

W&L After Class

With Guest Tom Camden

Episode Transcript

RUTH CANDLER

Thanks for tuning in to W&L After Class. I'm your host, Ruth Candler.

Today, I'm visiting with Tom Camden, head of Special Collections and Archives at Washington and Lee. We are so very fortunate that we caught him, for he is only on campus for one more week before he retires.

Tom's story is an interesting one. He grew up in Rockbridge County and is also a 1976 graduate of W&L. While on campus, he majored in religion with an emphasis on Eastern thought and later explored the world of Library and Information Science, earning his master's degree from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Tom's professional journey led him from the chilly winters of New England as curator of the New Hampshire Historical Society, all the way down to the warmth of the South, where he became Director of Special Collections at the University of Georgia. But as fate would have it, his heart called him back to his beloved state of Virginia, where he worked with the esteemed Marshall Museum and library on the VMI campus. Tom then moved east and became the Director of Special Collections at the Library of Virginia where he stayed for 12 years.

For the past decade, Tom has nurtured the invaluable treasures of W&L's Special Collections and Archives, preserving history, and illuminating our understanding of the past. But all good things must come to an end, and next week, Tom retires. He'll be hanging up his treasure hunting hat ready to embark on the next chapter of his life. Enjoy listening as we take one more walk through Special Collections and the vault with Tom Camden.

Tom, Welcome to W&L after class.

TOM CAMDEN

Thank you.

RUTH CANDLER

You grew up on a farm in Rockbridge County, and from what I understand, you weren't planning to stay in the area after high school. You received a full scholarship to W&L, that you said you could not pass up. Would you share what it was like growing up in this area? And how that contrasted with your time in college?

TOM CAMDEN

Absolutely. It was quite a shift for me to come to Washington & Lee, growing up in Rockbridge County. My family has been here since 1740, so I'm deeply rooted. And of course, at 18 years old, you really want to fly away, you want to, if you have an opportunity to go to college, and I knew I was going to do that. I really wanted to go, I wanted to fly, but my mother had a different idea. My family is large, and my father died when I was five, so my mother was a strong influence on my entire life. And so, when Washington and Lee asked me if I wanted to accept this full scholarship, I said, "No! I don't want to go to Washington and Lee!" and my mother said, "You will accept that. I cannot let you turn down that kind of opportunity."

Now, having grown up here, you know, I know the area very well. My family are, what is in this area called 'land poor.' They owned, at various points, vast acreage of property, but they were not educated people. I'm the first in my family to get a college degree, much less advanced degrees. My mother, you know, hasn't had an eighth-grade education. My father, we never talked about it, because I didn't know him very well, but I've come to realize in recent years that he may have been illiterate. And I'm not sure about that. I don't have anybody to ask about that at this point. So, an education was something that was encouraged by my family. But in order to take care of land, you don't necessarily need to hold multiple degrees.

It was a bit of a luxury, but my mother encouraged it, and everyone in the Natural Bridge High School where I went to school. There were lots of people who apparently saw potential in this country boy who was most happy on the Buffalo Creek or putting up hay in the summer, or, you know, hiking all over the place. So, I got lots of encouragement and there was never any question that I would be college bound. Coming to Washington and Lee was a bit of a game changer for me. I'm very grateful to the school for offering me that fellowship.

It was not easy. If you are a local boy, particularly if you're a county boy—and at that point, it was all boys, there were no women at the school—it was pretty quickly noted that you're a townie, and you carry that sort of moniker for the rest of your career. I was somewhat resentful of that. And actually, it sort of sparked me to be even sort of stronger and more unique than I was when I came to

school here. The first year was not easy. You want to be accepted, you want to feel like you are part of a group, you want to have that college experience. But I was not interested in the fraternity system, I was not interested in the social scene, and so it was a bit difficult. There was a little bit of a strange moment, pretty quickly recognizing the academic opportunities, I realized that my worldview was about to change radically, and it did. And that, *that* is what brought me to this point.

RUTH CANDLER

That incredible.

TOM CAMDEN

And I call it today, I call it enlightenment. And that's a really prissy sort of term to talk about—somebody being 19 years old and enlightened—but that I do recognize it or call it a form of enlightenment, my worldview went from this very narrow country-farm-boy attitude to something very, very broad. And it was all through the academic opportunities and the kind of exposure I got in the classroom here.

RUTH CANDLER

At W&L, you majored in Eastern thought, and you had considered pursuing a doctorate in religion at Princeton, then you took some time away from education. Tell us about what that time was like, and then what made you decide to get your Masters.

