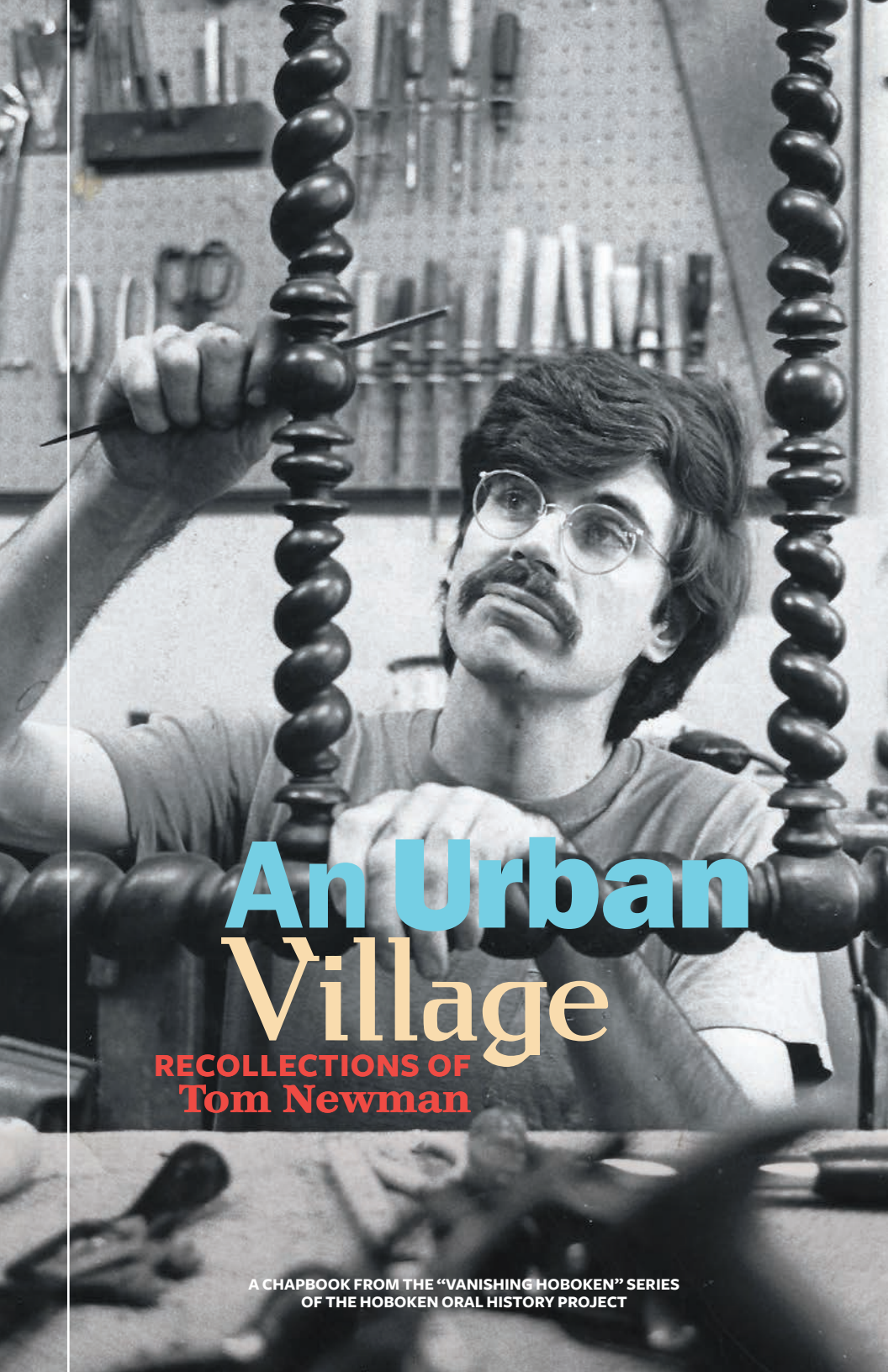
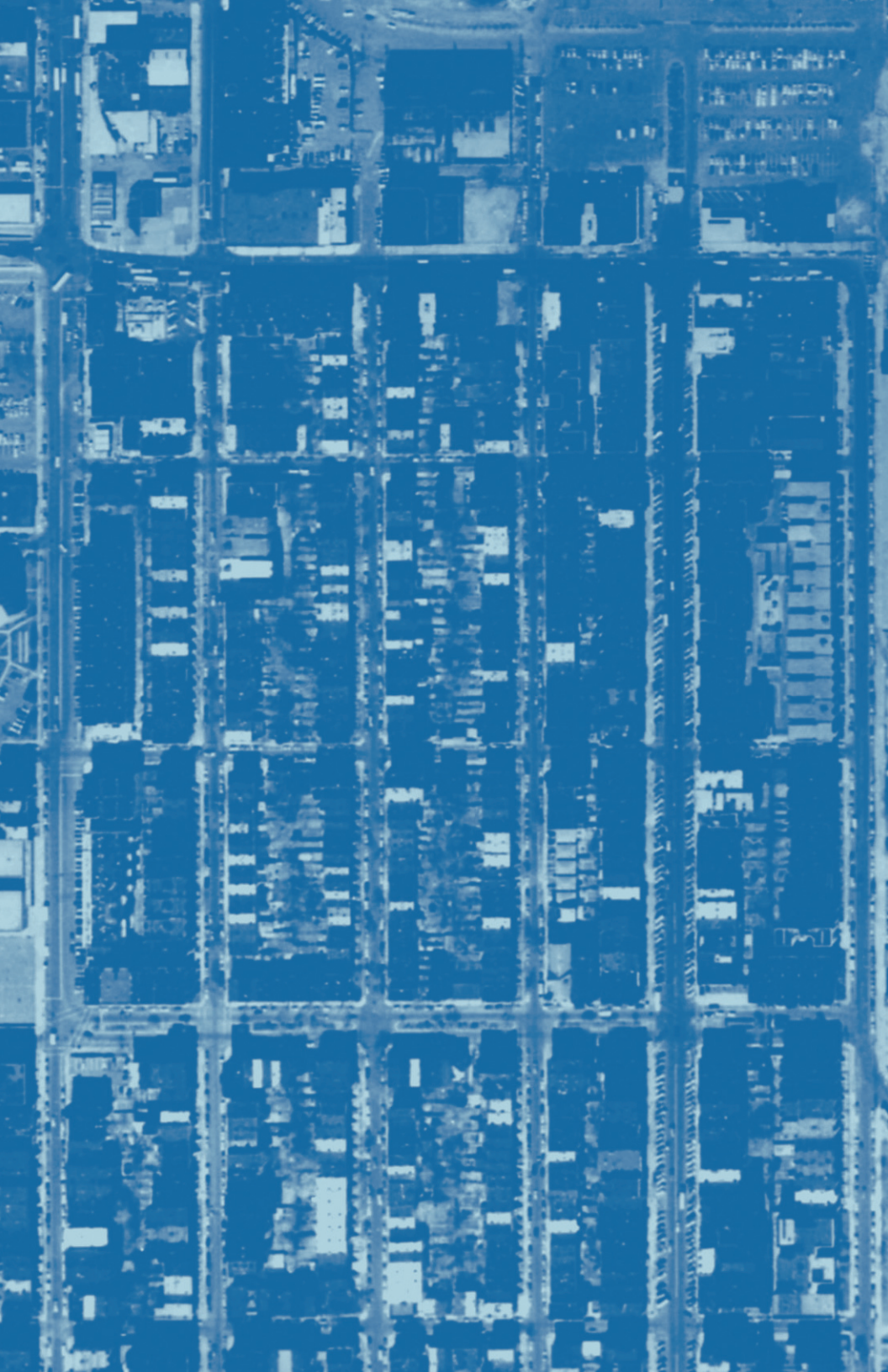


# An Urban Village

RECOLLECTIONS OF  
Tom Newman





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Tom Newman

A CHAPBOOK FROM THE "VANISHING HOBOKEN" SERIES  
OF THE HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## VANISHING HOBOKEN

The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of the Hoboken Historical Museum and  
the Hoboken Public Library

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COVER: Tom Newman at his studio in the Neumann Leather building.

