

Migration Stories: Tracing the Journey from Puerto Rico to Jersey City, 1940s and 1950s



Black and white photograph of Puerto Rican children on the steps of a Harlem elementary school. From the *Pittsburgh Press* newspaper article published on November 4, 1947.

The essential questions guiding this podcast are: Why did Puerto Ricans migrate to Jersey City in the 1940s and 1950s? Who within Puerto Rico was migrating? And, how did it feel to enter Jersey City in the 40s and 50s as a Puerto Rican migrant?

By the end of this podcast, students will be able to :

- Explain why Puerto Ricans were migrating to Jersey City in the 1940s and 1950s
- Analyze oral histories to describe how Puerto Ricans, from various racial and class backgrounds, felt when settling in New Jersey's cities in the 40s and 50s

The New Jersey Social Studies core ideas and performance expectations addressed within the podcast are the following:

- Demographic shifts and migration patterns both influence and are impacted by social, economic, and political systems; **6.1.12.GEOPP.13.a: Make evidence-based inferences**

to determine factors that led to migration from American cities to suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s and describe how this movement impacted cities (podcast starts to tell flip side of the story — who moves into cities in the 1950s, while white New Jerseyans are moving out)

- Social and political systems throughout time have promoted and denied civic virtues and democratic principles; **6.1.12.Civics.PI.13.a: Craft an argument as to the effectiveness of the New Jersey constitution of 1947, New Jersey Supreme Court decisions (i.e. Hedgepeth and Williams vs. Board of Education), and New Jersey’s laws in eliminating segregation and discrimination.**
- Historical sources and evidence provide an understanding of different points of view about historical events

Transcription:

Emily Sánchez: From the Newark Public Library, this is *Demanding Justice in New Jersey*.

[Introduction music - “Juanita Cruza el Charco” by Segunda Quimbamba]

This podcast is about local histories of community organizing in the state. I'm your host, Emily Sánchez. In this episode, we'll begin with local histories of one of the most populous cities in the state, Jersey City.

Jersey City sits on the edge of the Hudson River, about nine miles east of Newark, NJ, and three miles West of downtown Manhattan in New York City —and today is one of the most expensive places to live in the country. In the past several decades, Jersey City's downtown Waterfront has become home to tall, looming luxury apartments, rising rent, and people, often working in NYC, who can afford to live in expensive apartments — downtown Jersey City has been gentrified. The downtown was not always this way.

The land, known as Jersey City today, was originally home to the Lenape until the Dutch West India Company seized the land and colonized it in 1621. The land transferred from the grasp of the Dutch to the English in 1664, and in 1776, transferred from the English to the United States.¹ In the 1800s, aspiring American industrialists used the land for manufacturing — in this context, Jersey City's downtown became home to factory workers, who were mainly working-class immigrants from several parts of Europe, including Italy and Ireland.² In the 1930s and 40s,

¹ J. C. History, “Library Guides: Dutch West India Company: Dutch West India Company,” <https://njcu.libguides.com/c.php?g=1048094&p=7605910>.

² J. C. History, “Library Guides: Associates of the Jersey Company: Associates of the Jersey Company,” <https://njcu.libguides.com/c.php?g=1047525&p=7601878>.; J. C. History, “Library Guides: Colgate Palmolive Company: Colgate Clock / Colgate Palmolive Company,”

African Americans, escaping from racial violence in the South, began working in the city's factories and living in the downtown and Bergen-Lafayette areas.³ In the 1940s and 50s, Puerto Ricans joined the factory workforce and also started living in the downtown.

[Transition music - “Powerful Beat” by Penguin Music]

This is the first in a series of episodes that will together track the history of community organizing in Jersey City between 1940 and the present day. In this episode, we will specifically explore Jersey City's downtown area in the 1940s and 50s through the eyes of Puerto Rican migrants and answer why Puerto Ricans migrated to Jersey City. Many Puerto Ricans who migrated during this time became community organizers in the 60s and 70s and, in many ways, set the stage for Spanish-speaking migrants from other parts of Latin America, who began moving to the city in significant numbers in the 70s and 80s.

During the first part of today's show, we'll learn about the reasons behind Puerto Rican migration to Jersey City directly from interviews with Puerto Rican migrants and their children. I will provide a lot of historical context in this section, so I suggest that you have a piece of paper near you or a printed version of this podcast so you can take some thinking notes.

After this section, we'll together begin to reimagine the experiences of living in Jersey City's downtown through the eyes of Puerto Rican migrants. How do you think this section might change your perspective of the history of cities in the 1950s, which — as many of you may know — is usually categorized as a period of white urban residents moving out of cities and into the suburbs? How do you think oral histories can be used to reshape and clarify our understanding of cities and suburbanization?