TOM CAMDEN

I spent five years here because I was having so much fun, and I had this wonderful fellowship. So, I was allowed to stay an extra year and pursue a master's in art history with Pam Simpson and a minor in art. Sociology, anthropology, and all those things were contributed to that expanding-sort-of-worldview, I call it. My mentor here, my major professor, Dr. Manoj Rogers, said to me, "I think you should pursue a graduate degree, and perhaps teach, perhaps come back at some point and do what I'm doing."

RUTH CANDLER

Say, planting that seed.

TOM CAMDEN

He did. And I adored him. And I wasn't sure I wanted to be like Dr. Manoj Rogers, but I wanted to do what he was doing. And so, I did, I applied to Princeton, the theological seminary, but realized that the prospect of three more years of graduate work was sort of daunting. And so, I turned that down, and I ended up at the Marshall library as a research assistant, which means I was a Gopher. And you know, I was paid about \$1 More per hour than the janitor, but it was an extraordinary experience, because that's where my shift in thinking, my career shift, was made. That's where the first day on the job I was given a box of materials to to organize, and it was a box of materials created by a man named Frank McCarthy, who was an aide to camp to George Marshall during World War II but is better known as the producer of the movie Patton. He gave us the box of movie materials, or materials that were used in the writing of the script, including the original script, and photographs and diaries and letters from between Beatrice Patton and George Patton, her husband. I remember thinking, this is—this is *real* history. This is *raw* history. I'd never been exposed to it before. Having grown up here in this extraordinarily bucolic little valley, where history is all around, you sort of take it for granted. But to be holding raw history in your hands is a bit of a revelation. So, I remember thinking, *well, this is going to be an interesting experience for me; I'm immersing myself in raw history.* And then at the bottom of that box, there was an object that was wrapped in a towel, and I remember thinking, *this is very odd*, and unwrapped it and it was the Oscar; the original, the golden statuette that was won for best producer or director or whatever.

RUTH CANDLER

Not many people can say that they've held an Oscar in their hands.

TOM CAMDEN

No, they cannot. And so, here I am. I'm fresh out of Washington and Lee, and I'm holding it now. And I remember saying and thinking that was sort of my Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus experience. That's that religious sort of conversion where Paul was struck by lightning and and forever changed and I sort of felt like that. And I remember saying, much later, telling that story and saying, you know that that day is when it all became clear to me, that's where I was going

to be going the rest of my life, and I never looked back. And to this day I've not looked back.

RUTH CANDLER

That's so true with with a lot of our Lifelong Learning Program participants over the years, that you have allowed them to hold history in their hands, and it makes such a difference. It's impactful. So, let's come back to W&L; and in 2013, you *did* come back to W&L and Special Collections. What exactly *is* Special Collections?

TOM CAMDEN

Well, Special Collections *here* is not intended to be a great big secret; it has not always been acknowledged for the richness of its holdings. As I have aged in my career, I'm fairly quick to admit that I'm a shameless promoter. So, I believe very strongly that a collection of riches isn't worth a flip if you do not share it, with either the people who are most vested in it, or the constituents, and in this instance, the students, the faculty, the community. So, I accepted this position, not really knowing what was here, because there was no 'Special Collections,' when I was a student here, though, there was collection of materials, but it wasn't an organized collection in a separate department. So, I came here with some trepidation, because I left an extraordinary position in Richmond, as 'caretaker' or 'custodian' or 'steward' of the of the state of Virginia's treasures. And you can imagine, there's a reason why (Virginia) is called the 'Mother of Presidents.' And I was responsible for some extraordinary collections owned by the Commonwealth. But when my alma mater gave me the opportunity to come back, I said, yes, I think so. And so, I remember thinking, *what have I done*, I'd left a very high-profile position. Exciting, to come to the somewhat unknown. I knew I had a wonderful group of people to work with. The staff here is extraordinary. They're an extraordinarily good team.

But I didn't know, *really*, about the collections. But then a week after I came back here, I called my colleagues in Richmond, and they were very excited to hear from me and they said, "Oh, you're calling because you're coming back, please tell us you're coming back." And I said, 'I'm calling you to tell you that I won the lottery.' And I think I can say 10 years later, as I'm one week away from retiring, that I think that's still true. I know that's still true. We're still finding incredible treasures, or we're rediscovering incredible treasures. So yes—Special Collections is an unusual collection of materials. It's a teaching lab. I think there has to be a very clear distinction made here between the museum's collections and the and the Special Collections. Special Collections materials are teaching tools. Some of them are museum quality, as we'll see, as I will talk about when

we go in the vault. Everything we have is used in the curriculum or the classroom or has the potential to be used; nothing is put behind a case, or you can look at it, but you cannot get close to it.

