

Afro-Americans in New Jersey

Introduction

The long Afro-American presence in New Jersey has had a paradoxical and bittersweet quality. Some observers believe that New Jersey has had the worst race relations of the northeastern states. Still, over the years the state has served as a major area of settlement for southern blacks, offering a kind of refuge or "Balm in Gilead," to cite the old Negro spiritual. Viewed through the prism of the Afro-American experience, New Jersey offers contrasting images: a place of hostility and hardship necessitating struggle, and yet a place of succor and opportunity permitting achievement.

In its treatment of Afro-Americans, New Jersey has often been likened to the South. In 1823, for example, a traveler from Connecticut passing through New Jersey expressed a common northern view and called New Jersey "the land of slavery." Twenty-six years later Dr. John S. Rock of Salem, a leading black New Jerseyan, also linked the state with the South. When it was proposed to the legislature that New Jersey secede from the Union because the Union included the slave-holding southern states, he considered the idea hypocritical because slavery still existed in New Jersey. The state, he said, "has never treated us as men. . . . She has always been an ardent supporter of the 'peculiar institution' [slavery]—the watchdog for the Southern plantations; and unless she shows her faith by her works, we will not believe in her."

E. Frederic Morrow, a black who was born in Hackensack in 1909

and rose to become an executive assistant to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, titled his autobiography, published in 1973, *Way Down South Up North* to characterize the experience of growing up in the state. Southern blacks who came to New Jersey during the Great Migration that was prompted by World War I—the first massive movement of blacks to the North—began referring to the state during the 1930s as the “Georgia of the North.” Marion Thompson Wright, a pioneer in New Jersey Afro-American historiography, drew a similar parallel in 1943: “New Jersey is a state in which are found, so far as Negroes are concerned, practices that many people believe to exist only in the southern area of the country.”

Examples of antipathy toward the darker race in New Jersey are easy to find. With the possible exception of New York, New Jersey had the most severe slave code of the northern colonies. In 1704, for example, a New Jersey law prescribed forty lashes and the branding of a T on the left cheek of any slave convicted of the theft of five to forty shillings. It dictated castration for any who attempted or had sexual relations with a white woman. A century later, New Jersey was the last northern state to enact legislation abolishing slavery; a law passed in 1804 established a system of gradual emancipation. This system actually allowed slavery to continue down to the 1860s, later than in any other northern state. New Jersey’s slaves were affected by the domestic slave trade that relocated bondsmen in southern lands opened for cotton cultivation beginning in the early 1800s. Some were even delivered to southern markets, especially New Orleans, as late as the 1820s. From 1852 to 1859, the legislature appropriated \$1,000 annually to transport free black New Jerseyans to Africa.

During the Civil War the state legislature passed the so-called “Peace Resolutions,” which disputed President Lincoln’s power to free the slaves of the Confederacy. New Jersey was the only northern state that failed to ratify the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Its most prestigious educational institution, Princeton University (known as the College of New Jersey until 1898), openly discriminated against Afro-Americans in its admission practices, and between 1848 and 1945 it had no black graduates. The state had separate black public schools, especially in South Jersey, down to the 1950s. And well into the 1960s Jim Crow segregation practices governed the access of New Jersey blacks to many movie theaters, restaurants, swimming pools, and other public accommodations.

Several theories have been advanced to explain New Jersey’s racial conservatism. One theory suggests that it was caused by the

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antebellum economic ties between New Jersey and the South. This theory attributes the strong pro-Southern sentiment in New Jersey during the Civil War to the market in the South for the state's industrial products. Newark, for instance, was called an "essentially southern workshop." Both planters and plantation slaves wore shoes from this city, and there were major markets in the South for its other leather products—including carriages, saddles, and harnesses—and its clothing.

According to a second theory, the state's racial demography has primarily determined its race relations. This theory suggests that the level of Negrophobia rises with the size of the black population. The theory notes that while a large black presence does not automatically cause racist thinking, it exacerbates any existing anxiety about blacks. Those who advance this theory argue that New Jersey has generally had a larger proportion of blacks than other northeastern states. Indeed, they point out, the number and proportion of colonial New Jersey's slaves were second only to New York's, and from 1790 to 1960 New Jersey had the highest percentage of blacks of all northeastern states (see Table 1).

Third, New Jersey's type of urbanization—the "provincial character" of its towns and cities—has also been cited to explain its treatment of African-Americans. Supporters of this theory argue that although New Jersey has been highly urbanized for a considerable portion of its history (54 percent of its population in 1880 was adjudged urban), its urban areas have been towns and medium-sized cities. Attitudes towards the black race in such places, they point out, have traditionally been more conservative than those fashioned in huge metropolitan centers, where the dynamism, pace and cosmopolitan air have been more accommodating to the Afro-American quest for social justice.

Fourth, because New Jersey extends further south than any other northeastern state (its southern tip is well below Baltimore), some have argued that its racial practices are rooted in its geographical position. They maintain that since it is near Delaware and Maryland, its race relations need to be seen in the context of the border states.

The final theory, a variant of the geographical argument, poses a north-south division in the state's racial attitudes that is attributable to the metropolises at the state's opposite ends: New York and Philadelphia. According to this idea, New York's attitude towards the black race has affected the racial climate of North Jersey, while Philadelphia's has influenced South Jersey.

