

Lester Jesse Cappon

LESTER JESSE CAPPON, distinguished archivist, bibliographer, historian, and geographer, died of a heart attack on 24 August 1981, in the full stride of life, walking from the Newberry Library in Chicago to his nearby apartment. He was 80 years old.

Born in Milwaukee on 18 September 1900, Lester was educated at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music, where he received a diploma in piano in 1920, and the University of Wisconsin, where he received a Bachelor's degree in 1922 and a Master's degree in 1923. He then worked with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., at Harvard, where he received a Master's degree in 1925 and his Doctorate in 1928. He wrote his dissertation on the early iron industry in Virginia.

Most of Lester's illustrious career was spent in Virginia, the first half at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and the second half at the Institute of Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg. He started in 1926–27 as research associate at the University of Virginia's Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, took time off in 1928 to complete his dissertation, and then returned for a second term as research associate from 1928 to 1930. From 1930 until 1945 he served as assistant professor in the University's history department and was promoted to associate professor in 1945. Simultaneously, he served as archivist in the University's Alderman Library from 1930 to 1940 and as consulting archivist from 1940 to 1945. In 1936–37 he directed the Virginia Historical Records Survey and in 1944–45 the Virginia World War II History Project. He also served as editor of the Albemarle County Historical Society's *Papers* from 1940 to 1945.

In 1945 Lester was appointed the first editor of publications at the Institute of Early American History and Culture, a research and publications center sponsored jointly by the College of William and Mary and Colonial Williamsburg. He also served as Colonial Williamsburg's first archivist and held an appointment as lecturer in history at the college.

In the decade between 1945 and 1955, when he became director of the institute, Lester organized the institute's publication program and edited the first 13 titles issued under the institute's imprint. During his directorship from 1955 to 1969, an additional 50 titles helped establish the institute as the leading publisher in the field of early American history and culture. During that time, he also served two terms as editor of the *William and Mary Quarterly* (1955–56 and 1962–63), which enlarged its reputation as one of the leading scholarly journals in the United States. A quietly effective administrator who was a master at delegating authority, Lester inaugurated two new programs of lasting significance. The first was the transformation of the institute's program of research associates into a competitive post-doctoral program of institute fellows. The second was the initiation of *The Papers of John Marshall*, an editorial project that came into being only after Lester had spent several years in search of funding.

Recipients of the institute fellowship now constitute a distinguished group of alumni who value—even treasure—the unique experience of being welcomed as a colleague by Lester. Indeed, one of the remarkable things about the man was the marvelous relationship he had with his colleagues, particularly with younger scholars. His expectations—I almost said demands, but that is too strong a term—were high but never higher than the standards he set for himself (and he habitually worked a six-day



Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library.

week). As Thad Tate, his successor as director of the institute, noted at the memorial service held for Lester in Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, he always gave his colleagues "an incredible amount of support and encouragement," whether he was at the University of Virginia, the Institute of Early American History and Culture, or the Newberry Library. In an unsigned editorial in the *Newport News Press Herald*, Parke Rouse captured this side of Lester when he noted that "A legion of ex-students kept in touch until his death with this modest, bearded scholar. They loved him not only for his selfless work but for his helpfulness in all manner of matters that his wide career had touched on. They also prized his wit, his loyalty, and his warmth of friendship."

After Lester retired from the institute, he moved to Chicago and launched a new career at the Newberry Library, serving as senior fellow in 1969–70 before being appointed editor-in-chief in 1970 of the Atlas of American History Project, one of the nation's leading historical programs for the Bicentennial. Characteristically, Lester gathered a group of younger colleagues who, working as diligently and imaginatively as he did, completed the five-year project precisely on schedule. The *Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era, 1760–1790* was published on July 4, 1976, when Lester was 75 years old.

Lester's list of publications began in Charlottesville when he published his *Bibliography of Virginia History since 1865* (1930). He also compiled the standard bibliography of *Virginia Newspapers, 1821–1935* (1936). In addition, he wrote 15 reports as University Archivist (University of Virginia Library, *Annual Report on Historical Collections, 1930–45*), in addition to *A Plan for the Collection and Preservation of World War II Records* (1942) and *War Records Projects in the States, 1941–43* (1944). During 1944 and 1945 he served as editor of *The War Records Collector*. And he mined his dissertation in order to write his historical introduction to *Alexander Spotswood's Proposals for Leasing His Iron Works* (1945).

While in Williamsburg he edited the immensely useful reference work, *The Virginia Gazette Index, 1736–1780*, with Stella Duff Neiman (1950). He followed that project with one that he perhaps enjoyed most, the editing of *The Adams–Jefferson Letters* (1959). Two weeks before his death, he completed his final essay on the archival profession, described by Lawrence W. Towner as “a brilliant article summing up nearly fifty years’ reflection.” Active to the end, he completed the draft of his review of *The Cartography of Northern Virginia* on the day he died.

A gregarious man who was generous with his time for professional duties, Lester was elected by his colleagues in history, archival work, and editing to the presidencies of the Southern Historical Association (1949); the Society of American Archivists (1957), which also elected him a Fellow; and the Association for Documentary Editing (1979–80). Between 1947 and 1953, he lectured in Ernst Posner's summer institute on archival management before being appointed director of the Institute on Historical and Archival Management at Radcliffe College, where he taught during the summers from 1956 through 1960.

In addition to his membership in professional organizations, ranging from the American Antiquarian Society through the Organization of American Historians to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Lester belonged to the American Forestry Association, the National Parks Association, the Sierra Club, and the Wilderness Society. An ardent hiker and outdoorsman, he made annual expeditions to the West in his later years, riding horseback into the mountains, rafting down the Snake River, and roughing it in Alaska, Canada, and the West. He balanced his interest in the outdoors with his lifelong love of music, playing the piano despite increasing deafness and attending the concerts of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which he served as a Governing Life Member.

Lester's frail appearance masked his iron will and anonymous generosity. When he lost his wife, Dorothy Elizabeth Bernet, and his daughter, Mary Beth, he was deeply shaken but always composed. A private man in many ways, he kept a diary into which he poured his personal feelings as well as his professional musings. It will almost certainly become a valuable source for future historians.

