

Thomas Whittemore, Fundraiser for Russian Refugees

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Abstract

Thomas Whittemore (1871-1950) was an intriguing person whose interests spanned various fields of endeavor, including teaching art history, conducting archaeological excavations, carrying out humanitarian relief, educating refugees, collecting art, and uncovering the mosaics of the church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Various writers have explored discrete aspects of Whittemore's life, but the one part of his work that made his enterprises possible has yet to be studied: how Whittemore succeeded, over more than thirty years, in raising the funds he needed to carry out his projects. This research explores Thomas Whittemore as a fundraiser, particularly for Russian refugees, by examining his relationship with the Rockefeller family and its associates. Materials in the Rockefeller Archive Center help to sketch a preliminary picture of Whittemore's fundraising work in that domain after the First World War. His success was built first and foremost on his ability to immerse himself in the culture of the localities where he worked and thereby earn the trust of those whom he met. He built networks of supporters who advocated for him and introduced him to ever wider circles of people with wealth and influence. Whittemore's mix of cultural competence, personal appeal, and organizational efficiency led to long-standing relationships that served him and his work well for decades.

A Little-Known Story, Known Only in Discrete Parts

Thomas Whittemore (1871-1950) has been described in many ways: professor, scholar, humanitarian, archaeologist, cultural preservationist, aesthete, collector, and the founder of the Byzantine Institute. Together, these appellations begin to portray fully a life that was uniquely interesting; however, even collectively, they do not describe everything that Whittemore did.

Whittemore taught English and art history at Tufts College near Boston from 1894 until 1911, when he ceased living a somewhat settled life in America. From 1911 to 1915 he conducted archaeological work in Abydos, Egypt as the American representative of the British-run Egypt Exploration Society.¹ During the First World War, he carried out relief work in France. In 1917, at the age of 46, he witnessed the events of the February Revolution and visited the historic All-Russian Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, which convened in Moscow in August 1917 to carry out many reforms in church life.² In the 1920s, he led relief efforts for Russian refugees, then returned to teaching in New York in the late 1920s. Whittemore subsequently embarked on an endeavor that became his most enduring and well-known accomplishment: after helping to persuade Turkish President Kemal Atatürk to turn the then-mosque of Hagia Sophia into a museum, Whittemore began to uncover the Byzantine mosaics of the church, which had been built by Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian in the sixth century. Whittemore died suddenly on June 8, 1950 in Washington, DC while waiting to meet with John Foster Dulles, then special adviser to the US Secretary of State. He was buried in the historic Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where his remains joined those of 27 other individuals in the Whittemore family plot. His grave remains without a tombstone, a symbol of how little known his story is.

The existing writings about Whittemore are limited in scope and depth, as they have aimed to focus on particular episodes of his life or to provide an overview of his activity, which crossed continents, cultures, and collapsed empires.³ These accounts hint at his driving, determined disposition and engaging personality. They also prompt the realization that Whittemore needed more than ambition to

accomplish his work—he needed money. What lay behind Thomas Whittemore’s ability to influence wealthy people to financially support his efforts? One scholarly work does discuss Whittemore’s fundraising, but it does so within the specific context of the excavation and collection of Egyptian artifacts in the early twentieth century.⁴ However, no study specifically investigates the qualities and methods Whittemore used to raise funds for his endeavors.⁵

Documents in the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) help to formulate a preliminary answer to this question as it relates to Whittemore’s relationship with John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960), the Rockefeller family, and his work with Russian refugees in the years following the First World War. Learning how Whittemore gained position and influence in the major social and professional circles of the early twentieth century—and specifically how he attracted financial support—can help us see how Whittemore shaped history, rather than how he merely reflected the events of his time. This means uncovering the story of Thomas Whittemore, the fundraiser.

