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RECOLLECTIONS OF MARIA PEGGY DIAZ

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A chapbook from the "Vanishing Hoboken" series of the Hoboken Oral History Project

Vanishing Hoboken

The Hoboken Oral History Project

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Contemporary photographs of Peggy by Robert Foster, 2022.

INSIDE BACK COVER: 1910 postcard of Firehouse No.2, known as "The Island," where
Peggy is currently stationed. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

BACK COVER: 1910 postcard of the Firemen's Memorial, Church Square Park.
Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

So, one of the things I will say,
probably one of the things that has
helped me even where I am now,
in my life, and the way that
I see things and the way that I think,
was when I was younger,
I had kind of this limited view,
a limited world, right?
And then I started reading books.

—MARIA PEGGY DIAZ
FEBRUARY 21, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Maria Peggy Diaz was born in 1973 at St. Mary Hospital (now Hoboken University Medical Center), grew up on Garden and Ninth Streets, and, after a stint in the military, returned to her beloved hometown to become one of the first female firefighters in the more than 100-year history of the Hoboken Fire Department. In 2011 she became a captain.

Listening to her recollections of her Hoboken childhood is like viewing the city through an ever-widening aperture, as she describes playing outside in front of the HOPES center, a social services organization across the street from her Garden Street home; the growing number of streets she was allowed to frequent in the city as she grew older; and most of all, the way the world opened up to her through books shared by favorite teachers. A voracious reader to this day, the reminiscences she shares about her life in the Mile Square City are multi-layered, reflecting one of the great gifts readers can receive from books: an understanding of the capaciousness of the world, rich in stories.

Nested inside a large extended family that steadily migrated to Hoboken from Puerto Rico, Peggy—the nickname everyone uses—grew up in a Spanish-speaking household, proud of her heritage, and aware she was living in what she describes as a “very Latin” neighborhood, though one that also included residents of Italian and Polish descent. Her stalwart family kept her safe when arson was raging in the city during the 1970s and 80s; the fires killed many residents and permanently displaced thousands of poor and working class tenants of mostly Puerto Rican heritage.



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Peggy, Dad, Yomaira, Mom, her son Isaiah, and brother Peter in Union City, 2009. Her father died in 2010. Peggy and her son Isaiah, 2014. Peggy and her sister Yomaira at Yomaira's college graduation. Mom with Peggy's older brother Juan in Puerto Rico, 2000.

Peggy recalls the fires of that era now through childhood memories deeply informed in adulthood by her work as a firefighter, and the shared experiences of her colleagues.

Peggy Diaz was interviewed on February 21, 2022, by Holly Metz and Robert Foster at the Hoboken Historical Museum. Copies of the transcripts from which this chapbook was derived have been deposited in the Historical Collection of the Hoboken Public Library and in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum.



The Nickname Peggy

My nickname is Peggy. It's not in my legal documents—at all. [Laughs.] So that's an interesting story [—of my given name and my nickname]. When I was born—on December 9, 1973—I was a twin. But my sister passed away. We were in St. Mary's Hospital. My mom didn't know she was pregnant with twins. Her language barrier was really tough back in the 70s. She was really young. She was eighteen when she had us. We were premature. We were born, I think, at six and a half months, and coming from a Latin background, and a religious background, my grandmother was like, you have to name them, after Bible names. Both of them. So she named me Maria and she named my sister Socorro. I don't know if [Socorro] is a saint—maybe, I'm not quite sure.

But there was someone who was helping [my mom], and her name was Peggy. My mom really loved her and appreciated her. So when I was little, she just started calling me Peggy. And it stuck! It's been with me forever. It's funny, people ask me that all the time: “Your name is Maria Diaz, why do people call you Peggy?” That's where it came from.

OPPOSITE: St. Mary Hospital, 4th and Willow Steets, aerial view, circa 1974. Our Lady of Grace church stands just to the right of the hospital and behind that, Church Towers. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

THIS PAGE, BACKGROUND: Detail of the St. Mary statue, Our Lady of Grace church, opposite the hospital. Photograph by Ann Marie Manca, 2021.

When My Mom Came to Hoboken

So my mom had been living in Puerto Rico. She was born and raised in a town called Caguas. It's a pretty big town. It's like the center of Puerto Rico, about an hour from San Juan. Puerto Rico's a small island, but you know most of the towns. My grandmother is still there.

When she first arrived here [about 1971], she was in Paterson, New Jersey, with a family friend. My mom already had a son—my older brother—and she came with him. She was 17, very young.

She was in Paterson, and met my dad. My dad was already here. His family was from the Bronx, but he was kind of familiar with New Jersey. [My mom] moved from Paterson to the Bronx for about seven or eight months, with my dad. She ended up in Hoboken because her first cousin lived here, and he told her, "Come here, there's a lot of jobs; you can absolutely get a job here." And she ended up moving to Tenth and Garden, to a furnished room.

