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# The Heritage of a Life:

## Robert Stipe, 1928-2007

Milton Heath  
Myrick Howard  
Weiming Lu  
Josie Stipe with the Carolina Planning Editors

*The Carolina Planning Journal, the UNC Department of City and Regional Planning, and the broader planning community join preservationists from Chapel Hill, this state, and indeed around the country in remembering the remarkable life and far-reaching career of Robert Stipe, who died this past September. Stipe was certainly a pioneer in the field of conservation and historic preservation. From his base in Chapel Hill, he worked to legitimize the field and establish procedures and standards for preservation at the local, state, and federal levels. His edited volumes are used as university textbooks, while the ordinances and statutes he authored have enabled towns to preserve their past through historic district zoning.*

*However, Stipe's professional legacy is impossible to disentangle from the personal one, for he left an impact on the field not just through his writings, but also through his relationships of collaboration and mentoring. Four reflections here testify to Stipe's commitment to preservation and to people. Myrick Howard provides an overview of Robert Stipe's career and influence over more than one generation of students who went on to positions of leadership in land use, design, and preservation law. Weiming Lu writes in a more personal vein, as a fellow master's student with Stipe in Regional Planning at UNC in the 1950s. Milton Heath describes the variety of ways that these friends and colleagues collaborated over the years. Finally, conversations with Stipe's wife Josie and his son Fred provided the basis for an explanation of his motivations for dedicating his energies to historic preservation long before it was fashionable. The thread running through each piece is the radical idea, born in Robert Stipe as a young man and carried throughout an unexpectedly long life, to use the law to protect and enhance the landscape and design of cities and towns.*

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### Remembering Bob Stipe

*J. Myrick Howard*

Bob Stipe had a long association with the University of North Carolina's Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP). He was a graduate of the department, a friend and professional colleague of numerous faculty members, and frequent lecturer (as a faculty member at the Institute of Government). He was honored with a fellowship named for him, a gift of Marion Covington. However, Bob taught only one course in historic preservation there – in the spring of 1975.

After a heart attack, Bob had resigned under doctor's orders as the Director of the Division of Archives and History; he was only in his mid-40s. It was my good fortune that in 1975 I took that course, a workshop

to study Tarboro's historic district in preparation for local designation. The course was an introduction into a field that I have loved as a career and the beginning of a 32-year friendship with the man that I would refer to as my mentor.

I was not the only one who thought I was taking the last class that Bob Stipe would ever teach. Decades later, at the North Carolina State University School (now College) of Design, students would leave the first day of class believing that it would be Bob's last semester of teaching. Bob fooled us all, living well beyond his statistical life expectancy. We savored the time we spent with him, fearing that it would be our last.

Born in 1928, Robert Edwin Stipe moved to North Carolina from his native Pennsylvania immediately after World War II. In the 1950s he earned undergraduate and law degrees at Duke University, as well as a graduate degree from DCRP. While an undergraduate at Duke, he met and married Josephine (Josie) Weedon, who would stay by his side the rest of his life.

After several years as the principal planner at City Planning and Architecture Associates (where he worked with Jim Webb, a founding DCRP faculty member), he joined the UNC Institute of Government as an Assistant Director from 1957 to 1974. He rose through the ranks from Instructor to Professor of Public Law and Government, specializing in planning, zoning, and historic preservation and conservation law. In 1974-75 he served as Director of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History and State Historic Preservation Officer. He joined the faculty of the Landscape Architecture Department in the School of Design at N.C. State University, where he was Professor of Design and taught courses in community design policy, historic preservation, and the legal aspects of landscape and townscape conservation.

Bob retired in 2002 after more than 44 years of university teaching. As a teacher he influenced innumerable students. He made a point of getting to know his students individually and often maintained life-long relationships with them. Behind a curmudgeonly demeanor was a kind heart and receptive ear.

Bob's influence spread far beyond the confines of the university. Starting in 1976, he arranged periodic week-long courses for professionals in the field of preservation, anticipating the National Trust's Preservation Leadership Training. Speakers at these courses were a veritable who's who of preservation, as leaders from around the country came to North Carolina at Bob's request. Alumni of these courses would refer to our "sitting at the feet of Bob."

Bob wrote and wrote. Through his writings, he is credited with conceiving preservation law as a field of practice, urging attorneys to take preservation seriously as a legal tool. One of his writings was quoted by the United States Supreme Court in the Penn Central case, a landmark ruling that remains a touchstone in land use law. Two books that he edited (*The American Mosaic* and *A Richer Heritage*) became standards in the classroom of preservation education.

