



1997

## The Turbulent Sixties at Rutgers: An Interview with Richard P. McCormick

Michael J. Birkner  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/histfac>

 Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Birkner, Michael J. The Turbulent Sixties at Rutgers: An Interview with Richard P. McCormick. *The Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries*. 1997. 58: 42-61.

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/histfac/30>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# The Turbulent Sixties at Rutgers: An Interview with Richard P. McCormick

## **Abstract**

Richard P. McCormick's professional life has been so intertwined with Rutgers University's history that it is difficult to imagine anyone who knows more about Rutgers or who has put a greater imprint on the institution. Except for half a dozen years living in Philadelphia and Newark, Delaware, during the era of the Second World War, McCormick has been a significant presence at Rutgers for six decades. He arrived as a freshman at Rutgers College in 1934 and, after graduating in 1938, worked for the Department of History as a factotum while completing a master's degree in history. Recruited to join the department as a junior faculty member in 1945 while still completing his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania, McCormick has never left. He worked his way up the ranks of the faculty, served on virtually every major college committee during a thirty-seven-year teaching career at Rutgers, including a tumultuous term as department chair in the 1960s, and a three-year tenure as dean of Rutgers College in the 1970s. Although he formally retired from teaching at age sixty-five in 1982, McCormick has maintained an office on campus and since then has published a steady stream of articles, pamphlets, essays, and books, some on Rutgers University history. During his years teaching at Rutgers, McCormick was frequently invited to chair history departments at other institutions, assume deanships, and in one case, be seriously considered for a small college presidency. Always he declined, not because the offers were not flattering or were unattractive, but because, as he later told an interviewer, "I never wanted to leave Rutgers. . . . I was happy—and appreciated—here." [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Richard P. McCormick, Rutgers University, college president

## **Disciplines**

History | Oral History | United States History

## THE TURBULENT SIXTIES AT RUTGERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD P. McCORMICK

CONDUCTED BY MICHAEL J. BIRKNER

Michael J. Birkner is a professor of history at  
Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Richard P. McCormick's professional life has been so intertwined with Rutgers University's history that it is difficult to imagine anyone who knows more about Rutgers or who has put a greater imprint on the institution. Except for half a dozen years living in Philadelphia and Newark, Delaware, during the era of the Second World War, McCormick has been a significant presence at Rutgers for six decades. He arrived as a freshman at Rutgers College in 1934 and, after graduating in 1938, worked for the Department of History as a factotum while completing a master's degree in history. Recruited to join the department as a junior faculty member in 1945 while still completing his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania, McCormick has never left. He worked his way up the ranks of the faculty, served on virtually every major college committee during a thirty-seven-year teaching career at Rutgers, including a tumultuous term as department chair in the 1960s, and a three-year tenure as dean of Rutgers College in the 1970s. Although he formally retired from teaching at age sixty-five in 1982, McCormick has maintained an office on campus and since then has published a steady stream of articles, pamphlets, essays, and books, some on Rutgers University history. During his years teaching at Rutgers, McCormick was frequently invited to chair history departments at other institutions, assume deanships, and in one case, be seriously considered for a small college presidency. Always he declined, not because the offers were not flattering or were unattractive, but because, as he later told an interviewer, "I never wanted to leave Rutgers. . . . I was happy—and appreciated—here."

Examining his résumé offers clues to the preoccupations of a popular teacher and scholar who was also a good citizen of his community and his state. Any serious accounting of McCormick's career as a historian must note his numerous publications, focused primarily though not exclusively on state and local history, and on another track, on American political parties and politics. But McCormick's professional commitments and his influence as a historian far transcended publications. He participated in contentious debates such as those that swirled first in the early 1950s at American



Figure 3.I Richard P. McCormick

universities as communists and fellow travelers were exposed and, in some cases, removed from their posts. In the depths of the McCarthy era, and later, McCormick spoke out strongly for academic freedom. He labored behind the scenes for several governors of New Jersey as informal counselor and speech writer. He instigated commissions to celebrate key events in the state's history and to assure maximum public awareness of the rich New Jersey past.

As the foremost scholar of New Jersey history throughout the postwar era, McCormick served on a remarkable range of statewide boards, commissions, committees, and panels, running from the New Jersey Tercentenary Commission to the National American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, and headed the New Jersey Historical Commission and the New Jersey Historical Society. In each of these areas, McCormick expressed a consistent commitment. His goal was always to enrich the range of serious scholarship done on New Jersey themes and to disseminate that scholarship to the widest possible audience. His vision for New Jersey history—in which his native state would take a back seat to none in the country in terms of its support for history from the grass roots to the university—has not always been accommodated by political and economic realities. But when one assesses what McCormick dreamed and what he accomplished, his successes are noteworthy. They include reviving the New Jersey Historical Society in the early 1950s, helping build a first-caliber history program at Rutgers, spearheading a major statewide publication program in connection with New Jersey's 300th anniversary celebration in 1964, and launching the New Jersey Historical Commission. These are but some of McCormick's most satisfying endeavors, which made him among the best known as well as perhaps the most influential force in New Jersey history for decades.