Actually, what's funny, when she lived on Tenth and Garden, before we were born, it was Miss Fusco [who was the owner]. She was my art teacher in grammar school [later]. It was her house. She had a furnished room downstairs, and that's where my mom lived, until we were born, and then she moved to an apartment at 923 Garden Street.

It was definitely a shock [for her to come here, so young, from Puerto Rico]. I talk to my mom now, even to this day, there are moments when, I think, she's in awe of how far she has gotten. Or all of the things that she did without kind of having guidance. Is that the word

for it? Kind of winging it and I think, she was a child raising children. And then moving through her life: "This is what I'm doing." But yes, it was definitely a shock. She said, the first time she saw snow, it was like...

[It was so different.] I don't think she thinks she was fearless. I talk to her about it now and I think, to her it was like being in survival mode. Being so young and having a kid and just kind of "Where can I work?" and "What can I do?" My cousin is here. "How can I live a better life?" I think that's what she was thinking to herself.



ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT: Peggy, Mom, and brother Peter, 923 Garden Street. Peggy (left) and brothers Juan and Peter, who still lives in the Garden Street apartment, 1982.

A Seamstress

Mom was a seamstress. She started in the factories here, [eventually working at] the Tea building. It used to be a bunch of different businesses and one of them was a [garment] company. My mom was really good with the Singer sewing machines—she’s amazing. I think she started on Adams Street, where there was a factory that used to do nightgowns. On Fourth and Adams, and then they moved into the building on Fourteenth Street. That’s what she did, my whole life, growing up.



Joined By Sisters and Brothers

So my mom was the first daughter to get to Hoboken. We’re a really big family. My mom has 17 brothers and sisters. They’re here now. [When they began to leave Puerto Rico,] it was [during] the time, I think, the late 60s, early 70s, when there was this huge migration, where a lot of Spanish people were moving to this area. [My mom] was living here, she had my brother, [and] she had myself. (My younger brother wasn’t born yet.) And her sisters started coming over. She had three sisters who moved from Puerto Rico to Hoboken—one older and two younger sisters. They lived with my mom for a year or so. We lived [at] 923 Garden Street.



ABOVE: Peggy (far right) with her aunts at 9th and Garden Streets, April 1984.

OPPOSITE: Standard Brands Building, now known as the Tea Building, 14th and Washington Streets, which housed many industries including a garment business, circa 1982. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

We lived on the first floor, and [one of] my aunts lived on the third floor. Then my other aunt got here, Blanca, and she came to Garden Street and stayed with us for a couple of months and then she moved to Eleventh and Willow, across the street from Wallace School. There were sections of Hoboken, where you have a lot of Latin people—like there were areas that were Polish and Italian and African American.

Family Celebrations and Traditions

We used to have these big, traditional Christmas parties. As Latin people, Christmas Eve is a really big event. Everybody stays up 'til midnight and you play in a *par-randa*, and you play all these different instruments, guitar... Two of my uncles came to Hoboken, too, and they lived here. It was just a really big, family celebration.

Food [for holidays and every day] was very traditional. It still is. Rice and beans, *pollo guisado* (chicken stew), and then you have *bistec encebollado*, a red pepper steak in sauce, *platano maduros*, which is like sweet plantains, and *tostones*. Growing up, my mom cooked a lot. She still does that. She still makes her coffee, old-school coffee, with the cloth. It's the way she prefers it. She's like, "I'll always make it this way." [Laughs.]

The World of Ninth and Garden

I was born in '73. I was raised on Ninth and Garden, and I think back then, when we were growing up, it's very different, obviously, to the way kids are raised now. We were always outside. You were never in a house. It was like, "You're going to stay outside, and I'm going to clean, or I'm going to hang out with my sisters, and you guys just go outside, and when it's time for dinner, we're going to call you back in." It was a safe neighborhood, because everyone else is doing the same thing. All the parents were sending their kids outside.

Our neighborhood was very Latin, but on Ninth and Garden there were a lot of different cultures... right next to us [there were] a lot of Polish families, and you had Miss Raia and her kids across the street, and then you had Miss Fusco down the block. Growing up, looking at it as a kid, I was like, I'm used to this area, and being Latina and being around all these Spanish kids. And everything was so familiar. When you'd go to the stores—we called them *bodegas* at the time—and it's so funny, being a poor family, especially when you're growing up, everything was on layaway. [Laughs.] So my mom would be, "Go to the store and get me bread and eggs and sugar and flour," and the guy would pull out a notebook and put my mom's name and write down "This is what she got, this is what she owes me." And to us, I think that was pretty normal. It was okay, and it was like a normal thing to do.

[Growing up,] I knew that I was Latina and that we had a lot of events for Latino, Spanish people. We had CUNA [the social services organization Citizens United

for New Action. We needed] a lot of government help because our parents didn't really speak English; it was tough to learn, or to transition. My mother never did, so she always needed a lot of help. And I think CUNA and HOPES center [Hoboken Organization Against Poverty and Economic Stress, located across the street on Garden and designed to combat poverty through social services], helped her, and they helped us.