For many years, Bob served as a trustee of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and was elected

a Trustee Emeritus. He provided counsel to presidents and staff throughout his life, maintaining a dedicated relationship with the Trust's legal department. In 1988 he was awarded the Louise DuPont Crowninshield Award, the Trust's highest award for a lifetime of superlative achievement in the field of historic preservation. At the time of the award, many of his friends and colleagues didn't expect Bob to live much longer. At a dinner in his honor, Bob complained that the award sounded too much like an obituary, but I think he actually enjoyed the accolades.

Bob was the principal draftsman of most of North Carolina's preservation legislation, and he authored more than 100 articles and publications about planning and historic preservation and had produced several films in these areas. His "Letter to George," a folksy legal guide on how to set up and run a historic preservation commission, gained wide distribution nationally. At home, he helped get the Chapel Hill Historic District designated as a local and National Register district. He would proudly point out that he risked his job by including the university (his employer) in the National Register district.

Bob was always on the cutting edge of thinking about preservation's future, not just in Chapel Hill, but internationally. A former Senior Ful-

bright Research Fellow at University College, London University in 1968-69, he received the Secretary of the Interior's Distinguished Conservation Service Award in 1978. In 1987 he was elected a Fellow of the United States Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a UNESCO organization based in Paris, France. His last chapter in *A Richer Heritage* (published by the UNC Press in 2003), entitled "Where Do We Go from Here?" should be required reading for every preservation professional.

Despite the health issues that plagued him throughout his adult life, Bob Stipe helped make historic preservation an integral component of successful city planning in the United States. He changed historic preservation as a field, resisting its relegation to an aesthetic nicety,



**Robert Stipe**

*A photo portrait by his son Fred Stipe*

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and he helped open it up as a legitimate profession.

In 1977, a year before my graduation, the dean of UNC's law school laughed heartily when I told him that I wanted to go into preservation law after graduation. Bob Stipe buttressed me in my youthful ambitions, as he did with many of his other students who went on to fulfilling careers in historic preservation (and, in some cases, law). In the end, we enjoyed the last laugh.

## Remembering My Friend Bob Stipe

*Weiming Lu*

Bob was a classmate of mine. At that time our school was quite small. There were only five in our class. We got to know each other well, whether in class or studio projects. One year, we were sent to Jacksonville, North Carolina, to do a plan. We stayed at the local fire station there. In the middle of the night, we were occasionally awakened by fire engines racing out just below our floor. These experiences were one of our precious collective memories of our days at Chapel Hill.

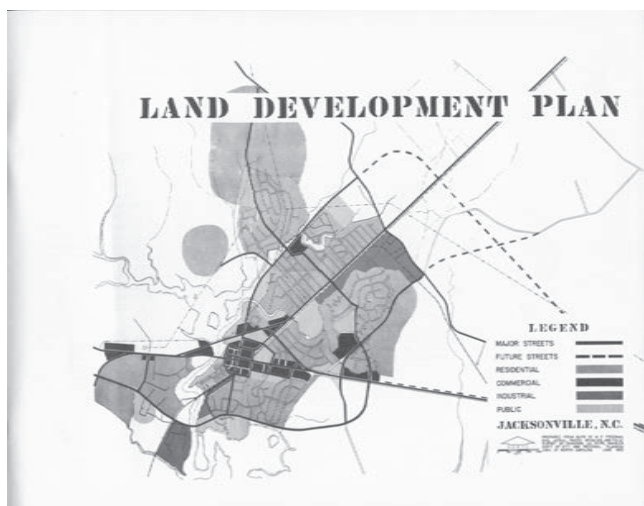
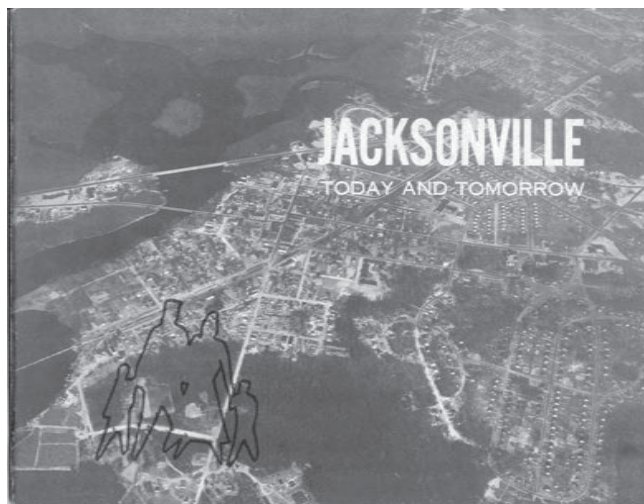
Bob came to the department with a law background. He stood out in our class when we had discussions on planning legislation. When we were in design studio, he also showed great interest. One of his favorite teachers and life-long friend was Jim Webb, our design professor, who also graced Chapel Hill with many of his fine modern designs, including the house for Bob and Josie. Bob was an accomplished photographer and Josie a sensitive Sumi-e painter. Whenever I visited their home, I enjoyed very much the beautiful works in their house.

