

BLACKS IN NEW JERSEY - 1983

Perspectives on Mount Laurel II

Fourth Annual Report of the New Jersey
Public Policy Research Institute

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NEW JERSEY PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The New Jersey Public Policy Research Institute (NJPPRI), established in 1978, is a volunteer, non-profit, tax exempt organization. The Institute is concerned with identifying, analyzing and promulgating public policy issues significantly affecting the black residents of New Jersey. Further, the organization seeks to present these issues for appropriate public discussion. Through public discussion, the Institute contributes to the development of strategies that address these issues in ways beneficial to the State's Black population.

The Institute is state-wide in focus and attempts to work cooperatively with public policy oriented individuals and organizations throughout New Jersey.

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A COMMUNITY REMEMBERS

Regina Waynes Joseph

Often, in the fevered discussions of a political debate or, in this instance, a landmark legal decision, the people around whom the debate or decision is centered can get lost in the process. The story of Mount Laurel II is more than the story of a landmark legal decision; it is also the story of black communities in Burlington County, New Jersey that are little known, rarely discussed and that have a long history of residency there. Recounted here are some reminiscences of people who live in two towns -- Moorestown and Mount Laurel -- their views of the black community in these towns and how they came to be there. There has been no attempt to select a scientific sample or cross section of individuals but an effort has been made to present a balanced view. First, some history.

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MOORESTOWN

According to a publication of the Historical Society of Moorestown, "Moorestown did not start to develop as a village much before 1700..." and "(i)ts growth during the first one hundred years was exceedingly slow."¹ Then, as now, it appeared to be a very gracious community known for its stately homes and wide, tree lined streets. A quiet town, Moorestown has never been an industrial center but rather "a town of homes."²

During the 1700's, it is evident that, though a predominantly Quaker community, the holding of slaves was not uncommon in Moorestown.³ However, the institution of slavery was not a comfortable fact for this community. In fact, John Woolman, a Quaker and tailor from Mount Holly, who Dr. Clement A. Price characterizes as "...an apostle of racial justice at a time when most whites were indifferent to the idea..."⁴ was felt to be a regular preacher at the Moorestown Friends Meeting House. Thus, as with most black communities in the United States, the black community in Moorestown had its roots in slavery.

Slavery in New Jersey was abolished by the legislature in 1846.

Dr. Ernest Lyght further notes:

For all practical purposes slavery in Burlington County was almost extinct by 1840, for the census of that year registered one "negress" held at Chesterfield. Slavery never gained a sound footing in Burlington County. In addition to the Quaker presence, the soil did not lend itself to slave labor in that it was not as profitable as in other areas of the State.⁵

One prominent white resident of Moorestown commenting on the history of the black community there noted that "...the white community was very wealthy and most had house servants...they built homes for

their servants in Moorestown..." A resident of Mount Laurel concurred stating that "...around those times, blacks mainly worked in the homes, as household workers, or on the farms in the area..."

As has often been the case, the black church is known for shedding light on history. In this instance, records show the founding of two black churches in Moorestown in the late nineteenth century -- the Bethel A.M.E. Church in 1879 and the Second Baptist Church in 1897. Both were founded with the support of local white citizenry. An interesting footnote is mentioned about the founders of the Bethel A.M.E. Church by Dr. Lyght, "The pioneers had previously been members of Jacob's Chapel A.M.E. in Mount Laurel, but they began to grow weary of the long, round trip walk each Sunday."⁶ Moorestown and Her Neighbors, first published in 1929, records the membership of the Bethel A.M.E. Church at the time as 223 and that of the Second Baptist Church as 240.⁷

In the present day, blacks are dispersed throughout the town though as Congressman Edwin B. Forsythe (R-6th District) admits "...primarily in two concentrations." The two concentrations to which he refers are both north of the railroad which divides the town into two major sections. One concentration is on Beech Street which is located on the east side of the center of Moorestown. It is here that the Second Baptist Church, referenced earlier, is found. The majority of Moorestown's poor black community lives on Beech Street. Up until the last few years, most of the homes in this area were dilapidated shacks, "...a blight on the community" noted Forsythe. Several years ago, a community coalition of churches finally took responsibility for rehabilitating this area, formed the Moorestown Ecumenical Neighborhood

Development Corporation, gutted Beech Street, replacing there decent, safe and sanitary housing.