RUTH CANDLER

If you have to look through the collections and think of, you know, you mentioned them as teaching tools. If you could pull out one item that you feel it was a 'wow' item as a teaching tool, what would it be?

TOM CAMDEN

It would probably be the oldest piece in the collection, which is the witches Sumerian clay tablet, which is an account book that was done in 2300 BC and down in the city of Ur of the Chaldees, the birthplace of Abraham. When you tell that story, about that particular piece, it's an account book, right? I've used it in business classes. I've talked about it in Phoenix, Arizona at the American Accounting Association meetings. It is not only a wow, it's 4000 years old, but it is a teaching tool. You can do so much with it. And it's a tiny little object. But there's absolutely no limit to what you can do to use that for teaching moments

RUTH CANDLER

In a variety of areas, too, right?

TOM CAMDEN

Areas (both) cross-disciplinary and cross-generational. Children are fascinated by this piece. You can talk about the composition of it, you can talk about the content of it, the historical significance. People oftentimes will smile, or they will weep, or they will get emotional, or they will be speechless to be in the presence of something that could have been created during the time of Abraham.

Those are the kinds of things you normally would see behind cases or tucked away somewhere out of sight where you can't get to it. This—these are teaching tools, we handle it with reverence, but it's still a teaching tool.

RUTH CANDLER

Do you know where it came from?

TOM CAMDEN

Came from an alum, as did most of the treasures in the vault. They are gifts of our incredible alumni.

RUTH CANDLER

I've heard you describe your approach and Special Collections as a public service model. What do you mean by that?

TOM CAMDEN

Well, public service to me is, what is the hallmark—should be the hallmark of, of librarianship. It's changing somewhat, unfortunately, you know. You're very lucky, these days, to have human contact anywhere you go, whether it's libraries or not.

But we still do one-on-one public service; we offer a public service function here, and that's the model that we have built our reputation on. People understand that they can come here, and they can talk to one of my staff or to me, they can get help. But public service is really important. And in particular, when you are responsible for unusual materials, you can catalog them, you can go on to the catalog and find the description of the piece. But I think it's even more important, now that we are so digital-oriented and that most of our students are born digital. We are so far removed from the original, that when our students and when my constituents and my patrons come into contact with original pieces, it's revelatory for them; it's like you can almost see the scales flying off their eyes. And I know I'm using a lot of religious things here, but that's my background. You can see the expression change when they realize, *this is the original, this is not a surrogate, this is not virtual reality, this is the real thing*. And so, I have made it a point to emphasize over and over that really nothing can replicate the power of the original.

RUTH CANDLER

Yeah, I've had the privilege of standing in front of an audience that you're presenting to, numerous times, through our Alumni College programs and seeing the faces of those that you are mentioning.

So, you've talked about, you know, kind of the public service that you do through Special Collections. There's such a rich history in Rockbridge County that interfaces with the most profound moments in American history, and Special

Collections, houses several treasures in that regard—How do those documents and other items in our collection benefit the local community?

TOM CAMDEN

I think it's also very important to note, and I've said this many times, and I say this, partially because I am a native; townie, if you will. (And) I think that we cannot deny that the history of this community and the history of this school have been intertwined from the beginning. I think oftentimes we'd like to think that we're over on the hill here, we sort of operate in our own world, our own little 'ivory tower.' But—the history doesn't prove that. The history of this community is absolutely intertwined with the history of this school, and no action on the part of this institution, or on the part of the community—they have an impact, whether you want to acknowledge it or not. And so, I remember this, this came to the forefront loud and clear, when Will Dudley asked me to be on the university's commission to look at the history of African Americans here at Washington and Lee. And I remember saying, 'I'm not sure I can be objective enough, because I am an alum, I'm a native, my roots go deep.' I'm keeping with the documentary heritage, that is either a triple whammy, or a major asset. And I think the assumption was made that indeed, it would be an asset—that perspective on this relationship between the community (and W&L.) So, I'm very much interested in the community having access to the materials that are here as well. It's an academic collection. The primary focus of anything we do has got to be our own students and our faculty. But the community is also deeply involved. The community loves this place.

