

John T. Cunningham (1916 - 2012)



On June 7, 2012, the New Jersey Historical Commission lost one of its founding members, John T. Cunningham. Known to many throughout New Jersey and beyond as the state's "unofficial historian," Mr. Cunningham holds a very special place in the history of the New Jersey Historical Commission.

Following the very popular observances of the Civil War Centennial and New Jersey's Tercentenary in the 1960s, Mr. Cunningham and his distinguished colleagues Professor Richard P. McCormick of Rutgers University and New Jersey State Librarian Roger McDonough formed a powerful and visionary triumvirate that guided and shaped the fledging Historical Commission. Professor McCormick became the first chairman, and Mr. Cunningham went on to serve over twenty years as a Commission member, including six as chair. Under their early leadership the Commission established keystone programs on behalf of New Jersey history, many of which continue and flourish today.

The Commission's annual New Jersey history conference, held now on the last Saturday before Thanksgiving, and a robust grant program for New Jersey history organizations and projects are just two examples of the rich legacy they left behind.

In a posting to the New Jersey History ListServ, the Commission's first director, Bernard Bush, shared the following thoughts on Mr. Cunningham and his many contributions to New Jersey history and the Historical Commission:

"The tributes to John Cunningham that have been made, and those yet to be made, will surely make clear the debt we all owe to him. I can add, with regard to the work of the Historical Commission, that virtually none of our achievements during his six years as chairman and his two decades as a member, would have happened without his leadership. For example, the Commission's publications program, its outreach to schools and local historical societies, the organization of the project to publish the papers of Thomas A. Edison, the establishment of the nation's first state program in African-American history, the authentic observance of important commemorative events, the close working relationship with the New Jersey Historical Society—and so much more."

Lieutenant Governor Kim Guadagno also paid tribute to Mr. Cunningham:

"I was saddened to learn of the passing of John Cunningham. As a historian, he chronicled New Jersey's rich and diverse history in a unique style that educated and entertained readers for more than six decades. Mr. Cunningham's legacy will live on in the generations of adults and children alike who will continue to learn about the history of our state through his work. As a tireless advocate for our state he amassed an unparalleled body of work that garnered respect and admiration within the history community, both inside and outside New Jersey."

John Cunningham's legacy as an author, historian and educator will certainly enrich many generations to come. At the New Jersey Historical Commission, we will also mark the passing of a dynamic leader whose wisdom and foresight helped build the framework for exploring and preserving New Jersey history that we still rely upon today.

Mr. Bush summed up what many feel about John Cunningham in this way:

"Finally, I would add what I and others have repeatedly said about John Cunningham, Dick McCormick and Roger McDonough. They were three remarkable personalities who somehow found their way to each other and formed a remarkable team in the service of New Jersey history for half a century. As the core of the New Jersey Historical Commission, and in so many other endeavors, they truly transformed our world."

Sara R. Cureton

Director

New Jersey Historical Commission

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