While listening to the interviews, I also challenge you to think about how migration and the experience of living in Jersey City differed from person to person, within the Puerto Rican community, depending on their racial background, their socioeconomic status, and their familiarity with English.⁴ The last section of this podcast will turn it over to you so you can explore Puerto Rican migrant experiences in schools.

<https://njcu.libguides.com/c.php?g=1047651&p=7602750>; J. C. History, “Library Guides: American Sugar Refining Company: American Sugar Refining Company,” <https://njcu.libguides.com/c.php?g=1047519&p=7601852>; Thomas Fleming, “How the Irish Ruled Jersey City,” 2012; “Jersey City Italian Village Casa Colombo,” <https://www.casacolombo.org/about>.

³ Martin Pierce and Deborah Hairston, “Histories of Black Jersey City: 1630-Present,” https://www.jerseycityculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Final-Brochure_Histories-of-Black-Jersey.pdf; Robert Hampton, “Jersey City's Lafayette Section Rich in Black History,” *Jersey Journal*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.nj.com/opinion/2021/02/jersey-citys-lafayette-section-rich-in-black-history-opinion.html>.

⁴ *For Teachers*: Latin American migrants were not a monolithic group and their experience in New Jersey depended on several factors, including their racial background, socioeconomic status, familiarity with English, home country, documentation status, etc.

With that, let's start the show with the story of Eliu Rivera.

[Transition music - "Bounce" by Coma-Media]

Eliu moved to Jersey City from Aibonito, Puerto Rico, when he was about 12 years old in the 1950s. But, his parents moved to Jersey City a bit earlier, in the 1940s. His father eventually opened a small grocery store, a bodega, while his mother worked at the Wonderland Fashion factory, making dresses. Why did Eliu's mom and dad move to Jersey City, out of all places in the mainland United States?

Eliu Rivera: Let me tell you, I had other family members that came to New Jersey to work in the farms okay. They came to work at Marbolo. There was— at that time, I don't know if you recall, there was an understanding with the government of Puerto Rico, and then here were migrants well, you know, they [the United States government] will pay your fare, bring you and put you to work in the farm [Operation Bootstrap]. So I had some of uh, my, my father's family members that were, uh, uh migrant workers and that's how we did it. So we did choose Jersey City. Uh, my uncle was one of them, Angel Luis Rivera, okay, was the first one. He was the one to help my father, bring 'em over here.

Emily: That understanding with the Puerto Rican government that Eliu is talking about is tied to a set of initiatives aimed at industrializing Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico's history of industrialization and the story of his uncle, Angel Luis Rivera, are some of the keys to understanding Puerto Rican migration to New Jersey as a whole.

By the late 1930s, many of Puerto Rico's government officials had started advocating for the island to move away from an agricultural-based economy to an industrial-based economy. Luis Muñoz Marín was one of these officials. In 1940, he ran for Governor of Puerto Rico on a platform that prioritized agricultural reform and industrialization. Proponents of Muñoz Marín's economic policies framed industrialization as a solution to the issues of unemployment and poverty on the island.⁵ (For context, this movement away from agricultural-based economies and movement towards industrial ones was a theme across Latin America in the 40s, 50s, and 60s).⁶ In 1942, while Puerto Rico industrialized, the US sent millions of Americans, including Puerto Ricans, overseas to fight in WWII.

Many of the people who were part of these troops had been laborers within factories like Bethlehem Steel in Hoboken and workers on farms belonging to food processing companies like

⁵ "Operation Bootstrap," accessed October 13, 2022, <https://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/Bootstrap.htm>.

⁶ A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City*, Illustrated edition (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 109-111.

the famous Campbell Soup Company in Camden, New Jersey.⁷ To replace the men going off to war, companies began recruiting Puerto Ricans with the help of the Puerto Rican government and the US government's War Manpower Commission. Angel, Eliu's uncle, was one of hundreds of Puerto Ricans recruited. And as Eliu explained to us, Angel set the stage for the rest of his family's migration, like many other farm laborers, in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁸

Migration from Puerto Rico to New Jersey continued after WWII mainly because industrialization efforts continued. In 1947, the industrialization process of Puerto Rico led to initiatives that offered tax breaks and free land to manufacturers from the mainland US. These initiatives, also known as Operation Bootstrap, were created to incentivize manufacturers to move their production to Puerto Rico. At the same time, employment in the agricultural sector was declining.⁹ This decline affected many poor, working-class people living in the rural areas of Puerto Rico — including the family of Mariano Vega, who moved to Jersey City from El Yunque, Puerto Rico, in 1950.¹⁰

Mariano Vega: My father was a sugar cane worker and when the sugar cane industry died [...] the sugar cane workers were encouraged to leave Puerto Rican and the Department of Labor was bringing people by the bulk, by the, uh, plane load here so that the unemployment rate would be smaller [in Puerto Rico] and there wouldn't be that much unrest in the, in the changing of the economy. My, my mother came here first uh, to work in a, probably, a factory.

