STREET BY STREET BLOCK BY BLOCK
HOW URBAN RENEWAL UPROOTED BLACK ROANOKE

Photo courtesy of Mary Louise Thompson

"We used to get together Sunday afternoons. I went by to visit. I had the camera and we took some pictures. The people there were very nice people ... hard-working people, church-going people." — *Mary Louise Thompson on visits to her friend Maxine Law and her children in Gainsboro in the 1940s.*

Urban renewal's untold stories

By MARY BISHOP, STAFF WRITER

SOMETHING began happening 40 years ago that changed Roanoke forever.

It displaced thousands of men, women and children, wiping out neighborhoods and institutions. A long chain of broken promises scarred citizens' political trust so badly that the bitterness flares up in public hearings to this day.

And yet the story — from the point of view of those who lived through it — has never been told.

Today, in a special section called "Street By Street, Block By Block: How Urban Renewal Uprooted Black Roanoke," we report what the

PLEASE SEE **STORIES**/A10

Your comments welcome

To comment on today's special report, there are four options:

- Write to Mary Bishop, Roanoke Times & World-News, P.O. Box 2491, Roanoke, Va. 24010.
- Send a letter to the editor at the same address.
- Call InfoLine at 981-0100 (703 area code) and punch in code 7822. You will have up to one minute to record your message.
- If you have access to an on-line computer service, send an e-mail to roatimes@infi.net.

SUPER BOWL San Francisco vs. San Diego, 6:18 p.m., WSET Channel 13, WFIR 960 AM
COLLEGE BASKETBALL VIRGINIA RACES PAST GEORGE MASON, TECH ROUTS LIBERTY
Roanoke Times & World-News
Gingrich PAC raises questions
Potential for conflicts enormous
Urban renewal's untold stories
Test of wills over missing

STREET BY STREET BLOCK BY BLOCK
HOW URBAN RENEWAL UPROOTED BLACK ROANOKE
The Loss still stings
Black Roanokers lament the taking of their communities
Roanoke Times & World-News
A SPECIAL SECTION

On January 29, 1995, this story on Roanoke's urban renewal history appeared on the front page of the Roanoke Times & World-News (left).

Inside the paper was a special section (below).

Stories

FROM PAGE A1

federally funded program called urban renewal did to the black families of Roanoke.

Their uprooting from the city's two largest and oldest black neighborhoods — Northeast Roanoke and Gainsboro — began in 1955. Urban renewal went through three long waves and several small ones that stretched over four decades. It continues today on a smaller scale as the city prepares to tear down 10 Gainsboro homes to build a road to downtown.

The history of urban renewal in Roanoke was all about what city leaders, most of them white, wanted to do with 395 acres of prime developable land just north of the railroad tracks from downtown and inhabited for generations by black families.

Government leaders here thought urban renewal was a progressive way to clear what looked like slums to them and put in highways, industries and public complexes such as the Roanoke Civic Center. But there was a lack of understanding among those policymakers — as well as reporters and editors at this newspaper — of what life was really like in black neighborhoods, what those communities meant to people, and exactly what would happen to the families made to leave.

Most of all, there was little recognition that black families had the same attachment to each other, community and home as everybody else.

"Slum" and "blight" are words that Roanoke's older white leaders use to describe what they saw in those neighborhoods. Black people who lived there had another word for it: Home.

In the 1950s, a majority of black Roanokers lived in either Northeast or Gainsboro, so nearly every black family in this city has known the effects of urban renewal, if not directly, then through the loss of a grandmother's home, a best friend's, a church, a school.

White people felt it, too, even if they did not realize what was happening to them because when black people were forced out of segregated neighborhoods, they had nowhere to go but the white neighborhoods just beyond the old color line. In the 1950s and 1960s white families fled their newly integrated streets and fanned out across the valley, filling the suburbs that began to encircle the city.

While some blacks moved into public housing and have been there ever since, most black families bought sounder homes than the ones they left. The problem was, many took on staggering debt to make the move and lost their neighbors, friends and social connectedness in the process.

Several older black Roanokers interviewed for today's report said it's too painful to ponder what urban renewal did to their communities. "I don't mind telling you," one man said, apologizing as he ended a long account of what happened to him, "it sort of makes me a little sick to talk about it."

Gainsboro natives still argue among themselves about whether they should have fought harder against urban renewal, which promised revival of one of the city's oldest neighborhoods but wound up doing more tearing down than building up. All these years later, they're still divided over it, another man said. "Just like Vietnam or Korea."

Urban renewal took place during the administrations of nine United States presidents. It was overseen in Roanoke by seven mayors, four city managers, three Redevelopment and Housing Authority directors, 44 members of City Council, and 32 members of the authority's board of commissioners. Of the more than 80 local officials, who presided over urban renewal, only 11 — four council members and seven authority board members — were black.

All these officials bear some responsibility for how urban renewal reshaped black Roanoke. No single person, however, has been held accountable.

"I have personally come to the conclusion, and it helps me sleep at night, that it was nobody's fault and it was everybody's fault," said Earl Reynolds, Jr., a former Roanoke City planner and assistant city manager.

A couple of years ago, Ted Edlich, executive director of Roanoke's anti-poverty agency, Total Action Against Poverty, put on paper what he thought were the long-lasting impacts of the loss of Roanoke's oldest black communities. He agreed a few days ago to let his words be printed here, saying his feelings haven't changed.

"These actions have for decades left the impression that the City of Roanoke not only has no regard for black neighborhoods and their institutions but will stop at nothing to appropriate the land and property of blacks when it desires it for some other use," Edlich wrote.

"It has dampened the incentive of blacks to invest in their homes. It has created a sense of transiency which has been a deterrent to attracting business investment. It has created a sense of hopelessness and even bitterness which has been transmitted to a new generation of young people who have seen their parents exploited."

Black Roanokers still feel wounded and angry about urban renewal. White Roanokers haven't understood why.

Today, we try to explain.

Roanoke Times & World-News

> *People look at urban renewal, but it was Negro removal. That's all it was.*
> **William Hackley**

Photo courtesy of Arleen Ollie

"That's my brother's bike. I got one too, and it was too big for me. I wouldn't let anybody else ride it. I wouldn't let anybody else sit on it. We had so much freedom. You didn't have to worry about getting shot, and no drugs. I don't think Roanoke has ever been the same."

— Arleen Ollie, on growing up on Raleigh Avenue Northeast. This picture was taken about 1954.

The Loss still stings

Black Roanokers lament the taking of their communities

By MARY BISHOP, Staff Writer

AGAINST the odds, Olivee and Arthur Tyree fashioned a life for themselves and their children in old Northeast Roanoke.

Polio had kept Arthur Tyree in a wheelchair since his teens. He earned money fixing radios in their dining room.

When you walked up their steps, you could look through the front door and see him sitting at the antique table and buffet, fixing somebody's old Philco.

Olivee Tyree cleaned white people's houses by day and nursed by night at Burrell Memorial, a black hospital. She was grateful that the white families she cleaned for gave her milk and hand-me-down clothes for their daughter and two sons.

The Tyrees owned their cottage in Northeast Roanoke at 1109 4½ St. They knew all their neighbors — Will Gaither, Eddie Wallace, Rulley Allen, George Smith. The kids rode their sleds down Diamond Hill and the steep slopes that surrounded their house.

Little grocery stores dotted the neighborhood. Selma Saker and Sadie Millehan each had one just around the corner.

Eventually, Olivee Tyree managed to add on to her house. "I enjoyed the house we had," she says. "Had it all fixed up, a fence around it and all painted."

In those days, she still had to drink from the "colored" water fountain at the Kress five-and-dime downtown; the newspaper wouldn't have run her daughter's engagement picture.

In 1955, when her elder son, Lewis, was about to go into the Army, the city announced it was going to take the Tyrees' house — and all their neighbors', too.

It didn't sound bad at first. "They promised they'd build new houses there and we could buy them back. They said they were going to fix it up and make it beautiful for the people."

Little did the Tyrees know that their home stood in the cross hairs of one of America's most massive social experiments. In Roanoke, it would force the migration of thousands of black men, women and children. It would tear down 1,600 of their homes. It would level more than 200 of their businesses and 24 of their churches.

CINDY PINKSTON/Staff

"You know, I loved Northeast," Olivee Tyree said. She misses those neighbors. "They all got along and their children got along just like they were brothers and sisters." Tyree, outside her current home on Hanover Avenue Northwest, is flanked by sons the Rev. Benjamin Tyree, on left, and Lewis Tyree.

Roanoke Times & World-News

A SPECIAL SECTION

"Urban renewal was considered a very progressive, socially desirable thing to do."
Former mayor Willis "Wick" Anderson

Photo courtesy of Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority

"My daddy never finished painting our house," Frances Calloway said, laughing as she looked at the picture the housing authority took of her childhood home at 516 Gilmer Ave., N.E. "That's Daddy's car. It was a Chevrolet. It was red. We used to have holes in the yard where we shot marbles." The authority photographed their house and others to document the city's need for federal money to tear down the homes. The Calloways were forced out in the late 1960s.

AFTER World War II, governments and developers across the country began sweeping away the urban fringes of downtowns, the tattered sections that might offend visitors sweeping in on new superhighways.

To white people in Roanoke, the movement was considered progressive, if not downright liberal. Poor people would have better housing, the streets leading into downtown would be widened and improved, and the city could quadruple tax revenues by replacing the old homes of the poor with new developments. Millions of federal dollars were waiting to help do it.

The official phrase was "urban renewal," but the record books in Roanoke City Hall were more direct: They called it "slum clearance."

To Roanoke's white government and business leaders, Northeast was an eyesore.

Many black homes had outhouses, a sight that disgraced white leaders. "It was not a very prestigious entrance to the city," Mary C. Pickett, on City Council in the 1950s, said in a recent interview.

It is clear from old photographs and all accounts — black and white — that some of the city's most tumbledown houses were in Northeast. Those were the homes of many of Roanoke's lowest-paid workers: the black women who cooked and cleaned for white folks; the bellhops, the redcaps, the porters, the black men who washed dishes in restaurants and shined shoes or, if they were lucky, worked on the gangs that fixed the railroad tracks.

Those were the years when blacks could only dream of fair housing, equal employment and political clout.

In 1950, the median income for a black household in Roanoke was $1,662 — half the average for whites — and Northeast was poorer than some other black sections.

Even the least-bigoted whites had an ugly name for Northeast: They called it Nigger Town.

If you were black, there were only so many places you could live. Garland Sheets, in Roanoke real estate for 50 years, said real-estate agents would not allow blacks to buy or rent houses west of 10th Street Northwest. Deeds for houses in the once-all-white Rugby neighborhood said straight-out they could not be sold to non-Caucasians.

Northeast, the biggest neighborhood for blacks, was one of the few places a black buyer or renter felt welcome. Houses owned by white slumlords and black-owned shacks weren't all that stood there, though. So did wood-frame houses built in 1882 by the Roanoke Land and Improvement Co., the city's original developer, and brick houses as well. Whites who had worked in the nearby railroad shops had lived in Northeast early in this century, before they moved up in the railroad and other companies and into bigger and more modern homes.

Black families say that what looked like terrible poverty to the people who saw their neighborhood as they drove by was not so poor at all.

"In Northeast," said Charles Meadows, who lived there 50 of his 90 years, "there was no poverty because everybody helped one another. When we could afford two pounds of beans, our wives would cook them up and everybody would have a bowl. If our next-door neighbor didn't have a job, we would help them out. We were independently self-supporting as a neighborhood. We enjoyed it, because we knew we had someone to rely on."

Urban renewal, as it was practiced from the 1950s through the 1960s, made no distinctions within a neighborhood. Northeast's solid homes and its dilapidated ones, its neighborhood networks and businesses were treated the same.

With few exceptions, all 980 homes, 14 churches, two schools and 64 small businesses had to come down.

So did Northeast's hills, bulldozed flat.

Elderly black Roanokers still say urban renewal was nothing but "Negro removal."

The city's first housing projects, Lincoln Terrace and Lansdowne Park, were finished by 1952. Lansdowne was for whites, but Lincoln Terrace was ready to take blacks who had nowhere else to go.

The destruction of Northeast began in 1955 and lasted 26 years. The first section to go was 83 acres the city called the Commonwealth Project, on the west side of Northeast, between Commonwealth Avenue and Gainsboro.

In 1956 and 1957, the city burned more than 100 homes. It was the cheapest way to get rid of them, two or three at a time. Firefighters were taught about fire by torching those houses and watching them burn. "It was like looking at a war movie," said the Rev. Ivory Morton, who watched the burnings as a boy.

City leaders thought they were wiping out a worthless neighborhood. "Don't glamorize it," Mary Pickett, the former City Council member, recently warned a reporter. "It was awful. And don't stir up trouble."

The average price people were paid for their homes was $4,300.

"You used to go for a ride on Sunday and it was pitiful, children sitting out on the curb, dirty. It was a slum area and it couldn't go any way but up," said Fred Mangus, a member of the city housing authority's board for decades.

Willis "Wick" Anderson, on City Council from 1958 to 1962 and mayor his last two years, said slum clearance was a liberal idea at the time. "Urban renewal was considered a very progressive, socially desirable thing to do. First of all, you removed a blighted area from the city, you made the area available for redevelopment, and presumably the people who lived there moved into better housing." White slumlords objected most strongly to urban renewal and public housing — because they would lose income.

Many houses were in terrible shape, but Northeast was a place where women kept their eyes on one another's children from kitchen windows, where neighbors shared sweet potatoes from their gardens, and shared even a common backyard water spigot.

The Rev. Ben Tyree, Olivee Tyree's son, remembers growing up in Northeast. "The people was concerned about each other. Anybody in that community would correct you, anybody in that community would tell you, 'I know your mother and father wouldn't allow that.'"

The city had to take the homes, Pickett insists. "It had to be done ... for the good of the city, for the good of the future. Their kids were growing up in slum conditions."

"That was prime growth land," she said, that could be used for community-wide facilities such as the Roanoke Civic Center. "Some people had to suffer."

And the consequences to the people forced out? "They just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time."

So was a large chunk of the city's history — its first post office, built around 1846; the second-oldest firehouse, built in 1890; and the 1885 Gilmer School.

As a young lawyer, Republican former Rep. Caldwell Butler tried to help people save their homes or get more money for them. He was troubled by the attitude of many white leaders.

"They called it 'substandard' housing, but the folks were surviving and had a sense of community. A lot of them moved to houses that were much nicer, but many of them were not in a [financial] position to do that."

Roanoke Times & World-News columnist Ben Beagle was one of the few white reporters who spent time in Northeast. "We'd go over there in the afternoons. You could smell supper frying, and it was nice."

Of the hundreds of Roanoke Times and Roanoke World-News stories written in the 1950s and '60s about Northeast's redevelopment, Beagle wrote some of the few that addressed what was happening to the people who lived there.

John Eure was a Times reporter and editor in the 1930s and 1940s and retired as day managing editor after the papers merged in 1977. He said reporters rarely went into Northeast unless accompanied by police to a crime scene.

For the most part, he and other whites were blind to black life, he said, "and I'm ashamed of it."

When urban renewal came along, Eure said, few white leaders questioned it. "There was not a sensitivity — I didn't have it, either — to the fact that we were destroying part of our community, and our history.

"When people, white people, began to be aware of what was happening and what it was doing to some of our citizens and began to say something about it, they weren't very popular. Progress was the name of the game."

Said Anderson: "If we were doing it again, I don't think it would be at all done that way. . .You would do some spot removal but the whole emphasis would be on neighborhood redevelopment and not clearance."

Photo courtesy of Olivee Tyree

"They all got along pretty good," Olivee Tyree says of her children growing up in Northeast. "They had a lot of friends. I'd love to feed them all. They liked spaghetti with tomato sauce." Seated, from the left, on the porch at their home at 1109 4 1/2 Street Northeast were Tyree's daughter, Margie Jane, and Margie Jane's cousins, Naomi, Maxine and Deloris Tyree. Standing, from left, Olivee Tyree's son Lewis, neighbor Freddie Stone and Lewis' brother Ben Tyree.