Although he spent untold hours on public history commitments, not to mention his ongoing and prolific work as a scholar, McCormick's central focus between 1945 and 1982 was Rutgers University. As a young professor, he was among those who most forcefully assailed the university's firing of History Professor Moses Finley, of the Rutgers–Newark campus, because of Finley's invocation of the Fifth Amendment. As a leading member of the state's history establishment in 1965, McCormick rose vigorously to the defense of Professor Eugene Genovese's right to free speech. At a Rutgers Teach-in in April 1965, Genovese had welcomed a Vietcong victory over American forces. McCormick argued repeatedly that political interference with speech on campus, however provocative, was intolerable.

In the latter part of the 1960s, Rutgers University was almost continuously roiled by debates over the Vietnam War, the black student protest movement, the movement for women's liberation, and a concomitant effort to admit women to Rutgers College. During these tumultuous years, as the oral history excerpt that follows indicates, McCormick was instrumental, together with

President Mason Welch Gross and a number of like-minded administrators and faculty colleagues, in helping to keep the campus from fracturing and in finding measures that moved the university forward without alienating its core constituencies.

The interview text that follows is part of a broader project recapitulating Richard P. McCormick's life with history, within the context of his life at Rutgers University. An original copy of the transcripts, based on tapes created in 1995 and 1996, has been deposited at the Special Collections and University Archives of Rutgers University's Alexander Library. Another version of the oral history, together with an extended narrative introduction and supporting materials, will be published by Greenwood Press.

## The McCormick Interview

Interviewee: Richard P. McCormick (RPM)  
Interviewer: Michael Burkner (MB)  
Place: New Brunswick, NJ  
Date: March 11, 1996

[The following has been excerpted from a longer interview. Copies of the complete transcript of all the McCormick interviews are available through Special Collections and University Archives, Alexander Library.]

MB: In looking at your career at Rutgers, it's clear that things at the university begin to accelerate in the early 1960s. You write in your history of Rutgers that 1959 was a particularly notable year. You mention the inauguration of Mason Gross; a state bond issue; the federal government's increasing interest in funding higher education because of Sputnik; and the imperatives of the Cold War. Is that still your impression? That 1959 was a critical year in Rutgers history?<sup>1</sup>

RPM: A whole lot of things came together. The fifties were a bad period. The G.I.s left, enrollments dropped, state support was extremely weak and uncertain, and moreover, it became inescapable that our ambiguous status with respect to the whole matter of the state relationship was a serious handicap. Finally, the trustees bit the bullet and agreed to a major change in their relationship with the state, which was embodied in legislation in 1956 that placed management of the university in the hands of a new agency, the Board of Governors, the majority of whose members would be appointed by the state. This was of enormous importance in clarifying our role. We had been designated as the state university back in 1944, but it never really took. And we had suffered defeats in attempts to secure the passage of bond issues that would have enabled us to expand.

MB: Was Governor [Robert] Meyner one of the obstacles you faced in that regard?

RPM: Governor Meyner, in a sense, was one of the obstacles we faced. On the other hand, his insistence that the ambiguous status of the institution must be clarified was decisive in inducing the Board of Trustees to face the handwriting on the wall, if you will, and to come forth with this new relationship. In that sense he precipitated what I regarded at the time—and still do—as a very essential change in the management of the university. He was a benefactor. (Laughs) All right. So we get this new status. At the same time other favorable circumstances come into the picture. There was Sputnik. That was extremely influential. It led to the passage of the National Defense Education Act, [more] money, and so on. Then we get a governor who is very sympathetic to higher education, in the person of Dick [Richard J.] Hughes. That was a plus. Then we get a very dynamic, charismatic young president, Mason Gross, who is a salesman for the university. And by that time we have become very, very conscious of the impending tidal wave of students. All of these factors coming together led to a great expansion in terms of numbers of students, to a series of successful bond issues which, together with other resources, provided us with \$250 million in the sixties that enabled us to rebuild our physical plant here in New Brunswick and enabled us to build whole new campuses in Camden and Newark. So it does mark the birth of a new era. All of these factors contribute to create that new era.

MB: How does the history department at Rutgers specifically get impacted by these changes?

RPM: Very favorably. We were fortunate that when the opportunity came in the sixties, the opportunity provided by increased resources, and also by increasing numbers of students, and within the framework of the sixties, a heightened interest in history among undergraduates, we were in a position to make some good appointments and enhance the standing of the department within the profession. And we were also able to greatly expand our doctoral program, which during the fifties had been very small. Aided among other things by the NDEA grants, we could offer decent fellowships. The sixties were a boom time in New Jersey and we had relatively generous state support both in terms of capital funds and salaries. By 1966–67 we were on the “A” rated AAUP scale and this, of course, greatly aided our recruiting. We were among the top public universities in compensation. Things moved.

