

# John C. Wenrich — *Architectural Illustrator and Artist*

Cumberland, Maryland

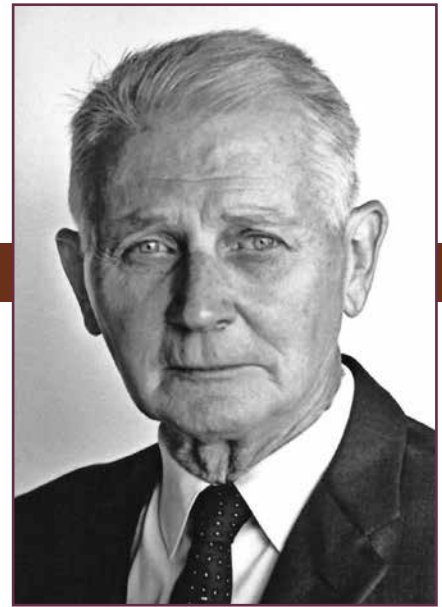
Written by: **Dan Whetzel**  
Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

## ***Who knew that a Cumberland native served on the architectural team that designed and promoted Rockefeller Center in New York City?***

The story of Cumberland's connection to the iconic metropolitan complex may have remained hidden or lost had it not been for a little luck and the efforts of Albert Feldstein, curator of the recent Allegany Arts Council exhibition hosted by the Allegany Museum.

The fascinating story of John C. Wenrich, architectural illustrator, was revealed to guests when the **Vintage Cumberland – Vintage Artists** exhibition opened in June 2016. According to Mr. Feldstein, the exhibition's purpose was to feature original works of art depicting Cumberland prior to and during the first half of the twentieth century. "It was through the eyes of our gone and perhaps forgotten artists of the past that we displayed depictions of historical Cumberland sites." In the process of developing the display, one of Cumberland's forgotten artists was rediscovered and documented, thereby preserving his story and rise to national prominence.

John Wenrich attended Allegany County High School prior to accepting a position at the architectural firm



**Cumberland, Maryland native, John C. Wenrich (1894 – 1970).**  
PHOTO COURTESY ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (RIT) ARCHIVE COLLECTION

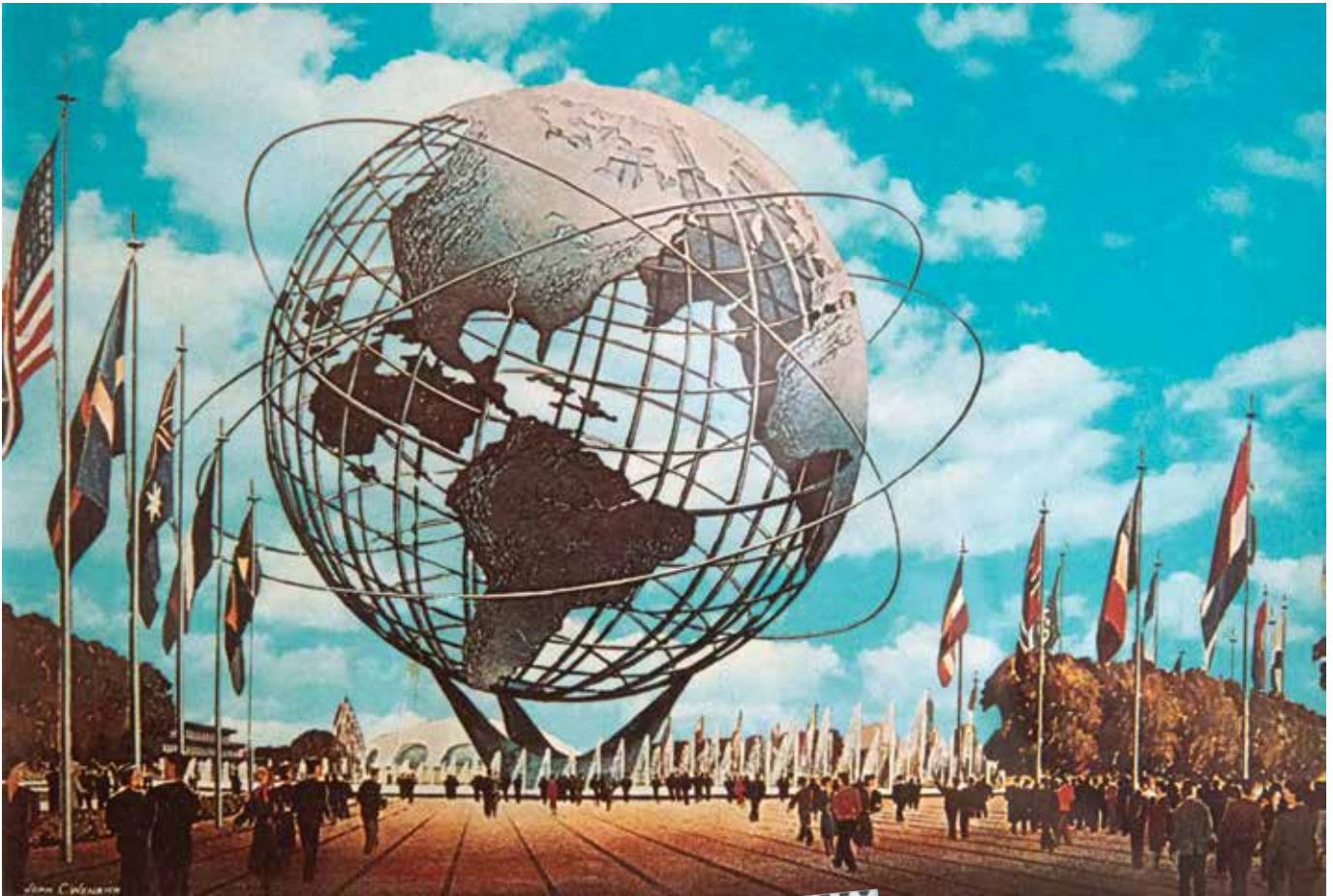
of George Sansbury who maintained offices in the Citizens National Bank building in downtown Cumberland. Employment with Mr. Sansbury lasted from 1911-1914 and included a weekly salary of \$3.00.

