Custodian of the Past: Arnold M. Shankman

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He was not particularly tall. He would not have won any awards for fashion. His eyesight was poor and he wore large, thick glasses that seemed to cover half his face. Short and rumpled, modest and unassuming, Arnold Shankman had an air and visage that might best be described as “bookish.” Typical, perhaps, for an historian. Yet Shankman’s appearance and demeanor belied a passion that undergirded his work and rippled throughout his life to the great benefit of both his profession and all who knew him. He “burned with the fire of professionalism,” as one colleague said, so that by the time of his death from cancer at age 37, Shankman had created a legacy of scholarship that is both inspiring and edifying. He authored four books, notably, *Ambivalent Friends* and *Human Rights Odyssey*, forty-five journal articles, and a score of other papers, essays and book reviews. Equally impressive, however, is the fact that, within a profession Shankman himself described as “cantankerous,” Shankman’s generous and sympathetic nature engendered in turn the love and devotion of friends, students, and colleagues alike.

Dr. Arnold M. Shankman was Professor of History at Winthrop University from 1975-1983. Devoted to his profession, Shankman’s scholarship and teaching focused on the Civil War, the history of the South, and the history of various ethnic and minority groups in America, particularly African-Americans, Jews, and women. He was a popular lecturer and well known for his sense of humor and his joy in teaching. He corresponded frequently with friends and colleagues, generously providing advice and assistance, from encouraging words, to letters of recommendation, to even enthusiastic help with research to his fellow historians. Though often saddled with ill health, Shankman managed an impressive work load, in addition to his teaching and research, that included significant service to both the University and the community. Among his many accomplishments, Dr. Shankman was instrumental in the development of the Winthrop Archives, where his papers are now stored.

During his career, Dr. Shankman established a reputation for meticulous research and historical accuracy. Once asked to speak on the topic of “History – Why Bother?” Shankman identified the historian as a “custodian of the past” whose job is to “describe and record as accurately as possible the facts of the past.” For Arnold Shankman, researching and reporting history was an important responsibility that he took very seriously. “At times the historian is justified if he is selective,” he said, “never can he adequately rationalize being sloppy.” If his shoes were sometimes scuffed and his shirt a bit unkempt, Shankman was never sloppy in what he considered his highest calling, an early and ongoing passion for history, from which he never wavered.

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1 Glenn Thomas, President, Winthrop College, March 7, 1983, at the Memorial Service for Arnold Shankman.
3 Ibid.
The Student

The first son of Jewish immigrants, Shankman was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on November 11, 1945. By the ninth grade, history had become his favorite subject. Although he had other interests, such as cooking and his Jewish faith, the study of history would remain virtually a single-minded pursuit for the rest of his life, a calling for which Shankman seemed particularly well-equipped. According to his younger brother, Harvey, his only sibling, Shankman had a prodigious memory and could read at a phenomenal 1800 words per minute.

After graduating from Shaker Heights High School in Cleveland, Shankman entered Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, on a PTA scholarship. There, in the 1960s, Shankman wrote history articles for the school newspaper, amid ads for six-packs of Budweiser at $1.29, announcements for the latest film, “Valley of the Dolls,” and regular reports of the latest opposition to the Vietnam War. But it was opposition to the century-old American Civil War that intrigued Shankman, and which would eventually become one of his major subjects of research.

At Knox, Shankman was awarded the Szold Prize for “extraordinary interest and merit in pursuing historical studies.” He was a member of Pi Sigma Alpha and Phi Beta Kappa honorary societies. He graduated *cum laude* with a B.A. in history and was selected as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow and a Ford Fellow in subsequent years, providing scholarships for his four years of graduate study. By the time he began to consider graduate school, Shankman had developed an academic interest in the South. As he would describe it later:

[In college] I once had the chance to enroll in a seminar on the distinctiveness of the Middle West. I passed up that opportunity. I doubted that the Midwest was all that different. What I wanted to take was a course on the uniqueness of the South, for I was sure that the South was distinctive. Alas, that was nearly a decade before Jimmy Carter and Dixie was not sufficiently fashionable to be a part of the curriculum. My interest in the South then, I confess, was mainly academic. But, as things turned out, when it came time to think about graduate school I had resolved to study the Civil War and the scholar under whose tutelage I wanted to study taught in Atlanta.  