INSIDE FRONT & BACK COVERS: Still from contemporary drone footage.  
Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

TITLE PAGE: Tom Newman in his woodworking studio, undated.

BACK COVER: Aerial photo of southern Hoboken and Jersey City  
railroad yards of the Erie-Lackawanna Railroad, Hoboken, looking  
west, 1961. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

## I WAS STUDYING ANTHROPOLOGY

over in New York, not out of a career  
interest, but out of trying to understand  
the world. And we needed a place to live,  
a place that was cheap and accessible.

A couple of different people said,

“You should go to Hoboken.” So we came  
over to Hoboken. It was 1968.

It was a June evening, warm, everybody  
out on the streets, kids all over the place,  
people on their stoops. And I think  
we recognized immediately that this  
was kind of an urban village.

—TOM NEWMAN  
APRIL 24, 2022



## INTRODUCTION

When Tom Newman, his wife Suellen, and their growing family arrived in Hoboken in 1968, they found a place that was “a kind of urban village,” where people knew each other and their kids played in the street. The Newmans set down roots at Second and Garden Streets—where they still live—and began to work on neighborhood projects. To tackle the area’s problems with substandard housing and unfair renting practices, they helped found the First Ward Block Association. Tom was later elected to the city council and served nine years, all the while working as a furniture refinisher and eventually, as a furniture designer; among other projects, Suellen founded the Hudson School and was its director for many years.

Robert Foster and Holly Metz interviewed Tom Newman on April 24, 2022 at the Hoboken Historical Museum. “The key thing, I think, is community,” Tom later remarked about Hoboken and what drew him here. “People live, work, fall in love, have friends and enemies, succeed or fail on a little stage of their own making. It’s a scene that breeds characters. Everyone has their story.” As the coordinators of the Hoboken Oral History Project, we couldn’t agree more.

A copy of the transcript from which this chapbook is derived, along with additional notes by Tom and Suellen Newman, have been deposited in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum.



### **OPPOSITE TOP**

Tom Newman on his motorcycle with Suellen Newman in the sidecar, undated.

### **OPPOSITE BOTTOM**

Suellen Newman with three of the Newman children, 1972.



**TOP**

In the Philippines: Hilongos villagers move house.

**BOTTOM**

Hilongos Summer Institute in Teaching English as a Second Language, conducted by Tom Newman, 1964.

**A VILLAGE PLACE**

**W**ell, I think the story really starts with having been in the Peace Corps, and my wife [Suellen] and I both were in the Peace Corps. I joined in '61, when it was brand new. I was 22, and I spent three years in the

Philippines, mostly in a little town, a village place. My wife was in Africa, also in a little village on the coast. We were both on the coast, both in education projects, [working] in schools.

And you live in one of these places, kind of a village, not a tiny little village, but a village in the way people lived and worked together. Nobody in the place where I lived commuted. Everybody lived and worked there. Everybody, if they didn't know somebody personally, they at least knew relatives of this person. So everybody knew each other.

The situation of this town was known to everybody. And so when you work with people [in a village] like this, they have ways of interacting. You have certain formalities. You always have smooth interpersonal relations because there are little things bubbling underneath. I would say its appeal [was] a lack of alienation. Everything is present to them. They know everybody and everything is personal and so it's not some abstract idea. And their lives are contained in this one place. They have a sense of place.

Hilongos was the place [where] I was. Hilongos in Leyte, where McArthur landed on the other side of the island. So that's their place and that's their world. That's where they live, where they succeed or don't. And they become experts at this: You meet people who are really good at life. And it's a life full of friends, relatives, enemies, people you like, people you don't like, all the human stuff.

For a kid from the suburbs of New Jersey, it was quite an experience. This makes a big impression on a person.

So I would say that when I came back, some things entered in between. I was studying anthropology over in



Newman family photo, 1984.  
Caroline Carlson, photographer.

**TOP ROW FROM LEFT TO RIGHT**

Cassandra, Philip, Enid

**SEATED BOTTOM ROW LEFT TO RIGHT**

Olivia, Tom, Suellen, Jacob

New York, not out of a career interest, but out of trying to understand the world. And we needed a place to live, a place that was cheap and accessible. A couple of different people said, “You should go to Hoboken.” So we came over to Hoboken. This was 1968. It was a June evening, warm, everybody out on the streets, kids all over the place, people on their stoops. And I think we recognized immediately that this was kind of an urban village. That it had that same atmosphere. Nobody commuted. Everybody lived and worked here. Everybody, if they didn’t know somebody personally, they knew their relative. There were a lot of Catholics. The Philippines was a Catholic country, on top of a lot of other stuff. It rang a bell, you know? And there was no way we were going to go live in a suburb. Just no way we were going to do that.

So it was the perfect place. We found a fifth-floor walk-up. You could always find a fifth-floor walk-up. *(Laughs.)* And so we lived in [one], and I went to grad school. Sue took care of the babies. We had three kids, one of them while we were here. And then the other two, later. [Sue also] taught English for the Board of Education night school. So we patched together a living, which you could do in Hoboken. You could patch it together. And I got started fixing up furniture. I was a handy guy and I started doing that, and went to school.

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## THE KEY THING IS COMMUNITY

### **W**hat was so special about Hoboken

as a working-class, multi-ethnic community? Have you ever read Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*? Hoboken

was like that. The key thing, I think, is community. People live, work, fall in love, have friends and enemies, succeed or fail on a little stage of their own making. It’s a scene that breeds characters. Everyone has their story. A lot of immigrant stories. Tragedies and comedies. But it’s rich and human. Honestly, I think people like this have better lives.

## SECOND AND GARDEN STREETS

**W**e rented, then bought our house in '71. We were the first new family to buy a house in Hoboken.

[Did we have trouble getting a loan, because Hoboken was a redlined area?]

*(Laughs.)* Yeah, when we bought our house there was a line around our neighborhood for urban renewal. They wanted to tear it all down. They had torn down the waterfront along Hudson Street there, River Street. We bought our house, and this was a sweat equity project. I got 2,000 bucks from the government to encourage us to buy. So it cost us \$16,500 to buy the house. And then it was sweat equity after that.

This is Second and Garden, 225 Garden. We're still there. It was a rooming house neighborhood. Rooming houses and some of the brownstones had been broken up into two-, three-, four-family houses. And that block was just full of kids. About half of the houses were owner-occupied. [Our neighbors] were Italian, Puerto Rican, Indian, you name it. It was the United Nations.

