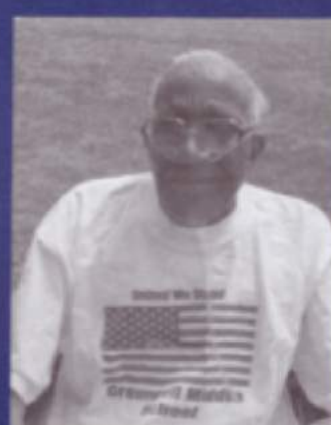


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Visualizing Connecticut's Past: The Art of Historical Documentary Filmmaking

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Never were the differences between historical documentary filmmaking and feature filmmaking so evident to many Connecticut citizens as when Steven Spielberg released his *Amistad* film in 1997. Many historians and educators in the state were intimately acquainted with the details of the story about the group of kidnapped Africans who after their violent revolt in 1839 aboard the schooner *Amistad* eventually won their freedom in the United States Supreme Court. So when the forty million dollar Spielberg film deviated from the true account of events, many people were upset with the much lauded filmmaker and his scriptwriting team. They were upset not only by changes in the facts of the story, but also about the liberties taken with the characterization of some of Connecticut's most honored citizens like Roger Sherman Baldwin and Josiah Willard Gibbs.

Two years prior to the release of the Steven Spielberg production I had been commissioned by the Amistad Committee in New Haven to produce and direct a film about the Amistad incident to be used in schools. The resulting film, *The Amistad Revolt: "All We Want Is Make Us Free,"* was a successful collaboration between myself and writer/historian Jeremy Brecher, who wrote a well-researched, clear and concise script for the thirty-three minute documentary. Although there was some interest in the film when it was first released in 1995, there was an explosion of attention in the historically accurate documentary once educators took umbrage with the Spielberg production. After the Spielberg film was released, I was asked to screen my film and participate in discussions at over fifty venues over a two year period. In addition, teachers in Connecticut and across the country began using the documentary to help teach this important story because they wanted their students to get the details right.

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Karyl Evans directing on the set of *The Amistad Revolt: "All We Want Is Make Us Free."*
Photo by Robert A. Lisak

Getting the details right is one of the most important obligations of the historical documentary filmmaker. Unlike other forms of documentary filmmaking like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, where advocacy, cleverness of assemblage, and the personality of the filmmaker predominate, the historical documentary uniquely values the accuracy of the content. Filmmaker Ken Burns introduced this genre to mainstream audiences with his highly popular *Civil War* series, which originally aired on public television in 1990. Historical documentary filmmaking, unlike its more personal and opinionated counterpart, is expected to strive for a more objective and balanced presentation of a particular topic.

When I first began my study of documentary filmmaking in graduate school at San Diego State University in the early 1980s, I was attracted to the genre because its vivid immediacy could inform and move large groups of people. My first foray into historical documentary filmmaking came when director Judy Chaikin hired me to

work as the Associate Producer on *Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist*, a film about the Hollywood Ten during the McCarthy Era. The research phase of the project was as long as the production phase and it was then I realized how satisfying it was to grapple with the topic's sources and assemble that material into a visually accessible narrative. In 1990 I returned to Connecticut from Southern California and have primarily worked producing, directing and editing historical documentaries since then, principally for the Connecticut Humanities Council's *The Connecticut Experience* series broadcast on Connecticut Public Television (CPTV). My historical documentary films include: *The Amistad Revolt: "All We Want is Make Us Free"*; *The Road to Freedom: Connecticut's African American Freedom Trail*; *The History of African Americans in Connecticut: Colonial Era to Civil War*; *The History of African Americans in Connecticut: Civil War to Civil Rights*; *The Amistad Story in Farmington, Connecticut*; *Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Connecticut*; *Connecticut and Its Cities: Three Centuries of Change*; *Connecticut and Its Cities: The Challenge of Renewal*.