The scholar with whom Shankman wished to study was Bell Wiley, noted Civil War historian and Professor at Emory University, who had made his mark on the historiography of the War by bringing to light previously untold stories of ordinary individuals in books such as *The Plain People of the Confederacy; The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy;* and *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union.* Wiley’s influence on Shankman would prove to be significant, and the two developed a close personal relationship. Not only did Wiley supervise Shankman’s dissertation on the anti-Civil War, or “Copperhead,” movement in Pennsylvania, providing extensive advice and commentary, but Wiley’s courteous

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manner seems to have set an example for Shankman. Shankman admired Wiley’s practice of writing commendation letters to students who had shown exceptional achievement in his classes. In at least one instance, Shankman went one step further—writing a letter to a student’s parents, commending them for raising an accomplished student.5

Shankman clearly felt a great deal of respect and admiration for his friend and mentor. In the same letter he remarked modestly, “I would be happy to be one-tenth as fine a human being as [Bell Wiley].” Shankman was one of several contributors to a festschrift in honor of Wiley at his retirement, Rank and File: Civil War Essays in Honor Of Bell Irvin Wiley, published in 1976. Wiley’s own affection for Shankman is captured in this letter written by Mrs. Wiley just a few weeks after Wiley died, apparently in reply to a letter of condolence from Shankman: “Thank you for your loving letter. So often Bell Wiley said to me ‘Arnold has one of the very best minds I have ever had as a student.’ Also, he loved you. Thank you for always being a joy to him.”6 Shankman was Wiley’s last doctoral student.

Once his dissertation was complete, Shankman spent two years as a Visiting Assistant Professor of History at Oxford College of Emory University (1972-73), and Emory College of Emory University (1974-75). During the interim school year, 1973-74, Shankman was awarded a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities to study ethnic history at Harvard. There, he had the good fortune to work with the internationally renowned and pioneering scholar in ethnic and immigration studies, Oscar Handlin. Handlin’s influence and the foundation in ethnic studies that he received at Harvard were instrumental in preparing Shankman for his second major area of scholarship—immigration and ethnic relationships.

The Professor

Back in Atlanta after his fellowship at Harvard, Shankman earnestly searched for a permanent teaching position, expressing concern about the tight job market in numerous letters to friends and colleagues. In the spring of 1975, Shankman’s search was rewarded and he accepted an offer from Winthrop University in Rock Hill, S.C., to begin that fall. In June, as he eagerly made plans to look at apartments in Rock Hill, Shankman learned that a salivary tumor near his jaw was malignant. Nevertheless, Shankman assured Fred Heath, the chair of Winthrop’s History Department, that he was fine after a brief hospitalization, and “eager to make up for lost time.”7

There is some evidence that Shankman knew when he first came to Winthrop that his cancer had metastasized and thus, his prognosis was uncertain at best. This may explain in part why Shankman’s life during his seven years at Winthrop was a beehive of activity. In fact, except for the few times he was hospitalized, Shankman never seemed to slow down. Even his letters were often signed, “In Haste, Arnold.” In one letter to a colleague, after listing the multitude of projects in which he was involved, Shankman

6 Letter from Mrs. Bell Wiley to Arnold Shankman, April 15, 1980.
7 Letter from Arnold Shankman to Fred Heath, June 26, 1975.
commented, “Rock Hill would be boring if I had nothing to do; at present, I do not think I will get bored.”

