

**NJS Presents*****Invited Talks*****In this Issue:*****50 Years of New Jersey History*****By Assemblyman Michael Patrick Carroll****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v4i2.122>**

*The following remarks were delivered by NJ State Assemblyman Michael Patrick Carroll at the 50<sup>th</sup> 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.*

Both of my parents were newspaper reporters, so, perhaps, my interest in history finds its genesis as an echo of how they made their living. Every good journalist knows that her job requires her to answer a few basic questions: who, what, where, when, why, and how. When a sometimes bored child, standing next to me on a battlefield, asked, “why does it matter,” my response is always the same: “we need to know how we got here, where we’ve been, and why it happened, so as to understand how to act, and what to do.”

When I leave Morristown, where Washington's Army endured two absolutely miserable winters, and come to Trenton along Route 29, retracing the steps of a few hundred freezing and hungry soldiers, I often wonder: "what motivated them to endure those hardships?" Or, looking at that building across the way, "what makes a man willing to fight for a King?" (Other than the money paid to a mercenary.)

To me, a fascination with political history follows naturally out of such events. Standing on the field at Gettysburg is necessary to understand why the battle unfolded the way it did, but one needs to read Madison, Lincoln, and others to understand what put the men there in the first place.

Even relatively mundane things, like seemingly quirky road alignments and grades around my home, can be explained by knowing that a trolley once ran there. Knowing why NJ has 565 different, often tiny little towns, can go a long way toward understanding our present political circumstances.

Both my parents, but especially my Dad, witnessed history, first hand. My Dad covered the Freedom Riders, and got shot at for his troubles. He famously stood, looking really bored, a few feet from Lee Harvey Oswald when Jack Ruby killed him. He rode with Bobby Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Perhaps more mundanely, but still importantly, my mother became something of a source for local history.

While I can certainly appreciate the quest for one's roots, I must confess that I've never entertained much in the way of interest in family history. Like any family, we have our stories – some which are actually true – but I've never considered the study of history to be about me. And given the way Irish families sometimes (mis)behave, and if one is not unhappy with one's personal narrative, one might best avoid "23 and Me" DNA testing.

To me, the study of history has never been personal. It's an attempt to understand us, and how we became us. Coming here, people who, in their countries of origin, blithely waged war upon one another, who considered their differences sufficiently important to kill, came here and moved in next to their former deadly enemies. In America, people set aside ancient, tribal animosities, and became one people. The pluribus became unum. Not that it was easy, mind you; look no further than Thomas Nast's depictions of the Irish to understand the welcome that many new Americans received. And, yet, they came together in Federal blue, fighting under a banner bearing a harp, speaking in their native German, or doing battle against the men who once claimed to own them, to put down the greatest threat this country ever faced. In the century and a half since, wearing olive drab, we acted, as Americans, to battle for freedom around the world.

Lincoln called the US the last best hope for the world. With apologies to JFK, "Two thousand years ago, the proudest boast was *kewis romanus sum* ["I am a Roman citizen"]. Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is "I am an American." Our collective history defines us, and it behooves us, as one people, to understand how that happened.

*Michael Patrick Carroll (born April 8, 1958) is a American Republican Party politician from New Jersey. He represents the 25<sup>th</sup> Legislative District in the New Jersey General Assembly, first taking office in 1996. You can find his official website [here](#).*