Words of thanks

We would like to thank all the people who came to a November photo-gathering at the YMCA Family Center and others who provided photographs for this section.

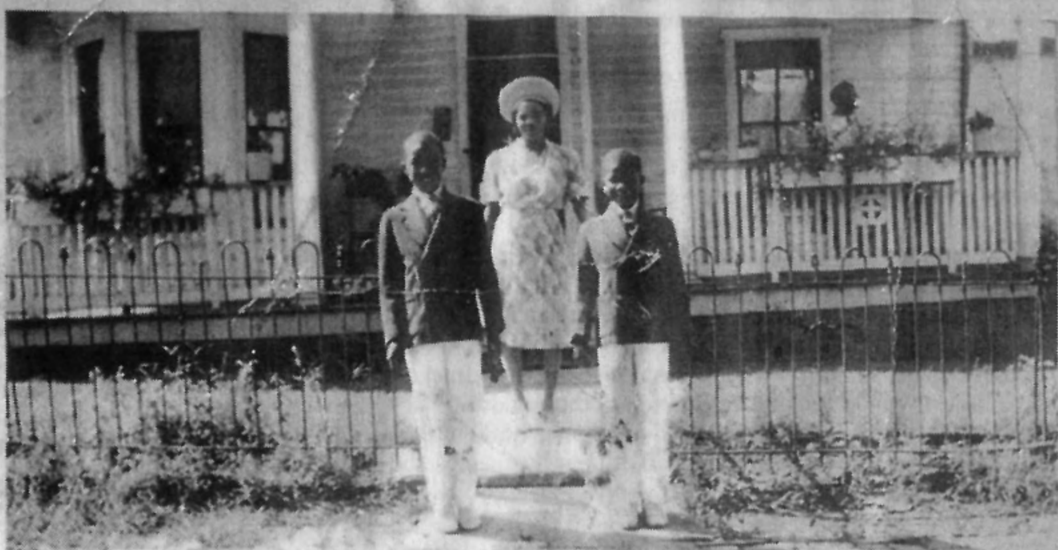


Photo courtesy of Carolyn Rudd Henderson

"That's Drucilla Franklin," says Carolyn Rudd Henderson, who took the picture in Northeast in the 1940s. "She was one of the first black nurses hired by the city. Everybody in the neighborhood looked up to her." Franklin is flanked by sons Wilford, on the left, and Charles. That is the Franklin house on Patton Avenue Northeast.

Photo courtesy of Frances Calloway

Growing up by the City Incinerator in Northeast Roanoke was "very, very noisy," said Frances Calloway, who has this mid-1960s picture in an album. "I was a little girl and I can remember at lunchtime, all the dump trucks lined up in front of my house. We used to get ice cream and milk and doughnuts...even toys sometimes." From the left, Sue Smith, "June Bug" Calloway, Frances Calloway's brother; his son Leroy, and their other brothers, Henry and William Calloway.

“The people are not here no more. The closeness — the black-people closeness.”

Richard Chubb

TODAY, Interstate 581 slices through the oldest part of Roanoke, cutting through the heart of what once were two hilly and densely populated black neighborhoods.

Gainsboro, the one that survives, sits to the west of the interstate. What little remains of it is nestled among the spires of St. Andrew s Catholic Church, the penthouse of the Hotel Roanoke and the two-story stacks of red plastic crates at the Coca-Cola Bottling Co.

Before the interstate, before the Civic Center, before McDonald's and all the industries and parking lots that now pave the way into town, Gainsboro sat cheek-by-jowl with Northeast.

Jefferson Street was the north-south boundary between the two communities, but life blurred any mapmaker's distinctions.

It was all one big black community, with every social class and personal philosophy packed tightly together — prim-and-proper churches towering near gin joints, solid old brick homes whose lawyer-and doctor-owners tipped their hats to the laborers and domestics who lived down the row in clapboard shotgun houses and tin-roofed shacks.

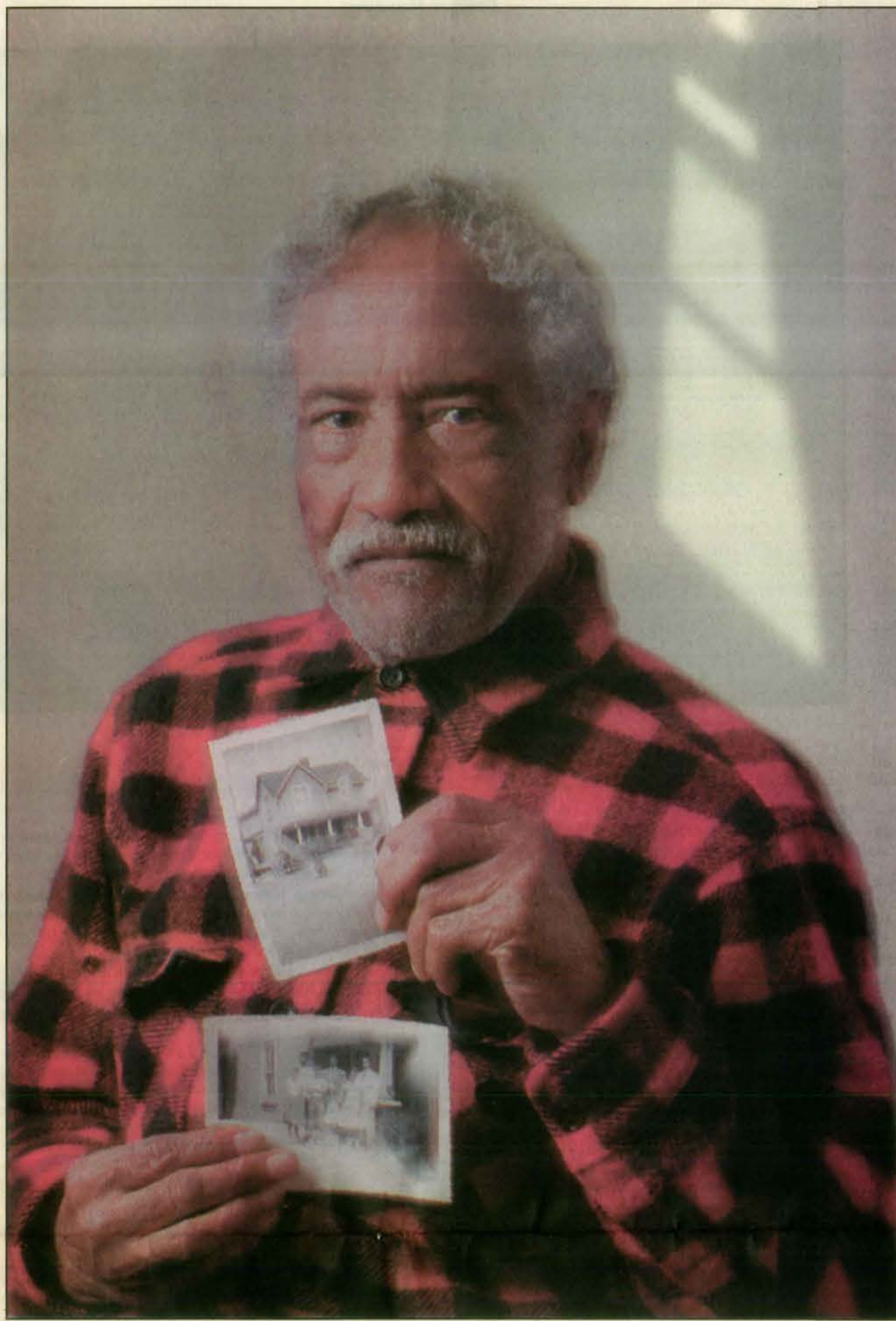
Northeast was the poorer of the two communities. The city's incinerator was there, and kids played in the fly ash and begged stale doughnuts when the Krispy Kreme man came to dump them. The city's gasworks was there, too, with its 156-foot-tall holding tank that gave that part of Northeast the nickname "Tanktown."

Some streets still were unpaved, "and the paved ones were very poorly maintained," said retired plumber Walter Wheaton, who installed many black families' first bathrooms.

In 1950, there was the Uneeda Lunch, the Modern Barber Shop, George Murray's grocery, the Citizens Undertaking Establishment, Roy J. Waller's blacksmith shop and Morning Star Baptist Church.

Altogether, more than 80 institutions and private businesses hugged the curbs of Northeast's streets.

It was home to people like Leroy Campbell.



CINDY PINKSTON/Staff

Leroy Campbell with a photo of his home before it was demolished at 322 East Ave., N.E., and another of some of his seven children. "I had just finished paying for the house and I had to up and move again " He was forced back into debt to buy another house. "We fought it, but that didn't do nothing."

EVERY workday morning for 32 years, Leroy Campbell walked from his home at 322 East Ave. N.E. to his job at Woods Brothers coffee company in Southeast. He smelled the roasting beans as he crossed the Randolph Street Bridge over the railroad and hung a left on Campbell Avenue to work, where he dumped bags of coffee beans into huge bins built into the floor.

He and his wife, Dorothy McDaniel Campbell, raised four boys and three girls on East Avenue. Practically everything they needed was nearby.

Gilmer Elementary School was across the street. A fire station was next door. Their church, Mount Zion Baptist, was around the bend on Fourth Street.

"There was a grocery store on almost every corner," said Melvin "Terry" Campbell, Leroy Campbell's son. "Assaid's, Moses', George's, they were mostly operated by Syrian people," or families of Lebanese descent.

Few black people had cars when Terry Campbell was growing up in the 1940s, so all he knew of Roanoke as a kid radiated from his home by only a few blocks. He played on the school fire escape at day's end, read comic books by the radio before bedtime, and on hot summer afternoons solicited cool fire-hose squirts when firefighters cleaned their engines.

In those years, he and other black Roanokers still were barred from most downtown theaters, although they could go in the back door of one and sit in a segregated balcony. He couldn't sit at the lunch counter at Peoples drugstore. If he got sick, he would not be admitted at Roanoke Memorial Hospital because he was black.

"We were just normal people," Terry Campbell says. "I didn't have a rough time growing up as a child. I was very secure. I didn't have to worry about clothes, I didn't have to worry about food. I didn't have no worries."

His grandmother, Lula Campbell, lived on the other side of their duplex. Leroy Campbell has pictures of their old wooden house with ten rooms and new siding.

Older white Roanokers often talk about Northeast's backyard privies as justification for urban renewal, but Leroy Campbell and his family had a bathroom.

It wasn't long after he made his last house payment that he got word in 1955 that his house would be demolished. Eventually, everything fell: his house, his church, his children's school, the stores, everything.

The first families forced out were stunned by how white Roanoke officials saw their homes. "I do remember when they first started talking about urban renewal," Terry Campbell says, "and how they had to get rid of these 'ram-shackles.' And we thought, 'What are they talking about?' "

Echoes Of Roanoke

Gilmer, City's First School, Stands In Path Of Progress

By Raymond Barnes

TODAY THE GILMER AVENUE SCHOOL, long since abandoned and soon to be razed, stands like a ghost in northeast Roanoke. But it has many memories. Three generations of children received an elementary education there. In Roanoke's early days, because the overwhelming majority of residents in the neighborhood were employed at the machine shops, Crozier furnace, bridgeworks, or were members of the "running crews" of the N&W, hence, for many education ended when Gilmer school's facilities were exhausted.

When the Town of Roanoke was chartered in 1882 the community boasted one grade school, later known as Commerce Street School, which stood on part of the site of our present Federal Building. From all I can gather most children of the town attended this institution until 1884.

* *

The original "grade school" reflected more than any other the appreciation for "higher education" entertained by the leaders of Big Lick. The Town of Big Lick (Feb. 1874) was about two years old when a frame house was purchased from Ferdinand Rorer in 1876 by the town, on terms, and its various rooms devoted to a "grade." (Legal requirements for public schools had come into being in 1870.) Instruction of pupils of various ages and proper response to the grade to which one was assigned, marked a great step forward in a school system where pupils of all ages assembled in one room. Thus the Commerce Street School was originally the Rorer house, (later enlarged and brick surfaced over). The grade school opened November 1878.

Clipping courtesy of Frances Calloway

"The schoolyard was full almost every day with kids," says Melvin "Terry" Campbell, who grew up across from Gilmer Elementary School in Northeast. "I never ventured further than, say, 11th St. I thought downtown was like going to Christiansburg." The school, built in 1885, was torn down in urban renewal.

About this report

This special section comes three years after readers started telling reporter Mary Bishop, a relatively new Roanoker, the newspaper should write about the black neighborhoods that once stood north of downtown.

Old Northeast Roanoke's first reunion in 1991 provided the initial accounts of life in a part of Roanoke swept away years ago. Reginald Shareef, a Radford University professor who had studied urban renewal in Roanoke, and Dr. Walter Claytor, who has been collecting information on Gainsboro all his life, were resources for the story.

Bishop, the newspaper's minority affairs and neighborhoods writer, and staff photographer Cindy Pinkston gathered more material covering Gainsboro's unsuccessful 1992-93 campaign against two four-lane roads. For this section, Bishop interviewed more than 100 people, including scholars, government workers and 65 people who lived in the neighborhoods.

Old photographs came from Roanoke families, the Harrison Museum of African American Culture, the Roanoke Valley History Museum, the Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority, newspaper files and the Norfolk and Western Historical Photograph Collection at Virginia Tech.

The section was produced by layout editor Tim Van Riper, staff artist Rob Lunsford, picture editor Keith Graham and Pinkston.

AT the beginning, the city said people could move back once Northeast was cleaned up.

Lewis Lionberger, a contractor who began his three decades on the Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority board around 1954, said the city did intend to build houses there. His memory was cloudy on why that wasn't done.

"I guess the highway coming through there, for one," he said of Interstate 581, built in the mid-1960s.

Yes, it was the interstate that had the biggest impact on the Commonwealth project, said businessman Fred Mangus, on the authority's board 39 years. "It changed the whole purpose of it."

When residents learned they would be shut out of their old neighborhood forever, "We were criticized quite severely for that, and justifiably, I think," Mangus said. "But it was out of our hands," because the highway had to go somewhere.

As for residents, "I think we treated them as fairly as we could."

One by one, Olivee Tyree watched the houses go. Her church, Morning Star Baptist, was demolished.

Where her house stood is now the Holiday Inn on Orange Avenue.

At first, she said, the city was going to pay her nothing. She had spent $2,500 for her house, paying it off gradually. She still owed on a loan for the addition she had built for her children.

Driven out of her home and with no money, Olivee Tyree could not get a loan for another one. Finally, she borrowed $1,200 from her mother-in-law, who inherited a little money when another son died in Detroit. With that, Tyree got a loan on the cheapest house she could find, at 424 14th St. N.W. She got it from whites who were fleeing as black families poured across the old color line and farther into Northwest.

Finally, the housing authority paid her $2,200. She repaid her mother-in-law, paid off the loan for the addition, and paid back her husband's disability benefits that the government was disputing.

Tyree, now 73, was in debt for 20 years to pay the remaining cost of her second house. She then moved to Hanover Avenue, where she now operates Tyree's Home for Adults.

The children and grandchildren of people driven out of Northeast are still in public housing, even though the housing authority's objective, as voiced by former director Roy Henley in 1960, was to "get them in here, get them on their feet and get them out."

Kathy Alexander was a baby in the mid-1950s when her parents were forced out of their home on Raleigh Avenue Northeast and into the Lincoln Terrace project. Now 37, she still lives in the apartment at 1818 Dunbar St. that her parents, now dead, moved her into as a child.

Mattie Williams, 80, moved into Lincoln Terrace 40 years ago from a rental house. The project's apartments were shiny and new, unlike the old Northeast house with its toilet on the back porch. "Of course, we couldn't do no better, I don't think."

One of the last people to leave Northeast was Kathleen Vaughn Ross, former secretary at Northeast's Gilmer Elementary School.

