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One Sunday morning, several weeks ago, I attended Six Mount Zion Baptist Church in downtown Richmond, Virginia. The thriving and passionate congregation gathered in the historic Jackson Ward building to remember the life of Reverend Dr. A.W. Brown. I was warmly welcomed and embraced. The worship service began with songs of praise and concluded two and half hours later. During that service held on January 26, 2014, the congregation celebrated the work of Reverend Dr. A. W. Brown and a few others, without whom the church would not exist today. Because of tumultuous events of the 1950's, this historic church, along with most of Jackson Ward, was slated for demolition ¹.

One of the untold stories in Richmond's history is the construction of the Richmond-Petersburg Expressway through downtown Richmond in the late 1950's. After World War II, the stage was set for what became known as urban renewal. In America's effort to modernize its cities, to reflect postwar lifestyle changes, the term Urban Renewal was used to describe the desire to reconstruct the American city ². City planners were brought in to draw up plans for development, highways were built, and consequential decisions were made. Richmond, with the authorization of the General Assembly of Virginia, created the Richmond Housing Authority, which has the authority to condemn property and issue bonds to construct housing. The primary focus of urban renewal became African American housing. Richmond, like many American

¹ Campbell , Benjamin. *Richmond's Unhealed History* . Brandylane Publishers, Inc. , 2012.156.

² Silver , Christopher. *Twentieth-Century Richmond:Planning, Politics, and Race* . Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984.

cities in the 1950s, destroyed downtown black communities, businesses, and neighborhoods in the name of urban renewal.

A major part of urban renewal was the construction of highways. Cities began to face various transportation problems and traffic congestion, due to greater car ownership and the growth of businesses in the city, which brought about the need for modern expressways, bridges and thoroughfares. Highways rose as a powerful force in shaping the physical landscape of both cities and rural places in the United States. In addition to contributing to the landscape and shape of the cities, highways became a political statement and a remaining an artifact of local histories³. Highways were promoted as public works projects to benefit the city and provide for future needs. What people did not fully realize was that instead of centralizing the city, like railroads, which brought people into the city, highways decentralized the city. In addition, highways escalated the flight of higher income earning residents to suburbs and displaced others. While most people see the highway as just another road, it can be viewed as a historical artifact of the 1950's.

Beginning in 1893, the Federal government formed a group, which later would be know as the Federal Highway Administration, for the purpose of managing the funds and overall design and construction of what would become the interstate system. The Federal Aid Act of 1944 initiated the national system of highways. This system would be a 40,000 mile network that connected areas of populations of 300,000 or more. Cities across America were given money for highways without consideration of where they would be built. So, Richmond, like many other cities in the 1950's, took this opportunity to not only build highways but also to try to restore the

³ Rogers, Michael "Remembering the Controversy of the Richmond Petersburg Turnpike: Politics, Rhetoric, and Visions of Progress." Paper presented at Interdisciplinary Studies: American City, The University of Richmond, Spring 2011.

city by modernizing and renovating dilapidated areas. City planners saw this time as an opportunity to clear out an area of Richmond known as Jackson Ward. The building of I-95 in the 1950's through downtown Richmond, Virginia displaced African American homeowners and increased racial animosity between Richmond residents that has yet to heal. For the purposes of this paper, the section of Interstate 95 that is being referred to is the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike and the terms interstate, expressway, and highway will be used interchangeably.

Jackson Ward, often referred to as "the Harlem of the South", was a thriving and booming community in the 1920's. It was considered the Wall Street of Black America. Jackson Ward was recognized as the center of Black enterprise and entertainment in the 1920s through 1940s and was therefore an important center of national Black economics and cultural activity. Churches served as the center of life in Jackson Ward.⁴ Out of Jackson Ward came many who impacted not only Richmond, but were also known across America. Arthur Ashe, a national tennis star, grew up and lived in Jackson Ward. Also from this area was the tap dancer and singer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, who became a national sensation. Maggie Walker, another Jackson Ward resident, became the first woman of any race to found and become president of an American bank in 1902.⁵

