

Randolph Wakefield Chalfant, 85, architect, museum curator

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THE BALTIMORE SUN August 20, 2004

Randolph Wakefield Chalfant, a retired Baltimore architect and former curator of the Radcliffe Maritime Museum of the Maryland Historical Society, died of heart failure Tuesday at Greater Baltimore Medical Center. He was 85.

"Randy was a wonderful, unique character from Baltimore who had a tremendous amount of charm and a great sense of history and place. He embraced the past and looked forward to the future. He was thoughtful, considerate and an eclectic collector," said former state Sen. Julian L. Lapidés.

Born in Uniontown, Pa., the son of an architect, Mr. Chalfant was raised in Pittsburgh. His architectural studies at Carnegie Institute of Technology, now Carnegie-Mellon University, were interrupted during World War II when he was drafted into the Army in 1942.

After being commissioned a lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers, he served in India; when stationed in Bengal he was involved in the design and construction of B-29 bases.

Discharged in 1946, he returned to Carnegie Tech, where he earned a bachelor's degree in architecture in 1947. He began working in Tallahassee, Fla., and later moved to Pittsburgh.

He was recalled to active duty during the Korean conflict and was sent to Germany as a construction supervisor. He had attained the rank of captain when he was discharged in 1953.

Mr. Chalfant arrived in Baltimore in 1953, having taken a job as construction supervisor, designer and draftsman for the firm of Fisher, Nes, Campbell and Associates. He joined Taylor and Fisher in 1960, and was made an associate of the firm in 1964.

During this time, he worked on a number of major projects, including additions to Rowley and Macaulay halls at the Johns Hopkins University, and the Monumental Life Insurance Co.'s building at Charles and Chase streets.

In the 1970s, he became a director of Taylor, Fisher, Bowersock and Martin Inc., and later was a director of Tyler, Chalfant and McShane until 1977, when the firm was dissolved.

Until the early 1990s when he retired, Mr. Chalfant worked as a resident inspector for several Baltimore engineering firms.

He was fascinated by the architectural history of his adopted city. That fascination resulted in a nearly lifelong research project into Niernsee & Neilson, the city's first architectural firm, founded by John R. Niernsee and J. Crawford Neilson in 1848.

"He had a curious mind that was interested in how things architecturally happened in Baltimore and was a walking encyclopedia on the firm of Niernsee and Neilson," said Walter Schamu, a Baltimore architect.

Mr. Chalfant's research into the two architects is now being edited into a book for publication under the sponsorship of the Baltimore Architectural Foundation.

"He had become almost totally blind and couldn't read or write any longer, so we gave him a dictating machine," said James T. Wollon, chairman of the Historic Architects' Roundtable.

Charles Belfoure, a Baltimore architect, writer and historian, is editing Mr. Chalfant's work.

"I was amazed by the intensity of the research. Niernsee was an Austrian who also spoke German and because Randy had a working knowledge of German, he was able to research those records in Austria," Mr. Belfoure said.

Mr. Chalfant, a longtime resident of Cloverhill Road in the city's Tuscany-Canterbury neighborhood, filled his house with books and research materials.

He was a member of the Steamship Historical Society of America and arranged for its library to be moved to the Langsdale Library at the University of Baltimore.

He was curator of the historical society's Radcliffe Maritime Museum from 1977 to 1980, and a member of several railroad historical organizations. He also was considered an expert in the toy theaters that he collected.

"In the basement were his books on theater and stage design. On the first floor were the architecture books and on the second all of his railroad material," said a son, Frederic C. Chalfant of Baltimore. "The third floor was his office and that's where he kept the maritime material and Lloyd's Registers."

At Christmas, Mr. Chalfant, who also collected HO-gauge trains, set up an elaborate garden in his dining room.

"On Cloverhill Road, he'll be best remembered for his train display at Christmastime. Every year it was different and everyone went to the Christmas Eve open house to see it," said former City Council President Mary Pat Clarke, a neighbor.

A memorial service will be held at 2 p.m. Sept. 25 at Faith Presbyterian Church, 5400 Loch Raven Blvd.

Mr. Chalfant is survived by his wife of 41 years, the former Jay Humphries; another son, Brett R. Chalfant of Baltimore; a brother, William P. Chalfant of Las Vegas; a sister, Elizabeth C. Crow of Pittsburgh; and several nieces and nephews.