Urban Renewal in the Colonial Capital: Contextualizing the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority

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College of William and Mary

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Urban Renewal in the Colonial Capital: Contextualizing the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in American Studies from The College of William and Mary

by

Zach Meredith

Accepted for ________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Arthur Knight, Director

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Jody L. Allen

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Jamel K. Donnor

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Charles McGovern

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Sibel Zandi-Sayek

Williamsburg, VA
April 29, 2019
This honors thesis emerges from a class that I took my sophomore year at William & Mary called the Williamsburg Documentary Project. In each iteration of the course, students are tasked with the assignment of researching a different aspect of Williamsburg’s history. When I took the class in the spring of 2017, the subject of my cohort’s study was the history of the Triangle Block. The Triangle Block was Williamsburg’s twentieth-century hub of Black-owned businesses that was displaced by the City and Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority through an urban renewal project in the 1970s and 1980s. My classmates included Ben Bowery, Erin Hegarty, Samantha Nichols González, Susannah Philbrick, Kayla Sharpe, and Sarah Thoresen. With the help of our instructors, Professor Arthur Knight and Graduate Assistant Barry Matthews, each student explored a different aspect of the block’s history, ranging from its original development to the present. My classmate Erin Hegarty and I focused on the redevelopment period of the block’s history. Specifically, I investigated the history of how the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority was activated as an autonomous governmental entity. As a class, we compiled our findings into a timeline to share the information with the public:


Through our class’ research project, I learned many of the methods that I would later employ during this thesis, namely oral history interviews and archival research. I am indebted to our class discussions which helped create a critical framework for engaging with the history of the Triangle Block and set out many of the research questions that I would later attempt to answer. Additionally, much of the archival material that my classmates identified and collected proved to be a critical source material that I used to construct my thesis’ narrative and argument.
Three students, Ben, Erin, and Samantha from the Williamsburg Documentary Project class continued researching the Triangle Block’s history through an independent study with Professor Knight during the 2017-2018 school year. Together they built off the work of our original classmates in order to uncover and assemble more important archival material that I also drew upon in my independent research. Further, they expanded the scope of our original research question to move beyond the Triangle Block and to more comprehensively consider how the redevelopment of the block related to the redevelopment of the surrounding neighborhood. As a synthesis of their research, they created a multimedia “story map”:
https://cga-wm.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=723122cd4a364732b8e0e1cd1

Indeed, this thesis would not have been possible without the prior research that my classmates conducted. Beyond the collection of archival material, my classmates constantly served as a source of inspiration and support throughout the process. As I began my research through a William & Mary Honors Fellowship, Samantha and Erin in particular acted as consultants whenever I encountered new or exciting information (not to mention the twenty-four days they let me sleep on their couch when my house was uninhabitable!). Further, using some of the fellowship money, I was able to pay Samantha to transcribe (and provide thoughtful commentary on) many of the oral history interviews that I facilitated.

I am also incredibly grateful for the guidance of Professor Knight who went above and beyond his expected duties as a thesis advisor. Not only did Professor Knight (miraculously) keep me ahead of schedule in terms of thesis deadlines, he provided considerate and encouraging feedback that undoubtedly shaped my thesis for the better. Further, he served as a constant source of support throughout the process while also pushing me to lean into the steep learning curve of both producing and sharing scholarship.
Likewise, I am forever thankful for Professor Sibel Zandi-Sayek who first sparked my interest in engaging critically with the built environment. In our meetings throughout the thesis process, she urged me to dig deeper into and, at the same time, think expansively about my research material. I am also appreciative for the advice, reading recommendations, and support of other educators who helped make this thesis possible: Professor Jody L. Allen, Professor Jamel K. Donnor, Professor Leisa Meyer, and Professor Charles McGovern.