We thought it was a great place to raise kids because [of] all of the diversity ... It was a working-class village town, multi-ethnic, working class. There were some people more successful than others, [and] a lot of them moved out when they made a little money. It was uptown, downtown. We were sort of downtown.

[But] it was pretty uniformly working class. Teachers and cops, they were the elite in Hoboken. And each successive wave of immigrants slid in under the previous one. There were the Germans, then the Irish came and became the workers and lived downtown. And then the Italians came in, a big influx of Italians. And they slid in under the Irish. And then the Puerto Ricans came, and they slid in under everybody. And the Cubans. And then they started buying houses, and so on. So you had an "owner-occ" [owner occupied] base.

## A TOUGH ELEMENT

**A**nd there were slums. There were buildings that got so dilapidated, the tenements. And the tenants whose rents

wouldn't support any renovation. So they were sort of condemned to deterioration. And then they became the housing of last resort for a tough element.

I differentiated between a hardcore and a softcore slum. A softcore slum is one where the owner or the owner with the help of some key tenants really had control of the building—the hallways, putting out the garbage, not burglarizing your neighbor, respect your neighbor, didn't steal from them or mug them. That sort of stuff. And if somebody was out of line, they would throw them out.

And then a hardcore slum was where the criminal element really ran the building. Because you had a landlord who didn't care or was just incompetent, didn't know how to deal with them. The hardcore slum was run—it's like the prisons, right? State prisons tend to be run by the inmates' gangs. Federal prisons aren't. And the thing that gives federal prisons the power is that they can transfer people. If you don't want to behave in New Jersey, [where] your family can come and visit you, and you would have people here that you know ... you can [get sent] to Kansas, where nobody knows you. The hardcore slum is an out-of-control slum.

[In the seventies, Hoboken] had a lot of softcore slums. In our neighborhood we had both [softcore and hardcore]. We knew the difference. We knew the landlords. And we had one landlord who was just simply incompetent. He wasn't a bad guy, but he just didn't know how to do it, didn't know how to talk to people, didn't know who's who and what's what.

So the control of these buildings was problematic, keeping good tenants. Good tenants would move out if gangsters moved in, and burglars, muggers, wife beaters. Any impoverished group has got their problem. So there was a big problem with housing and slums. And then people who didn't have much money, where could they go?



Street scene, 1970-1975  
with trash on street.  
Helen Manogue, photographer.

## ORGANIZING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

I remember, I was fixing up our house, I was up on the second floor, and I looked out the window and somebody had put out a bunch of jugs, glass gallon jugs, and some guy came over and was smashing [them] on the fire hydrant.

There was glass all over the place. And I said to myself, I can't just fix the house, I've got to fix the neighborhood. That's literally true, I looked out the window and saw this.

So I went down, and I had a couple of neighbors — Joe DePalma, Danny Valente. Danny Valente just passed away a year ago at age 99 years. He was in D-Day. The ship he was on hit a mine and sank, and he got rescued, and they went in later. [Anyway,] I knew that as an outsider, [it] was going to be a little hard to come in [and help to fix the neighborhood]. I had to have allies. So I got them.

I knew we [also] had to get some Puerto Ricans involved in this. There was a guy that lived around the corner, Joe Rivas. He had lost a hand in an accident, he was the “one-hand man,” we called him, “single-handed man.” He had bought an old tenement building, and single-handedly, literally, had replaced all the sheet rock. Joe Rivas could hang sheet rock on the ceiling with one hand using various jigs and so on. So, [along with DePalma and Valente,] Rivas, Raul Soto, Irio O'Farrell—these were homeowners, little “owner-occs,” who were the heart and backbone of the neighborhood. We decided, we gotta do something here. The housing problem was the big thing, the slums. At this time, the War on Poverty had come in and was sort of sputtering along. HUD had had a lot of disasters. They built these big things which turned into, you know, kind of new slums. And Applied Housing had just started—Joe Barry and Applied—uptown. They saw Hoboken as having the neighborhood quality and the village quality, if they could take care of some of the worst slums and provide people with good housing, they could do tenant selection and they could protect the low-income people. So they were on the scene, but they were uptown.



## THE FIRST WARD BLOCK ASSOCIATION

**W**e made a block association, and we had two big projects. The first one was, we got a grant from the Catholic charity, Campaign for Human Development, and we hired a

community organizer, a young Puerto Rican guy, Thomas Allende. And we had an office; one of our members gave us some space [a teacher, Mrs. Fugazzi, who was our association's secretary. Our office was down in the little storefront she had].

We had a Truth in Renting Project. The state had just passed, in '76, all the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants—how you were to keep peace here. You couldn't throw a tenant out without cause. You could throw a tenant out if they wrecked a place or they didn't pay their rent. They laid it all out. So this was now codified, and we hired Thomas Allende to go around and to help tenants get their rights when a landlord was a slumlord. And owners, if they had a tenant who was abusing, they knew what they could do. This was our idea. Let's see if we can't make this work. And we did a lot of stuff. [Allende] did a lot of counseling, telling them what the law was, pointing them in different directions, and so on.

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## THE BLOCK ASSOCIATION TAKES ON A HOUSING PROJECT

**T**hen we decided we really wanted to do a housing project. We had two terrible slums on our block. And these were out of control slums. Two small

buildings. And so we sold bonds around the neighborhood. Bonds—it means we collected money. (*Laughs.*) And we owed it back to you when we sold the house. We bought the houses and we renovated them.

Joe Barry was doing projects uptown, and he saw us doing this, and he came up to me in a City Council meeting. We were up there kind of saying we've got to do something and what's the city doing? And, you know, why aren't they enforcing the housing codes, and so on? And so he came over and said, "I'll help you. We'll do the legal and architectural work for nothing for you." And he just plugged in his team. He had an architect who did all their stuff. And these were simple, little things. So, he did the legal and architectural, and also gave us clues on how to deal with the government, and so on, which he got to be pretty good at.

So, with that help and Mike Coleman [Director of Hoboken's Model Cities, a federal program for urban renewal] and the CDA [Community Development Agency], we got a low interest loan, subsidized loan. And we bought and then sold two houses to two local families in town: one Italian and one Puerto Rican. And the Puerto Rican [families] are still there—the Mercado brothers. They're still there. They have great-grandchildren. I saw them the other day.

This would have been in the mid-Seventies, mid-'76, '77. Something like that. It was in the First Ward. We didn't go over to Marineview. We didn't go west of Willow Avenue. It was the little area in the center of the First Ward. That was our turf.

[Where did the idea of going around the neighborhood and asking people to donate money to buy buildings come from?] I don't know. We talked to the CDA, to Mike Coleman, and we said we wanted to do this. I don't even know how we got the idea, but we raised 10,000 bucks. And once we had that, we were pretty hard to turn down. Because the government was just looking for ways to do something. It was hard to do. And have a neighborhood organization that was going to take responsibility and make the judgements of what was fair and just.

[As for asking the city to do this,] well, the city was engaged with Joe Barry and so on. And the city, if you have a neighborhood organization that is willing to go out and raise the money, and be the one to front the whole job, that's what they like. Otherwise, they come into somebody's neighborhood, saying, "We're gonna do a project in your neighborhood." Right? They need people they

can talk to. And in Hoboken, it was easy to do this because we had a neighborhood.

