

NJS Presents**Invited Talks****In this Issue:*****50 Years of New Jersey History*****By Sara R. Cureton****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v4i1.102>**

The following remarks were delivered by Sara R. Cureton at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the New Jersey Historical Commission on December 4, 2017 in Trenton. The [New Jersey Historical Commission](#) (NJHC) is a state agency dedicated to the advancement of public knowledge and preservation of New Jersey history. Established by law in 1967, its work is founded on the fundamental belief that an understanding of our shared heritage is essential to sustaining a cohesive and robust democracy. The NJHC receives its funding primarily by legislative appropriation. It fulfills its mission through various initiatives, including an active grant program. The goal of the grant program is to engage diverse audiences and practitioners in the active exploration, enjoyment, interpretation, understanding, and preservation of New Jersey history.

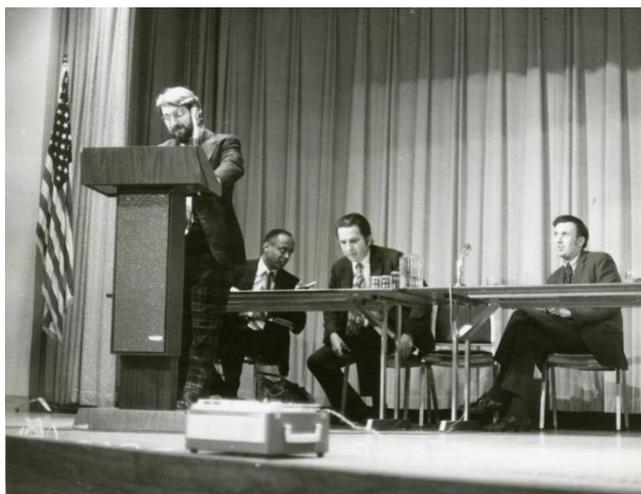
In my report today it is my happy assignment to invite you to join me in looking back on the past fifty years of preserving, teaching, exploring, and just plain enjoying New Jersey history.

The New Jersey Historical Commission was the offspring of success, namely the very popular state Tercentenary of 1964, and the Civil War Centennial. Temporary commissions were created to facilitate those anniversaries, but their popularity encouraged the State Legislature to create a permanent public agency to shepherd periodic commemorations, as well as generally promote scholarship and educational programming in state history. And so the New Jersey

Historical Commission was born. Legislation creating the Commission was signed into law by Governor Richard Hughes in 1966, and its first meeting was held on February 27, 1967.

As the Commission's first executive director, Bernie Bush, noted, the 1960s were a time when "a great many things were happening. The National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities were being established, the National Historic Preservation Act was passed, the National Historical Publications Commission began its grants program for documentary projects, and the federal government was expanding its role in cultural and intellectual life in all sort of ways."¹

Here in New Jersey, the 1960s saw the construction of the State Library and State Museum, followed by the establishment of the Historic Trust, the State Council on the Arts, and the Public Broadcasting Authority. Legislation passed that led to the creation of the county cultural and heritage commissions, agencies that continue to play a critical role in bringing cultural



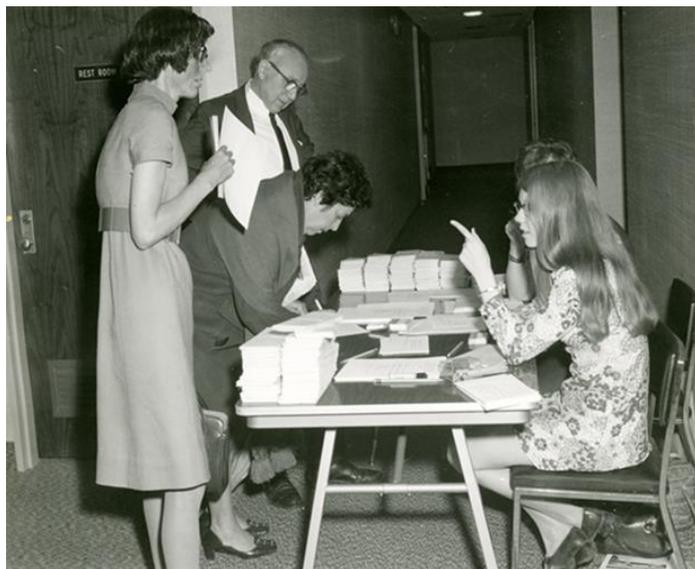
Panel presentation at the 1971 NJ History Symposium. Image courtesy of the New Jersey State Archives.

programming and opportunities to all parts of the Garden State. In short, the Commission was part of a wave of public investment in culture at both the national and state levels. The institutions and programs established at that time provide bedrock support to arts and history organizations, public media, libraries, archives, museums, and other key cultural institutions to the present day.

