

NJS Presents**Invited Talks****In this Issue:*****McFeely Muscle: The Campaign to Ruin George Harper*****By Holly Metz****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v2i1.24>**

When historians refer to the political bosses who controlled more than a dozen American cities and states after World War I, they are apt to mention “Boss Tom” Pendergast in Kansas City, Boston’s “Rascal King” James Michael Curley, and—most powerful—Jersey City Mayor Frank Hague, who commanded state lawmakers, judges, governors, and presidential candidates, through his ability to deliver hundreds of thousands of votes through whatever means he deemed necessary.¹

During Hague’s thirty-year-reign as mayor, statewide machine leader, and Democratic National committeeman, his exploits were richly recorded in the daily press, and interest in his political machine has persisted into the twenty-first century. Most recently, Boss Hague has been the focus of several books, and his persona has even been reimagined for the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*.²

But few today would summon the name Bernard N. McFeely when recalling the political bosses of the Jazz Age and the Depression years, even though McFeely was a contemporary of

¹ A version of this talk was originally delivered at the NJ Forum Conference, Kean University, on November 22, 2014. Regarding urban bosses, see for example, Blaine A. Brownell and Warren E. Sickle, eds., *Bosses and Reformers: Urban Politics in America, 1880-1920* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973) and Alfred Steinberg, *The Bosses* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1972).

² HBO’s *Boardwalk Empire* was inspired by the career of another New Jersey political boss, Enoch “Nucky” Johnson of Atlantic City. Following the success of the series, Steven Hart produced a dual biography of the bosses it portrayed: *American dictators: Frank Hague, Nucky Johnson, and the perfection of the urban political machine* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

Hague's, and dominated a city—Hoboken, New Jersey—just adjacent to Hague's hometown. The twenty-two-year reign of the McFeely machine has long been underreported by the national press and almost completely overlooked by historians.

I first became aware of this lapse while conducting research for my book, *Killing the Poormaster*, a history of Depression-era poor relief told through the trial of an unemployed mason accused of killing Hoboken's supervisor of public aid. I assembled extensive background on the miserliness and corruption of the McFeely administration, including voluminous Department of Justice files, released under the Freedom of Information Act, that attest to the coercion, beatings, and threats the Hoboken boss used to maintain control over the city's 50,000 residents.

Bernard McFeely assumed leadership of the Hoboken machine in 1925, after his mentor, then-mayor Patrick Griffin, began handing out great wads of cash—accumulated during his reign as political boss—to bootblacks and newspaper sellers he barely knew. The consequent physical examination determined Griffin was incurably insane. Five years later, Boss McFeely made his formal move into City Hall and held that office for seventeen years.³

As mayor, he displayed little interest in the on-the-street politicking that seemed to energize other machine politicians. Nor did he seek to win voters with his oratory. A son of impoverished Irish immigrants, Bernard McFeely had dropped out of grade school to work as a horse teamster after his father's death, and some suggested he avoided public speaking because of an unlikely self-consciousness about his poor grammar; others attributed his lack of engagement with the

³ Regarding Griffin's fortune, his illness, and permanent institutionalization in an asylum, see "With McFeely New Leader, Griffin to Stay Out of Hoboken," *Jersey Journal*, September 30, 1925; "P.R. Griffin to Be Buried on Saturday," *Jersey Journal*, January 15, 1931; and "Milton Also to Be Quizzed," *Jersey Journal*, July 13, 1928.

hoipolloi to a rapidly retreating hairline. But all could agree that Boss McFeely did not curry favor with his constituents.⁴



Rare photo of Bernard N. McFeely, 1921.
Courtesy of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

Reporters, aware of Hague's statewide political influence, too often assumed that McFeely simply followed orders; and yet, the Hoboken boss refused to replicate Hague's tried-and-true method for retaining power: matching bullying with programs that won the affection of poor and working class voters. Both men employed physical force (police and street-brawling supporters) to suppress protestors and

unapproved union organizers, and they shared the remarkable ability to amass tremendous personal wealth while claiming only an unexceptional municipal salary as income (a knack attributable to other city bosses as well), but while Hague gained loyalty among the poor by freely dispensing public aid, McFeely *withheld* it.⁵ The Hoboken mayor redirected public monies to benefit himself

⁴ On McFeely's appearance and background, see "End of a Boss," *Life*, May 26, 1947, 40; Vilas J. Boyle, "Hoboken: A Look at McFeely, the Man," *New York Post*, April 9, 1938, part of an investigative series; "The McFeely," *Time*, May 26, 1947.

