
Paul Stellhorn

and the History of Newark

“The Paul Stellhorn Lecture,” delivered by Professor Kenneth T. Jackson of Columbia University at the Newark History Society’s tenth anniversary program on May 2, 2012, honors the memory of Paul A. Stellhorn, a fine historian of Newark who died in January 2001. At the Society’s first organizational meeting on January 24, 2002, Professor Clement A. Price of Rutgers University-Newark paid tribute to Stellhorn’s contributions.

I can vividly remember the distant days when a rather large number of graduate students at Rutgers University were engaged in the writing New Jersey history. One of those students was Paul Stellhorn, with whom I shared a long friendship and complementary interests in the history of New Jersey and its largest city, Newark.

Paul and I met in the early 1970s, when the graduate history program at Rutgers-New Brunswick had at its intellectual center Richard P. McCormick, then arguably the most influential historian of 19th century American political history.

In part because Dick McCormick had an interest in every facet of New Jersey life, and because of the hiring of the urban historian Seth Scheiner in the late 1960s, the Rutgers program produced some really fine dissertations on New Jersey urban and suburban history. The finest of that crop was Paul’s masterful dissertation *Depression and Decline: Newark, New Jersey, 1929-1941*. Paul explored the interlocking relations between Newark’s corporate and political elite during the twilight of the City’s Golden Era and the dawn of a decline that most Americans associate, erroneously, with the riots of 1967.

Because he was among the first historians to examine the records of the Newark Chamber of Commerce, his work on corporate responsibility to urban places is important. But his dissertation was most significant because of its subtle revelation of the misdeeds of corporate leaders who abandoned Newark’s promise just when the City needed them most.

Even now Paul's dissertation is indispensable to a broad understanding of how Newark's 20th century decline was implicated by its early 20th century progress and the City's overindulgence of its corporate neighbors. For that reason, over the years that I have taught American urban history and the history of Newark, I have always placed Paul's brilliant article *Boom, Bust and Boosterism: Attitudes, Residency and the Newark Chamber of Commerce, 1920-1941* on the syllabus.

Paul's contributions to the historical literature on Newark and New Jersey also including the path breaking 1982 book, *The Governors of New Jersey, 1664-1974*, which he co-edited with Michael J. Birkner and the *Directory of New Jersey Newspapers, 1765-1970*. He also edited several volumes of the papers of the New Jersey Historical Commission's New Jersey History Symposium

He served two important public trusts before he joined the staff of The Newark Public Library—the New Jersey Historical Commission and later the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, where he was assistant director—always close to the center of the action, always deepening the civic endowment of both organizations.

It is fitting, I think, to make certain that this new society helps the history profession and citizens take better account of the 20th century.

Paul Stellhorn contributed to our understanding of how the last century's promise for Newark became undone. That maybe a story ill suited for a time when Newark has caught the attention of optimists everywhere. But it remains a story that true urbanists will ignore to the peril of the future of cities like Newark.

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