A Tribute to Robert Grant Crist
September 19, 1924 - January 27, 1995

“Bob” Crist was one of the most loyal, active, and influential officers ever to serve the Pennsylvania Historical Association. A long-time member, he was elected to the council and to the offices of treasurer, vice-president, and president. As chairman of the publications committee and, indeed, in whatever office he held, he was a driving force in the revitalization of the association’s “Pennsylvania History Studies” series. He secured funding grants, wrote, edited, and recruited authors, obtained illustrations, laid out copy, and saw manuscripts through the printing process. As a colleague put it, Bob came to the historical profession “by a different road.” His first professional career was in public relations where he was a partner in his family’s firm, specializing in organizational counseling, writing, and editing. Subsequently, he joined the staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital Association as assistant director, specializing in publications and government relations.

All the while, Bob was fascinated by local and state history. More than occasionally, he used his political contacts for historical causes. He worked with the Hampden Township Civic Club to have the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission preserve the historic Peace Church in Cumberland County and the Priestley House in Northumberland County. He advised the Commission on various projects and was a member of its historical records board. He wrote numerous works on his native lower Susquehanna Valley, including the history of Lower Allen Township and Camp Hill, The Confederate Invasion of the West Shore, 1863, and The Harrisburg Hospital: the First Hundred Years. He was the founder and editor of the Cumberland County Historical Journal.

In addition to an interest in matters historical, Bob had a “gift for organizational leadership” that propelled him not only to the presidency of the Pennsylvania Historical Association but to other important positions as well. He was president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies, the Pennsylvania Historical Foundation, the Society for Political Enquiries, the Cumberland County Historical Society, the Camp Hill Library, the Cumberland County Library System, and the Dickinson College General Alumni Association. He was chairman of the
Cumberland County Board of Assistance, commander of the Camp Hill American Legion Post No. 43, historian of Lowther Manor Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons, member of the Camp Hill and Cumberland-Perry County Vocational School boards, the board of delegates of the Harrisburg Area Community College, and a trustee of Wilson College. He was appointed by President John F. Kennedy to the Commission on the 175th Anniversary of the Constitution. At the time of his death, he was the Pennsylvania Coordinator of "We the People . . . The Citizen and the Constitution," an educational program funded by the Congress of the United States.

For the past fourteen years, Bob taught American Studies, American history, and Pennsylvania history at The Pennsylvania State University's Harrisburg and York campuses. He often traveled from one to the other on alternate days, always remembering when he was to be where. He was an interesting teacher who not only shared with his students his vast knowledge of local history, but who inspired and required them to learn more about it by doing their own research and writing. On the university's "Student Rating of Teaching Effectiveness" forms, Bob consistently received high scores.

For a career as a teacher, researcher, and writer of history, Bob was well-trained. He was graduated from the Camp Hill High School and Dickinson College. While in the United States Army's military intelligence branch during World War II, he was assigned to study German at the University of Pennsylvania, after which he was stationed in Japan. Returning to civilian life in 1946, he went to England's Oxford University on a Fulbright Fellowship and later attended the Dickinson School of Law. The capstone of his formal education was his graduate study emphasizing early American and Pennsylvania history at the Pennsylvania State University, University Park, where he earned the degrees of Master of Arts in 1979 and Doctor of Philosophy in 1981. He wrote an excellent master's thesis on "History and the Myth of Matthew Smith" and an equally fine doctoral dissertation on "John Armstrong: Proprietor's Man."

Bob never became exclusively an "academic." He used his education to expand opportunities for others in his classes, community, and state to learn where they had come from, who they were, and what they could become. He was a model of responsible citizenship. Many Pennsylvanians know more about their Commonwealth because Bob lived here.

The last decade of Bob's life was challenging because of the illness of his son Jeff. Although Jeff's Hodgkins Disease was in remission intermittently, he died on June 6, 1994, at the age of thirty-three. Bob never flinched from his professional duties, but he seemed to feel Jeff's illness and death so very deeply. On December 24, Bob suffered a stroke and died a little more than a month later. His survivors include his wife Christine, and daughters Catherine Crist Marcson and Jessica Crist Graybill.

John B. Frantz