

# Popular Government

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## The End of an Era: A Fond Farewell to Gladys Hall Coates

**G**ladys Hall Coates, who with her late husband, Albert, established and nurtured the Institute of Government, died Wednesday, September 25, 2002, at her home in Chapel Hill. She was 100.

In a message to School of Government faculty and staff, Dean Michael Smith said, “Albert and Gladys Coates were for so long the heart and soul of the Institute of Government, and their philosophy and sound original vision continue to be at the heart of what we do to this day. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude, for without them this unique institution would never have been conceived or have contributed so much to North Carolina. Mrs. Coates had a wonderful spirit and keen intelligence that many of us were privileged to share over the years. We will all miss her presence among us.”

“Gladys Coates symbolized the graciousness and gentility and all that went with being a southern lady,” said William C. Friday, president emeritus of the UNC system. “She was an enormous asset to UNC.”

“Gladys Coates was a wonderful woman whose life has been a symbol of love, loyalty, courage, and achievement,” said Elmer Oettinger, UNC professor emeritus of public law and government, who is a former student of Albert Coates and a former assistant director of the Institute of Government. “Everyone knew Gladys complemented Albert’s ideas with her own cogent thoughts and gracious personality.”

UNC Chapel Hill Chancellor James Moeser called her “unquestionably one

of the most important figures, along with her beloved husband, Albert, in Carolina’s history.”

A native of Portsmouth, Virginia, Mrs. Coates moved to Chapel Hill in 1928 as the bride of Mr. Coates, who was then a professor at the UNC Chapel Hill Law School. She met him when she was a junior at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College (Lynchburg, Virginia). She received a bachelor’s degree in history from the college in 1924 and then taught school for four years before the move to North Carolina.

“Mr. Coates used to characterize their marriage by saying it was a match of Tidewater, Virginia, with Swampwater, North Carolina,” said Henry Lewis, Kenan professor emeritus in the School of Government and former director of the Institute.

The impact of their union was no match for anyone opposed to their goal. As a team, they set about creating the Institute of Government, where students could learn about life in public service. With grace and élan, Mrs. Coates provided the support that Mr. Coates needed to accomplish their dream. The couple used their own funds—including mortgaging their house—and help from friends to create the Institute, which now is part of the School of Government. The Institute provides local government with training, advice, and research.

Gladys and Albert Coates worked together on *By Her Own Bootstraps: A Saga of Women in North Carolina*, which was published in 1975, and *The Story of Student Government in the*

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*,” which was published in 1985.

The Coateses were the first couple to have separate endowed professorships named in their honor at UNC Chapel Hill. Further, they both received the General Alumni Association’s Distinguished Service Medal and the Board of Trustees’ William Richardson Davie Award. In May 2001 the university bestowed an honorary doctor of laws on Mrs. Coates in recognition of her writing, publications, and contributions to the study of women and government. That made the Coateses only the second couple (after President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife, Eleanor) both to have been awarded honorary degrees from UNC Chapel Hill.

Mrs. Coates was buried next to her husband in the Old Chapel Hill Cemetery, across the street from the School of Government. Survivors include a niece, Jane Hope Watson of Virginia. Mr. Coates died in 1989.

A garden courtyard being built at the School of Government has been named in memory of Mrs. Coates and her extraordinary contributions. Memorial contributions toward landscaping and furnishing the courtyard may be made to the Institute of Government Foundation, CB# 3330 Knapp Building, Chapel Hill, NC 27599.

—Adapted by Ann Simpson, with permission, from a story by Valarie Schwartz in *The Chapel Hill News*, September 29, 2002