

PREFACE

My memories of Chester, Pennsylvania, stretch back to my early childhood despite the fact that I did not visit the city until I was in my late forties. I grew up in the suburbs of North Wilmington, Delaware, a mere fourteen miles and barely twenty minutes south of Chester on Interstate 95. But my life was worlds apart from that of people in Chester, as was the case in most of the 1970s suburbs of single-family homes, wooded parks, and shopping malls of cities like Philadelphia, Camden, and Wilmington. Or so I was told. When I was a child, acting up or misbehaving often came with an admonition from adults that I would “be sent to Chester.” A high school classmate whose uncle was a Chester police officer told stories of found bodies, drug world shoot-outs, gang wars, and most memorably, entire neighborhoods where even the police dared not go. When I was sixteen, a massive fire consumed Chester’s Wade toxic chemical dump for days. I can recall watching live news coverage of towering flames seeming to engulf the Commodore Barry Bridge and highway officials’ fears that the steel structure might buckle under the intense heat. Twenty years later and having moved away, I read in a follow-up news article that nearly a quarter of the two hundred firefighters had suffered from deadly cancers due to their exposure to chemicals leaking at the dump.

My first visit to Chester peaked my curiosity as a sociologist, which eventually led to the research for this book. Caring for my aging mother included the first of many trips to the Harrah’s Chester casino and racetrack, which opened in 2007 and quickly attracted senior citizens drawn to its rows of blaring slot machines and the elusive promise of jackpots. It was the first time my mother had been to Chester since the 1940s. Back then the city was the Delaware Valley nightlife destination, where

a multitude of dance clubs, music halls, and corner bars served up alcohol and entertainment well into the early morning hours. Her nostalgia mimicked that of thousands of white suburbanites, including those who visit the website OldChesterPA.com to view and post photographs of the “good old days.” To me, the city seemed a jumbled mix of land uses, each a testimony to a different period of urban change in the past one hundred years. The new Harrah’s, resembling a warehouse bathed in pink neon, sat across a narrow street from a minimum security state prison (constructed of pink bricks). The remainder of the waterfront housed metal shops, a recycling facility, and an energy-from-waste plant that incinerated trash generated by all of Delaware County and some municipalities in the tri-state region (including since 2015 New York City). Near the Commodore Barry Bridge, where the Wade fire had blazed out of control for days, the massive, Beaux Arts-style Chester Waterside Station of the Philadelphia Electric Company had been repurposed as an office building and anchor for Rivertown, a planned upscale mixed-use district. Across the Industrial Highway, sits the city proper, with its partially abandoned downtown commercial district, barren and overgrown lots, and neighborhoods of tidy redbrick row houses. In many ways, Chester’s past and present differ little from any number of small-to medium-sized former industrial cities in the northeastern United States, among them Camden, Wilmington, Baltimore, and Newark.

On our return home, we spotted a Chester Yes! billboard along the Industrial Highway proclaiming a new, revitalized Chester anchored along the waterfront was in the making. Not the Chester of my childhood mind’s eye, populated with images of violence, fire, and drug wars, but not that of my mother either, of busy shopping streets, brightly lit diners, and crowded saloons. That the deindustrialized, minority city is imagined quite vividly (but incompletely and more likely, erroneously) from a white, suburban perspective is of little surprise and of little research interest to me. Nor have I been interested in unearthing the “real Chester” in some effort to correct the middle-class, suburban myth of the minority ghetto—a project that might well lead to another

incomplete, albeit more sympathetic, reification (as I discuss in chapter 6). Instead, what piqued my interest was how the range of negative images and associations—Chester’s notoriety, the stereotypical view of the majority of individuals and families who live there—might play into a complex and surreal politics of urban development that could produce a prison, a casino, one of the country’s largest waste incinerators, a soccer stadium, and the promise of upscale housing and shopping. As I spent more time learning about the city and its past, I discovered how the politics of Chester’s development pivoted around race and, specifically, ideas about race and racial minorities. It soon became clear to me that the forces that transformed Chester’s neighborhoods, downtown, the waterfront, and its surrounding suburbs were articulated, justified, and enabled by an urban politics that relied on the manipulation of race—or more precisely, fictions and falsehoods that comprise the images, rhetoric, and ideologies of race. It also became evident that the manipulation of race was a consistent, intentional, and deliberate strategy in the local politics of development. In short, how might the employment of race as a convoluted yet useful set of ideas about “others” function as a strategy in the development of Chester? This book is an attempt to answer that by digging into the city’s past and exploring episodes in which the representations of minorities were intentionally manipulated to foster spatial changes in the city and the region, moments in which the saliency of race had little if anything to do with the ordinary experiences of people who lived in Chester and everything to do with the exaggeration and just plain falsification of impressions and representations of race. Although this book focuses on one city, there is little to suggest that the enduring significance of race to urban politics is unique to Chester.

The stories presented in this book come from a mix of data sources and research methods. In addition to spending lengths of time in Chester interviewing officials, residents (current and former), and community leaders, my research benefited from a wealth of resources produced by local historians, librarians, scholars, and journalists. My understanding of Chester’s past is in large part indebted to my reading of the historian

John J. McLarnon III's dissertation and masterful book *Ruling Suburbia: John J. McClure and the Republican Machine in Delaware County, Pennsylvania* (2003). Richard Harris's *Politics and Prejudice: Small-Town Blacks Battle a Corrupt System* (2008) documents the struggles of Chester's black community against the excesses of white politics outlined by McLarnon. As a hotbed of civil rights activism, the coverage of Chester loomed large throughout the Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), made available to me at the University at Buffalo (UB) library. My work benefited from multiple visits to the Delaware County Historical Society library which houses a vast archive of photographs, newspaper clippings, personal accounts, and secondary resources about Chester and Delaware County. Another archive, the George Raymond Papers at Widener University's Wolfgram Memorial Library, were similarly valuable to retelling key parts of the city's past. I also learned much about Chester's past and present from formal meetings and ad hoc conversations with residents, leaders of civic associations, and local church officials.