

Phifer, Robert Fulenwider ^[1]

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by Adair Phifer Crute, 1994

19 Nov. 1849–16 Oct. 1928

Robert Fulenwider Phifer, first benefactor of the [North Carolina Museum of Art](#) ^[2], was born in Concord, the fifth of seven children. His father was Caleb Phifer, a prosperous merchant involved in the cotton trade, railroads, and other commercial enterprises; his mother was Mary Adeline Ramsour of Lincolnton. His great-grandfather, [Martin Phifer](#) ^[3], Jr., a large landowner and millwright, was personally visited at his home, Red Hill in [Mecklenburg County](#) ^[4], by General George Washington on his southern tour in 1791. His grandfather, John (Jack) Phifer, a merchant in Concord, represented [Cabarrus County](#) ^[5] in the North Carolina Senate and House of Commons.

In September 1863, at age fourteen, Phifer entered [Davidson College](#) ^[6], where he made excellent grades in all subjects except deportment and had a reputation as a lively youth. Two and a half years later, in December 1865, he left Davidson when the faculty and his parents turned down his request to take an "irregular course." Thereafter Phifer engaged in merchandising in Newberry, S.C., as a planter and cotton buyer. He was a good businessman, made excellent financial investments, and became a man of substantial means.

In 1881, on the advice of physicians, he gave up business and went to New Orleans for several years. It was probably there that he acquired his taste for beauty, for his principal interests became painting, travel, and golf. He studied art both in London and Paris and once on a two-year trip around the world, he spent six months traveling and painting with a band of Japanese artists. After leaving New Orleans, Phifer took up residence in New York City, where he joined the [Salmagundi Club](#) ^[7] and the Calumet Club, two men's societies composed of artists and art enthusiasts. He acquired works of many members of the Salmagundi Club for his own collection.

In his later years Phifer became very concerned with finding a home for his paintings, a place where they would be well cared for and where many people would benefit from them. He sought a group that would not only take care of his collection but also use it as a basis for forming an art museum in the state; however, no such group seemed to exist. The towns of Concord and [Charlotte](#) ^[8] were approached, but he was apprehensive about how the art would be maintained as neither of these towns had an art museum. In 1927, after reading an article in the *Magazine of Art* about the formation of the North Carolina [State Art Society](#) ^[9], which in that year received its charter, Phifer wrote to John J. Blair, director of School House Planning (now the [State Department of Public Instruction](#) ^[10]), the first president of the Art Society and a personal friend. In his letter, Phifer told Blair that he wished to find a home for his collection and inquired about the society's organization and facilities for displaying and caring for art works. Blair responded with enthusiasm and arranged an exhibition of part of the Phifer Collection at the 1927 State Fair. This exhibit was well received by the public. Later that year Phifer sent ten paintings for the annual meeting of the Art Society.

The exchange of letters between Phifer and Blair continued, and in October 1927 Phifer put clauses in his will bequeathing his art collection to the Art Society with additional funds, held in trust, to become available under certain conditions. A letter written from a sanatorium in Battle Creek, Mich., on 28 Dec. 1927 informed Blair of the changes in his will in regard to his art collection and also his concern for his failing health. A few weeks before his death Phifer wrote in a shaky but still fine hand, "I feel now that any pictures I may leave the Art Society will be properly shown. . . . I wish the Society great success."

One year after his death, when the Art Society was informed of its share in Phifer's estate, [DiClarence Poe](#) ^[11], then chairman of the executive committee for the North Carolina Art Society, stated that the final settlement of Phifer's estate assured a minimum of one-quarter of a million dollars for the State Art Museum, with the possibility that the amount might greatly exceed this figure.

Though he had never mentioned bequeathing anything other than his art works to the Art Society, the major portion of Phifer's estate, with a net worth of \$1,172,834 according to a transfer tax appraisal filed in New York on 29 Aug. 1929, was to be placed in a trust for four principal beneficiaries who were all close relatives. Should these relatives leave no heirs, the North Carolina Art Society was to inherit their share of the Phifer trust. Eventually, all four portions of this trust, with its considerable interest, did pass into the hands of the Art Society. In 1960 the society presented the Phifer Collection to the state of North Carolina so that it now belongs to the North Carolina Museum of Art. In accordance with Phifer's will, the trust, still administered by the Art Society, has been and will continue to be used only for the purchase of works of art. For many years the trust Phifer left, both monetary and in his personal art collection, was the backbone of the Art Society, holding it together in its struggle to bring art to the people of North Carolina.

Phifer never married. He died in Battle Creek, Mich., and was buried in the Memorial Garden of the First Presbyterian Church, Concord.

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