RUTH CANDLER

So, we've talked about Special Collections and Archives and what it looks like today. What do you foresee on the horizon in terms of what's happening in the field in the near future?

TOM CAMDEN

That's a very good question. One of the things I'm very aware of and have been always is—I came here with this sort of mantra of eliminating barriers to access, both perceived and real. Special Collections has had, for years, this sort of reputation of being elite and off limits. And, you know, you're not allowed in there unless you have some special secret password. And I'm a keen observer of all that, and realize we have to eliminate that. But also, one of the things that we have got to do—that I have struggled with in the last year or so—is access now through the digital medium. I mean, the medium is changing. It is wonderful

to be able to share original materials and presentations and classrooms on site. But being able to share your resource materials, whether they are drives, dirt, research materials, or exciting treasures, you need to have that digital capacity. And we're doing that—we're doing it; we were doing it on demand for a while, and now we are looking at collections and specifically targeting collections that would be heavily used or could be heavily used. And that has allowed us to expand staffing, we've been able to acquire materials and more equipment. It's changing rapidly.

And also, in terms of our own record keeping; the university's own records, no longer are coming to us in banker's boxes, you know, from the president's office or from the dean's office. They're coming on thumb drives. And how do you deal, when an administrator says to me, "Tom, all of my records are in the cloud," I say, 'What cloud? I can't see that cloud, what happens if that cloud burst?' I am well aware that has changed so rapidly. And I have not kept up with it, but I have people on staff who know that and who work with it every day. And so that's dramatic. That's a dramatic shading.

RUTH CANDLER

It is exciting, too.

TOM CAMDEN

Yes, it is exciting.

RUTH CANDLER

Tom, would it be possible to take a walk through the vault and see some of your treasures?

TOM CAMDEN

Yes, yes. Let's go.

RUTH CANDLER

Okay, so Tom, this is—this is not—not quite what I expected.

TOM CAMDEN

No, I get it. I hear that often. I hear it from students, I hear it from faculty, I hear it from...just community. It's a bit of a rogue gallery. We have materials hanging on the walls, we have books, we have carts loaded with materials that are in use.

RUTH CANDLER

Well and files—

TOM CAMDEN

We have files—

RUTH CANDLER

What are the flat maps?

TOM CAMDEN

Flat map files or maps. They might be historic photographs. There might be oversized documents, scanned documents, that won't fit into regular boxes.

RUTH CANDLER

And what are all the photographs and prints? There's something from Washington College up there?

TOM CAMDEN

Yes—It runs the gamut. Materials come to us often framed and we traditionally will unframe them. But then oftentimes, we'll just leave them framed because it's easier just to store them that way. But if you can imagine the history of the school, we have framed broadsides that are limited number broadsides. We have poetry, we have sketches, we have photographs, we have actual paintings, we have portraits of very sour looking people.

RUTH CANDLER

'Serious?'

TOM CAMDEN

Serious, I'm not sure. Well, I would say, you know, sort of sour. But, serious people and their vintage portraits; oftentimes they are pieces that come in with family collections and their family members. Sometimes they're not even identified.

RUTH CANDLER

So, what is W&L ambulance, section five, three.

TOM CAMDEN

That's the—was an incredible group of of Washington and Lee students who became an ambulance corps in in World War One.

RUTH CANDLER

Wow.

Well, is that framed...money?

TOM CAMDEN

It is. Those are framed Confederate bonds that are very rare.

RUTH CANDLER

Interesting. So, for our listeners, at the very top it says 'Confederate States of America' and it looks—I can't read it.

TOM CAMDEN

Yeah, those are the bonds.

RUTH CANDLER

Wow.

TOM CAMDEN

At the time they were worth the paper they are printed on now. They're quite rare.

RUTH CANDLER

That's fascinating. And what is the collection?

TOM CAMDEN

So, right here as you come into the vault, is this incredible collection of southern fiction. And it's the Roger Mudd collection. Roger Mudd, class of 1950. Roger collected first editions of southern authors, not only first editions but all in book jackets and almost mint condition. In here you'll find one of the most famous ones, which is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is Harper Lee's first edition. So, this collection came (from) Roger, class of 1950. He offered us this collection, and we thought it would be a good showpiece collection, which is exactly how it's been kept. We've kept it together. We haven't integrated it into the rest of the collection. So, as you come in, it's very, very fitting that you see Roger's Southern first editions.

RUTH CANDLER

And we talked about how you use these materials, how have you used this collection?

