

## AN OPPORTUNITY FOR UNITY: THE JEWISH AND BLACK EXPERIENCE IN TRENTON

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### **ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

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Bessie Nelms Hill grew up in Montgomery Alabama during the Jim Crow era. Born in 1898 and faced with restrictions placed upon her race and gender, Hill found opportunities for success through her religion and perseverance. After getting a master's degree in education from Columbia University, Hill moved to Trenton, New Jersey around 1919, hoping to make a difference that would stretch from North to South.

What is left of Bessie Nelms Hill's life lives within the walls of the Trentoniana room at the Trenton Public Library. In a collection of nearly a dozen documents, Hill's life of activism lies silenced, her life largely unrecognized outside the walls. Only one other instance of Mrs. Nelms Hill's impact on New Jersey stands in Hill Hall on the Rutgers New Brunswick Campus. For a woman who made it her life goal to speak up for the rights of minority Trenton residents, she is largely forgotten.

Much of Hill's work was focused on minority activism in the city she called home. Hill spoke for those who were discriminated against, including women, African Americans, and non-Christian Trentonians. Trenton at the time was a majority white city with rules and policies that mimicked those of southern cities like Hill's Montgomery. Despite this, the minority groups of Trenton advocated not only for their own rights, but the rights of other minority groups, creating a growing coalition including Hill. But how did the minority groups in Trenton achieve equal rights? And what were some of the final impacts of the coalitions between minority Trentonians?

Historians have only recently started to take a look at these questions, though a majority of recent studies have only been looking at the impacts on and by Black Trentonians. In Autumn Dille's "A Journey Northward: The African American Migration in Trenton 1940-1960" Dille explains how, a lack of steady employment encouraged illegal activities, shown in a larger number of social delinquency cases among African Americans" among other acts of de facto segregation led Trenton to be considered "bad."<sup>1</sup> Dille's findings are important to the large study of Trenton's history, but seem to leave out some of the causes for the de facto segregation. It is a minority narrative that leaves out a large group of Trenton's minority population: Jewish men and women. Dille's findings only look at the later half of the twentieth century, and not to when Trenton was blanketly described as good. Such terms are problematic in addressing the key issues unreported or unrecognized.

Studies on minority groups in cities have been limited to the sole experiences of Black and Jewish people. While not Trenton specific, Karen Brodtkin Sacks observes this reclassification of Jewish people in cities in her book *How Jews Became White Folks and what that Says about Race in America*. Brodtkin Sacks notes the "occupational mobility" given to white passing Americans after World War II and how such benefits gave way to social mobility out of city environments.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Autumn Dille, "A JOURNEY NORTHWARD: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN MIGRATION IN TRENTON, 1940-1960" TCNJ JOURNAL OF STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP VOLUME XV APRIL 2013. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Brodtkin Sacks. *How Jews Became White Folks and what that Says about Race in America*. Greece: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Historian Michael Cort has also studied the Jewish environment of Trenton in the mid twentieth century and found that its own strength came from the inner community bonds between Jewish Trentonians. In his podcast on Trenton's now defunct "Jew Town," Cort writes, "Jew Town" was a community, a city within a city" with the bond between Jewish Trentonians being more significant<sup>3</sup> than the bond between Jewish Trentonians and the city itself. Cort cites the disbanding of the Jewish coalition with redefinition of whiteness and the midcentury concept of urban renewal.

Nicole Valdez continues the study on Trenton Jewish Unity in her paper, "Exiled in A New Promise Land: Changing Identity in the Jewish Community of Trenton 1929-1952". Instead of finding fault with the urban renewal projects of the midcentury, Valdez asserts, "The cohesiveness of these communities was threatened in the mid-twentieth century, however, as Jewish Americans sought to reconcile their identity as Americans and as Jews in light of new challenges at home and abroad" connecting Brodtkin Sacks research directly with the Trenton community.<sup>4</sup> As a whole, Valdez's paper stands as a greater answer as to what possibly happened between Jewish and Black Trentonians from 1929 to 1952.

