F. Gerald Ham: Jeremiah to the Profession

John A. Fleckner

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

ABSTRACT

For three decades, F. Gerald Ham was a forceful, energetic, incisive, and energizing presence at the annual meeting podium, in the pages of *The American Archivist*, and in the ranks of the Society's leadership. In all of these venues, he urged us to set aside our outdated custodial mindset, take more seriously our role in selecting an archival record for the future, implement strategies of planning and coordination, overcome our isolation and proprietary habits, and, above all, think critically and make the difficult decisions necessary in a new archival era. This article traces Ham's career and reviews his writings for insights into a critical time in our recent professional past, his contributions to the profession, and the ways his ideas remain relevant today.

© John A. Fleckner. CC BY-NC

KEY WORDS

Archival Selection, Social Justice, Archival History

In popular culture today, the biblical prophet Jeremiah is remembered more for his "woeful complaining" and "denunciations of his people" than for his words of "encouragement and of hope."[1] The archival prophet, F. Gerald Ham, could be unsparing in his criticism of our profession, but his eye was always on where we were headed and how we might better pursue our larger mission. For archivists new to the profession since Ham retired twenty years ago, his name may be most associated with his presidential address, "The Archival Edge," or with the graduate scholarship fund endowed in his and his wife's names. For archivists with longer memories, Ham was, for three decades, a forceful, energetic, incisive, and energizing presence at the annual meeting podium, in the pages of *The American Archivist*, in the ranks the Society's leadership, in the graduate classroom, and within the state of Wisconsin and its State Historical Society. In all of these venues, Ham urged us to set aside our outdated custodial mindset, overcome our isolation and proprietary habits, adopt a "more active and perhaps more creative role," take more seriously our role in selecting a "more useful and more representative" archival record for the future, and, above all, think critically and make the difficult decisions necessary in a new archival era.

This article traces Ham's career and reviews his writings for insights into his thinking and a critical era in our recent professional past. While the focus is on his writings, these were always informed by his experiences as an archivist and administrator, a leader within SAA, a teacher, and a consultant to scores of programs across the country. The archives profession has been transformed in the past two decades, especially by the consequences and opportunities created by new information technologies. Much of what Ham wrote in the 1970s and 1980s was prescient about these changes, and many of his prescriptions for archivists in this new era remain relevant today. These ideas inspired, and continue to inspire, Ham's generation and, especially, the generations that followed. Ham's successors created new approaches to selecting and managing the archival record in an age of information abundance. They picked up on the social justice themes that he had sounded, especially in calling for a "representative" record, and they pursued collaboration among archival institutions and programs in service of the larger goals of the profession. In sum, they became "activist archivists," entering the "postcustodial" era and reshaping the archival landscape forever.[2]

F. Gerald Ham was born in Toms River, New Jersey, in 1930 and was raised there and in Peekskill, New York. His father was a Baptist minister and, as Ham wrote in a brief autobiographical essay, "a pervasive evangelical faith dominated our family."[3] Ham's parents overrode Oberlin as his college choice, but at Wheaton College in Illinois, "the so-called Harvard for fundamentalists" (in Ham's words), he gained a love of American history and, in Elsie Magill, a

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

FIGURE 1. Madison, Wis. 1964. F. Gerald Ham, Wisconsin state archivist, examines papers (posed re-enactment) in preparation of a guide to labor history research materials in the State Historical Society. A print hangs in the headquarters of the American Association for State and Local History at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tenn. Photo by Paul Vanderbilt. Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# 11710.

lifetime partner. Ham interrupted his formal graduate work at the University of Kentucky in 1955 with nearly two years in the Counter Intelligence Corps, but during his posting in Washington, D.C., he continued his dissertation research on a history of the Shakers, working two half-days a week at the Library of Congress.

Back at Kentucky, Ham's first step toward becoming what he called "an accidental archivist" was a fellowship to work part time in the library's special collections. Two years later, while completing his dissertation, he found a position with West Virginia University Library's West Virginia Collection. It paid well for the day—$5,200, left him free from lecture preparation, and enabled him to crisscross the state building the library's manuscripts holdings. In 2012, he recalled for the SAA Oral History Project: ". . . when I was at West Virginia, really my favorite thing was collecting. I liked to collect . . . The 'Archival Edge' grew out of my experience collecting."[4] During his six years in West Virginia, Ham completed his Ph.D., taught American history survey courses, and compiled a guide to the West Virginia Collection. He also joined SAA, attended his first

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

annual meeting in 1961, and became a member of the College and University Archives Committee.