For years, she refused to give up the house at 510 Third St. N.E. that her parents had moved into in 1927. She insists Northeast was no slum.

"That's a lie. Now, Northeast had some undesirable sections just like every neighborhood has, but there were nice residences in Northeast, just like in Southwest or any part of Roanoke. They had nice homes, they had real nice homes, and were uprooted from it."

She watched her neighbors move out, and lose their next homes because they couldn't afford the payments in more expensive Northwest. She and others claim whites jacked up prices because they knew displaced blacks had nowhere else to go. "Some of the older residents never did ever get established," she said. "They got sick; they died."

Ross wouldn't budge until she got enough money for her home to afford her next one. "They called me the feisty one, that's what they called me. I

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

"There were so many things that destroyed the families, because when you took that father out and he had more debt than he could handle, for some reason or other, he turned just evil-minded and he just ran away because he couldn't handle it."

Charles Meadows

FROM PAGE 3

didn't care. It really irritated me how they were trying to move you around, shove you around. I'm just glad I had enough grit in me not to give in. Nobody gave it to me," she said of her old house, "and I wasn't going to give it to them."

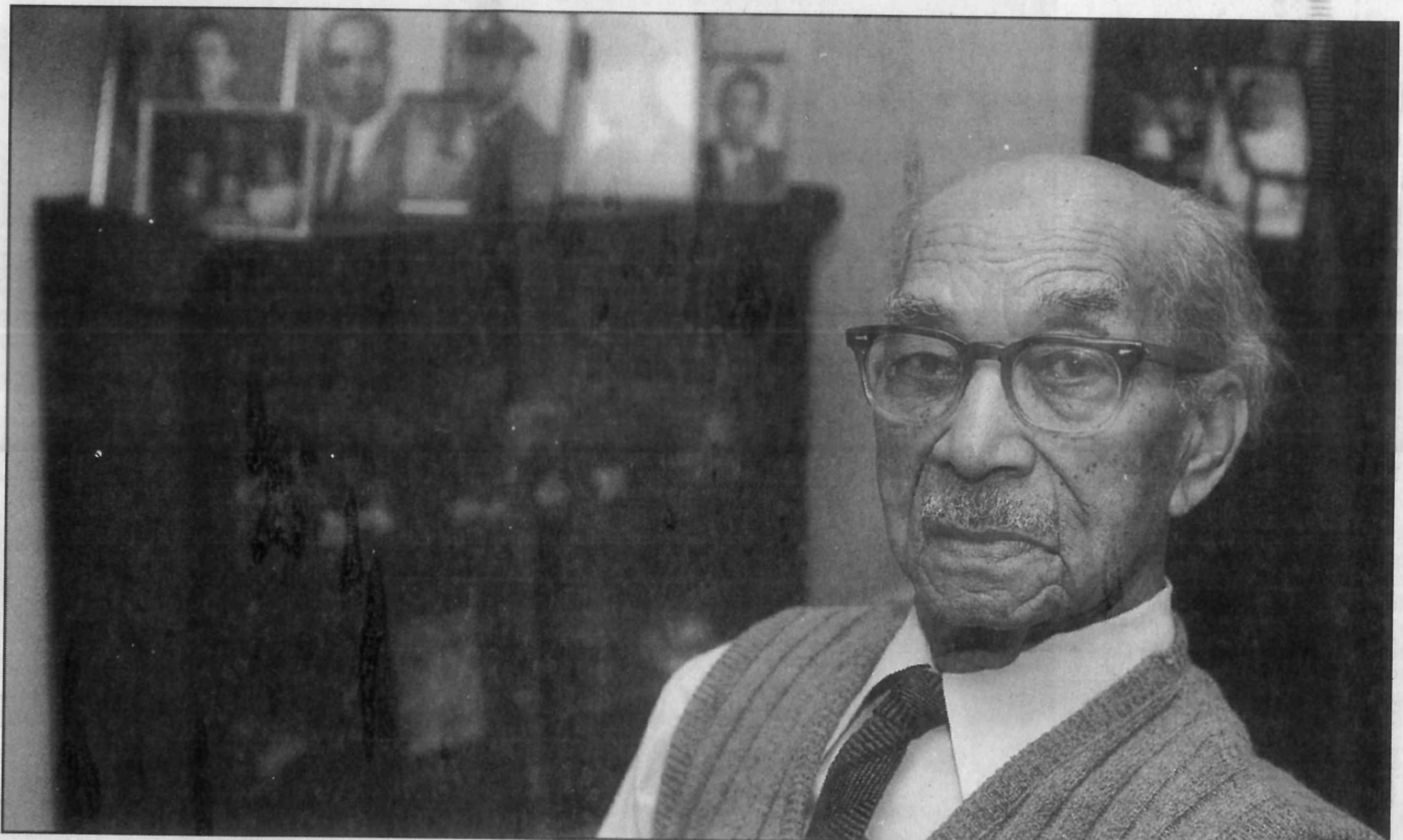
Many Roanokers, though, were glad to see Northeast go.

"The value of slum clearance to the community is fairly well evidenced for any who take the trouble to visit the cleared-off area in Northeast," the World-News editorialized in 1957.

"It has wiped out a slovenly and unsightly approach to the city's heart and is opening up not only new thoroughfares but is providing the beginning of an attractive new business center for our colored population."

The city built its Civic Center around Kathleen Ross, who stayed in her home until 1981. About 35 parking spaces behind the Civic Center cover the spot where she lived.

Where Olivee Tyree, Kathy Alexander, Mattie Williams and their friends once lived is now I-581, a Holiday Inn, a Days Inn, a Thrifty Inn, a McDonald's, Magic City Ford, the city's main post office, Roanoke Gas Co., a Chevron station, Branch Highways Inc., Adams Construction, the American Automobile Association of Virginia, the Norfolk Southern Credit Union and a dozen other industries and offices.



"They told us they were going to redevelop the land and move these people back in there, but it didn't happen," says Charles Meadows, forced out of 604 Patton Ave., N.E., in 1968. Some people went to court. "Then they found the truth was they were going to move business in that area, and there was no place for anybody to build back."

CINDY PINKSTON/Staff

WHAT happened in Roanoke was repeated across the country.

Congress had offered cities a billion dollars — and new legal muscle — to clear their slums. Before, the power of eminent domain could be used only to build government facilities. Under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, cities could condemn homes and businesses and deed them to private developers.

New York City's master builder and urban renewal director, Robert Moses, evicted an estimated 500,000 people, most poor and nonwhite, to build expressways, luxury apartments, parks, cultural centers, the United Nations and other developments.

"There was a kind of naivete in the '40s and '50s that assumed if you simply tore down poor neighborhoods, that you got rid of poverty," says Peter Salins, an urban affairs expert at New York's Hunter College.

Herbert J. Gans, a Columbia University sociologist who has chronicled urban renewal's history, has said many displaced families were forced into other slums, and nobody paid much attention.

"Slum-dwellers whose homes were to be torn down have indeed protested bitterly," he wrote, "but their outcries have been limited to particular projects; and because such outcries have rarely been supported by the local press, they have been easily brushed aside."

Another authority on urban renewal, Chester Hartman of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council in Washington, says no one knows for sure how many Americans were displaced, but most scholars believe the number exceeds 1 million.

Chicago State University urban planning Professor Fred Blum said developers worked behind the scenes guiding national, state and local policy so they could acquire large tracts of land adjacent to new highways and turn them into commercial and industrial centers.

As a result, Blum said, the land belonging to minorities became extremely valuable, but they didn't profit. They got little money for their property and wound up in adjoining areas that became overcrowded. Their movement into adjacent white neighborhoods, he said, hastened white flight to the suburbs.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development acknowledged in one of its publications that old-style urban renewal demolished buildings, produced "unwanted 'no man's lands' and separated people rather than building a sense of community."

Too often, Duke University historian John Hope Franklin said, American cities' urban renewal came at the expense of their black residents.

"I would regard urban renewal as one of the more ruthless efforts on the part of the [American] city to renew itself," Franklin said. "Roanoke is a microcosm of what happened in so many other places."

THE city came calling in 1964 for the rest of Northeast.

Dr. Lawrence E. Paxton, a Gainsboro dentist and at the time the city's only black School Board member, warned people that the housing authority had betrayed Northeast before.

"They brought in bulldozers and shaved it like with a razor," he said in a 1964 newspaper story. "Now they're selling it as business property for 10 times what they paid our people for it."

He said homeowners living debt-free in Northeast had little choice but to assume big debts to buy Northwest houses that cost twice what they got for their old ones.

Either that, he said, or they "ended up drinking up the money" and living in Lincoln Terrace.

Paxton feared the worst about the latest clearance, named the Kimball Project for Kimball Avenue, one of the main streets: "White people will make a big profit and we will get our necks broke." But he was unable to stop it.

The World-News urged the city to tear down Kimball. "Since the completion of the Commonwealth slum clearance," a 1964 editorial said, "Kimball has stood out like a sore thumb, lying cut off as it does between Williamson Road, Orange Avenue and Tinker Creek. Residents, mostly Negro, are in a worse position than ever and the section is increasingly becoming a problem area. As long as Kimball stands unchanged, it will be a roadblock to progress."

Photo courtesy of Helen Davis & Evelyn Bethel

"Her cooking was delicious," Helen Davis says of her mother, Agnes Elizabeth Davis (above), at her stove at 19 Patton Ave. in Gainsboro around 1950. Davis cooked at the Rathskellar restaurant and Woolworth's downtown. Her daughters remember her chicken, candied yams and pineapple upside-down cake. "It was seven of us," Davis said. "Really, we were poor, but we didn't realize it because we had so much love."

A 1965 story in the Roanoke Times said tax revenues had almost quadrupled in the Commonwealth area. One new business, Magic City Motors, already was paying more in taxes than the entire area did when it was residential.

The caption under a 1964 aerial photograph in the World-News said 300 "units" — presumably housing units — would be built in two years and that some old homes could be saved.

Within a few years, hundreds more black families, businesses and churches were forced out. No homes were left, and no new ones were built.

The city realized from the Commonwealth Project that people needed help. Those forced out by the Kimball Project got more money — a price for their property plus up to $5,000 to help find another home.

Poor families had never had that much money before; some bought their first cars with it, then had trouble paying for a place to live.

James Robertson was recruited by a government and business coalition to help talk blacks into moving out. "They wanted me because I was a labor person and I talked their language," said Robertson, then secretary of Roanoke's Central Labor Council.

Robertson, who is white, went from house to house. "They called it a slum district, but it was small homes. Some of them didn't look that good from the outside, but they kept them neat and clean on the inside. A few of the houses, we'd see curtains pulled back, but they wouldn't come to the door. They'd heard we were coming.

"We were supposed to tell them what a golden opportunity it was. The sad thing about it was, they went in debt, those old families," when they were forced to move into higher-priced, formerly white neighborhoods.

People did get better houses, but at a price, Robertson said. They lost touch with people they had known all their lives. "Like a lady told me" about her next house, " 'This is a house but not a home.' "

Walter Fizer Sr., part-owner of the Fizer Funeral Home, grew up adjacent to Northeast in Gainsboro and recalls how connected the people were in Northeast.

"It was knitted," he said. "The city wouldn't let that continue. They must have studied for years and they finally took it. They certainly didn't buy it. They *took* it. They did it with coldness, I'm telling you."

CHARLES Meadows had one of the best jobs a black man could find in Roanoke: he worked for the railroad.

He'd gone to work for the Norfolk and Western Railway in 1924, earning 34 cents an hour. He worked 10 hours a day, six days a week. He was stock keeper for 38,000 wooden patterns used to make all the parts for the trains.

During the Depression, he was given just one day's work a week. He said the Depression didn't affect the people of Northeast much. "With a few nickels and dimes put together, we fed the whole neighborhood."

He and his wife, Carrie Dickerson Meadows, brought up their five children at 604 Patton Ave. N.E. They were in the house 31 years.

Meadows paid off his mortgage and made $12,000 in improvements in the four-bedroom house. Altogether, he had $20,000 invested in it.

When the city forced him out in 1968, it gave him $7,800, plus $2,500 to help him relocate. Someone with the city told him his appraisal was low because of a rundown house next door.

Now, the land belongs to Roanoke Gas Co. Its buildings and eight acres are assessed at $2 million, the land at $67,000 an acre.

In Northeast, Meadows 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 in Northeast stopped crime before it could develop, he said. They would get an inkling that something bad was going to happen and go to the families and nip it in the bud.

He went into debt to get the big brick

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

"He first started in 1910 in the Northeast section of Roanoke....Soon after that, he moved...on Gilmer Avenue N.W., at 131 Gilmer. ...And that is where he conducted and had charge of a very lovely funeral business [over] 51 years," Mary Williams, widow of C.C. Williams, said in a 1992 interview with the Harrison Museum of African American Culture. Here, the C.C. Williams Funeral Home conducts a funeral in 1911.

Photo courtesy of the T.R. Holland Collection, Harrison Museum of African American Culture

“You gave us nicer homes ... [but] ... took away our past and our togetherness.”

Walter Fizer Sr.

“The housing authority says that not all the buildings in the area would need to be razed; some could be upgraded,” said the caption under this April 1964 photograph in the Roanoke World-News. The picture ran just before City Council approved the Kimball redevelopment project in Northeast. Contrary to what was in the newspaper, no houses were saved or built.

FROM PAGE 4

house where he lives now on Staunton Avenue Northwest. He'd rather have the old one.

He's lost track of old friends. “We didn't know where my neighbor moved to, or where he went. They scattered them to so many different places, so the only time we'd see people we know was at a funeral.

“I saw people go to court and cry and try to protect what they had. But they died. I think the fathers of the city saw the city needing to expand. So where else do you go? 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.”

Faces of Northeast residents show their skepticism as housing authority director Roy Henley (above, left) told them at a 1964 meeting at Gilmer School that they would fare better than residents of the Commonwealth neighborhood, which was torn down in the 1950s.

LEROY Campbell moved his family out of Northeast late in 1955. “Right after scuffling and paying for what you had, you had to go out and do it all over again. That really hurt.” He got $5,000 from the housing authority and shared it with his mother so she could relocate, too. He got $3,000; she got $2,000.

Leroy and Dorothy Campbell became one of the first black families to move into the mostly white streets west of 10th Street Northwest. The site of their Northeast home is now near an “on” ramp for Interstate 581 and Roanoke Auto Spring Works, one of the industries that set up shop after urban renewal.

The white man who sold the Campbells his house at 1119 Hanover Ave. N.W. said he was leaving because blacks were coming in.

The remaining whites were not openly hostile. “They spoke and that's it,” Terry Campbell says. “It wasn't long before they all were gone.”

To the seven Campbell children, moving to a brick house seemed like fun. But their father went back into debt to do it.

“Oh, yes,” Leroy Campbell said, “for lots of years.” Later, Terry built him the brick ranch on Gilmer Avenue Northwest where he lives now.

With her money, Leroy Campbell's mother, Lula Campbell, found a small house on Rutherford Avenue Northwest.

In Gainsboro.

Columnist/reporter Ben Beagle wrote in 1964 that families feared the project would “do away with homes and roots, which have taken years to build and put down.” None of the 20 people he interviewed wanted to move to public housing.

Rose Between Thorns . . . Typical of Kimball Housing

Mrs. Virginia Wright's Kitchen . . . Modern, Attractive

Kimball Families Wait in Fear

NOT long after Lula Campbell was resettled, City Hall and the housing authority started talking about urban renewal in Gainsboro.

In city memos, white leaders said they knew black Roanokers would be wary because of what happened in Northeast.

City Manager Julian Hirst announced in 1968 that this was a new kind of urban renewal. Few, if any, people would be moved out. Gainsboro had been picked as Roanoke's nominee for a federal Neighborhood Development Program grant because it was a strong community that could use a little help.

Hirst said the program chose neighborhoods where, “if the situation could be caught, held and gradually upgraded, it would be possible to return these particular areas to full usefulness and vigor.”

