



Newark Remembers

John T. Cunningham

June 26, 1915–June 7, 2012

On November 14, 2012, the Newark History Society joined with the Rutgers Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience and The Newark Public Library in a tribute to John T. Cunningham, native Newarker, distinguished historian of Newark and New Jersey, and longtime advocate for Newark cultural institutions.

Wilma Grey, Director of The Newark Public Library, announced that Cunningham's family has given his books and papers to the Library. Mark DiIonno of the Star-Ledger spoke extemporaneously, but the texts of the other tributes are available on the following pages.

John Cunningham

CLEMENT ALEXANDER PRICE

When I became a resident of New Jersey back in the day, that day being the late 1960s, there were three civic and intellectual giants who influenced my generation of young, then would-be historians. They were Richard P. McCormick, Charles Cummings and John Cunningham.

At that time, and for the rest of their lives, they were all generous citizens, especially toward citizens interested in America's past and New Jersey's relationship to the larger history of the American Republic.

I could not have been better mentored or inspired when I was new to New Jersey, and to what was then the "new" American History.

At that time, Dick McCormick, the patriarch of Rutgers, was arguably the most distinguished scholar and historian at Rutgers. His shadow was cast so widely over Rutgers, especially in the Department of History, that many if not most of my fellow graduate students wrote dissertations about New Jersey. Largely because of him, we then-young graduate students explored New Jersey's politics, its complexities and its uncertainties over time.

Charles Cummings, the other iconic figure, was, at the time, and would become all the more so, the encyclopedic historian of Newark, and was given the official title of Newark City Historian many years ago by then-Mayor Sharpe James.

And then there was John Cunningham, the journalist turned historian. What a historian he was, showing that the first draft of history was indeed the morning newspaper.

More than anyone else, John Cunningham gave a narrative voice to the complicated history of New Jersey. He acknowledged the State's idiosyncrasies, its ambiguities, and, over time, its abundant challenges—indeed the very hurdles it seemingly refused to scale.

John's greatest book, among many, is his narrative history, *Newark*. Its first edition came out the year before Newark's Summer of Discontent, in 1967.

It was subvented by the local Chamber of Commerce, so we should suspect that it would be, in large part, a booster book. Indeed, it was that. But it was much more. John Cunningham's *Newark* was a grand story of Newark's rise from its colonial, Anglo-Puritan origin, to its modern stature as one of the nation's most industrial cities. It was a book that gave the City of Newark a past that it deserved and craved.

Cunningham's *Newark* was essential reading back in the day.

It became all the more essential some years later, when in 1988 the New Jersey Historical Society brought out a revised edition.

In that revision, John had to take into consideration what he probably could not nearly generation earlier—that Newark's infamous decline was ignored by seemingly all but that decline's most notable victims—its poor, black residents.

Cunningham's second edition of Newark took account of the City's post-World War civic and economic decline. It remains one of the most important books about Newark, and, for that matter, any American city.

John Cunningham was among the very best of New Jersey's journalists, historians, and "Jersey Guys." He was bright, hardworking, and accomplished. He was also receptive to new ideas and ideals that far too many of his generation found too much to bear.

Not many years ago, John told me that if he had been a black man, he would have been a rioter during Newark's terrible days between July 12 and 15, in 1967. It was a revelation like none other . . . given to me, across the racial divide, by a friend, my Irish American friend and mentor, John. As I now consider it, I don't know if I really want to imagine John Cunningham, rioting, or revolting, or making a fool of himself, in the stark streets of Newark during the summer days of 1967.

But I do acknowledge, and relish, all that John said to me when we talked about his intellectual and moral growth over the years in which I knew him well and fell in love with him and his love of Newark and New Jersey.

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John Cunningham

CHAD LEINAWEAVER

More than a few years ago, I attended a small dinner where John Cunningham was being honored. At one point during the event, everyone present went around and commented on the impact Cunningham had on them or their institution and also how they first met him. As we went around telling stories common themes emerged: how influential Cunningham had been over a wide area of organizations and over the course of five decades; his large body of work covering various subjects and involving various people (both academic and public); and the further verification of a rapier and zinging wit that Cunningham possessed surely since birth. I had first met John Cunningham when I delivered him proofs of the latest edition of his history of Newark, which the New Jersey Historical Society was publishing. When my turn came up, I asked Cunningham if he remembered where we first met. He thought for a minute and when I reminded him that we met at the Turtle Back Zoo (it was a convenient, albeit unusual, median point so I could drop off the proofs), he rightly

asked: “Well, why did I see you there? Were you in one of the exhibits?” Needless to say, I got zinged!