In the fall of 1963, the "accidental archivist" made a momentous choice for himself and for the archives profession. ". . . My ambivalence over a career in archives or teaching history was resolved," Ham remembered, "when I was offered the position of state archivist of Wisconsin and head of the division of Archives and Manuscripts . . ."[5] The Wisconsin Historical Society, formed in 1846, two years before statehood, had long been among the nation's leading historical agencies, with exceptional archival collections and a library second only to the Library of Congress in its North American history holdings. The society also had collaborative ties, through a network of archival research centers, with eight state university campuses. In the early 1960s, the professional archives staff doubled and archival storage tripled to seventy-five thousand cubic feet.[6] To the new archivist, "the scope of . . . responsibilities seemed vast," and Ham was soon engaged not only with familiar state and local manuscripts, but with massive records of national labor unions and businesses; of theater and broadcasting notables; and of state, county, and local governments. These holdings ranged from early nineteenth-century papers gathered by the society's first director, Lyman C. Draper, to documentation generated by civil rights workers during the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and subsequent campaigns and collected by society field workers between 1965 and 1968.[7] The society also held extensive collections of photographs, films, sound recordings, and other nontextual records, and Ham's writings always reflected his awareness of the diversity of the archival record. Whatever the managerial challenges of this immersive introduction to the extent and complexity of the archival record in a major, modern repository, for Ham it also was an intellectual challenge. For the next quarter-century, Ham analyzed these issues and set out his conclusions for the entire profession to consider.

The Wisconsin Historical Society, notable for its major research collections, is also physically and socially at the heart of the University of Wisconsin—Madison campus. The university long had been a seat of progressive, and sometimes radical, political views, especially in its history department. In the 1960s and 1970s, the historical society was, in the words of archivist Patrick Quinn, "a refuge not only for reds of various persuasions but also for individuals who preferred a gentler sort of life than the 'real world' offered." As in Berkeley, Ann Arbor, and other university towns in the late 1960s and 1970s, the Madison campus was wracked with protests, and sometimes the society was literally a refuge as tear gas drifted through downtown streets and even into the society's grand headquarters building.[8] In this environment, Ham found his own political perspective gradually becoming "more liberal," although, he emphasized, he experienced no single moment of "seeing the light."[9]

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

In 1966, the university's School of Library and Information Studies invited Ham to create a graduate education program in archives administration. The initial one-course offering in 1967 expanded to three in 1970 and was cross-listed to permit its use as a minor within the PhD program. As Timothy Ericson remembers, Ham used his seminar especially, "to test out some of his ideas . . . and steered students to do research and writing in such areas as appraisal, collection development and documentation strategies."[10] By 1991, when Ham retired, "Jerry's kids," as some called themselves, numbered 364, and Ham counted among them four SAA presidents, numerous Council members (at one time six served together for a year), and many Fellows. He considers both his students and his writings as his "legacy to the profession."[11]

Along with Ham's move to Madison, his swift immersion in the life and politics of SAA also shaped his understanding of the world of archives. In the fall of 1964, he attended just his second annual meeting, renewing acquaintances with Philip Mason and others of the thirty-something-year-old generation who soon would seize the Society's leadership.[12] Ham also read a paper evaluating the effectiveness of eleven public records programs then located in state historical societies against the standards presented in Ernst Posner's *American State Archives.* Although he had been his state's archivist for less than one year, Ham's critique was blunt: "One of the ironies of the history of archives administration in the United States is that the institution most directly concerned with the preservation of historical resources has generally proved to be the least effective archival agency." He found that too often the archives at these societies were "relegated . . . to the status of Cinderella" and their operations were "rudimentary at best."[13]

In 1966, the "accidental archivist" became the "accidental" SAA Council member when he was appointed to fill a vacancy brought about by Mason's maneuvering. Three years as SAA secretary (and concurrent service on the Committee for the Seventies) followed in quick succession and two years (1972–1974) as president-elect and president. It was often an exhausting regimen, but it provided Ham with an extraordinary national exposure to archivists, archival institutions, and the issues of the archives profession that pervaded all his writings. It is a breadth that few professionals could achieve today.

Before 1974, when SAA finally created a paid professional office, the SAA secretary was effectively the Society's executive director. The secretary's highest-profile responsibility was an extended report read to the annual meeting and published in *The American Archivist*. Ham used these opportunities to reflect critically on the Society and the profession. His first message in 1969 set the tone: ". . . Your secretary could carefully select evidence to show that the Society is getting better as it is getting bigger . . . or cite the accomplishments of a few committees to imply the work of the majority. I do not believe that this would