It wasn't that they didn't want to do it, but here we were. We popped up. First, we went to them, and we said, "We want to do this. We've got a neighborhood. We've got an organization. We've got a couple of buildings we want to buy and fix. We need some help. How can we do it?"

We raised \$10,000. I think our biggest bond was \$200. The smallest was 25 bucks.

Yes, it was a lot, [but in small amounts. We raised money from] quite a few people all around the neighborhood. And we said, "Look, we're gonna do this and we're taking this money. When we sell the buildings, we give it back. That's the idea." Which we did.

At the heart of it, but not exclusively, was the little owner-occs. If you have little owner-occs, they want to keep the neighborhood. They're invested in the neighborhood. That was one of the things that was the success of Hoboken, all the little buildings with the little owner-occs. And these are people who owned, they owned the block. "This is our block."

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## TENANT SELECTION AND THE APPLIED COMPANY

**W**hile we were doing our project, Joe Barry was doing his projects]. The big issue with Joe Barry was tenant selection. They relocated everybody, and they had a very good relocation office. And so they didn't really have trouble with relocation, because where the tenants were living was pretty miserable. You find them a better apartment, and you get them a Section 8. In those days, there were plenty of options out there. There were a lot of buildings that were decent where they could move in. So there was not a big problem with relocation. The rub was who got to come back. They had tenant selection standards. If you were a drunk and beat your wife, if you didn't pay your rent, if you were a burglar, if your kids

were notorious in school, you know, you didn't get in. And the people who did get in were glad that you were selecting. It became a haven for a lot of people. But they didn't solve the problem [of all the others]. And that's a limitation. But who has solved that problem?

There was a lawyer named Steve St. Hilaire. He was a Legal Services lawyer. And the Legal Services, they help tenants, [but] they don't know the whole story. The tenant's story: the landlord wants them out and hasn't given them proper notice, and so on. [St. Hilaire] took the position that every person that [was] relocated out should have the absolute right to return, not subject to tenant selection. So the same people went back in. Applied said, "No, we're not going to do it this way." And this became a battle. The argument was, well, take somebody who doesn't pay his rent, who is an irresponsible person; you put him back in and you hope that having a nice apartment is going to convert him, so that he gets a job, and becomes a responsible person. You know, you hope. But it doesn't work that way. And the perfect is sometimes the enemy of the possible. And that really was it.

We backed Applied Housing politically in the First Ward. They should come in and do this. And their tenant selection was something. Because you had the tenants that moved in there—and these are low-income, Puerto Rican tenants—if they got into Applied Housing, [it was] like that was on their resume.

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## SAYING YES

**W**ell, for me, the other intervening story—this is personal history—was that I was studying anthropology and I got involved in the Anti-Vietnam War movement. And I got a little tired of protesting. You know, you're just protesting. That's the easiest—saying no is the easiest thing to do. Saying yes is a lot harder.

I got tired of these big, alienated politics [of the anti-Vietnam War movement]. We were marching on

Washington. What was going to be our slogan, you know, and how was it going to resonate, bla, bla, bla. People carrying the Viet Cong flag, I was totally against that. These are 19-year-old kids over there doing what their country asked them to do. You don't go carrying the Viet Cong flag. Who are you communicating with? So I was tired of all of that, and I wanted to do something very local with people.

I wanted to personally [take on this problem]: "We gotta fix this neighborhood. What can we do? What should we do? What's the right thing to do?" So this project was trying to figure out how do you find justice in a complicated situation like this. You have real poor people, and you have a criminal element amongst them that swims in that sea. You got the mafia with the Italians. You've got the Irish mafia. You've got the Puerto Rican desperados on the corner. You know, it's a human story. You can't just write all these people off. But how do you—where do you start? What do you do? This housing project was what was possible and what we could do.

In Hoboken, here it was. We had working-class people, all the problems, ethnic groups. It was America. It was a puzzle. And it had to start with the people. You had to convince people. I talked, talked, talked, talked, talked. Going around talking to everybody, and get them into a meeting. I would never call a meeting unless it was some sort of little crisis someplace, if something bad happened. Then people would come to a meeting. (*Laughs.*) Or if we were doing some project and we needed to meet. Once we got the office, we would meet over there. But before that, we would just meet at somebody's house or in my shop.

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## THE BROWNSTONE REVOLUTION

**A**nd then the "brownstone revolution" swept over us. I remember the day Peter Van Schaick, a do-gooder lawyer guy, and our volunteer lawyer, picked me up in the car, and we were heading to Trenton to see if we could put together a project. We had another building lined up that we were going to buy. We wanted to buy

the empties and restore and sell them to neighborhood people. And he said, "I gotta tell you that last night a lawyer called me, and he has someone who wants to buy the building that we were looking at, and they're offering more money than we're talking about." And I said, "Pete, turn around. We're done in the housing business." The brownstone revolution sort of swept over us.

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## RESTORING FURNITURE

**I** had already started my furniture business. I was restoring antiques. You could pick antiques in the junk stores in Hoboken in those days, really some good stuff, because Hoboken was a has-been town. I built a shop in the back of my house. I made a living out of that. And learned a lot.

[Eventually] I had to get out of there. I got really more big time. I needed machinery and stuff like that, and I started making things. Once you start making things, you can get ahead. I bought the building on the corner of my block, a former bar. You can restore antiques to a certain level, where you're just fixing and little stuff, but if you're making things, you need equipment and space.

I never took a course in my life. I just read books, met people, and made mistakes.

My grandfather was a homestead farmer in central Kansas. He was the son of a homestead farmer. His father had gone out there and busted sod. So he was very self-reliant, you know, and my father inherited this. And my father and my uncle, my brother and I, were the crew when we were kids, and we did everything. We had a little shop in the basement.

So I kind of messed around with the stuff. I mean, I was a kind of handy guy, but other than that it was reading books. Antiques, you had to do a lot of different stuff. You have to do a little carving, you have to do turnings, you have to work with veneers, joinery, finishing. I learned to French polish. And met people along the way. Read books. Because I was next to New York, it was a great market for it. So, just little by little, my business grew.

## GRASSROOTS LEADERS

**T**he most important Puerto Rican leader in the First Ward at that time, grassroots, was a woman named Martha Santiago, who lived at 109 Willow Avenue. She was the leader of the non-Applied Housing Puerto Ricans, the ones who hadn't gotten in. Maybe they hadn't tried, because they were in a softcore slum, and really didn't want to move. Anyway, they hadn't been relocated. [Where she lived,] she ran the building for the owner. She was a tough, smart, tough cookie, and really an inspiration. She never got a nickel for anything, and she took all this responsibility, did all this help. And I spent hours in her kitchen.

She [had] wanted to be a nurse. [When] she was kind of starting [to train as a nurse], her father came in... He was very conservative [and] he didn't want his daughter [working where], people were half-dressed, and so on. So that was the end of the nursing. [She became] a garment worker. She worked in a sweat shop in Hoboken. And Hoboken was full of them, coat factories.

But thank goodness there was Martha Santiago... there were [other] Martha Santiagos, a lot of them around, you know? And these were leaders. Real leaders, who paid their dues.

