries and later, in 2016, at the exhibit "The Life and Legacy of John Allcott: Art, Food and a Carolina Family."

