

Hoboken Is Burning: Yuppies, Arson, and Displacement in the Postindustrial City

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Between 1978 and 1983, nearly five hundred fires ripped through tenements and rooming houses in the square-mile city of Hoboken, New Jersey. The blazes killed fifty-five people and left more than eight thousand homeless. Almost all of the displaced residents were Puerto Rican; most never returned to Hoboken. Nearly every fire, investigators determined, had been the result of arson.¹

This rash of destruction, dislocation, and death occurred alongside another dramatic story: a transformation the local and national press hailed as the “Hoboken Renaissance.” Beginning in the late 1960s, the traditionally working-class city of 45,000, located just across the Hudson River from Manhattan, experienced a sudden influx of middle-income people. Homesteaders looking for historic brownstones made up the first wave of the “Renaissance.” By the end of the 1970s, thousands of young professionals joined them, attracted to Hoboken more for its proximity to Wall Street and corporate headquarters than for its distinctive architecture.²

These two narratives—one of death, another of rebirth—competed for readers’ attention in newspapers across the New York metropolitan area. Coverage alternated between breathless profiles of brownstone renovations and grisly tallies of the dead and injured. In truth, the stories of destruction and resurgence were one and the same. Hoboken’s arson wave resulted from a new phase of metropolitan transformation, as owner-occupied brownstone renovations gave way to landlords renovating tenements into luxury apartments. As the potential rent or sale price for converted units soared at the end of the 1970s, property owners faced powerful incentives to displace low-income tenants—

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¹ For the death toll, see “Fires Have Killed 55 in Four Years,” *Jersey Journal*, May 1, 1982, p. 1. For the fire statistics, see “Fires Changing Hoboken,” *ibid.*, May 1, 1982, p. 4. Displacement figures are estimates by Citizens United for New Action and Hoboken Union of Tenants spokespeople, quoted in Chuck Sutton, “Puerto Rican Group Demands Arson Probe,” *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 29, 1981, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum, Hoboken, N.J.); and Randolph Diamond, “400 Rally in Hoboken Arson Protest,” *Jersey Journal*, Nov. 16, 1981, p. 7.

² Randolph Diamond, “Hoboken: Wrinkles in the Facelift,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1981, p. NJ2. Hoboken Community Development Agency, “Hoboken: A Visitor’s Guide,” 1977, Map & Guide Collection (Hoboken Historical Museum).

particularly in rent-controlled buildings—and convert the vacant apartments to market-rate units. Hoboken's old tenement buildings rapidly became condominiums: from 41 units in 1981 to 3,500 built or proposed units by 1986. In 1982, over oysters and white wine, newly arrived stockbrokers discussed the benefits of the Hoboken-to-Manhattan commute just a half block from where an arson-related fire had killed twelve people a day earlier. "I don't want people to be burned," one remarked, "but I wouldn't mind a nicer element of people here, if you know what I mean."³

Like many other cities, Hoboken had experienced an influx of "homesteaders" in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Much has been written about this first wave of urban returnees: the authenticity-seeking counterculturalists, brownstoners, creative types, and loft-livers who rehabilitated buildings in New York, Toronto, London, and San Francisco. Hoboken welcomed a similar slate of newcomers in those years. Capital for mortgages and improvements was provided by the federal government, which awarded Hoboken Model Cities funding in 1967. In the process of converting row houses from multiple apartments back into single-family homes, Hoboken's homesteaders displaced some low-income tenants. By the early 1970s, Hoboken's real estate prices were rising, but the pace of change was slow and the consequences mild for the city's residents.⁴

But in Hoboken as in those other cities, the real estate market underwent a dramatic shift at the end of the 1970s—one largely overlooked by historians. While we have excellent work on the "back-to-the-city" movements of the 1960s, we know less about the subsequent years, when the deregulation of the banking sector and the resulting surge in financial and professional employment brought dramatic changes to America's urban neighborhoods. In those years, cities such as Hoboken absorbed thousands of so-called yuppies—young urban professionals. On the blocks around Hoboken's PATH (Port Authority Trans-Hudson) station, where trains whisked commuters through tunnels to Wall Street in under ten minutes, the proportion of residents working in professional or managerial jobs leapt from one in twenty in 1970, to one in three by 1980, to one in two by 1990. Those commuters, almost all of them single or childless, wanted a very specific sort of housing: studios and one-bedrooms with upscale appointments. As New York's financial industry boomed, adding over 85,000 jobs between 1977 and 1982, the slow pace of brownstone renovations gave way to a frenzy of condo conversions for the growing cohort of professionals. Other cities—from Chicago to Boston to Atlanta—experienced a similar influx of yuppies, and the story repeated itself again and again.⁵

³ "Fires Changing Hoboken"; Don Singleton, "Hoboken Revisited," *PSE&G: The Energy People*, 2 (1986), 21; Joseph Barry and John Derevlany, eds., *Yuppies Invade My House at Dinnertime: A Tale of Brunch, Bombs, and Gentrification in an American City* (Hoboken, 1987), 72.

⁴ Historical work on gentrification focuses almost exclusively on the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s—what one might call the "first wave" of urban revitalization. Examples of this first-wave literature include Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore, 1982); David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (New York, 1996); Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York, 2011); and Aaron Shkuda, *The Lofts of SoHo: Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950–1980* (Chicago, 2016). Social scientists have also begun to reveal the contours of "third-wave gentrification" or "super-gentrification" that began in the 1990s after the end of the economic recession. See Loretta Lees, "Super-Gentrification: The Case of Brooklyn Heights, New York City," *Urban Studies*, 40 (Nov. 2003), 2487–2509.

⁵ To date, histories of upper-middle-class knowledge workers have focused on suburban residents or on the high-tech and scientific sectors. See Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, 2014); and Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton, 2004). Employed Civilian Population 16 Years and Over: Managerial and Professional Specialty Occupations, 1970, 1980, and 1990, *Social Explorer*; <https://www.socialexplorer.com/>

Shifts in federal and local policy also enticed private developers into urban residential real estate markets, accelerating the rate of neighborhood change. In the early 1970s the Nixon and Ford administrations devolved Great Society-era programs such as Model Cities to local control—under which, too often, renewal funds were less likely to fight poverty than to promote real estate speculation. Indeed, once Hoboken's Model Cities program gave way to a city-directed renewal agency, its mission pivoted from day care and job training to a marketing campaign designed to attract yuppies from Manhattan. Then Hoboken's city council passed measures in 1981 that undermined the city's rent control laws, further emboldening landlords to replace poorer tenants with occupants who could afford market-rate rents. Taken together, the federal turn toward private developers and the weakening of local rent control accelerated the demand for high-end real estate. In Hoboken, vacancy rates fell below 1 percent by the start of the 1980s. Those policy shifts, Hoboken tenant organizer Tom Soto believed, created an "atmosphere that encourage[d] arsons and evictions, both legal and illegal."⁶

Histories of urban America in the 1970s and 1980s have discussed arson in decaying neighborhoods, where it was used to collect insurance money on overvalued or vacant buildings. This focus is warranted. New York City experienced around 10,000 arsons each year from 1974 through the early 1980s, and fires in declining neighborhoods served as an easy emblem for all the woes the city faced amid its fiscal crisis. During the television broadcast of the October 1977 World Series, millions saw buildings burning in the South Bronx just beyond Yankee Stadium's outfield fence. (Journalists later claimed—apocryphally—that the commentator Howard Cosell had blamed the fires on the social disorder of the neighborhood's residents: "Ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning! . . . Don't these people have any self-respect?") But the problem extended far beyond the Bronx. From 1975 to 1981, the incidence of arson in the United States increased 250 percent. Insurance companies paid an estimated \$5 billion in arson-related fire claims in the 1979–1980 period alone.⁷

e5cea12b25/view (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau). New York State Department of Labor, "Historical Employment and Wages, 1975–2000," https://labor.ny.gov/stats/employ/historical_qcew.shtm#CC. City of New York, *City in Transition: Prospects and Policies for New York: The Final Report of the Temporary Commission on Finances* (New York, 1978).

⁶ Office of the Mayor, Hoboken, New Jersey, "Affordable Housing in Hoboken: A Comprehensive Plan of Action," Sept. 26, 1985, Hoboken Historical Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J.); Randolph Diamond, "Landlords Ignore Hoboken Law," *Jersey Journal*, Feb. 1, 1981, p. 1; Earl Morgan, "Decontrol, 11.5% Rent Hike in New Hoboken Ordinance," *ibid.*, June 6, 1981, p. 2; Hoboken Neighborhood Planning Council, Model Cities program booklet, 1970, Hoboken Government & Politics Collection (Hoboken Historical Society, Hoboken). On New York's transition from Great Society-era liberalism to an economy based on real estate and finance, see Joshua B. Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor since World War II* (New York, 2001); Kim Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate: Regime Change in New York City, 1974 to the Present* (New York, 2007); Miriam Greenburg, *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World* (New York, 2008); and Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York, 2017).

⁷ After the 1968 urban uprisings, the federal government ensured high-risk areas would continue to be insured against fires by creating the Fair Access to Insurance Requirements plans—private insurance pools incorporated by states. These plans unintentionally incentivized arson in declining neighborhoods. See U.S. General Accounting Office, *Arson-for-Profit: More Could Be Done to Reduce It* (Washington, 1978), <http://www.gao.gov/assets/130/122823.pdf>; Marshall Berman, "Views from the Burning Bridge," *Dissent*, 46 (Summer 1999), 76–87, esp. 78; Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, esp. 227–40; City of New York Arson Strike Force, "Arson in New York City: 1985," Sept. 1986, p. 7, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/103200NCJRS.pdf>; and Michael Paul Jacobson, "The Enigmatic Crime: A Study of Arson in New York City" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1985), 22. Joe Flood, "Why the Bronx Burned," May 16, 2010, *New York Post*, <https://nypost.com/2010/05/16/why-the-bronx-burned/>. James Brady, "Arson, Urban Economy, and Organized Crime: The Case of Boston," *Social Problems*, 31 (Oct. 1983), 3.