Street Games

[HOPES was also our playground.] I don't know if you remember, the HOPES center was kind of set back, and there was a whole open playground, and there was a gate there. We would go across the street as soon as HOPES center would close. All the kids would be there, after school, 4 p.m. until 7:00 at night. And we would play these games. There was wallsies: you throw the ball and if somebody doesn't catch it, you gotta throw the ball *at* them. A dodge ball type thing. Then you had, freeze and tag. You had games like running bases.

I remember we had those three-wheelers, plastic. When we were kids, we would start in front of the building. And then you would take off and come around to Bloomfield Street and then you would go all the way around and whoever got back in front of the building was the winner. We would do that all the time, until you got so heavy that you couldn't really pedal. You would pedal and it would just keep going. [*Laughs.*]

We used to venture out, too, but being as young as we were, our parents were like, "You can only go to Tenth Street park." When I was growing up, I didn't know Hoboken below like Fifth, and I'm going to say, Clinton Street. I just knew my neighborhood.

LEFT: Exterior of the HOPES building, Ninth and Garden Streets, Hoboken. Photograph by William Tremper, ca. 1970. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

Candy on the Corner

[I didn't go to Washington Street after school.] My brothers would go. Mr. Big's. I didn't do that growing up. I think I wasn't allowed. My brothers were. But I wasn't. It was like, "I don't want you in Mr. Big's. I don't want you on Washington Street." The only time I would be on Washington Street, I would probably be with my aunt and my cousins. We would go eat Blimpie on Seventh and Washington. Or you would go have a slice of pizza at Benny's. Delicious.

And we would go to get ice cream, what was that place on the side street? It's day care or a school now? Magic Fountain. That was one of our treats. My mom and my cousins, we would just walk over and get some ice cream and some milkshakes and stuff like that. I would go to all these places with my cousins and my family. When I became a teenager, in high school, then it was different. I went all over the place.

And I remember there was Nellie's candy store on Tenth and Bloomfield. I would go there all the time; she would have the penny fish. And the five cent and penny chocolates. I still remember her.



OPPOSITE LEFT AND RIGHT: Blimpie's sign recreation, courtesy McKevin Shaughnessy. Benny Tudino's Pizzeria, Washington St., Hoboken, 1984. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

BELOW: Interior of Nellie's Deli, featuring owners Kenneth and Nellie Lenz, Tenth and Bloomfield Streets, Hoboken. Photograph by Michael Flanagan, ca. 1976. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.



Good Teachers and Good Books

[What was school like?]

I loved my teachers. I have a picture of my favorite teacher [to show you].

So, one of the things I will say, probably one of the things that has helped me even where I am now, in my life, and the way that I see things and the way that I think, was when I was younger, I had kind of like this limited view, this limited world, right? And then I started reading books. I was a huge, avid book reader. From when I first started—I'm talking about Beverly Cleary, and all these girlie books. And all these genres of books from the Scholastics. In grammar school we would get them and we would take them home and [say], "I want these three books," and my mom—we might have been poor, but my mom was like, "If this is what you want, I'm going to figure this out." She would give me the money and I would order these books and wait for days for [them] to come in.

I was a voracious reader when I was in grammar school. And that probably came from curiosity, but also from my teachers. One of my favorite teachers was Miss Palmisano. She was my third grade teacher. She was amazing. I loved her. I admired her. Every time I saw her I was—she was like the most perfect person ever, you know? I had Mr. Capuano, he was my fourth grade teacher. He was also a really great teacher. I really got into reading in the sixth grade. In sixth grade, I had Mr. Connors. One of the things he did—back then, there used to be kind of these little pamphlets, cardboard information on Greek mythology, and he would have like three of them, and then for two periods in grammar



ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT: Mr. Vincent Frank Cassesa, favorite school teacher, and Peggy, eighth grade graduation, June 1989. Marcia Morales (left), Peggy (center), and Sonya (right) in Brandt School, seventh grade, 1988.

school, you had to come up and grab one and read about Zeus, and then Zeus had this child, and then the next one. And you would read it. And on the back there would be questions. I was just in awe of Greek mythology! It was like, "I love this!" I would read them all the time.

Then I got to seventh grade, and I was just a really big reader. My favorite teacher of all time was Mr. Cassesa. I saw him around Thanksgiving [recently], and I was just hugging him because I love him so much. [Laughs.]

I think he struck a chord because he didn't limit you. Because if he saw you and he saw what your background was, he didn't put a limit on you and say, "Oh, you're this little Latina girl," or, "You should just stick to what's going on." To him, it was like, "No. There's this big world, Peggy, that you have to [explore]. You're reading *The Outsiders*? Well, I want you to read *this* book. And I think you're going to love it."

