The 2007 Caldwell Lecture in the Humanities
Delivered by Tom Lambeth, October 19, 2007, at the Reynolda House Museum of American Art on the Occasion of Honoring Caldwell Laureate Emily Herring Wilson

OUR HONOREE TONIGHT, just like my mother, came to North Carolina from Georgia. Indeed they came here — some years apart — from two Georgia towns separated by only one county and 48 miles of highway.

I am glad my mother came to North Carolina, although I must tell you she always identified herself as a Georgian. If she had not come, I might not be here tonight. I might not be in North Carolina. Indeed, I might not be anywhere.

I am surely glad that Emily [Herring Wilson] came. On the letterhead of the North Carolina Humanities Council and explicit or implicit in much of the work it supports, one reads “Many Stories, One People.” Emily’s career since she came to this blessed Tar Heel land is marked by her many efforts to help people tell their stories, and out of that she has helped to tell the story of North Carolina. She has worked hard to make us one people both freed and empowered by the telling of many stories.

So, what is the North Carolina story? Why is it worth telling? What does its telling say about the kind of people we are? How does our story fit into our national story?

Some years ago a lady of some vintage showed up to vote in Rockingham County. While standing in line, she asked those around her if they knew what the North Carolina state motto was and what it meant. One or two replied, “To Be Rather than to Seem.” One might even have known the Latin Esse Quam Videri. Yet, it was her translation that is remembered decades later:

“It means,” she declared, “stand for something in North Carolina.”

The North Carolina Humanities Council stands for something in North Carolina — for important things, for things that go to the very marrow of our being as a state. Tonight, by our choice of recipient for the Caldwell Award, we confirm both the value of the award and the value of the Council. Yet as important as the statement we make tonight is, it is what the Council does throughout the year that is the best measure of how well we uphold the standard of that Rockingham County lady.

If the Council did not exist and we were true to our heritage as Tar Heels, we would need to go out tonight and create it. In that event I would turn for our marching orders not to the inspiration of the scriptures (although they are an important and inspiring source for a discussion of the humanities and of what it means to stand for something).

Instead I would turn to the words of a North Carolina journalist, an English explorer, and a Pennsylvania founding father. What all of them wrote and how the years have embraced their words speak to the purpose of the Council. For in the main what we are about as a public body supported in part by taxpayer money is determining whether we as North Carolinians and we as
Americans will live up to our promise and the promises of our past.

Now, to my eloquent trio.

The journalist is the late Jonathan Daniels who decades ago wrote of North Carolina the following:

The State, good, beautiful, varied, is a long way from perfection; but more than any other State in the old America, it is as it was in the beginning — with the same high hope in it, the same free people and the will to possess the same free chance. Other states possess the houses, the capitals, the preserved places, the restored buildings but the North Carolina continuity is of peoples, not of buildings, of the pioneer possibility of equality and comradeship in equality. That belief in that possibility is more than anything I know the mark of North Carolina.

The English explorer is Ralph Lane who in September some four hundred twenty two years ago, wrote in the first letter written in the English language from the New World to the old, the following:

Since Sir Richard Grenville’s departure from us...we have discovered the mainland to be the goodliest land under the cope of heaven.

Three sets of words: a belief in “the pioneer possibility of equality”; “the goodliest land under the cope of heaven”; “We the people.”

When Daniels wrote those words, all North Carolinians did not share the same pioneer possibility of equality; it was a possibility deferred. And when the founders settled upon “We the people,” “We” was clearly only some of the people — it was, essentially, “We” the white males and not all of them. And the “goodliest land” spoke of a geography, not a people. Yet over the years, North Carolina has moved towards the expansion of those pioneer possibilities; the nation and North Carolina have come close to making “We the people” all of the people; and we in North Carolina have done much to create out of that 16th-century description of the land and water and climate a new notion of what we could as a state become for all of our people.

The humanities embrace history and insist that we have respect for the truths of history. The story of North Carolina is not always the story I would wish it to have been or to be. Walter Hines Page, who surely loved his native state, wrote once that “there must be somewhere in America where people dream and dream and sleep and sleep and it might as well be North Carolina,” and at least one respected historian has described us as a “Rip Van Winkle state.”