⁵ On wealth accumulated by Griffin, McFeely, and Hague, see findings of Case-McAllister Committee, *Commission to Investigate the Violations of Law and the Conduct of Public Officials* (Trenton, NJ: 1929). On Hague's aid to the poor and his use of force against opponents, see George C. Rapport, *The Statesman and The Boss, A Study of American Political Leadership Exemplified by Woodrow Wilson and Frank Hague* (New York: Vantage Press,

and his large extended family, creating what one critic called a “nepotistic republic.” In 1937 alone, during the depths of the Great Depression, the McFeely administration allowed \$16,000 for aid to the city’s thousands of poor residents, while \$39,000 was allotted to the salaries of *just fifteen* of the *sixty* McFeely relatives on the city payroll.⁶

McFeely’s draw on the city treasury was common knowledge, but who could openly contest it? For most Hoboken residents, their livelihoods, their ability to gain even the smallest of city jobs, or to receive any public assistance, depended upon their fealty to the McFeely machine. Dissenters could become unemployed and unemployable, or be threatened with eviction or physical harm. As Charles DeFazio, Jr., who worked in the city’s law department during that period, later recalled: “You could only get so far because they had the strength, they had the resources, they had the police, the fire department, the majority of favor. So you had to go carefully... If you tried to fight them physically, it was unfair competition. You didn’t stand a chance.”⁷

1961), Richard J. Connors, *A Cycle of Power: The Career of Jersey City Mayor Frank Hague* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1971), and Dayton David McKean, *Boss: The Hague Machine in Action* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940).

⁶ Vilas J. Boyle, “Hoboken: McFeely Tottering; Citizenry Aroused,” *New York Post*, April 15, 1938. City records referenced in Boyle’s article have not been preserved, but see Thomas H. Reed and Doris D. Reed, *The Government of Hoboken, A Report of An Administrative and Financial Survey of the City of Hoboken, New Jersey* (New York: National Municipal League, January 1948), which reports on city payroll during the McFeely administration.

⁷ Charles DeFazio Jr. interviews by Nora Jacobson, 1988 and 1992, as collected in *Charles DeFazio, Hoboken: Circus Maximus at All Times* (Hoboken, NJ: Hoboken Historical Museum and Friends of the Hoboken Public Library, 2002), 6.



Mayor Bernard McFeely (center) with supporters, including Fred DeSapio (to McFeely's right), who later unseated him as mayor, and Charles DeFazio, Jr., who worked in the city's law department (far right), ca. 1940.

Courtesy of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

For years, anyone who dared protest or even distribute flyers in McFeely's Hoboken was removed from the city streets to the main police station, overseen by the boss's brother, Chief of Police Edward McFeely. Dissenters left with broken ribs and swollen faces, or met with other forms of catastrophe.⁸

These incidents, when reported, brought no serious investigations by outside authorities—until September 1938. That's when a former merchant marine and organizer of the unemployed,

⁸ For detailed accounts of McFeely-backed harassment and violence against relief protestors, see Holly Metz, *Killing the Poormaster: A Saga of Poverty, Corruption, and Murder in the Great Depression* (Chicago Review Press, 2012).

Herman Matson, dared to speak out in a public park about the McFeely administration's lack of public aid to the poor, and was viciously assaulted by the boss's thugs.