Whittemore Immerses Himself Locally

When outside the United States, Whittemore immersed himself in what others from a distance could not see or understand, including knowledge of local cultural and political affairs, as well as language proficiency. In February 1920, Charles W. Eliot (1834-1926), former president of Harvard University, observed the following at a conference in Boston:

Mr. Whittemore is much the most interesting and convincing witness on Russia that I have heard during the last six years. He is the only witness, coming from Russia, who has been able for four years past to understand and speak Russian, and to find his way about the country without any guide whatsoever, and to deal with all sorts and conditions of men directly, personally, without the intervention of any agent. That alone makes him supremely interesting as a witness to the condition of things in Russia.⁶

Whittemore's supporters admired his ability to take initiative and directly manage his humanitarian and cultural efforts. Whittemore himself seemed quite aware of the power of local messages conveyed by prominent individuals. For example, he and his associates developed a fundraising brochure in 1919 for the Boston Committee for the Relief of Refugees in Russia, the organization he established to support his aid work. The pamphlet boldly emphasized "Mr. Thomas Whittemore's Relief Work among the Orphan Children of Russia," with Committee supporters that included Charles Eliot, the businessman, diplomat, and philanthropist Charles Crane, Elizabeth Cram, and the architect Ralph Adams Cram,⁷ as well as David R. Francis, the last US Ambassador to pre-Soviet Russia. The brochure prominently displayed a quote from Francis, which was a cable sent from Vologda, Russia to Whittemore's "Boston Committee, Refugees in Russia" on March 31, 1918:

"WHITTEMORE DOING EXCELLENT WORK HERE. WISHES TO REMAIN WHILE I STAY. HOPE YOU CONSENT THERETO. FRANCIS."⁸

In 1919, the Committee's fundraising campaign took a targeted approach toward a limited number of prospective donors. Whittemore's organization, while keeping the same leadership, began to use the title "The American National Committee for the Relief of Refugees in Russia," evidently seeking a broader donor base beyond Boston. The American National Committee, this time with Whittemore listed as "Director in Russia," sought to raise \$50,000 to "care for at least one thousand orphans for the year 1919." Having already raised \$25,000, the committee sent special invitations seeking 100 donors who would contribute \$250 each. The appeal included a letter, hand-signed by David Francis, which noted that "Mr. Whittemore did more effective work in the relief line in Russia than any single American within my knowledge [and] cherished a sincere sympathy with those afflicted people whose character he understood and to whose want he ministered in the most effective manner."⁹ While the printed appeal—addressed by hand to "Mr. John D. Rockefeller"—brought attention to "The Forgotten Children" and asserted that "peace is impossible in Europe with chaos prevailing in Russia," it also placed central importance on Whittemore personally. Indeed, the document noted that "the committee's representative in Russia not

only gives his services but provides for his own expenses.”¹⁰ The appeal to Rockefeller, dated March 1, achieved its purpose: on May 27, 1919, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. sent a \$250 donation to the National Committee’s Boston office.¹¹ Two years later, the question of financially supporting various Russian relief organizations had become more complicated. Charles Eliot was serving on Whittemore’s American National Committee, while also supporting another Russian relief charity, the American Central Committee, which had been organized by Princess Julia Cantacuzène Speransky (1876-1975), a granddaughter of President Ulysses S. Grant who had married the Russian Prince Mikhail Cantacuzène.¹² Rockefeller informed Eliot that he had already committed an anonymous pledge to Princess Cantacuzène’s organization, and that his support of refugee relief was mostly carried out through large organizations like Hoover’s American Relief Administration and the Red Cross.¹³ Although Whittemore had failed in 1921 to attract Rockefeller support amidst a crowded field of relief organizations,¹⁴ his supporters (like Eliot) were still actively advocating on his behalf.

A Network of Relationships

If there ever was an opportunity for Whittemore to make use of his talents, knowledge, and experience in the field, it was in the summer of 1922 in Seal Harbor, Maine, where he first met John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Whittemore was staying at the Maine house of Mary Cabot Wheelwright (1878-1958), heiress to the Cabot family shipping wealth, who owned a house in Northeast Harbor in the immediate vicinity of Rockefeller’s Seal Harbor home. It is not difficult to imagine that Wheelwright and Whittemore had found some passing interests in common. Unmarried and with parents who had recently died, Wheelwright had experienced enough of Boston upper-class life to have found Whittemore’s international endeavors worthy of her attention. After all, she had grown up in Boston, had traveled with her parents to Europe and Egypt, and had just made her first trip to New Mexico, which would spark her interest in Navajo religion and the American Southwest.¹⁵