The second concentration of the black community is on the west side of the center of town bordered primarily by the railroad to the south, and Flynn Avenue and New Albany Road to the north. Most of Moorestown's middle income blacks reside on these streets. One major development, Farmdale Road, which is said to have increased the number of middle class blacks moving to Moorestown and encouraged future such developments, had a curious beginning. The story was first mentioned to me by my father, William D. Waynes, a resident of Farmdale Road since 1964. He stated that the Farmdale Road development was built by Blase A. Ravikio, a prominent white builder/developer in Moorestown, at the behest of RCA for their black engineering talent who could not buy homes in comfortable communities in the area. At that time, my father continued, blacks could not purchase homes anywhere in Moorestown because of the housing discrimination which existed. In fact, he said, restrictive covenants denying purchase of homes to blacks and Jews were still to be found at that time in many deeds in this and other surrounding communities.

A talk with Blase A. Ravikio elaborated on the story my father had shared with me. Ravikio recalled that in late 1958 or 1959 (he was uncertain of the exact date), he received a call from a personnel manager with the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). RCA had a major facility in Moorestown and had many defense contracts. The personnel manager told him that he had a number of black engineers on staff that he was losing because they could find no housing in the area. Ravikio

was asked to help. Ravikio stated that he did not know how he could assist but that he would attend a meeting with the 18 black engineers at the Camden YMCA. After that meeting, Ravikio recalled, he was determined to build homes for these men and their families. The engineers had shared with him the blighted, impoverished conditions in which they lived in Philadelphia, Camden and other communities in South Jersey to which blacks were directed to live. Ravikio proceeded to look for a municipality in which he could build the proposed homes. He approached several municipalities in Burlington County and all refused for various reasons, not the least of which being that the homes to be built were intended for black families. He thought that the project would be impossible to complete but one day discussed the problem with then Moorestown Mayor Edwin B. Forsythe. Ravikio recalled that Forsythe said why not Moorestown? Ravikio indicated that he had not thought of Moorestown before because he felt that housing would have been too expensive to build there and thus, more than the black engineers could afford. But Forsythe told him that the town owned a tract of land on North Church Street that could be sold for the project. Ravikio purchased that land and assembled additional parcels adjacent to it and planned to build 18-21 homes. Prior to municipal approval, a public hearing of the Planning Board was held before which the 18 men appeared. The project was approved and the Farmdale Road development built. Blacks started moving into the development in 1959.

W. Edward Armstead, a resident of Farmdale Road, upon hearing the Ravikio story, said, "I was one of the 18." Armstead added to the story. He said that in 1958 or 1959 he received a call from Taber

Bolden, a black personnel manager in RCA's Camden facility. He was told of the planned project for Moorestown and was invited to meet with Ravikio in Camden. Armstead said that he went only because he did not want to break the unity of the group but actually had no intention of buying a new home since he had just purchased a home in Lawnside, New Jersey, six months earlier. He recalled that the plans proceeded well and finally reached the point when the 18 men were to draw numbers to determine in what order lots would be selected. Armstead drew his number which turned out to be number one. He had the first choice. He and his wife, Shirley, decided to move to Moorestown and moved there in March of 1960.

Upon reflecting on his decision some 23 years ago, Armstead said that he was not dissatisfied. He said that some years ago he resented the fact that he could not move anywhere he wanted in Moorestown but the times had changed somewhat. Blacks were, in fact, now dotted throughout the community and the quality of life had been and was rather good for him and his family. He said that he preferred living in the black community and noted that this neighborhood did not experience the crime that the rest of Moorestown was undergoing. This was due, in part, to the fact that, since the neighborhood was all black, it was easier to spot white youngsters who were engaged in petty crime. Armstead said the neighbors could, if this occurred, pick them up and turn them over to their families and/or police. Armstead further commented that, prior to the Farmdale development, the middle class black community was not large, consisting mainly of some teachers and a few principals. Subsequent to 1960, more middle income blacks bought lots and built

their own homes, but still, mainly in this concentration. Armstead commented finally that it was not until "...definitely 1970..." that blacks could move anywhere they chose in Moorestown. W. Edward Armstead is currently President of the Moorestown Board of Education on which Board he has served since 1967.

The 1980 census figures show Moorestown's total population as 15,596 with 919 black residents or 5.9 percent of the total population.⁸

MOUNT LAUREL

On March 7, 1872, a new township was "...set off from the township of Evesham in the county of Burlington...to be called the township of Mount Laurel."⁹ But the history of Mount Laurel extends further back than 1872 and much of it tells the story of the presence of a significant black community. That story can best be told by telling the story of one woman, Ethel Lawrence, whose family has lived in Mount Laurel since before the Civil War.