According to depositions and press accounts, Matson had spoken just a few words—"We are here to talk about McFeely and the starvation in Hoboken"—when a gang of men rushed the



Hoboken Police Department mug shot of Herman Matson following his beating and arrest, September 15, 1938.
Courtesy Hoboken Historical Museum.

small wooden platform where Matson stood, knocking over the American flag he had planted beside him. He was beaten bloody. As his attackers left the scene, some of Chief McFeely's police officers arrived—and arrested *Matson*, for "inciting to riot."⁹

Matson could identify several of the McFeely loyalists who beat him, including a boss loader who headed one of the mayor's political clubs. Newspaper photographers had also documented Matson's assault.¹⁰ The resulting press coverage, as well as the creation of a new Civil Liberties

⁹ "Angry Mob Beats, Routs Red Orator in Hoboken," *Hudson Dispatch*, September 16, 1938; "Hoboken Mob Beats and Kicks 'Red' Speaker: His Wife Also Injured; Attack on Administration Is Cut Short When Police Break Through Crowd of 1,500," *Jersey Journal*, September 16, 1938; "Hoboken Jails Speaker After Mob Beats Him," *Herald Tribune*, September 16, 1938.

¹⁰ "Speaker Arrested Following Attack by Longshoremen," *Jersey Observer*, September 16, 1938. Matson and witnesses to the attack were extensively interviewed by the FBI, see "Report of J.T. Madigan, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark, NJ, Regarding Frank Hague, et al.—Victims," filed May 4, 1939, box 15205, folder 109-286, Department of Justice [DOJ] Central Files, Classified Subject Files, Correspondence, Records of the Department of Justice [DOJ], (Records Group 60), National Archives at College Park, Maryland [NACP].

Division at the Justice Department, spurred federal law enforcement officials to investigate allegations of civil rights violations in Hoboken. A meeting between Matson and Justice Department officials was announced in area newspapers.¹¹

Records from that meeting are in Department of Justice files held in the National Archives; I used them to write about Matson's case. But I also discovered much more in those files—material that went beyond my book's focus on the lack of public aid in Hoboken and those who organized to better the lives of its poorest residents. I learned that after the Justice Department publicly announced their investigation of the Matson case, Hoboken residents began to send letters detailing Boss McFeely's active suppression of dissent. FBI agents followed up with dozens of interviews and gathered evidence of the punishments the mayor unleashed upon those who challenged his rule.

In this article I highlight just one of the many allegations reported to the FBI in 1939, when the Justice Department investigation into Hoboken's machine was most active: In February, Ann Harper, the wife of longstanding Hoboken milk supplier George Harper, wrote to the Attorney General to report that several months before the Matson incident, the mayor had “endeavored to ruin our business by intimidation.”¹²

According to the testimony the Harpers provided, George was a life-long friend of two men who had crossed McFeely: a former city commissioner, Joseph Clark, who had broken politically with the Boss, and a former school janitor, Thomas Magnan. McFeely's unhappiness with Clark

¹¹ See, for example, “Labor Group Asks Hague Indictment,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1939.

¹² For allegations of George and Ann Harper, and investigators' notes, cited in this article, see “Report of J.T. Madigan, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark, NJ, Regarding Bernard N. McFeely, Alias Barney McFeely; Edward McFeely; Frank Romano, Civil Rights and Domestic Violence” filed June 30, 1939, box 17313, 4th folder, DOJ Central Files, Classified Subject Files, Correspondence, Records of the DOJ (Records Group 60), NACP; Ann Harper to Attorney General Frank Murphy, February 10, 1939, box 4402, folder section 1 (1/2/39-2/15/39 236400), Records of the DOJ (RG 60), NACP; and “Report of J.T. Madigan, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark, NJ, Regarding Frank Hague, et al.—Victims,” filed May 4, 1939.

had concluded with his removal without cause or compensation from his City Hall position and his inability to gain any other employment in Hoboken; the mayor's discontentment with Magnan, as reported in the press, was expressed by McFeely's use of a heavy ashtray to strike the city employee in the face, after the two quarreled in his office.¹³

When George Harper marched alongside his old friends Magnan and Clark in a Hoboken church parade, Harper became McFeely's next target. The day after the 1937 march, several of Harper's customers arrived in his store to tell him the mayor was "raising the devil" and was threatening to ruin Harper's business. Harper's business partner came by to announce he was leaving the company because of the mayor's anger.

