

## A Brief History of Trenton

**Pre-European history:** For more than a thousand years, a tribe called the Lenapes lived and prospered along what is now the Middle Atlantic Coast region of the United States, stretching from southern New York State through New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania and northern Delaware. Some 20 different Lenape bands belonged to one of two major groups: the Munsee Lenapes inhabited the rocky highlands of the lower Hudson and upper Delaware rivers, and the Unami Lenapes inhabited the areas around Delaware Bay, southeastern Pennsylvania and northern Delaware. Together, the two groups had a population of about 24,000.

In 1524, the Italian navigator Verrazano sailed up the Atlantic Coast and made contact with Lenapes, followed in 1609 by the Englishman Henry Hudson, and then by Dutch, Swedish, French and English colonists, missionaries and merchants. They brought with them diseases unknown to the Lenapes. Fourteen deadly epidemics of smallpox, measles and cholera broke out in a 70-year period. In 1670, the Iroquois Nation claimed authority over all the surviving Lenape bands. Some found refuge in Moravian settlements, some migrated west to the Ohio and Susquehanna river valleys, and some to Canada. A small number disappeared into the Pinelands and other largely inaccessible areas of New Jersey, or adopted European ways. By 1864, war and disease had reduced the Lenape population to 3,000.

**Settlement:** What is now the City of Trenton, state capital of New Jersey, was settled by Europeans in 1679. Those first settlers were Quakers from Yorkshire, England, led by Mahlon Stacy. He and his comrades sailed up the Delaware River in late 1678 and wintered in what is now Burlington. In the spring, he sailed on to the falls of the Delaware, at what was later called Trenton. He built a grain mill along the Assunpink Creek, near present-day South Broad Street. The Assunpink was the dividing line between Burlington County and Hunterdon County.

**Name:** The city takes its name from a second-generation settler, Philadelphia merchant William Trent. In 1714, he bought 800 acres from Mahlon Stacy the Younger, acquired another 800 acres and set about building himself a manor house. Trent, a native of Inverness, Scotland, was one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia, the biggest city in the colonies. He's believed to have moved into his home, built at the falls line or highest navigable point of the Delaware River, between 1719 and 1721.

In 1721, following the first great stock market crash ~ known as the South Sea Bubble ~ Trent moved his family into his summer home permanently. Whatever his financial woes, his fellow Jerseyans evidently thought well of Trent, who was appointed Chief Justice of the New Jersey courts. He rebuilt in brick the grist mill that Mahlon Stacy had erected on the banks of the Assunpink Creek. He also laid out a small industrial settlement along the creek, calling it Trent's (or perhaps Trent) Town, building a sawmill, a textile mill, an iron furnace, a bakery and a dye works.

It's from that small settlement that the modern city takes its name. William Trent died in his home on Christmas Day, 1724.

**Misconception:** William Trent founded the City of Trenton. Instead, he was a second-generation settler, building a home here 40 years after Mahlon Stacy arrived, on land purchased from Stacy's heir.

**Early growth:** Early travelers from Philadelphia reached Trenton by boat up the Delaware River and then traveled to New York by land across the natural lowlands of New Jersey. Overland travel from Philadelphia to Trenton became an option with the establishment of regular ferry service at the foot of Ferry Street after 1726. Called the Trenton Ferry, this was the first of several ferries in operation during the eighteenth century, when the town had more than its share of inns. In 1790, the State of New Jersey declared Trenton the permanent capital, having moved the capital amongst 13 towns over a period of years. In 1792, the first State House, or state capitol building, was completed. Because the existing State House was built around that early building, ours is America's second oldest state capitol building in continuous use.

**Two revolutions:** Trenton is identified with two revolutions: Washington crossed the Delaware in the early morning hours of December 26, 1776, and marched to Trenton for a surprise attack on the Hessian garrison that gave the Americans their first great victory of the American Revolution. Later, on January 3, 1777, Washington pulled his troops from a second Battle of Trenton (also known as the Battle of the Assunpink) when darkness ended the fighting for the night. Following an all-night march to Princeton, he defeated the small British force left at Princeton while General Cornwallis and the main British force waited to resume the fight in Trenton. That ten-day military campaign changed the course of the American Revolution. The first Battle of Trenton gave Washington his first victory of the war, just days before his discouraged army had to decide to re-enlist or go home. The Battle of Princeton days later, while an attack against an inferior force that was made possible by trickery, was nonetheless a victory against the British. The impact was so great that 26 other states have places named Trenton, named by survivors or celebrants of that victory.

**Misconception:** The Crossing of the Delaware is the pivotal action of the American Revolution. Instead, Washington crossed to get to Trenton and the victory here.