Additionally, I would like to thank all of the help I received while accessing archival material. With the amount of time I spent there, the staff of the Swem Library Special Collections Research Center made the archives feel like a second home. I am grateful in particular for Anne Johnson and Carolyn Wilson who entertained my moments of excitement and random questions whenever I encountered something interesting or unexpected. Marianne Martin of the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library went out of her way to make sure all my requests and interests were attended to. The staff of the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority—namely JaLauna Burton and Tyrone Franklin—genuinely made me feel welcome in their already-busy offices and encouraged me to keep working throughout the research process. (Special thanks to JaLauna for sharing some of her Caramel Apple Milky Way candy stash with me!)

Moreover, I owe much to the community members who took significant amounts of time out of their days to meet with me, discuss my project, and share their perspectives on Williamsburg’s history: Barbara Richardson Blayton, Liz & Al Johnson, Sharon Scruggs, Robert A. Braxton, James Gurganus, Lloyd Wallace, Fred Liggin, Cam Walker, Edith Heard, Joan Andrews, and Robert Taylor.
I would also like to thank my roommate Samir Tawalare for putting up with me throughout the research and writing process. Whether it be through talking an idea through, proofreading a paragraph, or getting food together in order to take a break, he served as a critical source of support throughout the past year.

My family also has been key to my completion of this thesis. My mom and dad have provided unconditional support and encouragement throughout my education and this most recent project is no different. Additionally, my sister and brother have served as role models in their own academic pursuits and career achievements, who in turn have pushed me to be the best that I can be in my own activities and goals.

I am also grateful for the donors who made this thesis possible through their generous support: Carlton Thornbury, Alvin Trenk, Nancy Sivilli, Terry Meyers, The Lauer Family, Bonnie T. Guari, Lorraine Price, Alison and Michael Trenk, Ellen Jacobs Eisentstadt, Andrew Jacobs, Sarah Garratt, Natalie J. Goldring, and other anonymous donors.

Rex M. Ellis begins his chapter within the collection of essays on Williamsburg’s history prepared for the city’s tercentennial by writing “Much of the history of Williamsburg has been written by newcomers or whites.”\(^1\) I recognize that as a white middle-class William & Mary student from Durham, North Carolina, I am acting within this pattern of historical production. As much as possible throughout the research and writing process, I have attempted to check my assumptions and attend to my blind spots as an outsider. With this in mind, I am indebted to the people of Williamsburg for the opportunity to engage with their history—their lived experiences—and can only hope that this present thesis does it justice.

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Introduction

It is futile to plan a city’s appearance, or speculate on how to endow it with a pleasing appearance of order, without knowing what sort of innate, functioning order it has.

December of 2019 marks fifty years since the public referendum that activated the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority (WRHA). In the five decades since, the Authority has utilized public funding to develop two new neighborhoods, rehabilitate three others, and construct four public housing sites. The two neighborhoods, in addition to token projects located throughout the city, resulted in 75 new (originally) owner-occupied single-family housing units, while the four public housing sites consist of 104 housing units rented out and managed by the Authority. The combined amount of 179 units developed by the WRHA carve out only a fraction (3.46%) of the total 5,176 housing units within Williamsburg city limits as of 2018. In addition to its housing efforts, the WRHA developed and continues to own a commercial building in Williamsburg’s downtown area. While the Authority’s impact upon Williamsburg’s housing stock is minimal in comparison to that of the private market, the housing units developed by the WRHA are significant as they were intended as housing affordable to low-to-moderate income residents—a goal almost never shared by private developers driven by a bottom line. Additionally, the WRHA’s development efforts hold historical importance as the first concerted attempts by local government to provide affordable housing for Williamsburg area residents.

