Oral History Interview of Robert Allison

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Interview Summary

Dr. Robert J. Allison, a Professor of History at Suffolk University, reflects on his personal and professional accomplishments, as well as his teaching methods and relationships with past and present students, faculty, and administration. Professor Allison discusses the History Departments evolution over the years, notable colleagues and the department’s role in the university. He concludes with reflections on Suffolk’s impact on Boston and the region.

Subject Headings

Allison, Robert J.
Hartmann, Edward George, 1912-
Suffolk University—History
Universities & colleges

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ANTHONY GESUALDI: Record, okay! This is an interview with Professor Robert Allison of the Suffolk University History Department. It is Tuesday, March 11, 2008 and it is 2:30 pm.

Okay, where are you originally from, Professor?

ROBERT ALLISON: I don’t like to tell people.

GESUALDI: You don’t like to tell people? Okay. Why is that?

ALLISON: I just have my reasons.

GESUALDI: Okay. Where did you go to college?

ALLISON: I started at the University of Wisconsin, I dropped out. Went briefly to Madison Area Technical College, dropped out. Became a cook, traveled around the country cooking, wound up in Phoenix, Arizona started taking classes at Arizona State and decided I wanted to finish college. Moved to Boston, went to the Harvard Extension School, which was the least expensive night school in the area, while I was still cooking during the day. I got my undergraduate degree at the Extension School and then went into the day school at Harvard for my PhD.

GESUALDI: Any specific reason as to why you bounced around school like that?

ALLISON: I just didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life and education at the time, seemed like a waste of time. Plus, I had personal reasons. I didn’t want to be in college at the time. So, you know, that was it, I was earning money as a cook and it was a good enough life but I realized I was really interested in history and that I was eventually I was going to get too old to be flipping burgers and making omelets.

GESUALDI: What interested you in cooking?
ALLISON: Nothing really. Actually, the people I met I really enjoyed the people you meet when you work at a restaurant. All kinds of eccentrics, and people that have interested stories, so that was it, it was really the people. I am not interested in food or cooking.

GESUALDI: Are you married?

ALLISON: Yes!

GESUALDI: Alright. How long?

ALLISON: Since 1985. What’s that twenty-three years on July 5th 1985 we got married?

GESUALDI: Do you have any children?

ALLISON: Two, two boys: eighteen and fifteen.

GESUALDI: How would you say your family has played a role in your career choices?

ALLISON: Well, family has been essential to it. I would not have finished college had it not been for my wife. We got married while I was working, I was cooking and she was actually a waitress in the restaurant. And, she actually worked full-time while I finished school; that was about a year. You know when you have a family it really makes you think differently. When I was in graduate school there were two of us in our cohort who were married. And, the average PhD in history at that time took about seven years and the two of us that were married finished in about five years, just because we realized we didn’t have time to sit around talking about everything we were going to do, we were much more focused. It does focus you on the need to find work. Also it balances what you do, you are not going to waste any time when you have a family because you have to support them. Plus you want to spend as much time with them as you can. So, it’s really essential.
At the time—You know I remember a guy that didn’t have a family that said we seemed more grown up to him. What was another thing he said? Oh yeah I remember, once another guy in the program -this was before I had children—but he was married, I was married, and there was another guy who was in the prospect—process of getting married. The guy in the process of getting married, his girlfriend—her father was a very successful businessman. He didn’t like going to baseball games with us. This was in the eighties when if you decided to go to a baseball game you just went to Fenway Park. He didn’t like going to games with us because we would sit in the bleachers, he liked going because his girlfriend’s father had a sky box, you know had luxury box tickets, and he would go to the [Boston] Garden and have luxury boxes. So he did not like us plebeians. I remember him asking us one day, the other guy was doing his dissertation on Protestants in Hartford in the nineteenth century and I was doing mine on the Barbary Wars. He was doing his on the development of the U.S. customs services because he thought that would be a good choice for him. I think his father was a historian. I do not want to give away too much in case someone really looks at this (laughter). But, I remember him asking us, if we had married—if our wives were wealthy would we still be doing the same dissertation topic. It was as though this guy thought he was trapped somehow. I was thinking this is a really bizarre question to ask. Both of us said yeah, it did not really enter into it, and I do not know what our wives had to do with it. Since I know Andrew’s wife did not spend a lot of time worrying about the Protestants in Hartford in the nineteenth century and mine didn’t spend much time worrying about the Barbary Wars. This poor guy—I do not know if you want to talk about all the shmucks I have met along the way I would be happy to tell you about them.

GESUALDI: So.

ALLISON: A few of them at Suffolk incidentally.

GESUALDI: What made you go into history?

ALLISON: I was always fascinated with history. Even when I was a kid I was always really interested. I do not know what particular reason, but it has always been something that interested me. Different characters, the different stories they had, and just trying to recollect the past and
get a handle on how people made decisions. You know, fascinating stories, I’m always finding new stories, new things that I didn’t know. It is stories about people and how people made choices and how people have created their lives. It’s something I have always enjoyed learning about. When I was in college, in actually Arizona State—I actually started off at Wisconsin as a history major. The history department at Madison was a very good department but also a very big department, I didn’t really meet many people there just because it was so big and the classes were such huge lectures.

I started taking classes, just out of interest in African languages and literature and had some really great professors and relatively small classes, got to know people and was hanging out with the graduate students and the junior faculty in that program. That was a much better college experience. Also that was the only place I wrote papers, when I was at Wisconsin. So there I didn’t really know what I wanted to do. Yeah, I had been interested in history but was not really drawn to it in college. Then I wound up at Arizona State and I took a couple of really good courses, one on economics, actually the history of economic thought, and it was a really interesting class. I took a couple of interesting courses on macro and micro and I thought, gee maybe I should major in economics. But I was thinking I really should finish my college degree. Economics requires a great deal of math which is a big drawback.

