

**A VIEW FROM THE CHALKBOARD:  
TRENTON SCHOOL DESEGREGATION AND THE STRUGGLE OF  
BLACK TEACHERS IN THE PRE-BROWN ERA, 1944-1954**

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**ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

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On August 29, 1947, Miss Eleanor David was denied a job in the Trenton public elementary schools because of discriminatory employment practices against black teachers. At twenty five years of age, David held a degree from Tuskegee University, a prestigious all-black college in Alabama, where she had been elected class president. As a resident of Trenton, she was eager to teach in a New Jersey school that same year. David, therefore, applied for work as a substitute teacher in the Trenton Public School District in September 1946. Over the next four and a half months, Eleanor David accumulated teaching experience as a substitute in Trenton Public Schools, including Monument, Jefferson, Parker, Jr. #3, and Jr. #5. The principals of both junior high schools "...wrote very fine letters of recommendation for Miss David." By the end of the 1946-1947 school year, Eleanor David hoped to obtain a full-time job. Monument Elementary School was only an 11 minute walk from her house, so a teaching position there was ideal. Although David had sent in her application for a permanent teaching position in March 1947, she heard nothing from the Trenton Board of Education in response. In an attempt to discover what prevented her from obtaining a job, David scheduled a meeting with the superintendent of Trenton's public schools. The superintendent told Eleanor David in their August 29, 1947 meeting that "...he had picked the best persons for the jobs available" despite Eleanor David's exemplary credentials. Furthermore, he "...found nothing wrong with her qualifications except that there were other better applicants." David's suspicions grew. Even before her rejection by the Trenton superintendent, Eleanor David notified the Trenton Committee For Unity – an organization established in 1945 to foster "the best relationship" among different races and minority groups within the city – to help prove that she was discriminated against as a black teacher in a northern urban public school system.<sup>1</sup>

Eleanor David's story is but a page in the multi-volume epic that was the civil rights movement. David was not the only black educator to be denied employment on the basis of her skin color. Discrimination was rampant in public schools as Jim Crow passed fluidly through the Mason-Dixon Line. By the mid-nineteenth century, Americans realized that within the racially segregated schools of northern cities, separate was not equal. School desegregation is a phenomenon most commonly studied from the student's perspective. Yet, the integration of public schools offers another important and understudied piece of Civil Rights history – that is, the struggle for black teachers in breaking the color barrier of segregated faculties throughout the country. Black teachers faced unexpected hardships when segregated schools began closing on the state level. Desegregation was the buzzword among educational advocates following WWII, but integration became highly contested when white students, parents, and faculty realized that they would have to share the same public space as their black counterparts. Black teachers, consequently, struggled to find jobs in a market saturated by whites, especially as soldiers returned home after WWII. Desegregation may have made education more fair and accessible for black students, but it also initiated a difficult and complicated employment process for black teachers in the newly integrated public schools.

Although most history textbooks laud *Brown v. Board of Education* – the landmark Supreme Court decision in 1954 making segregated schools illegal and declaring that segregation can never be equal – as the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, the pre-*Brown* period is fertile ground for historical scholarship. Jack Dougherty's "That's When We Were Marching for Jobs" (1998) argues that school desegregation in Milwaukee "...interrupts the familiar *Brown* narrative."<sup>2</sup> Dougherty expands the scope of his article in *More Than One Struggle* (2004) by connecting the civil rights movement in Milwaukee to other Northern cities.<sup>3</sup> "Viewing the history of black education solely

through the lens of *Brown* distorts our understanding of the past by focusing only on school integration of student populations,” writes Dougherty, “when in fact there have been struggles for numerous reforms: hiring black teachers...and exercising community control.”<sup>4</sup> In *Ethnically Qualified* (2011), Cristina Collins analyzes the “intertwined and related factors” that made New York City have the lowest ratio of minority teachers and complicated the hiring of “qualified” teachers at mid-century.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Dougherty effectively challenges the *Brown* grand narrative by finding earlier movements of civil rights expression in the 1940s and 1950s, Collins questions the lasting implications of the 1954 Supreme Court decision by looking at lagging school desegregation in many northern cities during the 1960s and 1970s. In this paper, I argue that the classroom became the proving ground for the pre-*Brown* civil rights movement throughout America’s northern urban centers.