Bob led the movement for preservation in North Carolina for a number of years and had a great ability to reflect and write. He contributed a great deal to preservation. He won the Crowninshield Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1988, which is considered as the Nobel Award in the preservation field. He taught all his life, and as the Chinese would say, he had planted "peaches and pears all over the world." They are contributing globally today.

Bob was a generous person. He had a library of preservation and other literature. As he was winding down, he began giving away large numbers of his collections to other preservation institutions every year, especially to Eastern Europe based on his assessment of their needs.

Bob's health interrupted his career early while he hadn't even reached middle age. Yet through his strong will and Josie's love and care, he managed to live way beyond the doctor's expectation and continued to encourage and support younger generation to the end of his life.

Bob had a great sense of humor and gave me a nickname "Chop Chop." I have no idea whether that showed his favorite dish to be a pork chop or chop suey. He had good reason to be proud of his many achievements. One time he gave me a copy of his fine preservation report for a city, which he signed "from one genius to another." I am no genius, but I am proud to have been a classmate of his at UNC in Chapel Hill and a friend for over 50 years. I shall always remember him.



**Selections from their 1955 DCRP Workshop Class**  
*A Land Use Plan for Jacksonville, North Carolina*

*Weiming Lu received his MRP from UNC in 1957. He retired as the President of Lowertown Redevelopment Corporation in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 2006. That same year, he was given the prestigious UNC Distinguished Alumni Award for a lifetime of contributions to planning. He now serves on the Minneapolis Foundation board and as advisor to the National Trust for Historic Preservation/Favrot Family Fund. As an advisor to the City of Beijing, he will be helping with their planning efforts after the Olympic Games.*

## Fifty Years in Bob Stipe's Company

*Milton Heath*

Bob Stipe was the ultimate colleague and friend for half a century. We arrived at the Institute of Government at almost the same time in the late 1950s – along with Dexter Watts, and soon after John Sanders and Jake Wicker. Our paths crossed and recrossed many times, not unlike the woodland trails of the Chapel Hill scene.

Stipe's work in land use and mine in the environment intersected at a variety of points, one of which was environmental impact analysis. Stipe's contributions always had staying power.

In 1971 when a legislative committee asked me for a local impact analysis amendment to the proposed North Carolina Environmental Policy Act, I took the assignment back to Chapel Hill overnight to mull it over with Stipe. The next morning, with Stipe's language in hand, I took the amendment to the committee, which adopted it. Stipe's language remains in the Act today, a sturdy Stipe product.

Thirty-five years later Stipe called me when I was serving on the Orange Water and Sewer Authority (OWASA) board of directors about using environmental impact analysis to evaluate OWASA's planned water and sewer lines in the Pinetum, Stipe's neighborhood. He and I worked this through to a consensus, which I passed along to OWASA.

One of our happiest collaborations was musical. In 1961, we joined with several of my old Chapel Hill peers (including Helen Jane Wettach, the late Joel Carter and Margaret Lester, Bill Olsen, Fran Weaver, and Pearson Stewart) to resurrect the Chapel Hill Concert Series, which Jimmy Wallace had led for years. Our first full season, 1962-63, featured a stunning program – Isaac Stern, American Ballet Theatre, The Moscow Chamber Orchestra, and pianist Gina Bachauer, as I recall – at Sol Hurok's bargain price of \$20,000. When I took a leave in 1963-64 to work in the Kennedy Administration, Stipe assumed my role as President of the Series and gave it his superb brand of leadership.

