

James Murray Webb, 1908 – 2000

Fifth President of the Chapel Hill Historical Society, 1978– 1979



James (Jim) M. Webb was born on January 23, 1908 in Aguascalientes, central Mexico, the son of Ray Hickey Webb and Martha Murray Barkofcy. His father was assistant general manager for the American Smelting and Refining Company in Mexico; however, in 1913 when Jim was 5 years old his father suffered from appendicitis and died in the factory. The family, consisting of Jim, his younger brother John Bruce Webb, and his mother Martha, then moved to Covina, California, a town just east of Los Angeles, where James grew up on the family orange farm. He attended one year at nearby Pomona College with the intent of following in his father's footsteps in mining and metallurgy, but he did not like the major and dropped out. The family sold the orange farm just before the stock market crash of 1929 and moved to Berkeley, California. Jim was persuaded by his brother

John to join him in the study of architecture at Berkley, and Jim received his Bachelor of Arts in architecture from the University of California – Berkeley in 1936. Jim then worked briefly for the firm of prominent architect William Wurster but was drafted to serve in the U.S. Army in WWII. He contracted pulmonary tuberculosis during basic training, spent over a year in California and Colorado recovering, and then was discharged from the Army. He used his G.I. benefits to enroll in MIT's Department of City Planning and graduated in 1946. Although he had a number of job offers after graduation he was strongly recruited to UNC by MIT classmate John A. Parker, who had just been hired to found a regional planning department at UNC. Jim accepted the offer of associate professor and arrived in Chapel Hill on December 29, 1946.

Jim's responsibility in the newly formed Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) was mainly to teach four workshop, studio, and application-type courses, which constituted approximately half of the curriculum credit hours. But as part of his contract he also had obligations to the State Planning Board and to the Tennessee Valley Authority. His teaching career in the department spanned 28 years until his retirement in 1974 at the age of 66. Jim's UNC position also allowed for outside activity, and by 1949 he had opened an office (James M. Webb, AIA and AICP) in the old Methodist Church at the northeast corner of Henderson and Rosemary Streets to practice architecture. About 1954 Jim was joined by his brother John Webb and by Don Stewart, a graduate of the DCRP. John left the firm and Chapel Hill in 1957, but Robert N. Anderson joined the partnership, and in 1960 the name was changed to City Planning and Architectural Associates. In 1969 Jim withdrew from the firm to practice on his own. Jim retained his office at the corner of Henderson and Rosemary Streets and eventually bought the building. In 1956 Jim married Barbara Gray Henderson Kelly, the daughter of UNC's Archibald Henderson, and she brought three sons from a previous marriage to the family: Thomas, Archibald, and Clinton. They divorced in 1975. In 1979 Jim purchased a house at 4 Briar Bridge Lane in Chapel Hill that he had designed for Ruth Price in 1953. He lived there until his death in 2000.

Jim was active for many years in planning and preservation in Chapel Hill as well as in the region. He and his associates were involved in planning the Research Triangle Park and in the design for Appalachian State University (then Appalachian State Teachers College). Locally Jim and his associates designed the "Old" Chapel Hill Library building on Franklin Street (home to the Historical Society from

1995 until 2014), the Frank Porter Graham School, the UNC faculty recreation facility “farm” on Barbee Chapel Road, and several sorority and fraternity houses on the UNC campus. He and his associates also designed well over 50 homes in the Chapel Hill-Durham area in both modern and more traditional styles including the Highland Woods development. Jim participated in the development of Chapel Hill’s first zoning ordinance, and he served on the Chapel Hill Planning Board, the Community Appearance Commission, and the Chapel Hill Historical District Commission for a number of years. Jim was a member of the Board of Directors of the Chapel Hill Historical Society for 17 years between 1974 and his death in 2000, and he served as vice-president before becoming President. He also was active in Preservation Chapel Hill and the Chapel Hill History Museum. According to his stepson Thomas Kelly Jr., “He was an accomplished pianist and would play Beethoven piano sonatas”. He also was an accomplished gardener, and enjoyed maintaining a series of elderly cars, including a 1950 Oldsmobile, a 1950s Jaguar saloon, and a 1961 Thunderbird.

Addendum and Sources

Most of the above biosketch is based on newspaper articles published in the Chapel Hill Weekly, the Chapel Hill Newspaper, the Durham Herald-Sun, and the Raleigh News and Observer. Several of the articles are available through the “clippings” collection of the UNC Wilson Library.

Two oral interviews with Jim Webb have been recorded. The first by Paul A. Grygiel on April 28, 1995 for the UNC Wilson Library’s Southern Oral History Collection. It is about 50 minutes in length and covers his early life and his role in the UNC Department of City and Regional Planning, where he worked and taught for 28 years. The interview has been digitized and an index is available on the Wilson Library website. The Department of City and Regional Planning published a department history in 2014, *The School that Jack Built*, and several pages are devoted to Jim Webb. A PDF file of the book is available on the City and Regional Planning Department website.

The second interview is by Doug Eyre of the Chapel Hill Historical Society and took place in 1997. It is a little over 4 hours in length, covers his early life and education, his role in the UNC City and Regional Planning Department, his architectural practice in the Chapel Hill-Durham area, and a number of his projects. The last planned segment of this interview was never recorded; Jim died on January 1, 2000. The interview has been digitized and is available through the Chapel Hill Historical Society.

The North Carolina Modernist Houses website (ncmodernist.org/) has an archive section on Jim Webb that includes some biographical material on Jim and his brother John as well as pictures of a number of the modernist houses that Jim, John and their associates designed.

Upon Jim’s death, his estate was willed to the City and Regional Planning Department. It included a number of drawings as well as personal correspondence, photographs and slides and the house that Jim designed for Ruth Price in 1953 at 4 Briar Bridge Lane, Chapel Hill, and that Jim later bought in 1979 and lived in until his death. The collection of “James Webb Papers 1903-1999” was given to the Chapel Hill History Museum and then to NC State University when the museum closed in July 2010. The collection consists of 222.5 linear feet of materials and may be viewed by prior arrangements with the NCSU Libraries. An index to the materials is available on the NCSU Libraries website. Archie Henderson Kelly, Jim’s stepson, lived in the Briar Bridge Lane house before his death in 2015. The house was sold in 2016 to Lisa Rahangdale and Brian Jensen.