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

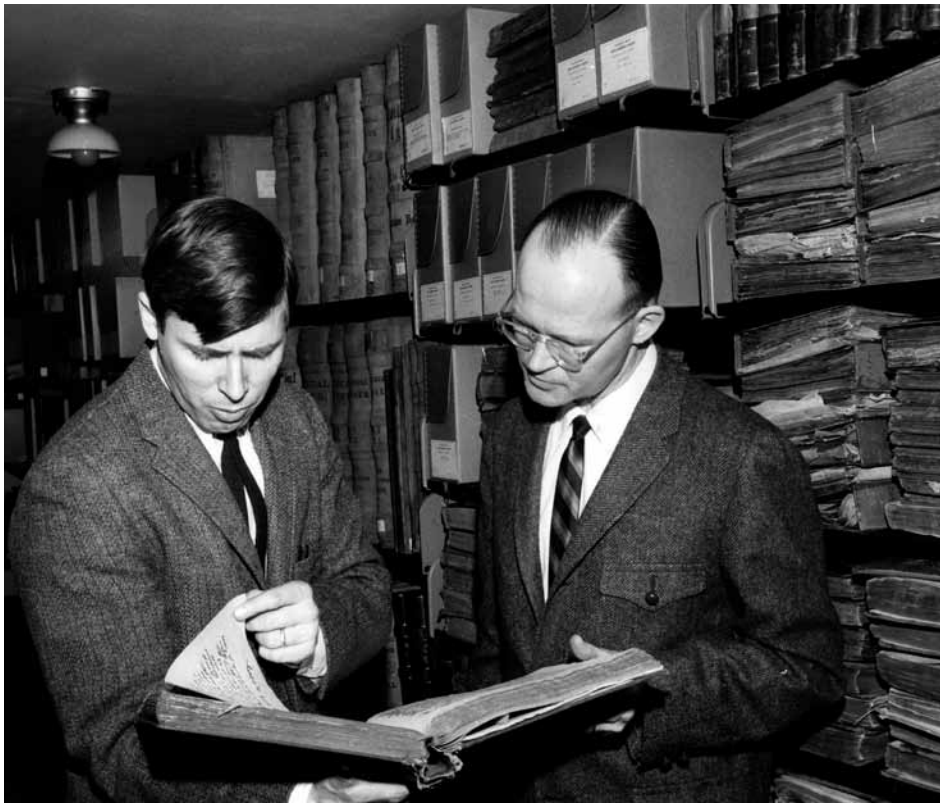

FIGURE 2. Milwaukee, Wis. March, 1965. Dr. Walter Peterson (right), professor of history at Lawrence University, Appleton, and F. Gerald Ham, Wisconsin state archivist, examine the records of Milwaukee Downer College on deposit in the State Historical Society's area research center at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Photo by the Milwaukee *Journal*. Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# 11728.

be a particularly helpful or a particularly honest way to report. Let us instead focus on the true strengths and weaknesses of our programs."[14]

Some of the "truths" Ham conveyed in his three reports were flattering: the Society's membership had doubled in a decade, at least twenty-six institutions now offered some kind of archival education and training, and ties with allied professions were strengthening. The makeup of the membership also was changing with a majority of members now in "nongovernmental archives and so-called manuscript collections" not in the public archives sector.[15] Reviewing the decade of the 1960s, he wrote: "By 1970, then, we had come a long way toward becoming a stronger, more coherent profession and a larger, more active, more broadly representative society. . . . ."

Yet major problems remained. Some were internal, especially an unproductive committee system, the lack of a strong institutional voice for the profession, and the unsustainability of all-volunteer management of an association with over two thousand members and subscribers. Other problems plagued the

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

entire profession. "Almost alone among the scholarly professions, archivists still lack a comprehensive program of education and training for entrants to professional archival work," Ham wrote, while acknowledging that there was no consensus among archival educators on curriculum and methods. More troubling was the lack of "discernible development of archival theory and the concomitant refinement of practice in the last generation." "Our profession," Ham said, "has not come to grips with a number of fundamental problems created by the nature of contemporary records and by the impact of a changing technology. . . ." The list of these problems included complexity, access, privacy, and "the need to select an increasingly smaller percentage of records, which contain more useful and representative documentation of American life and culture." The evidence that Ham saw most directly as SAA secretary was the lack of competition for SAA's publications awards and the absence of publications with which to respond to the onslaught of requests for "information on all aspects of contemporary archives administration." He urged SAA to publish "a series of informational and technical pamphlets . . . to provide the practical, technical requests for, and theoretical knowledge our profession so desperately needs. . . ."[16]

In the penultimate paragraph of his final report as secretary, Ham made an even more damning judgment. Summarizing the written comments by some 130 SAA respondents to a survey of members, he found, "conspicuously missing . . . any suggestion that archivists live a life that is totally integrated with the world about them." Repeating the refrain, "No one suggested," he reeled off the silences: "that we take cognizance of the dramatic social changes of the past decade"; "that we combat discrimination in service to and employment of individuals of all minority groups"; or "that we give special attention to the recruitment and training of members of minority groups." Archivists also were silent about the profession's role in promoting access to public records, protecting individual privacy, and cooperating with other associations, like the ALA, on public policy advocacy "to improve the society in which we live and work."[17]

As SAA secretary, Ham had a bully pulpit to express his views to the profession, but it was not a foundation from which to launch the changes that he and many SAA members and leaders believed necessary. That opportunity came with the Committee for the Seventies, an eight-member group appointed in 1970 by President Mason and funded for six meetings over the next two years by a Council on Library Resources grant. The Society's adoption of most of the recommendations in the "Report of the Committee for the Seventies," in the words of J. Frank Cook, "permanently alter[ed] the Society and its operations."[18] Although technically an ex officio member of the committee, Ham participated fully in its deliberations and coauthored two key sections.[19] For the most part, these dealt with internal SAA matters—creation of a paid staff, elections,

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

regional affiliates, and membership recruitment, but one paragraph addressed Mason's objective of making "the Society more democratic, responsive, and more relevant to its members" in ways perhaps not expected by those members. Paragraph three of the section on "Member Relations and Development," entitled "Social Relevance," proclaimed: "SAA should be actively committed to the social goals of racial justice, equal employment, and reasonable access to research materials." It called for a "standing committee on minority groups to press for the rights and advancement of minorities in the archival profession" and cited issues of "overrestriction" and "overclassification" of archival materials, "violations of confidentiality of records for political or other unworthy purposes, and elitism in manuscript collections." On these and other public issues, "however controversial," the committee believed, "SAA has a moral obligation to take official positions . . ."[20]

Ham's years as president-elect and president were largely consumed with implementing the many changes recommended by the Committee for the Seventies, especially recruiting and hiring the first paid executive director and negotiating placement of the SAA office at the University of Illinois–Chicago Circle.[21] Yet Ham never lost sight of the unique opportunity afforded to SAA presidents in the tradition of the presidential address, a highlight of the annual meeting's formal banquet and a message assured publication in *The American Archivist*. In "The Archival Edge," delivered in Toronto in 1974, he ignored SAA governance issues of the moment to draw into a more coherent, compelling, and very polished whole his ideas on the fundamental purposes of archival work and on the urgent need for archivists to change how they accomplish that work.