Following in the footsteps of Dougherty and Collins, my study similarly challenges the allure of the *Brown* narrative by looking at earlier roots of the modern civil rights movement before 1954. The basis for this argument rests in an intensive look at the ten-year period just before *Brown*. This period begins with *Hedgepeth-Williams* – a historic 1944 New Jersey Supreme Court case declaring that “local school districts and boards of education could not establish separate public schools based on race, color or creed” – as a milestone along the path towards school desegregation in Trenton.<sup>6</sup> Between the *Hedgepeth-Williams* case (1944) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), both the city of Trenton and the entire country made significant gains in the arena of educational reform. “As educational historians,” Dougherty writes, “we need to recognize how our interpretations of Black schooling in the twentieth century have been dominated by the *Brown* narrative...we must caution ourselves against reducing historical interpretation into a simplistic ‘celebratory history’ which obscures the diversity of local contexts of Black education reform movements.”<sup>7</sup> The well-known Civil Rights movement did not appear spontaneously in 1954; rather, the push for equal rights, especially among black teachers in public schools, ebbed and flowed throughout the twentieth century.

As the 1940s progressed, public schools in Trenton and throughout the nation hired fewer black teachers. Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (1944) argued that in the North, “Negroes have practically the entire educational system flung open to them without much discrimination.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Myrdal did not consider the plight of Trenton’s black teachers. Their struggle to get appointed in Trenton schools was not simple and straightforward. When viewed in context with other cities in both northern and southern United States, Trenton’s employment issues with black teachers were not unique. Newark, New York, and Philadelphia offer northern examples of school desegregation, while Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and Nashville serve as their southern counterparts. Since *Brown* impacted school desegregation on a national level, local movements occurring in cities like Trenton during the 1940s and early 1950s are often overshadowed by this chapter in the *Brown* narrative. In comparison with other cases across the country, Trenton’s treatment of black teachers closely resembles the formula followed by southern cities. The picture below (Figure 1), from a May 23, 1954 *New York Times* article, shows the way that New Jersey is divided by the Mason-Dixon Line. Trenton, in reality, sits just above the border demarcated between the northern and southern United States. Although this picture delineates only the very southern tip of New Jersey below the Mason-Dixon Line, I argue that Trenton should also be considered as a city that practiced those same Southern customs. Black teachers in Trenton were helped neither by *Hedgepeth-Williams* nor *Brown* in acquiring sweeping and lasting employment in public schools; thus, the capital of New Jersey appears to fall, in practice, far below the Mason-Dixon Line.

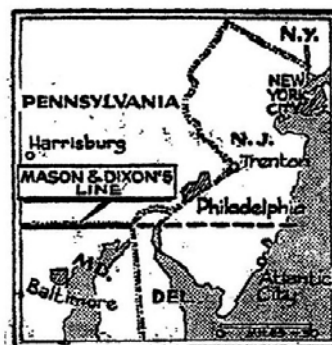


Figure 1 – This picture depicts the Mason-Dixon Line running through New Jersey. Though only the southern tip is below the line, the way that Trenton discriminated against black teachers, when public schools were desegregated, suggests that it follows those same southern customs (George Cable Wright, “Time, Tact Built Jersey’s Bias Ban” *New York Times*, 23 May 1954).

The conventional historical narrative surrounding the employment of black teachers in public schools needs to be deconstructed. Any story about the civil rights struggle for African Americans in education inevitably begins with Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Dougherty writes that “Black teachers functioned as the levers for racial uplift during the early twentieth century. Whether one subscribed to the industrial education strategy of Booker T. Washington or the “talented tenth” approach of W.E.B. Du Bois, both relied on black teachers to advance the race.”<sup>9</sup> Washington and Dubois held radically different ideas about how black teachers should improve their situation in public schools. In his “Atlantic Compromise” (1895), Washington urged African Americans to “cast down your buckets” and embrace agricultural work. Black teachers inevitably followed Washington’s advice during the first half of the twentieth century since they were obligated to “cast down their buckets” within all-black, segregated schools. W.E.B. Dubois, on the other hand, was critical of Washington and supported the advancement of blacks in higher education. Still, many black teachers were unable to obtain the necessary college education to obtain jobs in public schools during the second half of the twentieth century.

After WWII, only a very few African American teachers attending black colleges benefited from the GI Bill – a federal bill enacted soon after the Hedgepeth-Williams case that allowed for the college education of returning WWII veterans but disproportionately helped male soldiers of European origin. Although old occupational barriers fell rapidly for Jewish veterans, black soldiers did not receive their fair share of GI benefits after 1945. As an unintended consequence of the GI Bill, blacks were often denied veteran’s rights because they were excessively given dishonorable discharges from the armed services. Even if black servicemen were allowed monetary compensation for higher education from the federal government, nascent Jim Crow laws and other barriers denied black GIs entry into white universities. Consequently, black colleges were swamped with applicants. Although most of the twenty thousand African American veterans attended these institutions by 1947, as many as fifteen thousand additional black soldiers were unable to reap the benefits of the GI Bill.<sup>10</sup> Historian Karen Brodtkin-Sacks writes, “To African Americans, the government offered the cement boots of segregation, redlining, urban renewal, and discrimination.”<sup>11</sup> The discriminatory practices of the federal government soon trickled down to the local level in post-WWII America – even here, school boards continued to prevent black teachers from entering the workforce in the pre-*Brown* era.

