



LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP, NEW JERSEY

# Places in Time

**SPRING 2021**

## The Golden Age of Diners in Lawrence

By Dennis P. Waters

Perhaps you have been wondering what former New Jersey Mafia boss “Sam the Plumber” DeCavalcante had in common with iconic Princeton scientist Albert Einstein. The answer is that both were regulars at Cass’ Diner on Brunswick Pike. Sam the Plumber, who lived in Lawrence, reportedly had his regular stool at the counter, and Einstein would show up frequently, as would his fellow physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, president of the Institute for Advanced Study..

In the 1940s, 50s and 60s, diners were the one place where everyone went, and they were once as common as fast food outlets are in the 21st century. Even today New Jersey is often called the “diner capital of the world,” and many of us still occasionally feel the urge to get an eyeful of chrome and neon, browse an encyclopedic menu, or gorge on french fries with gravy at 2:00 a.m. Diners thrived in the Garden State because of our population density and extensive highway network. New Jersey was also a center for diner manufacturing, with several factories cranking out shiny prefab buildings.

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*The original Cass’ Hamilton Diner ca. 1950, on Brunswick Pike at Darrah Lane. (Photo credit: Carla Cielo)*

## President's Message

Dear Friends,

This quarter's newsletter offers insights into New Jersey's history. Judy Salcewicz reviews *Black New Jersey 1664—to Present Day*, by Graham Russell Gao Hodges, winner of the Richard P. McCormack Prize from the New Jersey Historical Commission. We also include a summary of Dr. Brooke Hunter's lecture "Slavery and African-American History in Lawrence Township" given in February in partnership with the Mercer County Library System. Dr. Hunter is our Township Historian and Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Rider University.

"The Long Lost Diners of New Jersey" are recalled in an article by Dennis Waters, former township historian. We hope you enjoy the articles and consider becoming a member of the Lawrence Historical Society.

Best wishes,

Kathie Meeker-Cohen  
President

## About Places In Time

The mission of *Places in Time* is to serve members of the Lawrence Historical Society (LHS) by:

- educating them about the history of Lawrence Township; and
- informing them of the activities of the Society.

Comments, questions, or submissions should be directed to sent to [webmaster@thelhs.org](mailto:webmaster@thelhs.org).

Deadlines for submissions are as follows:

December 15th (Winter issue)

March 15th (Spring issue)

June 15th (Summer issue)

August 15th (Fall issue)

Preferred length of submissions is 800-1000 words for feature articles and 400-500 words for reviews. LHS does not provide a commission for submitted works.

*Places in Time* accepts advertisements from businesses which provide services that would be of interest to LHS membership. Rates and other related information can be obtained by contacting the Society at [webmaster@thelhs.org](mailto:webmaster@thelhs.org)

*Places in Time* is published quarterly by the Lawrence Historical Society. Back issues are available at the LHS website -[www.TheLHS.org](http://www.TheLHS.org). We can be contacted at the following address: [webmaster@thelhs.org](mailto:webmaster@thelhs.org) This program is made possible, in part, by a grant from the Mercer County Division of Culture and Heritage, in partnership with the New Jersey Historical Commission, Division of Cultural Affairs/ Department of State. An advertisement (or sponsor recognition) appearing in *Places in Time* does not constitute an endorsement or recommendation of the advertiser's product or service by LHS or *Places in Time*. *Places in Time* and LHS assume no responsibility for statements made by contributors.

## History in the Pages

### Black New Jersey: 1664 to the Present Day

Graham Russell Gao Hodges, Rutgers University Press, 2019. 344 pages.

#### Review by Judy Salcewicz

Twenty years ago, I took five high school students to Okayama, Japan as part of an exchange program. We visited the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, an eerily beautiful site that generated many emotions. I felt remorse for events that took place before my birth. When I asked our student hosts what they knew about Pearl Harbor, I was met with blank stares. They didn't know about the event. The gap in their education surprised me.

