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
## "To Clear a Rock-Bottom, Low-Density Slum" Using Public Housing Means to Meet Urban Renewal Ends in New Orleans, 1954-1959

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“To Clear a Rock-Bottom, Low-Density Slum”: Using Public Housing Means to Meet Urban  
Renewal Ends in New Orleans, 1954-1959

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science  
in  
Urban Studies

by

Stephanie Lyn Slates

B.A. Harvard College, 2002

May, 2008

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## DEDICATION

I wish to thank the many wonderful individuals who assisted me not only through writing this thesis, but also through my graduate studies at the University of New Orleans. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Marla Nelson and Dr. Renia Ehrenfeucht, both of whom served on my thesis committee and both of whom taught me a great deal during my time at UNO. I am especially grateful for having been able to work with Dr. Arnold Hirsch all four semesters of my master's program. I learned more in his courses and in conversations with him about the structural causes of urban poverty than I had ever hoped to come away understanding. His guidance on my thesis was crucial, and I come away from my time as his student with a new life path of research.

My friends and family also provided essential support to me through the past two years, and I thank them for their patience and kindness as I disappeared for months at a time to finish my thesis while balancing school and work.

Finally, I would like to thank my former fourth grade students at Albert Wicker Elementary School. Seeing what their lives were like at the Iberville and Lafitte housing projects in New Orleans motivated me to pursue this course of study and ultimately write my thesis on public housing in New Orleans. They are my inspiration, and I dedicate this work to them.

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## ABSTRACT

Unlike major cities across the country, New Orleans did not have the power to expropriate property to engage in urban renewal projects after 1954. Yet city officials desperately sought to meet the ends of urban renewal, specifically through public claims of slum clearance and private motivation to speed along neighborhood segregation. Hamstrung in their efforts to move forward with taking residents' homes for private redevelopment, the city worked to reach its urban renewal goals by taking property for public works projects, including public housing. The city's decision to build the Guste and Fischer housing projects represents a case study of how officials, including Mayor deLesseps "Chep" Morrison, the City Planning Commission, and the Housing Authority of New Orleans, worked together to create a more racially separate city in the age of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Keywords: urban renewal, public housing, New Orleans, residential segregation, housing policy

## INTRODUCTION

When the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) demolished the high-rise building of the William J. Fischer Homes housing project on January, 25, 2004, *Times-Picayune* writer Rob Nelson noted that what was once “a symbol of hope for housing-starved residents” had become “an icon of poverty and bloodshed.”<sup>1</sup> Opened in 1965 on the city’s Westbank in Algiers, Fischer housed African-American families who were in dire need of affordable housing in New Orleans. Like its sister project, William J. Guste, Sr. Homes near the Central Business District (CBD), the Fischer site proposed by HANO in the late 1950s represented the city’s attempt to meet the ends of urban renewal through public housing construction. After the Louisiana legislature denied cities the right to expropriate property for private redevelopment in 1954, New Orleans officials creatively built public housing projects to meet their public goal of urban renewal, slum clearance, as well as their private goal, neighborhood segregation.

In “Revisiting the Second Ghetto,” historian Thomas J. Sugrue writes that “to a great extent, in metropolitan America, geography is destiny.”<sup>2</sup> While living in the suburbs today typically grants children access to high-quality public schools, a child residing in a segregated inner-city neighborhood does not share such a rosy future. Research into the effects of residential segregation in high-poverty urban areas concludes that students living in these neighborhoods overwhelmingly receive a less rigorous curriculum, are taught by less qualified teachers, have access to fewer resources, and ultimately suffer higher dropout rates than their

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Nelson, “From Dream to Dust,” *Times-Picayune*, January 24, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, “Revisiting the Second Ghetto,” *Journal of Urban History* 29 (March 2003): 288.



counterparts in more affluent suburban schools.<sup>3</sup> The effects of residential segregation that we see today prove beyond doubt that all too often, geography *is* destiny.

Given the pernicious effects of residential segregation, it is essential to understand the history of how urban areas became increasingly segregated. What federal policies, enacted at the local level in the mid-twentieth century, helped shape today's predominantly minority-occupied urban poor communities? Put more simply, how did the government institutionalize residential racial segregation? While federal housing acts approved between the New Deal and the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954 facilitated this process, the location of public housing institutionalized residential segregation in cities.

An analysis of public housing site selection from urban renewal projects will better inform the ways in which public housing construction maintained, if not outright created, segregated urban neighborhoods in the mid-twentieth century. Not only did the federal government design policy in the mid-twentieth century to exclude black residents from the private housing market, but this policy also allowed local officials to enact urban renewal and public housing policies at the expense of African-American residents, regardless of the city.

Unlike their counterparts in the urban North and South, New Orleans officials could not pursue urban renewal projects due to the Louisiana state legislature revoking cities' eminent domain power in 1954.<sup>4</sup> As such, officials used public housing construction to legally clear slums, which they did not have the option to do through private redevelopment. Although New Orleans city officials utilized public housing construction to meet the stated goal of slum clearance, ultimately their actions ensured that the city conformed to the national trend of

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee, *Why Segregation Matters: Poverty and Educational Inequity* (Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2005), 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> James Roche Andre, "Urban Renewal and Housing in New Orleans: 1949-1962" (master's thesis, Louisiana State University, 1963), 27.

locating public housing for African Americans in majority black neighborhoods, thereby solidifying and institutionalizing residential segregation for generations to come. In the era of *Brown*, this was exactly what city officials intended in order to maintain “separate” though not necessarily “equal” neighborhoods in New Orleans.

Although city officials created the *de jure* segregation of Jim Crow New Orleans through different legal means than Northern counterparts, ultimately the outcome was the same as the *de facto* segregation of the North. Housing policy enacted at the local level, whether in New Orleans, Atlanta, Chicago, or Detroit, concentrated black residents in the inner city, while providing homeownership opportunities for whites in outlying areas. As a result of these policies, city officials, backed by the federal government, denied black families access to high-quality public services, such as public schools, as well as opportunities to accumulate generational wealth through homeownership.

## “TWO TIERS” OF FEDERAL HOUSING POLICY

After a bitter battle between liberal housing reformers and the building and construction industries in the midst of the Great Depression, Congress passed the Housing Act of 1937. This legislation created the United States Housing Authority (USHA) to oversee the construction of low-rent public housing for the poor. In *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era*, Gail Radford describes this battle in detail and explains that the Housing Act of 1937 attempted, rather unsuccessfully, to build off of the Public Works Administration’s housing developments for poor residents during the Depression. Instead, the Act created a “two-tiered” housing policy. The upper tier consisted of subsidized mortgage opportunities administered by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), created in 1934, while the bottom tier encompassed public housing that was “stingy, physically-alienating, and means-tested.”<sup>5</sup> While white city dwellers built equity in the suburbs through the upper tier, the lower tier was typically the only option for black residents seeking housing opportunities in overcrowded black urban neighborhoods.<sup>6</sup>

Racial residential segregation occurring between the New Deal and the early 1960s can best be described as both a “push” of black residents into the central city and a “pull” of white residents to the suburban fringe. White residents were hardly running to safety in the suburbs in what is popularly described as “white flight.” Rather, federal loan programs “pulled” them out of central city areas due to attractive mortgage payments in the suburbs that were often cheaper

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<sup>5</sup> Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 197-98.

<sup>6</sup> Recent research into the contemporary effects of African Americans being denied the opportunity to accumulate generational wealth through home ownership includes: Dalton Conley, *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), Thomas M. Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

than monthly rent in the central city.<sup>7</sup> Federal policy filtered out black residents, regardless of class, from joining white residents in accessing the “upper tier” of new housing in the private market. Instead, policy “pushed” black residents into housing projects in all-black neighborhoods within the city, or, for a lucky few, into “trickle-down” housing in formerly white neighborhoods.

While the “push” of public housing will be the focus of this paper, the “pull” of loan programs for white residents under the FHA is a crucial component to understanding residential segregation. The federal government created the FHA through the National Housing Act of 1934; this agency was primarily responsible for providing mortgage insurance. Created in the midst of the Depression, the goal of the FHA’s insurance program was to make it easier for working families to afford a home by allowing buyers to have a smaller down payment and extend their mortgage payments for longer amounts of time than previously allowed.<sup>8</sup> In promoting homeownership, the federal government hoped that it would also be able to jump-start the construction industry, which had been lagging during the Depression.<sup>9</sup>

The FHA’s loan programs provided affordable homeownership opportunities to whites while systematically denying the same opportunity to African Americans. By refusing to grant loan guarantees in minority-occupied areas, the FHA “exhorted segregation and enshrined it as public policy.”<sup>10</sup> The FHA Underwriting Manual prohibited employees from insuring properties that would promote “inharmonious racial groups” and instead promoted the “stability” of

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 205-6.

<sup>8</sup> R. Allen Hays, *The Federal Government and Urban Housing: Ideology and Change in Public Policy*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, “With or Without Jim Crow: Black Residential Segregation in the United States” in *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 85.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 213.

neighborhoods continuing to be occupied by the same race.<sup>11</sup> Restrictive covenants, until ruled unenforceable by the Supreme Court's verdict in *Shelley v. Kraemer* in 1948, precluded African-Americans from buying homes in neighborhoods occupied by whites. These policies effectively locked black would-be-homeowners out of the "upper tier" of the private housing market. Left with few options, blacks could either purchase over-priced homes abandoned by suburbia-bound whites in transitional neighborhoods within the city or seek out new housing through the "lower tier" of public housing. Either way, the situation relegated African-American families to housing in the urban core.

Discriminatory practices in the private sector meant that "less than 2 percent of all federally insured home loans went to African Americans" between 1949 and 1959.<sup>12</sup> The effect of denying black residents affordable opportunities to move from the central city to the suburbs only hastened residential segregation.<sup>13</sup> The "pull" of whites out of inner cities is a crucial counterpoint to the "push" of public housing policies that kept blacks in the urban core. As historian Kenneth Jackson writes in *Crabgrass Frontier*, "Uncle Sam was not impartial."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Constance Baker Motley, "Some Theories upon which a Legal Attack on Racial Discrimination in FHA-Mortgage Insured Housing may be Predicated," Roll No. 11, Series III: Pre-Med Education to Monthly Reports 1956 Apr, Alexander Pierre Tureaud Papers, 1909-1972, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas W. Hanchett, "The Other "Subsidized Housing": Federal Aid to Suburbanization, 1940s-1960s," *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes : In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by John F. Bauman, Roger Biles and Kristin M. Szylvian (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 166. There is a wide literature documenting FHA's discriminatory mortgage insurance policies that led to the creation of white suburbia at the expense of black residents. As early as 1948, Robert C. Weaver wrote in *The Negro Ghetto* that black residents "benefited little from the activities of the agency [FHA]." In *The Negro Ghetto* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), 71. In *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*, David M. P. Freund highlights the shift in how whites understood their privilege of homeownership from one of racial hierarchy to a more nuanced racialized understanding of free markets and their right as citizens to a home.

<sup>13</sup> See Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 10; Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto*, 72; Freund, *Colored Property*, 213; and Hays, *The Federal Government and Urban Housing*, 86; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 206.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 230.