TOM CAMDEN

His collection of first editions is largely a collection that's used for exhibition purposes.

RUTH CANDLER

Okay.

TOM CAMDEN

Because many of these, you can find the text. In general collections, you'll find a copy of many of these books that you can check out,

RUTH CANDLER

But not necessarily first edition?

TOM CAMDEN

These are all first editions and rare because of that. So, great to keep it together. He was a close friend of Eudora Welty, who is a famous Southern novelist. And so, this collection also includes some some interviews with her, some correspondence and photographs, really beautiful photographs, which makes it even more rare.

RUTH CANDLER

Is it possible to see the tablet that you (mentioned)?

TOM CAMDEN

Yes, it is the tablet that we talked about earlier. And so, this vault is vast, it's shelf after shelf of books and documents. But we also have what we call 'Secure Files.' So, the secure files are actually files within; it's like a vault within the vault. This is where the most important pieces are housed. And so, oftentimes, I have a small group and I will say, 'Okay, let me show you the rarest of the rare.' And in here are the pieces that are often the rarest pieces. They are also the pieces that have been most often used in the classes and presentations. They're also the pieces that I've had restored; I have spent 10 years identifying and restoring and stabilizing pieces that I know are going to be constantly used, so that they can continue to be used. And so here is the tablet, and I had a special little linen box made for the Sumerian clay tablets circa 2030 BC. Now, and I'm all about presentation. I mean—

RUTH CANDLER

It is a beautiful box.

TOM CAMDEN

Anybody will say “Tom, you're all just, you know, circus sideshow; sort of a showman.” But you know, here you have this special little custom-made box, and it's all about the presentation. And so, you have this little box within a box and there you have that little clay tablet, nestling into its own little gorgeous, linen enclosure. It's important, I mean, if you're going to constantly be showing your treasures, you need to do it right.

RUTH CANDLER

Well and that it's protected.

TOM CAMDEN

And of course, everything has been restored and paid for by our wonderful alums. I'm shameless in that regard as well. So, in here, why do you have this vault within the vault? Well, then here we have a piece of George Washington's library with his signature. We have a book with Martha Washington signature on it. We have an early copy of Aesop's Fables. We have Thomas Jefferson's manual, a parliamentary practice, with his handwritten notes in it, which is a piece that is beyond, in terms of value. It is probably one of the rarest pieces in existence. We have a first edition of Darwin's “On the Origin of Species” in here, which is one of those pieces that we have acquired many, many years ago. And the value of that is phenomenal because of the controversy of that piece. We have a true first edition. We have books printed before Gutenberg, before the printing press. Books that are called incunabula. They are beautiful skin pieces and I share them often. And I will share these pieces with my classes and students because this is 1497; nothing has been done to it, it's an original piece. The binding, to the uneducated eye, or to someone who doesn't know bindings, they look at this and they go “This looks like the dickens, Tom. It looks terrible.” I think it's absolutely gorgeous, because it is a survivor.

RUTH CANDLER

Is that a leather strap?

TOM CAMDEN

That's a sheepskin overboard—beach board. And this would be a leather strap that would have held it together because they have a tendency to warp.

RUTH CANDLER

Let's move on to the pieces that you had. And I'm sorry, I got totally distracted. I just wanted to see the tablet.

TOM CAMDEN

While we're here. Let's talk about the Roman coins. So, it's sort of a bit unusual to have a collection like this, in this little beautiful antique cabinet. Oftentimes you get calls as I did regarding this collection, from an alum who said, "I'm working on my estate planning, I have something I think the school might want, can you come see me? I'm in Williamsburg." I drove down to see him; he was 100 years old, class of 1938. He had one thing, and it was this cabinet on the table in his assisted living place. And I opened the cabinet, and it's an entire cabinet full of Roman coins, many of which were done around the time of the birth of Christ. 100 years old, he's in a wheelchair, he'd had a stroke, but he said to me, "What do you think?" And I said, 'I think Washington and Lee would love this collection.' And he said, "Good, good. Take it." And so, I brought it back here. I've used it in so many ways over and over and over in classes. This is, in many ways, a museum collection. But it is a teaching collection, I used it in the spring term, I had a group of students who were looking at the Roman emperors, and there was a Latin class, it was a large class of 20 students or so. And I broke them into small groups, and I said, 'You have spent the first three weeks of your Spring Term looking at slides or looking at PowerPoint slides of the Roman emperors. Now, I'm going to break you into groups of three or four, and each of you gets a drawer full of original coins. Here's your worksheet. Here's what we want you to tell us about the coins.' And so, they spent a couple of hours being able to pick these up, look at them.