"The Archival Edge" won standing applause and still is frequently cited and used in classrooms. Ham followed this with two other well-received essays, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," a 1980 SAA plenary address, and "Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance," a core session at the 1982 meeting and winner of the Posner Prize. Although never intended as a trilogy, they are complementary, each contributing to complete a larger whole.[22] Three broad themes pervade Ham's view of the archival landscape in these works: first, its dynamic character; second, the failures of the custodial approach; and, third, strategies and actions necessary to make the work of archivists useful and effective.

Ham saw both larger social forces and new information technologies reshaping the nature of the archival record and the world of archives. For one, "the process of institutionalizing and nationalizing decision-making . . . has had a profound impact on documentation, making the archives of associations, pressure groups, protest organizations, and institutions of all sorts relatively more important than the papers of individuals and families."[23] Associated with

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

FIGURE 3. F. Gerald Ham receives Fellows Certificate from Herb Angel, at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting in Ottawa, 1968. From the Archives Department, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Libraries, Society of American Archivists Records, Collection no. 172, photo #160.

this was, on the one hand, the growing bulk and redundancy of the record and a decrease in the value of the information contained in it and, on the other hand, the fragility of the new record formats and vulnerability of documentation, such as that produced by civil rights protests, "that has little chance of aging into vintage archives. . . ."[24] The "information revolution," as Ham labeled it—meaning both electronic records and sound and moving image recordings—had "created records that are fluid, amendable, and reusable" as well as more complex and information dense.

The implications for archivists were unmistakable: they must abandon the attitudes and practices of the custodial past to be effective in the "*post-custodial era.*"[25] The custodial archivist was a product of a time when "the mass of records . . . was relatively small" and "the technology of their creation, storage, and retrieval fairly simple . . ." Custodial archivists, Ham explained, were content to adopt "a passive role in shaping the documentary record." They also were "uncommonly introspective . . . too little aware of the larger historical and social landscape" surrounding them and often obsessed with the "'nuts and bolts' or craft aspects" of their work. Introspection fostered both isolation from other archivists and a proprietary, sometimes competitive, relationship with other archives. Too often the passive, isolated, custodial archivist simply followed "the dictates of conventional wisdom and unexamined habit."[26]

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

Ham identified two continuing "institutional" responses to this "new world of information": the proliferation of archival programs and the decentralization of holdings. He cited the increase in college and university archives programs from 561 to 940 between 1966 and 1980, a notable growth in municipal records programs stimulated by federal funds, and the spread of the National Archives' regional programs. Undoubtedly, these largely unplanned developments brought more resources to archival activities and aided the growth and maturation of the profession, but they left many of the problems of the new archival era unsolved and the custodial traditions unchanged.[27]

When Ham evaluated the legacy of this custodial past, he found that we had paid a high price. Most famously, he excoriated our failure to shape "the national archival record" into "a national mosaic that will bequeath to the future an eminently useable past." Or, put more poetically, "a mirror for mankind . . . helping people understand the world they live in." Rather than "a representative record of human experience in our time," Ham found a "distorted national record" shaped by a random, fragmented, uncoordinated, and often accidental selection process. This record evidenced a structural bias toward preserving the records of politicians and academic institutions while leaving great gaps in other areas. Ham cited historians Howard Zinn and Sam Bass Warner and archivist Gould Colman in making his argument.[28] He also drew on his own experience, including his role as expert witness in a trial challenging the Internal Revenue Service's rejection of the appraisal valuation of the papers of former Illinois governor Otto Kerner Jr. The more than 750 cubic feet of records, Ham testified, "reveal nothing about the man, his thought processes, or his style of life, whether political or administrative" and 80 percent were "either duplicate or of marginal worth." Yet these records occupied more than 50 percent of the shelf storage at the Illinois State Historical Library and, Ham reasoned, "As a result of this emphasis, many other aspects of state history necessarily must go undocumented."[29] The custodial approach had additional costs. Scarce resources were wasted in competition to acquire collections, and "many large and complex collections go unattended while huge sums are invested in processing others to unnecessary and wasteful levels of detail." Two decades later, Dennis Meissner and Mark Greene cited this observation in famously arguing for "more product and less process."[30]

The passion and clarity of Ham's dissection of the custodial tradition continues to generate memorable quotations in the archival literature, but the bulk of his writing was given over to guiding the profession toward a more productive future. His recommendations were never cast as simple recipes or abstract ruminations. Indeed, he mocked those archivists who believed that matters were only "a bit out of kilter." "They say a simple formula of more cooperation, less competition, increased governmental largess and bigger and better records

