

NORTON MEMORIAL HALL



Photograph by Harold Wagner circa 1940

Norton Memorial Hall was donated to Chautauqua Institution in 1929 by Lucy Coit Fanning Norton in honor of her husband Oliver Willcox Norton and her daughter Ruth. Her husband, O.W. as he was known, had died in 1920 and Ruth in 1919.



O.W. Norton

O.W. Norton was an abolitionist, a successful businessman, a philanthropist and a great lover of music. He was born in Angelica, N.Y. in 1839, the eldest of the thirteen children of a struggling itinerant preacher, and had spent part of his childhood in nearby Sherman, N.Y. He believed in the abolitionist cause and enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War. He became a brigade bugler and in that capacity was the first person to sound Taps during the War when his commanding officer introduced it into use for Lights Out. While in the war he wrote hundreds of vividly descriptive letters to family members, especially to his favorite sister Libby who had settled in Sherman. In 1903 he published many of the letters in a book called "Army Letters". After the war O.W. and his brother Edwin started a tinplate firm, The Norton Brothers Company, which became one of the first to manufacture tin cans and later became the American Can Company, based in Chicago. With his success came philanthropy. To the town of Sherman he donated the Minerva Free Library, along with electric lighting, a water works, the town band and a soldiers' monument. His greatest philanthropic concern was for music in Chicago, where he contributed to the founding of Orchestra Hall. Having lost his sight in his later years, he found listening to music to be a solace and source of great pleasure.

In 1870, O.W. married Lucy Coit Fanning in a ceremony conducted by the abolitionist clergyman Henry Ward Beecher. They had four children: Ralph, Ruth, Elliot and Strong Vincent who was named after O.W.'s beloved Civil War commanding officer, Colonel Strong Vincent. Colonel Vincent later provided a connection to George Edgar Vincent, the son of one of the founders of Chautauqua, Bishop John Heyl Vincent. Ruth had sustained a childhood injury that had left her confined to a wheelchair. George Edgar, a professor at the University of Chicago, suggested Chautauqua as a vacation spot where Ruth would be able to enjoy herself. The Nortons spent their first summer at Chautauqua in 1898 and two years later built a home that still stands on North Lake Drive.



Lucy C. Norton



Norton home in Chautauqua

architecture and beauty. Although his mother was the donor, Ralph was the one who carried out the project and whose vision was expressed in its execution. He chose as artistic consultant the Chicago-based Beaux-Arts sculptor, Lorado Taft. As architect he chose Otis Floyd Johnson and as sculptors Mr. and Mrs. Fred Torrey and Elizabeth Hazeltine, all associated with the Taft Studio in Chicago.

The opening of Norton Hall in July 1929 was a momentous occasion for Chautauqua. The governor of New York, Franklin Roosevelt, who had come to speak in the Amphitheatre, toured the grounds along with his party, and Arthur Bestor and Ralph Norton, stopping at Norton Hall. This stop is memorialized in the photograph below.



Ralph H. Norton



Arthur Bestor, Ralph Norton, Guernsey Cross, Elliott Norton, Gov. Roosevelt, James Norton, Mrs. Roosevelt

As evidenced by the publication in 1931 of an article in “*Architectural Forum*”, the construction of Norton Hall was news in the world of architecture. This is due to its construction as a monolithic poured concrete structure (chosen for its durability and cost effectiveness), which at the time was not commonly in use in the Northeastern part of the country. Stylistically the hall is considered to be Monumental Art Deco, although it has elements that are more suggestive of Modernist architecture, such as the use of structural materials as finished surface. Although the exterior of the building has long been painted, the article states that,

“The exterior is light gray in tone, the natural cement tone having remained untouched after the removal of the forms...” The exterior texture consisted of the grain from the wood of the forms and horizontal lines of the seams between the boards, the joints of which were kept horizontally aligned around the whole building. The horizontal seams are still faintly visible under the paint. The article further states, “The door architraves, the inside and outside of which were cast in one piece, are in the natural color, in harmony with the dark, mottled gray of the untreated random ashlar (cinder blocks)...These walls, experimented with for economy, contribute an interesting feeling of texture....The interior of the auditorium is simple, decoration having been employed only on the proscenium arch where two reliefs of Pan appear. These panels, the fluting and the ornamental frieze were given an application of silver leaf to overcome the absence of a good cutting light...Except for the addition of two coats of cement paint, applied to match the color of the plastered walls and ceiling, the interior was left as it came from the forms.”

Regarding the façade and its decorative reliefs, the article states, “Massive corner pylons at each end of a series of tall, arched bays between pilasters, surmounted by reliefs, lend vertical lines to the horizontal façade, giving the design strength and beauty in addition to an interesting simplicity...Beside the two pylon groups (one illustrating the Moods of Music: the other, the Birth of Beauty) the pilaster reliefs portray figures representing Humor, Music, Poetry and Tragedy.”