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## RUNNING FOR A SEAT ON THE CITY COUNCIL

**T**he biggest thing I wanted to do in politics was the affordable housing thing. And the other thing, that was sort of a bee in my bonnet, was the machine, machine politics.

[So in my campaign for the First Ward council seat,] I ran against the machine. But [over time,] the more I got to know it, the more I respected the people who were good at it. Well, it's funny, but they were so much fun. I mean, Andy Amato, what a character he was! And Andy

and Flo Amato...when somebody had a problem, they went down to them, and they took care of them. They helped them with their welfare. Talk about constituent services. That was the name of the game with these guys.

[When I ran,] I had Puerto Rican support, and I had the neighborhoods. I didn't really have much to do with Marineview, which is a whole big thing over there, and not much to do with the seniors. Because the seniors would have been the old Hoboken machine. Right? So that was a little tougher for me, but I had the Hispanics, and I had the neighborhood, and a piece of the old-timer votes.

I went on the City Council in '86 to finish the un-expired term of my predecessor, who suddenly resigned with no real explanation. I suspect he didn't think he could win because he was so reliant on the machine. Tommy Vezzetti had just become mayor and the hand-writing was on the wall, so to speak. [In 1985, Vezzetti defeated Steve Capiello who had been mayor since 1973.] I ran as a reformer. The old "godfather" politics had to change.

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## THE POLITICAL MACHINE

**I**railed against machine politics. And you know, machine politics, the way the machine worked, was that you had to have three things: You had to have an engineer, a lawyer, and a politician. And you had all of this money out there that the feds were spending to fix up these cities to recover and so on. So you'd have a project. You would build a high school. You could build a multi-service center. You could build a park. You could do something with the waterfront. So you have an engineer that draws up the plans... And you have a lawyer who fronts the whole thing and keeps you from getting in trouble. You have a politician who goes down there and says, you know, "I can get you the votes. You want my vote? You gotta give us this. And who are you

**ON REFORM  
POLITICS...**

"I believe that for Hoboken to continue to progress we must change politically to match the changes that redevelopment has brought upon us. Specifically, we must discard machine-style politics where the vote is brought out largely through the dispensing of patronage. In the past, city jobs, political favors, personal and family connections, etc., have been the fuel on which the engine of government ran. This system, which may, in fact, have been necessary in the long period of economic decline, is no longer appropriate in our present situation."

"To make these changes, all of us who want responsible government must get active and make it happen. We must stop the foul odor of the past. Instead, we all can respect our issues."

These are change comes shapes the future brighter future opportunity to

**TOM NEWMAN**

for the first ward...

- IF YOU'RE ANGRY ABOUT HIGH TAXES...
- IF YOU SUPPORT BALANCED DEVELOPMENT WHICH BENEFITS ALL OF US...
- IF YOU OPPOSE PUBLIC OFFICIALS WHO ABUSE THEIR OFFICE FOR PERSONAL GAIN...
- IF YOU BELIEVE PROFESSIONAL POLITICIANS HAVE MADE A MESS OF GOVERNMENT...

**PLEASE JOIN US !**

**WE NEED YOUR HELP TO SEND  
A COMMUNITY LEADER  
TO THE CITY COUNCIL**

**TOM  
NEWMAN**



**NEW MAN...NEW POLITICS**  
for the first ward  
On November 4th  
VOTE C-11

**TOM  
NEWMAN**

Paid for by First Ward Residents supporting Tom Newman, Nancy Tsuchiya, Chairperson.

**THE DIFFICULT TIMES  
FOR HOBOKEN**

...ATE MUST COME DOWN DRAMATICALLY !

...IT MUST BE MANAGED TO HELP SOLVE  
...AN ADD TO OUR PROBLEMS !

...ING CORRUPTION MUST BE ELIMINATED !

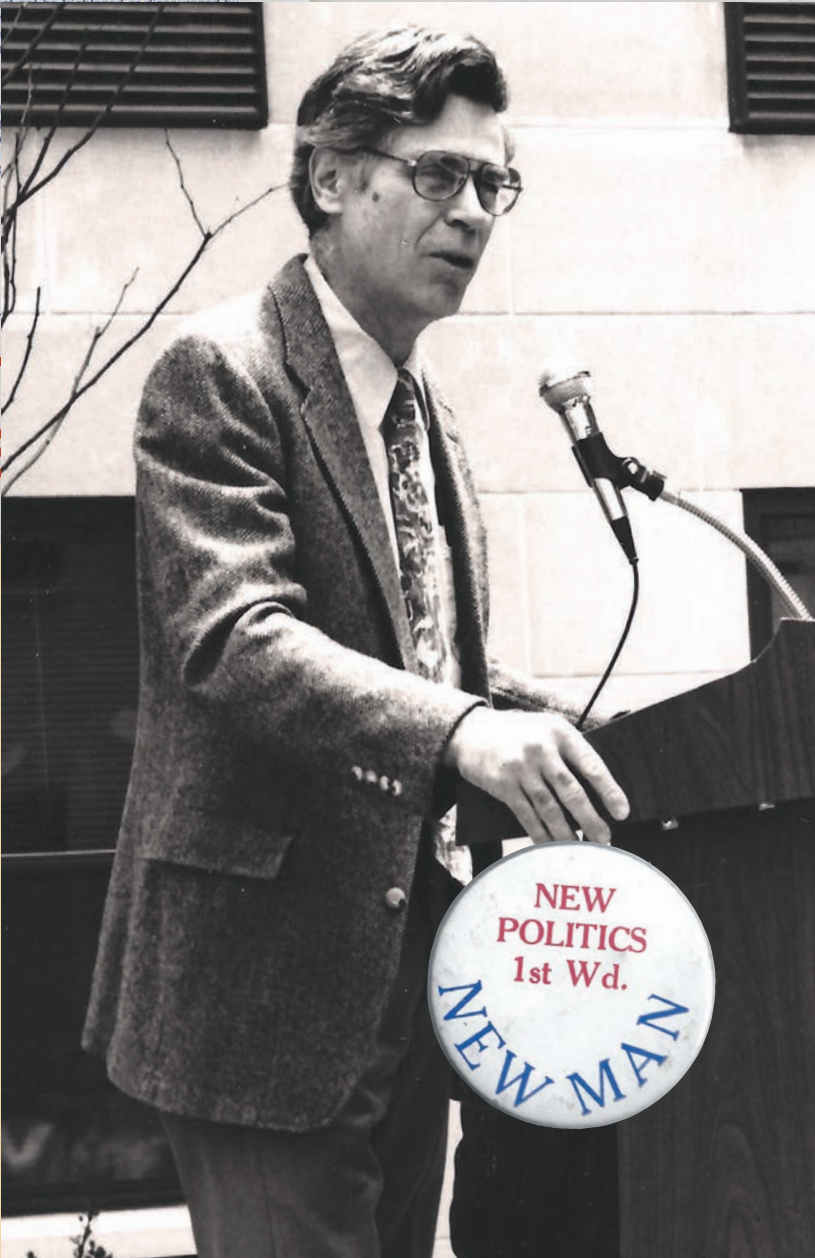
**Difficult Times Require  
Courageous Leadership**

**TOM NEWMAN**

**Choose a leader for over 10 years**

**LEADER OF THE FIRST WARD BLOCK ASSOCIATION  
TO CLEAN UP THE SLUMS.**

**MEMBER OF THE ZONING BOARD OF ADJUSTMENT HE HAS BEEN  
FOR BALANCED DEVELOPMENT.**



**TOM NEWMAN CONCEJAL  
Del Primer Distrito (First Ward)  
Brega con La Question de Viviendas**

Tom Newman nos facilita mejores vivienda a nuestro alcance.



