

SEGREGATION AND DESEGREGATION OF TRENTON'S SCHOOLS

An excerpt from *Three Centuries of African-American in Trenton: Significant People and Places*
by Jennifer B. Leynes for the Trenton Historical Society

Around 1832, the Trenton Board of Education established the city's first public school for its African-American children. The school was held in Jackson Hall, a building on Hanover Street that served as a meeting place for the city's Black residents. By the 1850s, the student population numbered around 60 children, and the building's condition had deteriorated to the point that it was commonly known as "Nightmare Hall." In 1855, this early schoolhouse was razed, and the new Higbee Street School opened on present-day Bellevue Avenue (then called Higbee Street) two years later. The growth of the African-American population necessitated construction of the Bellevue Avenue School in 1883 and the New Lincoln School in 1923. In the mid-20th century, Trenton's public schools became a focal point for the Civil Rights movement in the city.

Higbee Street School (John T. Nixon School)
20 Bellevue Avenue



Higbee Street School, c. 1920

The Higbee Street School was the first educational institution specifically constructed for the free public education of African-American students in Trenton and among the earliest such schools built in New Jersey.

The school was located to be convenient to at least four-fifths of the African-American school children of the city. Those who live a long distance away attended the other public schools throughout the city.

The Trenton School Board built five Greek Revival-style schools in 1856, employing design concepts promoted by contemporary education reformers. As such, the Higbee Street School is distinguished among the state's few surviving schools for Black children because of its progressive design. In 1872, the student population outgrew the facility and moved into temporary quarters while the new Ringgold Street School (no longer extant) was under construction.



Bellevue Avenue Colored School

Bellevue Avenue Colored School (Lincoln School)
81 Bellevue Avenue

By 1883, the city's Black student population had outgrown the Ringgold Street School, and a new building was erected on Bellevue Avenue. Notably, the school was built after the New Jersey Legislature passed the School Desegregation Act of 1881, which gave Black parents the option of enrolling their children in previously White only schools. The construction of the two-room Bellevue Avenue school only two years after passage of the act reflect-

ed the reality of a segregated school system for African-American children in Trenton. The school was expanded in 1888 and renamed Lincoln School in 1891. In 1923, the building was replaced by the “new” Lincoln School at Brunswick Avenue and Montgomery Street. By 1928, the population of the Lincoln School was overflowing, and some students were moved back into the Old Lincoln School. The school continued in use as a facility for Black children until the public schools were desegregated. The building was acquired by the King David Lodge in 1949. The Lodge, which is affiliated with the Prince Hall Free-masons, was formed in 1875 and met during the early 20th century at the first Shiloh Baptist Church building on Belvidere Avenue. Thus, the building continues to serve the African-American community as a Masonic lodge.



New Lincoln School

New Lincoln School 400 North Montgomery Street

The New Lincoln School was erected in 1923, the fourth and final school building constructed exclusively for the education of African-American children in Trenton. The school initially served both elementary and middle school students; those who continued their education beyond ninth grade attended Trenton High School. By 1928, the school could no longer accommodate the city’s population of Black school-aged children, and the elementary students were moved back to the old Lincoln School. These schools continued to serve all of the city’s African-American children until 1944, when the New Jersey Supreme Court outlawed segregated educational facilities in the landmark *Hedgepeth-Williams v. Trenton Board of Education* case. Two years later, the first White students were admitted to the New Lincoln School. Prin-

cipal Patton J. Hill, an African-American, remained at the integrated school until his retirement in 1958, becoming one of the nation’s first Black principals to serve a school with White students.

Trenton Central High School 400 Chambers Street

When the new Trenton Central High School opened in 1932, the school accepted both White and Black students, as had its predecessor. Problems arose quickly around the segregated swimming pool, however, as the school policy limited the accessibility of the pool for African-American students. In 1933, Black leaders filed a lawsuit to gain equal access to the pool, with Robert Queen as one of the attorneys. The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Black students. The case was a first step toward desegregating Trenton's public schools. Trenton Central High School was razed in 2015 and a new Trenton Central High School opened on the same site in 2019.