Black teachers in Trenton faced an employment crisis in the 1940s. Even though all Trenton schools were integrated by the 1945-46 school year, black teachers still faced discrimination first by the college admissions in the wake of the GI Bill and then by the public school boards who were disinclined to hire them. In order to insure that the city of Trenton would become a truly democratic community, the Committee on Unity investigated the reasons behind the employment crisis for African-American public school teachers. In the October 27, 1947 primer, “Facts and Observations Pertaining to Employment of Negro Teachers and Negro Clerks in Trenton Public Schools,” the Trenton Committee on Unity laid bare the unsettling fact that “The last time a Negro teacher was employed on a regular basis (not as a substitute) was in September, 1942.”<sup>12</sup> In an enumerated list, the report offered facts and figures about the absence of new, full-time black teachers in Trenton for over five years. Black substitute teachers were employed in the school system; however, none of these eligible teachers were appointed to a regular job between 1942 and 1947. These revelations surprised readers since qualified black teachers were already in Trenton between the opening of the all-black Lincoln School in 1923 and America’s involvement in WWII in 1941. The report’s author asserts that the number of black teachers in Trenton steadily declined in the 1940s – a trend exacerbated by the school board’s refusal to hire any new black teacher since September 1942. A vicious cycle, thus, developed as many black teachers saw the writing on the wall and chose not to apply for jobs in Trenton. The discrimination inherent in these hiring practices is bewildering since there was a severe need for teachers in the greater Trenton area and Mercer County by 1947.<sup>13</sup>

The startling decline of black teachers in Trenton schools during the 1940s should be viewed alongside city and country-wide patterns. The shortage of black teachers was not only a local problem but also a national struggle. On June 24, 1945, the *New York Times* reported, “From all

indications, the teacher shortage will remain critical for at least another year. The rate of turnover and the high percentage of emergency certificates are indicative of the serious situation confronting the schools of America.”<sup>14</sup> The situation was indeed serious. Since soldiers were returning home after WWII, the revitalized American economy and thousands of new jobs encouraged teachers to leave the classroom and enter other areas of the workforce.<sup>15</sup> Although the National Education Association (NEA) began a nation-wide campaign to stop this exodus, a *New York Times* article from September 16, 1947 stated that “...a teaching crisis still confronts the United States, which last year had 70,000 unfilled jobs in education...”<sup>16</sup> Black teachers, however, were rarely considered “qualified” to fill these positions throughout the nation. “By the 1940s,” writes Cristina Collins, “the end of the teacher surplus had at least opened up the possibility that the demand for Black teachers’ services might have increased enough to give them some leverage in overcoming principals’ discriminatory preferences.”<sup>17</sup> Urban school districts were even less likely to hire black teachers. “Although most Northern states legally abolished segregated education during the late nineteenth century, or maintained silence on the issue,” historian Jack Dougherty writes, “segregation continued to be the policy and practice of many local districts.”<sup>18</sup>

Further investigation into this trend through a wider historical perspective sheds light on the facts and observations contained within the report on black teachers in Trenton Public Schools. Even though the Hedgepeth-Williams case declared that segregation was illegal in Trenton schools in 1944, the employment of black teachers remained largely unchanged between 1944 and 1947. Dougherty writes that “...a 1925 survey of southern New Jersey revealed the existence of racially designated elementary schools in every town with a significant black population, stretching from the southern tip of Cape May to the midstate town of Princeton.”<sup>19</sup> The problem grew worse during the 1930s and 1940s. The author of the “Facts and Observations” report writes that a gap emerged in the hiring of black teachers to Trenton schools between 1942 and 1947. According to the report, this hiring freeze makes the future for black teachers in the city appear bleak. The prospects for black teachers in Trenton were further limited by severe discrimination in the 1940s. Even though New Jersey’s third Constitution in 1947 made it the first state to constitutionally outlaw racial segregation in public schools, not all districts followed the law of the land.<sup>20</sup> According to a 1949 *New York Times* article, “Public schools reported to have not complied with the new provision in the [New Jersey] state Constitution against racially separate schools were in the area south of the Raritan River” – a major river running through central New Jersey about thirty miles north of Trenton – “where customs are influenced by the South.”<sup>21</sup>