I took a course on American constitutional history with a very good professor, since retired, and I really enjoyed it. There were a couple of other students who really enjoyed it and most of the rest of the class seemed to be floundering. So, we would meet after class with these students who were floundering. Actually, it started that we met to just talk about the class and then we started meeting with students who were struggling and I discovered I really enjoyed helping them see what was happening in the class, helping them understand the concepts that we were talking about. You know, so that was an introduction, both, to the study of history a particular field of history, as well as to teaching. I discovered I really enjoyed that connection you have with someone, you know, when they are beginning to see something. That was a great experience. I decided what I really wanted to do was teach and in order to do that I needed to finish college so I needed to figure out how to do that.
I was then working at the Phoenix Hilton and there was a waiter working there whose brother lived in Winchester, and he was going to be moving to Winchester, and was, you know, April in Arizona where we had another summer approaching where the temperature reached one hundred and twenty on a cool day. Both of us wanted to get out of town, plus, I think, this is the early 1980s, I remember seeing somewhere that in Arizona, at that particular time there were I think a hundred-twenty men to a hundred women but in Boston there were a one hundred-twenty women for every hundred men. I think both of us had this idea in mind that we would move to Boston and we did. I didn’t drive at the time so he drove. And we stopped— he had a sister in Colorado and we stopped, he was a big Detroit Tigers fan so we stopped in Kansas City, because the Tigers were playing. And, we stopped in Wisconsin. He actually dropped me off because I was thinking of finishing in Wisconsin. Madison seemed like a really small town, there was one college and that was pretty much it. Phoenix, for all its detriments, was a big city and there was a lot going on.

So I wound up getting on bus and coming here in July of 1984. And, you know, I found a job in a restaurant and my buddy found a job at a hotel and coincidentally, both of us were married within a year. He met a woman working in the hotel, who was also working in—she actually wound up working in the mayor’s office here and now she’s working with the mayor of Austin, Texas. And I wound up meeting a woman in the restaurant where I was working at and we got married and that all worked out. Then I discovered the Harvard Extension School. I was looking for an inexpensive, undergraduate education and because I was working during the day I wanted to go to school at night. I do remember spending a lot of time walking around Boston and seeing the plaque, on Temple Street about [Suffolk University founder] Gleason Archer, and thinking, “Well, there’s really a really interesting story about starting a night school for people who people who want to become lawyers.” And I kind of filed that away. I found out about the extension school and started taking classes there and wound up getting my degree in either ’86 or ’87 I think it was, and then getting into the day school at Harvard. As I was finishing my PhD—you probably have a lot of questions, I anticipate those, but I’ll just tell you anyway.

In 1992 when I was finishing my dissertation, and I didn’t really have a job and didn’t know what I was really going to do. My in-laws lived—had a house in Provincetown so we spent the
winter there that year. We then had a two year old; no, I guess he was a year and a half. When I wrote my dissertation we spent the winter there. I was still teaching at Harvard one day a week. I would come up and I had a bunch of seniors that were writing their honors theses so I would come up and meet with them and kind of coax them through that process. I didn’t know what I was going to do in a year, and so one of my advisors at Harvard said, “What you should do is write to all the colleges in the area, send them your C.V. and tell them this is what you can teach.” So I did. I sent off, you know, sixty-some odd letters to colleges in the greater Boston area, history departments. You find out who the chair of the history department is and you send them a letter with a C.V. saying this is what I am able to teach and so on. Of those I think I got about fifty-nine letters saying that said “no we don’t need anyone.”

Then I got a call, it was in April, and actually it was a message on the machine, from Kenneth Greenberg, who was the chair of the history department. I had seen him giving a talk at Harvard, he was there as a Warren Fellow while I was there but had never met him. But it turned out that John Cavanaugh was going on leave the next year and they needed someone to teach the Civil War and Colonial America. So I came in for an interview, and I met Ken Greenberg and he introduced me to Bob Bellinger and John Cavanaugh. This was in the morning I came in, and he showed me around the campus. And then I had to come back in the afternoon to meet with the dean and at that point, let’s see, the history department was on the twelfth floor of the Sawyer Building. Dean Ronayne was in the Archer Building, it was the philosophy department until fairly recently; the little office—the little conference room was Dean Ronayne's office. I went over to Harvard in between. I remember one of my colleagues at Harvard admiring my suit and I said, Yeah, I just had an interview at Suffolk. Kenneth offered me the job pretty much in the morning but he said I needed to come talk to the dean. I said, “Yeah, they offered me the job.” He said, “It must have been the suit.” I said, “Yeah.” They asked if when I'm not there if they could use the suit. So I came back in the afternoon and talked with the dean and then in the fall I taught Colonial America and the Civil War because Professor Cavanaugh was going off to Spain. And it was a lot of fun, I really enjoyed it. I also finished—Finished by this time, getting my PhD and so I was also teaching still part-time at Harvard so, you know, for the next three years I taught part-time at Harvard, part-time at Suffolk and had a lot of fun.
GESUALDI: Aside from teaching have you—had you explored any other careers in history?

ALLISON: No, I had not. You know I was fortunate, and of—when I started graduate school, the expectation was that by the time we finished in the mid-nineties there would be a lot of openings for—on faculties just because universities had done a lot of hiring in the sixties, early seventies, and then hadn’t. So, the people who had become professors then were going to be retiring in the nineties. But what happened was the universities discovered it was really expensive to have full-time faculty and also the Congress changed the retirement rules. So, there had been a time when people had to retire, but that was eliminated, so people did not have to retire, you know. Plus, universities found that it was a lot cheaper to hire several part-time people; you can pay them two-thousand dollars a course and have two people each teaching two courses. You’re paying them two-thousand dollars a course, you can do the math, as opposed to a full-time person you’re paying fifty-thousand dollars a year. You would have to be an idiot not to think that this is of great benefit to the universities. You don’t have to pay benefits, these other things that you do for a full-time person.

