

## The Last Two Miles

How did interstate highway construction in Newark, New Jersey create the urban-suburban racial wealth gap?

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It did not have to be this way. In 1958, the New Jersey State Transportation Department had a choice: Build Interstate 78 on a route that displaced some 43 families in the suburb of Hillside or build it on a path that displaced some 7,800 Jewish and black families in one of Newark's only racially integrated neighborhoods. Engineers and planners chose the urban highway path through the Jewish and black neighborhood over the less destructive suburban route. It is a story local to Newark, but mirrored hundreds of times across the landscape of other American cities. The story of Interstate 78 is a microcosm that reveals much about the politics and inequalities of city planning in a suburban and auto age.<sup>1</sup>

Highways slice through Newark on all sides. They cut the city into parts and divide neighborhoods from each other. The millions of cars and trucks that pass through Newark annually emit soot particles that give Newark air the highest concentration in the state of nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide.<sup>2</sup> To the east of Downtown is the six-lane Route 22 built in the 1930s that divides the city from the Passaic River and restricts public access to the waterfront. To the north of Downtown is the six-lane Interstate 280 built in the 1940s. To the west of Downtown is the eight-lane Garden State Parkway built in the 1950s that divides Newark from commuter suburbs to the west. To the south of Newark is the ten-lane Interstate 78 built in the 1960s that divides Newark from historically and once majority-white suburbs like Hillside.

Collectively, these four roads box in Newark from four sides. New Jersey's largest concentration of poverty, where the median family income is a mere \$38,000, is separated from the rest of the state by a highway moat up to 400 feet wide in parts of Interstate 78. By contrast, the median family income in the Essex County suburbs that surround Newark is over \$100,000. Pre-pandemic some 200,000 residents of these commuter suburbs drove into Newark on these highways, parked in Newark, made salaries on average above \$50,000, and drove home at the end of each workday, leaving behind some 300 acres of surface parking lots.

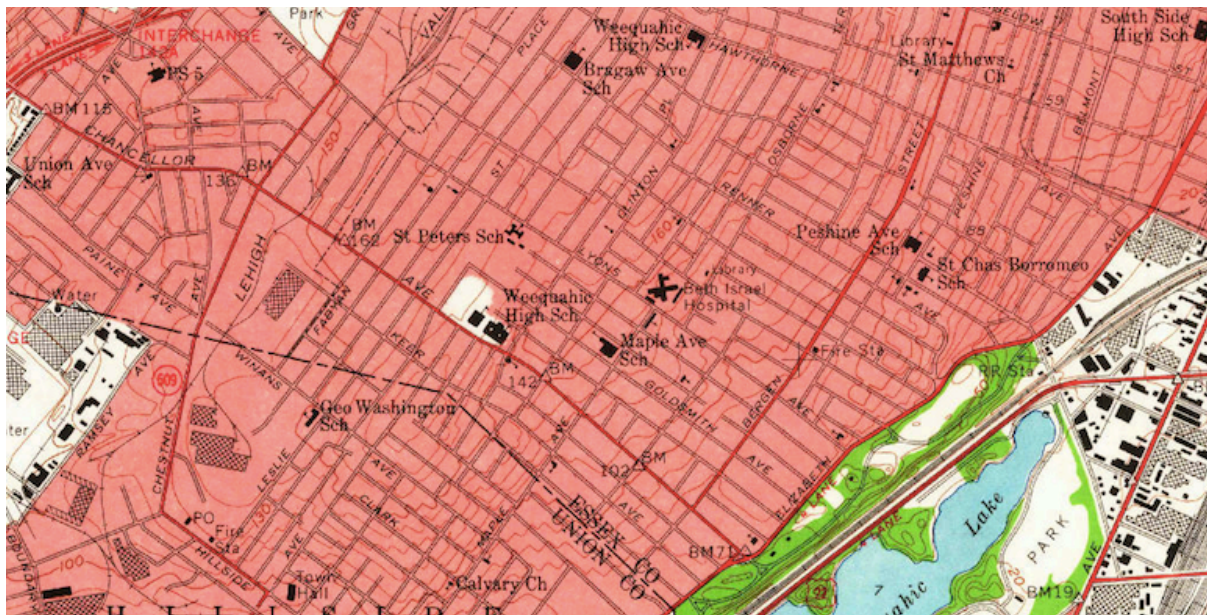
It did not have to be this way.

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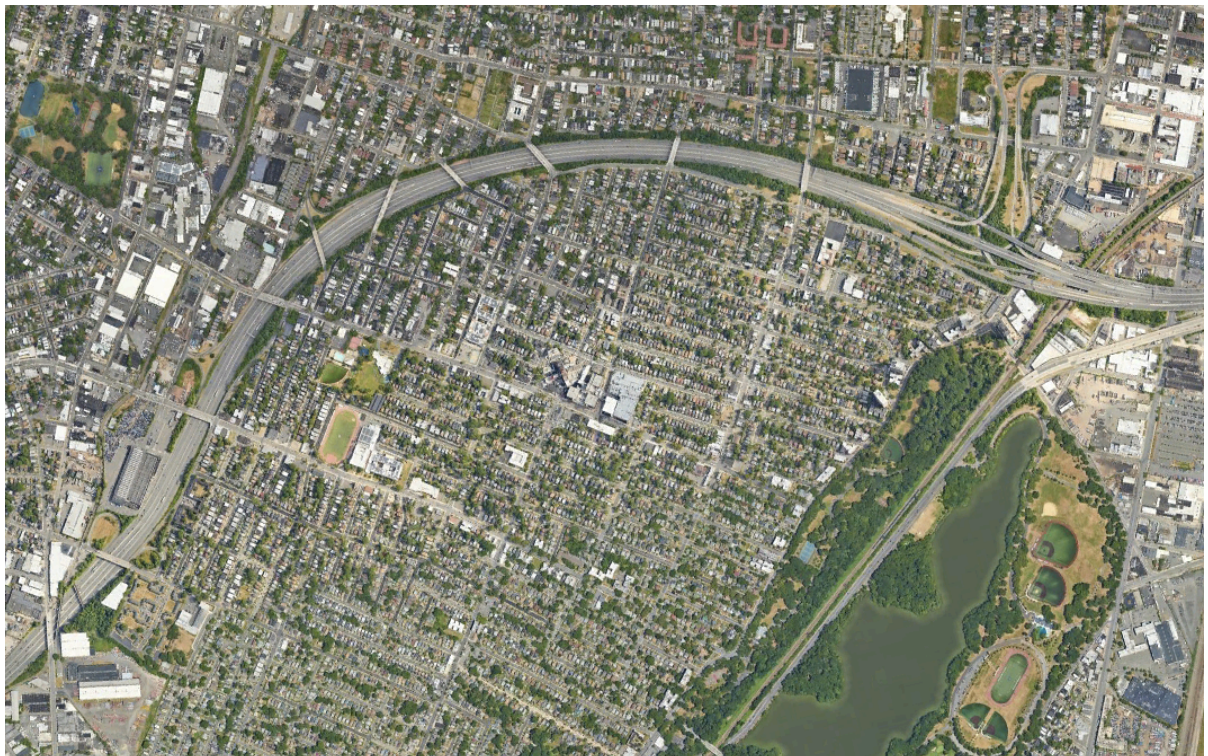
<sup>1</sup> For a near parallel story, see Robert Caro's chapter on how Robert Moses drove the Cross Bronx Expressway through the Jewish neighborhood of East Tremont. In a story both local and national, Moses could have routed the highway through an adjacent park on path that would have displaced only a few hundred people. He chose the path through East Tremont, resulting in what Caro claims was the destruction of 2,000 families from a stable working class tenement neighborhood. Read more at:

Robert Caro, "Chapter 37: One Mile," in *The Power Broker* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, "New Jersey Air Quality Report," November 23, 2021, tables 6-5 and 8-4: <https://www.nj.gov/dep/airmon/pdf/2020-nj-aq-report.pdf>.



*Weequahic in 1955*



*Weequahic in 2023*

In spring 1958, surveyors from the New Jersey State Transportation Department drove to Newark's Weequahic neighborhood. They stood on the hill that slopes up from Newark Airport and the meadowlands. And they surveyed before them the hill through which they planned to drive their highway. In their path stood, 2,247 homes. Most of these were single-family homes set back along tree-lined streets with small front yards, decent-sized side yards, and a driveway for each. The state's own planning documents identified that at least 1,900 of these homes were in "sound" condition.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> City of Newark Division of City Planning, "Route 78 Freeway Study II," April 1963.



