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

Emily Peterson | Completed under the mentorship of Dr. Rebecca de Schweinitz | History Department

**BACKGROUND**

Why New Jersey?
New Jersey had the highest percentage of African Americans during the 1930s and 1940s of any other Northern or Midwestern state.

At the same time, it also had a particularly extensive history of racist practices and was called the "Georgia of the North." One 1947 report suggested it had the worst case of segregated schools in the North.

Why Youth?
Scholars like Rebecca de Schweinitz (see right) have highlighted the important role of youth in helping to drive the civil rights movement in a more militant direction beginning with in the 1930s.

Why This Time Period?
The 1930s marked a stronger national focus around the importance of youth, including in organizations like the NAACP.

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**THESIS**

My research examines the role of youth in New Jersey from 1935 to 1955, investigating how they helped lay the groundwork for the larger civil rights movement on a local, state, and national basis through a variety of grassroots, interracial methods. Youth in New Jersey’s suburbs & urban spaces intentionally pushed the Black freedom struggle in the North in a more militant direction.

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**PLAINFIELD**

- Hosted rally & fundraiser for Scottsboro Boys
- Tripled the membership of the Plainfield adult branch
- Don't Buy Where You Can't Work campaign
- Sent 350 letters to legislators
- Participated in national youth anti-lynching demonstration
- Distributed several thousand copies of the Fair Employment Act in the community
- Organized to end segregation at local roller skating rinks, & restaurants

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**NEWARK**

- Initiated restaurant sit-ins
- Held fundraisers to support state civil rights case
- Hosted interracial social events including dances
- Organized mass assemblies at 7 high schools to gather signatures for a petition condemning the anti-integration efforts of students in Gary, Indiana
- Refused to participate in the Daughters of the American Revolution essay contest

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**MONTCLAIR**

- Ran vocational guidance program for high school students
- Don't Buy Where You Can't Work campaign
- Desegregation campaign
- Organized annual conference for all NJ youth councils
- Emphasized community & interracial collaboration
- Created bulletin that they regularly exchanged with Richmond youth council & would inspire national NAACP

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**CONCLUSION**

New Jersey youth activism at mid-century demonstrates that youth in the North played a key role in advancing civil rights. Well before the famous events in the South, New Jersey youth worked on grassroots efforts to oppose discrimination and affirm their dignity and autonomy. Their activism suggests New Jersey served as an important place of protest that helped shape the larger Black freedom struggle.