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

surveys," would suffice. Ham called for more fundamental changes, transforming the passive archivist into a "more active and perhaps more creative role," willing to make choices and to take risks.[31]

One essential element of this transformation would be a mobilization of intellectual resources to address critical concerns such as acquisition guidelines. In 1975, Ham found the existing archival writings "either inadequate or irrelevant when they deal with contemporary archives. . . . Without needed conceptual and empirical studies, archivists must continue to make their critical choices in intellectual solitary confinement." Following the mandate that "conceptualization must precede collection," Ham proposed—as an example—that church archivists might "determine the documentation needed to study contemporary religious life, thought, and change" and then integrate this into their records selection processes.[32] Colleges and universities might undertake empirical studies of their documentation, a point that Helen Samuels cites in her classic work, *Varsity Letters*.[33] Even in the earliest days of planning for archival bibliographic systems, Ham recognized the potential they offered for analysis of the documentary record.[34] As a full-time administrator and part-time teacher, Ham was well aware of the obstacles to archival research, but he recognized that it "is necessary in almost every area of our work," from understanding researchers' behaviors, to creating records-sampling models, to measuring records-processing activities, and developing model legislation.[35] While Ham could be unsparing in his criticism, he also was quick to recognize positive developments, for example the publication in 1980 and 1981 of two book-length reports on appraisal and sampling projects for the records of the Massachusetts Superior Court and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.[36]

Transcending the boundaries of individual archives programs to create linkages and coordination was a second pervasive theme in Ham's writing. He pointed to examples of interinstitutional cooperation among libraries and in document conservation but found special promise in the statewide regional archival networks. "The network concept and structure offer not only a means to document society more systematically, but also to utilize better the limited resources of participating archival units."[37] With more coordination, shared information, and no wasteful competition, archival units in a network could develop more "representative and comprehensive" holdings. The idea might be further developed into cooperation based on institutional type and subject area.[38] To foster cooperation and to provide archival services more effectively, Ham called for archival institutions, "at all levels," to become "archival centers." These centers could provide technical services such as micrographics and records processing but also training and consultation on program development and administration.

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

Ham recognized that federal funding from the NHPRC and NEH— $4 million annually in 1980—could help alter "the structure of the archival world" by promoting coordination, integration, and cooperation. In the state historical records advisory boards, created by the 1975 legislation that added a records program to the documentary editing and publications mandate of the NHPRC, Ham found "new and potent structures for . . . bringing together diverse, sometimes competing, interests in a setting that permits coordinated planning and action." In Wisconsin, Ham built an active board program, and he served as a consultant to at least eight other state boards. But he also understood the real difficulties in making these new entities into productive bodies. In 1989, he reviewed a round of assessment reports developed by state boards and acknowledged that compared to the efforts of a decade earlier, these were "a real advance in the process of developing cooperative intrastate archival planning." Still, too often he found the reports were "litanies of woe, compendiums of data (useful and otherwise), and proposals for a new archival order within the states," but not the "strategic plans of action with operational consequences."[39]

Between 1983 and 1986, Ham served as the chair of the Task Force on Goals and Priorities (GAP), making what he called his "last major contribution to the SAA." In 1984, in yet another SAA plenary address, he explained that our greatest "vulnerability" as a profession was our "lack of a clear and shared vision of what we need to do to meet [today's] challenges."[40] The GAP project would provide "an intellectual framework for planning and decision-making" and a means to institutionalize planning for the future. Nineteen task force and working group members hashed out GAP's final report, *Planning for the Archival Profession*. Ham wrote none of the report, but he skilfully facilitated a host of meetings and, with Timothy Ericson, spent days editing it. His influence, both in style and substance, is unmistakable. Goal 1, "The Identification and Retention of Records of Enduring Value," called for research on the creation and use of records by their initial creators and other users, for shared appraisal guidelines, and "the development of coordinated and cooperative documentation strategies" across repository lines. Goal 2, "The Administration of Archival Programs," called for research, cooperation with allied professions, and "cooperation and sharing of expertise and resources among the archival community," including technical assistance and program development training and guidance. Research, innovation, and cooperation, especially in increasing access to information about archival materials, were also major themes in the third goal area, "Use of Records."[41] The agenda for the archives profession, as expressed in the GAP report of 1986, very much resembled the archival landscape that Ham had been envisioning for the previous twenty years.

For two decades, Ham played center stage in the archives profession. He had an exceptional breadth of experience and understanding of archival records

