

# RACIAL REMAPPING: How City Leaders Bulldozed Black Neighborhoods

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**Abstract** In 1995, Mary Bishop traced Roanoke's racial politics and land grabs in a 12-page Roanoke Times special report, "Street by Street, Block by Block: How Urban Renewal Uprooted Black Roanoke." Mary's back to recap some uncomfortable history and say what's happened since.



**J**ust a five-minute walk over the railroad tracks from downtown Roanoke's white-linen steakhouses and old offices transformed into stylish condos lies a quiet, largely disregarded section of the city. It symbolizes both a dehumanizing racial history and several botched attempts at another sort of re-invention.

The Gainsboro neighborhood and land adjacent to it is hands-down Roanoke's most racially controversial section. It has been a hot spot for a very long time. Maybe even since the Ice Age. The story goes that mastodons, the elephant-like beasts with giant tusks, and other prehistoric creatures were drawn to salt marshes in the lowlands just northeast of downtown.

Thousands of years later, native peoples came to hunt, drawn by those same salt marshes and all the buffalo, deer, and wolves conveniently assembled there. Settlers followed in the 1700s in a place first called Big Lick for the salt deposits, then railroads in the 1800s. Within a few decades, rail and factory workers, white and black, had made homes in that most original part of town, just north of the tracks.

Early in the 20th century, Roanoke, like Baltimore, Richmond, Atlanta, and other cities, set up districts where only blacks could live and other neighborhoods where they could not. White

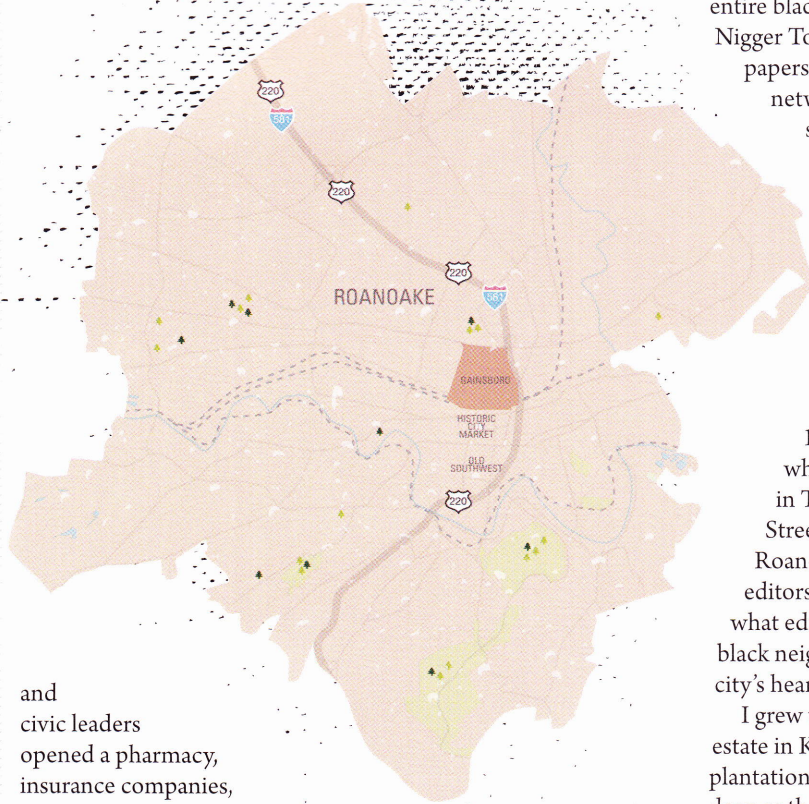
workers, often paid twice the wages of blacks for the same work, already were starting to move into newer housing in other parts of town. Black families, who had come to Roanoke to work in foundries, tobacco factories, and the railroad, stayed behind in the Northeast neighborhood and in the section just to its west, which today we call Gainsboro.

Small pockets of black housing existed in other parts of the Roanoke Valley too, but city government and real estate agents corralled the vast majority of African Americans — professionals as well as hard laborers — into Northeast and Gainsboro. Black doctors and lawyers lived alongside laundresses and shoe-shiners. All were essentially trapped there. Deeds in newer neighborhoods barred non-Caucasians from buying those houses. Real estate agents kept watch over racial boundaries to prevent blacks from buying on whites-only streets, and the Ku Klux Klan punctuated the borders with cross burnings. These and other practices led Roanoke to become one of the most racially segregated cities in Virginia, a pattern that persists to this day.

