

Prosser Gifford

Library of Congress
Staff Obituary

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Prosser Gifford, founding director of the Library’s Office of Scholarly Programs and of the John W. Kluge Center, died peacefully at his home in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, on July 5. He was 91.

Gifford was born in New York City and earned degrees from Yale University (1951), Merton College, Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar (1953) and Harvard Law School (1956) as well as a Ph.D. in history from Yale University (1964).

He was the first dean of the faculty at Amherst College from 1967 to 1979, where he helped spearhead the opening of admissions to women. He then joined former Oxford colleague James H. Billington as his deputy director at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for

Scholars. Together, they gathered hundreds of outstanding scholars from around the world to collaborate on research, writing and discussions of cultural, national and world issues.

He served at the Wilson Center from 1980 to 1988. In 1990, Billington, by then the Librarian of Congress, brought Gifford to the Library, where he served as the founding director of the Office of Scholarly Programs. Gifford worked with divisions across the Library to help develop a wide range of intellectual programs, such as conferences, publications and exhibitions, for which he often helped raise the funds.

When Billington secured the Kluge benefaction as part of the celebration of the Library's 200th anniversary, Gifford delayed his retirement to oversee the launching of the Kluge Center in 2000. Working closely with the Librarian, he directed the design and construction of the facility, conceptualized and initiated the programs for early career fellows and senior scholars, and brought the first scholars to the center, including Jaroslav Pelikan and John Hope Franklin — both of whom were later named Kluge Prize recipients.

He designed and directed the prize, from conceptualization through the solicitation of nominations from across the world, the multilevel selection process and the award celebration. Gifford also created the Kissinger Program that brought some of the best minds in foreign policy to the Library, initiated the program that brings young scholars from British universities to the Library for research and conceived the Library of Congress staff fellowship.

In short, the foundational programs of today's Kluge Center are the result of Gifford's vision and indefatigable work. He retired from the Library in 2005. Gifford shared Billington's love of poetry. The Poetry and Literature Center became part of the Office of Scholarly Programs and then the John W. Kluge Center during Gifford's tenure. The center flourished under his direction, and Gifford helped the Librarian select the poet laureate of the United States, facilitated the laureate's programs and secured additional poetry programs, including the Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry.

Gifford was an excellent colleague and a gentle and generous spirit, and those who knew him will always smile at the memory of his distinctive laugh, which frequently rang through the Library buildings, announcing his presence....

*[His absence will be felt by family, friends, colleagues,
students and associates in the years ahead]*