

# York native helped create national gallery

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*When donor died, he took reins to get job done*

A York native, David Edward Finley Jr., created the National Gallery of Art in Washington and was its first director.

Finley graduated from the University of South Carolina in 1910 and earned a law degree from George Washington University in 1913. For the next four years he practiced law in Philadelphia. He then served as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army Signal Corps during World War I.

After the war, Finley went back to law practice in Washington, specializing in income taxes. He has been quoted as saying that income tax law was a "terrible bore." He abandoned that line of work and went to work as an assistant counsel at the War Finance Corporation and then moved over to the Treasury Department where he found a new direction for his life.

Andrew Mellon, who had made a personal fortune from oil, steel, shipbuilding and construction, was the secretary of the Treasury in the administrations of Presidents Harding, Coolidge and Hoover. Mellon liked Finley and made him his special assistant in 1927.

In 1931, Mellon went to London as U.S. ambassador and took Finley with him, giving him the title of "honorary counselor." Finley mostly collected pieces of art for Mellon's private collection. Mellon told Finley that some day he hoped to establish an art gallery and wanted Finley in charge.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, Mellon, a Republican, was not a part of the regime. Finley opened a law office in Washington with Andrew Mellon as his major client.

On December 25, 1936, Mellon offered his art collection and much of his fortune if the government would accept both and name the gifts the National Art Gallery. Mellon died before the gallery was built, but the gift was accepted and David Finley Jr. became the first director. He also, in effect, designed the building. It has been termed the "greatest gift of an individual to a government." No government funds have ever been appropriated to the gallery.

For the grand opening on March 17, 1941, besides showing off Mellon's art collection, which included 21 masterpieces once owned by Catherine the Great of Russia, Finley was able to obtain as gifts the Samuel Kress, Peter Widener and Chester Dale art collections. Lessing Rosenwald, whose father founded Sears Roebuck, contributed 22,000 drawings and prints.

In a number of ways, Finley pioneered the displaying of great art. He had special backdrops built, introduced Sunday afternoon concerts, built an art library, started a lecture series that was acclaimed internation-

ally and invited international scholars and historians to study in Washington. A gardener, he insisted on having "garden courts" in the gallery.

David Finley served as director of the National Gallery from 1938 until 1958. But he did not limit himself to the gallery. Finley also chaired the National Trust for Historic Preservation from 1950 to 1962.

He also chaired the White House Historical Association and was one of the founders of the National Portrait Gallery, which was commissioned by Congress and came into being as a part of the Smithsonian complex. He also was involved with establishing the National Collection of Fine Arts Commission of the Smithsonian.

His father, David Edward Finley, was elected a Fifth District Congressman in 1898 when David Jr. was 8 years old. His mother was Elizabeth Lewis Gist Finley.

Finley died at his Washington home in 1977 at age 86. His lengthy Washington Post obituary described him as "A small, quiet man with a forceful capacity to accomplish large projects, he had been a major figure in Washington's artistic and cultural life for many years."

That was quite a tribute to a man who trained as a lawyer and never formally studied art.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