Advancing civil rights for minority groups is an important characteristic of the twentieth century. African Americans, Women and Jewish Americans all fought strenuous battles for equal rights. However, popular media shows these movements as individual struggles. In these accounts, the minority group in question is alone in their fight for equality. While much of the research on minority rights has been segregated in it's own nature, this piece will look at the full scope of minority activism in Trenton, New Jersey. From the 1920s to the 1960s, Trenton exhibited a band of unity between people, especially between the Jewish and Black populations with the help of some white Christian men and women. Instances of this bond include the formation of the Trenton Committee on Unity and the numerous social clubs that were formed in this time. In addition to social acts towards equal rights, Jewish and Black Trentonians also rallied for change through legal actions.

This paper is broken down into three sections, each covering a respective decade or decades and how the relations between the Jewish and Black communities were tested and strengthened. Looking generally, the trend of early unity was a more personal matter in the beginning, creating roots that would improve the future decades. Moving forward to the 40s and 50s, the relationship between the two groups was much more public and the groups took actions changing racist policies and ideas. Finally, moving on to the 60s, the two minority groups start to separate as Jewish Americans are able to meld into the descriptions of white America while African Americans are not able to receive said opportunities. This is not to say that the bond is broken by this point in Trenton history, but it surely weakened. Plainly, this paper traces the rise and fall of minority unity in Trenton, New Jersey.

To a large extent, the groups and people of Trenton in the early twentieth century are predecessors to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. The actions taken to create an equitable environment as well as the landmark decisions of local and state governments parallel the efforts of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders of the time. Understanding that a more equitable future would be up to the next generation, Trenton Civil Rights were focused on educational changes for equality, as the following events such as the Hedgepeth and Williams' case and actions such as the removal of *The Merchant of Venice* will illustrate. These early civil rights actions could not have been so successful without the work of people such as Bessie Nelms Hill, who is still an underappreciated member of the greater Trenton narrative. Mrs. Nelms Hill is a key figure in the study of Trenton's minority groups, as she served the Trenton community for over 40 years.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Cort, "Jew Town" TCNJ 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Nicole Valdez, "Exiled in a New Promised Land: Changing Identity in the Jewish Community of Trenton, New Jersey, 1929-1952" TCNJ, 2011. 3.

One key player in this study of unity between Jewish and Black populations is Civil Rights Activist W.E.B. DuBois. While not a Trenton native, Du Bois made several visits to the area throughout the aforementioned time periods. Using Du Bois's visits as historical markers, this paper will trace the history of unity between the Jewish and Black populations of Trenton and look at some of the key actions taken to promote unity as well as what trends led to the disconnect between the minority groups.

This paper utilizes sources from the Trentoniana collection of the Trenton Public library including essays, letters and newspaper articles. These primary sources come from the original figures and organizations important to the Trenton community in addition to local Mercer County residents. Additional primary sources come from the University of Massachusetts Amherst W.E.B. DuBois online archives.

### **PART ONE: TRENTON IN THE 1920s AND 1930s**

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From an outside perspective, Trenton of the early twentieth century didn't seem to be a place where minority activism was needed. Unlike cities such Hill's Montgomery, or Atlanta, black and Jewish Trentonians only made up about 10% of the population. In the early 1920s, the Black population of Trenton was only that of 4,113 residents out of the 119,000 total residents of Trenton.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish population of Trenton was slightly higher, with just under 7,000 living in the city according to the 1920 census.<sup>6</sup> By 1930, the African American group was growing significantly in population at just under 15,000 of the 123,000 total people living in the city. Regardless of the growing number of minority men and women, civil rights activism in Trenton was private but still powerful. It was in these early attempts at activism that the foundations formed for the successful coalitions of the 1940s and 1950s.

