

Checkered history: At 100, NJ State Police confronts racist past, notes stellar feats

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Jackie Robinson had been out of the major leagues for five years by the time the New Jersey State Police hired their first Black trooper.

Six decades later, the department hails that man, Paul McLemore, as a true breaker of barriers. A black-and-white portrait of his October 1961 swearing-in hangs in the agency's West Trenton museum, and troopers speak of him with the same reverential tones a young ballplayer might use when discussing the Brooklyn Dodger who broke baseball's color boundary.

Less spoken about — until recently — was the fierce racism McLemore met not only from the public, but from his own comrades-in-arms. And how the institutional racism that infused law enforcement at the time eventually pushed him out of the profession altogether.



Perhaps no other story better illustrates the contradictory history of the New Jersey State Police, which celebrates its centennial this year.

The State Police is lauded as New Jersey's premier law enforcement agency — a sprawling, professional enterprise with tendrils in patrol, community policing, homeland security, forensics, aviation and more. The unit has become the bar by which other New Jersey departments are measured.

But this is also the agency that was founded in 1921 to counter the influx of African Americans and immigrants into New Jersey, whom many white residents of the Garden State feared. And this is the same agency with a long, troublesome history of discrimination and profiling, which led to two federal consent decrees and a top-to-bottom restructuring of how the State Police trained, supervised and audited its troopers during the 2000s.

The problem is both versions of the agency are true. And that's something state officials still grapple with.

"It's a complex history, because there are incredible milestones in the State Police — how it was created and developed, the principles on which it was founded and the incredible investigative work it has done," New Jersey Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said during a recent interview.

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"But you have to acknowledge the shortcomings, which include multiple consent decrees, the fact that the first African American trooper didn't enter the State Police until 1961, and that female troopers weren't allowed until 1975," he said "And I think we've done that we've been trying to get on a better path "

Even harsh critics acknowledge the State Police has made strides since the last consent decree ended in 2009.

But there's still more work to be done, they said

"If I go by what I'm hearing and seeing, people are still complaining," Jason Williams, a professor of justice studies at Montclair State University and a Black Lives Matter activist, said about trooper interactions with minority drivers. "People's perception is reality. And we know that there has been long-standing, historical issues with [officers'] inability to give customer service to minority groups. That's a problem."

In the beginning

The State Police website says the state Legislature officially created the unit on March 29, 1921.

Lawmakers' reasoning was simple, the website says. There was a demand for a well-trained, professional police force in the state's rural areas, which at the time saw rising populations and increasing crime.

The first superintendent, Herbert Norman Schwarzkopf, designed the entrance exam and rigorous training regime that pruned 1,600 applicants down to just 81 graduates.



According to state trooper lore, the outfit's first officers were sworn in during a blinding snowstorm in December 1921 before riding on horseback and motorcycle to posts throughout the Garden State.

But the agency was actually created to deal with the Black people and immigrants flooding into the overwhelmingly rural Garden State, according to W. Carsten Andresen, a criminal justice professor at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas.

Andresen's research found that the State Police sprung from a seven-year campaign by New Jersey's Chamber of Commerce to replace rural departments and county sheriffs with a statewide force.

At the heart of the effort was a 1917 report written by businessman Paul Garrett that focused on what he called the "foreign problem" — crimes allegedly committed by Black people and immigrants, Andresen wrote in a recent article published on the website *The Conversation*.

Garrett, who freely threw about racial and ethnic slurs, claimed that "negroes come from the South to this place for the summer and give much annoyance," and that "foreigners should be given full freedom so long as they are law abiding. But the many instances of rape and robbery and assault and battery due to them would indicate that the problem has not yet been adequately solved," Garrett is quoted by Andresen.

The State Police mission expanded when the unit created bureaus specifically for fingerprints, criminal records and auto theft — precursors to the many specialty divisions and offices the department accommodates today.

