Vanguards of Change in the "Georgia of the North": Youth Activism in the New Jersey Civil Rights Movement, 1935-1955, A Digital History Project

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Honors Thesis


by

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History Department
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ABSTRACT


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In recent years, there has been growing interest in the civil rights movement, with scholars looking beyond the most prominent male leaders of the national movement in the 1960s. This project builds on the work of scholars like Martha Biondi and Tomas Sugrue who have established the significance of the Black freedom struggle in the North. Described as the “Georgia of the North” due to its particularly harsh discrimination practices, New Jersey offers a compelling setting to examine the civil rights movement. Like the rest of the North, New Jersey had civil rights legislation that did not explicitly codify Jim Crow segregation. However, these laws were rarely enforced. Drawing on NAACP youth council branch papers and local newspapers, this project showcases how youth in New Jersey from 1935 to 1955 were active organizers in advancing educational opportunities, facilitating direct action, and organizing community programs, to support local and national civil rights initiatives. This thesis project presents my research in an

1 De Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 165.
accessible and interactive format as a digital website. By highlighting how youth activism in New Jersey advanced efforts for racial justice in the state and facilitated regional and national collaboration, this website helps us understand the mid-twentieth century's civil rights movement as a national, not just a Southern struggle, led by youth.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support and mentorship of Dr. Rebecca de Schweinitz, who helped guide me through my research process and writing my initial capstone. Dr. de Schweinitz has served as a key mentor throughout my time at BYU who has encouraged me to pursue primary research opportunities and present at multiple conferences. I am grateful for her willingness to serve as an advisor for my honors thesis.

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This thesis project was made possible by my parents, who instilled in me an innate curiosity and love for history.
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I. Historiography and Original Research

The information presented on my website is based on my capstone paper, included below, which highlights civil rights activism in Plainfield, Montclair, and Newark, New Jersey.

On February 17, 1948, the small suburb of Somerville, New Jersey began preparations for its annual “Brotherhood Week” meeting, part of an annual national initiative to address racial and religious prejudice. That day, the planning committee for the event received the following letter from a local high school student who served on the Brotherhood Week Youth Planning committee:

“Every February…Brotherhood Week rolls around…But what about the other 364 days of the year? What happens to our fine ideas of cooperation, understanding, and goodwill then? Nothing ever comes of these meetings. We, the youth of Somerville, feel there should be a continual effort along these lines, and we plan to do something about intolerance in our community [italics added for emphasis].”

Rather than just participating in Brotherhood Week or organizing their own annual meeting, some of the students in Somerville had a vision to directly confront discrimination in their community. Somerville students organized their own interracial youth council to meet regularly.2 Less than one week after their initial meeting, the youth canvassed local shops that barred Black patrons. Their efforts to end racial prejudice garnered regional and national attention, including an invitation to speak at Columbia

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University. The letter demonstrates just one example of how youth in New Jersey in the 1930s and 1940s moved beyond the usual approaches of the period toward engaging in action that directly addressed racism in their community. As historian Rebecca de Schweinitz suggests, youth during this time period sought to be “significant political actors in their own right,” and set the stage for the later civil rights movement.

Often referred to as the “Georgia of the North” due to its reputation for harsh discrimination practices, New Jersey offers a compelling setting for examining the civil rights movement beyond traditional geographic and temporal settings of the 1950s and 1960s American South. Drawing from the NAACP youth council files, historical newspapers, and other archival sources, this paper demonstrates how young people played an important role as leaders, organizers, and advocates for the civil rights movement in several New Jersey communities. Youth in Montclair, Plainfield, and Newark, New Jersey from 1935 to 1955, formed civil rights organizations that adopted interracial, collaborative, and often militant methods to combat discrimination and push for racial justice. Although often overlooked in discussions of the movement, the activism of mid-century New Jersey youth illustrates how young people in the North helped to set the groundwork for the more famous period and events of the civil rights movement.

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“Columbia Honors Youth Committee,” *The Courier News* (Plainfield, NJ), March 11, 1948, 10 (microfilm) Bridgewater Library Special Collections, Bridgewater, New Jersey. The youth were also asked to speak to a group of teachers at Columbia University because of their efforts.  
HISTORIOGRAPHY

Recent scholarship investigates the Black freedom struggle and its legacies in the North as central to understanding the scope and goals of the movement.6 Scholars including Martha Biondi, Thomas Sugrue, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, have established the North “mattered enormously” as a setting for the civil rights movement.7 In “How New York Changes the Story of the Civil Rights Movement,” Martha Biondi argues the civil rights movement in the North began earlier and involved a more expansive agenda than its later Southern counterpart.8 Building on the work of Biondi and others, in Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North Sugrue argues that while Jim Crow was not legally mandated in the North, white

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northerners intentionally contributed to the institutionalization of Black people’s second-class citizenship through their private behavior, market practices, and local policies.9

Although much of the current scholarship on the civil rights movement in the North during the World War II period has focused on larger cities such as New York City and Detroit, some scholars have explored New Jersey in the context of the civil rights movement.10 Marion Thompson Wright interrogates the state’s history of discriminatory policies, particularly regarding education, in “Racial Integration in the Public Schools in New Jersey.”11 Brian Alnutt’s, “Another Victory for the Forces of Democracy: The 1949 New Jersey Civil Rights Act,” discusses Black resistance in the state during the early twentieth century, leading up to the passage of the groundbreaking state civil rights act in 1949.12 Although these scholars highlight the role of civil rights organizations and supportive state officials in passing effective civil rights legislation, their work leaves room for further examination, especially of the particular significance of young people’s involvement in the movement. Such examinations, Alnutt suggestively argues, could be especially fruitful since he suggests that the activism and resulting legislation in New

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Jersey had a regional and national impact in setting the stage for the national civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{13}

Also relevant to this study is work by Rebecca de Schweinitz and Thomas Bynum who have each explored the role of youth in the struggle for racial justice typically trivialized by most scholars. Bynum and De Schweinitz have noted how the 1930s marked a period of increased national attention on youth and youth programs as well as increased numbers of youth demonstrating their interests in activism. This drove organizations like the NAACP to remodel their youth program; thereby providing individuals ages 16 to 25 more independent spaces to engage in interracial and interfaith activism.\textsuperscript{14} Both scholars argue that the tradition of assertive youth activism began in the 1930s, not the 1960s, and demonstrates how NAACP youth councils propelled the NAACP to move beyond court action toward a more militant direction.\textsuperscript{15} De Schweinitz particularly points to the significance of the Scottsboro Boys trial, a case involving nine young Black men wrongly accused of raping two white women in Alabama, as a key event that mobilized Black youth who demonstrated their eagerness to be involved in making change.\textsuperscript{16} Both de Schweinitz and Bynum however, primarily center their scholarship on Black youth activism in the South, providing opportunities for additional inquiry into youth activism in the North.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 389.

\textsuperscript{14} De Schweinitz, “The NAACP and the Youth Organizing Tradition,” in \textit{If We Could Change the World}, 151-190.

\textsuperscript{15} Thomas Bynum, \textit{NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1916–1965}, Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2013; De Schweinitz, \textit{If We Could Change the World}, 152-153. De Schweinitz notes that youth nationally began to be involved in the Black freedom struggle as early as the antebellum period, but the 1930s marked a period when youth demonstrated more clearly that they wanted to play an active role in the civil rights movement.

