

North Carolina Humanities Council ^[1]

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by John J. Beck, 2006



JoAnna Ruth Marsland (with son), Julie Curd, Sue Ross, John Haley, Lynn Ennis, Willis Whichard, Lucinda MacKethan. Image from the North Carolina Humanities Council.

^[2][The North Carolina Humanities Council](#) ^[3] (NCHC).

In 1970 the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) ^[4] (NEH), a federal agency established in the mid-1960s to promote research and education in the humanities, was authorized by Congress to organize and fund state-based humanities councils. These councils were charged with making the fields of the humanities more a part of the civic discourse by shifting humanities scholars from colleges and universities into local communities. In June 1971 a small group of North Carolinians—including John Caldwell, chancellor of [North Carolina State University](#) ^[5]; H. G. Jones, director of the [North Carolina Department of Archives and History](#) ^[6]; and George Bair, director of [Educational Television at the University of North Carolina](#) ^[7]—organized the North Carolina Committee for Continuing Education in the Humanities. This committee, subsequently renamed the North Carolina Humanities Committee and later still the North Carolina Humanities Council, received funds each year from the NEH, which in turn "regranted" the money to public libraries, colleges, and community groups that applied for financial assistance to sponsor public programs.

In the early 1970s the NCHC solicited proposals that focused on public policy issues arising from North Carolina's transition from a rural, [agricultural society](#) ^[8] to an [urban, industrial](#) ^[9] one. Dozens of projects—community forum series, discussion groups, films, lectures, and plays—were funded in communities across the state, and thousands of people participated. In 1976 the NEH began encouraging state councils to fund projects dealing with a wider variety of issues, and the NCHC broadened the scope of the proposals it solicited.

By the mid-1990s, more than 1 million North Carolinians had taken part in a program funded by the NCHC, and the council's budget had grown to more than half a million dollars annually. Every year, hundreds of humanities scholars—historians, poets, philosophers, and others—crisscrossed the state participating in public programs that explored topics ranging from the history of the blues to medical ethics and U.S. foreign policy.

By the early 1990s the council's primary funding source, the NEH, along with its sister agency, the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) ^[10], had come under steady attack by conservative critics in Congress and the media for its alleged promotion of "indecent" ^[11] artistic works. Funding cuts and even the elimination of both agencies were proposed. Two former heads of the NEH joined the critics and recommended that the agency they had once led be dismantled. In response to this challenge, the council began, in the mid-1990s, to solicit more funding from private sources and to pursue funding from the state government. This strategy began bearing fruit as private contributions rose, and in 1997 the North Carolina [General Assembly](#) ^[12] approved an appropriation of \$100,000 for the NCHC. By 2006 the council had an annual budget of more than \$1 million and had recorded more than \$13 million in total grants since its founding.

Additional Resources:

North Carolina Humanities Council website: <http://nchumanities.org/> ^[3] (accessed November 15, 2012).

Works authored by the North Carolina Humanities Council at Digital NC: <http://digitalnc.org/institutions/north-carolina-humanities-council> ^[13] (accessed November 15, 2012).

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