[Transition music - "Cinematic Ambient" by Lexin_Media]

Emily: As Mariano begins to highlight, the US government also directly supported this migration by creating policies that encouraged working-class Puerto Ricans to leave the island and find work on the mainland.¹¹

⁷ Sandra Ramos, interview by Kimberly Garnick, August 2006 (Newark, NJ: New Jersey Hispanic Research Information Center (NJ HRIC), Puerto Ricans in New Jersey Research Profile); Ruben Ramos Jr., interview by Kimberly Garnick, August 2006 (Newark, NJ: NJ HRIC, Puerto Ricans in NJ Research Profile); Daniel M. López, "Puerto Rican Migrant Workers in Mercer, Camden Counties; Newark; and New Jersey's Puerto Rican and African American Populations, 1918 to 2020: A Chronological Sourcebook, (Including COVID-19)" (2021), held at the Newark Public Library.

⁸ Michael Fernández, interview by Blanca Vega, March 2008 (Newark, NJ: NJ HRIC, Latino Life Stories); Francisco De Jeseus, interview by Olga Jiménez-Wagenheim, August 1988 and May 2001 (Newark, NJ: NJ HRIC, Latino Oral History Collection).

⁹ "Operation Bootstrap," accessed October 13, 2022,

<https://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/Bootstrap.htm>.

¹⁰ *Note for teachers* As mentioned before, industrialization was a theme across Latin America in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, and pushed many working-class rural Latin Americans out of the countryside and into cities, including those in the United States. See the work of A.K. Sandoval-Strausz to learn more about the connection between the urbanization of Latin American and the revitalization of US cities between the 1960s and the early 2000s.

¹¹ Sherrie Bayer, Angelo Falcón, and Gabriel Haslip-Viera, eds., *Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition, Second Edition*, 1st edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 12.

Other Puerto Ricans in Jersey City in the 1950s had already been in the NYC metropolitan area for quite some time. This was the case for Juan Cartegena’s mother, Juanita Aponte, who migrated to Manhattan in the 1950s and later moved to Jersey City. Let’s hear from Juan about his mom’s work experience:

Juan Cartegena: My mother was a factory worker; she worked as a seamstress, *costurera*. She used to sew in a factory and she did that for decades until she retired.

Emily: Many Puerto Ricans living in NYC moved to Jersey City and other parts of the Garden State because of factory jobs.¹²

Once settled in Jersey City, Puerto Ricans — again, many of them were working-class — faced discrimination on both a structural and interpersonal level. The poor housing conditions Puerto Ricans had to live through, which were connected to redlining, is an example of **structural** discrimination.

In the late 1930s, the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC) redlined the downtown, where the families of Eliu, Juan, and Mariano eventually moved into. They described the downtown area as “hazardous.” The categorization was often tied to racist and classist reasonings — HOLC classified neighborhoods that had poor, working-class people, immigrants, and most significantly, Black people, as places that were “hazardous.”¹³ This classification discouraged bankers and lenders from giving mortgages to people living in those areas, thus making it harder for neighborhood residents to improve their homes. European immigrants and their descendants eventually moved out of these neighborhoods to the suburbs, but Black Americans and Black and Brown Latin American migrants, in many cases, could not do the same — suburbs, including those in New Jersey, often had racial covenants that only allowed the selling of suburban homes to white people.¹⁴

¹² *Note for teachers*: If you and your students would like to learn more about Puerto Rican migration from NYC to New Jersey cities, check out Anthony Villanueva's interview available through the Rutgers Oral History Archives: <https://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/latino-new-jersey-history-project>; Juan Cartegena, interview by Karlha Matta, February 2012 (Newark, NJ: NJ HRIC, Justice Stories); Anthony Villanueva, interview by Yazmin Gomez, July 2020 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Oral History Archives).

¹³ *Housing Segregation and Redlining in America: A Short History* | *Code Switch* | NPR, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5FBJyqfoLM>.