**Industrial revolution/Potteries:** The Industrial Revolution transformed what had been a sleepy town before the Civil War. "In 1850 there was one traditional redware pottery in Trenton, but by the turn of the century there were close to 50 factories churning out a variety of utilitarian ceramics. The city became known as the 'Staffordshire of America,' a reference to the industrial potteries of the English Midlands, where many Trenton potters had learned their trade before emigrating. Trenton products were supplied to markets throughout North America and overseas, chiefly in the form of hotel china, sanitary ware, electrical porcelain and art pottery. . . At the peak of the industry, between roughly 1880

and 1920, only one other industrial center in the United States (East Liverpool, Ohio) came close to challenging Trenton as the nation's leader in pottery manufacture. . . City directories published between 1901 and 1918 list between 38 and 47 pottery establishments, reaching a peak of 52 in 1924. The number of plants dwindled to around 30 at the time of the Depression and by the end of World War II only 18 were listed in operation . . . By 1891 almost all of the sanitary ware sold in the United States originated in Trenton, but a labor dispute that year resulted in the city losing its grip on the industry. . Joseph Ott and his nephew, John Hart Brewer, produced fine art pottery, including such notable pieces as the Cleopatra bust and two Baseball vases (at NJ State Museum) designed by artist Isaac Broome for the Centennial celebrations in 1876. Around the same time, in an effort to imitate Irish Belleek ware, Ott and Brewer perfected what became known as ivory porcelain. Brewer eventually became a powerful political figure in both the Legislature and later Congress, where he pursued protective measures for the pottery industry, including the imposition of tariffs in imported ceramic goods." *From "Teacups to Toilets, A century of Industrial Pottery in Trenton, Circa 1850 to 1940," Potteries of Trenton Society, 2001):*

**Misconception:** Trenton's role as a pottery capital was based on the production of fine china. Instead, at a time when plumbing was coming indoors, most of the city's potteries were devoted to sanitary ware (toilets, sinks & tubs) production.

**Industrial revolution/Wire rope and steel:** John A. Roebling came to Trenton in 1848, at the suggestion of Peter Cooper. It was at a foundry along the river (near the minor league baseball stadium built in 1992) that Cooper fashioned the first practical I-beams, making possible the building of skyscrapers in New York and Chicago. (The George Segal sculpture in front of the Roebling Building at State & Warren is a double tribute, to Peter Cooper's engineering and to the wave of construction and restoration by the State in the downtown) Roebling's wire rope factory was a growing concern long before his Brooklyn Bridge opened in 1883, but the acclaim for the East River Bridge created a demand for Roebling bridges across the country. In addition, every Otis elevator used Roebling wire rope (he'd cannily bought stock in Otis), and the fame of the company's suspension bridge designs (the George Washington and the Golden Gate amongst them) brought so much growth that John A. Roebling's Sons Co. sprawled over a 45-acre industrial tract. At its height during World War II, Roebling employed 5,000 workers in Trenton.

**Misconceptions:** 1. John A. Roebling invented the suspension bridge. Instead, he perfected it. 2. The Brooklyn Bridge used wire rope from Trenton. In fact, Boss Tweed got the wire rope contract for an ally of his. The inferior wire rope had to be replaced following the bridge's centennial, in a project led by an ex-Roebling engineer.

**Location:** Trenton's location played a large part in its industrial success. Factories used first the Delaware & Raritan Canal, built in 1834, and then rail lines (Camden & Amboy and Delaware & Bound Brook, both later absorbed into the Pennsylvania Railroad system) to get their goods to bigger audiences. Today,

the rail and road networks connecting to Trenton are good, and its location between international airports at Philadelphia, Newark and New York evident, although the infrastructure doesn't always support what maps show. (See Route 1 at rush hours, NJ Transit trains ditto).

**Growth/Immigration:** Trenton was a small town before the Civil War, with a population of under 30,000. Its size more than doubled by the end of the century and had nearly doubled again by 1920. Mercer County, created in 1838 from northern Burlington and southern Hunterdon, was largely farmland and crossroads communities outside of the city of Trenton and the town of Princeton. Census figures from the years of heavy immigration show to what extent the city dominated the county:

	<u>1890</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1915</u>	<u>1920</u>
Mercer	79,978	95,365	125,657	139,812	159,881
Trenton	57,458	73,307	96,815	103,190	119,289