The power of the humanities to help us build understanding and community is not just when the subject is easy. The recent re-examination of the legacy of Charles Brantley Aycock seems to me to offer a classic opportunity for the humanities. Those who are the heirs of the victims of the racism which characterized the campaign that brought Governor Aycock to office have confronted us with the need to look deep into the life of a hero of the past. I would want us to look not only at the travesty of the 1898 race riots and the KKK-like campaign of Aycock’s party, but to consider as well that he was the leader who risked his career to insist that education funds must go to black as well as white children. Indeed the humanities can force us to examine Aycock’s rise to office against his own description of the role of the leader as that of “speaking the rightful word and doing the generous act.” If the humanities insist that we seek truth through

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Tom Lambeth

**NOTED FOR HIS LEADERSHIP** in politics, philanthropy, and service, Tom Lambeth is a UNC graduate and native of Clayton, NC. Lambeth helped elect Terry Sanford governor and then worked as one of the youngest principle advisors to a governor in the nation. After serving on Congressman Richardson Preyer’s staff, Lambeth campaigned in North Carolina for gubernatorial succession. In 1978, Lambeth became Executive Director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation.

Lambeth continues to serve North Carolina as chair of the NC Rural Center and as a member of the NC Community Colleges Foundation, the Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership, the UNC School of Social Work, and the North Carolina Humanities Council.
such examinations, we can perhaps define the heroic for future generations, and we might even get folks to pay attention to North Carolina history. The humanities can help us examine not only where we have been but how far we have come.

My father was the first graduate of his rural Guilford County high school to go to the state’s university, and there his life and mine were forever influenced by a bantam-weight ex-Marine history professor named Frank Porter Graham, and much of my outlook has been the result of serving Terry Sanford and Rich Preyer. Yet one of the great electoral successes of our state is Jesse Helms. The story of North Carolina is in large part a tug between the different brands of leadership those men represent.

In that contest we are usually identified as a conservative state — a perfectly respectable designation. Yet we are a conservative state that would not join the union without a promise of a Bill of Rights; that first voted not to leave the Union and only did so when it became a choice of leaving or fighting our neighbors; we are a conservative state which created the first public university, the first state symphony orchestra, the first state museum of art, and the first state school of the performing arts. Perhaps Zeb Vance had it right when he described us not as conservative but as a “state of sober second thought.”

As the Council encourages us to examine the paradox of our state, it is important that we are a public body, that we are funded in part by all the people of North Carolina, that we are “We the people.”

I believe that the “public humanities” are a call to action. It is okay if they are unsafe. The humanities are not just celebrated or encouraged or displayed. They are lived.

Just outside this room, an exhibition celebrates the story of the flight of Zachary Smith Reynolds from England to China in 1931 and 1932. The tragedy of his death 75 years ago has been noted in recent weeks. One of the fictionalized accounts of that event was a movie Written on the Wind with a score that became a popular song. That song tells of “dreams we’ve thrown away.” It is in the best of North Carolina traditions that the dreams of none of our citizens should be thrown away. To throw away the dreams is to throw away the people.

What I want us to say through the humanities in North Carolina is not that we are all of one mind just as we are not of one religion or race or political affiliation. We have, as we declare, many stories; but we are one people, and that surely means the one people are all of the people.
We can perhaps agree on something while respecting our diversity. We can agree that to be great we must also be good.

Finally, in a year when our nation and our state confront the challenges of both a war and a national election, the humanities might remind us that we are a nation in large part created by scholars named Franklin, Jefferson, Rush, and Madison. In a time when there will be an inevitable clash of ideas, we might remember that it was the idea of liberty that inspired them. Osama Bin Laden made one bad calculation in his evil design. He thought that buildings like the Pentagon, the Twin Towers, and the Capitol were the symbols of our democracy and that bringing them down would destroy us. Yet the idea was here long before the buildings and will be here long after the symbols are gone.

In the horror just after 9/11 at a gathering in another place in North Carolina, one of the great riches of our state and a great friend of the humanities, Betty McCain, told the story of Sir Richard Shirley, who in England centuries ago built a cathedral in a time of pestilence and war. Many of those around him were outraged at such an act. Yet the words that you would find tonight engraved on the wall of that great church should inspire all of us. They read, “In the worst of times, do the best of things.”

The Humanities Council is about letting people in North Carolina stand for something in their own places, in their own times, through their own dreams; it is about our working together — even in the worst of times — to do the best of things. It is about our being as good as we are great.