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## Firm Mourns Loss of John H. Pickering

MARCH 19, 2005

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of our founding partner and friend [John H. Pickering](#), who died at age 89 on Saturday, March 19, following a stroke. In the countless awards and honors he received, John was recognized for his brilliant legal work, his advocacy of pro bono service, his dedication to the cause of equal justice, and his promotion of the highest standards of ethics and professionalism in the law. John's ideals shaped our firm from its very beginning; he inspired and taught us by living those ideals each and every day.

John has often been described as a family man, for he was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. John was also a family man in the sense of collegiality and caring he brought to our firm. He was kind, humble and funny, and always took a personal interest in young lawyers and staff.

John had a career-long partnership with his close friend, Lloyd Cutler. In 1962 they founded Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering, with just 19 lawyers. John and Lloyd led the firm to international renown. The firm merged with Hale and Dorr in 2004, forming WilmerHale. John took enormous pride in the firm's growth and development, encouraging his colleagues to go in new directions.

John had a distinguished career as an appellate lawyer. An expert in Supreme Court practice and procedure, he had a major role in a number of high-profile cases, including the "steel seizure" case defining the limits on presidential authority (*Youngstown v. Sawyer*), the attempted ouster of Congressman Adam Clayton Powell from the House of Representatives (*Powell v. McCormack*), civil rights (*NAACP v. Claiborne County, Mississippi*), physician-assisted suicide (*Washington v. Glucksberg* and *Vacco v. Quill*) and the University of Michigan's use of race as a factor in admission decisions (*Grutter* and *Gratz*).

John was passionate about civil rights, combatting the effects of race discrimination, encouraging pro bono legal services for the poor, and protecting the rights of the elderly. For his efforts on behalf of these causes, he received numerous awards and accolades from organizations including the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, National Women's Law Center, Council for Court Excellence, Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia and National Council on Aging.

In 1996, John was named "Lawyer of the Year" by the Bar Association of the District of Columbia. In

1998, he received the *William J. Brennan Award* of the District of Columbia Bar. In 1999, he received the ABA Medal, the highest award of the American Bar Association, for "conspicuous service in the cause of American jurisprudence." For his work for civil rights, social justice and the needs of the elderly, in 2002 John was given the *Robert F. Drinan Distinguished Service Award* by the ABA's Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities. In 2004, he received a Lifetime Achievement in the Law Award from *The American Lawyer*.

John was President of the District of Columbia Bar from 1979-80 and was active in organizations concerned with the administration of justice. In the American Bar Association, he served as delegate from the District of Columbia to the ABA House of Delegates. He was also a committed alumnus of the University of Michigan, which awarded him an honorary LL.D. degree in 1997, and the University of Michigan Law School. He delivered the Law School's commencement address in 1992, and his law firm established the John H. Pickering Scholarship in his honor.

John was also known for his sense of humor and humility. His first court appearance was in the Supreme Court in 1946. As a former clerk to Justice Murphy, he was asked by the Court to represent an indigent party. He later said, "I couldn't have said no even if I'd wanted to. So I argued my first case in the Supreme Court. I was brought back to earth the following week. My second court appearance was a traffic case in the old Municipal Court. I defended a chauffeur on a change of lane violation—and I lost."

The presentation that accompanied the ABA Medal said, "As a heroic public servant, John Pickering has given a voice to thousands of voiceless Americans and has inspired a new generation of lawyers to rise above self-interest to help make society a better place. As a courageous advocate, caring mentor, and continuous force for good in the legal profession, he has set the standard for what it means to be a lawyer. He has made a legendary contribution to American law and society and his spirit will live on in the lives of all he has touched."

Born in 1916 in Harrisburg, Illinois, John received his A.B. in 1938 and his J.D. in 1940 from the University of Michigan. After law school, he began his career at the New York firm now known as Cravath, Swaine & Moore LLP. In 1941, he moved to Washington, DC to accept a two-year clerkship with Justice Frank Murphy of the United States Supreme Court. During World War II, he served his country with distinction, first as an Ensign and then as a Lt. Commander in the US Naval Reserve. After World War II, he resumed his legal career in Washington, DC.

John was devoted to his family. He was married for 47 years to Elsa Mueller Pickering who died in 1988. In 1990, he married Helen Patton Wright, the widow of US Circuit Chief Judge J. Skelly Wright. In addition to his wife, Helen, he has a daughter, Victoria Aronoff of Bethesda, Maryland; a daughter, Leslie Pickering Francis of Salt Lake City, Utah; a stepson, James S. Wright, Jr., of Washington, DC; and six grandchildren: Sarah, Laura and John Pickering Francis; Andrew and Jeffrey Aronoff; and the late Sarah Aronoff.

We will miss John and will always be thankful for all he gave to us and to our profession.