The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Philip Lloyd White, professor emeritus, history, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
PHILIP LLOYD WHITE

Phil White came to The University of Texas on the recommendation of Allan Nevins, his thesis supervisor, arguably the most respected historian in the country. Under the urging of President Harry Ransom, the University was looking for bright, young faculty from outside Texas; White became one of the so-called “Ransom’s boys” brought on board to teach American Colonial history. White was a Midwesterner from Akron, Ohio. He had served two years in the army during World War II, mostly in England, which he grew to love, and in Paris. He then came home to finish college under the G.I. Bill. In the fall of 1947, he entered Columbia University. After earning an M.A. in economics, he changed his major to American history and government, where he ended up under the tutelage of Allan Nevins. Philip White, at thirty-one years, had just finished his dissertation when the job offer came.

After the war, a prominent New York family had been looking for someone to edit its early family records. Probably with the help of Nevins, though that is not certain, White was given access to two generations of Beekman family papers. It was a treasure trove for a graduate student in search of a dissertation topic, and White made the most of it. He transcribed and edited three volumes, The Beekman Mercantile Papers, 1746-1799, published by the New-York Historical Society in 1956. At the same time, White wrote his dissertation: The Beekmans of New York in Politics and Commerce, 1647-1877. This family history of over 700 pages was the work that brought White to Texas.

He had to choose between two loves: pursue a successful start in politics (He was already president of the West Side Branch of Americans for Democratic Action.) or follow a career in teaching and scholarship. He chose the latter and moved to Austin in 1955, a young, single, assistant professor of history. The very next year, 1956, the New York Historical Society published both his three volumes of mercantile papers and the Beekman family history. Not many assistant professors begin their careers with three published volumes. A year later, Phil applied successfully for a Fulbright grant to England. Before sailing in April, he married a student, Meda Miller, and that summer the couple moved to England. White spent the 1958-59 academic year as a Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Nottingham. It was an experience he long cherished. When they returned to the United States, it was not to Texas, but to the University of Chicago.

Why the switch? Answers are speculative, but suggestions come easily. Within the world of American universities at this time, Chicago far outranked The University of Texas. And the climate was more familiar than Central Texas, which was then experiencing a sustained drought.

White stayed at the University of Chicago as an assistant professor for three years (1959 to 1962), and then he wrote to the history department in Texas to ask if he could return to Austin. The reasons for this change of mind are as obscure as his move to Chicago in the first place. One can easily imagine that Phil White did not get along well with Daniel Boorstin, then an important member of the Chicago faculty and one whose conservative interpretation of American life was already well established. White was an outspoken liberal Democrat and advocate for labor unions. Perhaps foremost, the return to Austin also meant a promotion in rank.

Phil returned to Texas, in the fall of 1962, as an associate professor. As he had before, he at once sought research leave and won a year’s fellowship from the Charles Warren Center at Harvard University. There was to be one more flirtation with the University of Chicago. Meda was doing advanced work in sociology and had a
fellowship in the social psychology lab there. Phil went with her and spent his 1964-65 research year again in Chicago in offices offered by the University.

Back in Austin for good now, Phil White plunged into his work. In the academic field of early American history, the fashion then was for community studies: New England towns, for example, or specific southern regions where similar socioeconomic factors created a recognizable community of shared interests. Community considered as a social organism was central to White. He developed further his early research into colonial New York and his next book was a community study: Beekmantown, New York: Forest Frontier to Farm Community, Austin, 1979. White wrote several minor pieces in these same years. One was a twenty-five page essay on Herbert Levi Osgood. Phil used to say he may have been the only man still living to have read every word Osgood wrote. In collaboration with Norman Graebner and Gilbert Fite, he wrote a textbook, A History of the United States. It went through several editions in 1972 and 1975.

By the end of the 1970s, the fashion in Early American History had shifted from community to issues of race, gender, and ethnicity, none of which intrigued Phil. He had already turned to a new interest that greatly broadened his intellectual horizon. As early as 1972 he began a new undergraduate course, “Nationality and History.” He was searching, in nationality, for that fatal flaw in human relations responsible for the devastating international wars that had already scarred the twentieth century. The search led Phil to put nationality into an international and eventually a global context. It led him to world history.

No discussion of Phil White’s academic career in the 1960s and 1970s would be complete without mention of his political activities on and off the University campus. Choosing an academic career over politics in 1955 did not lessen his political activism, and the community played as strong a role here as it did in his early scholarship. First, he helped create a neighborhood organization where he lived, the West Austin Democrats. He became the chairman of his Travis Country voters’ precinct, and for five years was a member the Travis County Democratic Executive Committee. On the campus, he set to work to organize and inspire students. The early 1970s were chaotic years on American campuses. Phil drew a bright line between radical social and behavioral rebellion, which he rejected, and political activity within the established rules of government. Between 1970 and 1975, he was faculty advisor to several student organizations: the UT Young Democrats, a Student Action Committee, and a highly successful Student Council for Voter Registration. He also tried, although with less success, to unionize the University faculty within the Texas Association of Classroom Teachers. He became president of the UT Chapter and member of the executive committee of the union from 1974 to 1983.