Building effective historical documentary films is a highly collaborative art form. Because most filmmakers are not scholars of the history they have chosen to explore, they depend on historians and other scholars to help them communicate the story accurately and interpret its significance. When beginning a long-form documentary I often look to historians to write the initial script, providing a detailed outline of the most important elements of the story. Then I can do my job; finding the most knowledgeable and interesting people to interview, the most experienced crew, the most visually illuminating locations and images, an accomplished narrator, and the finest post-production team of music directors, sound designers and graphic artists.

This initial script produced by the historian is thoroughly and carefully researched, with all sources clearly cited. It also provides the narrative and interpretive foundation of the documentary. Historian/writer Jeremy Brecher is particularly gifted at telling a complicated story, placing it in historical context, and all the while revealing its impact on past and future events. In creating the script for *The Amistad Revolt*, Dr. Brecher investigated all facets of the Amistad story, distilling the research and writing a script that combined compact narration with vivid first hand accounts from those who lived the story. With this script in hand, it was then time to begin transferring the words on the page to a life on the screen as images. Identifying the most appropriate visuals is painstaking and critical. First, the archives richest in the story's sources are explored. In the case of the *Amistad* project this undertaking was particularly challenging, for numerous repositories had related collections. They included Tulane University, Oberlin College, Talladega College, the New Haven Colony Historical Society, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Connecticut Historical Society, and Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book Library. In addition, the image collections at the Library of Congress and the National Archives, both in Washington, D.C., were explored because of the depth of their collections and the relatively inexpensive cost to obtain copies of the materials. After still images were carefully selected from various archives, including the primary documents related to the story, like original letters written by the Amistad Africans, camera-ready copies of each image were

purchased. Each image was then meticulously documented and filed so that proper credit could be given to institutions when assembling the credits at the end of the film.

Excellent historical documentaries are crafted on an excess of visuals. For the thirty-three minutes of *The Amistad Revolt: "All We Want Is Make us Free,"* nearly 200 visuals were located for possible inclusion. The final product used 130 of those images. A surplus of visuals is just good sense. One never knows what small section of a painting or a drawing will end up becoming the perfect illustration of the script's words. In the final film some still images remain on the screen for a mere two seconds, while others remain for twenty-five seconds depending on what the script is trying to communicate.

My goal is to find visuals that embody exactly what the audience is hearing about in the script. Some descriptions are more subtle, like the size and ethnic diversity of a crowd or the look of intelligence or terror in an individual's eyes. Since much of *The Amistad Revolt* was devoted to the lives of the Amistad captives, a variety of images of the Africans were sought. Fortunately, Yale University's Beinecke Library housed original drawings of the captives by John Warner Barber. These images formed a vital part of the documentary because they so clearly delineated the alertness, grace, and pride of these men and children.