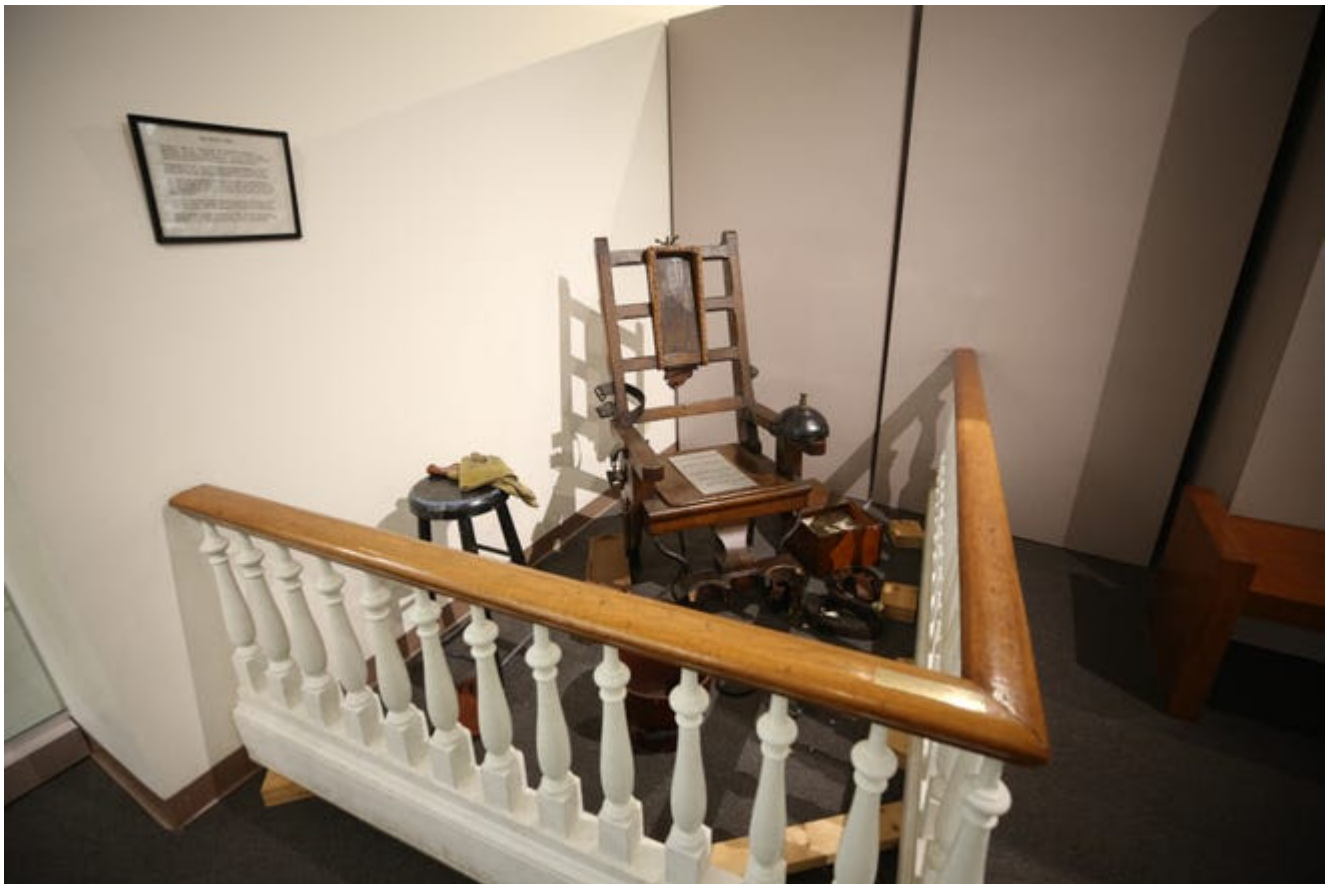
Over the following decades, troopers spearheaded a number of high-profile investigations, such as the kidnapping and murder of aviator Charles Lindbergh's baby in 1932.

The State Police coordinated the nationwide search for the suspect, Richard Hauptmann. The unit also collected evidence and helped the state attorney general prepare for the trial, which led to a guilty verdict and Hauptmann's 1936 trip to the electric chair, according to plaques at the State Police museum.

Housed in a brick building tucked inside the unit's division headquarters, the museum serves as a memorial to the finest aspects of the State Police.

Different displays enshrine the evolution of the troopers' mission as it changed throughout the decades. A wall of seized weaponry — including a mammoth anti-tank gun likely brought home from a foreign war — hangs near glass-enclosed mannequins clad in early-vintage state police uniforms.

A replica of a crime scene invites observers to find shreds of evidence that might convict a killer, while the actual wooden electric chair in which Hauptmann died sits menacingly in a corner.



There's an exhibit commemorating the first all-female recruit class in 1980, and the small photo of McLemore's swearing-in ceremony.

What's presented here isn't the only story of the State Police. But it's meaningful nonetheless.

"It's important to know the history so you don't repeat the same mistakes," Sgt. Rommel Cave, a Black trooper born in Barbados, said as he provided a tour of the museum recently. "As a trooper of 20 years, I enjoy my job, I enjoy the history. But I get different feelings from different things.

