

A Life Remembered  
GENEVIEVE HUNT AUSTIN  
(1908–1998)

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THE LIFE OF GENEVIEVE HUNT AUSTIN spanned nearly all of the twentieth century. In her later years she recalled “the simplicities of oil lamps, a pump for water, an outside toilet and a nightly walk to a neighbor’s farm through the dusk to bring home the bucket of milk for breakfast.” These memories extended back to her childhood following her birth in Redford Michigan on January 19, 1908. An only child, “Gen,” as she would later be known, shared many of the chores of the family business which supplied local farmers with agricultural supplies, especially those related to the maintenance and propagation of bees.

From her earliest days, Gen developed a lifelong affection for music, for travel, for the church, for walking, for swimming, for keeping diaries and journals, along with a flair for independence. In high school she met Gene Austin before going on to graduate from Oberlin College in 1930. Oberlin, she said: “. . . lived up to my expectations — liberal in philosophy (the first to accept women and blacks), highly rated academically, and with a variety of activities such as the proximity of a conservatory and a theological seminary.” For two years after graduation, Gen lived in Carr Creek, Kentucky — best known, until then, for local feuds and the consumption of beverages designed to liberate the mind. Here, she found employment in a school only accessible during the spring and winter by riding on a mule. In 1931, she answered the siren call of travel by visiting Egypt. Although commonplace today, in that era this was a considerable undertaking for a single woman.

She was married in 1932 to Eugene Austin and settled in Philadelphia where her husband completed divinity school and her son, Jack, was born in 1933. Her daughter, Jan, was born in 1939. Following a very successful pastorate in Charleston, West Virginia, the family moved to New London, New Hampshire where, in 1956, her husband became the second president of Colby Sawyer College. Gen remained in New London until 1962 when leukemia struck down her husband just short of their thirtieth wedding anniversary. On her own, she found employment at Bennett Junior College before moving on to Vassar College in 1963. Four years later, at the age of 59, she was appointed Dean of Residence at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During this period of her life she was deeply involved in the integration of Radcliffe and Harvard and, as a result of her efforts, became the Dean of Residences at Harvard University in 1971, a post she held until her retirement in 1973. She often spoke with considerable pride about these two great institutions and her role in their administration as the first woman dean at Harvard.

In 1973, Gen moved to Nashua where she remained for four years before coming to Hollis in 1977 where she established a wonderful life for herself in the Bliden residence in the center of our town. Never one to rest, she tutored high school students, played the piano for the elementary school chorus, and served on various committees in the church. Her life was again touched by great personal sadness when, in 1990, her son Jack died. In 1996, she moved to the Hunt Community in Nashua where she remained until her death. In January, 1998, she celebrated her ninetieth birthday surrounded by all of her family. She leaves behind her beloved daughter, Jan, whose faithful devotion gave her untold happiness throughout her life but especially so following her move to Hollis; her son-in-law, Dr. James Squires; her daughter-in-law, Ann Austin, seven grandchildren, two great grandchildren, and legions of friends and admirers, all of whom will miss and cherish this remarkable woman.