\textsuperscript{16} De Schweinitz, \textit{If We Could Change the World}, 165.
Building on the work of these scholars, this paper examines the role of youth in three communities in New Jersey. Of all the states in the North, New Jersey had the most widespread practices of enslavement. Indeed, as Lee Calligro and Melissa Weiner argue, enslavement was more widespread in New Jersey than any other Northern state, with its southern half upholding some of the most “draconian” pro-enslavement laws in the nation. Even after passing abolition laws, legal ambiguity opened the door for the continued intergenerational exploitation and discrimination of Black workers. Moreover, although New Jersey passed anti-discrimination laws in the 1880s, like the rest of the North, “from the end of Reconstruction…white citizens around the state actively resented and resisted the extension of citizenship to African Americans,” and civil rights laws were not enforced. At the same time, New Jersey, like many places in the North, offered greater opportunities for organized Black resistance than the South due to the lower risk of violent backlash.

During the Great Migration, African Americans migrated to New Jersey, attracted by both agricultural work in the southern half and service and domestic work in its northern suburbs and cities. As a result of these economic opportunities, New Jersey

20 De Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 171.
had the highest percentage of Black residents than any other Northern or Midwestern state during the 1930s and 40s. At the same time, white residents responded to the influx of Black migrants with hostility and implemented more policies and practices to enforce segregation. One NAACP field worker performed a survey that suggested New Jersey had the worst case of segregation and discrimination in schools of any state in the North, despite its “excellent” legal protections. African Americans in New Jersey refused to passively accept this discrimination, instead choosing to organize against it. According to historian Brian Alnutt, the late 1930s in particular marked when civil rights organizations in New Jersey began a concerted effort in the state to end discrimination and gained support from the national NAACP in these efforts.

While young people were active throughout the state, this paper will examine youth activism in Plainfield, Montclair, and Newark. Examining a range of communities provides an understanding of how youth activism arose within the context of each community and how they worked through particular obstacles. Furthermore, Plainfield

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and Montclair are suburbs, which allows smaller communities to be seen as important settings for activism, looking beyond large urban centers. Examining these three distinct communities reveals how direct action and other methods were used to achieve the movement's major goals, including labor rights, empowerment, educational equality, access to public accommodations, greater autonomy, and increased interracial and regional collaboration.

**PLAINFIELD NAACP YOUTH COUNCIL**

An urban commuter town 17 miles southeast of Newark and 26 miles from New York City, Plainfield, New Jersey offered limited opportunities for Black families. Plainfield was “virtually the only community between Newark and Trenton,” in which African Americans could buy or rent ‘respectable’ homes.” Because Plainfield attracted a relatively affluent white community, it was “very easy to get a job,” that offered relatively high wages for Black workers. Most Black migrant women worked as domestics while men served in semi-skilled, unskilled, and a small number of civil service and professional jobs. Moreover, a night school for adults provided educational and economic opportunities for migrants who sought to remedy the limited educational opportunities.


29 *ibid.*
experience provided to them in the South. Due to these drawing factors, by 1930, Black residents made up about 10% of the population and 17% by 1940.

However, despite being a multicultural community with Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants, Plainfield’s residents and policies “systematically withheld” African American residents from participating fully in political, economic, and social equality. Most restaurants, hotels, schools, and commercial facilities, for instance, would not serve Black patrons. In the schools, Black girls had to stay after hours because they could not swim with white girls. Moreover, residents were shut out of 69% of the town’s real estate due to redlining and were arrested at disproportionate rates.

A community with a history of some efforts directed at securing civil rights, civil rights organizations in Plainfield served as important precursors to later youth activism. The Black community appears to have chartered the NAACP adult branch in 1919. By the 1920s, the Plainfield NAACP began hosting national and regional civil rights leaders as speakers, producing a local newspaper and attracting at least 550 members. During

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31 “Plainfield: Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey,” 2. The survey reported 3,648 residents.
33 “Plainfield: Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey,” 9. The report points out that white boys and Black boys, however, could swim together.
this time, other civil rights organizations also emerged including the Negro History Club educated students about Black history; the Interracial Council educated the community on national anti-lynching legislation, investigated discriminatory complaints, and prevented the creation of a segregated glee club in the high school.\textsuperscript{37} Both of these organizations particularly focused on empowering youth and preventing the segregation of students, which likely served to inspire young people in Plainfield to become future activists. However, both organizations, like many civil rights organizations during this time, treated young people largely as passive, “future activists,” rather than acknowledging their ability as students to contribute to the movement.\textsuperscript{38}

In its early years, Dr. Clement de Freitas served as a particularly influential and militant leader in the Plainfield NAACP. By 1932, the Plainfield NAACP successfully prevented the creation of segregated cemetery areas, according to a report from the Interracial Committee from the New Jersey Conference of Social Work. The report also notes NAACP addressed discriminatory treatment in recreation, theaters, courts, and schools, although their methods and successes are unclear. Overall, however, the report concluded that the Plainfield NAACP achieved “some success, but seldom with the united support of the Negro community.”\textsuperscript{39} This difficulty in acquiring collective support from the Black community likely helped to drive the focus of the Plainfield NAACP toward youth people as potential proponents.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} De Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 159-160.
\textsuperscript{39} “Plainfield: Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey,” 16.
\textsuperscript{40} Robins, “Negro Awakening in Plainfield,” 16; “Interesting Items Gleaned By Age Correspondents: Plainfield, NJ,” The New York Age, April 7, 1928, 8, accessed via Newspapers.com, November 11, 2022. The article notes that “comparatively few new members are coming in” despite the Plainfield NAACP holding regular meetings.
The Plainfield NAACP, similar to other chapters during the 1930s, increasingly focused on getting youth engaged in the movement. By the early 1930s, under de Freitas’ leadership, the NAACP adult branch recognized the potential of young activists. Youth competed in speech competitions hosted by the NAACP, organized to provide youth with a positive sense of racial identification, train them in speaking up against racial inequality, and fundraise for the NAACP.

Young people also helped to distribute information regarding federal relief programs to Plainfield’s Black residents. Like other chapters, Plainfield recruited young people to increase their interest in engaging in civil rights, however, they did not treat them as important actors within the movement. After de Freitas’ departure from Plainfield, sometime after 1936, the adult chapter shifted away from its more militant tactics. The youth council took on the initiative to continue to move local civil rights efforts forward through direct action.

Following the example of the “Scottsboro Day” hosted five years earlier by the adult branch and similar efforts by youth councils across the country during this time, the Plainfield youth council, formed in 1937 with 50 original members, determined to rally further support for the Scottsboro Boys. The trial of the Scottsboro Boys served as a

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41 De Schweinitz, “The NAACP and the Youth Organizing Tradition,” in If We Could Change the World, 151-190.
42 Ibid, 160.
44 Robins, “‘Negro Awakening in Plainfield,’” 17; “Plan Testimonial To Robt. F. Kearse,” The New York Age, July 28, 1935, accessed via Newspapers.com, November 14, 2022. This article is the last mention of De Freitas’ involvement with the Plainfield NAACP in the New York Age, where he appears on occasion.
driving force in mobilizing young black activists in Plainfield and across the country, particularly as they recognized that any of them could be caught in a similar situation.46 The Plainfield youth council created an interracial committee of youth that met weekly at the home of Spencer Logan. During the meetings, young people in Plainfield organized an event to raise awareness and gather funds for the Scottsboro Defense Committee.47 These efforts culminated in a mass meeting with Olen Montgomery, one of the boys originally on trial, as a featured speaker.48 Spencer Logan, president of the youth council, reported over 300 attendees to the meeting and commented, “[the event was] very successful and [the remarks were] very enthusiastically received by the people present.”49 Logan’s comments suggest the positive reactions from community members facilitated momentum not only for the Scottsboro case but also for the youth council and its efforts. By focusing on this national cause, the Scottsboro meeting brought initial visibility and attention to the growth of youth activism in the community. The Plainfield youth council’s activities around the Scottsboro Boys case connected Black youth in Plainfield to the national struggle for civil rights and helped youth in Plainfield see themselves as part of an interracial, national struggle.50 The rally testifies to the importance youth placed on building interracial collaboration as the president reported one of the primary goals of the rally was to “use the meeting as a wedge into the friendship of sympathetic white youth in the community.”51

