

Forty Years of the New Jersey Historical Commission

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The first meeting of the New Jersey Historical Commission took place in February 2007. In the four decades since that first meeting, the Commission has gone through three distinct phases. An initial period of rapid growth lasted roughly 10 years, during which a foundation was laid and activities connected to the bicentennial of the American Revolution predominated. This phase was followed by a roughly 15 year long period of recognized accomplishments as an omnibus public history agency. Although the Commission achieved a great deal in its second phase, it was unable to find funds for many of its projects, and its budget did not keep pace with the budgets of comparable agencies. Its third phase was an approximately decade long struggle to survive, during which three successive gubernatorial administrations proposed to drastically reduce or entirely eliminate the Historical Commission. Each battle resulted in staff layoffs and diminished programmatic reach for the Commission. Whether by design, the organization was turned inside out in its third phase. It was transformed from a programmatic public history agency with a small grant program to a grant giving agency with a small public history component.

The impetus for the creation of the New Jersey Historical Commission lay in two commemorative observances that took place in the early 1960s: the centennial of the Civil War and the 1964 tercentenary of New Jersey's founding. While the temporary commissions created for these anniversaries did their jobs well, some participants saw the bicentennial of the War for Independence and other commemorative possibilities on the horizon. They suggested creating a permanent state government agency to handle these events, including the range of scholarly and educational undertakings associated with them. The Commission's mandate, defined in the 1966 legislation that created it, included producing scholarly and educational materials; fostering museums, libraries, and other historical organizations; and holding

public programs and commemorative events. It had six public members appointed by the governor and two *ex officio* positions: the state librarian and the supervisor of historic sites.

Three men share credit for founding the Historical Commission. John T. Cunningham was a former reporter for the *Newark Evening News* and a prolific author of works for the general public on the history of New Jersey; Richard P. McCormick, a distinguished scholar of Jacksonian America and New Jersey history at Rutgers University, was one of only a few academic historians who trained graduate students to work in the field of New Jersey history; and Roger McDonough was the state librarian. Collectively their backgrounds suggest the founders' intent for the orientation of the new agency.

The Commission, which elected Professor McCormick its first chairman, had a budget of only \$10,000 during its first two fiscal years. As a result, its early meetings were devoted to defining basic purposes, assessing staff needs, and planning New Jersey's participation in the bicentennial of the American Revolution. In Fiscal 1969, because of a desire to see bicentennial work proceed, the legislature appropriated sufficient funds to allow the hiring of an executive director and a secretary. Bernard Bush, an editor in the Bureau of Archives and History of the New Jersey State Library, became the commission's executive director in March 1969; he guided the agency for 22 years. During Mr. Bush's first years the Commission charted its early course. It established three core programs: an annual New Jersey History Symposium, a monthly newsletter, and a program of grants in aid of research and education in New Jersey history. It also began documentary publication projects, which became one of its early hallmarks.

Another of the Commission's early hallmarks was its resolute spirit of

cooperation and bipartisanship. It doggedly cultivated the community of organizations and institutions engaged in the work of New Jersey history. It also collaborated with sister state government agencies, which required a conscious effort to overcome the suspicions and turf battles that often divide state government agencies; and it built relationships on both sides of the legislative aisle.

The annual symposium, held on the first Saturday in December, soon became one of the most important events on the calendar of the New Jersey history community. It presented new scholarship on New Jersey history to an audience that generally numbered in the hundreds, although the conference proceedings, which the Commission published, broadened the audience for the papers considerably. Subjects of the programs were selected for their importance and the availability of historians doing new work. In the first dozen or so years, symposium topics included economic and social history of the colonial period, urban history, politics and government, legal history, African American history, labor history, religious history, and women's history.

The newsletter distinguished itself by not only featuring the Commission's activities, but also providing a medium of information and opinion on historical activities throughout the state. Although the internet age is scarcely a decade old, it is already hard to remember how difficult communication was before it. Even modest publications such as the Commission's newsletter were vitally important for keeping members of a geographically dispersed audience in touch with one another.

The research grant program whose maximum award was \$700 (equivalent to between \$3000 and \$4000, today depending on which measure of inflation one applies) helped hundreds of individuals -- academics, amateur historians, students, and others. Projects supported with commission grants became the basis for countless books, articles, and educational programs; they continue to provide the material that the

state's many museums, libraries, and local historical societies draw on for their exhibitions and other programs.

The first two documentary publication projects that the Commission undertook were on the history of African Americans in New Jersey (a joint project with the New Jersey Historical Society) and New Jersey in the American Revolution. These were followed in short order by a project to compile and publish the papers of William Livingston, the State of New Jersey's first governor, who served 14 consecutive one-year terms from 1776 to 1790.

