Rockbridge Anecdotes

How W&L Acquired the Reeves Collection: The *Real* Story

Good stories often have more than one version, and so it is with the way the famed Reeves Collection came to Washington and Lee University in the 1960s. The version for publication was told in the book *A Fragile Union* (2003) by James W. Whitehead, the prime mover in the story — how a postcard offering an unspecified "work of art" ended up on his desk because no one else wanted to deal with it and how he visited the prospective donor in Providence, R.I., and was astonished to find not one but two houses, side by side, filled to the rafters with priceless Chinese porcelain, which the collector planned to give to W&L.

The untamed version, however, had been told by one of its protagonists, the same Jim Whitehead, in a 1996 interview with Mame Warren for an oral history project involving W&L's late-20th-century movers and shakers. Here, from the vaults of the Leyburn Library, is that transcript, lightly edited.

By James W. Whitehead Sr.

THIS POSTAL CARD arrives [at Washington and Lee in 1963] and it says, as best as I can remember, "Some day I may wish to give a work of art to the university. Are you interested?" — signed, Euch Reeves, class '27, law. That's all it said. Well, that card went around from office to office and finally came into my hands, and I thought, well, when you say "gift," that caused me to give it a little more attention.

Euchlin Reeves as a member of W&L's 1927 law class

So I called Mr. Reeves and said, "I'm going to be in New York. Would it be possible to come by to see you?"

"I'd love to have you come," he said — Southern accent. He was from South Carolina.

. . . It took until about noon to get from New York to Providence. It was cold, ice cold and was just terrible, snow everywhere. I get in a cab that went past all these magnificent Federal houses. It was just like going into another century. Magnificent mansions, as well as some of the houses that were built at the time of the Revolution. [Finally the cab] pulls up on Benevolent Street in front of this little house. It was a one-room-wide, two-and-a-half-story, wood-shingled, little house.

89 Benevolent Street

I said to the cab driver, "Well, keep the motor running—I'm going to the door to find out if we're at the wrong place." There was a Christmas wreath on the door—this

PHOTOGRAPHS ON THIS AND THE NEXT PAGE: JAMES W. WHITEHEAD

now is February—and it was dried and had reached the point of decay. I knocked on the door, and finally the door opened and I heard a voice say, "Is that you, Jim Whitehead? I hope you've come to stay two weeks." And that was Mr. Reeves.

I walked into a vestibule that was only four feet wide, and there was a table there, and here was Mr. Reeves with his handyman and a barking dog. . . .

So I walked in from the vestibule. He guides me, and I've got on a coat that I held to keep from knocking things off. He had to move some porcelain and magazines out of the chair, and when I sat in it, I almost went on the floor. I don't know that anybody'd been in that chair in years. He sat on a little daybed right across from me.

He really seemed to be completely out of place in those surroundings.

Door to the "Little Museum" at 93 Benevolent Street, where the Reeveses kept their excess porcelain. Note the many locks on the door.

He was dressed in a very nice pinstripe, he had on a white starched shirt, and he had a silk tie with a diamond stickpin, and all around was old faded wallpaper peeling off the walls, no item that had been cleaned or dusted in years, and so crowded that you could not move. Yet he spoke with a very soft Southern accent he'd never lost, but continually talked about his wonderful years at Washington and Lee.

Euchlin Reeves with Presidential porcelain stacked randomly on bookshelves, 93 Benevolent Street

Finally my eyes adjusted to the surroundings, and I'm in this chair and he's on a daybed. There's a grand piano between the foot of his daybed, with the keyboard pushed against the front window, nobody could get to it to play, and there was an old black-and-white television set sitting on it and a telephone, and those were the only two things in the room that indicated that we were in the twentieth century. There was a light bulb hanging from a wire in the center of the room and there was one little table lamp, and there I was sitting with this man I'd never seen before.

He, in the meantime, had told me that Mrs. Reeves was sorry that she couldn't join us because she had not been well and was in a nursing home [she was then 87 years old], but he expected her home any day.

Then he said, "Would you like to see our little museum?" And he opens that door [to the adjoining house], and it was so dark and so cold, there was no light, heat, or anything in that building. They had lived in it when they first married and then filled it up and had to move next door, and they kept putting stuff in it.

THERE WAS NOT an aisle. I had to step over ceramics on the floor and around furniture. It was so dark in there, he carried a little flashlight. He takes an Oriental hanging off the wall, and behind that wall was a steel door like you'd find in a bank. It was a vault, and then there was another steel door. He opened the first steel door, which made this groaning, terrible noise, just like it was in great pain. Then behind that were two more little steel doors, metal doors, that he had to open. He put his flashlight in there and here was this table stacked high

REEVES CENTER, WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

Washington dinner plate, c. 1785, Qianlong, China; Lee family guglet, c. 1733, Yongzheng, China

with dishes. He said, "That's a plate that belonged to George Washington, that's the set that belonged to Paul Revere," and he kept doing that. He said, "Don't you want to go in and see them?"

And I thought, "I've never seen this man until today. All he has to do is for me to get in there and slam that door and nobody will ever know what ever became of Jim Whitehead." But I said, "Oh, thank you," and I put one foot inside the vault and then kept my hand on the steel lock on the outside.

Well, I went back and had dinner with him in this little dining room in his house, and he pushed all of these open cereal boxes and medicine containers to one side and put two willow ware plates, like you get at the dime store—this is no exaggeration, I had a jelly glass, he had a jelly glass, and he said, "Would you like a drink before dinner?" I could hardly talk because the dust from that other place was so great. I said, "Yes, I certainly would." Well, he brings out a bottle of Manhattan mix cocktail, that syrupy sweet stuff. He didn't put anything in it.

He had a problem at some time in his life, probably when he was at W&L, with alcohol. But that's all he had. To him, that was having a drink. He poured some in my glass, and then we had little pieces of sliced country ham that he had left over from Christmas, some biscuits and some beans.

So here we were surrounded by silver, porcelain, art, and we were eating off of dime-store plates and drinking from jelly glasses. But that didn't bother him in the least. He was oblivious to anything around him. They never let anybody clean, because they were afraid they'd break things, and they would have.

Doll and Boy, as they called each other, on their 25th wedding anniversary in 1966

Coda: In 1967, Euchlin D. Reeves, 28 years younger than his wife, died five months before she did. Mrs. Reeves, born Louise Herreshoff, was a descendant of the family that founded Brown University but nevertheless she immediately gave all the art treasures they owned to W&L, which turned out to include not only the world-class collection of porcelain but a series of paintings she had made as a young woman in Paris and New England. The paintings became renowned in their own right as fine examples of Impressionism after their debut in a one-women exhibition titled "An American Artist Discovered" in the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C., in 1976, the centennial of her birth.