After World War II, Richmond planners embraced the concept of a comprehensive city plan. These proposals would change the physical landscape of the city with little input from city residents. Harland Bartholomew and Ladisias Segoe, new northern planning professionals, brought their ideas and plans to Richmond. Bartholomew's firm was the primary consulting firm

⁴ Felton, Ameesha. "Struggling to Revive Business in Jackson Ward ." VCU School of Mass Communications:Multimedia Journalism (2011), <http://mmj.vcu.edu/2011/04/12/struggling-to-revive-business-in-jackson-ward/>

⁵ Landphair, Ted. "Richmond's Jackson Ward Abounds in Black History." VOA. <http://www.voanews.com/content/richmonds-jackson-ward-abounds-in-black-history-83907022/162642.html>

for the document called “A Master Plan for the Physical Development of the City”. The Richmond Master Plan of 1946 turned into a general move to undo the city of Richmond as it existed in 1946.⁶ The four pillars of the Master Plan included a civic center proposal, strengthened zoning ordinances, a neighborhood redevelopment strategy, and the reconstruction and enlargement of the street system. While all four of these were important to the city planners, the demands of the automobile and improved access to the central city for businessmen captured their greatest attention.

As the City Council of Richmond drafted the Master Plan of 1946, a very controversial question arose; “Where should the expressway be placed?” The city planners of 1946 knew that a connecting highway would need to run through downtown Richmond, the question was where to place it. Quickly, the highway became the focus of the Master Plan and according to a Richmond Times Dispatch article published on January 24, 1967, “No single issue in the past 12 years has caused more controversy.”⁷ The proponents for the highway largely consisted of downtown business men and city planners. Historian Christopher Silver, the author of *Twentieth Century Richmond*, said “The 1946 plan included a number of specific recommendations to balance the demands of increased automobile traffic with the goal of preserving central-city neighborhoods.” Unfortunately, the central city neighborhood, Jackson Ward, would ultimately not be preserved in the city’s master plan. Because the six lane expressway would run through the center, Jackson Ward would lose it’s historical claim as the heart of Richmond’s Black community. (see Image 1) To city planners, easier access to downtown outweighed the loss of an

⁶ Rogers, Michael “Remembering the Controversy of the Richmond Petersburg Turnpike: Politics, Rhetoric, and Visions of Progress.” Paper presented at Interdisciplinary Studies: American City, The University of Richmond, Spring 2011.

⁷ Silver, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984. 185.

important inner city neighborhood. On the other hand, African Americans and middle and working class whites greatly opposed it. Their voice was not only barely heard, but was often ignored by the authors of the Master Plan.

University of Richmond historian Michael Rogers wrote, “The local government did everything possible to prepare the idea of the plan before it was finally received by the people who would be the most affected by the changes proposed.”⁸ Although the first draft of the Master Plan, the Royer Plan created immediate and strong protest, the City Council continued to push it. Ladislas Segoe slightly revised the Royer Plan in attempt to earn public approval and called the new version the Segoe Plan. The City Council unanimously voted to submit the Segoe Plan to a referendum after two heated public hearings. Before the referendum in the fall of 1950, highway opponents campaigned for an alternate route running through or east of Shockoe Valley. This route was to the east of the business district and would dislocate far fewer homes or businesses. Opponents disliked the midtown route, not the overall idea of the highway. Highway proponents accused the opposition of just wanting to pick a fight with the city’s government. The campaign for the alternate route was shot down by the City Council and the referendum took place.

One issue that arose with the referendum was the limiting of public voices. Rather than welcoming the public’s input, referendums often used language that was not only confusing, but was easily misunderstood by the residents who would be affected. During the campaign for the referendum, it was revealed that 200 black families would be displaced. The expressway plan was rejected by an overwhelming margin, with only 8 out of 55 precincts voting in favor of it.

⁸ Rogers, Michael “Remembering the Controversy of the Richmond Petersburg Turnpike: Politics, Rhetoric, and Visions of Progress.” Paper presented at Interdisciplinary Studies: American City, The University of Richmond, Spring 2011.