Familia Mercado

Joe Lisa Compra edificio para su propio beneficio.



Tom Newman y La Asociacion del Primer Distrito Compararon dos edificios en malas condiciones en 208-210 Garden St. por \$12,000. La Asociacion los

Joe Lisa compro esta propiedad situada en 303 First Street por \$242,000. Despues de estas elecciones Las familias que viven en este edificio presentemente seran

to come in here and investigate us?" You know, some of the politicians. And then the machine gets this money, they steal the money, and they use the money in their campaign.

This is the way it was. And they were, at their best, Robinhood. They took this money, and they gave it to people. Everybody got five bucks, ten bucks, whatever it was, the going rate. Everybody got it, you know. "You're one of the gang. Come on. Here's your ten bucks. Come on, you've got to vote."

The other key guy in all of this was the mailman. (*Laughs.*) Because of the sample ballots, you know. Everybody in one of these buildings got registered to vote, no matter how transient they were. And if they moved out, somebody voted. The mailman was supposed to return sample ballots if they didn't have an address on the mailbox. So, the mailman would be sure all the sample ballots got delivered.

You could be sure that somebody was there to vote and use this sample ballot to vote. And this was good for, I don't know, several hundred votes. It took a thousand votes to win in a ward in those days. A thousand minimum. If you get 1,200 or 1,500, that was a landslide. So this was good for quite a few hundred votes.

The other part of the machine—a lot of the city workers had a little scam with a politician "godfather" who protected them, which was part of stealing the money. And not a way to run a government. I was against it. It had to end.

So I railed against the machine, but you're dealing with a population that, if they speak English at all, they speak it as a second language. And they don't know from this to that. And they stuck up for them. When it came to anti-poverty programs, they were all for them. They were the Dems that were for all the Dem programs, for better or for worse. And was it good? Was it perfect? No. Was it bad? It was not sin. It may not have been great, but it was not sin. I got to the point where I didn't consider these guys sinners so much as products of a situation. Difficult for anybody to change. It would take a demographic change to get machine politics out of Hoboken, which did happen with Dawn Zimmer [the city's 38th mayor, elected in a special election in 2009, and re-elected in 2013]. It was finally the death nell of machine politics. And it took that much time.

## THE TOMMY VEZZETTI REVOLUTION

**I** came in with the Tommy Vezzeppi revolution. (*Laughs.*) I loved Tommy. Tommy was a populist. He was a leftwing lovable populist. He won because he got the most of the new-comer and Spanish vote, but also a significant defection of the old timers. But he really didn't know what to do. He was no theoretical guy. And it was all heart, but he was a populist, and he went after the politicians. And he was a little brutal with them. He wasn't subtle about anything.

And Laurie Fabiano [Deputy Mayor in the Vezzeppi administration] was his alter ego. She's a goodhearted, sweet person. But you've got to be the leader. You can't be just working behind the scenes.

So I came in [at that time]. I was never a big Vezzeppi guy because I was always worried that Tommy was just too crazy... I was a reformer, but I was independent. And I began to not see the machine as being as evil. I began to see the machine as sort of like an accommodation to a reality and that it had its charms and its positives. But it's not good. It's not the way to run a city. And Hoboken was outgrowing that. You had a whole newcomer population now that wasn't going to put up with that. And the old politicians didn't know how to adjust. They still needed their machines to win in their wards and that was the only way they knew how to do it. And they weren't really good at dealing with the newcomers.

But the thing that really got the machine in trouble was that the politicians got involved in the real estate market, buying, and flipping buildings. It was like dollar bills were floating down out of the sky for someone who knew the neighborhoods. Suddenly we had a new crop of "developers" and sharpies cashing in on the rising real estate market. And pretty soon it wasn't just [more recently arrived] Puerto Ricans who were being displaced, but the old timers as well.

Then, of course, there were the fires. We always had tenement fires in the winter—people making their own heat in the railroad flats—but now there were some really suspicious cases. It gave a terrible odor to the whole Hoboken renaissance thing.



**ABOVE TOP**

Newly elected mayor Tom Vezzeti with a member of his reform ticket, City Councilman Pat Pasculli, 1985. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

**BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT**

Tom Newman with fellow council members Michael Schaefer, Roseanne Andreula, Stephen Hudock, James Fitzsimmons, Dave Roberts, Anthony Amato, Nellie Moyeno, City Clerk Jimmy Farina, and councilman Norman Wilson, 1993.

**NINE YEARS ON THE COUNCIL**

**I** completed my predecessor's term on the council and then I had two full terms. So [I served] about nine years. And there are four things you can be [on the council]. You can be majority support, which is the easiest thing to do. The administration does all the fighting for you ... And you just back it up. You can be minority support, which I was with Tommy Vezzetti. You can be minority opposition, which is by far the most fun, because you can grandstand. You're not going to win any votes. "I'm speaking for the people that are not represented here." "I want to solve this problem, and you haven't thought about this ..." You know, you can really be a demagogue, and you'd have no responsibility. You can just sort of sound off. [But] I didn't really [enjoy that]. I never wanted to do any of that. You don't have any power. You're not saying yes; you're just saying no.

But the most difficult thing is to be majority opposition, because then you can be an obstructionist. An obstruction is stopping things, saying no for political reasons. Not because of the good of the country or the good of the city. And I got in that position. By this time I knew I was tired, and I just was not going to run again. You know, [it takes up an] enormous amount of time and it's just exhausting—and by then we had five kids!

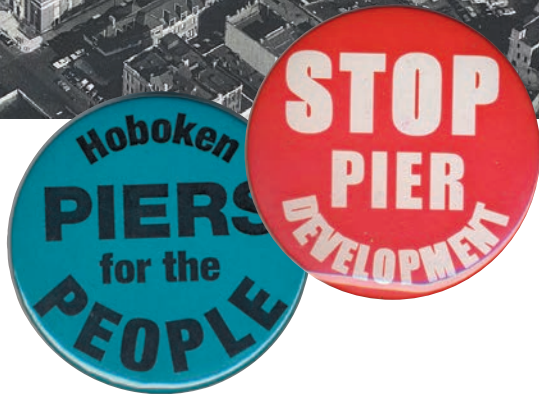
**THE DEBATE OVER PIER A**

**W**ell, the whole thing [when I was on the council] was what to do with the waterfront? And this was a tough one. I really do think that [Fund for a Better Waterfront has] done a great thing to keep the waterfront from being totally exploited, but the big issue was Pier A. And this was a big point. I was yes for Pier A [to be developed], to the horror of many, many people.



