

A JOURNEY NORTHWARD: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN MIGRATION IN TRENTON, 1940-1960

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

Between 1940 and 1960 much of the African American population of the United States experienced a staggering process of relocation, from their roots in the “deep South” to areas of the northeast. Trenton, New Jersey, as a metropolis with a history of booming industry, was one of many cities that appealed to African-American migrants seeking to flee the social injustices of the South. Rampant intolerance and prejudice against black immigrants, however, made Trenton seem as if it would be more comfortably located south of the Mason Dixon line. This paper will examine how discrimination in jobs, housing, and education severely limited the mobility of Trenton’s new black population. Lower standards of living caused by a lack of community and governmental support stunted the educational aspirations of black youth, which in turn limited the jobs available to them. Furthermore, lack of steady employment encouraged illegal activities, shown in a larger number of social delinquency cases among African-Americans. An examination of primary source documents reveal that, along with a vicious cycle of stifling economic conditions, a general acceptance of the “culture of poverty” ideology tainted efforts to bring equality for all citizens, even within the most outwardly tolerant social organization, the Trenton Committee on Unity.

Maxine Jennings was a dedicated, lifelong resident of Trenton. At 42 years old she could fondly remember walking down to Stacy Park on Route 24, participating in church activities, and as she grew older, mentoring Trenton’s youth. Maxine was an effective mentor because she knew personally what it was like to grow up in the turbulent city. Not only was she a teenager during the civil rights movement that was so widely publicized in the South, Ms. Jennings also had her own taste of the chaos as a witness to the riot in Trenton in 1968, which occurred five days after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As a black student in Trenton Public High School during the chaos of the 1960s, Maxine experienced the heart of the student movement, and could point to at least ten of her peers who were directly involved in the Trenton riot. Though she did not participate herself, Maxine shared in the aftermath of helping the injured and restoring her home city to order.¹

When thinking back on the causes of the riot, Maxine remembers the “frustration towards: the national, state, and local government’s lack of response to the needs of minorities; i.e., high unemployment, lack of education opportunities, racism, [and] lack of housing.”² Maxine’s memories capture the problems that most plagued black Trentonians following the massive shift in population from WWII through the 1960s. This paper explores the journey of these African-Americans who migrated from the Deep South to escape discrimination and civil rights violations, and ironically came to Trenton only to face similar – though better disguised – prejudices, even in well-known civic organizations such as the Trenton Committee on Unity, whose main goals were to promote racial and ethnic tolerance and acceptance. Indeed, discrimination in the job market, real estate, and education in Trenton severely limited the mobility of African-American migrants; poor economic standing and limited resources caused feelings of confinement that eventually led to frustration and unavoidable outbursts of violence. It was not only feelings of discrimination, however, that confined African-Americans to poverty. This discrimination was connected to a larger ideology, a subtle – maybe even subconscious – acceptance of the “culture of poverty” principle, in which mainstream society pointed to African-American cultural differences as an explanation for their misfortune.

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Between 1940 and 1960, much of the African-American population of the United States experienced a staggering process of relocation, from their roots in the “deep South” to areas of the northeast; “during the 1940s 1.24 million African-Americans left the South,” and by 1960 a majority of African Americans lived in urban areas.³ Following the Second World War, new migrants swept the city of Trenton by storm, reflecting the urban migration to many industrial cities across the United States; in the census period between 1940 and 1950, the city of Trenton experienced a significant increase in the non-white population, “from 9,340 to 14,352 inhabitants...an increment of 55.6 percent.”⁴ By 1950, non-white Trentonians made up 11.4 percent of the city’s population, but only 53 persons of non-white classification were not African American.⁵ The new black migrants crowded into the small black enclave of Five Points, about a half mile from the downtown area, which later “expanded outwards into the Italian North Trenton section as a growing number of blacks arrived.”⁶ The awareness of blacks in Trenton’s cultural, political, and economic activities became more prevalent as more black migrants entered the city.