And *he* was a big reader. But his introduction to a world that I didn't understand was really impactful. And

I was like, I freakin' love him! [Laughs.] He changed everything for me. I read *The Outsiders*, from there I just kept reading and reading. I've been like that ever since, and I think, his ideas were out-of-the-box, and a lot of teachers at Brandt School—back then, you had some teachers who weren't so great, right? And you had teachers who would try to discipline kids, right? Something that would never happen now. But this was back then. But then you had some teachers who made up for those bad apples, because they were interested in getting *any* kid, not just me, all the different kids, they wanted these kids from Hoboken to expand their focus and their vision. And understand there's just a bigger world out there. I feel like they made an impact, and that's what he did.



ABOVE: Hoboken Public Library on the corner of 5th Street and Park Avenue, circa 1975. The Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses is next to the Library on Park Ave. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

Why is Our Town Burning?

I'm going to say, for me, the change of Hoboken started late 70s, early 80s. I noticed it. My aunt lived on 11th and Willow [and] I remember there being a big fire [next to her building]. I remember her coming over to our house, because obviously they couldn't stay in the apartment, it was the building next door. I remember my mom and my aunt talking about it and saying these fires are happening, we don't know what's going on. And this family passed away. Obviously, I'm a little kid, they were older than me, [but] all the families know each other. It was: Oh, this family is lost. This little kid burned.

I still remember the fire where I think the husband set the fire in the hallway, because he was upset with his wife. I remember that, and I remember as a kid being terrified. Me, my cousins, as little kids, talking about it. "Oh my God, there's a fire." And little kids, just making stories up, like: "You've got to be careful, because they're saying that they're going to burn the building down tomorrow." I remember things like that. So yeah, it was like a really scary time. But you felt support. You felt a little less scared because we had so much family around us. My aunts and my mom were really good about looking out for each other. They were very close knit. And my uncles, too. They were very protective of us and would look out for us. So you were scared, but a little less scared because the people who were taking care of you were pretty vigilant. My aunts and my uncles were vigilant about us—and the buildings. To see who was coming into the building, and things like that. But that's probably when the change started.

As kids, we were scared of what was going on. Because we didn't understand, especially people my age, right? We didn't understand, what's going on here? Why is our town burning? Like, who's doing this? What's



ABOVE: Firefighters backed by a blazing fire on Observer Highway, ca. 1983. Photograph by Robert Foster. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.

happening? It was all these questions that you had in your head and you didn't know what was going on.

Growing up, as you get older, you start to understand things a little bit better. You kind of start knowing, and people start talking. And then Hoboken, the way that it changed, I feel, the gentrification, what was happening, and all the building owners, they were like, we want to get rid of these tenants. And I'm not saying, I would never say that that's exactly what it was, but growing up, that's how I *felt*. And I think a lot of people who are my age, whether they're Latino or not Latino, they feel the same way, too. Where they were burning the tenants out because they wanted to sell the buildings and they wanted to renovate, and they wanted to get—you know, we lived on 9th and Garden, and the owner at the time, in the eighties, he was renovating all the apartments, and he told my mom, there's five thousand dollars or ten thousand dollars, and you have to go. And I thank God, 'cause someone—it might have been [tenants' rights activist] Tom [Olivieri] or someone else—that was like, "You don't have to leave this apartment." This is yours. And my mom refused to [move]. He was very upset. But she ended up staying in the apartment. And he renovated every other apartment in the entire building but hers, and her next door neighbor's.

She wasn't *sure* she had a right, but she was, I'm gonna investigate. And this is what's going to happen, because I have four kids. She was like, no, something is wrong here. You're not going to push us out. I'm not going to take your money to go somewhere else. I'm staying here. This is my home.

Vezzetti Fights Gentrification

I remember Tom Vezzetti. When he was running for mayor. I really do. I used to think he was the craziest person ever. [He campaigned with a bull-horn on Washington Street.] This guy's running for mayor? I was a kid, though. [And] my mom said that he... had so many ideas. And he wanted to move the city forward. She voted for him, and she was very happy—short term. [Tom Vezzetti died in 1988, after only three years in office.]

BELOW: A crowd surrounding Tom Vezzetti on election night. Photograph by Robert Foster. A campaign button for Vezzetti. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.



The Community Changes

There was a lot of displacement, there was a really big push, to move old Hoboken out, and to bring in new Hoboken. During the 80s... and the 90s, too. [After that,] a lot of [people] moved to different places, like Church Towers [and] Clock Towers. And I think the projects, at the time, was a mix of different people. People started moving, started leaving. To Newark or Paterson or Passaic.

So a lot of my aunts—my mom is the only sister who stayed in Hoboken. She's like, I'm staying here, this is where I'm at. My hometown, this is where I'm raising my kids. And that's it.

[But] all of my aunts moved to Brooklyn. All of them. And my uncles, too. So, growing up, I had five aunts. Four moved to Brooklyn, and one uncle. So every weekend, we would all go to Brooklyn. We would leave Hoboken on Friday, take the PATH train to 33rd—I still remember—and we would take the L train to Brooklyn. We would stay in Brooklyn from Friday to Sunday night. [Was there enough room?] Absolutely not, but we didn't care! [Laughs.]