## FEDERAL PUBLIC HOUSING POLICY, 1937-1954

The Housing Act of 1937 laid the groundwork for public housing policy in the decades to come. While the legislation gave the federal government control over budgeting and auditing projects, local agencies wielded much more power. Among other controls, the Housing Act of 1937 allowed local agencies to choose the location of new projects and to determine tenant selection policies.<sup>15</sup> With the onset of World War II, public housing under this Act was primarily used for war workers rather than the poor it had been designed to assist.<sup>16</sup>

The passage of the 1949 Housing Act by a mere five-vote margin in the House of Representatives reflected the general unpopularity of the public housing movement.<sup>17</sup> Title III of this act authorized the construction of 135,000 units of public housing nationwide each year for six years.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the Housing Act of 1937, this version featured a new urban redevelopment provision that allowed local agencies to engage in slum clearance that would be subsidized by the federal government. Title I of this act authorized urban renewal with the caveat that at least half of any redeveloped areas would include new housing.<sup>19</sup> To assist local authorities in their urban redevelopment projects, the federal government would “pay two-thirds of the net cost incurred by the local authorities in purchasing and clearing blighted sites,” while the local authority covered the remaining third.<sup>20</sup> Many states already had enabling legislation on the books that allowed local authorities to use the power of eminent domain to expropriate private

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<sup>15</sup> Eugene J. Meehan, “The Evolution of Public Housing Policy,” *Federal Housing Policy and Programs: Past and Present*, edited by J. Paul Mitchell, (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1985), 291.

<sup>16</sup> R. Allen Hays, *The Federal Government and Urban Housing*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> Meehan, “The Evolution of Public Housing Policy,” 299.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Biles, “Public Housing and the Postwar Urban Renaissance, 1949-1973,” *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by John F. Bauman, Roger Biles and Kristin M. Szylvian (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 144.

<sup>19</sup> Biles, “Public Housing and the Postwar Urban Renaissance, 1949-1973,” 144.

<sup>20</sup> Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 107.

property and resell it to developers.<sup>21</sup> Title I of the 1949 Housing Act simply gave them the funding to begin wide-scale slum clearance and redevelopment programs paid for largely by taxpayer dollars.

The number of public housing units actually constructed after Congress passed the 1949 Housing Act shows that local officials did not view the Act as a vehicle for building more housing for low-income families. Although Congress authorized the construction of 135,000 units of public housing each year for six years, local agencies constructed only 25,496 new units each year on average during the 1950s.<sup>22</sup>

While local authorities were slow to build new public housing, they capitalized on the opportunity to use federal funds to clear out black residents living in overcrowded neighborhoods near the central city, especially those near lagging downtown areas. City after city engaged in redevelopment projects that displaced black residents and replaced their neighborhoods with “office buildings, parking garages, swank apartment complexes, and shopping centers.”<sup>23</sup> Many displaced African-American residents equated urban renewal with “Negro Removal,” which in turn “was the reason so many blacks now needed public housing.”<sup>24</sup> Re-housing black residents displaced from urban redevelopment, and later urban renewal, became the primary vehicle through which cities maintained, if not outright created, patterns of segregation.

Signed into law by newly elected President Dwight Eisenhower on August 2, the Housing Act of 1954 committed the federal government to building an even smaller number of public

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<sup>21</sup> Teafor, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 106. Teafor notes that some states granted this power to local authorities even before the start of World War II.

<sup>22</sup> Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 200.

<sup>23</sup> Biles, “Public Housing and the Postwar Urban Renaissance, 1949-1973,” 145.

<sup>24</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 234.

housing units. In a sharp decrease from the 135,000 units of public housing appropriated annually in the 1949 Housing Act, Congress only approved construction of 35,000 units for the fiscal year following passage of the 1954 Act. Cementing what was already common practice, this act also required that any new public housing units would be constructed in areas marked for slum clearance.<sup>25</sup> This virtually ensured that new public housing units would be built in majority-black neighborhoods. In addition, the 1954 Act modified the urban redevelopment provisions of the 1949 Act to include urban renewal provisions requiring cities to adopt minimum housing codes to prevent the spread of blight to neighborhoods that had not been taken over by slum conditions.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Biles, "Public Housing and the Postwar Urban Renaissance, 1949-1973," 146.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence M. Friedman, "Housing Reform: Negative Style," *Federal Housing Policy and Programs: Past and Present*, edited by J. Paul Mitchell, (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1985), 222.



FEDERAL MONEY, LOCAL CONTROL: PUBLIC HOUSING IN THE CONTEXT OF  
*BROWN V. BOARD*

With each of these three housing acts, the federal government left the implementation of public housing programs up to local agencies. By decentralizing the implementation of public housing and giving major decision-making responsibility to local agencies beginning with the Housing Act of 1937, the federal government sought to “apply federal resources in a locally sensitive manner.”<sup>27</sup> Federal “sensitivity” was undoubtedly a sign of the state and federal power struggle over New Deal policy and the distaste it created for direct federal intervention, including school desegregation federally mandated by *Brown*. As an executive with the Georgia Savings and Loan League noted, “once you ask Uncle Sam to subsidize you, you’ve got to also be prepared to accept and carry out what he tells you to do.”<sup>28</sup> As was the case in cities across the country and in New Orleans in particular, the “locally sensitive manner” of public housing location ensured that local officials used federal resources to promote segregation.

Beginning with its creation in 1947, the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA) oversaw all housing-related programs enacted by the federal government. In addition to overseeing the FHA and its mortgage insurance program, the HHFA also managed the Public Housing Administration (PHA), which was the successor of the United States Housing Authority and the precursor to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The HHFA maintained the precedent of local control of public housing site location and tenant occupancy, which was of great concern at the 1953 confirmation hearing of Eisenhower appointee and friend Albert M. Cole. When a senator from South Carolina asked the future

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<sup>27</sup> Mitchell, J. Paul, “Historical Overview of Direct Federal Housing Assistance,” *Federal Housing Policy and Programs: Past and Present*, edited by J. Paul Mitchell (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1985), 193.

<sup>28</sup> “Southerners Fight Order: Builders Say Segregation Ban will not Work in their Areas,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1949.

HHFA Administrator if the agency had any plans to renege on its commitment to local authority, Cole answered in the negative, telling the senator that the federal government would not “tell the community what they shall do.”<sup>29</sup> Not only would local agencies be able to continue offering segregated public housing, but they would also be allowed to continue building new public housing in whatever part of the city they deemed appropriate.

The federal government passed the Housing Act of 1954 two months after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board* overturned the concept of “separate but equal” enshrined by *Plessey v. Ferguson* as it related to public education.<sup>30</sup> This did not deter the HHFA, which had been maintaining the doctrine of “separate but equal” for black residents in public housing for some time.<sup>31</sup> For the “equal,” Administrator Cole applauded the agency’s inclusion of public housing construction for black residents displaced by urban renewal projects following the 1954 Housing Act. Cole was well aware that urban renewal disproportionately affected African Americans. He wrote to Connecticut Senator George Prescott Bush in 1956 that “since racial minorities constitute a high proportion of slum dwellers,” provisions for additional public housing units “orient the low-rent program significantly to meet their needs.”<sup>32</sup> Their very inclusion in the public housing program was supposed to constitute “equal” treatment.

It went without saying that the “separate” part of the equation ensured that black and white residents would not live together in public housing, beyond rare attempts at integration in

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<sup>29</sup> “The New Housing Administrator,” (typescript, March 2, 1953), 1-2, and NAACP, Press Release, March 5, 1953, both on Reel 6, NAACP Papers, Part 5: The Campaign against Residential Segregation, quoted in Arnold R. Hirsch, “Containment on the Home Front: Race and Federal Housing Policy from the New Deal to the Cold War,” *Journal of Urban History* 26, no. 2 (2000): 171.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, “Containment on the Home Front: Race and Federal Housing Policy from the New Deal to the Cold War,” 175.

<sup>31</sup> Hirsch extensively details the ways in which the *Brown* verdict ultimately strengthened the HHFA’s commitment to “separate but equal” in housing policy. See Arnold R. Hirsch, “Searching for a ‘Sound Negro Policy’: A Racial Agenda for the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954,” *Housing Policy Debate* 11 (Summer 2000): 419-430.

<sup>32</sup> Albert M. Cole correspondence to Prescott Bush, May 3, 1956. Folder, Racial Relations, Box 134. Subject Files, 1947-60. Record Group 207. National Archives II, quoted in Arnold R. Hirsch, “Searching for a ‘Sound Negro Policy’: A Racial Agenda for the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954,” 426.

the early years of public housing. Although Cole paid lip service to the notion of integration by holding a Minority Housing Conference that recommended new housing to include a 10% non-white quota, such a policy would be instituted only “if sites acceptable to the community could be found.”<sup>33</sup> Given the highly unlikely nature of such a site being accepted by local community members, the HHFA’s housing policy continued to promote residential segregation.

HHFA deference to local authorities was tantamount to sustaining segregation in both site location and occupancy. Administrator Cole explained that local control was essential not only because “housing needs and problems are peculiarly local but also because undue Federal intervention is incompatible with our ideas of political and economic freedom.”<sup>34</sup> By co-opting the states-rights language used by conservatives against the federally-mandated school integration in *Brown*, Cole assured local agencies that the federal government would not force the issue of integration in housing. The HHFA continued to sanction segregation post-*Brown* by letting local agencies implement public housing according to “peculiarly local” tastes.

Several housing advocates observed a trend of Southern cities creatively implementing urban renewal legislation to mitigate the implications of *Brown*. Frances Levenson of the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing believed that many Southern cities planned to use urban renewal “to insure future school segregation by moving minority families out of presently integrated neighborhoods.”<sup>35</sup> Thus the *Brown* verdict gave Southern communities an even greater impetus to move forward with their plans to solidify racially

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<sup>33</sup> Robert C. Weaver and Hortense Gabel correspondence to Albert M. Cole, January 13, 1954. Folder, Racial Relations, Box 96. General Subject Files, 1947-60. Record Group 207. National Archives II, quoted in Arnold R. Hirsch, “Searching for a ‘Sound Negro Policy’: A Racial Agenda for the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954,” 425.

<sup>34</sup> Albert M. Cole correspondence to Prescott Bush, May 3, 1956. Folder, Racial Relations, Box 134. Subject Files, 1947-60. Record Group 207. National Archives II, quoted in Desmond S. King, *Separate and Unequal: Black Americans and the US Federal Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 196.

<sup>35</sup> Frances Levenson to David M. Walker, October 9, 1959, Box 330, Folder: Racial Relations, HHFA General Subject Files, 1949-1960, RG907, National Archives II, quoted in Arnold R. Hirsch, “Containment on the Home Front: Race and Federal Housing Policy from the New Deal to the Cold War,” 177.

segregated neighborhoods. If the great quantity of private schools that came into creation after *Brown* is any indication of Southern distaste for the Supreme Court's verdict, "it seems likely that urban renewal could be used to refashion the neighborhoods that would serve as the foundation for any geographically based public system."<sup>36</sup> In essence, the federal government gave its permission to local agencies to run with segregation practices when re-housing black residents displaced by urban renewal projects.