The properties developed by the WRHA, however, did not manifest within a blank slate of “undeveloped” land but most often in re-developed areas that were already occupied—

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occupied nearly always by Black people. The two neighborhoods developed by the Authority—Crispus Attucks Place and Strawberry Plains—were acquired from Black property owners living in neighborhoods deemed “substandard” or “blighted” by city leaders. Authority members used similar terms to characterize the Triangle Block, the Black-owned business area where the Authority’s commercial building now sits. While the conditions that the Authority sought to remediate were often material consequences of Williamsburg’s white-over-Black socioeconomic hierarchy, the discourse from which redevelopment proposals emerged was bracketed by race- and class-based biases. The same racialized and classed discourse informed the development and design of Williamsburg’s public housing communities (with the exception of one), placed in “out-of-sight” locations within the city—meaning, out-of-sight from public spaces and middle-class and wealthy white neighborhoods. Such a discourse and its accompanying socioeconomic system did not simply appear with the establishment of the Authority in 1969, but have genealogies stretching back to the origins of America as a nation birthed from chattel slavery upon Indigenous land.

Indeed, the history of the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority cannot be understood beginning with its activation in 1969 but must be contextualized within the broader history of how race shaped the development of the Williamsburg area’s landscape and the society that functioned and functions atop it. The title of my thesis *Urban Renewal in the Colonial Capital: Contextualizing the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority* attempts to capture this mode of historical analysis. While “urban renewal” is a term mostly associated with the twentieth-century, “colonial capital” evokes Williamsburg’s history as the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century capital of the Virginia colony. Further, “colonial capital”—a moniker currently incorporated into the official municipal seal—bridges the past and the present
together, signifying how the remembrance and performance of Williamsburg’s colonial history became central to its economic, social, and political functions after the creation and expansion of Colonial Williamsburg during the twentieth-century.

The contextualization of the Authority within a broader historical narrative reveals how its various projects were informed by and responded to a system of white supremacy. As historian N. D. B. Connolly argues:

As a system—or set of historical relationships—white supremacy was and is far more than the overtly and occasionally racist act. It includes laws and the setting of commercial and institutional priorities. White supremacy also includes the everyday deals that political operations and common people strike in observance of white privilege or, more accurately, white power.

The WRHA’s work, most particularly the “Armistead Avenue Area Urban Renewal Plan,” found its antecedents not only in the displacement of and discriminatory land acquisition from Black communities in the Williamsburg area by federal military installations and the “Restoration” of Colonial Williamsburg, but in what Connolly calls “The unexceptional and mundane qualities of racial governance and the built environment” such as zoning ordinances and denial of basic municipal infrastructure.4

The WRHA’s implementation of the Armistead Avenue plan was not simply a local phenomenon. It was Williamsburg’s participation in the national project of urban renewal—albeit later than the large cities we usually think of when we hear the term—whereby approximately one-million people, two-thirds of them Black, were displaced in the effort to eliminate “blight,” a pursuit which destroyed an estimated 1,600 Black neighborhoods nationwide.5 In her discussion of urban renewal, clinical psychiatrist Mindy Thompson Fullilove

argues that the violence of displacement should not be measured only materially, in terms of land acreage and compensation, but must also account for the interconnected social, psychological and health implications of being forcefully displaced from one’s home and surrounding community. She calls the effects an individual and their community experience as a result of displacement “root shock,” articulating that:

Root shock undermines trust, increases anxiety about letting loved ones out of one’s sight, destabilizes relationships, destroys social, emotional, and financial resources, and increases the risk for every kind of stress-related disease, from depression to heart attack. Root shock leaves people chronically cranky, barking a distinctive croaky complaint that their world was abruptly taken away. Root shock…ruptures bonds, dispersing people to all the directions of the compass. Even if they manage to regroup, they are not sure what to do with one another. People who were near are too far, and people were far are too near. The elegance of the neighborhood—each person in his social and geographic slot—is destroyed.⁶

Though Fullilove Thompson develops the concept of “root shock” in her discussion of urban renewal, it certainly can be applied to other displacements experienced by Black people throughout the Williamsburg area’s history.

From 1900 into the present, Black citizens’ share of the population within the Williamsburg city limits has decreased from 33.2 percent to 15.9 percent, a “startling” trend that Williamsburg’s first Black doctor Dr. James B. Blayton called attention to in 1976 during the Armistead Avenue Area Urban Renewal Plan.⁷ The decrease in the Black community’s presence in Williamsburg as the city grew both in land area and total population was not natural nor inevitable but the product of both private and public actions facilitated in part by local planning policies.