So, at that time, when most of the people in my cohort graduated, the jobs weren’t there. So, of the people in my particular year, I think there were nine of us, if I am not mistaken, I think I am the only one teaching full time. A couple are administrators, academic administrators, and a couple I had just completely lost sight of. But, no I had not explored anything because I was fortunate enough to find a teaching position. And to tell you the truth I do not know if I would have stayed in history if I had not been able to find a job at it, just because I needed to support a family. I do know of people who continue hanging on as adjuncts and doing all kinds of things, they really should hang it up. It’s sad to say. That’s the reality we face. I think it is also kind of sad that if you are a historian and you cannot face the reality that some things aren’t meant to be.

GESUALDI: Was Colonial America the very first class you taught here at Suffolk?

ALLISON: Colonial America and the Civil war.

GESUALDI: How did you prepare for those classes?
ALLISON: Well let’s see, I read a lot. I read a lot, complied notes. The way it would work, and the way I worked, I did a lot of reading over the summer on the Civil War I remember. I think I had taken some colonial courses in graduate school. That was actually closer to my field than the Civil War was; I had taken a Civil War course though. But, just, you know, figuring out, you know, these are the books we will read, these are the general things I’ll be covering week to week. And then, what I would do was, the week of the class—I think it was, say okay, a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule: one was at eleven; one was at ten I think, one was at twelve or something like that, ten and eleven. But, you know, I would actually kind of have an outline or kind of have stories and things I wanted to tell in a particular day and then kind of this compilation of things. I should tell you, you can probably get this from the way I am talking, I don’t have a really well organized way.

I mean, organization has always been a big problem. When I was working on my dissertation I remember sending a chapter to my advisor and he calling me the next day saying, “I got the chapter. I can’t make any sense of it. Why don’t you send me the outline?” Of course I didn’t have an outline. Then what I did was, I went through the chapter and made an outline, and I realized it did not make any sense and it needed to be organized a different way. So, then I took it apart and put it back together in a more systematic order. That’s kind of what I would do with these classes and after a while it would become a second nature, it becomes something you can do relatively easily. You take all these notes that you have gotten from reading different books different things on a subject and then you figure out what’s the best sequence of telling this, what makes the best sense. Then you take it apart and put it back together with some kind of a cohesive outline. Then also you can write an outline on the board so the students know you actually are proceeding in a certain manner. It’s not just going from one thing that occurs to you to the next.

The way to prepare is to do a lot of reading, figure out what’s the story you need to tell, and also there is a difference between simply conveying information and actually trying to engage the students. Figuring out what’s the point on which you can have a discussion, you know. What’s the point in which they can start offering things, particularly if they are doing any reading on the
subject. So, the way to prepare is to know as much as you can but realize your job is not simply to just transmit all this to the students, otherwise they can do this at home, but really to engage them and get them to think about, okay, so what’s the importance of this and what would have happened if they had done x instead of y. And also, to remember the things that captivate us about history are really the stories.

I remember that first semester I was teaching about the Civil War class, and again I was learning, and I am still learning how to teach. It’s different every class, and you never really know how some things are going to go. One class may find the banking crisis of the 1830s really fascinating. Another just might want to talk about, I don’t know, Gettysburg or something. I remember just telling a story offhand about Jefferson Davis’ plantation, in Davis Bend, Mississippi and how this becomes an issue—became an issue after the war. What happens to land that had been—the Union Army had seized? There were several different things that could happen to it, it could be, you know, leased out to some Yankee, or it could be—or the owner could get it back if the owner had shown he had been loyal. That didn’t happen in Davis Bend, Mississippi. There the plantation was turned over to the slaves, who had been working it, the people that had been working it all their lives. They managed it and they ran it, it was theirs, and their owner could never get it back, their owner was Jefferson Davis who could never prove he been was loyal to the union. On the final exam, just about every student told the story of Davis Bend, Mississippi. It was a great. It was really interesting seeing this was how people learn things: through these stories. That was really a good experience discovering that the stories that are the way we remember things are that for a reason, history and the word story is in it for a reason. Not because it has anything to do with stories it actually comes from the Greek for inquiry. So, it always is a learning process you go through when you teach. Martin Buber a twentieth century philosopher wrote that, you know, “our works shape us our students teach us.” It’s really true, I learn a lot every time I teach a class.

GESUALDI: What specific areas of history have you focused on in your teaching?

ALLISON: Okay. Just about all areas of American History, plus World History. We introduced a course called Cultural Contact in World History, History-160. It must have been about the first
year or so I was teaching here, I had lunch with the chairman. He was trying to think of things that I could teach. One suggestion was American Constitutional History, which he said, “Oh yeah, we should have that because a lot of students go on to law school.” So I started teaching that here. I was also teaching it at the Extension School at Harvard.

Well then he said, “Well here the Dean of the College, Dean Ronayne, just heard that the business school had this new requirement that all students had to be introduced to different cultures, so cultural diversity.” He said, “There’s probably not anything you could do with that.” Well, you know, the entrepreneurial side me hears, okay, here is something there is a need for, is there something I can do? I said, “Yeah, we could do something with world trade.” There are some business students we could talk about different episodes of world trade, you know, African slave trade, American trade with China, the opening of Japan, the whole colonial enterprise, this is a thing about world trade and commerce, and so on and so on. You know, the trade with Native Americans, which I knew a little bit about from colonial America.” He said, “This is an interesting idea.” So I think I may have written a paragraph about it and he took it to Dean Ronayne. Dean Ronayne said, “Great, this is going to be the one course that we offer the business school.” He was always very competitive with the business school and there still is a certain degree of competition there.

