



Oral History Interview of Kenneth Greenberg (SOH-037)

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Interview Summary

Kenneth Greenberg, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Suffolk University, discusses his career at Suffolk, which began in 1978 as an assistant professor in the history department and eventually led to his appointment as dean in 2004. He touches upon his educational background in history and how it intertwines with his position at Suffolk. He also describes his responsibilities as dean, the changes he has noticed at Suffolk since the beginning of his career, and the university's housing situation. Greenberg concludes by discussing future plans for Suffolk's diverse and ever-evolving student body.

Subject Headings

Greenberg, Kenneth

Education, Higher --United States

Suffolk University

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Interview Transcript

TIM DODGE: This is Tim Dodge interviewing Dean Greenberg in his office. So Dean Greenberg, where did you—where are you originally from?

KENNETH GREENBERG: I was born in Brooklyn, New York.

DODGE: Brooklyn, New York? Did that influence you in any way, about what you are doing now?

GREENBERG: Well, you know I have a vague memory of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and when they went—when they left Brooklyn it was a great loss, but I grew up hating the Yankees so coming to Boston was a natural fit. They hate the Yankees here as well. So it has tremendous influence in my life.

But, no actually Brooklyn was an amazing culture there. I came from a relatively lower middle class family; we—family struggled for money. My parents, however, thought education was really important. And they sent me to Cornell University, struggled really to send me through college; in those days I was able to do it actually without debt. But really that connection of coming from a family that was struggling, and going to college made me really appreciate my college education.

DODGE: So when did you first start really falling in love with history?

GREENBERG: Pretty early on, I think I liked it in high school, but the key ingredient was when I was in college. Cornell had a spectacular group of historians. It just—one of these magical things that came together all at once. And those classes were very big compared to Suffolk; for example, we used to have 150 students in the class typically. And the lecturers were great performers, and there were many of them who were spectacular, who were all famous in the profession then, and continued to be famous in the profession after that. When you went to

one of these lectures it was a mind blowing experience each time and I had multiple professors like that, I knew that this was the thing I wanted to do.

DODGE: So did these historical professors, did they somehow affect how you run the school as a dean, or is—did they mainly affect how you go about your historical career?

GREENBERG: I would say the particular professors who were historians really got me into the historical profession and set models for how to do history. Being dean came from a sort of a set of life experiences, of how to deal with people, and how to figure out how to run an organization, that just, you know, came from watching other people do it. Suffolk had a wonderful dean before I was dean, and I watched him in operation for many years. I would say he's the person I learned most from about being dean. But deeply it's about how to deal with people. You know, I actually enjoy all the people I work with at Suffolk. Even when problems get generated around people, I just enjoy solving the problems, and taking pleasure in the job, for me, is the key to the job.

DODGE: While you were at Cornell, are there any differences you really see between Suffolk and Cornell?

GREENBERG: They are radically different. I would say Suffolk offers much more personal attention to students as, you know, as I mentioned before, there were these huge classes there. They had small classes as well, but even then, the overall feeling was being in a big institution and being a small person in a big institution. And so being there in order to get your education you had to sort of fight for it in a way, you were just one of many, many people doing that. And I went on to other educational institutions, and they were all the same way, they were, they tended to be, to be big, although when you are in graduate school, you're in a much smaller setting and it's a whole different ball game.

DODGE: So how do the students differ from Cornell to Suffolk?

GREENBERG: I would say at Cornell there were more students who came from wealthy families, and they had a sense of entitlement somehow. And that's not typical, well some Suffolk students come from wealthy families, but the overall tone of Suffolk and the students we have is not that, and they take their education seriously. Many, many of our students work, and are just, you know, struggling to be able to pay for their education; that means they're really serious about their education. You know at Cornell, they had—well, the fraternities, were very, very important there. They are not important at Suffolk. But about half the sophomore class lived, males lived in fraternity houses, and these houses are places where students ate and they had waiters serving the students at these houses and these houses had their own chefs, and it was a whole style of living, which we don't have at Suffolk and I think we're healthier at Suffolk not to have that.