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I aim to contextualize the local planning discourses and policies from which the Authority’s actions emerged, with particular attention to how the influence of Colonial Williamsburg and the College of William & Mary inflected municipal actions and projects. The historic importance assigned to the two powerful institutions by an interwoven local and national conception of heritage forcefully shaped discussions of the city’s appearance that then in turn impacted plans related to housing. With its unique concerns about the city’s historic “character,” Williamsburg applied a colonial revival façade treatment to nationwide racialized and classed housing discourses and policies that privileged the development of the owner-occupied, single-family detached housing unit above all other forms of housing.

Informed by these same housing discourses, the meandering trajectory of the federal public housing program likewise guided the history of the WRHA. In many ways, both the development and maintenance of the WRHA’s four housing sites illuminate the ways in which the story of public housing in the United States emerged, as urbanist Joseph Heathcott argues, “from deep moral ambivalence and constant political struggle over the terms of American governance,” and “the idea of the government as the broker of the public good.” The contested nature of the American public housing program translated into various waves of policy that then rippled into the operations of the WRHA.

Finally, as my citation of Dr. Blayton above hints, another historical force that I seek to contextualize is citizen activism. Particularly during the Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Plan, the advocacy of Black citizens—a multivocal rather than monolithic group—shaped the project’s outcome just as much as it was imposed by the WRHA. I hope that, rather than providing a top-down account of how events happened, this perspective creates a history that acknowledges how

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citizen activism contested and shaped the process through which WRHA plans and other municipal actions were implemented. In concert with my other analytical threads, I aim to attend to the local specificities of stories that are unfortunately all too common in communities across the United States.

The first chapter of my thesis, “Past is Prologue,” traces the history of how race informed the development of Williamsburg beginning with the eighteenth century into the rise of professional city planning during the twentieth-century—largely serving the interests of Colonial Williamsburg and William & Mary—that then spawned the discussion and, later, activation of the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority.

The second chapter, “The Authority in Action,” details the history of Williamsburg’s northwest area, the eventual site of the Authority’s first project, the Armistead Avenue Area Urban Renewal Plan. In addition to exploring how activists shaped the eventual development of the Triangle Building and Crispus Attucks Place, I chronicle the development of the WRHA’s four public housing sites that occurred around the same time as the urban renewal plan.

The third chapter, “A Second Wind,” accounts for the WRHA’s period of dormancy and neglect of its properties following the cessation of development projects at the end of the early 1980s as the ideas of both “urban renewal” and public housing had largely fallen out of national public favor. Afterwards, I explore the similarities and contrasts between the WRHA’s activities during the late 1990s and 2000s and its early history.

Finally, the conclusion draws the narrative of the WRHA’s fifty-year history into the present with a discussion and critique of the City’s ongoing Downtown Vibrancy Plan which involves redesigning areas impacted by the WRHA.
I have constructed my account of the WRHA’s history through both primary and secondary source analysis. Using scholarship on local and national trends as a framework for understanding the specific history of the WRHA, I then pieced together a narrative using government documents, newspaper articles, privately-collected papers, and photographs located in various archival collections. Additionally, oral histories that I either facilitated myself or accessed in archives provided an invaluable array of perspectives and remembrances that supplemented my other archival sources.

My intention with my narrative of the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority’s story is not to discount the ways in which its actions benefitted people—most importantly, by providing affordable housing. Rather it is to discuss an underexamined part of Williamsburg’s history that, I believe, holds great relevance to contemporary and future discussions, policies, and actions related to housing and economic development, particularly as they relate to race and class. In a city that relies economically upon the celebration of its eighteenth-century history, when the twentieth-century or (even rarer) the twenty-first-century history of Williamsburg is discussed, it is often presented as exceptional to national patterns. For example, Williamsburg emphasizes its history of racial integration as relatively smooth and uneventful—lubricated by the imperatives of its tourism-based economy—while eliding the ways that those with power in Williamsburg nonetheless participated in and benefitted from white supremacy. Further, my goal is not to isolate individual actors for criticism or praise—“there is little to be gained by exalting or tearing down imperfect [people],” as Connolly proposes—but to try to identify patterns, processes, and systems embedded within our present built environment and society that, without active refusal, we inherit and perpetuate.9

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Chapter One
Past is Prologue

There is considerable property on Duke of Gloucester Street owned by negroes which needs to be acquired if the idea is to clean up the street.