And run with it they did. Robert C. Weaver, an African-American housing advocate and future HUD Secretary, wrote in 1948 that the public housing projects built under the Housing Act of 1937 in the North reinforced patterns of residential segregation because cities built them in cleared slum areas.<sup>37</sup> Given the expensive property and redevelopment costs in the central city, most local agencies would have preferred to locate public housing on vacant land on the fringe of what were often white working-class neighborhoods.<sup>38</sup> Due to massive white resident resistance, however, attempts to build new public housing near white neighborhoods often failed, as residents "greeted public housing as they might have greeted the introduction of the bubonic plague."<sup>39</sup> For that reason, local agencies usually placed new developments in communities with an already majority-black population.

Following the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954, Northern cities continued the trend of building new public housing in areas already occupied by black residents. Through the use of urban renewal projects, city officials in Cincinnati, Detroit, Chicago, and Boston cleared "slums," displacing thousands of residents. For African-American residents who could not afford over-priced housing in other black neighborhoods, new public housing had to be built. In

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<sup>36</sup>Arnold Hirsch, "Second Thoughts on the Second Ghetto," *Journal of Urban History* 29, no. 3 (March 2003): 305.

<sup>37</sup>Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto*, 74-75.

<sup>38</sup>Mark I. Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 202-3.

<sup>39</sup>Hays, *The Federal Government and Urban Housing*, 92.

the displacement of residents for private redevelopment and in determining the location of new public housing in which they would reside, these Northern cities cemented patterns of residential segregation.

In Ohio, the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) relocated 3,705 families to build new highways and other urban renewal projects in the late 1940s. The CMHA had an inordinately difficult time finding a location to build public housing for black residents displaced by the project. In 1952, the CMHA selected a site on a former dairy farm to build a 340-unit development for black families. White residents living nearby quickly organized in opposition. When asking residents to sign a petition against the public housing project's location, organizers reportedly asked white homeowners, "do you want N-----s in your backyard?"<sup>40</sup> The 1,000 signatures organizers collected did not persuade the CMHA to move the site elsewhere, but a lawyer for the local homeowners association filed an injunction to prevent construction on the site. The CMHA still had the legal authority to seize the property through eminent domain but thought better of it.<sup>41</sup>

Concerned about the location of future projects, local realtors and white residents launched a massive campaign to require voter approval of all public housing sites. The amendment ultimately failed because a critical mass of voters feared that requiring public approval of sites would substantially delay a highway construction project. Although the CMHA attempted to build public housing projects in several locations on vacant land abutting white neighborhoods, local residents defeated the proposals at every turn. Ultimately, the CMHA was forced to build extensions on its existing projects to house blacks displaced from Cincinnati's

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<sup>40</sup> Robert B. Fairbanks, *Making Better Citizens: Housing Reform and the Community Development Strategy in Cincinnati, 1890-1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 165-171.

<sup>41</sup> Fairbanks, *Making Better Citizens*, 171.

urban renewal projects.<sup>42</sup> Building extensions, in turn, reinforced patterns of segregation by pushing black residents into existing segregated communities.

A similar pattern of black displacement and re-housing occurred in Detroit. In anticipation of federal urban renewal funding in the pipeline for slum clearance, the Detroit Housing Commission selected twelve sites for public housing projects that would accommodate displaced residents. Three of the four sites located in the cleared area had majority-black populations, while the city located the other eight sites on vacant land near white neighborhoods.<sup>43</sup> White residents revolted and showed their displeasure by electing Albert Cobo, a conservative Republican, as mayor. Taking office in 1949, Cobo reassured white residents by exclaiming, “I WILL NOT APPROVE Federal Housing Projects in the outlying single home areas.”<sup>44</sup> True to his word, Cobo vetoed projects in white areas and confined construction of new units to black neighborhoods in the central city.<sup>45</sup> Cobo, with the backing of his hand-picked Detroit Housing Commission, immediately set his sights to urban renewal, “including the proposed Civic Center, Medical Center, and a middle-income apartment project, all in the predominantly black inner city.”<sup>46</sup> Urban renewal in Detroit relegated African-American residents displaced from these projects to public housing in high-density, inner-city black neighborhoods.

Chicago fared no different in its implementation of urban renewal plans and witnessed a constant battle between white residents and city officials over the location of public housing projects for displaced black residents. In 1948, Mayor Martin H. Kennelly announced a new

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<sup>42</sup> Fairbanks, *Making Better Citizens*, 172-173.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 81.

<sup>44</sup> Detroit Housing Commission Monthly Report (December 1949), 1-2, in Mayor’s Papers (1950), Box 5, Folder: Housing Commission, quoted in Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 84.

<sup>45</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 85.

<sup>46</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 85.

redevelopment program in a slum area in Chicago's South Side. The project, Lake Meadows, received substantial support from the Illinois Institute of Technology and the Michael Reese Hospital, located in this predominantly black neighborhood. Both institutions wanted to expand and needed the city's assistance in clearing the surrounding community.<sup>47</sup> Relocating displaced black residents quickly became the top priority of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) as redevelopment moved forward. Due to Lake Meadows and other urban renewal projects, the CHA reserved 2,363 out of 4,636 units of public housing constructed between 1950 and 1954 for displaced families.<sup>48</sup>

The CHA needed to build additional public housing to accommodate the large number of displaced black residents, but white residents living near proposed sites in outlying areas often fought back violently. A series of "negotiations" ultimately prevented the CHA from locating new public housing in non-black areas.<sup>49</sup> The CHA resigned itself to the fact that attempting to do otherwise would be a waste of time; under CHA Executive Director Alvin Rose, staff gauged the likelihood of rejection of a site by ward aldermen and their constituents before proposing a site. As one CHA commissioner noted, "...we do not even try to sail non-ghetto sites past the City Council."<sup>50</sup> The result of the violence and political pressure waged by white residents in Chicago is clear: 26 of the 33 approved public housing projects planned in the 1950s and 1960s "were located in census tracts that were at least 95% black" when construction was complete.<sup>51</sup> Chicago, like Cincinnati and Detroit, conformed to the trend of institutionalizing residential segregation by constructing public housing projects in neighborhoods with majority African-American residents.

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<sup>47</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 116-19.

<sup>48</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 123-24.

<sup>49</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 240-42.

<sup>50</sup> Notes on Meeting with Ed Holmgreen, March 14, 1968, quoted in Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 241.

<sup>51</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 242-43.

At first glance, Boston seems to exhibit the opposite of this trend; after World War II, the city built only three of the twenty-five projects in neighborhoods with a majority African-American population.<sup>52</sup> In fact, the majority of housing projects built in Boston during this time are located on the periphery of the city, far from the central core. However, the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) intended for the majority of tenants in these projects to be working-class, white families.<sup>53</sup> Had the BHA been building projects for black occupancy, city officials would doubtlessly have seen white resistance on the scale exhibited in Chicago and Detroit when selecting sites in non-black neighborhoods.

When Boston sought to redevelop the West End, a predominantly Italian neighborhood, to build luxury housing in 1958, the project displaced 1,731 families and 824 individuals.<sup>54</sup> Although approximately two-thirds of displaced people qualified for public housing, only one in ten moved into subsidized units. Subsequent surveys revealed that white displaced residents who qualified for public housing had a negative perception about the type of people in public housing that precluded them from moving there. In the minds of residents, the racialized “two tiers” of housing policy meant that public housing, increasingly occupied by black residents, was no longer an option worth pursuing. By the end of the decade, “large family public housing projects were neither needed nor wanted...by the stable white working-class families they had been built to house.”<sup>55</sup> As such, the projects increasingly became minority-occupied when future urban renewal projects displaced additional non-white residents.<sup>56</sup> Although the city initially built most of its public housing projects on the periphery of the city, thus deviating from the trend

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<sup>52</sup> Lawrence J. Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 247.

<sup>53</sup> Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects*, 267-68.

<sup>54</sup> Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects*, 279.

<sup>55</sup> Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects*, 279.

<sup>56</sup> Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects*, 300.



seen in Cincinnati, Detroit, and Chicago of locating housing in all-black neighborhoods, the projects in Boston soon became segregated as white residents sought out the “upper tier” of housing through FHA programs geared toward homeownership.

As was the case with Cincinnati, Detroit, Chicago, and Boston, local agencies determined the location of public housing in a way that placated white residents. In Chicago and elsewhere, “with the emergence of redevelopment, renewal, and public housing...government took an active hand not merely in reinforcing prevailing patterns of segregation but also in lending them a permanence never seen before.”<sup>57</sup> In the urban South, the outcome was no different. In fact, the “push” of segregation through public housing site location intensified as *Brown* loomed on the horizon.

In Birmingham, Alabama, the HHFA approved the city’s urban renewal project for Avondale, a 93% black neighborhood, in 1953.<sup>58</sup> Due to earlier zoning patterns, city officials had cordoned off Avondale from white neighborhoods by surrounding the area with non-residential zoning.<sup>59</sup> Physically separate from white areas, Avondale would remain a black neighborhood after development was complete.

As a part of the development plans, the city committed to building a new elementary and high school for black students living in the neighborhood.<sup>60</sup> On the eve of the *Brown* verdict, the decision to couple urban renewal in a black neighborhood with new school construction made it clear that Birmingham was preparing to forestall any attempts at integrating neighborhood schools. No white children lived nearby to attend the new Avondale schools.

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<sup>57</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 254.

<sup>58</sup> Charles E. Connerly, *“The Most Segregated City in America”: City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 130.

<sup>59</sup> Connerly, “*The Most Segregated City in America*,” 130.

<sup>60</sup> Connerly, *“The Most Segregated City in America,”* 131-133.

For the two-thirds of displaced African-American residents eligible for public housing, Birmingham officials planned to build a new all-black public housing project two blocks away from the Avondale site.<sup>61</sup> By locating the new public housing in a black neighborhood, Birmingham officials used federal funds to reinforce the patterns of residential segregation that they had originally made with creative zoning laws that isolated Avondale.

Atlanta also followed the national trend of seeking out urban development projects to clear black-occupied neighborhoods near the Central Business District. In the 1950s and 1960s, Atlanta city officials sought to take over prime real estate for downtown projects and relocate black residents to predominantly black neighborhoods. Atlanta was unique, however, in that until 1963, the local policy dictated that no new public housing would be built in renewal areas.<sup>62</sup> As a result, the city concentrated public housing for displaced black residents on the black-majority west side of the city. The effects, as in other cities, consistently segregated African-American residents. A 1959 report by the Greater Atlanta Council on Human Relations describes how “racial residential segregation is much more complete in new housing developments than in established neighborhoods. Public housing developments have extended and strengthened patterns of segregation in some localities.”<sup>63</sup> Atlanta’s enactment of federal policy created more segregated communities by removing black residents from potentially mixed neighborhoods in urban renewal sites and moving them to all-black public housing projects in majority-black neighborhoods.

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<sup>61</sup> Connerly, *"The Most Segregated City in America,"* 134.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 70.

<sup>63</sup> Greater Atlanta Council on Human Relations, “Reports,” 19 March 1959, Southern Regional Council Papers, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library, quoted in Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 80.

Birmingham and Atlanta were not the only Southern cities that used urban renewal projects to displace black residents and confine them to a segregated part of the city. By the 1950s, Memphis and Richmond also “possessed a public housing inventory that numbered in the thousands of units and that by location reinforced the segregation of low-income black neighborhoods.”<sup>64</sup> Local officials in each of these cities used federal funding to create racially isolated communities.