Bessie Nelms Hill begins her public quest for minority activism in Trenton by inviting W.E.B. Du Bois to speak at the Young Women's Christian Association in 1929. Mrs. Nelms Hill, an African American woman and native of Trenton is the most consistent figure throughout the 40-year coalition because of her adaptive role in the community. At the time of this visit, Mrs. Nelms Hill was a teacher at the New Lincoln School, a segregated elementary school. In addition to her identity as an educator, Mrs. Nelms Hill is one of the first Black women on the board of the Y.W.C.A., serving as a secretary for the organization (though much of the information on her was hidden within Y.W.C.A. files) (Figure 1.1). This event was "private and by invitation only" because Dr. Du Bois had made plans for a more public engagement later that same day and legal requirements bound him to only one formal lecture a day.<sup>7</sup> While this lecture was only enjoyed by a select few, it was one of many that took place during the last three months of 1929, and coalitions between minority groups would grow in the coming years. Within the month prior, the Y.W.C.A. had invited female literary experts, wage equality speakers and global community leaders to speak on the pressing issues of the day.<sup>8</sup> Groups like the Y.W.C.A. who were focused on the proper raising of Christian young women and broader women's rights after gaining the right to vote only ten years before could not fully understand the issues of other minority communities, but they still banded together to gain an understanding on how to help.

Women's opportunities for activism were not limited to Trenton. Just one year later in West Orange, New Jersey, women in their local chapter of the Y.W.C.A. invited W.E.B. Du Bois to speak on the

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<sup>5</sup> "Population Statistics of African Americans in Trenton 1910-1950", New Jersey State Library (1990), Trentoniana, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Cort, "Jew Town", TCNJ 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Young Women's "Newspaper Clippings"1900-1999. Y.W.C.A. of Trenton (Series 3[Box 11]) 1929 Christian Association of Trenton, October 10, 1929. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

<sup>8</sup> "Newspaper Clippings"1900-1999. Y.W.C.A. of Trenton (Series 3[Box 11]) 1929

“Debate on Haiti.”<sup>9</sup> After being invaded by the United States in 1915, Haiti’s forced assimilation left the country with some struggles. Obviously concerned for their country’s well-being, but still only permitted in the domestic sphere, these women relied on their own education to better the country.



Figure 1.1 Bessie Nelms Hill’s yearbook photo in 1960, by this point Mrs. Nelms Hill was employed at a desegregated High School but still felt she could do more for the minority students in Trenton (Trenton Central High Yearbook).

Dr. Du Bois’s second visit to Trenton at the previously mentioned Young Men’s Hebrew Association or the Y.M.H.A. was publicized unlike Y.W.C.A.’s visit, but still had the exclusionist ties characteristic of 1920s and 1930s coalitions on equality. At the time of Dr. Du Bois’s lecture (and moving forward for most of the time period covered in this paper), Jewish men and women were considered to be a different race than white Christian Americans. Acknowledging that truth, Du Bois was an “Almost unanimous choice” for members of the Y.M.H.A. as they felt there was a comradeship between the groups.<sup>10</sup> In his lecture Du Bois spoke on “Modern Problems of Race and Color” to an audience of about 175 members of the Y.M.H.A. and their families.<sup>11</sup> What is interesting about this talk however is that while the event was publicized three times in the local Trenton newspaper, tickets were exclusively given out to members of the Y.M.H.A.

Collegiate Trentonians were an integral part of minority activism in the early twentieth century. For instance, a series of conferences held for and by minority students at the New Jersey State Normal School (now the College of New Jersey) on their Trenton campus enlightened young adult Trentonians. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, college presidents Don C. Bliss and Roscoe L. West ensured their students would be well equipped for teaching a diverse classroom by getting involved with Jewish and Black students on campus. A 1930 yearbook boasts the creation of Jewish and Black social clubs as well as private lecture series for students. Additionally, Don C. Bliss hosted Dr. Du Bois to speak on “Negro Education” or “Democracy” in the American classroom.<sup>12</sup> Despite many records on these events and

<sup>9</sup> “DEBATE ON HAITI ROUSES WOMEN’S CLUB; Dr. Du Bois Criticism of Our Policy Brings Heckling at East Orange Meeting.” *New York Times*. 1930.

