

What Effect Did the Development of the Interstate Highway System Have on the Socio-
Economic Growth of Richmond, Virginia?

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A: Plan of Investigation

President Dwight D. Eisenhower enabled widespread construction of a national highway system in the United States following the passage of the Federal Aid Highway act of 1956. Conceived during Cold War tensions, the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways was intended as an effective transportation system not only for the civilian population, but for efficient military ground movement in the event of a future war or invasion. Virginia, like many states, began experiencing a motor vehicle boom during this time; the construction of new highways would not only reduce traffic, but accommodate urban growth. For the city of Richmond, construction of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike had a profound effect on its population and the surrounding metropolitan area. This investigation answers the question: what effect did the development of the interstate highway system have on the socio-economic growth of Richmond, Virginia? An analysis of specific goals as presented by the *Community Renewal Program 1966* on socio-economic impact of urban development for the city accommodates actual statistical data regarding housing developments, demographic shifts, and increased poverty levels. These numbers and phenomena such as “white flight” are explained by various socio-economic effects of the construction of the highway system beginning in the 1960s. In addition to the *Community Renewal Program 1966*, *Twentieth Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race* was noted in section C, Evaluation of Sources, and evaluated for its origin, purpose, value, and limitation.

B: Summary of Evidence

The decades of the 50's and 60's following World War II highlighted racial segregation and urban decay that affected the metropolitan area within and surrounding Richmond

detrimentally.¹ Disparity among social classes highlighted antagonism between white “suburbanites” and those living within city poverty.² “White flight” consisting of the migration of the white, middle class demographic into suburbia subsequently caused the displacement of black people from neighborhoods³, where they became neglected.⁴ Radical development in forms such as the construction of interstate highway system was introduced within the 1946 Master Plan for Richmond, consisting of a major restructure of the predominantly black residential area at the time - Jackson Ward.⁵

The 1956 Interstate Highway Act enabled the facility of movement between counties surrounding inner cities through automobiles, fully entrapping the lower class to mobility only allowed by means of public transportation.⁶ Immediately following the construction of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike, over 1,000 homes were geographically located along the proposed highway⁷ and 7,000 people were immediately displaced.⁸ Over the next decades, a shift in tax base for development of suburbia, rather than the city also resulted.⁹

The “Community Renewal Program 1966” outlined specific goals for urban development within the following decades. Economically, it strived to “attract industrial development within the city and in suburban areas so as to provide employment opportunities for the ever increasing Richmond labor.”¹⁰ It also attempted to address social issues prevalent within the time period;

1. Campbell, Benjamin. *Richmond's Unhealed History*, (Richmond: Brandylane Publishers, Inc., 2012), 152.

2. Avila, Eric and Mark Rose. "Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal: An Introduction." *Journal of Urban History*. 35 (2009): 339. Accessed April 7, 2013.

3. Campbell, 159.

4. Rogers, Michael. "Remembering the Controversy of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike: Politics, Rhetoric and Visions of Progress." (2011): 62. Accessed April 7, 2013.

5. Silver, Christopher and John Moeser. *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1968*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 148. Accessed December 12, 2013.

6. Nicolaides, Becky and Andrew Wiese. *The Suburb Reader*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 402.

7. Campbell, 154.

8. Silver, Christopher, *Twentieth Century Richmond Planning Politics and Race*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 185.

9. Campbell, 197.

10. *Community Renewal Program 1966*, (Richmond: City Council of Richmond, 1966), 6.

essentially, it sought to “free parents and pupils from the isolation of poverty...by enlarging their cultural opportunities.”¹¹ The city wished, furthermore, “[to] accommodat[e] people living closely together...The physical facilities...must be designed to meet the needs of all of its people regardless of age, sex, race, religion or financial circumstance.”¹²

In 1994, the Social, Economic and Housing Profile for Henrico County, Virginia was created to compare, quantitatively, socio-economic growth in different counties within Virginia. In 1980, Henrico contained 50,600 households, which increased to 60,000 in 1990. 38,600 households in 1980 within Chesterfield increased to 58,900 in 10 years; for Richmond city, the number of households conversely decreased – from 52,200 in 1980 to 47,300 in 1990.¹³ Richmond also experienced an increase in poverty levels during the time period; in 1980, the city’s 19.3% poverty rate increased to 20.9% in 1990 – a 1.6% increase. However, in Henrico and Chesterfield County, both experienced an overall decrease – 14.3% and 6.5%, respectively.¹⁴

Richmond city’s population declined in conjunction with increased poverty levels and decreased housing units. In 1950, the city was named the 46th largest urban area in the United States – with a population of 230,310. In 1980, it was the 64th largest urban region, with a population of 219,214. Population continued to decline; by 1990, the city only contained slightly more than 200,000 people.¹⁵

C: Evaluation of Sources

11. *Community Renewal Program 1966*, 6.

12. *Community Renewal Program 1966*, 6.

13. *Social, Economic and Housing Profile for Henrico County, Virginia*, (Richmond: Bureau of the Census, 1994), 8.

14. *Social, Economic and Housing Profile for Henrico County, Virginia*, 12.

15. "Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990," United States Census Bureau, last modified May 21, 2012, accessed April 7, 2013, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html>.

