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# The Preservation of Handicrafts in the Southern Highlands: Northern Philanthropy and Social Idealists

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## Abstract

During the first half of the twentieth century, the surplus wealth of American industrialists was redistributed through a newly invented legal instrument, the philanthropic foundation. The Russell Sage Foundation was dedicated to using social science as an instrument to improve the living conditions of American culture. Handicrafts were aligned with the social sciences as tools for social intervention. Their therapeutic value rested in their ability to reconnect people with everyday life, cultural traditions, and bodily knowledge. John C. Campbell, Olive D. Campbell, and Allen Eaton were each funded by the Russell Sage Foundation to develop surveys of the cultural conditions of the Southern Highlands. This region was imaged as both needy and exotic. Despite the limits that their own idealism placed upon their work as effective instruments for social change, they succeeded in providing both lasting records of the region's material culture, *The Southern Highlander and his homeland* and *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*, and experiments in cooperative activity, The John C. Campbell Folk School.

Beginning with the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and running through the beginning of World War II, progressive reformers reacted to the disruptive effects of industrialization through a series of social service initiatives.<sup>1</sup> Models for a healthy interaction between art and life were drawn from practices carried out by people seen as untouched by technology and industrialization. Of particular concern were the living conditions, including the role of the arts, in communities formed and maintained by recent immigrants, Native Americans, and rural Americans (Eaton, 1932 & 1937; Kardon, 1994; White, 2001). One

rural region, the Southern Highlands, came to exemplify values associated with traditional crafts, community-based art forms, and the preservation of traditions originating outside of the United States. Over time, the valuing of these sensibilities led to a diverse set of social service initiatives. These included the production of handicraft for export through fireside and home industries, programs using handicrafts for both education and therapy, and surveys and programs concerning handicraft traditions for historic preservation and mainstream education. These initiatives were funded through Protestant missionary work, independent charities, philanthropic foundations, and government programs. The limits of these programs, as expressed by David Wisnant (1983) in reference the coal region of the area and the Hindman Settlement School, cannot be minimized:

And yet—one must reluctantly observe—they focus on the symptoms rather than the causes of social dislocations: on poor education programs and housing and nutritional conditions rather than the coal-dominated social, political, and economic system of the area. (p. 264)

This paper will focus on initiatives associated with funding by the philanthropic work of the Russell Sage Foundation, including the establishment of the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC.

## Philanthropic initiatives

The early twentieth century marked the beginning of America's experiment with new ways to administer social services.

While American industrialists had amassed great surpluses in personal and corporate wealth, the mechanisms for the dispersal of that capital did not become formalized until the first quarter of the twentieth century, when the working lives of industrialists such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Russell Sage came to an end. Provisions for the dispersal and oversight of their wealth was regulated through the establishment, sanctioned by federal and state law, of philanthropic foundations such as the General Education Board (Rockefeller), the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY), and the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF) (Lagermann, 1989).

These philanthropies had unique missions related to the distribution of their progenitor's wealth. The CCNY for example utilized the professional knowledge of researchers to provide insight into the best use of funds to affect social change. In effect these research initiatives functioned as a shadow government that influenced public policy. Foundations stressed the value of professional knowledge as obtained through research and theory as tools to provide critical insight and oversight related to both government and charitable initiatives (Lagermann, 1989).

The Russell Sage Foundation (RSF), chartered by the New York legislature in 1907, was established by Olivia Sage to benefit the social and living conditions in the United States. The RSF was then one of only seven foundations in the United States and the only one devoted to the social sciences. It is perhaps surprising to identify a variety of programs associated with the arts of the Southern Highlands with the RSF. This connection can be traced directly to the work of three people, John Campbell, Olive Campbell, and Allen Eaton, and indirectly to one of the Foundation's trustees, Robert de Forest. De Forest was Olivia Sage's lawyer but he was also the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Federation of the Arts and worked to promote a general sensitivity to the relation between art and life (Forest, 1926). John and Olive

Campbell and Allen Eaton contributed to surveys of the Southern Highlands in general, its handicrafts, and its roots to English folk songs and to the establishment of the John C. Campbell Folk School, the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers (CSMW), and the Southern Highland Handcraft Guild (SHHG), and to the support of education programs already developed at Berea College and elsewhere (Ballangee-Morris, 2002; Glenn, et al, 1947a; Kissler, 1994; Wisnant, 1983.)

