

Joseph Coolidge Wheeler Obituary

Joe Wheeler, Man of Vision



Joseph Coolidge Wheeler, age 97, died in his sleep at his home in Concord, Massachusetts on Feb. 11, 2024, following a normal day.

Joe was born in Concord on Thoreau Farm on November 21, 1926, to Caleb Henry Wheeler (a 9th generation descendant of the first English colonists to settle in Concord) and Ruth Winifred (Robinson) Wheeler, author of *Concord, Climate for Freedom*, written after she and Caleb retired from farming. Joe was educated at Concord High School (1945), Bowdoin College (1948), the Graduate Institute of International Studies of Geneva, and Harvard's Littauer School (MA/MPA 1951). He had a distinguished career in international development, living near

Washington, D.C. between posts in Jordan, Pakistan, Kenya, Paris and Geneva. After retirement, he returned to his beloved hometown. He quickly involved himself in town affairs and was instrumental in the promotion and passage of the Community Preservation Act and the preservation of the Thoreau birth house.

Joe considered his early boyhood on the Virginia Road farm idyllic. Despite the depression, there was always plenty to eat. The rhythms of milking a couple dozen Ayrshires twice a day, cutting asparagus, haying and raising chickens were punctuated by trips to his grandfather Robinson's summer home situated on stone terraces overlooking Fairhaven Bay for a swim or tennis game.

You could say that Joe's international career was launched in high school by a \$20 gift from his eldest brother, Henry, to attend a Quaker conference in the Poconos on World Federalism. Joe became a leader of the Student World Federalists, helping to organize national and international conferences, promoting the concept of a world governing system that would put an end to war.

Joe enlisted in the army at age 18; World War II ended before he was deployed. After completing his education, he began working for the US government in agencies that eventually became the US Agency for International Development. There was a hiccup when at one point during the McCarthy years he was denied security clearance because he had grown up on Thoreau Farm (which was apparently suspected to be a communist institution). He was USAID Mission Director to Jordan 1965-1967 and Pakistan 1969-1977 and Assistant Administrator for USAID from 1980 to 1982. He then worked for the UN Environmental Program and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). He helped to plan the 1992 Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, out of which came the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and Convention on Biological Diversity.

Joe met his first wife, Jean (Huleatt) Wheeler when he introduced himself after their pictures both appeared on the front page of the Boston Globe as scholarship winners for international study. They married as students in Geneva, then lived at Thoreau Farm while studying for graduate degrees at Harvard, before moving to Washington, D.C.

Joe's children remember him as central to family life. While Jean was staying up late at night to write her PhD thesis, he took on the morning responsibilities of getting five young children organized for school and feeding them a breakfast of hot cereal and poached eggs on toast. The Jordan years were filled with weekend and holiday camping and traveling throughout the Middle East.

Joe lost Jean and his son Daniel in a car accident in 1969. Afterwards, in Pakistan, he was very fortunate to meet and marry M. Verona (Farness) Wheeler, to whom he was married for 44 years. Both loved the outdoors, trekked together in many places in the Himalayas and travelled extensively throughout the world. One memorable summer included a camping road trip from Munich to Islamabad with seven teenagers. The couple lived in Islamabad, Washington, Nairobi, Paris, and Geneva. Between adventures, they hosted innumerable diplomatic and family gatherings. His children and grandchildren will always remember their visits to Paris and Kenya, fabulous holiday meals, and intensely competitive family croquet games.

When he was in his eighties, Joe gradually and completely lost his eyesight. A lifelong stoic and optimist, he found ways to manage his blindness with grace, and described his quality of life as very good right up until the end. He was assisted over the years by devoted caregivers. The family would particularly like to recognize Nicole Palmer, Larissa Almeida, and Shannon Dooling, each of whom helped him to continue to pursue his goals and interests in different ways.

Joe leaves five living children, Juliet Wheeler and Rachel Wheeler of Concord, MA, Deborah (Wheeler) Burk of Annadale, VA, Caleb Henry Wheeler of St. Louis, MO, and Margaret Jeanne Kane of Walnut Creek, CA. Juliet's husband Kenneth Turkington and Rachel's husband John Myers have been great supports to him. He will be missed by his five grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. He was predeceased by his four brothers, both wives, son Daniel Lincoln Wheeler and step-daughter, Marilee Kane.

For more, see a film by Susan Rieder <https://susanrieder.com/joe-wheeler> or Joe's memoirs <https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Wheeler-Joseph-C.memoir.pdf> .

Two oral histories are at the Concord Free Public Library, and one at the Library of Congress:

1995 https://concordlibrary.org/special-collections/oral-history/Wheeler_J

2008 https://concordlibrary.org/special-collections/oral-history/Wheeler_J_2008

A Celebration of Life service will be held in the spring. In lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be made to the Thoreau Farm Trust, P.O. Box 454, Concord, MA 01742. <https://thoreaufarm.org/annual-fund/>

Arrangements are entrusted to Dee Funeral Home & Cremation Service of Concord.