President Dwight Eisenhower's 1956 National Interstate and Defense Highways Act made possible the 41,000 miles of the Interstate Highway System. The federal government paid for ninety percent of clearance and construction costs. State governments paid the remaining ten percent. As a product of the Cold War mentality and with fears of nuclear apocalypse on the horizon, the interstate highways were designed with military defense in mind. Every major U.S. military base and installation was directly linked into the Interstate Highway system through large on-ramps. In the event of war, residents could drive out and soldiers drive into the bombed city. As a William H. Clark, president of the New Jersey Citizens Highway Commission urged Weequahic residents to support highway construction through their neighborhood: "National defense – this is imperative 'every time and everywhere a prolonged interstate highway controversy occurs. The quicker this highway is completed, the better the country's military posture.'"<sup>4</sup>

The largest highway bridge in Newark to date – Pulaski Skyway – was completed in the 1930s, running directly from Manhattan's Holland Tunnel, over the meadowlands, and landing at Newark's doorstep. From there, cars would continue from this superhighway for its time onto local streets. By the 1950s, Newark residents complained that – while the Newark region contained one-fifth the state's population, it was receiving less than one tenth of the state infrastructure investments for new roads and highways. As County Supervisor Gray pointed out: "'Ribbons of concrete state highways come from all New Jersey directions and end at Essex County's boundaries.' [...] By neglecting Essex, the state is also failing to give the rest of the state full value for its highway investment. Making Essex county a roadblock on the state highway system is a disservice to every other county."<sup>5</sup> Interstate 78 would change all this. Decent roads continued from Newark to suburbs to the west, and from Newark's downtown core to New York City in the east. But Interstate 78 would be a major superhighway through Newark, slicing through the city directly. By linking up with good roads east and west of Newark, it would empower hundreds of thousands of cars weekly to travel from comfortable suburbs to New York City office jobs. The \$488 million cost made this the most expensive infrastructure project in the history of New Jersey.<sup>6</sup>

City Hall's own planning documents from Harland Bartholomew's 1945 master plan mapped every city block and sorted each block into one of three action items: "protect home neighborhoods; rehabilitate the blighted areas; clear and rebuild the slums." Weequahic was one of the few neighborhoods to be "protected."<sup>7</sup> The 1966 master plan reiterated the need to preserve Weequahic by quoting Le Corbusier: "The greatest enemy of the city is despair."<sup>8</sup> The plan expanded by comparing the decay in redlined neighborhoods to the cancer that a surgeon must remove from the human body: "Just as a physician must first diagnose the cause and extent of a disease before he can effect a cure, so the ills of Newark needed first to be studied."<sup>9</sup> In 1939 redlining maps of Newark, only two neighborhoods in the entire city were ranked as "still desirable" for banks to invest in: the neighborhood of Forest Hill in the

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<sup>4</sup> "Backs Route 78: Clark Urges Alignment Acceptance," *Newark Evening News*, January 8, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> "Disservice to All," *Newark Evening News: Opinion*, January 7, 1951.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Harland Bartholomew and Associates,

A Proposed Comprehensive Housing Program for Newark, in *A Preliminary Report on Housing Conditions and Policy for Newark, New Jersey*, #4, Central Planning Board, April 1945 (NJ 352.9N4234R), p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Newark Housing Authority, "General Description of Program," in *City of Newark Community Renewal Program*, 1966, p. 1: <https://archive.org/details/NewarkHousing057/page/n1/mode/2up>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

north and a section of Weequahic in the south.<sup>10</sup> The planned highway path would go right through Weequahic. Novelist Philip Roth described Weequahic's Keer Avenue in the 1940s, the street now partially demolished for Interstate 78:

Here, on this grid of locust-tree-lined streets into which the Lyons farm had been partitioned during the boom years of the early twenties, the first postimmigrant generation of Newark's Jews had regrouped into a community that took its inspiration more from the mainstream of American life than from the Polish shtetl their Yiddish-speaking parents had recreated around Prince Street in the impoverished Third Ward. The Keer Avenue Jews, with their finished basements, their screened-in porches, their flagstone front steps, seemed to be at the forefront, laying claim like audacious pioneers to the normalizing American amenities.<sup>11</sup>

Weequahic was a self-sufficient and stable middle class Jewish neighborhood by the 1950s. On Clinton Avenue was the Temple B'Nai Abraham, built 1925 by the city's wealthiest followers of Progressive Judaism. Its temple front was modeled on a neoclassical temple with limestone columns four stories high, resembling a bank or courthouse more than a synagogue. It were as if Newark's second- and third-generation Jews were communicating through architecture that they were as American and as upwardly mobile as native-born Protestant Americans. Two miles north, in the former heart of Newark's Jewish community stood the far smaller Prince Street Synagogue built by first-generation Jews. Its Byzantine-style and heavy-set brick architecture modeled on Eastern Europe and German *rundbogenstil* architecture communicated to passerby and the street that its builders still saw themselves as immigrants. On Prince Street among the first-generation tenement immigrants, males and females were segregated during the service, with women sent to the upper galleries. At B'Nai Abraham, males and females sat together. In the schoolhouse behind Temple B'Nai Abraham, their children took classes in the Torah, in civics, and in American history.<sup>12</sup>

On Bergen Street, Jewish delis, hot dog stands, pharmacies, liquor stores, corner convenience stores, and restaurants sold to a mixed-race clientele. Most storeowners remained Jewish into the 1960s. Set off from the rest of the city by commuter trolleys and later by public buses, Bergen Street merchants maintained a fierce independence. When black shop-owners formed a larger and citywide business improvement association, the United Community Corporation, Weequahic merchants refused to join it and formed their own Clinton Avenue Merchants Association.<sup>13</sup>

In Weequahic Park, Boy Scouts, boaters, and baseball players gathered on weekends. For a city grid laid out on narrow lots, Weequahic Park represented one of the few green spaces in the city. As one of those areas not quite urban and not quite suburban, Weequahic homes were on wide enough lots to be freestanding homes in the image of the pastoral suburban ideal. But homes here were not so large as real commuter suburbs in Maplewood, Montclair, and Glen Ridge to the west. This produced in Weequahic that kind of walkable

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<sup>10</sup> LaDale Winling et al., HOLC tracts B10 and C13 for Union County, NJ, Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America: <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=12/40.666/-74.41&city=union-co.-nj&area=B10>.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Roth, "Paradise Remembered," in *American Pastoral* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ulana Zakalak for the National Park Service, "Temple B'Nai Abraham National Register of Historic Places Nomination," April 26, 2007: <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/07000358>.

<sup>13</sup> "Bernstein Urged Merchants' No," *Newark Evening News*, April 12, 1967, p. 28.



urbanism and mid-rise density between the noisy urban tenement core Newark's Jews were leaving behind and the pastoral suburban ideal they so desperately wanted to enter, but from which they were still denied entry by realtors and restrictive covenants.

By the 1940s, banks and realtors still assessed applicants for home mortgages by how "American" they appeared, how close to immigrant-stock they behaved, and if they were "swarthy" in appearance.<sup>14</sup> In this way, when it came to the project of desegregation and racial integration, Newark's Jews and blacks had common cause. Both found themselves on the "wrong side of the color line" so to speak. Blacks and Jews both lived in neighborhoods that were redlined, in cold-water flat tenements still heated by coal. The better off among both blacks and Jews lived in Weequahic. Both lived in neighborhoods experiencing the challenges of mid-century slum clearance by the likes of Robert Moses or – in Newark's case – Newark Housing Authority director Louis Danzig.<sup>15</sup>

In the north of Weequahic by Clinton Avenue and closer to downtown were the three and four story tenements, built mostly by speculators in the 1900s and 1910s for the Old Third Ward. Jewish and immigrant landlords lived in the ground floor apartments and rented out the upper floors to tenants. In the south of Weequahic by Bergen Street and farther from downtown were single-family homes, laid out in the 1920s as a commuter suburb. Here lived Jewish doctors, lawyers, salesmen at downtown department stores like Bamberger's, as well as skilled machinists in some of the city's 1,200-plus small manufacturers.<sup>16</sup>

Before it was Jewish, the Old Third Ward was Irish and German. As the second-generation immigrant Irish and Germans built wealth and moved out to the first ring of trolley suburbs in Weequahic that surrounded Newark's tenement core, the first-generation Jewish moved into the Old Third Ward. As the second-generation Jews built wealth and moved out to Weequahic, the blacks moved into the Old Third Ward. By the 1950s, Weequahic, too, was in racial transition. Second and third-generation Jews were now moving beyond Weequahic to still more distant commuter suburbs, suburbs accessible to downtown by car rather than trolley. As blacks built wealth, they too, moved into Weequahic to replace the Jews. Blacks tested the waters first in the north, in the part of Weequahic closest to the Old Third Ward. With time, they expanded south, such that by the 1950s Weequahic was about ten percent black. As much as any Newark neighborhood, Weequahic was in ethnic transition, as if its homes were mid-rung on the ladder to social mobility, a semi-suburban stepping stone between the urban tenement and the suburban tract home.