Black New Jersey won the 2019 Richard P. McCormick Prize from the New Jersey Historical Commission. The editors describe it as, "a rich and complex story of the African American community's remarkable accomplishments and the colossal obstacles they faced along the way."

I expected to find gaps in my own education as I read the narrative historian Graham Russell Gao Hodges brought forth from rare archives and primary sources. I was not mistaken.

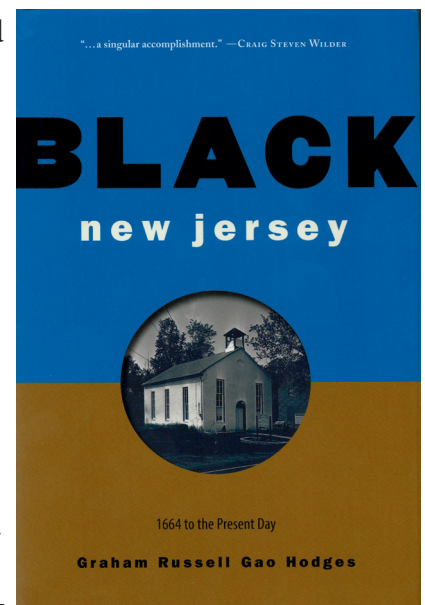
Born, raised, and educated in New Jersey, I wasn't taught that my state was the last state in the north to initiate

gradual emancipation in 1804 or that New Jersey's legacy of slavery continued up to and even after the Civil War. I was pleased to read that, after the American Revolution, New Jersey was the only state where white, propertied, single females and black males could vote. But, in 1807 this right, like so many hard won steps towards emancipation and eradication of Jim Crow laws, was revoked. It was difficult to read about the legal barriers that promoted oppression and the treatment of slaves as property. Professor Hodges described many of the individuals and the work of black community members who fought and sacrificed their lives to fight injustice.

Harriet Tubman found work as a maid in Cape May after her self-emancipation in 1849. She collaborated with Stephen Smith, the wealthiest black businessman in America, to work on the Underground Railroad. The local black community took part in these efforts which were imperiled by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in which the North gave governmental support to slave catchers. The rescues continued but fugitives were warned to continue to New

England and Canada.

Princeton University became segregated when Woodrow Wilson administered the school from 1902 to 1910. He fired all of the black dining hall employees and hired Greek immigrants to take their place. Reverend William Paul Robeson became pastor of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church. He made the church a hub for civic and social activity. Even as a respected community leader, Reverend Robeson was unable convince Wilson to even consider admitting his son. Wilson's angry response to the inquiry was to say that the university would not accept "colored" students.



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In Lawrence, the diners lined up along Brunswick Pike, US-1, which was the major north-south conduit for drivers, especially truckers, who wanted to avoid the tolls on the New Jersey Turnpike. Driving north from the Brunswick Circle to Quakerbridge Road, at one time or another you would have passed the Trent Diner, Annie's Diner, Nassau Diner, Cass' Diner, Clarksville Diner, and Swifts' Colonial Diner. Of these, the only place you can still catch a quick bite is the former Trent, just north of the circle and now known as the Route 1 Diner. Of the others, two burned down, two were moved elsewhere, and one was razed.

No one knows exactly when the first diner appeared in Lawrence. A 1935 want ad lists a diner for sale at Bakers Basin, but nothing more is known of it. In the late 1930s a place called the Slackwood Grill was in business on Brunswick Avenue just south of the traffic circle, but it was gone by 1940. The diner with the oldest pedigree is the Trent, now the Route 1. It was opened in the 1930s by Slackwood resident Charles Salt, who sold it to Frank Brennan in 1941.