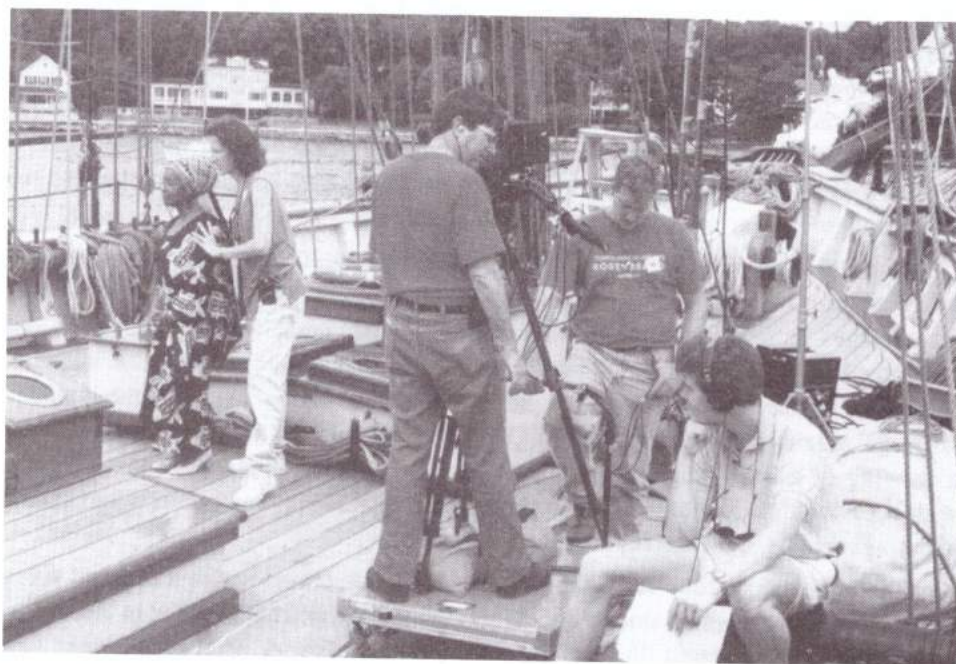
Of course finding an image of every person and event mentioned in a documentary script rarely occurs. If the exact visual called for in the script cannot be found, then images at least accurate to the event's or individual's era and location are researched. Dwight Janes posed such a problem in *The Amistad Revolt*. A visual of Janes, the Connecticut abolitionist who helped spread the word about the Amistad Africans' plight when they arrived in Connecticut, could not be located. Eventually a drawing of a man addressing a crowd circa 1839 was found. That visual, along with the script's text, sufficed to communicate that Janes was publicly outspoken about advocating the captives' cause.

The last visual of choice, when no other image that works with a scripted scene can be found, is a commissioned drawing. For two complicated scenes in *The Amistad Revolt*, newly created illustrations were joined with very detailed, narrated first hand accounts to bring the text to life.

Even with the use of hundreds of individual visuals in a film, it is not enough to simply cut from one still image to another. The still images must be brought to life by deliberately "animating" or moving the camera around them. Once the script is finalized, the exact amount of time required for each individual sentence to be read is determined. With that data in hand, the time each visual needs to stay on the screen is then calculated. Using an animation camera stand (a camera mounted on a stand operated by a computer) the camera is programmed, for example, to start with a close up of one person in a drawing and to hold on that person for two seconds. Then the camera is directed to move left over the course of seven seconds to reveal another person. After holding on that person for three seconds the camera zooms out over the course of five seconds to a wide shot of the entire scene and holds for one second.

All of this movement makes the scene much more visually appealing than using one static shot.

As important creatively and historically as the still images are, they alone are not enough to recount the story vividly. The shooting of live scenes at topical locations is equally significant for engaging the viewer. For example, in *The Amistad Revolt*, the on-camera scenes of the film's narrator, Vinie Burrow's, were all videotaped on the deck of a ship so that the narration footage differs strikingly from the drawings and photographs, while still connecting with the overall story. Although the contemporary footage enhances the visual diversity of the film, it is always composed with historical accuracy in mind. These narration segments were all shot on board the *Pride of Baltimore*, a schooner very similar to the *Amistad*. (The making of *The Amistad Revolt* film predates the building of the replica of the *Amistad*.)



Karyl Evans working with narrator Vinie Burrows on the set of *The Amistad Revolt*: "All We Want Is Make Us Free."

One of the powerfully unique aspects of the film was Jeremy Brecher's inclusion in *The Amistad Revolt* script of the Mende language spoken by the Amistad Africans. It was important that the Mende spoken in the film was grammatically and accentually as accurate as possible. We became aware of a group of people from Sierra Leone who spoke the Mende language and were living in the Hartford area. After interviewing several of the people over the phone, they made their way to a production studio at Quinnipiac University to record their lines. It was exhilarating to hear the Mende language and it, in combination with the images of the Amistad Africans, has a dramatic impact on audiences.

Over the past ten years *The Amistad Revolt* has been watched by hundreds of thousands of people. The countless hours dedicated to making the film have been rewarded by the knowledge that so many people have learned about the Amistad story directly as a result of the documentary. Thanks in large part to Jeremy Brecher's well-written script, the film has won numerous awards, including the American Bar Association's highest national award, the *Silver Gavel*, for "outstanding effort to foster public understanding of the law."

