Radical Roots

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Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism.

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Public history as a field or track in higher education has multiple roots, but its origins are most often traced either to the creation of applied history programs during the early twentieth century or to the establishment of the first named public history program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in the late 1970s. Applied historians of the earlier generation tended to emphasize the usefulness of historical research for policy makers.¹ Their goal was primarily to establish the legitimacy of their discipline—as natural scientists had in the previous generation—by connecting the study of history to the production and reproduction of formal state authority.² Applied history programs encouraged students and faculty members to conduct research that might benefit elected officials and civic leaders working to understand and solve social and political problems. Unfortunately, the establishment of applied history programs coincided with a period of discord among historians. Scholars in the American Historical Association doubted the intellectual integrity of historical narratives written for policy makers, and the discipline splintered. Because their subjects of inquiry originated in the political sphere, applied historians could not demonstrate their ability to achieve the ideal of objectivity. In the next generation, the founders of the original public history program at UC Santa Barbara did not attempt to challenge the emphasis on objectivity; they were not consciously working
to develop a new discipline. Rather, Robert Kelley and G. Wesley Johnson, traditionally trained historians who had accumulated experience as expert witnesses and consultants, founded the program in response to a crisis in the academic job market. Kelley and Johnson believed public history education would create jobs for PhD-trained historians in public service where they would act as dispassionate advisers, not as advocates, activists, or policy makers.3

This standard origin story is simultaneously useful and limiting. On the one hand, it establishes public history as a legitimate field of academic inquiry, one that emerged during pivotal moments in the evolution of history as a discipline. On the other hand, by situating the roots of public history education inside both the academy and the discipline of history, this origin story has tended to restrict efforts to historicize and theorize a distinctive set of values, ethics, and practices that have shaped public history education over time. Measured against traditional standards, public history appears more pragmatic than intellectual. This criticism led many public history educators to occupy a defensive position, constantly emphasizing their disciplinary fitness rather than identifying their unique professional habits. Therefore, recognizing founders’ emphasis on job development and their insistence on working toward the discipline’s ideal of objectivity is valuable. It helps explain the tension many public historians experience while operating from inside academic departments of history. Unlike their colleagues, public history educators tend to emphasize methods and process over content and product, and they often struggle to find the right balance in their classrooms.

However useful this origin story may be, it does not explain the evolution of more radical practices and objectives that have arisen in public history education. Whether working with neighborhood associations, local museums, preservation organizations, or historical societies, many public history educators situate themselves and their students as advocates and activists. They emphasize the role that history-making processes can play in efforts to advance social justice and promote political change. While radical public history education often—perhaps even usually—involves the production of interpretive historical narratives, it may not. Sometimes public history educators and their students work with communities to develop archival collections, gather oral histories, and build local capacities without asserting interpretive authority.

Is there a different origin story for this kind of work?
We can open up more nuanced critical perspectives on public history education by identifying pedagogical approaches that took shape outside of university and college history departments in response to a wide variety of historical conditions. In this context, the American Civilization Institute of Morristown (ACIM) in New Jersey serves as a valuable case study. Established in the fall of 1965, the ACIM was a collaborative experiment in education that brought together students and faculty from Morristown High School and Fairleigh Dickinson University to work on a series of place-based research and collecting projects. As a precedent for public history education, the ACIM is significant because it adopted several learning innovations that have become commonplace in public history education. It provides an early example of community-specific service learning in the field of preservation and museum education. It represents an effort to establish student-focused, multidisciplinary, collaborative learning opportunities in which students analyzed the past in their hometown. The ACIM emphasized process over product and methods over content. Although founders tended to describe the ACIM as primarily vocational, closer examination suggests the project was designed as a creative response to a variety of local conflicts and opportunities. Placing these at the center of the ACIM history illuminates important questions about how and why public history education emerged in response to a complex social and political environment.