National trends from both the Northern and Southern cities examined show that white officials implemented federal policy at the local level to engineer racially segregated communities. Ultimately, the *je dure* segregation of the Jim Crow South had the same result as the *de facto* segregation of Northern cities. By uprooting thousands of black residents for urban renewal projects, Northern and Southern city officials created a housing shortage that they met through building public housing in predominantly black neighborhoods. Without new housing in the private market to fall back on, black residents had little choice but to seek housing in overcrowded black neighborhoods or in newly constructed segregated public housing.

Block- and tract-level data show that segregation increased greatly in Houston, New Orleans, Memphis, Atlanta, and Dallas between 1940 and 1970.<sup>65</sup> As noted earlier, New Orleans was unable to participate in federally funded urban renewal projects after the state of Louisiana repealed its enabling legislation in 1954. When other cities used urban renewal programs to reshape the racial composition of neighborhoods, what did New Orleans do? Ultimately, New Orleans city officials accomplished the same urban renewal goals of other cities. By engaging in public works project, particularly public housing construction, New Orleans city officials

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<sup>64</sup> Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser, *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1968* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 126.

<sup>65</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, “With or without Jim Crow: Black Residential Segregation in the United States,” *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 80-81

simultaneously cleared slums and hastened neighborhood segregation. Although the city could not expropriate private property for urban renewal projects, the decision to build the Guste and Fischer housing projects in predominantly black neighborhoods helped the city maintain its goal of “separate” in the age of *Brown*.

## PATTERNS OF RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION IN NEW ORLEANS

The unique geography of New Orleans, with its below sea-level “backswamp” in the middle of the city, historically created a pattern of settlement in which “residents huddled in crowded interracial neighborhoods, clinging to the natural levees that stretched along the riverfront of the ridges left by the Mississippi’s ancient distributaries.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the economy of the city prompted black slaves and free servants to live in close proximity to whites. As the city dried out following the installation of a pumping system in 1899, additional land opened up for housing construction. In the height of Jim Crow in the early twentieth century, New Orleans officials sought to further segregate white and black neighborhoods by enacting a zoning ordinance that forbade black residents from moving into “white” neighborhoods and vice versa without the written approval of the majority of residents. Citing its 1917 ruling against such racial zoning laws in *Buchanan v. Worley*, the United States Supreme Court invalidated the New Orleans ordinance in 1927, reversing the Louisiana Supreme Court’s decision.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the lack of racial zoning, white residents still sought to segregate neighborhoods through the use of restrictive covenants. Following the national trend of only allowing whites access to the “upper tier” of new housing on the private market, developments in New Orleans excluded black homeowners in the early twentieth century, particularly in the new developments along the recently developed Lakefront. Black neighborhoods developed predominantly on the fringe of already-black “backswamp” areas, which “were the first to flood and the last to dry and thus never a sought-after residential location.”<sup>68</sup> But even by the 1940s, black neighborhoods

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<sup>66</sup> Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, “Part III: Franco-Americans and African-Americans: Introduction,” *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 198.

<sup>67</sup> “Zoning is Upheld by Supreme Court,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1927.

<sup>68</sup> Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, “Part III: Franco-Americans and African-Americans: Introduction,” *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, 198-199.

dotted the cityscape; only after the 1940s did the city's poor black neighborhoods begin to cluster together, particularly in "the old backswamp areas where the poorest blacks always lived."<sup>69</sup>

To understand how a fairly integrated city became increasingly segregated in the twentieth century, it is important to investigate where the city built public housing following each of the Housing Acts in 1937, 1949, and 1954. After President Franklin Roosevelt signed the United States Housing Act into law in 1937, an unprecedented amount of federal money became available for the construction of public housing in the United States.<sup>70</sup> New Orleans had already created its own housing authority, the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO), after the Louisiana legislature passed a law in 1936 requiring such an agency in every city with a population exceeding 20,000.<sup>71</sup> The influx of federal funds from the Housing Act allowed HANO to complete its first large-scale construction of public housing in the city in November 1942, which consisted of six developments. Four of the projects—Lafitte, St. Bernard, Magnolia, and Calliope—housed African-American families, while white families occupied the Iberville and St. Thomas projects. Although the Florida project for white residents did not open until 1946 due to delays, HANO also approved construction for this project during the first phase of development.<sup>72</sup>

The second phase of HANO developments followed the Housing Act of 1949, in which New Orleans received approval for an additional 5,000 units of public housing.<sup>73</sup> Using this

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<sup>69</sup>Peirce F. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Center for American Places, 2003), 97.

<sup>70</sup>Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 189.

<sup>71</sup>L. Kemper Williams, "New Orleans First Low-Cost Housing Projects," in *Twenty-five Years of Community Service In the Field of Public Low Rent Housing...Housing Authority of New Orleans, 1937-1962*, Housing Authority of New Orleans, 1962, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, 18.

<sup>72</sup>Martha Mahoney. "Law and Racial Geography: Public Housing and the Economy in New Orleans," *Stanford Law Review* 42: 5 (May 1990): 1273.

<sup>73</sup>Mahoney. "Law and Racial Geography," 1276.

money, HANO built the Desire housing project in the upper Ninth Ward for African-American residents, while also adding extensions to existing projects. Adding units to projects meant that city officials, for the most part, did not have to contend with the often lengthy battle of new site selection for public housing, as with Cincinnati.<sup>74</sup> At the conclusion of this second phase of HANO developments, the total number of public housing units in New Orleans neared 10,000.<sup>75</sup>

With the exception of the St. Bernard and Desire projects, public housing built during the first two phases of development was near the center of the city, or, in the case of the Florida project for whites, had easy access to public transportation. This followed guidelines outlined by the Federal Public Housing Authority's National Housing Agency (NHA) in its 1946 "Public Housing Design" document that recommended a "reasonable distance" to services such as public transportation, medical centers, schools, and shopping – as well as jobs – in order to prevent these areas from sliding into blight.<sup>76</sup> Although the NHA did not detail exactly how far a "reasonable distance" was, the agency provided sample maps of housing projects' proximity to services to give city planners an idea of what would constitute an appropriate distance.<sup>77</sup> In New Orleans, residents living in all but the St. Bernard, Desire, and Florida projects were near such amenities, especially jobs located downtown. The location of Magnolia and Calliope in particular placed them in the historical "backswamp" area of town in majority-black neighborhoods.

Following the passage of the 1954 Housing Act, the construction of William J. Guste, Sr. Homes and William J. Fischer Homes for African-American families represented HANO's third

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<sup>74</sup>Mahoney. "Law and Racial Geography," 1276; Fairbanks, *Making Better Citizens*, 172-173.

<sup>75</sup> Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Report of the Housing Authority of New Orleans – 1959*, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Jim Garvin, "There's No Place Like Home," in *Readings on Equal Education, Vol. 14: Forty Years After the Brown Decision: Social and Cultural Effects of School Desegregation*, edited by Charles Teddlie and Kofi Lomotey, (AMS Press: New York, 1997), 319-20.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 319-20.

phase of major public housing development (see Fig. 1). Both featured modern architecture and high-rise buildings for elderly residents. In May, 1955 the City Planning and Zoning Commission approved the site of Guste, situated next to the Central Business District (CBD).<sup>78</sup> Nearly four years later, the Planning and Zoning Commission approved the site for the new Fischer project across the Mississippi River in Algiers in January 1959; the Westbank Expressway bounded one edge of the proposed development.<sup>79</sup> Construction on both projects did not begin until the early 1960s, and Fischer was the last to open in 1965. To understand why the city built these two projects when New Orleans already had nearly 10,000 units of public housing, we must first understand the city's attempts to engage in urban renewal and the state of housing for African-American residents in the 1950s.

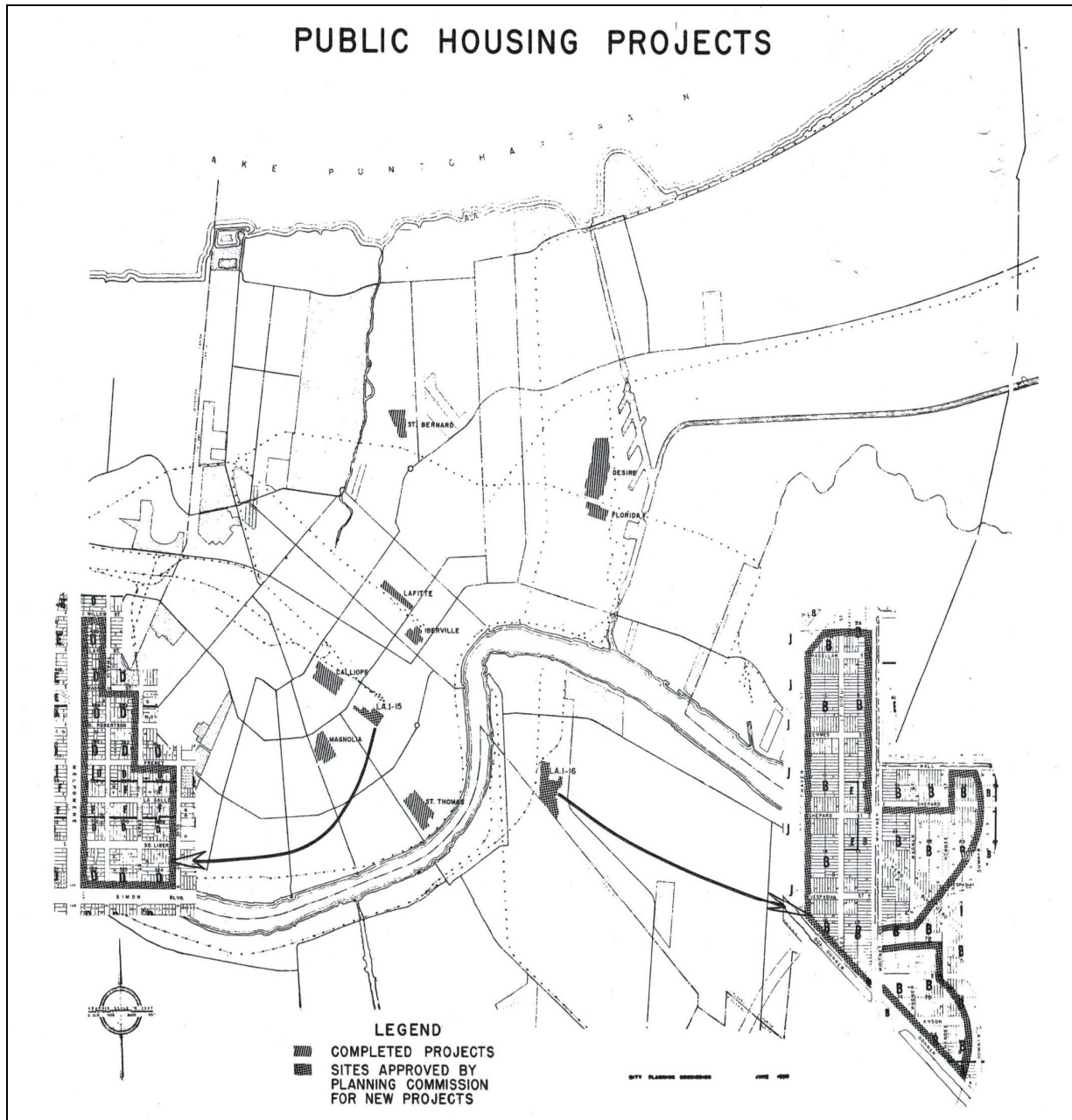
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<sup>78</sup> J. Gilbert Scheib to Councilman Glen Clasen, July 31, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing – 1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>79</sup> City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Minutes of the Advisory Committee on Planning, January 7, 1959, box 9, folder: Housing Authority of N.O. – 1959, Chief Administrative Office Correspondence, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.