Figure 1 – An October 11, 1946 photograph from the Trenton Central High School newspaper, *The Spectator*, showing two new black teachers, Lloyd Williams and Bessie Hill, who were not considered “qualified” or full-time employees. (Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library)

School districts “south of the Raritan River,” like Trenton, were not the only places in New Jersey influenced by southern customs. Almost a month after being denied a job in Trenton by Superintendent Dr. Paul Loser on August 29, 1947, Miss Eleanor David was similarly discriminated against while trying to become a school teacher in Plainfield, New Jersey – a town above the Raritan River, 40 miles north of Trenton, and only 20 miles west of New York City. Her ordeal began in January when she first wrote to the Plainfield Board of Education looking for a job in their public

schools. Plainfield Superintendent Arthur F. Hopper wrote back to Miss David saying, "We shall need several new teachers on our staff for the school year 1947-48."<sup>22</sup> She received a blank teaching application only after great persistence at the end of May. Overjoyed with this opportunity, David promptly completed the application and sent it back to the Whittier School Building – which was converted from a church to a school in 1896 in Plainfield. In order to be considered for a teaching position, though, Hopper gave her explicit instructions to send a photograph along with the application. David obtained a self-portrait and sent it under separate cover in late June. After months of scrutinizing over her photograph, the school board sent a rejection letter to Eleanor David on September 19. At that time, Miss David deduced that she was the victim of racial discrimination. The Division against Discrimination within the New Jersey Department of Education was willing to hear Eleanor David's story and register her complaint under the provisions of the Anti-Discrimination Act.<sup>23</sup> The Plainfield chapter of David's odyssey explicitly shows occupational discrimination. Since Superintendent Hopper required a photograph along with the application, Miss David had every right to believe she was the victim of racial discrimination. Her story is unfortunately not unique. Many black teachers applied to multiple school districts only to be turned down based on the color of their skin. Both in Plainfield and Trenton, white teachers with similar or lesser credentials were hired over competing black candidates.

Black teachers faced the same discrimination and prejudices as other African-American workers in Trenton. Even though Helen Lee Jackson, a young black civil servant, was hired as the first black woman in the central office of the state government in 1947, new workers in Trenton from 1940 to 1960 were "overwhelmingly white."<sup>24</sup> Holding menial jobs, the new black Trentonians were squeezed into Coalport and Five Points – areas which soon became known for poverty and "blight."<sup>25</sup> Trenton's white population blamed the ills of society on these black citizens. Typifying the white clamor for harsher police behavior by white citizens, "...the *Trenton Times* claimed that the rising crime rate during the late 1940s was due to an idle electric chair."<sup>26</sup> Black educators were likely to avoid Trenton schools because of the difficulties faced by African Americans throughout the city – struggles that came to a head with the "Trenton Six" case in 1948. In this case, six black Trentonians were charged with the murder of a white shopkeeper and police likely forced their confessions under duress. In *A Social History of Economic Decline*, historian John Cumbler cites an article from March 12, 1949 in saying that "The *Nation* headlined its story about the case with "They Must Die for Being Black," and restated Helen Lee's comment about Trenton being a "rubbish town, for here, less than 50 miles from Times Square we seem to have as raw a violation of due process as any below the Mason-Dixon line."<sup>27</sup>

Just as was the southern custom, white teachers had more opportunities to obtain jobs in public schools than black teachers in Trenton since World War I. As a result of increased school attendance, Trenton began a "modern and extensive school building program" in 1922 and spent "\$3.2 million for new schools by 1926 and adding a \$2.5 million high school in 1928."<sup>28</sup> Trenton's segregated, all-black Lincoln School first opened in 1923 as a part of this city-wide boom in construction. Although some black teachers were hired at this time, the Trenton Committee for Unity indicates that this did not put black teachers on equal footing with their white counterparts. "Lest anyone say that the door has been open to the Negro candidate in Trenton since 1923," writes the author of the "Facts and Observations" report, "it should be pointed out that Negroes incline to doubt that they will be hired in any but a segregated system."<sup>29</sup> This suggests that once desegregation occurred in Trenton after 1947, black teachers, in direct competition with their white counterparts, would not obtain jobs in the integrated schools. The issue was not about qualification. The author of the report remarks, "Since qualified Negro Teachers could be found for 19 years...it seems unlikely that none can be found now" in Trenton's integrated schools.<sup>30</sup>