DODGE: Yeah, you started working at Suffolk in 1978, is that correct?

GREENBERG: Yeah.

DODGE: You've seen this school evolve, so to say, from being a commuter school to now being a much broader, diverse school that comes from a lot of people actually staying in Boston and now taking classes every day here. How did this change take place?

GREENBERG: Yeah, well it happened gradually. You know, when I came here in '78, people were still talking not too long before I came of a time in Suffolk's history, when the whole law school faculty shared a single office. It was like a big space, and the college and the business school were together in another office. So there were two faculty offices, just to show you how far we have come since those years. But to tell you the truth, I look back very fondly and anybody who was here during those years looks back fondly on those years, because we were not as wealthy an institution, but we had great professors during those years and spectacular students, you know? They—they were commuter students and sometimes again they were students who were working to make ends meet, and they took their education really seriously so

it was a great thing to see. But the place had an energy and a seriousness and purpose that was really was at the heart of the institution.

And I would say the place began to change gradually, one big—the changes occurred—the two biggest changes probably were that we had dormitories and when we acquired dormitories sometime in the nineties or so, and there was a decision made to have dormitories and that meant we could draw students from all over the country and all over the world. And then the decision to have the abroad campuses in Dakar, Senegal and Madrid, Spain and then to bring students from all over the world and, and so now as you mentioned already we are a much more diverse place. But I do think that the problem I face as dean is to remember that old spirit that gave Suffolk its energy and make sure that it still remains and exists in the new context.

Prosperity can be a negative, in a way, when we are quite prosperous—even in this economic downturn, we're prosperous—and you can get satisfied with yourself and develop practices that are not as good. I like the place. For example, I remember when I first came, there was no gymnasium, at all! And now we have a gym; obviously, we need something much bigger and better, everybody agrees with that now, okay? But it had no gym whatsoever, and every high school in America has a gym and Suffolk didn't have a gym. And I said, "What do people do?" And they said, Well if you want exercise you put on sneakers and you run around the Commons. And I said, "What a great place this is, you know?" (laughs) Simple, direct and it was refreshing, so it made us stand out and we've got to remember that part of our heritage.

DODGE: What made—what made you take, not take really, take the job as dean over still being—of what fascinates you so much as a history professor—what made you swap?

GREENBERG: Yeah, I can say that the time I did it and even now, I love being a professor, I mean it was the greatest. I did it for many, many years and it was spectacular in many ways; being with the students in the classroom, writing and reading and so forth. And so the decision to become a dean comes with both gains and losses, but the losses are not teaching. I teach

occasionally, but not as much as I used to and not being able to write as much as I used to be able to write; those are tremendous losses. I miss those tremendously.

Being dean gives me an opportunity to create an institution, which is humane, which gives a good education to the students, where people are happy to work, and you can do a lot of good things. And an institution that is poorly run from the top, it can create so much misery. I have other friends at institutions that work that way. I like to think that the college at Suffolk does not work that way, and there is a tremendous amount of happiness and I can see the decisions I make that do this. Many people don't even know that I started things that they're enjoying the benefits of, and, you know, the origins of it get lost, but I can sort of see the whole thing play out.

DODGE: Did the previous dean of the College of Arts and Sciences influence you in any way?

GREENBERG: Yeah. I mean, he was non-bureaucratic. Now, what I mean by that is, being a bureaucrat has several features, but one is, an emphasis on paper, and paperwork, and so forth. Suffolk has always been an oral culture, you know I talk to people, things get settled in a matter of seconds. We try to avoid long meetings with each other, things happen quickly. You're able to do that because many people that work here have been here a long time. So, I go way back, I go back thirty years with many people on the faculty. And, they know me, I trust them, they trust me. And so that makes the place work smoothly and the previous dean, Mike Ronayne,¹ had that same style that was really important. Plus a general humane quality; you know, you're not—you're in the business of trying to make people's lives easier and it's easy to forget that sometimes.

