

In Memoriam

PHILIP MAY HAMER

1891–1971

Philip May Hamer, teacher-scholar, historian-archivist, first organizer of a national program of documentary publications, and editor of *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, grew up in lowland South Carolina and to the end of his life reveled in its flora and fauna, its moss-draped live oaks, its stately plantation seats, and all manifestations of its manners, customs, and history. But from early youth onward, in fact and in fancy, he traveled far beyond the locale of his birth. When he was only 14 years old a soaring imagination took him halfway round the world on his first expedition into the past: a project to gather sources for a history of the Russo-Japanese War. Though an innate prudence caused early abandonment of the plan, the zeal that gave birth to it could not be stifled. This zeal, encouraged and disciplined by wise teachers, was so compelling that he decided while still an undergraduate to devote his life to historical enterprise. His ancestry, which included sea captains from the Penobscot and rice planters from the Waccamaw as well as both northern and southern legislators, and the testimonials of his teachers, who soon perceived the traits of mind and character that set him apart, suggest that he might have distinguished himself in any field of endeavor. But his own youthful decision proved as right for himself as it was fortunate for the historical and archival professions whose inseparable aims were so usefully exemplified in his career.

In that career, as long and varied as it was useful, Philip Hamer spanned a great divide. He was educated during an age in which old-fashioned ideas of truth and honor were inculcated. He was well grounded in the classics and thus understood the need for civility in scholarly discourse as in other aspects of life. Such historians as Wallace at Wofford, Laprade at Trinity, and Ames and Cheyney at The University of Pennsylvania made him aware that any view of the past was inevitably colored by the time and circumstance of the viewer. Devoted to disciplined and objective inquiry, they warned him that this bias should never be regarded as anything except an obstacle to be overcome, like the defect in his vision which, corrected at 13, enabled him for the first time to see the leaves of a tree as separate details, not as a blurred mass of green. So, too, with the proposition that the historian had an inescapable obligation to concern himself with the state of the archival resources on which his craft depended. Above all, his teachers in

that other age urged him, in whatever area of historical activity he found himself, always to keep in view the relationship between impartial inquiry and free institutions—or, as James Madison conceived it, the inseverable bond between liberty and learning. To respect the past in its own terms, to discover its myriad forms in whatever aspect the records might reveal, and to present the result with scrupulous regard for the truth and with as little distortion as possible were the ideals that his teachers upheld.

In many positions of responsibility throughout his career Philip Hamer exhibited the durability of the centuries-old heritage that his teachers transmitted. For 15 years he was a professor of history, first at the University of Chattanooga and then at the University of Tennessee. During that time he took an active part in promoting the study of local history, writing the first scholarly history of Tennessee, and helping organize the East Tennessee Historical Society. He was also a founder of the Southern Historical Association and served as its president in 1938. He joined the staff of the National Archives in the first year of its existence and directed a nationwide survey of Federal records outside the Capital. During the next 10 years he served successively as head of the Library, Accessions, and Reference Divisions. As Director of Records Control from 1944 to 1951 he and his staff prepared the 1948 *Guide to the Records in the National Archives*, a succinct but comprehensive description of some 800,000 cubic feet of records. In the same office he directed a special project to describe the records of World War II civilian and military agencies, resulting in the publication of a valuable guide.

Thus in 1950, when President Truman gave directions for a new and more active role for the National Historical Publications Commission, Hamer was well prepared by both academic and archival experience to enter upon the national undertaking with which his name will always be associated. In 1951 he was chosen Executive Director of the Commission and was given a small staff and a very large assignment. His mission under the Federal Records Act of 1950 was to plan and promote a balanced national program for collecting, preserving, and publishing the records of leaders in all areas of life who had made significant contributions to the development of the Nation. The needs were vast and clearly discernible; public funds to meet them were not. But with characteristic and quiet effectiveness Hamer and his small, dedicated staff moved forward undaunted.

Within 3 years on the basis of long and careful consultations with national, State, and local historical societies, professional organizations, and specialized historical agencies, Hamer prepared and the Commission adopted *A Report to the President* outlining a national program of the Commission for publishing historical documents. This has been described as "a bold and unprecedented charting of the course." Among other pathbreaking ventures the *Report* announced the preparation of a guide to the archival and manuscript collections of the Nation. When it

appeared in 1961, Hamer's *A Guide to the Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* brought him honors and the enduring gratitude of scholars, but he expressed regret that this pioneering guide to thousands of collections in over 1,300 repositories should have taken so long to prepare. He and his staff produced it during the launching of a national program of documentary publications for which he bore the prime responsibility as inspirer, coordinator, and planner.

In 1960 *A Tribute to Philip May Hamer*, prepared in his honor by a few of those who were aware of how much the public good had been advanced through his labors, included this statement: "A decade ago this program was a blueprint. It is now a reality." The reality was evident enough in more than a score of large-scale documentary publications then in being and in many others for which the soil had been prepared and the seed planted. In the same year the Commission authorized and directed Hamer to assume one further official duty—editing the papers of Henry Laurens. In all respects save one this was a happy assignment for his years of retirement. Having labored long and successfully to mobilize support for other editorial tasks, Hamer agonized at the thought of seeking funds for the project under his direction. By the end of 1968 the first of 12 volumes of *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, jointly sponsored by the South Carolina Historical Society and the National Historical Publications Commission, was published by the University of South Carolina Press. The high standards of scholarly editing that he had insisted on for the national program were met with distinction in the volumes on which, despite failing health, he lavished such affection and care during the last decade of his life.

In successfully inaugurating both the national program and the volumes that so happily strengthened ties with his native State, Philip Hamer erected a symbolic landmark. More solid and enduring than granite, it will stand as a reminder to the archival and historical professions of the best in their tradition. It should also be noted that this landmark was erected by one whose innate kindness, generosity, and respect for the amenities of scholarship matched his exacting intellectual standards. Without these, as soft and ingratiating as the moss of his beloved Carolina live oaks, it would not be as complete or as memorable.

The Papers of Thomas Jefferson

JULIAN P. BOYD