The City Council, unconvinced by the results, called for further study and a new plan. Segoe created a new version of the expressway plan where the highway still ran through the heart of Jackson Ward. Segoe rejected the idea of the highway running through Shockoe Valley or a bypass claiming the ideas had been rejected by engineers. In the second referendum, Blacks and middle class whites outvoted highway proponents by a margin of six thousand votes. Again rejected by voters, the City Council decided to create a new method to pass their expressway proposal.

On August 24, 1953, the City Council voted to invoke special authority to build a toll highway. In other words, the City Council transferred control of the expressway construction to an independent turnpike authority, the Richmond Petersburg Turnpike Authority. In doing this, the council took the extraordinary step of transferring their representative authority to a non-elected body and thereby eliminating the risk of losing another referendum.

The highway controversy escalated then into a battle of rhetoric. The two main groups fighting this battle were the Richmond Expressway Council and the Richmond City Council. On a large scale, it was a battle to test the city's progressive leadership and their ability to dictate the city's development policy. The City Council, the body of officials that instigated the political battle, advocated and pushed for the building of the highway through Jackson Ward. Out of eight City Council members, Robert C. Throckmorton and F. Henry Garber were the two exceptions by opposing the expressway plans in City Council meetings. In addition to Throckmorton and Garber, the Richmond Expressway Council, along with local train and bus companies, protested the highway plan⁹. Lastly, the largest group to protest were the Black residents of Jackson

⁹ Silver, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984. 189.

Ward. Their voices were not only ignored but due to the at large system of voting, they did not have representation in the City Council.

During this battle of rhetoric, the purpose and value of the highway were discussed. Residents questioned the intent of the highway plan and wondered whether it was to truly benefit them or outsiders. The opposition argued that the expressway would not help city dwellers but rather help those traveling through Richmond. The City Council still held to the idea that it would make Richmond a superior and more accessible city. Another issue for debate was the cost of its construction. Highway proponents claimed that the highway was already funded with taxes paid by residents. In reply, opponents said it was a rejection of their own money because they did not support how their tax money was being used. Opponents also believed the high cost of both the destruction of residential areas and expensive construction were valid reasons for not building it.

Impacted residents appealed to the newly formed Richmond Petersburg Turnpike Authority (RPTA), who controlled the situation, to move the highway just a few feet from their homes. They realized it was no longer an option to prevent the highway, so they instead desperately tried to lessen the impact it would have on their neighborhood. As a non-elected body, the RPTA had no obligation to the residents and did not approve their requests¹⁰.

Once the inevitable facts of the expressway plans were fully revealed in 1957, Richmond resisted. Reverend A.W. Brown of Six Mount Zion Baptist Church passionately opposed the expressway plans because his church was at risk of being destroyed and a majority of his

¹⁰ Rogers, Michael “Remembering the Controversy of the Richmond Petersburg Turnpike: Politics, Rhetoric, and Visions of Progress.” Paper presented at Interdisciplinary Studies: American City, The University of Richmond, Spring 2011.

fourteen hundred parishioners would be displaced.¹¹ Four hundred residents signed a petition requesting the western route. The suggested western route followed the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac railroad tracks. With this plan, residents knew that no housing would be taken from their neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the authorities refused this request, replying that it cost more to build through industrial areas. “Proponents of the new highway, drawn principally from leading downtown business leaders, maintained that losses suffered by neighborhoods in the path of construction were the price of progress and added parenthetically that expressway construction helped to rid the city of its worst slums.”¹² Highway supporters not only failed to recognize the burdens and losses that Richmond’s Blacks endured but also put the needs of city businesses before those of homeowners. Planners tried to justify black neighborhood destruction by providing 894 units of public housing for the displaced at Whitcomb and Fairfield Courts. Little did they realize that only a small proportion of those who lived in Jackson Ward would choose public housing as a replacement for their own, familiar homes. Even at that time, public housing was considered a last resort due to the stigma that comes with living in government subsidized housing, and the concentration of poverty that follows. Another problem with offering 894 units of public housing to the displaced was that nearly a thousand homes were destroyed. There would not have been enough housing available even if the displaced had wanted it.

