

**Philanthropy and Social Movements:
the case of the Taconic Foundation, 1958-2013**

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In November 1963, Malcolm X accused philanthropist Stephen Currier of taking part in a white conspiracy to emasculate the revolutionary impulse of grassroots forces in the civil rights movement. In his “Message to the Grassroots” in Detroit, Malcolm famously distinguished between the “black revolution” and the “Negro revolution” in America. He accused white liberals of dressing up the anointed leaders of the civil rights movement to use them as house Negroes against the more radical, violent and ostensibly genuine “black revolution” emerging from the grass roots.¹

Malcolm pointed to the recent March on Washington as a central example. Initially, the March had been conceived as a confrontation with the white power structure in America. “It was the grass roots out there in the street. [It] scared the white man to death, scared the white power structure in Washington, D.C. to death,” Malcolm said. The Kennedy White House, he asserted, had ordered the civil rights leaders to call it off. When they said it couldn’t be done because the groundswell was too big, the Kennedys worked with philanthropist Stephen Currier to take control of the March by providing the money that would ensure that the March was less confrontational.

Relying on press accounts and rumors, Malcolm misrepresented a number of key facts in his telling of this story, but the essence of his message rang true for his audience and continues to be reflected in academic literature as a primary theme in the history of philanthropy and social movements—money from elite foundations and donors undermines the radical impulses of grassroots movements.

¹ Malcolm X, “Message to Grassroots,” November 10, 1963.

The academic argument regarding philanthropy's impact on social movements is based on both meta-analysis and specific case studies, much of it focused on various social movements in the 1960s, including civil rights.² One strand of this thesis asserts that philanthropy accelerates institutionalizing forces that both empower and constrain the movement within social norms and the existing legal and political framework.³ A large body of historical literature on the civil rights movement confirms and complicates this analysis from the perspective of the activists, the organizations, and the major political figures who were involved.⁴ On the philanthropic side, however, most of the literature focuses on the role and influence of the largest private foundations, while the story of smaller progressive foundations, like Stephen Currier's Taconic Foundation, is still poorly understood.⁵

² See, for example, Craig J. Jenkins and Abigail Halcli, "Grassrooting the System? Recent Trends in Social Movement Philanthropy, 1953-1990," in Ellen Condliffe-Lageman (ed.), *Studying Philanthropic Foundations: New Scholarship, New Possibilities* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 277-299. On the role of the donor within this context, see Ira Silver, "Buying an Activist Identity: Reproducing Class through Social Movement Philanthropy," *Sociological Perspectives* 41:2 (1998), 303-321. More recent scholarship has sought to explore the ways in which philanthropic processes channel grass roots movements. Erica Kohl-Arenas, for example, looks at how philanthropists use grant agreements to forge "consensus." Erica Kohl-Arenas, "The Self-Help Myth: Towards a Theory of Philanthropy as Consensus Broker," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 74:4 (September 2015), 796-825.

³ This point is debated in the context of resource mobilization theory arguments. See, for example, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, "Collective Protest: A Critique of Resource Mobilization Theory," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 4:4 (Summer 1991), 435-458.

⁴ See especially the three-volume series by Taylor Branch, *America in the King Years* and David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2004, originally published 1986).

⁵ In 1990, Alan Rabinowitz lamented the fact that the history of social change philanthropy had been left mostly to the sociologists who were "less detailed and more synoptic" in their approach. In the quarter century since Rabinowitz's book was published, there are still no major published histories of the progressive foundations he cites as pioneers: the Field Foundation (1940), the Stern Family Fund (1930s), the Taconic Foundation (1958), the New World Foundation (1959[?]), and the Joyce Foundation (1948). Alan Rabinowitz, *Social Change Philanthropy in America* (New York: Quorum Books, 1990), 49. In 1990 a history of the Field Foundation had been commissioned. That work exists only in manuscript at the Briscoe Center for American History.

To help illuminate this story, the Taconic Foundation has commissioned Vantage Point Historical Services to research and write a critical history of the foundation to be peer-reviewed and published by an academic press.⁶ This paper presents an overview of this work-in-progress, summarizing both the narrative history and the main thesis and arguments.

The Taconic Foundation was established by Stephen and Audrey Currier in 1958. He was twenty-eight years old; she was twenty-five. Stephen had grown up in the shadow of great wealth. His grandfather had been a successful Boston lawyer and investor who maintained a villa in Florence, Italy. But his father was an alcoholic, whom his mother divorced when Stephen was a boy. After a brief time living in New Hampshire, Stephen and his mother moved back to New York City, where she returned to work for *Vogue's* publisher Conde Nast, and soon married Eddie Warburg, scion of one of the city's wealthiest Jewish banking families. While his mother and Warburg socialized with New York's leftist elite, Stephen finished growing up at the George School, a Quaker institution in Buck's County, Pennsylvania. In 1948, he enrolled at Harvard. With a generous allowance from his stepfather, he was extravagant with his friends and drove a Mercedes

⁶ For commissioned, academic studies, Vantage Point requires authorial and interpretive independence. Clients are allowed to read and comment on the manuscript, but the author maintains ultimate interpretive control. Draft manuscripts are submitted by the press for anonymous peer review. Final acceptance of the revised manuscript for publication is up to the publisher's review board. Examples of past peer-reviewed projects completed by the author and Vantage Point include: *Anytime, Anywhere: Entrepreneurship and the Creation of a Wireless World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) with co-author Louis Galambos, *Spirited Commitment: the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010) with co-author Roderick MacLeod), and *Building Home: Howard F. Ahmanson and the Politics of the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

sports car, but he did not thrive academically. He left school before graduating. Remaining in Cambridge, he took a job with a financial services company and then went to work for an art dealer. Around 1954, he met Audrey Mellon Bruce.