Gainsboro “has a combination of good and well-maintained residential properties with deteriorated properties,” Hirst said. “It has a business area that should be kept there. There is a strong community of interest. Additionally, Gainsboro has energetic and interested citizens. It was felt the opportunity should be provided for these people to continue to live in their area, as well as to make their area attractive for new residences and businesses.”

And, he said, “the community could see results soon and frequently.”

Hirst met privately with residents at the old Hill Street Baptist Church in November 1968. Black Roanokers like A. Byron Smith, whose fuel-oil, bailbond and real-estate businesses had been chased from Northeast to Gainsboro, spoke about his fears that Roanoke would once again wipe out a black community.

World-News editorial writers said they understood such apprehensions, but they were convinced that this third wave of urban renewal would be kinder.

“As explained to us by a person associated with the [housing] authority, the Gainsboro project would be a far cry from old-style urban renewal,” they wrote in late 1971. “The aim would be to preserve the neighborhood and strengthen it through rehabilitation. Rundown properties would be salvaged if possible. The relocation of people would be kept to a minimum, and they would be put into new quarters within Gainsboro rather than moved outside it.”

The way City Hall and the white establishment talked about Gainsboro, “It was going to be the prettiest section of Roanoke,” said Dr. Walter Claytor, a retired Gainsboro dentist.

Old city documents show, however, that city planners had their eye on Gainsboro as an industrial area for years.

A 1965 report titled “A Proposal for Public Housing and Urban Renewal in the South Gainsboro Area” recommended that Gainsboro houses be wiped out from Jefferson Street to 10th Street. Planners said the land could be better used as an industrial park, that it “should have higher and better uses than the slums presently located there.”

IN 1880, Roanoke wasn't Roanoke, but rather the village of Gainesborough and its newer, across-the-tracks neighbor, the town of Big Lick, named for the area's salty marshes and creeks, or licks. A census that year showed 562 blacks and 446 whites.

Local historians think former slaves from surrounding counties were attracted by jobs in tobacco and cigar factories. They worked, too, in foundries and machine shops; by 1890, black bricklayers, plasterers and other construction workers were building the fast-growing railroad town of Roanoke.

Many early black Roanokers settled in what we now call Gainsboro, just south of the paved-over site of Roanoke's first settlement in 1834, which stretched along what is now Orange Avenue.

Early this century and for most of it, Gainsboro's citizens were black teachers, ministers and lawyers, as well as laundresses, railroad porters and brakemen. Like Northeast, its neighbor to the east, Gainsboro was black people in all walks of life.

Like the people, Gainsboro's houses were a hodgepodge. There were brick houses, and there were narrow clapboard ones packed in so tight a house-painter could paint two houses with a slight shift of his ladder.

For the purposes of this story, Gainsboro is an area bounded by Williamson Road on the east, the railroad on the south, Fifth Street Northwest on the west and Orange Avenue on the north, because those are the boundaries designated for urban renewal 27 years ago.

But for most of this century, residents thought of themselves as living in “Northwest,” not Gainsboro. When asked where they lived, they would normally just say the name of their street.

Henry Street, or First Street Northwest, was Gainsboro's primary commercial strip. The men who hung out there might have been in trouble for bootlegging and other crimes, but they were stern when a young person started to go astray.

“On up Henry Street, you'd find the biggest gamblers,” said Walter Fizer, “but when my mother goes through Henry Street, they tip their hat — ‘How do you do, Mrs. Fizer?’ ”

“Little Fizer,” he said they would warn him, “you better not do that or I'm going to tell your mama or your daddy.”

Gainsboro's landmarks were many — Burrell Memorial Hospital, one of the best-known black hospitals in the South . . . the Burrell Pharmacy, one of the first black drugstores in Southwest Virginia . . . the Claytor home, a 22-room mansion and one of Virginia's largest black homes . . . the

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Photo courtesy of J.H. White

"The largest and best-stocked drug store in the state owned by a colored man." In 1897, that's how The Richmond Planet, a black newspaper, described the Burrell Pharmacy on Gainsboro Road. Owner-physician Dr. Isaac David Burrell fell ill in 1914, and local histories say Roanoke's white-run hospitals refused to admit him because he was black. His family put him on a cot in the baggage car of a train and sent him to Freedman's Hospital in Washington. "He did not survive the operation," Dr. L.C. Downing, another black Roanoke physician, wrote in 1965.

"When Burrell was founded, more than one-half of Roanoke's colored babies were being delivered by midwives," Dr. L.C. Downing, hospital superintendent, wrote in 1965. Five black doctors opened Roanoke's first black hospital in a Gainsboro cottage in 1915. It was named for Dr. Isaac Davis Burrell. The non-profit hospital moved in 1921 to the old Alleghany Institute (below), a boys' home on McDowell Avenue Northwest and later built a modern addition. Burrell Memorial closed in 1978 and reopened two years later as Burrell Home for Adults, a subsidiary of Roanoke Memorial Hospitals.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Walter Claytor

FROM PAGE 5

Gainsboro library, organized in 1921 and one of the South's earliest black libraries . . . First Baptist Church, organized in 1867 and in its brick building on North Jefferson Street in 1900 . . . and Fifth Avenue Presbyterian's first 1898 church at 303 Patton Ave. N.W.

Famous Roanokers came out of Gainsboro, such as Edward R. Dudley, U.S. ambassador to Liberia under President Truman and later the president of the borough of Manhattan and a candidate for New York state attorney general. He was the son of a Gainsboro dentist.

"Right now, we don't have but one or two black dentists in Roanoke," said Charles Davis, a retired housing authority official who grew up in Gainsboro. "Back then, you might have had a dozen," and more black physicians and pharmacists than that.

THE 1950 city directory shows 900 homes and 165 small businesses in Gainsboro. The Off Beat Pool Parlor, the Day & Night Taxicab and the Dumas Ice Cream Bar & Fountainette were just a few. There was a savings and loan, an insurance company, a cleaners, a drugstore and more hairdressers than you could shake a hot-comb at on Gainsboro's densely populated streets.

"No, ma'am, they were not slums," William Hackley, a retired Roanoke public schools administrator, said as if he had been asked that about Gainsboro many times before.

His father, Brennie E. Hackley Sr., was Gainsboro's letter-carrier for 44 years. Every kid in Gainsboro knew "Mr. Hackley."

Brennie Hackley grew up on Gainsboro's Wells Avenue and raised his 10 children at 206 Wells N.W. Every one of them graduated from college.

The Hackley children didn't learn the lessons of life just from their parents. They learned from people like a neighbor who had a dirty, sweaty railroad job.

"Mr. Harvey, he lived down the street. Every morning, he went to work in a shirt and a tie, and he went to work at the freight station. What we learned was, 'No matter what you did for a living, you don't have to be dirty or dress shabby.' "

A man who grew up in Gainsboro didn't want to offend old friends, but he thought he could offer a more balanced picture of Gainsboro than what he's read in recent years. He refused to be quoted by name.

The man loved Gainsboro. His father was in business there. But, he says, Henry Street "has been glamorized and romanticized. Henry Street was a street of hustlers. A lot of those places were fronts for gambling, bootlegging." He said there were murders, prostitution and all kinds of violence on Henry Street.

"Some called it Little New York," he said.

He acknowledges there were legitimate businesses — a doughnut shop, a theater, drugstores, doctors' offices, an ice cream parlor, restaurants.

"Just realize one thing" about Gainsboro, he said. "Life was nice, but life was hard."

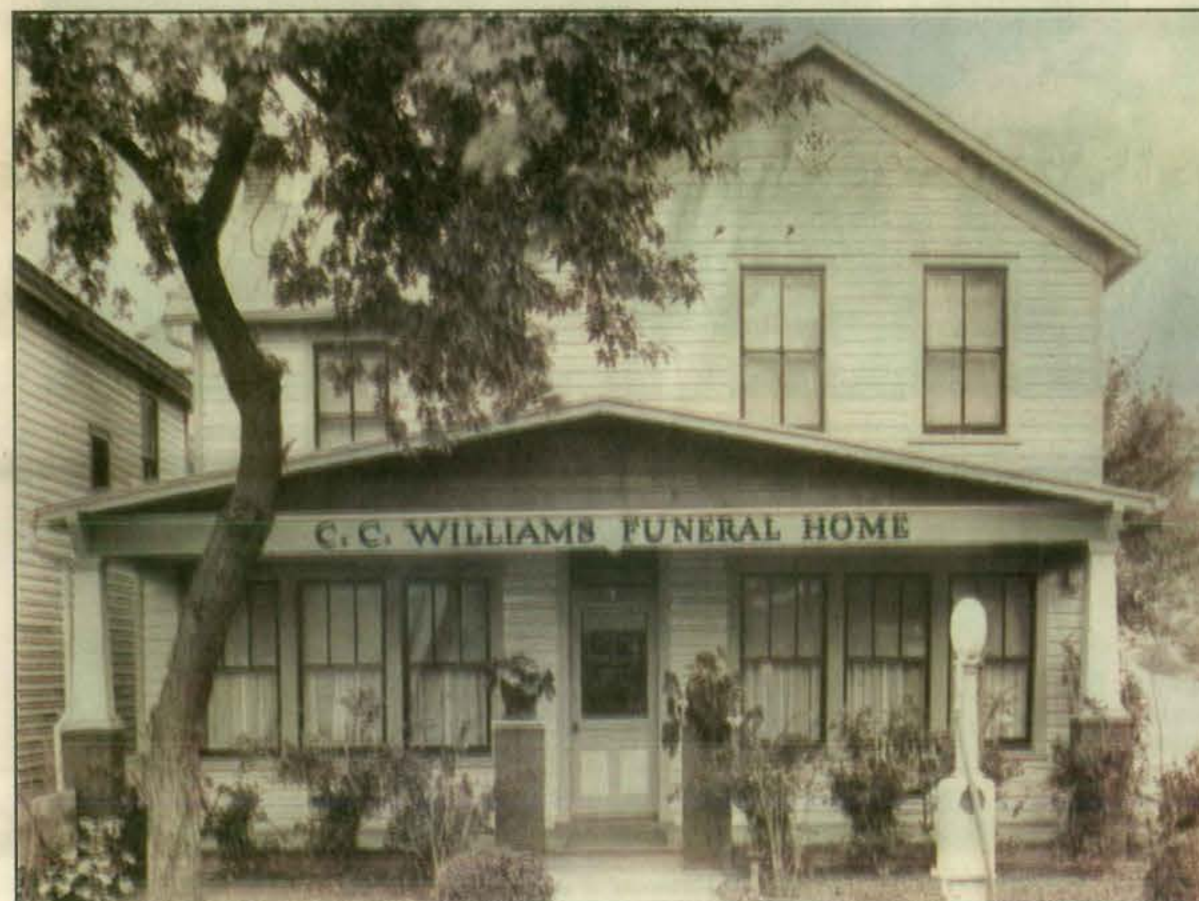


Photo courtesy of the Harrison Museum of African American Culture

"...he told families, 'don't put everything in the ground. You've got to live after them,' " Mary Williams said of her husband, C.C. Williams, when she was interviewed as part of a Harrison Museum of African American Culture oral history project two years ago.

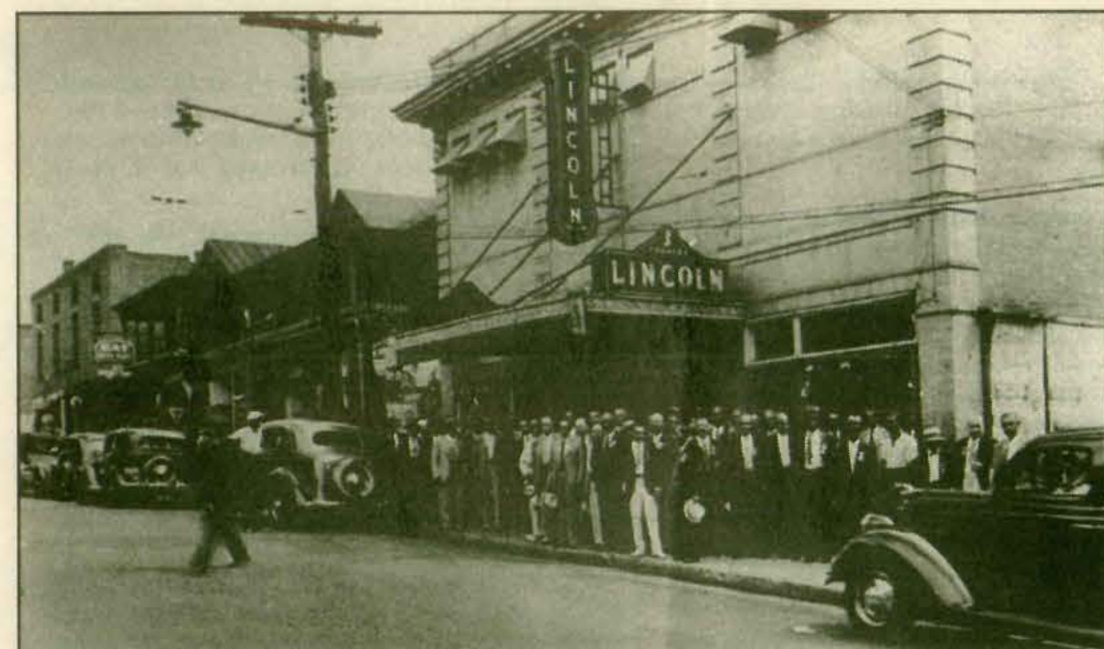


Photo courtesy of the Roanoke Valley History Museum

"Children would mostly go there on Saturday" for serial films staring Hoot Gibson, Tom Mix and other cowboy stars, A.L. Holland Sr. said of the Lincoln Theater. Above, the "Colored Division" of the Norfolk and Western Veterans' Association holds its convention at the Lincoln Theater in the late 1930s. The theater became night clubs the Club Morocco, then the Ebony Club. The building, now deserted, is one of the few still standing on Gainsboro's Henry Street.

GRADUALLY, skittish Gainsboro residents began to warm to what City Hall and the housing authority were saying they would do to Gainsboro.

"It's a matter of rebuilding the neighborhood with the same people, the same institutions and the same businesses, but in new quarters," Wesley White, who later oversaw the acquisition and demolition of homes for the authority, said in a 1972 newspaper story. "All we can say is, 'Give us a chance.' "

By then, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development required each urban renewal project to have a citizens' group, called a Project Area Committee.

The idea was that people living in the area or running businesses there would have a say in how urban renewal was done. But things were changing quickly. Late in 1969, President Nixon reduced funding for the first HUD initiative proposed for Gainsboro, the Neighborhood Development Program.

Former City Council member Mary Pickett says Gainsboro got caught between conflicting philosophies of urban planning: One said save and restore a neighborhood; the other said tear it down and build something else. "Gainsboro people got mixed up in the two theories," she said.

City leaders still pushed for redevelopment, though. Roanoke won a $1.2 million federal grant for Gainsboro in 1972. By then, some in the neighborhood feared that Gainsboro's renewal wouldn't be all that different from Northeast's.

Gainsboro dentist Walter Claytor resigned as chairman of the Gainsboro citizens' group in February 1972. He warned residents that the group was only advisory and did "not have the final say-so as to what transpires in the project impact area." The housing authority and a "rubber stamp" City Council were firmly in command, he said. He advised residents to "direct your energies toward . . . protecting your rights and your property."

Any early desire by government to save Gainsboro's old buildings was fading. A Washington consultant hired by the city said in 1973 that only 113 of 699 homes surveyed in Gainsboro were suitable for rehabilitation. Housing rehab had been cut from the federal budget.

Over the years, hundreds of Gainsboro residents sold their houses to the authority and moved to new neighborhoods. The authority ran a social-service program to ease the transition.

It opened an office in the former Fizer Funeral Home on Gainsboro Road and organized a food bank, cookouts, coffee hours, trips to Fairystone Park and other outings for kids. Gloria Martin counseled old people who were being moved out. "We carried them back and forth to doctors. We got very close to them. These were people who had lived there 40 or 50 years."