For all of this attention on arson in declining areas, however, historians have neglected the use of arson in *booming* neighborhoods. As this article demonstrates, real estate speculation and demographic transition in rapidly upscaling areas could also trigger an explosion in arson for profit. Such an influx of middle-class residents was not isolated to Hoboken during the late 1970s and 1980s. In gentrifying neighborhoods across urban America, a changing policy climate and the rising demand for housing by an emerging cohort of yuppies incentivized displacement by fire. On the North Side of Chicago, landlords were charged with burning buildings to remove tenants and, in some cases, to clear lots for wholesale redevelopment. On Manhattan's Upper West Side, the city's Arson Task Force reported in 1982 that owners had used fires to empty single-room-occupancy hotels so they could be renovated into luxury condominiums. In Boston's Back Bay neighborhood, soaring rents led to a 400 percent increase in the number of arsons for profit from 1979 to 1980. While running for mayor of Boston, City Councilor Raymond L. Flynn told a reporter: "I am convinced there is a correlation between building conversion and arson. There is nothing so effective as fire for circumventing eviction procedures. Just look at the money being made by conversion." Upon his election in 1983, Mayor Flynn declared a war on what he aptly called "gentrification arson." Nationwide, the situation became so dire and the loss of life so great that Congress held hearings on the arson-for-profit crisis in 1980, 1981, and 1982.⁸

In many respects, the arson epidemic was a continuation of a long history of race-based violence, exploitation, and displacement in metropolitan America. As an emerging body of scholarship reveals, coercion has been essential to securing property rights and realizing profits from the ownership of real estate. From the post-Civil War South to the mid-twentieth-century North, residents and property owners—usually, but not always, white—used force against minority communities to maintain exclusive access to valuable urban and suburban spaces. Arson was always an essential tool in this project. As late as the 1940s, white residents of Chicago's South and West Sides terrorized black newcomers with fires and incendiary bombs. In the 1950s black home buyers were beset by arsonists in Atlanta, Dallas, and Detroit. By the 1960s, residents of Birmingham, Alabama, had experienced so many racially motivated fire-bombings of homes and churches that some began calling it "Bombingham."⁹

⁸ On fires in other gentrifying cities, see "Rebirth of a Neighborhood Is Not without Some Pain," *Chicago Tribune*, June 21, 1979, p. N1; "Economic Revived Area Prone to Arson," *Boston Globe*, Oct. 13, 1980, p. 30; "Arson and J-51," *New York Times*, July 20, 1982, p. A23; James P. Brady, "Behind the Burning of Boston," *Boston Globe*, Oct. 23, 1983, pp. SM9, SM18; Raymond L. Flynn, "From City Hall to Neighborhoods, It's War on Arson," *ibid.*, Feb. 7, 1984, p. 19; James P. Brady, "Arson, Urban Economy, and Organized Crime," 17; U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Arson for Profit: Hearing before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Criminal Justice of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 96 Cong., 2 sess., Sept. 10, 1980. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Government Operations, *Condominium and Cooperative Conversion: The Federal Response: Hearing before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer, and Monetary Affairs of the Committee on Government Operations*, 97 Cong., 1 sess., March 30–April 1, 1981. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Judiciary, *Anti-arson Act of 1982: Hearing before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Crime of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 97 Cong., 2 sess., May 19, 1982. On Raymond Flynn and arson in Boston, see folder 2, box I-1, Mayor Raymond L. Flynn Papers (City of Boston Archives and Records Management Division, Boston, Mass.); folder 30, box I-4, *ibid.*; folder 5, box IVA-1, *ibid.*

⁹ Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (Chicago, 1983), 36–37; Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005), 85, 89; Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, 1996), 242, 253; Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (New York, 2000), 112; Glenn T. Eskew, "'Bombingham': Black Protest in Postwar Birmingham, Alabama," *Historian*, 59 (Winter 1997), 371–90. Other examples of the voluminous literature on how public policy, physical coercion, and private investment were used to exclude minorities from housing and opportunity

Overt violence, however, tends to fall out of our stories of metropolitan life in the 1970s and 1980s. Describing the emerging political economy of the era, historians often rely on bloodless terms such as *deregulation* and *neoliberalism*. Those concepts, however useful, remain nebulous and abstract. Even worse, they obscure the persistence of racialized and economic violence in late twentieth-century America. The story of Hoboken reveals how coercion continued to shape cities in the postindustrial era. That many of the landlords there who used fire to displace tenants were themselves Latino did not matter; arson remained a lucrative weapon for property owners, regardless of race. And just as in earlier decades, its worst effects were still borne by African American and Latino tenants.¹⁰

Hoboken's arson wave was also the result of other political, demographic, and economic shifts that remade cities in the late 1970s. This article demonstrates the grassroots effects of those changes. It connects the market turn in American life with deadly conflicts in urban neighborhoods. It exposes the local repercussions of the growth of the financial and professional sectors. It illuminates the federal government's increasing preference for market-based solutions to urban renewal, as older programs such as Model Cities, which at least claimed an antipoverty mission, gave way to profit-driven public-private partnerships. And it uncovers the origins of battles over gentrification in the real estate mania of the late 1970s and 1980s. All of these forces continue to plague urban America: in 2017 an arson wave in San Francisco signaled that property speculation had reached a new and frightful phase in that city.¹¹

Ultimately, this article reveals an important turning point for metropolitan America at the end of the 1970s. As capital, developers, and middle-class residents began to flood back into cities, long-standing concerns over urban decline combined with the threat of rapid gentrification and forced displacement. Cities faced not one urban crisis, but two: while they continued to experience disinvestment and flight, select areas also began to suffer the effects of fevered overinvestment. For residents caught in its path, the resulting maelstrom had deadly consequences.

Hoboken's Rise and Decline

Hoboken is surrounded on all sides by clear boundaries both natural and man-made. The Palisade cliffs loom to the west. The Hudson River courses to the east. Railroad tracks and industrial boulevards separate Hoboken from Jersey City to the south and Weehawken to the north. The skyscrapers of lower Manhattan across the river tower over Hoboken's three- and four-story row homes, five-story brick tenements, and squat factories.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, Hoboken's economy had been oriented toward the waterfront. Its docks were vital to the Port of New York: they took on break-

in cities include Matthew D. Lassiter, "De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth," in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (New York, 2009), 25–48; and Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeowners* (Chapel Hill, 2019).

¹⁰ On the profitability of expropriation and displacement, see N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago, 2014); and Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York, 2016).

¹¹ David Harvey suggests that New York's mid-1970s fiscal crisis was a proving ground for the neoliberal policies later pursued by President Ronald Reagan. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York, 2005), 44–48. For similar argument, see Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York, 2010); and Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*. On San Francisco, see Jon Ronson, "San Francisco Is Burning," *GQ*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.gq.com/story/san-francisco-is-burning>.

bulk and agricultural cargo, welcomed European immigrants, and dispatched millions of troops to the front during World War I. Hoboken's industrial livelihood depended on transforming raw materials into finished goods for the New York market. Hostess, Maxwell House, and Lipton Tea all had factories in Hoboken. Small shops hawked imported food and clothing along Washington Street, the city's main commercial corridor. Hoboken was so identified with its docks that it served as the setting for Elia Kazan's 1954 long-shoreman drama *On the Waterfront*.¹²

With multiple railroad terminals and quick ferry access to Manhattan and Ellis Island, Hoboken attracted tens of thousands of immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its population soared from 9,662 in 1860 to 43,648 in 1890; 40 percent of those residents were foreign-born. At first, almost all of these immigrants were Irish and German, with the remainder from England and Scotland. In the first decades of the twentieth century, these groups were overtaken by Italians from the southern Mezzogiorno provinces. As the number of immigrants swelled, the Hoboken Land & Improvement Company built rows of identical brownstone-style row houses in the city's south and central areas. Other companies erected multifamily apartment buildings, usually five stories of four-room railroad-style cold-water flats. The thousands of transient dock workers who moved to Hoboken for seasonal work lodged in dozens of single-room-occupancy hotels and rooming houses.¹³

After peaking in the 1920s, Hoboken's economy and population began a long decline. The passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act sharply curtailed European immigration to the city. The law's strict country-of-origin quotas pushed Hoboken's population from a high of 70,324 in 1910 down to 50,676 by 1950. Over the same period, the percentage of foreign-born Hobokenites dropped nearly 40 percent to 22 percent. As the number of arrivals slowed, businesses that depended on ship travel collapsed: seventeen of Hoboken's twenty-two waterfront hotels closed in the decade after immigration quotas began. And since the federal government owned Hoboken's cargo piers, the city was unable to collect tax revenue from its most important surviving industry.¹⁴

Other social, economic, and technological changes assailed Hoboken over the next forty years. In the late 1930s, as Hoboken's unions grew powerful, they demanded increasingly large concessions from the city's industrial employers. Workers appealed unfair labor practices at area companies—Dahahy Packing Co., R. B. Davis Baking Powder—to the National Labor Relations Board. Faced with worker activism and rising labor costs, manufacturers began to flee to nonunion southern states. The worst blow to Hoboken's economy, however, came in the 1960s as shipping companies began to containerize their goods. Containerized cargo required fewer dock workers to unload, dramatically cutting the demand for labor. In another blow, the giant cranes that replaced the stevedore gangs needed vast swaths of land to lift the steel shipping boxes onto waiting trucks. Hoboken,

¹² Christina A. Ziegler-McPherson, *Immigrants in Hoboken: One-Way Ticket, 1845–1985* (Charleston, 2011); Mary Proctor and Bill Matuszeski, *Gritty Cities* (Philadelphia, 1978), 91–109. *On the Waterfront*, dir. Elia Kazan (Horizon Pictures, 1954).

¹³ Ziegler-McPherson, *Immigrants in Hoboken*, 31–35, esp. 32, 35; *Delivered Vacant*, dir. Nora Jacobson (Island Pictures, 1992), <http://www.offthegridproductions.com/films/delivered-vacant/>; Geraldine Streckfuss, "A Hoboken Home Housed Sailors from Afar," *Asbury Park (NJ) Press*, June 28, 1992, p. C6; "Historic Preservation: Celebrating and Protecting Our Heritage," in *City of Hoboken 2004 Master Plan*, by Hoboken Planning Board (Hoboken, 2004), 117–37, <http://www.hobokennj.org/pdf/mplan/FINAL/VIII.HistoricPreservation.pdf>.

¹⁴ Johnson-Reed Act, Pub. L. No. 68-139, 43 Stat. 153 (1924). Ziegler-McPherson, *Immigrants in Hoboken*, 121–36, esp. 125, 123.



Girls play in an open lot on the south side of Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1975. Five-story tenement buildings, which housed many of the city's Latino residents, fill the background. *Courtesy Hoboken Historical Museum.*

with its constrained geography and narrow highways, was now at a disadvantage. As Judge Charles Defazio Jr. remembers, “You know what started it all? Containerization. That’s the thing!” Hoboken, he explains, “didn’t have . . . uplands,” the “land adjacent to the main buildings. . . . You didn’t have any storage space. You needed a lot of storage room for containerization.” Most of Hoboken’s shipping trade moved south to the nearby expanding ports of Elizabeth and Newark.¹⁵

Just as Hoboken’s economy approached its nadir in the 1950s and early 1960s, thousands of Puerto Ricans began to move to the city from the barrios of upper Manhattan. Many were recruited to fill low-paying jobs in the city’s remaining garment and food-processing factories. Like Hoboken’s Italian and Irish residents before them, the new Puerto Rican residents quickly established social and fraternal organizations. At El Centro, the Spanish American Catholic Center, Puerto Ricans gathered to sing, pray, and dance to folk songs. Members of the Catholic Sociedad del Santo Nombre marched in Hoboken’s many municipal parades. Puerto Ricans attended Mass in Italian and Irish churches, which would not offer Spanish-language services until 1965, after Vatican II. By 1970, about one quarter of the city’s residents—over ten thousand people—had either been born in Puerto Rico or were first-generation offspring. Several thousand more hailed from Cuba or elsewhere in Central and South America.¹⁶

¹⁵ Peggy Ann Brown, “Research Report 2: Parts 1 and 2: Selected Hoboken, N. J. Companies and National Relations Labor Board (1935–1946),” Jan. 7, 2011, Hoboken Manufactured Products Collection (Hoboken Historical Museum); Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton, 2006), 76–100; Charles Defazio interview by Hoboken Oral History Project, May 27, 1992, published as *Hoboken: Circus Maximus at All Times* (Hoboken, 2002), 16–17.

