

# The History of Weequahic High School



**Weequahic High School** is now **90** years old. The building is located at 279 Chancellor Avenue in Newark. The construction of the high school, designed in the art deco style of architecture by the firm, **Guilbert and Betelle**, was completed in 1932. The high school opened for classes on September 11, 1933 with 2,056 students.

The name "**Weequahic**" refers to the "*head of the creek,*" the high ground that served as a boundary between the lands of the Hackensack and Raritan and later as the partition between the cities of Newark and Elizabeth, known today as Weequahic Park. The high school and nearby park was named "**Weequahic**" to honor Newark's Native American roots.

The elementary and junior high schools that fed students to Weequahic were **Bragaw Avenue School, Chancellor Avenue School, Hawthorne Avenue School, Maple Avenue School, Peshine Avenue School,** and **Clinton Place Junior High School**. In the early years, some students also came from **Avon Avenue School, Bergen Street School,** and **Madison Avenue School**. The neighborhood branch library was located on Osborne Terrace. Many Weequahic students were born at nearby **Beth Israel Hospital**, located on Lyons Avenue.

**Max Herzberg** was Weequahic's first Principal and remained as the leader of the high school for 18 years until his retirement in 1951. He was a noted educator and writer. As an author and editor he wrote or edited fifty-seven books and pamphlets. In 1920 he became literary editor of the Newark Evening News, and from its inception in 1947 until his death, he edited the Sunday Book Page.

In 1934, Professor **Albert Einstein** sent a letter to the high school, entitled "*Thoughts on Education and on American Schools in Particular,*" that was published in the school newspaper. The letter was printed by 1300 newspapers all over the world.

Weequahic is home to one of the most important installations of public art in New Jersey: the **"Enlightenment of Man,"** a New Deal-era mural painted by **Michael Lenson**, who was the director of NJ mural activities for the *Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)*. The murals were installed in the lobby of the high school in 1939. Lenson also painted the murals at Newark City Hall and at a few other venues in Newark. The story told by the murals represents eight time periods in the history of humankind. They are as follows: *Prehistory, Early Civilizations, The Dark Ages, The Renaissance, The Enlightenment, The Industrial Revolution, Modern Times* and *The Future*. The Weequahic High School Alumni Association and Lenson's son, Barry, has established a fundraising campaign to restore the murals.

From its inception in 1933 through the middle of the 1960's, Weequahic was considered to be the finest academic high school in New Jersey. In the book ***The Enduring Community***, Weequahic is described in the following way: *"Its primary claim to fame, and justifiably so, was its student body and its faculty. It achieved a reputation as one of the best high schools in the country...The faculty at Weequahic High was outstanding by all accounts. The staff had terrific raw material to work with... Weequahic students were among the best in the land."*

In August, 1950, Weequahic was rated as **"one of the most outstanding high schools in the country"** by the *Commission of Secondary Schools of the Middle Atlantic States Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges*. On June 17, 1960, this same organization praised Weequahic's college program. On December 17, 1963, Weequahic was ranked 1st in NJ and 56th in the nation in the number of graduates who had earned a Ph.D during the preceding five years. In 1964, Weequahic had more national merit scholars than any high school in the tri-state area.

For many years, Weequahic offered more foreign languages - *French, Spanish, Latin, German, Russian, and Hebrew* - than any other high school in the city. In the early 60's, it also had a Swahili language club.

In addition, Weequahic was known for its athletic prowess. Throughout the years it experienced great success in basketball, track, and swimming. The high school is well known for its outstanding basketball teams under the leadership of coaches **Art Lustig, Les Fein, Dave Klurman** and **Frank Gavin**.

After years of *"almost,"* the high school won its first State Group IV Championship in 1962 and repeated as State Champions in 1966 and 1967. The 1967 team went undefeated, was the number one team in the country, and was nicknamed the *"Dream Team."* Over a two-year period in 1966-67, Weequahic won 40 games in a row. **Coach Les Fein** was selected as U.S. High School Coach of the Year. It also won the State Championship in 1972 and 2001.