46 De Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 165.
47 Spencer Logan to E. Fredrick Morrow, October 20, 1938, Part 19, Series D, Reel 4, NAACP Papers.
48 “NAACP Youth March Forward: National Youth Program Sept. 1936 – June 1937” n.d., Part 19, Series D, Reel 1, NAACP Papers, Microfilm; Youth Section Crisis: November” n.d. Part 19, Reel 4, NAACP Papers. The other speaker was noted to be “Reverend Wilson of the Methodist Church.”
49 Spencer Logan to E. Fredrick Morrow, October 20, 1938, Part 19, Series D, Reel 4, NAACP Papers.
50 De Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 15.
51 Spencer Logan to E. Fredrick Morrow, October 20, 1938, Part 19, Series D, Reel 4, NAACP Papers.
illustrates how youth actively addressed the pressing need for greater interracial cooperation to overcome white indifference and prejudice in their community emphasized by local reports and national NAACP leadership. 52 From its beginnings, the Plainfield youth council focused on creating a coalition of Black and white youth as a powerful tool in ending discrimination in their community.

Beyond supporting national campaigns, including the Scottsboro Defense Fund, the Plainfield youth council also combatted employment discrimination. Beginning in the late 1930s, the Plainfield NAACP youth council joined the national effort to open more job opportunities to Black workers, including organizing “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” boycotts. 53 In 1937, the Plainfield youth council sent its members to apply for jobs at local A&P grocery stores and dairy wagons. 54 By 1938, youth were going to other businesses and keeping track of which businesses refused to hire Black clerks. Then, they informed other organizations and churches in the area of their list. 55 After identifying the companies with discriminatory policies, they organized a boycott and picketed in front of those businesses. 56 The Plainfield NAACP youth council attracted students, newsboys, businessmen, domestic workers, housewives, stenographers, a model, and individuals of various other occupations, creating an interclass movement, which likely served as

53 Byrum, NAACP Youth, 33; De Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 168.
particularly useful in distributing information and gathering support from all of Plainfield’s Black community as part of these boycotts.  

Through these efforts, youth in Plainfield established economic mobility and opportunity as one of their primary initiatives. In this case, youth were not simply pressing for access to jobs; rather, they understood that job discrimination kept them financially reliant on the white population in service sector jobs. Their efforts highlight Biondi’s argument that labor served as a central goal of the civil rights movement in the North. It also demonstrates their own confidence in organizing and mobilizing members of the community through their own efforts.

Members of the Plainfield youth council also supported legislative reform. By 1945, they had sent 350 letters to federal and state legislators “in protest,” likely to pressure them to support state civil rights reforms and a national anti-lynching bill. It is likely the youth council contributed to the pressure on state legislators to pass the Law Against Discrimination in April of 1945, one of the first laws to address civil rights in the nation since Reconstruction. The law specifically targeted protecting against employment discrimination in the state. Following the passage of the Law Against Discrimination,


the youth council distributed several thousand copies of the bill in the community.\textsuperscript{61} Thus, youth in Plainfield saw themselves as responsible for educating members of the community on their legal rights to eliminate future discrimination. Furthermore, their membership campaign tripled the size of the adult Plainfield NAACP branch.\textsuperscript{62} Like other NAACP youth councils, the Plainfield youth council did not focus solely on problems impacting youth, but also state and national civil rights efforts as a whole.

Because Plainfield still practiced informal segregation despite state laws preventing it, students identified integrating public accommodations as another priority. They began by targeting Liberty Theater, a local movie theater, where Black patrons were only allowed to sit in the upper balcony section. Sometime around 1945, a group of Plainfield youth entered the movie theater and sat in the “white” section, where they were “constantly annoyed by officials requesting removal to the segregated areas.”\textsuperscript{63} The council recognized that they could not pursue legal action because no one had been forcibly removed. They organized a meeting with their attorney who advised the council to pursue a meeting with the mayor and police board to encourage them to enforce laws that prevented such segregation to occur. The council’s senior advisors and attorney


attended a board of police meeting; following the meeting, the council received a letter from the city clerk that the police had met with the Liberty Theater manager and ensured that the theater would no longer segregate its patrons. After receiving the note from the city clerk, the council continued to send youth to the movie theater to ensure the integration policy was upheld.64

After their success with Liberty Theater, the Plainfield youth council sent groups to local downtown restaurants that refused to serve Black customers.65 The students entered the restaurants in groups, seated themselves, and refused to leave until they were served. After several attempts, a report from the council suggests the restaurants eventually began serving Black customers.66 The efforts of the Plainfield Youth Council are noteworthy as they were engaging in direct challenges to racist practices long before the Greensboro sit-ins, thereby laying the groundwork for the larger civil rights movement.67 The Plainfield youth demonstrated a strong determination and obvious vigor to combat the town’s various policies and were strategic in how they approached each problem. While employment was a primary concern, the Plainfield youth also attacked segregation in public spaces. The youth experienced racism not only in their jobs but also in their shared experiences as they tried to enjoy spaces associated with the youth culture.

67 De Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 162.
of the era which “helped them see the collective nature of those constraints and encouraged them to confront Jim Crow collectively as well.” Similar to other councils during this time, rather than simply focusing on raising awareness of instances of discrimination, the Plainfield youth recognized how they could eliminate segregation in their own lives through collective action.

Following their successes in local theaters and restaurants, the youth council targeted the Plainfield Amusement Academy, a local skating rink, that refused to admit Black youth. Black couples from the council began attending the skating rink on various evenings. Those allowed in, experienced harassment, as white patrons attempted to trip or bump into them. The council had their advisors and attorney meet with the managers, who promised to prevent further intimidation of Black patrons. To ensure the rink manager kept his word, the council decided to rent out the rink twice. After the manager complained that he was losing business to other rinks that continued to segregate, the youth council proceeded to pursue similar tactics at nearby rinks in Morris and Essex counties, including in Springfield, New Jersey. It appears that the youth were genuinely committed to the cause of civil rights in the surrounding area and not just their own community. While the Plainfield youth began to conduct sit-ins to oppose segregation in

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68 Ibid. 233.
69 Ibid, 186.
their community, Plainfield’s adult branch expressed discomfort with what they saw as overly aggressive and confrontational direct action tactics of their young counterparts.\(^7\)

The Plainfield youth council’s enthusiastic adoption of direct action techniques sometimes put it in conflict with the adult branch. One report reflected that their picketing prompted the adults to worry about the students getting “out of hand,” likely because the youth’s actions were drawing attention and potentially considered reckless by the adults.\(^7\) Another report from the youth council pointed out that all of their efforts were accomplished without the help of the senior branch.\(^7\) Additionally, a letter from the president of the youth council, Spencer Logan, expressed frustration from working with a group of adult civil rights leaders on a state civil service discrimination case, stating:

“As youth representative, there has been no opportunity for me to represent or express my sentiments of the Youth in this matter. I do not see the necessity of my forcing [adults on the committee] to recognize the Youth spokesman…You cannot develop militant youth leadership under the pretense of granting to youth the opportunity to fight.”\(^7\)

While adult civil rights activists in Plainfield worried that young people were too radical and militant, Plainfield youth council leaders were frustrated that they were not being treated as legitimate voices in the civil rights struggle.\(^7\) All of these instances and Logan’s resignation from the board show that, as in the case of the Somerville youth

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\(^7\) “September 1937 Annual Youth Report,” Part 19, Series A, Reel 1, NAACP Papers.


council, young people in Plainfield resented the conservatism of the adults around them. They demonstrated their eagerness to actively participate in civil rights on their own terms, despite the lack of support from their elders.\(^76\) As Bynum says, the conflicts between adult branches and youth councils, “forced the national office to take the youth programs more seriously.”\(^77\) Young people in New Jersey had a new philosophy about civil rights, one that included direct action at the front and center of its focus.\(^78\) The youth council played a key role in “[redrawing] the boundaries of acceptable civil rights activism.”\(^79\)

Scholar Martin E. Robins suggests the Plainfield youth during World War II viewed the NAACP as “little more than a tea-sipping clique” with few accomplishments, reflecting their aggravation with the slow pace of the movement.\(^80\) However, the actions of the Plainfield youth council demonstrate that youth were committed to combating discrimination in their community. Historian Victoria Wolcott argues recreational and social spaces where young people could flirt, talk, and play were central settings of racial conflict because they symbolized power and possession. The actions of youth in Plainfield demonstrate their desire to assert their dignity and autonomy.\(^81\) While their actions may not have received major media attention, their militancy demonstrates the role youth in New Jersey played in organizing their communities and setting the tone for the movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

\(^{76}\) De Schweinitz, *If They Could Change the World*, 162.
\(^{78}\) De Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World*, 162.
\(^{79}\) De Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World*, 173.
Montclair NAACP Youth Council

Located about 15 miles from New York and ten miles Northwest of Newark, Montclair, like Plainfield, was an affluent commuter town in North Jersey that offered high wages for Black migrants seeking economic stability, security, and opportunities for economic mobility. Other migrants arrived to attend the New Jersey State Normal School based in Montclair. As a result, Montclair had the highest percentage of African Americans than any other major suburb or city in North Jersey. From this community emerged a strong network of Black organizations including a YWCA, Union Baptist Church, women’s social clubs, St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal, St. Peter Claver, and a chapter of the NAACP. These organizations ran various programs for the Black community and provided autonomous spaces for Black residents that could be utilized to prompt change. At the same time, white residents utilized economic power, racial covenants, paternalistic policies, and at times, informal segregation, to maintain a racial hierarchy in the community.

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83 “Along the Color Line,” The Crisis, Sep. 1913, 218. https://books.google.com/books?id=NVoEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA218&dq=Montclair+Normal+School&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj9wPGilLzwAhUmMDQHxDLwQ6AF6BAgJEAAtS&source=bl&ots=Oy8Y7yAfXg&sig=ACfU3U2AHq84Gk8zVc46P5Ox1v5tAfP9iw&hl=en#
84 Hampson, “Challenging Containment”, 4-5.
Beginning in the late 1920s, the Montclair NAACP emerged as a key organization in mobilizing its residents against discrimination under the leadership of Dr. E.S. Ballou. Founded around 1916, the Montclair branch established a tradition of direct action in the community. As one of their early initiatives, in 1922 the chapter supported the national effort to advocate for anti-lynching legislation by hosting a mass meeting. In 1928, the chapter responded to the arrest of Laura Stewart, a 31-year-old Black service worker, who had refused to sit in the segregation section of Montclair’s Claridge Theater, by organizing picketing of the theater for weeks until it announced it would allow Black patrons to sit anywhere in the theater. By the late 1930s, according to reports in The Crisis, the Montclair adult chapter became less involved or vocal in direct action initiatives, generally hosting speakers rather than protests. The chapters’ shift away

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88 “Meetings,” The Crisis, Jun. 1915, 85. https://books.google.com/books?id=T1oEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA85&dq=montclair&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi34rv1Lz-AhXbfQIHcobAOUQ6AF6BAGMEAI#v=onepage&q=montclair&f=false. This issue mentions a meeting held in Montclair hosting a member of the Board of Directors, Mrs. Florence Kelly, as speaker; “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” The Crisis, Feb. 1917, 166. This article mentions delegates from the Montclair branch; “Welcome to the Montclair NAACP,” Montclair NAACP, accessed November 14, 2022, https://www.montclairnaacp.org. The official Montclair NAACP website states that the Montclair NAACP was founded in 1916.
89 “Anti-Lynching Bill Subject of Meeting,” Montclair Times, Mar. 18, 1922, 1, accessed via Newspapers.com, November 5, 2022; Two years later, the NAACP gathered 550 signatures for a petition demanding the local Aldridge Theater not screen the racist film, “Birth of a Nation.” “Commissioners Bar Film,” The Black Dispatch (Oklahoma City), Aug. 21, 1924, 6, accessed via Newspapers.com, November 1, 2022.
from their earlier efforts of protest may have been due to the departure of Ballou. Just as in the case of Plainfield, particular leaders shaped the agenda and tactics of the NAACP in their local areas.

Chartered the same year as the Plainfield youth council, the Montclair chapter prioritized interracial collaboration. According to de Schweinitz, the 1930s and 1940s marked a period when Black and white youth joined forces to address racial prejudice and discrimination in a variety of ways. While perhaps an obvious approach, during this time in Montclair, there was likely strong opposition to such efforts, due to white hostility and fears of miscegenation. In 1925, a group of white men in Montclair burned a cross in the front yard of a man when they found out that the man engaged to a young white woman was a light-skinned Black man. Such strong hostilities in the community made the very act of bringing Black and white youth together, in itself, radical. As an important player in the local civil rights scene, Montclair intentionally engaged with interracial organizations to facilitate change in their community. In 1939, for example, two members of the youth council served as delegates for an interracial group of Christian youth to address issues of housing. The event included a speaker from the New Jersey District of the Federal Housing Administration. This is particularly noteworthy because it suggests youth were engaging with federal agencies responsible for housing and discussing with

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92 De Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World*, 165-166.
94 The Essex County Youth Commission sponsored the event, with the Delta Club of St. Luke’s, an Episcopal church in Montclair, also in attendance.
them issues of discrimination. Thus, the Montclair youth saw themselves as capable of collaborating with others to confront complex, systemic problems.

As World War II began, youth in Montclair recognized the limited employment opportunities for their community. Nationally, with the outbreak of World War II, Black youth and adults particularly focused on labor discrimination in the defense industry. The Montclair council made a list of all the Black residents able to work in the community, including their skills and careers of interest. Then, similar to the efforts of the youth council in Plainfield, they would approach all of the local businesses and recommend potential employees from their list to the businesses to hire. The council then organized a “method of action,” most likely boycotts, to combat policies at businesses that refused to hire Black employees.96 It is unclear whether this program was specifically for youth or for all working-aged individuals in the community. Either way, the youth council participating in these sorts of events demonstrates how youth in Montclair saw themselves as pivotal to achieving national initiatives of employment opportunity and economic empowerment.97

The youth council also understood the particular obstacles in their community to educational opportunities. Five years before the creation of the youth council, the adult NAACP attempted to pursue a lawsuit to protest changes to district boundaries that sent most Black students to Glenfield middle school, while their white peers attended a different middle school with a greater variety of curriculum, including college preparatory classes. However, the Board of Education refused to concede. The

superintendent asserted, “Black students should be satisfied with arrangements for separate schools…in the South, Black students had to take crumbs and were happy to get them.”