Some historians may argue that racial discrimination in the North was relatively tame in comparison to the segregation and civil rights violations widely publicized in the South. Historian Sean Cashman, for example, asserts that “in the North African-Americans could vote and there was not the same blatant segregation as existed in the South.”⁷ For African-American migrants to Northern cities, however, the reactions of established residents were less than welcoming, and they did not escape completely the racial prejudices they had hoped to leave behind when fleeing the South. White residents of Trenton reacted to these newcomers with a mixture of fear and hostility, a response that was no different from the national sentiment towards the mass migration. Cashman acknowledges that, “Renewed migration upset the delicate balance of institutional racism in the South and the North. As a result, race relations became more and more tense in the areas of housing...and employment...”⁸ An influx of African-American migrants was a catalyst in escalating tensions between white, and even established black, residents; Southern African-Americans came to the North expecting freedoms and acceptance, but what they found was a brick wall of intolerance that was hard to maneuver around. While prejudice certainly did not stop migrants in their pursuit a better life outside of the stifling South, it certainly limited black progress in employment, housing, and education that determined, for many African-Americans, a life of poverty.

The Trenton Committee on Unity, established in April 1945 in the expanding environment of postwar Trenton, is the organization that took most interest in understanding the new migrants. TCU met together for the first time on April 2, 1945, to encourage peace and tolerance as World War II came to a close, finally ending on August 15, 1945.⁹ This first gathering of concerned citizens occurred in the midst of global turmoil; while the United States was heavily involved in World War II on a national level, Trenton faced its repercussions on a local level: war demobilization caused economic insecurity, which was exacerbated by racial tensions on the city streets. This awareness of differences was intensified in the Trenton labor movement, where returning soldiers fought with southern black migrants for jobs and opportunities.

The Trenton Committee on Unity was committed to promoting tolerance among all groups of citizens and was especially determined to benefit Trenton’s youth through programs in public schools; section four of the first meeting minutes, labeled “Schools” is the longest of all seven designated areas, and outlines a clear plan for influencing Trenton’s students. The committee desired to create a Junior Committee for Unity, “to represent all school children, delegates of which will meet with the adult committee.”¹⁰ High school students would also “receive instruction through social studies classes and problems of democracy.”¹¹ The Unity Committee hoped to influence young people through education at an early age in hopes of putting an end to future intolerance. It is clear, however, that shadows of discrimination and the “othering” of the black citizen further cemented the marginal position of African Americans in communities across Trenton.

The Trenton Committee on Unity made a noticeable effort to understand what they felt were the cultural differences of these new migrants from the South and to correlate their findings with the African-American citizen’s noticeable disadvantages in employment, housing, and education. The Unity Committee subsequently published informative studies that attempted to analyze the position of African-

Americans in Trenton in what seems to be a desire to connect with this increasingly significant group. One such study, titled the "Trenton Negro Family," attempted to "assess the status and problems of the Negro population, to have a more intimate knowledge of this group of citizens than could be afforded by the available sources...direct field coverage was made by interview of Negro households and families throughout the city as a means of providing some pertinent current data."¹² This study attempts to collect data that helped the city of Trenton to understand the major problems in the employment, housing, and education facing the newest residents of African-American community. Subtle language choice in the "Trenton Negro Family" report, however, suggests that racial prejudices plagued even openly tolerant organizations such as the Trenton Committee on Unity.

The Committee on Unity regarded the makeup of the migrant family to be the main factor in determining success, and chose to study elements "which relate to type and composition of families, education, employment, and occupational status [which are] basic to the ability to adjust to the social and economic demands of the community."¹³ This report seems to place more emphasis on cultural reasons for why blacks are not succeeding in the job market, housing situation and the school system: "the Negro family of the city...is in a considerably poorer position, in structure and composition, than the average family of the nation."¹⁴ The Trenton Council on Unity focused narrowly on the disadvantages in family structure, which they subsequently used to explain large and more complicated issues such as high levels of unemployment, dilapidated housing, and poor education in the black community. It seems to be the view of the Council—which was in many ways reflective of the larger population of Trenton—that due to this breakdown in the family situation many southern blacks struggled to better themselves, and these feelings of inadequacy were passed down to subsequent generations.