The idea for the ACIM was hatched in the spring and summer of 1964. This timing suggests growing public investment in collecting and commemorating the past had galvanized the project’s founders. During the 1950s and 1960s, at least two state commissions encouraged the collection, preservation, and interpretation of New Jersey’s history. Both projects sought to challenge exclusive interpretations of the past. The New Jersey Civil War Centennial Commission was the more overtly political of the two initiatives. The executive director of the state commission, Everett Landers, appointed an African American woman—former Democratic assemblywoman Madaline Williams—to serve as a delegate to the Civil War Centennial Commission. During the opening meeting of the national commission in South Carolina, Williams was refused a room at the conference hotel. The treatment of Black delegates became a point of serious debate, and it is likely Everett had appointed Williams purposefully to challenge the national commission’s racist and exclusive perspective on the war. It is also clear that Williams’s appointment had more local political motivations as well; state legislators...
and agencies were eager to demonstrate New Jersey’s commitment to civil rights and to attract support from Black voters.

While far less controversial, the second state history initiative also sought to democratize the past and to institutionalize community-based processes of history-making. State lawmakers established the New Jersey Tercentenary Commission in 1958 to develop projects of “enduring, rather than transitory worth.” Commission members encouraged local communities to participate in tercentennial efforts by assembling collections, preserving historic structures, publishing local histories, and developing public programs. In addition, members of the commission’s advisory board on education advised college faculty and students to take the lead in identifying primary source material and making it broadly accessible. Passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 may have encouraged the 1967 establishment of the New Jersey Historical Trust and the New Jersey Historical Commission, but both entities emerged in direct response to tercentenary initiatives designed to engage the public in historic preservation.

The ACIM founders clearly adopted the tercentenary commission’s goals as the framework for their program, establishing an intersection between secondary school education and the rapidly professionalizing realm of preservation. On its most basic level, the ACIM was an experiment in applied learning that took advantage of a temporary intersection that had formed between history and policy. Morristown school district superintendent Harry Wenner, Morristown High School social studies teacher John “Jack” R. Stewart, and Morristown school board member Dorothy Harvey proposed using the Timothy Mills House, a mid-eighteenth-century, one-and-a-half-story house adjacent to Morristown High School, as a laboratory. There, history and science teachers could engage high school students “in the challenge and adventure of studying American civilization in depth through the reconstruction” of the house. Following the advice of the commission’s education advisory board, Wenner and his staff sought advice from faculty at Fairleigh Dickinson University. As a result, anthropologist Gene Weltfish, then on the Fairleigh Dickinson faculty, joined the ACIM project. Weltfish quickly became central to project planning and development. She and Harry Wenner shared leadership responsibilities, with Weltfish serving as academic director and Wenner as administrative director.

Under Weltfish’s guidance, the project team began planning. They reached out to the state field archaeologist Willard Schlosberg and the National Park
Service, Northeast Region, archaeologist John L. Cotter, and they began to view the NPS history program as a model. Nineteen students and faculty from both the high school and the university traveled to Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where site historian Martin Yoelson and historical architect Norman Souder gave them a “very complete tour of the Park in terms of the
various phases of work and a thorough briefing in the problems involved in the work of historic reconstruction.” They also took advantage of local expertise. They gathered at Morristown National Historical Park, where they met again with Cotter as well as the site’s museum curator, Theodore Sowers, and NPS regional director Ronald Lee. By the time the project began in earnest in the fall of 1965, it had evolved into a multifaceted, multidisciplinary, locally designed project in which faculty and students took seriously state lawmakers’ call to collect and preserve state history. Professors and students from Fairleigh Dickinson University acted as project leaders and mentors. Participating high school students encountered the project in courses as varied as social studies, art, home economics, and science. College students similarly entered into various phases of the project while studying history, chemistry,

Gene Weltfish, right, with her colleague Irving Herman Buchen from Farleigh Dickinson University. American Civilization Institute of Morristown, ca 1966.
and archaeology, among other fields. Weltfish and history professor Jack Fritz ran summer graduate seminars in which students conducted significant archival research “on the subject of the transfer of English institutions to the New World, making a close analysis of society on both sides of the Ocean during the Colonial Period.”