MB: It’s clear to me, reading things that you have written or spoken, that you have a high estimate of Governor [Richard J.] Hughes.

RPM: Oh yes.

MB: To what degree did you have interaction with Governor Hughes? You seem to have had a good relationship with Governor Robert Meyner, despite some different priorities. You did some ghostwriting for Governor Meyner,

you pushed him hard on the tercentenary idea and in other areas. To what extent were you able to have a similar relationship with Governor Hughes? Did he call on you for historical references, ask you to help with speeches of a historical nature?

RPM: It was a different relationship. I had a good relationship with both Meyner and Hughes. Meyner was a funny guy. When he liked somebody, he would go all out for that person. If he didn't like you, you were dead. For some reason, we struck it off very, very early. Among other things, I had served on the governor's commission on Morven, back in 1954–55, whatever it was. I had already met Meyner before that commission, but through that commission I got to know him better and then, as you said, I wrote some speeches for him. Then in '57 I wrote to him proposing the establishment of the Tercentenary Commission. By this time he knew me and he had confidence in me. So he backed me on that, and we got that legislation through. With Hughes, I had a cordial relationship. It was not as operationally involved as it was with Meyner. He liked me. But he liked everybody. (Laughs) He also liked my wife. Consequently, any time I wanted to have access to Hughes, I had it. I can't say that I used this access in any way for the university, in terms of lobbying. I didn't need to. Others, like Mason Gross, had good relations with Hughes. I would use it for such things as the Tercentenary Commission and, later, with other history-related matters. But he was just a delightful, warm, wonderful person. And of course I had a good deal of enthusiasm for his general policy orientation.

MB: In 1965 there was a contentious governorship election in which Wayne Dumont made a decision to base a lot of his campaign on the Genovese case.<sup>2</sup> Did your sympathies lead you to become politically active that year?

RPM: Only in this sense: I was involved, maybe I was the leader of it, in drafting a statement that was also signed by Dick Schlatter, Henry Winkler, and Peter Charanis, upholding Genovese's right to speak out.<sup>3</sup> This statement was endorsed by the university's Board of Governors, and it was given wide publicity. It clearly indicated, of course, that we were associated with the position Governor Hughes took in that controversy, not with the position that Dumont took.

MB: Do you understand, as a historian, why Dumont took that position?

RPM: Oh yes. Oh yes. (Talks off tape)

MB: The Dumont candidacy fizzled and Rutgers was able to move on. The campus of course by the latter part of the sixties is the home of a lot of unrest, a phenomenon common across the eastern universities.

RPM: All over. Kent State, Berkeley, wherever.

MB: To what extent do you notice a distinct change in the student body at Rutgers in the late sixties?

RPM: In 1964 the most active political group of students on the Rutgers–New Brunswick campus was students for Goldwater. That situation changed very much over the next year or two. We had that sensational, climactic teach-in in April of '65, which was one of the early teach-ins on the Vietnam War, and the one that produced, among other things, the Genovese case. This marks the boundary, the introduction, of an era of rebellion, radicalism, changes in life-style, changes in the whole youth culture. It's a very complex thing and has many different sources and many different manifestations. It is strongly apparent here, as I say it was at Columbia, Harvard, wherever you want to point to. My major concern, as these new currents began sweeping through the campus, was to work against certain tendencies toward the polarization of the faculty. I did not play an up-front role, as did many of my history colleagues, in public opposition to the war in Vietnam. I didn't march in demonstrations or speak in teach-ins. But there were certain issues before the faculty that were potentially very, very dangerous and explosive. Here is where I came in. I was concerned to try to prevent a complete breach within the faculty between the activists and those who were more oriented toward sustaining the academic programs. That was my role.

MB: What was your awareness of what was going on at Columbia in 1968 and your thoughts about the role people like Richard Hofstadter and Fritz Stern took, political liberals, who were defending the conservative values of the institution, [who sought] to maintain dialogue, to work to keep the university open. Did you identify with what they were doing, or did you see the Columbia issues as separate from Rutgers?

RPM: I'll give you a couple of specific illustrations. There was the whole matter of the black student protest movement, which develops in the mid-to-late sixties, and becomes quite evident by April 1968 with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and is surging by 1969. This movement is manifesting itself at Rutgers, but also at campuses elsewhere. As it came close to the climax, if you will, I was aware, and other members of the faculty were, too, that on all of these campuses where movements were under way, the blacks were presenting their demands, quite understandably, to deans and presidents and boards. I saw problems with that, because many of the demands they were making fell properly within the province of the faculty; for example, in the area of admissions requirements, in the area of curriculum, and so on. At these institutions a dean, a president, or the governing board would respond. This would cause a fissure between the governing body and the faculty because of a lack of consultation.