The residents got three times the money that Northeast families had received. Besides payment for their homes, Gainsboro residents were given up to $15,000 to help buy new ones, plus a few hundred dollars for the move.

Looking back on the Gainsboro project, Lewis Lionberger, on the housing authority's board during the project's years, scoffed at the complaints of people who were forced to move. "Well, I think it was just as good as it could be. They wanted something for nothing, with some cake and pie to put on it."

“*I have come to the decision — the city and the redevelopment authority, any land that they want they will take eventually.*”

Kathleen Vaughn Ross

WAYNE DEEL/Staff

When compared to the 1940 photograph (below, right) this one, taken early this month, shows just how much space was cleared for urban renewal and later used for Interstate 581, the Roanoke Civic Center, the city's main post office, motels, businesses, industries and offices.

Photo courtesy of the Norfolk and Western Historical Photograph Collection at Virginia Tech

This 1940 aerial photograph of Roanoke shows the density of housing in both Gainsboro and Northeast at the time.

LULA Campbell, Leroy Campbell's mother, bought a house at 413 Rutherford Ave. N.W. in Gainsboro after she was forced out of Northeast.

She had been an elevator operator at the State and City Building downtown on Campbell Avenue.

"It wasn't much better than she had in Northeast," grandson Terry Campbell said. The windows were leaking, the windowsills were rotting and the floors were in bad shape.

Lula Campbell got tuberculosis and was treated at Catawba Hospital, while her son, Walter, and his wife, Cleo, stayed on at the Gainsboro house.

Lula Campbell had been on Rutherford about 14 years when she got the word for sure: She would have to move again. Her side of the street was torn down; by 1974, she had bought a house deeper into Northwest Roanoke, at 918 Palm Ave.

Terry Campbell never heard his grandmother complain. "She wasn't upset about moving. She didn't dwell on it. It was a nicer house for her to be cared for in. She was glad to have a nice house."

But his cousin, Sandra Jordan, believes her grandmother took it hard.

"Grandma was active and moving around on Rutherford," Jordan said. "By the time she got up to Palm, she was pretty much staying in bed. She wouldn't even look at TV. All of a sudden, she did just get old. I think she pretty much lost the will."

Lula Campbell became an invalid; she died in 1979, in her mid-80s.

SOME people waited years for their houses to be bought by the city so they could find new ones. Many still complain that the housing authority tore down the best houses first and left the rest to deteriorate.

Old people who had lived in their houses all or most of their lives stopped maintaining them because the housing authority said the houses soon would be torn down. The residents also were left in a quandary: Should they buy oil or coal for the next winter? Should they plant their gardens again?

By June 1974, City Manager Julian Hirst was saying this was not the kind of redevelopment he wanted, and the World-News editorialized that Gainsboro had turned into just another bulldozing project.

That October, a man named Daniel Jones came to a housing authority public hearing. He had lived at his home on Peach Road for 73 years.

He had been at one of the first meetings on the Gainsboro project, five or so years earlier.

At that first meeting, Jones was quoted in a hearing transcript, "They said they'd fix your home up if it didn't come up with the standard of the city. . . . And if you're retired, they'd loan you money to fix your home up, and if they had to tear your house down they'd give you a grant to get you another home.

"That was the first meeting," Jones went on. "I remember that personally. And y'all got contrary, went plumb off of that. What I want to say, you've tore down homes that I remember. I'm 77 years old. You've tore down homes that I knowed that was built — *built* — good homes. And you left homes standing that had dry toilets and they didn't have no water or nothing in those homes.

"You've tore down some good homes that people could live in for the next 100 years or 75 years. . . . My home, termites is eating the bottom out of it. Of course, I wanted to fix it up but you said y'all gonna take it, so I won't gonna spend no money on it."

Jones came to a meeting the next year, still pleading for answers for himself and his wife, Martha.

"This winter, I'm not aiming to buy that much coal," he said. "I ain't spending four or five hundred dollars putting in another furnace in that old house. I want to know what you going to do and when you going to come out and inspect and tell us when we got to move . . . and that you going to build a house for us. I want to know, because five or six years from now, I don't expect to be living. . . . I'm just actually tired. Lord, I'm not complaining, but I'm just tired. I got an old termite-eat-up home. Take my home. I thought that was the idea."

In 1976, five new houses were built in Gainsboro, and Daniel Jones got one of them. Housing authority transcripts show he came to a meeting that year to say he was happy.

A newspaper story said 600 houses had been torn down. Where Jones' house once stood is a fire hydrant in front of the Innkeeper motel on Gainsboro Road.

Daniel Jones, a retired railroad porter and a prizefighter in his youth, died almost a year ago — after 17 years in his home at 301 Madison Ave. N.W. He was 97.

ZENOBIA "Zee" Ferguson heard about urban renewal from the women who came into her beauty shop and from Theodore Holland, who ran the Hilltop Confectionery down the street from her house on Chestnut Avenue in Gainsboro.

"There was so much ambivalence on the part of citizens because of the nature of the Northeast development," she said.

This time, she thought she could force the city's long-term plans into the open. She became chairwoman of the Gainsboro Project Area Committee in the early 1970s.

She wanted renewal to begin on Gainsboro's innermost streets first and work outward. If homes were rebuilt first, she thought, stores to serve those people would follow. She figured industrial developers would push those plans so they could get the land they wanted — on the outskirts of Gainsboro.

Instead, she said, the opposite happened. An industrial park and Innkeeper motel were built on Gainsboro's northeastern edge, and the Coca-Cola bottling plant took over the southwestern corner. The good things for the people and their neighborhood life never came, she said.

"I couldn't give you any concrete reasons, but the citizens' input wasn't used," she said. "It was on paper, but the city and the housing authority worked around it."

Ferguson and her husband, Willis, reluctantly left Gainsboro in 1976. They had remodeled their three-bedroom stucco house. Zee Ferguson's beauty shop was out back. Willis Ferguson's mother planted roses and other flowers in the front yard.

They bought a more expensive ranch house in a subdivision off Cove Road. Some neighbors did the same; others, especially the ones who had been renters, have been in Lansdowne Park or other public housing since they left Gainsboro 20 years ago.

In the end, Zee Ferguson said, the community was torn apart. "There was no building onto what we already had. It was all destroyed and left void. There's no store an elderly person could walk to. . . . It was left barren."

She watched people die waiting for a new house. "There were some people who got really ill. They were going to meetings and the next thing, we were going to their funeral. I knew what the people had been through, people who worked from sunup to sundown, and maybe it didn't look like something to other people, but it was their life's blood."

"*Our people are just as responsible for this area being the way it is as anybody else. We took flight. We kind of wanted to get out, flap our wings.*"

The Rev. Carl Tinsley

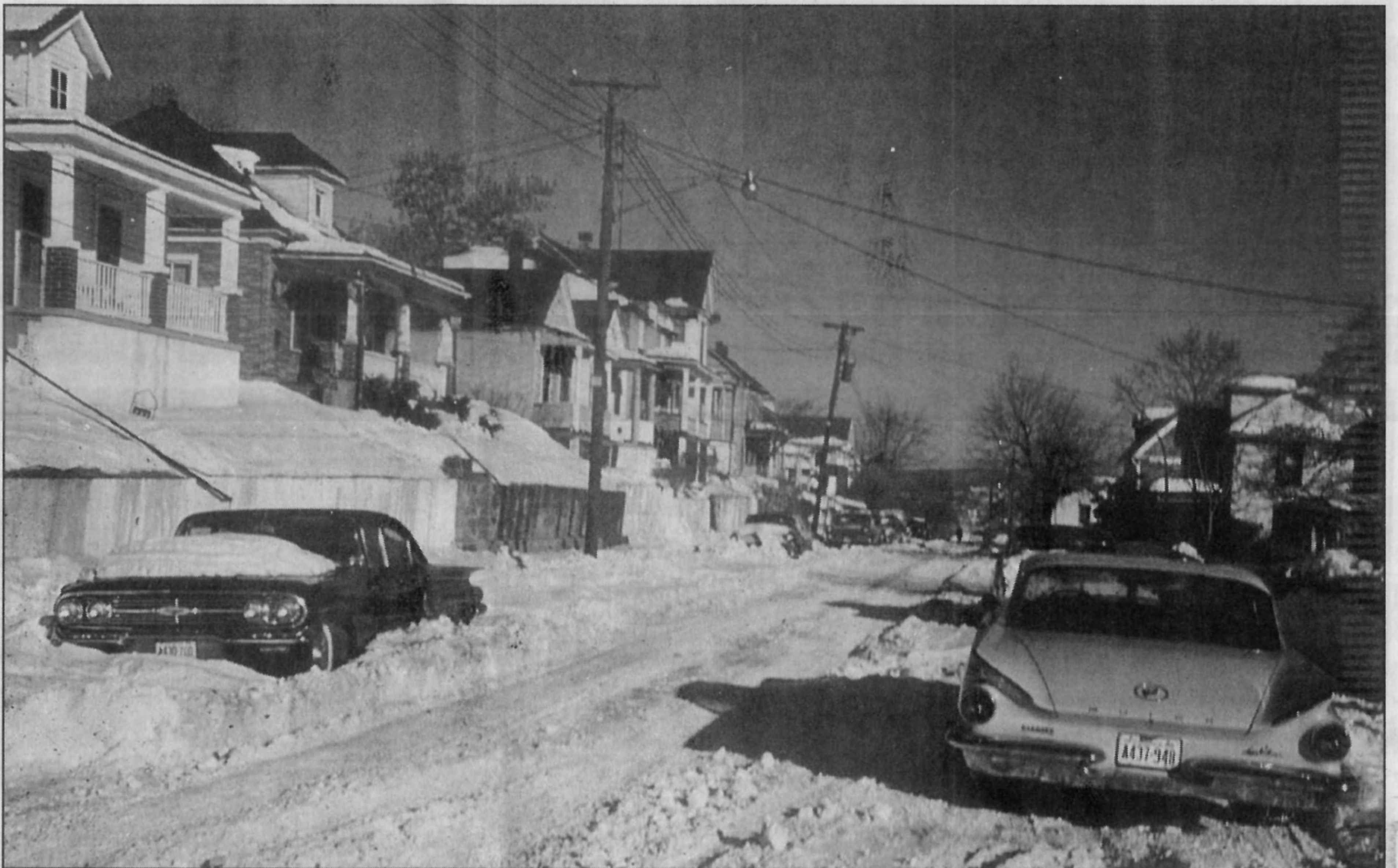


Photo courtesy of Zenobia Ferguson

MARY Juanita and Ernest "Popeye" Brown bought the old Monsour store in Gainsboro in 1972.

The late Joe Monsour had run the store at 902 Peach Road since at least the 1940s. Ernest Brown was his cashier and part-time manager. Mary Brown worked there, too.

Black entrepreneurs and people like Monsour, of Lebanese descent, fueled the life in Gainsboro. "It was like being at home," Mary Brown said. "They took pride in those places."

Monsour owned the Gainsboro building where The Roanoke Tribune was published and the Star City Auditorium at Wells Avenue and Henry Street where James Brown and Lionel Hampton played in the 1950s and 1960s.

"At one time, they had me believing that they were going to renovate, have a little mall over there," Ernest Brown said. "I should have seen through that."

Not long after they bought the business, Ernest Brown said, C. Frank Kefauver, an elderly white real-estate man, warned him, " 'Mr. Brown, you're going to have to move.' He knew something I didn't know. I hadn't heard nothing about it."

The Browns, so close that they finish each other's sentences, told what happened then:

Ernest Brown: "They moved everybody out from around us. If we could have stayed down there another four or five years, we would've had it made."

Mary Brown: "See, we couldn't afford to stay down there. Too many people were moving out."

Ernest Brown: "Some of the elderly people didn't have no way to get back down there. They just left us."

Mary Brown: "We tried to deliver" to homes to keep the business.

Ernest Brown: "But you've got to have the walk-in trade."

Mary Brown: "We had to get away."

The Browns closed the store in the late 1970s. Kefauver lent them $10,000 to buy land for a new store on Cove Road. Brown's Grocery had 11 employees, two cash registers and 10 compressors to keep the food cold. It was one of the biggest black-owned businesses in town.

But they were competing with chain supermarkets on nearby Hershberger Road. Then, too, the Browns blame their customers. They still have a box of bad checks in their basement.

The new store failed. They had opened it with a $212,000 Small Business Administration loan, so the government came in one day, took the keys and auctioned off the place.

Ernest Brown is retired now; Mary Brown is an aide at Fallon Park Elementary School.

"Sometimes the police would close a street and the kids would get together and just have an evening of sleigh-riding," says Zenobia Ferguson, who took this snapshot (above) from her house on Chestnut Avenue in Gainsboro. The street was torn down in urban renewal.

Photo courtesy of Zenobia Ferguson

"They were our fishing friends, and we didn't go [that day]. but they came by the house afterward to show us their catch. I think they had gone down below Buchanan to a place called Rocky Point on the James River. I think that is in the early '70s."
—Zenobia Ferguson, who shot the picture on Chestnut Avenue in Gainsboro

NOBODY knows how much money was spent on Gainsboro.

Estimates range from $10 million to $40 million.

When asked, no one at City Hall, the Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority or the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development could come up with a total. Most of it was federal money from HUD.

"I don't have the slightest idea. I really don't," said Wesley White, the authority's development director.

City documents and old newspaper accounts of City Council budget sessions indicate that at least $22 million has been allocated for the neighborhood since 1972.

Two officials at HUD's Richmond office said the total is around $25 million, but they weren't sure.

The expenditure of that kind of money is not visible in Gainsboro.

A few new streets got sidewalks, curbing and streetlights. Seventy-nine homes and two small sets of apartments were built. The authority and other agencies renovated some homes, and a community-based group, the Southwest Virginia Community Development Fund, built an industrial park with five small industries.

George Heller, former director of the Gainsboro Neighborhood Development Corp., believes that some of Gainsboro's unspent or "rollover" money carried over from prior years was spent to spruce up downtown or other parts of the city, but he has no proof.

Before he died last year, Theodore Holland, a confectionery store owner in Gainsboro, said in an interview that he felt betrayed by the project. "A lot of the money appropriated for Gainsboro, we never saw. All the money went for transportation, for developers out of Washington, consultants. They took the Gainsboro money and used it downtown." He, like Heller, said he had no proof.

Wesley White said there was no diversion of Gainsboro's money when the authority managed it until the mid-1970s, when HUD switched to community block grants and sent them to City Hall. "Whatever money we got from HUD," he said, "went to Gainsboro." Bob Herbert, who had been with the city since 1979 and became city manager in 1985, said he was not aware of any diversion of Gainsboro money, either.

Where did the money go?

For one thing, several hundred homeowners were paid for their houses and received up to $15,000 in addition to find new ones.

Housing authority records show more than 50 contractors doing all kinds of work on the Gainsboro project.

For years, there was a parade of private building inspectors, assessors, engineers, surveyors, architects, landscapers, lawyers, consultants, pavers, appraisers,

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Photo courtesy of Helen Davis and Evelyn Bethel

"All the kids came up to 19 Patton," Helen Davis said of her family home in Gainsboro. Here, her son Ricardo Stovall plays in the backyard around 1953 with his cousin, Wanda Davis Kasey.

Photo courtesy of Herbert Otey

"That was taken in my front yard on Moorman Road, right where Coca-Cola stands now," says Herbert Otey, on left in the picture (right). His cousin, Reginald Gilliam Jr., right, is now a senior vice president of the international public affairs firm Hill and Knowlton in Washington. "Across the street was a huge Caterpillar [tractor] place and we could listen to the engines, and the guys there would ride them around. Miss Annie's [store] was next door, so close that my mother could actually raise her window downstairs and Miss Annie would pass the bread and groceries through."

FROM PAGE 8

sign makers, road builders, home builders and other construction companies that made money in Gainsboro.