**ABOVE**  
Aerial photo of Port Authority piers A, B & C, ca. 1956-1959.

**RIGHT**  
Buttons against the development of Pier A, ca. 2000. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.



[With the debate over Pier A,] it was old Hoboken versus what I perceived as the gentrifiers. I saw [my position] as coming down on the side of old Hoboken. Because at that time, Hoboken really had, you know, we had to fix the sewers. We weren't totally gentrified. The city needed the money. It needed the budget. And Pier A was on top of the terminal. The Regional Plan Association, headed by Barbara Lawrence, they were a non-profit, public advocacy group, and they really wanted Hoboken to use Pier A. [The thinking was] if New Jersey wanted to develop an economic base in this new office economy, they should do it next to transportation hubs so that you don't have traffic. It was an environmental argument. And she was influential with me on this.

[So I supported the idea of developing Pier A as an economic base] as opposed to a park. I thought we were spoiling ourselves. We were treating ourselves, those of us who could afford it, treating ourselves to this fabulous park. But [it's] right next to the transportation hub. And I said, "If there's one place where we can tolerate this and make money, where it's a good idea, that's it." And if you do that, you can then have the resources to do a lot of other good things in the back of town. You could do parks. That was the trade-off for me.

And the old Hoboken, generally, was for this. The argument [against] was you can't trust these guys with a budget. You give them too much money, they're just going to blow it. And I said, "Well, that's a political problem we all have to work on, but that's scorched earth." That's not good politics, I don't think.

[I thought it was] an opportunity for Hoboken which would give us revenues, which is a good thing for a little city like this, with all our problems. We needed affordable housing, we needed a lot of stuff. And we needed to support a budget, and this is our opportunity to do that. Commercial is the ratable you want. That's the ratable where you don't have to fire, police, schools. This has been the conservative Republican argument, but it's true.

That was it. That was the hardest thing I ever did politically. That was the toughest thing I ever did. Because [a lot of] people were mad at me. [I have come to accept Pier A as a jewel of Hoboken.] It's wonderful. But at that time, it seemed like an extravagance for us, and it seemed like the gentrifiers versus old Hoboken. That's the way I read it. And I was a hybrid [of old and new].

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## WORKING AT NEUMANN LEATHER

I had moved over to [the] Neumann Leathers [building on Observer Highway, from my other shop], and I really wanted to make a go of it. It was always sort of something I did to make a living—[first restoring, then building things]. I did the block association, I did all this other





**ABOVE**  
Neumann Leathers Building, 2007.  
Hoboken Historical Museum  
collection.

stuff, [but] my business, I loved doing it. I couldn't wait to get to the shop. Then I decided, I'm in the stage in life here, if I'm going to take it really seriously, now is the time.

I don't do any more restoration. I quit doing that 20 years ago. [At the shop in Neumann Leathers,] we just build stuff, and now we're building art furniture. We just had a big break: One of our pieces, a chandelier, is on the cover of *Architectural Digest*, with Gwyneth Paltrow. You know, Gwyneth Paltrow? I heard there were six people in America who didn't know who Gwyneth Paltrow was, and I was one of them. Now there are only five.

The point is, we do this for a living. I don't have a trust fund or any subsidy, or a day job. We see ourselves as

artisans trying to swim in an ocean of competition dominated by global, highly capitalized operators—factories that do mass production. If you're going to compete with these guys you have to do something special, and something they can't do. There must be an element of art in what you do. Basically, factories have sacrificed a lot of beauty to gain their efficiency. And you must do “high end” work to survive.

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#### THE FIGHT FOR ARTISTS' SPACE IN THE NEUMANN BUILDING

**T**he Neumann Leathers building has a long history. The Neumann family—no relation to me, different spelling—moved here from Newark, and they set up a factory, the first major factory in Hoboken, in 1860, or something around then. It was a good spot for it because it was near the railroads, and a little creek ran through there. And you need water for a tannery.

They did all vegetable tanning. They never got into the chemical tanning. [And after] they quit tanning, they became a manufacturer of leather goods—handbags, baseball gloves. So, it's a clean site, relatively speaking. The worst problems are just oil from leaky tanks, but it's a clean site, despite the fact that's an old tannery. Old tanneries are among the most polluted sites in the world, when they started doing chemical tanning. [And it's] built on end-bearing piles down into the bedrock. There's no foundational problems with any of the structures there. They're solid. There's other little [problems with] the exterior, the windows, doors. But they kept it usable, and they had all kinds of [tenants], garment industry, Guild guitars, baseball gloves.

My first trip to Hoboken, I had a Guild guitar. I played rock and roll when I was a kid, and I had a Guild guitar.



**OPPOSITE TOP**

Embossing room, R. Neumann & Co., ca. 1939.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM**

Glazing room, R. Neumann & Co., ca. 1939. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

And I brought it over here and they fixed it for me. And so there it is, it's this old factory. And the Neumann family hung on.

The name changed to Bernheim. And old Mr. Bernheim, always [wearing] a little bowtie, was a public-spirited guy, and responsible. He felt responsible for his tenants, and the city—a public-spirited captain of industry. Then he died, and his son, Bill, took over and didn't really have the capability. So his controller, Joe, and [building manager] Vic Zarish, kind of ran the building. [They] had dreams. It was clear that industry was leaving. They've got to get rid of it, they've got to do something, got to cash it out. So they wanted to do what every owner of one of these old buildings wants to do—tear it down and build condos, and make a fortune. And unfortunately, they ran into us [artist] tenants and the city. Unfortunately, for them. *(Laughs.)*

And so, we tenants, we just thought it would be a shame. They had the parking lot, which is half the lot, or close to it, and [we] said, "Why don't you keep the old buildings and just build on the parking lot? Everybody can have a little piece of cake here." So that was the idea. And they didn't go for that. They got in this developer, Trammel-Crow, and they had some sort of contract with [them]. They had a plan that they would demolish the building, and they were going to take care of us. They proposed to build an artist building; it would be one of the



buildings there and it would be for artists. They would have subsidized rent. The project would subsidize this.

So this was an attempt to get us onboard, or at least not be too vociferous against them. [But] then they worked up an ersatz artists group: They got some rather innocent artists, I have to say, from [outside of the building], they got them to be the artist group that would be the ones that they dealt with, ignoring us. So we got together with these people and said, “You guys are like scabs here.” They didn’t want to be scabs, so they said, “Okay, we’re out.” That took care of that.

The Trammel-Crow plan went to the Zoning Board because it involved use variances. And so we mobilized, and we got out, we raised about 30,000 bucks, and we hired consultants. We had Ira [Karasick] as our lawyer. We had a planner. We had an environmental pollution guy. We had an old structures-architect to look at the buildings and so on.

So we went in there with a whole posse of professionals to counter their professionals. And this was a knock-down, drag-out [fight]. It took like seven or eight months, something like that, of meetings. And we won with a unanimous vote at the Zoning Board. It was quite a showdown. It was really quite a victory, because they had a star-studded posse on their side. Dean Marchetto was the architect [and] he was the go-to guy in Hoboken. Their lawyer was actually a state assemblyman or something like this. And they had an environmental guy talking about the pollution spreading into the neighborhood, the oil. So we had our guy, to call them on all of this stuff. And we won.

So then it was a question of, well, okay, what do we propose? And John Nastasi is the architect that came up with this wonderful idea. He drew the whole plan. And this became John’s dream. It was going to be a plaza on the inside, a piazza plan—retail and restaurants—and then you could build condos on the parking lot and keep the other buildings for us. And it went through a whole planning process. It was before the council. What about something like this? You don’t have to tear everything down. You’ve got the parking lot. Let’s make a deal. So that went to the planners, and they came up with, essentially, that idea.