The Polish and Irish parts of West Ward beyond Weequahic, as well as the largely Italian parts of the North Ward kept out blacks, formed their own John Birch Society, opposed bussing to desegregate schools, and called for *Brown v. Board of Education* to be rolled back. The most militant among these Italians formed neighborhood watch groups to protect Italian businesses, survey polling stations in black neighborhoods to "stop voter fraud," and escort Italians through the so-called "no go zones" of the majority-black Old Third Ward. By contrast, Jewish Weequahic generally supported the project of integration, so

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<sup>14</sup> Damon Stetson, "Michigan Fights Real Estate Bias Aims to Ban Discrimination After Disclosure of a Point Plan to Screen Buyers," *The New York Times*, June 5, 1960: <https://www.nytimes.com/1960/06/05/archives/michigan-fights-real-estate-bias-aims-to-ban-discrimination-after.html>.

<sup>15</sup> George Sternlieb, "Introduction," in *The Tenement Landlord: Residential Abandonment Revisited* (New Brunswick, N.J., Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

long as blacks represented no more than a sizable minority in their neighborhood. By the 1960s, the Congress of Racial Equality described the neighborhood as “above all a stable, functioning, interracial community.”<sup>17</sup>

It was by June 1960, letters appeared in the mailboxes of thousands of residents, notifying each family that the highway was coming through. The letters appeared on New Jersey State Transportation Department letterhead. They read there would be a public meeting at the Mosque Theatre on Broad Street to present highway plans. And that was that: no method to appeal the highway path, no details on how much it would cost, or when demolition would begin. The first thing residents did was walk around the street, inquiring which of their neighbors had received letters and who had not. There was randomness to it all. But by walking door-to-door and gossiping with neighbors, residents guessed the highway path. As a state highway employee clarified to angry residents in the path of Interstate 78: “The law does not require that notification be given the community. ‘But courtesy demands that we notify the property owner, and we usually try to do that.’”<sup>18</sup>

The twelve-lane depressed highway would cut a swath 400 feet wide across Weequahic, about 200 feet for the road itself and 200 more feet for earth embankments and service roads. In some parts by highway interchanges, the width of Interstate 78 approached 800 feet. About 100 city blocks would be erased. About 50 through streets in the city grid would now become dead end-streets, requiring residents to walk up to half a mile around the highway to get to neighbors once 200 feet down the street. Houses mid-block once sheltered on either side with the homes of wood-frame neighbors would now have bedroom windows and backyards that faced the highway fumes. Those whose homes would be demolished would be compensated; those with homes on either side would not, even if the highway’s associated noise and soot lowered the property value of their home. There was no noise study, no consideration of alternative routes, and no communication with residents in the several years of planning since 1955 before plans were made public. Residents had eviction letters, and that was that.

Hundreds of businesses and dozens of churches received eviction notices, too. Among those institutions within the highway path were Torah Chaim Jewish Center, Bet Yeled School, Bragaw Avenue School, Bethlehem Evangelical and Reformed Church, Chevra Radfee Sholem, Congregation Tefereth Zion, Hawthorne Avenue School, Congregation Kehlifath Israel, Congregation Talmud Torah, Mount Calvary Baptist Church, Peshine Avenue School, St. Charles Church and Parochial School, and the South Ward Boys’ Club.<sup>19</sup> The South Ward Boys’ Club had, in fact, just completed their new building for \$500,000 and hosted classes for racially integrated school children. President of the club David Warner asked: “What happens to the 1,500 children who look forward to using this building every day?” He estimated that highway construction would cause the Boys’ Club to lose half their members.<sup>20</sup>

Among those first to learn about the new highway in June 1960 was Lee Bernstein at 239 Osborne Terrace. The interstate would pass only four doors down and less than 200 feet from his home. He lived in this three-story wood-frame bungalow with his wife Rosalyn and two-year old daughter Susan. Bernstein was born 1930 in Newark, served from 1951 to 1952

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<sup>17</sup> “CORE Opposes Route 78 Line,” *Newark Evening News*, April 4 1963.

<sup>18</sup> “Highway Rights: State Denies Springfield Trespass,” *Newark Evening News*, May 14, 1959.

<sup>19</sup> *Newark Sunday News*, June 4, 1961.

<sup>20</sup> “Club Opposes Rt. 78 Path,” *Newark Evening News*, May 31, 1961.

during the Korean War, studied Government Administration at Rutgers University. His job for the past twelve years was as a credit manager for the Madison Photographers in Union.<sup>21</sup> “To help stabilize my neighborhood,” he co-created the Osborne Terrace Neighborhood Association. To protect stray dogs and prevent abandoned animals from being euthanized, he served as Executive Director of the Associated Humane Society.<sup>22</sup>

On July 15, 1960 at 10:30am in the Mosque Theater on Newark Broad Street, several hundred concerned residents gathered to voice their concerns to state highway planners. Over the thirteen-hour meeting, planners heard testimony from 650 people in attendance.<sup>23</sup> Attendees came from across Newark and the suburbs of Union, Maplewood, Hillside, and Irvington to gaze at the state’s plans printed on a map 54 feet long and ten feet tall. The width and size of the map occupied the entire stage of the Mosque, Newark’s largest theater. Here, for the first time, Bernstein and others learned in detail the scale of the state plans. For sections of the highway that cut through the suburbs, state planners presented to the public maps showing three possible highway alignments. Some alignments in the north took more from Maplewood; others in the south took more from Union. But it was the public’s job and the job of the mayor of each suburban town to advocate for the least destructive highway path. However, when the highway arrived at Newark, planners presented only one path to the public and refused to move it. Suburbs were given a choice; Newark residents were not.<sup>24</sup>

Bernstein was outraged. Within weeks, he worked with the Weequahic Community Council to form the Committee to Save Our Homes. By winter 1961, Bernstein was making his second trip to Washington D.C. to meet with members of congress and the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads. By May 1961, he travelled to Washington with Republican Assemblyman Hymen Mintz, Harold Vernick and President of the Chancellor Avenue Merchant’s Association. Bernstein’s friend Ralph Zinn also joined this meeting; Zinn would later become a candidate to serve on Newark’s Human Rights Commission. Lastly, the young Donald Payne joined Bernstein; he, too, would be elected to U.S. Congress in 1989 and serve as chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. Bernstein later told reporters, that he and Payne left both meetings feeling “definitely encouraged.” Walter Osborne, an official at the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, allegedly told Bernstein and Donald Payne that the highway route was “definitely not final.”<sup>25</sup>

By April 1962, Bernstein found himself running for South Ward Councilman on the platform to stop highway construction and promote racial harmony. The promotional pamphlet handed out to voters and slipped into mailboxes was in font visibly laid out by hand and typed out in a backroom typewriter. The advertisement began: “A veteran, Lee holds the reserve rank of First Lieutenant. Lee has an outstanding civic record. Leader of the ROUTE 78 ACTION COMMITTEE to save our homes.” The front cover proclaimed in all caps “HE CAN DO THE JOB” and showed a large photo of Lee posing with his black campaign manager Hickman Holmes. Holmes served in the New Hope Baptist Church was from the growing black neighborhood of Clinton Hill that bordered Weequahic just north. As blacks

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<sup>21</sup> “Candidate Questionnaire,” *The Newark News*, June 1970.

<sup>22</sup> Gunter David, Lee Bernstein biography in *The Newark News*, c. June 1962.

<sup>23</sup> “State Firm On Hearing: Sees No Need of Night Sessions on Essex Highways,” *Newark Evening News*, January 30, 1964.