Wheelwright and Whittemore visited Rockefeller for lunch during that summer stay in Maine.¹⁶ In Whittemore, Wheelwright was bringing to Rockefeller a guest whom she believed in, as she had already pledged \$1,125 to support Whittemore's Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile (CERYE).¹⁷ Whittemore had a lot on his mind that summer, as he had returned to the United States to raise funds for CERYE, which was supporting three schools in Bulgaria for 750 Russian youth in exile. It had also enrolled 226 gifted Russian scientific students in European universities in Lille and Paris, France; Louvain, Liege, and Brussels, Belgium; Sofia and Samokov, Bulgaria; Rome, Naples, and Milan, Italy; as well as Prague, Istanbul, Berlin, Beirut, Lausanne, Athens, and Belgrade. \$375 provided for "tuition and upkeep" for one student, and Wheelwright, through her donation, had committed to supporting three of Whittemore's students.¹⁸ It is sensible to conclude that Whittemore did not solicit Rockefeller for a donation during their lunch. After all, Rockefeller usually referred such inquiries quickly to his staff, and no record exists of any internal Rockefeller communications about Whittemore during the summer of 1922. Moreover, later that fall (in mid-October), Rockefeller wrote about Whittemore in pleasant terms (see below), as if the lunch had been social in nature. Therefore, one gets the impression that Whittemore spent his first meeting with John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in interesting conversation rather than targeted solicitation.

Whittemore did not need to be concerned that his lunch with Rockefeller was his only path to funding, because his supporters were advocating for him, and he himself was working with his networks to find funders, including Rockefeller-related ones. One of Whittemore's advocates was Frederic B. Pratt (1865-1945), an heir to the wealth of Standard Oil executive Charles Pratt; Frederic had met Whittemore in the spring of 1922 in Constantinople, where he saw "at first hand some of the work [Whittemore] was carrying on."¹⁹ Pratt met Whittemore again that summer in Boston, where Whittemore was reporting on his education work "to his Boston friends."²⁰ On October 11, 1922 Pratt and Whittemore visited the Rockefeller Foundation's president, George Vincent (1864-1941), accompanied by Jerome Greene, who had worked for Rockefeller, Sr. and was the chief executive officer of the Boston investment banking firm Lee, Higginson & Co.—the firm where Whittemore's long-time colleague and treasurer Seth Gano worked, and

which collected the donations for Whittemore's endeavors. Pratt informed Rockefeller that Dr. Vincent "apparently received a very favorable impression of [Whittemore] and his work,"²¹ but the Foundation was focused on medical-related issues and therefore would not donate to Whittemore. Vincent's own business diary noted that the president "will be glad to express a favorable opinion [of Whittemore's work] if consulted," and thought "there should be little difficulty in raising the required amount from private source[s]."²² Whittemore left the Vincent meeting with another powerful advocate, while Pratt indeed moved on to a private source of funding—Rockefeller himself.

Two days after the Vincent meeting, Pratt wrote to Rockefeller, Jr. asking him to support Whittemore, emphasizing the "[unquestionable] importance of his work" and his "efficiency and devotedness."²³ Pratt's boldness in soliciting Rockefeller likely stemmed from their families having known each other for many years, but also from knowing what Rockefeller valued: Pratt made it clear that he himself intended to make a contribution and that he had already introduced Whittemore to his own friends in Glen Cove, New York; Pratt's letter even listed seven other donors to Whittemore, including his younger brother George. Rockefeller responded to Pratt that he had "had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Whittemore last summer" at Seal Harbor, Maine; Rockefeller then asked his staff to advise on whether to support Whittemore's work.²⁴

Pratt's letter to Rockefeller included a memo pointing out that Whittemore was not working alone: "In Constantinople and Beyrut [*sic*], he has the sound counsel of Admiral Bristol, the US High Commissioner and of the heads of the American Colleges. In France and in Germany oversight of the American Embassy is welcomed, and in Bulgaria and Yonga Slavia [*sic*, Yugoslavia] members of well known business organizations give valued assistance." The memo made it clear that Whittemore built his case for support on careful use of funds, personal stewardship of donors, and partner organizations.²⁵

