

NJS Presents***Museums, Archives, Artifacts, and Documents*****In This Issue:*****The Ku Klux Klan in New Jersey*****By Tyler Bane****DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v10i1.352>

An often overlooked aspect of New Jersey history is that of the Ku Klux Klan activities throughout the state during the 1920s. Driven by a resurgence of anti-immigration rhetoric, the diversity of urban centers, and the general fears of some white Protestant residents of New Jersey, the Klan targeted immigrants, participated in public demonstrations and parades, hosted social events, and attempted to intimidate Catholic politicians in particular. This paper will examine this aspect of New Jersey history by using underutilized sources like the George Moss Collection at Monmouth University's Murry and Leonie Guggenheim Memorial Library. Hopefully, by understanding the influence the Klan had on local politics, the mistakes of the past can avoid being repeated.

The popular conception of New Jersey is that of a state that is incredibly diverse and multicultural in its population and progressive in its politics. But that progressivism is not always reflected in the historical reality of the state. Progressive advances in policy have often inspired reactionary elements; immigration in particular has often inspired pushback. In the early twentieth century, for example, New Jersey was characterized by shore resorts, rural farms, and industrial urban centers with diverse immigrant populations in cities like Newark, Paterson, and Jersey City. These diverse populations often came under attack from groups like the Ku Klux Klan, which had a significant, if overlooked, role in New Jersey history. This paper adds to the body of literature

beginning to address that, analyzing, in part, the George Moss Collection at Monmouth University's Murry and Leonie Guggenheim Memorial Library in West Long Branch.¹

The KKK emerged in the Reconstruction-era American South and had a goal of asserting white dominance and terrorizing the newly freed Black population. By the 1870s, the organization had withered due to internal strife and federal prosecutions. The KKK underwent a revival in popularity in the early twentieth century, this time far more organized and structured than before.² This revival led the KKK to expand to newer territories, such as New Jersey. In particular, the KKK had a strong presence within Central New Jersey, and documentation places them in numerous towns throughout Monmouth County, such as Red Bank, Long Branch, and Belmar.³ Their presence was almost ubiquitous and quite open throughout the region, marked with gatherings and parades.⁴

Much research into the KKK in New Jersey remains to be done, however. For example, did the KKK infiltrate the state's college campuses? Princeton has begun to investigate this under the auspices of its "Princeton and Slavery" project. For example, members of the class of 1920 dressed in something similar to Ku Klux Klan robes at the University's 1924 reunions celebration, ostensibly as a joke. Author John Weeren describes in his article for the *Princeton Chronicle* his reaction after discovering this photo, noting:

To my twenty-first-century eyes, the manifestation of the Klan, even in masquerade, on Princeton's campus was both dismaying and perplexing. That

¹ See Kurt Wagner, "George Moss Collection Donated to Monmouth University," *NJ Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 201–205.

² William Pinar, "White Women in the Klu Klux Klan." *Counterpoints* 163 (2001): 558

³ Lester Mount, *Knights of the Ku Klux Klan Invisible Empire*, Red Bank New Jersey: Red Bank Klan #10, 1926; *Souvenir Program Tri-State Klunkave Knights of the Klu Klux Klan*, Klu Klux Klan, 1924; Leah Bell, *Fourth Anniversary Woman of the Klu Klux Klan Realm of New Jersey*, Klu Klux Klan, 1927.

⁴ For more on the KKK in general, see Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright, 2017) and Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Gender and Racism in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). For more on the KKK in New Jersey in particular, see Joseph G. Bilby and Harry Ziegler, *The Rise and Fall of the Ku Klux Klan in New Jersey* (Cheltenham: History Press, 2019) and Aife Murray, "The Ku Klux Klan at Home in Hillsdale," *NJ Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 2 (2017): 177–214.

graduates of one of the world's great universities should ostentatiously mimic an organization that exemplified racial, religious, and social intolerance and resorted to invective, intimidation, and violence to achieve its ends was difficult to reconcile with the Princeton that I knew, even allowing for the passage of eighty-five years.⁵