Racism, however, was not exceptional to Trenton. Discrimination held back black teachers on both a local and national level. Discrimination increased along with the influx of African Americans in Trenton and throughout the country, especially in the 1920s and 1940s. African Americans experienced two Great Migrations in the twentieth century. The first migration of blacks from the Deep South to northern urban centers coincided with America's entry into WWI. Blacks fought in WWI in segregated regiments, but also took over many of the industrial jobs that many white men left behind in the home front. A similar trend occurred during WWII, when many more African Americans entered cities, like Trenton, looking for work. In *Cold War Civil Rights*, historian Mary Dudziak writes, "While World War I influenced civil rights activists' critique of American racism, it

did not lead to extensive social change. The moment for broader change came after World War II, a war against a racist regime carried on by a nation with segregated military forces.<sup>31</sup> Even though broader change occurred after WWII, black teachers still struggled to find work in public schools—especially in northern United States cities. “Although black teachers gained a small foothold in the Milwaukee school system,” writes Jack Dougherty, “they continued to confront barriers to full recognition in the 1940s.”<sup>32</sup> The same was true of Newark, New York, and Philadelphia. The Trenton Committee on Unity surveyed these and other northern urban centers in order to better combat the discrimination and racism in Trenton’s classrooms.

As the national and local histories of Trenton suggests, discrimination was enough to prevent blacks from entering professional occupations in large numbers.<sup>33</sup> The executive secretary of the Trenton Committee for Unity, Mrs. Edward M. Yard, sent a letter questioning other cities on their opinion and experience with desegregating public schools.<sup>34</sup> Yard contacted many colleges, universities, academics, intellectuals, organizations, and teachers. Letters from the Trenton Committee on Unity were sent to both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. But, out of all these letters, the experiences in Newark, New York and Philadelphia offer significant points of comparison to the story in Trenton among the northern cities.

The desegregation situation in Trenton and the entire state was deplorable—even by the standards of New Jersey civil rights advocates. Writing from Newark, New Jersey, the state Urban League Executive Secretary, Harold A. Lett, expressed his “dissatisfaction” with the desegregation situation in Trenton in a letter to Mrs. Yard on 18 April 1945. He found “no excuse” for the pattern of segregation in the state. This is significant because Lett’s letter was written only a year after Hedgepeth-Williams. Yet Lett pragmatically explains the employment situation for Negro teachers. He writes, “The fact of the matter is that many colored teachers advocate separate schools as their only means of finding employment.”<sup>35</sup> According to Lett, many of New Jersey’s African American teachers, especially in Trenton, were so fearful of losing their jobs in all-black schools that they ended up supporting segregated schools. This was a sentiment held most dearly in the south. Yet desegregation would help black students and hurt black teachers in both the southern and northern United States. Despite the struggle that black teachers faced in integrated public schools, few major northern cities felt that this justified the continuation of segregated schools.

According to the letters Mrs. Yard received, other northern cities disagreed with the idea in Newark and Trenton that black teachers should advocate for segregated schools in order to secure employment. The New York City NAACP assistant secretary, Roy Wilkins, ardently disagreed that “colored children are happier with their own kind” and explained, “Usually the Negro educators who advance this kind of argument are teachers in a segregated school system who have an economic stake in maintaining this kind of system. They are the people whose paychecks would suffer if there were no segregated schools.”<sup>36</sup> The National Urban League in New York also couldn’t agree that black teachers of any authority would prefer to work in segregated schools. On April 23, 1945, Alponse Heningburg, the National Urban League department of public education director, wrote, “I have spent the past twenty years in school work and I believe that I have never yet met a Negro educator who would subscribe to this belief.”<sup>37</sup>

Despite the struggles that black teachers encountered in integrated schools, cities outside of New Jersey appeared to handle discrimination with more ease and success. In New York City, the employment of teachers “...changed during and after World War II, as the economy strengthened and the baby boom increased the demand for teachers across the country. Suddenly, New York was facing a shortage rather than a surplus of instructors...”<sup>38</sup> Even though New York City officially opposed racial discrimination in schools, the city’s school boards were slow to hire black teachers in the 1940s and 1950s. Dr. Dan Dodson, the executive director of the Mayor’s Committee on Unity in New York City, understood the challenges faced by black teachers in his city, but still remained overwhelmingly positive. Dodson wrote that these teachers “...are accepted on the basis of ability like everyone else and there is no problem either [sic] of their relationship to white teachers nor their relationship to the community where they teach white children.”<sup>39</sup> This optimistic story was the same in Philadelphia. On April 27, 1945, Marechal Neil E. Young, an African American counselor in a Philadelphia school, wrote, “Parents have never raised inquiries...The fact that a number of Negroes are not serving in high schools as permanent substitutes points to a trend toward placement of more and more Negroes in these higher schools.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, most northern civil rights advocates disagreed that the perceived security of employment for African American teachers in all-black schools

validated the advancement of segregation despite the challenge black teachers faced. With the successes found in other northern cities, it seems only natural that Trenton would seamlessly transition to non-segregated faculties.