John Cunningham was a unique and talented man who had a strong interest in bringing history to everyone and making his books something that the everyday public could read. I think he wanted New Jerseyans to understand their state’s rich history, especially since so many people who live here, often know so little about it.

He and Rutgers Professor Richard McCormick, Sr. teamed up and raised awareness of the state’s history in the 1950s through the present by getting involved and professionalizing the New Jersey Historical Society, creating what are probably the first curriculum materials for New Jersey history, developing widespread educational programming, and publishing abundantly so that people had access to the state’s history.

The impact that he and McCormick made invariably raised the stature of the state’s history, so that at least in the present day, historians and even readers of history strongly consider the state’s history rather than discounting it in favor of the greater Philadelphia or New York City story.

The New Jersey Historical Society in the pre-war period was a highly-esteemed, albeit fairly closed place. Amateur scholarship and research pervaded the organization, but to a large degree in a Victorian, nineteenth-century fashion. It was an introverted place that exuded a pre-WWII atmosphere yet existed in a post-WWII environment. The organization’s ‘membership’ suggested a private atmosphere that was beginning to decline in the age of greater American class and race mobility of the 1950s (and one with which I would argue modern-day historical societies are still struggling). Through the insistence of Professor McCormick, several Historical Society trustees wanted to change the direction of the institution. They commissioned a strategic plan of sorts, which came to be known as the Alexander Report that offered a series of suggestions to reform the Society: having regular annual meetings of members, a more robust publications program, the hiring of an executive director, and developing history programming for students. To make this happen, the Board relied heavily on several New Jersey history luminaries: Donald Sinclair, a Rutgers grad who came back after WWII to essentially ‘create’ Special Collections and University Archives at Rutgers and who would edit the New Jersey History journal and serve in an advisory capacity for decades; Prof. McCormick himself and his ‘Irish Mob’ counterpart, John Cunningham, a Morris County resident and Newark News reporter, whose first major foray into New Jersey studies was a reporting trip with photographer Harry Dorer all over the Garden State to document people and places.

To a large degree, McCormick, Sinclair and Cunningham were brought on board to professionalize and modernize the institution, which they did rather quickly in the 1950s

and 1960s, with lasting impact through the present day. As Cunningham told me, McCormick was the ‘academic’ while he was the ‘people’s historian’, thus covering both ends of the organization’s intended outreach. In so doing, Cunningham centered his work on youth education for the historical society, a subject for which Cunningham would become synonymous even beyond the Historical Society walls. At those 1950s and 60s board meetings when educational programming would come up on the agenda, the chairman would wryly ask Cunningham: “So John, what have you been doing with the kids?”

Cunningham got several initiatives off the ground: a statewide essay contest for high school juniors and seniors, poster contests for younger students, and annual educational conferences held for teachers on various topics tied into New Jersey history. In fact, Cunningham even arranged to have 35 prize winners of one of the essay contests in 1959 take on a three-day bus tour of the Garden State! When asked about their involvement in the whole contest, “the most popular feature among the [students] was the trip” where they visited the ‘lost village’ of Feltville (today a Union County park, but then still 20 years away from being listed on the National Register of Historic Places), had lunch along the lake in the Watchung Reservation and even attended a Rutgers-Connecticut football game (imagine trying that today!). But perhaps most notable among the activities for students was the Jerseymen program, a far-reaching effort to involve high school students from many school districts all over the state. The program rose in the 1960s with some seed funding from the NJ Tercentenary Committee—an effort by State Government to Commemorate the founding of the Colony of New Jersey in 1666 and another activity in which both Cunningham and McCormick were involved—to involve over 200 Jerseymen clubs in high schools from Boonton to Ocean City that lasted for several decades and set the foundation for the award-winning museum education programming that was the hallmark of the Society from the late 1980s through the 2000s. In fact, while at the Historical Society, I regularly received calls from people donating collections, requesting information, etc., who were former Jerseymen participants. The program, its goals and its subject matter may appear somewhat dated today, but given that Cunningham had the Newark institution plugged into high school history clubs—albeit small at times—he thus was able to reach far and wide to many areas of the state. Considering that this was accomplished in the pre-internet age, demonstrates the achievement. Moreover, the NJHS struggled to connect to students beyond Essex County even during the internet age,

as many institutions do now, who face a crowded field among other distractions on the world wide web.

