

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 4, 2006, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Richard Alden Howard was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **RICHARD ALDEN HOWARD**

BORN: July 1, 1917  
DIED: September 18, 2003

On the last day in May, 1962, Professor Richard Howard received the following civil subpoena: “You are hereby commanded to appear in the United States District Court [and to] bring with you the entire card catalog of all books, pamphlets, monographs etc. now located in the Administration Building at Arnold Arboretum, Jamaica Plain.”

By 1962 Dick Howard had been director of the Arboretum for more than eight years, during one of the most intense controversies to have enveloped Harvard University and its supporters. The heart of the controversy involved a plan, announced by the Harvard administration in 1946, to consolidate in one location the University’s botanical collections—herbarium specimens of dried plants from around the world and their related library collections. This would involve moving the collections of the Arnold Arboretum from their historic location in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston to a newly constructed facility in Cambridge. The Committee to Visit the Arnold Arboretum interpreted this plan as an attempt to dismember the organization and reallocate its endowment funds to purposes serving the College and faculty in Cambridge. They were joined by a large number of influential alumni and friends of the University, including a former member of the Harvard Corporation.

In 1953, after extensive debate and legal review, the Corporation voted to approve the controversial plan. Richard Howard, a professor of botany at the University of Connecticut, was soon hired as Arnold Professor and Director of the Arboretum and charged with implementing a plan that deeply divided the Harvard community between supporters of the administration and supporters of the opponents. Under immensely difficult working conditions, intensified by disgruntled staff and angry friends of the Arboretum, Howard executed the administration’s decision and relocated most of the herbarium and library collections into the Harvard University Herbaria. However, the legal issues dragged on for twelve more years.

On January 31, 1966, two decades after the initial relocation plan was announced, the

Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court found, in *Attorney General v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 350 Mass. 125 (1966) that Harvard could legally move the collections without breach of trust. Of the seven justices, two abstained due to previous association with the University, two dissented, and three formed a majority. For the first time in his directorship, Dick Howard was free to devote his full attention to the scholarly and administrative work of the Arboretum.

Throughout this ordeal, and on any available occasion thereafter, Howard promoted the work of the Arboretum and the importance of plants in general. He brought to this task his love of plants, his vast understanding of botany and horticulture, and his remarkable ability to create engaging narratives about plants that captured the interest and enthusiasm of the general listener. He had first developed these rhetorical skills two decades earlier as an undergraduate at Miami University of Ohio through participation in the Miami Speakers Bureau; the Fisk Award for Oratory was the first of many honors he would receive throughout his life. He gave hundreds of lectures to popular audiences of which his most well-known were “A Botanist in Your Grocery Store,” “Jungle Housekeeping” and “Botany in Boston Restaurants.” These same skills and inclinations made Howard a wonderful teacher and mentor to young botanists. As one Harvard colleague noted, “Teaching alongside him was an education for all involved, because he was never happier than with a group of students and a large assemblage of tropical plants at his disposal.”

Upon graduation from Miami University in 1938, Howard could not afford to pursue graduate work. Fortunately, the department chair at Miami, Professor Arthur T. Evans, connected him with the great plant anatomist, Irving W. Bailey, at Harvard University. He began working for Bailey as a technician investigating the morphology of a little-known family of tropical plants, the Icacinaceae. Under Bailey’s tutelage, Howard was inducted into the Harvard Society of Fellows, whose support enabled him to complete his Ph.D. studies in 1942. During his graduate work at Harvard’s Atkins Garden in Cuba, and through his friendship with the plant explorer David Fairchild, he was introduced to his lifelong interest in the tropical flora of the Caribbean. His enduring connection with David Fairchild was sustained through mutual botanical activities at “The Kampong,” Fairchild’s home in Coconut Grove. At the time of his death, Howard was working on an enumeration of the plants growing at The Kampong.

His graduate student years also introduced him to Elizabeth Solie, soon to become his wife in 1944. “Betty” was the source of immeasurable support and companionship until her death in 2001. Together they raised a family of four children.

It is no surprise that Howard, disqualified from service in the Navy in World War II because of his height (six foot five inches), volunteered for the Army Air Corps, where he established the Jungle Survival Program of the School of Applied Tactics to train pilots for survival in the tropical forests of Pacific Islands. He wrote several survival manuals (printed

on edible paper and sized to fit in a combat boot). His service was acknowledged by the Air Force in 1947 with the Legion of Merit.

Howard's academic scholarship led to two major contributions to the field of systematic botany. The middle of the last century saw more and more evidence from disparate fields of study brought to bear on the evolutionary history of plants. To the traditional study of plant morphology was added the study of anatomical structures, cytology, genetics, developmental processes, and eventually biochemistry. Howard's early work on the vascular conducting system through which plants move materials from the leaf blade to the stem, particularly his careful study of putatively primitive tropical families, proved immensely valuable for the development of an evolutionary classification of plants. As a result, plant systematics became a more integrated discipline and grew in significance through its reciprocal feedback into those functional fields of study. This integration continues today, especially with advances in molecular biology and genomics.

Howard's other great achievement, based on his extensive knowledge of the vegetation and floristic diversity of the Caribbean islands, was the six volume publication of the *Flora of the Lesser Antilles* (1974-1989). This work was accompanied by numerous technical articles published in botanical journals, many of which illuminated the early history of botanical exploration and plant introductions to the Caribbean region following the voyages of Columbus. On a related, more practical side, Howard consulted over a long number of years with aluminum mining companies in Jamaica, Hawaii, the Dominican Republic and other tropical regions to promote the successful re-vegetation of strip-mined landscapes following bauxite ore extraction.

Following the end of the great controversy in 1966, Howard led the Arboretum and its friends through a jubilant celebration of its centennial in 1972. This decade also saw Howard successfully renew relations with Chinese botanists for the first time in a quarter century following the Communist revolution. The Arnold Arboretum has a distinguished history of botanical exploration and training of Chinese scientists, beginning in the early years of the 20th century. In 1978, Howard led the Botanical Society of America's formal visit to China and relations between the Arnold Arboretum and Chinese botanical institutions have been expanding ever since.

Following his retirement as director of the Arnold Arboretum in 1978, Howard continued to teach and publish his scholarship for another twenty-two years. Toward the end of this time, he was asked what his greatest accomplishment was. "I suppose the greatest accomplishment was to have the Arnold Arboretum survive a very, very difficult period. It could have gone down the drain . . . We got the Arboretum back so that it had a reputation as a scientific organization . . . I can be proud of [this]."

Respectfully submitted,

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