—An associate of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.  

We must not be unmindful of a series of displacements that have occurred in the past causing some resentment among the uprooted.

—Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME), Inc. in a report to the Williamsburg City Council recommending the creation of the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority

For much of its history, Williamsburg was a majority-Black city. During the era of the American Revolution that Colonial Williamsburg purports to recreate, Black people made up 55 percent of the city’s population. The wider Chesapeake region shared a similar proportion of Black people totaling 50 to 60 percent of its population. As the “peculiar institution” of slavery served as the foundation of the region’s economy, most Black people lived and labored as slaves. On rural plantations, cultivation of tobacco comprised the bulk of slave labor whereas in more urban settings like Williamsburg, slaves performed domestic tasks such as cooking, serving, and

10 Correspondence to Charles Heydt, Rockefeller’s realty advisor, from AA, August 20, 1927, Rockefeller Family Archives, Record Group 2 (OMR), Cultural Interests, Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg-General, Box 143, Folder 1251, cited in Andrea Kim Foster, “‘They’re turning the town all upside down’: the community identity of Williamsburg, Virginia before and after the Reconstruction,” (Dissertation, George Washington University, 1993), 227.
11 HOME Inc., “A Report from Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc. to the Williamsburg City Council, May 8, 1969,” Stella Neiman Papers, Series I, Box 1, Folder 8, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA.
12 While Williamsburg is officially chartered as a city, I use the term’s “town” and “city” interchangeably as is the common practice of Williamsburg residents.
gardening. Additionally, enslaved men sometimes worked as tradesmen, coachmen, or were hired out by their owners.

The racial demographics of Williamsburg and the surrounding area played a critical role in the American Revolution’s course of events. After fleeing the Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg due to hostility he faced from his colonial subjects, Lord Dunmore strategized to leverage the presence of the area’s large slave population in order to stop the rising tide of revolutionary activity. In November of 1775, the governor-in-exile issued what is now known as “Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation,” promising freedom to any Black people who were enslaved by patriots or patriot sympathizers and fought to defend the colonial government.15

By the time the Civil War broke out, the Black community of Williamsburg continued to form the majority of the town’s population, outnumbering whites 864 to 742 in the 1860 Census. About 121 members of Williamsburg’s Black population, or fourteen percent, were free. After the war ended, some freedmen left while others stayed and helped rebuild the town which had been damaged while serving as a site of battle. Some Black people continued working for their former masters while others found new employment and even started their own businesses. Black community members owned businesses such as a blacksmith, barbershop, theater, tavern, and restaurant.16 One notable example is Samuel Harris’ “Cheap Store” which was so successful, some speculate Harris may have been the richest man in Williamsburg. Court documents reveal that Benjamin S. Ewell, the sixteenth president of the College of William & Mary and former Confederate military officer once borrowed money from Harris.17

After the Civil War, Black people in neighboring York County and James City County mostly worked on farms, though a small portion also took part in York County’s oystering trade. The majority of Black people rented the land that they lived on—either through cash tenancy or, less frequently, the oft-exploitative system of sharecropping. Nonetheless, a large portion of Black people in the area did own land.\textsuperscript{18} During this period, several majority-Black communities emerged, such as Magruder and “the Reservation” in York County and Grove in James City County.\textsuperscript{19}

