A central, strikingly revealing, characteristic of Michael Kammen's half-century-long scholarly career was the rapid growth of his national and international distinction, complete with the winning of a half-dozen of the nation's leading historical prizes and the presidency of the Organization of American Historians (1995-1996), while he simultaneously deepened his commitment to and affection for Cornell. Four months before his death, for example, he was invited to teach an intensive seminar in Buenos Aires about his interpretations of U.S. history to an elite group of young Argentinians. Then, on his return to Cornell, Michael temporarily left retirement to accept the History Department's invitation to teach and administer its Honors Seminar, which he had earlier done with distinction. He taught the seminar until mid-November 2013, when rapidly failing health forced him to resign. The exceptionally wide ranging scholarship delivered in numerous lectures and seminars abroad as well as in the United States, and the remarkable successes as a teacher and administrator at Cornell were two halves of his academic life, with Cornell (especially its students) enjoying much the larger half.

Born in Rochester, New York, Michael was raised in Washington,
DC. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from The George Washington University in 1958. In 1964 Michael received his Ph.D. from Harvard University where he studied under Bernard Bailyn, a distinguished scholar of early American history. The next year he began his career at Cornell, a career marked in 1973 by his appointment to the Newton C. Farr Chair.

Michael's vita lists 27 books. It is a list that begins traditionally then evolves to studies analyzing subjects and approaches that throw strikingly new perspectives on American development. *A Rope of Sand: The Colonial Agents, British Politics, and the American Revolution* (1968), based on his Harvard dissertation, and *Empire and Interest: The American Colonies and the Politics of Mercantilism* (1970), became important contributions to an intense debate over the reasons for the controls the British Empire unsuccessfully attempted to impose on its rebellious New World settlers. But his interests and the range of his research quickly grew to be too large for even the British Empire. In 1971, an innovative text, *The Contrapuntal Civilization: Essays toward a New Understanding of the American Experience*, marked a major turn.

He began using his work in American colonial history to unlock fresh, telling perspectives on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1973, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (1972) won the Pulitzer Prize for history – and began its translation into thirty-three languages – for its analysis of the revealing paradoxes in American culture caused in significant part by their European origins being reshaped over several centuries in the New World's context. *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (1986) presented a unique approach to a much-studied subject by relating not the usual story of the making and political evolution of the Constitution, but how Americans over the following 200 years translated their own views, interpretations, and sometimes blatant biases about the document's clauses to create different contexts and meanings for the original, supposedly venerated Constitution. Michael provided not only this unique approach to understanding the Constitution's history, but offered major, indeed fundamental, challenges to his contemporaries in U.S. Courts and elsewhere who insisted on interpreting the
document with their doctrine of “original intent.”

The volume won the Frances Parkman Prize and the Henry Adams Prize, while becoming a foundation stone for the growing field of aptly named “memory studies.” Michael's contribution to defining the new field climaxed with Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (1991), a book in which he began to apply works on American memory to the evolution of American art, a subject he had long enjoyably studied – not least through the original pieces his spouse, Carol, and he collected on their auto trips across the country. Michael next won the Popular Culture Association's Award for best biography of the year with The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States (1996), a study that used Seldes to demonstrate how distinguished criticism not only helped transform certain arts in America, but could become a constructive center of debate that created wider interest in and perspectives on those arts.

Out of these studies exploring and defining the telling effects of Americans' memories (and also out of the Kammens' research on their auto trips) came the intriguing and highly readable Digging up the Dead (2010), in which Michael explored how the particular, and often peculiar, ideas and memories of some Americans led them to exhume famous compatriots (Jesse James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Frank Lloyd Wright, among others) and rebury them in places these authorities considered more appropriate.

In Michael's hands, memory could therefore exert considerable power on its subjects as well as revealing original, sometimes startling, insights into American character. In 1976, he was part of the year-long National Public Radio series that marked the Bicentennial by delineating the history of all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Michael was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1979. During 1980-1981, he became the first person to hold the new visiting professorship in American history at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris. In 2009, the American Historical Association honored his extraordinary career with its Award for Scholarly Distinction.
But these impressive accomplishments seemed secondary to his commitment to the Cornell campus, its undergraduates, and his Ph.D. candidates, a number of whom became distinguished scholars in a variety of historical fields. As History Department chair in the mid-1970s, he found funding to initiate seminars that explored historical subjects not taught in the usual undergraduate classes, while emphasizing research in primary documents and sophomore level writing instruction. Out of these seminars emerged original faculty-authored books, prizewinning undergraduate essays, and a precedent for other departments. As director of Cornell's Society for the Humanities, he had the difficult task of replacing the leadership of the founding generation, but successfully continued turning the society into a national center for interdisciplinary humanities scholarship.

Michael's devotion to Cornell was uniquely exhibited when he published What is the Good of History? (1973), a superbly edited collection of Carl Becker's letters. Becker, an iconic Cornell historian who died in 1945, had provided a widely accepted motto for Cornell ("freedom and responsibility"), while challenging and redefining basic tenets of the historical profession. He had done so with an unmatched writing style that provided attractive camouflage for his trenchant observations, including the phrase that Michael used for his collection's title. Michael told one of his graduate students that even after completing his Ph.D. at Cornell, both he, the doctoral candidate, and his mentor would still be continuing their search for an answer to Becker's question.

In 1991, Michael seemed to confirm this opinion when he wrote, "What people believe to be true about their past is usually more important . . . than truth itself." That obviously did not mean, however, that historians should give up the Sisyphean labor of making the record more accurate while noting where personal biases had distorted it. Michael made landmark contributions to exploring, and explaining, that record by investigating some three hundred years of American origins and cultural evolution in his books. He also did so by providing historical perspectives on contemporary issues in his many articles and book reviews written for public

All of this came from a gregarious person who enthusiastically (and sometimes engagingly critically) enjoyed theater, music, and sports as well as history and art, and with Carol did so in Ithaca as well as far outside that community. Michael explored those interests with a bottomless curiosity and an obvious passion that helped lead to an ever widening circle of friends, while setting a rarefied intellectual standard for the many students in his classes and the readers of his books and articles. David Blight, president of the Society of American Historians, recalled that “Most of all, he was simply a prince of the profession who supported younger scholars of all kinds. . . . He was a beautiful, decent man of deep humanity.”

His accomplishments at Cornell and far beyond the campus were remarkable, but two close, long-time friends testified that “his devotion to his family trumped everything else.” His spouse, Carol Kammen, an internationally recognized scholar of local history whose publications include significant histories of Cornell and Ithaca, survives, as do their older son, Daniel, the Class of 1935 Distinguished Professor of Energy at the University of California-Berkeley; their younger son, Douglas, Assistant Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore; Michael's sister, Edith; and three grandchildren.

Michael's ashes are buried close to the graves of Moses Coit Tyler and Carl Becker. Their careers shaped much of Cornell's 150-year history, just as their work became distinguished parts of that era's historical scholarship.

Walter LaFeber, Chair; Richard Polenberg; Joel Silbey