Figure 1. Completed and Approved Public Housing Projects in New Orleans, 1959



Source: New Orleans City Planning Commission, "Thirty-Sixth Report on Planning Progress: July 1, 1958-June 30, 1959 (New Orleans, 1959), Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, opposite page 21. Reprinted with permission of the New Orleans City Planning Commission (see *Appendix*).

## SLUM CLEARANCE AND URBAN RENEWAL IN NEW ORLEANS

Civic leaders in New Orleans had a strong interest in urban renewal, especially Democratic Mayor deLesseps “Chep” Morrison, first elected in 1946. Morrison, who remained mayor of New Orleans until he accepted a position as U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States in 1961, oversaw the city as its black population grew (see Table 1).

Table 1. Changing Demographics of New Orleans, 1940-1970.

	1940	1950	1960	1970
<b>Total Population</b>	494,537	570,445	627,525	593,471
<b>White</b>	344,775	387,814	392,594	323,420
<b>Black</b>	149,034	181,775	233,514	267,308
<b>Other Races</b>	728	856	1,417	2,743
<b>% Black</b>	30.1%	31.9%	37.2%	45.0%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1940 Census*, *1950 Census*, *1960 Census*, *1970 Census*

Aware of the potential votes to be won from the growing black population, Mayor Morrison fashioned himself as a moderate Democrat by trying to appeal to both black and white voters. With his sight set on becoming Governor, despite unsuccessful bids in 1955, 1959, and 1963, Morrison sought publicly to maintain a middle ground on integration issues.<sup>80</sup> He accomplished this goal, somewhat successfully at first, by creating new “separate but equal” facilities for black residents. He also sought to win votes by undertaking showy public works improvement projects to have visual signs of his success as mayor.

Morrison was an active member of the American Council to Improve Our Neighborhoods (ACTION), which was a “private, national, non-profit, non-political voluntary organization dedicated to the prevention and elimination of slums and blight through sound, comprehensive

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<sup>80</sup>Arnold Hirsch. “Simply a Matter of Black and White: The Transformation of Race and Politics in Twentieth-Century New Orleans,” *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 279-280.

urban planning.”<sup>81</sup> Although ACTION did not have any local chapters, it was governed by “a Board of Directors of 81 men and women who are leaders in business and industry, organized labor, education, government, and various professional fields,” including Mayor Morrison.<sup>82</sup> ACTION members held regular meetings across the country and served as a resource to share best practices in slum clearance.

In addition to serving on the Board of Directors of this national organization, Mayor Morrison was also a member of its Educational Program Committee. To drum up support for ACTION’s efforts, his office sent out letters to 28 mayors in the Southeast encouraging them to attend the Southeast Urban Renewal Clinic in September, 1958; workshops included “Getting Support of Civic and Business Leaders for Urban Renewal,” “Housing Code Enforcement Programs,” and “Effective Municipal Administration of Urban Renewal.”<sup>83</sup> Through his involvement with ACTION, Mayor Morrison stayed connected to major urban renewal projects across the country.

The mayor’s efforts to promote slum clearance did not go unnoticed. In a November 1957 Citizens’ Advisory Committee on Housing Improvement meeting, Col. Shelton Hubbard, head of the city’s Division of Housing Improvement, noted that earlier in the year *Fortune Magazine* selected Mayor Morrison as “one of the nine outstanding mayors in the country

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<sup>81</sup> American Council to Improve our Neighborhoods, “ACTION: What It Is and What It Does” in *Organizations in Renewal: A Program Aid from ACTION*, box S58-1, folder: ACTION, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.; American Council to Improve our Neighborhoods, “ACTION Board of Directors,” box S58-1, folder: ACTION, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>83</sup> Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison to Mayor J.W. Dance of Knoxville, August 22, 1958, box S58-1, folder: ACTION - 1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library; American Council to Improve our Neighborhoods, “ACTION Invites You to the Southeast Urban Renewal Clinic,” box S58-1, folder: ACTION -- 1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

because of the city's work in public housing and slum prevention."<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the magazine recognized New Orleans as one of five cities, along with Baltimore, Detroit, Los Angeles, and St. Louis, celebrated for effective slum prevention.<sup>85</sup>

Despite this progressive image, Mayor Morrison's vision for a modern New Orleans did not include integrating blacks and whites. He actively sought to maintain Jim Crow racial boundaries in the city, whether through access to public transportation, recreation facilities, schools, or housing. With school integration on the horizon, Morrison wrote that he was proud that the city had less trouble than other southern states "in keeping down mixing and in not having any trouble."<sup>86</sup> Morrison attributed the city's success to providing "the Negroes—in reality—with equal facilities" so much so that after "losing" integration battles with bus seating and City Park use, "we still have no mixing."<sup>87</sup>

Believing that "equal" facilities would prevent true integration, Morrison sought out opportunities to provide new, segregated facilities to black residents to maintain the "separate" of the Jim Crow South. A.P. Tureaud, a local civil rights attorney and activist, pressed the issue of access to recreational facilities by demanding the right to play golf at City Park and Audubon Park. Rather than conceding to integrating these two facilities, Morrison pushed for the creation

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<sup>84</sup> Citizens' Advisory Committee on Housing Improvement meeting minutes, November 12, 1957, box S57-12, Folder Housing Improvement and Slum Clearance – 1957, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison to Louise Jones, June 26, 1959, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, quoted in Edward F. Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform: New Orleans Politics, 1946-1961*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 255.

<sup>87</sup> Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison to Louise Jones, June 26, 1959, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, quoted in Edward F. Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform: New Orleans Politics, 1946-1961*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 255.

of a new blacks-only golf course, as well as other recreational facilities that were “threatened” by the prospect of integration from civil rights agitation.<sup>88</sup>

Morrison’s desire to maintain “separate but equal” facilities extended into the realm of housing as well, particularly with the construction of the Pontchartrain Park subdivision for middle-class black families. When it came to his attention that the some of the Seabrook tract upon which developers planned to build the subdivision might actually be used for white housing, the Mayor rallied support for the black development, but not for magnanimous reasons. In a “Personal and Confidential” memo to the City Commission Council, he alerted them that although the city owned 183 acres in the tract, Hamilton Crawford, who was also building the all-white Gentilly Woods subdivision immediately to the south, owned 202 acres in the Seabrook tract.<sup>89</sup> After consideration, Crawford thought that the northern part of the tract that he owned was too expensive to develop and asked the city to swap land with him.

Mayor Morrison, although cognizant of the fact that Crawford was getting the higher-valued land in the deal, told the New Orleans Commission Council that “the northern sector...is adjacent to the lake front where the Negroes presently have their swimming and recreation.”<sup>90</sup> He acknowledged that foregoing Crawford’s land would mean that the northern part of the tract “could go to white housing,” thus “creating a future social problem of having white housing adjacent to a Negro park.” He told the councilmen, “my own personal reaction is that it might be safer for the city to buy the 202 acres, making certain that our Negro Park project will be fully

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<sup>88</sup> Arnold Hirsch, “Race and Renewal in the Cold War South: New Orleans, 1947-1968,” *The American Planning Tradition: Culture and Policy*, edited by Robert Fishman (The Woodrow Wilson Center Press: Washington, D.C. 2000), 229.

<sup>89</sup> Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison to Hamilton Crawford, April 16, 1952, Carton 24, Folder: Zoning and Planning Commission, Z-1 1952, Commissioner Lionel G. Ott Records, 1946-1964, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>90</sup> Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison to Members of the Commission Council and Mr. Louis Bisso, April 16, 1952, Carton 24, Folder: Zoning and Planning Commission, Z-1 1952, Commissioner Lionel G. Ott Records, 1946-1964, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

protected...I trust that you will keep this matter confidential.” The council members must have agreed with the mayor’s assessment because two weeks later, Mayor Morrison sent a telegram to Crawford saying that the city would purchase his land because “negro housing [is] a critical community necessity” and “nothing should be done to jeopardize development of [the] Seabrook tract for Negroes.”<sup>91</sup> Although Mayor Morrison had the appearance of assisting black residents by moving along land acquisition for Pontchartrain Park, his only motivation for doing so in this instance was to ensure that African-American recreational facilities would not be adjacent to white housing. Mayor Morrison actively sought out ways to maintain “separate but equal” for black residents.

Mayor Morrison was not the only New Orleans civic leader actively engaged in the national slum clearance movement. William “Billy” J. Guste, Jr., HANO attorney and son of the Guste project’s namesake, served on the board for the National Housing Conference (NHC), which he described to Mayor Morrison as “THE national organization fighting for improvement of housing throughout the nation in all aspects.”<sup>92</sup> Joining the likes of former Chicago Housing Authority Director Elizabeth Wood and housing reformers Charles Abrams and Catherine Bauer Wurster on NHC’s Board of Directors, Guste, Jr. also worked to secure funding for the nonprofit agency through his ties to New Orleans.<sup>93</sup> In 1958, for example, he asked Mayor Morrison to send out letters soliciting donations for NHC to local contractors, union leaders, and suppliers in

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<sup>91</sup> Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison to Hamilton Crawford, April 16, 1952, Carton 24, Folder: Zoning and Planning Commission, Z-1 1952, Commissioner Lionel G. Ott Records, 1946-1964, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>92</sup> Billy J. Guste, Jr. to Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison, October 30, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>93</sup> National Housing Conference pamphlet to solicit donations, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

New Orleans, all of whom stood to benefit from the construction of the two new housing projects in HANO's third phase of development.<sup>94</sup>

During the late 1940s and 1950s, city officials like Morrison and Guste obsessed over clearing slum areas and preventing the spread of blight. At a 1953 "slum clearance school" for city officials sponsored by the National Association of Home Builders, Morrison told the gathered crowd that 40% of housing in New Orleans was substandard.<sup>95</sup> City officials often described slums and urban blight in terms of a contagious disease. In a 1954 Housing Report, the City Planning Commission noted that "the older central areas have been allowed to deteriorate and have lost population to the suburbs. In the wake of this decentralization, blight spreads outward from the center and gradually infects the more recent development."<sup>96</sup> In addition to clearing far-gone slum areas through urban renewal, city officials also sought to prevent blight from taking over in borderline neighborhoods by strictly enforcing minimum housing codes.<sup>97</sup>

Despite city officials' interest in slum clearance and urban renewal, the state of Louisiana presented a unique challenge to the efforts of New Orleans leaders who wanted to clean up the city. The Louisiana state legislature originally passed laws in 1948 that allowed the state to take over private property under the aegis of eminent domain for redevelopment by private parties.<sup>98</sup> After a series of political clashes between Mayor Morrison and conservative assessor James E.

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<sup>94</sup> Billy J. Guste, Jr. to Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison, October 30, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>95</sup> "New School Aims to Improve Slums: Home Builders Sponsor First Institution of Its Kind in New Orleans," *New York Times*, September 12, 1953.

<sup>96</sup> New Orleans City Planning Commission, "The Comprehensive Plan for New Orleans: Housing," (New Orleans, 1954), Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, 9.