<sup>10</sup> “Du Bois to Speak on Racial Subject” *Trenton Evening Times*, November 11th, 1929.

<sup>11</sup> “Activity Attendance Sheet” Y.M.H.A Files (Box 1:Folder 1), *Trentoniana*.

<sup>12</sup> New Jersey State Normal School (Trenton, N.J.). Letter from New Jersey State Normal School to W. E. B. Du Bois, February 6, 1928. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

visits being lost in the college's move from Trenton to Ewing, New Jersey, the spirits live on in the modern counterparts held, albeit more publicly.

### **PART TWO: TRENTON IN THE 1940s AND 1950s**

Moving forward into the 1940s and 1950s, the coalition between minority groups strengthened greatly through legal action and public service. It was during this time period that Trenton had its most publicized event on racial equality, the *Hedgepeth and Williams* case of 1943. In this landmark NJ supreme court case that would later help Thurgood Marshall create a winning argument for the *Brown V. Board of Education* supreme court case, the community members of Trenton made efforts to end the segregation that was going on in the school districts for teachers and students. Black educators could only work at segregated schools and students could only attend certain schools depending on their race. Additionally, historian Lauren Wells cites a dearth of curriculum for the "Black" schools "the types of classes offered to their children (mainly vocational and few academic) perpetuated the racism that Black adults faced, ultimately continuing the discriminatory policies that once started in the classroom."<sup>13</sup> This Black and white de jure segregation seemed to conflict the neighborhood environments in Trenton, which was very interracial at the time. While certain parts of the community lived in set economic strata, the neighborhood bonds were not racially tied. Thelma Smith, daughter of the aforementioned Williams explained in a later interview "We had Italian neighbors, Jewish neighbors, Polish neighbors. We were all in poverty, but it was a poverty of money, not a poverty of spirit" and that the only thing that separated the minority groups was the schooling situation.<sup>14</sup> Equipped with a lawyer from the NAACP Trenton Branch, one of the main questions of the case would force superintendent of public schools Paul Loser to consider what made different minorities better or worse. "do you consider it advisable to set up separate schools for minority groups such as Italians, Poles, Jews, Hungarians and Germans?" Robert Queen, the NAACP lawyer asked a then stunned Loser.<sup>15</sup> Facing this question the Supreme Court of New Jersey went on to find segregation of any kind in schools fully unlawful.

Another important moment for the Jewish and Black experience in Trenton was the foundation of the Trenton Committee on Unity in 1943. Historian Autumn Dille explains, "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" in her study of the impacts the group had on Black lives alone.<sup>16</sup> This idea of school security for minority students is evident in some of the group's earliest members. It is by this time that Mrs. Bessie Nelms Hill reappears in the equality narrative, with Mrs. Nelms Hill being an executive secretary for the group, and now working at a desegregated Trenton Central High School. Other important members of said group would include Mrs. Glayds Hedgepeth and future Trenton mayor Arthur J Holland serving in different positions over the nearly 20 years of the organization's existence.

The Trenton Committee on Unity stressed the importance of equality to students in the 1946 series of correspondence surrounding the William Shakespeare play *The Merchant Of Venice*. Just coming off of World War Two, the education subgroup of the Trenton Committee on Unity agreed with the idea that the *Merchant of Venice* painted an unkind portrayal of Jewish men and women. In a letter penned by Mrs. Edward M. Yard (Mary Emma Howell) to Sidney Goldmann, a local board of education member, Mrs. Yard explains how the play has been a source of "embarrassment and humiliation" for young Jewish

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<sup>13</sup> Lauren Wells, "Thesis with Janie Butler interview transcript, 2016. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Jon, Blackwell. 1943: Hedgepeth-Williams. *The Trentonian*. 2021. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Autumn Dille, "A JOURNEY NORTHWARD: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN MIGRATION IN TRENTON, 1940-1960" *TCNJ JOURNAL OF STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP VOLUME XV APRIL 2013*. 2.