We created this course called Cultural Contact in World History and the lofty idea was that we would talk about global trade as a way of cultural interaction and the other thing is, we’ll introduce people to different cultures. So fall, I don’t know, it was ’93-'94, the first time we teach this course and I looked at the roster and the students in the class came from Indonesia, East Africa, Vietnam, Dubai, and plus there’s a big contingent of kids from Everett, Malden, Medford, and Revere. And I look at this and realize wow, these kids come from all over the world. Here I am, a white guy, living in South Boston, [with a] PhD from Harvard. I’m supposed to tell them about cultural diversity (laughter). So I said ok well, we’ll do this—the second thing I realized is, all of these sophisticated things I’ve been reading about international trade that were barely comprehensible to me, I couldn’t make comprehensible to them and I realized there was no point in doing that since a lot of it was, you know, academic nonsense. But anyway, I said what we will do is have each student do presentations on culture and what it means to them. And
so we broke the class up. I would during the semester make up pairs of students. Sometimes I would put a great deal of thought into this. Okay, so, here is a student who is from Israel; here is a student from Saudi Arabia, great. Here is a student who is of Armenian decent; here is a student from Turkey. You want to be careful doing this you do not want to pit people together that are going to hate one another. But you see, here are two students that have something in common but they do not realize it. I used to do this really painstakingly, but then what would happen is, you know, students would be absent and you would have people floating around. By the last time I taught the course I would simply pair up the students who were there and get really interesting things because they would learn a lot about culture from each other and a lot about history from one another.

History wasn’t not just something that you studied in a book it was something that had affected them. I remember there was a student from Vietnam who had paced off on the floor how big the boat was that his family had left Vietnam in. There was a student that came to me one day, early on in the semester, and he said, “Can you tell me what my culture is, my mother is an Irish Catholic, my father is a Russian Jew, I went to Catholic schools, and I’ve been Bar Mitzvahed.” And I said, “No, I don’t know what your culture is.” Then there was a woman in the class, a middle-aged woman, who was from Russia. One day, she came in with these things she had bought because all of her life she knew she was Jewish, that is what it said on her papers in Russia, but in Russia you were forbidden to practice your religion, so she had no idea what any of this meant. So she brought in a prayer shawl, a little book, other things, she got here and what she wanted to do was become Jewish but she didn’t know how. So, she had this stuff and she said, “I wonder if you can tell me what these are?” Well I couldn’t; but, this student could. And so, the two of them—he was explaining all of these things to her. I mean, these are the kind of moments that you can’t invent: when people are discovering something.

There are relative other things, I remember there were two other kids in the class one was from Ireland and one was Irish American. They immediately decided they wanted to do their presentation together because as the Irish American kid said, “Basically we’re both the same.” They did their presentation and discovered basically we’re really different. There was one semester when a number of the Italian American kids would explain about how in their families
Sunday dinner is a big thing and all these other things. And then, one of the Irish American kids said, “I used to think we had a close family until I heard what close families really do.” It was really an awakening, and culture isn’t simply something that makes people different, but you have to figure out what it is that makes you who you are and it’s not simply a matter of inheritance. I remember one student went on and on in his paper—and in his presentation about being Scottish and Scottish tradition so on and so on. One of the papers he only showed me, he was gay. Of course he would not stand up and say that but he could stand up and talk about being Scottish. I had another student that had stood up and said she was a Sioux Indian and the reason she knew this was her great-great grandmother was a Sioux Indian and she lived in Malden. I didn’t think there were that many Sioux in Malden. A kid from one of the suburbs of Boston, but in her mind or at least in her dreams she’s a Sioux Indian. I hope none of this is going to get published in the Alumni magazine because they might come hunting me down.

But, it is really a fascinating thing and they also learned a lot about the history of the twentieth century by talking about their parents’ stories and grandparents’ stories. A student whose grandfather was in the Russian army and her grandmother was in a concentration camp and they met when he came to liberate the concentration camp and other episodes like this. And I think it was because of the unique nature of Suffolk at the time where you had these students, often the first generation in their family to go to college, that they were able to share these things.

GESUALDI: You were saying about how you were looking at the lists, and you saw the different areas your students are from, do you do that for all the classes you teach?

ALLISON: I do look at the roster, but, you know, I don’t try to determine where people are from. There was a faculty member here, Ed Hartmann, who taught history. He was the really great history department guy from the forties; he came here in the forties. His field was immigration history and he was Welsh, and he had written—he wrote the authoritative book on the Welsh in America. And he would go down his roster and whenever there was a Davis or a Wilson he would say, “You’ll do fine. You’re Welsh.” He was also famous for his grading; he was a very tough grader. He had a system of grading, he didn’t think it was fair that a student who might have tried really hard who got a fifty-nine which is an F, got the same grade as
someone who didn’t do anything and got a ten. So he created the F, the respectable F that was say, between forty-five and sixty. Then there was the double F that was say between thirty and forty (laughter). Then there was the triple F for people way down there and the Q for quit.

Grades—I think there is some merit to the argument that grade inflation really started as a result of the draft and the Vietnam War. There was an episode in the 1960s when Ed Hartmann and Judy Dushku got into a fist fight in the lobby of the Sawyer building because Ed Hartmann thought it was morally reprehensible to give people—to pass people merely to help them avoid military service, and Judy Dushku of course thought it was morally reprehensible to flunk someone knowing that they could be sent off to war. The two of them had an argument and it wound up with Judy Dushku punching him in the face. She actually has some contrition about this and she’s told me about what a sweet man Ed Hartmann really was. She remembered her son was doing some project in Junior High or High School and Ed Hartmann had him come in so he could show him how to use the library.