No project was too much for Stipe. Late one week in the early '60s Albert Coates decided to impress a visiting convention of county officials with a display of North Carolina's one hundred county courthouses. On Friday he gave Stipe a weekend project: to collect and

mount a picture of each and every courthouse. Stipe went to work Friday and came up for air on Monday, with the collection that is still mounted on the walls of the third floor.

Stipe's extraordinary design flair was always reflected in his yard and garden in Highland Woods and Pine Lane – another facet of Stipe that reached me, as a lifelong flower gardener. A visit to the Stipe's was always a pleasure to the senses in anticipation – the visual treat of his landscaping and the joy of seeing Bob and Josie.

Some of one's interpersonal relationships have a touch of the eternal. Thus it was with Bob Stipe for so many of us, a remarkable person who will never entirely be gone from our consciousness.

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## Seeing the Big Picture

*Based on conversations with Josie Stipe*

Bob Stipe's story reads as the tale of a visionary, able to see through and even beyond current trends to an alternate version of the future and to articulate that concept compellingly to the public. Not only was historic preservation absent from planning curricula and agendas in the 1950s, it was seen as an obstacle to the ability to master plan whole communities and cities with the economic wealth of the post-war years. How and why did this law and economics major from Duke stand against the prevailing tides and transform himself into what the *Raleigh News and Observer* called an evangelist of preservation?<sup>1</sup>

Stipe's wife Josie feels that the long career in preservation was born of the seed of his interest in architecture. Clerking for a judge in his native Pennsylvania, he realized quickly that his heart was not in law, at least not in the conventional path. He returned to North Carolina and to a job with City Planning and Architecture Associates, headed by Jim Webb, a renowned Chapel Hill architect. As part of his job, according to his wife, "he used to take the most wonderful photos of the interiors and exteriors of houses." With this eye and this feel for individual structures and the details that render them unique, he was drawn on to city planning and eventually felt that the two fields came together in historic preservation. Preservation at the scale of districts and communities led Stipe to a keen interest in place and in the role that preserved buildings have in physically connecting us to not just any past, but to a specific time and sentiment in history.

Already fully immersed in the growing preservation movement at the federal, state, and local levels, Stipe had a transformative experience while on a Fulbright

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*Milton Heath is a Professor of Public Law and Government in the UNC School of Government where he has held a position since 1957. In 2004 he was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the Southeastern States Association of Conservation Districts.*

scholarship at the University of London in the late 1960s. Both his wife and his son Fred remember what a tremendous impact this trip had. Traveling about England and seeing the fruits of generations of preservation efforts was a great source of inspiration and eventually led to more research in historic preservation in other countries. In fact, a series he edited in the 1980s that included profiles of France, Ireland, Denmark, Switzerland, Poland, and other European nations, was for some of these countries the first treatment of their preservation methods ever published in English.<sup>2</sup> In his forward to Stipe's *American Mosaic*, Terry Morton also suggests that conversations with European preservationists drew Stipe's attention to the task of identifying the soul and the purpose of the American preservation project.<sup>3</sup> Much of his later work involved telling this very story and setting it within a national and a global context.

That eye for structural detail which Josie Stipe noted in his early architectural photos developed over time into something of an all-encompassing eye, very keen to note how the individual elements of local policies influenced the big picture, of preserving the past, and of the evolution of preservation itself. In *A Richer Heritage*, he wrote of the shifting landscape of the movement:

*The machinery of historic preservation has now come mostly into the hands of a younger generation that brings to the movement new and different—and sometimes controversial—visions of what is important. They add many more strands to the preservation rope, but it is not yet woven into a single, strong, politically viable cable.*<sup>4</sup>

Stipe's life work was perhaps less about preaching preservation than about illuminating the connections between time, place, generations and the built environment. His gift for illustrating the vision apparent to him when he viewed the American landscape has made a lasting impact on towns, cities, and universities throughout the country.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Martha Quillin, "Stipe evangelized preservation", November 4, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Terry B. Morton, in the Foreword to *American Mosaic*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Stipe, Preface to *A Richer Heritage*.



**The Stipe Home in Chapel Hill, designed by James Webb**

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*Josie Stipe* was married to Robert Stipe for 55 years. She is a longtime resident of Chapel Hill and lives in a modernist home designed by Jim Webb for her parents, Fred and Josephine Weedon, when Bob was working in Webb's firm.

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*Frederick Stipe*, the son of Robert and Josie Stipe, is the Head of the Digital Production Center located in Davis Library at UNC-Chapel Hill. He carries on a family interest in music and photography.