readers.<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Yard also explains that the only way for the *Merchant of Venice* to be taught with little to no effect on the Jewish population is by employing “one thousand teachers” of Jewish descent to speak fairly.<sup>18</sup> While hyperbolic, this sentiment speaks well to the continuing idea of antisemitism in America even after the war. One teacher who already signed her support to readdress the issue surrounding *The Merchant of Venice* was the ever-important Bessie Nelms Hill who was teaching High School English at this time. Always willing to do whatever it takes for an equal environment, Mrs. Nelms Hill is mentioned in further materials in the Trenton Committee on Unity’s archival files.

Attached to this letter is a pamphlet/petition Mrs. Yard hopes Mr. Goldmann would circulate to teachers and other members of the board of education. In the pamphlet, Mrs. Yard expresses that even the most liberal teacher would be unable to adequately explain the character of Shylock (the Jewish stereotype) to his or her students. Mrs. Yard quotes specific instances of the play that are hurtful and finally pleads for the “removal of *The Merchant of Venice* from the curriculum” as it is as harmful as the Jim Crow depictions of Black men and women.<sup>19</sup> With the publication of this petition and it’s circulation to a mainly white and Christian staff of teachers, the Trenton Committee on Unity reflects the importance activist groups were placing on combating anti-Semitism (and racism) during this time period.”<sup>20</sup>

In a 1941 article published in *Bags and Baggage Newspaper* journalist Henry Canby explained why racism towards Black Americans led to antisemitism. While American soldiers fought overseas to liberate the Jewish people captured by the Nazi reign, Canby saw America going down the same path if actions weren’t taken: “Intolerance tolls for one... it tolls for all.”<sup>21</sup> The Trenton Committee on Unity seems to put a stop to the continuing nature of intolerance through their advocating for Jewish and Black Trentonians.

A second instance of the Trenton Committee on Unity using liberal pamphlets on the effectiveness of a fair education. One such pamphlet was “Effective Teaching For Democracy”, a transcript of a speech given by Dean Gauss of Princeton University. This speech from 1947 stresses the education of the “community modern man belongs” instead of teaching idolized (or more plainly white education).<sup>22</sup> Without a modernized education, Gauss believes the world would be less humane and advanced.

Leaving the classroom, the Trenton Committee on Unity also tried to create a unified minority community through their Diner’s Out club. This club was made up of white, Black, Jewish and Christian men and women who wanted to expose different dining establishments for their racist ways. Going in mixed groups of people, members of the Diner’s Out Club would secretly fill out a form observing the attitudes given by the employees and owners of the restaurants. (See Figure 2.1) Leading this committee was the ever-important Bessie Nelms Hill, who was referred to as Mrs. George Hill in correspondence because she was already well known in the community.

If the individual members of the Diner’s Out Committee were treated unjustly because they had a Black person in their party, Mrs. Edward M. Yard would write warning letters to the owners. In one case with the American Restaurant, where a bunch of the waitresses treated men and women of color

<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Edward Yard, “M. Mrs. Edward M Yard to Mr. Sidney Goldmann”. Trenton Committee on Unity Papers (General Files [Merchant Of Venice]) 1946.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Edward Yard, “M. Mrs. Edward M Yard to Mr. Sidney Goldmann (Continued)”. Trenton Committee on Unity Papers (General Files [Merchant Of Venice]) 1946.

