



Part IV - African American Neighborhoods and Businesses Destroyed

Excerpt from Housing Segregation Report

1. Highway Construction and Other African American Displacement:

In the 1960's and early 1970's, a number of major highways were built in Hampton Roads: I 264 (1960), I 464 (1968), and I 664 (1972). Even though in 1970, 70% of the population was white, most of these highways ran through majority Black neighborhoods. Although this increased mobility for those with automobiles, it decreased mobility for those living in those neighborhoods by cutting them off from parks, schools, and jobs. An example of a minority community cut off by major thoroughfares is the St. Paul's area in Norfolk. It is divided from downtown Norfolk on the west by St. Paul's Boulevard, on the north by Virginia Beach Boulevard, and on the East by Tidewater Drive.

Richmond offers other examples of Black neighborhoods split by highway construction in the guise of "Neighborhood Revitalization" and "Urban Renewal". These are described poignantly in Benjamin Campbell's book, *Richmond's Unhealed History*.

Over the next thirty-five years, (beginning in 1946) in the name of urban renewal, the (all-white) city council pursued a plan that destroyed or invaded every major black neighborhood in the city. The neighborhoods included Apostle Town, Jackson Ward and Navy Hill in the north; 17th Street, portions of Church Hill and Fulton in the east; Oak Grove and Blackwell in the south and the Black west end (Randolph); Penitentiary Bottom and Carver in the West.

Residents were given \$700 with no other support for relocation. They were given priority for the new housing but many did not want to live in what they considered unattractive and socially demeaning places. "The result of the massive clearance was the destruction of most major black neighborhoods. In the decade of the 50's, the city destroyed 4,700 units of housing in black neighborhoods and replaced them with 1,760 units of public housing."

Campbell describes in detail how Jackson Ward was split in half by the construction of I-95. To get around two public referenda opposing the construction through the historically significant

black neighborhood, in 1954, the all-white General Assembly created the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike Authority and gave it eminent domain. Four months later, the Authority announced the highway would be built through Jackson Ward.

As many as 1,000 homes of African Americans lay in the path of the proposed expressway. Residents of Jackson Ward, who were not represented in the City Council or on the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike Authority, were powerless to stop the destruction of their historic neighborhood. The highway cut a barrier canyon the width of a city block through the middle of the neighborhood, from east to west, separating half of it from the center city, eliminating pedestrian pathways, and blocking thirty-one streets.

Campbell cites several other similar examples of black neighborhoods being destroyed in the guise of urban renewal.

In Norfolk, issues of strict segregation and the scarcity of affordable housing for Black citizens were clearly related to attempts to avoid integrating the schools despite federal mandates to do so. For example, in 1955 a group of Black developers “had already platted the Broad Creek Shores subdivision and had a number of houses under construction.” The city of Norfolk annexed that area to isolate the black development from nearby white neighborhoods and used its powers of eminent domain for a park and possible school expansion, “neither of which was ever built on the site.” (White, p. 198 Forrest R.”Hap” White (2018) *Black, White and Brown*. Parke Press, Norfolk.)

Similarly, about the same time that a federal judge was ordering the desegregation of Patrick Henry Elementary School in the Atlantic City portion of the city, a working class racially integrated area, the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority announced that it planned to demolish the entire neighborhood. (White p. 199) In just 16 months, the homes of almost twenty thousand working-class white families and a few black residents—roughly 10% of its population were demolished. Neither Broad Creek nor Atlantic City had been slums, and most of the dwellings met the city’s minimum housing code. Both these areas “were rushed into the demolition phase so quickly that portions of the cleared land sat vacant for close to three decades. (White, pp. 202-203)

Black businesses were also displaced in Williamsburg. In a recent article that appeared in the *Williamsburg Yorktown Daily*, <https://wydaily.com/local-news/2021/02/08/paying-the-price-how-williamsburgs-black-business-sector-died-in-the-20th-century-2/>, the story is told of how the Triangle Black Business block was destroyed and Black businesses displaced in the 70’s again under the guise of urban

renewal and efforts to increase tourism in Colonial Williamsburg. In the mid-20th century, the Triangle Area was home to Black barbers, store owners and the only hospital in the area serving African Americans. The story was kept alive by Latasha Holloway whose grandmother and other relatives owned businesses in the area and who kept articles and stories that she donated to William and Mary. Hollway said her grandmother told her Blacks started businesses because they were not welcome in white establishments and told her that she was personally denigrated by a white business owner as she tried to try on a hat. “Holloway said her grandmother told stories of that time and the fight Black business owners put up against the city to try and preserve their properties. Part of the issue was that Black business owners continuously asked the city for improvements to the area but were never granted any. The city then used language such as “substandard” or “blighted” to describe the area, which allowed for a certain amount of grants to redevelop the Triangle Block.”

“Plans to redevelop the area started in the 1950s when a comprehensive plan designed the Triangle Block as the site of a bus terminal and single-family housing units. The comprehensive plan was updated in 1968 and recommended the area for “Tourist Commercial” land use and considered how the area would serve tourists since it was so close to Colonial Williamsburg.” Despite protests and articles in the paper by the Black community, this area and other nearby areas were redeveloped and Black businesses were pushed out.

In the City of Roanoke, urban Renewal (the term Slum Clearance was used in record books) began in 1955 and lasted more than 26 years. Most of Urban Renewal occurred in the primarily black neighborhoods. People were promised “that they were going to fix it up and make it beautiful for the people” 1600 homes were demolished, 200 businesses owned by persons of color and 24 churches attended by primarily people of color were demolished. Businesses were built in the cleared areas and eventually public housing was erected. However, there were reports that owners of property had trouble getting paid for their land. (Roanoke Times and World News Special Section by Mary Bishop Jan 29, 1995 *Urban Renewal*)