

The Liberation of Conklin Hall: Reconsidered Forty Years Later



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On February 24, 1969, a group of student members of the Black Organization of Students barricaded themselves within Conklin Hall.

For seventy-two hours they held their ground within the building while a mounting protest against—and in favor of—the takeover gained momentum outside the building and around New Jersey. Behind the scenes of their bold and, let’s not forget, illegal protest, there were negotiations between the students and the University. There was also discussion to end the protest by taking back the building . . . by force. Gus Heningburg, whose memories of those days are virtually without peer, remembers counseling then Governor Richard Hughes to keep the New Jersey State Police—the Troopers—off the campus, certainly to keep them out of the building. Had he and others not been successful, I don’t think we would now celebrate the Liberation of Conklin Hall. Instead, we would likely commemorate it as a tragic event.

By any measure, it was a tense seventy-two hours on all sides. For the black student liberators of Conklin Hall, there must have been many minutes of fear and loathing. What would they do if law enforcement officers sought to end their protest? Would they resist? They were without arms, thank God, and all of them came from families ill-prepared for scandal and shame. For the Rutgers administration, the Conklin Hall takeover was a potential nightmare, a public relations disaster, and a fearful encounter in a city that had recently, in July 1967, witnessed a collapse of civility and order on its streets. White students, too, were in quandary. At that time, Rutgers-

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Newark wasn’t so much a predominantly white campus as it was a predominantly white ethnic campus—comprised of the progeny of the eastern and southern Europeans who had come through Ellis Island on their way toward the American Dream of success. Some of them were white; others were on their way to becoming white.

Indeed, one way to look at the Liberation of Conklin Hall is how it played out in the imaginations of those for whom Newark and America offered opportunity as opposed to those for whom America had little respect and offered few avenues to equal opportunity. Put another way, Conklin Hall can be seen through several lenses as a contested place, where one of the great struggles for the soul of Rutgers was waged.

It is important, I think, to consider the historical context in which the Liberation of Conklin Hall occurred, this 40th anniversary of the event. More than a generation has passed. The faculty, students, and administrators who witnessed the event have moved onto other paths. Some lives of participants in that drama have ended, including Joe Brown, the ostensible leader of the liberation, and Marvin McGraw, another brash leader within the building. Dean Henry Blumenthal, Provost Malcolm Talbot, and President Mason Gross, among other administrators who negotiated with the students during the takeover and after it ended, have passed on. With the passage of so many eyewitnesses and with the now challenged memories of those still alive, the Liberation of Conklin Hall has increasingly yielded to historical analysis.

Here is what we know: The liberation, though a localized event involving local people, was a part of nation-wide black civic, political and cultural aspiration unique to the mid and late 1960s, when the Civil Rights Movement swung into a different gear in the northern states. While the southern theater of the Movement focused on elemental constitutional rights, like the right to vote and to enjoy equal protection under state and federal laws, in the north blacks sought an expansion of their economic domain and better housing. Such was the case here in Newark, which for most of the 20th century had been a City of Opportunity for European immigrants and their progeny. The paltry opportunities available to blacks seemed to be a custom of racial discrimination and indeed it was. But it was also caused by the reality of a city whose job infrastructure had been declining for years. It is likely that the black students who took over the building knew that Newark was declining as a blue collar town, making higher education all the more pivotal to them and their brothers and sisters.

Newark by the mid-1960s was well on its way to becoming a predominantly black city. That reality embellished ethnic and racial tensions, hastened white flight out of Newark, and made the primacy of ethnic struggle one of Newark’s defining narratives for the rest of the decade.

Rounding out the historical context of the period was, of course, the riot, the rebellion, the disorders, the Revolution. From July 12th to July 17th, all Newarkers witnessed, and all would remember forever, the 1967 Summer of Discontent. The rebellion/riots of that summer left the city spiritually spent, embarrassed, and in search of paths toward reconciliation. The Conklin Hall Liberators were kids when they saw what can happen when a city disrespects a huge swath of its residents, when it allows its law enforcement officers to misbehave along racial lines, and when it threatens, bullies, and lies to its residents.

A few words about the actual takeover: The students of BOS were seemingly influenced at the time by the Black Nationalist element of the Black Freedom Movement, but their rhetoric was economical and larger without rant. There were those who wanted the Liberation crushed by force if need be. But there were also supporters of the black students and their demands. In the days following the takeover, a group in support of the BOS' demands formed, calling for open admission for students with high school diplomas, for the hiring of minority faculty and for a recruitment and educational enrichment program that would later take form as EOF. In short, although the Liberation of Conklin Hall was a black student protest, it received support from a cross section of students. Perhaps more than anything during that period, the joining of forces and the joining of aspirations and ideals surrounding the Liberation of Conklin Hall, marked the beginning of Rutgers Newark's future as the most diverse campus in the United States.

The takeover was well organized and disciplined. There was no vandalism; the students were disciplined in their comportment and in the propriety of their writings. And they launched their protest with adult consultation, most notably from Bessie Hill, then the only African American member of the Board of Governors.

Conklin Hall was strategically chosen because the campus switchboard was located within the building. That was a smart decision, enabling the students to voice their demands, to rally their supporters, and to negotiate with the Rutgers administration. The negotiations that began during the takeover were sufficiently productive to enable the students to end their protest. No one was hurt, though it is fair to say that the protest had a resonance in the lives of the black students who took over the building. Joe Brown fundamentally committed himself to the Black Liberation struggle, so much so that his undergraduate career suffered. It took the longest time for him to graduate, finally, from Rutgers. He then went to Law School here and reemerged over the years as a much admired icon of the University's transformation to one of the most diverse campuses in the world. Many other Conklin Hall Liberators, perhaps ennobled by what was in fact one of the nation's most remarkable

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and successful student protests of that era, went on to become activists and servants in public life, seemingly drawing inspiration from their youthful protest at Conklin Hall.

At the February 24, 2004 Commemoration of the Conklin Hall Takeover, Rutgers University President left us with these words: "Today we honor the courageous men and women, then students at Rutgers-Newark, who expressed their outrage and their determination to change a racist institution by occupying Conklin Hall 35 years ago today. Rutgers had not caused the fundamental racial and economic inequalities that characterized American life, but prior to February 24, 1969, neither had Rutgers done very much to address those inequalities. These young men and women wanted Rutgers to serve them and their communities, too, and they were right."

And then President McCormick said this: "Although the Rutgers Board of Governors, faculty and administration ultimately got the message, it is fitting today to offer, on behalf of the institution, an apology to the students of Liberation Hall and those who came before them. It should not have required a building takeover, and all the risks involved in that, to make Rutgers recognize its responsibility to the African American community in this city and throughout the state."

Here are the remains of the day: As it turns out, the Liberation of Conklin Hall was the defining event of the University during the 1960s, when so much changed in the nation, in Newark, and New Jersey. It has been called the bloodless coup because the changes it fostered came about rather peacefully. Many of the students went on to live productive lives.

The Liberation of Conklin Hall fundamentally changed Rutgers. It set the stage for the creation of the EOF Program; it set the stage for an African American Studies Program that matured into a Department; it enabled the naming of the campus center in honor of Rutgers alumnus, Paul Robeson. And in its daring and strategic mindedness, the Conklin Hall takeover established a powerful narrative in the history of Rutgers that has as its center educational opportunity, justice, and an appreciation for honorable discontent. During this commemorative and celebratory season, we honor that extraordinary narrative and the students who created it.