In addition to his teaching responsibilities, Shankman carried a substantial load of administrative duties. During his time at Winthrop he served on various committees, such as the Curriculum Committee for the College of Arts and Sciences, the Faculty Library Committee, and the Forum Committee. He served several years as the adviser to the History honor society, Phi Alpha Theta. He also was editor of the Winthrop Self-Study in 1980, a time-consuming, tedious, and thankless task. Most important, however, Shankman was named by President Charles Vail in 1979 to serve on a new committee charged with developing the University’s Archives, a role Shankman must have relished, for he had a great love of libraries. He worked diligently on the Advisory Committee for Archives and Special Collections and was instrumental in helping to develop guidelines for Winthrop’s Archives that are still in use today. He also worked eagerly and often successfully in lobbying individuals to donate their personal papers of historical significance to the Archives, and he helped compile a guide to archival material held in Southeast repositories concerning Native Americans. In 1982, he received a Presidential Citation from Winthrop’s President for “notable service in building library and archival collections.”

But for all of Shankman’s busyness related to his own research and his diligence in performing the various administrative duties to which he was assigned, Shankman consistently asserted “I consider teaching to be the single most important of my responsibilities at Winthrop.” During his tenure at Winthrop, in addition to American History survey classes, Shankman taught primarily courses on the Old South and the Civil War. He also taught, at various times, “The Black Experience in the United States,” “History of American Minority Groups,” and “American Social History,” all classes that he personally developed and added to the curriculum. By all accounts, Shankman was a popular instructor who tended to lecture while sitting on a desk. He used a variety of teaching methods depending on the class, and was a trendsetter in the use of oral histories as a teaching tool. Shankman’s papers include class files containing long topical essays that may have been the basis for his lectures, which Shankman appears to have typed largely from memory or with a minimum of notes.

Shankman was not a self-promoter. If anything, he was more likely to seek recognition for someone else than for himself. But in a form document, completed to support his own promotion, Shankman modestly reported that “student feedback on my teaching is quite positive,” and “insofar as I can determine I have good rapport with students. Although my survey classes are not at prime times … they attract large enrollments. …I make myself accessible to students and spend a considerable amount of time working with them.” In a memo from his colleague, Louise Pettus, to the chair of the History Department in 1980, Ms. Pettus reported feedback received from student

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8 Letter from Arnold Shankman to Mark Bauman,
teachers who were history majors. The student teachers commended three professors, including Dr. Shankman, for being “excellent models for their own teaching.” Shankman was commended in particular “for his insistence on student participation and his methods for getting it.”

From the outset, Shankman tried to connect with his students. He made a deliberate effort to remember the names of individuals, writing mnemonic notations next to student names on class rolls, such as “red hair” or “granny glasses.” Unmarried and without children of his own, perhaps Shankman felt a particular empathy with his students. Shankman’s papers contain numerous letters written to or on behalf of students showing his willingness to go the extra mile in their support, especially when he saw latent talents in need of nurturing. Indeed, judging from the numerous thank you notes from students contained in his papers, Shankman was a favorite professor and had a positive impact on the lives of many students. As one student confided at his memorial service: “He guided me through my college education and in his kind and understanding way, helped me to find the best road for my future. … Not only was he interested in his students academically, but he also showed an interest in other aspects of their lives.”

The Scholar

It is apparent that Shankman enjoyed the study of history; by his own testimony and that of his students, it is clear that he loved to teach history; and from the significant body of published work that he produced during his professional career, it is manifest that Arnold Shankman loved to write history. A social historian who wrote in a clear, descriptive style, Shankman eschewed complex or speculative analysis in favor of expository narratives. Indicative of the quality and lasting value of his scholarship, his works are often still cited in books and academic journals, and used as readings in college classes. Although the internet was just an embryo when he died, Shankman would no doubt be flattered to see his work cited today in online discussions and even a thing called “Wikipedia.” Scholars most often cite his work in three areas: 1) ethnic history, especially how ethnic groups interrelated and viewed each other; 2) the northern opposition to the Civil War; and 3) Southern Jewish history.

His dissertation and most of his early research dealt with the Civil War and the mid-nineteenth century South but he maintained a secondary interest in ethnic history, publishing his first article related to Jewish history in 1971. While most of his articles prior to 1975 related to the Civil War, almost all of them after that year concerned civil rights, minority issues, or ethnic history, including Jewish and African-American history.