Yet Trenton struggled with the desegregation question in much the same way as southern cities like Washington, D.C. and Atlanta. Our nation's capital tried to distance itself from Trenton's struggles with desegregation. In a letter to Mrs. Edward Yard, the Washington, D.C. chief examiner of public schools, Howard Hale Long, found it was difficult to give specific advice for Trenton's schools and the desegregation "problems that are so local as your problem is."<sup>41</sup> Even though Trenton would reciprocally prefer to view desegregation in the District of Columbia as a strictly southern phenomenon, Long gives further evidence that Trenton had a great deal in common with the south. He writes, "Enforcing segregation always carries with it the implications of caste and superiority and inferiority. If people wish voluntarily to segregate themselves, [then] that is their own business..." In effect, Long is condoning white flight—a phenomenon that historian Kevin Kruse says is "more than a literal movement of the white population...it represented a much more important transformation in the political ideology of those involved"—in Washington.<sup>42</sup> This phenomenon also occurred in other southern cities. White flight from public schools affected Atlanta, even after the landmark Supreme Court decision in 1954. In *White Flight*, Kruse writes, "Indeed, in spite of *Brown*, the city's leaders acted as if nothing had changed or ever would."<sup>43</sup> Desegregation did not occur with "all deliberate speed" throughout the south. "As [whites] fled from the schools in record numbers and at record speed," writes Kruse, "yet another desegregated public space passed from segregation to resegregation, with barely any time spent on true "integration" at all."<sup>44</sup> Historian John Cumbler writes that a long history of flight also occurred in the north and plagued Trenton, NJ. According to Cumbler, "The rapid expansion of Trenton's suburbs occurred over a half-century and was already noticeable in the 1920s...What had been a long process of "flight" became "white flight" in the 1960s."<sup>45</sup> The comparisons between southern cities and Trenton become eerily similar when looking at the defense of segregation.

While New Jersey civil rights leaders realized that black teachers in Trenton advocated for segregation in order to obtain jobs, the same pattern was observed in southern urban centers. In Nashville, Tennessee, the Social Science Institute of Fisk University responded to Mrs. Edward Yard on April 18, 1945 in this way: "It is a fact that the segregated school is sometimes defended even by Negroes who are a part of the system itself. One of the most frequently advanced arguments for the practice is the immediately observable end of jobs for Negro teachers and administrators."<sup>46</sup> On the same day, Harold Lett and the New Jersey Urban League observed this exact phenomenon occurring eight hundred miles north of Nashville—in Trenton. Since Trenton practiced the same southern customs as Nashville, the New Jersey state capital appears to lie below the Mason-Dixon Line. In an article from October 9, 1946, Noma Jensen writes that "Observation in 22 school systems north of the Mason-Dixon Line leads one to believe that the integration of Negroes, both pupils and teachers, into our public schools in the North is a very spotty affair."<sup>47</sup> Though Jensen proceeds to say that the NAACP branch in Trenton and the Trenton Committee on Unity integrated "both colored students and teachers into the Trenton public school system," this ultimately proved to be a limited phenomenon. Desegregation in Trenton proved beneficial for black students and harmful to black teachers since segregated schools were often defended by those hoping to keep their jobs in the classroom. The similarities between Trenton and the southern struggle with desegregation are no coincidence.

Despite the many suggestions for how to improve Trenton's experience with desegregation, much as in southern cities, little had changed for black teachers in New Jersey's capital by 1947. Institutional racism effectively barred blacks from teaching jobs in integrated schools leading up to *Brown*. A letter from H.J. Austin, president of the Trenton Branch of the NAACP, to the president of North Carolina State College for Negroes on November 13, 1947 recognizes that the employment outlook for black professionals continued to look bleak in public schools. While this copy of the letter was only addressed to NC State in the records of the Trenton Committee on Unity, the same message was forwarded to over eighty other schools and colleges. By surveying the names of the other historically black colleges—including Fisk, Howard, Tuskegee, and Spelman—which were forwarded this letter, it appears that the NAACP attempted actively to recruit black male and female teachers to join the faculties of Trenton Public Schools. Austin's letter reaches out to black colleges throughout the country—touting the "relatively good" salaries in Trenton schools and the progress that the city

has made—in an effort to draw the best and brightest graduates to Trenton faculties.<sup>48</sup> Yet almost four years after Hedgpeeth-Williams, black teachers faced severe occupational discrimination. Black students became integrated in public schools as a result of this 1944 case in New Jersey, but black teachers largely did not break the color barriers of Trenton’s faculties. Had Trenton become as integrated as Austin proclaimed, black teachers would not have struggled to gain employment after the GI Bill and the ratification of the third New Jersey Constitution. The failure of integration for black teachers in Trenton continued into the 1950s. While *Brown* helped black students integrate into public schools on a national level, black teachers still faced discrimination in finding jobs.