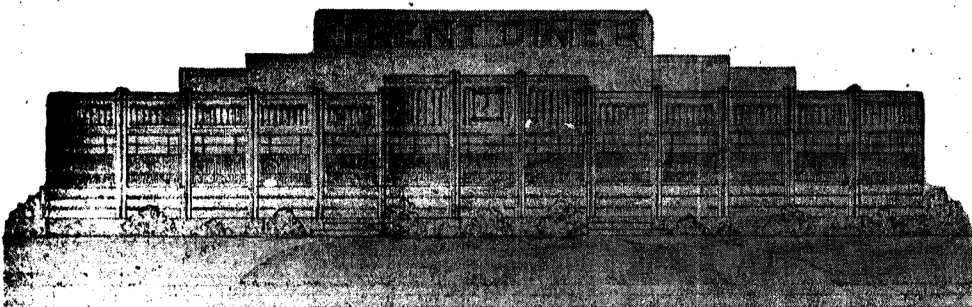
Brennan's day job was in the trucking industry and he must have known what truckers wanted. He operated the Trent until 1957, when it was sold to Mac DeLuca, who replaced the old building in 1964 and ran the place until 1973. After DeLuca, the Trent went through several owners and names, including the Lawrenceville Diner, Rainbow Diner, and Crystal Diner, until it became the Route 1 under new ownership in 2014.

Two Brunswick Pike diners came to fiery ends. The Hamilton Diner opened in the 1940s opposite Darrah Lane, and in 1948 was sold to Cosmo Giordano, who renamed it Cass' Hamilton Diner. In 1949 the Lawrence Drive-in Theater opened for business across the way and in 1951 the large W.T. Cowan trucking terminal was

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*Frank Brennan*



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*1947 newspaper ad celebrating the Trent Diner, now the Route 1 Diner. (Photo credit: Trenton Evening Times)*

was built right next door, making this a great location for a diner. Around 1954 Giordano decided to move further north on Brunswick Pike, and sold his old diner to Gus Elley, who named it Annie's in honor of his wife. Annie's became a regular stop for Lawrence police officers, but in 1957 it was gutted by fire. The owners never recovered and in 1960 the remains of the building were sold at auction. The site is now occupied by the Route One USA auto dealership.

In 1961 two brothers, Nick and Basil Antonakos, opened the Nassau Diner on Brunswick Pike opposite Carnegie Road. The diner's name most likely came from the nearby Nassau Estates subdivision, which had recently been built and where Nick Antonakos lived. The Nassau was destroyed by fire in 1977 and never reopened. The property was sold in 1985 and is now the site of Team Toyota.

The prefabricated nature of diner buildings made them readily movable, and two Brunswick Pike diners concluded their days in Lawrence by being loaded onto flatbed trucks and carted off to new locations. Around 1947 Jim and Jane Swift opened the Clarksville Diner on the northbound side of Brunswick Pike at Province Line Road. In about 1956 they updated it with a diner building that had previously been the Princeton Grill further up Brunswick Pike at the Penns Neck Circle (Washington Road).

The Clarksville Diner survived into the 1980s, when construction of the new US-1 interchange encroached on its property. In 1988 a businessman bought the Clarksville Diner building and moved it to Iowa with the idea of opening a Jersey-style diner there. That venture lasted only a few years, and in 1998 the diner was acquired by a French television network. It passed through New Jersey again on its way to Paris, where it currently looks out across the Seine River. It is not used as a restaurant, however, but rather as a set for television production.



*The former Clarksville Diner at its new home in Paris, France, overlooking the Seine.  
(Photo credit: Google Street View)*

The Swifts liked the business so much that in 1961 they opened a second diner across the road from the Clarksville, on the southbound side of Brunswick Pike. This was Swifts' Colonial Diner, which they operated until selling it in 1988. The Colonial continued in operation until the 1990s, when it was torn down to make room for a Denny's restaurant and a Porsche dealership.

The last diner to get out of town was Cass'. After getting his start at the Calhoun Diner, just south of Lawrence, Cosmo "Cass" Giordano bought the Hamilton Diner in 1948 and sold it around 1954 (when it became Annie's). He then moved his namesake north to the corner of Bakers Basin Road with a brand new building. Besides Einstein and Sam the Plumber, Cass' Diner<sup>1</sup> was a frequent stop for Lawrence police, who nicknamed it "the second precinct."