Audrey was the twenty-one year old granddaughter of Andrew Mellon and beneficiary of at least two enormous trusts designed to provide income to her throughout her life and then pass to her children after her death. Described by those who knew her as smart, but withdrawn and lonely, Audrey had grown up as an only child in the care of her governesses. Her mother Ailsa Bruce was aloof and often depressed. Her handsome and charming father David Bruce, divorced her mother in 1940, when Audrey was seven, and went on to an illustrious career as a diplomat, serving successively as ambassador to Germany, France and—under President Kennedy—to the court of St. James in London. Audrey had been educated at Foxcroft, an elite boarding school in Virginia and matriculated to Radcliffe in 1952. In November 1955, after Audrey became pregnant, she and Stephen eloped and were married by a justice of the peace.

These details of Stephen and Audrey’s biographies are important to the narrative history of the Taconic Foundation, but they also help us understand how the Curriers fit into the growing body of literature on donors.⁷ Neither one was an “acquirer.” As an “inheritor,” Audrey grew to hate the attention her wealth commanded. According to one story, she would hide on the floor of the family’s

⁷ Dennis T. Jaffe and James A. Grubman, “Acquirers’ and Inheritors’ Dilemma: Discovering Life Purpose and Building Personal Identity in the Presence of Wealth,” *Journal of Wealth Management* (Fall 2007), 20-44.

limousine rather than be seen in the chauffeur-driven vehicle by others.⁸ When she and Stephen began to date seriously, she insisted that he sell the Mercedes because it was ostentatious, and in the early years of their philanthropy, most of their personal gifts were made anonymously or without fanfare.

For Stephen, marriage to Audrey gave him access to an enormous income that undoubtedly exceeded that of his very wealthy stepfather. Although Audrey had been dropped from the Social Register as a result of her elopement, her wealth assured Stephen the place in New York's elite society that had seemed extremely tenuous throughout his childhood. Indeed, Audrey's money gave him the resources to emulate the connoisseurship, activism, and philanthropy that he had seen in his stepfather—and in his mother's friends, including, most importantly, Marshall Field III.⁹

Like many children of great inherited fortunes in her era—especially women—Audrey was apparently only vaguely aware of the extent of her wealth when she and Stephen were married. The Mellon interests were managed by teams of lawyers and bankers at the Mellon Bank in Pittsburgh. When Audrey needed money she simply made a phone call.

Shortly after Stephen and Audrey were married, and around the time that Audrey came of age in terms of her trust funds, the Mellon Bank sent her a form to

⁸ Interview with Sharon Francis by Dorothy Pierce McSweeney, September 5, 1980, Electronic Copy, LBJ Library, 18.

⁹ Marshall Field III inherited a fortune from his grandfather, the famous Chicago department store entrepreneur. Growing up, Stephen spent a great deal of time at Caumsett, the Fields' 2,200-acre estate on the Gold Coast of Long Island. In 1940, Marshall Field III established the Field Foundation (which was divided into two institutions in 1960, four years after Field's death). The Field Foundation of New York was directed by Field's widow Ruth Field.

sign that would have turned over control of her fortune to the bank and placed restrictions on her use of the income. Unsure of the significance of this document, Audrey and Stephen sought independent legal advice, which led them to New York attorney Lloyd K. Garrison—a trusted advisor of Marshall and Ruth Field.

Garrison was the great-grandson of William Lloyd Garrison the writer and publisher who played a key role in the development of the abolitionist and women's suffrage movements in the United States prior to the Civil War.¹⁰ Born in 1897, he was the former dean of the University of Wisconsin School of Law who had served as chair of the powerful National War Labor Board during World War II and then joined the firm of Paul, Weiss in New York.¹¹ Like his forbearers, Garrison was deeply committed to progressive causes. A member of the National Urban League since 1924, he had served as president from 1947 to 1952. Garrison had also been a trustee of Howard University.¹² At one point, Franklin Roosevelt had considered naming him to the U.S. Supreme Court, but chose William O. Douglas instead.¹³

Garrison convinced the Curriers that they should not sign the Mellon Bank's document. Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison then helped the Curriers establish their own banking relationships and began providing them with tax advice. Garrison also quickly became a mentor, and perhaps a father figure, to the

¹⁰ Two hundred years after William Lloyd Garrison's birth, one of his great, great granddaughters would say: "I feel that being a descendant is almost a responsibility, an assignment." See Katie Zezima, "Abolitionist's Family Celebrates a Legacy of Nonconformity," *New York Times*, August 8, 2005.

¹¹ Garrison tells the story of Louis Weiss recruiting him to the firm in the manuscript for his autobiography, Folder 3, Box 1, Lloyd K. Garrison Papers. Historical and Special Collections, Harvard Law School Library. See also, Lloyd K. Garrison biography at <http://www.paulweiss.com/about-the-firm/history.aspx#5>.

¹² <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~law00054>.

¹³ Arthur Liman, *Lawyer: A Life of Counsel and Controversy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 18.

Curriers. He perceived that Stephen was a creative individual, but like some other children of inherited wealth, he lacked focus. Garrison suggested that Currier should make philanthropy his life's work, and Stephen readily embraced this idea.

In 1958, shortly before the birth of their second child and Audrey's twenty-fifth birthday, the Curriers established the Taconic Foundation to help them qualify for what was then called the "unlimited charitable contribution deduction."¹⁴ The move also provided the institutional framework for Stephen to begin to find fulfillment in philanthropy.