My aunts lived in different parts of Brooklyn, so we would go a few blocks away, in East New York, or Marcy Avenue, or these different places. We would go on Friday, and I would stay in this apartment with my aunt, and my brother would stay with my uncle, then my other brother would stay here. Our family was so big. My mom probably has the least kids of all the sisters; she has four. And there should have been five, because of my sister. But all my aunts have five or more kids so it was just a big family with lots of kids.

Moving Out of 923 Garden

When I was growing up, and I was eight or nine years old, my mom became a Jehovah Witness. She transitioned from Catholic to Jehovah Witness. The Kingdom Hall is next to the Hoboken Public Library.

So it was like a big shock. “What, I don’t celebrate Christmas and birthdays, these different events, anymore?” I didn’t understand what it was. I was born and raised and baptized Catholic, right? And I went to Catholic Sunday school, every Sunday. But [that Sunday school] wasn’t as deep-rooted as the way Jehovah Witnesses start their study for kids. The transition was a little bit shocking. But I accepted it, obviously, because... it’s my mom. I got to really know the Bible and [to] learn, at least, Bible stories.

So now I get to high school, and kind of rebel. Sixteen, and I’m like, “This isn’t what I want to do, I don’t want to follow this, and I don’t want to get baptized, and I want to do my own thing. I have my friends. I just have my whole life.” And my mom was still in this place of... so it was really tough.

There’s a couple of things I have to say, so I have to go back. When I was in eighth grade, obviously I grew up pretty poor. There were limited things that my mom could do. Whether shopping, [for] summer clothes, things like that, for school clothes. In eighth grade, I got offered a job at Tucker’s Pharmacy, working the front. I was fourteen at the time. And I ended up working at Tucker’s for a year. So I made money—and that was like, my school clothes and my lunch money and whatever I wanted.



ABOVE LEFT: Peggy in Baron’s Drug Store, 416 Washington Street, where she worked in high school, circa 1994. **ABOVE RIGHT TOP AND BOTTOM:** Eighth Grade graduation, circa 1989. Peggy, circa 1988.

And then, when I became a freshman in high school, a year later, after working in Tucker’s, the summer between eighth and freshman year, Baron’s Pharmacy offered me one dollar [an hour] more! So I quit Tucker’s and I went to Baron’s. And believe it or not, I worked in Baron’s my entire four years of high school. After school I would work three or four days a week. From three or three-thirty, ’til about seven-thirty.

During that time I think my mom and I grew apart a little bit. I was doing my own thing, I was in high school, and I was kind of rebelling. Typical teenage rebellion.

Then one of my best friends in high school had a child very young; she was a freshman in high school. And she ended up getting an apartment on Section 8,

on Second and Jackson. And I told my mom, “I don’t want to be a Jehovah Witness anymore.” My mom was like—she was pretty tough about it—“If you don’t want to be a Jehovah Witness, you can’t live here.” And I was like “Okay,” and I moved out. I moved in with my best friend, who had a Section 8 apartment and a brand new baby. I worked in the pharmacy. That’s how I was out of my mom’s house at 16 ½.

Of course I still loved my mom and I came to visit. And I used to come see my sister, all that good stuff. I just wasn’t in that household. As a Jehovah Witness at that time, that’s the way she thought. She doesn’t think like that now. She says, “I can’t believe I did that.” But you know, it’s okay.

“I Want to Go Somewhere”

When I was in high school and partying and doing teenage rebellious stuff, I said to myself, “I have to do something.” Or, “I want to go somewhere, that’s going to help me have discipline, and focus, and just be accountable to myself.” And I was like, “How can I do that?” I can’t go to college, because I didn’t have the grades for college. I was like: the military. And that’s how I ended up in the military.

At the time, in 1992, there was a program, that [the military] had just come out with, it was two years active



ABOVE: Peggy in the Navy with a colleague, Whidbey Island, Washington, 1993.

reserve [and] four years inactive reserve. So technically, you were owned for six years. But two of them were active, the other four didn’t have to be. If you wanted to be active, you could. Or you could do reserves, or inactive. I did two years of active duty and four years inactive (since I had my son after I got back). But the military had the option for the next four years to recall me for duty.

I did my two years. I graduated [high school] in June of 1992, and I was in boot camp on August 26th, that same summer. I kind of winged it, like: Let’s go.

It was in Orlando, Florida. It was a co-ed company, so it was males and females in the same company. The military had just started integrating at that time, like two years before when I came to boot camp. So I went to one of the first integrated companies. I [started] in August and I finished in December—boot camp and rate school. I was an airman. I came home for Christmas, and then I was stationed in Washington State. I was there for two years; I worked in Whidbey Island Naval Station. I was a “PC,” which is a plane captain. You basically maintain the planes for the officers who

are flying: You wash them, you fuel and grease/degrease them, inspect and prep them for flight. You help the pilot to launch them out for practice and flying time. I don't know if you ever watched the guys on the aircraft carriers with the helmets, and they have different colored shirts? I was a brown shirt. So on the airfield I would just sort of have on my headset and give them signs and signals, when to go. That was my job in the military.