¹⁶ Christina A. Ziegler-McPherson, “Records of the Project: Role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Development of the Puerto Rican Community in Hoboken 1945–1975,” April 22, 2010, Puerto Ricans and the Catholic Church in Hoboken, NJ, 1945–1976 Collection (Hoboken Historical Museum); Angel Padilla, photo album of

Formal and informal methods of discrimination pushed Puerto Rican newcomers into Hoboken's worst housing, creating the conditions that eventually fueled the city's arson crisis. Some landlords openly rejected renters who "looked Spanish"; others arbitrarily doubled rents for prospective Puerto Rican tenants. Owners who did rent to Puerto Ricans allowed their buildings to decay, deferred maintenance, and ignored repeated repair requests. As former Italian and Irish areas diversified, neighborhood boundaries were enforced with violence. As Angel Padilla remembered, "When the Puerto Ricans started coming in, the Irish and Italians stop fighting and they start picking on the Puerto Ricans." Walking into the wrong neighborhood could be dangerous. "If you went to [Church Square Park] at Fourth Street and Willow . . . if you went there by yourself, you used to get beat up." Hopeful home buyers discovered that affordable mortgages and home-improvement funds were nearly impossible to acquire, since the entire city had been redlined by federal housing officials and thus became off limits for banks and commercial insurers. Denied economic opportunity and shut out of municipal politics by Mayor Louis De Pascale's Democratic machine, hundreds of Puerto Ricans took to the streets in 1970 and 1971 to protest miserable housing conditions, police brutality, and the arrest of a local community leader. Following those demonstrations, Hoboken's Latinos formed tenants' rights groups that would later contest landlords' campaign of arson and displacement.¹⁷

Hoboken's economy was in dire straits. Its unemployment rate passed 12 percent, with unofficial estimates running even higher. Its taxes were some of the steepest in New Jersey. After Newark, Hoboken had the state's highest percentage of people on welfare. Absentee landlords did little to maintain or update their properties, over 95 percent of which were built before 1910. Almost a third of the city's apartment buildings had only cold water—when the water ran at all. In 1960 state officials graded 48 percent of the city's 15,528 housing units as "substandard," because of either plumbing or structural issues. Hoboken's Puerto Ricans suffered most from the deepening crisis. The same structures of racial inequality also prevented them from following the Italian and Irish residents who had fled the city for nearby suburbs. Instead, Hoboken's Latinos leased the only housing they could afford: crowded tenement apartments.¹⁸

From Model Cities to "Renaissance"

In 1967, as Hoboken's woes mounted, Mayor De Pascale's administration applied for and received a grant from the Model Cities program, part of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program. Those funds, some \$2 million per year (in 1970 dollars), paid for

Spanish American Catholic Center activities, 1958–1960, *ibid.* George Guzman and Carmen Guzman interview by Christina Ziegler-McPherson (for El Centro Puerto Rican History Project), Dec. 11, 2009, *ibid.* On Puerto Ricans in the New York area, see Lorin Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City* (Chicago, 2010). Ziegler-McPherson, *Immigrants in Hoboken*, 141.

¹⁷ Angel Padilla and Gloria Padilla interview by Ziegler-McPherson (for El Centro Puerto Rican History Project), Jan. 26, 2010, Puerto Ricans and the Catholic Church in Hoboken Collection; Socorro Rivera and Teófilo "Tom" Olivieri interview by Ziegler-McPherson (for El Centro Puerto Rican History Project), Nov. 23, 2009, *ibid.*; "Hoboken Remains Tense after Clash between Puerto Ricans and the Police," *New York Times*, Aug. 29, 1970, p. 36. Edward C. Burks, "35 Puerto Ricans Freed, Ending Hoboken Strife," *ibid.*, Sept. 7, 1971, p. 43.

¹⁸ Hoboken Planning Board, *Hoboken Master Plan: Land Use Plan Element 1978* ([Hoboken], 1979), 11, Hoboken Historical Collection; Ziegler-McPherson, *Immigrants in Hoboken*, 140–41; Martin A. Bierbaum, "Hoboken: A Comeback City: A Study of Urban Revitalization in the 1970s" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University–New Brunswick, 1980), 75.

several antipoverty initiatives, including an after-school tutoring program, a job-training course, a family-planning clinic, and improvements to the city's parks and swimming pools. Model Cities also catalyzed the rehabilitation of Hoboken's housing stock. With its Home Improvement Program (HIP), Hoboken's new Model Cities agency subsidized commercial mortgages and provided U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) home-improvement loans to enterprising buyers. Federal backing was essential, as almost the entire city—particularly the predominantly Puerto Rican First and Third Wards—had been redlined out of mortgage financing by private banks and insurers. Beginning in 1972, HIP reduced the effective interest rate for purchasers of Hoboken's brownstones to 3 percent—a massive discount when prevailing mortgage interest rates hovered closer to 9 percent. Unlike many other Model Cities programs, which were aimed at the poor and working class, HIP targeted middle-income renovators. Hoboken's city planner called the HUD-backed mortgages “bait for brownstoners.”¹⁹

Hoboken's brownstoners were part of a broad trend of row home revitalization in the 1960s. Rejecting what they saw as the mass-culture schlock of suburbia or the bourgeois homogeneity of established urban areas, brownstoners flooded into northern Brooklyn and Manhattan's Upper West Side. These middle-class homesteaders believed they were pursuing more “authentic” life-styles by moving to historic dwellings in ethnically diverse neighborhoods. As *New York Magazine* described it in 1969, “brownstone fever” was driving intellectuals and white-collar professionals “out of their aseptic uptown apartments” into “old, forlorn but solid and roomy brownstones” that they restored to “pristine glory.” While the “fever” gripped Hoboken slightly later—taking off in earnest in 1970—it burned no less fiercely than it had in Brooklyn Heights a decade earlier.²⁰

Sada Fretz and Curly Fretz, who arrived from a New Jersey suburb in the early 1970s, were typical of this first wave of Hoboken brownstoners. The couple read about Hoboken in a 1972 *New York Times* article and began a search for their own “cheap Victorian brownstone.” Like the Brooklyn homesteaders before them, the Fretzes romanticized the city's ethnic population. Sitting on a stoop, Sada watched older women gather on the corner “just as they had probably done for generations here and maybe centuries in their Italian villages. They were clustered at both ends of the block . . . all in black from kerchiefs to thick hose.” Hoboken “beguiled” her “like a quirky foreign village.” After securing a HIP mortgage subsidy, the Fretzes bought a house on Bloomfield Street. They then turned their attention to renovations. In this they were not alone. Among their peers—the writers, intellectuals, and roughly three hundred artists who came to Hoboken in those years—party conversations inevitably segued from the Vietnam War to “advice on stripping paint from fancy moldings” to “sad tales about burst pipes, collapsing ceilings, contractors who

¹⁹ Louis De Pascale et al., *Hoboken Model Cities Comprehensive Plan* (Hoboken, 1969), Hoboken Government & Politics Collection; Sada Fretz, “Coming to Hoboken,” in *From Another Time: Hoboken in the 1970s* (Hoboken, 2007), unpaginated, (Hoboken Historical Museum), <https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/D9D57AB4-3BF6-4125-A1CA-352762506525>; Robert Armstrong, “Hoboken in the 70s: Model Cities, Affordable Housing and the Future,” lecture delivered at the Hoboken Historical Museum, June 24, 2007, p. 4, <https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/E30C0C70-5F6F-4BEE-A641-078272675555>. Hoboken Municipal Home Improvement Project, *Brochure: Bringing Low Cost Loans to Hoboken Homeowners* (Hoboken, [ca. 1973–1975]), Hoboken Government & Politics Collection. On the prevailing interest rate, see “Global Financial Data: Real Estate, 30 Year Conventional Mortgage Rate (1900–2018)” (available by subscription). On Great Society liberalism in New Jersey's cities, see Mark Krasovic, *The Newark Frontier: Community Action in the Great Society* (Chicago, 2016).

²⁰ Peter Hellman, “The Consequences of Brownstone Fever,” *New York Magazine*, March 31, 1969, pp. 22–32, esp. 22; Ruth Rejnäs, “A Brownstone Mini-revival Brushes Hoboken,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1972, p. R1; Osman, *Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*.

absconded without finishing their jobs.” Fretz spent hours with her fellow brownstoners “talking up the priceless features of their bargain nineteenth-century homes. Ours has marble mantles, etched-glass pocket doors, arched windows nine feet high.”²¹

The city disbursed \$2 million (equivalent to over \$11 million in 2017) in HIP rehabilitation funds during the program’s first five years. By 1980, the city estimated that 1,500 homesteader households had received financing aid from the program. Some transplants were so enamored by Hoboken’s cheap rents and plentiful loft spaces that they made real estate their full-time job. Maureen Singleton and her husband, Donald Singleton, bought a four-story brownstone in 1970 for \$22,300 and poured \$15,000 into renovations. Soon after, Maureen became Hoboken’s first female real estate agent and its unofficial “one-woman booster committee.” She began with her personal contacts—the scores of friends looking to buy and renovate a brownstone in an urban neighborhood close to Manhattan. Singleton helped her clients spot buildings with valuable architectural features: antique tin ceilings, exposed brick walls, hand-carved bannisters. Singleton took potential buyers—including Sada and Curly Fretz—to the city’s HIP office, where an administrator worked with them to secure federal subsidies and a city tax abatement. Soon she had so many clients clamoring for Hoboken’s brownstones that she began a waiting list.²²

In the mid-1970s, Hoboken’s shift from Model Cities to a community development agency—and the resulting transition from brownstoners to yuppies—accelerated the pace of change in the square-mile city. In 1975, with the brownstone boom well underway, Mayor Steven Cappelletto announced that federal Model Cities initiatives (including the Home Improvement Program) would now be directed by a new local public-private body, the Community Development Agency (CDA). Developers would receive a direct infusion of federal dollars to rehabilitate multiunit buildings, and the CDA would launch a public relations campaign to attract upwardly mobile professionals to Hoboken. As a result, owner-occupied brownstone rehabs gave way to developers converting tenement buildings—some of which had been cleared by arson—into luxury condominiums. Of course, in Hoboken as in other cities, Model Cities had also funneled money to developers and real estate speculators. But under the new urban redevelopment regime, the emphasis of public-private collaboration would shift decisively toward for-profit development and away from Model Cities’s commitment to social justice—however superficial or ineffective it had been.²³

The CDA and its branding campaign were part of a larger transformation in the federal government’s urban renewal philosophy during the mid-1970s. After his 1972 reelection, President Richard M. Nixon ended most comprehensive federally funded programs, such as Model Cities, that dated to Johnson’s Great Society. In their place, the Nixon and Ford administrations devolved funding for urban renewal to local governments in the form of community development block grants. These grants ushered in a new era of increased

²¹ Stuart Jones, “Living High in Hoboken,” *New Jersey Monthly*, 1 (Aug. 1977), 38–45; Fretz, “Coming to Hoboken.” “Artists Community Grows,” *Jersey Journal*, Oct. 28, 1980, p. 15.