In the beginning, the Taconic Foundation had only three board members—Stephen, Audrey, and Lloyd Garrison. A year later, they added two more members: Edith Entenman, a child psychiatrist, and John Simon, a Yale-educated lawyer who was roughly Stephen's contemporary, who had recently joined Garrison's law firm. And in 1960, two other board members were elected: Dorothy Hirshon, a wealthy, New York socialite; and Harold Fleming, the former executive director of the Southern Regional Council. To guide the organization on a day-to-day basis, at Lloyd Garrison's recommendation, the Curriers hired Jane Lee Eddy to serve as the executive director of the Foundation. For the next 17 years, except when disaster

¹⁴ Adopted by Congress in 1924, this provision in the tax code was "designed substantially to free from income taxation one who is habitually contributing to benevolent organizations amounts equaling virtually his entire income." For extraordinarily generous donors, individuals who gave 90 percent or more of their adjusted gross income to charity in eight of the ten previous years, the unlimited charitable contribution deduction offered an escape from the existing 20 or 30 percent cap on charitable deductions. Donors with substantial appreciated assets could qualify for this deduction by donating these assets at the full value, counterbalancing any income they might have received during the year. See J.S. Seidman, *Seidman's Legislative History of Federal Income Tax Laws, 1861-1938* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1938), 944, cited in Vada Waters Lindsey, "The Charitable Contribution Deduction: A Historical Review and A Look to the Future," *Nebraska Law Review* 81:1056 (2002-2003), 1061. See also, Charles T. Clotfelter, *Federal Tax Policy and Charitable Giving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) footnote 10, page 27. On the elimination of this provision from the tax code in 1969, see "Panel Acts To End A Tax Aid To Rich," *New York Times*, October 14, 1969, 1.

struck on a stormy night over the Caribbean, this board and staff would remain unchanged, guided essentially by the evolving vision of Stephen Currier and his mentor Lloyd K. Garrison.

As the parents of two young children in 1958, the Curriers had a strong interest in children's issues. They were also deeply interested in psychotherapy and the field of mental health. Garrison introduced them to the National Urban League, the NAACP, and issues related to the civil rights of African Americans. He also put them in touch with Mamie Phipps and Kenneth Clark, directors of the Northside Child Development Center in Harlem, whose pioneering research on the effects of segregation on the psychology of African American children had helped shape the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.¹⁵

Taconic's grants in its first couple of years were modest, although the Curriers clearly had the capacity to make major donations.¹⁶ At the end of 1958, and before the foundation had received its 501c3 letter from the IRS, the Curriers made personal gifts to the National Urban League for \$103,520 (\$848,089 in 2015 dollars) to help expand the League's program and to the Phelps-Stokes Fund for \$309,050 (\$2.53 million in 2015 dollars) to help fund the purchase and renovation of Holly

¹⁵ Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, *Children, Race, and Power: Kenneth and Mamie Clark's Northside Center* (New York: Routledge, 2000)

¹⁶ At the end of 1958, while Stephen Currier and Lloyd Garrison were still negotiating the foundation's first major grants, Stephen and Audrey made a personal gift of \$309,050 (\$2.53 million in 2015 dollars) to the Phelps-Stokes Fund to help fund the acquisition and development of Holly Knoll, the former home of the president of Tuskegee Institute, in Capahosic, Virginia and turn it into a retreat and conference center for African American leaders working on civil rights issues. This gift, like nearly all of the Curriers gifts at this time, was made anonymously.

Knoll, the former home of the president of the Tuskegee Institute in Capahosic, Virginia, to turn it into a retreat and conference center for African American leaders working on civil rights issues.¹⁷

In 1960, Garrison continued to shape the trajectory of Currier's philanthropy by deepening Stephen's knowledge of race relations work and philanthropy and introducing him to the inner circles of Democratic politics. A close friend and law partner of Adlai Stevenson, Garrison and the Curriers were with Adlai Stevenson in his hotel room during the Democratic convention when John Kennedy cut short Stevenson's bid for a third straight nomination. Shortly after Kennedy was elected, Stevenson and Garrison invited Currier to travel with them to Atlanta to learn more about the Field Foundation's work in race relations with the Southern Regional Council.

Stevenson and Garrison both served on the Field Foundation's board. Established by Marshall Field III in 1940, the Field Foundation was among a handful of smaller, progressive foundations helping to fund efforts to improve race relations. Early on, influenced by Stephen's family connections to the Fields and by Garrison, the Taconic Foundation had given to many of the charities in New York that Field supported.

The Atlanta trip marked a turning point in Currier's evolution as a philanthropist. In the South, a wave of lunch counter sit-ins in the 1960s had ignited a student-led grassroots movement to end segregation. The sit-ins built on the Montgomery bus boycott and the school integration crisis in Little Rock in the mid-

¹⁷ Currier personal giving cards, Taconic Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center.

1950s, but also brought a new wave of young people into the movement and led to the creation of a new organization—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). By the fall of 1960, Atlanta was at the heart of this movement.

Having learned from his grant to the National Urban League that grantmaking could give him a creative opportunity to shape important programs in a national organization, Stephen Currier saw the potential to play a role in civil rights related policies that would affect the nation. In Atlanta, he and Garrison attended services at Ebenezer Baptist Church, and Currier met and heard the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁸ Riding in a bus with Harold Fleming, the director of the Southern Regional Council (SRC), Currier conceived the idea of establishing a race relations think tank in Washington, D.C. to focus on the mechanics of integration in the federal government.¹⁹ Within months, the thirty-year old Currier had helped convince Fleming to leave the SRC to establish what would become the Potomac Institute and to join the Taconic Foundation’s board.