<sup>97</sup> Arnold Hirsch, "Race and Renewal in the Cold War South: New Orleans, 1947-1968," *The American Planning Tradition: Culture and Policy*, edited by Robert Fishman (The Woodrow Wilson Center Press: Washington, D.C. 2000), 229.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

Comiskey over the site of a renewal area in the latter's district, opposition to the use of eminent domain grew so strong that the state repealed its enabling legislation in 1954.

The repeal specifically prohibited "the municipal exercise of eminent domain for all but direct public uses [which] effectively locked New Orleans out of prospective renewal and rehabilitation projects facilitated by the new federal Housing Act of 1954."<sup>99</sup> New Orleans remained crippled in its urban renewal efforts until state legislators overturned the repeal on enabling legislation in 1968, which allowed for participation in federal renewal programs.<sup>100</sup> In the interim, the city creatively cleared slums through the use of housing inspections and eminent domain for "direct public use."

One tactic the city used to clear slums was a strict adherence to the minimum housing codes. Called the "Baltimore Plan," the city utilized this method of slum prevention with success in downtown Baltimore, Maryland. Civic leaders in New Orleans, including businessman Clifford F. Favrot, became interested in the Baltimore Plan as a way to clean up dilapidated neighborhoods. Fueled by this interest, the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce invited Yates Cook, chief of Baltimore's Housing Bureau, to the city on three separate occasions to convince local officials that the city could fight blight through a stringent enforcement of building codes.<sup>101</sup>

Mayor Morrison jumped on the Baltimore Plan bandwagon when he noted in 1953 that "80% of our trouble can be remedied without the necessity of expropriating private property, but through private owners correcting substandard conditions of their own property."<sup>102</sup> Although city officials initially expressed enthusiasm regarding the effectiveness of housing code

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<sup>99</sup>Arnold Hirsch, "Race and Renewal in the Cold War South," 227-229.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>101</sup> Martin Millspaugh and Gurney Breckenfeld, *The Human Side of Urban Renewal: A Study of the Attitude Changes Produced by Neighborhood Rehabilitation*, (New York: Ives Washburn, Inc., 1960), 158.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 158. Also cited in Arnold Hirsch, "Race and Renewal in the Cold War South," 229.



enforcement, the Division of Housing Improvement sought to distance itself from the city's efforts at urban renewal and instead strictly saw itself as a slum prevention agency. In a March 19, 1957 Executive Committee meeting of the division, members unanimously agreed that they should only be concerned "with the Minimum Housing Program and are in no way associated with urban renewal and urban redevelopment plans."<sup>103</sup> Given the backlash against urban renewal's use of eminent domain at the time, it is not hard to understand why.

In the "City of New Orleans Decennial Report, 1950-1960," the City Planning Commission bemoaned the fact they did not have the power to engage in urban renewal projects for private redevelopment and noted that only "limited progress in slum removal has been accomplished."<sup>104</sup> In addition to building new public housing, "some slum areas have been cleared and replaced by such public projects as the Civic Center, Pontchartrain Expressway and the Mississippi River Bridge approaches."<sup>105</sup> Although the city could not clear slums for private redevelopment, officials took advantage of the provision for public facilities to raze black communities, displace thousands of residents, and re-house them in ways that solidified residential segregation. As mayor, Morrison selected all five of HANO's Board of Commissioners and thus had a direct hand in shaping public housing for the city.<sup>106</sup> Within a year of being elected, he "acknowledged the great need for housing units for Negroes and included provisions for slum clearance and the construction of public housing projects in his

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<sup>103</sup> Minutes of the Executive Committee on Housing Improvement, March 19, 1957, box S57-12, folder: Housing Improvement and Slum Clearance – 1957, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>104</sup> New Orleans City Planning Commission, "City of New Orleans Decennial Report, 1950-1960," (New Orleans, 1961), UNO LACOL, 25.

<sup>105</sup> New Orleans City Planning Commission, "City of New Orleans Decennial Report, 1950-1960," (New Orleans, 1961), UNO LACOL, 25.

<sup>106</sup> Comptroller General of the United States, "Report to the Congress of the United States: Review of the Housing Authority of New Orleans, Louisiana," April 1959.

overall program for New Orleans.”<sup>107</sup> “Negro removal,” and the problem of where to re-house residents, occurred in New Orleans just as it did in other major cities.

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<sup>107</sup> Edward F. Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform*, 68-69.

## “DO WE NEED ANOTHER BIG HOUSING PROJECT?”:

### HOUSING SHORTAGE FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

Given that the city already operated five large public housing projects for African-American residents in the mid-1950s, some questioned the necessity of building more. At an August 28, 1957 New Orleans City Planning Commission Meeting, the agenda included a discussion of the proposal for the new Guste housing project near the CBD. In a handwritten note, the city’s Chief Administrative Officer, David R. McGuire, Jr., scribbled, “Mayor Morrison – re: Item 2, don’t you think we have enough public housing projects in [the] city? Do we need another big housing project?”<sup>108</sup> As the mayor’s right-hand man, McGuire’s skepticism undoubtedly carried weight with the mayor. Despite the CAO’s trepidation, however, the city did indeed need a solution to the severe housing shortage for African Americans in New Orleans.

White residents faced no difficulty in securing affordable housing. Frequent vacancies and turnover in the St. Thomas, Iberville, and Florida housing projects resulted from federal policies that assisted white families in purchasing their own homes. Federal policy, including “federal housing, mortgage, and tax policies placed a premium on home-owning rather than renting, thus promoting the dispersal of central-city population, particularly the white population.”<sup>109</sup>

Black families that exceeded the income limit for public housing found it virtually impossible to secure quality housing in the city because “the growing New Orleans suburbs were closed to blacks both by individual discrimination (no one would rent or sell to them).”<sup>110</sup> When

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<sup>108</sup> Memo to Members of the City Council of New Orleans from Louis C. Bisso, Director-Secretary, City Planning Commission of New Orleans, August 26, 1957, box S57-24, folder: Planning and Zoning – 1957, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>109</sup> Raymond A. Mohl. “The Transformation of Urban America since the Second World War.” In *Essays on Sunbelt Cities and Recent Urban America*, edited by Raymond A. Mohl, Robert Fisher, Carol Abbott, Roger W. Lotchin, Robert B. Fairbanks, and Zane L. Miller (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1990), p. 13-14.

<sup>110</sup> Mahoney. “Law and Racial Geography,” 1274.

the federal government announced in 1949 that FHA insurance could not be used to build segregated housing, local builders balked at the implications. Jack Helm, executive vice president of the Home-Builders Association of New Orleans, responded, “I don’t know how it is going to apply down here. We’re building homes for white people. Do they expect us to sell them to Negroes too?”<sup>111</sup> Apparently not, given that in 1953 the New Orleans Home Builders Association estimated that only 1 to 2% of the 48,000 homes built at the end of World War II were for black New Orleanians.<sup>112</sup> The plight of the city’s black residents in securing housing mirrored what was happening in urban areas around the country. With the exception of 1,000 homes in Pontchartrain Park, which opened in 1954 for middle-class African Americans, few options existed for black residents seeking housing outside of public housing developments.

When HANO began planning for the third phase of large-scale development, it was already operating eight large housing projects, including five for African-American families, as well as several smaller temporary housing developments for veterans. Marie C. McGuire, Commissioner of the Public Housing Administration, noted that New Orleans had “the fine distinction of having the highest per capita rate of low-rent housing in the United States,” even prior to the completion of Guste and Fischer.<sup>113</sup>

Despite this “fine distinction,” New Orleans experienced a serious dearth of affordable housing options for African-American families, as evidenced by long waiting lists for black residents seeking a spot in public housing developments. HANO’s waiting list included 20,000 black residents in 1947 and nearly 30,000 in 1954.<sup>114</sup> In a typical letter from HANO’s Tenant

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<sup>111</sup> “Southerners Fight Order: Builders Say Segregation Ban will not Work in their Areas,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1949.

<sup>112</sup> Hirsch. “Race and Renewal in the Cold War South,” 222.

<sup>113</sup> Marie C. McGuire “PHA Commissioner Salutes Housing Authority of New Orleans.” In *Twenty-five Years of Community Service In the Field of Public Low Rent Housing...Housing Authority of New Orleans, 1937-1962*, Housing Authority of New Orleans, 1962, 15.

<sup>114</sup> Hirsch. “Race and Renewal in the Cold War South,” 222.

Selection Supervisor to the Mayor's Office regarding such an applicant, HANO representatives told residents looking for public housing that "the Authority is unable to offer encouragement at this time as vacancies occur infrequently in the Negro projects, besides which all such projects are badly congested with eligible applicants in the legal preference categories, --veterans, servicemen and families displaced by public agency action."<sup>115</sup>

"Families displaced by public agency action" actually constituted a growing number of African-American residents seeking public housing nationwide. Through "negro removal," approximately 425,000 units of predominantly minority-occupied low-income housing had been demolished nationwide between 1949 and 1968; in its place, "only 125,000 new units had been constructed, over half of which were luxury apartments."<sup>116</sup> This shortage was only exacerbated by highway construction and downtown revitalization projects that tore through non-white neighborhoods.

Although New Orleans did not participate in traditional urban renewal programs after the state legislature repealed enabling legislation in 1954, it did undertake other public works programs that displaced residents typically living in African-American communities. The construction of new schools, the Mississippi River Bridge, the Pontchartrain Expressway, the Union Passenger Terminal, and the new City Hall downtown all displaced residents living in predominantly black neighborhoods. This point was not lost on African-American homeowners living in the proposed Fischer site in Algiers. As Reverend Joseph Thibodeaux, President of the Oakdale Property Owners' Improvement Association, indicated in a letter to Senators Allen Ellender and Russell Long in October, 1959,

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<sup>115</sup> Allen Dowling to Hugh W. Stewart, May 6, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing – 1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>116</sup> Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*, 243.

Many of the same property owners [being forced to move due to the construction of Fischer] have had to sacrifice their former homes to sell to the Orleans Parish School Board and many of these same people had to sell to the Mississippi River Bridge Authority for a bridge. Now they are being asked to sell to the New Orleans Housing Authority for a low rent housing project...We feel that the City of New Orleans and the Housing Authority of New Orleans are taking unfair advantage of us the residents of this community.<sup>117</sup>

Of the 71,297 homeowners residing in Orleans Parish in 1960, only 22.3% constituted “non-white” owners, like Reverend Thibodeaux.<sup>118</sup> By expropriating property from black homeowners, the city put a stop to any accumulation of generational wealth that the fortunate few black families amassed from purchasing property.

The City Planning Commission noted in its 1952 “Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy” that “many families displaced by housing project land clearance are not eligible for low-rent housing project occupancy,” nor could they afford to move into “minimum-standard dwelling elsewhere.”<sup>119</sup> Many displaced families had to double up with acquaintances or move to outlying areas. The City Planning Commission explained that “during the last four years, considerable migration of Negro families has occurred to the area below the Industrial Canal between Claiborne and Florida Avenues and the Parish line.”<sup>120</sup> Citing a recent letter from a representative of the Ninth Ward Property Owners League, the City Planning Commission acknowledged that of the families living in the Ninth Ward on the then-future site of the Desire housing project,

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<sup>117</sup> Reverend Joseph Thibodeaux to Senators Allen Ellender and Russell Long, October 1959, box S59-11, folder: Housing – 1959, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>118</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1960 Census*, Table H-1. Occupancy and Structural Characteristics of Housing Units, by Census Tracts: 1960, p. 79.

