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Legacies Align with Colby's Acquisition of Allen and Benner Islands

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Legacies Align with Colby's Acquisition of **Allen and Benner Islands**

The College
creates a 500-acre
island campus in
Muscongus Bay

By Bob Keyes

The Colby Island Campus consists of 450-acre Allen Island, in the foreground, and nearby Benner Island, at 50 acres. The College purchased the islands from the Up East Foundation and the Wyeth Foundation for American Art.







Taken soon after she purchased Allen Island, Betsy Wyeth poses for a photo with Benner Island in the background. Photo by Peter Ralston.

When Betsy Wyeth purchased and began cultivating Allen Island five miles offshore from Port Clyde in midcoast Maine in 1979, some of the local people grumbled.

They didn't like the look of the barges and heavy machinery, and they became suspicious of her intent and ambitions. They called her island reclamation project "Betsy's Folly."

Eleven years later, she bought nearby Benner Island and created a summer getaway for her family, a landscape for her husband, the painter Andrew Wyeth, and a wharf for the local fishing community.

Now they call it "Betsy's Legacy."

In one of the most significant and transformative acquisitions in the history of the College, Colby announced in February it had become steward to Allen and Benner in Maine's Muscongus Bay. Colby paid \$2 million for the islands, with the balance of their market value coming as in-kind donations from the family foundations that owned and managed them, Up East and the Wyeth Foundation for American Art.

Colby had previously partnered with the Up East Foundation to provide students with research opportunities. With this acquisition, Colby gains an island campus with approximately 500 acres for learning, research, and creative inspiration, and inherits the vision of an innovative, forward-thinking, and

committed leader—as well as her legacy.

As stewards, Colby will move forward by honoring Betsy Wyeth's vision by using the islands for scholarship, teaching, and as a place where people can connect with the larger natural world, said President David A. Greene. Going forward, that connection may prove as important as the opportunity for science, he said.

"The more adherent we are to technology instead of technology being adherent to our needs, the more a place like Allen and Benner is going to be welcome in our lives," Greene said. "It is going to be a place that forces reflection and thought, and a place where you can take your eye off the screen

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As an outcome-based liberal arts college, this immersive experience is part of what we do. Now we are leveraging that tradition in new ways.”

—Whitney King, the Dr. Frank and Theodora Miselis
Professor of Chemistry

and put your eye on nature and into the world around us.”

As the islands become places of reflection, inspiration, and creativity, they also will become places for action. The islands will provide real-time data on climate change and Maine’s evolving marine economy, as well as insight into coastal communities and how they are changing—and the impact of all of those things on the larger world.

Colby’s interdisciplinary approach will involve labs for monitoring the water temperature of the Gulf of Maine, an outpost for bird research, and a platform for weather observations, among

other things. Clare Boothe Luce Assistant Professor of Biology Allison Barner is using a National Science Foundation grant to examine the predator-prey-competitor relationship among coastal species and what happens to those above and below when a species disappears from the food web.

“So if, for example, a key prey species goes extinct, what happens to the predators in the ecosystem? What happens to the predators of those predators? We are thinking about how the loss of just one species can have a cascading impact that moves through food webs like a seismic wave,” Barner said.

Colby student Jade Ma ’23 created a sculpture in the Allen Island environment. “I don’t want to make art that is just in the vacuum of a studio,” she said of the opportunity to create on the island.





Science students are using Allen Island for a variety of research projects involving climate change, ecosystems, and bird habitats. Whitney King, the Dr. Frank and Theodora Miselis Professor of Chemistry, called the research opportunities of the island campus “a very logical expansion of moving those research opportunities into a coastal area and expanding them in a way that is more than just science.”

On Allen Island, scientists are simulating local extinction in the rocky intertidal marine ecosystems. To simulate extinctions, they systematically and continuously remove certain species from plots around the island and track what happens.

“This enables long-term research to be established in one of the fastest warming regions on the planet. The Gulf of Maine is warming rapidly, and one of the most valuable pieces of data we can collect about how climate change impacts ecosystems is repeated long-term monitoring,” Barner said, noting that most ecological field studies last less than a year.

