

Society

for The National Archives

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A Tribute to Tom Wheeler

A chance seating next to former Foundation president Charles Guggenheim at a December 2001 wedding prompted the initial conversation that eventually brought Tom Wheeler onto the Foundation board. As the two men talked of their mutual love of history, the National Archives and its treasures, and the role of this important institution in preserving and sharing with the American people the story of our national heritage, Tom was “sold.”

A visit to the Archives and the document vaults reaffirmed Tom’s initial reaction, but it also confirmed his feeling at the time that the Archives was, as he says, “the best kept secret in Washington.” He enthusiastically joined the board determined to help put the Archives at the center of Washington’s map of public institutions. Within two years Tom had become the Foundation’s chairman and president and was championing the idea of the *National Archives Experience* – the Public Vaults, theater, learning center, traveling exhibitions, and web site – which under his six years of leadership has become a reality.

Although Tom refuses to acknowledge the NAE as “his” legacy – “It was always a team effort,” he argues – without his enthusiasm, guidance, and persuasive determination, each of the NAE programs might not have been made secure for the future. A man who



Photo by Earl McDonald

is practiced in getting things done, Tom knew the measures that needed to be taken to make the Archives widely appreciated as well as obtain for it the public recognition it deserved. He brought in Thora Colot to head the Foundation staff, led the effort to raise a capital campaign of over \$23 million for the NAE, worked to expand and enhance the board so that today it is a notable gathering of talented and dedicated individuals, and created and became a strong advocate of an annual Gala with its Records of Achievement Award, which has galvanized public focus on the Archives.

In spite of his serendipitous meet-

ing in 2001, it is not surprising that the Archives had considerable appeal to Tom. A history buff since he was a child in Columbus, Ohio, Tom had walked the eastern Civil War battlefields with his grandfather who would “tell the stories,” a concept Tom believes is central to the mission of the Foundation and the Archives: “making available to the American people the important national documents that give voice to the stories of our country’s past.” With his particular interest in Civil War history, he authored a book in 2000 in which he drew on nine lessons from Civil War battlefields that have analogies in modern business leadership. His second book in 2006 grew out of his direct association with the Archives and its documents. While taking a potential donor through the vaults, he saw a collection of President Lincoln’s original telegraph messages and was inspired to research and write about “Mr. Lincoln’s T-Mails.”

Tom’s professional life has been in telecommunications where for over three decades he has worked in policy and business development. He is considered to be an expert in that industry in both of those areas. As an entrepreneur he started or helped start multiple companies offering new cable, wireless, and video communications services, both domestically and internationally. As a policy expert he has been intimately

continued on page 2

Conservation Lab Tour an Exclusive Treat for Society Members

Imagine holding in your hands the original 1783 Treaty of Paris, the document that ended the Revolutionary War. Or painstakingly repairing an Indian treaty or a personal letter penned by Abraham Lincoln. Or carefully flattening a huge cowhide parchment with the handwritten text of the earliest laws of our nation.

This is the work of 20 conservators and conservation technicians responsible for maintaining millions of cubic feet of records held for the American people in the National Archives. On December 8, Society

members are invited to take a rare glimpse into their world during an exclusive tour of the original Conservation Laboratory at the National Archives Building.

While much of the agency's conservation work now takes place at Archives II in Maryland, the busy lab in downtown Washington, DC, is one of the oldest, continuously operating conservation labs in the nation's capital, and it is responsible for stabilizing and preserving some of the most important documents in the Archives.

Catherine Nicholson, deputy director of the National Archives' Conservation Division, admits the work can, at times, require a great deal of patience. "You have to be the type of person who is willing to clean an entire wall with a cotton swab," she joked.

It also can be extremely rewarding, she said, to pore over frail documents and treat them in an effort to preserve the stories they tell. And there is no overestimating the thrill of opening an old box or binder, unfolding an ancient map or unrolling a scroll, and literally holding history in one's hands, Nicholson said.

"One of the things people on the tour will see is the work we are doing on our earliest laws, which are on full animal skins – parchments that can measure about 30 by 36 inches," she said.

Society members also may get a look at muster rolls from the War of 1812. The rolls, which list every soldier in a particular unit, were unfolded repeatedly for roll call, then



Photo by Scott Suchman

stored in a pocket or pouch, so many are extremely fragile. In anticipation of the 200th anniversary of the war, conservators hope to preserve as many as possible.

"They will never look beautiful, but our goal is to assure that they are readable," Nicholson said. "Every single name is important to someone."

It is possible visitors will see items planned for the *National Archives Experience's* "Discovering the Civil War" exhibit, scheduled to open in the Lawrence F. O'Brien Gallery in 2010, or the "BIG!" exhibit, which opens early next year. They will certainly see Civil War widows' pension claims, and possibly treaties from the Lincoln administration, which are in the process of being digitized.

"While the task of meticulously preserving papers may seem repetitious, the conservator has to be constantly alert, constantly watching, constantly asking, 'Is this working?'" Nicholson said. "What's interesting to me about being a conservator is that it is a bit of detective work to find clues to determine what chemical or physical processes are causing damage. Every single item is different and every single item is challenging." ■

Wheeler *continued from page 1*

engaged in the development of the government's telecommunications policy at both the legislative and regulatory levels. Tom, the co-founder of SmartBrief and currently a managing director at Core Capital Partners, is a member of the Wireless Industry Hall of Fame and has been chosen by *Cablevision* magazine as one of the twenty most influential individuals in that industry's history.