“A Better Version of What I Am”

From the moment I went into boot camp, I was scared. Out of my brain! [*Laughs.*] I was really, really scared. I was very stubborn and hardheaded, and I think coming where we come from, in Hoboken, from this area, sometimes it was tough to listen to people tell you exactly what to do...

And you're with all these people from across the U.S., who lived completely different from you. So there were times I was like: Well, I'm smarter than you, or I can do this better—only because I came from a town that was tough and people tend to speak up for themselves. This is where I came from. When you join the military, you have these young kids, I'm going to say Midwestern, country, who just have never been out of

their element, and there are times you think, I'm smarter than this person. Or I'm smarter than my boss, who's telling me what to do. So it was really tough. In that part, because I was very stubborn. But, because it was the military, there was a limit to what I could try and do. And I did listen to them, and I look back on it now and that kind of set me up to be a better person, or a better version of what I am. 'Cause it did. The military taught me. It taught me discipline, it taught me punctuality, it taught me organization, and I learned how to work with different groups and personalities. Which was a really big thing.

In the military, there are always issues. The military's really big—you have hundreds of thousands of soldiers, right? And you do have that, you have the differences and the disparities, you have the arguments, harassment. You have all of that. But they're pretty strict about a lot of things. The military has gotten a lot better about a lot of things—especially sexual harassment. I haven't been in the military in twenty years. But it was kind of a learning curve. And they're doing a lot better. But there's always issues. I learned pretty quickly how to adapt.

And then, when I was in the military, I took a fire-fighting class during boot camp, and that was my first thought of being a firefighter. I was like, I love this. This is really scary and crazy, and insane, but this is definitely something that I can do. But I didn't think any further about it, because I was in boot camp. I still had a couple of years that I had to do in the military. But it always stuck with me.

Becoming A Firefighter

When I finished my military duty, I came back home, and civil service exams were out, and it was like police [and] fire. And I ended up taking them both. But I *really* wanted to become a firefighter. Because that one little event, that happened to me in boot camp, stuck. I was: I can do this, I really love this.

Audra [Carter] and I were the first two females who joined the fire department. [We joined at the same time]—2002. We had a class of eleven. December 19, we got sworn in. I had a military background, Audra had a sports background. She was an athlete.

We came on, and it was a really big deal. I didn't realize it was a really big deal because I wasn't really paying attention to that. But it was on the news and it was in the *Jersey Journal*. And when we officially finished the academy and went to the firehouses, it was a big deal, because you could feel it. You could feel the tension. Of sitting in the kitchen, and there being seven or eight guys, not knowing what to say to us. It was the first time—I'm talking about 2002—they had to take sexual harassment classes. In 2002! It wasn't even 1996; it was 2002. It was like this century; it's crazy! Like, you guys didn't have a sexual harassment class before this? So it was a big adjustment for them. There were no locks on the bathrooms. Lockers—pictures and magazines, and things like that. They had to get rid of all that. So it was a big transition for them.

I didn't push it on them. They'll know that they don't have to walk on eggshells around me. And they figured it out. They don't walk on eggshells. [Laughs.] But yeah,



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Peggy in a fire truck, 2020. Peggy at Engine Company 2, known as “Hollywood,” 1313 Washington Street, Hoboken. Crew for the firehouse in front of Hoboken High School, 2005. Peggy with firefighting equipment, 2008.

not for the faint hearted. If you're a woman and you love this job and this is what you want to do, kudos to you. But you better know that this is what you want to do. You'd better know. And you'd better be comfortable with it.

I've always worked in a field with men. And people ask me all the time, how can you hang around with a bunch of men? And I think because I've been doing it since I was 18 years old, I adapted quickly. I don't care

that he's cursing. As long as they're not disrespectful, then they're gonna be who they're gonna be. You know? And I feel that some women are the same way. But I don't have any issues when it comes to little things like that.

I learned how to have a boundary and limits. Because—don't get me wrong, I love my job and I get along with the guys—there are times where I'm like, "No. You're not going to talk to me like that." Or like, "No, I'm going to leave the room and we'll revisit this argument or discussion because you're not going to push my buttons, and I don't want to push yours." But it took a while for me to get there and learn. And that probably comes from being in the military.

And Now, the 20th Year

I just started my twentieth year. This past December 19, was the start of year twenty. I became a firefighter December 19, 2002, and then, got promoted, to captain, May 11, 2011. A few of us, actually. Bernie Grilletti, Audra Carter, Baron Ballester, Vinnie DePinto, a few more people.

During my twenty-year career, I have moved around to different houses. When I first came on as a firefighter, I was at 1313 Washington. We call [that house] "Hollywood." *[Laughs.]* At the time, they had re-done it—'cause there was a fire in that house—so it was all fancy. Not anymore. But that's why we called it Hollywood. And it's on Washington Street, so it's a lot of sight-seeing, and people get to see you. All of that good stuff.