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

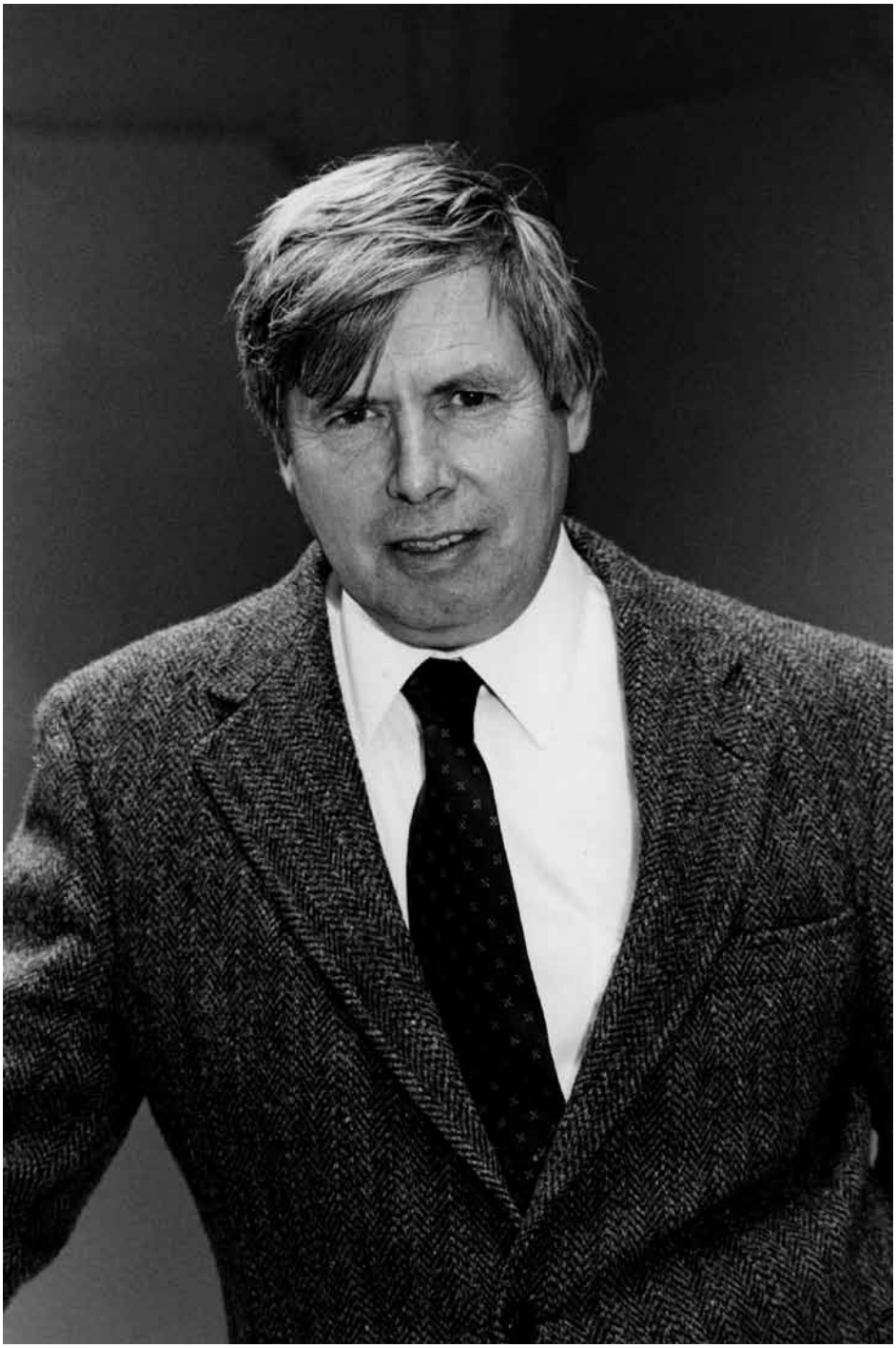

FIGURE 4. F. Gerald Ham, photographed on September 28, 1988, by Bob Granflaten. Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# 11727.

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

and of the landscape of archival institutions and the profession. He was a polished writer and an effective speaker, and his energetic presence, quick intelligence, and social manner supported his message.

We archivists recognized the truths in Ham's blunt critiques of our performance, especially in the areas of appraisal and selection, and we were inspired by him to do better. Mark Greene called "The Archival Edge" "a very unnerving bombshell" on "the relatively quiet . . . appraisal front." Richard Cox called it "the opening salvo in this reconsideration of collecting by archivists" and "a foundation for an entire generation of new musings about and practices in archival appraisal." For Bruce Dearstyne, it was "a turning point for the American archival enterprise." Frank Boles cited it as a stimulus for "a new generation of archivists to rethink the question of selection." Ham summarized much of the new work he had inspired in his own 1991 prize-winning contribution to SAA's Archival Fundamentals series.[42]

Ham's words announced, and helped to usher in, a new era in American archives history, but not all archivists found them convincing and inspiring. Just two years after Ham delivered "The Archival Edge," Lester Cappon, an admired founding SAA member and past president, published a full-length rebuttal in *The American Archivist.* Ham greatly respected Cappon, a long-time professional friend, and he believes that Cappon's essay helped draw attention to "The Archival Edge."[43] Cappon argued that little was new in Ham's address and that past collecting practices needed no major revision. As Cappon's biographer Richard Cox has written, Cappon saw Ham's address "as a repudiation of his own work and career."[44] A decade after Cappon's article, John Roberts focused on Ham and Frank Burke in a full-bore denunciation of the idea of archival theory, a backhanded tribute to the two as the most significant exponents of this misguided notion. "The Archival Edge," he wrote, "is quite plainly the product of an historiographical tradition that is already a trifle hackneyed," and Ham's ideas on "creative acquisitions policies, archives networks, and specialized archives . . . are still the nuts and bolts Ham thinks he is avoiding . . . [and merely] searching for more efficient practices." Unsurprisingly, Roberts's dismissal of archival theory as "a rather superfluous and uncompromising diversion" has not spawned the degree of attention and critical thinking generated by Ham's writings.[45]

