Virtual Snapshot Series

Origins of the Capital City
THE LENAPE PEOPLE

The Lenape (pronounced lun-NAH-pay), also referred to as the Delaware, were the first inhabitants of New Jersey. The name Lenape means “the people.”

Throughout the region, the Lenape lived in small communities where they would fish, hunt, and garden. They utilized the rivers for food and transportation, and created a trail connecting the Delaware and Hudson Rivers, making a direct route between what would become Philadelphia and New York City.

Today, after being forced westward, many of the ancestors of the Lenape live in the State of Oklahoma.
A Tale of Two New Jerseys

On June 24, 1664, James the Duke of York presented the land between the Hudson and Delaware Rivers to Sir George Carteret and Lord Berkeley of Stratton. The land grant proclaimed “said Tract of Land is hereafter to be called by the name or names of New Cesarea or New Jersey.”

The newly created province was named after the Isle of Jersey in the English Channel, where Sir Carteret had been governor.

Sir Carteret was in charge of East New Jersey, and Lord Berkley was in charge of West New Jersey. This division of power continued until East and West New Jersey became united in 1702.

Credit: New Jersey State Archives
Trenton

The first European settlers of Trenton were English Quakers, a Christian-based religious group, who established a settlement at the falls of the Delaware River in 1679.

Forty years later the town was named Trent-towne after William Trent, a Philadelphia merchant and the area’s largest landowner. His home, built in 1719, is the oldest building in Trenton.
Trenton and the Revolution

The American Revolution began in April 1775. By the winter of 1776, the Americans were losing the war and morale was low.

On Christmas Day 1776, General George Washington’s forces crossed the Delaware River near Trenton. Fighting through the streets of Trenton, Washington’s troops defeated a garrison of Hessian mercenaries (German soldiers who were hired to fight for the British Army). Over the course of the next ten days, Washington’s men won two additional crucial battles in the American Revolution.

The victories during the Battle of Trenton increased the morale of the American army and kept the dream of independence alive throughout the colonies.
Choosing the Capital

When New Jersey became independent in 1776, the state’s first Governor, William Livingston, recommended that the state capital be located “in some convenient and plentiful part of the state.” Previously, the capital had been temporarily located in various towns throughout New Jersey.

Trenton’s role in the American Revolution had made the city so famous that it briefly served as the United States capital city during the winter of 1784. Trenton’s location in the middle of the state and its access to the river made it the ideal location for New Jersey’s permanent state capital.
Building a Capitol

The New Jersey State House was built in Trenton in 1792 by architect Jonathan Doane. The cost of the project? Roughly 250 British pounds, or approximately $400.

All three branches of government were housed in the State House. The legislative chambers were on the first floor, the General Assembly to the left and the Senate, originally called the Legislative Council, to the right. The Governor’s Office and the judicial chambers were located on the second floor.

Image Credit: New Jersey Historical Society
The New Jersey State House

Today, New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the country with approximately 9 million residents. As representation for the population grew, so did the State House. Since 1792, there have been 16 major construction projects or additions to the complex. The Governor, some executive branch offices, and the Legislature are housed within the State House.