²² Office of the Mayor, Hoboken, New Jersey, “Affordable Housing in Hoboken,” 49; “Fixup Loans Help Stabilize Hoboken,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 1974, p. E24; Jones, “Living High in Hoboken,” 38–45; Elena Testa, “Hoboken: On the Way Back to the Last Laugh,” *Forum Magazine*, 1979, clipping, pp. 19–22, 31–33 (Hoboken Historical Museum), <https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/B5F40C05-75B2-496C-AF2A-193819543500>; Claire Walter, “All That Attention Spurs Hoboken Rents and Prices,” *New York Times*, Aug. 21, 1977, pp. R1, R7; Nancy Shulins, “You Wanna Talk about Hoboken? There’s Plenty to Say,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 26, 1982, p. B3.

²³ On the transition to private rehabilitation of urban neighborhoods in this era, see Rebecca Marchiel, “Neighborhoods First: The Urban Reinvestment Movement in the Era of Financial Deregulation, 1966–1989” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2014).

public-private coordination on renewal projects. For example, instead of spending federal dollars directly on public housing, Nixon's HUD secretary George Romney subsidized bank loans for the private renovation of "slum buildings" under the Project Rehab program. In 1974 the Housing and Community Development Act gave municipalities more freedom to distribute federal funding. It also capped the amount that cities could devote to public services and antipoverty initiatives. Hoboken directed those grant funds—roughly \$3 million per year—toward projects designed to spark real estate development: infrastructure improvements, subsidies for capital repairs to buildings, and an extensive rebranding campaign.²⁴

In the mid-1970s, Hoboken and other cities began to pursue a strategy of dispersed urban renewal, partnering with local entrepreneurs and largely eschewing the Model City-era emphasis on poverty relief. Indeed, the shift spelled the end of several programs, including subsidized preschool, which targeted the urban working class. The new funding model also did away with Model Cities's requirement that community members participate in the planning process. In Hoboken, the majority of Project Rehab and federal housing grants began to be funneled to Applied Housing Associates, a local affordable-housing developer. Instead of demolishing and replacing older buildings, Applied Housing preferred to rehabilitate them with financing from HUD-backed bank loans. Its directors, Walter Barry and Joseph Barry (father and son), were committed advocates for low-income people: they hired Puerto Rican residents for key positions, invested in landscaping around their buildings, and secured a total of \$2 million in compensation for tenants that they displaced. And without exception, Applied capped monthly rents at 25 percent of tenants' income to ensure affordability. This policy reduced displacement in projects such as the renovated Tootsie Roll Flats, a complex of five-story tenements that housed workers from a nearby candy factory.²⁵

However well intentioned, Applied Housing's upgrades of multifamily buildings contributed to the wave of speculation that crescendoed in Hoboken's condo and arson boom. Applied Housing stringently controlled tenant selection to weed out the very poorest renters. Tenants with the least ability to pay were then forced into unrenovated tenements, frustrating the city's other landlords and increasing demand at the bottom of the rental market. Meanwhile, Applied Housing's successful projects—the Tootsie Roll Flats and the Yellow Flats on Washington Street—proved the financial viability of renovating Hoboken's decrepit tenements. By 1977 and 1978, a rumor that Applied Housing might purchase a building would trigger a frenzy of buying activity on nearby blocks. Contrary to their efforts to empower low-income residents, Applied Housing's directors consistently described their renovations in terms of frontier combat familiar to front-line gentrifiers. "You attach yourself to the periphery of a slum and establish a beachhead into it," founder Walter Barry said in 1977. "You create amenities that people are proud of, keep up the buildings, and the rest takes care of itself." Indeed, private-market forces "took care" of upgrading the rest of Hoboken's housing stock during the late 1970s and 1980s.²⁶

²⁴ "Project Rehab Target: Slums," *Associated Press*, July 21, 1970. Housing and Community Development Act, Pub. L. No. 93-383, 88 Stat. 633-2 (1974). Daniel DeMaio, "Mayo, Lynch Is Bullish on Hoboken," *New Jersey Magazine* (Feb. 1977), p. 5, Hoboken Government & Politics Collection, <https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/5725A6FD-8F22-42D4-AB07-505641643954>.

²⁵ Jones, "Living High in Hoboken," 44; Testa, "Hoboken."

²⁶ Raul Morales interview by Ziegler-McPherson (for El Centro Puerto Rican History Project), Jan. 8, 2010, Puerto Ricans and the Catholic Church in Hoboken Collection; Armstrong, "Hoboken in the 70s"; Walter, "All That Attention Spurs Hoboken Rents and Prices," 7; DeMaio, "Mayo, Lynch Is Bullish on Hoboken."

Hoboken's CDA sought to encourage this sort of market-rate rehabilitation by incentivizing landlords to renovate their buildings to attract middle-class newcomers. Starting in the mid-1970s, Hoboken offered owners 6 percent loans to update multiunit buildings or to convert factories to apartments. Local banks, subsidized by grants from the state's Department of Community Affairs and the federal Urban Reinvestment Task Force, offered up to \$9,000 in low-interest loans for each project. Volt Information Services, a real estate developer, used these funds for the city's first factory-to-condominium conversion, the 267-unit Clock Tower Apartments in the former Keuffel and Esser factory. Only the second multiple-unit renovation of a former industrial space in the New York area, it was completed in 1976. Yet as with Applied Housing, these subsidized loans created a perverse incentive for landlords to renovate apartments, then raise their rents to price out their low-income renters. For tenants at the very bottom of the market, even the 7.5 percent annual increase allowed by rent control often translated into displacement.²⁷

Indeed, rent control was the last stopgap keeping rental housing affordable in Hoboken's private market during the mid-1970s. While New York City residents had enjoyed federal, then state and city rent control since the 1930s, a 1957 New Jersey Supreme Court ruling forbade municipalities from passing their own rent control ordinances. In 1971 President Nixon enacted a nationwide wage, price, and rent freeze to combat the spiraling inflation brought on by spending on the Vietnam War. Just as the last of those federal controls were removed in 1973, the New Jersey courts overturned their earlier moratorium on local rent control. In January 1973 Hoboken passed the Rent Leveling and Stabilization Ordinance, capping yearly increases at the rate of inflation, as determined by the consumer price index. A newly created rent control board reviewed landlords' requests to raise rental rates.²⁸

Meanwhile, do-it-yourself enthusiasts continued to buy derelict row homes—which, by the late 1970s, fetched close to \$60,000. Most of these homesteaders were not particularly wealthy. Many were artists, social workers, and left-leaning academics drawn to Hoboken by its bohemian atmosphere and affordability. Residents such as Ron Hine, who came to Hoboken in 1969 as a community organizer, did most of the work on their renovations themselves. Like his fellow rehabbers, Hine depended on HIP subsidies to purchase and improve his property, an abandoned movie theater from the early twentieth century that he converted into a home.²⁹

The CDA, however, now fixed its sights on a new demographic: New York's growing cadre of young finance, law, and corporate professionals. Yuppies, the CDA and local developers hoped, would be willing to pay higher rents than current Hoboken residents were for studios and one bedrooms in recently renovated apartments. With unemployment at 17 percent in Hudson County at the end of 1975 and a quarter of city residents on welfare, the capital for a continued real estate revival would have to come from elsewhere. The CDA hoped that private equity could replace sweat equity in Hoboken.³⁰

²⁷ City of Hoboken Community Development Agency, *Neighborhood Preservation Program* ([Hoboken, 1975]), Hoboken Government & Politics Collection, <https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/D6EF6D48-FC4B-411A-88C6-011755921127>; "Loophole in Hoboken Rent Rule Gives Landlord Big Boost despite Violations," *Jersey Journal*, May 24, 1980, p. 1.

²⁸ *Wagner v. Newark*, 24 N.J. 467 (1957). Sharon Henry, "Three Decades of Rent Control," *Hudson (NJ) Reporter*, Dec. 10, 2002, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum); John I. Gilderbloom and Lin Ye, "Thirty Years of Rent Control: A Survey of New Jersey Cities," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 29 (May 2007), 207–20.

²⁹ Dylan Gottlieb e-mail correspondence with Ronald Hine, Jan. 7, 2016 (in Dylan Gottlieb's possession).

³⁰ Michael Sterne, "Hoboken Is Riding the Road to Revival," *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1976, pp. NJ1, NJ18.

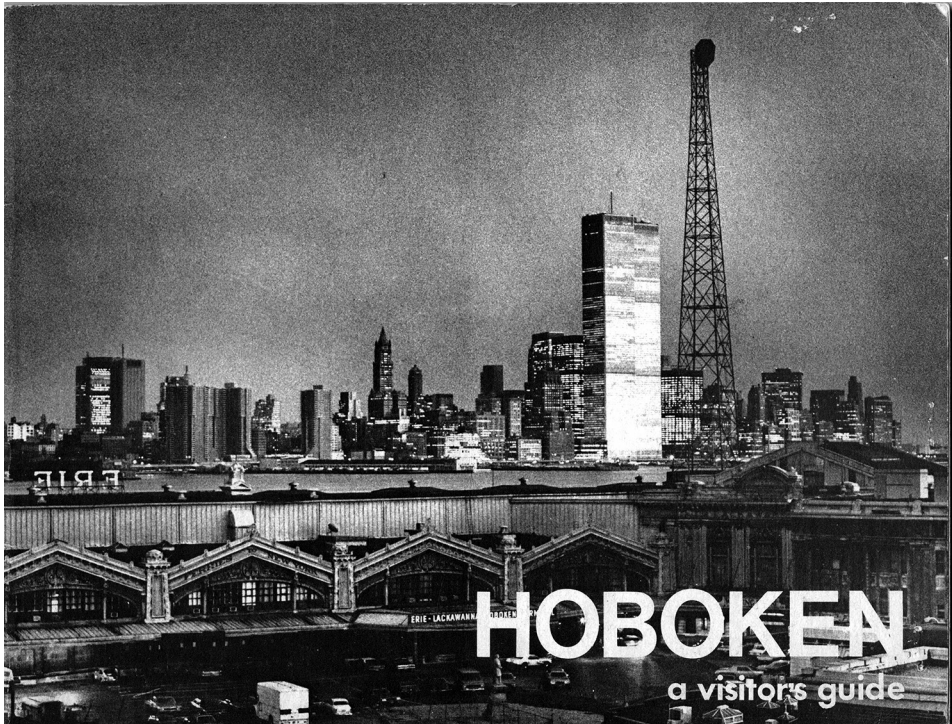
Peter Beronio, a marketer at the CDA, launched a promotional campaign designed to lure young professionals to Hoboken. Sponsoring public events, printing brochures, and giving optimistic interviews in local newspapers, the CDA's marketing team helped move Hoboken away from its brownstone rehab phase into a developer-led boom of condo conversions. In 1975 the CDA kicked off its promotional drive with a weekend arts-and-food fair on a waterfront pier just across the Hudson River from the Manhattan skyline. Beronio was frank in describing the fair's goal: "we . . . want to interest developers in the area." In 1976 the CDA created a thirty-stop annotated walking tour, printing pamphlets to distribute to visitors from its office on Washington Street. The following year, the CDA produced a more elaborate twenty-seven-page visitor's guide, the cover of which barely pictured Hoboken at all. While the city's historic Erie Lackawanna train terminal sits in the foreground, lower Manhattan's imposing skyline, punctuated by the recently completed World Trade Center, dominates the frame. By 1977, the CDA had clearly turned its focus outward—toward yuppies who would value above all else Hoboken's proximity to their Manhattan workplaces.³¹