On the advice of his lawyer, George Harper went to see Boss McFeely in City Hall, and asked him directly about the rumors. "How can I, as mayor of the city, run you out of business?" McFeely asked. Then the mayor launched into a tirade about Magnan and Clark. Harper told the FBI that he listened to these "rants" for twenty minutes before leaving the mayor's office.

The next day, dozens of Harper's customers—all city employees or their kin—cancelled their milk orders. Some had been buying milk from the Harpers for forty years, going back to when George's father headed the business. George Harper listed each cancelation in a small memo book and approached customers individually to find out why they were quitting their business with him. Quite a few alluded to coercion. Harper jotted down their replies and later supplied his notebook to an agent in the FBI's Newark, New Jersey, office, who typed them for easy access.

¹³ Regarding Clark, see "Clark's Bolt Causes Change in 1935 Lineup," *Hudson Dispatch*, May 4, 1934; "Clark Trial Adjourned After Lively Session," *Jersey Journal*, July 30, 1934; Vilas J. Boyle, "Hoboken: The Police Are Disgusted," *New York Post*, April 8, 1938, citing Clark's testimony before a Supreme Court commissioner, after his removal from office, and "Report of J.T. Madigan, FBI, Newark, NJ, Regarding Frank Hague, et al" filed June 2, 1939, box 15205, folder 109-286, DOJ Central Files, Classified Subject Files, Correspondence, (RG 60), NACP. On Magnan's beating, see "McFeely Battler Fails to Appear in Court," *Jersey Journal*, October 25, 1937, and "Report of J.T. Madigan, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark, NJ, Regarding Frank Hague, et al.—Victims," filed May 4, 1939. Magnan was then fired from his position; he later reported that his mother, who was employed as a cleaner in a public school, was fired as well.

The cancelations proceeded in waves. The FBI report devotes four pages of single-spaced type to list the names, addresses, and occupations of the fifty-five customers who discontinued their service on just one day—January 30, 1938.

In his interview with the FBI, Harper said that former clients, when asked why they cut off their milk deliveries, replied: “You know how it is” or “You know how McFeely is.” Others remarked, “We’ve got our orders,” or “The orders are to stop buying milk from you.” A few customers named the person who had come to their home to demand they cancel their milk delivery. McFeely emissaries included police officers, Democratic committeemen, and the superintendent of schools. “Even our brother-in-law was forced to stop taking our milk,” Ann reported. “He is a policeman.”

Ann also described the intimidation of a Harper employee. Two men, she wrote, confronted the driver of their milk truck in a dark tenement hallway around 4 a.m. After pushing the driver’s face to the wall so he could not see their faces, the men ordered him to “quit working for Harper.” He might be sorry otherwise. When the driver went to the police to report the threat, the desk sergeant brought forward two officers, who just happened to live in the building where the incident occurred, and who both said they were awake at just the time the driver mentioned. The officers said they’d heard nothing.

In the meantime, George Harper’s business partner followed through on his threats to break from him. He told George he was concerned about “getting in wrong with the Czar”—Boss McFeely. The former partner then established a competing milk business, and made City Hall’s approval evident to frightened would-be customers by hiring one of McFeely’s relatives as a driver.

Over the coming days and months, Harper lost more customers. By the time he met with the FBI, he could document a loss of at least 250 clients—half of his original customer base. A list of the occupations of the cancelling clients provides a sense of McFeely's reach, the scope of the campaign to force Harper out of business, and the chilling compliance of the Harpers' neighbors and longtime customers. Most were city employees and their relatives, but the list also included the owners of a candy shop, a dry goods store, and a grocery store (the latter told George Harper he "couldn't afford to get in trouble"), tavern owners, and even a woman who rented out rooms to bookmakers. The rest were Hoboken teachers, firemen (including the Chief of the Fire Department), city engineers, police officers, the Chief of Police (the Boss's brother, Edward), the head of public works, the city insurance vendor, a school principal, a school janitor, a nursery school teacher, city payroll clerks, a truant officer, a city commissioner and his secretary, the police matron, the widow of a police inspector, a detective, the superintendent of parks, a city blacksmith, the president of the board of education, inspectors for the board of health, a doctor who worked for the city and who had been George Harper's personal physician for most of his life, the city attorney, and the city's judge. Joining them were numerous county employees, a freeholder, county police officers, and a state assemblyman.