Building upon work that Fleming had done at the Southern Regional Council, the Potomac Institute quickly began to play an important role in the Kennedy administration’s efforts to integrate the federal bureaucracy and implement equal opportunity. For the next twenty-five years, it operated as a stepchild of the Taconic Foundation, which provided the core funding for operations. While Currier and Garrison served on Potomac’s board, with Stephen in the role of president, Fleming

¹⁸ Interview with Max Hahn by Kathy Schwarzschild, November 12, 1979, 36-37 in [no folder] Box 4X98, Field Foundation Archives, Briscoe Center for American History.

¹⁹ Harold C. Fleming and Virginia Fleming, *The Potomac Chronicle: Public Policy and Civil Rights from Kennedy to Reagan* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 4-5.

quickly became a trusted advisor to key members of the Kennedy administration who were focused on civil rights issues.

These relationships proved critical in the spring of 1961 when the Freedom Rides sparked a new wave of civil rights-related violence in the South. Seeking to turn the civil rights movement away from confrontational strategies, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and other senior members of the administration lobbied the leadership to focus on voter registration as a way to eradicate the Jim Crow system. To fund such an effort, they turned to Fleming, Currier and the Taconic Foundation.

On July 28, 1961, while the nation was fixated on the Berlin Crisis, the Taconic Foundation hosted an extraordinary meeting in its offices in New York. All of the major leaders of the civil rights movement were present, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and his chief deputy Wyatt Walker from the Southern Christian Leadership Council; Roy Wilkins, the head of the NAACP; Thurgood Marshall and Robert Carter, from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; Lester Granger and Whitney Young, the outgoing and incoming executive secretaries of the National Urban League, and James Farmer, the director of the Congress for Racial Equality. The younger generation was represented by Charles McDew and Marion Barry of SNCC and Timothy Jenkins of the National Student Association. From the White House, the President had dispatched Harris Wofford, along with Burke Marshall, the head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and his deputy John Seigenthaler. Representatives of several progressive foundations closely aligned with Taconic

included Lloyd Garrison, Harold Fleming, Justine Wise Polier (Field Foundation board) and Vernon Eagle, the director of the New World Foundation.²⁰ The five and a half hour meeting ended with the decision to launch a massive voter registration campaign, funded by philanthropic dollars, coordinated by the Southern Regional Council and implemented in communities throughout the South by affiliates of all of the major civil rights organizations.

Despite the consensus in the room, however, many of the civil rights organizations were deeply ambivalent about the effort. The SCLC already had a grant to develop its own “citizenship schools” with funding from the Field Foundation, and there was some concern that they might be asked to repurpose these funds to support the larger effort. SNCC had already received a grant from the New World Foundation to host a three-week leadership training program in August. Over the course of a three-day meeting that took place in the middle of that training, SNCC’s leaders grew increasingly divided over whether to pursue direct action or voter registration. In the end the divide was so sharp that they chose to establish two separate wings of the organization to pursue each course of action.²¹

Meanwhile, the National Urban League and the NAACP were also deeply ambivalent. Urban League board members feared the campaign would divert precious resources

²⁰ Leslie W. Dunbar to Members of the Executive Committee, SRC, July 31, 1961 in Folder 1025, Box 161, RG 1.4 Project Files, Series 200, RF, RAC; “Proposed Agenda,” Meeting of July 28, 1961 in Folder 10: Currier, Stephen R. and Audrey, Correspondence, 1961-67 in Harold C. Fleming Papers, Manuscripts Division-Library of Congress.

²¹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 42.

from other programs. Roy Wilkins worried that NAACP involvement might be construed as abandoning its efforts to integrate schools.²²

The promise of foundation dollars, however, was attractive to all of the major civil rights organizations. In 1961, SCLC relied on funds it could raise in black churches. CORE and SNCC survived on small budgets and were dependent on volunteers. Even the venerable National Urban League was deeply in debt and struggling to make payroll on a monthly basis. Under this financial pressure and with the hope that voter registration might further the goals of the movement, the leadership agreed to launch what became known as the Voter Education Project (VEP) in the spring of 1962.

Taconic committed \$250,000 (\$2.0 million in 2015 dollars) over two years to support the project. They contributed an additional \$61,590 per year to help the Southern Regional Council staff the operation. The Field Foundation added another \$140,000. Money also came from the New World Foundation and the Stern Family Fund (\$120,000), another family foundation, which traced its roots to the Rosenwald fortune. Notably absent from the list were major private foundations like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, the Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund—entities that had a long history in the field of race relations. The Southern Regional Council had been soliciting support from these entities for years.²³ But as the civil rights issue became more confrontational after the *Brown v.*

²² Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 481.

²³ Harold Fleming visited the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in March 1957 as a prelude to asking for basic support. See Montgomery S. Bradley to RBF Files, July 15, 1957 in Folder 5778, Box 953, RG 3.1-Grants, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Archives, RAC. RBF did agree to provide support to the SRC-

Board of Education decision, the Montgomery Bus boycott and Little Rock, these funders had backed away as they tried to assess the rapidly changing dynamics of the situation.²⁴

Over the next two years, the Voter Education Project played a pivotal role in American politics. By the eve of the presidential election in 1964, VEP grants had helped increase the percentage of eligible African Americans who were registered to vote in the South from 29.1 percent in 1960 to 35.5 percent by 1965.²⁵ In every state that Johnson carried in the South in the 1964 election, except Texas, black voter registration exceeded Johnson's margin of victory. And in each Southern state that Johnson lost, black registration was less than 35 percent. The results undoubtedly helped persuade Lyndon Johnson to support the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which helped to increase black voter registrations in the South even more dramatically.²⁶ Eventually, this shift in political power would result in the election of African Americans to positions in city halls, Congress and the White House.

affiliated Arkansas Council of Human Relations. This support came with Winthrop Rockefeller's endorsement.