The ACIM faculty and students were not precisely starting from scratch, however. Morristown’s ties to the Revolutionary War had stood at the center
of the town’s identity for at least a hundred years. Situated about thirty miles outside of New York City, Morristown’s hills provided colonial forces with a clear vantage point from which to monitor British troops quartered in New York City. General George Washington established winter headquarters there twice, once in the winter of 1777–78 and again in the winter of 1779–80. During the second encampment, Martha Custis Washington and her two children accompanied her husband, and the family lived in a large home owned by Colonel Jacob Ford. Morristown was not the stage for any significant Revolutionary action. Indeed, bored troops suffering from disease and bitter cold constantly threatened mutiny. Nonetheless, the presence of Washington and his family became a source of civic pride for local residents and state officials alike. In 1874, these men established the Washington Association of New Jersey to purchase the Ford Mansion and acquire various sites associated with the troop encampments in order to ensure their preservation. In 1933, the
Washington Association conveyed their holdings to the National Park Service, and Morristown National Historical Park became the first place designated as a national historic site by the NPS.\textsuperscript{12}

Jack Fritz and his students did not seek to challenge the dominance of the Revolution in Morristown’s past, but their work identified a broader global context and a deeper historical time line for understanding local history. Two of Fritz’s graduate students established a residential research program at the Mills House. Morristown High School students joined them as researchers and, eventually, as docents and interpreters in a “junior museum.” Together, students, teachers, and professionals completed a multiyear project to gather, study, and reinterpret the history of Morristown. The results of their work clearly met the official goals of the New Jersey Tercentenary Commission: They assembled archaeological and archival evidence as well as oral histories into collections that are still held by local institutions. They also established a variety of projects and educational programs to “make available to school children and to the public the results of the historical, educational, and preservation work accomplished by the organization and to allow the public to visit the reconstructed or restored buildings at reasonable times and for reasonable fees.”\textsuperscript{13}

Over the rather brief life-span of the project, faculty advisers produced annual progress reports and held at least one symposium during which over seventy high school and college students presented their research findings. These documents make clear that the ACIM was a point of origin in the development of public history education. It advanced service learning as a core method of teaching and learning. In some ways, it fits neatly into the traditional historiography of public history education. Like the founders of applied history programs and the UC Santa Barbara public history program, the leaders of the ACIM project tended to emphasize its practicality in preparing students for an evolving job market. Gene Weltfish explained in the first annual report, “The American Civilization Institute of Morristown, Inc., is an educational enterprise designed to close the gap between theoretical knowledge and applied skills so that we can prepare our young people educationally for a new age to come.”\textsuperscript{14} In several reports and presentations, she described the project as a remedy for youth unemployment and a rapidly evolving job market.\textsuperscript{15} Undoubtedly, focusing on the pragmatic potential of the ACIM to train students for a postindustrial economy had immediate value. Weltfish and her colleagues successfully applied for funds from the Office of
Economic Opportunity in the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare. In addition to supporting project administration, Weltfish and her colleagues used these funds to pay students for their work. “One of the reasons this project was set up as jobs for money,” she explained, “is that we want to have a preamble, a preview to the possibility that these will be very important jobs in the future, and we wanted you to think of yourselves as . . . pre-professionals.”16

At the same time, evidence suggests that the value of the ACIM projects transcended both the agenda set by state history commissions and the practical connection between education and job creation that Weltfish often emphasized. By the time the project ended in 1969, well over three hundred students had participated, and their voices are included in the formal project reports. While many offered narrow, concrete descriptions of their work, some reflected more critically on its value and meaning. Barbara Livings-ton, who worked in the loan department of the Junior Museum, thought the project had shifted her perspective on children: “I have tried for perhaps the first time in my life to put my mind on a different level of understanding and knowledge—namely, that of the grade school child. I have ceased to think of childhood as a mindless, obnoxious state of human existence.” 17 Jessica Brambir, who participated in the summer work program at the museum, commented on the intellectual value of “vocational” education. She said, “In the academic world, actual experience is often divorced from the theoretical level. This is unfortunate because it leaves the person with a rather abstract frame of reference, which is of little use in guiding his life experiences as they occur. At the Museum, I found that there was an emphasis on . . . experience. The various artifacts that I handled became meaningful to me as I did research on them.”18 Emoke S. B’Racz reflected on the broader philosophical impact of the project, commenting, “Reconstruction of man’s past is an activity of supreme importance to humanity, not least because in the collaboration of different individuals it holds the key to general interest and understanding. . . . As someone said, it is the most human of all sciences and the most scientific of all humanities; an opportunity for all to get to know one another on the best and easiest of terms.”19 By engaging students in a collaborative, real-world educational experience, the American Civilization Institute of Morristown facilitated emotional as well as intellectual and practical development.