McCormick and Cunningham pushed to return the Historical Society's publication program to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s. The organization had become more lax in publishing much beyond its journal—which in and of itself was often full of trustee and member information and Society news in addition to articles of history—although in fairness to the Historical Society staff of the period, a Great Depression and World War most certainly curtailed publishing efforts, so that the 'Irish Mob's' involvement can essentially be seen as a 'reboot' of sorts. The program returned in earnest and by the end of the 1970s was vibrant and attracting New Jersey scholars from Clement Price to David Cowen. Cunningham even contributed to the effort himself with the first major work on the city of Newark in the more than 50 years in 1966, a book entitled simply Newark, that not only had a third edition published in 2002, but it still considered the de-facto and widely-cited history of the city today, despite largely being written for a popular audience.

By the 1980s, the program was publishing regularly from manuscript collections of the Society, had a robust and more modern academic journal in *New Jersey History*, and was publishing academic monographs on a variety of subjects. One thing that has amazed me was the reach of this 1950s-1980s publication activity and confirms its importance to raising awareness of the state's history. When visiting libraries around the state, but especially around the country, I could always find runs of *New Jersey History* and publications from this period. Whether I was in the Sutro Library in San Francisco or the Clements Library at the University of Michigan, if I looked for these publications, I would find them on the shelves and the subscription lists we used to receive at the Historical Society always confirmed how long this reach was even into the 2000s.

Not only through these monographs and his work with the Jerseymen, but also with his own publishing and speaking, Cunningham was contributing to the state's history, raising it above the New York-Philadelphia focus, where the state's history often was relegated. Many of our first experiences with the state's history were through Cunningham's *New Jersey: A Mirror on America*, *New Jersey: America's Main Road* or even what we learned in his 4th grade textbook *You, New Jersey and the World*, a standard in many school districts for almost a half-century. He was the one who informed us that we were not the first to live along these Atlantic Highlands and shores: it was the Lenni Lenape. He was the one who expressed how much of our country's fight for independence was actually fought and contested here on New Jersey's soil. He also intimated that the growth of industrialism in the United States in the nineteenth century was also centered here with its origins in

Paterson, its boom in Newark, Trenton and Jersey City and its innovation throughout the state with inventors such as Edison, Marconi, John Holland and Edward Weston. He also expressed that the “Garden State” moniker fit our state, not only as the breadbasket throughout the Revolution, but as a food cupboard for New York and Philadelphia, and as an innovator with Rutgers Agricultural Experiment Station and small-scale produce farming for over 200 years.

John Cunningham never considered himself an academic (and many times he did not even consider himself an historian!) and yet he probably had the greatest impact among a generation of men and women trying to educate students and raise awareness of the state’s history to the Garden Staters at large. Certainly, Cunningham may not have been the last word in New Jersey history, but...for almost all of us, he was the first word.

CHAD LEINAWEAVER *is Assistant Director at Morristown and Morris Twp. Library and former Director for Library and Museum Collections at the New Jersey Historical Society.*

The Cunningham Blue Book

THOMAS MCCABE

What do you think of when I say, “Blue Book”?

Most of us probably think of the Kelley Blue Book, the trusted resource for the value of a new or used car. Lawyers may well think of another blue book, the trusted resource on legal citation. I don’t. I think of this blue book, the Cunningham Blue Book, the trusted resource on the history of Newark. And I keep it at my side, to the right of my computer, whenever I’m researching and writing about Newark.

And I know I’m not alone.

Since 1966, when John T. Cunningham—the author of 45 books and thousands of magazine articles—wrote a narrative history of Newark, students of history have turned to it for knowledge and insight and good old-fashioned storytelling. Hundreds of thousands of students throughout the Garden State have come to know Mr. Cunningham, starting in the fourth grade when the state curriculum has them exploring New Jersey history. That relationship can continue through their high school years, and even into college. His numerous textbooks have sustained and nurtured the minds of many young people. It started for me in the fourth grade, too, but went all the way through college when I wrote two research papers on Newark. Cunningham was always at my side.