RUTH CANDLER

They had them in their *hands*.

TOM CAMDEN

They had them in their hands. They were of course doing their research on their laptops. And it was a phenomenal experience for them. It was going from a classroom situation where they're looking at slides and virtual reality to looking at originals—

RUTH CANDLER

And touching!

TOM CAMDEN

And touching. Yeah, yes. I mean, this is an unusual teaching tool, but it's still a teaching tool. These are not off limits to our students. I mean, Washington and Lee can hold its own with some of the larger institutions, in terms of its special treasures. And that is largely due to the generosity of the alumni; not only the generosity, but the diverse collections that the alumni will come to me and say, "I've been collecting dust and such for years." And you're flabbergasted; you go, "Why?" But then you go, "Yes, we are interested in adding that."

RUTH CANDLER

Doesn't it go back to the joy of a liberal arts education, when you are exposed to so many different things.

TOM CAMDEN

And speaking of donors here, in 1870, a man named W.W. Corcoran, the same man whose name was on the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., donated to this school, in 1870, over 3000 volumes, of a collection that he had acquired at auction, of early classics. When I say early classics, I mean 16th century and some 15th century, classics bound in skin. You know Plato, you know Cicero, all of the major classic authors, those were given in 1870. They're noted in the trustees' records as having received that gift. And they were given in honor of his friend Robert E. Lee. Lee had just died. And so, they had been here since 1870. Now when I came 10 years ago, I remember saying to some of my colleagues in the Classics Department, 'Did you know we have these? Have you ever been over here?' "No, we didn't know." Well, let me tell you. It's been one of the most incredibly heavily used collections since I've been here, and it's one that I'm so excited about. I'm constantly making new discoveries with some of these pieces. Because you can use them for the study of the classics, but you can also use them for study of early bookbinding. We do bookbinding classes here or, a book arts class; you can use them in so many ways, this is one of the collections that I'm most excited about. Because you have so many of these pieces—over 3000 pieces. One of the ways that I will start just a regular presentation, doesn't matter if it's a business class or whatever, I will say to (the students,) 'I'm going to pass around two books for you to look at, I want you to look at them, I want you to hold them, I want you to stroke them, I want you to

love them, because this one is 1590. This one is 1606. And I want you to look at the book, I want you to look at the binding, I want you to look at the marginalia, I want you to look at all the things,' because most of those students have never been in the presence of a piece, this old, and many of them don't have access to books like this at all... Most of their time's spent, you know, on their devices. And so, it's incredibly revelatory. I've had students come to me almost in tears saying, "I never knew we'd had this opportunity." And these are skin volumes. They're durable. This is 1590. And it's still beautiful. That's it, you're not gonna hurt these pieces, because you know, and I said, as a matter of fact, skin is so durable. I don't care if you had French fries for lunch, you know? Just give this a little love and a little oil, it's not going to hurt it. And you get these wonderful marginalia. I said, 'I want you to look at the piece. I want you to look at the physical piece. It's Latin, I don't expect you to read it. But I want you to look at the piece.'" And they will oftentimes smell—

RUTH CANDLER

Alright, I have to smell the book.

TOM CAMDEN

—because there's just a unique smell, to old books. And then they will giggle and say, "Oh," and one day I had a young man who said, "Mr. Camden, this smells like potato chips." And I said, '

Well, yes, because you had potato chips for lunch! On your hands! What are you talking about?'

RUTH CANDLER

What are you going to show us next?

TOM CAMDEN

Well, I think we can look at the documents. One thing we probably ought to talk a moment about is the collection of the university's own history. The history of this school is phenomenal. And I've said in the past, the history of the school mirrors the history of the nation. The school founded in 1749, the school was witness to the revolution, the War of 1812, World War I—'The war'—the Civil War, World War II, Vietnam. The history of the school mirrors the history of the nation. And so, we have here in all this compact shelving, which allows us to grow, we have the

early history of the school. Here's where this became central for our our commission work. For the first time ever, there was a concentrated deep dive into the history of African Americans on this campus; the ownership of enslaved people by the institution. This is part of the history that that has been known but has never necessarily been acknowledged or looked at very carefully. That's one of the things that Lynne Rainville and her crew and her students will be doing, have been doing, and will continue to do well into the future. It's all here. It's all here. It's safe. And it's beautiful, because that's part of the history. It's not all pretty. Whoever led us to believe that history was pretty was really leading us down the primrose path, because it's not pretty. Some of the history is not pretty, but it's here, and you have to look at it in order to understand where the school has been and where it's going.

