

Ellington, Douglas D. ^[1]

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by Edward F. Turberg, 1986

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Douglas D. Ellington, architect, was born in Clayton, the eldest of three sons of Jesse and Sallie Williamson Ellington. His father was from Clayton and his mother from Suffolk, Va. Educated at Randolph-Macon College in Virginia, Douglas demonstrated a talent for the arts and continued his training in architecture at Drexel Institute and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. In 1913 he was accepted to the renowned Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris where he won two distinctive awards, the Paris Prize and the Prix de Rougevin. He was the first southerner to win the Paris Prize and the only American at the time to win the latter. Ellington remained in Europe until the United States entered the war in 1917. Returning home, he enlisted in the navy and as a chief petty officer was assigned to the newly established camouflage department.

After the war, Ellington resumed his architectural work. His early employment was in the offices of George B. Post and Sons, New York; Joseph H. Frelander, New York; and E. B. Lee, Pittsburgh. Until 1920 he held the post of professor of architecture at Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. Additionally, he taught at Drexel Institute for two years and at Columbia University for one year. In 1920 he set up his own architectural office with his brother, Kenneth ^[2], as business manager, in Pittsburgh. His commissions there included the Gates Building, Steel's Restaurant, Nixon's Restaurant, and the architectural design for the approaches to the steel bridges across the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers.

In 1926, Ellington was invited to design the First Baptist Church in Asheville, N.C. ^[3] The structure, octagonal in plan and surmounted by a colorful tile dome, is notable for its highly individual decorative detail as well as for its engineering. At the end of the same year, he was commissioned by the city of Asheville to design a new city hall. The design was soon expanded to include a twin facility of city and county offices joined by a central bus depot. Once again, the architect's individual perception of color, proportion, and engineering resulted in a building of unusual drama and dignity with strong geometric forms softened by muted tones, "selected so as to embrace a transition in color paralleling the natural clay-pink shades of the local Asheville soil," he said. Because it was disputed that one architect should be commissioned to do both the city and county buildings, the original plan of engaging Ellington only for the city hall ^[4] proceeded. Thus, the uniform concept was destroyed and a county building in the classical style was constructed instead. Still, the city hall retains its distinction as one of the fine examples of civic architecture of the 1920s.

In 1929 Ellington designed the Lee Edwards High School ^[5] between Asheville and Biltmore. It is a fortresslike stone structure of three wings radiating from a low rotunda. The plan was designed to be expanded in the future to include a junior college, each educational center occupying its own eminence and connected by a bridge. Like the earlier commission, only half of the design was realized. Again, color and geometry predominate in the use of rough cut Balfour Pink granite from Salisbury, N.C., and earth tones in the detailing. The concept was so dramatic that the architect was honored by Teachers College, Columbia University, for "the best and most beautiful school building of its classification in this country."

A fourth commission in Asheville was the S & W Cafeteria ^[6] facing Pritchard Park, also designed in 1929. Continuing in the previous vein with exotic and geometric color and decoration, the building is considered to be one of the finest Art Deco structures in North Carolina.

Again in 1929, Ellington entered an international competition for the design of the Christopher Columbus Lighthouse Memorial in Santo Domingo and was one of three American architects considered for the award. His submittal won first place but the memorial was never constructed. While in the Virgin Islands, however, he painted a series of watercolors. These were selected to be shown as the United States' entry in the Intercolonial Exhibition in Paris, 1930–31.

During the 1930s, the architect became directly involved in the creation of a model community. Named Greenbelt ^[7], the community was developed north of Washington in Maryland and received praise from Senator Robert A. Taft as well as from General Francisco Franco of Spain. The model was chosen by Franco as the guide for similar projects in Spain. The design is still considered an important concept in community planning.

In 1937 Ellington and his family moved to Charleston, S.C., where he began restoration of the old Dock Street Theater ^[8]. Only the exterior fabric remained from the early structure, and the architect created an unusually elegant and classical theater/restaurant complex within the tightly controlled space. The family continued to visit Asheville, centering their activities around the architect's home in Chunn's Cove ^[9]. This remarkable house, which evolved without a plan and incorporated pieces of broken tile, glass, and cast-off architectural ornament in the design, was selected by *House Beautiful* magazine as one of the fifty most artistic and interesting dwellings in North America.

In addition to these projects, Ellington designed Biltmore Hospital ^[10], the Merrimon Avenue fire station, and the Park Avenue School auditorium—all in Asheville; several distinctive homes in Wilmington; Kappa Sigma and Kappa Alpha fraternity houses in Chapel Hill; numerous private residences and churches in Pennsylvania, Virginia, South Carolina, and Mississippi; and St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Charlotte.

Ellington was a member of many professional organizations, including the American Institute of Architects, the Beaux Arts Institute of Design, the Society of Beaux Arts Architects, the Society for Preservation of Old Dwellings of Charleston, the Carolina Art Association, the Charleston Art Commission, the Philadelphia Water-Color Club and Sketch Club, the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh, the Artists' Guild of Charleston, and the South Carolina Historical Society. He died at his home in Chunn's Cove after a short illness.

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Additional Resources:

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