

## IN MEMORIAM



*David D. Dixon, 1954–2008*

*D*avid Dean Dixon, professor of history at Slippery Rock University, former Pennsylvania Humanities Council Commonwealth Speaker, and a member of the Pennsylvania Historical Association Council, died unexpectedly on July 16, 2008 while bicycling along a historic canal route in western Virginia. He was 53 years old.

Born in Ashland, Kentucky on July 20, 1954, David grew up in and subsequently made his home near Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Slippery Rock high school in 1972, after which he attended Slippery Rock University, where he earned a B.A. in Secondary Education–Social Studies. After spending several years installing and repairing industrial cranes as a member of Iron Workers Local 3 in Pittsburgh, David returned to Slippery Rock University to pursue his true calling.

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PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 76, NO. 1, 2009.  
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He graduated with an M.A. in history in 1983, and then went on to earn his Ph.D. in American history from Kent State University in 1991, where he studied under the late Frank Byrne. Throughout his life, fate and fortune conspired to keep David in his beloved western Pennsylvania, and it is altogether fitting and proper that he joined the history faculty at Slippery Rock University in 1990, where he taught for 18 years until his death. In 1999, he was promoted to full professor, making him one of the quickest ever to achieve the rank at the university. Most recently, he served as director of the graduate program for the History Department. At Slippery Rock, he also served as curator of The Old Stone House, an early nineteenth-century inn and tavern formerly owned and administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

David was an enthusiastic and energetic scholar whose research interests spanned the United States. Early in his career, he focused most of his efforts on the history of the trans-Mississippi West. His first book, *Hero of Beecher Island: The Life and Military Career of George A. Forsythe*, won a prestigious Spur Award from the Western Writers for America in 1995 for Best Biography. Over the last decade, however, David reoriented his attention to historical events closer to home, particularly during the era of the French and Indian War. He published his second book, *Never Come to Peace Again: Pontiac's Uprising and the Fate of the British Empire in North America*, in 2005, for which he was awarded Slippery Rock University's President's Award for Outstanding Scholarship in 2007. He also authored two books in the Pennsylvania Trail of History series, *Bushy Run Battlefield* and *Fort Pitt Museum*, in addition to numerous scholarly articles and book chapters. He was also a noted Civil War scholar, appearing as a commentator in several Civil War documentaries, including the History Channel's recent production, *Eighty Acres of Hell*, which recounts the story of the Camp Douglas prison compound in Chicago.

Yet where David's many contributions will be most keenly missed is in the classroom and the community. He was beloved by his students at Slippery Rock University, where he leaves behind a devoted corps of former graduate students, many of whom he continued to mentor and advise throughout their doctoral studies and beyond. He made no secret of his pride in the accomplishments of his former M.A. students, whose successes he valued far more than his own. He was no less beloved by undergraduates, who flocked to his classes to absorb his infectious enthusiasm for history and experience for themselves his quick, satiric, and sometimes biting wit. It was a well-known fact around campus that he was one of the only professors whose 8:00 AM

classes were always full to capacity. Befitting of a teacher of his caliber, Slippery Rock University is establishing a memorial scholarship for students in his honor, the David D. Dixon history scholarship.

The lasting impressions he made upon his students helped to foster the countless ties and bonds David had in the Slippery Rock community, Butler County, and western Pennsylvania. He was seemingly omnipresent in the region, patronizing and participating in historical programs, re-enactments, and local seminars as often as he was able to meet the many demands for his services. He had a strong interest and keen respect for local history, perfectly reflecting Samuel Elliot Morrison's famous commentary regarding what constitutes a good historian. In the 1951 *American Historical Review*, Morrison wrote that "Everyone should, I believe, study something general or national in scope and something special or local ... The national field teaches you what to look for in local history ... Local history as a sideline also serves to integrate a historian with his community, to make him a valued and respected member of it, instead of just another professor."

David Dixon was certainly more than "just another professor." He will be deeply missed, but fondly remembered.

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