George Harper submitted his list to the FBI on the day of Hoboken's mayoral election, May 9, 1939. Perhaps he felt a sense of urgency, as threats and violence by McFeely loyalists had accelerated. The day before, Herman Matson and his fourteen-year-old son Bill had been distributing opposition-ticket pamphlets on a Hoboken street when three men jumped from a car and beat them. As they did in 1938 after the park brawl, the police refused to detain the Matsons'

assailants; again, they arrested Herman Matson and charged him with the use of bad language.¹⁴ The following day, Joseph Clark was beaten in a Hoboken polling station. According to Florence Keator, who wrote about the incident in a letter to the Justice Department, Clark had protested the placement of city employees “to cajole, threaten, and force citizens to vote for the McFeely machine,” and he was attacked. Only one person was arrested: Joseph Clark. Bleeding from a deep gash in his face, he was charged with disorderly conduct and assault and battery. “I am a citizen of Hoboken, N.J., but sometimes I wonder if I still am a citizen of the United States,” Keator wrote. “The miserable conditions under which the people of this city are forced to live put me in doubt...”¹⁵

For his part, when an FBI agent came to interview Boss McFeely, he expressed no doubt about the validity of his regime and made no admissions of impropriety. In his written account of their meeting in City Hall, the agent made note of the mayor’s claim that “it is his policy, and always has been his policy, to allow anti-administration speakers to speak freely.” He knew nothing about Matson’s beating, he said, and, according to the agent’s account, “flatly denied” having anything to do with Harper’s massive loss of clients. Hoboken’s residents, McFeely pointed out, had elected him “time and again” with large pluralities. He had concluded that voters simply preferred him as their “chief executive.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Memorandum for acting assistant attorney general Hopkins from J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, Washington, DC, May 25, 1939, box 17313, 4th folder, DOJ Central Files, Classified Subject Files, Correspondence, Records of the DOJ (RG 60), NACP.

¹⁵ Letter of Mrs. Florence Keator, Hoboken, NJ, to Mr. Henry Schweinhaupt (sic), DOJ, Washington, DC, January 6, 1940, box 17594, folder 144-48-0, section 2, DOJ Subject File, Records of the DOJ (RG 60), NACP. On Clark’s arrest and aftermath: “Armed Groups, McFeely Critic Held,” *Jersey Journal*, May 9, 1939; “Clark on Stand in Trial for Poll Fracas,” *Jersey Journal*, May 22, 1939; “Clark Found Guilty, Fined for Poll Row,” *Jersey Journal*, May 23, 1939.

¹⁶ See “Report of John T. Madigan, FBI, Newark, NJ, Regarding Bernard N. McFeely, Alias Barney McFeely; Edward McFeely; Frank Romano, Civil Rights and Domestic Violence” filed November 1, 1939, box 17594, folder 144-48-1, DOJ Subject File, Records of the DOJ, (RG 60), NACP.

The Justice Department did not, in the end, take any action against Bernard McFeely, and the files do not explain why. He remained in power until 1947, when, aided by tamper-resistant voting machines and supervision by state police, Hoboken voters swept in a slate of “good government” candidates. Fred DeSapio ran as a reformer and unseated the Boss as mayor, although he had been a McFeely stalwart for decades. A review of George Harper’s list shows that DeSapio, too, canceled his milk order in 1938, helping to ruin the milk dealer’s business because he had displeased the man who controlled the city.¹⁷

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¹⁷ “Report of J.T. Madigan, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark, NJ, Regarding Bernard N. McFeely, Alias Barney McFeely; Edward McFeely; Frank Romano, Civil Rights and Domestic Violence” filed June 30, 1939.