If the ground proved fertile for Ham's ideas on shaping the archival record, it has proven less so for some of his other ideas. Archivists have collaborated to create descriptive standards and to implement information technologies, but the landscape of archival institutions seems no more integrated and coordinated than Ham found it. The decrease in public funds has shrunken the ambitions of archival repositories and funding agencies. We have given no systematic attention, analysis, or direction to what a "useful and representative" historical record

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

might look like. Instead, we continue to identify and preserve a national historical record through a patchwork of private and public institutions, laws and regulations, and professions and professional practices. We lack any substantial means for building the capacity and sustainability of archival institutions. We can only hope that this assemblage will assure us the reliable, authentic, secure, and accessible historical record to which we believe we are entitled.

These misfortunes of the moment make it all the more important to listen to Ham's message about the larger purposes of our work, which he left us in his writings and which he summarized, in a sense, in 1998 when he endowed the Ham Scholarship: "Don't let the lure of the process—the technical or hands-on aspect of archival activity—obscure and dilute the intellectual aspects . . . such as determining the content of the historical record and understanding its potential uses. Don't confuse tools with goals."[46]

Notes

The author is grateful to Jerry Ham for providing documentary materials, for several interviews by telephone and one in his home, and for his years as mentor and friend. He also thanks Timothy Ericson, Susan Davis, the editor and peer reviewers of *The American Archivist*, and other friends and colleagues who read versions of this paper.

1 Rabbi Louis Jacobs, "Jeremiah: Prophet of Judgment and of Hope," My Jewish Learning, http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Prophets/Latter_Prophets/Jeremiah.shtml?p=2.

2 Randall Jimerson cites Ham's presidential address, "The Archival Edge," and places him in "a small but influential cadre of archivists [who] heeded the call to social activism and sought to define their own profession's perspective." *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 110. Mark Greene begins his recent critique of Jimerson's views on social justice and the archives profession with an analysis of the term "activist archivist" and its association with Ham's presidential address. "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We're Doing that's All That Important?," *The American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 303, 325. The subtitle of this article draws on one of Ham's most frequently quoted phrases as used by Jimerson.

3 F. Gerald Ham, untitled autobiographical essay submitted to the SAA Oral History Project, p. 1.

4 "Followup Q&A with Dr. F. Gerald Ham," conducted by Lauren Kata (by telephone), February 18, 2012, the SAA Oral History Project, p. 9.

5 F. Gerald Ham, untitled autobiographical essay submitted to the SAA Oral History Project, p. 3.

6 F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Standards and the Posner Report: Some Reflections on the Historical Society Approach," *The American Archivist* 48, no. 1 (1985): 230.

7 Michael Edmonds tells this story in detail in "Bold (Not to Say Crazy)": Collecting Civil Rights Manuscripts during the 1960s," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 97, no. 4 (2014). "Between 1965 and 1968, they'd brought in 232 shipments of civil rights manuscripts. Over the next 15 years, 343 more would arrive, mostly from leads generated in the mid-sixties. . . ." Some twenty-five thousand of these documents are online at Wisconsin Historical Society, "Freedom Summer Digital Collection," http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15932coll2.

8 To celebrate the society's 150th anniversary, its journal published a series of recollections, including Patrick M. Quinn's, *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 79, no. 4 (1996): 329. In the same publication, Josephine Harper Darling, an SAA Fellow and thirty-five-year veteran at the society, recalled Jerry Ham as, "Energetic, dynamic, creative, and articulate. . . . Under stress he could be mercurial, but he could also inspire and stimulate us to new heights," 279.

9 F. Gerald Ham, telephone conversation with author, January 14, 2014.

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

[10] Timothy Ericson, electronic communication with author, October 31, 2013.

[11] Ham, untitled autobiographical essay submitted to the SAA Oral History Project, pp. 3–4. Many of Ham's students are well recognized in the profession, and some joined the historical society staff in some capacity, including Steven Hensen, Susan Davis, Michael Fox, Margaret Hedstrom, Timothy Ericson, Gregor Trinkaus-Randall, and Michael Stevens. Other prominent staff included Max Evans and George Talbot. These lists are only illustrative; a better memory would add many more names.

[12] The best historical overview of this period in SAA history is J. Frank Cook, "The Blessing of Providence on an Association of Archivists," *The American Archivist* 46 (Fall 1983): 374–99. Philip Mason was founding director of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University.

[13] Ham, "Archival Standards and the Posner Report," 223, 224, 226.

[14] "Report of the Secretary, 1968–69," *The American Archivist* 33, no. 1 (1970): 119.

[15] "Report of the Secretary, 1970–71," *The American Archivist* 35 (January 1972): 109.

[16] "Report of the Secretary, 1969–70," *The American Archivist* 34 (January 1971): 92–97.

[17] "Report of the Secretary, 1970–71," *The American Archivist* 35 (January 1972): 111.

[18] Cook, "The Blessing of Providence," 397.

[19] "President's Page," *The American Archivist* 35 (April 1972): 219.