<sup>20</sup> Nicole Valdez, “Exiled in a New Promised Land: Changing Identity in the Jewish Community of Trenton, New Jersey, 1929-1952” TCNJ, 2011. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Canby, "Intolerance." *Bags and Baggage* (Chicago, Illinois) IV, no. 4, April 1, 1941: 4. Readex: America's Historical Newspapers

<sup>22</sup> “Effective Teaching For Democracy” Y.M.H.A. (Jewish Historical Society [Box P]) 1947.

poorly, Mrs. Yard recommends that the information must be passed onto “the Trenton NAACP for (legal persecution)” as they had no legal power to sue themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Figure 2.1: An example of Diners Out Survey filled out by Bessie Nelms Hill and Gretchen Hormell describing an initially shocked waiter “Investigator’s Report”, Various authors, Trenton Committee on Unity Papers (Box 1 [Civil Problems: Restaurant Discrimination]) Circa 1940s).

Throughout the time that the Diners Out club operated, they would send out public lists of restaurants that did not discriminate to the Trenton Community. One of the greatest trends among these restaurants was that a majority of them were owned by people who were already part of the equality movement. For example, when Mrs. Higginbotham of the Y.W.C.A. asked for a list of acceptable restaurants she and her Black company could feel comfortable eating in, Mrs. Yard replied that the Y.W.C.A. 's own establishment had distinguished themselves as one of the most equal.<sup>24</sup> Other establishments were also drug stores and deli’s owned by Jewish men and women.

The Diner’s Out committee would pave the way for later civil rights work. Because the Trenton Committee on Unity gave their findings to the NAACP, “sit in and stand in” techniques like the ones practiced in Trenton were promoted by the NAACP in newspapers to be acceptable forms of peaceful protest.<sup>25</sup> By the time of the 1960s, sit-ins had become the favored choice for protest in the South for school aged young adults. Even Martin Luther King Jr. said of the sit ins, “electrifying movement of Negro students [that] shattered the placid surface of campuses and communities across the South.”<sup>26</sup> By setting the standards for young people to follow later on 1940s Trenton activism became an important part of the later narrative.

<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Edward M. Yard, “Mrs. Edward M Yard to Mr. Andrew Wise”. Trenton Committee on Unity Papers (General Files [Diners Out Committee]) ca. 1947.

<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Edward M. Yard, “Mrs. Edward M Yard to Mrs. A. M. Higginbotham”. Trenton Committee on Unity Papers (General Files [Diners Out Committee]) ca. 1947.

<sup>25</sup> "Core Booklet on Non-Violent Techniques out Washington." Los Angeles Tribune (Los Angeles, California) 19, no. 52, February 5, 1960: 20. Readex: America's Historical Newspapers.

<sup>26</sup> “Sit-ins” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute (Sanford University) Sanford University Online, 2020.

Along with the work of the Trenton Committee on Unity for the advancement of Jewish and Black Trentonians, many individuals made their marks on having Trenton be a more equal place. One cannot speak to the efforts of individuals without acknowledging Bernard Forer and his family. Bernard, a Trenton Central high school teacher (and coworker with Mrs. Nelms Hill for more than ten years) and his wife Rose, a former nursery schoolteacher, were some of the most progressive members of Trenton's community. Both coming from Jewish immigrant families, the Forers understood the struggles of being a minority group in a growing city.<sup>27</sup>

Bernard Forer (Figure 2.2) taught in Trenton for almost 40 years and was an active member of the staff when *Hedgepeth & Williams* desegregated education for teachers and students. Forer was described as a radical by the school board in his early years as he and others pushed for the rights of teachers (both white and Black). At the same time that Forer was educating Black and white students in math and science, his brother Joseph served as attorney and would later on go on to defend a group of young Black men falsely accused of rape by a white woman and "denied due process of law by the prosecution's suppression of evidence favorable to them and by knowing use of perjured testimony."<sup>28</sup> (*See Giles v. Maryland 1967*) Joseph Forer took the case as he felt that what was happening to these young boys was a repeat of what happened to Emmitt Till in 1955. And at home, Bernard's wife Rose, cared for her children as well as being part of "various labour and anti-racism events" with her husband and brother in law.<sup>29</sup> And it is through these anti-racism events Dr. W.E.B. DuBois returned to Trenton in 1950.



