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### Oral history interview with Kenneth S. Greenberg (SOH-049)

Kenneth S. Greenberg  
*Suffolk University*

Fred Marchant  
*Suffolk University*

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## Oral History Interview of Kenneth Greenberg (SOH-049)

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### **Oral History Interview of Kenneth Greenberg**

**Interview Date:** October 31, 2019

**Interviewed by:** Fred Merchant, professor of English

**Citation:** Greenberg, Kenneth Interviewed by Fred Merchant. Suffolk University Oral History Project SOH-049. 31, October, 2019. Transcript and audio available. Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

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### **Interview Summary**

Kenneth Greenberg, distinguished professor of history and former dean of Suffolk University's College of Arts & Sciences, discusses his life from childhood in the 1950s to college and graduate work in the 1960s and 1970s. He describes his first teaching opportunity at the Harriett Beecher-Stowe Middle School in New York City and how it influenced his teaching style. Greenberg also goes into detail about his scholarship, service, and leadership activities within New York, Wisconsin, and Boston. He explains the background and motivations behind his books, essays, and documentary film surrounding the stories of Nat Turner. Related to Suffolk University, he reflects on the school's history, his tenure as dean of the College of Arts & Sciences and as chair of the history department. The interview ends with brief a discussion of his recent return to the faculty and his ongoing scholarly research and writing.

### **Subject Headings**

**Greenberg, Kenneth S.**

**Suffolk University-- College of Arts and Sciences**

**Universities and colleges – Faculty**

**Suffolk University -- History**



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**TRANSCRIPT BEGINS**

**FRED MARCHANT:** This is Fred Marchant, emeritus professor of English speaking and interviewing the Distinguished Professor of History Kenneth S. Greenberg. The interview is taking place in Sargent Hall on Suffolk University campus. Today is October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019. We are not wearing any masks. Our conversation will follow this general outline: I'll ask Ken about his early years, and then we'll go into his teaching, then his scholarly work, then his years in service and leadership in this university. And we'll conclude with a few minutes about what he's doing right now and what his hopes are for his future work. Ken, I hope you are comfortable in your chair, you have some water. And so if you're ready, let's begin.

[00:00:51]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I'm ready.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Alright. Welcome. We've known each other many years. And over those years, every now and again, you have mentioned to me, your other colleagues, and your students that you are from Brooklyn. And you would adopt even occasionally, for a few seconds, a genuine Brooklyn accent. So I'd like to begin today by wondering with you what growing up in Brooklyn meant to you, and how it's been in any way a part of your later life.

[00:01:26]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Brooklyn was an important influence on my life. I grew up in a lower-middle class neighborhood. It was a block. And we had many ethnicities on the block – actually, I shouldn't say many. It was mostly Italian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, people from the Middle East, and there were almost – there were no African Americans on my block. But we didn't notice the absences at that time. We all played together on the street. It was an interesting cultural mix. We had no organized activities. The kids on the block would organize themselves.



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We would use the street itself. I was a street kid in Brooklyn. We played sports together. And it was great. My family always emphasized reading and learning , so school was also really, really important.

I always had my eye on the fact that I was going to go to college. My parents never completed college, and they really were unsophisticated about it. So I had to make my way. I was also in a program where I skipped the eighth grade. New York had that system going. You went from seventh grade to ninth grade. That put me together with other serious students. It never even occurred to me that I might have trouble going to the college I wanted because I didn't have enough money. My parents really just barely made ends meet, and it was always a struggle. So I graduated from high school at age 16 and started college at age 16. Cornell was the only expensive school that I applied to. My brother went to Brooklyn College. That would've been a route which was quite different. It was also a very good school, but quite different.

[00:03:16]

I ended up going to Cornell. I never visited the campus ahead of time. In fact, I remember getting a ride with a friend. My family didn't have a car, and I went with a friend's family. They dropped me off at the dorms there, and [I remember] being sort of lost. It was an entry into a world that I knew nothing about. I had no idea how it worked -- how college worked exactly. So I learned along the way and picked up things I observed very, very carefully. So that's a summary of my Brooklyn years.

**FRED MARCHANT:** That's very helpful, Ken. Thank you. And you anticipated one of my questions about those Brooklyn years, about whether or not there were books in your childhood. A family of readers, and there were books in your house?

[00:04:01]



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**KEN GREENBERG:** My family wasn't really a family of readers. But I read. I loved books and got them when I could. And I remember staying up late into the night in high school reading some of the great Russian novels. I remember specifically reading *Crime and Punishment*, and I felt as if I lived through hell reading that book. I really [came to understand] the power of books and the power of reading. It was really extraordinary. That was the key to my interest in education.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And when you went to Cornell, did you have any idea about what scholarly path you would pursue, or what your major would even be?

[00:04:40]

**KEN GREENBERG:** No, I was completely clueless in every way. So I can't remember what the first history class was. I think I was required to take some history at Cornell, and I took that. During the time I was at Cornell, I had a spectacular group of teachers. In fact, the first teacher I had who taught me about slavery was David Brion Davis, who later went on to have a major chair at Yale University. The year after I had him, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his first work of history. He was an extraordinary scholar, a great lecturer. I was in a class of 300 students, and when many years later I actually sat on a panel with him -- we had never talked before, never met each other. I sat on a panel with him and I turned to him and said, "You're the reason I became a historian." And he said, "Oh, that's good to hear, but you know, there are scores of people who tell me that. You were in that Cornell class." And he [confirmed] the year I was in it. And I said, "Absolutely."

[00:05:42]

His was one of the great classes. I remember it was a course on intellectual history. We would focus on one thinker for one session. For about an hour and a half or so, he would talk about that person. It wasn't an interactive class; it was just him lecturing. And by the time we were done



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with that thinker, he convinced all of us this was the greatest thinker who ever lived. We were all absolutely astonished by it. And then the very next class, he would have us convinced about someone else in exactly the same way. It was jaw-dropping to see. I had many professors like that. It worked for the group of students, the kind of student I am, and the group of students I was with to excite us. It was theater in the extreme by a really brilliant scholar.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Since we're both teachers and we both have taught many undergraduate classes, I'm curious. Do you remember how old you were when you first met him, David Brion Davis?

**KEN GREENBERG:** Probably 17.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Seventeen years old. We just have to meditate on that fact for a while. How extraordinary. Could you mention some of the books that you first encountered that were meaningful to you at Cornell?

[00:06:52]

**KEN GREENBERG:** So I have to tell you, Davis is a key figure. The book he won the Pulitzer Prize for was *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, and his reach in that book was quite astonishing. He read from many languages and talked about the issue of slavery cross-culturally. It was jaw-dropping to see a scholar like that in operation. I had also another great teacher, a teacher in foreign policy, Walter LaFeber. In fact, one of my colleagues at Suffolk was a student of Walter Lafeber. We were a few years apart at Cornell. But he was a great lecturer, and he would always – he used no notes except he had a little card in his pocket. And once in a while, there would be a statistic on the card. He'd pull it out and give us this statistic.

[00:07:53]



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But we read things that were works of history there that were astonishing. These were the years when the New Left was popular. [Lafeber offered a] critique of American foreign policy. Also, the Vietnam War was beginning to heat up, and that crept into it as well. So, you had a sense during those years that the work you did in the classroom wasn't academic only, but it had an impact in the real world as well. That made going to school very exciting.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Right, I anticipate, but also it flows quite naturally from this topic. I was going to ask you a note. You graduated from Cornell in 1968, which means that you spent four years there and four years that were, at the very least, profoundly turbulent in this country, and in the world beyond because of this country. And so I wanted to know if you'd reflect a little bit at length now about how the American war in Vietnam and the how the Civil Rights Movement may have come into your undergraduate education.

**KEN GREENBERG:** Both of those were really central. First of all, this was a transition period because when I started at Cornell in 1964, it was another world. Women still had curfews in the dormitory, and men couldn't come into the women's dormitories. There were those kinds of rules. Everything was about to change. The world was about to undergo a tremendous transformation. But in 1964, it was quiet. I'll give you a nice example -- an illustration of this. Once, I was on the main part of the campus and I saw in the distance coming across the main quadrangle a crowd of hundreds of students. It looked like they were angry and chanting, and they walked past me, and I said, "Oh, this is interesting. I wonder what this is exactly." And I got caught up in it, and we walked.

[00:09:52]

I didn't ask anybody. I just assumed this was some kind of protest, although that was not so common during those days. It turned out we ended up at the women's dorms. And this was what may have been the last panty raid in Western civilization. What panty raids were was the men



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would stand outside the women's dorms and scream for ladies underwear, and the men would throw them. So that was about the change. That was probably the last [panty raid] at Cornell. The next time I was involved in a demonstration, it was against the Vietnam War. Getting caught up in those demonstrations was extremely important. And then it escalated. As you know, it got increasingly violent, increasingly violent in Vietnam, increasingly violent on the campus as well. And ultimately, it exploded, and every campus I had an association with, there was a major explosion during those years during the Vietnam War.

At the same time, it was completely parallel with the Civil Rights Movement. This was the tail end of the era of segregation in the United States. Many pieces of segregation had begun to fall down, but there were all kinds of other issues related to race. During those years, while at Cornell, I became, because of my interest in modern race relations, I was led back into an interest in slavery. How are you going to understand the current situation without understanding the institution of slavery? We look back. I looked back at that time and said, "This is the area I want to study." This is what got me interested in it. And so I read about it and I became knowledgeable in the area. And the two were really parallel, even in the case of Martin Luther King's life where he understood the connection between somehow what was happening in foreign policy in the Vietnam War and race issues in America.

[00:11:46]

It was also a time of great change. This was the era when Black Power came into existence by the time I graduated. That was a different approach. When I started out, the dominant approach on civil rights had the goal of integration. . By the time I was done, we had this other, powerful movement, the Black Power Movement -- Malcolm X for example and many, many others who approached it from a different angle. These were really complicated issues to work out. As I began to work these out for the world in which I lived. I began to work them out for the past as well.





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**FRED MARCHANT:** Let me stay in the present tense of 1968 for a minute or two. Do you remember what it was like for you as a young student of history and a graduating senior to learn of the assassinations of the spring of 1968? How did that come into your mind, and how did it affect your thinking?

[00:12:49]

**KEN GREENBERG:** So, there were two things. First, on the larger level, it looked like the world was falling apart because there was tremendous turbulence. There was the assassination of Martin Luther King, and then there were the riots afterwards as well. It looked like there was disorder everywhere. And then at the same time, there was the Vietnam War and the demonstrations against the Vietnam War were also becoming increasingly violent. So the feeling was that the world that I lived in, the world I knew, was falling apart. It was full of tremendous turbulence, and being able to understand it was important. How that figured in – how that related to my own personal biography was an issue.