### **Valuing the crafts of the Southern Highlands**

At the turn of the last century, the Southern Highlands became the object of attention for many interest groups. The region consists of a stretch of mountains and valleys extending from Pennsylvania to Alabama, including the Appalachian Valley, the Allegheny/Cumberland Mountains, and the Blue Ridge Mountains. The broad valleys that run its length, from southwest to northeast, provided a corridor that allowed the flow southward of early settlers from Pennsylvania, and the northward movement of freedom-seeking African Americans. Looking back from the turn of the century, it had been less than four decades since the end of the Civil War, when the region's inhabitants had competing allegiances. Cotton was not king in the Southern Highlands and slave labor had been minimal. The industrial north's interests in the development of coal, steel and railroad industries had all utilized the natural resources of the area, including the labor of its inhabitants. These conditions caused changes in social conditions, including an exodus of talented residents to economic opportunity elsewhere (Campbell, 1921).

The Southern Highlands drew the attention of the settlement movement and the missionary work of numerous religious organizations toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A wide range of church and independent schools had been developed to address social issues (Campbell, 1921, Kessler, 1994). In 1910 the region's illiteracy

hovered at 13.4 with African American rates as high as 33.1 percent (Campbell, 1921). This, as well as a concern for the delivery of health care, inspired philanthropic interests from the north to the region. While natural resources supplied real economic wealth to the regions' developers, the indigenous people of the Southern Highlands were mythologized as a repository of valuable cultural knowledge, a pre-modernist peoples whose Anglo-Saxon customs remained intact due to the regions' isolation (Campbell, 1921; Sharp, 1932). This appeal to authenticity correlated with the Arts and Crafts Movement's longing for the integration of art and labor, Modernism's interest in simplicity unencumbered by Victorian artifice, and the Americanization Movement's interest in historic preservation of old world traditions. In addition, more generalized interests in education for economic development including adult education in rural areas, expressed through legislative initiatives such as the Smith-Hughes (Industrial Arts) Act of 1917 and interest groups such as the Association for Adult Education (1926), contributed to philanthropic funding (Campbell, 1926).

### **John C. Campbell**

John C. Campbell's interests began in the north with his studies at the Andover Theological Seminar (1895), where he learned of missionary opportunities in the Southern Highlands. The Settlement Movement in the nation's urban centers had come to influence the establishment of independent, church, and industrial schools throughout the mountain region. Several of these, Phi Beta Phi (1912), which became Arrowmont, the Appalachian Industrial School (1913), which became Penland, the Hindman Settlement School (1889), the Berry Schools (1902), and the Pine Mountain Settlement School (1913) among others, had begun crafts programs in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In addition, work at Berea (1893), Allanstand (1895), and Biltmore (1901) had drawn people's attention to the crafts of the re-

gion (Eaton, 1937; Kessler, 1994; Wisnant, 1983). Campbell's work led him to education positions for thirteen years in the southern part of the Southern Highlands, finishing in Georgia as President of Piedmont College. National interest in rural poverty had been the subject of multiple national initiatives, including Roosevelt's 1908 Commission for Country Life. In 1908, Campbell was invited to attend the National Conference on Charities and Corrections (NCCC) held in Richmond, VA. There he met Mrs. John Glenn, chair of the conference, whose husband, John, was president of both the NCCC and the Russell Sage Foundation. The RSF had developed some interest in the arts through Luther Gulick's programs involving folk dance for community building and physical training and William Chauncy Langdon's involvement with community pageantry. Campbell proposed that a survey of the conditions and needs of the people of the Southern Highlands was needed. With the subsequent approval of the RSF, John and Olive Campbell set out by wagon to study the region's educational opportunities. This work led to the eventual development in 1912 of the RSF's Southern Highlands Division to be directed by Campbell. It was operated out of a field office established in Ashville, NC. in 1913 (Glen et al, 1947a; Wisnant, 1983).

Campbell's surveys were thorough, sympathetic, and primarily ethnographic. They drew upon the interviews he conducted as he traveled throughout the region, which reflected his genuine empathy for his subjects. At the outset, these were conducted in relation to independent and church related schools but they were soon expanded to include accounts of the lives of individuals obtained through personal interviews in residents' homes. Campbell came to see his survey work as a tool that could intercede between the decisions being carried out by government agencies and by independent and church schools. In his book, *Southern Highlander and his Homeland*, Campbell (1921) situates his interest in the arts under the topic of home life (material culture) and religious life (music).<sup>2</sup>

Campbell's concern for education developed out of his Christian beliefs and the sensibilities he acquired during his work in the region and education. John and Olive Campbell saw that social action required the formation of cooperative efforts by people of shared values and concerns. Social workers, divided as they were among various denominational church missions, educational institutions, and social service agencies, lacked a coherent organizational structure. Campbell worked for this through his organization of the first Conference of the Southern Mountain Workers (CSMW), held in the spring of 1912 in Knoxville, TN. The members of this conference were driven by shared protestant values (Campbell, 1921, Wisnant, 1980).