Figure 2.2: Bernard Forer in 1922 and ca 1979 [Trentoniana Archive] Dwyer, Bill "Bill Dwyer's World" (VF Schools [Public Community]) 1979.

"I don't remember much about the visit," says Arthur Forer, son of Bernard and Rose in a 2021 interview, "but my parents were always concerned about civil rights."<sup>30</sup> Growing up as a Trenton youth, Arthur Forer recalled the numerous events he was taken to, as well as some of the more hurtful comments that he and his family were called including "dirty jew" and "n\*\*\*\*r lover".<sup>31</sup> Dr. Du Bois' visit in the 1950s was more unrestricted than his visit nearly twenty years earlier, and though much of the information of that night has been lost, Forer explained that Dr. Du Bois likely talked to a group of teachers so that they may better teach a desegregated classroom.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Forer (Professor of Cell Biology), Interview with Author, March 2021

<sup>28</sup> Justia US (Supreme Court), "Giles v. Maryland, 386 U.S. 66 (1967)" 2021 Justia Inc.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Arthur Forer (Professor of Cell Biology), Interview with Author, March 2021

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



Dr. Du Bois visited the NAACP in 1953, and while the event was exclusive to members of the Trenton branch, one important guest reappeared. At the time of Dr. Du Bois visit, “Mrs. Bessie Nelms Hill served as state (NJ) secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People”, and likely had her hand in arranging the meetup.<sup>32</sup> While this is the last recorded visit Dr. Du Bois makes to Trenton, Mrs. Nelms Hill continued to be in correspondence with him until his death in 1963. From her communications with Dr. Du Bois, Mrs. Nelms Hill found new ways to promote activism in Trenton.

### **PART THREE: TRENTON IN THE 1960s**

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The 1960s marks the end of the coalition movement between Black and Jewish Trentonians. The 1960s began with the most striking blow to Trenton’s activism scene, the departure of Bessie Nelms Hill from the Trenton Community. Mrs. Nelms Hill was offered a job as an admissions counselor at Rutgers New Brunswick and had taken it as it created an opportunity for more Black voices on the collegiate level. To celebrate Mrs. Nelms Hill’s achievements for the Trenton community, the city threw a dinner party and gifted Mrs. Nelms Hill with a portrait in 1962.

Mrs. Nelms Hill’s retirement party was filled with her fellow Trenton activists, like Mayor Holland and National NAACP secretary Roy Wilkins, who all spoke to her years of service to the community. Of Mrs. Nelms Hill, Roy Wilkins said, “You don’t forget discrimination, but like Bessie Nelms Hill... you work for humanity.” implying that without her service, Trenton would not have made the equitable efforts they had made so far.<sup>33</sup> To those in attendance, they figured that the bond between Black and Jewish Trentonians would last without the influence of Mrs. Nelms Hill, but they quickly learned that it wasn’t to be the case.

National events also led to the fall of Trenton’s history of minority unity. As the rest of the country was catching up when it came to Black Civil Rights, white perceptions of Black Americans changed. In addition to the changing perceptions of Black Americans, post war rules and policies changed the guidelines as to who and what constituted white america. Upward and downward movement propelled by the rest of the country led to instability.

Jewish movement that came with their new identity was one factor that contributed to the downfall of Trenton’s coalitions. Recently granted the ability to blend in through the passage of the FHA and the G.I. Bill, Jewish Trentonians left or moved to better parts of the city. In a way, they gained their own civil rights, and many no longer felt like they needed to help. At this time, city boundaries were reformed, and places and names changed. Wanting to escape the city identity, the outskirts of Trenton became towns like Lawrenceville and Ewing. For example, the Trenton Y.M.H.A moved out to Princeton and then East Windsor, changing their name to the JCC (or Jewish Community Center) of Mercer county.

For Black Trentonians, these changing boundaries did not diminish their city unity. Businesses and buildings kept up the Trenton name as a tie to their original cause. For example, the Trenton NAACP, despite now technically being a part of Lawrenceville, continued and still continues to identify as a Trenton group.

