

***Knowing Newark: Selected Star-Ledger Columns by Charles F. Cummings*****Timothy J. Crist, editor****Newark, NJ, Newark Public Library, 2016****112 pages****\$6.74 from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)****ISBN: 9780997428704****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v4i1.112>**

From 1996 through 2005, Charles F. Cummings, longtime Newark City Historian and librarian at the Newark Public Library, published a weekly column in the *Star-Ledger* newspaper resulting in a remarkable collection of over 500 illustrated essays documenting every aspect of the city of Newark's history and culture. All of these works are available on the Internet at <http://knowingnewark.npl.org/>. This resource represents the most comprehensive history of New Jersey's largest city. The printed volume contains 31 of those essays divided into four categories: Landscape and Early History, Industry and Commerce, Groups and Communities, and Education and Culture, selected and edited by Timothy J. Crist. Also included are a detailed chronology of Newark's history from its settlement in 1666 through 1999, and biographical essays by novelist Philip Roth and *Star-Ledger* reporter Guy Sterling. Although far from complete, the volume contains essays that are representative of all of Cummings's columns. The printed volume appeared before the entire body of work was available on the Internet so it provided the first compendium of this incredibly important resource.

The editor has picked some of the most representative essays for the printed book. The reader will gain insight into Newark's beginnings and its transformation into one of the nation's largest and most diverse industrial and commercial centers. A good example is the column entitled *Town of Cottage Industries Becomes a Manufacturing Empire*, which explains how the "seeds of manufacturing, industry, and commerce" were sown in Newark's 17<sup>th</sup> century beginnings and how small workshops ultimately evolved to provide products for the entire nation. Other essays

highlight specific industries such as breweries, leather, textiles, and jewelry, all of which were distributed throughout the country and the world. Another area where Newark provided leadership for the nation was in commerce; particularly in the fields of insurance, department stores, and health care. Newark is home to one of the largest insurance companies (Prudential) and its large and attractive department stores, begun as small dry goods shops in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, were unique to the city and an inspiration to others to imitate. A column on Prudential appears in the printed book. The other topics appear in the Internet version.

The printed book is particularly strong in its coverage of Newark's ethnic makeup and diversity and how the city developed from an early English settlement into one of the most diverse in the nation. There are essays on the African-American, German, Irish, Italian, German, Greek, Polish, Portuguese, and Puerto Rican communities, detailing the roles they played in the transformation of the city. Their immense contributions are further documented in the columns on education and culture, which include essays on music, literature, theater, sports, and the renowned Newark Museum and Newark Public Library.

The articles are thoroughly researched and well written; the product of a man who personified the city of Newark for so many years. In addition to containing information that is not available in other published histories, that knowledge is conveyed in a manner that can be understood by most of the readers of the *Star-Ledger* with appropriate illustrations throughout. The printed version serves as a partial compendium of the complete work, a reference work, and a keepsake for those to treasure Newark's past. While head of the New Jersey reference section of the Newark Public Library, Cummings built a huge research collection and he used that collection to research the subjects of his articles. His generosity and enthusiasm for sharing his wealth of knowledge was known throughout the region by colleagues, researchers, and indeed, all

who interacted with him. That generosity is noted in the biographical essays by Roth and Sterling, and through Cummings's tireless work in conveying the city's legacy in his lectures, tours, and pulpit as the city's official historian. That generosity is thoroughly reflected in this volume and especially in the Internet version. It takes a very special person to have the knowledge and grasp of resources to produce a major newspaper column every week for a decade!

As previously noted, this book together with the Internet site provide the best history produced for New Jersey's largest city as well as a tribute to its finest historian and curator. The editor, the Newark Public Library, and the *Star-Ledger* are all to be commended for making it possible for the public to be its beneficiary.

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