The CDA's Manhattan-oriented marketing campaign took advantage of the explosion in both New York's financial sector and adjacent fields such as insurance, corporate management, law, communications, and marketing. In 1970 New York City had forty-seven banks with assets of \$10 billion under management; by 1985, it had nearly two hundred banks controlling some \$238 billion. From 1977 to 1987, Manhattan's finance, insurance, and real estate sector added 151,755 jobs. At some Ivy League schools in the mid-1980s, nearly a third of graduating seniors headed to Wall Street. As byzantine securities, merger, and private equity deals became more common, the demand for lawyers increased. All thirty of New York's largest law firms doubled in size from 1978 to 1987. Once again, New York became the top destination for graduates of elite business and law schools. In 1977 Harvard Law School sent 117 of its 545 graduates to New York—up 35 percent from just a few years before, at the nadir of New York's fiscal crisis. "Making it in Milwaukee just isn't the same," a Harvard placement officer attested.³²

The brownstoners of the late 1960s and early 1970s had flocked to Hoboken for its handsome and affordable housing stock, but the new yuppie commuters were more concerned with the short travel times to their jobs in lower Manhattan. Realtors' ads emphasized proximity to the PATH train—"1 blk from PATH"; "nr PATH"; "3 blks PATH"—which whisked commuters from Hoboken to Wall Street in under ten minutes for a 30-cent fare. Even luxury buildings outside Hoboken proper, such as the Galaxy Towers condos in neighboring Guttenberg, advertised their shuttle services to Hoboken's PATH station. Galaxy residents could enjoy spacious apartments, a health spa, and twenty-

³¹ Hoboken Community Development Agency, "Hoboken"; "Fair Recalls Hoboken's Past of Busy Days on River," *New York Times*, July 28, 1975, p. NJ25; Sterne, "Hoboken Is Riding the Road to Revival"; Leslie Maitland, "Metropolitan Baedeker: Hoboken," *New York Times*, April 30, 1976, p. C24.

³² Greenburg, *Branding New York*, 236–38, esp. 236. Steven Brint, "Upper Professionals: A High Command of Commerce, Culture, and Civic Regulation," in *Dual City: Restructuring New York*, ed. John H. Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells (New York, 1991), 155–76; Blake Fleetwood, "The New Elite and an Urban Renaissance," *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 14, 1979, pp. sm16–20, sm26; Samuel M. Ehrenhalt, "Economic and Demographic Change: The Case of New York City," *Monthly Labor Review*, 116 (Feb. 1993), 40–50; New York State Department of Labor, "Historical Employment and Wages"; Wharton Undergraduate Division, "Placement Survey, Class of 1988" (University of Pennsylvania Career Services Office, Philadelphia) (in Dylan Gottlieb's possession). Daniel C. Poor, "Organizational Culture and Professional Selves: The Impact of Large Law Firm Practice upon Young Lawyers (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1994), 65. On the growth of the financial and professional sectors in New York, see Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, 1991), 133.



Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Community Development Agency tried to attract young professionals to Hoboken, New Jersey, with a series of promotional events and brochures. This 1977 pamphlet emphasized the city's proximity to Manhattan's corporate, legal, and financial headquarters. *Courtesy Hoboken Historical Museum.*

four-hour concierge—and still be as close “to midtown as most of Manhattan itself.” Ads such as these brought throngs of yuppie apartment hunters to Washington Street with *New York Times* real estate classifieds in hand. Twenty-five-year-old advertising executive Marion Lyons was one such prospective buyer. She contemplated a move to Hoboken after growing tired of paying \$700 per month for her one-bedroom in Manhattan. “I want to own a condo but I can’t afford those in New York,” she lamented. “So I figure this is the next best thing. Hoboken is so close to New York and the people seem pretty friendly.”³³

Local and national media, in their coverage of Hoboken, amplified the CDA's reorientation toward the Manhattan-commuting yuppie. Earlier reporting on Hoboken's brownstone revival focused on desirable totems of the city's working-class authenticity: its ethnic diversity, dock-working heritage, and Italian food shops. By the early 1980s, however, journalists pivoted to covering Hoboken's new Manhattan-oriented image as articulated by the CDA. Hoboken's Italian and Puerto Rican population became less important than the city's life-style-enhancing amenities: its affordability, charming architecture, proximity to Manhattan, and density of like-minded young professionals. A *New York Times* profile of Hobokenites Manus Pinkwater and Jill Pinkwater (writer-illustrators and owners

³³ “Hoboken Converting Tenements to Condos,” *Jersey Journal*, Oct. 14, 1982, p. 20; “Galaxy: The Condominium,” advertisement, *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 1982, p. B21. For other real estate ads, see “1981 Por la Gente Scrapbook” (Hoboken Historical Society). On the increasing interest in condominiums in this era, see Matthew Gordon Lasner, *High Life: Condo Living in the Suburban Century* (New Haven, 2012).

of a “dog kindergarten”) rhapsodized about their roomy loft and its “exciting view of the New York skyline and the monolithic peaks of the World Trade Center.” In 1982 *Metropolitan Home* magazine urged readers to abandon the well-established neighborhoods of Manhattan and brownstone Brooklyn for a “bargain” apartment in Hudson County, New Jersey. Hoboken was also featured in a *New York Times* “Metropolitan Baedeker” column, which encouraged Manhattanites to explore Hoboken’s historic neighborhoods before these places were engulfed by “condomania.”³⁴

By the beginning of the 1980s, Hoboken’s rebranding had attracted droves of commuters. Professionals now made up anywhere from a quarter to a third of residents in the rapidly changing southeast corner of Hoboken. Along the blocks closest to the waterfront, where many buildings enjoyed views of the Manhattan skyline, the percentage of professional and managerial workers quadrupled during the 1980s; their ranks increased eightfold in the Uptown neighborhood just to the north. The proportion of professionals and managers at the southern end of Washington Street jumped from 5.8 percent in 1970 to nearly 34 percent by 1980. And on the blocks surrounding the PATH station, over 10 percent of residents were employed in finance, insurance, or real estate jobs, up from just 1 percent in 1970.³⁵

The supply of high-end apartment rentals and condos could not keep up with young professionals’ demand. In 1981 Hoboken’s residential vacancy rates fell under 1 percent. (By comparison, New York City’s vacancy rate was then 3 percent.) Two reasons caused this housing shortfall. The first was the widespread conversion of brownstones from multiple units back into single-family residences by middle-class homesteaders. Second, apartments in the city’s walk-up tenement buildings, which still made up one-third of Hoboken’s housing stock, were overwhelmingly occupied by families who enjoyed rent control on their seven-hundred-square-foot railroad flats. For landlords of those five-story tenements, profit beckoned. Yet New Jersey law compelled landlords to give tenants three years’ notice prior to converting to condos, and occupants could apply for up to five additional one-year extensions. Eager to cash in quickly on yuppies’ strong demand for renovated apartments, landlords sought to remove their rent-controlled tenants with an organized program of harassment, neglect, and, most terrifyingly, arson.³⁶

Arson for Profit

The arson wave began in earnest on Saturday, January 20, 1979, when a fatal fire ripped through a tenement building at 131 Clinton Street. Twenty-one people were killed and 130 survivors were permanently displaced from their apartments. Nearby residents were

³⁴ Maj Kalfus, “Noted Hoboken Dog Trainer,” *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 1975, p. 133; “Going Rates,” *Metropolitan Home*, 14 (Feb. 1982), 22; Maitland, “Metropolitan Baedeker”; Andrew L. Yarrow, “Hoboken, 10-Minute Ride to Far Away,” *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1985, p. C1.

³⁵ Employed Civilian Population 16 Years and Over: Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate, 1970 and 1980, *Social Explorer*, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/3e31303122/view> (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau). Employed Civilian Population 16 Years and Over: Managerial and Professional Specialty Occupations, 1970, 1980, and 1990, *ibid.*, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/6b4ef89b20/view> (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau). Data from City of Hoboken Planning Board, “1986 Master Plan Review Statement,” Hoboken Historical Collection (Hoboken Public Library).

³⁶ City of Hoboken Planning Board, *Hoboken Master Plan: Land Use Plan Element 1978* (Hoboken, 1979), Hoboken Historical Collection; City of Hoboken Planning Board, “1986 Master Plan Review Statement”; Charles Buchanan, “Hoboken Housing,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1981, p. C7; Lee A. Daniels, “Thousands Seek 126 Vacancies in Apartments,” *ibid.*, Oct. 16, 1981, pp. A1, B1–B2.

traumatized by the grisly scene. Trinidad Roman, who lived across the street, watched fire fighters search for bodies amid the wreckage. "Everybody's afraid," she said. She planned to leave the neighborhood before her own building burned. "I can't stay . . . I'm worried for my [four] children." Roman had good reason to fear: at 2 a.m. the next night, arsonists attempted to burn down another five-story apartment building, this time two miles south at 358 York Street in neighboring Jersey City. As residents watched two suspects flee, first-floor tenant Doris Gonzalez shouted warnings to her neighbors, all of whom managed to escape with minor injuries. Once on the scene, fire department officials confirmed that the fire was the third arson attempt at 358 York Street over the past several months. The same night, fire fighters were called to a three-alarm blaze at the Hoboken Young Men's Christian Association. In the coming months, at least two more multialarm fires struck Hoboken apartment buildings. In total, twenty-six people died in arson-related fires in Hoboken in 1979. Two more—boys aged eight and two—would die in 1980.³⁷

Before resorting to arson, some city landlords had taken advantage of loopholes in the city's rent-control law to try to replace poorer tenants with better-off newcomers. One statute allowed owners to decontrol rents if they made capital improvements equaling 50 percent of the structure's (artificially depressed) value. Ivan Silverman, who owned a tenement at 819 Washington Street, had charged tenants only \$60 to \$100 for their seven-room apartments. In 1980 Silverman made \$23,753 worth of dubious repairs—replacing working kitchen sinks with smaller ones, ripping out and replacing a functioning heating system—all while failing to fix broken windows and cracked walls. After finishing the unnecessary work, Silverman doubled and tripled rents. For residents subsisting on Aid to Families with Dependent Children, pensions, or unsteady wages, such a rent increase was simply unsustainable. Most of the building's tenants left "voluntarily," and their apartments were re-rented at market rates.³⁸

In 1981 the Hoboken City Council passed two prodevelopment measures that made arson a more lucrative option than removal by renovation. The new rules weakened rent-control laws, and encouraged landlords to find a way—any way—to replace their low-income tenants with well-off renters. The first measure allowed a "hardship increase" that permitted owners to hike up rents if they could demonstrate that they did not make at least an 11.5 percent yearly profit from each unit. Even more pernicious was the vacancy decontrol law, which the council passed over the objections of tenants-rights organizations and a petition of opposition signed by nine thousand residents. It allowed landlords to raise rents to "whatever the market could bear" if rent-controlled occupants vacated their apartments. Owners could now dispense with the charade of capital improvements and shift their efforts to tenant harassment and intimidation.³⁹

That year, arsons became an almost daily scourge. In April four arson-related fires over two days displaced sixteen families. A multialarm blaze on July 30 left seventeen more families homeless. That summer, three arson-related fires filled the five-story apartment

³⁷ "A Neighborhood in Fear," *Jersey Journal*, Jan. 20, 1979, p. 2; "Survivors of the Blaze Learned from Earlier Fires," *ibid.*, Jan. 22, 1979, p. 1; "Fires with Major Loss of Life," *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 1984, p. B4.