A civil rights audit released the year the youth council formed highlighted that Black youth in Montclair had limited academic support and no vocational guidance resources, further evidencing the lack of resources available to them.

Contrary to the beliefs of the Montclair Board of Education, the youth council made it clear that they were not satisfied with the inadequate resources available in their schools. The youth council ran a “guidance program” for those in middle school and high school which included tutoring services facilitated by members, lessons on union practices, lectures from guest speakers related to labor opportunities, and discussions of issues around employment discrimination for the Black community. This sort of vocational guidance program appears to be unusual among NAACP youth councils, but fairly common among social service organizations beginning in the mid-1910s.

By adopting this approach, the young people in Montclair demonstrate their ability to both recognize a growing need among their peers and mobilize to respond to that need by

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adopting best practices that were emphasized by African American educators at the time.\textsuperscript{101}

The council also surveyed graduates to track their successes and challenges in finding employment.\textsuperscript{102} Youth not only saw themselves as capable of securing employment but also understood the prejudices youth faced and took action to provide the resources the board of education denied them.

Beyond local efforts, the council also furthered regional organization. They worked with the New Jersey Urban League, the Newark Sojourner Truth YWCA, the New Jersey Federation of Youth Organizations, and other local clubs and organizations to organize a job drive for Black youth in North Jersey. The council had the highest number of representatives in comparison to the other youth organizations, suggesting their substantial presence in civil rights organizing in the state. The youth council also hosted an annual youth conference for all North Jersey councils to come together and explore various civil rights issues, bringing in leaders from New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{103} The Montclair youth saw themselves as part of a state and regional effort and recognized their need to collaborate to achieve ultimate success.

In their efforts to increase awareness and engagement among youth, the Montclair chapter began producing a bulletin around 1939 and produced it monthly for at least until 1943.\textsuperscript{104} The bulletin highlights the wide range of work youth were doing and their desire

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{rice} De Allyon Rice to Juanita Jakson, January 12, 1938, 1, Part 19, Series B, Reel 4, NAACP Papers.
\bibitem{conference} "Annual Youth Conference" May 21-22, 1938, 1, Part 19, Series A, Reel 4, Frame 00814.
\end{thebibliography}
to educate youth on Black history and issues impacting the Black community. Sections like “Why Fight for Equal Education” and “The Negro in Literature” highlight how Black students in Montclair were keenly focused on securing educational and employment opportunities.\textsuperscript{105}

The youth council also used the bulletin to facilitate collaboration with other councils through their monthly bulletin. An NAACP report reveals that Montclair regularly exchanged bulletins with the Richmond, Virginia branch, demonstrating how Montclair’s youth council engaged in interregional collaboration across the Mason-Dixon line.\textsuperscript{106} The Montclair youth council also likely shared it with its neighboring chapter in East Orange, only six miles from Montclair, which began producing its own bulletin in 1941 and distributed it in local stores, salons, and other public spaces.\textsuperscript{107} From this, it is clear that the Montclair branch set the direction of the movement in other parts of the state. High praise from the NAACP regional coordinator suggests the bulletin rendered increased awareness and engagement from the community and for shaping the methods of the other chapters.\textsuperscript{108} The national NAACP would adopt this practice and begin

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\textsuperscript{105} Montclair NAACP Youth Bulletin, Dec. 10, 1939, 4. Edited by E. Alma Williams and Wilbert Howard. NAACP Papers Part 19 Series B Group III Box E-153, Reel 4. \\
\textsuperscript{106} “Report of Acting Youth Director to December Board Meeting,” Dec 11, 1939, 3, Part 19, Series B, Reel 4, NAACP Papers. \\
\textsuperscript{107} “Youth Council News: East Orange, NJ,” The Crisis, September 1941, 295. https://archive.org/details/sim_crisis_1941-09_48_9/page/294/mode/2up; “Youth Council News: Jersey City, NJ,” The Crisis, October 1941, 329. https://archive.org/details/sim_crisis_1941-10_48_10/page/328/mode/2up. This article notes “inter-community activities have been carried on with the councils from Elizabeth and Montclair.” \\
\textsuperscript{108} Letter from E Fredric Morrow to Mr. J.N. Williams, November 21, 1938, Part 19, Series B, Reel 4, NAACP Papers. In praise of Montclair’s bulletin, Morrow wrote, “It is one of the finest I have seen, and I doubt whether any council matches this bulletin in excellence. I think that the senior branches of the Association could well afford to copy this method used by you to advertise the activities of the organization.”
\end{flushleft}
producing its own bulletin three years later, exhibiting youth as models in helping to shape the methods of the national NAACP and its methods going forward.\textsuperscript{109}

\textbf{Newark}

An urban center only 10 miles from New York City, Newark experienced an industrial upswing beginning in the 1920s that attracted many Black migrants. However, similar to Plainfield and Montclair, Black migrants to Newark were primarily funneled into the lowest-paying jobs.\textsuperscript{110} Newark did have higher numbers of Black residents than Plainfield and Montclair, however, Black residents only made up 10\% of Newark’s population in 1940.\textsuperscript{111}

Aside from early efforts to eliminate educational segregation in the 1870s, scholars note that, unlike Montclair and Plainfield, Newark lacked a strong history of collective militant African American activism.\textsuperscript{112} Similarly to Plainfield and Montclair, most of its theaters, stores, pools, hospitals, and restaurants, publicly observed Jim Crow segregation.\textsuperscript{113} Scholar Kevin Mumford argues that while there were Black social organizations established in Newark, unlike Montclair, Plainfield, and nearby urban areas

\textsuperscript{109} De Schweinitz, “The Youth Organizing Tradition,” in \textit{If We Could Change the World}, 151-190.
\textsuperscript{110} Mumford, Newark: A History of Race, 21.
\textsuperscript{113} Mumford, Newark: A History of Race, 32. Mumford also notes the downtown YWCA was segregated.
like New York City, Black organizations in Newark were largely insular and rarely reacted to discrimination with collective action or protest.\footnote{114}

Founded in 1914, the adult chapter of the Newark NAACP appears to have initiated some momentum, although limited, around civil rights.\footnote{115} Issues of the NAACP in 1913 and 1914 mention lawsuits pursued by Black Newarkers for being refused admission to local movie theaters.\footnote{116} A 1936 article from The Crisis suggests that like Plainfield, the adult Newark NAACP hosted a rally in support of the Scottsboro Defense Fund.\footnote{117} Like Montclair, the adult chapter also joined the national campaign against lynching by hosting an anti-lynching rally, writing to their legislators to enact anti-lynching legislation, and by fundraising for NAACP efforts against lynching.\footnote{118} Most other records from the Crisis provide little information on the actions of the adult chapter during this time other than a few mentions of meetings the chapter hosted.\footnote{119}

\footnote{114}Mumford, Newark: A History of Race, 24-25.
More combative approaches appear to have occurred in Newark in the late 1930s outside of the NAACP. In 1938, three female “young Newark socialites” conducted a sit-in at a local restaurant that would only serve Black patrons at the counter. That same year, a civil rights group, the National Negro Congress, organized a brief “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign with a small number of supporters.