As things were reaching a boiling point here, some of us talked about this matter, and one Sunday night a large segment of the faculty of Rutgers College met over at the Physics Building at Busch campus. We decided that the demands which we knew were imminent at that time should be presented to,

and received by, the faculty at Rutgers College. We asked Dean Arnold Grobman to call a special faculty meeting to receive these demands. He agreed to have this meeting. He was a very good dean. So a couple days later this faculty meeting was held in the gym. The gym was packed. The faculty was sitting on the main floor, together with a representative delegation of the black students and their attorney, Bill Wright, an alumnus of Rutgers. The galleries were packed.<sup>4</sup>

MB: A great way to have deliberation.

RPM: Well, we had a scenario prepared. The black students presented their demands. Then, I don't remember whether I presented the resolution—I know I wrote the resolution and I probably presented it—which was to the effect that the faculty would not take up any other business until all of these demands had been addressed, and that a special committee be appointed (and we knew who the members of that committee would be) to meet immediately following the end of this meeting to prepare a response to these demands. And this was overwhelmingly approved by the faculty. I was named chair of this committee. It was the hardest working day I ever spent in my life.

Our committee adjourned down to Milledoler Hall, which was the office of the dean of the college, and we had also convened all the relevant committees of the college—Admissions Committee, Committee on Instruction, etc.—and we parceled out these demands. Those committees went to work. We, the Central Committee, went to work on several of them. Meanwhile, as part of that resolution in the morning, we had agreed the faculty would reconvene in the evening. Finally, these things came funneling back into our committee, and we had a whole staff of secretaries there, mimeograph machines going, and the result was that just before the evening meeting was to assemble, we had this lengthy mimeographed material responding to all of the demands that were within the province of the faculty (there were some that were completely outside our province). Our responses addressed such things as admissions, financial aid, curriculum, and so on. I hadn't had a bite to eat. (Laughs) And as the last sheets came out of the mimeograph machines, we walked back up to the gym. We presented our resolutions one by one by one. There was discussion, but every one of the resolutions passed.

MB: Was the situation in the evening the same as in the morning?

RPM: Same. In the gym, faculty on the main floor, galleries packed with students—very orderly, very orderly. No chanting, no booing, no stamping of feet, no anything like that. It was a very orderly meeting, remarkably so. At the same time, there was an extraordinary sense in the air that we were involved here in quite an historic operation. Well, one of the great difficulties that we had somehow to overcome was that this was March. By March, we had virtually accepted our incoming class for the succeeding year. By mid-March, under standard procedure, we weren't receiving applications.



Figure 3.2 A faculty meeting in the gym during the black student protests of February 1969. Richard P. McCormick, center, was appointed chair of a select student faculty committee considering the black student demands. To his left is Peter Charanis, professor of history, and, on the right, Mark Singely, a faculty member on this committee

Well, we had only a small number of black students admitted—maybe forty, maybe fewer. We were determined that we had to boost that figure, and boost it by September. How to do it? Well, there'd been an idea that had been kicking around, that hadn't gotten anyplace, and we seized on that. We established a Transitional Year Program (TYP) and, because it was a new program, we argued that we could accept applications for it, and that we would seek to raise the number of black students to 100. That passed. And that gave us the opening to go out and do some recruiting for this program. This so-called Transitional Year Program became what we know today as the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and that transition was made. That, quite frankly, was a gimmick to enable us to reopen the recruitment and admissions process.

MB: This was March of 1969?

RPM: March of '69.

MB: What were the reactions, respectively, of the president, the dean, and the students?

RPM: They were all supportive. However, what had finally precipitated these actions on whatever day it was in March was the fact that early in March the black organization of students at Newark had taken over a building. For two or three days there were negotiations between the students in the building and the acting dean at Newark. Mason Gross became involved.<sup>5</sup> There were less disruptive demonstrations at Rutgers–New Brunswick. Here, the black students had gone through the cafeteria line and dumped all their food on the floor. A similar thing at Douglass. But attention focused on Newark. Press reaction was, shall we say, mixed. Some—many—journalists denounced this student takeover. Because they had crippled school for a few days, [many people] denounced the “coddling” of these students. So that the president, Mason Gross, who had involved himself there and also had involved himself at Camden, got hundreds of vicious letters. The files are full of them. There was considerable distress on the part of certain segments of the alumni. Finally, there was a legislative hearing in Trenton conducted by the House Education Committee, in which politicians had an opportunity to express their concerns about the manner in which this was handled. One of the consequences of it all was legislation that constrained Rutgers in its management of its funds. It set up stricter state controls over how Rutgers used its funds—a punitive measure. While within the university—speaking now of the president, the dean, and the students—there was strong support [for change]. Outside the university there was considerable hostility to the actions taken by the black students and toward the effort made to address their concerns.

MB: Were the black students willing to accept the faculty recommendations?