Rockefeller referred the matter of support for Whittemore's CERYE to his aide W.S. Richardson (1866-1952), who spoke with Pratt and then himself met with Whittemore. Richardson advised Raymond Fosdick (1883-1972)—at the time an

adviser to Rockefeller and a future president of the Rockefeller Foundation—to meet Whittemore as well. In an internal memo to Fosdick, Richardson noted that staff of the American Relief Administration “commended highly the work of Mr. Whittemore” and considered it “the most effective in Russia, though a comparatively small undertaking depending absolutely upon Mr. Whittemore’s personal leadership.” Richardson considered “the competence of Mr. Whittemore” to be an “extremely important element.”²⁶ Moreover, with Rockefeller considering when to end his support of the American Central Committee, Richardson “thought it just possible that when the contribution to Princess Cantacuzène ends, we might be willing to give something to [Whittemore’s] work.”²⁷

Anson Phelps Stokes (1874-1958), clergyman, philanthropist, and a member of the Rockefeller-funded General Education Board since 1912,²⁸ also advocated for support of CERYE. In an October 1923 letter to Richardson, he stated that he knew Whittemore personally and had “heard much of Mr. Whittemore’s work from friends in Constantinople, Prague and other places in Europe.” Although writing “whole-heartedly,”²⁹ Stokes noted that he was advocating at the suggestion of Emily Ryerson of Chicago, who had donated to Whittemore’s efforts.³⁰ One week later, Richardson informed Stokes that Rockefeller, Jr. would be contributing \$2,500 to Whittemore’s project. This was a relatively small sum compared to the commitments he had made to Princess Cantacuzène. However, Rockefeller staff were already questioning how long to continue supporting Russian relief efforts,³¹ and the donation matched and even exceeded the amounts of other Whittemore donors.³²

Whittemore would continue to receive small gifts from the Rockefeller family, specifically for his restoration work in Hagia Sophia.³³ The key to Whittemore’s success as a fundraiser was three-fold: be the closest of anyone to the actual work, identify yourself with the institution you established to accomplish that work, and gradually, persistently weave networks of influential people around you to support it.

¹ His work in Egypt is discussed in: Thomas Whittemore, “The Ibis Cemetery at Abydos: 1914,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, January 1914, 248-249. Lidiya McKnight, “On a Wing and a Prayer: Ibis Mummies in Material Culture at Abydos,” *Arts* 2020, 9 (4), 128; <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts9040128>.

² Rémi Labrusse and Nadia Podzemskaia, “Naissance d’une vocation: aux sources de la carrière byzantine de Thomas Whittemore,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 54, 2000, 44-45. Thomas Whittemore, “The Rebirth of Religion in Russia,” *National Geographic Magazine*, vol. XXXIV, no. 5, November 1918, 378-401.

³ A valuable study of Whittemore’s early life is: Holger A. Klein, “The Elusive Mr. Whittemore: The Early Years, 1871-1916,” in *The Kariye Camii Reconsidered*, ed. by Holger Klein, Robert Ousterhout, and Brigitte Pitarakis (Istanbul, 2011), 472-476. Two broader surveys are: Rémi Labrusse and Nadia Podzemskaia, “Naissance d’une vocation: aux sources de la carrière byzantine de Thomas Whittemore,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 54, 2000, 43-69; and Ben Major, “The Socialite Archaeologist: Thomas Whittemore (1871-1950) and the roles of patronage, politics, and personal connections in cultural heritage preservation.” Rutgers University thesis (New Brunswick, NJ, 2010).

⁴ Alice Stevenson, *Scattered Finds: Archaeology, Egyptology and Museums* (UCL Press, 2019), specifically Chapter 2: “Collecting in America’s Progressive and Gilded Eras (1880-1919),” 69-104.

⁵ Robert S. Nelson’s 2004 study deserves to be highlighted for its revealing research on Whittemore’s work to uncover the Hagia Sophia mosaics. Nelson reconnects for the reader many of Whittemore’s personal networks, makes note of some of his fundraising tactics, and places his efforts within the growing art historical interest in Hagia Sophia and Byzantine art and architecture. See Robert S. Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950: Holy Wisdom Modern Monument* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), specifically Chapter 7: “Unveiling the Mosaics: Thomas Whittemore and His American Patrons,” 155-186.

⁶ Labrusse and Podzemskaia, 64-65.

⁷ Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942) was a noted architect and proponent of Gothic Revival architecture. Among many works, he designed New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the buildings of Princeton University’s Graduate College, and Rice University’s Lovett Hall and campus master plan.