The significance of the project is perhaps best understood by placing it within a local political context. The timing of the project’s development and
the composition of project leadership suggest the ACIM was designed, at least in part, as a tool to address deep and troubling rifts in the community. Like the members of the New Jersey Civil War Centennial Commission, the founders of the ACIM also intended their work to challenge racism and disrupt exclusive practices of community development. Examined from this angle, the ACIM comes into focus as an origin point for radical public history practice, a project developed as part of a larger response to local conflicts over social justice and inclusivity.

Morristown is a small urban municipality, just 2.9 square miles. It is completely surrounded by Morris Township, a largely residential suburban district measuring 15.7 square miles. The boundary lines distinguishing town from township are irregular and rather illogical, cutting across natural features and established streets. The two jurisdictions originated as a single entity, but they were separated by petition to the state government in 1865. Popular histories commonly suggest the reasons for the separation between town and township are unknown and unknowable. This is not the case. It is significant that Morristown “seceded” from Morris Township at the end of the Civil War. The state of New Jersey had long been divided over issues of slavery and emancipation, and those fissures transformed local politics in Morris County during the war and left powerful traces in the way race relations evolved in the state as a whole and in Morristown in particular.

After the Revolution, northern states abolished slavery gradually, and New Jersey was the last of these. The state legislature voted for gradual abolition in 1804, and many slaveholders took advantage of loopholes that enabled them to profit from enslaved people’s labor well into the nineteenth century. In 1830, 3,568 people were still enslaved in the North, and more than two-thirds of them were in New Jersey. While slavery was permanently abolished in the state in 1846, eighteen people were still categorized as “apprentices for life” at the start of the Civil War.

During the war, so-called Peace Democrats dominated the New Jersey state legislature, which repeatedly passed resolutions denouncing the war as futile. Party members in the state were hostile to abolition, and during the state convention of 1862, they condemned the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation Lincoln had issued in September. The Democrats in both the New Jersey state house and state senate were also opposed to the Thirteenth Amendment. This was particularly true in the New Jersey House of Representatives where Democratic members adopted the most extreme anti-Black
arguments against emancipation, saying it would impose “negro equality” on the White majority and lead to “amalgamation of the races.” New Jersey failed to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment until 1866, when a postwar legislature dominated by Republicans took up the vote for a second time.

George T. Cobb was a lone moderate in the state’s virulently racist and antibolitionist Democratic Party. Democratic leaders ejected Cobb from the party in 1862 because he had shown modest support for abolition. While it would be inaccurate to suggest he was a champion of African American civil rights, his position on slavery had begun to shift after the April 1861 attack on Fort Sumter. When Confederate sympathizers fired on Union troops in Baltimore just a few days later, Cobb led a mass meeting in Morristown in which local residents vowed to provide material support to the Union. Cobb was elected to Congress in 1861, where he supported emancipation in the District of Columbia and became an advocate of compensated emancipation. He was the only New Jersey Democrat during the war to demonstrate any support for emancipation and among a minority who supported the war. During Cobb’s tenure in Congress, another New Jersey Democrat, Andrew Rogers, wrote a new platform for the party in Cobb’s home district, advancing a rigid antiemancipation stance. Cobb refused to sign it, and the party refused to nominate him for a second run for Congress. Rogers ran in his place and served in Congress from 1863 until 1867. Cobb defected to the Republican Party and was elected to the New Jersey senate in 1865 and again in 1868. In 1865, George T. Cobb led the successful effort to establish Morristown as a separate political entity.