The Campbell's saw the co-operative movement as a useful force for improving the organization and education of rural people. These sensibilities guided their identification of the Danish Folk School Movement as a suitable model for developing a rural educational agenda. Independent and church schools, which were more flexible than public schools, were seen by Campbell as the most natural sites to initiate experimental programs in cooperative education. With positive results, the model could then influence public education. His early death (1919) left the development of these ideals to Olive Campbell. It also resulted in the end of the Department of the Southern Highlands at the RSF. Into this void, Olive Campbell and Allen Eaton stepped to carry forth the momentum of John Campbell's work. They emphasized the importance of traditional arts in the development of a regional identity and an integrated life (Campbell, 1921; Glen et al, 1947a; Wisnant, 1983).

### **Olive Dame Campbell**

Olive Campbell's connection to the Russell Sage Foundation developed out of her relationship with her husband, although her interest in the arts introduced a line of research and a sensibility that were uniquely hers. Between 1907 and 1910, as Olive

aided John on his survey, and as they both traveled about in their wagon, she conducted a study of the region's folk songs. In some ways this provided a more direct involvement with the region's artistic expression than John's survey. In 1916 she met with Cecil Sharp, music director of the Stratford-on-Avon School of Folk Song and Dance and convinced him to come to the region to conduct a more thorough survey. Sharp was interested in the connection between these works and English folk songs. For Sharp, and for both of the Campbell's, the Southern Highlands came to signify a repository of artistic traditions that connected to ancestral traditions from the British Isles. The first compilation of these efforts *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* was followed by a more thorough survey published in a work of the same title (Campbell & Sharp, 1917, Sharp, 1932). This research established Olive Campbell's interest in the arts, rural culture, oral traditions, and the relation between art and work. It is a relationship that is perhaps best articulated in a stanza she drew from a poem by Mads Hansen "I sing before the plow." This stanza graces the cover of Olive Campbell's (1928) second book, *The Danish Folk School* and expresses her interest in oral expression and the connection between life and work (Campbell, 1928, p. xvi). It was a motto that defined both the idealism and the limits of their model for social and artistic work.

After John's death, Olive Campbell devoted her time to carrying through with those projects that evoked their shared interests. She was hired by the RSF as an assistant to John Glenn, the president, from 1920-1922. During that time she compiled her husband's manuscript for the *Southern Highlander and his Homeland* (Campbell, 1921; Glenn et al, 1947b). This was followed by her continuing John's work on the foundation and development of the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers (CSMW). The RSF financed the publication of the Southern Mountain Workers' Conference publication, *Mountain Life and Work*. Olive invited Allen Eaton of the RSF

to speak at the April 1926 CSMW to stimulate interest in the development of what was to become the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild (SHHG) (Eaton, 1926 & 1937).

Olive devoted herself to preserving the memory and ideals of her husband by founding in 1925 the John C. Campbell Folk School. Olive Campbell saw that educational reform needed to be grounded in both local knowledge and cooperative efforts. Area schools were hampered by a history of talented teachers leaving for jobs in areas with greater opportunity. She found in The Danish Folk School Movement, a model to stimulate future education in the region. This rural, cooperative movement had a progressive agenda, which included teaching through the Humanities, oral traditions, and inspirational leadership (Campbell, 1928).

The theory of the folk school is applicable anywhere. It seeks to stir youth to the realization of ideals; in teaching it lays the emphasis on personality rather than on books. It believes in making young people want before trying to fill them with facts. I have found that the county agents with whom I have talked appreciate the principle very clearly as it is related to economic life. As one said to me recently. "You make them want, and I'll teach them agriculture." (Campbell, 1926, p. 16)

Olive Campbell saw the potential for the application of these principles to recent developments in adult education, an interest that she pursued through grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Campbell, 1926).<sup>3</sup> The Folk School Movement and American adult education initiatives provided momentum that Olive Campbell believed in, researched thoroughly, and applied to the principles that guided The John C. Campbell Folk School.<sup>4</sup>