⁸ Tufts University Archives. Collection on the Thomas Whittemore Family. Brochure: “Refugees in Russia,” 17 pages.

⁹ The American National Committee for the Relief of Refugees in Russia to Mr. Rockefeller, March 1, 1919. Rockefeller Family Archives (hereafter RFA), Record Group (hereafter RG)-2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (hereafter OMR), World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 369, Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, 1919-1929.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Richardson to Starr J. Murphy, May 15, 1919; Murphy to Seth T. Gano, May 27, 1919. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 369, Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, 1919-1929.

¹² On the Committee’s founding, see: “The American Central Committee for Russian Relief,” *Struggling Russia*, December 27, 1919, 642.

¹³ Rockefeller, Jr. to Eliot, April 14, 1921. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 369, Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, 1919-1929. Charles O.

Heydt to Princess Cantacuzène, April 1, 1921. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 368, Russian Relief through Princess Cantacuzène.

¹⁴ For example, the London-based Russian Refugees Relief Association, whose board consisted of British subjects and many notable Russian émigrés, also sought financial support through Rockefeller officials. See: C.D. Nabokoff to Colonel Arthur Woods, October 23, 1922; Richardson to Woods, November 23, 1922; Woods to Nabokoff, January 3, 1923. Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Archives, Series III-Appropriations, Subseries 3-Emergency Relief, Box 8, Folder 107, Russian Refugees Relief Association-London 1921-23.

¹⁵ Laura Cunningham and Rosemary Foy, “Their Objects, Their Stories: The Nichols Women as Collectors, 1870-1960,” Nichols House Museum, 2018, 6.

¹⁶ Rockefeller, Jr. to Frederic B. Pratt, October 16, 1922. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 369, Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, 1919-1929.

¹⁷ Pratt to Rockefeller, Jr., October 13, 1922. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 369, Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, 1919-1929.

¹⁸ Pratt three-page memo on “Mr Thomas Whittemore,” specifically about CERYE, October 1922. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 369, Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, 1919-1929. For context on the expansion of educational opportunities for Russian émigrés in Europe, see: Susan Gross Solomon and Nikolai Krementsov, “Giving and Taking Across Borders: The Rockefeller Foundation and Russia, 1919-1928,” *Minerva*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2001), 265-298.

¹⁹ Pratt to Rockefeller, Jr., October 13, 1922.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RG 12.1, Vincent diary, October 11, 1922, 232-233.

<https://dimes.rockarch.org/objects/SMpbAmArgXprvhv3DfMzG/view>. Accessed May 29, 2021.

²³ Pratt to Rockefeller, Jr., October 13, 1922.

²⁴ Rockefeller, Jr. to Pratt, October 16, 1922.

²⁵ Pratt three-page memo on “Mr Thomas Whittemore,” October 1922.

²⁶ Richardson to Fosdick, October 20, 1922. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 369, Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, 1919-1929.

²⁷ Richardson to Fosdick, October 17, 1922. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 369, Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, 1919-1929.

²⁸ *The General Education Board: An Account of Its Activities, 1902-1914* (New York, 1915), xiv.

²⁹ Anson Phelps Stokes to Richardson, October 10, 1923. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 369, Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, 1919-1929.

³⁰ Emily Ryerson and her children survived the sinking of the Titanic, but her husband Arthur perished in the tragedy.

³¹ For example, see Fosdick to Rockefeller Jr., In re Princess Cantacuzene Sperensky, July 29, 1922. RFA, RG-2 OMR, World Affairs, Box 42, Folder 368, Russian Relief through Princess Cantacuzène.

³² Toward a goal of raising \$50,000 before his departure to Europe in November 1922, Whittemore had received the following pledges: Charles Crane - \$7,500; Mrs. Arthur Ryerson - \$1,125; Miss Mary Wheelwright - \$1,125; Mr. Horatio Lamb - \$1,125; Arthur

C. James - \$1,000; Frederic Walcott - \$2,500; and George D. Pratt - \$1,000. See Pratt to Rockefeller, Jr., October 13, 1922.

³³ Seth T. Gano to Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., September 13, 1940. RFA, RG-2 OMR, Series H-Friends & Services, Box 165, Folder 1280, Letters from Turkey, Venezuela, 1940-1961.