

John T. Cunningham

1915 - 2012



Anyone who is a New Jersey history buff will likely have heard of him. Yet John T. Cunningham told *The New York Times* in a 2003 interview, “I consider myself a journalist rather than a historian.”

But that, perhaps, is what made him so good at what he did. “A journalist lets it fall where it should,” he continued. “We approach things with an open mind, while historians tend to take a subject and find the material to prove their point.”

Born in Newark on June 26, 1915, he grew up in Brookside, near Morristown and graduated Morristown High School in 1932 and Drew University in 1938. “History” as a discipline didn’t interest him much, though a paper he did on the Spanish American War helped him to realize it could be an interesting subject to write about.

He was always a writer at heart, seized by the curiosities that drive the journalist. He contributed pieces for *The Morristown Record* while still in high school and in 1939 landed a job with *The Newark News*, where he would work until 1963—the one interruption being a stint as a Captain in the Army

Air Corps in 1946 during the Second World War.

After 1963, he took up writing and publishing as a fulltime occupation. And the rest—as much literally as in the well-worn metaphor—is history. Over 40 books and numerous articles came from his pen, typewriter and finally computer. Generations of New Jerseyans gleaned a sense of pride in the Garden State thanks to Cunningham’s work. He found that important balance between the integrity of scholarly foundation and entertainment that has made our state’s rich history seem exciting and relevant. The depth of his knowledge of New Jersey’s history has inspired many to call him “Mr. New Jersey.” He was instrumental in the creation of the New Jersey Historical Commission and establishing New Jersey history curriculum for our public schools.

There is, of course, much more to Cunningham’s life story than this. When he passed away on June 7, 2012, the New Jersey history listserves, Facebook and other online forums were flooded with fond reminiscences. I will encourage the reader to go research the man’s story—

somehow that seems a rather apropos tribute.

But I would like to share the memories and tributes a few GSL's readers have offered. I'm sure more will be forthcoming after "press time" that can be added later.

My own was from just a couple of years ago, when we were both at a Civil War Roundtable lecture up in Morristown. I had bumped into him at some other events, but this was my first real opportunity to speak with him. I told him how I could still remember his "You, New Jersey And the World" from when I was in grade school—a book that was first published in 1953 and hasn't been out of print since. In fact, I think I still have it somewhere. As someone who fancies himself a New Jersey history writer, I wanted him to know that his example was an inspiration for my efforts. But he seemed more interested in what I was working on than hearing praise—ever the journalist, interested in the people he encountered. When he said he wanted a copy of my James Parker biography, I was flattered as I went to my trunk to get him one (always keep a stock on hand!). When he asked how much he owed me, I said it was on the house . . . what did *he* owe *me*? Much more the other way round! In that brief encounter, I could see all the qualities that had made him successful. Indeed, I would go so far as to say he was the father of New Jersey's history writers in the 20th century. He leaves behind a wonderful legacy in his work and inspiration.

I think what made John so special was that he was so multi-faceted and committed to his task. He had a strong interest in bringing history to everyone and making his books something that non-academics could read. I think he wanted the public to understand about their state's history, especially since so many people who live in New Jersey, often knew so little about it. He and Richard McCormick (Sr.) very much 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, and publishing widely 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 readers of history strongly consider the state's history rather than discounting it in favor of the greater Philadelphia or New York City story. But John was also a fabulous speaker and had a wit to match any person I had ever met. He was engaging and entertaining and this also served him well in spreading his message and I cannot tell you how many times he was considered as a keynote speaker for events or given awards and honors (all rightly deserved). I remember seeing him more recently and I asked him 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 proofs for one of his upcoming books), he rightly asked: "Well, why did I see you there? Were you in one of the exhibits?" I still laugh out loud when I think of it.

Chad Leinaweaver

I got to work closely with John Cunningham, when he agreed to be the host of our New Jersey Legacy television series. Like everyone else, I admired his writings, especially his book about Newark, and he was a founding member of the New Jersey Historical Commission, when I came to work there in 1979. However, it wasn't until we wanted a replacement for Celeste Holm as the narrator of the television series that I really got to know John. Dick McCormick, another founder of the Commission, suggested that we ask John Cunningham to take Celeste Holm's place, and it was the best suggestion that anyone made. John Cunningham was New Jersey's Alistair Cook and David McCulloch rolled into one. He had an eloquence and poise that added a polish to the series. He was a natural on camera. And he was game. He stood in the summer heat outside the State House for one of the shoots. He took us up to an outlook on the

Appalachian Trail and perched perilously near the edge for another. We went into Llewellyn Park to the house that once was the home of Thomas Edison's son, New Jersey Governor Charles Edison. (By the way, Columbia historian Kenneth Jackson told us that he once was kicked out of Llewellyn Park trying to do the same thing.) Once, after a shoot along the Delaware and Raritan Canal, John Cunningham and I got lost in central New Jersey, but I promised I won't tell anyone that John Cunningham had been lost in New Jersey. In truth, however, I do regret that I took John's suggestion that we change the title of one program from "Factories in the Garden" to "Technology in the Garden." John (who an avid sports fan and who told me that he once considered becoming a professional golfer) would appreciate the fact that no one ever bats one thousand.

Like many local historians, John Cunningham was a superb researcher. I recall that during the recent 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's exploration of the river that now bears his name, I wanted to prove that Hudson first anchored in Raritan Bay and made landfall on Staten Island and the Atlantic Highlands of New Jersey. Despite the fact that most of the festivities took place in New York City, Hudson didn't even stop on Manhattan Island on his historic journey up the river. After I consulted Robert Juet's journal and various nautical maps, I discovered that John had written a pamphlet years many years ago proving this contention.

To usurp the famous quotation of General Douglas MacArthur, old historians, such as John Cunningham, never die, they just leave historical markers.

David Steven Cohen, Chapel Hill, NC

I am so sorry to hear of John's passing. Although we never met in person, I had several opportunities to speak with him on the telephone when I was starting my writing career. He was always extremely gracious and helpful—a real gentleman of the old school—and I know he will be missed.

Patt Martinelli

He was indeed a state treasure. Cunningham's articles in the old *Newark News Sunday Magazine* on New Jersey history, and New Jersey in the Civil War, which preceded the Centennial of the war, got me interested in the subject, an interest that has endured to this day.

Joe Bilby

John Cunningham had a puckish sense of humor and a sense of wry self-mockery. When he came to give a talk, he would listen politely to the introduction from his host who would talk at great length about John's many accomplishments. John would then go to the lectern and say "That John Cunningham sounds like quite a guy; I can't wait to meet him."

In reminiscing about his long friendship with historian Richard P. McCormick, John would jest that the two men complemented each other: Dick did New Jersey history wholesale, while John did it retail. In other words, the Rutgers academic wrote for an audience of specialists, while the veteran newspaperman did it for the general public. I think that John was being overly modest. In his speeches and publications John was writing in the tradition of the great public historians like George Bancroft, Francis Parkman, and David McCulloch—historians who communicate history in a way that is informed and accessible. One of John's great contributions was as a cofounder of the New Jersey Historical Commission, an agency that has that same public history mission.

With the passing of John Cunningham I can't help but think that we need a new generation of New Jersey historians who can inform the citizens of the Garden State about their great heritage in the masterful way that John did.

Marc Mappen

Do you have a story about John T. Cunningham that you would like to share with GSL? You can email it to gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com. Please type "Cunningham GSL" in the subject line.