RPM: I worked very, very closely with the leadership of the black students—a remarkably dedicated, well-informed, concerned, responsible group. My respect for them was sky high. For example, we'd gone ahead and done all these things, and [done so] with the support of the dean and the central administration. But we had also provided that a committee would monitor to assure that these things were done. We met and scrutinized what was being done in admissions, in financial aid, with respect to the police force, and so on and so on.

By April, it was obvious that we had a problem, in terms of where the money was going to come from. So, we held another special faculty meeting. By this time I was working very, very closely with another highly respected member of the faculty, a physicist, Bernie Serin, and like me, he had widespread respect among the faculty. He had a lot of credibility. So we worked out this scheme wherein individual faculty members would be asked to pledge I percent of their salary to help finance this program. And by God, we had an astonishing number of them sign up for this. It was important as a manifestation of faculty support, but it was also very tangible.

But we were still short of money. So in June, Leon Green and I—Leon was head of the black student organization—persuaded the Board of Trustees (with support from the administration) to tap their special funds for money to ensure the success of this initiative. That was a joyous afternoon when we got that commitment. Now, there were lots of rough spots in this program. I won't deny that. It was done in a hurry, and even with honest deliberation you never know what the side effects will be. But we were able to meet our commitments as a faculty and as a college and avoid the kind of ruptures that had occurred at many other institutions.

MB: When you revisited those days, by virtue of writing a book about them, did you come up with perspectives that surprised you as you were assessing those very interesting times?

RPM: I had forgotten the extent of the virulence of the opposition of certain of the political segments and the citizenry and alumni. At the time, my eyes were so fixed on the operational aspects of this thing, that I wasn't aware, as I was later, how much opposition there was to change.

MB: At the same time you have the black student protests, at least two other things are going on . . .

RPM: The Susman Report.

MB: Tell me about it.

RPM: Warren Susman was a very gifted member of the history department. The dean, Arnold Grobman, was a very open-minded guy. He asked Warren to let his imagination roam, to take a whole fresh look at the college, and come up with proposals that he thought would be interesting and

worthwhile to reshape the college. Well, it was quite a report. It was published, distributed to the faculty, and the students became very much interested, because Warren had an extraordinary relationship with students.

Susman produced a sweeping document, the very title of which tells you that. It was called "Toward the Reconstruction of an American College."<sup>6</sup> It covered everything related to the academic and social life, the whole organization of the college. Immediately, the faculty split. The active faculty split almost down the middle, with a pro-Susman faction and an anti-Susman faction. Warren enjoyed enormous popularity with one faction of the faculty. Another faction of the faculty couldn't stand him. (Laughs) It was personal as well as opposition to his ideas. This occurred at about the same time as the black student movement, but it came to a climax a little bit later. This polarization worried me greatly. Feelings ran so high on both sides.

MB: Was he going to change requirements? Get rid of requirements?

RPM: There wouldn't be much left of requirements. For example, you'd get rid of the old distribution requirements, like requirements for foreign language, science. So, there were vested interests involved, also, deep-seated political differences. Anyhow, we had these rancorous meetings, and I was looking for a way to heal this. Well, at one of these meetings, a professor of German, Claude Hill, who had never been active at all in faculty affairs, came up with a proposal which he put before the faculty somewhat diffidently. It was immediately brushed off, because he had no standing. Most people didn't even know who he was, I guess. But I saw something there. So I went to my trusted colleague, Bernie Serin, and I said, "Bernie, I think we've got something here." We discussed it. Bernie lived near Arnold Grobman over in Piscataway. We went and tried it out on Arnold, and he said, "maybe we can do this."

A day or two later, the OAH [Organization of American Historians] was meeting in Philadelphia. I managed to catch up with Warren, who was always surrounded by a coterie of admirers. I caught him just as he was getting off the elevator. I had a good relationship with Warren. I took him aside and said, "Warren, let me try this on you." I explained what Bernie and I had in mind. He had respect for Bernie and of course for Arnold. I said, "Do you think this can work? Do you think we can do this?" And he agreed. So, we had another faculty meeting in the gymnasium. Again, faculty on the main floor, students packing the galleries.

MB: So the students were intensely interested in this?

RPM: (Laughs) Oh, yeah, there were vigorous partisans and opponents among the students. . . . Anyhow, we presented this proposal. And it was pretty clear to me that the center of the faculty—the not-so-radical ones and the not-so-conservative ones—were eager to bring this festering dispute to a solution. On the other hand, there were those on the far left and the far right who were

still interested in continuing the battle. After a couple of rather unpleasant episodes, we got the proposal through with a pretty substantial majority.

MB: You refer to “unpleasant episodes.” Do you mean difficult meetings?

RPM: No. Some people were saying some pretty nasty things. We had the votes, however.

MB: So, what was the change?

RPM: A modest change in the curriculum. A reduction in the number of requirements, but not as sweeping as the Susman report proposed, and minus several other features in the Susman report that were just too visionary.