By February 7, 1957, the highway was past the point of politics. Throughout this month, residents were forced to desert their homes so they could be demolished. The next step, which began on March of 1957, was destruction. Anyone who spent time in Jackson Ward during this time knew a disaster had taken place. The once thriving black community, the “Harlem of the

¹¹ Campbell, Benjamin. *Richmond's Unhealed History*. Brandylane Publishers, Inc., 2012. 156.

¹² Silver, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race*. 184.

South” was now deserted and decimated. What most did not realize was that this disaster was not only planned but was preventable. Jackson Ward was cleared and exposed during March and April. (See image 2) The northern side of Jackson Ward was utterly destroyed, leaving Six Mount Zion Baptist Church alone, to stand as a remembrance of that thriving community.

In the summer months of 1957, the moving of earth began. From December 1957 through March 1958, construction of the highway took place. (See image 3) The highway was completed in June of 1958. While it took only 13 months to construct the highway, it would take much longer for the Black community and displaced people to recover. Jackson Ward, the Wall Street of Black America, suffered economic depression after the highway was built. The residents were upset after first being silenced, then rejected, and lastly, displaced. During a time when democracy was supposed to be flourishing, people were not represented by their local government.

Throughout this process, not only was physical space destroyed but also a thriving community and culture. This highway did not help the people of the central city, it displaced them. The highway did not centralize the city, instead it was decentralized. The highway became a path for people and trucks to drive straight through the city of Richmond or to move residents into growing suburbs, leaving the center city to further decay.

The completion of Interstate 95 through Jackson Ward did not end problems for downtown residents. Instead, it created a whole new set of challenges. The people of Jackson Ward were powerless in the wake of their bulldozed historic neighborhood. “The expressway 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 of the city, eliminating pedestrian pathways, and

blocking thirty-one streets.”¹³ The center of the Black community in Richmond was cut in half. The neighborhood did have one small victory: the rescue of historic Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church. Highway authorities had suggested that the historic 1876 church, which had over 1,400 worshipers, be either moved or demolished. But Pastor Dr. A. W. Brown, church secretary Cerelia Johnson, and others fought hard to save their church at the location where it remains today. While driving on Interstate 95, it is hard to miss Six Mount Zion Church because it sits directly on top of the highway. Tragically, the church did lose about one thousand members when the interstate was built. Many more churches and businesses, due to the decreased population, left the once thriving neighborhood.

Over the next several years, public housing was built and offered as a replacement for the residents’ destroyed homes. Richmond placed five out of six public housing projects within a mile of each other. In fact, all of Richmond’s public housing projects were built three miles away from the center of Richmond, causing it to have what is now the sixth highest concentration of public housing among cities with populations over 200,000 in the country¹⁴.

Shortly after the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike was finished, Interstate 64 was built right through what remained of Jackson Ward. Trapped within these six lane highways, an area of poverty was created that would be hard to escape. Local author Benjamin Campbell wrote, “Richmond’s five major public housing projects would thus be completely fenced in by limited access superhighways.” The city government claimed that the highway cleared the “slums” of Richmond and that they were providing poor citizens with better housing. What the city actually accomplished, in addition to displacing the residents of over 1,000 homes, was crowding low-income-earning Black people into concentrated public housing courts. With the land taken

¹³ Campbell , Benjamin. *Richmond's Unhealed History*. Brandylane Publishers, Inc. , 2012. 154.

¹⁴ Campbell , Benjamin. *Richmond's Unhealed History*. Brandylane Publishers, Inc. , 2012. 156.

almost exclusively from Richmond's Black community, it was white Richmond residents who benefited from the new highways, new public facilities, new professional employment centers, and new industrial sites¹⁵.

