



Front of Trenton Junior No. 1, Postcard, 1916

TRENTON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL NO. 1

Introduction

Since the dedication of the Trenton Junior High School No. 1 more than a century ago no one could have imagined the demographical, financial, and educational shifts that would occur in Trenton, NJ since 1916 when the school was established. To tell a story of Junior High School No. 1 over its 90 year lifespan and the 15 years since its closure is to compile a glimpse into some of the factors of what the building itself witnessed over the decades and look at the conditions affecting the students who attended, who lived in the neighborhood, who taught and who carry the first hand knowledge of its halls.

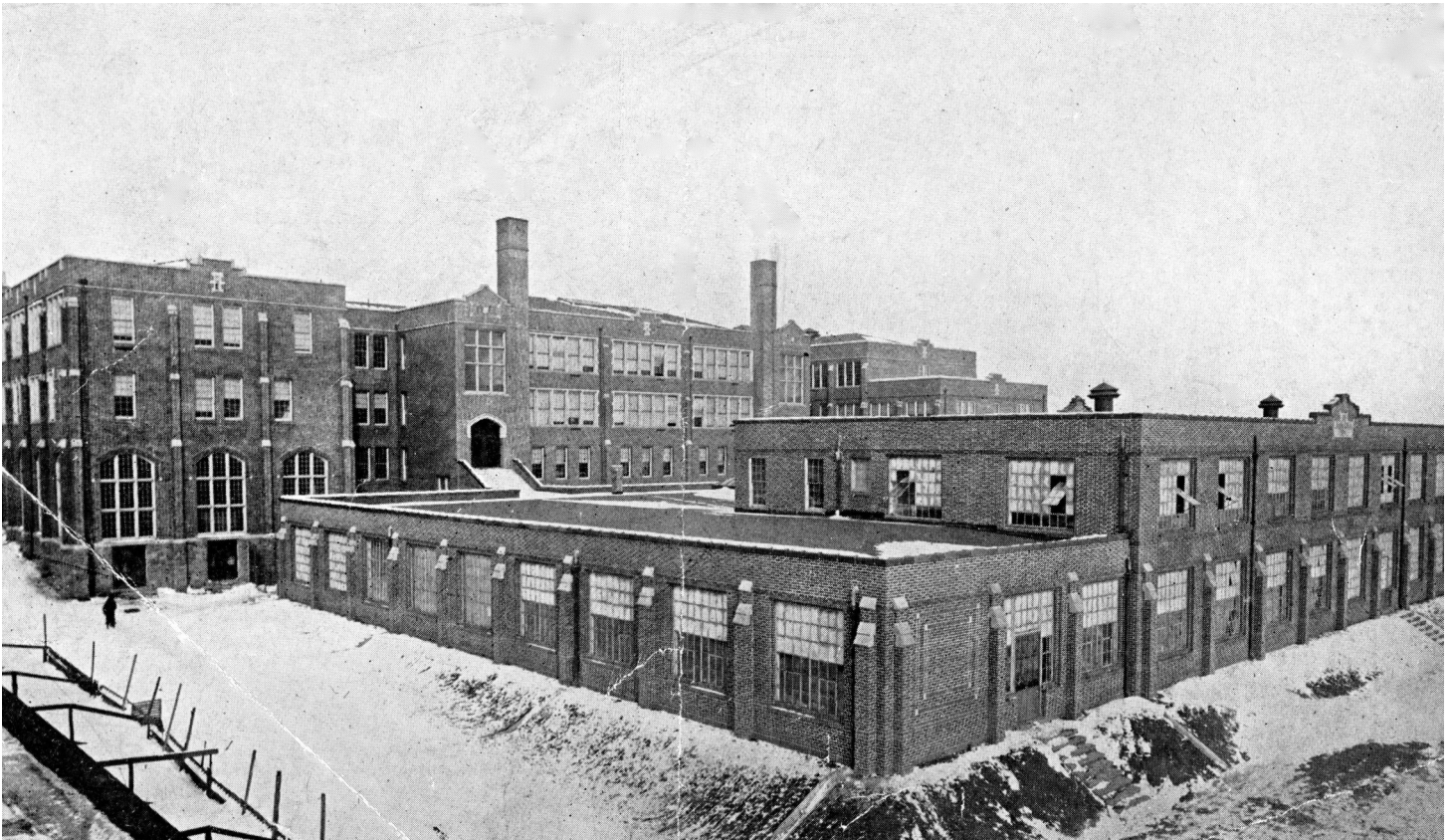
The two years prior to its commencement, those who were responsible for its inception and planning took into consideration what they could afford, the pedagogical changes that were being considered nationwide and the urgency to provide a better educational system for future generations.