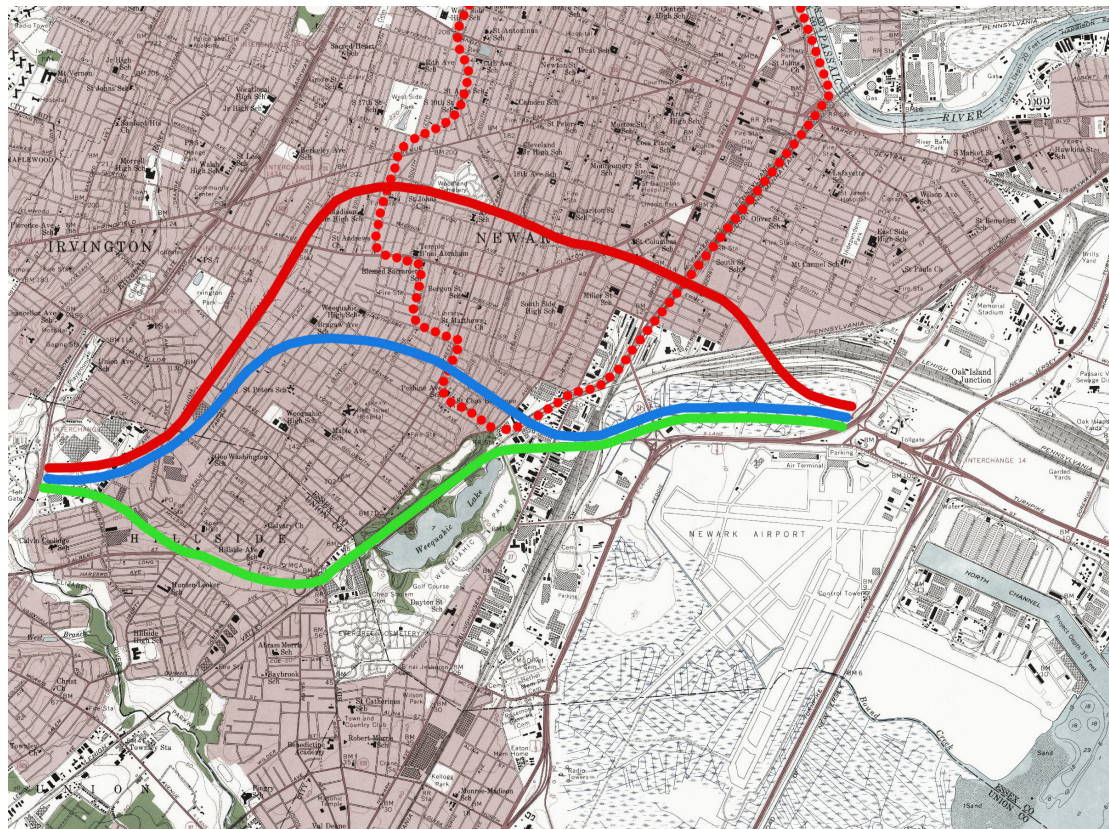
<sup>24</sup> “Merits of Rt. 78 Alignment To Be Discussed at Mosque,” *Newark Evening News*, June 30, 1960.

<sup>25</sup> George Kentera, “Weequahic Group Heartened by Capital Talks on Rt. 78,” *Newark Evening News*, May 9, 1961.



built wealth, those from Clinton Hill were moving south into Weequahic. Lee Bernstein won. He had just turned 30 and was the city's youngest Councilman.<sup>26</sup>

The first job of Weequahic activists was to investigate the highway path and propose alternative routes. Planners presented the public a choice between three possible suburban paths; so it was possible there were other less destructive paths through or around Newark. The Committee to Save Our Homes reasoned that, if only, if only they had the time and research to present a cheaper and shorter path, the planners would recognize the error of their ways and chalk up the whole conflict as little more than a miscommunication.



.....	Racial color line separating majority white from majority black neighborhoods <sup>27</sup>	
—	Proposal from Newark City Hall	Would displace: 8,346
—	Proposal from federal government	Displaced: 7,818
—	Proposal from residents of Weequahic	Would displace: Just 43 homes

There was an alternative. Interstate 78 was supposed to parallel, and in many cases replace, traffic from the older state-owned Route 22. Route 22's four-lanes of congested traffic ran its entire length through strip malls, gas stations, car dealerships, industrial areas, auto parts suppliers, and the factories of Ford Motor Company. As Route 22 traveled north to Newark, it ran south of the Weequahic neighborhood entirely and through the suburb of Hillside. Route 22 instead bisected Weequahic Park parallel to the double-track heavy freight mainline of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Activists reasoned that Interstate 78 should be built above Route 22 on its existing alignment. At this point, to save on taking space from the park, Interstate 78 could be built as an elevated highway above the railroad and Route 22's

<sup>26</sup> Lee Bernstein, "Elect Lee Bernstein Campaign Advertisement," April 1962, accessed via *Internet Archive*: [archive.org/details/Winters0248/page/n1/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/Winters0248/page/n1/mode/2up).

<sup>27</sup> Map created by author based on 1955 USGS map, accessed via USGS Topoview: <https://ngmdb.usgs.gov/topoview/viewer/#14/40.7391/-74.1993>.

existing right of way. The park's dense foliage, 500 feet thick, would shield Weequahic residential areas from the noise and views of the elevated highway just south. As Interstate 78 exited Weequahic, it could join up with traffic from Newark airport and continue onward over the Pulaski Skyway to the Holland Tunnel and New York City. At this point, east of Weequahic, Interstate 78 would continue on the state's existing proposed alignment. West of Weequahic in the suburbs, Interstate 78 could take any one of the state's three proposed alignments. This proposal was only 1,000 feet longer, limited in scope, and smoothly linked up on either end with the state's existing plans. By this arrangement, thousands of Weequahic families could stay in their homes, with no reduction in park size and no reduction in the highway's capacity.

The town of Hillside just south of Newark resisted this plan; the Weequahic proposal would hurt their town most. By the 1960s, Hillside was largely home to second- and third-generation Irish, German, and Polish immigrants. Many had been born in Newark and had left for Hillside as they acquired the jobs and wealth that allowed them to move to the suburbs. Most Hillside residents were not wealthy; few were bankers, lawyers, or the white-collar professions of wealthier suburbs to the west. Many were first-generation homeowners, paying off their mortgages and invested in ensuring that no infrastructure project and certainly no highway project jeopardized the value of their homes. At least seventy percent of Hillside residents were homeowners. Of the 16,427 residents of Hillside in the 1960 census, 99.8 percent were white. In the entire town, there were only 15 black residents and only 16 whose race was listed as something "other" than black or white.<sup>28</sup> The 1939 Home Owners' Loan Corporation redlining map described Hillside as an attractive commuter suburb for blue-collar factory workers:

A typical area of factory workers homes, largely employed in the adjacent industries. [...] All city facilities including excellent one-fare bus transportation to Newark. The center of Newark may be reached in about 20 minutes. [...] Proximity to Weequahic Park is a favorable influence and schools, churches, and neighborhood shopping centers are convenient. It is a fair middle class area, with sufficient pride of home ownership to retain a good appearance and a fair degree of residential desirability. Adverse influences predominating are: traffic<sup>29</sup>

Hillside residents were anxious that highway noise and traffic would damage property values, 75 to 100 homes total in their town, as well as the recently completed \$75,000 Police Athletic League. They wanted Interstate 78 as far as possible from their suburb. Highway construction would also replace property-tax-paying commercial structures with state owned and therefore non-taxable space for public roads, in effect depleting the town's revenue streams. By May 1961, Hillside hosted a mass meeting and mailed at public expense letters to every house in Hillside. The newly completed City Hall, which stood in the proposed highway's path, only had room for 500. And so, City Hall installed floodlights and loudspeakers outside for the mass meeting. Town leaders mobilized and hired a public relations firm to strategize with business owners to stop the highway.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. census data for 1960 accessed via *Social Explorer*.

<sup>29</sup> LaDale Winling et al., "HOLC tracts B10 and C13 for Union County, NJ," *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*: <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=12/40.666/-74.41&city=union-co.-nj&area=B10>.

<sup>30</sup> "In Hillside: Mass Rally Is Set To Oppose Rt. 78," *Newark Evening News*, May 25, 1961.

