

Knapp, Joseph Palmer ^[1]

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by David Stick, 1988

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Joseph Palmer Knapp, publisher, financier, philanthropist, and conservationist ^[2], was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., the son of Phoebe Palmer and Joseph Fairchild Knapp, a founder of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. He was educated at the Polytechnical Institute in Brooklyn and Columbia University, from which he was graduated in 1884.

A substantial inheritance left by his father enabled Knapp to invest in a variety of business ventures, primarily associated with printing and publishing. In 1895 he founded the American Lithographic Company, and was instrumental in developing a multicolor process that carried a sheet of paper over a number of cylinders, from each of which an impression was made in a different color. With control of this process he began printing the *Associated Sunday Magazine* in 1903, thus providing newspapers with their first weekly magazine supplement. For many years, as a principal stockholder and chairman of the board of the Crowell-Collier Publishing Company, he was the publisher of several of the nation's largest circulation magazines including *Collier's The American Magazine*, *The Women's Home Companion*, and *Country Home*. For most of his adult life he was a director of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, serving for many years as chairman of its finance committee.

Among the specialized printing jobs for which the multicolor presses of the American Lithographic Company were particularly well suited was the production of millions of small pictures of popular baseball players which were packaged with cigarettes. In this way he became associated with James B. Duke ^[3], founder of the American Tobacco Company ^[4], from whom Knapp gained considerable information about North Carolina. But duck hunting, not baseball, was the reason for his first trip to eastern North Carolina, and that initial visit to the Currituck ^[5] area in 1916 marked the beginning of a long association between the New York financier and the sparsely populated coastal county of Currituck. Knapp soon purchased a hunting club and an island, Mackey Island, from author Thomas Dixon ^[6], and designed a spacious colonial home which was completed there in 1920. For many years he and his wife, the former Margaret Rutledge of Summit, Miss., spent part of each year in their River House apartment in the heart of New York City and the remainder on isolated Mackey Island in the middle of Currituck Sound.

Concerned about the lack of educational opportunities for the young people of the county, he offered to supplement whatever could be raised locally in order to bring about needed improvements. His first donation to the Currituck schools, in 1923, was for \$50,000; until his death he continued to make annual contributions. With his assistance modern school buildings were constructed, together with comfortable houses for teachers as an inducement to attract capable instructors; school buses were purchased; teaching salaries were supplemented; and Currituck took the lead among North Carolina counties in providing textbooks and school lunches for all students, in employing school nurses and vocational teachers, and in extending the school term to nine months, setting an example for the state to follow later.

Knapp extended his largess to the people of Currituck County ^[5] far beyond the public schools, employing agricultural experts to advise the farmers, furnishing credit for the operation of a Currituck Mutual Exchange through which farmers could finance their crops, and making substantial annual donations to the public welfare fund. In a published report in 1932, the clerk of the Currituck County Board of Commissioners said: "Mr. Knapp has given us more this year than we have paid in taxes."

In September 1947 Governor R. Gregg Cherry ^[7] announced that Joseph Knapp, through his Knapp Foundation, Inc., had given a quarter of a million dollars to the state for a two-year survey of school needs and for fisheries research, projects the governor described as "a tribute to Joseph P. Knapp's lifelong interest in the betterment of mankind."

Ironically, Knapp's final, and possibly his most important, contribution to his adopted state did not reach fruition until after his death. This was the provision of funds, by the Knapp Foundation and at the insistence of his widow, for the construction of the Institute of Government building in Chapel Hill.

Knapp, the father of two children, Joseph Fairchild and Claire Knapp Dixon, was buried in Memorial Cemetery near Moyock in Currituck County.

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