

Destruction in the Name of Progress: Durham's Urban Removal

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ABSTRACT

Durham's historic "Hayti" neighborhood was once referred to as a beacon of Black success in the South. The once thriving community filled with unique opportunities for black entrepreneurship today only exists in memory. Much like other cities at the time, this destruction —placement of a freeway running over the region— was due to the Urban Renewal campaign, but to what extent did the advertisement and planning of Durham's urban renewal set itself up for community-wide acceptance while also ensuring the preservation of the existing racial power dynamic? This paper explores the various elements that went into the appeal of urban renewal on differing racial demographics as well as the lack of forethought in the urban renewal plan proposed. Evidence and analysis from a variety of primary and secondary sources point to these methods as causes for the eventual physical and spiritual loss of the Hayti community. Findings about this initiative for urban change and how it ultimately afflicted a marginalized community contribute to the ever-evolving understanding of what goals should be prioritized when trying to foster growth in urban spaces.

Introduction

Following WWII, Durham found itself in an economic slump. In desperate need of escaping its apparent decline, the need to adapt to the growing usage of automobiles emerged: the plan for urban renewal was hatched. Durham wasn't the only area that had undergone a plan of urban renewal, nor was its black community particularly special in the displacement epidemic it created. Hayti, however, stood out as the "Mecca of Black Capitalism."¹ Yet, how exactly did the once "bustling neighborhood" with once a "national reputation"² for its black success become razed of its community? By garnering black support through its advertisement as a path towards economic progress, destroying the physical and conceptual Hayti, and lacking clear forethought while planning, Durham's urban renewal severed community connections of the black community, ensuring the preservation of existing racial power dynamics.

Advertising to Black Communities

The way in which urban renewal was advertised to the black community took advantage of black political power and had a lack of black input in its planning, deliberately setting up urban renewal to gain the power to fully execute. Black support played a crucial role in this large-scale project as the funding needed their support. In an interview with Robinson O. Everett, one of the members of the Durham Redevelopment Commission, he asserts how "the black community was politically very powerful" and urban renewal "otherwise couldn't have passed" without their support.³ To appeal to the community, urban renewal was presented with extensive promises for infrastructure and improvement without the mention of racial integration.⁴ Paired with the fact that two of the five-member Redevelopment Commission were black leaders at the time, many in the community ended up lowering their suspicions. As the procedure for urban renewal played out, however, the clear lack of knowledge regarding the details of the plan quickly came to light, with many Hayti residents soon claiming that urban renewal was "forced onto them."⁵ Without adequate knowledge about the specific details of recompensation, the unsatisfactory result of urban renewal ended up being a

jarring contrast to what former supporters had originally anticipated. Ultimately, however, it was the harnessing of black political power that enabled urban renewal to come to action.

Physical and Spiritual Loss

Hayti was depicted as having been an area riddled with junk, lined with deteriorating houses, carrying crime, and impairing the overall growth of Durham. It needed to be destroyed for the sake of improvement.⁶ Yet, at the same time, “there [were] many places in [Hayti] that have historical values and are sentimental in the hearts of many of the inhabitants.”⁷ The attachment from the black community to Hayti was clear. This was also seen with the white population—historic preservation had become more rampant with the restoration of Robert E. Lee’s birthplace and Abraham Lincoln’s home, for example.⁸ This was no foreign concept to either party. The demolition of Hayti wasn’t just in a physical sense, but also a spiritual one. With a community so closely tied to its infrastructure, when Hayti was destroyed, so was the sense of black solidarity. This weakening further kept the power of redevelopment in the hands of white leaders, and the racial dynamic of white supremacy remained unchanged.

Furthermore, there was a lack of overall foresight for the plan, which resulted in a severe economic strain that fell onto the shoulders of those displaced. Despite Robinson displaying optimism about the plans, where he says the Commission tried to protect the interests of the citizens and was receiving good news, there may have been underlying bias when planning as the carelessness with which the plans were constructed was evident.⁹ Southern whites knew to appreciate “shared place and collective memory”¹⁰ from their erected monuments, yet failed to exercise the care Hayti needed to preserve its own. Despite promising availability of “existing sale or rental housing” or “new houses,”¹¹ the “destruction of residential structures in Hayti began before Durham public housing had space for any of the dislocated families.”¹² The execution of the plan was catastrophic, and it forced those displaced into black neighborhoods with poorer conditions than white ones, already with a concern of overpopulation.¹³ Former Hayti residents found themselves being crammed into areas with no housing, no businesses, and impoverished conditions. The Hayti community and the soul of Black Durham were left in a devastating condition, especially in comparison to before. The very core of the plan didn’t have the considerations needed to create the economic jumpstart that was advertised to the black community.

Social Justice for Successful Change

Despite the “unmistakable scars of racial segregation and discrimination,”¹⁴ Hayti shined as a beacon for black success. The existing racial dynamic of white power was only proved and exacerbated by urban renewal. With a primary tunnel-vision-like focus on monetary gain, there was no discussion of a more equitable alternative when creating a plan. Hayti was a “plague.” Durham needed to cure it. A mixture of hastily created planning, usage of black political influence to put this plan into action, and ultimately, the lack of actionable steps about the fate of those to be relocated resulted during urban “removal” demolished the community. What had once been “front porches in black neighborhoods” that cultivated a “shared history”¹⁵ had been plowed over and turned into a freeway. The effects of urban renewal on what once was such a vibrant community really put into perspective what our intentions and priorities should be moving forward, especially with so many inequality issues still pressing at us today. Will we choose the same path for economic gain, following in the wake of America’s urban removal movement, or will we, perhaps, continue our so-called growth without our discussion being “revolved around social justice?”¹⁶

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Endnotes

- ¹ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "Black Memorials and the Bulldozer Revolution" in *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 227-255.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Robinson O. Everett, interview by Brandon Winford, February 29, 2008, Interview no. U-0285, *Southern Oral History Program Collection* #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- ⁴ Brundage, "Black Memorials and the Bulldozer Revolution," 241.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Charles Barbour, "Urban Renewal, Foe of Blight, Deterioration," *Durham Morning Herald*, September 2, 1962, in *Durham Urban Renewal Clippings*, vol. 1, Durham County Library.
- ⁷ Foster, Harold. "Relic of Bygone Era Reduced to Rubble by Urban Renewal." *Carolina Times* (Durham, NC), August 3, 1963.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Robinson O. Everett interview by Brandon Winford, Interview no. U-0285, *Southern Oral History Program Collection* #4007.
- ¹⁰ Brundage, "Black Memorials and the Bulldozer Revolution," 230.
- ¹¹ *Concerning Durham's Urban Renewal Program* (Durham, NC: Durham Redevelopment Commission, [1960]), in *Durham Urban Renewal Records*, Brochures and Booklets, Durham County Library.
- ¹² Brundage, "Black Memorials and the Bulldozer Revolution," 247.
- ¹³ Ibid, 246
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 235.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 229.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 265.

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- Barbour, Charles. "Urban Renewal, Foe of Blight, Deterioration," *Durham Morning Herald*, September 2, 1962. *Durham Urban Renewal Clippings*, Volume 1. Durham County Library.
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- Robinson O. Everett interviewed by Brandon Winford, February 29, 2008, Interview no. U-0285, in the *Southern Oral History Program Collection* #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.