In many cases only long-term data can alert scientists to impending extinctions,

ecosystem collapse, population booms, or other unexpected changes in nature. Now they can collect these valuable data that could inform management of coastal marine ecosystems.

Whitney King, the Dr. Frank and Theodora Miselis Professor of Chemistry, has taken students on research trips to Allen Island for five years. As a place for science, the island already has delivered everything he hoped and expected it would. As Colby becomes more present on the islands, he is eager to discover what the islands hold for Colby students and their research going forward.

“Colby’s brand is the high-level research opportunities we provide our students,” he said. “This is the next logical piece.

It is an amazing expansion, but a very logical expansion of moving those research opportunities into a coastal area and expanding them in a way that is more than just science. As an outcome-based liberal arts college, this immersive experience is part of what we do. Now we are leveraging that tradition in new ways.”

The islands are also ideal for the social sciences and humanities and provide a stunning backdrop for filmmaking, the visual arts, writing, and other forms of creative expression. They will serve as spaces for art-making, inspiration, reflection, and response, said Jacqueline Terrassa, the Carolyn Muzzy Director of the Colby College Museum of Art.

“Betsy Wyeth made art, environment, and community central to her life,” Terrassa said, envisioning seasonal artist residencies, art retreats, and teacher workshops. “This unique combination of elements left an imprint on these islands, one impossible to recreate. Her creative vision and work are worth illuminating in their own right and could serve as a point of departure for programming.”

PRESENT EVEN WHEN SHE ISN'T

Betsy Wyeth died in 2020 at age 98, and she spent nearly every summer on the islands over the last 40 years of her life.

Andrew Wyeth, who died in 2009 at age 91, painted in many locations during that time, including on Allen and Benner. In 1989 he made his first major painting on Allen, titled *Pentecost*, showing fishing nets blowing in the wind in representation of a young girl who was washed into the ocean by a wave and died. His last painting was a tribute to his wife, an image of a solitary figure sailing out to sea with the white sail loft of Allen Island standing solidly in the background.

Also known as Betsy's Headstone because of its shape and the way it stands on the horizon, the 19th-century sail loft came out from the mainland in pieces. Betsy supervised its reconstruction.

Part of Colby's stewardship responsibility is honoring Betsy Wyeth's vision for the islands while bringing them into the future, Greene said. He senses Betsy's presence each time he visits the islands, even though she isn't there—in the architecture, in the landscape, and in the overall vibe of the place. As he has gotten to know the people who work at the island and who knew and loved the Wyeths, he has also come to understand just how revered Betsy was among them.

She had their respect and admiration, Greene said. “She was demanding, smart, and precise in her wishes, and also very generous. They wanted to do right by her because they liked being with her,” he said.

Beyond her presence, her imprint is everywhere and on everything, from the array of wharves, to the design and decor of every building and how they are arranged in the landscape, to the landscape itself. She cleared pastures and dug the ponds—or directed the workers who did, said longtime family friend Peter Ralston.

“She created these worlds in which Andy lived and painted, and she was a brilliant, tough, willful woman with an unlimited budget and an unlimited attitude for adventure and flat-out creativity,” said Ralston, a photographer from Rockport, Maine. “She was every bit as brilliant as Andy, but instead of tempera

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Clare Boothe Luce Assistant
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Colby College Museum of Art

and watercolor and pencil and paper, she worked with men—often tough men—and bulldozers and skidders and fishing boats and hydraulics.”

He called Allen and Benner “Betsy’s single greatest masterpiece.”

Ralston knew the Wyeths as a family friend. He grew up next door to them in Chadds Ford, Pa., where the Wyeths lived when not in Maine. He followed them to Maine in 1978, the year before Betsy purchased Allen.

He has no doubt that Betsy would be pleased with this new chapter in the history of Allen and Benner islands.

“Betsy would be thrilled,” Ralston said. “It’s sort of like knowing that Andy’s great masterpieces would be preserved for centuries into the future. Betsy always knew she was creating on that level herself. To know that an institution as esteemed and as bedrock-Maine as Colby would bear responsibility and care for her greatest masterpiece ad infinitum, that would please her to no end.”