When the *Brown* decision was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1954, black teachers realized that their difficulties in obtaining jobs in Trenton schools were not over. A *New York Times* article from May 18, 1954 indicates that the employment of black teachers continued to be in jeopardy even after *Brown* because the closure of all-black school put black teachers in direct competition with white teachers—a competition they would surely lose in the context of continued occupational discrimination. The article expresses “the possibility of a gradual reduction in the number of Negro teachers and administration. They will not be absorbed in a nonsegregated system...”<sup>49</sup> The Civil Rights history of the pre-*Brown* era, thus, offers a precondition for the struggles black teachers faced beyond 1954.

Miss Eleanor David’s inability to obtain a permanent teaching position in Trenton’s public elementary schools on August 29, 1947 because of her African-American heritage was one of the many stories depicting the uphill battle for black teachers in northern urban public schools. David’s account, as well as those of other black teachers in the 1940s and 1950s, should not be overshadowed by the *Brown* narrative. Historian Jack Dougherty writes, “Retelling the history of Black education solely through the lens of *Brown* narrows our focus to a one-dimensional struggle, the NAACP campaign for school desegregation, when a growing number of scholars have suggested that there were many different civil rights *movements* rather than a single unified movement dominated by a few elite leaders.”<sup>50</sup> By unpacking the conventional narrative surrounding *Brown*, the plight of black teachers in the 1940s and 1950s can be placed alongside the larger twentieth-century Civil Rights movements. The occupational discrimination faced by African-American educators in the New Jersey state capital eerily resembles the struggle of black teachers in the southern United States, effectively placing Trenton below the Mason-Dixon Line.

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<sup>1</sup> The preceding vignette was drawn from an untitled chart featuring black applicants denied employment in Trenton Public Schools from August 29, 1947, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library; I feel confident in saying that David contacted the Trenton Committee on Unity because untitled handwritten notes within the committee's papers suggest that contact between both parties began on August 21, 1947, a full week before Eleanor David met with Trenton Public Schools' superintendent, Dr. Paul Loser. This paper does not offer any opinion about Dr. Loser's participation in Miss Eleanor David's story. See "Untitled" handwritten notes on Miss Eleanor Davis from 21 August 1947, 23 October 1947, and September 1947 from Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library; Harry R. Pine, "Memorandum on Non-Segregated Faculties," July 9, 1945, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Dougherty, "That's When We Were Marching for Jobs": Black Teachers and the Early Civil Rights Movement in Milwaukee," *History of Education Quarterly* 38, 2 (1998), *JSTOR*, 123.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 4. While Dougherty draws only on comparisons with Northern cities, I survey urban centers on both sides of the Mason Dixon line. Also Milwaukee and Trenton cannot be thought of as interchangeable starting points. Milwaukee was decidedly segregated during the pre-*Brown* era, while Trenton appears both Northern and Southern based on one's own perspective. Therefore, I argue that Trenton takes on a more complex characteristic when viewed in context with the civil rights movements occurring simultaneously in other cities.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cristina Collins, *"Ethnically qualified": Race, Merit and the Selection of Urban teachers, 1920-1980* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Frank N. Cane, "An African American Experience in the New Jersey Courts to Assure Equal Public School Education," *Hedgepeth-Williams.org* (2008-2009), <<http://hedgepeth-williams.org/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Dougherty, "That's When We Were Marching for Jobs," 140.

<sup>8</sup> Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 36. Dougherty responds to Myrdal's statement, saying, "Myrdal was wrong." But, I will use Trenton as a lens for studying northern and southern cities, instead of Milwaukee, to prove this point. This is a difficult task seeing that discrimination was less visible in New Jersey than it was in Wisconsin.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Brodtkin-Sacks, "How did Jews become White Folks?" within Gregory and Sanjek, eds., *Race* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 92.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> "Facts and Observations Pertaining to Employment of Negro Teachers and Negro Clerks in Trenton Public Schools," October 27, 1947, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>13</sup> "Survey Bares County Setup of Teachers," *Trenton Times* [?], 19 October 1947 within the document "Facts and Observations Pertaining to Employment of Negro Teachers and Negro Clerks in Trenton Public Schools," October 27, 1947, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Fine, "Education in Review: Schools Will Again Face a Serious Teacher Shortage When They Reopen Next Fall." *New York Times* (1923-Current file). 24 Jun 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007), 51.