Researching and filming *The Amistad Revolt* left me dedicated to documenting the history of African Americans in Connecticut. The timing was perfect. The Connecticut Historical Commission (now the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism) was developing a plan for an African American Freedom Trail in the state. While reviewing the new Freedom Trail brochure highlighting approximately seventy sites in thirty towns, it was easy to envision visual documentation of this important history. People will want to see more than just one still shot of each site as pictured in the brochure, especially considering that most people will not have full access to many of the sites, which are privately owned. Moreover, many of the sites are no longer standing. Others will want more details about the history surrounding each site. The solution to such concerns was obtaining a grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council (CHC) to produce two Freedom Trail projects. Finding the funds to produce projects is a constant challenge for documentary filmmakers, and the key to securing funding is identifying a funder with the most inherent interest in the project. The Connecticut Humanities Council has a long history of supporting important projects for our state's history organizations and they therefore seemed the perfect resource.

With the CHC's financial support and with the help of the Amistad Committee in New Haven, the first project completed was a box set of four audiotapes (over three hours of programming) with historical background for each site that visitors could use to accompany their tour of the Trail. Along with these audiotapes was a 52-page companion booklet including further descriptions and directions to each site. The second project comprised a 42-minute historical video entitled, *The Road to Freedom: Connecticut's African American Freedom Trail*. Jeremy Brecher, with the help of historian Frank Mitchell, wrote the scripts for both Freedom Trail projects. Together, they unearthed an impressive amount of information related to the Freedom Trail sites, which helped supplement the initial research compiled by Cora Murray at the Connecticut Historical Commission and by the Amistad Committee in New Haven. It was an exciting process of discovery for the filmmaking team because the general public knew so little then about many of the people, events, and places on the Freedom Trail. We selected specific sites to be highlighted in the documentary and determined that the film's narrative should be structured chronologically in order to make sense of the often disjointed sites.

With the initial research and video script completed, the next phase was finding the visuals, actors, locations, production crews, and music director for the project. At first, locating early images of African Americans living and working in the state

seemed difficult, but it soon became apparent that the best visuals were held primarily by state and local historical societies and at the Freedom Trail sites themselves. Whereas the residents living in proximity to a Freedom Trail site were often unaware that it even existed, local history organizations prove to be amazing repositories that collected wonderful materials on the people, places, and events that have created a local community. Additional archives for this project included the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights, the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, Mystic Seaport Museum, the New Haven Colony Historical Society, the Connecticut Historical Society, the Mattatuck Museum, the Bridgeport Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives at Yale University, the Hartford Public Library, various church and personal photo collections, and the not-yet-unpacked Simpson collection, later named the Amistad Collection, at the Wadsworth Athenaeum. Visuals for more nationally known events and individuals like the Harper's Ferry insurrection, Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson were found at the Library of Congress and the National Archives. Without the consistent and concerted assistance of the many conscientious people working in our state's history organizations, many of these visuals would never have been uncovered. Once the visual research for the Freedom Trail project was completed, nearly 250 images from more than forty different archives had been secured. More than 200 of these visuals were used in the final forty-two minute film.

The final Freedom Trail video highlighted thirty of the most significant and visually compelling of the original sixty-nine sites on the Freedom Trail. In addition to the still images, contemporary footage of the sites was recorded to enrich the visual representations and add a degree of immediacy to the documentary. Investigating these sites for visuals sometimes led to other important discoveries. For example, while touring the Fort Griswold battlefield, I noted various plaques placed around the site and realized that they revealed a progression in the recognition of the two black soldiers who fought in the only major Revolutionary War battle on Connecticut soil. The first stone monument from 1830 listed the two black fighters at the very bottom of the list, separated from the white soldiers under the heading "Colored men." In a newer 1911 plaque placed at one of the entrances to the battlefield, the names of the two black soldiers were now listed alphabetically with the names of the white soldiers. Yet the word "NEGRO" in parentheses after their names distinguished them from the white soldiers. The most recent plaque, however, made no racial distinctions whatever and instead featured one of the black soldiers about to spear a British officer. The course of this monumentalization itself revealed something important about the changing ways in which African Americans have been located in the state's history.