²⁴ The Rockefeller Brothers Fund, for example, looked at funding the Southern Regional Council in 1954 following the *Brown* decision, but "decided to stay away from it." See Robert C. Bates to Mr. Meserve and Mr. Bradley, July 11, 1957 in Folder 5778, Box 953, RG 3.1-Grants, Rockefeller Brothers Fund Archives, RAC.

²⁵ Paul Kleppner, *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout* (New York: Praeger, 1982), 116, cited in Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Don't Vote* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 144.

²⁶ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Don't Vote* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 146.

Beyond the ballot box, the project provided a critical forum for collaborative action on behalf of the major civil rights organizations and deeper engagement by white liberal philanthropists like Stephen Currier. With very different constituencies, philosophies and strategies, the major civil rights groups were frequently caught up in inter-organizational rivalries in 1962. White philanthropists occasionally offered funding to promote dialogue between the leaders and a more unified vision for the future. In January, for example, the Phelps-Stokes Fund sponsored a top-level retreat in upstate New York, but the discussion quickly became acrimonious.²⁷ VEP meetings hosted by the Southern Regional Council were more operational. Led by civil rights attorney and VEP project director Wiley Branton, they were also somewhat more cooperative.

In January 1963, the Taconic Foundation's Executive Director Jane Lee Eddy suggested to Stephen Currier that the foundation should build on the early institutional success of the VEP and organize a series of meetings of civil rights leaders to develop a more thorough understanding of the issues facing the black community. Eddy hoped that a series of reports developed by this collaboration would inform other foundations and policymakers and build support for additional funding. She was also concerned that "the increasingly open hostility to white people" in the movement, "whipped up by the [Black] Muslims" like Malcolm X,

²⁷ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972, 1985 edition, 363.

would lead liberal organizations “to modify their posture” on civil rights to avoid being associated with more radical elements.²⁸

Currier broached the concept to Whitney Young, the head of the National Urban League, who agreed to help recruit the other major leaders to participate. The first meeting took place on February 18 and was followed by others that spring. The most valuable legacy of the Assessment Project was the spirit of collaboration cultivated in conversation, especially given the rivalries between the different organizations. According to Dorothy Height, the head of the National Council of Negro Women, “Month after month the relationships grew deeper and there was a sense of unity and purpose.”²⁹

The foundation for dialogue proved critical that spring as Birmingham exploded with confrontations between civil rights protestors, segregationists, the police and city officials. On Saturday, May 4, Sheriff Bull Connor unleashed police dogs and aimed high-pressure water hoses at more than 1,000 black protestors. Front page images from the conflict shocked the nation. A foreboding of imminent and widespread violence, however, swept the South in June following the assassination of Mississippi NAACP Field Director Medgar Evers.

Currier and Eddy feared that Evers’ death “could mean a terrible blowup in the South.”³⁰ They feared that the crisis in Jackson would further divide the NAACP

²⁸ Jane Lee Eddy to Stephen R. Currier, January 17, 1963 in Folder: Assessment Project on Negro Needs, 1963-1964, 1983, Taconic Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center.

²⁹ Dorothy Height says that it was at one of these meetings that she first tasted macadamia nuts, and for the rest of her life the taste of macadamias reminded her “of the unity and purpose of our Civil Rights leadership.” Dorothy Height, “Food Memory: Civil Rights Leadership” in Folder 579, Box 56, Taconic Foundation Archives, RAC.

³⁰ Quoted in Michael Barker, “Elite Philanthropy, SNCC, and the Civil Rights Movement,” November 15, 2010 <http://www.swans.com/library/art16/barker69.html#012>. Barker cites: Craig Jenkins and

and the SCLC, which were already antagonistic over issues of fundraising and recruiting.³¹ Believing that he could at least do something about the problem of money, Currier and Eddy quickly organized a meeting of Assessment Project leaders in the Taconic Foundation's offices. Attendees included Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, Jack Greenberg and James Farmer.³²

At this meeting, Currier proposed to organize a breakfast with civil rights leaders and deep-pocketed donors in New York to help the white establishment deepen its understanding of the crisis and to inspire donors to support the civil rights movement. Currier had in mind a kind of community chest approach that would raise money generally for the movement and then allocate portions of those funds to each of the civil rights organizations.³³ Young, Wilkins and Farmer recruited the civil rights leaders that had been involved with the Assessment Project, all of whom agreed to attend and speak on behalf of their respective organizations. Believing that tensions in the South were nearing a flash point, the group planned to host the breakfast eight days later, on June 19, at the Carlyle Hotel. In the meantime, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others from the SCLC, along with

Abigail Halcli, "Grassrooting the System? The Development and Impact of Social Movement Philanthropy, 1953-1990," In: Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (ed.), *Philanthropic Foundations: New Scholarship, New Possibilities* (Indiana University Press, 1999), pp.232-3; Carson, In *Struggle*, p.92. Eddy's quote comes from Nancy Joan Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Princeton University Press, 1989), p.115.

³¹ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2004, originally published 1986), 270.

³² Garrow notes this meeting but does not mention the phone call between Currier and Young or include Farmer among the attendees. These details come from Nancy Weiss. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2004, originally published 1986), 270 and Nancy Joan Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr. and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 115.