¹⁴ “Mapping Inequality: Introduction,” accessed October 13, 2022, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/>; New 12 New Jersey Staff, “Decades-Old Racist Covenants on Property Deeds Have Lasting Effect in New Jersey,” <https://newjersey.news12.com/decades-old-racist-covenants-on-property-deeds-have-lasting-effect-in-new-jersey>; To read more on how redlining impacted the accumulation of Black wealth, see Diego Mendez-Carbajo, “Neighborhood Redlining, Racial Segregation, and Homeownership,” <https://research.stlouisfed.org/publications/page1-econ/2021/09/01/neighborhood-redlining-racial-segregation-and-homeownership>.

Redlining had an impact on the housing conditions of neighborhoods where working-class people of color lived for decades. By the time the families of Eliu, Juan, and Mariano moved to Jersey City in the 1950s, many of the houses in the downtown needed major repairs.¹⁵

Interpersonal racial discrimination — especially when manifested through violence— shaped how some Puerto Ricans maneuvered through their own neighborhoods. Mariano created a specific pathway between his home and elementary school to avoid entering the predominantly Italian and Irish neighborhoods.

Mariano: So, what, what happened with me is, other than the script that I had for going to grammar school, if I departed [strayed] a few blocks, I'd run into someone else's territory and get my ass kicked, so you learn your place quickly. You learn how to behave. You learn how to, where you belong and, uh, well, you know, in order for you to survive, um, you learn it quickly.

Emily: The hostility that Mariano faced from his white neighbors was not unique — in his interview, Eliu remembers having to run between his home and Public School #37 to avoid physical beatings. Ralph Soria, a Puerto Rican community leader who in the 1950s grew up in Paterson, another manufacturing city not too far from Jersey City, remembers avoiding white neighborhoods because he did not want to get beat up for being Puerto Rican.¹⁶ What do the combined experiences of Mariano, Eliu, and Ralph reveal to us about New Jersey's cities, and perhaps the North, in the 1950s? How do these experiences inform your geographic understanding of racist violence?

Dr. Johanna Fernández, in her book *The Young Lords: A Radical History*, helps us situate these experiences into the longer history of white racist violence and anti-Black racism in Northern urban spaces.¹⁷ She explains that during World War I, in Chicago, white ethnic groups viewed Black laborers who were being recruited from the South to work in the city's factories as part of a "black invasion" and reacted with six days of violence against Black Chicago residents in 1919. The violence continued in the 1950s when white ethnic groups bombed the homes of Black Chicagoans near white neighborhoods — in 1954, Italians bombed the home of a Puerto Rican

¹⁵ Churchill-Fulmer Associates, "Jersey City, New Jersey; Master Plan Report Planning" Jersey City Planning Board, Jersey City, NJ, 1949, ix-17, held at the Jersey City Public Library.

¹⁶ Rafael Soria, interview by Thomas Carroll, "I always look to being ahead, I always like to be a leader," September 13, 1994, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afcwip003984/>.

¹⁷ *Note to teachers*: This book is an amazing resource! Dr. Fernández provides a detailed history of the Young Lords Party in New York and demonstrates how it was a multiracial and multiethnic organization fighting to radically transform of society. José "Cha Cha" Jimenez founded the the Young Lords organization in the late 1960s in in Chicago. The NYC chapter was created in 1969. Although the focus of Fernández's book is the Young Lords in NYC, it is a great resource and can help students further understand Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. through a wider scope. An excerpt of Fernández's work for teacher and/or student-use can be found on the NPL website.

family.¹⁸ The violence that Eliu and Mariano were experiencing on their way to and from school every day is part of this longer history of violence against non-white and non-European-descended urban residents.

Some Puerto Ricans were able to avoid this violence temporarily because they were visibly white. In Paterson, for example, Ralph Soria's dad was able to get an apartment because he was white. The landlords eventually tried to kick him out though after they learned he was Puerto Rican and spoke Spanish.¹⁹ This experience does not, however, erase the fact that Puerto Ricans themselves, some of whom were white or light-skinned, discriminated against Black and Brown Puerto Ricans — examples of Puerto Ricans refusing to rent apartments to Black Puerto Ricans [in NYC] date back to the 1940s.²⁰

[Transition music - “Password Infinity” by Evgeny_Bardyuzha]

In this next and final segment, we will step into some of Jersey City's schools by listening to Eliu and Juan one last time. As you listen, think about how Eliu and Juan's stories change or add to your understanding of schooling in New Jersey in the 40s and 50s? Let's first hear from Eliu:

Eliu: First experience was that I was in a, I believe, in the sixth grade and I was dropped, uh two years because of my language barrier. [...] that, that was, that was one thing that I was not happy with, but at that time they used to do that. If you didn't speak the English, if you were in the sixth grade they, you know, they put you back, a couple of years back.