Whether the subject was the Civil War or civil rights, Shankman’s work reveals a recurring theme: his focus on the individual and a concern that individual stories be

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10 Memo from Louise Pettus to Birdsall Viault, May 1, 1980.
11 Even as a freshman in college, Shankman’s papers showed a “literary flourish,” according to one professor in a handwritten comment on a paper from December 1966.
preserved. Surely, the influence of his great mentor, Bell Wiley, is evident to some degree in this theme, but it is likely that Shankman’s sympathy for the individual may have begun earlier, with the visit to Knox College in March 1968 by Dr. Frank Klement of Marquette University. Dr. Klement spoke to the Knox History Club on “The Meaning of the Civil War,” according to an article written by Shankman for the Knox student newspaper.  

Shankman’s article is revealing for two reasons. First, it indicates that Klement’s talk may have planted a seed in Shankman’s mind, or at least reinforced his own predilections. According to Shankman’s article, Klement asserted that Civil War historiography “should focus upon the participants in that war and the meanings that the war had for them. Too often one forgets that the politicians, storekeepers, teachers, and farmers all had vital roles during the war. To each man, woman, and child the war had a unique meaning, and by examining these meanings, one can better understand the true importance of the conflict.”  

Later, Shankman would devote a significant amount of his scholarly work to recording the history of individuals who played varying roles, large and small, in the making of American society in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Shankman’s article reporting on the Klement visit, one of several that he wrote for the paper, is also interesting because it reveals his early interest in writing. In the article, Shankman did not merely regurgitate Klement’s remarks. Rather, he seized the opportunity to expound upon his own knowledge of an individual whom Klement had not discussed – Philip Sidney Post, a civil war colonel, newspaper editor, and politician from Galesburg, Illinois, where Knox College is located. Shankman’s knowledge of Post was well founded – while a student, he authored a research guide for the use of the Philip Sidney Post manuscript collection housed at Knox.

Shankman had a particular penchant for minority viewpoints. At Knox, he was part of an effort to establish a new “group interest course” on the topic of “American Negro History since 1830.” His master’s thesis examined the life and career of Clement Vallandigham, a little-known Ohio politician who was part of the minority movement in the North opposing the Civil War. The “copperheads,” as they were known, were also the subject of Shankman’s dissertation, which explored the movement in Pennsylvania and became the foundation for his book, The Pennsylvania Antiwar Movement, 1861-1865. When published in 1980, it was touted as “the first book-length treatment of peace sentiment in Civil War Pennsylvania.” Shankman asserted that antiwar democrats in Pennsylvania were not traitors, as many had previously characterized them, but rather were Lincoln’s “loyal opponents” who were alarmed by certain threats to constitutional liberties brought on by the war. According to reviewers, Shankman had shown “dogged persistence” in collecting sources for the book, and he had provided “extensive new evidence mined from newspapers and manuscript

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14 Ibid.
holdings,” to support a revisionist view of the northern opposition, making the copperheads, “now more like garter snakes.”

Many of Shankman’s publications chronicle the stories of southerners who went against the grain of their larger cultural communities. For example, in the 1970s, Shankman discovered the work of white civil rights activist Marion A. Wright, a lawyer from South Carolina who in 1928 had witnessed South Carolina’s first executions by electric chair, a formative experience in the evolution of Wright’s life and work. Wright went on to become an outspoken opponent of the death penalty and a vigorous supporter of the civil rights movement. During a time in the South when civil rights was not a popular cause, Marion Wright was that rare commodity – a Southern white liberal.

Shankman contacted Wright, then living in retirement in the mountains of North Carolina and began a long correspondence and working relationship leading to the publication of Human Rights Odyssey, a compilation of Wright’s speeches and letters, with commentary by Shankman. Shankman’s exhaustive review of Wright’s papers and his active effort to publish Wright’s most notable speeches have helped to preserve the legacy of one of the South’s less widely known defenders of civil liberties. Human Rights Odyssey won the Lillian Smith award from the Southern Regional Council for best non-fiction book on the South.

Similarly, Shankman documented the work of an obscure civil rights advocate from Georgia, Dorothy Tilly. Shankman’s description of Tilly evidences his expressive writing style: “Frail, barely five feet tall, addicted to hats with roses, she was, at first glance, an unlikely crusader for civil rights, but few fought as hard and with as much conviction as she to better the lives of black southerners.” At first working just within her local Methodist church, Tilly became such a successful advocate for civil rights and improved race relations that she was often asked to speak and even to serve as a peacemaker in tense situations.