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Trenton was heavily industrialized while the rest of the county remained largely rural, dominated by farms. Farmers came to town to sell their produce at the farmers' markets (in covered sheds in the middle of North Broad Street until 1870; indoors at the Washington Market (site of DCA) and outdoors, along the river until 1948). With money in their pockets, they bought seed and farm equipment, clothing and furniture, horses and wagons, and later cars; went to theaters, later vaudeville and eventually the movies; patronized the library, went to high school, college and night school. They visited Cadwalader Park, bought by the city in 1888, for free Sunday band concerts; attended lectures, plays, political conventions and high school graduations at first the Taylor Opera House (built 1876) and later the War Memorial (built 1932). There was an elegant New York-based department store (Arnold Constable), as well as local stores for the carriage trade (first Nevius Bros. and H.M. Voorhees, later Nevius-Voorhees), as well as S.P. Dunham's, Goldberg's, etc., for those of lesser means.

The city grew up along a triangle formed by the Assunpink, Warren and Broad streets, with new development along canals and around factories. Factory owners lived in the city: along North Clinton and Greenwood before and just after the Civil War, then in the State House area of West State, and, after the 1888 purchase of Cadwalader Park, westward as the city moved that way. Factory workers lived in rental units, worked six days a week and long hours. They banded together with fellow ethnics for companionship and protection. So many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants who came in waves from first Ireland and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire were farm people, unused to cities, that the noise and smoke of the city was in itself a shock. As soon as they could put enough money together, each ethnic population built its own church. The Friends Meetings, St. Michael's Anglican/later Episcopal and First Presbyterian all existed during the Revolution, but the first Catholic church in New Jersey wasn't established until

1814 (St. John's/later Sacred Heart). Their societies, fewer and fewer of which survive, were village-based: the Societa San Bernardino, for instance, is for people from six hill villages around Naples, who venerated St. Bernardino as their patron. The village association was so strong that even Protestants belonged.

English and Scots were the first to arrive in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, followed by Germans, with a sprinkling of French and Irish by early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. More Germans and then Irish arrived prior to the Civil War, with waves of Irish and Austro-Hungarians (Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks, Austrians, Romanians) by the turn of the century, with Italians and Greeks in the early 1900s. While the first African-American and West Indian-American residents we know of were 11 slaves owned by William Trent, a small African-American population is present until after World War II, when a northward migration from the Carolinas brings large numbers. There are population spikes ~ Hungarians after 1957, Poles after Solidarity's revolution begins to sour, Ukrainians and Russians after World War II. Recent public debate over the extent to which other Spanish-speaking groups should be embraced by the Puerto Rican Parade ~ even the merits of renaming it ~ offers the best evidence of the growing influx of Mexican, Guatemalan and Columbian immigrants. Korean, Nigerian, Pakistani, Liberian and Haitian populations are here, as are Caribbean.

**The long decline:** Trenton celebrated its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1929, culminating in a week of parades and civic celebrations that coincided with the stock market crash. Some major industrial players had already crashed: Maddock's Pottery, the pioneering sanitary ware firm, built the world's largest sanitary ware factory and promptly went bust in April of 1929, selling out to American Standard. Other businesses failed when families, unable to sort inheritance issues or without the strength to tackle reorganizations, sold out to national firms who had no allegiance to local workers when industry moved south and west. The sale of John A. Roebling's Sons to Colorado Fuel & Iron ended one era, which was fully ended when CF&I closed down the Trenton and Roebling plants, to be followed by other, smaller steel outposts here and then by U.S. Steel across the river. Similarly, Lenox's sale to conglomerate Brown, Foreman paved the way for the company's exit from Trenton.

The riots of 1968 ~ mild here in comparison with other cities, but with one death ~ shattered a sort of social compact by which former factory owners still lived in the city. Whole developments in Ewing and Lawrence were built and occupied by former Trenton neighbors. Stores moved out of town and first strip malls and then large-scale shopping malls straddled the outskirts of the city. The bulldozing of large areas for urban renewal projects added to the sense of dislocation (see the Times and Trentonian's Coalport buildings, for instance, or the leveling of neighborhoods from the county courthouse to the Trent House, to be replaced by offices surrounded by a sea of parking).

**And rebound:** Heritage Days was created in 1979 to celebrate the city's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Its emphasis on the ethnic groups of the city's heyday, its involvement of churches and ethnic societies, and its location in the center of the

downtown sparked a revival of interest in the city's evident strengths. The building of new state offices downtown in the '80s (DCA, Roebing, DEP) and the wave of major restorations of state buildings, beginning with the Legislature, Annex, War Memorial, Barracks and Edison townhouses in the '90s, continued a sense of physical revival, added to by the 1992 ballpark, 1998 arena, and 2002 hotel-conference center.

~ Sally Lane