³³ Reese Cleghorn, "The Angels Are White: Who Pays the Bills for Civil Rights?", *New Republic*, August 17, 1963 [Note, *New York Times* says the breakfast meeting raised \$800,000. (Peter Kihss, "Joint Negro Council Allocates \$565,000 to Rights Groups," [*New York Times*], July 18, 196[3])]

representatives from CORE and SNCC, came together in A. Philip Randolph's office in New York on June 18 to discuss for the first time a plan to organize a march on Washington.

All totaled, ninety-six top business and civic leaders from banks, corporations and foundations gathered for the breakfast hosted by Currier. While the guests listened, the heads of the major civil rights organizations took turns, one by one, at the podium. In the wake of Evers' assassination, they explained the situation in the South "to a group who, until then," says NAACP lawyer Jack Greenberg, "had been largely oblivious to the problem." They were people "to whom we would not have had access" but for the entre provided by the Curriers.³⁴

Currier set a goal to raise \$1.5 million dollars to support the cause. Before the event was over, more than \$800,000 (nearly \$6.2 million in 2015 dollars) had been pledged to support the movement. This was a substantial sum; in 1963 the entire national budget for the well-established NAACP was \$1.2 million.³⁵ Currier also organized a meeting in Washington of publishers and editors from major newspapers in the North and South to promote a broader understanding of the conditions that propelled the growth of the civil rights movement.³⁶ And three days after the breakfast at the Carlyle Hotel, he and the civil rights leaders associated

³⁴ Reese Cleghorn, "The Angels Are White: Who Pays the Bills for Civil Rights?", *New Republic*, August 17, 1963) [Note, *New York Times* says the breakfast meeting raised \$800,000. (Peter Kihss, "Joint Negro Council Allocates \$565,000 to Rights Groups," [*New York Times*], July 18, 196[3])] For Greenberg's quotes, see Jack Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 368-69. Nancy Joan Weiss says pledges for \$500,000 were received at the breakfast. Nancy Joan Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr. and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 115.

³⁵ Reese Cleghorn, "The Angels Are White: Who Pays the Bills for Civil Rights?", *New Republic*, August 17, 1963.

³⁶ Lloyd Garrison, Eulogy for Stephen and Audrey Currier, February 15, 1967 in Currier Memorial Book, Taconic Foundation Archives, RAC.

with VEP and the Assessment Project gathered in the Oval Office with the President to talk about the civil rights crisis.

Kennedy had just submitted his civil rights bill to Congress and suggested to the group that passage of his proposed bill would be easier if there was a “truce” in the battle over civil rights. “Unruly tactics or pressures will not help,” he said, “and may hinder” consideration of the bill. But the civil rights leaders unanimously rejected the President’s appeal. James Farmer of CORE asserted that peaceful demonstrations were needed to put pressure on legislators. Roy Wilkins suggested that they were part of the American tradition of protest. Martin Luther King, Jr., warned that if legislators from the South tried to block the civil rights bill, the leadership would organize a massive protest in Washington, plans for which had been announced a day earlier.³⁷

Currier spoke up in favor of the march.³⁸ At one point in the conversation, he noted that civil rights people needed money from the government. Then he leaned across to John Kennedy and said, “And they need private money,” meaning philanthropic dollars. According to Leslie Dunbar, who was sitting next to Stephen, “All of a sudden, it was just two rich men confronting each other.”³⁹ Almost four weeks later, on July 18, during a news conference, President Kennedy endorsed the

³⁷ Richard J. H. Johnston, “Integrationists Bar Truce; Protests Will Go On,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1963, 1. See also, Tom Wicker, “Kennedy Asks Broad Rights Bill as ‘Reasonable’ Course in Crisis,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1963, 1.

³⁸ David L. Lewis, *King: A Biography* (University of Illinois Press), 219.

³⁹ Oral History Interview with Leslie W. Dunbar, December 18, 1978. Interview G-0075. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See also, Lloyd Grove, “Child of Fortune, Take 2,” *Washington Post*, July 8, 1998.

idea of the March on Washington, dubbing it “a peaceful assembly calling for a redress of grievances . . . in the great [American] tradition.”⁴⁰

Philanthropy’s tepid response to the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s can be partly explained by the institutional structure of the movement. Most of the major civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, the SCLC, CORE and SNCC were not established as public charities under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, and did not have charitable subsidiaries or affiliates. One exception, the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, was founded in 1940 to address this issue, but its institutional independence had created friction within the organization.

Money raised by Currier’s “freedom chest” campaign was divided into two pots: non-charitable support dollars destined for the non 501(c)(3) organizations was distributed by the newly created Council for United Civil Rights Leadership (CUCRL). Funding provided by private foundations or donors who wanted a tax deduction, passed through a newly established 501(c)(3) entity, the Committee for Welfare Education and Legal Defense (WELD). Stephen and Lloyd Garrison both served on the board of CUCRL and WELD, along with the leaders of the major civil rights organizations that would benefit from this fundraising. As Malcolm X complained in his speech several months later, Stephen, one of the few white members of the CUCRL board, was elected co-chair along with Whitney Young from the National Urban League.

⁴⁰ Mark Stern, *Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson & Civil Rights* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 104.

Over the next year, CUCRL became an important forum for conversations among the civil rights leaders. At a CUCRL meeting held on the same day of John Kennedy's funeral the leadership discussed how the assassination and the ascension of Lyndon Johnson to the presidency was likely to affect the movement, and debated strategy in the near term. As plans moved forward in the spring of 1964 for the Freedom Summer in Mississippi, led primarily by SNCC and CORE, the organizations that tended toward direct action, friction within CUCRL increased. By September, Currier, feeling increasingly out of place in the conversation and frustrated by his inability to shape critical strategy decisions, resigned.