Newark leaders and Weequahic residents responded that white families in suburban Hillside had choices of where to live and could easily find new homes in other areas. A Hillside path would displace dozens; a Newark path would displace thousands. Blacks had no choice in a segregated New Jersey. Donald Payne, president of the Block Avenue Block Associated described: “Negro homeowners in the integrated Weequahic section would have difficulty finding suitable homes if forced to move. ‘We can’t go to Hillside [...] because the Iron Curtain of segregation has effectively cut us off from buying there.’” Lee Bernstein added: “What of our own Negro residents? [...] Can they move to Hillside? No. They couldn’t buy a home there no matter what the price. In times like these, when we see results of discrimination in Mississippi and Alabama spread all over the front pages, we ought to pay more attention to the same situation closer to home.”<sup>31</sup>

Within months of hearing Weequahic’s proposal, the federal government ruled that the Hillside alignment was not feasible. As the main sponsor for ninety percent of clearance and construction cost, the federal government had the most choice – and in many cases final choice – of where the highway could go. As the mayor of Union complained at a public meeting, the state “did not even say why it chose the route it did and what the difference would be in cost.”<sup>32</sup> However, a few reasons slipped through: For one in the event of war, a single missile strike could wipe out the double-deck construction of both Interstate 78 and Route 22 beneath it. The double-deck would collapse on the road below, taking out in one blow traffic in both directions on two major arteries. By contrast, according to the state’s proposed alignment at least three missiles would be required to take out traffic: one on Route 22 and at least more on Interstate 78. As Hillside township attorney Monroe Ackerman described: “If Route 78 is to be considered a defense highway, then it should be separate from Route 22 so that at least one thoroughfare would be left open if the other was destroyed.”<sup>33</sup> In this way, highways construction must consider the movement of military vehicles into Newark and the New York City warzone. Race was another factor that must have influenced federal actions.

Suburban drivers intuited another reason to carve the highway through Newark. By removing 10,000 Newark residents from the tax roll, the highways would alleviate Newark of the need to provide these 10,000 people with city services. The point of highway construction, therefore, was to remove people in and as an end in itself. As suburbanite G.V. King of Springfield wrote: “The freeways will remove 5,817 dwelling units and that that this will entail an annual tax revenue loss of \$3,629,000.” But, he added, leaders neglected to “mention the cost to Newark of providing the residents of these dwelling units with police and fire protection, education, health, and welfare services. [...] Newark as the commercial, cultural, and economic center of our area stands to lose far more from the lack of freeways than it does from lost dwelling units.” Fewer people would mean fewer liabilities. What this logic neglected to consider, however, was that Weequahic was a stable and middle-class neighborhood whose tax revenue subsidized social and welfare services in Newark’s growing number of poor neighborhoods. In this way, the highway did not just hurt middle-class families; it weakened the city’s ability to provide social services and public schooling to its growing population of poor black families.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Rt. 78 Antagonists Set for June 5 Talk,” *Newark Evening News*, May 28, 1961.

<sup>32</sup> “Rt. 78 Path Hit as Vague,” *Newark Evening News*, April 12, 1961.

<sup>33</sup> “Hillside Aides See Victory In Protest on Route 78,” *Newark Evening News*, June 7, 1961.

<sup>34</sup> G.V. King of Springfield, “What News Readers Have in Mind: Newark and Route 78,” *Newark Evening News*, May 22, 1963.



Mayor Leo P. Carlin had other ideas. If Newark officials could not convince the state to route the highway through Hillside or any town outside Newark, maybe they could convince the state to choose a less destructive alignment through Newark. By April 1963, the City Council appropriated \$10,000 to commission a report on alternative routes from the Division of City Planning. To avoid Weequahic, Carlin chose a route north through Central Ward and the Old Ward, adjacent to the new campus of the College of Medicine and Dentistry and a half dozen other slum clearance projects for public housing. By July 1967, conflict over massive slum clearance for the College of Medicine and Dentistry triggered the citywide “riots,” better known to Newark residents as the “rebellion” that left 26 dead and ten million in property damage. By relocating Interstate 78 north from the mixed-race Jewish neighborhood to the majority-poor black neighborhood near the College of Medicine and Dentistry, Mayor Carlin was entering a sensitive racialized space.

By this logic, it was not a coincidence that public housing for the urban poor tended to be near highways, freeways, and other undesirable land uses. It was not a coincidence that the same federal agencies that built this public housing also built the nearby highways. Instead in Newark, according to Carlin’s proposal, it would become intentional state policy to use the tools of “slum clearance” to replace neighborhoods of some 45,000 people with towers of public housing and their adjacent four, six, and eight-lane highways. The city engineer clarified freeways “would directly tie in and coordinate with the extensive Urban Renewal Program now being undertaken in Newark.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, “one-third of the proposed alternative alignment would be within areas presently established as urban renewal projects. Aligning the freeway through public housing projects would substantially reduce the total federal cost when combining freeways and urban renewal costs.”<sup>36</sup> Since the federal government paid ninety percent of construction costs, then routing the highway through a “slum” area would mean that the federal government – rather than the Newark Housing Authority – would pay neighborhood demolition costs. Land that would otherwise go for public housing could instead become highway. Adjacent to this highway, the Newark Housing Authority planned more public housing, an industrial park, street widening projects, and hundreds of acres of surface parking. In addition, the city planned the Midtown Connector, a four-lane highway branch that stretched two miles north linking Interstate 78 to Interstate 280. On a path through Newark’s Central Ward one block wide by about 25 blocks long, the Midtown Connector would wipe out the homes of 3,871 more people, ninety percent of whom were black families.

	<b>State Proposal</b>	<b>City Proposal</b>	<b>Weequahic Proposal</b>
Length in miles	4.52	5.27	About 4.7
People displaced	7,818	8,346	Fewer than 500
Demographics of those displaced	10% black	70% black	Fewer than 1% black
Total homes demolished	2,247 homes	2,699 homes	40 homes
Sound homes demolished	1,900	1,426	40
“Deficient” homes demolished	347	1,273	0

Overall, the City’s proposal was three quarters of a mile longer, displaced 528 more people, and demolished 452 more homes. In addition, Newark Housing Authority projects

<sup>35</sup> City of Newark Division of City Planning, “Route 78 Freeway Study II,” April 1963, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

were concentrated in black neighborhoods and disproportionately displaced blacks from areas deemed slums. While between ten and twenty percent of those displaced by the state's proposal were black, at least sixty percent of those displaced by City Hall proposal were black. In other words, ironically, the consequences of Newark City Hall's northern alignment were more destructive and more racialized than the federal government's own southern alignment.

Rather than settling the issue of highway routes, the city's proposal instead highlighted racial tensions. When the choice of highway path was between the urban Weequahic and suburban Hillside routes, black and white residents of Newark could unite against a common enemy and demand that no highway of any kind or any length be driven through their neighborhood. Racial harmony in opposition to the common enemy of highways was key to Bernstein's campaign. However, the City of Newark conceded to the state that the Hillside route was "unfeasible" and instead left only two routes through Newark: one in the middle class and majority-white neighborhood of Weequahic and the second in the working class and majority-black neighborhoods of the Central Ward and Old Third Ward. Either way, black or white, thousands of Newark residents would be displaced by Newark City Hall's own plans. By 1963, racial tensions in Newark were rising.

Faced with a plan from City Hall that was more destructive and likely more expensive, the state stood its ground and insisted on the Weequahic path. One strategy from the state was to schedule all public meetings at times when working-class Weequahic residents were likely to be at work. To participate in efforts to stop the demolition of their homes, Newark residents would have to, in effect, take a day off work and lose a day's paycheck. The state scheduled two Friday morning meetings at 10:30am, one on February 21 in Irvington and the other on February 28, 1964 in Newark. Despite written requests from Lee Bernstein, hundreds of residents, two state assemblymen for Essex County, and Newark Mayor Hugh Addonizio, the state insisted at the morning meeting times.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, despite working hours, 300 people attended the meeting in Irvington. Attendees strategized to pack the room and stretch out the length of their testimony from 10:30am until the end of the workday at 5:00pm, so that working people could arrive after work to testify. Meanwhile, Weequahic residents protested outside carrying signs that read: "A Route Must Not Uproot Integration," "Highway Must Not Destroy Integration," and "Where can 10,000 Weequahicans go?"<sup>38</sup>

The state did not budge. Neither the southern route through Hillside nor the northern route through Central Ward was acceptable to the state. In a last bid effort to save their neighborhood, Weequahic residents proposed a new route through their own neighborhood that would be, at least, minimally less destructive. By passing the highway about 400 feet north of the state's proposed alignment, about 9,500 people rather than 10,000 people would lose their homes. Addonizio estimated that "a rejection of the compromise will affect some mighty good homes in the Weequahic section." The state again did not budge. After some four years of community pushback, dozens of meetings, thousands of signatures, and requests from elected officials from city council all the way through the U.S. Congress, Addonizio added: "Now we are back to the original alignment."<sup>39</sup> As minimal proposal as

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<sup>37</sup> "Ask Night Road Talks: Mayor Urges Change in Hearing Times on Route 78, 75," *Newark Evening News*, January 28, 1964.