This past year, the girls basketball team, under the leadership of **Coach Amiri Baraka, Jr.**, had a 23-4 record and were the Super Essex Conference Liberty Division champions with an unbeaten record and also won their Group 2 sectional title.

In 1949, **Untermann Field** was dedicated in honor of **William M. Untermann**, a Newark attorney. What was once an empty lot near Chancellor Avenue School became Weequahic's

home field for football, soccer, track and field, and baseball. A number of years ago, the Weequahic High School Alumni Association replaced the plaque (that had disappeared) on the famous **“Rock”** outside of the entrance to Untermann Field.

In 1952, Weequahic won the city championship in football and repeated in 1967 and 1968. In 2006, under the leadership of **Coach Altarik White**, the Indians won the Central Jersey Group II state football championship for the first time. Coach White was selected the NJ High School Coach of the Year. Since then, under **Coach Brian Logan**, a 1982 graduate, the Indians have made it to the Group 2 sectional finals in the past three consecutive years.

Throughout the generations, Weequahic has always had a fine music department, orchestra, and an outstanding marching band under the leadership of **Dr. Henry Melnik, Frank Scocozza, Vernon Ross, and Michael Page**. On an ongoing basis, the band won honors both in local and national competitions. In 1944, Melnik was honored by receiving the Music War Council of America's distinguished service citation in recognition of the band's outstanding contributions to the home front war effort.

Many Weequahic students contributed to the war effort in the 1940's by joining the armed services. At home, students, faculty and families raised nearly one million dollars selling war bonds through rallies, drives and shows. A plaque outside the auditorium memorializes 57 Weequahic students who lost their lives in World War II.

In 1951, **Eleanor Roosevelt**, addressed more than 1,500 students at an assembly at Weequahic. She was introduced as the *"First Lady of the World."* A year before, Pulitzer Prize winning author, **Philip Roth**, graduated from the high school.

In the earlier years, the student body was over 2,000. There were 9th grade annexes located first at **Hawthorne Avenue School** and later at **Chancellor Avenue School**. Until 1964, when one-year school terms were instituted, students graduated in January and June. The current population at the high school is around 600.

In 1958, an addition to the high school was constructed which provided more space for classrooms, offices, and storage on all three floors. A new cafeteria with north and south wings was built in the early mid-70's on land between the high school and Chancellor Avenue School. The old cafeteria was renovated and turned into a media center and library. In the 90's some of the classrooms became computer centers. Two years ago, a new exercise facility was built for the athletic teams and a new music room was provided for the marching band.

In 2007, **Untermann Field** received a *“state of the art”* facelift which include artificial turf, a rubberized running track, upgraded bleachers, a renovated field house and bathrooms, and a new scoreboard.

The **Ronald G. Stone Community Gymnasium** opened in 2010, housing a new physical education facility, a 2,000-seat basketball arena, a community meeting room, locker rooms and offices, an exercise room, and a large parking area. The basketball arena was named after Weequahic's legendary basketball coach, **Les Fein**. The Alumni Association installed signage

for the inside of the building and banners for the arena. The new gymnasium which is connected to the high school was built on the site of the Chancellor Avenue School playground. Its entrance is on Goldsmith Avenue and it is adjacent to Untermann Field.

The ethnic/racial makeup of Weequahic students parallels the changing demographics of the city of Newark. For the first 40 years, Weequahic was predominantly white and Jewish. That population eventually moved to the suburbs by the late 1960's. For the past 45 years the high school has been primarily African-American.

The **Weequahic Adult School**, which offered a wide variety of evening classes covering many different areas of interest, served the local community from the 1950's through the 1970's. For many years, the directors of the school was **Dorothy Rowe Scott**, a 1938 graduate, and **Louis Dultz**, a 1949 graduate and science teacher at the high school.

The high school newspaper is the *Calumet*, the literary magazine is *Ergo*, and the yearbook is the *Legend*. The school's colors are **Orange** and **Brown**. Its nickname is **Indians**. The student governing body is the **Orange and Brown Association (OBA)**. At one time, Weequahic had student hall monitors known as *Sagamores* and a student court system.