Blacks migrating into New Jersey's industrial capital attained an economic status that was shaky at best. Because these southern migrants were often poor and uneducated, they were forced into the lower levels of society and had little agency to better themselves—Historian John T. Cumbler writes, "over 70 percent of the new black residents were from the Deep South, and many found jobs in Trenton as janitors or sweepers and outside the city as potato pickers, chicken pluckers, or part-time day laborers."¹⁵ Discrimination against new lower level workers was a national phenomenon; in Chicago, blacks were "restricted to the dirtiest and least desirable jobs, partly because of color prejudice, partly because of inadequate training, and partly because of opposition from trade unions."¹⁶ A survey of the employment status of Trenton's African-American families points out similar statistics: "those families coming into the city since 1945 as compared with those previously had a larger proportion in the lower occupational levels."¹⁷ Examples of this difference in new workers versus older workers is evident in the fact that 57 percent of post-1945 migrant workers held jobs in the labor and service occupations, while only about 46 percent of older residents held these jobs. All of the clerical and sales personnel and all of the professionals in the sample of workers belonged to the group of older residents.¹⁸

Though older black residents were at an advantage in comparison to recent migrants, a majority of all employed blacks had low-level jobs: "more than 8 out of every ten non-whites, were in the lowest occupational groupings—operatives, services and labor classifications...among craftsman and foremen, there was only about one non-white to every three persons in the population generally"¹⁹ Some white citizens, including Assistant Commissioner of Education John P. Milligan recognized the dilemma that was brought forth in response to racial population shifts: "many Americans of the white race talk one way but act another way. In all of our ethical pronouncements, many of use exclude, mentally, the Negro... We do not practice what we preach... As long as we discriminate against Negroes in employment and in upgrading in employment, we not only hurt them, but we hurt our economy."²⁰

Discrimination in the job market and the idea that blacks could not successfully hold higher-level jobs was a common theme in Trenton; in August 1958 the State of New Jersey Division Against Discrimination (DAD) published its annual complaint report, in which it documented receiving 942 formal complaints on the basis of refusal to hire due to discrimination.²¹ Though 902 of these complaints were settled outside of court, it is clear that many companies in Trenton reflected the racial tensions throughout the city by holding unfair standards for employment; even if businesses were hiring, they were *not* hiring blacks. African-Americans were also barred from joining many labor unions; Cumbler writes that as early as 1939 the AFL was set to undermine black activism in the formation of unions, and

encouraged unions to only allow white members: "WE are an American organization and will not allow any negroes, aliens, or any other foreign elements to hold office in the AFL."²² Without this protection many were forced to take low-paying unskilled jobs with little pay, which left little support for their growing families.

Hard times forced a conflict between new black migrants and established black and white ethnic groups that had previously arrived in Trenton not only in the job market but in the competition for housing. As more black migrants moved into the city, the originally Sicilian area of North Trenton began a rapid shift towards a majority African-American population: "the black population increased by 42 percent in this area while the population fell 4 percent...it was the ethnic communities that felt the pressure to open up to black families hunting for desperately needed housing."²³ The North districts of Trenton, specifically tracts 17, 18, 19, and 20 fell into decline as the population increased in these areas, and which the Trenton Council of Social Agencies blamed on "a combination of physical, economic, and social factors."²⁴ Nationally, black migrants faced similar living conditions: "four times as many African-Americans as whites lived in houses with more than two people per room...the mortality rate was almost twice that of whites...If they survived infancy, [they] could expect to live, on average, twelve years less than whites."²⁵ Migration to the North for many African-Americans meant leaving their homes for equally destitute living conditions in unfamiliar areas.