This is a perfectly reasonable reaction; institutions of higher education are meant to be centers of learning, and Princeton, especially, is often held in high regard as New Jersey's Ivy League school. However, making light of the Klan at the time can be understood (if not excused) to an extent. During the first iteration of the Klan, its membership "included all classes of southern white men, but the leaders were often well-to-do."⁶ This is a trend that carries through into 1920s New Jersey. When examining Klan literature and fliers from this period, it is readily apparent that local wealthy elites often supported the Klan. For example, in a program guide for the Fourth Anniversary of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan Realm of New Jersey celebration on July 4, 1927, multiple businesses are listed within the program as sponsors. These include the First National Bank of Avon-by-the-Sea, a concrete company, a plumbing supply company, and one Frank L. Stone, Attorney-at-Law, from Asbury Park, New Jersey.⁷ As Princeton was an Ivy League school, it was more likely that the student body included individuals with a privileged background and some amount of wealth. These socioeconomic conditions, when compared to likely Klan membership, match well.⁸ Can the same be said of other institutions of higher education across New Jersey? More research needs to be done.⁹

Further (particularly interdisciplinary) research should also be done to understand why the Klan of the 1920s existed as such a visible, almost mainstream force in New Jersey, hosting

⁵ John Weeren, "Shades of the Ku Klux Klan: The Class of 1920's 'Fiery Fourth,'" *Library Chronicle* 71, no. 1 (2009): 89.

⁶ William Pinar, "White Women in the Ku Klux Klan," 556.

⁷ Leah Bell, *Fourth Anniversary Woman of the Ku Klux Klan Realm of New Jersey*, Klu Klux Klan, 1927.

⁸ William Pinar, "White Women in the Ku Klux Klan," 556.

⁹ For more on Princeton University's exploration of the Klan and its campus, see Gabrielle Girard, "Princeton and the Ku Klux Klan," Princeton and Slavery, <https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/princeton-and-the-ku-klux-klan>.

gatherings, festivals, and marching in parades. These parades received little political pushback. As John Weeran writes, the Klan

. . . was active in New Jersey, including Mercer County, where in 1924, a Labor Day rally in Hamilton Township attracted some 10,000 Klansmen, one of many shows of strength that culminated in a massive march down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., on August 8, 1925. An estimated 35,000–45,000 robed but unmasked Klansmen participated in the parade, which President Calvin Coolidge declined to condemn publicly.¹⁰

Another parade took place in Red Bank in Monmouth County. Two black and white photographs in the George Moss Collection depict the Klan's participation in the Red Bank Fourth of July Parade. This image depicts hooded Klansmen marching in the Red Bank parade openly, carrying unfurled American Flags. Marches like this accomplished several goals for the KKK. They would have served as an intimidation factor for local minority groups the Klan opposed, projected a specific image of America that the Klan supported, and acted as ways to recruit new members into the Klan.



KKK parade in Red Bank, NJ. Courtesy of the George Moss Collection at the Monmouth University Murry and Leonie Guggenheim Memorial Library.

¹⁰ John Weeren, "Shades of the Ku Klux Klan: The Class of 1920's 'Fiery Fourth,'" 93.

These public demonstrations with little to no resistance enabled the Klan to operate openly throughout the state, backed by business interests that aligned with their stated goals. The KKK during this period took on an especially strong anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish stance, and rallies were designed to intimidate religious minorities and politicians.¹¹ One such rally is documented in the George Moss Collection. As Moss writes, “New York’s Catholic Governor Alfred E. Smith’s candidacy for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States evoked many anti-Catholic demonstrations across the country. The Ku Klux Klan chose a most patriotic day to express their dislike for Gov. Smith in particular and Catholicism in general.”¹²

In another example, there would be a rally at Elkwood Park, Oceanport (what is now the Monmouth Park Racetrack).¹³ Klansmen from as far as Delaware and Pennsylvania gathered at this event, and as many as 20,000 members were present.¹⁴ The program that was used to advertise the event and outline the itinerary for the



Program for the 1924 Tri-State Klonvocation. Courtesy of the George Moss Collection at the Monmouth University Murry and Leonie Guggenheim Memorial Library.

attendees depicts a flaming cross, commonly used as a method of intimidation by the Klan and to mark gatherings. During the gathering, the “Keynote speaker, Indianapolis Judge C.J. Orbison declared ‘I have . . . been to the (N.Y.) Democratic Klonvocation. No matter what they do, there

¹¹ John Weeren, “Shades of the Ku Klux Klan: The Class of 1920’s ‘Fiery Fourth,’” 92.

¹² George Moss, “Klansmen on Parade,” *Footnotes in History*, n.d.

¹³ *Elkwood Park Documentation*, 1924.

¹⁴ George Moss, “Klansmen on Parade.”

will not be anybody but a Protestant as President or Vice President.”¹⁵ The KKK in New Jersey’s focus on Catholicism as the “enemy” is logical within the context of Klan history, if odious. As a white supremacist organization, the Klan needed to unite its membership by focusing on an outside threat. New Jersey was a state with an ethnically and religiously diverse background. Immigrants with a Catholic background and rising political power, represented by a Catholic candidate for President, would have provided the perfect threat and target for the Klan.