¹ Bernard Bush, "The New Jersey Historical Commission: A State Agency in Public History," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Fall, 1981), 34.

The Commission's first meeting was an auspicious occasion. Held in the director's office of the State Library, the meeting was called to order by State Librarian Roger McDonough. Historians Richard McCormick and John Cunningham were in attendance, and Governor Hughes provided a warm welcome. Earl Schenck Miers is recorded as observing that the Commission's task is "to make history a permanent part of the state's consciousness," an objective that this agency continues to strive for today.² Money was a problem then, just as it is today, and the minutes record that the New Jersey State Council on the Arts was due to receive a total of \$125,000 in funding from the state and federal governments, while the Commission's \$25,000 appropriation was apparently dropped from the bill.

Nevertheless, the development of the agency and its programs moved forward from that point. Securing enough money to hire staff took a bit of time, but by 1969 an initial appropriation



Registration desk at an Annual NJ History Symposium in the early 1970s. Image courtesy of the New Jersey State Archives.

of \$25,000 made it possible to appoint an executive director, Bernard Bush, and a secretary. Programs soon followed. Annual New Jersey History Symposia were offered, a monthly newsletter was launched, and planning for the upcoming bicentennial of the American Revolution began. In 1970, the Commission first offered a Grant-in-Aid Program for Research in New Jersey History. Grants of

² Minutes of the First Meeting of the New Jersey Historical Commission, February 27, 1967, New Jersey State Archives.

up to \$700 were “available to academic scholars, students, and amateur historians engaged in original research.”³

The celebration of the United States Bicentennial stimulated a flurry of research and publications from the Commission, including *The Papers of William Livingston*, a very popular series of 26 pamphlets on the Revolution in New Jersey, and a one-hour documentary titled “Crossroads to Victory.” This period is also notable for an initiative undertaken by the Commission in partnership with the New Jersey Historical Society to compile and publish a one-volume documentary history of African Americans in the state. A young scholar named Clement Alexander Price was engaged to compile the work, which was published in 1980 as *Freedom Not Far Distant*. As most in this room know, Dr. Price went on to found the Clement A. Price Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and The Modern Experience at Rutgers-Newark. With the Commission’s director of Afro-American History, Giles R. Wright, Dr. Larry Greene, and other members of the Marion Thompson Wright Study Group, he also established the Marion Thompson Wright Lecture Series (MTW). Soon to enter its 38th year, MTW is an extraordinary annual opportunity for



Clement Alexander Price at the NJHC’s Civil War conference in 2011. Image courtesy of the New Jersey State Archives.

scholars, humanists, and community members to gather and explore a variety of topics selected to enhance the historical literacy of an intercultural community and utilize the humanities to promote civic dialogue. The Commission, a founding sponsor, is proud to continue its support for this program.

³ Bush, 35.

The Historical Commission initiated another landmark project in 1978. Inspired by the 100th anniversary of the invention of the light bulb, the Commission partnered with the National Park Service, the Smithsonian Institution, and Rutgers University to edit and publish the papers of Thomas Edison. The eighth volume of this work was published in 2015, with another seven projected to complete the series. Now with print and digital versions, the Edison Papers project is utilized by scholars and students around the world.

Through the 1980s the Commission produced an impressive catalogue of publications. *New Jersey Portraits* offered short biographies of lesser known but pivotal figures in state history; the *New Jersey Ethnic Life* series contained numerous oral histories collected by the Multi-Ethnic Oral History Project; and an active folklife program produced books, films, and a major exhibition on the New Jersey Pinelands curated in partnership with the Council on the Arts and the State Museum.