Black Roanokers in the last century made the most of their lot, as did African Americans locked in other cities' tight, segregated wards. They created Burrell Memorial Hospital, one of the best-known black hospitals in the South. Over the years, black business

and civic leaders opened a pharmacy, insurance companies, funeral homes, a YMCA, a life-saving crew, a movie theater, a library, stores, schools, cafés, dry cleaners, barbershops, and dozens of churches. Black shoppers often weren't welcome at white-run stores and institutions downtown, so they were thankful they could enjoy significant independence within their own mini-Roanoke.

Their part of town was never as predictable as the white sections, where each social class had its own expansive turf and well-off whites lived far from the poorest members of their race. In the concentrated quarters of Northeast and Gainsboro, prostitutes and



entire black section as an eyesore. The rudest among them called it Nigger Town. They didn't spend much time there. White newspapers blared incidents of violence but didn't notice the vast network of black neighborliness that kept children tended, soup pots shared, and cars repaired right outside the door.

White leaders were embarrassed that out-of-towners might see barefoot black children sitting on the curb when driving into town. They were ashamed of neglected housing too — though some of it was owned by white landlords.

What happened next in Roanoke was repeated in hundreds of other cities across the United States. What makes Roanoke's experience particularly instructive, however, is that with a population of around 100,000, its history can be traced neighbor by neighbor, which is what I did in 1995 for a special 12-page section in *The Roanoke Times & World-News* titled "Street by Street, Block by Block: How Urban Renewal Uprooted Black Roanoke." Publishing it wasn't entirely comfortable for my editors. Under former owners, the newspaper had cheered on what editorial writers called "slum clearance." They referred to the black neighborhoods as "a slovenly and unsightly approach to the city's heart."

I grew up the daughter of a white farm worker on a rich family's estate in Keswick, Va., near Charlottesville. On those old Keswick plantations in the 1940s and 1950s, race and class divisions were as deep as they'd been in the 19th century. But no one talked about it. Before coming to Roanoke, I lived in Richmond, Washington, D.C., Boston, New York, Charlotte, and Philadelphia. Those cities' geographies were so vast, it was hard to get a sense of their racial histories. In Roanoke, black elders could show me on a small scale exactly where and how they had lived their lives.

Of the scores of black Roanokers interviewed for that article, no one's perspective was richer than that of the late Charles Meadows. He had about as good a job as a black man could have in Roanoke: He cared for 38,000 wooden patterns used for metal castings of parts for the Norfolk and Western Railway. He and his wife, Carrie,

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bootleggers plied their trades in close proximity to the churchly goings-on of conservative black families. On Henry Street, black Roanoke's once-booming business and entertainment district, a prim and proper Baptist deacon could get a haircut just feet from unemployed men playing the numbers, hoping to hit it big and raise themselves out of debt.

On any given block of Northeast and Gainsboro stood vastly contrasting real estate, reflecting the economic conditions within each household. Many black-owned houses were maintained in pristine fashion, with flower gardens, fresh siding, and tidy porches, while more impoverished owners and tenants lacked the means to keep their houses painted and their roofs weather-tight.

By the 1950s, Roanoke's white municipal leaders regarded the

raised five children in Northeast and took immaculate care of the house they owned for 31 years. In his neighborhood, he said, "The section was so unified at one time, you could start at the Norfolk and Western station and call the names of everybody on every street. We didn't need telephones. You'd just walk out and call somebody's name, or spread the word. 'Hello, Brother John. Hello, Sister So-and-So,' hollering on both sides of the street." People halted crimes before they could develop. When trouble was brewing, they could usually nip it in the bud.

A few years after World War II, the federal government had begun offering Roanoke and other cities millions of dollars to build interstates to downtowns and to construct industries and civic centers alongside them. Roanoke went for the big bucks. Over four decades



beginning in 1955, Roanoke leaders used more than \$40 million in federal dollars to redevelop the old black neighborhoods. They tore down 1,600 black-owned homes, some of the city's most historic schools, two dozen churches, and more than 200 small businesses owned by black, Greek, and Lebanese immigrants. On the seized land, totaling 395 acres, Roanoke built the Roanoke Civic Center, the main post office, white-owned industries, hotels, fast food restaurants, and businesses.