Suffolk was a unique place, you had this issue that was polarizing the whole country, but also you had people that could look behind that and see their common mission as members of the faculty, which is a good story. For years I had only heard the side of Judy Dushku punching Ed Hartmann, I hadn’t heard the side of, “what a sweet man Ed Hartmann really was.” You knew Ed Hartmann was coming because the smell of his cigar would, you know, waft ahead of him and he looked like Winston Churchill and he didn’t care if what he said would offend people. I remember, every year he would come back for the Phi Alpha Theta induction, he would go down the list of faculty, I guess no one here could tell him to get lost. He since has died so I guess that’s a moot point now, but one year— this was actually. I for some reason didn’t go to this event, but Professor Bellinger told me about it—he went down the list of Alumni who have done things, he read the name of Marlin Wilson and he looked up and said, “Who’s a woman, has just written a book on Africa!” And then turning to Professor Bellinger and Professor Jaffoni and said, “And I am sure our black professors will find that very interesting.” Just, unbelievable. This guy was—that more people did not punch him in the face, I guess, is, I guess the lesson here. And I know, either Professor Plott or Professor Umansky told me at one point that he would always come back and he would ask Professor Greenberg, “How are the girls doing?”
GESUALDI: Have you published any works?

ALLISON: Yes.

GESUALDI: How many?

ALLISON: I don’t know maybe a dozen books. I have edited a number of books. And let’s see, I’ve written a book on the Barbary wars, *A Short History of Boston*, a book on the Boston Tea Party, a book on the Boston Massacre. Let’s see, I have edited an edition of Equiano’s narrative, I have just edited a collection of Barbary captivity narratives, I have edited a book called, let’s see—well two books of 20th century source documents called *History in Dispute*, a book called *American Eras on the Revolution*, a book called *American Eras in the early Republic*. I did a small book on Boston and the Revolutionary sites of greater Boston, right now I have—in the process of finishing a short book on the American Revolution and I also have a short history of Cape Cod in the works. I am working my way through it. Next year I will be on sabbatical and I hope to finish this—a book on the Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, and the siege and evacuation of Boston. I think that’s everything, also a biography of Stephen Decatur, an American naval hero, that came out about a year or two ago.

GESUALDI: Which of the books have meant something really special to you?

ALLISON: Well they all have in different ways, you know? Books are like children, but that’s one way of saying it, but they are much different if you have children you know. Equiano, great story, I edited my edition—the first edition came out in ’95 and has been reissued, I guess, last year or the year before, the revised edition came out. It’s a great story and I came to that because I was teaching the narrative a lot and it wasn’t available. He wrote this in the 1780s. He was—we think from Nigeria, and became a slave and then after about ten years as a slave in the West Indies and fighting in the Seven Years War he became free and he wrote this book in the 1780s during the British campaign against the slave trade. It’s really one of the great documents of the era. So that, just having time to get to know Equiano.
You know, more recently I think, my biography on Decatur I really enjoyed working on. I learned a lot doing that. You know, so I think that would probably be my favorite book. The *Short History of Boston*, a fun book to do, it circulates a lot and Boston is a fun city. The books I am doing—you learn a lot when you do a book. As Buber said, “Our works shape us.” You learn a lot more usually than goes into the book. So, I don’t know, I would think, you know, Decatur and Equiano are probably my favorites, the *Short History of Boston*, people say they really like it, some people say they like the Barbary Wars book. In a sense you are always really disappointed when you finish because then you go back and see what you could have done differently, you know, should have. William Faulkner was once asked, not to compare myself to William Faulkner, he said if he could live again he would write his books over again and they would come out better. If I had a another life to live I don’t think I would write the same books or rewrite the books I have already written once something is done, it’s done and there is not a whole lot you can do about it.

GESUALDI: What sparked your interest in Equiano and Stephen Decatur?

ALLISON: Well Equiano I had done a lot—well I had been using his narrative in teaching. Using it actually in conjunction with Franklin’s autobiography. So I was interested in it, and, you know, to be perfectly honest I had a friend who was doing an edition of Franklin’s autobiography and he told me the publisher was looking for more books. I said someone should do this one and they said sure why don’t you do it. Actually there’s another kind of funny story about this. Bedford books and St. Martins Press, it was this relatively new imprint in the early nineties, I guess, based in Boston. My office mate at Harvard’s girlfriend, I ran into her in the subway one day, and she was just going off for a job interview. She said with this [publisher]—you know, Bedford Books. Her field, really, had been European Art History, she didn’t really know much about American History, but they hired her. So she called me and said, “Could I come and talk to you about American history?” And I said, “Sure.” “They are starting this imprint and I kind of need to know what are the periods of American history?” So we sat down and I said, “Okay, well Colonial period, Revolutionary period, Early Republic, Civil War period, Civil War Reconstruction, you know Gilded Age, Progressive Period” and so on. I kind did this scheme,
wrote it down, and you know, did this chart, which became their “chart,” so this is how they break down American history. Which is really a straightforward thing. She became an editor there and so I sent in a proposal on Equiano and they liked the idea so they asked me to do it and that came out in '95.

As I had said, I had written a book on the Barbary Wars; that was my first book. And the History channel did a show on the Barbary Wars and I was one of the talking heads. And I remember at the end of the show they wanted to talk about Decatur so I told a little story about his duel and so on. The day after the show aired, the eighth grade teacher at my kid’s school-I saw him when I was dropping the kids off-and he said, “Decatur sounds like an interesting guy, is there a good book about him?” I said, “Gee, no there isn’t.” This must have been around, I don’t know, 2000-2001, I said, “No there isn’t.” So, I looked to see when the last book was written on him and it had been like sixty years. Then I looked to see if I found him at all interesting and I did. There were a couple of old biographies and he did leave papers, which you need. So, I decided, yeah, I could write a biography on Stephen Decatur, so you know, I did. I was at work on it for quite a while. Actually, let me go back and figure out how long this was. Okay, I was on sabbatical in the spring of 2002 and this was the first time I had a chance to do any serious work. I was working away, going through newspapers of the period, making plans to go to Washington to look at the National Archives, they have microfilm of all of the letters from all the Naval Captains.