Elizabeth C. Norton

Chautauqua Institution intended for the hall to be used as a multi-purpose enclosed facility. Chautauqua's musical director, Albert Stoessel, quickly organized the Chautauqua Opera Association and brought in Alfredo Valenti from the Juilliard School of Music to serve as the company's production director. The inaugural performance during the summer of 1929, was Friedrich von Flotow's "Martha". Among those who attended were Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Edison, Adolph Ochs, and Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Bestor. Over the years, the Chautauqua company's affiliation with Juilliard proved fruitful. It enabled some Juilliard productions to be staged at Chautauqua and provided an important pool of young talent. Singers who came to Chautauqua early in their careers and went on to the Metropolitan Opera include Helen Jepson, Rose Bampton, Josephine Antoine, Julius Huehn, Francis Bible and Charles Kullman. The opera company has continued to produce

operas each season since 1929, making it the longest continuously running seasonal opera company in the U.S. Norton Hall served as a facility not only for opera but also for chamber music and theater. Ralph Norton's wife, Elizabeth, sponsored a chamber music series. An affiliation with the Cleveland Play House had the hall serving as a stage for alternating productions of theatre and opera each week of the summer season until about 1974. Since that time the hall has been exclusively the home of the Chautauqua Opera Company.

When Arthur Bestor died in 1944, he was in his 30th year of serving as Chautauqua's president. Ralph Norton was president of the Board of Trustees at the time and stepped into the vacancy left by Bestor. He served for two years as Chautauqua's president. In memory of Arthur Bestor, he donated Bestor Plaza Fountain to Chautauqua. As with Norton Hall, he chose a simple monumental style with classical reliefs. Also like Norton Hall, the fountain was designed and executed by people from Chicago's Lorado Taft Studio, giving Chautauqua two structures of similar architectural style and artistic expression.



Bestor Plaza Fountain

By the late 1930's Ralph Norton's art collection had grown large enough that he felt the need to find a home for it. In 1941 he opened the Norton Gallery of Art (now the Norton Museum) in West Palm Beach. Its architectural style was similar to that of Norton Hall. It was a Monumental Art Deco structure designed by Marion Syms Wyeth. It too featured classically-inspired reliefs expressing ideals similar to those expressed in Norton Hall. The exterior façade of the Norton Museum, like the proscenium of Norton Hall, is inscribed with a portion of an Austin Dobson poem, "Ars Victrix", adapted from the French poem by Théophile Gautier. The quote on the Norton Museum façade is:

All passes.
 Art alone enduring
 Stays to us. The bust outlasts
 The throne. The Coin Tiberius.



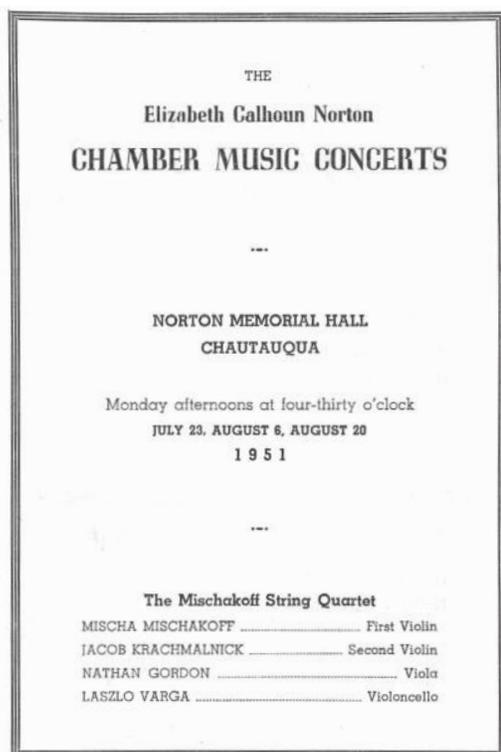
In 1944 Ralph created a trust that jointly endowed the Norton Gallery of Art and Norton Memorial Hall, with 90% going to the Gallery and 10% going to Norton Hall. The trust to this day distributes its income in that proportion to the two institutions, with the Norton Gallery now being the Norton Museum. The Norton Museum has grown from Ralph's seedling to become one of the preeminent art museums of its region and is currently undergoing a substantial renovation and addition designed by the firm of Pritzker Prize-winning architect, Lord Norman Foster.

Like his father, Ralph Norton was a man of strong convictions. Many of Ralph's convictions centered on the arts. He believed that the arts could be transformative. He believed in embodying his ideals in the arts institutions he created. He stipulated with regard to the Norton Gallery that any art that would be added would be of a quality equal to that already on display and that any buildings would be added only with "due regard to architectural beauty". He tried to make the arts as accessible as possible and thus stipulated that the Norton Gallery be free and open to the public. He included a school of art with the Norton Gallery. He wanted opera in Norton Hall to be performed in English for the sake of accessibility. (The Norton family now feels that with the introduction of supertitles he would be happy to see opera performed in the original language.) He was a man of progress who believed in changing with the changing times. Indeed the gradual evolution of his art collection from Chinese jade to contemporary works of the early twentieth century reveals an intentional evolution in his own understanding of art.

The architectural style of Norton Hall embodies Ralph's belief in the importance of human progress: its roots in the ideals of classicism as expressed in the reliefs on the façade; its use of Art Deco, the idiom of the time; and its looking to the future with the use of unfinished monolithic poured concrete on the exterior and the experimental unfinished cement block on the interior. It is a building that embodies past, present and future.

When Ralph spoke at the inauguration of Norton Hall in 1929, he made an earnest appeal for beauty in architecture. Twelve years later at festivities surrounding the opening of the Norton Gallery and School of Art, someone who was a donor to medical research reproached him for not spending his money on something more useful. Ralph replied, "You go ahead and help save people's lives and I'll make their lives more worth living."

--Cynthia Norton
Great granddaughter of O.W. and Lucy Norton
June 2017



Program for Elizabeth Norton's Chamber Music Series