[00:13:31]

What am I going to do when I graduate, for example? What's the appropriate thing to do? Let me just take a second and talk about that, because by then, I knew I wanted to do graduate study in history. And I realized that we had the draft during those days, and I was not going to fight in the Vietnam War, and wasn't going to go into the army. I believed I was a conscientious objector, and wouldn't have joined that war. And therefore, I had to figure out a path which would be appropriate for me. I actually filled out all the paperwork to become a conscientious objector because the U.S. does have a very nice system where you can--That route is possible, as you well know, Fred, as a way out. But leaving the country was another possibility. So the abstract academic work and my own personal life oddly converged during those years.



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[00:14:27]

So, I chose a path.... There was a program in New York City which a new graduate of any university could apply [for admission]. This was at City University of New York. And it guaranteed to give you a summer's worth of courses to make you prepared to become a teacher. New York City had a shortage of teachers in the schools. If you agreed to go to this program – which was very hard to get into and was one of the most elite programs you could imagine. They selected a small number of people. You took the courses over the summer. Then you agreed to continue getting a Master's degree in teaching. Finally, you got a teaching job in New York City schools. I was in the middle schools. Turned out when I entered that program, the New York City school system was on strike. This was one of the most bitter strikes in [the history of the city]. [It involved] white, middle-class teachers trying to preserve the way the teaching system used to be.

[00:15:32]

And there was a movement among African Americans who were organizing on the more local level trying to take over the schools so that they could change the education to be more appropriate for the population of New York City. It was a racial clash. And there I was about to enter the school system during the strike. So, the question is, ,what do I do? Do I go [into this program]? If I didn't go, I get drafted and go to Vietnam. If I begin to teach, I was a scab and a strike breaker. I also understood completely the African American position. So there were no good choices in this kind of a situation. I began to teach at that point. Then, when the other teachers came back, there was some tension.

I did that for two and a half years. I was a middle school English teacher. But since my real love was history, I also applied to Columbia to go to graduate school in history. At the same time -- I was a middle school teacher, which was the hardest job I've ever had, or anybody could ever



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have; I was also in a Master's program in teaching; and I was in graduate school at Columbia. I had a busy life during those years.

**FRED MARCHANT:** I noted on your resume the coincidence of the teaching and the beginning of the graduate work at Columbia. I did not know, thank you for telling us, that you began as an English teacher, which allows me to circle back to one last question about Cornell. When did you learn to write so well?

[00:17:20]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I have no idea.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Were you writing papers at Cornell?

**KEN GREENBERG:** I was writing lots of papers at Cornell, but I really don't know. Nor did I think of myself in those years – I didn't say, "Oh, I'm a writer." I didn't think of it that way at that time.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And I should say for the record that you were teaching at the Harriett Beecher-Stowe Middle School in New York City for those two and a half years. You were an English teacher, so you must have been teaching students how to write, or grammar.

[00:17:51]

**KEN GREENBERG:** What was it like? This is hard to reconstruct First of all, here's how I experienced it: middle school teaching – I was at an all-girl's school, but they phased it out a few years after I did this. So I only had women in the classroom. And it was chaotic. There was a men's version of the school, which was just as chaotic. But when I say "chaotic," teachers were focused on keeping order in the classroom. If you could survive a day and the class was orderly,



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then that was – at the beginning at least, because we had no training. We had no idea what we were getting into. And the underlay of race – there was a lot of hostility towards the teachers. The students were all African American. The teachers were almost all white with some really interesting exceptions. One of the things I noticed was there was usually some older 65 year old African American teacher who had been doing this for years and years and years.

She would walk into a classroom and you could hear a pin drop. And these were magical classes that she taught. And then I noticed that all the young whites that came out of college recently didn't know what they were doing. And I was in that group. But I stuck with it long enough to begin to learn because I really tried to watch really, really carefully. And I learned a lot during those years about dealing with people that I was not the same as exactly. And not only that, by the way, but when I was teaching in the middle school, then I would go right from there to Columbia. And the difference between being in the middle school classroom and the Columbia classroom – sound and noise were one of the big differences.

[00:19:42]

Middle school classrooms were noisy places, and Columbia was deadly quiet. [At Columbia], people who were often posing and phony and didn't know what they were talking about. It was so obvious to me that they were disconnected from some other world. I learned to live between two worlds. I could switch between those two worlds. But I also learned to look at hypocrisy, and it was quite evident to me when I saw it. And so that was one of the breaks in the culture that I was watching.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Would you say that your teaching in the middle school – those students were, what, ten to 12, 13 years old? So, pre-adolescent youngsters?

[00:20:23]



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**KEN GREENBERG:** Yeah, about 13, yeah.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And mostly African American. Would you say that's your first encounter –?

**KEN GREENBERG:** And some Hispanic students as well.

**FRED MARCHANT:** A broad swath of African American and Spanish culture?

[00:20:33]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Yes. And so I had to learn a lot about the culture. For example, I noticed that this happened to me as well: when a student was angry at me, they would – not just me, but other people who were white teachers as well – they would express their anger using a certain language and style. And we didn't know what they were saying. There was a language gap of astonishing proportions, and I said – one of the things I said to myself was to figure out, what is this gap that I'm watching exactly? And so this actually set the tone for a lot of my scholarship later on, this particular experience.

**FRED MARCHANT:** You anticipated what I was going to make a leap – not to stay there, but just to point out and ask you to respond to how language translation, cultural translations of various kinds of languages, both literal and metaphorical, seems to be at the heart of your scholarly work. And you say so explicitly in the introduction of *Honor & Slavery*, which we will get to later this morning. Let me go – one sort of little lacunae kind of question. Did you in any way reflect that Harriett Beecher-Stowe was indeed a white abolitionist novelist of great importance, and there you are, a beginning historian, and you're teaching in a school named after her – did that mean something to you?



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[00:21:56]

**KEN GREENBERG:** You know, it actually didn't. What meant a lot was teaching in an African American community. And the other thing was that I discovered how great the students I had were. It was easy not to see it when you first started, because if you couldn't understand the language and you couldn't understand the people you were teaching, then I missed a great deal at first. That's what I spent the time learning. That was the key thing -- less about Harriett Beecher-Stowe and her past.

**FRED MARCHANT:** She wasn't memorialized necessarily.

[00:22:29]

**KEN GREENBERG:** [I tried to learn about] who these people were I'm speaking with, and what's my relation? [I tried] to understand, [to learn to] speak the same language. And by the time I was done, I believe I was a very successful teacher. I was sad to leave. They were sad to see me go as well. I had honed great friendships.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Let me just -- one or two small points about this period in your life that you returned to New York City. Did you feel some fundamental connection with the city after your time?

[00:23:03]

**KEN GREENBERG:** New York during those years: I was in Manhattan, and I grew up in Brooklyn. When I was teaching and going to Columbia, I was in Manhattan. It was another world. From where I [grew up] in Brooklyn, we used to talk about "going to the city" when we would go to Manhattan. We called that "the city" and what Brooklyn was, was something totally otherworld. And crime was really high. People would visit us -- I had an apartment with my wife. We got married after college [and lived right] behind Grant's Tomb near Columbia University.



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People would visit us carrying cans of mace with them because the assumption was that they might get assaulted. Actually none of my friends ever got assaulted. It wasn't ever an issue. But it was this fear that gripped the city that crime was completely out of control.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And of course from 1968 to 1970, the Vietnam War is still going on in a significant way. And it occurred to me in looking over your time in your early years that I wonder if at that time, you encountered Martin Luther King Jr.'s Riverside Church speech, his last major speech on the direction a nonviolent Civil Rights Movement, and it was toward looking at the commonality between the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war movement. Did you encounter that in those days?

[00:24:29]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I don't remember that speech from those years, no. I lived only two blocks from the Riverside Church, and that was one of the centers of anti-war protest.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Let's now look inside the moment you got into Wisconsin. You applied for a PhD program in history after getting your Master's degree at Columbia. What did you think you were going to do when you went to Wisconsin?

**KEN GREENBERG:** Actually, that narrative is not correct. So my wife and I didn't love living in New York City. It was a difficult place to live. Our image of what college was like came from our experience at Cornell. It was a wonderful place to go to school. Columbia felt like it was falling apart, and New York City felt like it was falling apart during those years. I was doing this teaching to avoid the draft, if you remember. So there was a long story which I will not get into here. What happened was that I got out of the draft in December of 1970. The only school in the country which would take both my wife (who was in law school at Columbia) and me on short notice and that was a good school was Wisconsin. The two of us decided to leave on one



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month's notice. It wasn't systematic in any way. It was the only place, really. We went to Wisconsin. Wisconsin was a wonderful place to go to graduate school. It was also one of the centers of the anti-war movement, and civil rights were important there as well, so it was a great place to go to school.

**FRED MARCHANT:** You intuited why I was asking that. I was going to say to you that you certainly were not leaving the anti-war movement to go to Wisconsin. You were actually going to one of the centers of it.

[00:26:23]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Just as I was leaving – Columbia had a big explosion. Each of the places I went to: Cornell, the big moment there was when the African American students took over the student union. But things were escalating. There were rumors that white local townspeople were going to throw the African American students out of the student union. African American students decided to protect themselves because they couldn't rely on the police force, and they came with rifles. Those became very, very famous pictures of those students standing outside. It completely split the campus [as people debated] the purpose of a rifle on campus. You could imagine how complicated those issues were. So Cornell exploded there.

[00:27:09]

Columbia had a series of riots around student protest when the police were called into campus and seriously injured scores of students. And then those injuries continued over time. It was getting bloody, and it looked like not only my academic world but this society was falling apart. Just before I arrived in Wisconsin, it escalated there as well. There were students protesting the war. [One small group] decided to bomb a building called the Army Mathematics Research Center where they were doing research for the army. As a result of that bombing – they didn't intend this --but a young professor was killed in that building. This was becoming increasingly





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violent; a matter of life and death. And the violence was not just in Vietnam anymore, but it seemed to be coming [to the United States]. It was coming to Cornell, to Columbia, and to Wisconsin as well.

**FRED MARCHANT:** I don't want to neglect the personal dimension of your life that you mentioned. So, you met your wife Judi at Cornell, and you subsequently married [and lived] behind Grant's Tomb?

[00:28:20]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Actually, we met her first year there. By then, I was a junior, I think. I was ahead in years because of skipping the eighth grade. That always put me a year ahead. When we graduated, we got married right away. She graduated early. She went to graduate school at Columbia – in law school at Columbia -- and finished at Wisconsin. And that's when I started graduate school in Wisconsin.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Well you arrived at Wisconsin in the turbulence of that moment that you described just now. And what was your academic focus? What were you thinking of as a student and ultimately writing a PhD?