So I was in Hollywood for two years, and then I moved to Eighth and Clinton. I was there for about five years. Eighth and Clinton is rescue, across the street from the high school. That's where I got a lot of my technical training. I got qualified as a rescue. We did classes, Hazmat, breaching and breaking, lifting and moving. I did a lot of classes in Lakehurst, New Jersey, which is a big place where a lot of fire departments train. For different things—like September 11th. They'll have a pile of rubble, and a bus turned over, or a car turned over, and we did that type of training. I did that when I first came on. I had two great captains at the time: Moe Andreula and Brian Green. Also Joe Nardello, uptown. They were all born and raised in Hoboken. Phil Picinich, was another one of my captains—because I stationed in different houses.

They're all retired now. Moe Andreula, Phil Picinich, Danny Cunning, John Cunning—both of them, Danny and John, were my captains. And then they became battalion chiefs while I was on the job. They were great [at] training. When I came on the fire department, it was a really big transition at the time. [There were] a lot of old school, very old Hoboken, like all of these guys—even the youngest guys. And we were trained by these older, old school mentality guys, who got a lot of fires. Because they were here at the time of all the fires. Frank Daliani, he's still on the job, I love him. He's one of my favorite captains; he's one of the best captains on the job. These are the guys that trained us.

So the fire department was in the middle of this transition, old school to new school. When I got hired,



ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT: Captain Phil Picinich and Peggy, 2005. Peggy and some of her crew, Hoboken Fire Department, 2015.

Chief Cassesa was chief, and Frank Palmisano, he was a captain at the time. He was very important to my hiring process also. And they were just really great.

Now the job is really different; they're all gone. We have a very young generation of officers. But I think the officers, that includes myself and other people, we still have that old training and mentality, because of those guys. Where the new guys, who are going to become captains—they'll learn from us, but they'll never experience the things we experienced. I think that's going to happen to every generation.

[Are the younger ones more accepting of me as a female firefighter?] Yes. That is a difference, a big difference. The one thing that I will say, even when I first came on, and it was really tough for Audra and I, 'til we came to being accepted, I think the accepting part came when we had a couple of fires. And we were there. We were, "Alright, we're not leaving. We're here, and we're going to do the same thing you're doing." And that's how you earn your respect. You earn your respect because you do what you're supposed to do.

[Yes, there were incidents, in the beginning, where there was uncertainty of how it would go.] I'll give you a perfect example, like one of the first times I had to go up the stairs, [and I had] to carry one of these high rise packs up many floors. I was like, what is going on? Like, I need help with this. It was probably one of the first times I ever picked up a bag. I was like, Why am I carrying this? I didn't understand, and I needed help. And I had a couple of guys who helped me. And that was like a transition, and also an eye-opener. Like, wait a minute, Peg, you've got to carry this thing. It was like a lightbulb goes off. They carry it on their own, you have to, too. And then you just work on it. It's like, it's okay, I'm carrying it. It just takes a little bit of practice, maybe a mistake or two. And you do make mistakes on this job.

They're going to see, is she going to carry this up the stairs or is she going to do this, is she going to do it correctly? And I get that now, but I didn't get it then. [Some of those guys were waiting for me to screw up.] And believe me, I know it, because I experienced it a couple of times. Where the younger generation is not like that. The guys that come on now, they don't understand the job without women. They're like, "That's Peggy," "That's Audra." We have another firefighter who just joined. "Oh, that's Ashley." It doesn't click in their heads: There's not supposed to be women here.

But those old school guys taught me a lot. They had knowledge, and eventually, when I was accepted, they didn't want me to fail. [It took] a couple of years—two, maybe three years. Then it was like, you're going to do it. We're going to figure this out together.

After-Effects of the Fires

Coming on the job, I saw it, [how those fires from the 1970s and 80s weighed on the firefighters]. I see it now. Captain Daliani is probably the oldest person [I know as a captain]. He's still on the job. I still talk to Phil Picinich and Frankie-boy. There's a lot of guys from the past. I remember Mr. Wallington, who lives downstairs from me now. I talk to him all the time, and he says it was heartbreaking. He said it was tough; you didn't know what was going on. You couldn't understand it, you saw all these people being displaced. These little kids, hurt. All these things, we carried that all the time, and I think [that was] one of the reasons why—not anymore, I don't think—firemen had a hard time, and they drink hard, and they party hard. It was a tough, tough life. I would talk to them and you would see it in them. You would see it on their faces, and the stories... I think, now I'm older, but when I was younger, I kind of take it for granted, too. When I was older, and I became a firefighter, I was like "I remember the fires" but until I got in my first fire, it was like, "Wait a minute, Peggy, *do* you remember?" It's a tough career. When it's active. When bad things happen, it's hard. It's a really tough career. But it's also, I think, rewarding.