Klansmen from New Jersey would have been well represented at the aforementioned Washington, DC, rally. Those who attended the 1926 rally received commemorative ribbons to mark the occasion, one of which is included in the George Moss Collection. In the context of the Klan in New Jersey, this rally can be viewed as the culmination of previous marches and membership drives, delivering the political message of the Klan to the seat of the federal government.

The Klan in New Jersey’s most notable events typically fell on patriotic holidays, particularly the Fourth of July, to match their outward projected image of Americanism. Preceding these large gatherings, a “Fiery Summons” would be issued with the details needed for the attendees. One such summons was issued by one Carl Grossinger, who signed the summons as “Exalted Cyclops, Red Bank Klan #10, Realm of New Jersey, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.”¹⁶ This particular summons details a regular meeting, the topic of which was



Commemorative ribbon for the Klan rally in Washington, DC. Courtesy of the George Moss Collection at the Monmouth University Murry and Leonie Guggenheim Memorial Library.

¹⁵ George Moss, “Klansmen on Parade.”

¹⁶ Carl Grossinger, “Fiery Summons,” 1925.

“matters of finance concerning Elkwood Park and yourself.”¹⁷ The timing of this meeting, April 8, 1925, and the contents of the meeting indicate that the Red Bank Klan was involved with the acquisition of Elkwood Park and the planning of the Tri-State Klanvocation.¹⁸ The significant amount of contemporary documentation and evidence indicates that the Red Bank Klan was particularly well involved with local affairs and the planning of more prominent Klan events that gathered national attention. Evidence of both their political ideology and recruitment efforts can be seen in a missive issued by Lester Mount, Exalted Cyclops Red Bank Klan 10 in 1926, which reads:

Esteemed Klansmen: I have been elected Exalted Cyclops of Red Bank Klan #10 and am making an appeal for your support and co-operation. The great and noble principles of Klankraft to which we have pledged ourselves need only the LOYAL [sic] support of every red-blooded Protestant American to make them a reality.¹⁹

The missive goes on to issue a call to “Defend and preserve American Ideals and Institutions and to keep them free from interference of any foreign powers, either religious or political.”²⁰ The combination of both religious and political enemies, when contrasted with the Klan’s view of themselves as Protestant defenders of America, can be inferred to mean Jewish and Catholic Americans, and foreign powers with this context in mind can be inferred to be the Pope. This hateful rhetoric, when coupled with parades and gatherings, would have been used to intimidate any political activists of Catholic or Jewish faith and to preserve what the Klan viewed as the “real” America in which influential Klan organizations like the Red Bank Klan played an important role.

¹⁷ Carl Grossinger, “Fiery Summons.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Lester Mount, *Knights of the Ku Klux Klan Invisible Empire*, Red Bank New Jersey Klan #10, 1926.

²⁰ Lester Mount, *Knights of the Ku Klux Klan Invisible Empire*.

When discussing the history and culture of the Klan, the role of women within the Klan has often been overlooked; however, this is a mistake that should be rectified as the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) played an essential role in the Klan's operations. Feminist historian Kathleen Blee argues that “if we take women’s politics seriously, we find that in the 1920s, the activities of Klanswomen, commonly dismissed as inconsequential and apolitical, were responsible for some of the Klan’s most destructive, vicious effects.”²¹ The organization of the WKKK itself mirrored the Klan with the complexity of rituals and titles.²² The primary role of the WKKK was to support the KKK by acting as base builders and as a legitimizing force for Klan activities. As Kathleen Blee notes, “Klanswomen worked to solidify the Klan movement itself, led political assaults on non-Klan businesses, and organized to strengthen the Klan’s political base, actions essential to the Klan's political and social impact.”²³ Additionally, the WKKK would utilize traditional feminine roles such as homemakers to empower the Klan and build up a culture of “Klanishness.”²⁴ Women would have been situated well to propagate Klan propaganda, assist in organizing Klan events and gatherings, and would have been essential in indoctrinating the next generation into Klan ideology. The reasons for women joining the Klan were typically the same as men; however, women that joined often leveraged the fact that “the Klan promoted its ability to protect women from sexual harassment on the job and from abuse by husbands. Both the KKK and the WKKK issued warnings to men who cheated on their wives, owed child support, or neglected their families.”²⁵ This would have been a tempting draw for many women as it would

²¹ Kathleen M. Blee, “Women in the 1920s’ Ku Klux Klan Movement,” *Feminist Studies* 17, no. 1 (1991): 57, 60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178170>.