"When I look back at the forming of the State Police, it's excitement and joy," he said. "But when I look at the incident on the Turnpike — it's depressing. Everything isn't going to be roses about the organization."

A separate history

The incident to which Cave referred is perhaps the most pivotal moment in State Police history.

On April 23, 1998, two troopers stopped a van carrying four young basketball players headed to an out-of-state tryout — three Black, one Hispanic, none of them armed. The van pulled over, and started to roll backward on the highway shoulder. The officers fired into the vehicle.

The van kept rolling. It hit a passing Honda Accord and again rolled toward the troopers, who fired nine more shots and wounded three of the occupants.

That was a watershed moment for the State Police, and led to the 1999 federal consent decree that reshaped the way the agency conducted traffic stops, documented troopers' actions and reviewed them afterward.

Shocking though it was, some saw it as the culmination of a long, troubling run that started with the unit's inception.

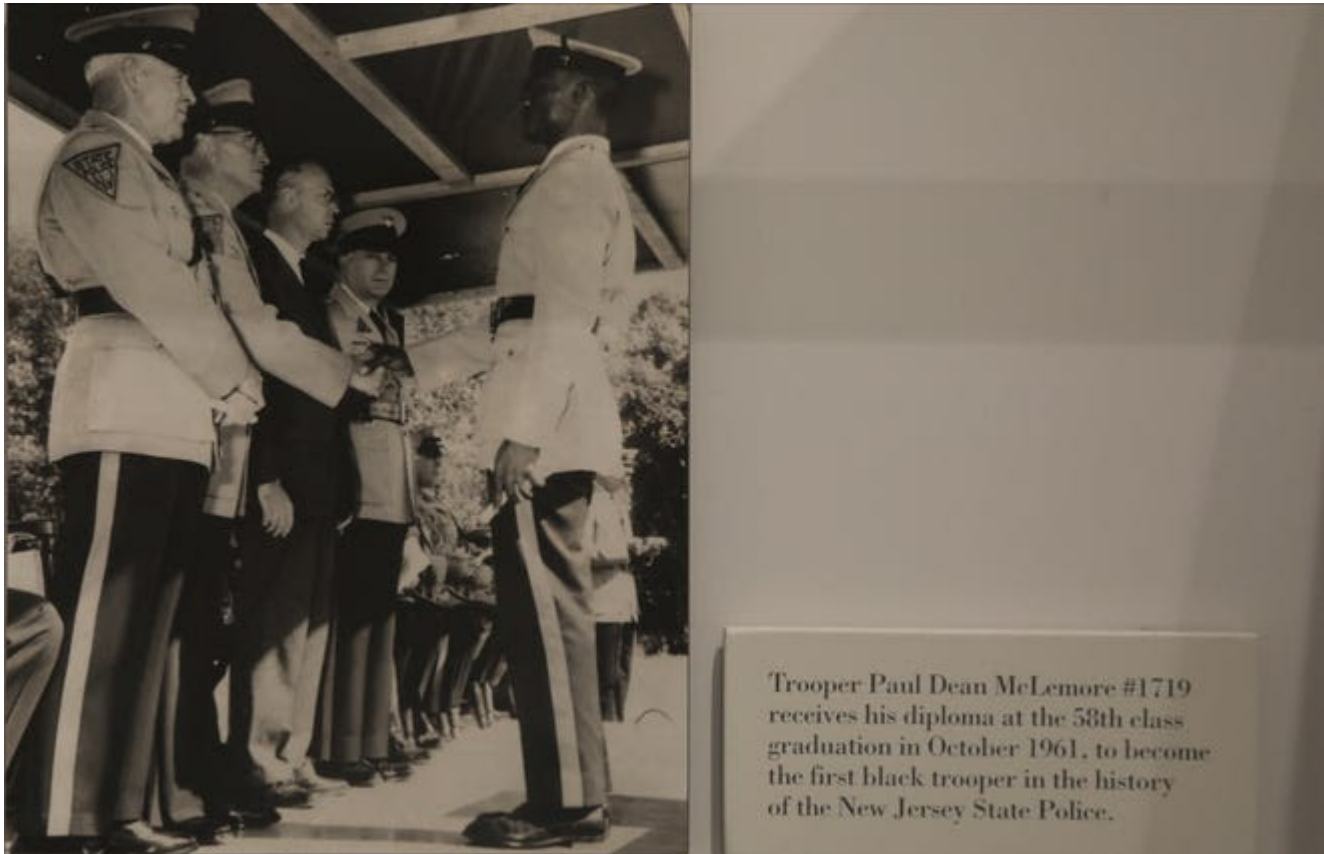
Well before 1998, the agency was involved in a number of racially-charged incidents, such as the 1937 shooting of a Black teenager, the frequent profiling of minorities and migrant workers in the 1950s and the singling out of Black people and businesses during the Newark riots in July 1967, Andresen wrote.