Blacks were forced into the most impoverished neighborhoods in Coalport and Five Points, and rampant poverty had disastrous effects on the community and the reputation of the black citizen. African-Americans were consistently blamed for Trenton's rising crime rate; the Trenton Council of Social Agencies characterized the area as "hazardous to physical and moral health. Alcoholism and petty crime became serious social problems for the black community."²⁶ The "Trenton Six" murder symbolizes most infamously the willingness to automatically blame the rising population African-Americans for crimes in Trenton. It was this murder of 73 year-old junkshop owner William Horner on January 27, 1948 that would turn into Trenton's most controversial case involving issues of race and of prejudice in law enforcement and the justice system. Though there were no solid witnesses and the stories conflicted, the Trenton police felt under extreme pressure to solve the case, and eventually focused the blame on a black male named Collis English, who was originally arrested February 6 for driving his father's car without permission. Following English's arrest, the police force went wild, arresting five more men supposedly connected with the case. A *Time* magazine article which followed the case explained, "For five days in February 1948, turned the heat on six young Negro suspects, finally got all but one to sign confessions that they were parties to robbing old man Horner in his shop, and to beating him to death with a soda bottle."²⁷ However, journalist Jon Blackwell notes in his *Trentonian* article that, "there was something incredibly fishy about these confessions."²⁸ He quotes Ruth Rabstein, a defense lawyer who would later serve on the team defending English: "You didn't have to be very smart to recognize what it was. It was a manufactured case. They had the wrong people, pure and simple."²⁹ Eventually, all six were convicted and sentenced to death by the electric chair.

Around the world, the trials of six accused African-Americans made headlines and stirred passions. *Time* magazine makes clear the reasoning behind the international outrage: "During the 55-day trial the prosecution refused to say whose fingerprints were found on the murder bottle (apparently the evidence would have helped the defense), and was upheld by the trial court"³⁰ Eventually, the State of New Jersey overturned the conviction because of mass public outrage and protests by civil rights organizations. But the trial and conviction of these men represented an overarching theme in the Trenton justice system: Trentonians, especially those involved in the legal system, were more apt to blame and convict blacks for crimes because the repercussions for arresting an African-American citizen were minor in comparison to implicating a white citizen, and it was more important to make an arrest than to spend the time to make sure that justice was served. It is clear that as far as the justice system of Trenton was concerned, blacks were dispensable. It was easier to stain the reputation of the rising populations of African-Americans with the blame for the rising rates of crime because they were not really welcome or important in the first place; the Trenton Six fiasco made it clear that whites were quick to place the blame for social problems on black residents.

Trenton's prejudice can be connected to larger national issues that were a result of the second great African-American migration. As cities began to increase in population following WWII, there was an acknowledgment of social issues that were the result of large populations. Senator Daniel Moynihan spells out these issues: "desire[s] for order...are commonly enough encountered among working-class and lower middle-class persons...for the first time in the history of public opinion surveys, crime emerged as the principle issue of domestic concern."³¹ The Trenton Committee on Unity embodied this national trend in a survey in 1951 that attempted to explain delinquency statistics for that year. What the committee found was that delinquency records were higher in black communities: "it is clear that the occurrence of delinquencies for non-white children is conspicuously higher than that of other children."³² While one out of every thirteen non-white juveniles were arrested for crimes, these numbers are comparatively less for whites, where one out of nineteen were arrested.³³

What is especially startling, however, is the acknowledgement that fifty percent of non-white juvenile arrests went to court as compared with about seventeen percent of white arrests. It is clear that a certain amount of prejudice and reflection of racial tension in the judicial system had a negative impact on black youth because they were more likely to end up in prison for even petty crimes. The Trenton Committee on Unity offers an explanation: "prejudicial or some other systematic handling of the cases by the court"; the committee goes further and cites "less than favorable possibilities for adjustment in home situation for non-white cases"³⁴ By tracing delinquency back to family structure, the TCU seems to suggest inherent cultural flaws that negatively impacted African-Americans, rather than a larger structural patterns of discrimination that could potentially lead to negative behaviors.