In stepping down as president of the Foundation, Tom is hardly retiring from active public service. He has been asked to use his considerable experience and skills in the service of the nation as a part of the incoming administration's transition team in the position of Agency Working Group leader for the Science, Technology, Space and the Arts Group.

Tom says he feels "incredibly privileged to have been able to be the voice of the Foundation for the past six years." The Foundation board shares that sentiment. We, too, have been incredibly privileged to have Tom be our voice. ■

Fall 2008: A Season of History, Discussion and Celebration

One autumn evening each year, Society members and other distinguished guests celebrate at the Foundation for the



Society and Foundation board member Jane Fawcett-Hoover and husband Bill Hoover visit with The Atlantic president and publisher John Fox Sullivan, left, and Society member Raymond Garcia, center.

National Archives' gala. The annual black-tie evening is a premier gathering for Society members and has become a "can't miss" event on Washington's fall social calendar.

Guests began this year's event on September 16 at a cocktail reception in the Archivist's Reception Room, then toured the *National Archives Experience's* award-winning Public Vaults exhibit.

Archivist Allen



Society members David and Carolyn Stump

Weinstein joined Foundation President Tom Wheeler in welcoming guests at the formal program in the McGowan Theater, which featured a film tribute to James McPherson, the 2008 recipient of the Foundation's Records of Achievement Award. The renowned historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning author thanked the National Archives for protecting and preserving the historical record and improving history and civics education nationwide.

The event, generously sponsored by The Boeing Company and chaired by Board and Society Member Pat Butler and his wife Donna, also included a preview by Wheeler of the planned "Discovering the Civil War" exhibit, scheduled to open in 2010.

Following the program, guests were treated to an elegant dinner in the National Archives Rotunda Galleries and concluded the evening on the portico where they enjoyed champagne and dessert.

Society members also were invited to exclusive receptions this fall with award-

winning novelist E.L. Doctorow and with political commentators E.J. Dionne of *The Washington Post*, David Brooks of *The New York Times* and *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, and Rice University Professor Douglas Brinkley, all of whom participated in the "American Conversation" series with the Archivist.

Other major events included a reception and screening of Charles Guggenheim's 1968 Academy Award-winning film *Robert F. Kennedy Remembered*, and the opening of the *National Archives Experience's* latest exhibition, "1783: Subject or Citizen?" ■



Honoree James McPherson, Board President Tom Wheeler and Archivist Allen Weinstein

Photos by Margot Saunman

Society Members on the Web

Many of the National Archives' exciting programs are now on-line, showcasing the many ways in which Society members and other Archives supporters contribute to the *National Archives Experience*.

The programs are available at: <http://www.archives.gov/nae/news/featured-programs/>.

"Citizens by Choice: Women in

Business Leadership," and featuring Foundation Board and Society member Fruzsina Harsanyi, is now on the Web, as is the July 4th celebration, featuring Board and Society member Riley Temple in a ceremonial reading of the Declaration of Independence. American Conversations with Board and Society members Cokie Roberts and Ken Burns also can be found on the Web. ■

Save the Date!

Event: Conservation Lab Tour and Society Dinner

When: Monday, December 8

Where: National Archives

Event: An American Conversation: Daniel Schorr and Private Reception

When: Thursday, December 11

Where: Archivist's Reception Room and McGowan Theater

Please contact Caneil McDonald, Manager of Special Events and Sponsor Relations, at (202) 357-7361 or Caneil.McDonald@nara.gov with any questions or to RSVP to an event.

Society Donations Help Boeing Learning Center

The Boeing Learning Center, D.C. headquarters for the National Archives' educational outreach, has had a busy summer and fall, welcoming nearly 7,500 visitors from all 50 states and 42 foreign countries in its ReSource Room from June through September.

Thanks to the generous financial donations of Society members and other Archives supporters, the Learning Center team also conducted:

- 45 workshops for nearly 1,000 educators from all 50 states. Included were the Center's flagship "Primarily Teaching" summer institute for teachers and a three-day joint National Archives/Smithsonian American Art Museum workshop called "Teaching with Documents and Works of Art: An Integrated Approach."
- 35 videoconferences for 875 educators and students in California, Massachusetts, Maine, Nebraska, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Washington.
- 22 "Constitution-in-Action" Labs for 421 educators and students. The labs allow middle school students to take on the roles of archivists and researchers to complete a mock assignment: providing the President of the United States with real-life examples of our Constitution in action for a new public information campaign. Using the "stacks" and "reading room" – replicas of the actual research facilities



Photo by Earl McDonald

used at the National Archives – students mine primary sources for historical examples of checks and balances and separation of powers, gaining a greater understanding of the Constitution. Pre- and post-field trip classroom lessons reinforce the learning experience.

"This was a great summer of non-stop activity in the Boeing Learning Center," said Lee Ann Potter, director of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives. "My team and I had the pleasure of working with hundreds of K-16 educators from all over the country and we are confident that they will be sharing much of what they learned with thousands of students this school year." ■

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* First name denotes a member of the Board of Directors

Honorary members in italics