Shankman also publicized the story of Julian Harris (son of Joel Chandler Harris), who as editor of a Columbus, Georgia, newspaper, The Enquirer-Sun, in the 1920s, wrote editorials that advocated better treatment of blacks and denounced lynchings and other inhumane practices. So effective was Harris in decrying the inequities of justice prevalent at the time, that the Enquirer-Sun was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for “meritorious public service” rendered by an American newspaper. Shankman recognized that Harris harbored segregationist views, reflected in his opposition many years later to the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education, but he contended that Julian Harris nevertheless “deserves to be remembered as a courageous crusading editor who demanded justice for blacks when it was neither popular nor safe to

Shankman also helped preserve the story of Mildred and Mary Hicks, two sisters from Georgia who were socialists and advocates of an income distribution plan in the 1930s that they hoped would end the Depression. Shankman’s article “The Five-Day Plan and the Depression,” was based on family manuscripts in the Emory University Archives, local newspapers from the 1930s, and interviews with several individuals who had known the Hicks sisters. Not only is it a good example of Shankman’s tendency to leave no stone unturned in telling a story but it also represents the value of Shankman’s work. As Linda Matthews, an archivist at Emory, told Shankman: “The continuing saga of the Hicks sisters, whom you have single handedly raised from oblivion to at least historical respectability, never fails to entertain and instruct.”

In the introduction to his seminal work, Ambivalent Friends: Afro-Americans View the Immigrant, Shankman notes that he began researching blacks and immigrants in 1972 but searched in vain for about a year before he discovered a wealth of information in black newspapers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There, he found ample discussion of immigrants, including not only information about Jews, but also Chinese, Mexican and Japanese immigrants. Shankman published most of his findings in various academic journals in subsequent years, then compiled, revised, and updated them as Ambivalent Friends in 1982.

When he began researching the interrelations of ethnic minorities, Shankman was one of only a handful of historians focusing on the subject, a fact that he frequently pointed out in his publications. With his articles and Ambivalent Friends, Shankman shed new light on the interrelationship between African-Americans and various ethnic groups. For example, Shankman learned from black newspapers that, while some blacks expressed sympathy for the Japanese over prejudicial incidents, others were themselves prejudiced against the Japanese and harbored both resentment over potential competition for jobs and a distaste for perceived cultural differences. Similar ambivalence existed toward the Chinese but, according to Shankman, the African-American view of the Chinese from 1850 to about 1935 was predominantly negative. Not only were the Chinese potential competitors for jobs, but they were also very different – even odd – in their beliefs and customs. As Shankman noted, “many blacks were devout Protestants… and they were unable to rid themselves of the image of the Chinese as heathens who smoked opium, conducted gambling lotteries, desecrated the Sabbath, engaged in the white slave trade, and participated in tong wars.” These historical

22 Ibid., 456.
23 The Historian, XLIII (1981), 393-409.
24 Letter from Linda M. Matthews, Reference Archivist, Emory University, to Arnold Shankman, Nov. 28, 1981.
27 Ambivalent Friends, p.22
28 Ibid., 23.
viewpoints were important to understand, Shankman noted, because they helped to explain the origins of lingering attitudes between ethnic groups documented in contemporary sociological studies.

Of the various ethnic groups whom Shankman chose to study, the Jews accounted for the most significant portion of his research. Perhaps because of his own background and faith, Shankman showed a special interest in the history of Jews in the South. As implied in the title of one of his early articles, “Southern Jews: People in Need of a History,” Shankman believed that not enough attention had been given to southern Jews by historians and set about to rectify this oversight, through such articles as “Atlanta Jewry, 1900-1930” and “Happyville: The Forgotten Colony.” Happyville was a short-lived Jewish agricultural colony established in Aiken, South Carolina in 1905. Shankman used state records, newspapers and individual interviews to trace the rise and fall of the colony, preserving an interesting chapter in South Carolina’s immigration history. While researching Happyville, Shankman became familiar with Mina Surasky Tropp and Esther Surasky Pinck, two accomplished Jewish sisters whose own stories Shankman helped to record and publicize.