And you're also—you know, the other, very, very important thing to keep in mind, is there are many things that happen, during the course of the year in a university, but keeping your eye on the main focus, which is that, we are providing the best possible education to our students. You know someone in the whole system has to keep that in mind every second of every day. And

¹ Michael R. Ronayne, Jr. (1937-2005), was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1972 to 2004.

that's one of my jobs too, is just to recognize, hey, no matter what else is going on, you may hate your colleague, but that's not what it's about, really it's about educating the students, and therefore all the decisions I make have to be with that in mind. Which is, how do you get whatever is going on, how do you get the best education for the students here.

DODGE: Earlier you mentioned you missed writing. I know one of your books, *Honor and Slavery*? What was that about and what other books have you written?

GREENBERG: Yeah, so *Honor and Slavery*, well, it has the—one of the longest subtitles of any book. In fact, let me, it is one of the few books (inaudible) the author cannot tell you the whole title, (opens cabinet) the whole subtitle. The subtitle is: *Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South*. So, (laughter) this was a book, it's all in there by the way, and this was a book about southern honor, the institution of honor. You know, the master class of great believers in honor, a group of people who dueled with each other. You sort of know, when you read about their duels for example, that it has something to do with them being masters in an institution of slavery; so this is the book that explains what is the connection. Why do people who own slaves tend to also think of themselves as men of honor. So it's a complicated story but that's the story I tell here. And my other books are all about slavery in the South before the Civil War.

I wrote—I edited a volume—two volumes actually, about the Nat Turner slave rebellion. Nat Turner rebellion was the largest American slave rebellion—well, I shouldn't say largest, it was the most important American slave rebellion. There were other rebellions that might have been larger, [but this] led to a large number of deaths that were highly publicized. Other slave rebellions that might have been larger were quickly repressed and forgotten, but this sort of stood out in people's minds. It happened in 1831, in Virginia, and it led to—amazing things flowed from this rebellion. For one thing, the Virginia legislature actually debated abolishing slavery. They actually thought, Well, if it's so dangerous for us to have slaves, maybe we should get rid of slavery. So there was a debate in 1831 in Virginia where the Virginians actually thought about

getting rid of slavery. They ultimately decided not to do that, but that was an interesting moment. And then the abolitionists in America looked south, and said, Boy, slavery is such a dangerous institution, and they tried to convince Southerners to also get rid of slavery. So it was an important turning point.

And then Nat Turner became a hero among the black community and among the abolitionist community as someone who gave his life to try to end slavery. So he's a really important figure. When he was captured, the rebellion lasted, maybe only twenty-four hours or so, but he was able to escape capture for about two months. The biggest man-hunt in American history, and he never left within a few miles of his home plantation; but it's a swampy, difficult area, and so he was able to hide out in there, and wasn't captured for two months. When he was captured, his trial was quick and he was executed shortly after that. But there were about a week and half or so, between when he was captured and when he was tried and executed. During that period he was in his jail cell and someone came to visit him, a local lawyer. And he, the lawyer, said that he [Nat Turner] confessed to him and so there was this amazing document called *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which the local lawyer published after Nat Turner was executed.² It is an amazing document because Turner describes himself, and the whole rebellion, in great detail. It was published at the time, and so I basically did a modern republication of that document, and then I wrote a long essay about what it was all about, and the significance of the document. That was another thing I did.

I also wrote a book called, *Masters and Statesmen: the Political Culture of American Slavery*. And that was about the behaviors of people who were politicians and how that was related to living in a slave society, it was a similar topic to *Honor and Slavery*. Then I also edited a volume on the essays of Nat Turner and wrote several essays on Nat Turner.

DODGE: What influenced you to really get into this time period?

² *The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in South Hampton, VA* was published by Thomas R. Gray in 1831.

GREENBERG: When I graduated from college in the late sixties, the racial issues in America were bubbling over, and there was violence connected with it. This was basically the end of the era of the civil rights movement, and the civil rights movement in America is one of the great American stories. It's a story of tremendously brave people, facing difficult circumstances and in a sense with the election of Barack Obama, it's almost the close of that era, and the logical result of that era. But when I began graduate school, racial strife and conflict were central to American culture. And in order to understand that you had to go back to slavery. And so I began to study slavery with that in mind, to understand the racial conflict that was going on at the time.

