

Obituaries

WILCOMB EDWARD WASHBURN

Few scholars of American history have been as versatile, prolific, and influential as Wid Washburn, who succumbed to prostate cancer February 1, 1997. Through his long leadership of the Smithsonian Institution's program in American studies, through membership (often as an officer) in a variety of national and international organizations, and through scores of publications—books, pamphlets, articles, opinion pieces, letters to the editor—Washburn helped to shape the nation's scholarship and its public opinions.

The American Antiquarian Society elected Wid to membership in 1969 and, not surprisingly, he quickly took an active part. He attended numerous annual meetings (the first in 1971, the last in 1996); he served on the committee that planned new educational programs under a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; he contributed books of his own authorship as well as older works that he believed would enrich the Society's collection; and he kept up a lively, intermittent correspondence with Marcus McCorison and other officers of AAS.

Although Wid was born in Ottawa, Kansas, on January 13, 1925, and travelled widely, he spent the greater part of his life in the East: at Phillips Exeter Academy ('43), Dartmouth College (*summa cum laude* '48), Harvard University (M.A., '51, Ph.D., '55), the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Virginia (postdoctoral fellow '55-'58), and the Smithsonian Institution (1958 until his retirement at the end of 1996). Important exceptions to his affiliation with eastern educa-

tional institutions were stints in the U.S. Marine Corps in World War II and the Korean Conflict and, in between, two years as Civil Information and Education Officer in Toyama Prefecture, Japan. His presidency at one time or another of the American Society of Ethnohistory, the Society for the History of Discoveries, and the American Studies Association also took him far afield. Friends who phoned Wid at the Smithsonian were seldom surprised to find that he was temporarily on the other side of the country—or of the world.

Wilcomb Washburn was a tireless educator in the broadest sense. His formal teaching positions were numerous enough—at Harvard, William and Mary, the University of Maryland, George Washington and American universities—but they were mostly brief or part-time assignments and surely less important to the long run than his largely self-fashioned role at the Smithsonian. First as curator of political history for several years and, from 1965 until retirement, as chairman of the department of American studies, Wid was a ubiquitous ambassador for American history and culture, simultaneously reaching sizeable professional audiences by participating in every major convention (it seemed) in several academic disciplines and reaching even wider audiences as the author of voluminous publications on a remarkable variety of topics.

Wid was especially outspoken and prolific on Native American history and rights, to which he made several landmark contributions. His revised doctoral dissertation on Bacon's Rebellion in seventeenth-century Virginia emphasized the event's Indian aspects (*The Governor and the Rebel*, 1957); subsequent books addressed Indian issues directly: *Red Man's Land/White Man's Law: A Study of the Past and Present Status of the American Indian* (1971); *The Indian in America* (1975), a volume in the New American Nation series; *The Assault on Indian Tribalism: General Allotment Law (Dawes Act) of 1887* (1975); coauthorship of *The American Heritage History of the Indian Wars* (1977); editorship of *The American Indian and the United States: A Documentary History* in four

large volumes (1973); compiler of *The Garland Library of Narratives of North American Indian Captivities* in, believe it or not, 111 volumes (1975); editor of the massive volume on Indian-White relations in the Smithsonian's *Handbook of North American Indians* (1988); and, most recently, coeditorship and coauthorship of *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas* (1996). An earlier documentary collection, *The White Man and the Indian* (1964), was aimed at general readers. As the foregoing list suggests, Wilcomb Washburn was titular 'dean' of Indian-White relations.

Wid's catholicity of interests resulted in several accomplishments that did *not* pertain to Indians. Somehow he found time to write a 400-page centennial history of Washington's Cosmos Club (1978) and several articles and pamphlets on the history of Washington, D.C. He also, in recent years, served as historian of the U.S. Postal Museum, housed in the huge post office next to Union Station, where imaginative displays of old and new technologies delight and inform visitors of all ages about postal communication from the colonial period to the present. Wid also penned dozens of 'think pieces' on a host of topics, from education to athletics (he was an ardent Redskins fan) to politics and public policy. But Wid's insatiable curiosity and boundless energy defied classification as liberal, conservative, libertarian, or any other label. He was more of a gadfly than a dogmatist, more a challenger of conventional ideas than a pronouncer of his own opinions. As a public intellectual, Wilcomb Washburn spoke out on any issue that aroused his lively mind, always to the edification, if sometimes the annoyance, of those who disagreed.

Wid's memorial service and funeral befit the man. On February 10, several prominent friends paid tribute to his life and career, recalling with humor and obvious affection a remarkable man. A riderless horse with boots backward in the stirrups and several-score Marines in dress uniform accompanied the caisson bearing his casket, drums softly beating, through Arlington National Cemetery. After taps and a twenty-one-gun salute, Wid's remains were interred in a grave site overlooking the federal city he had

long served and deeply loved. He is survived by his wife Kathryn Cousins Washburn, a son, Alexandros, from his previous marriage to Lelia Kanavarioti, and two granddaughters.

The American Antiquarian Society and American historical scholarship are intellectually richer and more genuinely humane for Wid Washburn's manifold contributions. Those of us who were privileged to know him have lost an uncommonly genial, generous, and stimulating friend.

Alden T. Vaughan

STEPHEN THOMAS RILEY

Steve Riley was born in Worcester on December 28, 1908, and died in Wayland on February 15, 1997, the last (but not the youngest) of the numerous progeny of John and Mary (Ward) Riley. Between those dates, Steve lived a glorious life, rich in service to others as librarian and later director of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Although he worked in Boston and lived there and in suburban Weston later, he never forgot his Worcester origins and affiliations.

He was bookish, recalling for me once that as a small boy his favorite reading place in winter was on his stomach under the cast-iron, coal-burning stove in the family kitchen. When in high school, he worked in the Worcester Public Library. That he would attend college seemed foreordained. That he would attend Clark University in Worcester rather than the College of the Holy Cross seemed not foreordained, the former institution appearing dangerously radical to some. But Clark it was to be, Steve graduating *magna cum laude* and with a Phi Beta Kappa key (which I never saw him wear) in 1931 and winning an A.M. degree in 1932. A doctorate in American history followed in 1953, with Clark conferring his fourth degree, an honorary L.H.D., in 1981. He spoke at Clark that spring on enlarging the holdings of manuscripts at the MHS, prompting a wonderful story headline in the

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