Fifteen demolition companies won contracts with the authority in 1979 alone to tear down homes and other buildings.

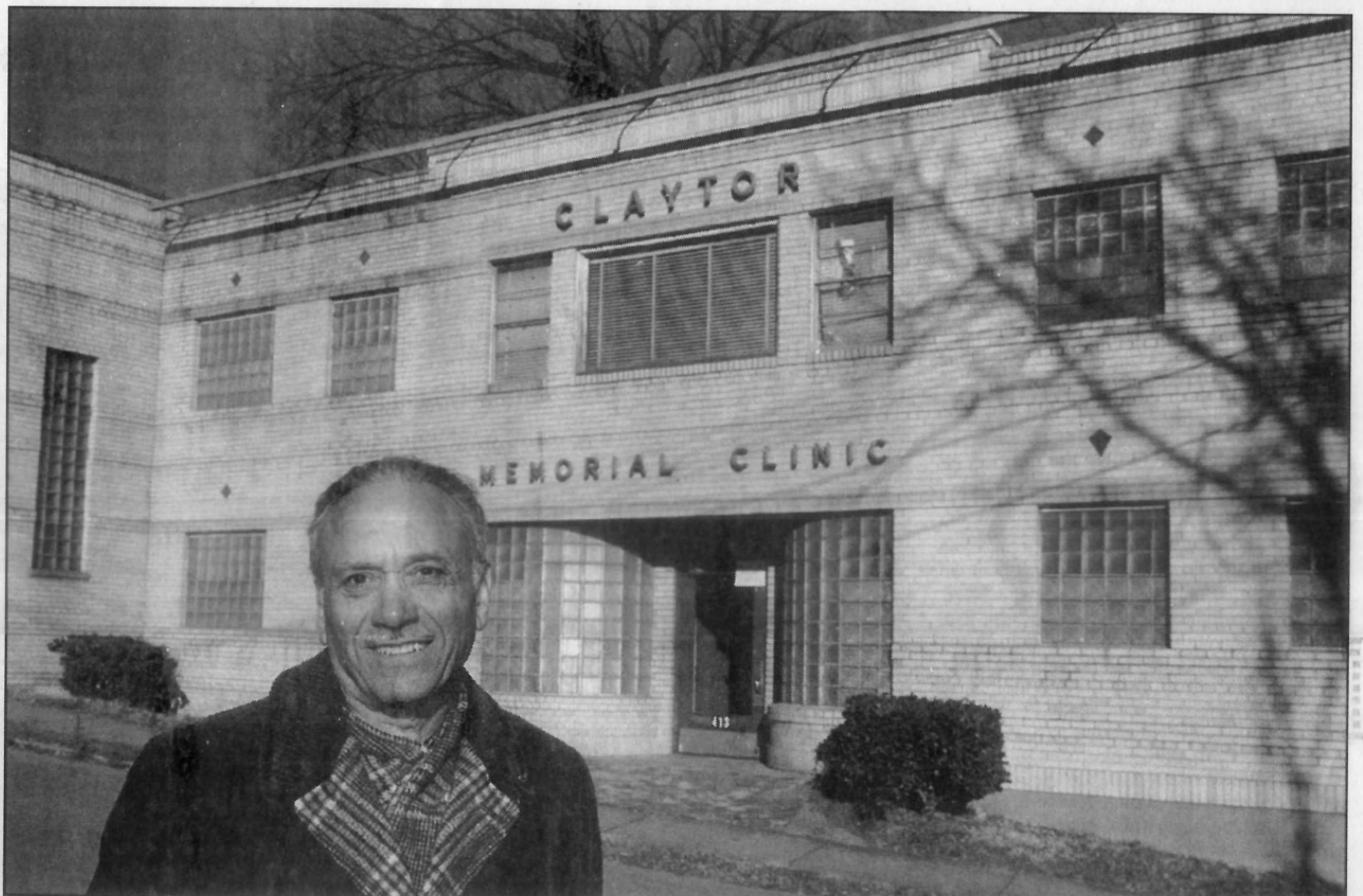
Seven different consulting firms from Washington, Richmond, Baltimore, Charlottesville and other cities studied Gainsboro and made recommendations about how the project should proceed. At least seven lawyers worked on aspects of the project, including acquisitions, closings and title work.

Major contractors such as Hayes, Seay, Mattern & Mattern, a Roanoke architecture and engineering firm, won jobs for up to $1 million in the 1970s and 1980s.

Dr. Walter Claytor, retired Gainsboro dentist and a member of early neighborhood organizations that monitored what city government was doing, said urban renewal triggered the sale and construction of hundreds of homes, a multimillion-dollar domino effect.

First, blacks were forced from their homes and into adjacent white neighborhoods. Whites then built houses in subdivisions farther from downtown. That fed the purses of developers, bankers, real estate agents, carpenters, roofers, surveyors, the lawyers who oversaw the property changes and everyone else in the real estate and construction industries.

"It was a real industry around urban renewal," Earl Reynolds Jr., Roanoke's former chief planner and assistant city manager, said of such projects nationwide. "But the missing piece was that the black community and the poor people, black and white, they did not get a piece of that economic pie."



CINDY PINKSTON/Staff

"If I have to leave, I'd like to leave a legacy, let people know what happened to us, anyway." —*Dr. Walter Claytor at the Claytor Memorial Clinic, on his 25-year personal inquiry into urban renewal and its impact on people in Gainsboro.*

BY 1979, 10 years after the project began, hundreds of Gainsboro homes had been torn down and 25 new ones built.

Beulah Dennis was in one of the new houses, a small ranch at 334 Madison Ave. N.W. She is still there.

Dennis, 83, was one of the first black clerks at the Heironimus department store downtown. She ran the elevator at first, then the kitchen. She remembers that she was wearing a brown plaid dress the day a co-worker suggested she apply to be a sales clerk. She got the job. It was 1963, the early days of Roanoke's desegregation.

She lived most of her life at 9 McDowell Ave. N.W. in Gainsboro, with her mother and her sister, Edna. She has snapshots of the neat white wood-frame house with green trim and a glider on the porch. "It was our castle."

She said a white man with the housing authority arranged to buy her old house, tear it down and get her the new one. "He was the nicest thing."

The authority worked it so neighbors on McDowell still were neighbors in the new houses on Madison, so Dennis' next-door neighbor from the old days still is next door. Their old block was demolished.

Dennis still marvels at having central air and central heat. When Heironimus had a sale about the time she moved, she acquired a new couch and a framed still-life print of flowers. The picture and the couch, upholstered with gold flowers on a beige background and still good as new, continue to be the centerpieces of her living room.

But her prize is the small white dogwood she brought as a sapling from her old yard on McDowell.

BERN Ewert didn't like what he saw going on in Gainsboro when he became Roanoke city manager in 1978. The whole objective had changed from the project's early days.

When he arrived, he said, "the board of the housing authority and the staff of the housing authority were almost adamant in their position that almost nothing could be rehabilitated in Gainsboro."

It cost up to $100,000 to buy and clear an old house, move its residents and put another house on the lot. "I said to myself, 'We can do better than that. The money's going to run out.' " He said no one believed him.

Ewert suggested at a mass meeting of residents at the old First Baptist Church that the city try to preserve what was left of Gainsboro. He warned there wasn't enough money to complete the $13.5 million clear-and-rebuild plan.

He took people to Charlottesville, where he had worked before, and showed them how rehabilitation worked there. "I thought when they saw there was an option to save the houses, they'd want to do that."

Instead, residents were furious. They had waited years for their houses to be bought, and they had not maintained them.

Earl Reynolds Jr., Ewert's assistant city manager, said he saw Ewert weep in his office after some of those meetings. "And the folks were saying, 'The government made this mess; the government has to straighten it out.' "

Ewert backed off and proposed a combination of clearance and rehabilitation, but City Council killed his idea and continued with plans to clear people out.

Ewert said most of the millions of federal dollars earmarked for Gainsboro went to contractors.

"That's why I wanted to bypass all that and give the money directly to the people, but they didn't want that. They were seduced by the big government lie, and it's too bad."

BY 1981, though, City Council had changed its direction on Gainsboro yet again: Now it said it would try to save what was left of Gainsboro's soundest buildings.

Another consulting firm, the city's fourth on Gainsboro, suggested creating a new citizens' group that would have legal standing as a developer in the neighborhood. The new group, the Gainsboro Neighborhood Development Corp., would have the authority to enter into contracts in hopes the project could make more progress.

The consultants said the city should save an old building that once housed the area's YMCA. Fire struck the building later, and it was torn down.

The consultants also recommended saving the Gainsboro home of the Claytors, a medical family.

NO one has pressed harder than Dr. Walter Claytor to find out what happened in Gainsboro.

Why, he wants to know, did the promised neighborhood renewal fail? Where did the millions of dollars go?

For more than 25 years, the Gainsboro dentist has been obsessed by what he sees as a boondoggle that profited city government and a slew of developers but did next to nothing for Gainsboro.

Claytor blames scores of powerful people, white and black.

Dozen of people oversaw the Gainsboro project — mayors, city staffers, City Council members, leaders of city-sanctioned Gainsboro organizations, housing authority staff and board members.

"Why didn't they stop it?" Claytor asks. "Who came to our aid? All the people who knew things, and knew things were going bad, they did not tell the people."

When his father, Dr. John B. Claytor Sr., decided to build a Gainsboro home for his wife and four children in 1922, Roanoke's white builders refused to construct it.

It was to be a 22-room mansion, designed by a Washington architect. Walter Claytor said Roanoke construction crews thought the house too grand for a black man. The Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on the property.

John Claytor's father-in-law brought men out of east Tennessee to build it. On dental-school breaks, Walter Claytor helped them haul bricks from a freight car to build the house.

When the Claytors welcomed neighbors to a reception in 1923, The Roanoke Church News, a community newspaper published by Gainsboro's First Baptist Church, reported that "the home was pronounced by all that attended the opening that it was a model home from every viewpoint and a credit to the owners, the builder, the community, and the race."

Eventually John and Roberta Claytor had four more children. Their home became a kind of social center for Gainsboro.

In 1949 the Claytor Memorial Clinic opened on Gainsboro Road.

Gainsboro residents poured into the medical offices of John Claytor Sr. and five of his children — physicians John B. Claytor Jr. and Frank W. Claytor, dentist Walter Claytor, laboratory technician Bernice Claytor Boddie, and accountant and business manager Ralph V. Claytor.

It all fell apart during urban renewal. People moved, and the drugstores and dry cleaners that kept commerce brisk were gone. "The money doesn't circulate the way it used to," Walter Claytor says. "We don't have a black economy like we used to. We've now become beggars. We're now on the welfare rolls."

Most of his family has died or moved away. The house burned, then was torn down.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Walter Claytor

"How many millions of dollars have come into Gainsboro? What do we have to show for it?" — *Dentist Dr. Walter Claytor in his office at Gainsboro's Claytor Memorial Clinic in 1970.*

The family's Claywood Service Station burned, too. Claytor says somebody — he doesn't know who — set those fires. "We've had more fires in our section than we ever had in my lifetime."

Walter Claytor quit Gainsboro citizens' groups years ago, warning residents that those groups were toothless entities set up only because federal law required them.

He says nobody really cared about the people. "It was the transferring of the ghetto, that's all it was. They tore us up. They raped us."

When planners unveiled new street patterns, Claytor protested that they ignored the way the land lay — that Gainsboro had grown up in the little valleys running east-west between the hills, not along the north-south streets. He protested when planners designed streets so that water meters would have to be installed under the sidewalks, and when they forgot to install natural gas lines. Many homes still use propane.

To try to preserve black history, he drew up a list of 144 businesses, churches and institutions that once stood in Gainsboro and Northeast, and of the 27 black doctors, dentists, pharmacists and lawyers who practiced in the neighborhoods. He found that only six of the businesses set up shop again after their buildings were torn down.

For years, he's written Virginia senators, members of Congress, U.S. attorneys and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development asking for a "no-holds-barred, complete, line-item audit" of the millions of federal dollars appropriated for Gainsboro. He's been told it would be too hard, maybe impossible, to retrieve decades' worth of government documents.

At his urging, HUD paid for a 1991 study of Roanoke urban renewal by Reginald Shareef, a professor of political science and public administration at Radford University. Shareef found that uprooted families believed urban renewal was about getting them better housing, when, instead, "the politics of urban renewal revolves around the profit margin for both land developers and the local government."

Shareef's report asked for an independent audit to determine whether money earmarked for Gainsboro was diverted to other city projects, an official apology to uprooted families from the city and the housing authority, and unspecified compensation to property owners who had to leave the urban renewal areas.

Claytor sent the report to libraries, to state and local officials, to President Clinton. Claytor got little response.

He says the city has broken so many promises that black Roanokers have little faith in government. "Until the city says, 'We're not going to take your houses for 30 or 40 years,' nobody's going to fix them up. People are living in fear."

A year and a half ago, his brother Ralph was walking to his car in front of the clinic when a decayed building across the street collapsed and knocked him to the ground. He was hospitalized briefly. A few months later, he died of cancer.

Walter Claytor, 69, retired a year ago. Right away, someone shattered the clinic's windows and broke into the building. Walter Claytor tried to shield it from the surrounding gloom but now it stands dark and cold. Now, he says, "It's going to pot like everything else."

"It was more than just a house. Our parents saw to it that it was a real home. In the era of segregation, it was known nationally for its warmth and as a haven of rest for a host of tired and weary travelers." — *Dr. Walter Claytor, who grew up in the house, which fronted on North Jefferson Street in Gainsboro.*

Photo courtesy of Dr. Walter Claytor

> *It seems like where we've lived and what we've done has been swept away.*
>
> **Zenobia Ferguson**

CINDY PINKSTON/Staff

"I didn't think too much about segregation or integration because in the community we had shoe repair shops, cleaning and pressing, drug stores and movies. They even had a dance hall on Harrison [Avenue] and, of course, we had the library, the Y and the schools," says Zenobia Ferguson. She and her husband moved from Gainsboro in 1976. "There was no building on to what we already had. It was all destroyed and left void."

GAINSBORO was the neighborhood where Earl Reynolds Jr. grew up. In 1982, he saw it disintegrating.

By then, he was Roanoke's chief planner and the highest-ranking black official in the city. He warned that preservation, the city's written objective in Gainsboro, was not happening. Unlike other neighborhoods, Gainsboro was not even eligible for housing rehabilitation programs.

During the project's early years, a colorful mural hung on the wall of a community building. It showed an even better Gainsboro, a sunny and charming neighborhood full of people and shops after urban renewal.

"People went by every day, looking at that vision of the future," Reynolds said. "That kept people going, irrespective of the fact that it wasn't materializing."

Urban renewal made life worse in Gainsboro, not better, Reynolds said.

By slapping on the "urban renewal" label, he said in an interview, government automatically depressed the value of real estate. Banks were less likely to let people use their homes as collateral.

Reynolds said, "It was just as effective as what we think of as redlining today," the systematic refusal by banks to give loans to neighborhoods they think are deteriorating.

What saddened him the most were the last people bought out by the city. Urban renewal stretched on so long that owners had let their property run down. By the time they left, assessed values were lower than ever, and they didn't get as much money as they would have a few years earlier.

Even worse off, he said, were people whose properties never had been selected for a buyout. "By the time we started rehabilitating those houses, they were in tremendously bad shape. There had been no maintenance."

Reynolds later became assistant city manager and now is Martinsville's city manager.

When he was growing up at 331 Harrison Ave. N.W., solid old homes were all around. "We were living in architecturally interesting houses, and we didn't even know it."

The irony of Gainsboro, Reynolds said, is "we could have left the old homes down there, and not only would people have had safe, sanitary and affordable places to live, but we would have maintained the historic sense of the neighborhood."

The root of urban renewal's misjudgments, he said, was that from Washington on down, "there was nothing in the policy that dealt with people" or what would happen to them and their neighborhoods.

Gainsboro's project was a patchwork of little projects, some just a block or two long, that stretched over more than a quarter-century. "There was no whole," he said, "no big picture."