Cunningham followed me to my first job as well, when I started teaching local history at St. Benedict’s Prep. The interdisciplinary course was called “Newark Studies” and student-journalists wrote articles for a magazine publication titled Newark InDepth. That course

followed in the tradition of “The Newark Study,” a study that dates to the early 1900s when the Newark Sunday Call’s Frank Urquhart wrote a series of pamphlets on Newark history for schoolchildren. Through the influence of the Newark Public Library, and especially with the endorsement of John Cotton Dana, Urquhart’s short histories became part of the school curriculum. With these studies, Newark became the first city on the East Coast to focus attention on local history and civics.

Almost one hundred years later, we told our students at Benedict’s that as young journalists writing about this great yet often misunderstood city they had no better guide than Cunningham. He was a trained journalist like Urquhart, of course, and wrote a long-running column on the state’s history called “Let’s explore.” His Newark book, the Cunningham Blue Book, became their trusted resource for exploration into Newark’s past. We just called it “Cunningham.” We’d tell students: “Go get Cunningham.” “Look it up in Cunningham.” “Does Cunningham have anything to say about it?” That blue book was our bedrock, our touchstone for historical inquiry.

Cunningham was so fundamental to their understanding of their city’s history, just like that early 20th century “Newark Study.” Urquhart’s pamphlets and Cunningham’s Newark resonated with generations of students largely because they are both about stories. As you’ve heard over and over tonight, John T. Cunningham could always tell good stories. Stories help people understand something in a way that numbers and statistics don’t. Stories allow us to introduce complexity, nuance, sensitivity, humor, fallibility, ambiguity, and unpredictability into our own pasts, and certainly Newark’s past.

Cunningham followed me to my first book, too, one on the history of St. Benedict’s Prep. Some of the themes from his book helped me contextualize the story of a school in a particular city. In the introduction of his revised and updated 1988 edition, Cunningham observed, “Old Newark was reborn in the 1967 riots, for better or for worse.” There have always been the themes of violence, rebirth, and re-invention in the long history of this old American town. “Each revival has been a combination of imaginative entrepreneurs and newcomers encouraged to bring their needed skills or muscles to town,” he wrote. “Such has been the genesis of each ‘new’ Newark. The genius has been in the melding disparate people into a congenial, workable synthesis.”

To that end, John T. Cunningham’s genius is his keen sense of melding the disparate into a congenial, workable synthesis. He is New Jersey’s great historian, and those of us in Newark are forever grateful for his blue book, one full of the stories that help us understand who we are, and where we come from.

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Tribute to John Cunningham

TIMOTHY J. CRIST

What I remember most about John Cunningham are the car rides. If there was an event coming up in Newark that I thought would interest him, I'd get in touch and ask him if he wanted a ride. To my delight, he usually said "yes." He never once asked for a ride, for he was not one to impose. But he was happy to accept one.

I would arrange to pick him up at his home at 269 Brooklake Road in Florham Park, usually at 4:30 or 4:45pm—in plenty of time to get to a 6:00pm event. John liked to be early. He would greet me at his door, make sure the outside light was on to guide his return later, and get in the car. Then we would talk. John may have lived the solitary life of a writer and scholar, but he was a great conversationalist. He told good stories and he listened well. He had firm views that he did not hesitate to express—he may have been broad-minded, but he was also tough-minded. Although he experienced vast changes during his long life, he was not nostalgic or in the least sentimental.

During our car rides, we talked about all sorts of things: about his playing baseball for Drew University as an undergraduate during the Depression and about his annual trips until just a few years ago to Florida for spring training. I told him about traveling around the country with my son to different baseball stadiums, and John followed up with a personal letter to my son about his love of baseball, enclosing an inscribed copy of his piece about the early days of baseball in New Jersey.

We talked about his approach to research and to writing history, and about his upcoming projects—he was especially keen about writing a book about Progressives in New Jersey, which I wish he had completed because it's such an important topic.

We talked about libraries, and he would always say how grateful he was to the Newark Public Library. We talked about what was happening in Newark, and I tried to take him along different routes to downtown so that he could see some of the newer developments.