The Road to Freedom: Connecticut's African American Freedom Trail eventually aired on CPTV and was the recipient of a New England Area Emmy Award in 1999. The success of this film led to a new proposal to CPTV on an expanded version of the history of African Americans in Connecticut. CPTV was producing a series with the Connecticut Humanities Council called *The Connecticut Experience*, modeled on the PBS series, *The American Experience*. Consequently, executives

from both organizations enthusiastically received the idea, recognizing that very little had been produced on television to document the history of African Americans in the state. With CPTV's considerable resources in the late 1990s and the addition of the CHC's Executive Director Bruce Fraser to the writing team of Jeremy Brecher and Frank Mitchell, the project, eventually titled *The History of African Americans in Connecticut*, was in good hands and ultimately proved one of the most rewarding experiences of my career.

The project's original conception was to cover the history of African Americans in Connecticut in just one hour. It soon became evident, however, that presenting the history effectively in even two hours would be a challenge and so the documentary was restructured so that the first hour covered African American history from the Colonial era to the Civil War, and the second from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights era.

With a project this important it was paramount to include a high profile person to serve as host and narrator, both to heighten viewer interest and awareness of the series. Actor/activist Ozzie Davis and his wife Ruby Dee both graciously accepted the request to host and narrate the series. Ozzie Davis hosted the first hour, *The History of African Americans in Connecticut: Colonial Era to Civil War*, and Ruby Dee narrated the second hour, *The History of African Americans in Connecticut: Civil War to Civil Rights*. Employing the talents of professional actors to narrate my films is a long tradition. Good actors have the ability to enhance the words on the page by using subtle voice inflections, shifting the emphasis of a word or sentence, or changing the mood entirely with a shift in tempo. Using the considerable talents of Ozzie Davis and Ruby Dee as the narrators for this series brought an intensity and authenticity to the script that could not have been achieved with a standard voice-over talent or announcer.

As shooting began on *The History of African Americans in Connecticut: Colonial Era to Civil War*, a number of official Freedom Trail site events were in the planning stage and it therefore made sense to incorporate many of these activities into the documentary. Events ranged from a Freedom Trail race in Bridgeport, to a gospel choir singing at John Brown's birthplace in Torrington, to a libation ceremony over the newly laid *Amistad* replica keel at the Mystic Seaport Museum shipyard.

Excellent historical documentaries also depend upon great on-camera interviews, such as the one at the Venture Smith family reunion at which the descendent of Smith spoke with such pride in his voice and demeanor about his beloved ancestor that he beamed with confidence and a sense of his birthright. An interview was also conducted with a Civil War soldier, played with great enthusiasm by Kevin Johnson (a Connecticut State Library employee). We also filmed a meeting of the Descendents of Connecticut's 29th Colored Regiment, at which individuals talked excitedly about plans to support a national monument in commemoration of the colored troops who fought in the Civil War. Cameras followed a bus tour of parents and their teenaged children from Waterbury to Freedom Trail sites in Canterbury and New London. These interviews, like nothing the narrator could have stated, ex-



Karyl Evans winning three Regional Emmy Awards for *The History of African Americans in Connecticut: Civil War to Civil Rights*, Boston, 2000.



Karyl Evans working with host Ozzie Davis on the set of *The History of African Americans in Connecticut: Colonial Era to Civil War*.
Photo by Wallace Branch.

pressed so eloquently the deep connection to history and the inspiration felt by many of our state's African American citizens.