Then the city took Meadows' house and those of his neighbors. He went into debt to buy another house a mile or so away and lost track of his friends. People dispersed. He'd see old friends only at funerals. He watched some of them go to court, trying to save their homes, but they lost, gave up, and died. City leaders wanted Roanoke to grow and change. "So where else do you go?" Meadows said. "Here are a bunch of poor people over there struggling. They just moved them out and scattered them around. That broke up the cooperation of fellow man."

The national program was called urban renewal; black Roanokers came to call it "Negro removal."

For their land, property owners received modest payments based on residential assessments of what the city considered "blighted" slums. More than 100 of the homes were torched as practice burns for firefighters — a horrific sight for the people who'd been born there. "It was like looking at a war movie," said the Rev. Ivory Morton, who watched the burnings as a boy. Once the patchwork of

small tracts were cleared to create vast swaths of developable land, values jumped astronomically to commercial rates that brought the city many times more in tax revenue than it ever gleaned from the individuals who once lived and conducted small-scale commerce there.

In the early years of demolition, city leaders publicly and repeatedly promised residents of Northeast and Gainsboro that they would be allowed to build new houses on the old sites and to re-establish their communities. That only happened years later in one tiny 25-house patch of Gainsboro. Instead, black homeowners who had been debt-free were forced to take out onerous loans to relocate to more expensive neighborhoods. Many renters moved into public housing and stayed there for generations. As the waves of urban renewal radiated ever more deeply into the community, some homeowners and at least one church were forced to relocate more than once.

Some people hired lawyers and pleaded before judges, with little success. In mid-century, powerbrokers across the country crusaded passionately against decay in the oldest parts of cities. To spruce them up, courts favored giving local governments the power of eminent domain — the right to seize private property without consent. Large tracts were swept clean and turned into revenue-pumping projects, which many thought served the greater good.

In Roanoke, the people of Northeast and Gainsboro lost

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touch with complex veins of mutual aid that even they had undervalued until they were gone — the sweet potatoes harvested from a backyard garden and left on front porches by a neighbor, the close-by care available for an ailing great-grandfather, the relaxed atmosphere on streets where in hard times a kettle of beans and a batch of biscuits could feed a whole block.

Over decades of urban renewal, the color line gradually nudged north and west of the old 'hoods, and the black population spread out in a fan that now covers all of the city's northwest quadrant. As black families migrated farther and farther in that direction, white residents, who had in many cases lived there for generations, took flight, creating predominantly white suburbs both within the city and all over surrounding Roanoke County.

Because of this painful history, elderly black Roanokers and many of their descendants still share a jaundiced view of city government and of developers in general. Four neighborhood organizations represent the small Gainsboro area, each with its own take on the history and on how vacant land there should be used. A few years ago, a new Social Security building was constructed downtown, instead of on Henry Street, because some residents thought it would create a cold, bunker-like presence on what used to be a friendly, comfortable street. Because of the lack of consensus, only two buildings remain on a now-deserted Henry Street — a cultural center in an old hotel and a culinary school in a former theater and adjacent stores.

Few architectural anchors remain in Gainsboro. The widening of Wells Avenue by the Hotel Roanoke in the 1990s took more buildings. So did construction of the Second Street thoroughway to downtown. Proposals for music clubs and restaurants along Henry Street, reflecting those of the past, were rebuffed years ago.

Roanoke's racial history continues to flare up in unexpected ways. When city government wanted to work with Roanoke's natural foods co-op to open an organic garden near what had been a city-owned golf course, people living nearby rose up in fierce opposition — primarily because the co-op wanted to raise chickens there. Neighbors, many of them black, complained that the city was disrespecting them once again, this time with stinky chickens. Signs with a slash through the picture of a chicken popped up on lawns. The farm moved elsewhere.