³⁸ Diamond, "Loophole in Hoboken Rent Rule Gives Landlord Big Boost Despite Violations," 1. On the arbitrariness of assessment values in urban real estate, see Andrew W. Kahrl, "Capitalizing on the Urban Fiscal Crisis: Predatory Tax Buyers in 1970s Chicago," *Journal of Urban History*, 41 (Sept. 2015), 1–20.

³⁹ Randolph Diamond, "Landlords Ignore Hoboken Law," 1; Morgan, "Decontrol, 11.5% Rent Hike in New Hoboken Ordinance," 2; Wilfredo Fernandez, "Hoboken Vacancy Decontrol-Approved," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, July 16, 1981, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum).



This photo shows the aftermath of the fire at 131 Clinton Street, in Hoboken, New Jersey, which killed twenty-one people in January 1979. *Courtesy Hoboken Historical Museum.*

building at 411 First Street with thick smoke. The owner, an absentee landlord, had repeatedly threatened her tenants that she would remove them, even if she had to resort to arson. And on September 2, a suspicious fire—the fourth that year—gutted the top floors of a building at Third and Madison Streets. Fifty-one residents, almost all Puerto Rican, were unable to return to their apartments. Most were unable to find another apartment in Hoboken's inflated rental market. Hoboken Housing Authority director Joseph Caliguire

was not sanguine about rehousing those displaced by the fire: "It will be almost impossible. The vacancy rate is nil. And in most cases, if there was a vacancy, they wouldn't be able to afford it."⁴⁰

New York's major publications largely ignored the mounting casualties. If *New York Times* readers learned about Hoboken at all, it was likely in a life-style piece about well-off white renovators. In July 1981 Anna Quindlen penned a two-page spread in the *New York Times* that failed to mention either the arsons or the exile of Hoboken's low-income population. Instead, paragraph after rapturous paragraph described the replacement of tacky Formica and drop ceilings with tastefully chosen Tiffany windows. The chief worry for new resident Robert Groux, a vice-president at RCA, was deciding between modern and antique Victorian furnishings. Indeed, Quindlen's characterization of Hoboken as a "brownstone haven" was itself dated: by 1981, the influx of enterprising homesteaders had largely given way to well-capitalized condominium developers.⁴¹

Mayor Capiello's administration also denied the relationship between the fires and Hoboken's condo boom. Throughout the arson crisis, his office blamed the Puerto Rican population for the fires. Capiello maintained that the blazes were likely perpetrated by revenge-seeking Puerto Ricans or the result of crowded living conditions. For Capiello and his Democratic political machine, the cause of Hoboken's fires was bruised egos and Latino machismo—not arson for profit. Joseph Lecowitch, the executive director of the local Red Cross chapter, attributed the fires to Puerto Ricans' living habits. "You're having more and more families crammed together in space that is becoming smaller and smaller," he said. "This can naturally lead to fires." Instead of compassion and protection, Hoboken's city fathers dispensed callous judgment.⁴²

The arsons during the spring and summer of 1981 were a prelude to more deadly fires in October. The first was a suspicious blaze at 67 and 69 Park Avenue that killed two Puerto Rican boys: seven-year-old Modesto Echevarria and his two-year-old brother, Javier Rosa. While their mother and sister survived a jump out their third-story window, the two boys had been trapped in their bathroom by mounting flames. The building's smoke detectors were either missing or broken, and its fire alarms had been disabled. That night, thirteen more people were injured and one hundred—almost all Puerto Rican—were left homeless. A displaced mother of eight worried that she would have to leave the city entirely. "Where is there to go? There are no apartments in Hoboken. As a matter of fact, with eight kids there aren't going to be any apartments anywhere." Other tenants blamed the fire on the absentee landlord Zena Hecht. Since purchasing the building a month before, she had harassed tenants, neglected repairs, and warehoused apartments—refusing to re-let them at rent-controlled rates. Community leader Raymond Grullon, whose mother-in-law lived on the block, said that this and earlier fires at 67 Park Avenue had been set intentionally with newspapers and matches. "The police should have guarded this building after those fires," he said. "But the city officials don't care because this building was all Hispanic. They just want to get the Hispanics out of town and bring in the New Yorkers." An arson investigator from the Hudson

⁴⁰ Roy Kahn, "Sometimes I Think I'll Be Sleeping in the Street," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 16, 1981, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum); Roy Kahn, "Tenants Say Owner Threatened Arson," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 29, 1981, clipping, *ibid.*

⁴¹ Anna Quindlen, "Mile-Square Hoboken, Still a Brownstoners' Haven," *New York Times*, July 2, 1981, pp. C1, C6.

⁴² *Delivered Vacant*; "This Is 'Only the First' of the Season's Fatal Fires," *Jersey Journal*, Oct. 14, 1981, p. 1.

County prosecutor Harold Ruvoldt Jr.'s office agreed with Grullon's assessment, calling the fire "very suspicious."⁴³

An even more lethal fire swept through a tenement at Twelfth and Washington Streets in the predawn hours of October 24. Witnesses saw a suspected arsonist run from the burning building into a waiting car. By the time the flames were extinguished, eleven people—including every member of the Mercado family—were killed. A county prosecutor yet again confirmed residents' suspicions: "It's apparent arson. The fire started in the hallway immediately inside the building and an accelerant was used." The mayor's investigative team noted that gasoline-filled firebombs had been thrown into the building several times earlier that year. After Capt. Patrick Donatacci of the Hoboken City Police interviewed the landlord and the suspected arsonist, he determined that the blaze was "definitely arson for profit."⁴⁴

As before, residents understood the fatal linkage between the fires and Hoboken's condo boom. At a memorial service for victim Ana Mercado, Sister Norberta Hunnewinkel of St. Francis Parish stated it plainly: "You can see the renaissance of Hoboken moving right up the block. They were in the way. Is this the price we have to pay for renaissance?" Juan Garcia, a representative of the Hoboken Union of Tenants, lamented that the fire displaced twenty-five more families—on top of the 2,500 already left homeless since 1978. The fires, he added, have "destroyed the apartments, the security, and the lives of Hispanics." After the eulogies, the five-hundred-person audience sang "Kumbaya," changing the lyrics to "*Cuántas mas, Señor, cuántas mas?*" ("How many more, Lord, how many more?").⁴⁵

Subsequent investigations by local journalists and tenants groups established an incontrovertible connection between arson and profits. In 1980 Olga Ramos, the owner of the building at 12th and Washington, had asked the city's rent-control board for a \$50-per-month rent increase—roughly four times the 7.5 percent annual cap. After Ramos's request was denied, she warned tenants that she would use fire to drive them out. Tenant Jennie Vega told a reporter that Ramos had threatened that "she would get them out, even if she had to burn down the building." (Ramos, who was herself Puerto Rican but lived outside Hoboken, delivered these threats to Vega in Spanish.) Just weeks after the October fire, Ramos sold the gutted tenement to the developer Joseph Fox for conversion into upscale condominiums. In the coming weeks, a tenants' group led by brownstoner Ron Hine produced a more comprehensive study that blamed this and several other fires on landlords seeking condominium conversion. In seven out of eight of the cases they studied, landlords had submitted plans for condo or co-op conversions just days after a major fire.⁴⁶

⁴³ John Kampfe and Randolph Diamond, "Two Kids Missing in Suspicious Tenement Fire," *Jersey Journal*, Oct. 13, 1981, p. 1; Roy Kahn, "Maintenance of Building Changed with Ownership," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 13, 1981, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum); "Suspicious Blaze Ravages Tenement," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 13, 1981, clipping, *ibid.*; Bill Alpert, "Peace for Some Victims, but . . .," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 17, 1981, clipping, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ James Benson, "Hoboken Fire Kills 11, Including 7 in One Family," *Newark (NJ) Star-Ledger*, Oct. 25, 1981, p. 1; Kahn, "Tenants Say Owner Threatened Arson"; Robert Diamond, "Fatal Hoboken Fire Linked to Arson," *New York Times*, April 11, 1982, p. NJ17.

⁴⁵ Sister Norberta Hunnewinkel interview by Ziegler-McPherson (for El Centro Puerto Rican History Project), Feb. 2, 2010, Puerto Ricans and the Catholic Church in Hoboken Collection; Roy Kahn, "Fire Victim Sought to Defend Family," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 26, 1981, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum); Chuck Sutton, "How Many More, Lord?," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 26, 1981, clipping, *ibid.*; "Puerto Rican Group Demands Arson Probe," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 29, 1981, clipping, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Gottlieb e-mail correspondence with Hine, Jan. 7, 2016 (in Gottlieb's possession); "Signs of Arson in Hoboken Fire That Killed 11," *Jersey Journal*, Oct. 26, 1981, p. 1; "400 Rally in Hoboken Arson Protest"; James Kopchains, "Arson Pattern Seen in Hoboken," *ibid.*, Feb. 26, 1982, p. 11.