Besides Max Herzberg, other principals at Weequahic were: **Michael Conovitz, Julius Bernstein, David Weingast, Benjamin Epstein, William Monprode, Morris Brinn, Charles Brodsky, James Barrett, Patrick Restaino, Dr. James Wright, Claude Scott Bey, Lawrence Majors, Richard Williams, Charles Meadows, Edna Bailey (the first woman Principal), Ronald Stone, Elizabeth haden, John Toner, and Faheem Ellis**, who is the current leader of the high school.

Weingast and Epstein also became Newark's Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education. Bernstein became the Superintendent of Schools in Livingston. Current Principal, **Faheem Ellis**, is a 1996 graduate of the high school and is only the second graduate to become Principal of Weequahic. The first was **Claude Scott Bey**, a 1965 grad, who returned as Principal in the early 1980's. **Jill Graifer Watkins**, a 1961 graduate, was Vice Principal in the early 90's. **Loraine White**, a 1964 graduate, was on the faculty at Weequahic for more than 40 years as a physical education/health teacher, coach, substance abuse counselor, and administrator. She was the only female football coach in the city of Newark.

Some Weequahic graduates who were faculty at the high school were as follows:

**Sidney Sperber (1935), Carolyn Parm (1938), Louis Dultz (1948), Gary Barr (1955), Morey Bobrow (1959), Maria Piacente Galeota (1959), Barbara Brookman (1961), Patricia Joyner (1962), Phil Yourish (1964), Harvey Ritter (1964), Morris Horwitz (1964), Ben Ribnick (1964), Barry Muster (1965), Gwen McClendon (1965), Dave Lieberfarb (1965), James Lowenstein (1965), Linda Norton (1967), William Southerland (1969), Rosalind Robinson (1977), Cheryl Howard (1978), Anthony Timmons (1980), Darryl Taylor (1987), Yolanda Bogan-Cassidy (1987), and Waunita Scott (1991).**

Weequahic alumni are well represented in the Newark Public Schools as instructors, department chairs and administrators. **David Wright (1966)** was the Principal of South 17th Street School, **Carl Gregory (1966)** was the Principal of Morton Street School, and **Joseph Brown (1969)** was the Principal of Louise Spencer School, where **Sharon Pogash (1965)** was the Vice Principal. **William Saks (1964)** was the Vice Principal at Burnett Street School. **Fred Chatman (1995)** is currently an administrator with the Newark Public Schools. At the central office, **Dr. Glenda Seals Johnson-Green (1967)** is an assistant to the Superintendent of Schools.

In 2008, the Weequahic High School Alumni Association celebrated the high school's **75<sup>th</sup> Birthday** with a **Diamond Jubilee Celebration** which included the first **Alumni Hall of Fame Ceremony** at Temple B'nai Abraham in Livingston.

12 alumni and/or faculty were inducted into the first class of the Alumni Hall of Fame. They were: **Alvin Attles, 1955** - NBA player, championship coach, and executive; **Sid Dorfman, 1937** - award-winning sports journalist for the Star-Ledger; **Les Fein** - legendary basketball coach from 1955 to 1967; **Dr. Max Herzberg** - first Principal of Weequahic from 1933 to 1951; **Sandra King, 1965** - award-winning host and reported on New Jersey Network; **Benilde Little, 1976** - best-selling author and journalist; **Robert Lowenstein** - longtime Newark educator and Chair of the WHS Foreign Language Department; **Hilda Lutzke** - popular English teacher at WHS from 1937 to 1975; **Seymour "Swede" Masin, 1937** - one of Weequahic's greatest athletes; **Dr. Vincent Parsonnet, 1941** - pioneer in cardiology at Newark Beth Israel Hospital; **Philip Roth, 1950** - Pulitzer Prize winning author; and **Ronald G. Stone** - beloved WHS Principal from 2002 to 2007.