A Community Renewal Program 1966 was published by the Richmond City Council as a statement of addressing specific objectives for all citizens in terms of city renewal and coordination of all city activities. This source was valuable, not only because it addressed the intended purpose of development of highway systems or specific economic and social goals for Richmond, but because these goals led to evaluation of the true impact of the Richmond-Petersburg turnpike of economic and social conditions on the city. This *Renewal Program* was evaluated specifically and served to structure the main argument present within the analysis. A limitation was the lack of charts or diagrams showing the intended results or effects of the stated goals. It did not specify the regions of Richmond city the highway would have eventually impacted, nor depict the potential loss of homes incurred by its development. Effectively, these goals focused on the positive aspects of highway construction, without weighing the negative aspects at the same time.

Richmond's Unhealed History was written by Reverend Benjamin Campbell, a former director of the Richmond Urban Institute and Home Base, Incorporated – a low-income housing initiative - to account Richmond's history from the earliest days of Jamestown to 2010. The source was valuable, within specific chapters; urban development in areas surrounding Richmond and the decline of the city were detailed in terms of social and economic factors. These took form from phenomena including “white flight” affecting the population of Richmond and shift in spending to the development of other highways. Reprints of primary photographs within the time period - as well as various charts, diagrams, and graphs, further strengthened the explanations of highway development on socio-economic growth of the city. However, its limitation lies in the strength of information regarding specific economic impacts of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike on Richmond. A broad generalization of impact of developing

superhighways in surrounding jurisdictions was provided, yet there was a lack of depth regarding how that may have affected Richmond in comparison to the social effects of highways.

D: Analysis

The “Community Renewal Program 1966” set a goal “[to] accommodat[e] people living closely together” yet failed to accommodate the growth of the black population - specifically within Jackson Ward.¹⁶ Immediate results seen within Richmond as a result of highway construction caused animosity between the white and black population. Failed attempts by the government to readjust neighborhood demographics following the highway’s construction affected over 20,000 people in the long term, mostly black, in the early 1960s.¹⁷ Michael Rogers cites this as Richmond’s prime example of cultural and communal destruction, seen especially within the still predominantly black Jackson Ward district in the downtown area.¹⁸

The decrease in housing units following this displacement and subsequent destruction of neighborhoods began, according to Christopher Silver, a foregoing migration of black people into traditionally white neighborhoods. Yet, rather than living in co-existence, “white flight” took place, hastening the migration of the white, middle class demographic into Henrico and Chesterfield counties.¹⁹ As seen by statistical data, social decay set up numerous adverse effects in Richmond – including an increase in poverty level. Between 1980 and 1990, the city experienced a 1.6% poverty increase. However, in Henrico and Chesterfield County, both experienced an overall decrease – 14.3% and 6.5%, respectively.²⁰

16. *Community Renewal Program 1966*, 5.

17. Silver and Moeser, 148.

18. Rogers, 62.

19. Campbell, 159.

20. *Social, Economic and Housing Profile for Henrico County, Virginia*, 12.

Prevalent social issues such as “the isolation of poverty” as stated within the “Community Renewal Program 1966” were not resolved as a result of the highway construction.²¹ Beginning in 1956, the Interstate Highway Act facilitated movement between Richmond and neighboring jurisdictions seeing rapid development. Automobiles essentially prevented the lower class from long distance travel; their social status limited them to using public transportation which itself was limited in giving mobility. Suburbanization, as a result, was partially spurred by desires to maintain racial homogeneity.²² Equal economic opportunities were then lost, further evincing a lack of improvement to economic conditions within Richmond.

Consequently, the reality of desire to improve economic conditions for the city and the suburbs as to increase industrialization in both instead resulted in a shift in tax base for development mainly in suburban regions – where growth was largely occurring.²³ Taxes were also allocated to the development of other highways that linked the city to surrounding jurisdictions, such as Henrico and Chesterfield with both I-295 and I-288, respectively.

A shift in tax base reciprocally contributed to the phenomenon of “white flight” just as much as the other way around.²⁴ Over \$1 billion was spent to accommodate growth in neighboring counties to increase commercialization and industrialization; however, in Richmond, spending was refused by state and federal governments.²⁵ People moved out of the city and into suburban neighborhoods, where commercialization created a wide array of jobs, explaining a decline in the city’s population from 1950 to 1980.

E: Conclusion

21. *Community Renewal Program 1966*, 6.

22. Avila, Eric and Mark Rose, 340.

23. Campbell, 197.

24. Campbell, 185.

25. Campbell, 186.

The construction of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike and other highways such as I-295 and I-288 profoundly impacted suburbanization, population, and growth in the city. The facilitation of automobiles as an effective method of transportation proved as a valuable asset to a growing white population in surrounding regions of a central city, yet solidified that the city as an urban region – in the case of Richmond - experienced adverse effects in terms of increased poverty levels, decreased housing development, limited black population mobility, and ultimately detrimental socio-economic impacts. Impact of the highway system largely created socio-economic disparity between the predominantly black community within Richmond and the outgoing white population. Instead of largely impacting positive growth of the city, the development of highway systems proved otherwise, as it occurred at a time when racial segregation, shifting of business interests, increased interest for suburban areas, and quality of schools shifted the overall demographics into surrounding jurisdictions of the metropolitan city.

F: Sources

Avila, Eric and Mark Rose, "Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal: An Introduction", *Journal of Urban History*. 35 (2009): 335-347, accessed April 7, 2013.

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