The RSF provided assistance for Olive Campbell to explore means to develop the Folk School, but her funds for the construction and running of the school came from local and other philanthropic sources (Glenn et al, 1947b).<sup>5</sup> The mission of the school was conceived to offer a broad

range of programs, designed to build a viable economic community. Olive Campbell saw the exodus of local inhabitants from the region as a serious drain on community integrity. The school was originally established to provide adult education for students ranging in age from 18 to 30. The school had programs involving: a Danish four-month course, farm and agricultural courses, farm related cooperatives, and handicrafts (Wisnant, 1983). The cooperative programs resulted in the development of the Brasstown Farmers Association and the Mountain Valley Creamery. Teaching at the school was conducted primarily through oral instruction and hands on activity. These lessons were to be interspersed with daily practice involving, music, dance, and prayer. David Wisnant (1983) notes that despite Olive Campbell's genuine interest in local traditions, her imposition of dances and songs from the Danish Folk Schools and the valuing of more mainstream craft ideals from the Arts and Crafts movement, undercut the more focused commitment to local knowledge. Today the school operates primarily as a craft education center. It follows a weekly schedule of rotating students and teachers. Evidence of Olive Campbell's original vision can be found in its offerings of instruction in traditional crafts and a daily schedule that includes morning song and evening music activities.

### **Allen Eaton**

Allen Eaton's contributions to the Southern Highlands came through his position at the RSF as a staff member of the Department of Surveys and Exhibitions, which in 1941 became the Department of Art and Social Work. Eaton was originally from Eugene, Oregon, where he owned a book and art store, worked as a state legislator, and wrote a book on the legislative process in Oregon. In 1915, Eaton lobbied for regional art as the organizing principle for the Oregon room at the Panama-Pacific Exhibition in San Francisco. His lobbying efforts and curatorial skills insured that the room was dedi-

cated to arts and crafts of his native Oregon. Following a request by Eaton for a traveling exhibition from the American Federation of the Arts (AFA), the federation's president, Robert de Forest, asked Eaton to become the association's first field secretary (Glenn et al, 1947a & b).<sup>6</sup>

Eaton worked with de Forest to mount an exhibition of color prints at the MET and to embark on a program of producing high quality color prints of its collection for distribution in schools and universities. The Association of Practical Housekeeping Centers utilized these prints in the presentation of model flats in High Schools. Eaton built upon his Oregon experiences with traditional and regional art forms in developing *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands*, an exhibition of the handicrafts of America's immigrant groups.<sup>7</sup> The show, first mounted at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo traveled to Rochester and Albany. Sponsored by the AFA and the New York State Department of Education, it fit into larger cultural agendas related to Americanization, adult education, and the social service traditions initiated by the Settlement School movement and the RSF. Eaton was adept at surveying, collecting, exhibiting, and distributing artwork. An article in *School Arts Magazine*, *Immigrant Arts in America* (Eaton, 1933), is but one example of the ways that Eaton was capable of promoting the sensibilities that he valued, in this case to mainstream America's teachers and children (Glen et al, 1947a & b).<sup>8</sup>

In 1926, Eaton was asked by Olive Campbell to address the issue of handicrafts at a meeting of the CSMW. Several handicraft centers throughout the region also represented works indigenous to the area. This was Eaton's first introduction to the region, which reminded him of his native Oregon. In this address he expressed affinities with the Arts & Crafts Movement through references to William Morris, the importance of connections between art and life, the role of art in healing through occupational therapy, and the importance of art as meaningful work (Eaton, 1926). This meeting led to a proposal for a survey of

regional handicrafts and the formation of a handicraft guild, modeled on the Arts and Craft Society's earlier efforts.

A meeting devoted to the forming of the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild did take place at Penland in 1928.<sup>9</sup> The guild can be seen as an outgrowth of John and Olive Campbell's enduring interest in the cooperative movement. In attendance at the Penland meeting were eleven participants including: Olive Campbell of the John C. Campbell Folk School, William Hutchins and Helen Dingman of Berea College, Mary Martin Sloop of the Crossnore School, Clemintine Douglas of the Spinning Wheel, Lucy Morgan of the Penland Weavers and Potters, representatives from Allanstand Cottage Industries, Brasstown Handicraft Association, Cedar Creek Community Center, and others (Report of the Penland Conference, 1929; Eaton 1937). Of the contents of the meeting, Eaton (1937) writes:

The following topics were among those considered: the economic significance of handicraft in homes and schools; the influence of crafts upon the character of workers; necessity of keeping standards of craftsmanship high; disposing of work not up to standard; protection of designs originated by others; use of native materials; use of attractive and permanent colors in weaving; methods of marketing employed in countries such as Canada, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark; creation of new objects and new designs to meet market requirements; methods of financing these industries and paying of workers; cost of production and its relation to selling price; partial use of machinery in hand-made articles; commissions allowed to dealers and consignment plans; extent of output in industries represented at this meeting; and the possibilities for extending markets. (p. 241)

The group asked Eaton, as a representative of the RSF, if the foundation would support a survey of the region's handicrafts.<sup>10</sup> After some delay this work was sponsored by the RSF, conducted by Eaton and compiled into *The Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* (Eaton, 1937). Eaton

had secured the services of Doris Ullman to provide compelling photographs of Southern Highlanders engaged in their work. Ullman's photography, both in its formal style and its performative base (some of the sitters were posed in traditional costume), individualized and glorified Southern Highland life. Eaton's treatment of the material culture of the region was thorough, insightful, and was widely distributed. His opening chapter stressed the region as a reservoir for forgotten traditional practices. The second presented the log cabin as an expression of regional identity and home as central to art and community. It is a text that equates handicrafts with the region's material culture.