Emily: Eliu was not the only person to be held back in school because he did not speak English — In the 1950s, bilingual education or ESL did not officially exist in New Jersey's schools. What does the story of Eliu and other Puerto Ricans who were left behind reveal about the state's public school educational system in the 40s and 50s? Whose educational rights did public schools privilege, and whose rights did they leave to the wayside?²¹

¹⁸ Dr. Fernández also explains that Puerto Ricans formed part of a “seismic internal migration to major American cities of a broad spectrum of previously rural people,” Johanna Fernández, *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 4 and 16.

¹⁹ Rafael Soria, interview by Thomas Carroll, “I always look to being ahead, I always like to be a leader,” September 13, 1994, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afcwip003984/>.

²⁰ *Note to teachers*: To learn more about the history of anti-Blackness within Latin America and Latino communities in the United States, please check out the work of legal scholar, Dr. Tanya Kateri Hernández; Tanya Kateri Hernández, *Racial Innocence: Unmasking Latino Anti-Black Bias and the Struggle for Equality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 91; Pura Delgado, “Puerto Rican: If You're a Shade Darker, You Face Discrimination,” *Orlando Sentinel*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/os-ed-colored-puerto-rican-has-endured-racial-slurs-myword-20170504-story.htm>.

²¹ *Note to Teachers*: With this question, I'm trying to challenge students to think about how public schools, during this time, privileged English-speakers. Student might also connect this segment of the podcast to the history of racial discrimination in the state's public school educational system. (i.e. the Hedgepeth-Williams case)

Let's hear from Juan, to get more insights on how English-speaking Puerto Rican students also faced discrimination from their teachers.

Juan: There are stereotypes that come with schooling. There's stereotypes that come with growing up in a racially mixed environment. [...] There was the changing of my name by my kindergarten teacher who insisted, I guess, that my name could not be Juan because I'm in America. So my name became John and all my school records became John. And until I got to high school and I went to the principal's office and I have them change it back to Juan because my formal name is Juan. Uh, that kind of like, you know uh, paternalistic uh, appropriation of someone's identity just to make them assimilate, or to feel that's the best thing for them because you're supposed to know better because you're white, I guess uh, permeates a lot of the schooling experiences of anybody of my generation uh, because I was going to school in the late fifties, early sixties and that was just part and parcel. I mean, what happened to me is not unusual to what happened to other Latino children.

Emily: After hearing from both Eliu and Juan, how do you think discrimination might have impacted Puerto Rican students, and more generally, students who were non-white and, in some cases, non-English speaking, in the long run? How were assimilationist attitudes, like that of Juan's kindergarten teacher, harmful? Considering all the experiences mentioned in this podcast, what do you think might happen next, especially knowing that the Puerto Rican community only grows in the years to come?

[Transition music - "Powerful Beat" by Penguin Music]

Keep your answers to these questions in mind for the next two episodes. We'll continue to hear from working-class residents of color in Jersey City and at the same time examine federal policies that shaped their lives and further grew inequality in the city.

Thanks so much for tuning in! If you'd like to learn more about the sources I used for this podcast, check out my footnotes at the bottom of each page of the transcript — all transcripts are located on the Newark Public Library (NPL) website. For educators, you can also access accompanying lesson plans, including worksheets and in-class activities, at the Newark Public Library website as well. And to all listeners out there, if you liked what you heard and would like to share this podcast, please do. It is available on all major streaming platforms.

Our intro theme music is "Juanita Cruza El Charco" by Segunda Quimbamba. Our transition music is from Pixabay. And our outro theme music is "Powerful Beat" by Penguin Music.

A special thank you to everyone who made this possible – everyone part of the HRIC staff, all educators who have given me their time, the staff at the MakerSpace at the Newark Public Library, and the ReachOut Fellowship program.

I'm Emily Sánchez, your host for *Demanding Justice in New Jersey*.

Definitions

Redlining: discriminatory lending practices that make it more difficult for people of color to become homeowners

Structural Racism: “refers to the totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination through mutually reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care and criminal justice. These patterns and practices in turn reinforce discriminatory beliefs, values and distribution of resources”

Definition is from: <https://www.ama-assn.org/>

Gentrification: “a process in which a poor area (as of a city) experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents”

Definition is from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentrification>

Assimilation: “Assimilation, sometimes known as integration or incorporation, is the process by which the characteristics of members of immigrant groups and host societies come to resemble one another. That process, which has both economic and sociocultural dimensions, begins with the immigrant generation and continues through the second generation and beyond.”

Definition is from: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/assimilation-models-old-and-new-explaining-long-term-process>