[00:29:02]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I was a historian of slavery. I defined myself that way from the time I was an undergraduate at Cornell. And I knew I wanted to study the history of slavery in America. Wisconsin was famous because in 1890, one of the great historians wrote a famous essay about the significance of the west in American history, Frederick Jackson Turner. And from the 1890s on, Wisconsin was one of the centers of the study of American history. That tradition continued there, but then they had a number of spectacular professors during those years. One of whom – two of whom, actually, became mentors to me.



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One was a young professor at that time named Peter Kolchin who was writing a comparative history of slavery in the United States and serfdom in Russia. Those two [countries], both [used]unfree labor, and they both [ended those unfree labor systems] around the same time. They have a lot of parallel elements to them. [Kolchin]knew how to speak and read in Russian and also in English, and was able to do this comparative study. It was an amazing book and made a big splash. He was working on that when I was doing my work. And then I also had another spectacular person, Paul Conkin, who was an intellectual historian, a historian of ideas. And Paul Conkin was a genius of astonishing proportions, but he had several features, the center of which was that he was also down to earth in an extreme way.

[00:30:50]

Now, I always found myself liking that: someone who didn't just have his head in the clouds. There he was, an intellectual historian. It looked like his head might be in the clouds, but he came from the hills of Appalachia. And he would carry [what he called] a lunch bucket -- . a little metal case where he'd bring his lunch every day to his office. Oval top, exactly right. Whoever wanted to talk to him [he would welcome to] talk. He [seemed to have] an infinite amount of time. It was a model for how to be a great teacher. I would come in and we would chat about anything. It didn't matter. And he would never end it. He wouldn't say, "I've got to do something else."

**FRED MARCHANT:** Could you tell me his name again and spell it out?

[00:31:28]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Paul Conkin. C-O-N-K-I-N. He was remarkable in many ways. And [was also] a man with a moral center – that's the other thing about doing academic work. The best scholars also have a moral center, and that often guides their work. The great historians I was



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attracted to always had that moral center. It wasn't that you were just doing academic work disconnected from the society. They were [also engaged in] academic work which mattered in the world.

**FRED MARCHANT:** You may have already realized that we are in your teaching mode right now of teaching at Harriett Beecher-Stowe and here at your PhD program. Did you do teaching assistant work?

[00:32:14]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Yes, I did.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And what did you teach?

**KEN GREENBERG:** Usually they were survey classes. There were big classes for the undergraduates. [Large classes] they had a few graduate students who taught discussion sections, so we would have groups of 20 to 30 students in a discussion section. They would come to the lectures of the great professors. And then the junior people getting PhD's would teach these discussion sections.

**FRED MARCHANT:** It makes me wonder – and this is going to be a theme throughout our conversation – it makes me wonder whether or not that concept of a moral sensor guiding one's scholarship – did you find that in your own work with those sections?

[00:32:57]

**KEN GREENBERG:** It would come out all the time. Here's an example of this kind of thing – not quite sure this is the right anecdote for this point, but I'll tell you the anecdote anyway. I remember sitting in this classroom with all the undergraduates, and I was a teaching assistant in



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that section. There was turmoil on campus. There were anti-war protests going on all the time. One student raises his hand. This was in Conkin's class, actually. And I knew this was another language – talking past each other, people not understanding each other. So the student said, “Shouldn't we close the library?” This came out of nowhere actually, and everybody looked around. And we all knew pretty quickly what the student was getting at, which is, how can you be reading in a library when people were killing each other in the world outside?

The professor, I remember, said something like, “Well” – had no idea what the context was even -- and just said, “Why would you close the library?” That was his answer to that. “Why would you close the library?” Then we didn't have any further discussion about it. I saw that as another example of a clash where communication had broken down completely, and that was happening all over the society.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And if I may, it reminds me also of what you were saying about the complexity of your work at the middle school where it was a lot of ethical tugs this way and that. There was no really great choice. No one had to manage a certain set of choices, some of which may be worse than others. But none of them were really great. And ethical dilemmas of that sort, it seems to me – let me preview some of the things we might talk about. That's the sort of thing that a high-level administrator like a dean might have to deal with at some point in his life. One more thing about this consonance, and it's really about your writing. So, in your writing of your doctoral dissertation, what was its title? How did that process of writing your doctoral dissertation go? How long did it take you, and how hard was it?

[00:35:03]

**KEN GREENBERG:** By the time I was working on my dissertation (I was obviously nearing the end of the PhD). And during those years, I happened to remember this figure. It typically took a history PhD student nine years from being an undergraduate to finishing the PhD. Nine



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years. That's after having gone for four years as an undergraduate. People were spending long periods of their lives doing that. And I was married, and near the end of my time there, we had a child as well. And so I wanted to get on with my life. That period when we had a small child, my wife was in law school still at that time, and I was writing the dissertation. It was extremely difficult. And that's when I got my first teaching job. These were hard jobs to come by, as you well know. For people in the humanities -- the jobs were few and far between.

**FRED MARCHANT:** This was at Alfred?

[00:36:05]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I was in Western New York at Alfred University, a school I had never heard of. There were little schools like this, in rural areas, very often, that were gems. They were extraordinary places. And I fell into one of the great places on earth for educating students and for having colleagues that were wonderful to work with. It was paradise. It was spectacular. But I hadn't yet finished my dissertation, so during my first year of teaching, full-time teaching, I was finishing the dissertation, we had a small child, and was teaching for the first time in a university.

**FRED MARCHANT:** This is 1975 through 1977, am I right? And that is like having spinning plates on the top of a pole. You've got three or four of them going.

[00:37:00]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I had no time for anything else other than that. So again, this is consistent with the themes I've been talking about earlier? What I did with my doctoral dissertation -- may have had a different name as a dissertation, but ultimately, it came out as a book called *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery*. What I tried to do was figure out the question -- okay, the fact that the people who -- the whites who governed in the South during the



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time of slavery – and conducted a kind of politics. They had elections, they would debate with each other, and they would discuss the substantive issues of the day. So I asked myself the question did being a master – did that change the way you conducted your politics? So I began to look at them as different people. They became different people because they were masters. No one had really looked at this closely before, but the question is, okay, how are they different exactly?

[00:38:08]

At the same time, you have people who were from northern society, outside of slave society. And how did they conduct their politics? What was the clash like? So here you have again the theme that I keep seeing over and over again: people who don't understand each other. We think about the Civil War as involving a clash over the institution of slavery, which it was, of course. But part of that was a clash was over how to communicate what they're saying, the language that they used. And I began to get interested in the language issue academically.

**FRED MARCHANT:** I did think that *Masters and Statesmen* was the result of how your doctoral dissertation evolved. And I was wondering – the reason why I asked this question about the composition – I was really wondering about that moment when you first read about a master, a statesman, and started to say, “I might write about this person.”

**KEN GREENBERG:** There was no moment, no. I slowly got into it. I can't remember. There was no moment.

**FRED MARCHANT:** You introduced me to the Antebellum South literary corpus, and I don't remember if we ever talked about your doctoral dissertation in that regard. There wasn't a text of that sort. It was the phenomenon of these people. It's really interesting that you began the sentence to describe it as “being a master,” because it seems to me – and I'm going to ask if this



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is your experience – you had to imagine what it was like to be a master. That was hard work, I imagine.

[00:39:44]

**KEN GREENBERG:** This is a problem that every writer faces and every historian faces when they deal with this. The question is, when you study another person or group of people, you can't understand them unless you put yourself in their shoes. And so that's a hard leap because these are repulsive, reprehensible people, the ones who were the master class of the old South. But on the other hand, you want to know, why did they act the way they did? What were their motivations exactly? To understand them, you have to see the world through their eyes. And then you can critique it and use it and so forth and so on. So whenever I deal with anybody – and this has been the case in all my work since then – the first questions I always ask are, how does the world look through their eyes? Because it's been part of my biography already. You can see it pops up over and over and over again, people misunderstanding, not being able to communicate.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And I think over the years, I've known you well enough to say this with some experience, that is your process, that is the act of historical imagination. It involves a lot of other things that it's founded on all sorts of data. But it is an act of understanding someone whose value system you would find repellent. That really is a profoundly difficult task. Novelists try it and they don't do so well, for instance.

[00:41:06]

**KEN GREENBERG:** This is dangerous territory. And in fact, I think what I'm describing when I describe these earlier experiences of my life – I'm looking back on a life which is dead. It's not my life. That is to say, I would like to be able to say it as a kind of continuity. And you could see elements of continuity in my work since then, my life since then. But actually, the nature of the world that I was living in at that time that made me think about those issues this way was trapped



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in a time and place which has changed. So for example, this became obvious to me on the issue of – well, you got to put yourself in the shoes of someone else who's not you, right?

[00:41:57]

Now, another way to describe that exact same act – and not a friendly way to describe it – is you're appropriating somebody else's voice, someone else who once lived who had a voice. And you have the arrogance to go back in time and to begin to understand their voice that you're becoming them? What's that all about? Isn't that insulting? And of course, lots of people made those accusations. All these white scholars who are trying to imitate or understand African Americans are engaged in that kind of activity. So, it looks innocent from one angle, which is the desire to understand, is appropriation from another angle.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And it is contextually conditioned. That is to say over time, when that happens, that kind of thinking – and I was wondering about the dangers of appropriation. I also have another wondering question. These are sort of deep, existential questions. You were brought up in a Jewish culture. Did you inherit from the Jewish – whether you're practicing the religion or not, did you inherit a sense in this country of an outsider's point of view?

[00:43:07]

**KEN GREENBERG:** That's very interesting. Okay, so I was never connected to Judaism in a deep sort of a way. But clearly, my background is Jewish, so it must have affected me in a million different ways. But it wasn't a conscious kind of thing. The hand of anti-Semitism in the United States remains today, and it had been existent when I was growing up as well. But I never felt it in any way that it stung exactly. But looking back, I would say sure it was there, and I just never felt it really. So in that sense, my sense of being an outsider came from my peculiar background of getting a PhD in history. That makes me an outsider everywhere.





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**FRED MARCHANT:** The last question of this sort of murky moment of becoming the historian that you're going to be later, I recollect Stanley Elkins book on slavery, and in the fifties having a great presence, that somehow understanding slavery as a closed system made it analogous to Nazi racism in the concentration camps and the holocaust. And so there wasn't any of that Stanley Elkins understanding that motivating you toward the study of slavery?

[00:44:32]

**KEN GREENBERG:** No. In fact, Elkins is a very problematic figure among American historians. That book was first published in 1959, and it had many pieces to it. It stimulated a lot of research. But most of the research that it stimulated was people attacking it. And it set the agenda for the next 20 years among American historians, who devoted themselves to arguing against that view.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Did you at any point?