The Commission's early outreach efforts involved providing whatever assistance it could, especially to the smaller organizations in the New Jersey history community. After laws were enacted creating them, the Commission coordinated statewide meetings for the historical component of the county cultural and heritage commissions and for the network of officially designated local historians.

Much of the Commission's activity in its first years concerned the bicentennial of the American Revolution. In 1970 the legislature officially gave the Commission responsibility for planning the state's commemoration of this anniversary and provided it some funds for the purpose. It also added four of its own members (one from each party in each house) to the Commission.

Commission members soon worried that the bicentennial would swamp its other historical work, and in 1972 they made a fateful decision. Calling on the state government to separate historical from purely commemorative activities, the Commission asked the legislature to establish a temporary agency to coordinate New Jersey's many American Revolution bicentennial activities. It further requested that the state government's historical projects for the bicentennial be assigned to the Historical Commission. A companion bill to the legislation that created the New

Jersey American Revolution Bicentennial Celebration Commission reaffirmed the Historical Commission's responsibility for the state government's historical programs related to the two hundredth anniversary of the American Revolution. In its first decade this separation was not a problem because the Historical Commission and the Bicentennial Commission collaborated closely. But by peeling off broadly popular commemorative activities from its core mission, the Commission separated itself from a potentially large base of supporters and a source of spillover funds for its projects. Over time this came to be a weakness.

For a number of years much of the funding for the Historical Commission's American Revolution related projects came through the Bicentennial Commission. With these funds, and in some cases federal grants as well, the Historical Commission developed its major bicentennial projects: the papers of William Livingston; a pamphlet series, *New Jersey's Revolutionary Experience*; and a museum exhibition, *The Pulse of the People* that was done in conjunction with the State Museum and the New Jersey Historical Society. The Museum and the Historical Society have been among the Commission's closest collaborators. The New Jersey Public Broadcasting Authority (later renamed New Jersey Network) became a third important partner soon after it was established in 1968. Early cooperation on films about New Jersey in the Revolution initiated a relationship that has produced many notable documentaries about New Jersey folklife and history.

Within a handful of years after the first two Commission employees were hired, the staff had grown to include 7 professionals and 4 clerks divided among three offices: research, public programs, and publications. Major products of these years included basic reference tools such as a directory of New Jersey newspapers. Work on a collection of gubernatorial biographies began in this period too. But growth slowed

as the bicentennial ran its course. An oral history program focusing on former members of the legislature was created in 1979, but it was canceled in the mid 1980s. So too was a very productive folklife program created around the same time as the oral history program, with grant funds from the National Endowment for the Arts.

One new program that has lasted came to the commission during its second phase. A bill sponsored by Assemblywoman Mildred Barry Garvin creating an Afro-American history program at the Commission and providing it a budget that included a small grant program was enacted in 1984. This was, to the best knowledge of everyone involved, the first official, state-sponsored African-American history program in the nation. It incorporated two ongoing commission projects before developing an agenda of its own: a guide to black historic sites, and the Marion Thompson Wright lecture. Named for a historian of Afro-American history in New Jersey who was the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. in history, this annual program was begun during black history month in 1981 in cooperation with Rutgers University, Newark, and other cosponsors. It has featured most of the major figures in the field of African American history, and is thought to be the oldest continuous, scholarly lecture series about African-American history in the United States.

During the 1980s, the Commission's budget kept pace with increasing costs. Although, with the exception of the grant program, which reached \$100,000 for a few years before it was reduced, the budgets in those years contained no new initiatives. Despite disappointment in its requests to start new projects, however, the Commission's record of achievement in the 1980s was impressive. To its original core undertakings -- the monthly newsletter, annual symposium, and research grant program -- the commission added two annual workshops, one for teachers and one that provided technical training to staff and volunteers at museums and historical

organizations. A partial list of commission accomplishments in the decade includes: publication of the concluding four (of five) William Livingston papers volumes; initiating the multi-volume Thomas A. Edison Papers project in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution, the Edison National Historic Site, and Rutgers University; conducting a massive multi-ethnic oral history project funded by the United States Office of Education, and publishing a series of ten pamphlets on ethnic life in New Jersey derived from its transcripts; producing a major exhibition at the New Jersey State Museum on the folklife of the New Jersey Pinelands, which was accompanied by a catalogue and film; launching a *Seminar for New Jersey Historians*, cosponsored by the Princeton University history department; publishing a guide to manuscript collections on New Jersey history held in state repositories, which remains an important research tool; and playing a leading role in commemorative observances such as the centennial of Thomas Edison's development of the light bulb, the sesquicentennial of the Delaware and Raritan Canal, and the bicentennial of the United States Constitution.