In 1914, Mr. Wenrich moved to New York where he enrolled in the Rochester Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute now called the Rochester Institute of Technology. A short stint at the Art Students League in 1917 preceded his induction into the United States Army and World War I. Mr. Wenrich elected to stay in France after fighting ended and enrolled at the University of Toulouse for instruction in drawing and painting. Following a return to the United States in 1919 Wenrich was hired by the firm of Gordon and Kaebler where he served as an architectural illustrator. Over the next three decades John Wenrich earned recognition as a renderer and part time instructor at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

National notoriety first occurred when he illustrated for the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition (1930-1931), a World's Fair held to celebrate the city's centennial and technological innovation. Wenrich worked closely with design architects to produce a variety of Art Deco style drawings.

**A 1921 proposed Dingle Theatre on Cumberland's west side drawn by John Wenrich for the architectural firm of George Sansbury, located in downtown Cumberland.**





It was the subsequent assignment that proved to be significant because it involved redrawing and redefining New York City's skyline. The four year building project (1931-1935) came to be known as Rockefeller Center.

John D. Rockefeller's complex in Midtown Manhattan was the largest private building project in modern times, a 250 million dollar investment and a venture complicated by the Great Depression. Pressure quickly mounted on everyone involved with the work following the stock market crash of 1929; failure on such a grand scale would be devastating to the famed industrialist and city.

Rockefeller assembled an architectural team to design the buildings but the subsequent step of translating the designs into compelling images was crucial since prospective tenants were not exactly waiting to sign leases. The most prominent of the illustrators was Cumberland's John C. Wenrich, later called "Artist of the Center."

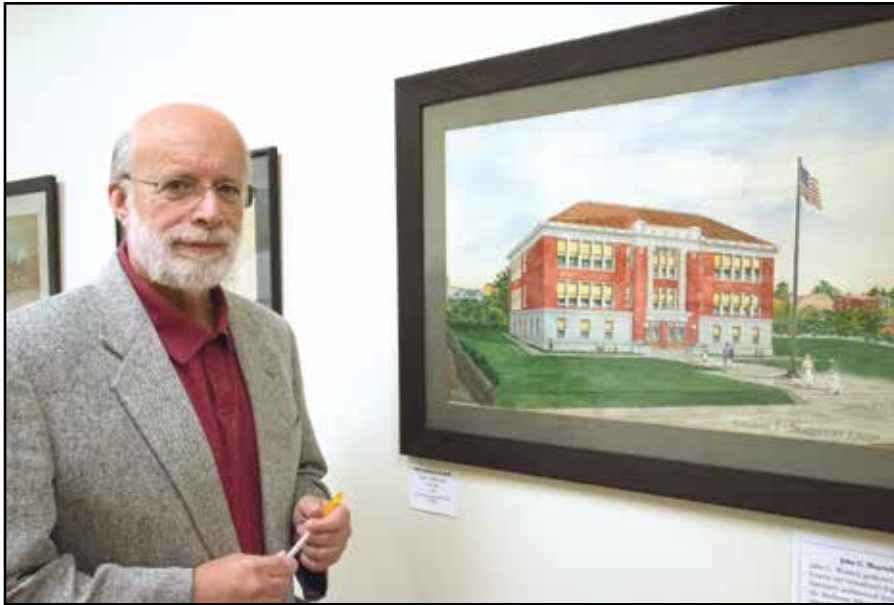
A multipage article appearing in *American Heritage* magazine (October/November 1982) summarized the significance



**John C. Wenrich was an architectural illustrator for the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair. This official postcard (above) depicting the Unisphere is based upon his 1962 signed and dated architectural rendering. The U.S. Postal Service also used one of his paintings for its 1964 commemorative stamp.**

of his work by stating, "John Wenrich's original drawings of Rockefeller Center helped attract tenants in the middle of the Depression. Fifty years later they survive as talismans of a golden moment in American architecture." According to the author, Wenrich enabled Mr. Rockefeller to present the attractive drawings to potential tenants and say, "This is what we will offer you." Wenrich's dramatic drawings of the RCA Building, Rockefeller Plaza, the Promenade and surrounding buildings brought praise and notoriety and continue to define our collective image of the site.