The ideals of education in 1916 highlighted academic, industrial and commercial skills. This newly established model of education was a gateway and an important foundation of skills that would prepare students to be best equipped for the workforce. Being at the forefront of the Junior School

Movement, there were countless additions and removal to the original blueprints of the school that adapted with the growing needs of the student population, as well as the way that the city itself faced the aftermath of WWII, segregation and desegregation, urban renewal and moved away from the Junior High School as a model for education nationally.

The importance of Trenton Junior High No. 1 and its eventual renaming and restructuring systematically to Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School highlights how significant the change has been in Trenton, as well as many other post-industrial cities.

We hope that this exhibition will bring to light the stories and voices never before documented and become a collective historical record of the thousands of students that were part of these changes and to make sure that future generations learn from this history.



Back of Trenton Junior No. 1, Postcard, 1916

The Cornerstone of Education on the East Coast

Between 1916 and 1935, there was a continuity within the local government within Trenton, as well as with the Board of Education and the administrative bodies for the citywide educational system. Meaning that there were few changes in those who were in power both in the city commission form of government and Trenton's long term tenure of Mayor Frederick W. Donnelly. While, the nepotism and strong hold of power existed in the city, this continuity did signify that the policies that were in place stayed primarily the same as during the dedication of the building. The school was certainly affected by the Great Depression and the coming of WWII, yet the initial framework of the Junior High Movement was relatively similar to how the educational layout was when the cornerstone was laid in 1916.

The emphasis of schooling was Latin, math, grammar, to name a few. In 1917, there was a prominent Math Conference held in Trenton that sought to look at the guiding principles that students should be learning and how math is part of every facet of society, no matter if a girl or boy would be entering into the workforce or needing it to help at home. These fundamental concepts were the core part of education and a model of what every 7th, 8th, and 9th grader should know before entering the halls of the high school.



Photo by Karl J Flesch

The cornerstone held the documents of the clandestine and keepers of the city a century ago and the reasons that motivated them to build it in the first place outside of the educational need.