In the 1960s, when white violence against racial integration was making headlines elsewhere, Roanoke set out to avoid the outbursts and the publicity. A biracial committee, begun in 1959 and determined to prevent chaos, worked quietly with business leaders and public officials to peacefully desegregate stores, lunch counters, theaters, schools, and some workplaces. The committee led voter registration drives at a time when voting rights advocates were being assaulted elsewhere. The NAACP did take the city to court to preserve historically black schools and to hire black city employees. But the only well-publicized demonstration by blacks was against *The Roanoke Times'* refusal to publish black brides on its society pages.

Roanoke attacked discriminatory Jim Crow practices more straightforwardly than many other cities. But cruel racial customs went on here, and there's never been a full airing of what happened during more than a half-century of lynchings, residential segregation, and injustices of all sorts.

City officials tend to tiptoe around any issue that might fire up black neighborhood activists, particularly two pairs of elderly

African-American sisters who watch over separate turfs in Gainsboro. These otherwise gentle ladies witnessed the disrespect and demolitions years ago and react with such distrust to proposals for change in Gainsboro that other black citizens no longer comment on Gainsboro at all. "I just threw my hands up," said a man who decided to quit talking about Gainsboro rather than be criticized by the women.

Several years ago, after I retired, I tried to drum up interest in a professionally planned airing of Roanoke's racial history. Like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which recorded the history of apartheid, our city's racial strife and our successes would finally be recorded in full. People on all sides would be able to speak without fear of reprisal. The director of Roanoke's Conflict Resolution Center was excited by the idea. She saw its potential. But she moved away, the next director wasn't interested, and nothing ever came of it.

Once again this past winter, city leaders were hearing familiar racial apprehensions as they formed plans for some of the last farmland along Interstate 581 leading into downtown Roanoke. The privately owned property, called Evans Spring, totals 130 acres and features fields, woods, a lake, and a stream. Just across I-581 is Valley View Mall, the region's largest shopping center. If state officials have their way, the mall interchange will be extended to open up the land on the southern side of the interstate for commercial development. Nearby black residents and some activists fear the loss of green space and neighborhood tranquility.

Reginald Shareef, an African-American professor of political science and public administration at Radford University, grew up in Roanoke and has been studying Roanoke's land grabs for decades. He notes that the city's use of eminent domain became unpopular several years ago after the city was forced to pay significant damages to a black dentist and his family, longtime medical pioneers in Gainsboro. A judge ruled that two decades of threatened condemnation had devalued the family's land.

So instead, Shareef said, Roanoke is using another tool less familiar to neighborhood leaders — the designation of properties like that along I-581 as economic enterprise zones. Governments give businesses financial and infrastructure help to build in these often economically depressed areas.

More than a year ago, Shareef got a call from a community leader near I-581 asking about enterprise zones. "When I explained — and directed her to the City of Roanoke web page — she better understood the incentives for business people to want the property," Shareef told me in an email. "The city/state/federal governments are giving substantial incentives for business to build in the area. The question is, does it improve the economics of the neighborhood? Probably not."

Nearly 30 years ago, in the last stages of urban renewal in Gainsboro, Roanoke designated an area near the Coca-Cola bottling plant as an enterprise zone. The city promised that a quarter of new Coke jobs would go to people living nearby. That pledge helped persuade the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to lend Coke \$4 million for an expansion. Twenty-three more Gainsboro homes and 21 small businesses were leveled. A few residents who won jobs were laid off soon after. Hints of jobs are being talked about now in Evans Spring, and observers like Shareef are afraid neighbors are overlooking the long-term picture for short-term gains.

# “BLACK ROANOKERS CONTINUE TO SUFFER FROM HIGHER UNEMPLOYMENT RATES THAN WHITES, EARN LESS MONEY, SUFFER HIGHER FORECLOSURE RATES, ARE DENIED MORTGAGE LOANS AT A HIGHER RATE, ARE MORE LIKELY TO RENT THAN TO BUY A HOME AND TO LIVE IN PUBLIC OR SECTION 8 HOUSING.”

“Neighborhoods,” he writes, “only become economically stronger when dollars spent at the eatery are then spent at the service station and are then spent at the cleaners, etc. This is called the ‘velocity of money.’ Because of the lack of businesses in black communities and the fact that the entrepreneurs don’t live in black communities, Ronald Reagan used to quote an economic truism: ‘A dollar turns over one time in the black community and eight times in the white community.’ Consequently, black communities remain poor in deals like the enterprise zones on I-581.”