Rockefeller Center was followed by work at the New York World Fairs of 1939-1940 and 1964-1965. His illustration of the Unisphere and "Rocket Thrower" became the iconic image of the former World's Fair and a United States Post Office stamp.



**Al Feldstein curator of the Allegany Arts Council exhibition, Vintage Cumberland – Vintage Artists, was able to purchase several pieces of artwork from a Florida sale featuring Cumberland architect George Sansbury. One of those pieces was this watercolor (left) of Pennsylvania Avenue School, 1914, by John C. Wenrich.**

**Also purchased by Feldstein was Wenrich's circa 1912 pen and ink drawing (below) of the Liberty Theatre on North Liberty Street, Cumberland.**

While Wenrich's renderings provided employment and fame, personal enjoyment could be found in painting old houses, barns, and steam locomotives. A love of trains was instilled at an early age by his father's employment as an engineer on the Western Maryland Railway.

Rediscovering Wenrich's story began decades ago when a resident spoke briefly to Mr. Feldstein about the artist's accomplishments. "I remembered Wenrich's name but really didn't pursue it further until 1983 when a friend living in Panama City, Florida, called to notify me of a sale featuring Cumberland architect, George Sansbury. At that point I was able to acquire the original pen and ink drawings and watercolors from Florida. It was a Sansbury estate sale but some of the drawings, like the Pennsylvania Avenue School and Liberty movie theater, were rendered by John Wenrich when he worked for Sansbury. It was a stroke of luck that his drawings were made available to me."

The colorful drawings were signed by Wenrich and followed by "Del," an abbreviation for "Delineator."

In preparation for the Vintage Cumberland – Vintage Artists exhibition, Mr. Feldstein completed additional research, thereby providing a more complete story of Mr. Wenrich's work, life, and list of awards, including being cited as "Outstanding Alumni" at the Rochester Institute of Technology and establishment of the Wenrich Memorial Library in Rochester, New York.

Mr. Feldstein explained that Wenrich's work received national acclaim yet went largely unrecognized by his



home town. It is likely that Wenrich's move from Cumberland at an early age contributed to his anonymity within the local community, stated Feldstein.

The Vintage Cumberland – Vintage Artists exhibition also featured the works of David B. Rosenthal, Alfred R. Ward, John L. Wellington, Morris Lapidus, Gertrude DeBrau, and Hiram Wertz, and depicted streetscapes, landscapes, schools and businesses. Early lithographs of the city were particularly interesting since they documented individual dwellings and businesses from different eras, including those from 1873 and 1906. The lithograph displays also proved to be a timely resource in the documentation of a local historic site that will be seeking funding through a state agency. As Mr. Feldstein stated, "The exhibit demonstrated the value of combining art and history."

While the Vintage Cumberland – Vintage Artists exhibition closed in July, the Allegany Museum continues to



feature a variety of artifacts and exhibits reflecting the region's past.

*In addition to serving as curator of the Vintage Cumberland – Vintage Artists exhibition, Albert Feldstein has published a variety of articles, books, video tapes/DVD's, websites, and posters on regional as well as national history. Feldstein's most recent poster, "A Black History of America in 110 Buttons," can be viewed at [blackhistorybuttons.com](http://blackhistorybuttons.com).*



Wenrich's personal enjoyment could be found in drawing and painting. His love of trains was instilled at an early age by his father's employment on the Western Maryland Railway. Top left: *Pennsylvania Class 1-L* and top right: *Pennsylvania Class E6, 4-4-2, East Altoona roundhouse (1957)*. Two pen and ink drawings: *Lady in Garden (left)* and *Flower (circa 1914)*.

# Potomac Eagle® Scenic Railroad *Where Eagles Fly*

Enjoy a narrated excursion through a tranquil and pristine mountain valley along the South Branch of the Potomac River.  
**Eagle sightings occur on over 90% of all excursions!**



Open Window Coach Seating & Observation Cars, Snack Bar, Open-Air Gondola Car, and Club Seating with Climate-Controlled Lounge Cars

FOR INFORMATION AND RESERVATIONS

**FALL FOLIAGE DAILY OCTOBER TRIPS**  
 304-424-0736 • [www.potomaceagle.info](http://www.potomaceagle.info)

See our website for schedule and special events

**2016 Additional Service out of Petersburg, WV**



Potomac Eagle Wappocomo Station  
 Rt. 28 North, 149 Eagle Drive • P.O. Box 657  
 Romney, WV 26757