<sup>119</sup> City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy, 1952, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 3.

<sup>120</sup> City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy, 1952, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 2.

“many...are persons who were evicted from central areas of the City as a result of land clearance for housing projects, civic center, and major street improvements.”<sup>121</sup>

HANO was legally obligated to offer public housing units to eligible residents displaced by its actions; as Scheib wrote to the city’s Chief Administrative Officer, “all site residents who qualify for public housing projects are entitled to the highest priority as a matter of law.”<sup>122</sup>

Moving residents who once resided in homes into public housing only added to the crowded conditions.

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<sup>121</sup> City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy, 1952, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 2.

<sup>122</sup> J. Gilbert Scheib to David McGuire, Jr., January 14, 1959, box 9, folder: Housing Authority of N.O.--1959, Chief Administrative Officer Correspondence, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

## “A HORRIBLE AND DEPRESSING SLUM AREA”: SLUM CLEARANCE AT THE GUSTE AND FISCHER SITES

Within this context, it is easier to understand why the City Planning Commission approved the two new public housing sites. Large-scale slum clearance traditionally left to urban renewal projects was only possible through government action for public use in New Orleans during HANO's third phase of development. In choosing the sites for the Guste and Fischer housing projects, city officials publicly pointed to neighborhood-wide slum conditions, as well as wholly inadequate infrastructure, that could only be remedied through an infusion of federal money accompanying public housing construction. Both neighborhoods consisted of African-American families, many of whom were elderly homeowners. In a July 30, 1958 letter to Mayor Morrison, HANO Executive Director J. Gilbert Scheib noted that building both the Guste and Fischer public housing projects would provide “the esthetic benefit to the City of eliminating a horrible and depressing slum area and replacing it with a contemporary development which will enhance the value of the entire area.”<sup>123</sup>

Aesthetics aside, the city had its eyes on removing perceived slum conditions at both sites for several years. Scheib wrote to New Orleans City Councilman Glen Clasen that “slum clearance and low-rent housing Project La. 1-15 [Guste]...has been under serious consideration by the Housing Authority of New Orleans since 1955.”<sup>124</sup> The City Planning Commission had long sought to build new public housing in “the well-recognized Negro slum area between St. Charles and Claiborne Avenues, Louisiana Avenue and Calliope Street” – the backswamp area –

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<sup>123</sup>J. Gilbert Scheib to Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison, July 30, 1958, box: S58-14, folder: Housing, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>124</sup>J. Gilbert Scheib to Councilman Glen Clasen, July 31, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing – 1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.



but the “disproportionate cost in land acquisition” previously held them back.<sup>125</sup> However, the authorization of federal funds following the 1954 Housing Act made this an affordable option for slum clearance.

Similarly, portions of the Fischer site were “determined as being incapable of rehabilitation by the Division of Housing” and would require outright demolition.<sup>126</sup> In a letter to Senator Russell Long, HANO Attorney Guste, Jr. noted that “for many years the City of New Orleans has contemplated a slum clearance and low rent housing project in the Algiers area. Such a project was not considered wise until transportation across the Mississippi River was available.”<sup>127</sup> Guste, Jr. explained that the construction of the new bridge provided the right opportunity “to clear a rock-bottom, low-density slum” through the construction of the Fischer housing project.<sup>128</sup>

Not only did the city hope to clear houses that it deemed incapable of rehabilitation, but it also sought to provide better infrastructure to the area. For Fischer in particular, Scheib indicated that the site lacked “sub-surface drainage, sewerage, and paved streets.”<sup>129</sup> However, the city often neglected to provide public improvements like paved streets and streetlights in black neighborhoods, despite adjacent white neighborhoods having brand new improvements.<sup>130</sup> Residents living in the proposed site in Algiers noted the irony of HANO’s rationale for demolition; as one African-American resident indicated,

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<sup>125</sup> City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy, 1952, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 2.

<sup>126</sup> City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Minutes of the Advisory Committee on Planning, January 7, 1959, box 9, folder: Housing Authority of N.O. – 1959, Chief Administrative Office Correspondence, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>127</sup> William J. Guste, Jr. to Senator Russell Long, July 29, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing – 1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> J. Gilbert Scheib to J.D. Henderson, National Managing Director of the American Association of Small Business, October 26, 1959, box: S59-11, folder: Housing – 1959, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>130</sup> Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform*, 73.

The City Authorities justify the condemnation of this area for lack of facilities such as lighting, drainage, good streets and sewerage. For many years we owners have petitioned the City for those same facilities. We have voted for two bond issues which were passed but the City used these funds elsewhere.<sup>131</sup>

Slow to build up infrastructure in black neighborhood of the proposed Fischer site, city officials then used the lack of facilities as a public reason for why they would clear the neighborhood.

Although New Orleans officials publicly said they selected the Guste and Fischer sites to clear slums, behind the scenes they were mostly interested in maintaining and strengthening the city's color line. In the 1952 "Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy," the City Planning Commission, at the request of HANO, analyzed different New Orleans neighborhoods that they deemed suitable for future black-occupied public housing. The City Planning Commission explained its methodology for selecting sites by noting that "it was assumed that proposed low-rent Negro housing projects should be located, if possible, in existing Negro neighborhoods."<sup>132</sup>

The report makes this point especially clear for the proposed Fischer site by noting that approximately 7,733 black residents, or 2,148 families, lived in Algiers according to the 1950 census. Forestalling any criticisms against large movements of black residents across the Mississippi River, the report concluded that "a housing development for Negroes in Algiers would not necessarily involve migration of Negro families from the east bank to the west bank."<sup>133</sup> By building black-occupied public housing units in already-black neighborhoods, the city preempted white backlash as was the case with Chicago, Detroit, and Cincinnati.

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<sup>131</sup> Reverend Joseph Thibodeaux to Senators Allen Ellender and Russell Long, October 1959, box S59-11, folder: Housing – 1959, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>132</sup> City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy, 1952, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 3.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 5.

Not only did the city seek to maintain general neighborhood patterns of segregation, but it also created more segregated areas. The City Planning Commission defined the “black” neighborhoods in which it would build new housing as those “where more than 50% of the dwelling units within the block were occupied by Negroes.”<sup>134</sup> By defining “black neighborhoods” as those with a simple majority of African-American residents, the City Planning Commission advocated turning these areas into 100% black occupancy since local authorities had the federally-mandated right to build segregated public housing if they so chose. The City Planning Commission’s report identified land in future Guste and Fischer sites as having neighborhoods with 50% or more black occupancy, and thus making the areas eligible for public housing construction. City officials in New Orleans, determined to maintain a separate color line through its neighborhoods, followed the national trend of bolstering residential segregation by wiping out neighborhoods that while technically majority black, did in fact experience some racial integration.

The City Planning Commission recognized the link between additional high-density public housing and public schools, especially with *Brown* looming in the horizon. Acknowledging that black schools near the Fischer site could not handle a massive influx of new students, the City Planning Commission sought to calm fears of overcrowding or worse, integration: “It is important to state that a new Negro elementary school is planned in this vicinity. Selection of Area 1 for a Negro housing project would provide an excellent opportunity for coordinated school plant planning and housing project planning.”<sup>135</sup> As with Birmingham, city officials in New Orleans sought to maintain patterns of “separate but equal” by building new

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<sup>134</sup>City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy, 1952, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 3.

<sup>135</sup> City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy, 1952, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 4.

school facilities in segregated communities. Schools and surrounding playgrounds “would serve a joint use, being available for both school and municipal and recreational activities.”<sup>136</sup> By building new black-only schools and recreational facilities near all-black housing, city officials hoped to stave off African Americans’ attempts at integration by providing brand new facilities for them.

Utilizing the only legal means that it had of wholesale clearance of the proposed Guste and Fischer sites, HANO—backed by the City Planning Commission, the City Council, and the Mayor, worked assiduously to secure federal funding for the projects at the eleventh hour to be considered for funding for the fiscal year. On July 31, 1958, Scheib informed Councilman Clasen that “at long last the Public Housing Administration...has signed an Annual Contributions contract with the Housing Authority of New Orleans, which contract provides over \$15,000,000.00 of financial assistance from the Federal Government with which to clear the area and construct the project.”<sup>137</sup> Using federal funds, the city was free to move forward with plans to shape the racial makeup of the city through public housing construction.

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<sup>136</sup>City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy, 1952, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 5.

<sup>137</sup> J. Gilbert Scheib to Councilman Glen Clasen, July 31, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing – 1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

## BACKLASH AGAINST THIRD PHASE DEVELOPMENT

HANO, with input from the mayor, City Council, and City Planning Commission moved forward with the Guste and Fischer housing projects within this context. Both projects drew vehement opposition, but from very different constituencies. Slated to be built adjacent to the CBD, the Guste site garnered vociferous opposition from the business community. In a letter to HANO Executive Director Scheib, the Executive Vice President of the Chamber of Commerce, Admiral W.F. Riggs, laid out the organization's concerns with building a new housing project so close to downtown. Not only was the location "highly desirable for development...for light industrial and branch houses of national companies," but it was also "much too valuable to be used for a low rent housing project."<sup>138</sup> Rather than building in an area with so much economic promise, Riggs believed that "other sites for such a project are available in an area where land costs are considerably lower and where industrial development is not likely to expand in the foreseeable future."<sup>139</sup>

When Councilman Clasen presented the same concerns to Scheib in 1958, he responded with incredulity that opponents had over three years to make their case given that the Planning and Zoning Commission approved the site in 1955. Furthermore, "industrial or commercial enterprises have had over three years to take steps to acquire this property privately and clear it so as to use it for industrial purposes."<sup>140</sup>

Mayor Morrison, however, took a softer tone with business elites who opposed the Guste site's proximity to the CBD. In responding to Admiral Riggs' concerns as identified by the Chamber of Commerce, he tried to win over city business leaders by explaining that "we have

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<sup>138</sup> Admiral W. F. Riggs, Jr. to J. Gilbert Scheib, July 15, 1958, box S58-14, folder : Housing – 1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> J. Gilbert Scheib to Councilman Glen Clasen, July 31, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing – 1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

approximately \$25 million of public housing involved in these two areas which will be of great benefit to our economy in somewhat cushioning the business set back we have experienced during the first part of this year.”<sup>141</sup> The Mayor commonly cited the economic impact of the project as an added bonus to clearing slums and providing additional public housing units to low-income African-American residents. As he wrote to Guste, Jr., “I am certain the proposed \$30,000,000 low-rent housing construction program will provide much needed employment in addition to contributing considerably to the economic picture of our community.”<sup>142</sup> As an added financial incentive, Mayor Morrison noted that upon completion of the two projects, the payment in lieu of taxes that the city would receive would be \$25,000 more than the city was currently collecting from low-income African-American homeowners at both sites.<sup>143</sup>

Located in a desolate neighborhood across the river, the Fischer site in Algiers received no opposition from downtown business interests. Rather, black homeowners and nearby white residents alike protested the construction of the project for a variety of reasons. Hiring civil rights activist and attorney A.P. Tureaud to fight their forced removal, African-American homeowners living on the site, such as Reverend Thibodeaux, were unsuccessful in preventing their homes from being razed.<sup>144</sup>

Similarly, white residents clamored against the construction of the project on the West Bank. In seeming sympathy to black homeowners, Earl J. Schmitt, chairman of the Upper Algiers Improvement Association’s Organizing Committee, wrote to Councilman Victor H. Schiro that “the condemnation of these dwelling units would not accrue to the benefit of those

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<sup>141</sup> Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison to Admiral W.F. Riggs, Jr., August 11, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing—1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>142</sup> Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison to William Guste, Jr., November 10, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing—1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>143</sup> Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison to Admiral W.F. Riggs, Jr., August 11, 1958, box S58-14, folder: Housing—1958, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>144</sup> “1000-Unit HANO Plan Studied, *Times-Picayune*, February 21, 1959, 12.

presently occupying the area but would work to their very definite disadvantage. Families would be displaced and broken up to their social and economic detriment.”<sup>145</sup> However, the group revealed its true motivations further in the letter in a section that was crossed out; members worried that displaced black residents would find alternate housing in other parts of Algiers, “which would ~~either~~ create a false housing shortage within the normal areas of colored occupancy, ~~or, would result in an encroachment into otherwise white neighborhoods.~~”<sup>146</sup> Similar to many struggles over the location of public housing taking place across the country during this time, white residents worried that developments built near their neighborhoods would result in black families “encroaching” into white communities. Schmitt’s concern with keeping separate neighborhoods reflected city officials’ desire to keep black and white neighborhoods separate.