The inability to get new programs funded was not the only portent of changes to come. By the early 1980s, the Commission had outgrown its original administrative attachment to the State Library in the Department of Education, and it joined an effort to establish a cabinet-level department of cultural affairs. Supporters argued that such a department would provide the cultural agencies of state government a unified voice. It would enable the constituent agencies of the department to better explain themselves and their budgetary needs because they would no longer be small appendages to departments whose missions they fit loosely, at best. Legislation creating the department passed the state senate but failed in the assembly. After the campaign ended, the Commission was transferred, in April 1983, to the Department of

State where it became a division alongside the Arts Council, State Museum, and State Archives.

With the Commission's elevated administrative status as a division of state government, came pressure to be more closely aligned with the politics of Trenton. If in the Department of Education the commission had suffered from mostly-benign neglect, in the Department of State it was often subjected to efforts to harmonize its programs with the policies of the respective gubernatorial administrations. In the early 1980s Mr. Bush wrote in *The Public Historian* that "no government official outside the Commission membership and staff" had ever "seriously attempted" to exert "the slightest degree of control over the substantive policies and programs of the Commission." For better and worse, within a few years that would no longer be true.

The Historical Commission took two important steps in the mid 1980s that revised earlier practices. From its inception the Commission, like most organizations, had used a system of standing committees through which virtually all program and project recommendations passed before reaching the Commission for a decision. The notable aspect of the Commission's committees in its early years was that while they were always chaired by Historical Commission members, they were not made up exclusively of Commission members. Including outsiders on its committees enabled the Commission to draw on experts from the New Jersey history community who represented its spectrum of interests and organizations, and it bolstered the community's sense of partnership with the Commission in its programs and projects. But in the mid 1980s the Commission began to see this as a surrender of control and it centralized its decision making by dropping the outsiders from its committees. Gradually, most of the committees ceased operating. Around the same time the

Commission reconfigured its annual symposium, at which attendance had been declining, in an effort to attract a broader audience. The program was redesigned to include a keynote address for a non-specialist audience by a recognized scholar, followed by sessions intended to provide an opportunity for the historical community as a whole to assemble, exchange information, and exhibit its publications.

The Commission's financial picture in the early 1990s was unenviable. Funds were so reduced that the newsletter was halted and the grant program reduced until it was temporarily suspended altogether in 1992. When Bernard Bush retired in 1991 he was succeeded by the Commission's long-time associate director, Richard Waldron. Chronic budgetary problems soon became acute crises.

In the Commission's third period, the successive administrations of governors Jim Florio, Christine Todd Whitman, and James McGreevey sought to slash the commission's budget. The three episodes had different causes, but similar outcomes. After each struggle the staff was reduced and programs cancelled. Yet paradoxically, the commission's community of support strengthened from one fight to the next. The first emergency came in 1992 when the Florio administration proposed to eliminate more than 60 percent of the Commission staff. Ultimately the Commission lost three staff members from the publication office, which destroyed its ability to put out books, its newsletter, and other publications, but the Commission also saw one of its long standing efforts repaid in this fight. The many historical organizations that the Commission had been nurturing since its birth rallied to its support, mostly under the banner of the League of Historical Societies of New Jersey. The fight also invigorated a fledgling organization of friends of the Historical Commission, which had been meeting for awhile. This group renamed itself the *Advocates for New Jersey History* and having played a part in a clear, albeit partial, victory learned some vital political

lessons. Acting on a proposal from Commission chairman Dr. Joseph Salvatore, the Advocates established the *New Jersey History Issues Convention*, which quickly became a spring companion to the Commission's fall program and served as an invaluable launching pad for the next struggle to save the Commission. This came sooner than anyone expected it.

When Governor Whitman formed a *Task Force on New Jersey History* not long after she took office in 1994, the Commission and its friends welcomed the move. They took it as an opportunity to make the case for the importance of the Commission's work and the need for an increase in its level of funding. Instead, in 1996 the governor surprised just about everyone with a proposal to completely eliminate the Commission's less than \$800,000 budget. The Governor's office seemed to be thinking that the state government's history program required such radical surgery that destroying the Commission and starting over was the best course. The Task Force became a forum where the Commission's survival was debated.

The friends of New Jersey history rallied behind the Advocates, and they mounted a clamorous campaign that resulted in the partial restoration of the commission's budget. Layoffs again cut deeply into the commission's operations, but its support network strengthened again. This time the voluble state history community even left a favorable impression on the legislature. In 1999, legislation introduced by Assemblyman Richard Bagger was adopted providing \$4.5 million to revive and expand the commission's grant program, including for the first time support for the general operations of historical organizations.