One good thing, if you ever get into writing books, you want someone who left papers but you don’t want someone who left so much that you’ll never be able to get through them. Actually, someone I know who was working on a biography of Benjamin Waterhouse, a Boston scientist who lived to be about ninety said, never write a biography of someone who lived past the age of eighty.” Just because, you know, you’ll never finish it. Decatur tragically died young and Decatur also believed he was not a good writer and consequently he didn’t write a lot. But, what he did write was really interesting. You know, so he had a manageable collection of stuff. I found it a really interesting story. So there’s that part of the story, and then there’s this, you know—during this era in which we live, and I was giving a great deal of thought of what kind of world I want my kids to inherit, and it is a world where the kind of heroic patriotism of Decatur
should have a place. You know, so that’s part of it. My first book on the Barbary Wars, sometimes it can seem as though I am making apologies for these guys, Algerians and Tripolitans who are capturing American ships, so writing a biography of someone who is fighting against Algerians and Tripolitans—you know, is a good thing.

GESUALDI: You were saying you wish you would have the opportunity to go back and change some stuff—

ALLISON: No I wouldn’t.

GESUALDI: You wouldn’t?

ALLISON: I hate to look at things I have written just because it’s painful. Because you can see what you should have done differently, so, no, once it’s done you should put it aside, put it behind you. And you should try and do it as well as you can the first time. You know, things usually go through multiple drafts; this is something I actually learned back in the era when you used a typewriter, and if you decided to change something on page three it meant you are going to have to change everything after that. So, consequently I would write, and rewrite and rewrite a lot. That becomes easier than when, you know, you have to do things relatively quickly that you have learned that it’s just learning how to write stuff quickly and you’re always having to change things. And it is good to be able to change things but once it’s in print it’s too late and it may as well be engraved in marble.

GESUALDI: Have you ever used any of your own works in class?

ALLISON: Yeah. The History of Boston, Equiano, and I think that’s about it. That is all I have assigned, it has not really fit in with other things I am doing. But you know you share what you’ve learned anyway, just through the course of teaching.

GESUALDI: Out of all the courses you have taught—taught here, which one have you enjoyed the most?
ALLISON: You know, it depends. The class that I always find the most interesting is American Constitutional History. But a lot depends on who the students are. Sometimes you have a really good group of students who sign up for one class and that makes it a lot of fun. Cultural Contact in World history, History 160, I always really enjoyed. Some classes were better than others just because some groups of students were more interesting than others or more engaged than others or would do different things that made it interesting. I have enjoyed all of them, it does change from semester to semester or even day to day sometimes—I would say probably American Constitutional History but it always has this caveat, it depends on who the students are in that the class.

GESUALDI: Have there been any students that stand out in your mind: former students or Alumni?

ALLISON: Yeah, yeah—. Yeah, and actually in the last year or two we have been getting in touch with a lot of our former students. And it is amazing too, that sometimes you hear from someone and you can’t picture them but then you see them and you remember who they are. I don’t know if I should mention any names. Let’s think. Well, Laura Muller, who was just here setting up the computer or the tape recorder, when I was first teaching here there were a number of interesting students in the classes. And actually, some of them whom I have just seen recently, Paul Kineley who went on, I think, to law school, Brian Glenon who also went on to Law School, Kevin Mulvey who also on to law school, this isn’t the persistent theme. Charlie Tocci, who now doing something in New York. He’s in Columbia in the teachers college in New York. Let’s think. The students—the best students really do challenge you and make you rethink things also make you think about how you’re presenting this. One day I’ll remember you as one of these students: one of the memorable students. Sometimes it is a student who is really just academically gifted and some more often it is a student who is making a sincere effort and is interested in things and is plugging along and, you know, you’re all—we’re all always learning things. The students always—were often, the students that you remember are the one that exceed your expectations, and keep trying, keep working. I think that is part of the Suffolk ethic, where you give someone an opportunity and see what they can do with it. So that’s really—I think—
that’s why some students really stand out. And sometimes it can be a student that didn’t really get a very good grade but it’s just one episode in class, and a student where you might not remember their name but you remember this particular episode.

There was another student in my Cultural Contact class, Phil Collaruso. He was a business major as most of the students in History 160 were. It was a great thing being able to teach a bunch of kids who are going to be accountants, or financiers, or managers. Phil, I didn’t know what he was going to do, he was kind of wise guy. My wife doesn’t like me to tell this story, but one day he kept talking when I was talking and I threw a piece of chalk at him and hit him in the forehead and my wife said, “What would have happened if you had hit him in the eye?”(laughter) Also, he went off to do something, and then I remember running into at the Office Max near where we lived, where he was working, you know, at an Office Max. I got a call from him and he really wanted to leave that and what he really wanted to do was become a math teacher. Great, there is a need for math teachers, and there is a need for someone with his particular personality, kind of a borderline wise guy to be a math teacher. And so, the last I heard he was teaching math up in New Hampshire, he started off at the Catholic school in North Cambridge and then he married a young woman from New Hampshire so he moved up there, so he certainly stands out.

There is another guy from History 160, Steve Coffey, C-O-F-E-Y, from South Boston, lives on K Street and took the Cultural Contact class. A lot of these kids took the Cultural Contact under duress: “Why do I need to learn about people from different cultures, what a bunch of bullshit, this political correctness.” I can see that. I kind of agree with a lot of that, I came not to think much of diversity as a virtue, because the world is a diverse place it’s like running around saying we love air, air is important, it goes without saying. Steve Coffey took the class, and, you know, he was quite upfront about his views of things. Saying, “People from South Boston feel somewhat legitimately that they are always being castigated as a bunch of racists.” Steve is now working— he got his law degree, discovered he really didn’t like being a lawyer, he is now working for the Paraclete Center, which is a social service agency, actually which works mainly with middle schoolers in South Boston. He had done a lot with the Boys and Girls Club in South Boston. The thing he is doing though, the Paraclete Center, the nun who runs the Paraclete
Center has a—developed a relationship with a group of nuns in Rwanda, and she’s built a school in Rwanda. And Rwanda—do you know what Rwanda’s chief export is?

GESUALDI: I do not.