Whitney Young was quick to praise Currier for his role in creating CUCRL, insisting that Currier deserved "tremendous respect for what he has done." Stephen said he would continue to support CUCRL and the civil rights movement, but he told a reporter that he felt it was "inappropriate for him to continue to sit in on meetings because he was not a leader of a major national group."⁴¹ Stephen's departure, however, removed the glue that held CUCRL together. As SNCC executive secretary and later Black Panther James Forman wrote in his autobiography, "Because he represented a source of funds, Stephen Currier probably did the most to hold the group together."⁴²

⁴¹ "Young Praises Currier," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 26, 1964, 9.

⁴² James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972, 1985 edition, 367. Note, however, that Forman felt it was appropriate for Stephen to resign because "he was white and not a civil rights person."

Stephen Currier recognized that his role as a philanthropist did not legitimize his place at the table as civil rights leaders debated strategies, issues and values reflected in microcosm racial dividing lines emerging in the civil rights movement. In August, President Lyndon Johnson's signature on the Voting Rights Act marked a major step forward in the effort to empower African American voters at the ballot box, but a week later, rioting in Watts revealed the seething anger and frustration that simmered in low-income, African American neighborhoods in cities across the country. The following summer, after Stokely Carmichael became chairman of SNCC, whites were explicitly discouraged from becoming members and the "black power" movement was launched in Greenwood, Mississippi.

Stephen Currier and the Taconic Foundation continued to be involved in civil rights issues, but Currier's primary focus had already begun to shift in 1964. Long interested in a variety of issues related to urban design and its influence on marginalized communities, Currier returned from a vacation in Greece, which included Taconic Foundation board members John Simon and Lloyd Garrison, with a new passion for grantmaking to address the emerging urban crisis.

In a remarkable feat of social entrepreneurship aimed at addressing the problems affecting America's cities, Currier effectively took over two prominent national associations working on issues related to open space and urban design. The venerable American Planning and Civic Association (APCA) was led by the American conservationist Horace Albright, the former director of the National Park Service who was primarily involved in education and advocacy for conservation, planning

and beautification. In the immediate postwar years, for example, APCA had called for the removal of billboards from parks and highways and worked closely with the National Park Service to prevent commercial encroachment.⁴³ Action to Improve Our Neighborhoods (ACTION), a Ford Foundation-funded organization of 70 regional planning groups in major cities from across the United States had been created in 1954 to support vigorous and effective efforts to address the problem of slums and urban renewal.⁴⁴ ACTION's leaders included prominent business CEOs, like TIME's Andrew Heiskell, as well as progressive developers like Maryland's James Rouse.

With the promise of philanthropic dollars, Currier prodded these APCA and ACTION to merge and adopt a new name—Urban America—and work to bring private capital to bear on the needs of the inner city.⁴⁵ At the same time, Currier negotiated with Heiskell to take over the publication of one of the nation's leading design magazines—*Architectural Forum*—and fold its operations into the nonprofit structure of Urban America.⁴⁶

Thus by the end of 1965, in the same year that Congress created the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Currier had forged a national institution that brought together leading voices in the emerging battle for open space and urban parks with progressive planners focused on community-

⁴³ Rockefeller Brothers Fund, "American Planning and Civic Association: Agency Analysis," February 17, 1950 in Folder 6449, Box 1058, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, RG3.1-Grants, RAC.

⁴⁴ Joshua Olsen, *Better Places, Better Lives: A Biography of James Rouse* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 2003), 66.

⁴⁵ American Planning and Civic Association, "Minutes of Special Meeting of Board of Trustees," January 29, 1965 in Folder 1511, Box 152, Taconic Foundation Archives, RAC.

⁴⁶ American Planning and Civic Association, "Minutes of Annual Meeting of Members," December 18, 1964 in Folder 1511, Box 152, Taconic Foundation Archives, RAC.

focused architecture and design to address issues like poverty and segregation. To champion the values and best ideas emanating from this community, he had saved *Architectural Forum* from TIME's budget-cutting chopping block. To support all this work, the Taconic Foundation committed \$1.95 million.⁴⁷

Urban America's first major initiative was to plan a national convocation on urban issues for the fall of 1966. Titled "Our People and Their Cities—A Conference to Improve the Quality of Urban America," the conference brought together leaders in urban planning and design from across the country in an effort to help "reverse the spread of urban ugliness and blight and work for order and more effective planning in the continuing urbanization of the United States." As Stephen put it, "Our goal is more livable, more workable, and more beautiful cities and towns."⁴⁸ The Taconic Foundation provided an additional \$125,000 grant to Urban America to support the convocation.⁴⁹

Currier won the support of the President and Lady Bird Johnson, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey delivered the conference keynote address. With the ballroom at the Sheraton-Park Hotel packed with nearly 800 people, Humphrey challenged the attendees and the nation to "recognize the crisis of the nation's cities as their own and to join in finding solutions."⁵⁰

To close the conference, Stephen Currier, having just turned thirty-six years old, gave the final address outlining his vision for Urban America. "Whenever a

⁴⁷ Minute books, Taconic Foundation, Vol. 2 (1963-1969), Taconic Foundation Archives, RAC.

⁴⁸ "Urban America Meet to Eye Quality of Cities," *Trends in Housing*, September 1966, 2. Clipping in Folder 1514, Box 152, Taconic Foundation Archives, RAC.

⁴⁹ Taconic Foundation, Minute books, July 21, 1966 in volume 2 (1963-1969), RAC.