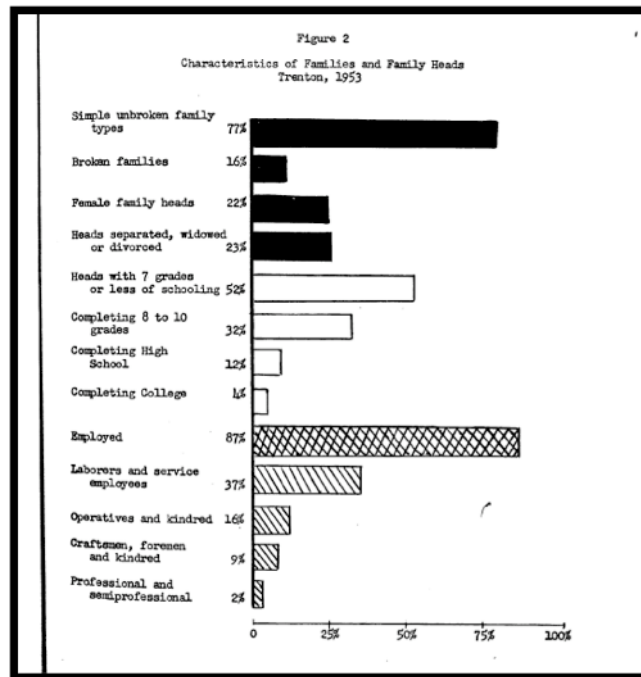
For newcomers to the city, the difficulty in attaining a better paying job related back to limited education. Nationally one in ten African-Americans over twenty-five had not completed a single year of school, and only one in a hundred had graduated from college.³⁵ The Trenton Study on the Negro Family notes a similar educational disadvantage: "there is a somewhat startling decline in the number and percentage of Negro pupil population from the 4th through 12th grade levels": at the 4th grade, over 30.5 percent of students are black, but by the 12th grade that number shrinks to 9.4 percent.³⁶ A majority of blacks—52 percent—completed seven grades or fewer of schooling, which are "almost two grades below the median achievement for the city at large which was reported at 8.8 grades in 1950."³⁷ The Trenton Committee on Unity finds only one explanation for this fact: "there is strong evidence that Negro newcomers to the city since 1945 have contributed to lowering the average education achievement of the non-white group."³⁸ The "Negro Family" study attributes this to the educational standard of the black southerner and the low "level of education attainment associated with the rural South."³⁹ This discrepancy in levels of education had the potential to incite feelings of disunity among groups of black citizens; the "new blacks" were blamed for their lower levels of education and singled out as the source of poor school performance in Trenton.

The sharp decrease in the number of black students was, in the opinion of Trenton's public school teachers, prompted by above average problems in "tardiness, retardation, low motivation, and poor preparation."⁴⁰ The study of the Negro Family asserts that it is in the "more nominal aspects of the school-attending and learning process where the more critical adjustments lie."⁴¹ The study suggests that these maladjustments were not clearly related to new adjustment to the integrated school situation: "The roots of this problem and the basis of its alleviation lie not only in the school situation, but also in the family and community setting." According to the TCU report, lack of education had deeper roots within the family structure of new African-American citizens: levels of education drop because students have no clear motivation from adults in their homes. This idea would later be echoed nationally in the Moynihan report: "within the minority community, skilled Negro 'models' after whom the Negro youth might pattern himself are rare, while substitute sources which could provide direction...are nonexistent"⁴² Both of these studies attempt to trace the roots of African-American poverty back to cultural differences, embracing "culture of poverty" ideas that do not take other historical factors into consideration.

The Committee on Unity seemed quick to blame the family structure of the recent migrant, rather than accept that Trenton's poor public schooling and its failure to anticipate problems in adjusting to newly desegregated schools left many blacks to fend for themselves. This would later be explained in the Moynihan Report as the result of the matriarchal characteristics of African-American families, in which

mothers are the heads of household and fathers are relatively nonexistent. This difference in family style is, according to these reports, devastating to the African-American child; however, white children who grow up in single parent households still have the opportunity to be successful because of family history. Moynihan asserts that, "the white family, despite many variants, remains a powerful agency...for transmitting no less valuable contracts with the world of education and work." This happens because many white surnames, such as "Weaver, Mercer, Farmer, and Smith" give the child a sense of family history relating to some sort of trade. Thus, "white children without fathers at least perceive all about them the pattern of men working. Negro children without fathers flounder and fail."⁴³