Yet, if Black organizations collectively resigned themselves to accommodate Newark’s racist policies, NAACP records, and newspapers reveal that young people began to take on their roles as defenders of democracy. Chartered first in 1936, early efforts of the Newark NAACP youth council included organizing a play to fundraise for a state civil employment discrimination case, raising $10 for the defense fund. Similar to youth in Plainfield, the Newark youth also helped with membership campaigns for the senior branch. The council also participated in the first National Youth Demonstration Against Lynching, in 1937. One letter to national NAACP leaders suggests the council may have struggled with its smaller number of members to organize effectively. The letter notes the Newark council hoped to “outline plans for a more effective unit in

120 “It’s Alright to Shop Downtown, But to Eat That’s Different!” New Jersey Herald News, December 24, 1938, 1. https://archive.org/details/NewJerseyHeraldNews19381224/mode/2up. The article mentions the women were involved in a “civic organization” but it is unclear if that organization was the National Negro Congress or another organization.
121 Mumford, Newark: A History of Race, 31. Mumford notes that the campaign only attracted forty members and a couple hundred supportive bystanders.
122 Malcolm to Juanita Jackson, March 15, 1938, Part 19, Series D, Reel 4, NAACP Papers. The branch successfully raised $10 in support of the case, in comparison to Rahway who also raised $10 and Montclair that raised $5.50.
Newark and vicinity,” and noted “they need some very definite help.”125 Because of these potential limitations, it appears the council focused primarily on social activities. Similar to Montclair, they engaged in community events focused on civil rights legislation, and attended regional youth council socials.126

After what appears to be a couple of years of inactivity, the rechartered council organized a dance for youth.127 In 1943, later a play for soldiers stationed at Port Newark.128 Although these events may seem inconsequential, these efforts are still very much political and significant because they were designed to bring Black and white children together in proximity during a time when racial tensions were increasing. Although perhaps not as active, large, or radical as the chapters in Montclair or Plainfield, Newark youth still organized events to increase awareness of the NAACP’s efforts in the state.129

As in Montclair, World War II shaped some of the protests common during this civil rights period in Newark. The rhetoric of World War II around the power and responsibility of youth helped to shape youth’s sense of themselves as “vanguard[s] of change” for democracy abroad and at home.130 Scholars like Kevin Mumford have cited the World War II context and the Double V campaign as “spontaneously [awakening] a

125 E. Fredric Morrow to Juanita Johnson, April 4, 1938, Part 19, Series D, Reel 4, NAACP Papers.
129 Charted Branches,” 1936, 5; “Application for Charter of Newark, New Jersey Youth Council of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” June 4, 1938, NAACP Papers, Series A, Reel 4. The council was re-chartered in 1938, with 25 students listed as members.
130 De Schweinitz, If We Could Change the World, 183-184.
powerful sense of entitlement among Black Newarkers.” Mumford identifies World War II and the influx of African Americans to Newark as inspiring a wave of everyday individuals who began pushing back against segregation policies. For example, in 1941, a group of Newarkers formed an Interracial Council to combat Newark’s segregated city hospital. Youth were noted as being “associated” with the Interracial Council and collaborating with the NAACP, suggesting that members of the youth council may have been involved with their efforts. Youth were an important part of this group of empowered individuals in Newark speaking up to end racism on a local, state, and national scale.

Armed with a sense of their own power to make a change, Newark students responded to national civil rights struggles. In September 1945, the Froebel school in Gary, Indiana made national headlines when white students held a strike protesting integration efforts. In response, students in Newark organized an interracial effort to publicly condemn the strikes. Their efforts reflected the national NAACP’s focus on addressing explicit school segregation in the state. In November of 1945, a council of

131 Mumford, Newark: A History of Race, 32.
132 Ibid, 31-33.
133 “Plans to Lift Ban on Negro: Interracial Unit Studies Vote to Get City Hospital Posts,” Newark News, Nov, 19, 1940, N-41, Newark News Microfilm Collection, Newark Public Library, Newark, New Jersey. An article mentions representatives in attendance to a 1940 meeting of the Interracial Council. The article does not specify whether the attendees were adults or members of the youth council. No membership rolls exist from the NAACP youth council during this year to confirm names of members of the NAACP youth council and if they were involved.
135 For more information regarding the Gary, Indiana 1945 strike see: Moore, “Everyday People.”
136 Douglas, Jim Crow Moves North, 240.
14 students associated with the Newark Interracial Youth Council, staged assemblies at seven local high schools to gather signatures for a petition denouncing the strike, part of which stated,\(^\text{137}\)

> “Whereas your strike protesting the admission of Negro students to the high school is definitely un-American, your actions tend to promote intolerance and bigotry throughout the nation, and we fought a war against race and hatred. It is our democratic responsibility as students of Greater Newark to strongly urge you to call off your strike immediately.”

Young people in Newark were working to bring about their own visions of the nation’s founding values. Seeing themselves as central in “[making] the United States one country indivisible,” they demonstrated a clear understanding of the fascist implications of racism and their responsibility in combating it, labeling Gary students’ conduct as “modeled on the ideas of the Hitler Youth Movement.”\(^\text{139}\) The fact that the effort was interracial is particularly important as Newark scholar Kevin Mumford suggests a general increase in white hostility in Newark beginning in the 1930s as well as Black residents becoming increasingly concentrated into certain areas of the city.\(^\text{140}\) Thus, students recognized how the strikes in Gary potentially encouraged increased hostility in their own communities. Recognizing this growing issue, they garnered support from predominantly white high schools.\(^\text{141}\)

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\(^{137}\) “Segregation Move Opposed by Pupils.” November 10, 1945, *Newark News*, N-47, Newark News Microfilm Collection, Newark Public Library, Newark, NJ. Speakers included students from Weequahic, Hillside, East Side, Central and South Side high schools. It is unclear whether these individuals were also members of the NAACP youth council.\(^\text{138}\)


\(^{140}\) “Integration” and “Double V Campaign” from Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race*.

The Newark youth assemblies drew attention across the country and inspired youth locally. Notably, the Newark students’ protest made the front page of the *Indianapolis Recorder*, indicating how the strike gained attention from Indiana residents. Another newspaper based in Alabama featured the strike, which may have inspired other youth to speak up against segregation in their own schools and nationally.\(^{142}\) Even though the strike appears to have ended before the petition was delivered, the Newark students’ actions remain meaningful because they unified Black and white youth in the city to confront national issues of civil rights and inspire continued activism.\(^{143}\) Not long after, a group at a different high school in Newark voted unanimously to refuse to participate in the Daughters of the American Revolution essay contest due to the organization’s refusal to allow Black pianist Hazel Scott to perform at Constitution Hall.\(^{144}\) This suggests that the rhetoric and activism of students inspired them to continue to stand up to racial intolerance.

**CONCLUSION**

The omission of places like New Jersey in studies of the Black Freedom Struggle has allowed a narrative around the civil rights movement to emerge that is often oversimplified, presenting the movement as a transcendent moment of mass marches in the American South. When examined in its full complexity, however, the civil rights movement emerges as a long, continual struggle that has been driven by the grassroots


\(^{143}\) “Gary School Strike Off Again This Week,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, November 17, 1945, 1. Accessed October 30, 2022 via NewspaperArchive.com. The article notes that the strike ended on the preceding Monday and that student strikers were not penalized for their actions.