While dwellings were more spread apart from one another in the agricultural landscape of the counties, residents of Williamsburg—Black and white—lived in close proximity to one another, often on the same streets. The town did not stretch beyond Duke of Gloucester Street and its adjacent branches of streets; however, the racially-mixed arrangement of neighbors mirrored the “salt and pepper” pattern found in larger Southern cities.\textsuperscript{20} Residential patterns began to shift towards racial segregation at the turn of the century due to the reemerging power of white supremacy following the end of the Reconstruction period, though not yet to the scale wrought upon the town only a few decades later by the “Restoration”—the term used to describe the creation of Colonial Williamsburg. Additionally, the 1900 Census recorded that Black people


\textsuperscript{19} For information about the settlement of Magruder, see Will Carmines, “From Magruder to Highland Park: The History of An African American Community,” (undergraduate independent research paper, College of William & Mary, 2010), 11. For information about the settlement of “the Reservation,” see Braddon, McDonald, and Stuck, \textit{Cast Down Your Bucket Where You Are}, 19.

no longer formed a majority but one-third of the town’s population, comprising 678 members of its total 2,044.\textsuperscript{21}

The shift towards local racial segregation at the beginning of the twentieth-century paralleled legislation at the state level which wrote Jim Crow ideology into law and consolidated white control of government. Six years after the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of “separate but equal” doctrine in \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson} (1896), the Commonwealth of Virginia ratified a new constitution (1902) which disenfranchised Black citizens. As a result, the number of Black men registered to vote in Williamsburg fell from 192 to 36.\textsuperscript{22} In 1912, state law mandated racial segregation and prohibited people from living in residential areas inconsistent with their race unless they were employed as servants.

By 1928, right before the Restoration would completely reshape the social and spatial organization of the town, only eleven Black families lived along Duke of Gloucester alongside their 86 white neighbors. Still forming about a third of the population, most Black residents lived on streets and blocks found off the main drag.\textsuperscript{23} Likewise, all four of the town’s white churches were located on Duke of Gloucester while the four Black churches were located in more peripheral locations.\textsuperscript{24} Doris Epps captured the complexity of how race informed the everyday lives of people before the Restoration, recalling:

\begin{quotation}
 everybody was segregated, but everybody got along. You were next door neighbors, black and white lived next door. The only thing, we didn’t go to the same schools, and we didn’t go to the same churches, we could go in the drugstore and get ice cream, you couldn’t sit down and eat it.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{22} Rowe, “The African-American Community in Williamsburg (1865-1947),” 126-127.
\textsuperscript{23} Andrea Kim Foster, “‘They’re turning the town all upside down’: the community identity of Williamsburg, Virginia before and after the Reconstruction,” (dissertation, George Washington University, 1993), 20-21.
\textsuperscript{24} Morrill, “The Development of Merchants Square,” 18.
\textsuperscript{25} Doris Epps, oral history interview, August 4, 1986, James City County Oral History Collection, Box 4, Folder 86-001, Swem Library Special Collections Research Center (From this point on referred to as “Swem SCRC”). This
The racist policy prescriptions at the state level matched local interventions enacted by the federal government during World War I and World War II. On August 7, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson issued Executive Order #1472 to exercise eminent domain for the seizure of 11,433 acres of land that “the Reservation” sat upon for the construction of a Navy Mine Depot (now referred to as the Naval Weapons Station). The federal government ordered people living on the land to vacate within thirty days, with the promise that just compensation would be worked out later. The creation of Naval Weapons Station displaced an estimated 600 Black families, many of whom owned land in the area. From the perspective of the people moved out, compensation was not “just” and, in some cases, those who were unable to prove their title to the land did not receive anything. As the federal government provided no relocation assistance, families spread out to other communities such as the nearby Lackey of York County, Grove in James City County, or Lee Hall in Warwick County.26

At the beginning of World War II, Magruder, another majority-Black farming community, became displaced by federal action. In 1942, the federal government began efforts to acquire land in York County and James City County for the construction of the U.S. Naval Construction Training Center (now called Camp Peary), including the area where Magruder existed. Much like the case of the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station, the process of compensation was disorganized, confusing, and upsetting for Magruder residents. Twenty displaced families were temporarily housed in the abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) barracks on the campus of William & Mary (the current site of Zable Stadium). The barracks remained from when the CCC dug out the Sunken Gardens on the College’s campus.