In 1974, the property was sold to Beatrice "Mrs. G" Greenberg, who owned the appliance store next door. After the sale, the place became Ben's Diner. It operated under that name for about five years, then opened and closed under various other names until 1984, when it shut its doors for good. For the next fifteen years Mrs. G's operated a plumbing supply business from the diner building.

In 2012 Mrs. G's unveiled plans to redevelop the site and a call went out to save the diner building, which by that time had been vacant for many years. The developer offered to give the diner to anyone who would cart it away. Trenton nonprofit Isles Inc. and Hamilton developer Modern Recycled Spaces took them up on the offer and moved the diner to Johnston Avenue in Hamilton with the intent of turning it into a job training facility for food service. It remains there today, wrapped to protect it from the elements until funds can be raised to restore it.

*Dennis Waters is a Lawrence Township resident and Lawrence Hopewell Trail board member. He served as Lawrence Township Historian from 2006 - 2018.*

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<sup>1</sup> If you look up this diner online, you will find a great deal of misinformation, even from sources you might consider reputable. First, it was never called the Giordano Diner, although that was Cass's last name. Second, the diner building was not originally the Calhoun Diner, although that is where Cass once worked. He bought a new Mountain View diner building in 1954.

## **Lawrence Historical Society Co-Sponsors Lecture on Slavery and African-American History in Lawrence Township**

On February 24th, Dr. Brooke Hunter, Associate Dean of The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Rider University and Lawrence Township Historian, spoke about on slavery and African-American history in Lawrence Township. At the event, which was co-sponsored by the Mercer County Library System, Dr. Hunter placed the township's history with slavery in the general context of slavery, African-American history, and race relations in New Jersey and the United States.

Dr. Hunter has served as Lawrence Township's historian since 2018 and conducted extensive research in the township's historical collection. According to Dr. Hunter, although New Jersey was a northern state, it was the last northern state to abolish slavery and when it did so, in 1804, state law only provided for a very gradual emancipation of slaves. As a result, not only was there slavery in Lawrence, but that slavery existed in the township as late as 1860.

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Paul Robson was, in Hodge's opinion, "the most important person ever to emerge from the state." He was the third black student to enroll at Rutgers. He excelled at football and won over teammates who initially threatened to strike if their team became integrated. He gave a valedictory address at graduation and moved on to achieve acclaim as a singer, actor, and activist.

Future judge Bruce Wright had his admission and full scholarship withdrawn in 1939 Princeton when Wright attended Princeton's student orientation. The dean wrote a letter claiming that he "could not in good conscience" put Wright into a hostile environment. Throughout the 1950s only one or two black students were admitted each year. Judge Bruce Wright visited Princeton and spoke about his dismissal. Robert Goheen, Princeton's president was floored. He moved forward on integration. "In 1968, the number of blacks in Princeton's entering class rose from twenty-eight the previous year to seventy-six."

This book contains a detailed description of the experiences of many black individuals in New Jersey. Black New Jersey celebrates people and groups who stood up to a society dedicated to separation and degradation. I believe that, through information, it's possible to learn from the past and apply this knowledge for a better future.

For those who attended Dr. Brooke Hunter's lecture, Slavery and the African-American History in Lawrence Township, this book expands on the topic with a wealth of information and specific events. If you regret missing the lecture by Lawrence Township's Historian, Black New Jersey will fill in the gaps that are often overlooked by the institutions of learning in our state.

*Judy Salcewicz, a Lawrence Historical Society board member, lives, writes and gardens in Lawrence. Her work has been published by Chicken Soup for the Soul, The Kelsey Review, and other publications.*

### **From The Township Archives: Lawrence Drive-In**

The Lawrence Drive-In opened on August 23, 1949. Located behind Riis Trucking (current library building) on land now occupied by Carriage Park, the drive in operated until the mid-1980s despite many changes in ownership. The original theater included a petting zoo and play ground area as well as the usual snack shack. In the 1950s you could even win a free jalopy on Friday nights - guaranteed to run (probably just enough to get you back to the drive-in each week).



The Lawrence Historical Society  
P.O. Box 6025  
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