Urban renewal "changed the character of Roanoke. I don't think the black community of Roanoke is as strong as it was, politically or philosophically, and I think the city as a whole is worse off because of it.

"I mean, Roanoke is surviving and Roanoke will continue to grow and to prosper, but it will not be as strong as it could have been. It will not be as attractive a community as it could have been."

IN 1983, the city announced it would take more homes on Gainsboro's western edge to help Coca-Cola expand its bottling plant. The Rev. Noel C. Taylor, a Gainsboro pastor who in 1970 had become the city's first black council member, was mayor; Bern Ewert was city manager; Bob Herbert, assistant city manager; and Earl Reynolds Jr., chief planner.

Twenty-three more Gainsboro homes were targeted, along with 21 businesses, including George's Grocery, which stood at Centre Avenue and Third Street for 70 years.

Former City Council member James Harvey said the neighborhood was so decayed that politicians were frightened when they toured Gainsboro before the city won a federal grant for Coke. "I kid you not," he said. "We were afraid to get off the bus over there, because it was a slum area — people sitting around drinking wine."

A Roanoke Times & World-News editorial said the project would displace "a number of dilapidated buildings that serve as breeding grounds for blight and crime. . . . It should also be a stabilizing force for the rest of Gainsboro."

Cora Lee Wilson's boarding house at 330 Loudon Ave. N.W. was in the bull's-eye, too. She'd been there 40 years.

Luther Wilson, her son, said his mother had chickens and an outhouse in the back yard when she first moved there in the 1940s. She added a bathroom, a back porch, a kitchen and a dining room. "She even dug up the basement herself," said Mary Wilson, Luther's wife.

"She didn't really want to go nowhere," he said, "but they started talking about eminent domain. She had to leave everything she'd built up and start over again."

He said it wasn't right for the city to pay his mother only $13,000 for her house, then give it to Coca-Cola, which profited from it.

Cora Lee Wilson bought a house on Hanover Avenue Northwest, where Luther, his wife, Mary, and some of the elderly boarders from Gainsboro still live. Cora Lee Wilson caught pneumonia and died not long after they moved.

The boarders, most of them old bachelors who got $150 each for the move, were disoriented when they went searching for old friends. "When they moved up here, they were a little frightened," Mary Wilson said. "A couple of them did get lost and we had to hunt for them. That's where they lived all their life, down there."

Luther and Mary Wilson own the Hanover Avenue house debt-free. They work the night shift — she as a weaver, he on the balljoint — at Precision Fabrics in Vinton.

As they were being moved out of Gainsboro, Luther and Mary Wilson were told they might get jobs at the Coke plant. The city used the lure of Gainsboro jobs to persuade the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to lend Coke $4 million for the expansion.

The Wilsons went to the housing authority and to the Virginia Employment Commission to apply. They were turned down. "Everybody we talked to, I think they got the same runaround they gave us," Luther Wilson said.

A few Gainsboro residents work at the Coke plant now, but others hired shortly after people were moved out soon were laid off.

Twenty property owners went to court, saying the seizure of their homes was unconstitutional because it benefited a company, not the public. Others said the city's offers for their houses were below fair-market value. A judge ruled that the city could condemn the homes because Gainsboro was "blighted."

Charles Davis, then the housing authority's community relations officer, said he felt people were not treated fairly.

"Since the city had a plan for the land," he said, homeowners should have been paid at commercial or industrial rates. "I think everything was sold at residential values, and they were depressed values at that. But I don't think the city ever leveled with the people about what they were going to do or how it would affect them."

Some former Gainsboro residents and business owners place part of the blame on Taylor, the first black on council and the mayor from 1975 to 1992, for what they say were missteps in the Gainsboro project. "He could have delayed it. I don't think he could stop it," says Claudia Whitworth, publisher of the weekly Roanoke Tribune. Her former office on Henry Street was torn down by the city.

Few would be quoted by name criticizing Taylor. One man said, "I don't have nice words to say about it."

"Sure, there were times when I wanted to do things differently," Taylor says, "and I engaged in dialogue along those lines. There are things I would have done *very* differently." He declined to be specific, saying he'd resolved not to cast judgment. "Mayor Taylor had his day."

Photo courtesy of Zenobia Ferguson

"My mother-in-law's name was Susie Ferguson, and she loved flowers, and our backyard and around front and all were just a beautiful place," says Zenobia Ferguson. While living with her son and daughter-in-law on Chestnut Avenue in Gainsboro, Susie Ferguson and their next-door neighbor, Frances Parker, had a joint flower bed right along their property line. This picture of Susie Ferguson's roses was taken about 1961.

Photo courtesy of Zenobia Ferguson

"I was dressed to go to the Debutantes' Ball," says Zenobia Ferguson, pictured in her Gainsboro living room about 1957. "I was the lady-in-waiting for one of the girls in our community."

IT seemed at times like everybody was grappling for control of Gainsboro — City Hall, the housing authority and the Gainsboro Neighborhood Development Corp.

Lawyers for the authority warned in 1985 that Gainsboro land was being acquired improperly by the development corporation.

Jack Place told City Attorney Wilburn Dibling in an April 4, 1985, memo that he knew of at least one instance in which a development corporation representative told a property owner that his land would be condemned if he did not accept the development corporation's offer. Place reminded the city that only the housing authority had the power to condemn, not the development corporation.

"If, in a condemnation suit," Place wrote, "evidence were introduced: that [the development corporation] obtained appraisals; made an unacceptable offer to the owner; requested the City to direct the Authority to condemn and the Authority did so condemn under the City's directive, I feel that we would be on very thin jurisdictional ice."

George Heller, the development corporation's Gainsboro-born executive director at the time, says most of the time, his group had a good working relationship with the housing authority. He wishes, though, that the city and the authority had given citizens more power over the project in the 1970s.

A decade ago, his group ran into trouble when it tried to redevelop Gainsboro's Henry Street. The organization spent $100,000 on plans; then-Mayor Noel Taylor took over the project and the plans were discarded. The Henry Street redevelopment has been slow; the authority announced last November it wants to build its headquarters and some retail shops there.

Heller said the citizens' group would have saved many of the old Henry Street buildings that have been torn down.

Margaret Turpin, who became director after Heller, said Gainsboro was an embattled turf. "The housing authority had its hands in the pie, and the city had its hands in the pie. It was a pie-eating contest."

> *"Our children and our children's children don't have a beautiful past to look back on the way we do."*
> **Walter Fizer Sr.**

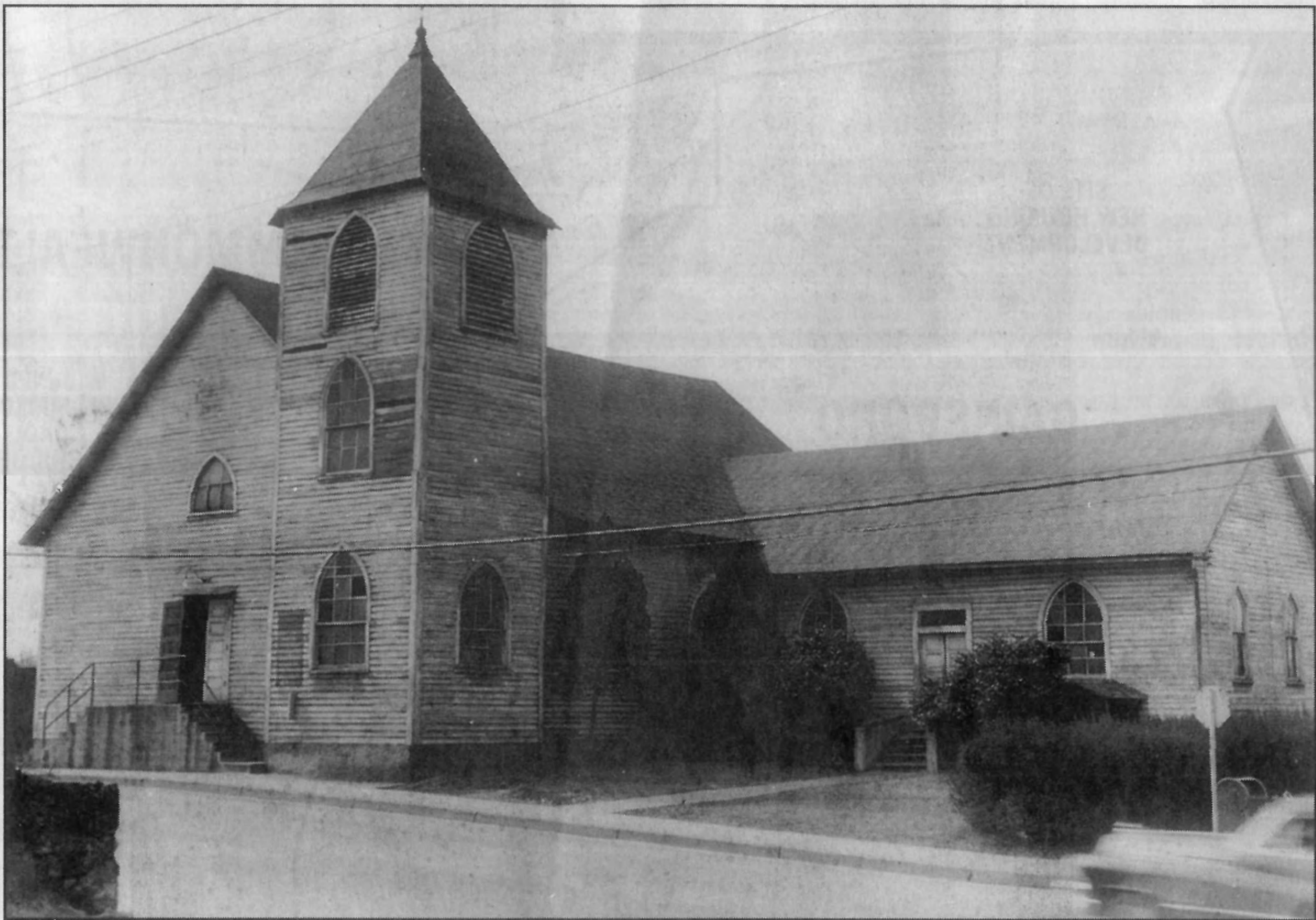


Photo courtesy of Cecil and Marshall Curtis

Mount Zion Baptist Church, formed in 1884, has had four buildings. The one at left was its second, built in Northeast in 1908. Mount Zion built its first brick building, renamed Greater Mount Zion, in 1955. It was torn down 15 years later to build the Roanoke Civic Center. The fourth building is on Grayson Avenue Northwest.

AS an entrepreneur and a Gainsboro native, Walter Fizer Jr. wanted a piece of that pie. He wanted to build apartments in one spot and a motel in another.

He hired an architect and a market analyst, and told the housing authority he aimed to put up a motel. The authority said no: The property he wanted was promised to developers who built the Innkeeper Motel.

Fizer, a retired Norfolk and Western Railway clerk and part-owner of the Fizer Funeral Home, said someone else beat him to the apartment site, too.

He says the authority had no faith in him and other black Roanokers. "We're still children" in the eyes of the city, he said. "We cannot handle our own affairs."

Now, when he drives by the Innkeeper with his grown children, one of them will say, "Daddy, there goes your hotel." The loss still stings.

"I'm proud of downtown," he says, "and I'm proud of the malls that have come up, but when I take a real deep look at it, I'm very, very upset that all the best of everything I had in my community has been turned into a million-dollar playground, and I got none of it."

JUST as the people of Gainsboro were dispersed by urban renewal, so were their churches.

There were 24 black churches in Gainsboro and Northeast in 1950; now, none is in the building it originally occupied.

The city and the housing authority helped many of the bigger churches build new sanctuaries. First Baptist and Hill Street Baptist rebuilt in Gainsboro. Others, like High Street Baptist, pastored by former Mayor Noel Taylor, moved to other neighborhoods.

Other churches had a harder time, and none took a worse beating than Greater Mount Zion Baptist Church.

It was founded in Northeast as Mount Zion Baptist in 1884. After its first building burned, the congregation built a wood-frame church in 1908. The minister baptized people in a nearby stream.

By the 1950s, the church was thriving under the Rev. Metz T. Coker. A new brick church, now called Greater Mount Zion to reflect its progress, was built at 326 Madison Ave. N.E.

Members had paid off that building and been debt-free for four years when they learned they would have to move. The city wanted to build the Roanoke Civic Center on their property.

Charles Meadows, 90 and a church trustee most of his life, remembers the pain of his pastor when he heard the news. Coker told him, "They can't make us move."

"I said, 'No, my brother. We're going to have to leave here.' "

The city tore down the church in 1970. The civic center stands there now. Greater Mount Zion built its fourth and biggest church, at 1810 Grayson Ave. N.W., the next year.

Wesley White oversaw the Gainsboro project from its inception as the housing authority's development director. White said the authority recognized the significance of Gainsboro's churches. "We needed to maintain the institutions," he said.

In 1976 correspondence with the Rev. R.R. Wilkinson, one of Roanoke's strongest civil-rights leaders and pastor of Hill Street Baptist Church in Gainsboro, White wrote, "We have a difficult job in Gainsboro. We are trying to rebuild. Key thing is the church..... We will acquire the church some way."

The old Hill Street Baptist, on a section of McDowell Avenue Northwest that the authority wanted, had turned down the authority's offer of $47,000 to build a new church in Gainsboro. Wilkinson warned White, "You will have to cross many bridges before you get it."

Eventually, the authority helped Hill Street build its new church on Madison Avenue.

White said he created a miniproject-within-the-project just to help First Baptist build its new Gainsboro church.

Walter Wheaton has been a trustee at First Baptist more than 40 years. "We were asked by the housing authority to stay there and help stabilize the Gainsboro area. They made it possible for us to stay, economically."

The authority helped the church acquire its site on Wells Avenue and spent about $90,000 on grading. To widen Wells Avenue near the Hotel Roanoke, the Virginia Department of Transportation recently paid the church $160,000 for parcels on the edge of its property.

Wheaton is glad the church still is in Gainsboro, but he questions the wisdom of the whole Gainsboro project. "To be honest with you, I don't think it has done a lot for the development of minorities.

"The majority of our parishioners don't live in the immediate area. What we did was preserve the identity of what *formerly* was there."