RUTH CANDLER

So, during the pandemic alumni engagement, did a program that showcased some of the things that were in the vault, and we have videos, I'd like to access those and share those in our show notes so that our alumni can take a deeper dive into the vault.

TOM CAMDEN

I think that's a wonderful idea. I remember when I was asked to do that. I said to Bo Dudley, who was alumni director at the time, I said, 'Bo, I don't know if I can do this. I'm not sure how this is going to work. I'm used to seeing my audience. I don't know how to do this on Zoom. I don't even like the word zoom.' But everybody was so desperate, then, to try to connect. I said, 'I will do the best I can.' And I remember sitting down in my office with a zoom camera and having some things on my desk, and I started talking, and then I just forgot that I was not talking to a group of people, and we just carried on. And it was incredible. And I remember as soon as it was over, it was about an hour, there was a lot of sort of noise and chatter out in the reading room, the people who are helping me, and I remember thinking, *Oh, no I wonder what I've done? What did I say that's so hysterical?* And they were all cheering because there were 400 people on that Zoom call. And I remember thinking, for the first time realizing, that Zoom allowed two things; it allowed the numbers to be as large as we wanted them to be, and it also bridged the geographical distribution. There was an alum from Bahrain who zoomed in. And immediately chat rooms open up in there, just like flying chats and comments asking questions. And then I got people emailing, saying, "You need to do this once a week." How can I do this once a week? I have work to do.

RUTH CANDLER

That was the silver lining of the pandemic.

TOM CAMDEN

It was, and I wasn't sure it was going to work because I was so wedded to the fact that I had to be in front of my audience, and that I had to have the originals. But I remember saying, 'You went to pandemic lifts, you've got to come here and see these things.' In reality, because, what? You're looking at them on a zoom call is not going to cut it.

RUTH CANDLER

No, it's very different to be here in person. Thanks again, Tom.

Well, Tom, thank you so much for taking us through the vault and letting us witness firsthand this incredible collection; what we call Special Collections.

TOM CAMDEN

You're welcome. You're welcome. You're welcome.

RUTH CANDLER

Tom, I have to be honest with you, when I first heard you talk about the vault, I envisioned dark quarters and dark walls and dim lighting and stacks and stacks of dusty books. But but it looks like a library collection.

TOM CAMDEN

It is a library collection. And that word 'vault' is a is a purposeful misnomer, really. I think people assume it's a, you know, steel lined vault,

RUTH CANDLER

So mysterious!

TOM CAMDEN

Like a bank vault, whatever. And I use that word just to sort of build up to it. But the truth of the matter is, it's often referred to it as Ali Baba's cave, sometimes talked about as grandma's attic, because it's a working vault. So, it's not all neat and orderly.

RUTH CANDLER

I almost don't want to share that with our alumni, because it's so mysterious when you talk about it in such terms.

TOM CAMDEN

I've actually taken classes into the vault if they're small classes. But I had an interesting experience right at the end of the term. This past spring, I had a young fellow who said, "Some of my friends and I, Tom, would love to come by. We're seniors, if we come by, if we set a time, can you show us the vault? And can you show us a few things in the vault?" And I said, Sure. We set a time. That day, he shows up and he pokes his head in the door, and it's about time for them to be there. And I said, 'Is your group here?' And he said, "Mr. Camden, this has gotten way out of hand," he said "there are 23 of my classmates." I thought that's extraordinarily gratifying. I have 23 Seniors who want to come in here. And I said, 'It's a beautiful spring day. Why are you not at Goshen?' You know? He said, "But we want to be here." And so, they came, and I took him in the vault. Well, I remember thinking this is a large group. And this is not really a very good idea. And then I'm talking and then I look around, and about half the group has disappeared. They're all "Oh!" exploring every nook and cranny in the vault, which of course, it was exciting to them. And then I think they're probably still talking.

RUTH CANDLER

Yeah, what a gift that you've given them.

I'd like to turn our conversation just a little bit and talk about you. It was an honor to join so many of your colleagues last month to celebrate your work at the University and your retirement. Gosh, the stories that were shared really illustrated your dedication and contributions to the University. What are you most proud of?