MB: Why do you think Susman went along?

RPM: It’s hard to say; it’s always hard to figure Warren. But, number one, he had a loyalty to the college. I think he was troubled by the controversy. He had great respect for me and for Serin. He was willing to listen to me and to Bernie and to Arnold. There were significant concessions, but not so great as to alienate the right, if you will, and sufficient concessions to bring in the moderate left. It was a compromise, in other words. So, we got that through and got that off our backs. Well, a couple of years later, 1975 I believe, we went back and had another look, in a quieter atmosphere, and restored some of the requirements that had been eliminated. That was another interesting experience.

The third one that I was deeply involved in was coeducation. Very interesting story. There was a cocktail party in the spring at Arnold Grobman’s. A half-dozen of us were sipping our drinks, chatting. Coeducation was in the air back then, and it came up in this conversation. And we discovered that everybody in this little group felt, “Yeah, Rutgers College ought to be coeducational. Of course it ought to be coeducational. It’s ridiculous to still have an all men’s college.” So the thing went through the planning committee, and it went before the faculty, in ‘68. The faculty voted unanimously, with one abstention, in favor of coeducation.

OK. So then I found myself chairman of the committee to bring this about. Well, we collected data, we looked at what had happened at other schools, we had input from the Women’s Action League, which was perhaps more involved in this than NOW was, I don’t know. Meanwhile, our resolution went to the Board of Governors. The Board of Governors turned it down. Not too surprising. So then we went to work further, collecting more information. Among other things we consulted with the ACLU office in Newark, on the possibility of bringing a lawsuit. And that sort of dragged along. Meanwhile the administration appointed a committee headed by Henry Winkler to study the matter.

It soon became apparent that the main stumbling block was the dean of Douglass College, Marjorie Foster. She foresaw, correctly, that if Rutgers College went coeducational, this would greatly impact her women’s college.

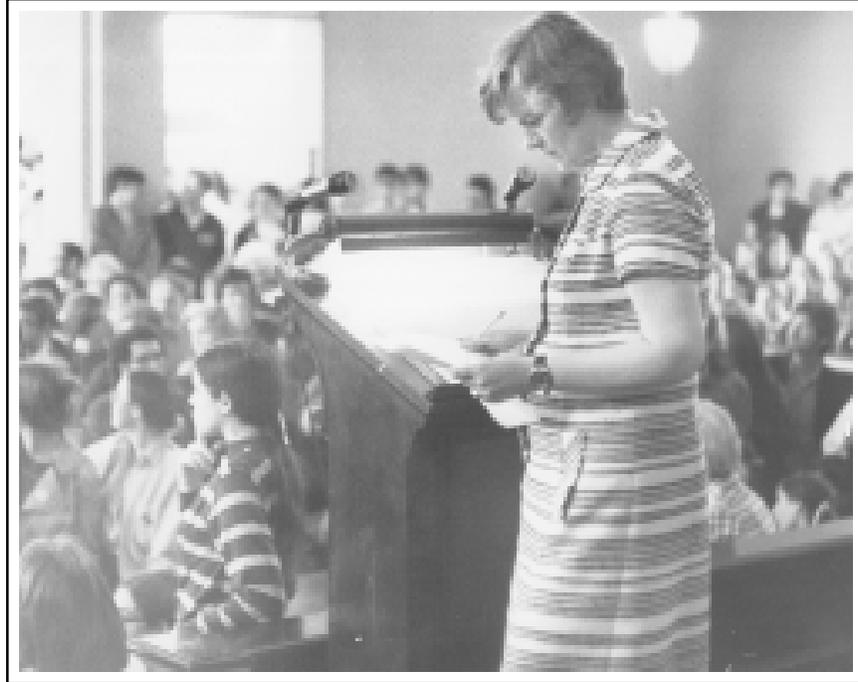


Figure 3.3 Marjorie Foster, dean of Douglass College, looking over notes in Voorhees Chapel during student strike over the U.S. expansion of the Vietnam war into Cambodia

There was a great possibility that many of the strongest women candidates for admission would apply to a coeducational school rather than to a single-sex school. Foster was a formidable adversary. She had her supporters on the Board of Governors, she had her supporters around the state, and she even managed to gain support among Rutgers College alumni who feared that if you let women in there would be fewer spots for men, and so on.

Then one night, Arnold Grobman and I met with the governing committee of the Rutgers College Parents' Association up at this apartment house at the end of George Street. I'll never forget it. Somewhat to our surprise, we found the Parents' Association wholly supportive of coeducation. Shortly thereafter there was a meeting of the Rutgers Board of Governors in Camden, and they sent a delegation to Camden. This had an effect on the Board of Governors. They weren't a bunch of crazy college professors. Meanwhile, there had been a committee of students, which wasn't as active as you might have supposed, on the subject. Finally, in 1971, around there, the Board of Governors capitulated and agreed that Rutgers College could become coeducational.