Unlike most major metropolitan areas, New Orleans was unique in that the city moved forward with construction of both projects on their proposed sites despite opposition from the business community and white residents. Defiance from these two constituencies regarding the location of new public housing developments was usually the death knell of a project site. New Orleans city officials, however, not only looked forward to the economic boon that \$25 million worth of construction would bring to the city, but they also sought to maintain patterns of racial segregation while clearing slums and paying lip service to the serious lack of housing opportunities for low-income African-American residents.

In this regard, New Orleans was no different from its large urban counterparts in using federally-funded housing projects to maintain the city’s color line. The very fact that both projects went up in areas already housing black residents probably contributed significantly to opposing forces refraining from using more aggressive tactics, such as violence, as was

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<sup>145</sup> Earl J. Schmitt to Victor H. Schiro, February 21, 1959, box S59-1, folder: Algiers Housing Project – 1959, Victor Hugo Schiro Collection, 1957-1970, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

occurring in large cities like Chicago. White residents and business elites had less to lose than their counterparts in cities where public housing for African Americans “encroached” on “their” neighborhoods.

Mayor Morrison biographer Edward F. Haas indicates that slum clearance in New Orleans was a “prime example” of one of the city’s short-term accomplishments that led to greater problems over time:

The removal of ramshackle buildings in downtown New Orleans cleared the way for the construction of the Union Passenger Terminal and the civic center complex, but the failure to provide adequate housing for the displaced residents forced many people, mostly blacks, to crowd into predominantly Negro sections of the city and contributed to greater residential segregation in the metropolitan area.<sup>147</sup>

While Haas referred specifically to public works projects downtown, the same could be said for the construction of Guste next to the CBD and Fischer in Algiers. Although HANO made public housing units available to families displaced due to construction at both Guste and Fischer, some did not qualify, while others chose not to participate. Reverend Thibodeaux made this point abundantly clear when writing to his Senators: “we have never lived in a project nor do we intend to live in one after having owned our own homes for a long number of years.”<sup>148</sup>

Although African-American residents such as Reverend Thibodeaux did not want to move into public housing, there were few affordable options available. He noted that the limited income of “the old people, some of whom are pensioners” would prevent them from being able to afford a new house in another location; furthermore, “surrounding properties are already

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<sup>147</sup>Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform*, 290-291.

<sup>148</sup> Reverend Joseph Thibodeaux to Senators Allen Ellender and Russell Long, October 1959, box S59-11, folder: Housing – 1959, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.



restricted for white only by real estate companies.”<sup>149</sup> Limited in their options to move, displaced residents often crowded into already-black neighborhoods.

For residents who did not qualify for or did not want to move into public housing, the city was able to secure Section 221 mortgage insurance “to rehouse families displaced by urban renewal and other public actions.”<sup>150</sup> The “221 Relocation Housing” brochure published by the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA) described Section 221 mortgage insurance as a device “to help private industry provide low-cost relocation housing for sale or rent, through new or existing construction.”<sup>151</sup> Mayor Morrison received a telegram from Senator Allen Ellender on June 29, 1960 notifying him that New Orleans was eligible for 300 such units “to help rehouse families displaced by site acquisition by federal government for public housing projects and demolition of war housing project [Barre Homes for African-American veterans].”<sup>152</sup> Fully aware of the city’s color lines and lack of possible areas in which the private market could absorb displaced black residents, the Mayor’s Executive Assistant, Tommy Heier, scrawled to the Morrison, “I cannot see where this could possibly be used in Orleans Parish.”<sup>153</sup> Mayor Morrison responded in a handwritten note, “How could anyone lose in this deal—FOR NEGROES of course. Maybe Pont. Park [Pontchartrain Park] can handle.”<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Reverend Joseph Thibodeaux to Senators Allen Ellender and Russell Long, October 1959, box S59-11, folder: Housing – 1959, deLesseps S. Morrison Collection, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>150</sup> Norman P. Mason of the Housing and Home Finance Agency to Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison, June 29, 1960, box 8, folder: HHFA Section 221 Financing, Chief Administrative Officer Correspondence, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>151</sup> Housing and Home Finance Agency, “221 Relocation Housing,” box 8, folder: HHFA Section 221 Financing, Chief Administrative Officer Correspondence, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>152</sup> Senator Allen Ellender to Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison, June 29, 1960, box 8, folder: HHFA Section 221 Financing, Chief Administrative Officer Correspondence, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

Despite Mayor Morrison's exuberance over the acquisition of Section 221 housing, there was no possibility that Pontchartrain Park could accommodate the vast number of black residents who would be displaced by the third phase of HANO development. In an April 20, 1960 letter to HHFA Regional Administrator John Foster, Scheib included an attachment outlining how many families would be rendered homeless from the construction of Guste and Fischer, as well as the demolition of Barre Homes, a temporary veterans' public housing development. All families affected were African-American; while 254 families would require housing from razing Barre Homes, 350 families would be displaced due to the Fischer project in Algiers, and approximately 640 families would be displaced from the Guste site near CBD.<sup>155</sup>

Although Guste and Fischer created 993 and 1,002 public housing units, respectively, the demolition of homes on those sites, coupled with the deactivation of Barre Homes, displaced 1,244 African-American families.<sup>156</sup> HANO's plan to increase the density of housing units at both sites concentrated low-income black residents in smaller areas of the city. Interestingly, in 1952 the City Planning Commission balked at the idea of building any more black-occupied public housing in "well-recognized Negro slum area" in the backswamp part of the city due to density concerns. Concerned about encouraging "an undesirably high population density in the new development," the City Planning Commission wished it was "economically feasible to clear high-density slums and to construct low-rent housing projects at a density considerably lower

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<sup>155</sup> J. Gilbert Scheib to John Foster, April 20, 1960, "Exhibit A—Families Displaced and to be Displaced, by Type of Displacement, by Race and Time Period of Displacement," box 8, folder: HHFA Section 221 Financing, Chief Administrative Officer Correspondence, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>156</sup> Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Twenty-five Years of Community Service In the Field of Public Low Rent Housing...Housing Authority of New Orleans, 1937-1962*, Housing Authority of New Orleans, 1962, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, 9.

than that which has heretofore prevailed in New Orleans.”<sup>157</sup> The city’s decision to move forward with building *Guste* in this area represented a reversal of the City Planning Commission’s original goals. By creating higher-density public housing than what was previously present at both sites, the city created a pressure valve for white neighborhoods by providing low-rent housing for a growing black population, preventing them from “encroaching” on white enclaves.

The construction of new public housing developments designated for African-Americans on the site of neighborhoods with more than 50% black occupancy solidified spatial segregation in New Orleans. This reflected national trends in public housing construction for minorities occurring during this time. Even though the federal government mandated integration in public housing after 1964, by then New Orleans public housing had already become a place for the city to warehouse its displaced, often low-income, black residents. In doing so, city officials laid the groundwork for the concentrated, racialized poverty that Hurricane Katrina brought to the nation’s attention.

While the physical structures of both *Guste* and *Fischer* are slowly being replaced with new mixed-income housing from federal HOPE VI funds, the permanence of institutionalized spatial segregation, coupled with inadequate social services nearby, remains with us still in the form of high poverty rates and low educational attainment levels of too many of the city’s public housing residents. If “geography is destiny,” then New Orleans has a long way to go to right the wrongs of having actively engineered residential segregation. It remains to be seen if HOPE VI redevelopment will provide this opportunity for integration in New Orleans.

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<sup>157</sup> City Planning Commission of New Orleans, Report and Recommendation for Selection of Low-Rent Housing Project Sites for Negro Occupancy, 1952, New Orleans City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 2.

## APPENDIX

Gmail - FW: City Planning Commission document for master's thesis <http://mail.google.com/mail/?ui=2&ik=0f7cd69cd3&view=pt&search...>



Stephanie Slates <[stephanie.slates@gmail.com](mailto:stephanie.slates@gmail.com)>

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### FW: City Planning Commission document for master's thesis

3 messages

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Yolanda W. Rodriguez <[ywrodriguez@cityofno.com](mailto:ywrodriguez@cityofno.com)>

Wed, Apr 2, 2008 at 11:25 AM

To: [stephanie.slates@gmail.com](mailto:stephanie.slates@gmail.com)

Ms. Slate,

Please let this e-mail serve as authorization to use the map image you requested from the NO Public Library.

Yolanda W. Rodriguez

Executive Director

City Planning Commission of New Orleans

Office: (504) 658-7000

Fax: (504) 658-7032

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**From:** Derek I. Scheerer

**Sent:** Wednesday, April 02, 2008 10:08 AM

**To:** Yolanda W. Rodriguez

**Subject:** FW: City Planning Commission document for master's thesis

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**From:** Stephanie Slates [<mailto:stephanie.slates@gmail.com>]

**Sent:** Tuesday, April 01, 2008 11:57 AM

**To:** Derek I. Scheerer

**Subject:** City Planning Commission document for master's thesis

Hi Derek,

I hope you're doing well. I received your email address from Kristen Phillips, who is a classmate

mail - FW: City Planning Commission document for master's thesis <http://mail.google.com/mail/?ui=2&ik=0f7cd69cd3&view=pt&searc...>

of mine at UNO. I am finishing up my Urban Studies master's thesis and would like to include a map from a 1959 City Planning Commission annual report from UNO's Louisiana Collection. I checked with the head librarian for Special Collections at UNO, and she said that I would have to get permission from the City Planning Commission to use an image of the map in my thesis. Do you know who I should reach out to about asking for permission to include this image? I would need to secure permission in the next two weeks. Thanks so much for your assistance!

Best wishes,  
Stephanie Slates  
504.782.3754

## VITA

Stephanie Lyn Slates was born in Waukesha, Wisconsin and grew up in Arlington, Texas. After graduating from Arlington High School in 1997, she attended Harvard College and received a Bachelor of Arts in History in 2002. In May 2008 she will receive a Master of Science in Urban Studies from the University of New Orleans.