\(^{144}\) “Jersey Graduates Vote to Disregard DAR Contest,” *The New York Age*, November 10, 1945, 3. Accessed November 23, 2022, via Newspapers.com. The students were part of Chancellor Avenue Grade School.
efforts of youth like those in Plainfield, Montclair, and Newark. When brought into the conversation, an examination of the civil rights movement in the North dispels assumptions of Northern innocence and presents a national struggle with racism that is more complex and nuanced, as legal protections clearly do not always translate into equality in practice. By understanding the efforts of youth in places like New Jersey during this time period, we can see how, as scholar Martha Biondi argues, Northern activists “always saw racial inequality as complex, and as deeply entwined with other systems of hierarchy, exclusion, and domination.”

As New Jersey and other states in the Northeast continue to grapple with racial stratification and inequality today, perhaps we can learn from youth in the North who saw themselves as critical to local, state, regional, and national efforts for civil rights in confronting issues of racism that remain complicated and deeply embedded in our institutions and communities. By empowering youth at the grassroots, we can continue to draw closer to achieving a more perfect union.

PRINCETON ADDENDUM

To add to my website, I also added a section on Princeton. I had included Princeton in my original drafts of my capstone but had to cut the section due to length and time constraints.

Princeton is a particularly valuable addition as it lies in southern New Jersey, thus helping the site to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the political climate of the state as a whole. Historiographically, civil rights history in the state has

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predominately focused on urban areas like Newark or Camden, while only briefly discussing more suburban and rural areas with smaller Black communities like Princeton.\textsuperscript{147} Princeton offers an interesting setting for civil rights as it is home to a historic Black community dating back to the time of enslavement in New Jersey.\textsuperscript{148} Princeton also hosts the famous Ivy League Princeton University, thus providing an opportunity to better understand the role of college student activism in the state before the 1960s, where more scholarship has focused.\textsuperscript{149} In the research presented on the Princeton page, I primarily relied on Jackson Washington’s \textit{The Long Journey Home: A Bicentennial History of the Black Community of Princeton, New Jersey, 1776-1976}, which presents a comprehensive view of Black social history in the township and \textit{I Hear My People Singing: Voices of African American Princeton}, which primarily includes voices of Black Princeton residents retelling their experiences in Princeton. In creating the website, I hoped to mimic the approach of \textit{I Hear My People Singing} of centering the voices of Black Princetonians themselves to present a narrative of Black resistance in the town. In regard to Princeton University and the Trenton Six, I relied primarily on the \textit{Daily Princetonian} student newspaper and Cathy Knepper’s \textit{Jersey Justice: The Story of the Trenton Six}, which recounts a comprehensive, day by day retelling of the case itself and the activism that surrounded the case. While Knepper’s \textit{Jersey Justice} briefly


mentions students engaging in activism around the case, my research helps to center their role in calling for justice for the Trenton Six.

II. Methodology

Initially, this project was initiated with the goal of being focused on restorative history, as approached by the Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Restorative History.\(^{150}\) The approach “[recovers] silenced narratives and prompts audience reflection on history’s afterlives in the present.”\(^ {151}\) Put simply, the approach seeks to center the voices of communities that have been historically ignored or marginalized and approaches history as a tool for prompting people to demand justice in the present. Because of time and distance limitations, I also relied heavily on the suggested approach of Ana Lucia Araujo and other public historians who have emphasized the need to approach public history projects with the purpose of centering and amplifying existing Black voices, particularly considering how exhibits have historically been colonial spaces rather than spaces of Black protest. Araujo’s *Slavery in Public Memory* includes various suggestions, including using the words of Black voices themselves in an exhibit and using active language to describe the actions of Black individuals or groups.\(^ {152}\)

Because I did not have easy access to Black voices from these communities due to distance constraints, I hoped to incorporate oral histories as a way to center Black voices

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in the exhibit, because they have been a key part of the “democratizing” of history and whose stories are told.\textsuperscript{153} I also wanted to highlight resources from the local communities like the Montclair History Center and Plainfield Public Library, which many people may not have the time to find and explore on their own. When I did choose to include commentary from historians, I tried to prioritize including the voices of academics who are people of color. For example, I highlight a quote by Isabel Wilkerson and include a podcast with historian Dr. Paula C. Austin on the introduction page regarding the Great Migration. Additionally, I adopted the practice within restorative history of strongly tying the past to the present in a way that informs and provokes reflection on continued social issues and resistance by incorporating the questions for reflection and the “Thinking About Today” sections.

\textbf{PROJECT ORIGINS}

The inspiration for this project originally came as I was completing a project for my \textit{African American History 1860-Present} course with Dr. Rebecca de Schweinitz. Having grown up witnessing existing racial inequities in Northern New Jersey, I had been taught that the North was “good” and didn’t have the same issues as the South. However, as I grew older and realized the existing disparities between Black and White neighborhoods, I began to be more curious about the historic legacies of where these issues were coming from. As I was putting together my blog posts for a class project, I learned about “Freedom Schools” set up in East Orange, New Jersey in the early 1900s,

much earlier and much closer to home than the “Civil Rights Movement” is traditionally taught. This drove me with an interest to further understand what the Black freedom struggle looked like in New Jersey. As I began to dive into resources, I found a general gap in research during the interwar and World War II period and a lack of scholarship around young people’s involvement.

INITIAL RESEARCH

Last summer, I utilized my experience interning at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC to begin to observe what makes an effective and powerful exhibit. During my time, I visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture seven different times, seeking to work through and understand how it particularly worked to present African American history in the United States and connect it to the American present today. I took pictures of displays or captions that I felt were particularly powerful or effective and conducted informational interviews with curators and other staff at the various museums. Going to museums and experiencing the exhibits at various museums helped me to begin to think about how the public experiences history and how I might effectively adopt some of those best practices to present my own research.

The following fall, I conducted my primary source research for my capstone paper on this topic based on the NAACP Papers and newspaper archives. I traveled to New Jersey to conduct original primary source research at the Newark Public Library, New Jersey Historical Society, Historical Society of Princeton, and Rutgers University.
Special Collections. My capstone research provided the bulk of the research that I would utilize for this project.

Following the completion of my capstone, I interned with Better Days 2020, an organization focused on celebrating Utah women’s history and presenting that history to the public. I primarily helped conduct biographical blogs highlighting the stories of three women in Utah history, as well as assisting with planning activities for an annual educational event. Through this internship, I received helpful training from Katherine Kitterman, the executive director of Better Days, as she helped me learn how to compose and edit content that is accessible to elementary, middle, and high school students. I also received exposure to preparing educational resources and coming up with activities for students. At the same time, I also took a directed readings course with Dr. Christopher Jones centered on slavery in public history and memory, which also helped me to establish a framework to present my research to the public.

Creating a Website

Although some Black history sites and digital resources exist focused around New Jersey, the story of the civil rights movement has received limited financial investment in the North. As a result, while much scholarship exists around civil rights in New Jersey, it is not accessible to the public. Having grown up without having access to resources about these topics, I wanted to ensure my research would be more accessible than an academic paper. Additionally, because the topic of my research focuses on young people, I knew it was particularly important to make a resource that young people could reference and
interact with. Moreover, the COVID pandemic increased awareness of the greater need for digital resources among museums and historical sites and is considered a growing field of interest.

