

Who Were Tom and Cornelia and
Why Did They Give the Money?

Shannon M. Wood
Berg
Doing Sweet Briar's History
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" I pledge..."

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On October 16, 1970, the Wailes College Center was dedicated in memory of Cornelia and Edward Thompson Wailes. Edward T. Wailes had a distinguished career in the Foreign Service, before being elected to the governing boards of Sweet Briar College from 1954 until his death in June of 1969. Cornelia L. Wailes, member of the Class of 1926, was deeply involved with the Red Cross and with Sweet Briar; she died in August of 1970.

Upon their deaths, both the Wailes bequeathed more than a million dollars to Sweet Briar College.¹ All over America, college's and university's endowment funds are increased by people similar to the Wailes. How do these private donations effect colleges and how are they managed? But, even more importantly, who were Cornelia and Edward Thompson Wailes, how did he begin his career at Sweet Briar, and why did they will so much money to the College?

After his graduation from Princeton in 1925, Mr. Wailes traveled extensively throughout Asia.² This experience led to the beginning of his notable diplomatic career in the Foreign Service. He received his appointment to the Foreign Service in 1929 and was immediately sent to the Consulate in Shanghai until 1933.³ In 1934, taking a breif pause in his career, Edward T. Wailes married Cornelia Lyons Wailes, his second cousin and a member of Sweet Briar's Class of 1926; this was the first of his many encounters with Sweet Briar College.⁴

From 1934 until his retirement in 1962, Mr. Wailes occupied many diplomatic posts all over the world. He rose

quickly in the government, achieving many important ranks: Ambassador to the Union of South Africa in 1954, to Iran in 1958, to Czechoslovakia in 1961, and served as Minister to Hungary from 1956 to 1957, just as Russian troops were taking over.⁵ In 1959, Ambassador Wailes was awarded the Department of State Distinguished Service Award and held a position in Washington, D.C. until 1962.⁶ By this time, Edward Wailes had become acquainted with Sweet Briar College, but it was not until later that he realized his full potential on the Board.

A main source of his driving power was his wife. She had always remained closely involved with the College, even when abroad with her husband.⁷ She majored in Bacteriology and held many jobs at hospitals and laboratories.⁸ During Mr. Wailes' diplomatic profession, Mrs. Wailes became involved with the Red Cross, participating in each country her husband happened to be posted.⁹ Her role, "though unheralded and unsung was of almost equal importance to his."¹⁰ It was she who influenced her husband on matters concerning Sweet Briar; she "encouraged her husband to accept membership on the Sweet Briar Board of Overseers and Directors."¹¹

Apparently he valued her judgement, because he joined the Board of Overseers and Directors and became a member of Buildings and Grounds, and Development committees in 1953. A year later, while a member of the Master Planning Committee, Mr. Wailes was convinced that an informal meeting place for all was in order; "he knew of student interest in such a meeting place."¹² This knowledge could have been from his experience in the Foreign

Service, wanting a quieter place to converse with someone, outside the Embassy or other busy buildings.

Later, Ambassador Wailes became more involved with the College. This increased participation was noted by Mrs. Edna Gilchrist, one of Mrs. Wailes' dearest classmates. She commented on his devotion to the College by saying:

I believe he was more delighted to be elected to Sweet Briar's Board than to be chosen Assistant Secretary of State! He regretted missing occasional meetings while they were overseas, but more than made up for this by his constant concern and frequent visits when they were in the country....¹³

Mr. Wailes's commitment to Sweet Briar was recognized with the establishment of the Edward Thompson Wailes Professorship in International Affairs in 1961.¹⁴ Soon after that, in 1962, "they both retired after 35 years of distinguished diplomatic service."¹⁵ Ambassador Wailes must have been honored to have his name given to such an important title at Sweet Briar College, relating to his career.

It was at this time that the Wailes began to make monetary donations to the College. They had contributed to the Guion Science Building, the Memorial Chapel, and to faculty salaries.¹⁶ In 1964, Mr. Wailes was elected Chairman of the Buildings and Grounds Committee, and was in charge of all architectural matters. Then, Mr. Wailes decided to begin funds for the earlier mentioned student center. Their initial grant of \$40,000 was made in 1966.¹⁷

With this grant, a question arose: why does Sweet Briar College need a student center? A formal answer finally came

from the Development Office in the form of a pamphlet, which gave: reasons why, total funds raised and funds needed, floor plans of the proposed two-story building, and other miscellaneous items.¹⁸ In it, some reasons were given, and all were in favor of the building. One reason was that small colleges, such as Sweet Briar, needed a place which

encourages free give and take between students, faculty, administration, and staff. There is a need for a 'living room' on the campus where the dialogue can continue beyond the walls of the classroom in less formal surroundings. There is also a need for proper facilities to help counter Sweet Briar's country location with constructive student activity.¹⁹

With this type of response, the funds needed for completion began to increase.²⁰ Mr. Wailes must have realized that his idea for a student center was nearing reality, and had to have considered this when making out his will.