These political machinations suggest that personal rivalries, framed by irreconcilable positions regarding slavery and emancipation, led directly to the separation of Morristown from Morris Township. George T. Cobb played a prominent role in nearly every philanthropic and economic initiative that took place in Morristown between the time he left the Democratic Party in 1862 and his untimely—and tantalizingly suspicious—death in a railroad accident in 1870. He served as mayor from 1865 to 1869. He donated land and $10,000 for the construction of a high school, which opened in 1869. He led the incorporation of the Morristown Bank in 1862, and after the passage of the 1864 National Bank Act, he was on the first board of directors of the First National Bank of Morristown. Active in the local Methodist Church, Cobb funded the construction of a new church building in 1866 and donated the building outgrown by the congregation to the members of the local African
Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. As Morristown grew into a financial and business district, the township remained a largely rural area, dependent on town services and on townspeople as customers.

In the years immediately following the Civil War, the African American population of Morristown remained small. Two hundred and ninety-three Black people lived in town in 1880. By 1900, migrants from Virginia and North and South Carolina had increased the Black population to 815. Irish and Italian immigrants also settled in the town. Although the overall population grew from 5,418 in 1880 to over 11,000 in 1900, the percentage of Black residents remained small—just around 5 percent in 1880 and 7 percent in 1900—until after the turn of the twentieth century. While overall population numbers in Morristown grew steadily and consistently, averaging about 2,000 new residents per decade, racial diversity began to expand at a more rapid pace. By 1970, Morristown was home to 17,662 people, about 25 percent of whom identified as African American. The number of Black residents in the surrounding district of Morris Township was always much smaller, and the population growth there fits the profile of a post–World War II transition from rural to suburban. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Morris Township was sparsely populated. Indeed, after the Civil War, the district experienced a sharp drop in population. In 1880, it was home to fewer than 1,500 people, and the population fluctuated through the first half of the twentieth century, experiencing periods of minor growth and periods of decline. This changed dramatically after World War II. Between 1950 and 1970, the population of Morris Township grew from 7,432 to 19,414. But while overall numbers grew, diversity suffered. By the 1960s, Morris Township had evolved into a wealthy, White suburb, home to fewer than 1,000 African American residents. Morristown, in contrast, had evolved into a densely populated urban center, home to an economically and racially diverse community, including more than 4,500 African American people.

Differences—real and perceived—in the economic status and racial identifications in the town and in the township created unease and even hostility that influenced local decisions about education. Since 1865, the residents of the township had sent their children to school in Morristown, contributing some tax revenue to the maintenance of the school system. This arrangement met with little debate until the middle of the twentieth century. The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared school segregation unconstitutional. In the South, this meant that
the practice of formal segregation—the maintenance of entirely separate Black and White schools—became a flash point in civil rights activism. In the north, questions of racial imbalance created tension. Studies found that segregation or near-segregation were common in northern states, not only in large cities but also in small communities and in the suburbs. African American parents organized to protest these conditions. They made requests to transfer their children to different schools, petitioned school boards, and distributed fliers and pamphlets documenting unequal conditions and de facto segregation. Their efforts intensified during the 1963–64 school year with incidents of civil disobedience and increased policing of student behavior.38 African American students staged sit-ins at predominantly White schools in Englewood, New Jersey, and boycotted predominantly Black schools in Jersey City, New Jersey.39

Similar unrest troubled the Morristown school district. When Harry Wenner arrived as superintendent in 1961, the two districts were renegotiating their relationship. Wenner advocated for a formal merger between the town and township educational systems, but residents of Morris Township had begun to press for the creation of a separate system. The two jurisdictions had agreed to a new ten-year contract in 1962, but their relationship was strained. Residents of Morris Township had begun to push for the creation of a separate high school. Although six of eight members of the township school board had expressed support for a formal merger of the system, pressure from township residents began to erode their commitment.