<sup>38</sup> "Weequahic Protestors Picket Rt. 78 Hearing," *Newark Evening News*, February 21, 1964.

<sup>39</sup> Moray Epstein, "Rt. 78 Line in Newark Turned Down by U.S.: Verdict Hits Weequahic Homes," *Newark Evening News*, September 4, 1964.

moving the highway a few hundred feet was not acceptable to the state. For all the community efforts, the highway was built exactly as originally proposed.

Lee Bernstein asked Mayor Hugh Addonizio to take a stand. Addonizio said it was beyond his power and pointed to state legislators in Trenton. State legislators pointed to Washington D.C. and said that, since this project was ninety percent funded by the federal government, highway routes were a federal issue. When state legislators confronted the federal government, members of U.S. Congress said that it was beyond their expertise and was the job of professional planners in the Department of Commerce. Leadership at the Department of Commerce pointed to their subsidiary office in the Federal Bureau of Public Roads. Employees at the Federal Bureau of Public Roads pointed to their boss, the chief administrator Rex Whitton from Missouri. Rex Whitton, in turn, pointed to the text of the 1956 National Interstate and Defense Highways Act that described his powers as an administrator. It was the President and U.S. Congress, after all, who drafted the text of the law and gave Whitton his job.<sup>40</sup> In turn, Mayor Addonizio, on behalf of Weequahic residents, personally requested a meeting with President Lyndon B. Johnson. Only one year before President Johnson had launched his Great Society program that explicitly included civil rights legislation, expansion of welfare programs, improved funding for public health, and a proclaimed “War on Poverty.” Newark leaders were hopeful that the White House would agree that highway construction must consider community impact and racial equity. As U.S. Congressman Joseph D. Minish from Essex County asked:

How can the City of Newark, or any other city, hope to achieve the type of community envisioned by the President if all its planning, all its efforts, are arbitrarily overridden by highway officials? Judging from the Newark problem, the future of our cities will be determined by the narrow concept of highway needs rather than by the high purposes called for by the resident.<sup>41</sup>

By February 1965, President’s Johnson’s confidant and Special Assistant Jack Valenti wrote back to Mayor Addonizio: “Recent events have disrupted the President’s routine to such an extent that I do not foresee a time in the near future when the president could meet with you.”<sup>42</sup> White House inaction returned the matter to Rex Whitton’s desk.

By September 1965, even though the route through Newark was “not finalized” according to engineers’ public statement, the state began buying up land in the future path of the highway – houses, factories, small businesses, a lumberyard. Time was of the essence. Federal law and the U.S. Constitution demanded in Fifth Amendment that private property cannot “be taken for public use, without just compensation.”<sup>43</sup> Buy it early, and the state could benefit from the element of surprise before individual property owners could hold the project hostage by refusing to sell. Buy it early, and the state could lock in ownership of the property and ensure that no improvements were made to the property that would increase its value. Weequahic’s battle had been going on five years, and residents in the highway path were hesitant to maintain or improve their property, in the uncertainty when or if the highway

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas D. Larson, “Rex Whitton – The Man from Missouri,” Administrator’s Note,” Volume 2, Number 10, November 16, 1990, [www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/whitton.cfm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/whitton.cfm)

<sup>41</sup> “Highways vs. Cities: Minish Says Route 78 Action Contrary to LBJ Principles,” *Newark Evening News*, March 7, 1965.

<sup>42</sup> “Route 78 Plea Fails: Addonizio Told President Is Too Busy to See Him,” *Newark Evening News*, February 9, 1965.

<sup>43</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment in the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution, 1791.



would come through and demolish their investment.<sup>44</sup> Some homes and businesses had already relocated from Central Ward slum clearance projects, and now found themselves less than a decade later again in the highway's path. The first round of slum clearance displaced small businesses to Weequahic. The second round would displace them from Weequahic to the suburbs, or close them down entirely. Hundreds of other homeowners, even if they wanted to sell, found trouble finding buyers. No hopeful homeowner would buy a home, if they would have to resell it and move again months or even weeks later. Both Newark and nationwide, the mere announcement of highway construction – and the several years between announcement and actual construction – depressed property values the length of highway's urban paths. Ralph Zinn, a Weequahic resident and a candidate for Newark Human Rights Commission, explained that fighting the highway "completely demoralized the neighborhood." He added: "Many people have been trying to paint and keep up their properties in cooperation with the Weequahic-Clinton Hill campaign of improving the neighborhood. But for several reasons others have lost interest in the program. Millions of cubic yards of earth would be moved during highway construction, resulting in absolute filth and debris all over the area."<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, the state continued building the parts of Interstate 78 to the east and west of Weequahic. As the highway cut west from Newark across the Watchung Mountains, tons of dynamite blasted a valley through the rock. Country clubs, summer homes, and the hotels where working class Newark residents spent their summers were all in the highway path. As the highway cut east from Newark across the low-lying meadowlands, the natural habitat was carved out and piled up to form the highway's dirt embankments. To find soil, earth moving equipment and dredges carved out a 7-foot deep and 50-acre lake in the meadowlands. By May 1965, this was a 24-hour-a-day operation; floodlights illuminated the meadowlands by night. To find still more highway fill, rubble from other demolished Newark neighborhoods and urban renewal projects like Interstate 280 were carted to the meadowlands, crushed up into pellet-sized aggregate, spread over the ground, and then compacted by steamrollers. Statewide, as Interstate 95 cut across the meadowlands, Interstate 280 across the mountains, and the Garden State Parkway through the New Jersey Pine Barrens, thousands of acres were paved over.<sup>46</sup> The earthmoving work for Interstate 78 was so expensive that the State Highway Department announced in 1966 that they had just received the "highest-ever low bid" in state history to excavate the highway through Weequahic and over the meadowlands. The interchange would need to handle hundreds of thousands of cars per day and, over a one-mile length, connect Interstate 78 to Route 9, Route 21, Route 22, Interstate 95, and a half-dozen local roads and parallel access roads for nearby industries. When complete, the Interstate 78 interchange in Newark would be the largest and most expensive highway interchange in New Jersey. It would remove from the public tax roll hundreds of acres of land.<sup>47</sup> As one sympathetic resident described Newark's meadowlands and Weequahic Park transformed: "The sounds of the meadows – of rails and marsh wrens, of scurrying rats and wild dogs, of owls flapping in the night – are gone."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "Mayor, Bernstein Hit Condemnation," *Newark Evening News*, September 25, 1965.

<sup>45</sup> "Rt. 78 Plan Effect Cited Weequahic Civic Leader Says Neighborhood Demoralized," *Newark Evening News*, May 27, 1961.

<sup>46</sup> Moray Epstein, "The Case of the Vanishing Lake: Sand is Being Dumped in Meadows Hole for Rt. 78," *Newark Evening News*, May 23, 1965.

<sup>47</sup> "Highest Ever Low Bid: \$11.5 Million Contract is for Rt. 78 Interchange," *Newark Evening News*, November 25, 1966, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Moray Epstein, May 23, 1965.