[00:45:04]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Absolutely. I did attack him many places, but I was just part of a group of people that were saying this is the wrong headed way of thinking about it from a lot of different angles. So this is a complicated subject.

**FRED MARCHANT:** But from the depths of these kinds of questions, let me move to another teaching question. And I'm going to ask you – I don't ask you to do this on the spot, but you are notorious, Ken. You're notorious as a punster. Especially in your teaching. And I would like you to take a moment now, take a deep breath, and not to describe – not to a pun, necessarily, because you know I might groan. But to describe a little bit your sense of the role of humor in your teaching over the years.



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**KEN GREENBERG:** So I'm very fond of humor because I think that what humor does is if you're going down a road, the humor comes from the side, and you suddenly look over there and say, "Where'd that come from exactly?" And I enjoy that in my personal conversation, in my teaching, to come from the side like that. In fact, I'm actually writing something now that does exactly that, where no one else has looked at something I'm looking at. Usually if you tell the story in a straightforward way, you miss a great deal. You think, I'm going to explain it to someone. But if you can come from the side and explode it – now, this comes from another tradition that I'm in as well which I can discuss my involvement with the critical legal studies movement. That's the intellectual side of it.

[00:46:42]

But nonetheless, it's the coming from the side and the surprise from the side that's really, really important. The disruption, basically. And in fact, if you look at my biography, it's full of disruptions like this. There I was on the straight line to go to graduate school. I was privileged and lucky to be able to teach at a middle school in New York City. Where'd that come from? And then I was able to understand Columbia University much better because I had had this come from the side. And this is true in many points in my biography.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Well speaking of those many points, let's wonder out loud. So you and your wife Judi are at Alfred, or are you commuting in some way?

[00:47:24]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Judi would, one day a week. She wanted to be a law professor, and so she would teach law at Syracuse University. But I was stationed in Alfred.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And then suddenly, you're in Boston. How did that happen?



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[00:47:36]

**KEN GREENBERG:** This is because of Judi. Judi had a career that she was interested in. She wanted to be a teacher in law school. There aren't so many of those jobs around. Harvard Law School had a wonderful program in which you got a Master's in law – a Master's in law is after the bachelors in law, which was changed to the doctorate in law. Now, why would you get a Master's exactly since you could practice law without a Master's degree? The Master's opened up the door to teaching because this was a scholarly kind of a pursuit. Harvard had a wonderful – it was a two year program, but you got a Master's in law. Then you also learned about teaching because you became a teacher in legal methods at Harvard Law School.

[00:48:35]

This was a first-year course at the law school. We decided if she's ever going to get involved with being a law professor, this was the best route to do that. I said, "I hate to do this." I loved Alfred. We both loved Alfred. But this can't work out. You can't be a law professor in Alfred. We went to her program. Then I spent the next year looking for a job in the Boston area.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And indeed the next September, you began at Suffolk.

[00:49:05]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Actually, there was a year gap, I think. I taught at UMass Boston for a year, and then during that period, I found the Suffolk job.

**FRED MARCHANT:** September 1978, according to your resume. And so I actually had come just the year before, so we are really contemporaries in that sense. So I have a peculiar sort of sense that everyone wants to know – all of your former students, for instance, want to know – how did you prepare for your first classes? What was it like to be a rookie teacher here at Suffolk?



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**KEN GREENBERG:** I probably made a rookie error right away -- which was over-preparing. Because every teacher has the sense when they start out – and when they finish – that they don't know that much. Every year in my field now, there are hundreds of books that get written. [I only could read a] tiny fraction of them. I'm struggling to keep up. I'm not keeping up, really, because there are hundreds I don't read. So it's insecurity at the beginning. And then the question is, how do you make up for that? I prepared furiously. And then if you prepare furiously, often you're not such a great teacher. I remember there was a moment fairly early on when I said, "I'm just going to put these notes aside." Because after all, I understood everything in question of translation and being able to be understood, being able to talk to people.

Moving away from that overly elaborate preparation and being able to focus on fewer things that were more important that was the clarifying moment. And that came to me early. I don't know why it came.

**FRED MARCHANT:** It's funny that you should put it that way because we've taught together and I've watched you teach and visited your classes. I have noticed in your maturity how you can do that. You decide what's important to you, and you clear the deck a little bit for people to find those things that are important. Who met you at the door of the history department when you first came to Suffolk? Who hired you, who did you meet?

[00:51:18]

**KEN GREENBERG:** John Cavanagh, who is a Suffolk legend in many ways – he was chair of the department during those years. We had some people who retired pretty quickly after I came here. But Cavanagh was a central figure. And of course Mike Ronayne was the dean.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And Ed Hartman was also a senior –



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[00:51:42]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Actually, I took his place. So when I was hired here, Ed retired, and that created the position, and I was hired for that position.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And Mike Ronayne was indeed the dean at that time. And when you were hired by the history department, what did they say your teaching chores would be? What was your assignment?

**KEN GREENBERG:** I covered a huge range of American history. And they had – in those days there was a joke. Not at Suffolk, but I remember hearing this from others as well, when people decided what they were going to write their dissertation on. This is a mythic story. Go into the chair's office and there were three wheels that you'd spin. One wheel said "1832." Another said "social" or "economic" or something like that. You'd pick it. And then there'd be a country. And you'd do your three wheels, and that was what you wrote your dissertation on. So that's the way the fields of history were organized as well. American history was broken up into eras of one sort or another. I had a sense that these are artificial creations, and I'm willing to break the rules. Its humor is really, really important. It's coming from the side. And so, I began to play a round with the inherited body of knowledge. That was really important to do.

[00:53:16]

But it took me a while to figure out where I was exactly. It was a strange group of people [in the History Department]. We didn't speak the same language, actually. I had to learn their language in order to understand my colleagues. I think I understood the students better than I understood my colleagues, but after a while, I got to know them.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And your class sizes were --?



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[00:53:37]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I remember the teaching load was four courses a semester, a total of eight courses a year. And class sizes were – remember I had classes with 40 and 50 students and so forth. You can imagine running a school compared to the way it is now with class sizes of that size and the teaching load of that size. Everybody who was a teacher was devoting their time to grading papers and doing that teaching. There was little room for scholarship here. And always, I was stretched. During that period when I was finishing the PhD dissertation, writing a book essentially, having a little child, doing my first year of teaching – this stretched me and everybody.

When I came to Suffolk, I was familiar with the kind of world where there was time to think, to sit back and say, “I’m just going to linger over this.” That didn’t happen. So that was something I missed. Then I decided, well – once I decided I was going to stay here – and I decided to stay here because I loved the students and I came to love my colleagues as well, quite a bit. There were no pretensions. I remember my time at Columbia when there was a lot of pretension. And here, there wasn’t those pretensions. And I said to myself, why would I want to leave here? I ought to try to change the place to make it the kind of place which I love and which I think my colleagues will love as well. And then I met you.

**FRED MERCHANT:** Well, interestingly enough, that idea of wanting to change the place and actually have it realize its potential – I think you sensed the potential for change and for growth in the school at just that moment. I’m going to go back to the classroom though, just for a minute. Now, what I know about your teaching is that you’ve always been able [to include humor], to invite class participation, whatever that means. Obviously for different classes, different teachers, it means different things. But could you say a word or two about how in your first years



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of teaching at Suffolk – put it in the most practical teacher, how did you get those students to talk?

[00:55:57]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I think I learned about teaching by teaching in that junior high school, that middle school, because the way I understood what was happening was that there was a gap, a language gap, a communications gap. So, the trick to teaching was -- the first step --to love what I was doing. I had to think what I'm going to teach isn't as important. It matters to the world, it matters to them, and it matters to me. And so I'd only teach the things that I thought were really, really important. That helped me focus and hone down instead of trying to teach everything. There was never a date that I thought the students really needed to know because it was a date. It fit in somehow.

[00:56:40]

So it was that attitude. And then communicating with the students meant that my teaching style, I describe it as conversational, so that I might say some things, but then I wait and have them respond and have them go in the directions that I have in mind, but that they hopefully have in mind as well.

**FRED MARCHANT:** When young teachers of the future watch this interview, they're going to hear something that's incredibly important, and it was what you said, "And I wait." And one of the things that young teachers always worry about is that moment of dreadful silence, right? But actually, it's a really good moment. It's a moment in which somebody's thinking, maybe, one hopes. But it's a moment in which thinking is possible. And so we'll add that to humor as one of the ways in which –

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**KEN GREENBERG:** That’s absolutely right. Fred and I have known each other for many years. We taught together as well. And we've had conversations about this. But being able to tolerate silence – one of the big mistakes that a teacher can make is that suppose you ask a question and you'd like an answer, and there isn't any answer. So what the teacher often does is fill in the answer. Reframe the question, do something, and you go down some roads that don't involve the interaction. Silence is really, really important to learn to live with and to tolerate.

**FRED MARCHANT:** This is probably a bit of an embarrassing question, but I'm just wondering if you, as a teacher, in all the classes you've taught and all of the incredibly important human topics you've addressed in those classes, with those students, did you ever have a moment in which you felt, you know, this really is going to have an impact on the lives of these young people?

[00:58:29]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Well you know, what's interesting is I never taught anything [that doesn't "matter"]. And this is true today as well. If I go in in any given day, I say, "this matters." And if it doesn't matter, why am I doing it? Exactly. So, leave it out next time, or go on to something which [does matter]. Of course, then the students can sense that. If I don't think it matters, why should they think it matters?

**FRED MARCHANT:** I heard loudly and clearly that you learned a great deal from your students at Harriett Beecher-Stowe. I wonder if you could say a word or two about what you've learned from your students here at Suffolk.

**KEN GREENBERG:** I don't think I learned different things from them. So, it's not a particular thing. It has to do with – the students come to the classroom with lives. And then the question is, how do their lives connect with the academic stuff? I always learn the same thing over and over





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again, which is the answer to that question, which is: Here's this academic stuff. Here's your life. And many students experience college with a gap between the two. There's this other life I lead, and then there's the classroom. And of course, living through the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, I realize those are collapsed into each other somehow. That's the best kind of education you can get. It's not just going through the motions of education. It's feeling it in your gut.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Well you know, you intuit the last part of the education unit of this conversation, and I want to raise – not the invention of these programs, but you're teaching in the Integrated Studies Program. And your invention with me and others of co-teaching certain kinds of classes. Could you tell us a little bit about what it meant to teach in the integrated studies program when the integrated studies program required you to reach beyond your discipline?

[01:00:30]

**KEN GREENBERG:** So first of all, Fred, were you with me when we created this?

**FRED MARCHANT:** In the beginning, yes. In the first year. I took a leave of absence in the first year of its existence. But the planning year, I was here for.