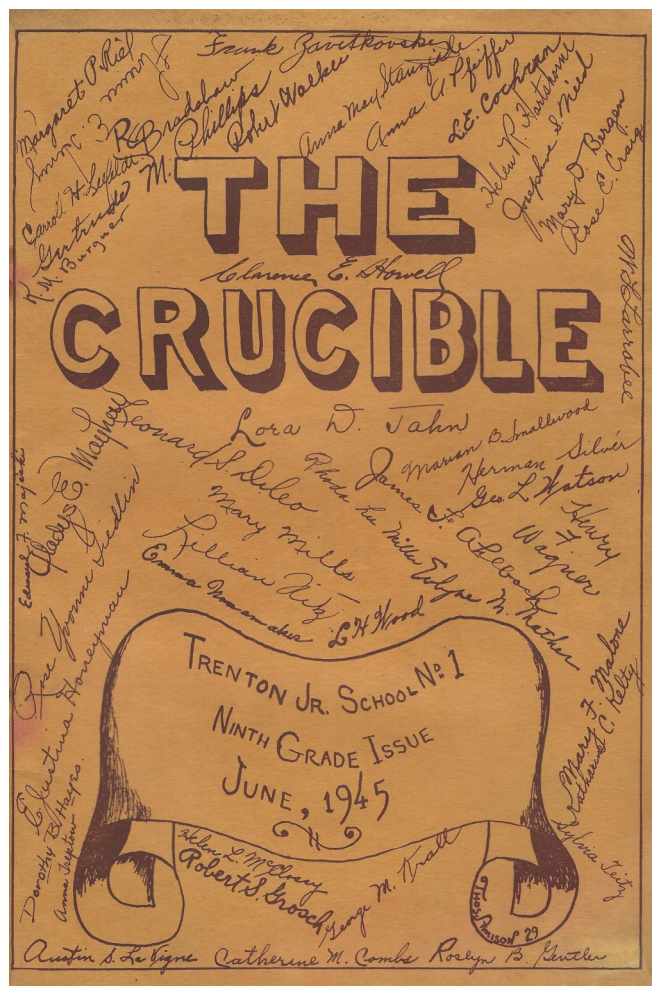


Photo by Carlos Vargas

Separated into the boys and girls section of the school the curriculum was split into gendered disciplines, similar to what occurs in parochial and private school. Though this was a public school, these divisions were common at the time and the boys and girls even had separate entrances. to go into the facility itself..



Junior High and Middle School are that transitory moment in a student's life where they begin to establish critical and creative reasoning, try new activities and learn how to find their individual voices amongst their peers. Whether at Trenton Junior High No. 1 or at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle Schools, much of these same awkward moments are shared over its 90 year legacy in Trenton. Finding school spirit and joining extracurricular activities have been a constant. Looking back at Junior High No. 1, we discovered that the yearbook in the 1920's was called The Junior Trumpeter, by the mid 1940's was reestablished as The Crucible. In 1990, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in 1990.

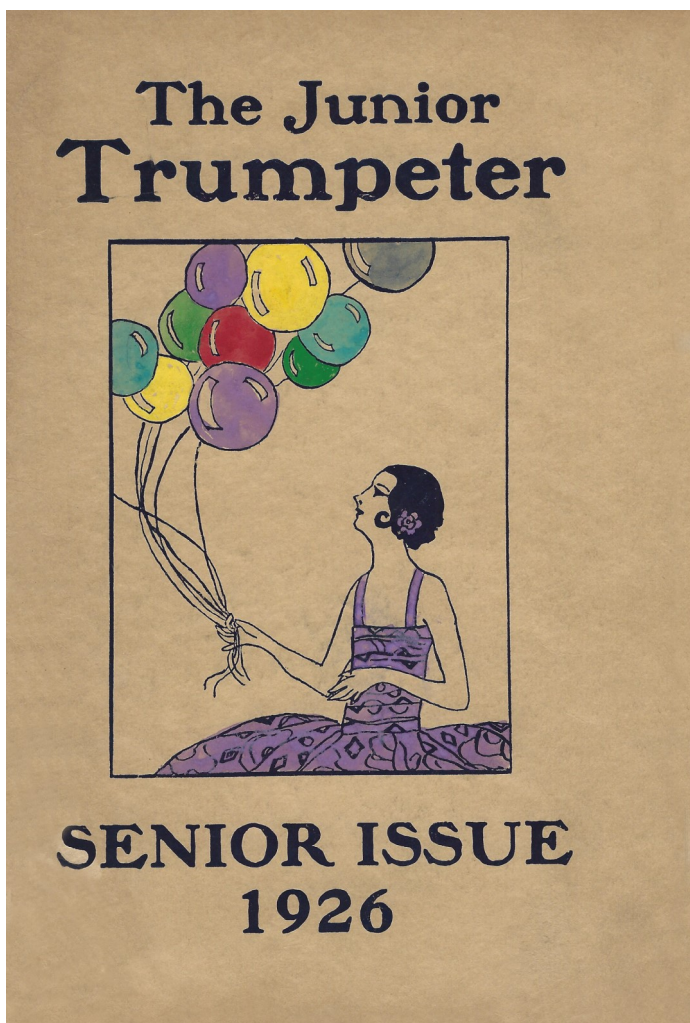


From the collection of Richard Willinger

Music appreciation and performance was also another element that was significant to student learning. Whether they were at a sports function or part of an assembly at school, music prominent in the curriculum. Early on at Junior High No. 1, the pipe organ was a key feature of the building and very prominent during the first two decades of the building.