Eaton provided a history of the region's craft, which included detailed insights into the social context developed through spinning and weaving, coverlets, quilts, dyes, baskets, furniture, whittling, doll making, pottery, and instrument making. His work highlights the role of the dulcimer as emblematic of mountain music. Eaton also provides insight into the economic development of the handicrafts as an industry and the possible application of these activities to adult education, recreation, and occupational therapy (Eaton, 1937).

Eaton's primary contributions to the development of the crafts of the Southern Highlands drew from his experiences as a curator, promoter, and writer. Through his work, the handicrafts of the region found a wider audience, which in turn contributed to a more general interest in rural and traditional crafts. In 1930 he arranged for an exhibition of the SHHG to be held in Knoxville, TN. This was followed in 1933 with a program distributed under the auspices of the AFA distributed to schools throughout the United States. His connection helped the guild to secure an outlet in New York at Rockefeller Center and in the Shenandoah National Park. Working with the United States Department of Agriculture, Eaton arranged for these works to be placed into the wider context of American rural art, *Rural Handicrafts in the United States*, held at the Department of Agriculture in Wash-

ington, DC in 1947 (Eaton & Crille, 1947, Glenn et al, 1947b).

## Conclusions

The works of John C. Campbell, Olive D. Campbell, and Allen Eaton can be viewed through their shared interests. These included the preservation of artistic traditions and the use of the arts for economic, social, and personal development. As outsiders, they drew upon the protestant missionary zeal and various movements of European origin to construct their vision of programs for the Southern Highlands. The sequence of their interests, from John Campbell's broad survey of the Southern Highlands, to Olive Campbell's pointed interest in arts and education for the region, and to Allen Eaton's interest in introducing America to the value of traditional handicrafts, signify the path of the Russell Sage Foundation's immersion into and out of its engagement with art as a tool for cultural therapy. In the end, their influence had less of an effect on the improvement of life for the people of the Southern Highlands than did the more aggressive work done by both labor unions and public agencies. Their efforts do set forth significant questions related to the role of the arts as vehicles for social intervention, bringing us back to the efficacy of the arts in relation to present-day issues. What is evident is that it took both the commitment of inspired and devoted cultural workers, leveraged through funding by concerned private foundations and public agencies, and carried forward through a rich network of human relationships to make any of these attempts significant and available for discussion today.

## Notes

1. For discussion of art and industry see (Boris, 1986; Lears, 1981).
2. For discussion of material culture studies see (Blandy & Bolin, 2003).
3. The American Society for Adult Education was established in 1926 at a conference that Olive Campbell attended.



4. For a detailed account of the formation of the school see Wisnant, D. (1983) *All that is native & fine: The politics of culture in an American region*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

5. The connection between the RSF and the John C. Campbell Folk School ended in 1945, the last year that school-made craft items were marketed during the Christmas season in the foundation's headquarters in New York (Glenn et al, 1947).

6. The AFA was funded primarily through the CCNY but also received funds for the distribution of prints, from the RSF.

7. This exhibition was followed by his more comprehensive study, *Immigrant Gifts to American Life* (Eaton, 1932), which was cited by the RSF as "an aid to a citizenship course in schools and colleges" (Glenn, Brandt & Andrews, 1947 p. 586).

8. Eaton was involved with a variety of projects concerned with the arts of particular groups including: rural handicrafts (Eaton & Crile, 1946); immigrant arts (Eaton, 1932); New England handicrafts (Eaton, 1949); handicrafts of Japanese internment camps (Eaton, 1952); and the art of the blind (Eaton, 1959).

9. Goodrich is credited with starting the Southern Mountains Craftsman's Guild shop. Her early efforts, beginning in 1897 with the development of the Allanstand Cottage Industries presented a model for homework in the region. The ownership of her retail shop, begun in 1908, was transferred to the SMCG in 1932 (Eaton, 1937; Kessler, 1994).

10. Eaton was also asked by the state of New Hampshire to conduct a similar study of the handicrafts of the New England region. This study was also made and resulted in (Eaton, 1949) *The Handicrafts of New England*.

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