[01:00:46]

**KEN GREENBERG:** And by the way, when I talk about the things I've done while I'm at Suffolk, always it's a group project. And Fred, you were always a central part of those groups. But I remember thinking through this integrated studies idea. And this was, again, a breaking frame. It's another version of the humor thing. It's something that comes from the side, doesn't fit the usual model, and yet it'd be really interesting to go down this road. So the model we had for integrated studies had the following elements: faculty had to love getting involved in this. It ought to be a treat, a delight. Otherwise, why would you leave your department to teach in this



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course, which was a required course for freshman? All freshman. So it had to have that quality. And then I began to think of the people I was discussing with began to think of -- what would be really delightful? I had colleagues that were wonderful. And even when we disagreed with each other, they were wonderful to work with.

Therefore, I had the idea and others had the idea that we should meet together to plan the course. And then I got a grant, which was the key to the whole operation -- because I can't remember who we applied to for the grant -- but the grant gave every teacher in the course a course reduction. And the course reduction would, in a sense, allow us the free time for the faculty to meet as a group on a regular basis as we worked out the details.

**FRED MARCHANT:** I think we should say for an audience member -- we'll talk about your administrative work in this, but this was a course in which the readings came from a variety of disciplines on purpose, being that they were topics across the board. But the people who were specialists in one discipline might find themselves working with texts from another discipline.

[01:02:41]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Yes. The model was -- one way to teach in an interdisciplinary way -- was that each section would be narrowly focused. We decided, no, let's make it so that every instructor taught everything. We would basically put together "great works", but also other works that haven't been recognized as "great." The members that wanted to teach it would meet together. We had only one thing we needed to agree on -- which was the readings. Someone would try to convince the group that this would make a good reading. You didn't have to teach it in a certain way. I was never a believer that it should be rigid, but only that you just had to agree to teach it. But you could teach it however you wanted. There were a range of things you could use. And therefore, the seminar was important because that's where you'd workout [the details of the teaching].



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**FRED MARCHANT:** And over the years, it did formulate itself into roughly the first semester of ancient work and the second semester of more recent, more recent being from the renaissance on. But that was a kind of – but it wasn't strictly chronological that way.

[01:03:52]

**KEN GREENBERG:** No, and I never was so fond of that. This was the people teaching it wanted to do that kind of thing, that it was ancient and modern. But you could do anything you want with it, so you could do modern things with an ancient text.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Didn't mean to interrupt. I do want to remind you, you're the person who introduced thousands of students to the Epic of Gilgamesh. And that remained the touchstone for 20 years –

[01:04:17]

**KEN GREENBERG:** It was a pleasure to work with the colleagues that I had at Suffolk, and we had time. And then when the grant ran out, this was the beauty of our dean at that time, Mike Ronayne. I convinced him and others convinced him to continue it, supported by the university. It was such a successful program. And we did it for many years.

**FRED MARCHANT:** This is leaping ahead, but that fact what you just described is also one of the initial faculty developments and support efforts that you ever made, and that played itself out and transformed itself into other things later on. Let me just end the teaching part with the idea of co-teaching a course, one course, two teachers. You and I have done this together many times. And in preparing for this interview, it occurred to me that it actually was the integrated studies model writ small. It was more than one voice of authority in the room. And there were different



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points of view being compared and contrasted, sometimes meshing and sometimes not. Could you say a few words about what it was like to be a co-teacher?

[01:05:21]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Anybody who is listening to this interview knows that Fred Marchant and I are different. We have different styles, different ways of thinking. We like each other a lot, and that helps. What happens when you put the two of us in a classroom is that the students will look at this and they'll get these multiple angles. It's another version of the humor coming from the side because my colleague in the classroom is now coming from the side. It's such a pleasure to have that happen. In fact, we used to prepare for these classes, and at some point in our preparation, one of us would say, "I want to surprise you." So the classes were full of surprises for us as well as part of it, and it was a pleasure to be in the same classroom. And we had a dean that tolerated this.

After all, think about what I just said. This is the most expensive form of education. We had a relatively small number of students in the classroom with two professors. Who's paying for this exactly? And of course, you decide, well, it's worth the investment. And that sets up a model.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And I think it would be fair to say that Ken Greenberg is the one who proposed that there be a course on the history, literature, and film of the Vietnam War, which became our co-taught staple. We tried a couple of other things. But that became the one that we returned to. And that, it seems to me, is also reflecting back to what we've spoken of earlier in your education and then your teaching. And I think that what I'd like to do is take a break at this moment. Is that okay?

[Paused for A Break]



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Hello, Ken, we just took a quick break. We talked about your teaching, through the years of your teaching. We're going to move now into your scholarship. And to be very honest, the 30 minutes or so we can devote to it does not do it justice. So, we know that going in. So, we'll take a few angles and try to talk about what's important. For instance, at the end of *Honor & Slavery*, your 1996 second book, you say that you are translating and hoping to form in this book a primer on the language of honor or the culture of honor among the white Southern society, put it that way more broadly. Could you say a word about what you meant by the word "primer" in that?

[01:07:56]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Well, it's funny, because as you were speaking, the last thing on earth I thought you would end with was "primer." I have no idea what I meant by primer. It was a model for a way of thinking about the world, which I'd been discussing already in my earlier life. But let me just describe something which I discovered in dealing with honor. So first, I had mentioned earlier that my interest as an academic was in the institution of slavery. And during the 1960s, as I began to study the master class of the South. I realized that these are very strange people. When I wrote *Masters and Statesmen*, I said they're acting in ways that I don't fully understand. I believe – I'm not sure every historian agrees with me on this, but I believe that when you look at the past, you're looking at another culture.

[01:09:01]

It's another world, which is – in my case, it's long gone, basically. Especially in a society with masters and slaves. And so one thing you want to do as a historian is to understand that world. That helps you understand why things happen the way they did in the past. And there are multiple ways in which historians deal with this. Sometimes you'll just laugh at it, like dueling and the kinds of things that masters did. They would shoot pistols at each other. There's a whole generations of historians who wrote about that as if it's funny and humorous, that these are weird people. The weird kind of reaction.



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[01:09:40]

I said, no, when I look at them, I've got to take them seriously. Why would they do that? My favorite example of this sort of a thing with dueling, for example, which appears in the *Honor & Slavery* book, is a case that happened at South Carolina College where it was the custom – students would eat together communally at long tables. Two students were opposite each other at the table, and they each grabbed a dish of trout which was sitting between them at the same moment. And neither one lets it go. If it happens today, one student would let it go and say, “You go first, I'll go second.” But then they didn't do that. But the odd thing about it is it becomes increasingly odd when after that happens, they're looking at each other, not letting go. And the whole table gets quiet because they know something very serious is about to happen.

[01:10:35]

One lets go of the dish and says, “I will see you later.” And in the language that everybody understood, it meant that this was – they were going down a road which might lead to a duel. They were going to shoot pistols at each other. And so in the end, they do. But something else happens too, which makes them incomprehensible from our point of view. They ask professors to be the seconds. A second is supposed to make the duel happen [or help resolve the dispute]. Here you have two students who are about to shoot at each other, risking their lives over a dish of trout, which a professor like you and me might say, “Boy, that's silly.” And all of a sudden, the professors are involved and everybody takes this very seriously. And they end up shooting each other. One student is maimed for life. The other one is killed. Imagine a university today writing home to a parent saying, “Sorry, but your child got shot in a duel and the teachers were seconds.”

When I saw something like that, I said, “These are very strange people, and I don't understand them. And I've got to figure out what's going on to make this make sense to them, while it



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doesn't make sense to us." Then I began to look. Now, in 1980, I had a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar on anthropology and history. And that seminar was key for me because it was at Northwestern University. I spent the summer there, I talked with other scholars. We had a great scholar who's still around leading the group. And we read anthropology.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Who was the scholar?

[01:12:19]

**KEN GREENBERG:** His name was Breen.

**FRED MARCHANT:** It's funny you should say it that way. Of course, since we've known each other, you probably told me this. But I made in my notes, I said I think that in some way, your method is the same as an anthropologist would be. And looking at cultural artifacts and trying to understand them as a system of signs and symbols that had great meaning to those who shared that culture.

[01:12:42]

**KEN GREENBERG:** You know, a big figure in that era from the area of anthropology was Clifford Geertz, who wrote about Balinese cockfighting. It was a very influential article which I read in there. So I began to understand that method. It turns out I was at the cutting edge of a whole group of historians who began to use anthropology in history. So what you see in the *Honor & Slavery* book is the culmination of that work. I ultimately focused on not only trying to understand dueling, but I came across something which is really astonishing in the same tradition of, I don't understand this, I've got to find out about it. I did find out about it. That has to do with nose pulling.



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So the book you're talking about, which is called *Honor & Slavery*, has a very long subtitle. And the subtitle includes things like “noses, lies, duels, dressing as a woman, gambling, honor” – this is not the right order --“the pro-slavery argument, humanitarianism.”

**FRED MARCHANT:** I can give it to you so you can remember.

**KEN GREENBERG:** I tried to figure out, well these are features of the society that I don't understand. I'm going to explain it all in this book so a modern reader can understand what this is about. And that's where you came across that reference.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Did *Masters and Statesmen* lead you to the question of honor?

[01:14:00]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Absolutely. I had dealt with duels in that as well.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And so would you say that the honor question became clear to you as a result of that book, and then you plunged into the anthropological --?

[01:14:14]

**KEN GREENBERG:** It opened the door to me I would say. And then I had my reading of anthropology after that. Then I began to apply it in my work. But that became a very famous article because that got published in the premier journal for historians and had a tremendous influence in the profession. The nose article, the nose pulling. And I also discovered in that something which historians had looked at and never understood. The first assault on a president of the United States was against Andrew Jackson. And he had his nose pulled.





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**FRED MARCHANT:** I don't want to leap ahead into the book, but as you wish, would you tell us how you understood nose pulling, dueling, and what not in relation to the society they were manifestations of?

**KEN GREENBERG:** So, let me just focus on the nose because that's a deep subject. So I had come across this phenomenon. Normally when two people were involved in an altercation involving honor, as was the case with the dish of trout, you wonder what that was about. And I'll just say a few things as background to this. What it was about was when you live in a society of masters and slaves, masters are always sensitive to the fact that they may fall into the category of being a secondary or slave-ish kind of figure. They were very sensitive to that. And what the duel was all about was an attempt for the two parties to assert themselves as equals with each other. That's why neither could give up the dish of trout. By exchanging shots, they made themselves back into equals again for the whole community to see. They all wrote about this and talked about it.