The development of the expressway system in Richmond hastened white and middle class flight to the suburbs. Now, the expressways served as commuter roads so that suburbanites could work in the city without living downtown. This had a long-lasting detrimental impact on those left in the city. Because suburbanites no longer lived in the city, they escaped high city taxes and educated their kids in non-Richmond Public Schools. The flight of educated, better-earning homeowners to the suburbs was massive.

Richmond in 2014 is still affected by the highway's placement. Most of the displaced residents moved into Church Hill, in the city's East End, which has the highest crime rate in the city and significant economic depression. The value of land dropped significantly near the highway because no one desires a highway in their backyard. Not only is a highway loud and noisy, but it can also be a dangerous threat for families with children. What was once a thriving neighborhood to live in, has now become a hard neighborhood in which to survive.

Some would challenge this argument by bringing up possible benefits of the Interstate highway systems. While it is true that businessmen and suburbanites benefited from the convenient and quick access provided by interstates, the benefits are a paradox. The amount of destruction created by running the interstate through Jackson Ward outweighed the advantages of the downtown businessmen. At its core, the problem is not highways, but where they are placed and the consequences to the community.

¹⁵Campbell, Benjamin. *Richmond's Unhealed History*. Brandylane Publishers, Inc., 2012. 157.

Another possible counter argument is that replacement homes were offered to displaced residents. This is similar to comparing apples and oranges. Peoples' beloved homes can not simply be replaced by uniform government housing units. As stated earlier, most people only chose this housing as a last resort. In contrast, when the government takes land today through rights of eminent domain, compensation is offered. With the compensation, people have the freedom to choose where they would like to live and how to use the money. In the case of Jackson Ward's displaced residents, they were either offered crowded government housing or the prospect of fending for themselves. There was no monetary compensation offered.

Lastly, one might argue that the building of Interstate 95 through Jackson Ward did not increase racial tension. While there was existing racial tension, any time a large group of people have no voice in matters that greatly affect them, there is tension. An all white city council ran a major highway through the historic black neighborhood of Jackson Ward without listening to or considering their voice in the matter. Not only were the residents agitated with no representation but they also lost their homes in the process.

The building of interstate I-95 through Jackson Ward exacerbated existing racial tension in Richmond. Intentional plans destroyed a community. The voice of a large percentage of the population was ignored by the City Council. The construction of a highway led to the destruction of hard won businesses and homes. While nothing can be done to change the past, there are opportunities to recover and rebuild in the future. In order to prevent another event such as the 1950s highway controversy, every citizen needs to have a voice. The reason for a democratic process is to make sure all people are heard.

Richmond citizens today have a chance to make wise decisions. Daily, laws are drafted and decisions made. One current issue has many echoes of the highway debate. There are plans

to build a baseball park stadium on top of the historic downtown neighborhood of Shockoe Bottom. Similarly to the highway, the plan has been intentionally developed without public input. Current Mayor Dwight Jones feared resistance and disagreement with the plan and has tried to pass it quickly before people have time to consider the damage to another historic area.

The idea of a fancy new ballpark sounds exciting, just like the idea of a new, modern roadway once did. But progress has a price. Shockoe Bottom, like Jackson Ward, is an area packed with Black American history, from slavery to freedom. Also, alternate sites are being explored as much as alternate routes were explored for the highway. Like the highway, the public has opposed the plan, yet it is still being pushed by the city government. One difference is the the ballpark has not been built yet. The story of Shockoe Bottom is still being written.

On January 26, 2014, as I walked out of the remembrance service at Six Mount Zion Church, I was thankful for the historic victory won in its preservation. Thankful that Reverend Brown, Cerelia Jones, and others spoke loud enough to not only be heard but also listened to by a City Council known for racial discrimination. Thankful that the church is still here, as a landmark and tribute to the once vibrant neighborhood of Jackson Ward.

Image 1: Regional Highway Plan from the Master Plan of 1946



Image 2: Land next to Six Mount Zion being bulldozed and cleared



Image 3: Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike construction through the center of Jackson Ward