But the 1990s brought hard times to the Commission, including budget cuts, reductions in staff, and even threats of elimination. Community members, some of whom are with us today, raised their voices in support of the agency's work. The slides above provide ample evidence that the history community can "rally the troops" and take their case right to the steps of the New Jersey State House! I must note here the valiant leadership of Dr. Joseph Salvatore during this tumultuous period. Many here will remember him on the march, proudly waving a sign reading "Give the Past a Future!" The Advocates for New Jersey History formed in response to these developments, and a series of yearly gatherings, the History Issues Conventions, began to provide an opportunity for the state history community to address current concerns and trends in the field.



Historical Commission Chairman, Dr. Joseph Salvatore (left), during a march to protest budget cuts in the early 1990s. Ronald Becker, Professor Emeritus, Rutgers Special Collections and University Archives, is pictured on the right. Image courtesy of the New Jersey State Archives.

Despite these challenges, the Commission continued to produce new resources in New Jersey history. The *New Jersey History Series* explored topics ranging from Native Americans to architecture; Research Director Howard Green edited key documents in *Words that Make New Jersey History*; Dr. David Cohen produced two video series for students, *Around and About New Jersey* and *New Jersey Legacy*, as well as several radio documentaries; and Mary Murrin produced several publications of her own while serving as the Commission's grants director, such as *New Jersey Historical Manuscripts: A Guide to Collections in the State*.

This seems an appropriate time to pause and salute those I just mentioned and others who have played critical parts in the Commission's story. Over the years, this agency has benefitted from the leadership and talents of many individuals who served as Commission members and staff. I have had the privilege of knowing so many of them, and, more importantly, learning from them.

Every day, I measure my efforts against the high standards they established for the agency over its first fifty years. Behind me you see the names and faces of all the distinguished executive directors, Commission chairs, and many of the staff who have served here.⁴ We all owe them a debt of gratitude for their vision, erudition, and great passion for state history.

But more change was on the way with the establishment of the Task Force on New Jersey History in 1994 and its subsequent report published in 1997. Among its transformative recommendations was a call for a grant fund to “be created by the state to provide support for operations, capital and non-capital historic preservation projects, historical records storage, and program services to those non-state government applicants deemed qualified.”⁵ Remarkably, funding for a general operating support (GOS) grant program was provided through legislation sponsored by Assemblyman Richard Bagger in 1999. Speaking from personal experience, I think it would be hard to overstate the impact that these GOS grants had on the history organizations that received them. I believe my organization at that time, Absecon Lighthouse, was in the first group of GOS recipients, and I know how much the support meant to that site and its programming. But you needn’t take my word for it. I can also offer the perspective of Lucienne Beard, executive director of the Alice Paul Institute:

We are proud that the New Jersey Historical Commission believes in our mission to honor the legacy of New Jersey’s own Alice Paul and has supported our organization for over 20 years. Thanks to NJHC, the Alice Paul Institute, at historic Paulsdale, has grown from a small historic site to an active center of the New Jersey community. A series of NJHC project grants in the past specifically funded a redesign of the New Jersey Women’s History website and the installation of the *Alice Paul: New Jersey’s Heroine for Equality* exhibit, allowing us to serve visitors throughout the week in

⁴ The author refers to a slide used in her presentation. Chairs of the New Jersey Historical Commission, in chronological order, have been as follows: Richard P. McCormick, Ph. D.; John T. Cunningham; Henry N. Drewry, Ph.D.; Douglas Greenberg, Ph.D.; Joseph Salvatore, M.D.; Jan Lewis, Ph.D.; Joseph Weisberg, Ph.D.; Larry Greene, Ph.D.; Michael Fernandez; and Maxine N. Lurie, Ph.D. Executive Directors of the New Jersey Historical Commission, in chronological order, have been as follows: Bernard Bush, Richard Waldron; Marc Mappen, Ph.D.; and Sara R. Cureton.

⁵ *A Heritage Reclaimed: Report of the Task Force on New Jersey History*, Volume 1 (June 1997), 12.

addition to our select weekend dates. Today, historic Paulsdale is open to visitors over 200 days a year and has become a must-see destination for visitors to New Jersey. With NJHC's general operating support, in 2016/17, API doubled the number of K-12 students that we served in our history and leadership programs and more than tripled the number of guests who attended our events!