[01:15:58]

It was a way of reasserting their equality, basically. If you didn't fight a duel, suppose you're having an encounter, as happened in the case of the nose pulling. Jackson was president, and someone got court-martialed and kicked out of the navy. He'd been a purser. He'd been accused of stealing things. Kicked out of the navy. And Jackson signs the document which kicks him out, and describes him as not an honorable gentleman. Now, this is a man from Virginia who thought he was a man of honor. He would normally challenge a guy like Jackson to a duel. But Jackson's the president of the United States. He's not going to duel with a disgraced naval officer. So dueling isn't a possibility. What he does is something else.

[01:16:53]



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To show his contempt for Jackson and his own superiority, he's going to pull Jackson's nose. It's a way of showing contempt. Now why is that – again, you've got to get into the background. I actually began to study noses in Southern culture, what the meaning of the nose was. The nose was the most prominent projection of a man's face. And you showed contempt for it by just touching it. You didn't even have to give it a hard pull, you just touched it. So he decided he was going to do that to Jackson. Jackson was in his sixties at that time. Jackson was on a boat going up the – he was in Alexandria, Virginia going to some event. And this was before the Secret Service. No one's guarding Jackson. He's with a bunch of aides in a suite in that boat.

And this disgraced naval officer comes into the room and pulls Jackson's nose. Any historian reading that, if he were to read it, or anybody were to read it in the newspapers – it was described in the newspapers – would have no idea what just happened because the way the newspapers described it, they say that this guy came in and thrust his hand into Jackson's face – I'm sorry, thrust his hand – repeat that – thrust his hand into Jackson's face. And that's all it says. If you read it, did you know the nose was the object and so forth? The way I came to it was I was reading about another nose pulling, and that nose pulling was labeled a Lieutenant Randolph outrage. And Lieutenant Randolph was the guy who pulled Jackson's nose. But this came later. So what I decided to do – this is the hard work of doing history – I read for years back in the Virginia newspapers for a period of time until I stumbled across it from that direction and realized it was a nose pulling. So this was a guy who was insulting Jackson. He's reasserting his own superiority.

**FRED MARCHANT:** If someone pulled someone else's nose, would they, in effect, be saying that they're the master and the other is the slave, metaphorically?

[01:18:58]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Yeah, that's right.



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**FRED MARCHANT:** It's really a social hierarchy gesture?

[01:19:02]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Yes. So the duel, if they exchange bullets with each other, what they're doing is they're showing they're the kind of person who's willing to die rather than to be insulted that way and to be disgraced that way. Without that, he can't resort to that, then he's got to do something else.

**FRED MARCHANT:** From a reader's point of view and a non-historian especially, from the reader's point of view, it is stunning the way in which you, in that book and elsewhere, take these cultural manifestations and not only analyze them, but ultimately root them in a slave society. That is to say that the phenomenon of slavery is in fact the thing lurking underneath and supporting these. And so I noticed in *Honor & Slavery*, it's not as if you focus only on masters. In fact, was that the first place you wrote about Nat Turner?

**KEN GREENBERG:** I had been involved with Nat Turner almost from the time I was in graduate school because just to turn to Nat Turner for a second – during the time I was in graduate school, one of the big controversies of the era was a sort of an intellectual dispute centered around the novelist William Styron. William Styron wrote a novel called *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which had the same name as the original document *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Nat Turner led the most important rebellion of enslaved people in American history.

[01:20:42]

Styron wrote this novel, which tried to tell Turner's story from the point of view of Turner. He thought of it – since I know, I spoke to him a great deal about this – but he thought of it as



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complimentary. He was an important – he was already the most important American novelist or among the most important, and now he was going to turn his attention to Nat Turner and take it seriously. He grew up in that area and so forth. He wanted to tell that story. And he told it from Nat Turner's point of view, or his imagined [point of view]. He said that this is consistent with the historical record. But places where the record was silent, he was going to imagine things. So it was a work of history and literature combined in a way which he thought was respectable.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Let's circle back to what you said earlier about the historical imagination, and that there's a balance that one has to somehow at least understand the danger of appropriation. Was Styron's novel, in your judgement, an appropriation of the Nat Turner elements?

[01:21:50]

**KEN GREENBERG:** One hundred percent. He was someone who was a white integrationist from the South in the fifties. He was a liberal by that standard. And when he wrote this novel, he wrote it at the time that the Black Power Movement was becoming important, and people understood that critique of whites trying to write Black history. And Styron himself never understood that. So, he basically was attacked by African American writers. There's a great book of ten essays called *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. And it was a major intellectual racial clash of the era. Whites by and large tended to support Styron, Blacks tended to support the critics of Styron. And it was a clash.

I was in graduate school learning it that way, so I learned it along with everybody. But right away, I understood the Black critique and agreed with the Black critique of Styron. When I later met Styron, I will say that he meant well in his own mind and had no idea what he was involved in at that point. Never really understood it. Considered this to be the worst moment of his life. He won the Pulitzer Prize for this novel. And when you read the reviews of it when it came out, this



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is a dream to have a novel written about with such tremendous praise. So it haunted him the rest of his life.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Let's circle back to you, though. Nat Turner had been in your imagination and your understanding somewhere, but you were writing about the master class for the first part. But somewhere, Nat Turner was present throughout. And I was going to say that it's really remarkable and worth noting for the record that your 1996 was a good year. It was the year that you also – not only did you do *Honor & Slavery* and its analyses, but you also published the definitive edition, scholarly edition, of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. And so I wonder if you could say a word or two about how Nat Turner came to the surface with you in your writing and your scholarly work.

[01:24:03]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I was familiar with this clash that Styron had. And then I began to look at Nat Turner and the record about Nat Turner and realized that historians hadn't dealt with Nat Turner. Styron's Nat Turner was an invention of the 1960s, and was an invention of a white liberal Southerner. But what about the historians? There's actually remarkably little scholarship about Nat Turner. So, when the ten Black writers began to respond to Styron, they didn't have that much to draw on. They were drawing on what was available, and it wasn't a huge amount in fact. So that's when I began to think about it.

[01:24:44]

I wrote about Turner in the *Honor & Slavery* book because one of the things about honor was how you treat dead bodies. When a person dies who's considered a person of honor, their body is treated with tremendous dignity. In the case of Nat Turner in his execution, I'll give you a nice contrast. White Southerners admired John Brown. John Brown hated slavery, tried to start a rebellion of – he's White, he's a Northerner – tried to start a rebellion of enslaved people in



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Virginia. He's ultimately captured, he's tried, and he's hanged in Virginia. Nat Turner is also from Virginia, and he too was captured, having engaged in a rebellion against slavery. So the two of them are similar to each other. But then I came at it from the angle of, well how were their bodies treated, their dead bodies treated?

[01:25:41]

Because I was interested in the topic of honor. And I discovered that White Southerners, even though they hated what John Brown was all about, they also admired several things about him. They admired his bravery. When he died, he was holding his son in his arms. He was willing to die. When he was hanged, he didn't move. He hurried the executioner up. He wasn't afraid to be hanged and so forth. There were qualities that he had. So when he died, first there was doctors who had to certify his death, and one of them said, "Let's cut off his head," and the others say, "No, no, let's go have lunch. We'll come back, and we'll see if he looks dead at that point." So they came back, they decided he looks dead. His body was given to his family, and then he went, and it was ultimately buried in upstate New York near his family's residence. That was treating him with a kind of dignity.

[01:26:42]

So, the famous song, "John Brown's Body Lies a-Moldering in the Grave." What happened to Nat Turner was he was dissected, he was skinned, his head -- which still is floating around in our culture today -- his head was taken off, separated from his body. You can't go to his grave. You can't go to the town where it all happened and find any remnants of Nat Turner whatsoever. And I said, "Whoa, this is very, very different." The White Southerners of the master class hated John Brown, hated Nat Turner -- but they treated Turner so differently from that. And that's when I began to seriously look into Turner.



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**FRED MARCHANT:** You remind me so well of the importance of – in *Honor & Slavery*, that title, that coordinating conjunction is so important. You really yoke the two together in such a fundamental way. The confessions – I remember when it came out, the scholarly edition. And I had at the time wondered what it had required of you. Here you are, scholar teaching your classes here in Boston. And this time you're the chair of the history department. You've got responsibilities in life. How did you go about doing the scholarly edition of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*?

[01:28:02]

**KEN GREENBERG:** So, the project was huge. If you look at the book, it's not a long book. The confessions themselves are maybe 25 pages long at the most or something like that. What I'm talking about are the 1831 confessions. So, what happened was when Nat Turner was captured, he was in his jail cell for a little while before he was executed and tried – tried and then executed. And he spoke to a White lawyer who then published a document called "The Confessions of Nat Turner." And that's the document that inspired William Styron. It has the same name, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. But my thing isn't about Styron at all. It's about 1831 and what the White lawyer says that Nat Turner said. So I needed to somehow present it so that students could use it. That's what I wanted to do.

[01:28:54]

And there's a lot to sort through. A lot. Just to even mention it shows how complicated it is. So this took as much as any book I've ever done – took out of me basically, because I had to learn all about Nat Turner. And I wrote the introductory essay. I had to describe the whole Styron controversy. And then I – the book itself includes the original confessions, but other key documents like Nat Turner's trial, the trial of other rebels. So I had to cover a large territory in it.



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**FRED MARCHANT:** But in the spirit of being a resourceful scholar, that work was also the basis, then, of your next public presentation and analysis of Nat Turner's rebellion in the stories surrounding it, and that is your film.

[01:29:40]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Yes. Let me talk about the film because that was a really important thing -- for me to do this film. When I published *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, I began to work on a major new interpretation of Nat Turner. I was basically coming off having done the Confessions with a lot of knowledge already, but I realized I was just scratching the surface, so I wanted to do a major book about Nat Turner. And I was beginning to work on that when somebody from California, a Hollywood person, got in touch with me, and I responded to them. And ultimately, there were three of us involved with this. One was a guy named Frank Christopher, who is a marvelous documentary filmmaker who has done some really quite wonderful films. And then Charles Burnett. Charles Burnett is an African American who you can see many years ago was described by the New York Times as the greatest African American film director. And within the last three years, he was just given an Academy Award for his lifetime achievement as a director.

[01:30:55]

I really fell in with some amazing people. The three of us really hit it off. And we didn't know quite what we were going to do at the beginning, but they were interested in telling the story of Nat Turner on film. I [undertook] an odyssey during these years in the late 1990s, early 2000s, of learning about filmmaking and trying to figure out how to tell this story on film. One of the things we did together was -- the three of us -- we received grants. One of the grants was to allow us to go anywhere in the country to do interviews (like the one we're doing now) with everybody who is alive today who had anything to say about Nat Turner, including William Styron the novelist and all the critics of Styron as well. We began that way.