As was noted earlier in the discussion of Moorestown, slavery was not uncommon. This was no less true for Mount Laurel. Mount Laurel: A Centennial History concurs:

The Civil War and the Industrial Revolution played minimal roles in the history of Mount Laurel. Although the Quakers were to profess a religious indignation toward the institution of slavery, some of New Jersey's earliest settlers found they were economically forced to separate livelihood from morality. (underlining mine) Slaves purchased in Newark, Delaware and Baltimore, Maryland were imported to work as field hands and household servants.¹⁰

Dr. Ernest Lyght compiled a sampling of slave manumissions in Burlington County effected during the period 1786-1800. Of those 24

listed from Deed Book A, 11 slaves were freed in Evesham Township.¹¹ A look at the census data of the mid-nineteenth century further provides a sense of the size of the black community. The census data of 1830 records 46 black households in Evesham Township with a total of 194 persons living in those households. The 1840 census figures report a "total (white and free)" population of 5,060; 355 free and no slaves reported. Census records of 1861 show a total population of 3,144 with 2,861 white and 284 black.¹²

It was around this time, the middle of the nineteenth century, that reference is first made to Ethel Lawrence's family.

It was Petersburg, located between the foot of the Mount and the junction of the Moorestown-Mount Laurel and Union Mill Roads to the south, that was the final destination of Mary Robinson's great grandparents following their escape as slaves from Delaware. And this is where her grandfather, David A. Gaines and her great uncle, George Gaines, were raised.¹³

Mary Robinson, the mother of Ethel Lawrence, still lives in Mount Laurel. The village of Petersburg, mentioned above, was one of several villages which were a part of Evesham Township.

Ethel Lawrence was born in 1926 and raised in Mount Laurel. She recalled her early years there as poor ones during which she attended segregated schools for her elementary education. Upon graduation from eighth grade in 1939, she and the other black youngsters in Mount Laurel attended the same high school as the white students since there were no segregated high schools in the area.

Mrs. Lawrence described Mount Laurel then as "...all farmland..." with most blacks living there as tenant farmers. She remembered vividly working on the farms as a child along with white farming families. But, she noted, though blacks always knew "their place", they were treated

with dignity and respect by the white members of the community. Black and white children played together, her mother, Mrs. Mary Robinson served as Brownie leader of an integrated troop of little girls and all were involved in civic activities.

The "...big change..." in race relations came, according to Mrs. Lawrence, with Ramblewood, a middle income development. This area which previously was a fruit farm now housed mainly white residents, characterized by Mrs. Lawrence as "...transient people...", many of whom worked for RCA, lived there five to six years, with their major concern -- 'how much can I sell the house for?' From her perspective, these residents "...brought their crime with them, snobbishness and fear...". The 'change' included black children who began to be harassed with stones thrown at them, white children, previously members of the integrated Brownie troop, told they could no longer belong, and parents who had "...a lack of manners and respect...". The police, said Mrs. Lawrence, were active participants in the harassment of black children in Mount Laurel.

With Ramblewood came other residential developments and a boom as well in industrial and commercial building. Middle income blacks were always dotted throughout these developments with professionals, sports and television personalities among them. Mrs. Lawrence noted that she knew several of these residents since her brother Dave Lawrence was a prominent football player.

While Mount Laurel was booming, efforts were being made to assist low income, poor communities as well. To this end, the Mount Laurel Community Action Program, which was an offshoot of the Burlington County

agency, formed the Springville Action Committee to provide a variety of assistance, including social services and housing to this "blighted area" of Mount Laurel. Mrs. Lawrence described the Springville area as originally a Jewish summer community prior to World War II when Fort Dix was in its heyday. These summer residents raised chickens on their properties and during the late 1940's, early 1950's, when the properties were abandoned, the chicken houses were converted into apartments where poor blacks, whites and some Puerto Ricans lived. Mrs. Lawrence recalled that as late as fourteen years ago her daughter lived in one of those apartments which one could still tell had been a chicken house. She said the conditions there were very bad to the extent that "...raw sewage came up into the backyards, sometimes into the bathtubs..."

It was to correct these and similar conditions that the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs supplied a seed grant to the Mount Laurel Community Action Program to build low income housing on Hartford Road in Springville. The Mount Laurel Planning Board turned the project down. Outraged, nine private citizens, including Mrs. Lawrence, sought legal counsel to determine if they could sue Mount Laurel Township and its Planning Board. In a strictly economic suit, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled in 1975, in what is now known as the Mount Laurel I decision, that the township discriminated through its local zoning ordinances against poor and low income people.