All this did not pass unnoticed by an administration that was deeply rooted in a conservative culture. In 1975, his department recommended White for promotion to full professor. Usually promotion carried with it an increase in salary. That year the college also passed an across the board salary increase. Instead of receiving both raises, White was awarded only one. He believed he was being penalized for his outspoken political activities, and along with several other members of the faculty, he sued for the combined increases. The Texas District court ruled for the University. Several of the plaintiffs appealed, and in 1981, Phil White alone among them was adjudged by the U.S. 5th Circuit Court to have been denied his constitutional right to free speech.

Nevertheless, White began to withdraw from politics and to devote more of his energy to teaching. He was troubled by the fact that nowhere, least of all in the Ivy League, did graduate education include instruction in how to teach. Colleges of education were in very bad repute. Furthermore, in most universities there were few incentives to teach well, nor was there even a consensus of what the goals of good teaching might be. Along with a very few like-minded colleagues, Phil turned to the Center for Teaching Effectiveness at the University and Marilla Svinicki, a specialist in educational psychology who became the center’s director. There ensued long debates with colleagues about “higher level thinking” and “taxonomies of abstraction.”

Phil took over a seminar for graduate students, “Teaching History at the College Level,” that the history faculty generally shunned and tried to make it into a real-life preparation for the classroom. At least the issues would be given the light of day. Even more imaginatively, Phil worked out an agreement with St. Edward’s University to give University of Texas graduate students actual classroom experience while earning academic credit. Unfortunately for Phil, these efforts, about which he was an earnest Don Quixote, met with indifference. By and large, until the 1990s rewards in academe went exclusively to published scholarship: publish or perish.
The same tilting against windmills characterized Phil’s long campaign to persuade the Department of History to create a position in world history. Despite the global nature of the Cold War, no one at the department considered world history an academic subject. Texas high schools did, and already world history was a required course. Phil always wanted to bridge the gap in communication between schoolteachers, community college teachers, and the elite university teachers. In 1985-86, he co-chaired a conference on “Texas, U.S., and World History for Secondary and Community College Teachers of History,” and he began to propose that his department create a new position in world history.

Very few major universities in the United States had yet incorporated world history into their curricula. The academic discipline had only been given birth in debates in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1960s. At first the field seemed confined to a one-year survey course, which seemed to limit its potential development to writing a school textbook. University historians brought up on publish or perish could see no professional career there, and Phil’s department yawned year after year when he urged it to create the new position.

At age sixty-five, largely for family medical reasons, Phil arranged in 1988 to retire to half-time teaching. He continued his studies into the origins of war and also began to plan for a conference on world history and geography that relied heavily on teachers from Texas high schools but also brought to Austin leading scholars in world history from around the country. This conference turned out to be the crowning achievement in Phil’s long struggle. Single handedly, he organized a conference titled “World 2000: Teaching World History and World Geography.” A passage from the announcement published in August 1999 gives an idea of its scope:

WORLD 2000 will offer 50 panels exploring all major regions of the world and thematic topics including all major regions of the world, religion, trade, technology, warfare, migrations, art, agriculture, and culture. Instructional strategy sessions conducted by outstanding teachers will follow most of these panels.

Registration quickly outgrew any facility on the University campus, and the conference was moved to the largest downtown hotel. Phil had persuaded half a dozen of the best-known scholars in the country to attend. Many were personal acquaintances. More importantly, it brought scholars and teachers from high schools, colleges, and universities across the state. Half a dozen members from UT’s history faculty read papers, and others seized the opportunity to meet prestigious visiting scholars. The conference was a dramatically successful validation of Phil White’s long argument about the importance of world history. The department saw the light. It soon created a new position in world history and hired a distinguished scholar to fill it. It is poetic justice that Phil White’s last significant publication should be in a book edited by that new member of the department, Anthony G. Hopkins: “Globalization and the Mythology of the Nation State,” by Philip L. White in Global History: Interactions Between the Universal and the Local (New York, 2006).

White had retired fully in 2000, the year of his World 2000 conference. Squeezed by the exigencies of an ever-growing department, he moved into smaller and smaller office space. He continued to hunt for a universal basis for war. The search led back to the wellsprings of human aggression and to aggressive behavior among all social animals. Meanwhile, he developed cancer and fought tenaciously to continue his studies. At last, he surrendered himself to the care of his wife and children. He died at home on October 15, 2009.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Michael G. Hall (chair), Howard Miller, and Norman Brown.