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[01:31:47]

All day, we would do these interviews. They were amazing interviews that went on for hours and hours just like ours is going on for hours and hours. In the evenings, we would discuss what we saw. Here we were, an interracial group talking about American race relations at its most volatile moment because there's no more controversial figure, and no figure who is misunderstood as much as Nat Turner. I brought my historical knowledge and my knowledge of the original Nat Turner, but also a knowledge I had acquired about the Styron controversy of the sixties as well. Together, the three of us did the film. Now, that meant – it was a mixture of a documentary film, which we had to recreate because there are no – the original events of 1831 -- there's no photography at that point. So there's nothing to go on from that.

But if we wanted to tell something like the William Styron story – one thing we had to do was to decide how do you tell what the novel is about? You can have people talking about the novel, but that's not nearly as effective as actually recreating the novel. We decided to show the things that were most controversial [in the style of] a feature film, recreating some portions of the novel. At the same time, we would use documentary style by doing interviews with all the people who had written about the novel. It was a really complicated project, and it required a lot of money. The big support we got was from the National Endowment for the Humanities, who gave us – I think it was \$800,000. Then we got about five or six other major grants. This was cheap for a film. It was a million two, a million four, or something in that area. But it enabled us to do the film.

[01:33:46]

And then PBS, public television, bought into it as well. It had a national airing on PBS. After that, it went on a circuit and went to the Museum of Modern Art, the Getty Museum, the Louvre, to European countries as well, various universities, scores of universities.

**FRED MARCHANT:** It's regularly available on YouTube.



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[01:34:08]

**KEN GREENBERG:** It's available on Netflix. You can get it on Netflix. It's called "Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property." It is about not just Nat Turner, but it's about how people have thought about Nat Turner since then, including about the Styron controversy.

**FRED MARCHANT:** It's the story of the stories. It's a meta-story. It's a film that really tells the stories in vignettes of the various versions of Nat Turner. I'm aware of the time, and so I'm going to say that I'm going to give short shrift to the edited collection of essays on Nat Turner by other writers as well as yourself. But just to say that you, in the process, have become the leading scholar of Nat Turner. And there is a community of scholars, Nat Turner scholars that you know. And also a community of people who want to –

**KEN GREENBERG:** It's a small community. Three of us.

**FRED MARCHANT:** But there's also a community of folks in Southampton County, Virginia that you met and know. In fact, I remember you brought – I forget his name now –

**KEN GREENBERG:** James McGee.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Thank you. And that in fact you enriched the school tremendously with your expansive sense of this community of scholars and others who were interested in –

[01:35:22]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Can I just say something about that? What I discovered in doing the film was that in the community where it happened, it's still an isolated, rural community. People have strong folk memories because they have family members who died on both the Black side and



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the White side of that rebellion. They still remember it as if it were yesterday. Those feelings are really, really strong. They're so strong that there's nothing commemorating the rebellion. They can't remember it in public. We were actually going to tell that story and we decided that would be a separate film. It was too complicated to tell all in one film, but that's an important –

**FRED MARCHANT:** We will end later today – maybe this afternoon – we will end later today talking about what you're working on now. But for now, I think we really should shift gears a bit. But this is why I bring up the contribution to the school. Your film was also perfect for educational purposes. And it's roughly around that time that you started assuming a new leadership role in the school that you became an acting dean. And then the dean of the college –

[01:36:27]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I was never an acting dean.

**FRED MARCHANT:** You were not. What was that, you were filling in?

**KEN GREENBERG:** I was just doing it without – yeah. I was told by Ronayne and the president that if I became acting dean, acting deans never become the dean, and therefore I should stay away from that. I said, I don't want anything anyway. I wasn't sure I was interested in being the dean either.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And also, we should also add that Michael Ronayne, dean for thirty-plus years, he had illness issues. And you were filling in.

[01:36:57]

**KEN GREENBERG:** But my assumption was – exactly. My assumption was he would be back and get better from his illness.



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**FRED MARCHANT:** But you became the dean of the College of Arts & Sciences when he did pass away, and you did assume that responsibility. So let's just step back and take a deep breath and think. The night before you did your first faculty meeting as dean, what were you thinking? What did you want to do, become dean after this – not only illustrious, but profoundly exciting scholarly life, the great joy in teaching, and now the dean?

[01:37:33]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I didn't say this enough when I was talking about the other things I've done, but I loved Suffolk, and I loved the students. In the end, from the dean's position, especially in those days when deans had a great deal more power, we were much more decentralized than we are now. Deans still do a great deal. But then, each tub was on its own bottom; the law school, the business school, the college were separate. You could help shape the institutions separately. And I loved my colleagues. I loved the Suffolk students. And being the dean put me in a position to be able to turn the place into something which was even better than it was, and it was pretty great during those years too, I thought. I had fallen in love with it already.

**FRED MARCHANT:** You and I have spoken about this, but we can just simply say there was a cohort of faculty members of roughly your time that were all really eager to join you in this. So I'm going to actually start ticking off some things and ask you to respond quickly to them, alright? And the general rubric of this – did you think of yourself in deanship as in a position where you would have a transformational effect on the school? Did you think of it that way?

**KEN GREENBERG:** I don't think I actually thought of it that way because my approach to being the dean was that it was a collective enterprise. Nothing happens unless the faculty and the students and the trustees all come along. So you're not alone as the dean. I can't have a dream



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and then make it come true. It's an illusion if you do have that. I understood going into the job that appropriate humility was central to that position. . When I made a list of the various things that happened while I was dean, I was responsible for a good number of these, but there are many other faculty who are responsible. What I thought of my job as dean my position was to release the energy people had and the creativity. The worst thing you can be as a leader is to deaden everybody. If you say "I'm going to go and transform this place, and this is the thing I'm going to do," you go down the wrong path.

**FRED MARCHANT:** I can say having been in your company, many decision-making moments, I can remember you saying just that, that it's really the job of the dean to release the energy that's there and that people should come along with their ideas and see what can be done. I want to also say that you had been a chairman of the history department for a while, maybe, what, ten years, twelve years?

[01:40:17]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Fourteen years.

**FRED MARCHANT:** So you had some leadership experience that way. But if you had to contrast the chairmanship with the deanship, what's the difference?

[01:40:28]

**KEN GREENBERG:** That's interesting. I came across a nice reference that some university president described when you stop being president. They asked him that kind of question, which is, what's the difference between when you were president and you weren't president? And the way he described it was, "Well, imagine that someone has been shooting a firehose in your face for years. And suddenly, they turned it off." Now what you're asking is the reverse of that, which is, here I am a department chair, which is a significant position. And all of a sudden, you're the



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dean. And then all roads lead to the dean. And I know right away, everybody who speaks to me under any circumstances usually wants something. Everybody's got something in mind. So my antennae have to be up all the time. That was a huge change. All of a sudden, it changed my relations with everybody.

**FRED MARCHANT:** It also should be said that you accrued an enormous budgetary responsibility. How did that make you feel?

[01:41:34]

**KEN GREENBERG:** The dean – being responsible for the budget means that everybody's job is out there, everybody who's employed by the university. But the dean is also responsible for the education of the students and, in the end, the curriculum, and those sorts of things. When I say “The dean is responsible,” I mean the dean is leader of the group that runs the college. But nonetheless, it is the responsibility for making sure the college is healthy. And so whenever there's a crisis, there's no one else to handle it. We had very little central administration. We had some that did basic things, and if I ever needed help, I could call on the president of the university. But mostly, I was on my own.

**FRED MARCHANT:** We should note that Michael Ronayne had developed the integrated studies support, for instance, and there were some efforts at faculty support. I think that when you became dean, one of the areas you turned to was how to support faculty members as scholars as well as teachers. And so could you say a few words about what you did and why you did it?

[01:42:42]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I realized that as long as we had this system -- and this predates my time as dean, but I worked on this as a faculty member – but a system where teachers are teaching four courses and they have 50 students in a class, they couldn't do any scholarship. I was a firm



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believer in the idea that what a professor had to do was both those things. That you couldn't be a good teacher unless you were a good scholar. Think of how much you learn as a scholar which you then bring to the classroom. So the question is what the balance is exactly. We had been to one extreme, and I had hoped that during the time before I was dean and after to change that a bit. So one manifestation of the change was changing the teaching load. I led the [movement], along with others, of reducing the teaching load before I became a dean.

That was already reduced to a three-three load from a four-four load. And then when I became dean, I also made this other change, too, of changing it from three credit courses to four credit courses. The students' load changed. I wanted to create more space where people had time to think rather than just go from thing to thing and didn't have the time there, both for the students and the faculty.

**FRED MARCHANT:** I know that as an historian, you probably think this has too much continuity, but let me just say that one could trace a genealogy here. The original argument was, Mike Ronayne that he supported to reduce the teaching load of integrated studies faculties in the 1980s. All the way through the nineties, this gradual sort of refocusing, so that the actual teaching load was three-two a couple of years into your deanship. There is a genealogy there that understood just those – that articulated just those needs.

[01:44:45]

**KEN GREENBERG:** If I could just interrupt for a second, but another way of describing what you're describing too is that you're investing in faculty time to do scholarship. That's what it is. Because it's money, it's shifting money. When you reduce the teaching load, you make the faculty do more scholarship.



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**FRED MARCHANT:** I want to call your attention to what you just said about how you firmly believe – and we can say it again – that somehow that scholarship, activities as a scholar and activity in the classroom, they are mutually informant, and they complement one another. Did you encounter any resistance to that idea?

[01:45:20]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Yes. I never acted as dean by imposing something that I wanted. So It's a question of persuasion over a long period of time. But there are people who always, in any institution, who love things the way they were and remember with nostalgia about those moments the way they were. There's a resistance to change because change is really hard. When we went from the three-three load of four credit courses for faculty to a three-two load of three credit courses that was a huge reduction in teaching for faculty. And that has budget implications. How do you make it work exactly? And that was my job there. But the other thing was faculty had to agree to it. And so it's a lot of conversation and talking about this to see what the pros and cons are.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And let's be frank to the point where some faculty may not have wanted to engage in more scholarship, would rather teach more. And of course, they would teach an overload or that sort of thing.

[01:46:30]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I generally – what I try to do is work out and give people what they actually want, and I'd figure out ways of accomplishing that. And I did that in a few cases. This was a very complicated transformation. When you change three-credit course to four-credit courses, this is as complicated a transformation as any university has ever undergone. And it took a lot of time. The people who worked in the dean's office worked out a lot of the details.





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The budget office had to work it out. It was very, very difficult. And that it still survives today – I'm thrilled.

**FRED MARCHANT:** It is a testament, Ken. And it's a testament to the principle that you articulated about how both are made better by the other, both the classroom and the scholarship. I wanted to move to the question of students. You also did some pretty significant work as dean on behalf of educational opportunities where students can go through the list. But certainly one of those has to be – well, let's do two of them anyway. The honors program and the first-year seminar program. Would you speak about the honors program first?

