Colton Packer Wagner (1919–2013)

Former Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Trustee Colton P. Wagner died this year at the age of 95. He was born in Seattle and graduated from St. Paul’s School with an honorary scholarship to Harvard College, from which he received a B.S. in 1941, magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa. A distinguished lawyer with an L.L.B. from Harvard Law School, “Colty” helped found the community-based law firm of Humes & Wagner LLP in 1962. He served on the Board of Trustees from 1971 to 1977, a pivotal period in the contemporary history of this institution.

At that time, the Laboratory was the only major scientific organization whose Board of Trustees was composed almost equally of leaders in the local community and notable scientists. During the early 1970s, the staff of CSHL was approximately 100-strong, operating on a budget of just about $3 million. It was a difficult time financially, and the dedication and support of trustees were crucial.

In the year that Colty retired from the board, Jim Watson declared that “our long period of emergency is over.” In the 1977 Annual Report, he wrote:

"For the past fifteen years we have had to work very hard—first to survive when the Carnegie Institute of Washington began the close-down of its Department of Genetics, and then to grow again into a serious body for the advancement of fundamental biology. In the beginning the outcome was in doubt, and only through the efforts of many loyal friends did the Participating Institutions come into existence and join forces with our friends in this community to see that we kept going as an independent body. . . . Now we are completely different."

So much happened during Colty’s term of service. In 1971, the Laboratory received its first Cancer Center grant from the National Cancer Institute. To this day, CSHL is one of the nation’s leading NCI-designated Cancer Centers.

At the same time, the seeds of our neuroscience research program were being sown. In 1971, summer courses in neurobiology began with a view to complementing them with a year-round program of research. By 1977, the focus had turned to initiating such a program to investigate the way nerve cells grow and form synapses.

During Colty’s tenure, much was also accomplished in the physical growth and modernization of the campus. But preservation of the historic and environmental beauty of the Cold Spring Harbor shoreline has always been paramount. In 1973, CSHL seized the opportunity to acquire the Whaler’s Cove Marina so as not to “lose the tranquility so very essential to our existence and become part of the commercial-urban spread that now dominates so much of the north shore of Long Island.” We are sure that Colty, an avid fisherman who was active in local conservation organizations including the Long Island Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, appreciated the tranquility of the Harbor that this purchase continues to guarantee.

We will be forever grateful to trustees like Colty who helped to navigate this institution through rough and sometimes perilous waters. As a seaman who served for 5 years in the U.S. Navy as the Executive Officer on a Second World War destroyer escort, Colty was particularly qualified for such a mission. He retired from the Navy in 1946 as a Lieutenant Commander. We salute his service to CSHL, community, and country. Our condolences go to his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

Bruce Stillman