The Person

In the stacks of future libraries and indices of academic journals, Arnold Shankman will be remembered as a reputable historian with a respectable list of publications that, at least for a time, will retain their historical value in the annals of scholarship. But to see Arnold Shankman in this light alone would do a grave injustice to his character as a person. For as one of his friends noted, Shankman’s “scholarship was not coldly logical or purely factual; it was permeated with that warmth and concern for his fellow man.” This concern is reflected in Shankman’s essay, “History – Why Bother?” in which he explained:

History can teach us to understand – or at least to appreciate – the attitudes and culture of others. …We live in a world, and unless we wish to be an island, we need to learn how to appreciate our differences and to love people because they are different.

Shankman’s life was a reflection of his genuine love and caring for others. Material possessions, on the other hand, were of little concern to him. “Not everything has to have a dollar and cents value,” he said, “or we are in big trouble.” Frugal to a fault, Shankman saved money by taking notes on all types of paper scraps and using the

30 *American Jewish Archives*, XXV (1973) 131-55.
35 Ibid.
reverse side of used paper for the carbon copies of his typed letters and manuscripts. Yet he was generous in his gifts to others and especially in his donations to libraries, commonly giving books in memory of others. He seems never to have sought recognition for himself – other than to obtain academic promotions when they were due – but he was zealous in his pursuit of recognition for others. For example, Shankman was singularly responsible for Winthrop’s bestowing of an honorary degree on Marion Wright. In addition, Shankman was so impressed with Esther Pinck, a Winthrop Alumna from the Class of 1912, that he nominated her for the Mary Mildred Sullivan Award in 1981. Not satisfied that she did not win the award that year, he nominated her again in 1982 when, no doubt as a direct result of Shankman’s persistence, she was honored with the Award for her many contributions to charitable causes throughout her life.

A member of Temple Israel in Charlotte, North Carolina, Shankman was committed to his Jewish faith. He hosted Seders in his home and was careful to ensure that kosher Jewish visitors to Winthrop were properly accommodated by the cafeteria. On another occasion, he hosted a special party to celebrate the publication of a friend’s book of poetry. In this and many other respects, Shankman exposed a sensitive and caring nature, further evidenced by the volumes of correspondence – hundreds of notes and letters from friends and colleagues – included in his papers, which reveal the many kindnesses he conveyed.

Did Shankman possess any vice? His papers seem to document only his intelligence, integrity, humility, courtesy, kindness, generosity, and a continuing list of positive attributes. And yet, buried deep within the 30-plus file boxes of papers that Shankman left to the Winthrop Archives, a single letter contains one thin shred of evidence that Shankman had at least one lapse into devious behavior. In July, 1974, while studying at Harvard, and to help a fellow historian, it appears that Shankman illicitly made copies of certain source material from an archive that would not have been permitted but for the fact that Shankman made the copies “on a Saturday when the professional help is off.” “[I]f the archivist knew I had photocopied any of the material,” Shankman confided to the beneficiary of his escapade, “I would be in big trouble.” Even if he did break the rules, it seems, it was only for a good cause.

In many ways, Arnold Shankman was the ideal historian. History – learning it, telling it, and teaching it – was not just a passion for him, it was his life. Dr. Shankman had a unique skill set that well equipped him to become, in a relatively short period of time, a noted scholar in every subject that he chose to study. Intelligent, curious, and dogged in pursuit of detail, Shankman’s personal integrity and facile writing style led to a volume of writing that is remarkable for its meticulous documentation and relevancy. From his early work on the anti-war movement in Pennsylvania during the Civil War, to his pioneering work in ethnic history, and to his focus on civil rights and women’s issues, Shankman used both his professional skills and his compassionate nature to capture countless stories of historical importance and human interest that might have been overlooked otherwise. As Shankman himself would say about so many of the individuals whose stories he brought to light, Arnold Shankman deserves to be remembered.