DODGE: You also have been working on, or you have worked on, movies, I believe it was called—

GREENBERG: *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property.*

DODGE: Yeah, *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property.*

GREENBERG: Which is being shown, you know, next week. I don't know if you know this.

DODGE: Yes, I do actually, on PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] correct?

GREENBERG: Yes. It was on PBS.

DODGE: And you also have another show, which—I didn't really understand what it was.

GREENBERG: It was a film on medicine, which I worked on, but when I became dean I had to make a choice between finishing that or doing this, so my colleagues finished it. It was on PBS as well. So, but I was part of the group that started that project. So I can talk about that too.

DODGE: So how do you think delving deeper into the American past has helped you, currently, with your job and also just how do you think, you know, really getting into the gritty stuff in the American past helps us as a society?

GREENBERG: Yeah, I would say, you know, that both past and present are complex places. And so what historians do is they try and go back and see how things happened and why things happened the way they did. So that act of sort of analyzing the situation and seeing how complex it is, that it's easy to over simplify it tremendously, and it's easy to, you know—well, the thing about studying the past is, the people you are writing about are not around to defend themselves and call you a liar. So you have a tremendous responsibility to get it right. Because it sort of sits there on the page and someone can pick up my book in a hundred years in a library and say, Oh this is what it was like. And I have a big responsibility to get it right. So that experience of sort of seeing the complexity of human interaction is great preparation for being dean. And actually the particular topics that I was interested in, such as honor in the South, well, I can see the same patterns of honor appear in the certain kinds of situations even in a university setting. Even though we live in a very different time and place, I can see the same kinds of things happening. So, sort of, studying people in their full complexity in the past is a way of understanding them in the present.

DODGE: On to a different topic. Suffolk is growing very fast—we've all, anyone who goes here sees it with every freshman class that comes in, it's even larger. There has always been a lack of housing and in this economic time, is there anything that—not only just in this time, but in all times—is there anything being done to maybe help the students with the housing?

GREENBERG: Well, you know, we have another dormitory that is coming on-line, this is where the Modern Theatre is on Washington Street. You know, there's the current dorm we have on the corner of, I guess it's West, no, I can't remember what the intersecting street is, but it's on Washington Street on that corner. And there's a building next door to that. That building housed an old abandoned theater which was in decay. For twenty-five years it was abandoned, basically. It is a historic Boston theater and so what we've done is bought that building that that theater is

in, which is basically a tear down building, but we're tearing it down and reconstructing a new theater in that space with the spirit of the old theater in mind. And then above that theater we're going to have dormitories, which will be connected to the existing dorm next door. And that project is well on the way: we have the space, we have the permitting, we're beginning the tearing down of the old building now.

So that should give more—and we are constantly on the lookout, the only thing that is holding us back now is—there are a few things, I suppose. We're moving at break neck speed to get more dorms, but there's—having the capital to be able to make the purchase of the land and so forth, and then the opportunity doing building of things in Boston and this area, it's pretty crowded, there is a lot of neighborhood groups and negotiating that whole thing is quite difficult.

DODGE: That was actually my next question. How has the relationship changed since we've, since Suffolk now has the dorms and more students, has the relationship gotten better with the communities or has it decayed just due to the fact that we take more area?

GREENBERG: I would say in the years I have been here we're now at a point which is pretty good for our relations with the community. There was period where, I think, the two groups—we and the community were not talking much to each other and not understanding each other. Hopefully that's behind us now, because in order to do our new construction and expansion we have had to deal with the community. And we have modified things to accommodate their needs and we need to understand what they're all about.

We live on Beacon Hill, this is one of the great historic living communities in America, and we have to respect that space. You know, Suffolk has been here for a hundred years, so it's not as if we're newcomers with bull dozers trying to transform the world. We depend on the elegance of Beacon Hill for our own ambiance as a university, so we need each other desperately. So I would say that things are pretty good now, we have done a master plan, which you need to file with the city if you're going to do any major construction and we have given a new master plan, and we have all agreed on this. So the relations I think are remarkably good right now.

