12-2002

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Elizabeth M. Nuxoll

Columbia University, emn2109@columbia.edu

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In Memoriam: E. James Ferguson
1917–2002

E. James (Jim) Ferguson, founding editor and project director of The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781–1784, died at his home in Maryland on September 11, 2002, at age 85. He is survived by his wife of 60 years, Louise, his son Bruce, and two grandchildren.

Born in Provo, Utah, in 1917, Jim received his bachelor’s degree in 1939 and his master’s degree in 1941 at the University of Washington, where he studied under Merrill Jensen. After wartime service from 1941 to 1945 as a technical sergeant in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, he became one of Jensen’s first Ph.D. students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he received his doctorate in 1951. He thus became one of the earliest members of a renowned school of progressive Early American historians that followed in the footsteps of Charles Beard and reshaped interpretations of the Revolution, Confederation, Constitution, and Early National Periods. His thesis on Revolutionary-era public finance culminated in major articles in the Mississippi Valley Historical Review, the William and Mary Quarterly, and the Journal of Southern History during the 1950s and finally in the classic The Power of the Purse: A History of American Public Finance, 1776–1790. Published in 1961 by the University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Power of the Purse won the American Historical Association’s John H. Dunning Prize in 1962. It remains an influential and widely used work, much appreciated by the many historical editors who have depended on his lucid explanations of complex and abstruse topics for guidance in annotating their own editions. As John Catanzariti, Ferguson’s student, coeditor, and successor as editor of the Morris Papers, commented in Newsday, “No work before, and none in the 40 years since, has explained with such extraordinary clarity the intricate financial history of the American Revolution and its fundamental connection to the major political and constitutional themes of our early national history.”

Jim Ferguson began his teaching career as an instructor at the University of Maryland in 1947, and, apart from various guest lectureships and his years with the university’s extension program in Europe (1955–57), remained at Maryland until 1964, when he joined the faculty of Queens College of the City University of New York in Flushing, Queens. A fortuitous meeting at the American Revolution Roundtable at Fraunces Tavern with Richard Hexter of the Wall Street firm of Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette, owner of a major collection of rare books and documents in American financial history, led to a startup grant for an edition of Robert Morris’s diary while at the Office of Finance, which Hexter admired for its depiction of a master administrator at work. Upon further consultation with the then National Historical Publications Commission, Jim broadened the edition to include Morris’s letterbooks and other papers as head of both the Office of Finance and the Marine Department of the Confederate government. Ferguson’s historical expertise, combined with the superb editing skills he had honed as visiting editor of publications at the Institute of Early American History and Culture in 1960–61 and as editor of The Selected Writings of Albert Gallatin, published in 1967, made him the ideal editor for the project, which opened its doors in 1968. Jim continued as editor through 1980 when an accidental fall caused serious head injury. Although time and extensive therapy enabled him to resume an active lifestyle in Laguna Hills, California, and to provide invaluable advice to his successors.
as editor emeritus of the Morris edition, his health did not permit him fully to resume his scholarly career. He officially retired in 1984.

During his tenure, Ferguson edited the first five volumes of the Morris edition, coedited the sixth volume, and trained a generation of graduate students as editors and scholars, several of whom continued as longtime editors on the Morris project or went on to other editions. Among the editors he helped to train were John Catanzariti of the Morris and Jefferson editions, Mary A. Y. Gallagher and Nelson Dearmont of the Morris edition, NHPRC fellow Elaine F. Crane, later editor of the Diary of Elizabeth Drinker, and, of course, myself. As a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center, he taught graduate courses in American history and supervised several doctoral dissertations, including Rudy Bell’s *Party and Faction in American Politics: The House of Representatives, 1789–1801*, published by Greenwood Press in 1973, John E. O’Connor’s biography, *William Patterson Lawyer and Statesman, 1745–1806*, published by Rutgers University Press in 1979, and my own *Congress and the Munitions Merchants: The Secret Committee of Trade During the American Revolution, 1775–1778*, published in Arno Press’s series of Dissertations in American Economic History in 1985.

