Bricks, Mortar, Memories and Pride:

Exhibition Opening Reception
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The James Street Commons Reconsidered

Newark Public Library, Third Floor
Among its many assets, Newark's age is arguably its most important. Indeed, when one thinks of Newark's age, The James Street Commons Historic District readily comes to mind. Those who live in the Commons have been remarkable stewards of Newark's fledgling historic preservationist movement. All Newarkers are indebted to those residents because the Commons is a complicated community that survived through the determination of its neighbors and the deepening mutual respect between those who live in the area and those who do not.

The James Street Commons is Newark's most enriched civic space by virtue of a constellation of assets unique to the city. These include a tenaciously caring group of residents who look after their neighborhood and each other, some of New Jersey's most important institutions - including The Newark Museum and The Newark Public Library - and, within a short walk, two major research universities - Rutgers and the New Jersey Institute of Technology. The Commons' complication is marked, too, by seemingly contradictory elements: its quiet residential streets, the hustle and bustle of the downtown corridor, a nineteenth century hospital—St. Michael's Medical Center, and an educational and civic complex - the Women in Support of the Million Man March. The presence of WISOMMM, the patronage of other nearby institutions, and indeed the current residential population, underscore one of urban America's venerable traditions, that of ethnic succession. The Commons also benefits from one of the Republic's oldest public spaces, Washington Park. No Newark neighborhood rivals the Commons' sheer abundance of things to see, savor and protect. It is a Newark gem.

The Commons survives in spite of, or perhaps because of, Newark's troubled decades of the 1960s and 1970s. During those decades, Newark, and many other old industrial cities, was deprived of many residents who could trace the lives of their forebears back to early years of the twentieth century, when the city emerged out of the nineteenth century with a civic spirit that was expressed in architecturally interesting buildings, grand public institutions, and public rituals that forged city life to democratic sensibilities. Over time, much of what early twentieth century Newarkers' relished lost its meaning in the post-industrial age. Newark's retreat from its storied past was spectacular, taking its toll on many neighborhoods, including the James Street Commons, and on the public sphere. But those who lived in the Commons, and those who value such places, were determined that it would survive. And it has.

Through fits and starts, a cross section of James Street Commons residents, and the institutions that add vitality and stature to the neighborhood, have ennobled the place where they live, work, study, and play, making the area remarkably resilient, interesting, and seductive. *Bricks, Mortar, Memory and Pride* is an ode to those people and the neighborhood they saved and call home.

Documents, photographs and ephemera uncovered in the archives – including those from the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee, the James Street Commons Neighborhood Association, the Newark Public Library, the Newark Public Housing Authority, and the National Archives – are presented here in a social history of Newark's first nationally recognized historic district. Accompanying the exhibition is a documentary film comprised of interviews with residents and historic preservationists who have been integral players in the ongoing development of this urban village.