McLemore, the first black trooper, recalled in an interview with NorthJersey.com last week how he watched the orange glow of a burning city light up the night in 1967 as he and three other troopers drove up the Turnpike toward Newark to quell what he called an outright rebellion.

It was during that tumultuous week that McLemore, 83, had what he called his "defining moment."

McLemore said he was standing in front of a burned-out ShopRite, holding an M-1 rifle with bandoliers of ammunition slung across his shoulders, when a Black youth walked up to tell him how "silly" he looked.

"He couldn't have been more than 10 or 11, and he stood there, looking up at me with his arms crossed," McLemore said. "And he said, 'You silly [expletive], do you know how silly you look?'"



A Newark cop walked over and tried to shoo the kid away, McLemore said. When that didn't work, the cop sunk a shotgun barrel under the child's chin for extra emphasis.

The incident deeply affected McLemore, who left the State Police in 1976 and eventually became a civil rights attorney.

"That blew my mind, man," McLemore said. "I said, 'Where have I been living? What world have I been in?' That changed my life. I said, 'I got to learn what's going on here.'"

Andresen's article also noted the first federal consent decree, sparked by a 1975 Department of Justice lawsuit that charged the State Police with "engaging in a pattern and practice of discrimination based upon race, sex, and national origin in all aspects of employment," according to an August 1999 report from the New Jersey Legislative Black and Latino Caucus.

The decree was dissolved 17 years later. And the State Police "reverted to business as usual: minority recruitment declined, minority troopers were subjected to unfair and unequal treatment in the terms and conditions of employment, and racial hostility increased," the report stated.

Other complaints and lawsuits followed as minority officers took the brass to court. Eventually, the slew of legal actions, allegations of racial profiling and the 1998 Turnpike shooting led to the next consent decree in 1999, which lasted until 2009.

Andresen said last week he believes the State Police, which prides itself on being a straight-laced law enforcement organization, still needs to confront the demons of its past. One way to do this might be by educating individual troopers on the unit's full history so they better understand why people from certain backgrounds remain apprehensive in their presence.

"When you have an organization that is entrenched in this image of themselves — I think that can do real damage," Andresen said. "I think it would be interesting if they said, 'We've done some things in the past that we should be very proud of, but we've also done some stuff that's disastrous, and we need to really talk about that.'"

The next century

The current State Police leadership has made a conspicuous effort to bring to light the darker parts of its history.

In a video posted to the agency's social media accounts in February, Grewal and State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan sat down with McLemore, a now-retired municipal judge, to talk about the former trooper's experiences with racism in the force, among other things.

In an interview with NorthJersey.com last week, Callahan credited the changes mandated by the consent decree with rebuilding and modernizing the State Police and its culture. In retrospect, it was one of the best things to ever happen to the agency, he said.

"It was tough to go through," Callahan said. "At the time, it's the federal government coming in and saying, 'You're doing [these things] wrong.' And who wants to be flagged as having issues? But I think it set us apart in many ways and made us better."



The agency still has issues with diversity. About 75 percent of its 3,000 troopers are white men, according to statistics provided by the State Police. And although Hispanic men are making inroads — they made up about 20 percent of each of the last four recruiting classes — Black people and Asian Americans remain severely underrepresented.

Experts and outside observers said they also want to see more done in the way of training and transparency.

Williams, the Montclair State professor, said he'd like the state to be more clear on how traffic stop data — which the State Police began recording under the consent decree — informs their day-to-day work.

"How has that helped them better their policing?" Williams said. "I'd love for them to put out reports about that."

Grewal said he was open to Williams' idea. "That's something we could do," he said.

The attorney general also highlighted the steps he's taken to make sure the agency moves in the right direction over the next century. This includes mandated implicit bias training for every state trooper, moving to release the names of those officers accused of serious misconduct and instituting new use-of-force guidelines, among other things.

Grewal said he and Callahan are also working on ways to diversify the force in the future. But he was adamant that the State Police are moving forward.

"I want to be clear — they are trending in the right direction," Grewal said. "They are the most visible symbols of law enforcement in this state, and in the next 100 years they're going to be the most visible symbol of how to be a top-shelf policing organization in this state."

Steve Janoski covers law enforcement for NorthJersey.com. For unlimited access to the most important news about those who safeguard your local community, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.

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