Trenton Central High School

Trenton Central High School 1932-2014



Trenton Central High School's swimming pool

Junior High School #2 (Hedgepeth-Williams School)
301 Gladstone Avenue



Junior High School #2

In 1943, Junior High School #2 was a White school within the Trenton Public Schools segregated system, and the Lincoln School served the community's African-American children. In that year, two African-American mothers, Gladys Hedgepeth and Berline Williams, attempted to enroll their children in their neighborhood school, Junior #2. The Trenton School Board denied the request, and the women filed suit, with local NAACP attorney Robert Queen litigating the case. In January 1944, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that the public schools could not deny enrollment based on race. The decision served as a legal precedent for the United States Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The Hedgepeth and Williams children were subsequently admitted to Junior #2, and about 200 other African-American students also transferred from the Lincoln School to formerly White middle schools around the city. In 1946, White students began enrolling in the Lincoln School.

Notes Added to the Exert:

When Junior No. 1 opened in 1916, the Nixon and Lincoln Schools were combined for African-American elementary students. The seventh and eighth grade African-American

students would go to the new Junior No 1. Trenton's African-American seventh, eighth and ninth grade students would continue to attend Junior No. 1 until the New Lincoln School for African-American students opened in 1923.

In 1940 a new Junior High School No. 2 opened with an adjacent elementary school. The acting principal was Beekman R. Terhune for the 789 pupils enrolled. The building was modern and well equipped. It was part of a US Government project at the end of the Depression and provided much needed jobs for many local workers.

In 1943 Junior No. 2 was a white school within the Trenton Public Schools' segregated system. The neighborhood surrounding the school was integrated in which the Hedgepeth, the Williams, and the Snyder families lived. Their children, Janet, Leon and Delores respectively, had been playmates and classmates through the sixth grade. In the fall of 1943, the rising seventh graders applied for an admission to Junior No. 2. Delores, who was white, was admitted, but Janet and Leon, who were black, were turned away by the school's secretary. Their mothers appealed the decision, which was first ignored then turned down by the school principal, and then turned down by the school district's Superintendent Dr. Paul Loser and finally by the Trenton Board of Education, forcing the students to attend a school five miles away.



L to R: Mrs. Berline Williams, Robert Queen, Esq., Leon Williams, Mrs. Gladys Hedgepeth, and Janet Hedgepeth

Mrs. Hedgepeth and Mrs. Williams then petitioned the NAACP which Mr. Robert Queen, a brilliant black lawyer, to handle their lawsuit to make the Trenton Board of Education enroll their children in Junior No. 2. When Queen

had discovered the NJ Law of 1881 (a law that prohibited racism,) Loser, the superintendent, proudly testified that Junior No. 2 had not been build for “Negroes” and claimed that “Negroes” were actually better off when separated from whites. The NJ Supreme Court unanimously disagreed. On January 31, 1944 the Court ordered the Trenton Board of Education to immediately enroll Janet Hedgepeth and Leon Williams to Junior No. 2, and to admit all black students to all Trenton public schools by the end of the school year.

New school districts within the city were created by Loser and approved by the Board of Education the end of May, 1945.

The redistricting brought about reshuffling:

From New Lincoln to Junior 1, 132 pupils, Junior 2, 14, Junior 3, 49 and Junior 4, 34, a total of 229.

To New Lincoln, 122 from Junior 1, 50 from Junior 3, 216 remaining at New Lincoln, 35 from Parker, 5 from Monument, 31 from McKinley, 18 from Jefferson and 14 from

Grant, a total of 491.

Loser did not know the number of white or black children involved in the groups to be transferred to New Lincoln. They were totaled solely on the basis of the new district created.

A new district was also created for the elementary grades at New Lincoln.

There will be 41 pupils transferred from Grant School to New Lincoln, 78 from Jefferson, 161 remaining at New Lincoln, 2 from Gregory and 77 from Monument.

A few will be reassigned from New Lincoln to other schools.

The entire teaching staff at New Lincoln remained intact.

Roughly, the new district created for New Lincoln is bounded on the west by Calhoun, on the north by Rose Street and Monmouth Street and on the east by the Pennsylvania Railroad.



Hedgepeth-Williams Middle School