<sup>15</sup> Collins, 45.

<sup>16</sup> "Pay Rises Halt Teacher Exodus," *New York Times* [?]. 16 September 1947, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>17</sup> Collins, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 36-37.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> Cane.

<sup>21</sup> "Racial Fairness Widens in New Jersey," *New York Times* (1923-Current file), 19 June 1949, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007), p. 52 In the article, East Orange, Passaic, Plainfield, Linden, and Hamilton Township were praised for employing African American teachers since those communities had few black families.

<sup>22</sup> "Form No. C-1-c. (9-6-46). Miss Eleanor David vs. Arthur F. Hopper." State of New Jersey Department of Education Division Against Discrimination. 30 September 1947. Folder F.E.P.C. Formal Complaints A-M, Box Trenton Council on Human Relations (3) 1946-59 Unprocessed, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library. The complaint was filed under the of the Law Against Discrimination (Chapter 169, P.L. 1945), "and specifically within the meaning of subsection A of section eleven of said law; by reason of which the complain is aggrieved, in that: she was refused employment as an elementary teacher in the Plainfield schools." I'm confident that this is the same Eleanor David as in the opening vignette because the names and dates correspond. Also, she lists the same home address (217 Church Street, Trenton, NJ) on all TCU documents. See Chart featuring black applicants denied employment in Trenton Public Schools, 29 August 1947; Handwritten notes on Miss Eleanor Davis from 21 August 1947, 3 September 1947, and 23 October 1947.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> John T. Cumbler, *A Social History of Economic Decline: Business, Politics, and Work in Trenton* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 152 and 154.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 151. After wartime expansions, blacks only found jobs as dishwashers, sweepers, etc.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 155.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 105. See also "Facts and Observations."

<sup>29</sup> "Facts and Observations," 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> African Americans first served in the Navy during the Spanish-American War. Then as well as in WWII, blacks faced severe discrimination. They often held the lowest positions, such as cooks and dish washers.

<sup>34</sup> "A copy of the letter the Trenton Committee for Unity sent to a number of leading organizations and colored and white educators and leaders interested in education and race relations," April 1945, Folder TCU Letter on School Segregation April 1945, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>35</sup> Harold A. Lett to Mrs. Edward M. Yard, 12 April 1945, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library. Lett advocates for necessity of black leadership in saying that "The Negro in America can develop leadership and prosper only to the degree that he is associated with, develops understanding of, and is able to compete successfully with the whites...Leadership of a minority group cannot be developed in a racial vacuum."

<sup>36</sup> Roy Wilkins to Mrs. Edward M. Yard, 11 May 1945, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>37</sup> Alphonse Heningburg to Mrs. Edward M. Yard, 23 April 1945, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>38</sup> Collins, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Harry R. Pine to Charles P. Messick, "Memorandum on Non-Segregated Faculties," 9 July 1945, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library. This memorandum was likely compiled from Ms. Yard's letters. The memorandum was excerpted from 1945 TCU memorandums and attached the Pine to Messick letter. The William Penn High School for Girls letter was quoted directly in the Memorandum and found separately in another folder in the TCU papers.

<sup>40</sup> Marechal Neil E. Young to Miss Weber, 27 April 1945, Folder Responses-letter on racially mixed teaching staff (1945), Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>41</sup> Howard Hale Long to Mrs. Edward Yard, 5 May 1945, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>42</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>45</sup> Cumbler, 156.

<sup>46</sup> Fisk University Social Science Institute to Mrs. Edward Yard, 18 April 1945, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>47</sup> Noma Jensen, "Negroes in the Northern School Systems." *American Unity: A Monthly Educational Guide*, 9 October 1946, (Vol 5, No 1), 14-16. Unprocessed Papers, Box 1: Trenton Council on Human Relations c. 1950s Clubs & Organizations, Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

<sup>48</sup> H.J. Austin to President of the North Carolina State College for Negroes, 13 November 1947, Folder Employment of Negro Teachers 1937-1948, Box Trenton Committee on Unity School Desegregation, Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library. Denoting this progress, Austin writes that "Trenton has now an integrated school system; not only the student body but those of the faculty are scattered throughout the city..."

<sup>49</sup> "School Bias Issue Has Complexities: Conjecture Arises Over Jobs of Negro Teachers and Fate of Separate Buildings," *New York Times* (1923-Current file), 18 May 1954, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007), 22.

<sup>50</sup> Dougherty, "That's When We Were Marching for Jobs," 122.