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Ellis A. Johnson Lecture Hall

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23-15-18

Ellis A. Johnson Lecture Hall Dedication

November 10, 1997



Elmer A. Sperry
Learning Resources Center

Cortland
State University of New York College at Cortland

Dr. Ellis A. Johnson

Born July 4, 1925 in Chicago, Ill., Dr. Ellis A. Johnson shared the passions of education, history, politics and music enjoyed by his father, an accomplished pianist, and his grandfather, a one-time State Assembly floor leader for the Illinois governor and later a school superintendent.

As a teenager, Johnson was a soloist in a boy's choir and already an exceptional guitarist. He played professionally in the Chicago area and later toured the Midwest and South. In 1943, he joined the U.S. Navy and would remain in the Naval Reserve until 1955, when he retired as a lieutenant junior grade.

While in the service, Johnson entered the ROTC program at the University of South Carolina and graduated with an English and Naval Science double major. Johnson returned to the "Windy City" as a graduate student at the University of Chicago's Committee on International Relations.

Johnson maintained his interest in music. He sang in the Rockefeller Memorial Chapel Choir, played Bach with the Collegium Musicum and was active with the Classical Guitar Society of Chicago. He interrupted his graduate studies when asked to join the famed Hal Otis trio performing at the Sherman House and across the



Midwest. Johnson closed out his professional career in 1950 at Chicago's legendary Blue Note.

He earned both a master's degree with honors in social sciences and a doctorate in history from the University of Chicago. His doctoral dissertation on the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as an American cultural history became a respected secondary source.

In 1959, Johnson married Joan Pantley '59. They became the parents of three children: Andrew, Thomas and J. Christine.

Johnson, who had never visited SUNY Cortland, accepted an invitation in 1955 from College President Donnal V. Smith to join the faculty for year. "I signed on for six courses and quit counting at 19," Johnson would later joke. In actuality, his affiliation with SUNY Cortland would continue for the next four decades.

A year after arriving at Cortland, Johnson teamed with his History Department officemate, Distinguished Teaching Professor Donald H. Stewart, to begin discussing the Civil War in classroom settings. Their incomparable "Lincoln Portrait" gained momentum in the 1960s when Cy Koch, the College's Learning Resources Center director, suggested a few slides to enhance the course. As the course's popularity surged, so did the number and variety of slides to eventually become, in Johnson's



words, "the finest Civil War slide collection in the world." Today, these slides form the Ellis A. Johnson Civil War Slide Collection in the College's History Department. In 1978, Stewart retired and Johnson taught the two-semester course by himself into the 1990s.

Johnson wrote scholarly reviews for historical journals and assisted with a centennial salute in Cortland to the 76th New York Regiment which fought at Gettysburg. A lifelong Chicago Cubs fan, he was an avid supporter of SUNY Cortland athletics. He served as the Men's Athletic Association advisor and on the Faculty Athletic Committee on campus.

An inveterate musician, Johnson played Gershwin with the College Orchestra, performed on guitar and banjo with the Cortland Jazz Ensemble, and collaborated with the College's Theatre Department in creating musical scores for a trio of plays. Within the community, he was a founding member of "The Five Profs" jazz group, frequently sat in with Spigle Willcox and His All-Star Band, and played guitar with the Joe McConnell Orchestra.

Johnson retired from SUNY Cortland as professor emeritus of history on Jan. 5, 1996. He continued teaching his beloved Civil War course through the College's Center for Lifelong Learning. Hours after completing an evening lecture, Johnson died on Nov. 8, 1996.



Dedication Ceremony

Introduction

Judson H. Taylor
President
SUNY Cortland

Dedication

Stephen J. Hunt '72
Chair
SUNY Cortland College Council

Tribute

Frank Burdick
Professor of History
SUNY Cortland

Closing Remarks

Judson H. Taylor

Reception

Ellis A. Johnson Lecture Hall



A recent photo of a class held in the Ellis A. Johnson Lecture Hall, located on the first floor of the Sperry Learning Resources Center. For many years, "Doc" Johnson taught his popular Civil War course in the room which now bears his name.