Biography of Leo M. Bernstein

Leo M. Bernstein (1915-2008) was a Washington, D.C. real estate broker, banker and philanthropist with a keen interest in American history and a deep devotion to democracy and to democratic institutions.

The son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, he believed fervently in the American Dream—and he lived it. He believed strongly in this country’s ideals—the values embedded in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights—and he sought to put them into practice in his own life. He took great pride in his country, and he celebrated its presidents and the opportunities it had afforded him.

A proud second generation American, Bernstein revered the country of his birth and immersed himself in its history, collecting a treasure trove of artifacts and even a good chunk of a town, Strasburg, Virginia, where he displayed his collections in the Wayside Museum of American History & Arts. Historic preservation was a passion. He restored the 1797 Wayside Inn in Virginia and also renovated the oldest house in the District of Columbia. He was an early proponent of a museum dedicated to the history of the District.

While earning his law degree at night from the Columbus School of Law (now Catholic University’s Columbus School of Law), he developed a successful real estate business. During the Great Depression, he bought houses at the bottom and then sold, helping immigrants and other disenfranchised groups get loans and homes.

But he did more than buy and sell properties. At the age of 22, in 1937, he challenged the then widespread racial covenants that barred African Americans from buying homes in many neighborhoods. Despite a covenant on the property, Mr. Bernstein sold a rowhouse near Howard University to a black couple and hired a lawyer to successfully defend the transaction in court. He would later become an active fundraiser for the United Negro College Fund.

Barred from the close-knit Washington banking fraternity, which had long excluded Jews from its ranks, Mr. Bernstein crossed state lines to establish a savings and loan association in suburban Maryland. That led to his opening a branch on Dupont Circle in the District. Eventually, he became head of several Washington banks and served as the president of the D.C. Bankers Association. His keen interest in American history was evident in his bank lobby, where items such as letters from the wife of President Woodrow Wilson were on display.

During his career, Mr. Bernstein appointed the first African-American, the late columnist Carl Rowan, to a directorship of a major Washington bank. He was also instrumental in the growth of Women’s National Bank, first as chairman and then turning it over to the city’s first female bank president.

As an active collector of Americana, Mr. Bernstein owned a desk that once belonged to President James Madison and a lock of George Washington’s hair. He owned the oldest house in the District, the Peter house in Georgetown, where the first president was a frequent visitor. He eventually established an American Presidents Museum in Strasburg, Va., which he made into an
antiques center in the Shenandoah Valley. In nearby Middletown, he acquired the Wayside Inn, which dates back to 1797, and he adorned its walls with pictures of presidents.

A staunch supporter of a free press, Mr. Bernstein was a major booster of the National Press Foundation and instrumental in its first successful fundraising dinner in 1983. The Foundation in turn bestowed on him its Kiplinger Distinguished Contributions to Journalism Award. He regularly hosted retreats for the foundation at his Wayside Inn. Mr. Bernstein knew acclaimed novelist Herman Wouk, and he was a close friend of columnist Drew Pearson, organizing a fundraising dinner for Big Brothers, Pearson’s favorite charity.

Mr. Bernstein’s legacy exists not in the things he collected but in the democratic ideals he fought for and achieved for society at large: open housing, gender equality, racial and social justice. Even today, there are lessons to be learned from the life of Leo M. Bernstein, as society continues to struggle with some of the same issues he encountered during his 93 years of life.