The African-American child who is fortunate enough to have lived in the same household as his or her father still had problems "adjusting" because of "the kinds of objectives which parents have for their children", more specifically, "both educational and vocational objectives which the parents have for their children are rather poorly defined."⁴⁴ The Trenton Negro Family study notes, "It would seem that, even though education aspiration is somewhat high, it is nevertheless a vague expectation, unsupported



(Trenton Negro Family Study, TCU) This graph illustrates the lack of high education levels in African-American family heads, which directly correlated with the type of jobs they attained.

by realistic and concrete objectives in work and career...more than half of the children look toward a future which has been inadequately shaped by parental motivation"⁴⁵ Both the Moynihan Report and the Trenton Negro Family study are quick to hold dysfunctions in stereotypical black home life accountable for lack of major successes among African-American youth. These documents fail to reference the idea that, just as in white families, there is diversity in structure, and instead group all blacks into one massive group. Their findings offer a startling explanation for low levels of education among African-Americans that is undeniably one-sided: broken family structure and lack of parental values and clear outlines for the future doomed Trenton's youth from the start.

The Trenton Committee on Unity, which maneuvered under the banner of promoting tolerance and acceptance for people of all backgrounds, seemed to contradict itself by finding cultural reasons to blame black children for not doing well in school, rather than looking at the social environment of recently desegregated schools. In an explanation of their data, the TCU found that though parents may attest to having standards concerning education for their children, lack of realistic parental support in encouraging attendance and participation in school limited future generations to jobs that required little

or no formal skill; in this data the cycle of poverty was deemed to be intergenerational: “[these are] the responses of parents who are in a considerable part recent migrants from the South, with limited formal education and engaged in work below the skilled level.”⁴⁶ Service sector and manual labor jobs required little schooling and often came with low pay, making it hard for blacks to maintain a standard of living above the poverty line.

New workers coming into Trenton faced not only economic but social disadvantages. Discrimination in all facets of every day living severely limited the mobility of African-American migrants. Lower standards of living caused by a lack of community and governmental support affected the educational aspirations of black youth, which, in turn, limited the numbers and kinds of jobs available to them. This vicious cycle made it difficult for many African-Americans to extricate themselves from poverty.

The mass migration of African Americans during the 1950s caused changes in social, political, and economic activity in the core of northern cities, and Trenton was not immune to these effects. As African-Americans struggled to find a place within the city’s structure, they faced the challenge of discrimination not just from within Trenton’s older – and often white – population, but also within the civic organizations of the city itself. Nationally, governmental leaders and organizations recognized that discrimination was hurting America; former governor of New York Herbert H. Lehman commented on the need to correct these civil rights abuses in three major areas:

in the field of employment, prejudice against persons...bars them from better paying positions which they are qualified to fill. The result: many families are doomed to poverty. In housing, some property deeds have clauses forbidding the renting or selling to persons of certain races...the result: millions of families are obliged to live in congested areas where disease and delinquency flourish. In education, many colleges and professional schools refuse to accept qualified students because of their creed or color. The result: millions of qualified young Americans are denied the chance to develop their native talents.⁴⁷

Though civic organizations such as the Trenton Committee on Unity recognized the need to acknowledge and embrace the newly expanding black population within the city, there seems to be a underlying embracement of the “culture of poverty” ideology: the need to correlate disadvantages in the economy with cultural and social differences that limited the agency of the black migrant. It was easier for these groups to ignore a long history of discrimination and instead focus on reasons to blame the new migrants for their own suffering. As Governor Lehman recognized, these “abuses are costly.”⁴⁸ Trenton had to take ownership for the centuries of abuse endured by the African-American population; it would be only at this point that black citizens would be afforded truly equal rights and gain equal footing in Trenton, New Jersey, and the United States.

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⁴⁴ "Trenton Negro Family," 21.

⁴⁵ "Trenton Negro Family," Folder: Community Services in Trenton, Box: Trenton Council on Human Relations, Trentonia Collection, Trenton Public Library, 21.

⁴⁶ Herbert H. Lehman, "Civil Rights" *The Trenton Times*, April 15, 1948.

⁴⁷ Lehman, "Civil Rights."