## HOBOKEN FROM 1968 TO TODAY

**W**hen we moved here in ’68, there was no brownstone revolution. Nobody commuted to New York. It was working class. It was old Hoboken. And in the Seventies that began to change and we experienced

all of that, and were activists in Hoboken during that period, and involved in all of these things that happened. So we have that perspective of this history from the late Sixties until the present. At least once you get to a certain point, once you get past [the election of] Dawn Zimmer, it was that political kind of big change. [She] wasn’t born and raised. She was a woman, and Jewish. And now you’ve got a Sikh mayor.

[If I ended up in Hoboken now, just out of the Peace Corps, would I say “I want to live here”?] You know, now that I’m 83, I might like to live here now in a high-rise, so I wouldn’t worry about the plumbing and stuff. *(Laughs.)* If I just wanted to just be comfortable. Seriously, it’s a nice place to live. It’s so convenient to New York. It’s a walk-around city. The many things, the attributes of Hoboken which were built into the architecture, the whole size and shape, [how it’s] sealed off, the river, the cliffs, the tunnels, and so on, still are charming, and are still attractive. But if I were the young guy that I was back then, even if I could have afforded it, I don’t know today whether I would be as attracted. I might have moved to Jersey City.

I have a new neighbor. Next-door was a Hoboken fireman and his wife, Italian/Irish marriage. And his father was the first Italian cop. He rode a motorcycle, a Harley Davidson police bike. I think it was his father who bought the building. And they were one of the first Italians to move from down in the Third and Fourth Wards up—it was a big thing to move up—closer to the river. So he had a long history. Now he died, and just recently—his wife, I think, she’s still in a home—but their daughters sold the old family [place]. A Sikh family moved in. And I asked them, “Did you move here because we have a Sikh mayor?” And they said, “We didn’t even know.” *(Laughs.)* But I got to know them and that’s nice. So, I still like it.

Generally, [though,] I don't really know my neighbors as I used to. Because in the old days your kids were out on the street. And there was a mass of kids out on the street. There was no "I'm bored, what do I do?" Just go out. They go outside and there's somebody doing something. They could play whiffle ball in the street. There was no traffic. There were kids all over the place. It was like there was a circus of kids.

The street was the playground. And when your kids are out there, you meet their parents. And in comes this kid's [visiting] our kids in the house. "And who's your parent?" And then you see them on the street. "Oh, yeah, he was in my house." You know, "Thank you for inviting him." He wants to go someplace. He wants to bring your kid along. "We're going up to the park. Is it all right?" Sadly, this sort of thing, the village as it were, has kind of disappeared.

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**OPPOSITE**

Tom Newman and son Philip,  
undated.



## THE HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

“Vanishing Hoboken,” an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to consequent “vanishing” of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken’s industrial base relocated over the 1970s and ’80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992.

In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken’s row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, in which affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, “Vanishing Hoboken”—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken”

chapbooks. Since 2002, thirty-nine chapbooks—including this one—have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

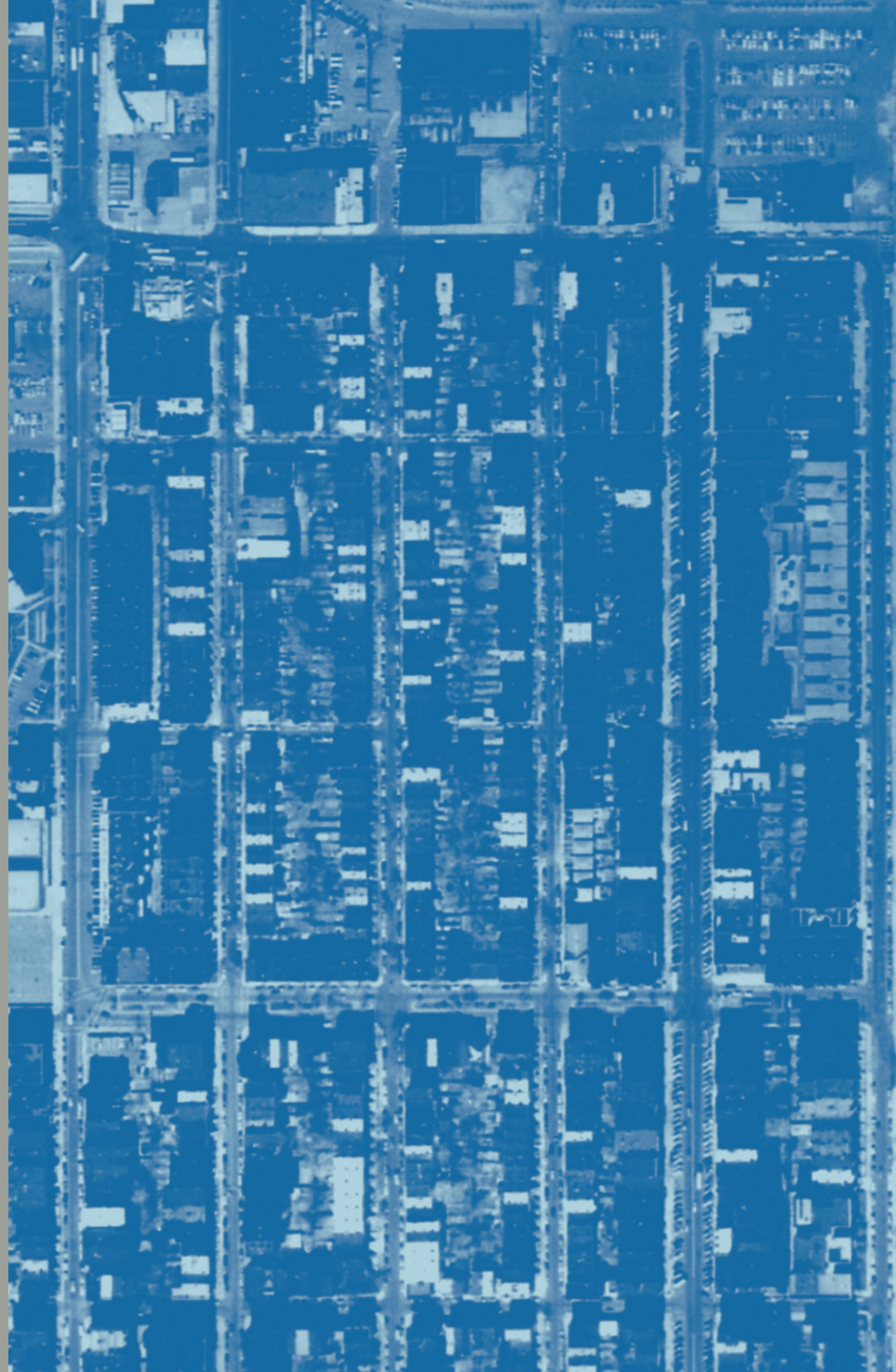
## VANISHING HOBOKEN CHAPBOOKS

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets “chapbooks,” a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the “Vanishing Hoboken” series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the “manners and morals” of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.





**A PROJECT OF THE HOBOKEN PUBLIC LIBRARY  
AND THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM**