

Bill Still: An Appreciation

As one who has known Dr. Bill Still for half a lifetime, I have much regret in his passing before we might have had one more road trip, one more laugh together, and one more gin and tonic on the backyard deck. We met in Washington at the Naval Historical Center (NHC) in the early 1980s when he arrived to do some research in the Operational Archives and to say hello to Dr. Morgan, the Senior Historian of the Navy, who was my boss at the time. Bill and I struck it off immediately since we both were historians who had served in the Navy within the same decade, 1953-1963. He was teaching at East Carolina University (ECU), and I had taught at Southern Methodist University (SMU) before coming to Washington. From then on, we had a conversation that never ended, about subjects of mutual interest, whether it was the Civil War, the American Revolution, or the War of 1812 and the current state of the Navy. At that time, too, we both showed up at annual conferences of the North American Society for Oceanic History (NASOH) which he called "Nasa" and I called Nay-so, a difference in dialects. Later the US Naval Academy Symposia offered more opportunities to meet up between sessions and at the always grand receptions.

The road trips became numerous as we traveled to these conferences, sometimes in the ECU travel-all van with students, stopping at Sackets Harbor on the way to Kingston, Ontario, or stopping for a sumptuous luncheon at the New York Yacht Club at which none of us were members, and always someone else, not Bill, doing the driving. I got elected to drive leaving New York and heading for Mystic

Seaport, a perilous trek threading through NY traffic on the East River Drive to the Triboro Bridge and then on to Connecticut for the conference. Other trips followed, Point Clear, Lake George, Honolulu, St. Michaels, Bath, Savannah, and others. During these trips, when he stayed with us, my wife Donna always looked forward to seeing Bill and got used to his curmudgeonly ways. When he was up on his high horse, referring to some difficult person or situation. Her humor brought him back to the present. She also knew that Bill's favorite dessert was Pecan Pie (pronounced "Pah")

Bill's concerns were nearly always professional, he was concerned to bring his students into the maritime conferences which he felt should not just be for old-timers and wanted to build NASOH for the future. He was proud of the work he did to build naval collection at ECU's Joyner Library. He persuaded Admiral Eller, a former NHC director, to donate his personal library to Joyner and worked to get other retired officers to send their papers to add to the collection. Bill and his co-director Gordon Watts made great contributions to the study, teaching, and practice of Maritime History and Underwater Archeology. Bill's connections with the Navy were wide and deep. He covered its history from the Civil War to the interwar period in three impressive volumes and lately was working on a fourth to bring his coverage up to 1939. To continue his research, he spent the year 1989-1990 in Washington, D.C. working at the National Archives and the NHC under the auspices of the Secretary of the Navy's Research Chair in Naval History. He also accepted my invitation to join the Secretary's Advisory

Committee on Naval History. During that time, we discussed what more the NHC could do to strengthen the Navy's protection of historic sunken US naval vessels, including those in foreign territorial waters. From these discussions came the establishment of the NHC's Underwater Archaeology Branch. Our first underwater archeologist was ECU graduate, David Cooper, who stayed with us for one year on loan from his real job as Wisconsin State Maritime Archeologist. Dave set the standards for the position thanks to his training at ECU. In his stead, we hired Bob Neyland who has remained at the Center for almost thirty years, enlarging the office and demonstrating the importance of our work in underwater archaeology. If it weren't for Bill Still's constant encouragement, this might never have happened. In gratitude for Bill's great work in and for U.S. Naval History, the Naval Historical Foundation awarded him the Commodore Dudley W. Knox Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Naval History, based on his unwavering commitment to the teaching of maritime and naval history, the mentoring of hundreds of students, his major publications, and contributions to maritime archaeology. Since that occasion Bill Still and his coauthor Richard Stephenson somehow found time to complete their epic reference work *Ship Building in North Carolina, 1688-1918*. For this, in 2021, the NASOH awarded them the John Lyman Award in American Maritime History.

Dr. Still's passing has been noted by his former students and colleagues: Dr. Barry Gough, University of British Columbia, wrote: "Bill Still was one of the true originals of NASOH and maritime historical studies in the US and beyond,

with encyclopedic interests. I always admired his courageous positions taken on heritage matters. He led from the front, and collaboratively, on programs and projects too numerous to mention. He left a tremendous legacy. My condolences to his family and all his many friends.” Donald Shomette, a historian and underwater archaeologist, stated: “A friend, colleague, superb scholar, educator and leader that all will miss, Bill was an incredible fellow who will be forever enshrined in his legacy of his myriad works. As Joseph Campbell once said, "Follow your bliss," and Bill did just that throughout his life. And I, for one, am grateful.” Former student Dan Warren offered: “Bill greatly influenced my career in maritime archaeology and helped me attend the Maritime Program at ECU. He always treated me and the other students in the program as peers. I had the privilege of being his Teaching Assistant for a time while at ECU which was one of the best jobs I had while in the program. He was a friend and a mentor. He will be greatly missed!” Finally, a few choice words from Dr. Andrew Lambert, Kings College, University of London: “a great loss, a pioneer and an inspiration. He will be in my thoughts on Friday.” And so he will be for all the rest of us.

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