TOM CAMDEN

That's a very good question. You know, evening was a bit of a blur. But I think I remember saying that, I've spent my entire career sort of fighting this urge to confess that I'm an academic fraud, that at best, I'm a storyteller. But that is what I am. A historian and a storyteller are two different things and I'm a historian as well. Historians—you can tell stories, but you cannot embellish them and make up things and add to them, whatever. Storytelling, you can do all that. But being able to tell stories about the objects that you are describing, or that you're sharing. It's the stories that make this so special. And I think everyone would agree that—the alumni here, the students—when you tell a compelling story about something you're holding in your hands and sharing with them, it adds another layer of intimacy to it. And I have also been told that, you know, it's passion; it's the passion, that really does make a difference. I think passion is like an infectious disease. Passion is one of those things; if you are passionate, and you're excited, your audience is going to get it. And they might not even know why they're passionate, but they're going to feel that and they're going to come along with you. So, I think, as an academic, as a professor, as an instructor, one of the things you're often most proud of is when you can say, 'If I've reached one student, if I've reached one person, if I've touched one person, by something I've done or said or shown or shared, then (I've) been successful.' It's an adrenaline rush too, when I'm doing open house for Alumni Weekend, or Parents Weekend, or any of those things. I am rolling for a couple of hours. And then afterwards, I'm like a deflated helium balloon. But, I feel like I'm sort of the bridge between the school and the community.

RUTH CANDLER

And you're a connector for sure.

TOM CAMDEN

So, I think that's been something I'm most proud of.

RUTH CANDLER

Yeah, well, you you're a gifted and natural storyteller. And it's funny that you say that the energy lifts in the room, I've witnessed that with alums who come back and look forward to your presentation. So, that is definitely a gift that you shared. So, one more week? Do you have one more week left?

TOM CAMDEN

One more week.

RUTH CANDLER

Okay. So, what are you most looking forward to as you wrap up your time here?

TOM CAMDEN

I'm actually a little apprehensive, I wasn't, I'm still not sure what a retired person is supposed to do. I'm a very structured person, so, I need to know, from day to day, what I'm going (to do), my schedule, you know, and I'm very disciplined in that regard. So, I think I'll have to learn to back away and relax, some. There're all kinds of opportunities for me. I will now be able to do more community-based projects, things where I can give back to the community, having grown up here, and having come from a family that has been here for since 1740.

But they are certainly not land gentry. They were hardworking foreign people who, in many cases, are very poor. So, I need to give back to those, and I need to actually reconnect with some of those folks, who, some of my relatives, who love me very much, but still don't know what it is I've done all these years.

RUTH CANDLER

Maybe they need a tour of the vault.

TOM CAMDEN

And so maybe I will go sit with them and they're on their front porch, and sip moonshine with them and reconnect. I don't know, I'm not sure, I mean, truly. I will do some traveling. I anticipate that I will be able to be doing what my my wonderful alum friend, Harden Marian, has done, and take every possible class I can take here. I can audit them.

RUTH CANDLER

Well, you have some catching up to do there.

TOM CAMDEN

I sure do.

RUTH CANDLER

I don't know how many hundreds he has (attended).

(JOINT)

He has set a record.

RUTH CANDLER

You know that if you find yourself twiddling your thumbs that our alumni always will welcome you back to Alumni College.

You've mentioned travel. Where are you going?

TOM CAMDEN

Oh, my goodness. You know, I've done some traveling abroad, and had some wonderful experiences through the offices of my wonderful friend Rob Fure a couple of times, but I've suddenly realized that there are parts of America I've never seen. So, I anticipate that I'll be able to go to Montana, or Wyoming, or to see the West, or the Midwest, and those places that I have never visited. I've done southwest. But I also will be going to be going back to Austria in the fall; I'll go there to Vienna in the late fall with friend; friends of mine who have relatives there who are quite well connected. So, I'll be able to see Vienna not as a 'tourist,' so, that'd be kind of fun.

RUTH CANDLER

Sounds like a wonderful trip.

Tom, it was great talking with you today. Thank you for taking time out of out of your last few days at W&L.

TOM CAMDEN

Well thank you. I hope this podcast will be entertaining at best.

RUTH CANDLER

You are a fabulous storyteller, so I'm not worried about that.

Thank you for our listeners for tuning in. We hope you'll visit our website wlu.edu/lifelong where you'll find our show notes as well as a truly great selection of other W&L Lifelong Learning opportunities. Take a look and until next time, let's remain together not unmindful of the future.