So, what do Roanoke’s racial patterns look like today? Most of the city’s black citizens still live in Northwest Roanoke. Black Roanokers continue to suffer from higher unemployment rates than whites, earn less money, suffer higher foreclosure rates, are denied mortgage loans at a higher rate, are more likely to rent than to buy a home and to live in public or Section 8 housing — all findings in a comprehensive study of the city’s fair housing issues conducted by Pittsburgh consultants Mullin & Lonergan Associates and released last year by Roanoke officials.

Roanoke City’s population is now about 29% black, while suburban Roanoke County, surrounding the city, is roughly 5.5% black. Forty-four percent of the city’s public school students are black, compared with only six percent of students in the county. But like most cities across the nation, Roanoke City is gradually becoming less racially segregated. Demographers commonly measure segregation with something called a dissimilarity index, a figure that represents the percentage of people who would have to move to make a neighborhood match the overall diversity of the entire jurisdiction. The higher the index, the greater the segregation.

In 1980, Roanoke City’s index was 73.4. By the 2010 census, the figure had dropped to 59.3. Among Virginia cities, only Richmond, at 63.5, is more racially divided. Lower segregation rates in Virginia include Portsmouth’s 55.5, Norfolk at 50.8, Chesapeake at 41.7, Martinsville at 37.1, Danville at 34.1, and Charlottesville at 30.8. (Outside Virginia, Chicago’s 82.5 ranks among the most segregated, along with New York at 81.2, Miami at 75.5 and a tad lower than Roanoke, Detroit at 59.2.)

Slowly, very slowly, some of the Roanoke Valley’s more affluent black families are trickling into once-all-white neighborhoods. Some seven percent of black Roanoke households now have incomes of \$75,000 or more, compared with 20 percent of white households. Gradually, black children are appearing more frequently in the school snapshots of The Roanoke Times’ suburban tabs. The sight of a middle-aged black homeowner out for a stroll

in one of Roanoke’s traditionally white suburbs is becoming less surprising now to the white drivers who pass him.

Until the 1970s, The Roanoke Times refused to run black brides in its wedding announcements. But now the smiling faces of those brides and their grooms show up occasionally on those pages, as do black couples who weren’t allowed in print years ago but who now, for a fee, can proudly celebrate their anniversaries.

The late writer Jane Jacobs, at various times a Pennsylvanian, New Yorker, and Canadian, was widely regarded as one of the world’s foremost thinkers on urban planning. Her classic work, “The Death and Life of Great American Cities,” warned in 1961 of the often soul-stripping nature of urban development.

I sent a copy of the “Street by Street” section to Jacobs in 1995, 11 years before her death in Toronto. “I read it with the greatest interest and also admiration,” she wrote me, “for the way you’ve faced up to civic misapprehensions and errors — something so few other communities have done as yet. It’s an important step.”

“Of course some things done can never be ‘undone,’” she continued, “but since life doesn’t stop they can be not only learned from, but considerably rectified over time and the first necessary stage for that is the kind of reassessment you undertook: both fascinating as history and heartening for the city’s social and economic moves in [the] future.”

Jacobs noted that her father had been a Virginian and that her brother, John Butzner, was at that time a federal judge in Richmond. “So you can appreciate,” she wrote, “that it makes me sad to contemplate the vicissitudes but also proud to see how realistically and courageously you are facing up to them.”

Well, I don’t see that Roanoke has lived up to Jacobs’ faith in us. We still aren’t talking about why we’re such a segregated city. We still aren’t talking about why racial distrust continues, or how things got this way in the first place.

The afternoon of last fall’s Election Day, I was out doing a final sweep for the Obama campaign, making sure Roanoke’s Democratic faithful had indeed voted. I knocked on the door of 71-year-old William Keeling in one of Roanoke’s more affluent black subdivisions. Keeling was upset. He had stood in line for two and a half hours at a middle school polling place. His legs hurt so badly, he’d come home without voting. “I’ll never vote again — for anybody,” he said. “They don’t want us to vote.” He looked me hard in the eye and said, solemnly, “You’ll never know what it’s like to be a black man in Roanoke.” He is right.