In addition to the footage connected to the individual Freedom Trail sites, on-camera interviews were also conducted with scholars and historians for inclusion in part one of *The History of African Americans in Connecticut*. These individuals included scholars such as Christopher Collier (Connecticut State Historian at the time), and local historians Dale Plumber of Norwich and Bridgeport's Maisa Tisdale. Their articulate and passionate knowledge offered essential historical context and insights into key people and developments in the struggle for black equality by discussing people and events such as the Black Governors, black soldiers in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the importance of church and schools in the early African American community, the Underground Railroad, the Amistad case, Prudence Crandall, John Brown, and blacks in the maritime trade.

The narrative structure of the second hour in the series, *The History of African Americans in Connecticut: Civil War to Civil Rights*, did not follow its predecessor. Part two, which traced the history of struggle for equality for the next one hundred years, was written and directed with the intent of placing the history of Connecticut's African Americans in a much larger context. This more nationally focused film included on-camera interviews with well-known scholars like Eric Foner (Columbia University); Constance Baker Motley (United States District Judge); Hugh Price (President, National Urban League); Lloyd Richards (Professor Emeritus of Drama, Yale University) and William Sloan Coffin (former Chaplain, Yale University).

In addition, locating those individuals who have a very personal connection to the material under discussion is a key ingredient to making an historical documentary lift off the page. In *The History of African Americans in Connecticut: Civil War to Civil Rights*, it was critical to find individuals who could speak intimately and passionately about the history. Edgar Beckham spoke of his good friend Mary Seymour, who began the Hartford Chapter of the NAACP; Branford Police Chief Robert Gill reminisced about his grandfather who was part of the "Great Migration," settling as a young man in Branford from North Carolina; William Pickens, a friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of the influence people in Connecticut had on King; Reverend Samuel Slie, who left New Haven to fight with a segregated unit in World War II, recounted his return to a country still entrenched in segregation; Estelle Taylor, wife of the late Negro League all star Johnny Taylor, shared her story about a New York Yankee's baseball scout asking her husband to change his race to "Cuban" so that he could play Major League Baseball for the team in 1934.

Another great addition to *The History of African Americans in Connecticut* two part series was the original musical score written for each film by musician/composer/ music director, Neely Bruce. Mr. Bruce, a musicologist with a broad knowledge of African American music, brought a unique understanding and dedication to the project, which elevated the project to a new level and afforded me an even deeper appreciation for the intricate process of incorporating historically accurate music into a film. When the film was in rough cut form (in other words, no fancy edits, just straight cuts between scenes with the interviews, narration, and most of the visuals in place) it was given to Mr. Bruce with a copy of the script. After he studied the script and determined the musical underpinnings needed, he gradually made decisions about what music should be heard at what point in the program and on what instruments the music should be played in order to enhance the meaning and emotion of each scene.

One illustration of the sometimes unexpected synergy between the visuals and music in the film came with a quote from Hugh Price in which he speaks about the "economic ladder" blacks were trying to climb. His words fit perfectly with a wonderful archival photograph of a black man atop a ladder working with a gas lamp. Using the words of Mr. Price with that visual, along with a minimalist instrumental version of *Jacob's Ladder*, created a subtle and delightful effect.

As the film's music director, Mr. Bruce was careful to use only period music in the film, which brought another layer of authenticity to the project. Most of the music for the film was recorded live, using professional instrumentalists and singers performing in his Middletown studio. In the final film, spiritual moments were made more spiritual, dark moments were made more insidious, dramatic moments were heightened as we placed both original musical compositions and historically-based compositions on the film. Observing the rich transformation of the primarily visual scenes as we laid in Mr. Bruce's music was an unusually satisfying moment as we completed one of the final phases of the film. With the music placed, using a non-linear computer-based editing system, the series sound designer, Jeff Jacoby, then creatively placed layers of sound effects throughout the film which animated the archival images with sounds of people interacting, gun fights, ship horns and whatever else it took to dramatize the scene aurally.