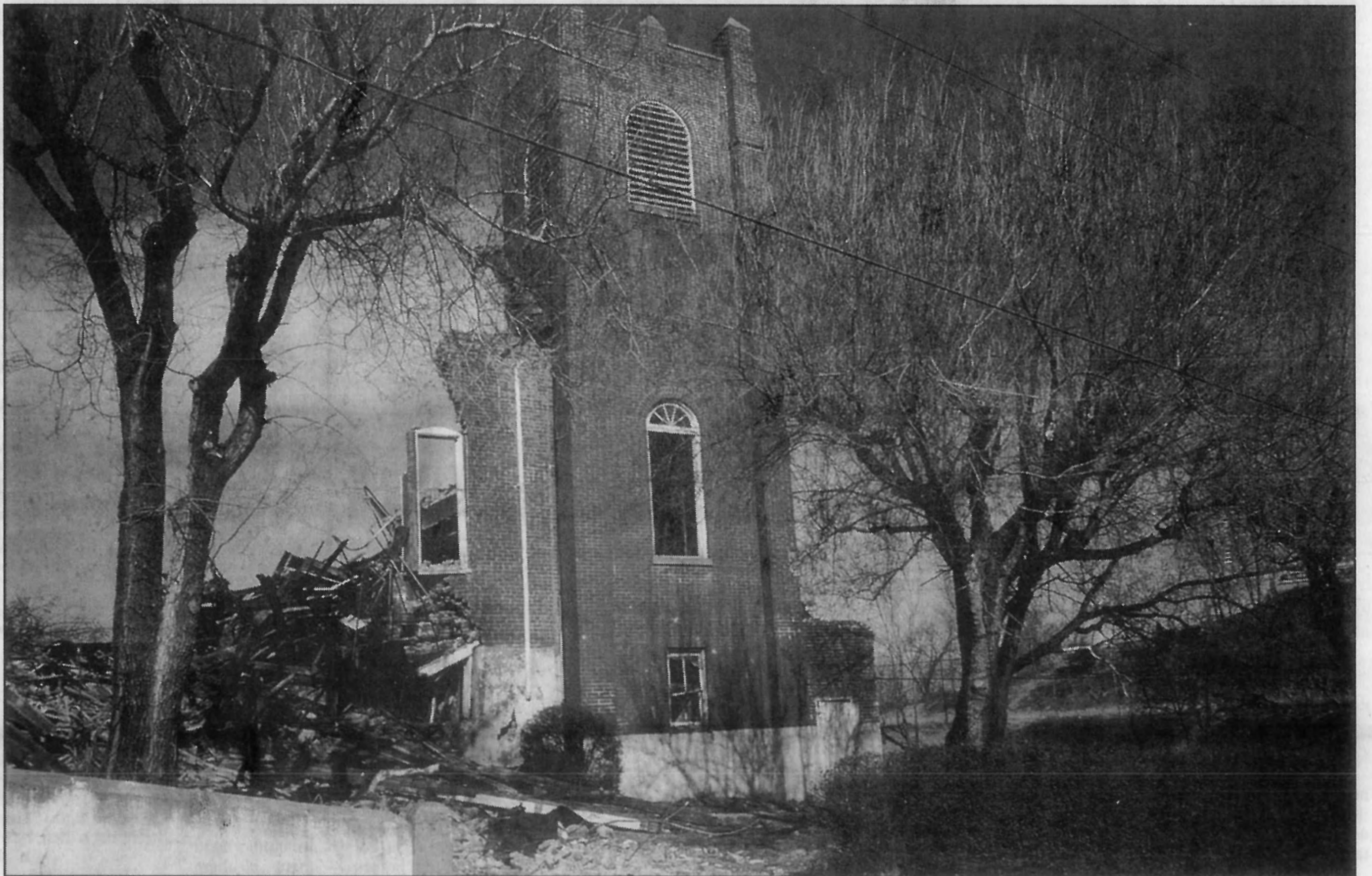


Photo courtesy of Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority

Twenty-two churches were torn down in Gainsboro and Northeast. Long-time residents think this may have been Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church as it was being demolished in Gainsboro in the 1970s.

Photo courtesy of Herbert Otey

In the sanctuary of Sweet Union Baptist Church, probably in the 1950s. The Rev. William Gilbert, a former pastor, is the gray-haired man on the front row. His wife, Cora, is right of him.

ST. Andrew's Catholic Church and Roanoke Catholic Schools are still on "Catholic Hill" in Gainsboro, along with Our Lady of the Valley retirement home, built in 1989.

The bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, who administers the parish, schools and nursing home, checked out the home's construction in April 1989. He was not pleased with what he saw nearby.

"The area at the bottom of the hill still looks like a slum," Bishop Walter F. Sullivan complained in a letter to City Council member David Bowers, a Catholic. Bowers now is Roanoke's mayor.

"The Catholic Church is investing over six million dollars in the improvement of the image of downtown Roanoke," Sullivan said. "I hope that the city can do likewise as a start. Perhaps some of the dilapidated buildings can be leveled as a sign of the city's commitment to continue the improvement of the area."

About that time, the city set its sights on more of Gainsboro for another project — this time for two four-lane roads that would speed traffic toward downtown and by the restored Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center.

Black Roanokers, led by neighborhood activist Evelyn Bethel, packed hearings to plead with the city not to take any more of their community. "If we don't have Gainsboro, we have no history," said the Rev. Charles Green, president of the Roanoke branch of the National Association for the Advancement of

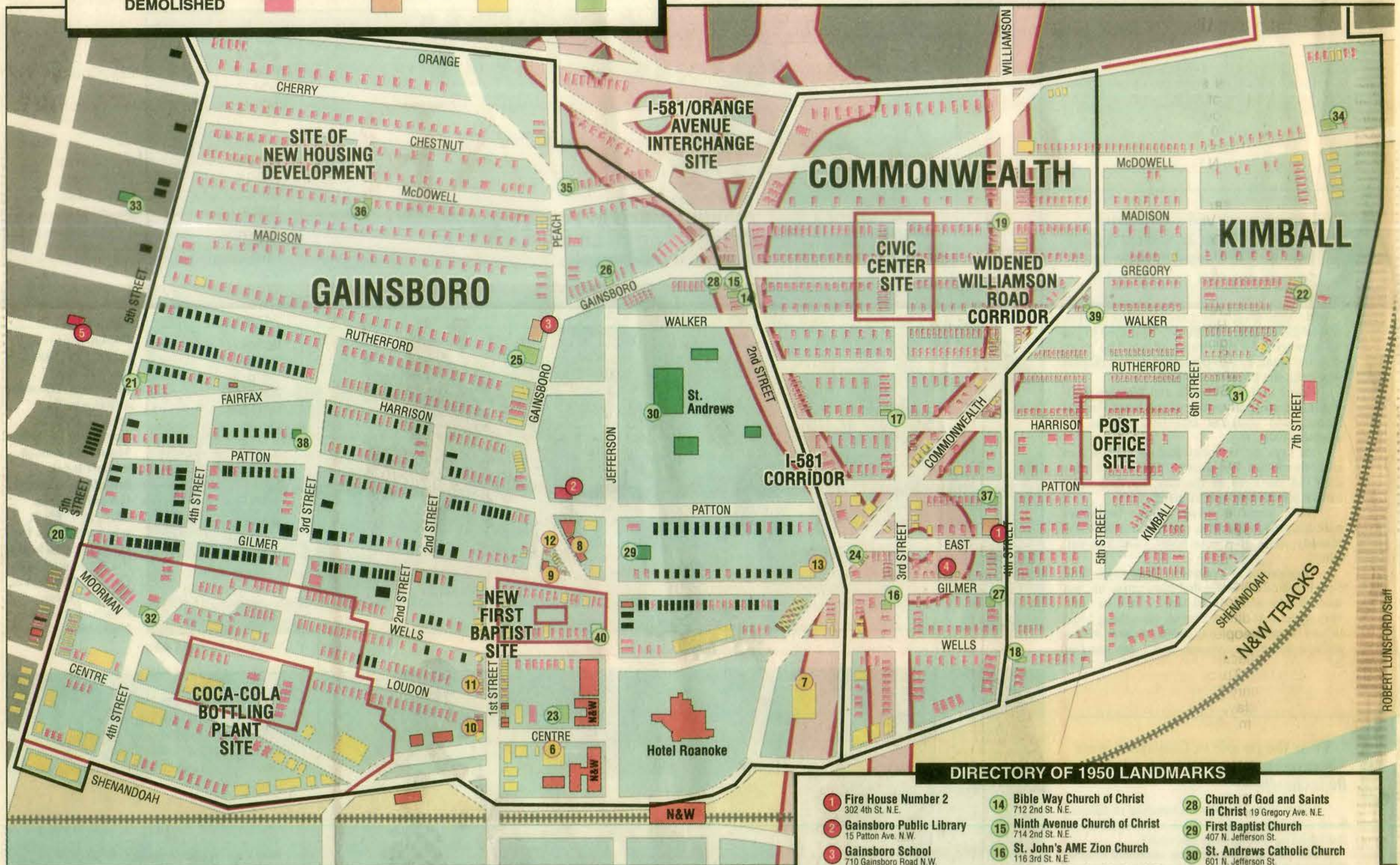
CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Each rectangle represents a structure existing in 1950. Color codes indicate present status of structure. Size and position are approximate.

	Residential	Government	Commercial	Church
STANDING IN 1995				
DEMOLISHED				

GAINSBORO / NORTHEAST ROANOKE IN 1950

THE NEIGHBORHOODS



1955 COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth Project begins, including the widening of Williamson Road. Holiday Inn and Magic City Ford build on property made available where homes were removed.

1964 KIMBALL

The Kimball Project begins making way for a new main post office, NW computer center and Roanoke Gas offices.

1966 I-581

I-581 along the western edge of the Commonwealh Project including interchange at Orange Avenue completed in 1966.

1968 CIVIC CENTER

Work on Roanoke Civic Center begins on land cleared by the Commonwealth Project more than a decade earlier.

1973 GAINSBORO

Gainsboro clearance begins. Hundreds of houses are torn down. Between 1976 and present 79 houses are constructed in a development between Cherry and Harrison Avenue.

1983 FIRST BAPTIST

First Baptist builds new church after clearing block at Jefferson Street and Wells Avenue.

1984 COCA-COLA

Demolition begins for an expanded Coke plant in Gainsboro.

1991 PROPOSED WELLS WIDENING

Historic Gainsboro Preservation District Inc. opposes widening and rerouting of Wells Avenue and destruction of homes.

DIRECTORY OF 1950 LANDMARKS

1. **Fire House Number 2** 302 4th St. N.E.
2. **Gainsboro Public Library** 15 Patton Ave. N.W.
3. **Gainsboro School** 710 Gainsboro Road N.W.
4. **Gilmer Avenue School** 324 Gilmer Ave. N.E.
5. **Harrison School** 523 Harrison Ave. N.W.
6. **Allied Arts Building** 36 Centre Ave. N.W.
7. **American Legion Auditorium** Commonwealth & Wells N.E.
8. **Claytor Memorial Clinic** 413 Gainsboro Road N.W.
9. **Cosmopolitan Building** 103 Gilmer Ave. N.W.
10. **Dumas Hotel** 110 1st St. N.W.
11. **Palace Hotel** 204 1st St. N.W.
12. **YMCA (Hunton Branch)** 416 Gainsboro Rd. N.W.
13. **YWCA** 304 2nd St. N.E.
14. **Bible Way Church of Christ** 712 2nd St. N.E.
15. **Ninth Avenue Church of Christ** 714 2nd St. N.E.
16. **St. John's AME Zion Church** 116 3rd St. N.E.
17. **Glorious Church of God in Christ** 500 3rd St. N.E.
18. **Church of God in Christ** 17 4th St. N.E.
19. **Mount Zion Baptist Church** 812 4th St. N.E.
20. **St. Paul Memorial Methodist Church** 312 5th St. N.W.
21. **Church of God** 601 1/2 5th St. N.W.
22. **Pilgrim Baptist Church** 714 7th St. N.E.
23. **High Street Baptist Church** 25 Centre Ave. N.W.
24. **Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses** 205 Commonwealth Ave. N.E.
25. **Mount Zion AME Church** 700 Gainsboro Rd. N.W.
26. **Iron Side Baptist Church** 726 Gainsboro Road N.W.
27. **Mount Sinai Apostolic Church of God** 331 Gilmer Ave. N.E.
28. **Church of God and Saints in Christ** 19 Gregory Ave. N.E.
29. **First Baptist Church** 407 N. Jefferson St.
30. **St. Andrews Catholic Church** 601 N. Jefferson St
31. **United Holiness Church** 502 Kimball Ave. N.E.
32. **Maple Street Baptist Church** 407 Loudon Ave. N.W.
33. **Sweet Union Baptist Church** 521 Madison Ave. N.W.
34. **Central Baptist Church** 702 McDowell Ave. N.E.
35. **Hill Street Baptist Church** 31 McDowell Ave. N.W.
36. **Church of God in Christ** 110 McDowell Ave. N.W.
37. **Morning Star Baptist Church** 333 Patton Ave. N.E.
38. **Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church** 303 Patton Ave. N.W.
39. **Christian Faith Band Sanctified Church** 434 Walker Ave. N.E.
40. **Ebenezer AME Church** 1 Wells Ave. N.W.

SOURCE: 1950 Roanoke City Directory.

FROM PAGE 11

Colored People.

The city rerouted its plans for Wells Avenue, one of the roads to be widened. It tore down several commercial buildings, most unoccupied, but spared a dozen homes it had targeted earlier.

Residents were not appeased. The word went out that 500 to 1,000 people would be bused to a City Hall hearing on Wells Avenue. City Manager Bob Herbert suddenly canceled it.

Then four Gainsboro-based organizations, Gainsboro Neighborhood Development Corp., Southwest Virginia Community Development Fund, First Baptist Church and Total Action Against Poverty — all of which received grants or assistance from the city over the years — promptly broke away from Bethel's Historic Gainsboro Preservation District and two other black groups opposed to the road widenings.

Saying they wanted to win Gainsboro some perks in exchange for the roads — like job training, housing rehabilitation and small-business help — the four breakaway organizations went into months of private talks with Herbert.

He and they unveiled plans for Wells to become a pedestrian-friendly boulevard with flowers, signs about Gainsboro's history and special streetlights by the time the hotel reopens this spring. They presented plans to give work to minority contractors and service workers at the hotel, fix up Gainsboro's old homes and create start-up money for small businesses.

Last summer, two homes on Wells were purchased and moved to nearby Gilmer Avenue at a cost to the city and state of $400,000.

James Harvey, a former City Council member, said recently that more government money has been spent on Gainsboro than any other neighborhood. "Everybody's talking about how Gainsboro is being mistreated," he said. "Give me a break."

City Manager Herbert said the city's trying to be more sensitive. "We've been trying to do things differently."

This summer, Gainsboro is expected to see some demolitions. Ten homes and six commercial buildings will be seized for a new four-lane Second Street/Gainsboro Road. City engineers say most, if not all, of the buildings will be torn down.

NINE-HUNDRED homes, a dozen churches and 165 small businesses stood in Gainsboro in 1950.

Now, Gainsboro is a neighborhood of 190 old homes — many of them vacant — on a few streets and 79 small ranch-style homes and duplexes on redeveloped lots. There is one small office building, several industries, and acres of vacant, weedy lots, many that the housing authority says it can't give away.

■ ■

Earl and Clara Reynolds, parents of former Assistant City Manager Earl Reynolds Jr., have been at 331 Harrison Ave. N.W. for 57 years.

Most of their friends are gone now, and renters have taken their places. Earl Reynolds, a barber who's 78, still walks an hour a day and takes his scissors along to trim the hair of older men who can't get out much anymore.

Eight or so houses near the Reynoldses have been demolished. "They tore down the best ones first," Clara Reynolds said, referring to demolitions 20 years ago. "This was a beautiful street back then, beautiful old homes."

■ ■

Pauline Stevens Kegler was born in the house her father built at 215 Patton Ave. N.W. She doesn't like to publicize her age; suffice it to say she has lived in that house almost every day of this century. The city came in and remodeled it for her a few years ago.

From her front porch, she has seen some good years in Gainsboro. "Everyone would get along all right together." Neighbors visited each other. Sunday mornings, they'd all go off to Sunday school.

"I knew all the people." She doesn't now.

Neighbors have moved away or died. The house next door hasn't been lived in for a dozen years.

"There's been 14 homes torn down on this block," she says.

She looked down the street at the rows of old houses set apart by empty lots and she says with certainty, "After I'm gone, this will all be pushed down."

■ ■

Lullaby Edwards Curtis, 80, has lived in the 200 block of Wells Avenue for 40 years. When she moved there, 85 houses stood on the Gainsboro stretch of Wells. Now, only 11 remain, and at least four are vacant.

The Coca-Cola expansion 10 years ago took the western end of Wells. Stuck now at the end of a dead-end street, Curtis looks out her back windows at the Coke plant, its trucks and its giant stacks of plastic cartons.

"Every night, [there's] bumpin' and knockin'. Sometimes it makes so much noise it shakes the house."

On her street now, she said, "Nobody comes here hardly ever."

CINDY PINKSTON/Staff

Gainsboro's urban renewal consisted of many small projects — a block here, two blocks there, and stretching over 27 years. Today, the neighborhood is a mixture of 79 new suburban-style houses in the center of the area and 190 older homes on the outskirts, like the ones (left), north of the Coca-Cola bottling plant. Pauline Kegler's house (above) sits isolated now on Patton Avenue Northwest. Fourteen homes have been torn down on her block.