

Hamilton, William Baskerville ^[1]

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by Robert F. Durden, 1988

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William Baskerville Hamilton, historian, was born in Jackson, Miss., the oldest son of William B. and Bessie Cavett Hamilton. After attending the public schools in Jackson, he received an A.B. degree from the University of Mississippi in 1928 and an M.A. in 1931. He taught in the public schools of Holly Springs and Jackson, Miss., from 1928 until 1934, when he entered the Graduate School of [Duke University](#) ^[2]. Beginning two years before he received his Ph.D. in 1936, Hamilton taught in the [Department of History at Duke](#) ^[3] until his death.

He began his career as a specialist in the history of the American South, having written a much-used dissertation on the Mississippi Territory under the supervision of Professor [William K. Boyd](#) ^[4]. Hamilton also received solid training in British history from Professor [William T. Laprade](#) ^[5], and most of his teaching and publishing were in the areas of modern British constitutional and political history and the history of the British Commonwealth. These interests led him to play a prominent part in the establishment of the Center for Commonwealth Studies at Duke University and to make numerous trips to Canada and England in connection with his scholarly projects. He also made similar trips to New Zealand, Australia, Ghana, and Nigeria.

At Duke University, Hamilton took a special interest in the library and served on the library council for a number of years, including one term as its chairman. He was also the chief builder of the British Historical Manuscripts Collection in the Perkins Library of Duke University. As president of the Duke chapter of the American Association of University Professors in 1949–50, he took the lead in presenting the faculty's proposals for a Faculty Senate and was elected a member of the Committee on Faculty Reorganization, which was created in 1951 and led to the rewriting of the university's bylaws and the establishment of a University Council. After serving as a member of the Council for several terms, Hamilton held the vice-chairmanship (with the president of the university as chairman) in 1960–61. From 1962 to 1964 he served as the first chairman of the Academic Council, which was the successor of the earlier body.

A Fellow of the Royal Historical Society of Great Britain, Hamilton was also a member of a number of professional organizations in addition to Phi Beta Kappa and Omicron Delta Kappa. He was a longtime member of the Southern Historical Association and served as the chairman of its European History Section in 1962–63.

Hamilton became the managing editor of the [South Atlantic Quarterly](#) ^[6] in 1956, after he had edited and written an introductory essay for an anthology, *Fifty Years of the South Atlantic Quarterly* (Durham, 1952). His most important book was *Anglo-American Law on the Frontier: Thomas Rodney and His Territorial Cases* (Durham, 1953); he also edited a volume on the British Commonwealth, *The Transfer of Institutions* (Durham, 1964), and was the author of over two dozen scholarly articles and chapters in books.

He married Mary Elizabeth Boyd on 27 May 1938, and they had one child, Elizabeth Cavett, who was born in 1940. Mrs. Hamilton died 5 Mar. 1954.

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