⁵⁰ "When Down on the Farm They Refuse to Stay..." *AIA Journal*, nd, 34, clipping in Folder 1514, Box 152, Taconic Foundation Archives, RAC.

generation has the opportunity to act greatly, that opportunity becomes a command. The vastness of the challenge calls for greatness in action. We have no choice but to measure up.”⁵¹

As Harold Fleming would later write, the Urban America conference marked a turning point for Stephen. Previously he had exercised an “almost obsessive insistence on privacy and anonymity. With this event, he began to show “a new willingness to play a public role commensurate with the size and importance of his undertakings.”⁵² With a booming stock market and the Curriers’ income growing substantially, Stephen, the Taconic Foundation and its various offshoots, seemed poised to make a dramatic difference in American society. Indeed, eight years after Lloyd Garrison had suggested that Stephen Currier make philanthropy his life’s work, Currier had in fact matured into the role.

With the conference over, Currier moved quickly to broaden the coalition he was building to fight for America’s cities. He began planning for a conference of big city mayors to be held in late January 1967. To jump start this initiative, on January 9 he hosted eight big-city mayors in Washington, D.C. at Urban America’s headquarters to discuss the plight of major cities in the United States and the need for a national coalition to advocate on behalf of the cities. Afterwards, he held a press conference to announce that the mayors had agreed to work with Urban

⁵¹ “When Down on the Farm They Refuse to Stay...” *AIA Journal*, nd, 34, clipping in Folder 1514, Box 152, Taconic Foundation Archives, RAC.

⁵² Harold C. Fleming and Virginia Fleming, *The Potomac Chronicle: Public Policy and Civil Rights from Kennedy to Reagan* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 165.

America and others on a new urban coalition.⁵³ Currier planned to form this new coalition at a major meeting on January 27.

Currier never made it to that meeting. On the night of January 17, with a storm blowing across the Caribbean, he and Audrey took off in a small privately chartered plane from Puerto Rico intending to fly to St. Thomas for a short vacation. The plane never made it. A massive, multi-day search by air and sea, aided by the White House, failed to turn up any sign of the wreckage.⁵⁴

The Curriers' untimely deaths profoundly reshaped the future of the Taconic Foundation and the lives of the members of the board who were all close friends. The bulk of Audrey's estate along with the income from her trust funds passed to her three orphaned children, leaving the Taconic Foundation with a modest endowment worth approximately \$20 million and title to a remarkable piece of property owned by the Curriers in Vermont. Board member and Yale Law School Professor John Simon and his wife Claire, who had a young son of their own, were named guardians for the Curriers' children. With Stephen's death, Simon also became president of the Taconic Foundation.

In collaboration with Garrison, executive director Jane Lee Eddy, Harold Fleming, Edith Entenman and Dorothy Hirshon, Simon sought to continue grantmaking in the spirit of Stephen's vision even though diminished resources forced fundamental changes in strategy. Over the next four decades, the Foundation

⁵³ Folder 1505, Box 151, Taconic Foundation Archives, RAC.

⁵⁴ Benjamin Muse, "A Fleeting Wisp of Glory," mss in Folder 11: Currier, Stephen R. and Audrey Correspondence, Box 9, Harold C. Fleming Papers, Manuscript Division-Library of Congress.

played a pivotal role in developing new models for youth employment and education programs. It funded housing litigation strategies designed to force suburban communities to accept their fair share of regional affordable housing needs. It continued to champion equal opportunity and played a leading role in the development of community revitalization strategies in some of the nation's most impoverished urban neighborhoods. The foundation's impact resonated far beyond its modest grantmaking, primarily because it was able to develop new tools that brought private capital to low income neighborhoods and engaged much larger foundations interested in Taconic's innovative approach.

Without Stephen's vision and deep pockets, Urban America struggled for a short time but was quickly absorbed by the larger success of the Urban Coalition that Stephen had organized in the last weeks of his life. Meanwhile, under Fleming's leadership and with continuing support from Taconic, the Potomac Institute would continue to play a significant role in federal policymaking related to equal opportunity for nearly two decades.

For historians and students of philanthropy, the Taconic Foundation's story underscores a number of important points that help us understand the dynamics of small family foundations. The first is obvious: philanthropy at this level reflects not only a donor's intent, but also his or her evolving sense of personal identity, especially when the donor is still relatively young.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ In more recent years, other models for progressive social movement philanthropy have found ways to balance the donor's need for a sense of involvement with protections that empower movement insiders to control the strategy for spending philanthropic dollars. Ira Silver, "Buying an Activist Identity: Reproducing Class through Social Movement Philanthropy," *Sociological Perspectives* 41:2 (1998), 303-321.

The second point may also be obvious, but is too often ignored in the study of philanthropy: for small family foundations and even for some larger foundations, grantmaking is profoundly shaped by the donors' personal relationships, even after death. The Taconic Foundation's board, like the boards of other small foundations, was intimately connected to the donor and those relationships played a key role in guiding the foundation's program. After the Curriers' death, for the next fifty years, the board was primarily composed of continuing board members or new members who had been associated with the Curriers or other board members in the 1950s and 60s. This dynamic made for continuity in vision and in program that nevertheless resisted growing stale.

Personal relationships were also critical to the way in which the Taconic Foundation became involved in the epic story of the civil rights movement. Stephen Currier used his philanthropic dollars to insert himself and the Taconic Foundation into the movement. As convener and funder, especially of the Voter Education Project, he and the foundation helped to draw an important thread through the tapestry of the movement's history. But Malcolm X was undoubtedly overreaching when he suggested that Stephen Currier, Taconic or the small band of private foundations that helped to launch VEP had the ability to constrain the major crosscurrents within the civil rights movement. In the case of Stephen Currier and the Taconic Foundation, philanthropy helped to invigorate the debate over strategy and tactics, but it did little to shape the movement's ultimate direction and character.