²² Blee, “Women in the 1920s’ Ku Klux Klan Movement,” 63.

²³ Ibid.

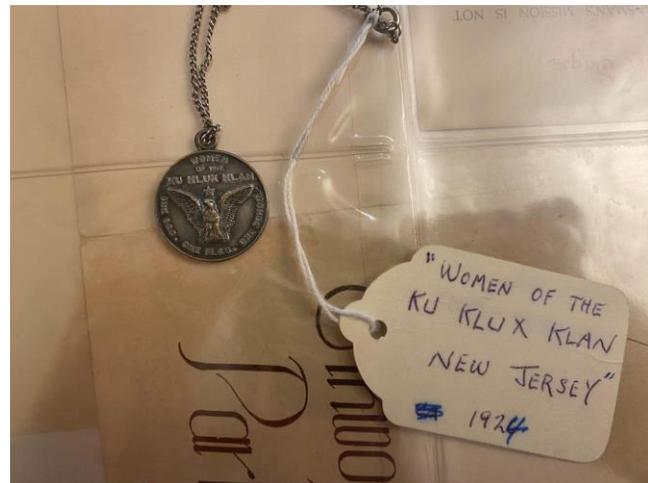
²⁴ Blee, “Women in the 1920s’ Ku Klux Klan Movement,” 70.

²⁵ Kathleen M. Blee, “Women in the 1920s’ Ku Klux Klan Movement,” 71; Blee, “Women in the 1920s’ Ku Klux Klan Movement,” 68.

have shifted the dynamic between Klan men and Klan women to be more equal than it otherwise would have been.

WKKK, like their male counterparts, were active in New Jersey as well. One notable WKKK member was Leah H. Bell of Belmar who served as the “major kleagle” for WKKK in New Jersey.²⁶ She would eventually go on to serve as “realm commander” for all of New Jersey.²⁷ Klanswomen would, like male counterparts, don regalia like the medal pictured below from the George Moss Collection.

The WKKK’s constitution listed all its roles, rules, regulations, and bylaws. A copy of the constitution is in the George Moss Collection. The constitution outlined the requirements for a realm and its provinces: “The Realm Commander shall designate the bounds of a Province in her Realm, and shall form new provinces as the development warrants, but in number not to exceed six Provinces in any one Realm, except by permission of the Imperial Commander.”²⁸ In addition to the organization of a realm and its provinces, the constitution outlines ranks and duties, the highest of which under the imperial



**Women of the Ku Klux Klan necklace medallion.
Courtesy of the George Moss Collection at the
Monmouth University Murry and Leonie
Guggenheim Memorial Library.**

commander of the order was a major kleagle. The constitution said that “a Major Kleagle is an organizer in charge of one or more states. A Kleagle is a local organizer in any given state. Major

²⁶ George Moss, “Klansmen on Parade.”

²⁷ Leah Bell, *Fourth Anniversary Woman of the Ku Klux Klan Realm of New Jersey*.

²⁸ Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (1927).

Kleagles and Kleagles and any other field workers shall be appointed only by the direct or delegated authority of the Imperial Commander.”²⁹ Notably, Leah Bell served in New Jersey as a major kleagle.

In addition to the constitution, other rituals dictated the governance of the WKKK. One such was the oaths to be taken with promotion through the different obligations. One example is the “Second Degree Obligation,” which could be administered by an “excellent commander” to a potential initiate swearing her fealty to uphold the oath and obligations of the degree.³⁰ These rituals mirrored their male counterparts in the KKK and would have aided in keeping both organizations together united by a common fraternal culture.³¹

The KKK serves as a darker aspect of New Jersey history, particularly in Monmouth County where the Klan was quite active. The marches, parades, and gatherings served as a way to intimidate local minorities (particularly Jewish and Catholic immigrants), project an image of America that the Klan desired, and cement their view of American society as valid. This last part is particularly well demonstrated by the Klan marching in Fourth of July parades. Far from total social outcasts, the KKK attracted white Protestants from all walks of life, such as the working class, wealthy lawyers and business owners, and men and women. Businesses would financially support the Klan, and the Klan would, on occasion, deal in real estate, such as Elkwood Park. The Klan was an influential and dangerous part of New Jersey state history and must continue to be studied in order to understand how they came to be so influential and how the mistakes of the past can be avoided in the future.

²⁹ Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (1927).

³⁰ Second Degree Obligation First Section (n.d.).

³¹ Kathleen Blee, “Women in the 1920s’ Ku Klux Klan Movement,” 70.

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