In the middle of all of this ferment, Harry Wenner met with Gene Weltfish to discuss the plans for the ACIM.40 Although the notes from that first meeting are long gone, if they ever existed, it is evident that the two shared a commitment to inclusive community development, diversity, and antiracism. These beliefs stood at the center of both the ACIM development and the school district boundary fight. Gene Weltfish was a well-known, accomplished, and—in some circles—notorious anthropologist with an impressive intellectual pedigree. During the 1920s, she had studied with the progressive educator John Dewey, the rationalistic naturalist philosopher Morris Cohen, and the anthropologist Franz Boas. Under their tutelage, Weltfish developed a strong belief that intellectual inquiry must be relevant, grounded in contemporary life and politics. She joined the Columbia University graduate faculty as a contract lecturer in 1935. While there, she repeatedly connected her work as an educator and an anthropologist to a larger effort to challenge
racism. In the early 1940s, she collaborated on the development of a high school science curriculum on heredity that called beliefs about racial difference into question. She was also quite active as a community organizer, helping create a conflict resolution center in the diverse neighborhood surrounding Columbia University, and working through the Chamber of Commerce, neighborhood associations, and a variety of city agencies to build cross-cultural understanding.

During the same period, she and her colleague, Ruth Benedict, coauthored a pamphlet *Races of Mankind*\(^{41}\) that challenged contemporary beliefs about racial differences in intelligence, strength, and morals. For a brief time, the pamphlet was used by the War Department to educate soldiers, juxtaposing scientific evidence of human development against Nazi propaganda regarding white racial superiority. By 1944, the pamphlet had attracted ire from those who said it unfavorably compared the intelligence of White southerners to that of Black northerners, and it was banned from use. Immediately after the war, Weltfish’s strong antiracist views and multifaceted efforts to organize communities and end racism combined with her participation in international feminist organizations attracted the attention of anticommunist politicians. She was called before Joseph McCarthy’s Committee in 1952 and summarily dismissed from Columbia. Unable to find another faculty position in the Cold War climate, she turned full time to anthropological fieldwork and completed important studies of the Pawnee people. This work established her academic credentials, and Weltfish was hired in her first tenure-track position at Fairleigh Dickinson in 1961 when she was fifty-nine years old.\(^{42}\)

Like Weltfish, Harry Wenner was committed to facilitating interracial cooperation and integration. He adopted as his guiding philosophy the key tenets of progressive education. Often criticized for its pragmatism, progressive education strives to make intellectual inquiry relevant in the lives of students from diverse backgrounds. For Wenner, this meant that “being born is enough of a passport to take you where your abilities should take you without any preconditions” and the role of education is to help all young people achieve their potential.\(^{43}\) Born in Philadelphia, Wenner attended Northeast High School, a large, racially integrated, all-boys public high school. After completing a BA at Bucknell University, he taught biology and coached football at West Orange High School in New Jersey. While teaching, he pursued graduate studies at New York University and the Columbia University Teachers College. He was affiliated with the Teachers College research institute.
known as the Horace Mann Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, which encouraged teachers to develop innovative classroom methods and to design curricula that was both responsive to student needs and encouraging of high student achievement. Wenner may first have come into contact with Horace Mann Lincoln Institute leaders while teaching in West Orange. In 1952, the institute led a training session there for teachers interested in improving classroom discussion.

Harry Wenner earned an ED in curriculum and teaching from Columbia Teachers College in 1956. His dissertation examined the impact school superintendents might have in establishing activities that might lead to program improvement. The study built on previous work that had established the importance of administrative leadership in program development by addressing the “need for evidence which can provide the basis for ‘better preparation programs in educational administration in universities and improved educational leadership by superintendents and their associates in schools and communities.’” While the timing of his degree makes it impossible for him to have worked with John Dewey—whose philosophies are the cornerstone of progressive education—it is possible that Wenner met Gene Weltfish during his studies; she remained at Columbia until the termination of her contract in 1953, and she had worked extensively with the Teachers College. In any case, after completing his degree, Wenner briefly served as superintendent of the Mountain Lakes school system in New Jersey, but he jumped at the opportunity to move to Morristown in 1961. Mountain Lakes was a predominantly White, middle-class area, while Morristown was a more diverse school district, similar to both West Orange and Philadelphia. Wenner’s son, Rolfe Wenner, recalled, “He viewed this as an opportunity to attempt to develop success in a diversified environment. There were many candidates who had more experience in terms of size and diversification of the community. However, during the interview process, his commitment and dedication to providing equal opportunities for success for all students plus demonstrated skill set in moving a district forward” earned him the position.