ALLISON: Coffee! Okay, so this is a country that was absolutely devastated by this war, this genocide, these horrible things that have happened. And, so, the Paraclete in its small way is trying to help this one small part of this devastated country. What Steve is doing, is trying to develop a market in America for Rwandan coffee. He measures out the coffee and goes around trying to get people to buy it. Great coffee, if you like coffee, this is really good coffee. This is what he’s doing, this is something when I saw him the first time in History 160, would not have picked him as someone who is going to be working with a group of Rwandan nuns trying to sell their coffee in the United States, but it’s exactly what he is doing. It is this kind of ethic he developed from growing up where he did and being fortunate enough to have come to school here and learn things about marketing and about law, and so on. I think that’s one of the most rewarding things, it doesn’t mean I can take any credit for this. You know, some students do stand out more than others—That’s it.

GESUALDI: Sorry. Are there any professors that stand out?

ALLISON: Let me think. You mean here, colleagues?

GESUALDI: Yes.

ALLISON: I have learned a lot form a lot of different people here. It’s one of the really unique things about this institution. When I started here the history department and the government department were on the same floor so we got to talk a lot to one another, you know: Judy Dushku, and John O’Callaghan and others. Getting to know people in other departments, Walter Johnson in Physics and Mohammad Zatet, who I came to know through the—just being a chair. John Cavanaugh of course, is the character in the history department, great teacher, absolutely committed to teaching. Bob Bellinger is probably the closest friend I would have on the faculty
here. I have learned a lot from him about teaching; he has a great commitment to undergraduates. Let me think. Who else is there? Jim Nelson is really a great human being and other people in the administration. I really have developed a great fondness for some of the folks who have been here for many years doing great service, like Frank Flannery, the Vice President in charge of Finance. Honest. He’ll tell you exactly what he thinks and is always thinking about the good of the university, the university’s role and so on. We have been fortunate to have him; we have been fortunate to have Jim Nelson and other folks who have been really essential to making Suffolk what it is. Someone like Judy Dushku, Jim Nelson, Betty Mandl in the English department, you know, people who are not full of themselves but have a certain sense of the way things should be.

One of the great opportunities I had here was to help bring Joe Moakley’s papers here. It was really through that effort and through working on the Boston Massacre that I got to know Joe McEttrick in the law school. A great historian, really an interesting guy, he is working on a history of Roxbury, which is where his family is from. I remember a student of mine coming to say, “I just saw this poster over in the law school they’re doing a reenactment of the Boston Massacre trial.” He brought me the poster and I called the guy who was responsible and it was Joe McEttrick. And so, the two of us struck up a friendship—I did a little bit of research for that and I was in the cast but he was really the impresario who put this thing together. It was part of the dedication of the law school. That was really great moment for us. But, it was one of the distinguishing features about Suffolk that you are able to make these working relationships with people in other parts of the university which you wouldn’t have in a much bigger school. And it’s something I worry about as the university grows; will we still be able to do these things? Or will people become isolated in their little area, you know, and not see that here is someone in a different department or a different school who actually shares something or has something in common with you. That is one of the great things about Suffolk.

GESUALDI: What do you think Suffolk’s affect has been on Boston as a city?

ALLISON: Good question, I’m not sure I know the answer. As a university it hasn’t been as big a player as say Northeastern, BC, or BU but it has appealed to a certain demographic who
otherwise would not have been able to go to college. That’s something that has been changing as tuition goes up. When I started here people did have a reasonable choice between Suffolk and UMass Boston. The benefits of Suffolk: good location, strong faculty, smaller classes than UMass Boston. The benefits of UMass Boston: the price of tuition. Is it worth it now when tuition is, I don’t know, maybe ten, fifteen time as much, probably not, with whom are we competing? I’m kind of getting off the subject here. But thinking about the fact that the law school, for many years, was right outside the back door of the State House, a lot of people elected to the state’s House Representatives were able to go to law school or people who worked as clerks or as aides could go to law school or go to college. That is this connection the state government and the city government, that, you know, that’s a big effect. Also that it has been—was a school of opportunity—has been a school of opportunity for kids from, say, the blue-collar suburbs of Boston who did have this option for going to school here, relatively low cost, often would be commuter students. Obviously this is changing even as we speak, whether it is—we don’t know how the change is going to come out. Historians, you know, sometimes we can get the past right; we should not try to predict the further.

Then you can also think of the mayors—the two mayors that went here: Hynes¹ and Collins.² You know, neither one—Hynes did some positive things, overlooking the developing of the central artery through the middle of the town. Leveling the west end was that him or Collins? I always get them mixed up. Building the new Boston, that was kind of a farce, on the other hand where would the city be without the Prudential Center and John Hancock building, which were part of his legacy.

Obviously it has had a big impact on the city. The universities as a whole have had a big impact on a city. And now we’re in this situation where the universities and hospitals are all that’s left. How effect—how good is that going to be when tax revenues are based on property taxes and your biggest economic entities are non-profits? That means it is going to be more expensive for

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¹ John B. Hynes (1897-1970) was a 1927 graduate of Suffolk University Law School who served as city clerk of Boston from 1946-1950, then as mayor of Boston from 1950-1960. Mr. Hynes also served as a trustee (1964-1970) and treasurer (1969-1970) of Suffolk University.

² John F. Collins (1919-1995) served as mayor of Boston from 1960 to 1968. Prior to serving as mayor, Mr. Collins served in the Massachusetts State Senate and Boston City Council and also ran unsuccessfully for attorney general of Massachusetts in 1954; Collins graduated from Suffolk Law School in 1941.
people to live in the city, and we’re in this process where the middle class has been moving out of the city. And it would be really good if the universities could get together and: a) figure out some way out of this impasse, b) universities should get together and figure out some way to solve the health care problem because that’s costing everybody a fortune. There are things the universities can do and the universities have been really valuable to Boston simply because of what universities do. Suffolk has been really reluctant to step up and become this player and offer itself as a place where people can get together and meet. There have been some outstanding examples like the Moakley Institute that does workshops for aides to state reps and so on, but there is more we can do as a university.