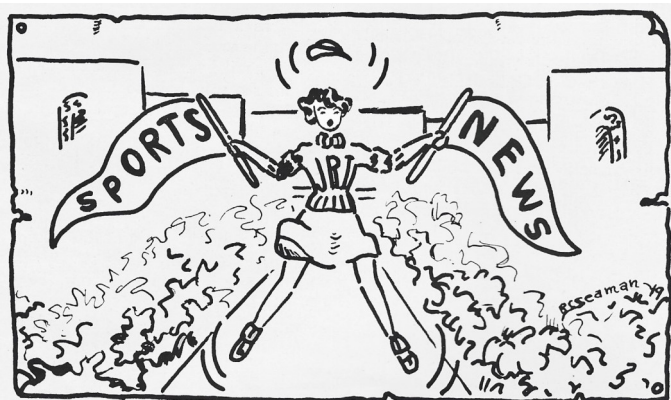


School Orchestra 1944-1945



From the collection of Richard Willinger

Seniors at the high school had launched a project to place a pipe organ in the new junior high school. Money was raised from the senior play, Children's May Festival, high school student donations, and proceeds from a high school supper.



There is no doubt that sports played a crucial role in facilitating school spirit and helping put the school on the map regionally, especially for basketball, baseball and soccer.



Here you can see a photograph of the girls basketball team from 1920, where they display the then customary sports wardrobe for girls.



Starting in 1917 the Trenton High School basketball team played at Junior No. 1's gym, Trenton's largest school gymnasium. Games were transferred to the new Junior No. 3 gym in 1925.

Segregation/Desegregation

Elementary schools in Trenton were segregated and by 1916 there were two elementary schools (Nixon and Lincoln) for Trenton's African-American students. The schools were located to be convenient to at least four-fifths of the African-American school children of the city. Those who lived a long distance away attended the other public elementary schools throughout the city. African-American students did not initially attend the high school. It was not until 1894 that the Trenton Times reports that two African-American students graduated from Trenton High School.

The Trenton Times reported on August 25, 1916 that the Nixon and Lincoln schools were being combined for "colored" children and the seventh and eighth grades will go to the new junior high school.

However, in 1924 the city opened the New Lincoln School to be used by the city's African-American students. The school was the second of the all new junior high schools the city was to build and would accommodate both elementary and junior high school students. Junior No. 1 became an all white school.

It is interesting to note, that numerically, the New Lincoln School should have been named junior No. 3, but only after the desegregation of Trenton's schools does the school get renamed Junior No. 5.

The time period between Post-World War II to 1980 ushered in major urban renewal initiatives, civic unrest that would give birth to sweeping changes in the demographics of the city and historic legislative measures that would make it unconstitutional to discriminate based on the color of one's skin. Yet, the undoing years of segregation that permeated all levels of society and every system was not easy to desegregate.

Across from Junior No. 1 in 1940, the Mayor Donnelly Homes opens, containing low rent housing for 376 white families. The Lincoln Homes next to the New Lincoln School opened at the same time for non white residents.

Non Whites are allowed to rent In the Mayor Donnelly Homes starting in 1958, just prior to the new Federal fair housing laws.

In 1943 two African-American mothers, Gladys Hedgepeth and Berline Williams challenged Trenton's segregation of junior high school students and is win in 1944. Trenton is forced to desegregate the school in the fall of 1945 and African-American students return to Junior No. 1.



Changing Enrollment Numbers

Junior No. 1 was built to accommodate 1,200 students, and opened in 1916 with 929 students.

In 1936, 1,414 students attended the school. According to a 1936 Fac Finding Study of Trenton School by the Trenton College Club, the average number of students per class room at Junior No. 1 had increased from the planned 30 pupils per room when the school was built to a planned average of 40 pupils per room. The policy resulted in insufficient floor space per pupil and inadequate ventilation. They stated that the 20 year old school needed more modern equipment, new toilets and some repairs. Overall, they stated the school was one of the bright spots in the school system.

In 1955, there were 794 students enrolled at Junior No. 1. In 1965 there were 517 junior high school students enrolled, and 56 sixth graders from the nearby Jefferson School to relieve overcrowding there. 949 students enrolled in 1965 and

896 students in 1969.

Addition Added

The city wanted to build a new McClellan School off North Clinton Avenue between Fillmore, Poplar and Taylor Streets. However the plans were dropped in the face of opposition from the Trenton Branch of the NAACP. They objected to the building of a new school in a completely "Negro" neighborhood. Instead the city decided to use the money for the new school to add additions to both Junior No. 1 and Junior No. 2. Junior No. 1, the only junior school without a pool, would get a pool and new cafeteria in 1965. The old cafeteria was converted into 6 classrooms. At the same time the city was looking at a proposal for a 30 room new junior high school to be built on North Clinton Avenue, backing up to the Miller Homes site.