The extra attention to detail in terms of visual images, the narrator, interviews, and music proved amazingly successful. In 2000, *The History Of African Americans in Connecticut: Civil War to Civil Rights* received three Regional Emmy Awards from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

The next series of films I produced and directed reckoned with the history of cities in Connecticut, in part to bring the history of African Americans up to the present day. The two one-hour documentaries were part of *The Connecticut Experience* series co-produced by the Connecticut Humanities Council and CPTV. The first hour, *Connecticut and Its Cities: Three Centuries of Change*, chronicled the steady rise of Connecticut cities from the Colonial era, through the industrial revolution to the urban centered state of today. Written by Jeremy Brecher, the film was organized chronologically so viewers might better understand how our cities became what they are today.

The script and visuals for the first hour had to illustrate 300 years of urban history. The images used included primary documents, archival photographs and film footage, and contemporary video of Connecticut cities. The more liberal use of archival film footage spurred a faster pace for the film. Useful archival film footage included downtown Bridgeport in the 1940s, Federal Housing Administration promotional films detailing the housing boom after World War II, and downtown New Haven during the Black Panther trials in 1970.

Scholars with widely varying expertise were sought to interview on-camera, including Douglas Rae, Gaddis Smith, Ellsworth Grant, William Hosley, Christopher Collier, and Vincent Scully. Local historians and individuals connected to important events and organizations in our cities were also located for interviews, including Warren Kimbro, Toni Harp, Eddie Perez, Edna Negron, and Carrie Saxon Perry. These individuals told about their personal involvement in various city neighborhoods and in the politics of the day. A careful balance was made in the selection of interviewees in terms of gender and race and between scholars, politicians and local people so that the history was recounted by a spectrum of representatives. A complex and compelling narrative of Connecticut's cities resulted, which detailed the rise

of the industrial city and of immigrant labor, urban cultural growth, the increased political power of the Irish, black and Puerto Rican communities, as well as post-war urban renewal plans and suburban sprawl. On camera interview subjects ranged from former G. Fox employees who spoke of working in a vibrant downtown Hartford in the 1940s, to those who recalled the displacement of New Haven's Oak Street neighborhood by urban renewal, to the Black Panther trial in New Haven. The first film in the series concluded by posing the question, "What should our cities become in the future?"

The second part of the series, *Connecticut and Its Cities: The Challenge of Renewal*, explored the vitality of many cities today. The primary visuals were contemporary footage and on-camera interviews. With the urban history established in part one, part two was free to explore urban problems and strategies for revitalizing Connecticut's cities. A number of exciting innovations around the state were researched and documented, including: the reuse of a brass mill in Thomaston; the renovation for artists to live and work in the defunct Reads Department Store building in Bridgeport; outreach to biotech firms in New Haven and Groton; the building of a convention center complex in Hartford; housing incentive plans in downtown areas; and the use of the arts as a catalyst for change. The issues of suburban sprawl, influxes of new immigrants, crime, and resistance to regionalization by individual towns were also discussed.

As a result of the wide interest in this two part series on CPTV, an hour long in-studio discussion program featuring some of the states' leading politicians and activists was also produced. Keeping in mind that one of the goals of making a documentary is to inspire change, this was a positive result of a well-received series.

Historical documentary filmmakers must approach their subjects with every degree of care to which academic and public historians aspire. Rather than merely throwing together a compendium of interesting images, the documentary filmmaker must first dive headlong into the subject's history, locate significant and useful sources, and engage professional historians to gain a full understanding of the topic. Filmmakers certainly do not have the luxury of including a bit of fiction to enliven a scene or bridge some sort of gap in presentation. As much as every academic historian strives to verify and accurately portray a person or subject in writing, documentary filmmakers attempt the same on the screen. After working for over twenty-five years producing, directing, editing and writing documentary films, I am continually infused with the energy to create accurate history on film. The potential of the moving image creatively combined with narration, interviews, natural sound, music and sound design to inform and inspire people about our shared history, has a unique ability to create a venue through which people might learn about the past.