[01:47:34]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Suffolk, when I first came here, Suffolk had problems with honors programs because we thought of ourselves as an egalitarian school, and we would give great education to anybody. We began to introduce elements of honors programming quite a while ago, but always there wasn't a huge initiative. Then we realized that there were many students who wouldn't come to Suffolk because we didn't have an enriched program. They were looking for something [along those lines]. Over time, we discussed it and we ultimately introduced it. That was a huge change because it enabled us to attract and appeal to a certain group of students. But I also believed that they shouldn't be isolated from the others. That was really important. It's easy to take a group of great students and say, "Well, they're not going to connect to others." Having an honors program in which they can talk to each other in the program, but enrich the classes of their colleagues as well, is a great thing.

**FRED MARCHANT:** You remind me of the evolution of the honors program. Originally, it was a very small number, and then it grew to be 100 and scattered. They had a central experience, but there was a more decentralized constituency of honors students. What about the First-Year Seminar Program?



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[01:48:54]

**KEN GREENBERG:** That actually came at the time the Integrated Studies Program went out of existence. The thing for me that was most important about any curricular change was that the faculty had to love it. It had to be just like with integrated studies. If you join that, you're joining something, you're thrilled to be in it, and you're privileged to be in it. So, in the seminar for freshmen, the basic idea is really, really simple. Faculty can teach whatever they want about any subject that really excites them. If it excites you, then you can teach in the program. You also have to convince other faculty it's a legitimate academic pursuit. But getting that excitement is really important. And then we offer these courses and students get to choose the ones that excite them the most. And when you have an excited faculty member in the classroom and you have students who have made the choice, you don't have to do much else, to tell you the truth. The program runs itself. It's a great program.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And let's also be very practical in the sense that even in, perhaps, your own experience – and certainly we've seen it with many students – that high quality early experience, educational experience really does make the student committed to the school for the next three years and beyond.

[01:50:11]

**KEN GREENBERG:** They actually form friendships in there, too. They're all freshmen. We also have programming in there which addresses issues that are of concern to freshmen. And I know from looking at student evaluations, the students do love this course.

**FRED MARCHANT:** I'm going to move a little bit too rapidly to another kind of domain of the university that you, as the dean, you supported tremendously, and encouraged a kind of expansiveness, if you will. Even a globalizing imagination of the Madrid campus. But when I



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talk about the broader intellectual community of the university, I'm referring to things like connections to the Athenaeum, a next-door neighbor. I'm also talking about things like the Poetry Center which involves both students and citizens who are interested in writing and coming to the Poetry Center. I'm also thinking about the Modern Theatre and its expansiveness. Did you have a kind of theoretical understanding that the role of the university in this city – here at the center of this city – had to sort of reach out?

[01:51:21]

**KEN GREENBERG:** It hits you in the face, right? And this is central to the current reformulation of the mission of the university, which is that we sit in the middle of one of the great cities in the world. Having our students connected to it in a million ways will be very, very exciting. So wherever I could – and again, a lot depends on the energy and interests of faculty who try to reach out to elements of the city. In the curriculum change, one of the iterations of the curriculum, we had something called an expanded classroom requirement, where if a faculty member wanted to offer a course in this area, they could teach their regular material, but it had to reach out to the city in some way. So if you could bring – as a historian, there's a lot of places. Of course, the historic sites, the museums that we have and so forth. Those are great things. We included those things. And it expanded much, much more than that.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And as dean – you became dean in 2004 officially?

[01:52:28]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I think so.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And so what happened in 2006?

**KEN GREENBERG:** I don't know, what happened?



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**FRED MARCHANT:** The centennial. The centennial celebration. And there are no doubt many moments as dean in which you woke up in the middle of the night worried about this or that. But one of them certainly wasn't the moment you had an idea that there should be a new alma mater. Could you say a word about that please?

[01:52:54]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I laugh because the man who wrote the lyrics to that sits in front of me. And here's the way I would describe it. Fred may describe it differently, and Emilio Aragon may describe it differently. But these were two people who were central to this. Emilio Aragon was my student. He was from Madrid. He was a superstar in Madrid. Those who are Spanish will know him right away, but he's done extraordinary things as an entertainer in Spain. And he was my student -- one of the best students I ever had. And then I also had Fred, who was one of the best poets I know, as well.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Emilio had taken a course with me as well.

[01:53:35]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Oh that's right, he knew Fred as well. So I said, "Suffolk needs an alma mater." Actually, I think President Sargent may have said it first, although he didn't quite know what he was getting into. And I said, "I'll see what I can do." And so I kept pressing Emilio and Fred to get together to do something for an alma mater. And that has a really long and complicated story. It took a long time to work out. But the Suffolk alma mater ultimately came from that.

**FRED MARCHANT:** We did, and I was saying that I learned from -- Ken, this was, we'll say, the second year of your deanship. And I learned one of the lessons you had learned from Mike



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Ronayne which was that somebody can say “no” one day, and then if you go back the next week, they may not say “no.” So Ken did it for several weeks until I said yes.

**KEN GREENBERG:** It felt like several years, Fred.

**FRED MARCHANT:** My wife Steffi—

[01:54:24]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Her name is on it as well.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Exactly, so she's a co-author. And Emilio is a great friend of the school as well as us. I'm coming to the end, Ken. That doesn't do justice to your deanship and all of the things that resulted from it. But we are getting – right now we're actually exactly at our limit, so I'm going to take ten extra minutes at the most and ask you how things are now that you have stepped away from the deanship, you're still teaching, you are a distinguished professor of history. And are you writing as well as teaching?

[01:54:56]

**KEN GREENBERG:** Let me say a few words about my scholarship right now because I have a sabbatical this year, and it is one of the great pleasures. I had forgotten. To tell you the truth, I don't think I ever had a research sabbatical since coming to Suffolk. I don't know how that happened, but it did happen. And so I have that. As soon as I stepped down as dean, I realized I could get back to Nat Turner. If you remember, I was beginning to write about Nat Turner. Then I got involved with film. I even wrote about filmmaking and history during that period as well and after that as well. Then I plunged back, not into the 1960s and William Styron, not into all the people who had written about Nat Turner -- but into 1831. I went back to 1831. And I am in now the middle of one of the most exciting, interesting projects you could possibly imagine. All



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the material, the documentary and material from 1831 has been available to people for a hundred and some odd years.

But when I look at it, and because I like this approach of coming from side angles, I begin to see things that I know no one has ever seen before. Every day is exciting. what I'm doing here and what I'm writing about. The trick is not only understanding it, but then being able to write it in a way which a modern audience can understand. Because no one, in my opinion, has ever scratched the surface with Nat Turner. So, I come to it – think about all the years I've been working on Nat Turner – I come to it with a lot, and it's still an amazingly complicated topic. S I'm working on that.

[01:56:40]

At the same time, I have another project too, which stems from my work on honor, because the world changed. When I did my honor and slavery book, the scholarly world that let me write that thing is completely different. The kind of work I did rooted in anthropology isn't done as much now. I began to relook at that from another angle. I got involved with – in Germany, there's this wonderful institute. We had a conference of about ten people who work on the institution of honor in Western culture. I met them and went there and today we're doing a couple of projects together as a result of that conference. Each person involved is writing a chapter of a book which will be published. The second thing is that Bloomsbury Press in England -- they're the ones who did Harry Potter, for example – they want to do a book on honor, and I've agreed to create a volume of essays in which I will write the introduction about honor, and that will bring the honor story up to the present moment.

**FRED MARCHANT:** That's really wonderful too, and it does – I want to say this as a friend and colleague – it does bear witness to the fact that you gave all of your energies to the deanship when you were the dean, and that now you're returning to the scholarly world, the scholarly



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domains anyway, with just as much energy as you went into the deanship. I also want to say that last year I visited one of your American history classes because you wanted me to come in and talk about Emerson, you remember? And I was thinking then about how much I enjoyed visiting your class. And I was thinking about your students in preparation for this interview and wondering how you, as a senior scholar, someone who has really done enormous work, how you come to your basic American History 101, whatever the right history is, and how you bring your scholarship into that room. Could you give us an example of that?

[01:58:49]

**KEN GREENBERG:** I'm not sure I can just pick up an example because that requires some background. But I will say that oddly enough as I talk about my early career as a teacher up to the present moment, I still use the same basic technique with variations. That is to say, the conversation is what I'm most comfortable with, getting people engaged that way. That's central to the teaching. Modern technology lets you do things you couldn't normally do. Last semester I could bring in William Jennings Bryan, who delivered his famous Cross of Gold speech in 1896. He then re-recorded it in 1920. So we have that speech from 1896.

Now again, modern technology lets you instantly call that up on the screen. Students can listen to that as well. That's a tremendous addition, showing things like that. Photography is also really, really important.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Remember when I came to your class with Emerson, I had some things to show, a couple of cartoons.

[01:59:55]

**KEN GREENBERG:** That's a really positive change.



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**FRED MARCHANT:** And also, the students. Of course they're not the same, they're not the same human beings at all. But my instincts tell me that your sense of the students is that there's some deep continuity from the beginning of your time here to now.

**KEN GREENBERG:** People -- this is true of the faculty as well -- they hunger to do their best. And the job of the teacher, just as with the administrator, is you just release that energy. And you don't do it by badgering them and forcing them to do things. You do it by inspiring and by drawing them in.

**FRED MARCHANT:** Well, Ken, we could talk about a thousand other dimensions of your experience here at Suffolk, and we could probably do it for the rest of the day and it would still be interesting at four o'clock this afternoon. But we have to draw this to a close. As an interviewer, I do want to know if there's something pressing in your mind that you're saying, "I wish he had asked me about," or something that really we neglected. I really would like you to let me know now and we can take a few minutes for it.

**KEN GREENBERG:** I do want to say something about Fred Marchant. Fred -- this was true for my life at Suffolk, and it's true for the lives of many others as well -- has inspired me. And the nature of the inspiration is he really has a moral center, and loves what he does as a teacher. Both those things are characteristics of him. The students understand that fully. Whatever project he undertook, he put his heart and soul into it. Even this project here. It's agony getting together with Fred because there's all this prior time, although it's a pleasure, too. So I just want to thank my colleague.

**FRED MARCHANT:** And I thank you, Ken. It's been an inspiration and a real joy to work with you over the years, and also to learn from you. As so many of your colleagues and students, suddenly you realize something you never understood before is now coming clear. And so your





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work has, for me as an American citizen, your work on the unresolved issues of our national history has been exceptionally important, and I think will continue to be important for generations to come. So thank you for your time today, and I'll see you around the campus.

**KEN GREENBERG:** Thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**