

## David P. Wheatland (1898 - 1993)

**Scholar, Author, Avid Collector,  
*Sine qua non* for the Collection of  
Historical Scientific Instruments**

**Dr. Sara J. Schechner  
David P. Wheatland Curator**

*Mr. Wheatland conserving some  
electrical apparatus, c. 1950.*



David Pingree Wheatland — known affectionately to many as Mr. Wheatland — began amassing the nucleus of objects that were to become the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments in the 1920s. After graduating from Harvard College in 1922 with a Bachelor of Science degree, he became involved in his family's lumber business in Maine. Though successful in business, he remained unfulfilled in this work, and Mr. Wheatland returned to Harvard in 1928 to work in the Physics Department, first as a technical assistant to Professor Leon Chaffee, then as Department Secretary, and in 1940, as the Assistant Director of the Cruft Research Laboratory of Physics.

Mr. Wheatland's duties in the Physics Department led to numerous encounters with obsolete instrumentation often discarded in stairwells and attics of the science buildings on campus. A zealous collector of rare books on electricity and magnetism, Mr. Wheatland recognized what these castoff instruments were from the marvelous engravings in his old books. He understood that these objects represented an important part of local scientific heritage, but he feared that they were in physical danger due to neglect as well as the propensity of faculty and students to cannibalize them for spare parts. Since the Physics Department did not then see any value in the instruments, Mr. Wheatland took them into his office for safe-keeping. Larger items, like the Pope orrery, were stored in the basement of the Music Building.



*Professor I. Bernard Cohen and Mr. Wheatland ministering to the Pope Orrery, c. 1947. On right, the grand orrery by Joseph Pope, Boston, 1776-1786 (inv. no. 0005) on display in the Putnam Gallery, as part of TIME, LIFE, & MATTER: SCIENCE IN CAMBRIDGE.*

When his small office became filled to overflowing with "foundlings," Mr. Wheatland sought a new space for the assemblage. He was assisted in this effort by Paul H. Buck, the Provost of Harvard College, I. Bernard Cohen, then an Assistant Professor of the History of Science, and William A. Jackson, the founding curator of Houghton Library, and Samuel Eliot Morison, the historian. The group gathered

together an introductory exhibition of the collection in February 1949, and the following year, the Provost found space in the basement of the Semitic Museum to serve as the home of the now officially-recognized Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments. Mr. Wheatland was appointed curator, and generously agreed to work for \$1 per year. He held this post until 1964, when he became honorary curator.

Mr. Wheatland was tireless in watching out for wayward parts of Harvard's scientific heritage. On a visit to the university's photographer, he noticed a "nice little brass bubble level" in his photo lab. The photographer confessed that he had picked it up somewhere in the physics labs, and let Mr. Wheatland have it. Over time he recognized that this was part of a surveyor's level by Benjamin Martin of London. He found the magnetic compass with arms in a case in the Jefferson Laboratory, the telescope that clamped to the arms in a cabinet of teaching apparatus for Physics B, and the tripod of wood and a brass cap with fittings to set and level the compass in a pile of discarded parts in the attic. This significant brass instrument (Inv. Number: 0068a) had arrived at Harvard in 1765.



*One of the foundlings: Surveyors Y level by Benjamin Martin, London, 1765 (inv. no. 0068a).*

*Below, a narrow escape from re-purposing: Dip circle by Edward Nairne, London, c. 1765 (inv. no. 0026).*

Mr. Wheatland made another spectacular find on top of an apparatus cabinet in the laboratory of physicist Kenneth Bainbridge. It was a divided brass circle mounted vertically, which Bainbridge claimed he was saving to make a student spectrograph. It turned out to be a fine dip circle selected by Benjamin Franklin for Harvard in 1765 at the shop of Edward Nairne in London (Inv. no. 0026).

Rescue missions became a regular and legendary part of Mr. Wheatland's curatorial program. He was often joined in them by his wife Elizabeth (Betty) Hinckley Wheatland, and beginning in the 1960s by Ebenezer Gay, the devoted assistant curator for the Collection.

The Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments continued to grow under Mr. Wheatland's care and relocated several times. After the Semitic Museum basement, it moved first to the basement of Perkins Hall, then in 1973 to the Allston Burr Lecture Hall, and in 1979-1980 to the basement of the Science Center.



Mr. Wheatland also began his own private collection of instruments with the idea of supplementing and filling in the gaps in the Harvard Collection. His collection included over 700 sundials and a similar number of dialing books, over 3000 early vacuum tubes and some of the first transistors, many radios and radar devices, telephone prototypes and meteorological firsts, as well as significant instruments related to the history of astronomy, navigation,

surveying, and physics. He had a real knack for knowing what would be of fundamental historical importance long before anyone else thought to save it. These items were stored in a stone house, barn, and Quonset hut dubbed the Radar-Radio Shed on Mr. Wheatland's farm in Topsfield.

In 1968, Mr. Wheatland published *The Apparatus of Science at Harvard, 1765-1800* and by the 1970s, he and Gay were showing off some of the instruments in the annual lectures that Professor Cohen delivered to sophomores concentrating in History and Science. In 1976, I attended one of these lectures and decided to stop by Allston Burr the next week to learn more about the instruments. Apparently I was the first student to do this. I was thoroughly charmed by the two curators, who invited me to come again. When I returned the following week, I was greeted with "Looks like we have a live one here, Eben!" – "Better sign her up, Mr. Wheat." And so I became their apprentice.

Mr. Wheatland had a longstanding belief in the value of the Collection as a resource for understanding of the past and a vision for its use in research and teaching. In this belief and vision, he was way ahead of his time. By the time of his death in 1993, thousands of scientific instruments, books, maker's catalogues, and manuals had been donated to the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments and another 4,600 rare imprints had been given to Houghton Library. Even more critically, he insured the future of the Collection by establishing an endowment, the income from which supports a curator and other operating costs.

Approximately ninety-five percent of the apparatus, books, and other items in the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments were touched by David P. Wheatland. They were rescued, conserved, documented, and housed, bought, donated, treasured, and shared. Without his vision and unstinting generosity, this Collection would not exist.

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**A cartoon of the time re-captioned by Diana Gay, wife of assistant curator Ebenezer Gay, suggests the rescue team's intrepid activities around campus.**



—That looks too good to leave there, Mr. Wheat,  
— We need it, Eben. Bring your station wagon  
in the morning and we'll pick it up.