By January 1967, to handle claims from among the nearly 10,000 displaced people, the State Transportation Department opened a relocation office on Weequahic's Hawthorne Avenue. Some Weequahic residents like Lee Bernstein held out. Other white residents began selling and relocating to suburbs like Livingston and Union. Thanks to the highway that would link suburb and city by car, many of them could afford to flee. They could live in the suburbs, commute home each day, and spend the money they made in Newark in the suburb they lived. As white residents left, black residents began moving in. Some blacks had already been displaced by slum clearance projects in the Old Third Ward just north. Some moved into homes slated for highway demolition. Other blacks – locked out of Livingston and Union by redlining and discrimination – chose Weequahic as the only suburb available to them. As Lee Bernstein described in an editorial for the *Newark Evening News*: “The devastating effects of Rt. 78 would be a local problem to Newark because the people displaced are discriminated against in most if not all of the communities that would benefit from the building of this highway through Newark. This, in simple language, means they are not free to move where they want to if the highway comes through and takes their property.” Whites displaced by slum clearance had a choice of suburban homes; blacks did not.<sup>49</sup>

As each month passed, a new section of Interstate 78 opened up in the countryside. The road reached as far west as Phillipsburg, 55 miles away from Newark on the Delaware River. For many country towns and sparsely built up suburbs, the highway was a boon, whose mere announcement doubled property values and brought their corner of the world in direct contact with Newark and New York City's wealth. Subdivisions sprouted on farming towns like Bedminster, now home to one of Donald Trump's golf courses and country homes. Office parks opened in Berkeley Heights, spread-out picture window palaces in a landscape of manicured lawns and parking lots. Commuters rolled directly from the highway exits, through landscaped lawns, into parking spots, and from the parking lot to air-conditioned offices. AT&T opened its corporate headquarters just north of Interstate 78's intersection with Interstate 287 in 1975. Anxious to secure investment from AT&T, the state allowed the corporation to build its very own custom exit directly from the interstate system and onto AT&T's property. Four lanes of traffic exclusively for AT&T employees branched from the public road and into the corporation's underground garage for 1,200 cars. State subsidies and tax breaks made possible the migration of white-collar labor from the city to suburb. Some employees alleged that AT&T's actions by high-paid senior management were discriminatory because, while the company employed hundreds low-income non-white service workers, there was nowhere in a twenty-mile radius these employees could afford. Janitors and clerks at AT&T had to live in places like Weequahic Newark and own a car to get to work.<sup>50</sup> The Mall at Short Hills opened in 1961. Its developers strategically chose to locate the highway adjacent to Interstate 78. By the 1990s, Short Hills had over one million square feet of sales space, acres of enclosed glass, thousands of parking spots, and profits from retail sales that surpassed all of Downtown Newark. Just a few decades before in the 1910s, retail sales from Downtown Newark represented fifty percent of all department store sales in the entire state of New Jersey. Bamberger's, Hahne's Kresge, L.S. Plaut, Woolworth, and dozens of other department stores once lined the streets of downtown. By the 1990s, every department store and theater in Downtown Newark either closed, moved to the suburbs, or relocated to a shopping mall accessible only by car.

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<sup>49</sup> Lee Bernstein, “Editorial: Rt. 78, Other Topics,” *Newark Evening News*, May 26, 1963

<sup>50</sup> “Retrospective: Building AT&T Headquarters Basking Ridge,” Mr. Local History Project, January 11, 2023: <https://www.mrlocalhistory.org/att-basking-ridge-history/>.

Interstate 78 construction also benefitted banks, realtors, and mortgage companies. For instance, the Jersey Mortgage Company was founded in Elizabeth, New Jersey in the 1930s. Throughout its three-decade existence, it financed through mortgages the purchase of over 10,000 homes. Its loans were always backed with guarantees from the Federal Housing Administration, and risk-free promises that if the customer defaulted on their mortgage, the federal government would refund the lender for its financial loss. Its initial activities were focused in and around Newark, but the company soon realized that the suburbs were a more attractive place to invest than the city. As branch office manager and realtor Arthur Dube described to the press:

The step to expand Jersey Mortgage facilities to the Central New Jersey area was influenced by the improvements of the state highway network, making more land accessible and available for development. [...] And it is much more accessible now due to the opening of the new Garden State Parkway, the New Jersey Turnpike, and other transportation improvements.<sup>51</sup>

In this way, the suburban real estate industry uniquely relied on federal aid every step of the way: the Federal Housing Administration to insure home mortgages, the Interstate Highway system to make their suburbs accessible to commuters, “restrictive covenants” that locked undesirable groups out of their suburbs, tax laws that allowed homeowners to write off the cost of the mortgage interest from their taxes, redlining maps that discouraged investment in cities, and state policies that made it cheaper to buy a home in the suburbs than to rent a home in Newark. Interstate 78, despite its massive size and destructive impact on Newark, was only one small component of this larger national plan to transform New Jersey into a suburban state. And when activists like Lee Bernstein went up against Interstate 78 and the depopulation of their neighborhood, they were not – in effect – fighting one highway. They were fighting a national system.<sup>52</sup>

While the highway was an economic boost to the suburbs, it was an economic drain to the city. Thousands of homes, hundreds of acres, and dozens of businesses were now paved in asphalt that paid no property taxes. Port Newark and Newark Airport were expanded in the same years as, and in collaboration with Interstate 78 construction. Neither port nor airport – which covered over one third of Newark’s surface area – paid property taxes. In lieu of taxes, they paid an annual rent to Newark City Hall, negotiated based on the weak political power of Newark rather than as a percentage of the value of the goods that passed through the port. As early as 1945, the Newark master plan identified that the city had few land left for residential development. The available land in short supply amounted to a zero sum game; land taken for highways would not open up new land elsewhere for higher property values in city. The majority of Newark’s land is now given over to roads, institutions, and the infrastructure that support the metro region’s suburban population, all while none of the tax revenue from this metro region goes back to support Newark. In other words, Newark’s low-income residents subsidize through their property taxes the infrastructure to support thousands of suburban residents and highway commuters.

When Newark erupted in seven days of rioting, protesting, civil unrest that left 26 dead and ten million dollars in property damage in July 1967, Weequahic was in full racial

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<sup>51</sup> “Opens New Office: Jersey Mortgage Co. Establishes Asbury Park Branch to Handle Central Area,” *Newark Evening News*, November 12, 1964.

<sup>52</sup> Myles Zhang, “Homesteads to Homelots: The history of New Jersey suburbs as told through five data visualizations,” December 24, 2020: <https://www.myleszhang.org/2020/12/24/new-jersey-suburban-history/>.



transition. In 1960, Weequahic was mostly Jewish and eighty percent white. In 1970, the neighborhood was eighty percent black. In less than five years, Weequahic lost about 40,000 whites and gained about 30,000 blacks. Some Jewish businesses on Chancellor Avenue and Bergen Street held out; many of them were burned and looted during the rebellion.<sup>53</sup> Other businesses, social clubs, and synagogues followed their customers and moved to the suburbs. In 1973, the largest synagogue in Weequahic at Temple B’Nai Abraham followed the movement of its worshippers to Livingston. The temple sold its building to the majority-black Deliverance Evangelistic Center. It remains today a black church across from vacant stores, empty lots, and within earshot of interstate highway traffic.

As the neighborhood changed, racial tensions rose. The conciliatory approach of Lee Bernstein when first elected evolved to become more hostile by the late 1960s. Decades later on the fortieth anniversary of the July 1967, Lee Bernstein’s wife had moved from Weequahic to the suburb of Union. The ease of driving on Interstate 78 ensured that she was no more than a ten-minute drive from her old Newark home and old neighbors on Osborne Terrace. She wrote in 2007: “The SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) made effigies of the councilmen heads with nooses around their necks on the steps of City Hall. There was a full body of me with a fur jacket and a sign around my neck which said ‘I am Mrs. Bernstein and I have black maids’ This was not true as I didn’t have any maids.”

Back in 1962, Bernstein had run on a platform to stop Route 78, “save our homes,” and make Weequahic safe. After the 1967 unrest, *Newark Evening News* increasingly reported on Bernstein’s efforts to fight crime on a platform of “law and order.” Anthony Imperiale formed the all-white North Ward Citizens Committee, a group largely composed of the ethnic Italians who had not yet fled Newark or could afford to leave. They claimed 5,000 members, and Imperiale considered giving them uniforms: a military helmet, camouflage jackets, and an ascot-style neck scarf. A circuit of fifteen to twenty patrol cars drove around weekends to radio in suspicious activity to Imperiale’s headquarters. Headquarters then sent backup or informed the Newark Police Department. Imperiale identified 1967 as evidence that police were not doing their jobs to defend person and property. The Kerner Commission, Imperiale claimed, was an anti-police communist conspiracy by pinko liberals. Bernstein agreed and formed his own Jewish neighborhood watch in the South Ward, complete with shortwave radios and patrol cars. That same year, in response to a series of rapes in Weequahic, Bernstein proposed that rescue dogs from the Humane Society, where he volunteered as director, be trained to hunt down criminals and drug dealers. He demanded:

How much do our law-abiding citizens have to tolerate before this rapist is captured? It is obvious to me that if the patrolmen who came upon a man hiding in the bushes, would have had a trained canine, the rapist would have been captured and the citizens of Weequahic would be able once again to sleep in peace and safety at night.<sup>54</sup>

The next year, Bernstein realized that he no longer had the Jewish powerbase in Weequahic to run as South Ward councilman. Jews were now the minority. He instead ran as Councilman-at-Large, in hopes to build a coalition of ethnic whites from across Newark. With Italians in the North Ward, Jews in the South Ward, Germans and Irish in the West Ward, and Poles in the East Ward, whites were now a minority in the city. But united behind

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<sup>53</sup> Robert D. Lilley, “Report for Action,” (Trenton, N.J., Governor’s Select Committee Commission on Civil Disorder, State of New Jersey, February 1968).