Junior High Movement Fades

As the model of education nationwide began to shift away from the Junior High Movement, Trenton also had to address how the new system of the Middle School Movement would be integrated into their school system. This would change the then widely used 7th, 8th and 9th grade, as an in between elementary school and high school and shift towards 6th, 7th and 8th grades for the new platform of learning.

Abolishing of Jr. High Schools in Favor of Middle Schools

In April, 1990, the Trenton Board of Education decided to enroll at Trenton Central High School grades 9-12, totaling 2,696 students. The junior high schools would become middle schools with grades 6-8. A total of 401 students would attend Middle School No. 1; 430 students would attend Middle School No. 2; 440 students would attend Holland Middle School, and 525 students would attend Dunn Middle School. No middle school students would attend Junior 5.

Renaming the School Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School

The school's principal Albert Williams had told Trenton School's Superintendent Crosby Copeland that several students, teachers and parents said they thought a school named after King would instill more pride in the students. Copeland was given a petition to change the school's name, signed by 45 staff members.

On May 31, 1990 Trenton school's Superintendent Crosby Copeland recommends to that the Trenton Board of Education vote to rename Junior No. 1 the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School. The vote is passed, with a hope that the name would give more identity to the school, which was lo-

cated on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard.

Final Closing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School

Unfortunately the MLK School became more known for outbreaks of trouble than for its educational achievements.

During the school's last 5 year's, the school did not meet the state guidelines for adequate yearly progress. Results from the 2005 state standardized testing revealed that fewer than 10 percent of the more than 100 proficient in math. Fewer than 20 percent were proficient in literature.

Because the No Child Left Behind Act required drastic measure be taken at underperformance districts, Trenton school official decided to send students from MLK to other schools.

In 2005 the MLK School was one of 4 schools named to the list of Most Dangerous Schools in NJ. In 2006 there were slight improvements in the school with fewer violent incidents being reported and less out of school suspensions.



Contamination at the nearby construction site of a school to combine elementary and middle grades also became a factor in why the school would close.

After low levels of contaminants were found on the school construction site of the former Jefferson School, located on the same block as the MLK School, parents demanded that their kids be sent elsewhere and school official obliged.

The last graduation ceremony was teary and emotional for the students and teachers who gathered at the school auditorium on June 21, 2006.

Wearing brown and yellow gowns, 118 students walked across the 90-year old stage and went down in history as the last group of youngsters to collect their diplomas from Junior 1.

The new school built on the former Jefferson School site, behind the former Jr. 1 would open as the new Dr. Martin Lu-

ther King, Jr. Middle School on March 8, 2010 for 700 students.

The Abandonment of the Building

The school board vacated the building and the vast building was loosely secured. Over the years there were various break ins and the building became a favorite site for urban explorers. The once pristine interior walls would become tagged by the various intruders. Valuable copper was pulled out of the building and recycled for cash.