Once historical museums and organizations became eligible for state aid through the Historical Commission, their support for its continued operation became a matter of self interest, and effective advocacy a matter of survival. This was

precisely what got the Commission into trouble with governor McGreevey. When he proposed to eliminate the budgets of the Commission and the State Arts Council, he urged an assembled group of their supporters to fight him. McGreevey wanted a package of new taxes to balance his budget, and with the state senate evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, he needed at least one Republican vote for any budget measure to succeed. McGreevey calculated that the easiest way to get support for his new taxes was by having angry constituencies swarming the legislature demanding it. Because the historical community was capable of mounting a fight, the Commission's tiny budget was worth targeting. This fight ended with a restoration of most of the Commission's funding, a yet smaller commission staff for programs and historical activities, and a strengthened infrastructure. The commission's staff, which had included more than a dozen members before the first cuts under the Florio administration, was now reduced to five professionals and an administrator, roughly one third of whom were devoted to grants administration. But during this campaign the Advocates built an effective alliance with the arts community's lobby, Art Pride, that bolstered each organization; and a small percentage of the newly enacted tax on hotel and motel room charges was dedicated to the Commission's grant program.

Throughout these demoralizing battles for survival, the commission continued to produce. Beginning in the late 1980s, it turned out a number of projects aimed at bringing New Jersey history to a broad audience, including K-12 school children. A partial list of these projects includes a book on African-Americans in New Jersey, a series of ten pamphlets on New Jersey history topics such as native Americans, women, immigration, and the arts; a documents reader for high school and college course adoption; a series of eight fifteen-minute television programs intended for use in the elementary schools, with curriculum materials; a series of ten half-hour

television programs covering the span of New Jersey history, also with curriculum materials; and a booklet on the Underground Railroad in New Jersey. These were important and high quality products, for which there was demonstrable need, though none was a basic research tool like those the commission had focused on earlier.

No one can know what the future will hold, of course; but the transformation of the Historical Commission seems complete. From an agency whose grant program was a small element among many programs, it has become an office which is dominated by grant giving. In fiscal 2007, which ran from July 1, 2006, to June 30, 2007, the Commission awarded more than \$3.6 million in grants to 127 recipients who lived in all 21 counties. The grant funds seem secure over the foreseeable future for a few reasons. Though they are an almost negligible proportion of the overall state budget of roughly \$30 billion, the funds are of signal importance to the state's history community, which will fight to protect them, if necessary. Moreover they are tied to a relatively stable funding source in the hotel/motel tax, although the legislature could decouple them at any time. Lastly, by helping improve the historical sites and museums in the state they are beneficial to heritage tourism, currently a matter of great interest.

To some degree this change of the last decades is consistent with a particular approach to government that was promoted in the 1980 and 1990s. The idea was to reduce the size of government by cutting the number of civil-service professionals who directly carried out research and other projects in favor of using the private sector through contracts and grants to accomplish public objectives. Whatever the general merits of this approach, it has only been partially successful in the field of New Jersey history. Although the Commission has been able to play some role in supporting new work in the field through its annual scholarly prizes, which alternately reward books

and dissertations on New Jersey history, the Garden State, with a few notable exceptions, continues to be overlooked in new scholarship, and basic research tools that might help reverse this are lacking. In the long run this could stymie the effort to promote greater heritage tourism because much of the work is going undone on which fresh and imaginative interpretations might be based.

The grant program has proven enormously beneficial to the museums and historical organizations of New Jersey. But despite successes such as the *Encyclopedia of New Jersey*, which it supported but did not play a leading role in, the Commission has not been very effective in catalyzing basic reference works and research tools through its grant program. For the maximum benefit of the broad field of New Jersey history, the commission needs to find a way, using the grant program to the degree it can, and by other means as necessary, to stimulate the whole spectrum of activities necessary to promote knowledge and awareness of and advance interest in the history of New Jersey. This is a challenge the entire New Jersey history community must face as its audience ages, and the social composition of the state changes.

The Commission's fourth decade concluded with a period of comparative peace. It has recently played a large role in developing New Jersey history materials for the schools, and the anniversary year was capped with national recognition. The American Association for State and Local History selected the Commission as a recipient of its 2007 "Leadership in History" Award. The Commission was cited for its general organizational excellence and its role in supporting the state's historical interests. As it starts its fifth decade the Commission will continue to incubate and support the New Jersey history community with its grant program and through other means. It is also looking to find a new equilibrium between grant giving and public history programs and projects.