I was made chair of the committee to handle the transition. I had an interesting committee, men and women. We didn't have many women on the faculty at that time, but there were some; there were people from the dean of students' office. So we went to work on that, we had about a year to work on it. It turned out that it wasn't a very big problem. You had to change some urinals to something else, decide on patterns of housing, predict enrollments, and so on. So in September of 1972 we admitted our first cohort of women.

MB: How many were there?

RPM: I don't remember?

MB: Small, medium, large contingent?

RPM: Small. But by 1979 there were as many women as men. Now, what facilitated this transition, as at many other places, was the decision to expand the size of Rutgers College. We had at that time, say 5,000 students, I forget the exact figure. If you're going to admit a freshman class of, say, 1,000, you're going to reserve, say, 300 spaces for women, that's 300 fewer for men. So the transition at first was gradual. The cohort of women was small, but growing. But at the same time the size of the college was increased, we didn't get a kickback in depriving the vaunted males of their prerogatives.

MB: What about the impact on Douglass?

RPM: It hurt them badly. Their admissions profile immediately started downhill. There was no question that that was going to happen. At first it was the decline of the admissions profile, not a decline in the number of students, because there was enough of a pool to keep admissions up. But in the past few years there has been a decline in enrollment at Douglass. We have Rutgers students housed over there. So it had that impact.

MB: But this was a trend that was impossible to ignore, and it would have been foolish to ignore it.

RPM: We were the last nonmilitary men's college in a public institution in the United States—that is, Rutgers College—to go coeducational. But that was a fun fight.

MB: I'd imagine that less fun would have been the rancor on campus over the Vietnam War.

RPM: That was a completely different battleground.

MB: Did you have teach-ins, did you have debates? Did you have protests?

RPM: As I said before, I was quite deliberately not an activist, as many of my colleagues were. [Eugene] Genovese, [Warren] Susman, [Lloyd] Gardner, [Donald] Weinstein, [Samuel L.] Bailey, [Rudolph] Bell,<sup>7</sup> they were all in this thing. I was not. As I say, my concern was to prevent the kind of damaging polarization that could flow from these various issues. I had my own feelings, but I've never been a political activist in terms of going out on picket lines, carrying signs, that kind of thing.

MB: By 1967 you are chair of the history department. Are you still in the classroom?

RPM: Half time. Maybe one course one term, two courses another term, something like that. I had finished writing the history of Rutgers [Rutgers: A Bicentennial History]. The final year was the most exhausting year I had ever gone through, trying to meet the November 1966 deadline. I had just completed The Second [American] Party System; I had polished up New Jersey from Colony to State; I was becoming increasingly involved in some of these collegiate issues, and so on, so that I hadn't spent the amount of time I should have over the years working on the history of Rutgers. In effect, it is 1964 before I can really get down to work on it.

MB: So, a lot of years to cover in very little time.

RPM: Oh, God. The worst year I have ever had. And when I handed the final pages in to the press in August of 1966, I went right across the river to the golf course and bought myself a new set of golf clubs. That was my reward for this horrible year. (Laughs)

MB: It was a reasonable step to take, to take on more administrative duties in the department after all of this.

RPM: Well, I had to. In those days, we had a policy of three years and out as chair. It was my turn. So, I did it. Actually, I had to do it a little earlier than I anticipated. Peter Charanis, who was chair before me, had a heart attack, so I had to step in about the last year of his administration, and I was chair during all this turmoil. As chair I was not only buffeted by all the turmoil that was going on, and internal divisions in the department that were related to all of this political stuff, but it was also the period—you couldn't imagine it today—of offers. During my three years as chair, at least half the members of the department had substantial offers from other universities.

MB: And you had to deal with that.

RPM: I had to deal with that; get up the money to keep them, and so on. Also, we were still expanding. So we were doing recruiting. It was a tough time to be chair, with all that going on. I never wanted to be chair. I did it because it had to be done, and I was glad to give it up in '69.

MB: When you left the chairmanship, what was your greatest satisfaction?

RPM: I survived. (Laughs) I managed to survive personally, and I managed to keep the department together, although there were very, very deep cleavages, political, ideological cleavages. It was a harrowing experience. You had an old guard, as you might expect, and basically they were ideologically conservative, particularly on academic issues. The younger members of the department tended to be ideologically left and far more experimental. Trying to steer a course here—oh, brother.

MB: How well did you do holding onto people who had offers from other institutions?

RPM: In most cases we held on to them.

MB: Any major disappointment along those lines, losing someone you wanted to keep? Genovese left during your time as chair?

RPM: Yes, but that was presented as a *fait accompli*. Gene was not interested in bargaining at that point. I can't think of any others we lost.

MB: So you kept your talent and recruited new talent.

RPM: Oh yes.

MB: Any disappointments as chair?