It's stressful, in your head, as a firefighter. Always thinking, am I doing the right thing? Am I making the right decision? And you're always worried about the guys that you're kind of leading. 'Cause you want to make sure that they get home safe, all the time. So that is a stressor. And I think you think about it even when you're not working. That's one of the reasons why they

always say, exercise, and do mindfulness [exercises], things for yourself. Take care of yourself. Because when you're in a firehouse for those 24 hours, you're thinking... especially as an officer, you're thinking ten steps ahead. What's going to happen today? Are we going to go here? Is this gonna happen? A gas call, are you worried? If you go on a carbon monoxide call, let me make sure that there's absolutely no CO here. You don't want to leave and think, I'm going to leave these tenants here. If something's wrong.

It affects all of us. You never want to lose somebody in a fire, ever. We worked the fire on 12th and Washington where the young kid passed away—Applied Housing. I worked that fire, and that was a really sad event, you know. It's a tough thing. To see people lose—to see people lose *everything*. Their material possessions, right? But even worse is losing a life.

[Is there a connection between my becoming a firefighter and the fires of the 1980s?] There might be. I think so, a little bit. You know, when I was growing up, in the 80s and as a kid, I looked up to the firemen. I used to see them and I used to be in awe of them. There were times I wouldn't even talk to them because I was so... I used to think, when I was younger, that you weren't allowed to talk to them. Maybe because I put them on a pedestal. You can't talk to them. They're too important for us to talk to. So I do think that seeing what happened in the 80s and these guys do this admirable job, it was like, I would love to do that. Never in a million years did I think I would do it though. But I think that was a part of it, yeah.

Time For More Female Firefighters

You know what's so funny, I did it [joined the fire department] and I didn't think about it. I wasn't thinking, I'm making this huge change, impact, or ... I just wasn't. For me, maybe because I was in the military, the transition was like, this is normal. I didn't realize that it wasn't normal, until I was really in it, I think. Until a couple of years, and I was like, "Holy shit, this is a big thing." I see it a lot when I see little girls.

I honestly feel the reason there are not more females is because I don't think women think this is a possibility for them. I think being a firefighter and sometimes, being a police officer, more so being a firefighter, is just, it's kind of like playing football, right? The NFL. That's just a man's sport. And that's the way people see it, and that's it. I feel like firefighting is such a strong, physical... and I'm going to say 90 percent of the time, all you see is men. You don't see women. We don't have fire gear that's catered to women.

So I think now, in 2022, even the fire service is thinking about it. Like before, when I became a firefighter, it wasn't like these pants are for women and these are for men. I was wearing the same pants, I was wearing the same bulky gloves, I still wear all that stuff. Now, they're starting to think, women are built differently, and their gloves should be built differently. Now they're trying to make the changes. To be inclusive to women. But when I first came on, it wasn't very inclusive.

[Right now there's] just an open call. But I was having this conversation with my chief, Audra, and we were saying that we should try [to reach out to more women].

We would like to. Audra and I do talk every year to the kids at the Hoboken High School. This last year we had to do it virtually, but quite a few kids attended, and they asked us questions. That was a really fun event. But I feel like we should do more. I need to do more. Audra wants to do more. Women don't try it because they don't think it's a choice. And if you're not making an effort to reach out to them, they're not gonna do it.



ABOVE: Some of Peggy's crew, Hoboken Fire Department, 2021.

BELOW: Detail from a Certificate of Appointment for Firemen of Hoboken, New Jersey, ca. 1870-90. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.



The Hoboken Oral History Project

“Vanishing Hoboken,” an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to consequent “vanishing” of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken’s industrial base relocated over the 1970s and ’80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992.

In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken’s row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, in which affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, “Vanishing Hoboken”—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken”

chapbooks. Since 2002, thirty-six chapbooks—including this one—have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets “chapbooks,” a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the “Vanishing Hoboken” series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the “manners and morals” of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Spanish Baked Chicken and White Rice

ONE OF PEGGY'S RECIPES FOR HER FIREHOUSE CREW

SPANISH BAKED CHICKEN

- 4 tbsp oil
- 8 pieces chicken legs, thighs and/or bone in breasts
- 3 tbsp *Adobo* seasoning
- Freshly ground pepper
- 5 oz Puerto Rican *Sofrito*
- 3 tsp *Sazón* seasoning
- 1/2 tsp ground cumin

- Season with above ingredients and refrigerate for 3-4 hours.
- Bake at 350° for 20 minutes then raise oven temperature to 425° for another 15-20 minutes or until internal temperature reaches 165°.

WHITE RICE: STANDARD

- 3 cups of white rice (*arroz canilla*)
- 5 cups of water
- 1 tsp salt
- 3 tbsp of Goya oil

- Mix all ingredients in a *caldero*.
- Cook on high heat until water starts boiling and then lower to medium low heat and cover rice. Should be done in 45-60 minutes.

Key to making any Puerto Rican rice is to use a "*caldero*" (Puerto Rican Rice Pot) or a cooking cauldron. A *caldero* is made of cast iron and allows the rice to cook uniform and also creates a crispy bottom layer to *caldero* known as "*pegao*."