With arson an almost daily occurrence, residents of Hoboken's tenement buildings lived in a state of terror. Milagros Quinoes, who lived at 267 First Street, spoke to the *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch* in October. "I can't sleep at all. I'm too afraid that my daughter and I will die just like what happened on Park Avenue." Yvonne, the head of the tenants organization at Eleventh and Willow Streets, also had trouble sleeping because of the constant threat of arson. Any sound on the roof above, she thought, might be an arsonist's footfalls. Nine-year-old Rosanna Hernandez and twelve-year-old Lois Toledo, young tenement residents, kept bags packed with clothes by their bedroom windows—a ritual they repeated each night after the October 25 fire. "I could be next," Rosanna said. "I think about the fires. I don't want to die."⁴⁷

Hoboken's low-income tenants organized several groups to combat the arson campaign and the city ordinances that had encouraged it. In 1981 Puerto Rican residents and local Catholic clergy founded *Por la Gente*, which joined the recently formed tenants groups Emergency Coalition to Save Rent Control in Hoboken and Citizens United for New Action (CUNA, an acronym chosen because it means "cradle" in Spanish). Working together, these groups used direct action tactics to protest the arson wave. They papered the city with flyers that blamed gentrification for the fires. Tenants, they promised, would "not sit by while children are killed in arson fires" and Hoboken was "turned into a preserve for the rich." Above an image of a building engulfed in flame, block letters declared, "No more arson deaths! No more displacement! No more war against the poor!" At 1327 Willow Street, residents and *Por la Gente* volunteers began an around-the-clock arson watch. Meanwhile, Hoboken's Tenant Union (an umbrella organization that included *Por la Gente*) challenged the city's vacancy decontrol laws on legal and political grounds, with no immediate success. The union also appealed to the Hudson County and New Jersey district attorneys to investigate the arsons for profit.⁴⁸

Hoboken's tenants-rights groups struggled to direct public attention to the continuing crisis. On November 14 they held an antiarson march that began in front of the burned-out building at 12th and Washington. Over four hundred residents joined in the protests, carrying signs bearing the names of fire victims. Organizers used the demonstration to publicize the sheer scale of displacement in Hoboken: some ten thousand people, according to one CUNA representative. The arson-related death toll, he added, was forty-one since March 1978. Tenants-rights activist Tom Soto encapsulated tenants' grievances. "They are trying to push the poor people out, to make this an exclusive upper-middle-class community," he said at a *Por la Gente* meeting. "The landlords, for their own profit, are being encouraged to push out the poor." Arson, he argued, constituted "an offensive against the poor."⁴⁹

Even as public protests and media attention mounted, the arsons for profit continued. In November 1981 the American Hotel, a five-story single-room-occupancy building, went up in a fatal blaze that investigators determined had been set by arsonists. The hotel's owner had been under contract to sell the building to a developer for \$500,000 under

⁴⁷ *Delivered Vacant*; Kahn, "'Sometimes I Think I'll Be Sleeping in the Street'"; Chuck Sutton, "For Hoboken's Poor, a Fiery Terror," *Newsday*, June 28, 1982, p. 13; Chuck Sutton, "Arson Scars Are Slow to Heal," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Aug. 2, 1982, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum).

⁴⁸ Emergency Coalition to Save Rent Control in Hoboken, "Handbill: Come to a Mass Tenant's Rally," Aug. 15, 1981, Hoboken Societies and Organizations Collection (Hoboken Historical Society); "Churches, Civic Group Joining in Hoboken to Form Tenants Union," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Jan. 26, 1981, clipping, (Hoboken Historical Museum); "Frightened Tenants Begin Arson Watch," *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 20, 1981, clipping, *ibid*.

⁴⁹ Diamond, "400 Rally in Hoboken Arson Protest," 7.

the condition that it be “delivered vacant.” In April 1982 an intentionally set fire gutted 107, 109, and 111 Clinton Street, displacing twenty-three more people. Two days after that fire, real estate agents hung “for sale” signs above the stoop at 109 Clinton. By 1984, the three buildings had been converted into forty-two new condo units. Just two weeks after the Clinton Street fire, a three-alarm blaze forced eight families out of an apartment building at 320 Monroe Street. And on April 30, arsonists set yet another inferno: a pre-dawn fire at the Pinter Hotel and rooming house at 151 Fourteenth Street. Witnesses watched as desperate mothers dropped their infants from windows to passersby before jumping out themselves. Thirteen residents, all Puerto Rican, perished. A subsequent investigation found that the building had been fined a week earlier for lacking any working smoke detectors. By that time, the cleared lot had been sold for redevelopment. Arson yet again proved the most effective—if deadly—way to clear out tenants to make way for luxury apartments.⁵⁰

Hoboken’s middle-class newcomers took divergent positions on the fires. On the one hand, the brownstoners—a politically liberal contingent schooled in the protest style of the New Left—allied with tenants’ groups fighting the arson scourge. Dozens wrote outraged letters to area newspapers and joined Puerto Rican tenants on picket lines. Ron Hine, a brownstoner who moved to Hoboken in 1969, headed an independent investigation into the fires; it established a clear pattern linking area landlords to multiple arsons-for-profit. On the other hand, the city’s brace of young Manhattan-oriented professionals did not express much concern over the fires. Self-identified yuppies dining at a café down the block from the still-smoldering Pinter Hotel expressed a sense of glib inevitability. One young woman gestured out the window from her table. “In five years, those tenements wouldn’t be there. What will be there is renovated fancy apartment buildings and fancy stores like on Columbus Avenue in New York. I predict there are going to be more fires. How else are landlords going to get the tenants out?” Vincent Slavin, a twenty-three-year-old Wall Street trader who had just moved into a renovated \$775-per-month apartment, was also unconcerned. “We’re not doing anything wrong. [Developers are] offering something better for people who can afford it. What’s wrong with that?” Of course, yuppies’ demand for luxury apartments *was* driving arson-related displacement. The city council’s vacancy decontrol measures also deserved blame. As long as those laws remained, the incentives for arson proved too tempting to resist.⁵¹

In 1983 several changes finally slowed the arson wave. First, the federal government allowed the city and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to purchase rights to redevelop Hoboken’s waterfront—acres of vacant piers and warehouses—as a massive mixed-use project. While the planned condo towers took years to materialize, the mere prospect of tens of thousands of square feet of new condominium space softened developers’ interest in vacated tenement buildings. Meanwhile, developers began renovating former commercial storefronts into condos, completing over one hundred conversions over five years. At the same time, neighboring Jersey City passed a measure that exempted

⁵⁰ “3-Alarm Fire Destroys Central Hoboken Hotel,” *New York Times*, Nov. 22, 1981, p. 45; Barbara Demick, “Hoboken Arson Suspected,” *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, April 19, 1982, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum); “11 Feared Dead in Hotel Blaze,” *Jersey Journal*, April 30, 1982, p. 1; Chuck Sutton, “Hell on 14th St.,” *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, May 1, 1982, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum); Mark Leyner, “The American Hotel’s Runyon-esque Past and Renaissance Future,” *Hoboken (NJ) Reporter*, Dec. 14, 1983, clipping, *ibid.*; City of Hoboken Planning Board, “1986 Master Plan Review Statement.”

⁵¹ “Fires Changing Hoboken,” 4; “Hoboken Rebirth Puts Poor in Vise,” *Bergen County Record*, July 28, 1983, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum).

Hoboken Multi-Alarm Fires, 1976-1983



This map shows the locations of major fires in Hoboken, New Jersey, from 1976 through 1983. Most of these fires occurred in the southern half of the city, within walking distance of the PATH (Port Authority Trans-Hudson) train station. This area was also home to the greatest number of five-story tenements and Latino residents in 1970. *Map by Dylan Gottlieb.*

newly constructed apartment buildings with over twenty-five units from all rent control. Ironically, Jersey City's prodeveloper law helped ease the arson crisis in Hoboken: higher profits on new construction meant fewer inducements for tenement arson and condo conversion. While some developers continued to buy occupied buildings in Hoboken, many shifted their sights to the open expanses of former industrial land in Jersey City.⁵²

⁵² "Hoboken Waterfront: Who's in Charge Here?," *Jersey Journal*, Feb. 2, 1983, p. 1; City of Hoboken Planning Board, "1986 Master Plan Review Statement"; "Jersey City OKs Exemptions from Rent Control," *Hudson (NJ)*

Just as the economic incentives for arson began to disappear, mounting media outrage over the fires drove the real estate industry to re-evaluate its strategy in Hoboken. In 1982 the *New York Times* and *Newsday* finally ran stories on the arson wave, exposing the “fiery terror” facing Hoboken’s poorest citizens. In July 1982, New York’s WPIX-TV broadcast a documentary, *Hell, Heaven, and Hoboken*, about the arson-for-profit epidemic. Under a barrage of bad publicity, developers began offering tenants cash buyouts to vacate their apartments. At a tenement at 1122 Hudson Street, the eight remaining tenants were offered \$4,000 in “relocation money” if they did not fight the Hudson Development Group’s application to take the building off rent control after renovation. On Eleventh and Willow Streets, a group of mostly female Puerto Rican tenants gave up their apartments to another developer for \$7,500—enough to pay rent for less than a year on an equivalent market-rate apartment in the city. Tom Olivieri of Por la Gente was there when the women signed away the rights to their apartments. “These people, whose lives centered around this neighborhood, who raised their kids in this town, whose children were born in this town, have left this community, never to return again.” Some of the women joked about returning to Puerto Rico. Others cried as they considered leaving Hoboken for good. “It was really a sad scene,” remembered Olivieri. “I felt like crying myself. And it’s one of the last memories I have of this block.”⁵³

Local investigations of Hoboken’s arson-for-profit wave never resulted in any convictions. Arson is an incredibly difficult crime to prosecute: even when a suspect could be located and arrested, conviction rates nationally were under 1 percent, according to a 1980 U.S. Department of Justice report. Proving that a landlord was guilty of conspiracy to commit arson required evidence that they had paid an accomplice to start the fire; evidence of economic gain alone was insufficient. Local prejudices also hampered prosecution. While Hudson County’s prosecutor at the time, Harold Ruvoldt Jr., believed many of the fires were “suspicious,” his investigations concluded that almost all were “non-economic.” “It was not uncommon in a largely Hispanic community for the threat of burning someone’s house down to be made,” he said later. “[The fires] had some ethnic basis.” Ruvoldt did prosecute several arsonists, some of them Latino, for setting fires without a clear economic incentive. Still, intraethnic conflict fails to explain most of the fires in Hoboken. Neighboring Union City, which had a similar number of Latino residents in 1980—but no influx of young professionals—never experienced anything approaching Hoboken’s spate of arsons.⁵⁴

There was more success fighting arson at the federal level. After a 1978 Government Accounting Office report revealed that arson for profit cost \$1.5 billion and a thousand lives every year, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, a federal agency that channeled funding to state and local law enforcement, agreed to funnel funds to localities to help combat the problem. The Senate held hearings on arson for profit in 1980, followed by the House of Representatives in 1981 and 1982. Hoboken’s arson wave featured prominently in those investigations. Ramon Irizarry, representing tenants in Hobo-

Dispatch, Oct. 23, 1983, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum); “Relocation Funds OKd,” *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 13, 1983, clipping, *ibid*.

⁵³ Interviews with Tom Olivieri and other tenants in *Delivered Vacant*. Diamond, “Fatal Hoboken Fire Linked to Arson,” NJ17; Sutton, “For Hoboken’s Poor, a Fiery Terror,” 13; “TV Show to Probe Arson in Hoboken,” *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, July 28, 1982, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum).