GESUALDI: What impact do you think it has had on its students?

ALLISON: Well I hope it has had a great impact. Otherwise, were not really doing anything, if we do not have an impact on our students we should pack up, go home, and get other jobs. Because we should be teaching them, and as I see it just as a resident of Boston. I think one of the most important things we can teach them to appreciate the city they live in. Beyond that I hope it has given them opportunities.

GESUALDI: What role has the history department played in Suffolk’s Development, the past few years?

ALLISON: It has been really crucial. It has been really crucial, if you think about. Ed Hartmann, who I mentioned was, in many ways the founder of the History Department, he also came here to be director of the library. And he, you know, built this department; it was a group—if you see pictures of the History Department in the sixties, they look like the Politburo. These very somber-looking middle aged, elderly men, who wore really sour looks. And in many ways, at that time, the whole college was in the Archer building. They had a room called the bullpen which was all the faculty’s offices. Everybody was in there, they shared a small number of classrooms with the business school—there was a college of journalism and the law school. So all of them were in this one space. And the History Department, they regarded themselves as this thin line between civilization and barbarism. Part of us can say, what a bunch of old farts, and
the other thing is there is actually something to that. They hired, or actually John Cavanaugh was hired in about 1970 or so, to change things. If you see pictures of the faculty in the old days you’ll see a class of people sitting there taking notes and someone is sitting at a desk reading, reading out loud from a book and that was it. Cavanaugh came in and one by one got rid of these guys and replaced them with people like David Robbins and Ken Greenberg. And really changed the nature of the department.

And in the eighties, Greenberg became chair of the department, and really—he and Fred Marchant, from the English Department, really had different idea of what the university could do. So they started things like Integrated Studies, which you probably endured, and the idea is to have something everybody does, and also raising the standards: making it less like a high school and more—have a more rigorous curriculum. Greenberg tells the story about inviting one of his senior colleagues to his class, a historian here whose real expertise was on the Middle East. He thought, ok I am doing western civ, have him do a course on the Middle East, and this guy’s lecture was on how people in the Southern part of Arabia have long heads and people in the Northern Arabia have round heads and that—he went on for forty-fifty minutes on that theme. And, you know, so you can see what kind of a change it was that was required here. You know, Hartmann was really a very serious scholar and a lot of these other guys were really not.

So, anyway, Greenberg and Fred Marchant have these different ideas for how the university should go, so toward the end of Dean Ronayne’s tenure in the nineties and the early part of this century, Greenberg had a greater role as an advisor because he has an understandable knowledge of the way the university should operate. In that sense, the History Department, though it wasn’t as big as some of the other departments: communication and journalism, et cetera, did have a certain role in generating ideas. So you have, you know, Dave Robbins who has been really instrumental in the international programs, and Bob Bellinger with a collection in African American literature, Laurie Umansky who now has gone on to the dean’s office, Michelle Plott who does European history. That is he hired really capable, smart people to do there work and to teach and to elevate the kinds of courses we offer. You know, it’s been instrumental in that way, plus Dave Robbins really wrote the history of the university in the eighties, *Opportunities Open Door*, and really became—the archivist, for many years. There’s a guy named Dick Jones, an
alumnus, who was very good at raising for the school in the phone-a-thon (inaudible), he did smoke himself to death in the archives. He knew where everything was but no one could figure out his system and Robbins really helped to organize the archives. Because it’s important to an archives—important to a university to keep a memory, and so that was a really an important initiative of the History Department through Dave Robbins. You know, so it’s not simply—Greenberg didn’t say, “Ok we are going to create this history department that is going to be the most important entity in the university,” then again, being in the History Department I tend to see it as more important than it really is, but he was able to bring in people who helped to do this. Either through, you know, through the preserving the archives or through making connections with other institutions and really helping to elevate the nature of the university at a time that it was undergoing tremendous change. You want to maintain having it a place where someone, first in their family to go to college, could come, and do well. As well as attracting students, as you know, for whom going to college is something they expected to do all their lives; having the international students along with students that thought that Everett was on the other side of the world because it's the next town.

GESUALDI: Since you have started here what do you think Suffolk’s greatest achievement has been?

ALLISON: Hiring me. (laughter) No—I don’t know. You know, I think—I’m a little leery of pointing to great achievements because we’re still in the process of them. I think educating people. Continuing to educate people.

GESUALDI: What do you think—I am sorry—

ALLISON: I think building the library has been a great achievement. The new library. The new law school has been another great achievement, the new law library and the Moakley Archives.

GESUALDI: What do you think its weaknesses have been?
ALLISON: I think not remaining true to its mission of being a school of opportunity. I think buying property and getting involved in buying property, you know which forces you to raise tuition. I don’t know that faculty salaries have remained competitive with other places, we have not really built enough of an endowment so we can offer more financial aid to students. I don’t think we have done enough of outreach to—I hate to use the term, but communities of color. Right now we’re at a peak moment for eighteen to twenty-two years-olds but that’s going to change in five years, and then the only groups will be—the college bound groups will be primarily—well, the growing ones will be Hispanics and African Americans. We have not done enough to recruit Hispanics and African Americans, or in the case of also in Massachusetts’ unique geography: Cambodians, Portuguese, or others. I think that’s been a big weakness we have not done enough recruiting, you know, in the cities we haven’t maintained enough of a connection with the Catholic schools in the area and partly that’s because the cost of what we are offering has gone up.

GESUALDI: Where do you think Suffolk will be heading in the next few years?

ALLISON: I do not know. No one tells me these things.

GESUALDI: (laughter) All right, is there anything else you would like to add?

ALLISON: No I think that is it. Do you have any more questions?

GESUALDI: No. Pretty good.

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