<sup>54</sup> “Bernstein Plan for Dog Patrol,” *Newark Evening News*, March 10, 1968.

a single candidate they could still win elections for Councilman-at-Large. Many of these whites had neither the desire to see Newark change nor the ability to leave Newark for more expensive suburbs. Anthony Imperiale's assessment was less optimistic: Each group of ethnic whites had its own interests and its own leadership. And now the city was so carved through with roads and highways that formerly continuous neighborhoods were now divided from each other, no longer interacted with each other, and saw each other as separate. Before Interstate 78, Weequahic residents could stroll north to temple at B'Nai Abraham, shops on Clinton Avenue, and neighbors in Lower Clinton Hill. Now, a walk north entailed detouring around the highway and a walk across treeless highway overpasses some 300-feet long. Bernstein lost re-election.

As whites left on the highways to still more distant suburbs, racial color lines began falling in Newark's closest suburbs. Irvington to the west of Weequahic and Hillside to the south of Weequahic were ninety-nine percent white in the 1960 census. Both became majority black and Hispanic by the 1980s. Just north of Irvington, the half of East Orange that bordered Newark became majority black in less than ten years. The more distant half of East Orange farther from Newark held out as white a few years longer before it, too, fell. Groups like those of Imperiale and Bernstein could appeal for law and order in Newark and attempt to save their neighborhoods from demolition, but larger and regional forces of suburbanization were at work – forces made possible by highway construction. In the 1920s, a forty-minute commute by car reached no more than ten miles from the office jobs and shopping of Downtown Newark. By the 1980s, that same forty-minute commute in cars much faster and highways more efficient reached almost as far as the Delaware Water Gap, some sixty miles away on the other side of the state. In the 1920s, eighty percent of those commuting to jobs in Newark lived in Newark. By the 1980s, eighty percent of those commuting to the more than 200,000 downtown office jobs lived beyond Newark and traveled to work on bands of asphalt.

A 1957 public informational newsreel from the lobbyist arm of the American Road Builders Association identified the benefits of highway construction. It claimed that the locations of highway routes were entirely impartial and decided by economic and engineering experts alone. In a picture book scene of a mid-century suburban living room, the father figure in white dress shirt and blue tie narrated to the assembled family and TV audiences:

There are always some people [...] who don't want progress. They're just against everything that's new and different whether it's good or bad, but they never win. [...] The highway has to go someplace. Now the routes are selected by experts who have nothing against us. They don't even know us. They just designed the road to go where it'll do the most good for everybody and for the overall plan.<sup>55</sup>

The film continued, showing scenes of highway construction, new businesses opening up, and new roads coming through rural areas. In the closing scenes, the film showed the growing town of Hilldale, its main street now free of traffic jams. The narrator closed:

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<sup>55</sup> American Road Builders Association, "We'll Take the High Road," 1957, 31:30 minutes. Accessed via Periscope Film YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnrqUHF5bH8>.

The useless dangerous traffic jam was gone, and Hilldale owned its own streets again. The people who had been inconvenienced for a short time were all in fine shape. [...] Above all Hilldale itself had become a part of progress, had taken its rightful place with all the other active forward-looking communities that have always made our country great.<sup>56</sup>

Much existing literature on highway construction identifies roads as a state tool to divide neighborhoods and to prevent the mid-century movement of blacks into white neighborhoods. The highways themselves were moats to carve up urban space and segregate blacks to the worst available housing in and near the city center. For instance, in his essay for *The 1619 Project*, Kevin Kruse identifies Atlanta's twelve to fourteen lane wide State Route 400 as a road intentionally carved through black neighborhoods.<sup>57</sup> Interstate 90 was allegedly carved next to the Bronzeville center of Chicago's black community, in an effort to stop black movement to communities of ethnic whites on the other side of the road. Interstate 10 was carved through along the spine of once-tree-lined Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans, removing a black community's main street and public park. Interstate 75 was carved through Detroit's Paradise Valley and Black Bottom neighborhoods, erasing the homes of some 50,000 people the length of its route. Every city has a Black Bottom and black community paved under slum clearance and highway projects.

However as much as highways were lines on the ground to affirm racial order, the case of Weequahic illustrates the highway as agent to reproduce segregated space, or transform integrated neighborhoods into segregated spaces. The 1960s color lines around Newark did not stand. If the highway had been routed through Jewish and black Newark to protect the white community of Hillside, the irony is that displaced residents leaving Newark Weequahic settled in Hillside. Within months of Interstate 78's opening, the demographics of Hillside began mirroring Newark. Highways were not tools to hold down the racial color lines; they were tools to create new lines, to recast the city-suburban spatial divide as a racial divide.

Redlining maps of Newark and its suburbs from the 1930s give the impression of an already divided metro area. The irony is that the fixity of lines on redlining maps rarely held up. Areas marked on these maps as white neighborhoods safe for investment were, in a few decades, black neighborhoods suffering from issues of aging housing, disinvestment, and poverty. Instead, highway construction illustrates the dynamic forces of racial change in one neighborhood, in this case a neighborhood that in the 1930s was specifically *not* redlined.

Interstate 78 construction revealed the collaboration between state actions and market forces. As one of the most expensive state-funded infrastructure project in New Jersey history, Interstate 78 made possible dozens of privately developed suburbs outside Newark, and it was responsible for capital flight of people and profit from Newark. Furthermore, in an age when racial discrimination was technically illegal but widespread in New Jersey, blacks families displaced by highways from Weequahic had few suburbs they could move to. Displaced Jews and ethnic whites had choice, and they largely moved beyond Newark, to reproduce in the suburbs the businesses, synagogues, and institutions familiar to them in Newark. By contrast, the numbers of urban homes available to black families in Newark to purchase was in short supply. While neglect, demolitions, and highways diminished the

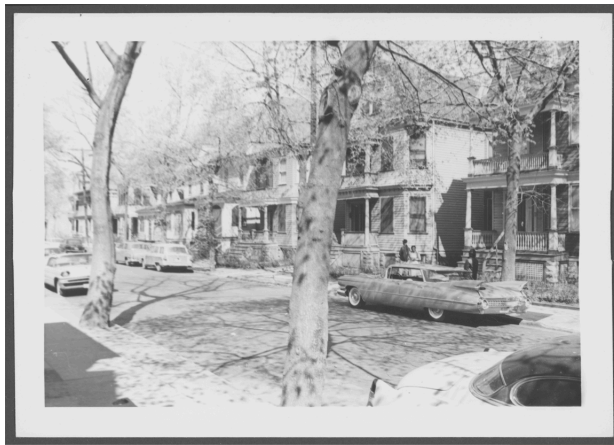
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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Kevin Kruse (contributor) and Nikole Hannah-Jones (editor), "Traffic," in *The 1619 Project* (New York – Random House, 2021), 406-10.

supply of urban homeownership opportunities for black families, suburban opportunities for homeownership were growing for white families.

The case of Weequahic finally illustrates the range of institutions and actors affected by anti-urban federal policies. Highway construction and redlining are most often identified in the public imagination as policies that were (and are) anti-black. However, slum clearance and highway construction in Newark displaced significant numbers of ethnic white people. In fact, the paths of all highways that now divided Newark were, when they were built, cut through economically stable neighborhoods of ethnic whites. In addition, at the time redlining maps of Weequahic and Newark were created in the 1930s, about seventy percent of those living in redlined neighborhoods were poor ethnic whites of immigrant heritage. More than anti-black, Interstate 78 – and the highway system more broadly – was anti-urban and discriminatory to whoever happened to be living in cities, black or white. As North Ward activist and politician Stephen Adubato described urban race relations in 1972: “This area is made up of Italians and blue-collar workers. We’re not oppressors, just other victims.”<sup>58</sup>



*Before vs. after: east side Hillside looking northeast from #315 is now this location on I-78.*<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Joseph Sullivan, “Protestors in Newark Halt Work at Project Sponsored by Blacks,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1972.

<sup>59</sup> Samuel Berg and Myles Zhang, *Newark Changing*, April 1962: <https://newarkchanging.org/category/interstate-78/>.

**Further Reading:**

American Road Builders Association, "We'll Take the High Road," 1957, 31:30 minutes.

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