

# Hubert Eugene Baxter

*September 21, 1887 — February 19, 1976*

Hubert Eugene Baxter, professor emeritus, taught in the College of Architecture at Cornell for forty-four years, from 1911 until 1955. He died in Ithaca at the age of eighty-eight.

He was born in Tonawanda, New York, and received his early training in the public schools there and in neighboring Buffalo. A recipient of a New York State scholarship he entered the College of Architecture at Cornell in September of 1906, following in the footsteps of an older brother Roland, a 1908 graduate of the Cornell Law School. Hubert received the degree Bachelor of Architecture in June 1910 and returned to Buffalo where he joined the firm of Kahn and Kahn Architects. With the encouragement of the partners he returned to Cornell in 1911 to undertake a graduate program with a concentration in architectural illustration. His return coincided with the offer of an instructorship, not in the field of his choice but in geometry and mechanics. He continued in graduate studies for a few years but the die was cast, and Hubert was launched in a long and distinguished career in architectural education.

The only interruption to this career was a two-year stint in the Signal Corps of the U.S. Army. He was commissioned a first lieutenant in October of 1917, served in a number of locations in the United States, and in November of 1918 reported to Kelly Field, San Antonio, for flight training. In September of 1919 flying officer H. E. Baxter received his discharge— whether this was in the dress uniform of signal corps airmen, which included boots and spurs, we do not know.

Shortly after his return to Cornell he was promoted to assistant professor, and the next thirty-six years saw continuous and uninterrupted service in the teaching of architecture. He was one of those dedicated individuals who are the very foundation of a successful school of architecture. As a teacher of descriptive geometry and structural design he came in close contact with every student who passed through the college during those years. For these, the memories of that basement drafting room and of the professor will always be strong. Circulating from board to board, he would, on the one hand, urge on the slow and bewildered with fatherly encouragement and, on the other, cut the brash down to size with a few words of devastating sarcasm. His insistence upon high standards of accuracy and performance started many young men and women on a road that has led to success and distinction in their professions.

His course in descriptive geometry was legendary. This was the freshman architect's introduction to spatial

visualization and comprehension which lie at the very heart of architecture. Baxter never permitted the how of the discipline to ever gain the upper hand over the why, and thus an experience here was always stimulating and never easy. Over the years the course was brought to an ever higher degree of polish. Those faculty who worked with him discovered, to their surprise, that the course had many levels and that they, just as the students, were enjoying a very special kind of educational experience.

He brought the same concern to the courses in structural design. Here, students in the later years of the curriculum were exposed to the same high standards and discipline they found in their freshman year. Woe to the unfortunate student who appeared before a review jury, of which Baxter was a part, with an “interesting” structural idea that he was unable to explain in terms of the principles involved. Here again his interest was in principles not formulas, understanding not clichés.

Baxter was a coauthor, with Professor George Young, Jr., of textbooks on both descriptive geometry and mechanics of materials. The material he prepared on perspective for *Architectural Graphic Standards*, the most widely used reference book in the profession, has survived every edition and revision in its original form.

Few faculty have played such a large part in University affairs over a long period of time. Always interested in students and broad in his understanding, he served with distinction on many University committees including those on student affairs, student conduct, secondary schools, and entrance credentials. He was for some years chairman of the Committee on Student Activities, which dealt with all student organizations, and his interest in intercollegiate athletics was reflected by his membership on the Council of Physical Education and Athletics, on which he served as vice chairman. In this latter capacity he was largely responsible for the codification of the University’s eligibility rules for athletics, a report that contributed to the high standard of sports at Cornell. He served on the board of directors of the Campus Store and, for a time, was its director.

In community affairs, he served for eight years on the board of trustees of the Village of Cayuga Heights, six years as chairman of the zoning board, and was elected mayor for a period of four years. He was a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca.

Baxter was listed in *Who’s Who in America*, a member of Gamma Alpha, graduate science fraternity, Tau Beta Pi, engineering honorary, and Gargoyle, architectural honorary. He was recognized by the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects, receiving special citation in recognition of important contributions made to the profession of architecture through effectiveness in teaching.

Although he did not carry on a formal practice of architecture he did occasional consultation. For the University there was a weather kiosk, a remodeling of the dining room at Sage, and work for the theatre, then located in Goldwin Smith. For his assistance on the latter he was made an honorary member of the dramatic club. There was also his own residence in Cayuga Heights.

A rather reserved facade was a thin veneer over a warm and compassionate human being. His students realized this, and many were those who turned to him for help and advice during difficult periods, never failing to find sympathy and assistance. His life was an eloquent testament to his total dedication to his university, his community, and his family.

He is survived by his wife, Phebe Poole Baxter, M.A. Cornell 1926, of Ithaca; a daughter, Mrs. Robert H. (Louise) Gerrity of Great Falls, Montana; a son, Daniel P. Baxter of Moraga, California; six grandchildren; one great-grandchild; and a brother, Faber Baxter of Atlanta, Georgia.

*John A. Hartell, James W. Yarnell, Thomas H. Canfield*