TABLE 1

BLACK POPULATION IN THE MID-ATLANTIC SINCE 1790
(PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL STATE POPULATION)

YEAR	NEW JERSEY	NEW YORK	PENNSYLVANIA
1790	7.7	7.6	2.4
1800	8.0	5.3	2.7
1810	7.6	4.2	2.9
1820	7.2	2.9	2.9
1830	6.4	2.3	2.8
1840	5.8	2.1	2.8
1850	4.9	1.6	2.3
1860	3.8	1.3	2.0
1870	3.4	1.2	1.9
1880	3.4	1.3	2.0
1890	3.3	1.2	2.1
1900	3.7	1.4	2.5
1910	3.5	1.5	2.5
1920	3.7	1.9	3.3
1930	5.2	4.5	3.3
1940	5.5	4.2	4.7
1950	6.6	6.2	6.1
1960	8.5	8.4	7.5
1970	10.7	11.9	8.6
1980	12.6	13.7	8.8

The arguments based on urbanization and geographical divisions appear to have the greater merit. While racial intolerance has been pervasive in New Jersey since the earliest times, South Jersey generally provided black people with a less hostile milieu until the twentieth century, and then the situation reversed. This pattern refutes the linking of any large concentration of blacks to an increase in white hostility.

Several reasons explain the pattern. Colonial South Jersey and Philadelphia had large settlements of Quakers, the first organized group in this country to oppose slavery and champion the idea that freedom was a natural right. While Quakers were not free of racist and paternalistic attitudes and did not view blacks as their social equals, their influence nonetheless minimized the scale of slavery in South Jersey and gave a more benign character to black life there than in North Jersey during the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth century.

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The Quakers' numbers and influence waned in the last decades of the nineteenth century. South Jersey's treatment of African-Americans began to reflect its larger geographical context, and in the twentieth century its discriminatory practices resembled those of Philadelphia and the neighboring border states, Delaware and Maryland. In Philadelphia, for example, a segregated public education system endured until the 1930s, and this was true in South Jersey as well for much of the twentieth century.

The shift in the north-south pattern was also caused by twentieth century urbanization. North Jersey, with the state's larger cities—albeit they have been of a medium size—became more amenable to the interests of Afro-Americans. A lesser degree of segregation, especially in schools, shows this, although, given the small black population in some places, the economic factor also probably deterred the building of separate schools.

Considering the difficulties blacks have faced in New Jersey, the state's role as a major place of settlement for southern blacks is a paradox. Why have so many southern blacks made New Jersey their home? During the antebellum years some of the fugitive slaves using the escape routes through New Jersey stopped here, and many of them settled in the state's all-black communities. In the present century, which has brought the greatest numbers, they have come mainly in search of better work opportunities.

New Jersey's accessibility has also helped make it a destination for black migrants from the south. In all periods the state could be reached easily by the common modes of transportation—boat, train, bus and automobile. Also, occupying a strategic location between New York City and Philadelphia, huge metropolitan centers that attracted many migrants, the state was in the path of a major stream of black migration. Most of New Jersey's larger municipalities were near one of these cities and received some of their spillover. Moreover, many southern blacks evidently preferred the smaller, more manageable size of New Jersey's urban centers, which offered a slower, less hectic existence closer to that of the South.

The numbers of southern blacks moving to New Jersey account for most of the increases in the state's black population, with far-reaching historical implications. The settlement patterns of migrants have helped determine the present-day distribution of New Jersey Afro-Americans. Their points of origin, mainly along the Atlantic Coast—Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida—have marked New Jersey Afro-American cultural life. Tra-

ditional folkways, beliefs and customs have been transplanted. Participants in the Great Migration, for example, have noted that a broad range of southern foods (for instance, collard greens, yams, and mullet fish) were not available in black neighborhood markets at the time of their arrival but eventually appeared because of their presence. They have also mentioned their continued use of traditional cures ("home remedies") in treating injuries and illnesses. And in 1941, when the folklorist Herbert Halpert studied the Pinelands, he collected folklore including Br'er Rabbit stories from migrants living in South Toms River. These tales, he said, represented a "living tradition that has recently been brought into South Jersey."

There were five southern black movements to New Jersey after the colonial period. Before the Civil War the migrants were free blacks and runaway slaves. Between the Civil War and World War I a larger number of Afro-Americans arrived. World War I set in motion the Great Migration; 1.5 million blacks uprooted themselves before 1930 and many came to New Jersey. World War II set off another sizable movement northward, and New Jersey again received an appreciable number of newcomers. The last major period of black southern movement to the north occurred between 1945 and roughly 1970, and again many migrants came to New Jersey.

The following pages contain a brief account of the long Afro-American past in New Jersey, from the colonial era to the 1980s. It is impossible to include every phase of this past, but it is hoped the account will present its main features and reveal the uniqueness of Afro-American life in New Jersey over the years, as well as the major circumstances that have shaped this life.

Colonial Period to 1790

It is not clear when blacks first appeared on New Jersey soil. Probably the Dutch—who were among the foremost slave traffickers of the seventeenth century—were responsible. One can speculate that Fort Nassau, erected by the Dutch West India Company in 1623 near present-day Gloucester City and occupied intermittently until 1651, probably had slaves, since the Dutch customarily used slave labor to fortify posts of this kind. Recent scholarship suggests that the few slaves in the colony of New Netherland were all in its capital, New Amsterdam (present-day Manhattan). Still, one can speculate that slaves may have been used on the scattered farmsteads of Pavonia,