Under the direction of Harry Wenner and Gene Weltfish, the ACIM directly challenged long-held ideas about the composition of the community. By demonstrating that the history of Morristown extended beyond long-revered historical and geographical boundaries, the ACIM project had not only established a strong intellectual context for disrupting the sense of “difference” between town and township but also encouraged a generation
of students from town and township to recognize their mutual connections and responsibilities to one another. As Weltfish explained, “By taking a very limited area, this area here that is under our feet, a certain reality begins to grow up, not only about the past and its long time, but also about the possible long time of the future. That’s the kind of future that we hope you will identify yourself with, the long time future that sees we have tried many things, we have survived many difficulties, and we move into the next step.”49

Racial segregation was very much on the mind of Gene Weltfish as she celebrated the success of the ACIM during the student symposium. While Morristown High School itself was racially integrated, the project, apparently, was not. She challenged participating educators to address this directly. She said, “I have one more thing to say and that is, as I stand here and look around and I have been talking about it, I see on the whole that I address a middle-class White America and we should look at ourselves clearly and realize that in part this is the result of the nature of the senior research personnel who selected the apprentices for their work.”50 Weltfish’s comments pushed symposium participants to think more broadly about issues of racial injustice. She said, “The trouble in White America comes from the middle class. . . . We are in need of assessing ourselves. We are the most in need of thinking about our values; we are the most in need of asking ourselves what American civilization really is. . . . Now we have to assess ourselves and hopefully the work we have done here will help us assess ourselves.”51 Weltfish believed that community based public history projects like those sponsored by the ACIM could provide necessary context and experiences for challenging White privilege and facilitating racial justice.

While Weltfish was challenging white supremacy and working to articulate connections between the ACIM work and a broader project of racial justice, Harry Wenner was working to disrupt perceived connections between geographical boundaries and community boundaries. Wenner hired an urban design firm led by Isadore Candeub to issue a report on the viability and benefits of a school merger.52 Candeub’s report challenged the validity of the boundaries between town and township, pointing to their irrationality and demonstrating that the two jurisdictions commonly shared municipal services. The report advanced a definition of community that rested on the maintenance of relationships, not on the respect for municipal boundaries. Candeub wrote, “We mean ‘community’ as describing the society of man occupying a given area within fairly definable boundaries, interacting within
that area, with many interests in common despite differences and even antagonisms. If man is a social being, let’s treat him as one and provide him with an environment in which he can function as a social being.”

Candeub’s report argued that a unified school system could facilitate the establishment of community connections across lines of race and class. Wenner picked up key points from the report, consistently using them as talking points at school board meetings and elsewhere. In particular, he championed the idea that a community shares a common sense of history and a common commitment to the creation and management of cultural institutions.

In the ACIM, Wenner and Weltfish designed an educational program that encouraged students to become active members of their community. They also clearly hoped the project would enable students and faculty to form relationships across lines of race and neighborhood, though Weltfish’s pointed comments suggest they fell far short of this goal. Nonetheless, over the course of the short project life-span, strategies of civic engagement and concern for social justice shaped efforts to preserve and interpret historic places and to educate students in the broad realm of public culture. Student researchers established indigenous people as part of the evolution of the landscape and assembled collections of artifacts and oral histories that pointed to the importance of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrial development in mapping the various relationships that defined Morristown over time. Their work lent credence to the idea that communities are made by human connections, not by municipal boundaries.

As the ACIM program took shape between 1964 and 1969, the school district dispute made its way through the New Jersey court system. The dispute hinged on competing understandings of the history and nature of community. In 1968, the township board of education held a nonbinding referendum, asking residents if they favored the creation of a separate K–12 system. Township residents voted 2,164 to 1,899 in favor of separation, and the township began to take steps to build a new, separate high school, including initiating a bond referendum. When Wenner challenged the validity of this referendum, the state commissioner of education acknowledged that the vote was likely non-binding and that the outcome would be to segregate the school districts, but he refused to act. The case eventually arrived in the state supreme court as Jenkins v. Township of Morris School District.