While in New York, Jim did not limit his own scholarship to his role as historical editor. He continued to pen numerous book reviews, including those for all but one volume of the *Hamilton Papers*. He produced a series of major articles and papers, including “The Nationalists of 1781–1783 and the Economic Interpretation of the Constitution” (*Journal of American History*, September 1969); “Merrill Jensen, A Personal Comment,” in *The Human Dimensions of Nation Making: Essays on Colonial and Revolutionary America* (Madison, Wis., 1976); and “Congressional Investigation of Government Corruption during the American Revolution” (*Congressional Studies*, 1981), for which I was privileged to act as coauthor. Shortly before his accident, Jim won a fellowship to the Huntington Library where he conducted extensive research in comparative English and American economic thought and policy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, entering a field that subsequently became a major trend in Early American History. His research had advanced far enough to produce the masterful “Political Economy, Public Liberty, and the Formation of the Constitution,” published in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in July 1983. During these years Jim also edited *National Unity on Trial, 1781–1816* (1970), volume II in the Random House Readings in American History, and *The Constitution, Constitution and Early National Periods, 1781–1815* (1974), in the Goldentree Bibliographies in American History, and composed one of the best written and most concise texts for the period, *The American Revolution: A General History, 1763–1790* (Dorsey Press, 1974, rev. ed., 1979). Such works demonstrated Jim’s thorough research, brilliant analytical and synthesizing skills, and talent for writing with such speed, accuracy, clarity, and concision on abstruse subjects that it disguises, to those who have not tried to tackle such topics, the difficulty of the task. Those of us, his students, who emulated his achievements in the field, but, despite his guidance, could never come close to matching them, were not fooled by the fact that he made it all look easy. What we found even more amazing was that he still had energy to spare for gracious entertaining, gardening, salmon fishing, and travel to archeological sites in Mexico, Greece, Crete, and elsewhere.

Like Clarence L. VerSteeg of Northwestern University, author of the prizewinning *Robert Morris: Revolutionary Financier, with an Analysis of his Earlier Career*, whom Ferguson recruited as editorial advisor for the Morris project, Jim was a member of the twentieth century’s “Greatest Generation” that served in World War II. They brought to the edition the awareness of the importance of national unity and effective mobilization of resources that Morris represented. At the same time, they retained a critical awareness, honed during the Roaring Twenties and ensuing Great Depression, of the potential dangers and dilemmas derived from the influence of business or “special interests” with which Morris has also long been associated. Perhaps the most frequently quoted of Jim’s writings are lines like these from *Power of the Purse*: “The merchant whose career owed most to the fertile linkage of public office and private business was Robert Morris.” Ferguson’s noting that during the 1790s federal accountants declared Morris owed over $80,000 on his various accounts with the Continental Congress, and his challenge to “[t]he myth ... that Morris financed the Revolution out of his own pocket” are favorites with those who prefer a scoundrel image of Morris as “Founding Finagler.” The Jensenist author of such statements would seem an unlikely person to devote so large a portion of his scholarly life to an edition of Morris’s documents. Over time, Jim, a scholar who never let ideological considerations blind him to the evidence, developed a more nuanced, balanced and positive view of Morris’s over-
all contributions and included it in interpretations advanced in the edition. In his introduction to volume one, Jim revised his familiar phrases to the more accurate but less quotable: "A popular tradition survives that he [Morris] financed the Revolution with his private fortune, an idea that adequately conveys neither his contribution to American development, which was of a higher level of significance, nor the relationship between his private fortune and the Revolution, in which the benefits were reciprocal." But even in Power of the Purse, Ferguson stressed Morris's importance to preservation of national unity and constitutional development and added to the remarks quoted above that, "If it is rather the other way around—that the Revolution financed Robert Morris—he was nevertheless one of the great men of his time." Nevertheless, despite his growing respect for Nationalist and Federalist achievements, Jim retained his underlying populist sympathy for more "democratic" or "equalitarian" forms of public finance, his belief in the viability of the much-maligned paper money and the efficacy of "currency finance" under many circumstances, and his admiration for the contributions of Antifederalist and Democratic-Republican political economists and politicians like Albert Gallatin, Blair McClanachan, Matthew Carey, William Findley, and John Smilie. Jim would no doubt have advanced further study of such alternative thinkers in England and America had the fates allowed.

Jim Ferguson's contributions to documentary editing as editor and project director of The Papers of Robert Morris and as editor of The Selected Writings of Albert Gallatin have long been recognized by scholars and served as models for other editors. Though his work was tragically cut short by accident, illness, and now death, what he accomplished as teacher, author, and editor during the time allowed him, any of us would be delighted to equal, and few expect ever to surpass. We, his students, his colleagues, and his friends, will long admire his writing skill, his scholarly insight, his intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm, his zest for life, his humor, and his endurance in adversity.

—Elizabeth Nuxoll

E. James Ferguson (left) and Mrs. Louise Ferguson (center) with editors John Catanzariti, Mary Gallagher and Elizabeth Nuxoll at reception for publication of volume 7 of The Papers of Robert Morris, 1989