Early in 1969, Mr. Wailes was elected Secretary of the Board. In June, he was attending a Board meeting in New York, his first in his new position, when he suffered a heart attack and died.²¹ In his will, Ambassador Wailes bequeathed \$1.6 million in the name of Sweet Briar College, for the sole purpose of the construction of a student center.²²

The student center project began immediately; plans had been drawn-up in October of 1968, and its floor plan and contents were used.²³ The proposed completion date was in September of 1970. But, in August of 1970, Mrs. Cornelia Wailes died, two months before the dedication of the Center. The Board of Overseers and Directors elected to name the building

the Cornelia and Edward Thompson Wailes College Center.²⁴

Ambassador Wailes' idea had become a reality. He had used his knowledge and experience from his political career and applied it, as he knew best, to Sweet Briar College; the results were outstanding. As Mrs. Gilchrist said at the dedication ceremony:

Next to the United States of America and his service to it, Tom's greatest enthusiasm and interest was to Sweet Briar College. Through her [Mrs. Wailes] interest Tom became one of Sweet Briar's most loyal and most helpful Overseers and Directors.²⁵

NOTES

- 1 Memo, Mr. Peter V. Daniel (August 12, 1980).
- 2 Letter, Letters From Tom to Dad - 1928 (May 21, 1928).
- 3 The National Cyclopedia of American Biography: Edward T. Wailes (1969), p. 2.
- 4 Edward T. Wailes, p.2.
- 5 Edward T. Wailes, pp.2-3
- 6 Edward T. Wailes, p.3.
- 7 The National Cyclopedia of American Biography: Cornelia L. Wailes (1969), p.2.
- 8 Cornelia L. Wailes, p.2.
- 9 Cornelia L. Wailes, p.2.
- 10 Alumnae Magazine, "Tom and Cornelia and Sweet Briar" (Winter 1974), p.14.
- 11 Cornelia L. Wailes, p.2.
- 12 Alumnae Magazine, "The Wailes College Center" (Spring 1970), p.1.
- 13 Alumnae Magazine, "Tom and Cornelia and Sweet Briar" (Winter 1971), p.28.
- 14 Edward T. Wailes, p.2.
- 15 Alumnae Magazine (Winter 1974), p.14.
- 16 Alumnae Magazine (Spring 1970), p.2.
- 17 Alumnae Magazine (Spring 1970), p.2.
- 18 Sweet Briar's Destiny, "College Center" (October 1968), p.1.
- 19 Sweet Briar's Destiny (October 1968), p.1.
- 20 Progress Report (August 1970), p.1.

²¹Newsclipping, "Edward T. Wailes Dies; Former Ambassador",
date and origin are unknown.

²²Alumnae Magazine (Winter 1974), p.14.

²³Sweet Briar's Destiny (October 1968), p.2.

²⁴Edward T. Wailes, p.3.

²⁵Alumnae Magazine (Winter 1971), p.28.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Alumnae Magazine (Spring 1970, Winter 1971, Winter 1974).

Past magazines are encased in red leather bindings, with "Sweet Briar College Alumnae News: 1966-1970 and 1970-1973." Information concerning the intended function and contents can be found in "Spring 1970;" useful because of its intended functions. In "Winter 1971" there is information on his career and their involvement at Sweet Briar; it is useful because of this. In "Winter 1974" there is much of the same information as in the above magazine. Located in Room 2, left side, second section, on the third from the bottom shelf.

College Destiny article (October 1968).

This pamphlet contains: a drawing of the Center, basic reasons in favor of the Center, two sets of floor plans, and other miscellaneous items pertaining to the proposed Center. It is a useful source because these are the basic plans and reasons used at the time of construction. It was brought to me by Mrs. Clement, in the Development Office. It is a photocopy, located in my binder.

Letters (1928-1933).

Correspondence from Tom Wailes to his father; Tom went abroad after his college graduation. Contains information about his travels and early work in the Foreign Service. This source is helpful because it gives details as to the beginnings of Edward T. Wailes' diplomatic career. Located in Room 2, left side, lower middle shelf. The letters are bound in three leather books.

Memo (August 12, 1980).

The memo is from Mr. Daniel to Mr. James, concerning a photo album, but it also gives some information about the amount given by the Wailes in their wills. It is a useful source because of the basic information, and the photographs (difficult to use) show how important Mr. Wailes was during his Ambassadorship. Located in Room 2, on the far, middle, left-hand shelf, inside a photo album.

Newspaper clipping, "Edward Wailes Dies; Former Ambassador".

The date and origin of this clipping is unknown (to me). The article is of use because it tells of his diplomatic career, in detail. It was brought to me by Mrs. Clement, from the Development Office. It is a photocopy, located in my binder.

Sweet Briar News article (October 2, 1970), "S.B.C. Mourns Passing of Benefactor," p. 3.

Contains condensed information about the Wailes: previous jobs, involvement at Sweet Briar, and the dates of their deaths. The article is useful because it tells of their activities prior to their actions at Sweet Briar. Located in Room 2, in a stack of bound papers, on the far, lower left-hand shelf. It is in Vol. 44- No. 1.

Sweet Briar Progress Report (April 1970).

This pamphlet is a construction report. Proposed features are described; it is a good source because of the features, but it does not contain any important information about the Center itself. Located in Room 2, left side, far section, on the middle shelf. It is contained in a metal binder labeled: "Sweet Briar College Development Campaign 1968- ."

Sweet Briar Progress Report (August 1970).

This is a pamphlet concerning the completion of the Center. President Pannell thanks many people and praises the new building. It is a semi- useful source because it contains information about its completion, costs, contractors, and other little items similar to these. Located in Room 2, left side, far section, on the middle shelf. It is contained in a metal binder labeled: "Sweet Briar Development Campaign 1968- ."

SECONDARY SOURCES

The National Cyclopedia of American Biography, Edward T. Wailes,
(1969), pp. 1-3.

This is the most important piece of informative literature, because of the detailed facts about Mr. Wailes' life. It was brought to me by Mrs. Clement, from the Development Office. It is a photocopy, located in my binder.

The National Cyclopedia of American Biography, Cornelia L. Wailes,
(1969), pp. 1-2.

This contains similar information as does Mr. Wailes' biography, but it tells a bit more about her husbands life that is not available in his version; therefore, it is a useful source. It was brought to me by Mrs. Clement, from the Development Office. It is a photocopy, located in my binder.