The New Jersey state supreme court decided the Jenkins case in 1971, declaring it the responsibility of the state commissioner of education to act to
prevent segregation. The school district remained unified. In the aftermath of the decision, the Morristown unified school district experienced some minor incidents of racial unrest. Shortly after formal consolidation in 1973, scuffles between White and Black students drew both media and police attention, but they blew over quickly with no lingering legal ramifications for individual students or for the reputation of the school. Indeed, the district is among the most racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse in the state of New Jersey, and Morristown High School has a record of high achievement for all of its students.\textsuperscript{56}

The history of the American Civilization Institute of Morristown, New Jersey, suggests that public history education was not only an academic invention, designed to broaden job opportunities for history PhDs. Public history education has also been a broadly public invention, deriving radical intentions from the contexts in which it arose and from the individuals who gave it shape. It has been broadly interdisciplinary, approaching a study of the past from a variety of perspectives and areas of expertise. It was community-based, encouraging students and teachers to work together to collect and organize often overlooked forms of historical evidence—from material culture to oral history. It was inspired by state initiatives that sought to democratize the process of history-making and challenge racist and exclusive interpretations of the past. It was organized by two individuals with lifelong commitments to racial justice and diversity. It was temporary, designed to address a particular set of historical and political issues. In the end, the work of the ACIM engaged students, teachers, history buffs, and others in a process that made a legal and political philosophy of community into something concrete, measurable, and meaningful. And it has often fallen short of its most radical goals, forcing public history educators to question our determined belief that processes of historical inquiry can bridge stubborn barriers to inclusiveness and equality. The ACIM demonstrated that communities are made through shared experiences and shared spaces, and they cannot be contained by political or social boundaries. Surely, then, the ACIM emerges as a significant antecedent for radical public history education.

Notes

1 Benjamin Shambaugh coined the term applied history in 1910. See Rebecca Conard, \textit{Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History} (Iowa City:


5 “New Jersey Tercentenary: For Three Centuries People, Purpose, Progress,” History News 17, no. 6 (1962): 76.

6 “New Jersey Tercentenary.”


9 ACIM, “ACIM So Far,” 3.

10 Gene Weltfish, “American Civilization Institute of Morristown 1-Statement of Purpose,” North Jersey History and Genealogy Center, Joint Free Public Library of Morristown and Morris Township, American Civilization Institute of Morristown Collection, box 1, folder 5.


13 “By-Laws of the American Civilization Institute of Morristown,” North Jersey History and Genealogy Center, Joint Free Public Library of Morristown and Morris Township, American Civilization Institute of Morristown Collection, Box 1, folder 1.
14 Quoted in ACIM, “ACIM So Far.”
15 For example, ACIM, “ACIM So Far”; Gene Weltfish, “American Civilization Institute Symposium,” p. 5, North Jersey History and Genealogy Center, Joint Free Public Library of Morristown and Morris Township, American Civilization Institute of Morristown Collection, box 1, folder 9; Weltfish, “ACIM 1-Statement of Purpose.”
17 Weltfish, “ACIM 1-Statement of Purpose,” 19.
18 Weltfish, 23.
19 Weltfish, 26.
22 Hennelly, “Secret History.”
24 Richards, Who Freed the Slaves?, 234.
25 Richards, 234–35.
26 Richards, 235.
27 Richards, 207.
30 Richards, Who Freed the Slaves?, 207.
31 Miller, States at War, 4:575.
32 Pitney, History of Morris County, 90, 242.
36 NJDOL, Labor Planning and Analysis, “Table 6.”
37 Jenkins, S.J. 483.
39 “School Desegregation.”
47 “Tribute to Dr. Harry Wenner.”
48 Rolfe Wenner, personal email with author, July 8, 2016.
49 Weltfish, “American Civilization Institute Symposium.”
50 Weltfish, 17.
51 Weltfish.
Candeub was born in Romania, and he was a 1943 graduate of the City College of New York. He attended graduate school at Columbia University, and received a master’s degree in architecture and city planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He and Morris B. Fleissig established a community development and environmental planning firm—Candeub, Fleissig, and Associates—in 1953.


Jenkins, 58 N.J. 483.