DODGE: As current dean, and also being here in the late seventies, has Suffolk followed, or was Suffolk following a tradition? Is it now starting to create new traditions with the, with more active body, more active student body, rather?

GREENBERG: I would say the way I like to think of Suffolk is that it has roots in the past, and I'm a historian so I'm sensitive to that past. So, you know if you look at the deep past of Suffolk, where this place that began with a handful of law students—and they were students who were not allowed to attend the other schools in the area because they were Irish, and the Irish were excluded from those schools. And Suffolk opened the doors to the Irish immigrants and so forth.

So that part of Suffolk's mission of trying to open the doors to people for education who might have been excluded from education is still a central part of Suffolk's mission. Now, couple that idea with the idea, well, we've got to give our students the best possible education they can get, so you do both those things. And what you're describing really, the changes of Suffolk, all the things that students are doing, all the new construction and so forth, is along the lines of giving them the best possible education you possibly can get.

For me, you know, the things that Suffolk was less good at in the past, and we are much better at now, is that there are certain things which might be, have been considered frills of an education. If you're working as a student and you're working as a waiter in Boston, and you're working long hours there, and you're going to school and you're exhausted all the time, and someone says, Well, do you want to take courses that will let you open a small business, say, or, do you want to take art history courses? Now your focus might be, Gee, I want to make it in the world, my focus has to be economic. But a liberal arts college, which is what we are, has to give you the full range of stuff. So you want students, yeah, they might want to learn how to do a business, but they also want to take art history; that's what liberal arts education is all about. So it's those areas, the humanities areas, that have become really exciting. You know, we have the New England School of Art and Design with us and that combines the art and the practical as well. The Communications Department has the same qualities, but then, now we offer languages

which we never offered before. We just use to offer French and Spanish, and now we have Chinese and Japanese, and Arabic as well. So it's those kinds of things which might have been considered frills at an earlier time. I think it's the recognition and our maturity as a college to realize those aren't frills, those are the heart of what the liberal arts are all about.

DODGE: Do you believe the school is making headway now more so now with the international community than before?

GREENBERG: You mean in terms of attracting students?

DODGE: Yes.

GREENBERG: Abroad, yeah, absolutely and by every measure, you know, we're getting more and more international students, and then we're also sending more Suffolk students abroad. And this is something, which we changed the curriculum in the college to require an out-of-classroom experience of all students. And any abroad experience is considered to have satisfied that requirement. It's our way of encouraging students to figure out ways to get out in the rest of the world. So yeah, I mean, I think as many students as possible, we want to get them to be able to study abroad.

DODGE: The school has always been very diverse, even since the beginning. Do you think there's a particular reason why that is?

GREENBERG: I think it's the ability to attract—well, first of all, we're a very tolerant culture. I'll give you a nice example, it's quite wonderful. In many universities—I know this has happened—when students form organizations, they form organizations which people like, people who are similar to each other, find themselves and they exclude others, and often it's based on ethnic grounds, or religious grounds, or racial grounds, and so places get divided up. And there's a magic about Suffolk, where that seems not to happen; where people don't wall themselves off and just disconnect from other people, people are open to other groups and other ideas. So that's

a warm and welcoming environment and other students who are prospective students come here and see that and they like a place that has that kind of openness and toleration.

DODGE: Is there anything else you would like to mention about Suffolk, or even, I, maybe your upcoming shows or movies or are you thinking about doing anything else like that?

GREENBERG: Yeah, well, again being dean is all-consuming. And so it's hard to find the time to do another movie, even though I would love to. There are some interesting possibilities out there, but I don't see how I can fit it in. Maybe I can play a small role in those in the future. I do have in mind some writing projects I want to do. But I would say, you know, I have been at Suffolk for over thirty years now, and it's a thrill being here to see it transform. I'm happy I devoted my life to the institution. It's been extremely rewarding and I hope to continue in the future.

DODGE: Well, thank you Dean Greenberg. It's been a pleasure interviewing you.

GREENBERG: Good. It was a good interview.

END OF INTERVIEW