Mount Laurel did not comply with the spirit, much less the letter, of this decision. In fact, around 1979 or 1980, Mrs. Lawrence recalls, Mount Laurel attempted to rezone the area in which she lived into an industrial zone. A petition was gathered with the signatures of all the

black and white residents in this area and presented at the planning board meeting which was attended by all the petitioners. The President of the Mount Laurel Planning Board, a Mr. Campbell, told Mrs. Lawrence that he did not believe the signatures were authentic and wanted them notarized though all the petitioners were in the meeting room at the time. But Mayor Traino interceded at this point and said that he believed the signatures to be authentic and noted that he knew that these residents had lived there for generations. The industrial rezoning was defeated.

Mrs. Lawrence seemed resigned but resolute about what is a constant battle for her and others in Mount Laurel. She said, though her family is poor, they are educated and not asking for a handout. (Mrs. Lawrence attended Burlington County College, Glassboro State and Bank Street Colleges concentrating in early childhood education.) A resident of Ramblewood wrote her a letter asking her if people got together and bought her a house and paid the taxes, would she be happy? This is clearly not the point for Mrs. Lawrence and others who merely wish the right to have decent, safe and affordable housing built in which to live in the communities in which they have always lived.

The 1980 census figures show Mount Laurel's total population as 17,614 with 806 black residents or 4.6 percent of the total population.¹⁴

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Are Moorestown's zoning ordinances as restrictive as Mount Laurel's? Armstead and Carl S. Bisgaier, Esq. say they're worse. Congressman Forsythe, upon hearing these comments, said, "I suspect that's a fair statement." But what of the Moorestown Ecumencial Neighborhood Development Corporation's efforts, particularly, the Beech Street project? Bisgaier commented "...what was that -- 13 units?" One problem with Moorestown, he felt, is that since it is such an attractive community, land acquisition is highly competitive, thus difficult for developers interested in pursuing low income projects without municipal support. Congressman Forsythe, a Moorestown resident, noted another problem -- that of the historic unwillingness of the town council in Moorestown to confront the issue. He stated, "...Mount Laurel II has not produced any real movement in Moorestown..." but because of the push by the community coalition of churches, he "...think(s) there's a move now to provide for public housing..." among town council members.

Some have said that the Mount Laurel lawsuit was one manufactured by the attorneys; that, in fact, the attorneys went searching for plaintiffs, selected Mount Laurel as the sample township and having identified the ideal plaintiffs, persuaded them to litigate. I posed these thoughts to Carl S. Bisgaier, Chief Counsel for the Mount Laurel plaintiffs, former Director of the Division of Public Interest Advocacy, now in private practice in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, who along with Kenneth E. Meiser and Peter J. O'Connor, litigated the case. Bisgaier stated that this was not the case, that Ethel Lawrence and the other

eight plaintiffs brought their case to the attorneys after the Mount Laurel Planning Board rejected their request to build low income housing on Hartford Road. Bisgaier further noted that a popular rumor as well was that Mrs. Lawrence and the other individual plaintiffs were recent residents of Mount Laurel. The exact opposite was true. He felt that it was precisely because Mrs. Lawrence had lived there all her life, that her ancestors dated back to the pre-Civil War era in Mount Laurel and that they had been, or so they thought, an integral part of community life in Mount Laurel for so many years that she was determined to sue the township and pursue the case until its end. Bisgaier said he thought the plaintiffs had never expected to be turned down by the Planning Board, that they were "genuinely shocked." It was his view that "...in 1968, it was the first time they realized they were a minority...."

Footnotes

1. George De Cou, Moorestown and Her Neighbors, (Moorestown, N.J.: Historical Society of Moorestown, 1973), p. 13.
2. Ibid., p. 17.
3. Ibid., p. 16.
4. Clement Alexander Price, Freedom Not Far Distant A Documentary History of Afro-Americans in New Jersey (Newark, N.J.: New Jersey Historical Society, 1980) p. 21.
5. Ernest Lyght, Path of Freedom, The Black Presence in New Jersey's Burlington County 1659-1900, (Cherry Hill, N.J.: E & E Publishing House, 1978), p. 25.
6. Ibid., p. 72.
7. DeCou, op.cit., pp. 61, 63.
8. State Data Center, New Jersey 1980 Census Counts of Population by Race and Spanish Origin, (Trenton, N.J.: New Jersey Department of Labor and Industry, 1981), p. 8.
9. Barbara Picken and Gail Greenberg, Mount Laurel: A Centennial History (Mount Laurel, 1972), frontispiece.
10. Ibid., p. 22.
11. Lyght, op. cit., pp. 31-32.
12. Ibid., p. 47.
13. Picken, op. cit., p. 19.
14. State Data Center, op. cit. p. 8.

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R.W.J.