Photo by Robert J. Sammons

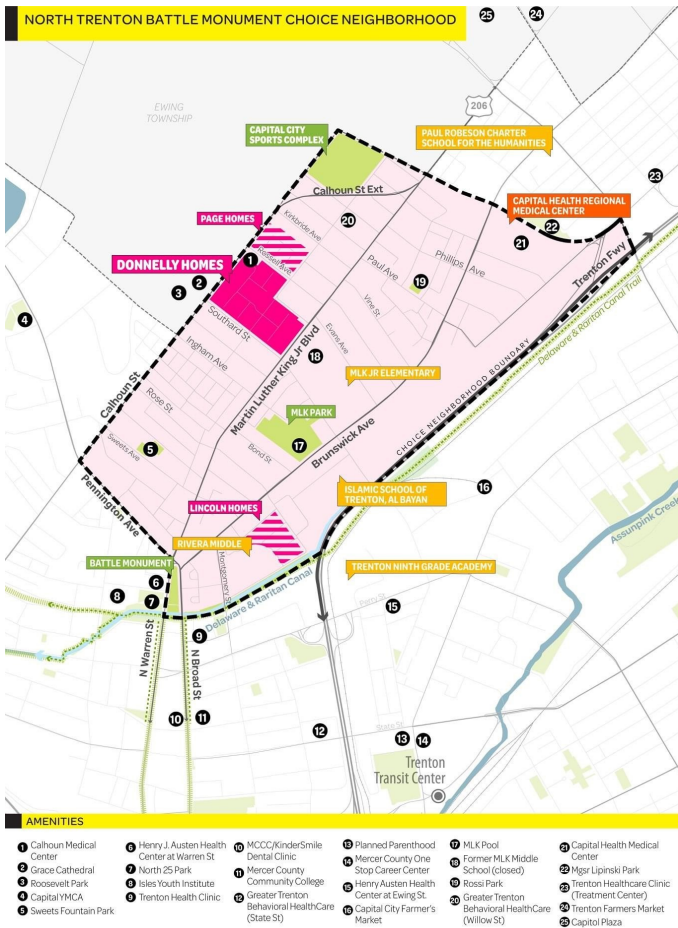


Photo by Robert J. Sammons

North Trenton/Battle Monument CHOICE Neighborhood

In 2021 the City of Trenton and the Trenton Housing Authority presented plans to transform the area into a safe thriving, family-friendly, mixed-income neighborhood. Plans included preserving and the reimagining of the vacant former Jr. 1 building. Community ideas were: artist lofts and or senior housing; performing arts space; library and reading room; business incubator, shared commercial kitchen; programming such as GED, literacy and vocational training; community

space that can be rented for yoga classes, events, etc.; exhibition space for art; lounge area with Wi-Fi and café to reuse the beautiful fireplace; and daycare center.



Devastating Fire

On May 15, 2023 a massive three-alarm fire collapsed roofs and floors of the abandoned junior high school. Fire officials watched as kids ran from the flaming building. After the fire, the site was secured with a high fence and some of the remaining walls were securely propped up.



Photo by LA Parker for the Trentonian

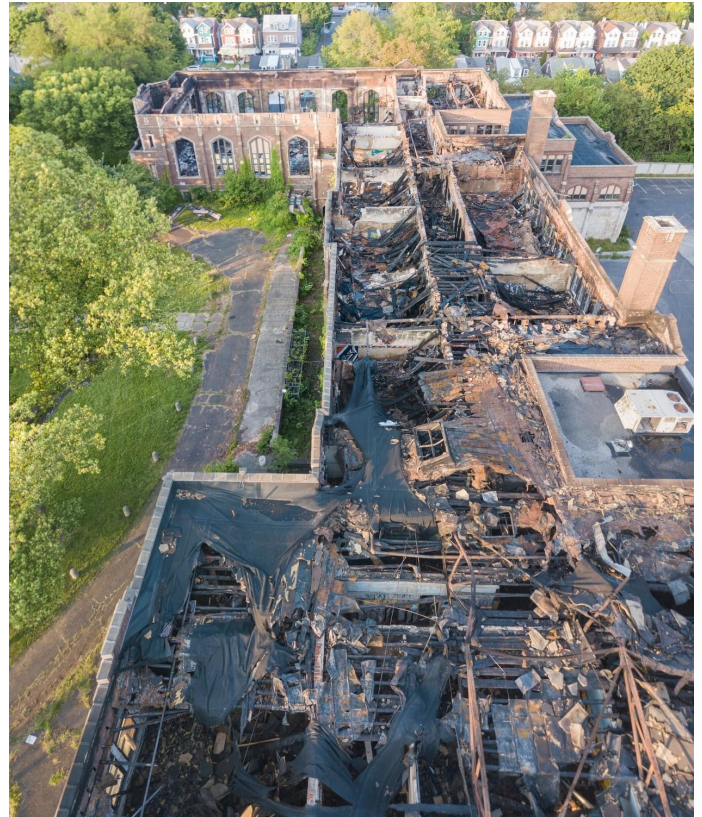


Photo by Rich Hundley

The fate of the fire ravaged building was left up to the insurers of the building who determined that the building could not be saved. In August 2024 the demolition of the massive historical school began.



Demolition August 2024—Photo by Karl J. Flesch

In late August 2024 the US Department of Housing and Urban Development offers \$15 million, short \$35 million that was asked and needed for Trenton’s CHOICE Neighborhood project.