To use the cliched phrase, the final nail in the coffin for Trenton’s unity committee were the riots of 1968. Starting a week after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April of 1968, disgruntled Black Trentonians took to the streets in violent acts of protests. “Trenton's fancy downtown jewelry and clothing stores were gone. No longer were there department stores, furniture salons, sporting goods shops and meat markets” Historian Paul Mickle of the Trentonian explained.<sup>34</sup> This mindset of looting

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<sup>32</sup> “Hill Hall” Rutgers University New Brunswick. Places. Updated 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Mrs. Hill Honored For 40 Years Of Service In School System” *Trenton Evening Times*. November 8th, 1962. Trenton, New Jersey. 2021 (Trentoniana: Biography Binders)

<sup>34</sup> Paul Mickle, “1968: The Trenton Riot” *The Trentonian*, 2011.

and destruction ruining Trenton was racially charged and not entirely correct. While the riot did happen, recountings of the event were propagandized to create a false narrative of Black destruction.

Martin Luther King stood for peaceful protest and activism, something Trenton had been doing for nearly forty years at this point, and his death-combined with the white flight of the Jewish community-left Black Trentonians alone.

White men and women (including the newest Jewish members) mostly looked down on these actions because of this propaganda. Rioting and looting was dangerous and too far. "I never understood it," Arthur Forer said along with more distasteful comments about how black Trentonians behaved.<sup>35</sup> At the time of the riots, Forer had already left Trenton, and was on his way to "work at a research center Copenhagen, Denmark" after receiving his PHD at Dartmouth University.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps without realizing it, Forer had bought into the concept of White Flight, and despite his early activist ties, he felt the Black community had gone too far.

For Black Trentonians, the events of the 1968 Trenton riots placed an unjust label on many. Now categorized as "young thugs" and criminals, many of the efforts Black Trentonians had taken to gain civil rights were overlooked.<sup>37</sup> Justified anger had been twisted and ruined nearly a half century of progress, and for those Black Trentonians that could move, they left as well.

Additionally, some Black Trentonians felt like their anger was being misinterpreted, "King assassination just added to a heap of problems, including the lack of well paying jobs. Things were not easy for blacks in Trenton. King dying just ignited a very bad situation" Charles Jeter, a former Trentonian expressed nearly 50 years after the event.<sup>38</sup> The timing had just worked out where this world event coincided with a decade of decline.

## CONCLUSION

The coalition of Black and Jewish people in Trenton was unmatched in the early to mid-twentieth century. What started as quiet private interactions between groups quickly became more public and more powerful. Proven by the intersectional visits of Dr. W. E.B. Du Bois and strengthened by the actions of local leaders like Mrs. Bessie Nelms Hill and Bernard Forer, Trenton created a more amicable environment that was only broken down when the rest of the country bucked against it. When peace seemed to no longer be an option, the Black community of Trenton took to war, which summarily killed the city.

The Trenton of 2021 may still represent the broken coalition of the late 1960s in terms of population makeup and racist ideas, but that does not mean it is unsalvageable let alone broken at all. Within its historic buildings and new homes, Trenton still is a place where community and culture can coexist. While it is unlikely that Trenton will return to what some historians consider its former glory, the advancements made for civil rights and the opportunities granted over the past 100 years have far outweighed this belief. And while Bessie Nelms Hill and Bernard Forer have both since moved away and passed, their impacts still live on. There is no replacement for either of them, but that does not mean others can't continue to do great things.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Forer (Professor of Cell Biology), Interview with Author, March 2021

<sup>36</sup> Trenton Times, "Forer earns first Ph.D. at Dartmouth in 25 years", Trenton Times, 1964. (Trentoniana Biography Binders)

<sup>37</sup> Paul Mickle, "1968: The Trenton Riot" The Trentonian, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> L.A. Parker, "Trenton was already at the tipping point in 1968 before MLK's death" The Trentonian, 2018.

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