John seemed to enjoy the rides as much as I did. He once wrote me that they were "voyages well taken."

I first got to know John well in the 1990s, when he was the driving force behind setting up the Friends of the Newark Public Library. He was the first President of the Friends, and I was his Vice President. I saw first-hand his remarkable skill in setting an agenda and running a meeting. After a few years, he passed the torch to Rebecca Doggett and then to

me to serve as President of the Friends, but he was always keen to get updates on what the Friends were doing and how much they had raised for this Library.

It was the founding of the Newark History Society ten years ago that started our car rides. While the Society was still in the organizational phase and before we sponsored any public programs, John agreed to come to a meeting and talk about William Cone, the dean of Newark photographers, whom he had known well. I drove him to and from the meeting, and he made a comment about the Newark History Society that I've always treasured: "If only there had been a group like this when I was getting started."

Not long after, the Newark History Society helped to host a book launch party at the New Jersey Historical Society for the third edition of John's history of Newark. Again, I picked him up. His brother-in-law came along and John was in great spirits that evening.

Several more rides followed in subsequent years, including a solemn one when I drove him here to the Library for the memorial tribute to his good friend Charles Cummings.

The last time I gave John a ride was in January 2008 for the Newark History Society's program on the Newark Evening News. John was well into his 90s at that point and slowing down physically, but his mind was still as sharp as ever. As all of you know, John was responsible for saving the Newark Evening News clippings file and the huge collection of photographs for deposit here in this Library. He knew that the event would be "like old home week", as he put it. And indeed it was. Centennial Hall was full, and dozens of Newark Evening News alumni were there. John waited to the end of the Q&A session to offer his comments. As he leaned on his cane, he spoke in is wonderfully clear and strong voice about his own experiences at the Evening News, and about its demise. The respect and admiration that everybody in the room that evening had for John was palpable.

The more I dig into Newark's history, the more impressed I've become with John's skill and accomplishment as an historian. I've come to think of him as a three-dimensional historian. Not length, width, and depth, but time, space, and people. Every historian has to become comfortable in thinking about people and events in an earlier time. You have to get the chronology down, and know the sequence of events and what else was happening in other places at the same time, if you want to convey what happened and then suggest some reasons for why it happened. John had the time dimension knocked.

Because of his work as a journalist visiting and writing about every county in New Jersey, John also had the geography of this state down pat. He knew where the roads and rivers of New Jersey are, and how one city or town stands in relation to another. He knew how

ridges and mountains affected where battles were fought and how commerce developed—and that knowledge infused his analysis and guided his narrative. Not every historian masters this dimension of the historian’s craft, but John certainly did.

The third dimension of John’s success as an historian was people. John once said, “History for me, is people – all kinds, great and small, rich and poor, hero and scoundrel.” Drawing on his background as a journalist, John demonstrated the true historian’s ability to dig for facts, get at the truth, and tell a good story. He did not engage in statistical analysis or lock horns about some question of theory. That diminished John in the eyes of some who were tempted to dismiss him as a “popular” historian. From our conversations, I could tell that bothered John somewhat. But it didn’t stop him in the least, nor did it affect his own pride in his work.

I think that’s due to another aspect of “people” – not just people as subject matter, but people as the audience for his work. John wanted to reach his audience. He wanted to get them excited about history, whether they were schoolchildren, college students, or the general public. That’s why there’s such a strong narrative thread in his work. That’s why he wrote film scripts and experimented with different media. That’s why he made such extensive use of photographs and illustrations, and why he thought it was so important to preserve the Newark Evening News photographs, as well as the photographs taken by Harry Dorer and William Cone. And, that’s why he was so keen to take part in public programs, large and small, where he might engage his public face-to-face.

I only knew John in the last third of his life, when he was in his 70s, 80s, and 90s. T.S. Eliot famously wrote that old men should be explorers. I think of John in that way: he never stopped asking questions, never stopped wanting to find out what had happened, and why. And as far as I could tell, John had such a steel-trap mind that once his research turned up answers, he never forgot the details.

For those of us who are engaged in our own way in exploring different aspects of Newark’s and indeed New Jersey’s history, we could do much worse than to model our efforts on his example of sustained curiosity, narrative verve, and continuing commitment to the institutions that make our work possible. We, too, can be explorers.

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