Girls participating in one of the Alice Paul Institute's leadership programs stand with their mentors in front of historic Paulsdale. Image courtesy of the Alice Paul Institute.

The 21st-century history of the Commission has been marked by change. Staff so vital to the early development and accomplishments of the commission retired or were, sadly, lost to us. The arrival of the internet and omnipresent digital

communication meant that news was no longer printed and mailed, but e-mailed or shared through the History ListServ. The Commission's state website now provides access to information about programs and grant rounds, and applications for funding are made exclusively through SAGE, the System for Administering Grants Electronically. In 2014, the Commission's Caucus Archival Preservation Evaluation Service (CAPES), offered in partnership with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, celebrated 25 years of providing free archival surveys and advice to paper-based collections around the state, and inspired the Artifact Assessment Program, an artifact survey service provided through the New Jersey Association of Museums. And traditional history conferences began to alternate annually with the New Jersey History Forum, day-long events

offering scholars an opportunity every other year to share new research with colleagues and the general public.

The new century also brought a new focus on the needs of local history organizations as they faced challenges in securing the essential human, financial, and material resources to achieve their missions. “Best Practices in Non-Profit History Management,” a series of high-quality, low-cost professional development workshops, was launched in 2004 in partnership with the New Jersey State Museum and the New Jersey Historic Trust. This series has reached hundreds of staff, volunteers, and board members over the years, and continues to the present, most recently focusing on assessment.

2014 was the 350th anniversary of New Jersey itself, and the Commission partnered with organizations around the state to present programming to mark the occasion. “Diversity,



Participants gather to enjoy some special cupcakes at the NJ350 celebration in Trenton in June 2014. Image courtesy of Joanne Nestor, New Jersey State Archives.

Innovation, and Liberty” was the theme for the anniversary year, and a special website was launched in partnership with the Crossroads of the American Revolution. Events were held around the state, including a series of NJ 350 pop-up stores featuring local products and coordinated by Main Street New Jersey; cultural exchanges with a delegation from the Isle of Jersey; an NJ 350 festival in Trenton; exhibitions and programs offered around the state coordinating with the anniversary themes; and a series of short videos titled “It Happened Here: New Jersey” that received Emmy nominations in the New York and Mid-Atlantic regions. Another legacy project of the 350th was the commissioning of a series of books exploring aspects of state history previously neglected or underexplored. I am pleased to announce that, working in partnership with Rutgers University Press, the first two volumes of that series are due to appear in 2018.

Let me conclude this brief journey through the past 50 years with a snapshot of the grant program to-date. From its small beginnings, the Commission’s grant program now includes general operating support grants, project grants, co-sponsored project grants, and the county history partnership program. Looking back through the past 50 years, we reckon that the Commission has funded 3,729 grants, including more than 157 publications, 627 exhibitions, and over \$60 million in project and GOS funding. And those are conservative tallies.⁶

But what does the future hold? While some traditional approaches to presenting state history are less popular than they were fifty years ago, general interest in the past and its impact on the present appears to be growing. Recent events at the national and international levels have sent journalists scrambling to consult historians for perspective, and students around the nation have loudly questioned the historical legacies of many campuses, particularly as they relate to

⁶ Note that this Journal is itself a Historical Commission initiative. Metrics show that to date, the Journal has thousands of readers from around the globe, to include far flung locations such as China, Germany, Egypt, India, and Malaysia.

matters of social justice. And as New Jersey and the nation become increasingly diverse, the public history field confronts the exciting challenge of promoting historical inquiry that includes all parts of our communities. The opportunities for engaging the public in state and local history utilizing the communications tools of the information age are apparent, and, in its next fifty years, the New Jersey Historical Commission is committed to taking full advantage of them.⁷

Sara R. Cureton is the current Executive Director of the New Jersey Historical Commission.

⁷ In addition to the sources cited, the recollections of Dr. David Cohen were very helpful in the development of these remarks, as was an article written by Howard L. Green, titled "[Forty Years of the New Jersey Historical Commission.](#)"