⁵⁴ Harold Ruvoldt Jr. interview by Gottlieb, May 10, 2017 (in Gottlieb’s possession); U.S. General Accounting Office, *Arson-for-Profit*, 7. On the dismissal of arson for profit, see Barry Goetz, “Organization as Class Bias in Local Law Enforcement: Arson-for-Profit as a ‘Nonissue,’” *Law and Society Review*, 31 (no. 3, 1997), 557–88.

ken and Jersey City, told a House subcommittee in 1982 that “there is an effort to bring middle-class people from New York and provide them with condominiums and housing . . . yet New Jersey [has] . . . the most progressive tenant laws that prevent large-scale displacement. [So] the only alternative, the most logical alternative is arson for profit.” Irizarry continued: “The children in Hoboken are no longer drawing flowers and nice buildings and houses. The children of Hoboken are drawing buildings burning with kids jumping out the windows and dying. We do not feel at this point that our local authorities, federal authorities, are capable or even willing to deal with the problem. It is going to take a direct congressional investigation.” In 1982 Congress passed and President Reagan signed into law the Anti-Arson Act. It directed the Federal Bureau of Investigation to reclassify arson as a Part I offense (along with crimes such as murder and rape), which meant the bureau would collect more data and devote more resources to fighting it. These measures, however, came too late for Hoboken.⁵⁵

Even as the fires slowed, an antideveloper political movement began to coalesce. In June 1983 tenants-rights activists joined brownstoners to elect to the city council Thomas Vezzetti, an outspoken and eccentric public advocate. Vezzetti promised to strengthen the rent-control laws that the council had enfeebled in 1981. “Developers and politicians are trying to drive the people of Hoboken away so they can get higher rents from out-of-towners,” he declared in his victory speech. “That’s going to be stopped.” After the election, the council tried to reassert rent control and remove the incentives for arson. In October Vezzetti cosponsored an amendment to city rent-control ordinances that would cap the increases landlords could demand after making capital improvements. While the measure failed to pass in the council, the issue electrified voters—nearly one thousand boisterous supporters packed council hearings throughout October. To try to quell the protests, Mayor Capiello allowed Sister Norberta, a tenants-rights stalwart, to join the city’s Rent Lowering and Stabilization Board.⁵⁶

More political change came in 1985 when Vezzetti defeated three-time incumbent Steven Capiello in a mayor’s race in which rent control and displacement were the central issues. Hoboken’s remaining Puerto Rican tenants had not forgotten Capiello’s insistence that the fires had been set by revenge-seeking Latinos. Along with good-government liberals and antidevelopment Italians, Hoboken’s Latinos led the campaign to unseat him. One Vezzetti supporter, interviewed in a documentary about Hoboken, remembered election night: “That night was just an incredible feeling. People from the brownstones uptown to the projects downtown, old people, young people, old-timer, new-comer: it was such a release for people. It was all symbolized that night in the march down to City Hall, marching down the width of Washington Street. It was just an incredible evening.” In July Mayor Vezzetti capitalized on that sense of unity by issuing a sixty-day moratori-

⁵⁵ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Arson-for-Profit*, 6. Committee on the Judiciary, *Arson for Profit*. On the funneling of funds by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), see Stephen E. Nordlinger, “Arson ‘Epidemic’ Stirrs U.S. to Take Lead in Crackdown,” *Baltimore Sun*, Jan. 2, 1979, p. A1. On the LEAA generally, see Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016). Committee on Government Operations, *Condominium and Cooperative Conversion*; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime, “Hearing on Federal Role in Criminal Justice Matters,” 97 Cong., 2 sess., May 17, 1982, pp. 66–68; Joseph Laura, “Hoboken: Fear of Fire Haunts Many,” *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1981, p. NJ1. Anti-Arson Act of 1982, Pub. L. No. 97-298, 96 Stat. 1319 (1982).

⁵⁶ “Pasculli, Vezzetti Win Hoboken Runoffs,” *Jersey Journal*, June 15, 1983, p. 28; “Council Moves on Decontrol,” *Hudson (NJ) Dispatch*, Oct. 6, 1983, clipping (Hoboken Historical Museum); “Landlords Win Hoboken Rent Control Fight,” *Jersey Journal*, Nov. 3, 1983, p. 31.



The mayoral candidate Tom Vezzetti and supporters celebrate his election in June 1985. Vezzetti campaigned for Hoboken, New Jersey, mayor on an antidevelopment platform, promising to curb the speculation that had led to the arson wave. *Courtesy Hoboken Historical Museum.*

um on new building permits. That September, he proposed a broader affordable housing law: all developers would be required to set aside at least 20 percent of new or renovated units for low-income renters.⁵⁷

Still, the efforts of Vezzetti's coalition to stanch the exodus of poor renters proved futile during the booming real estate market. The day after the sixty-day permit freeze ended, a developer sought approval for a new 259-unit condominium project on Newark Street. Two more apartment towers began construction in 1985. By early 1986, the cost for an average condo unit in Hoboken had risen to \$127,000—more than double the median asking price in 1982. In the southernmost neighborhood near the PATH station, more than 45 percent of apartments rented for over \$750 per month in 1990. In 1980 only 1 percent of those units cost \$500 or above. The mayor and allied tenants-rights groups worked to increase the capacity of Hoboken's overcrowded homeless shelters. But with President Reagan making deep cuts to federal housing subsidies, funds were elusive. Legal efforts to stem displacement also fared poorly. As one member of Vezzetti's administration remembered, "There was not much we could do. We had no legal handles in a situation where somebody had already gotten permits and people were in the process of being displaced." Vezzetti's reforming crusade came to an abrupt end when he died in office in 1988.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Quotation from *Delivered Vacant*. Joseph F. Sullivan, "2 Elections Toll Bell for Hudson Machine," *New York Times*, June 16, 1985, p. NJ1; Anthony DePalma, "Hudson Towns Are Feeling Growing Pains," *ibid.*, July 21, 1985, p. E6; "Hoboken Offers a Plan to Curb Development," *ibid.*, Sept. 29, 1985, p. 47.

⁵⁸ Gross Rent for Specified Renter-Occupied Housing Units: Cumulative (more), 1980 and 1990, *Social Explorer*, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/6bc2b78ed9/view> (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau). Singleton, "Hoboken Revisited," 20–21; Anthony DePalma, "How Hoboken Tries to Control Growth," *New York Times*, Feb. 9, 1986, p. R10. *Delivered Vacant*.

By the end of the 1980s, Hoboken's demographics had been radically transformed. As tenements were emptied and rents spiraled higher, Latinos streamed out of Hoboken. Some moved into dilapidated housing in nearby Union City. Others moved back to the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. As low-income families were displaced, the Hoboken School District saw enrollment fall 30 percent from 1979 to 1985. In the end, tenant activists had accurately estimated the massive scale of displacement: in 1980, 17,151 Latinos lived in Hoboken, but by 1990, only 10,036 were left. The sharpest drops came in neighborhoods on the southwest section of the city, where almost all of the arsons had occurred from 1978 to 1983. Fire had proven to be a remarkably effective way to terrorize thousands of people into leaving their community.⁵⁹

At the same time, Hoboken's population of yuppies—well-compensated workers who commuted to finance, corporate, and professional jobs in Manhattan—was growing. According to census data, apartments rented to households with income above \$20,000 increased from 2,786 in 1980 to 7,601 in 1990. On the desirable blocks closest to the Hudson River, the proportion of college-educated residents doubled over the decade. And, most tellingly, the number of finance, insurance, and real estate workers skyrocketed citywide: from fewer than 500 in 1970, to 1,111 in 1980, to 3,430 by 1990. By the latter year, 40 percent of Hobokenites were employed in managerial or executive positions. The remaking of Hoboken—envisioned by the CDA and pursued by landlords through a campaign of terror—was nearly complete.⁶⁰

A New Era for American Cities

The summer before the presidential election of 1984, Ronald Reagan was worried about the Catholic vote. The Democratic candidate, Walter Mondale, had just selected Geraldine Ferraro, a New Yorker who attended weekly Mass, as his running mate. Reagan's campaign staff decided that a photo opportunity in a typically Roman Catholic northeastern city would demonstrate his commitment to urban voters. They chose Hoboken. In late July Reagan shared a dinner of spaghetti at St. Ann's Church with local Catholic clergy, then gave a speech underlining his antiabortion and anticommunist bona fides. And then he told St. Ann's parishioners the real reason for visiting their city. "I'll tell you about your secret weapon. I heard about your zeppoles," referring to the iconic Italian-American dessert. "And so here I am in Hoboken."⁶¹

Reagan's choice of Hoboken had more to do with the city's historical reputation as a white ethnic bastion (and hometown of his friend Frank Sinatra) than it did with its new

⁵⁹ Office of the Mayor, Hoboken, New Jersey, "Affordable Housing in Hoboken," 2. Persons of Spanish Origin, 1980 and Total Population: Hispanic, 1990, *Social Explorer*, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/ca3a55acc9/view> (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau).

⁶⁰ "Opponents Successfully Challenge Hoboken Rent-Control Limits," *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 1994, p. B11. Persons 25 Years and Over: Bachelor's Degree or More, 1980 and 1990, *Social Explorer*, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/e7441ecb4/view> (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau). Employed Civilian Population 16 Years and Over: Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate, 1970, 1980, and 1990, *ibid.*, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/b65ad68d4d/view> (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau). Employed Persons 16 Years and Over: Managerial and Professional Specialty Occupations, 1990, *ibid.*, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/cc076f88a/view> (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau).

⁶¹ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the St. Ann's Festival in Hoboken, New Jersey," July 26, 1984, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40204>; Francis X. Clines, "Reagan Courts Ethnic Voters by Assailing Foes," *New York Times*, July 27, 1984, p. A10; Francis X. Clines, "A Reporter's Notebook: In Hoboken, Reagan Was Good at What He Does," *ibid.*, July 28, 1984, p. 7.

status as a yuppie bedroom community. Indeed, Reagan failed to acknowledge any of the dramatic changes that were reshaping the city. The arrival of thousands of finance and professional workers received no mention. Neither did the arsons, condo conversions, or forced displacement of thousands of low-income Catholics from the city.

Whether Reagan knew it or not, some of the same political and social currents that had brought him to office had reshaped Hoboken. As private urban development supplanted antipoverty programs and as manufacturing was abandoned for financial-sector growth, Hoboken and cities like it were remade into havens for an expanding professional class. Whether existing residents were dislodged by arson, as they were in Hoboken and Boston, or by co-op conversion, as they were on Manhattan's Upper West Side, the arrival of yuppies signaled the beginning of a new phase of expropriation and profit seeking. After 1980, cities faced dual crises. On the whole, they continued to lose population and jobs. Yet at the same time, a small number of neighborhoods began to suffer from the convulsions of speculation and displacement. Those twin problems worsened in the following decades, as yuppies moved in increasing numbers to cities such as San Francisco, Boston, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C. In those places, as in Hoboken, gentrification would not solve the long-standing issues of racial discrimination, inequality, and segregation. More often, it would only intensify them—with dire consequences for those cities' black and Latino residents.