[20] Philip P. Mason, "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies: Report of the Committee for the 1970s," *The American Archivist* 35 (April 1972): 205.

[21] Philip Mason made the executive director position a major focus of his presidential address, "The Society of American Archivists at the Crossroads," *The American Archivist* 35 (January 1972): 5–11.

[22] "The Archival Edge" was reprinted in *Library Lit. 6—The Best of 1975* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1976) and as concluding essay in Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, *A Modern Archives Reader: Readings on Archival Theory and Practice* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1984). A standard text in its day. "Archival Choices" inspired the title and was the concluding essay in Nancy Peace, ed., *Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1984). Richard J. Cox judged Ham's "triptych of essays" as "perhaps the most influential writings" aimed at "redefining the very essence of archival work and the values of archival records." "Bibliographical Essay: Essential Writings on the Archival Profession in the United States in the 1980s," in his *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1990), 332. Ham's essays were not reprinted in the most important recent book of archival writings, Randall C. Jimerson, *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2000), but, excepting David Bearman and Terry Cook, he is the most frequently cited author in the volume.

[23] F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *The American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 8.

[24] Ham, "Edge," 10. F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance," *The American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 12.

[25] F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *The American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 207.

[26] Ham, "Archival Choices," 22.

[27] Ham, "Archival Strategies," 210.

[28] Zinn and Warner, in separate addresses to the 1970 SAA Annual Meeting, delivered what Patrick Quinn called "two of the most important critiques of archival practices in recent years. . . . " Zinn "shocked and offended many in his audience. . . . " Patrick M. Quinn, "The Times They Are A-Changing," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977), http://libr.org/progarchs/documents/Quinn_Article_MwA_1977.html. Gould Colman's brief critique of archival collecting was especially important to Ham who recalled that he was "thinking down the same track" but found Colman's expression of these ideas especially compelling. Ham, telephone conversations with author, January 14, 2014, and December 23, 2013.

[29] Ham, "Archival Choices," 13, and Ham, "Archival Edge," 9.

[30] Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 255.

[31] Ham, "Archival Edge," 5, 8.

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access

[32] Ham, "Archival Edge," 12–13.

[33] Helen Willa Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992), 2.

[34] Ham, "Archival Strategies," 212.

[35] Ham, "Archival Strategies," 215.

[36] Ham, "Archival Choices," 20. Ham reviewed Michael Stephen Hindus, Theodore M. Hammett, and Barbara M. Hobson, *The Files of the Massachusetts Superior Court, 1859–1959: An Analysis and a Plan for Action* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1979) in *The American Archivist* 44 (Fall 1981): 360–61.

[37] Ham, The Archival Edge,"11.

[38] Ham, "Archival Choices," 15.

[39] F. Gerald Ham, "Documenting America: Observations on Implementation," *Midwestern Archivist* 14, no. 2 (1989): 84, 91.

[40] F. Gerald Ham, "Planning for the Archival Profession," *The American Archivist* 48 (Winter 1985): 27. Larry Hackman, "The Origins of Documentation Strategies in Context: Recollections and Reflections," *The American Archivist* 72 (Fall/Winter 2009): 436–59, examines his development of the documentation strategies concept and SAA's goals and priorities activities focusing on the early 1980s.

[41] *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986).

[42] Mark A. Greene, "The Existential Archivist: Use as a Measure of 'Better' Appraisal" (unpublished paper for the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, 1999), 7; Richard J. Cox, *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 128, and "Lester J. Cappon and the Relationship of History, Archives, and Scholarship," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 1 (2005): 104; Bruce W. Dearstyne, *The Archival Enterprise: Modern Archival Principles, Practices, and Management Techniques* (Chicago and London: The American Library Association, 1993), 44; F. Gerald Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993).

[43] F. Gerald Ham, telephone conversations with author, January 14, 2014, and July 8, 2013.

[44] Cox, "Lester J. Cappon and the Relationship of History, Archives, and Scholarship," 105; Lester J. Cappon, "The Archivist as Collector," *The American Archivist* 39, no. 4 (1976): 429–35.

[45] John W. Roberts, "Archival Theory: Much Ado about Shelving," *The American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 69, 71, 74, and, in much the same vein, "Archival Theory: Myth or Banality?," *The American Archivist* 53, no. 1 (1990): 110–20.

[46] Society of American Archivists, *Archival Outlook*, January/February (1998): 17.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John A. Fleckner began his archival career as a graduate student in F. Gerald Ham's introductory course. Ham hired him at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1971, and he served as local government records and statewide extension services archivist for eleven years. SAA published his volume on records surveys in the Basic Manual Series in 1977 and *Native American Archives: An Introduction* in 1984. Fleckner went to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History to establish its Archives Center in 1982. He served on the SAA's Task Force on Goals and Priorities and later chaired the SAA Goals and Priorities Committee. Fleckner is an SAA Fellow and served as SAA president in 1989–1990. Fleckner retired from the Smithsonian in 2007 but continues to teach a graduate-level introduction to archives course in the collaborative program of the Smithsonian Institution and George Washington University's Museum Studies Department. He delivered an abbreviated version of this paper at the SAA 2013 Annual Meeting in New Orleans in a panel entitled "Ideal and Real: Striving for Archival Perfection in an Imperfect World."

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-02 via free access