However, I was limited in terms of distance from physical artifacts to curate a physical exhibit. Additionally, I wanted the information to be utilized by students, academics, and friends and family in New Jersey. I was worried that a podcast would limit the amount of content I would be able to present. For this reason, I decided on a digital website as a way to present information for a wide audience because it can be skimmed by some, and read more in-depth by others, depending on interest level.

Originally, I had hoped to present this information in the Omeka software as it is well-known and utilized in the digital humanities and public history sphere. However, the plan itself requires an expensive paid plan for software. As a student with limited knowledge of coding and HTML, I chose WordPress as an easy, affordable, and professional-looking setting to present information.

STRUCTURING THE SITE

In the process of determining my website format, I based my website off of digital exhibits or websites created by the New York Historical Society, the National Museum of the American Latino, West Chester University, and the Equal Justice Initiative. I drew inspiration from the New York Historical Society online exhibits to create an introduction

page that would situate the audience with an appropriate overview of my topic. I also drew from the online exhibit Presente! from the National Museum of the American Latino, to incorporate brief individual biographies that help to draw people’s curiosity. That online exhibit informed my reflection questions reflection throughout my site as well. I knew I wanted to present my research on the three areas I explored in my own paper, which informed the area pages. However, from my research, I had notes of youth councils and other youth organizations across the United States that I was not able to dive into as deeply. In order to utilize this information, I decided to create an interactive map. The interactive map also acts as a way to engage audiences throughout the state of New Jersey and to help demonstrate how young people’s activism expanded across the state. I had to cut Princeton from my capstone paper due to time constraints, but I saw this project as an opportunity to return to Princeton’s story in my research. For my website, I wanted to make it relevant to a general audience who is still dealing with questions of what resistance and civil rights look like the United States after the summer of 2020, which included the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmed Arbury.

Drawing from recent events and the aforementioned restorative history approach helped to shape my introduction and conclusion pages to focus on making a strong connection to racial justice in the present. However, in the future, the introduction and conclusion may be adapted to adjust as the events of 2020 feel less recent or fresh in the minds of the audience themselves.


TARGET AUDIENCE

I initially hoped that the audience of this site would primarily be young people in New Jersey. However, as I progressed through the site, I came to realize that my expertise lay in the research, and was extremely lacking in regard to knowledge of proper pedagogy and teaching methodologies that history teaching majors tend to be more familiar with. I also decided that my own target audience is primarily my peers, college-age students, as well as potential graduate schools, and my friends and family who live in or have lived in New Jersey. For this reason, I shifted the tone, language and depth of the website to provide adequate context and information rather than choosing to keep things brief and more kid-friendly.

Additionally, due to limited funding, I was limited in terms of the website formatting to WordPress, which was primarily designed for presenting informational blogs rather than having interactive games for kids. For these reasons, I decided to concentrate my primary audience on my college peers and other adults. I based my model on more of an approach of the Smithsonian Institution, by presenting an extensive amount of information that can be sifted through by different audiences, rather than excluding information for the sake of brevity. Throughout this project, however, I struggled to figure out how much information to present to provide adequate context while not being overwhelming. I attempted to use headings and bold text to help deal with this issue, by allowing individuals to skim and still get some information. I also incorporated definitions, a practice learned from my experience at Better Days, to use appropriate terminology while providing adequate context.
THE PROCESS

I first drafted the content of the page. I also began making notes of potential images to use and highlighted places where it would be helpful to incorporate an image or some other kind of visual cue. After initial edits, I began to transfer the information over to WordPress, to better visualize what the content looked like laid out on the site. I had to deal with challenges that included limited options for presenting text visually, with no drop-down menu or definition page available with a free plan. After establishing a general layout of content, I pursued acquiring rights permissions for the use of images, videos, and other resources. I also began searching for oral histories that I could incorporate into the site. Following a series of editing each page, I began to incorporate the “Thinking of Today” sections and “Questions to Consider” to help to contextualize the information. My final edits focused on ensuring unity across the different pages in terms of formatting, tone, and layout.

In order to still make the project accessible to young people, I created basic lesson plans that could be utilized in a classroom, particularly a high school classroom in New Jersey. The lesson plan incorporates observations from lesson plans from Rutgers University, the Equal Justice Initiative, the Smithsonian Institution, the Zinn Education Project, and Better Days 2020.

III. Project Presentation

My website can be viewed at newjerseycivilrights.wordpress.com.
IV. Discussion

Overall, one success of this website is in consolidating a variety of resources and information into a single place. Much existing academic research and online resources exist about New Jersey history, but this research is often difficult to find for the general public and much of this information is scattered in various sites, podcasts, and videos. Ultimately, by putting different places and resources in dialogue with each other, I believe that this site helps to provide a thoroughly contextualized understanding of the history of youth activism in the New Jersey Black freedom struggle.

However, room for further research still exists. Due to time constraints, some gaps exist in terms of understanding the adult NAACP chapters and their interactions with the youth councils, as I primarily focused on reviewing the NAACP Paper files on the Youth councils rather than on the adult chapters themselves. This leaves room for potential research using the NAACP Papers focused on areas to create a more comprehensive understanding of the efforts for civil rights in each of these communities.

Additionally, although the website claims to focus on all of New Jersey, the website is obviously not comprehensive in its scope and focuses primarily on Northern New Jersey. This was a result of time and distance constraints when traveling, and because the NAACP youth council papers had more information on these areas than others. However, further research into communities in South Jersey could be a potentially beneficial addition.

Another potential shortcoming is the overall layout of the site. Because I was working in a free format, I was limited in terms of being able to differentiate how text boxes looked and how information was laid out on the webpage.
high amount of external rather than internal linkage. This occurred primarily due to copyright restrictions and restrictions on the WordPress formatting due to not having a paid plan.

Considering that this research centers on issues that still exist in these communities and the website itself seeks to help the audience understand the civil rights movement as a continual, and existing struggle, it would have been particularly powerful and appropriate to pursue a true restorative approach by collaborating with these communities. However, due to time constraints and physical distance, this was not possible at this time. As a creator, I did reach out to some community members and the current existing NAACP youth councils in Montclair and Plainfield but did not receive responses or follow-up responses. I hope to pursue such measures in the future, potentially by performing oral histories with those involved in the NAACP youth councils and other youth groups and by reaching out to contemporary voices in the Black community and working to build trust with them to the point that they would be willing to give feedback and commentary.

As mentioned earlier, the project contains some sections heavy in text which may not be the most accessible to middle or high school students, or even an older person with limited knowledge of African American history and civil rights. In this way, the website may come off as overwhelming, boring, and too confusing. A potential future project could be translating the website into a series of videos or a more interactive website format that could be utilized for children of various ages in a classroom setting. This would be particularly useful for teachers in Montclair, Plainfield, Newark, and Princeton, to have easy resources.
VI. Conclusion

If we are to understand the struggle for racial justice today, we must understand the struggle for racial justice of the past in all of its complexity and nuance. *Vanguards for Change in the Georgia of the North* helps to provide a helpful resource to begin to fill the existing gap of public history resources on the Black freedom struggle in the North. Hopefully, this project inspires greater awareness among the public, and potential opportunities for collaboration with local New Jersey historical sites going forward, to better present Black history in a way that is accessible, contextualized, and strongly linked to our present today.
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