RPM: I don't think of it in terms of disappointing. I just think of it as very, very arduous, with competing offers, recruitment, political divisions within the department, tremendous ferment that was going on at the college—coeducation, black student protests. No [time for] research.

MB: In May 1970, an event occurred at Kent State University—kids were killed. When you first heard the reports, did you say to yourself or your wife, “Oh God, something is gonna happen here at Rutgers”?

RPM: No question about that, but I might just say parenthetically, I was more impacted by what happened in April of 1968—the assassination of Martin Luther King. Just a day or two after the assassination, it was a Saturday, I was due to speak to the parents at Douglass, and so was Mason Gross. I had prepared some remarks, the usual thing expected of a university historian on that occasion, but that was not what the occasion called for. Remember, I was devastated by that event [King's assassination]. Kent State—so many things happened in that arena that while I saw it as an event that had a character of its own, it was sort of a culmination, it wasn't the kind of bolt out of the blue that the assassination of King was. I do remember walking down to Queen's campus where there was a gathering of students, and Mason Gross with his wonderful touch with both faculty and students,



Figure 3.4 Student activists take over President Mason Gross's office as a protest over the U.S. Cambodia invasion in May 1970. President Gross in the center with glasses and striped tie

addressing them. The students, with a sort of combination of anger and bewilderment—anger that this had happened, bewildered that their understanding of the situation, their diagnosis, their vision, seemingly had so little support in the public arena.

MB: I was a college student at that time and my closest friend was at Rutgers. He was in that crowd. He wrote me a letter several days thereafter from the president's office at Rutgers, saying he was part of a group of students who had occupied the president's office . . .

RPM: Very politely, too.

MB: And in that letter he wrote me from the president's office he said, "By the way, President Gross said we were welcome to occupy his office so long as we keep it relatively orderly. This is not Columbia," or words to that effect. Does this accord with your own memory?

RPM: Oh, certainly. Certainly. No cops. But Mason paid a price.

MB: Because conservatives on campus and alumni would have been hostile.

RPM: Not just on campus, but across the state. He paid a price.

MB: Not just hate mail this time—he lost some leverage as president, right?

RPM: He did.

MB: Do you believe what he did as president that critical week made sense under the circumstances?

RPM: Certainly, yes. The alternative—Kent State was an alternative.

MB: So you were in sympathy with Mason Gross.

RPM: Of course, yes.

MB: How much longer did Mason Gross remain as president?

RPM: You're onto something here, aren't you.

MB: I've always thought there was a connection.

RPM: There was. I say, the battering that he took from the black student protest incidents and the Vietnam demonstration, though far more was involved than simply Vietnam, took a toll in terms of his support within the Board of Governors, within the alumni, among politicians, the general public.

MB: It probably took a physical and emotional toll, too.

RPM: Physically, he changed tremendously. If you look at a picture of Mason in, say, 1968 and another one in 1972 [there was a tremendous difference]. He wasn't in good health. He never took care of himself, but that was a whole different story. There were other factors, but these things weakened him, no question about it. But, I say, the alternatives were worse in terms of the university, because the mistakes that might have been made, were rather readily repaired in the later years. Mistakes that would have really crippled us were avoided.

MB: It seems that in many ways he did for Rutgers what Kingman Brewster did at Yale, as opposed to what Grayson Kirk was like at Columbia.

RPM: It took Columbia years and years to recover. And Cornell, too.

## NOTES

1. See Richard P. McCormick, *Rutgers: A Bicentennial History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966), pp. 315-320.
2. In April 1965 History Professor Eugene Genovese spoke at a teach-in at the university, saying he welcomed a Vietcong victory in the conflict then ongoing in Vietnam. Many citizens of New Jersey responded with anger to Genovese's assertion, and an effort was made to have Genovese fired. Republican gubernatorial candidate Wayne Dumont made the Genovese case a centerpiece of his campaign that year. Dumont lost decisively in the election to incumbent Governor Richard J. Hughes, and the issue faded. Genovese, however, chose to leave Rutgers in 1966 for Sir George Williams University in Canada. Genovese subsequently emerged as the foremost American historian of slavery and the old South. Contemporary news clippings about the Genovese case are in the Eugene Genovese biographical file, Special Collections and University Archives. McCormick's involvement in the episode is documented in the Richard P. McCormick Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, Box 4. For a pithy summary of the controversy, see Stacy Kelner, "The Genovese Affair," *Rutgers College Quarterly* 2 (Spring 1989): pp. 4-22.
3. Members of the Rutgers Department of History.
4. For more on this scene, the context for it, and the outcome, see Richard P. McCormick, *The Black Student Protest Movement at Rutgers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 46-55.
5. On the situation at Rutgers-Newark, *ibid.*, pp. 34-46.
6. Susman's treatise was published by Rutgers College in October 1968 and is available in pamphlet form in Special Collections and University Archives.
7. All members of the history department at Rutgers College.