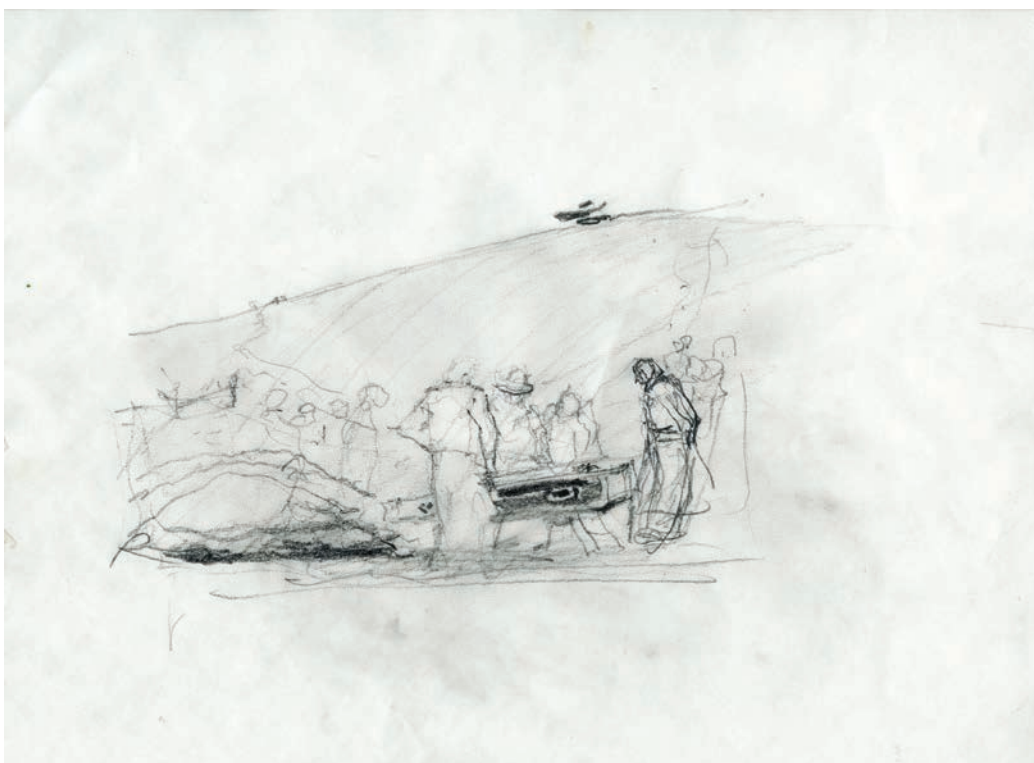
ANDREW WYETH DRAWINGS ON DISPLAY AT THE COLBY MUSEUM OF ART

As part of its involvement with the Wyeth legacy, the Colby Museum presents the first public viewing of a dozen or so drawings that Andrew Wyeth made in the 1990s, where he imagines his own funeral.

Andrew Wyeth: Life and Death will be on view until Oct. 16, 2022.

Fascinated with existential ideas throughout his life and painting career, Wyeth explores the finality of his own life and what that might look like with this suite of drawings. The artworks portray Wyeth's friends, neighbors, and his wife, Betsy, surrounding his coffin, as well as a self-portrait from inside the coffin. The setting is Chadds Ford, where Wyeth's father, the painter and illustrator N.C. Wyeth, also died.

These drawings had been kept secret and were only recently unearthed. The Colby exhibition will connect these sketches, now known as the Funeral Group, to other works where Wyeth explored death as a theme, as well as his use of drawing. Colby will display the drawings in context with works by other artists who have explored similar themes.



Top: Andrew Wyeth, *Kuerner's Hill 16* (Funeral Group), ca. 1991–94. Pencil on paper. © 2021 Andrew Wyeth/Artists Rights Society (ARS) Collection of the Wyeth Foundation for American Art

Bottom: Andrew Wyeth, *John Olson's Funeral*, 1945. Watercolor on paper. © 2021 Andrew Wyeth/Artists Rights Society (ARS). New Britain Museum of American Art, Charles F. Smith Fund, 1945.26