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Some families relocated to Grove while a significant amount helped settle Highland Park, a new neighborhood developed by Colonial Williamsburg located just north of Williamsburg city limits.27 Fort Eustis, a U.S. Army installation developed in Newport News in 1918, and Cheatham Annex, a naval base constructed during World War II, also displaced a considerable number of Black people in the area.28

The pattern of the federal government targeting land mostly inhabited by Black people for the construction of military facilities demonstrates the lack of power possessed by the area’s Black communities in the face of state or institutional action. Not only did the Black population lack the resources to fight back, but their status as second-class citizens within a system of white supremacy afforded them, their properties, and their livelihoods little to no consideration from powerful white actors. As lifelong Williamsburg resident Doris Crump Rainey recalled:

If whites wanted anything the blacks could not fight back. The town of Magruder was predominantly black. Where Fort Eustis is now, was predominantly black; where the Naval Weapons Station is, was predominantly black…Blacks could not fight back, they didn’t have the resources back then. The lawyers were white, the judges were white. How

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27 Carmines, “From Magruder to Highland Park,” 43. In an oral history, Rev. James B Tabb recalled that “This was, of course, during the war, of course, after Pearl Harbor and they wanted . . . the call it Camp Peary Experimental Station [indiscernible]. But the people had to move out in ’42 and then they came up where we were and moved people in ’43 but they never built anything on…they even took the other side, I think as late as the City of Williamsburg. People on the other side of what is now 64 but at that time 168…[W]e had a lot of property that, uh, that, you know, was taken. Of course, which means to settle to a settle to a smaller area. We came to Grove. My father bought a house from a man called Braxton. Some came to Grove, some came to Ironbound Road and a lot of them went to the CC camp before Highland Park and later they began to build in Highland Park and those that were in the CC camp mostly, then located in Highland Park.” On whether property owners were adequately compensated Rev. Tabb said “Not, no, no they didn’t. Some that held out got a better price but a lot of them didn’t. Because the people relly [sic] did not know the value of the property. It wasn’t as it would be today, have someone to appraise it. Didn’t have, I don’t think there was, I’m not sure about assessment by county for taxes so forth, that type of thing that you made by assessments and so forth so people didn’t know but they knew that they had to move and they took what they were offered because they thought it was a fair price…But many of them did not get, I don’t think, an adequate money for to…go purchase property after building that. We were fortunate, my father was fortunate to get a house that was already built and it had plumbing inside. Plumbing and so forth which we didn't have before.” Rev. Rev. James B. Tabb, oral history interview, 1984, James City County Oral History Collection, Box 2, Folder 84-087, Swem SCRC.

much money did a lawyer stand to make defending the black community over the U.S. Government, or Colonial Williamsburg, or the state of Virginia.\textsuperscript{29}

Such was the uneven landscape of power upon which the Restoration took place. At the local level, the most influential force shaping the development of Williamsburg during the same time period (and, arguably, throughout the rest of the twentieth-century and into the present) was not the local government, but the private entity later to be known as Colonial Williamsburg.

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While many shared the dream of restoring their small town back to its glory as the former colonial capital during the eighteenth-century—organizations such as the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) and Colonial Dames of America had preserved specific buildings in a piecemeal fashion—it was the figure of W.A.R. Goodwin who most leveraged his position in society to see the vision fulfilled at a city-wide scale.\textsuperscript{30}

Goodwin came to Williamsburg in 1902 to serve as the rector of Bruton Parish Church, which, frequented by the likes of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson (and the people they enslaved), was one of the town’s oldest structures. He helped facilitate the financing of the church’s 1905 restoration, reflecting on the need to “guard these ancient landmarks and resist the spirit of ruthless innovation which threatens to rob the city of its unique distinction and charms.”\textsuperscript{31} Soon after, Goodwin took another position at a church in Rochester, New York, only to come back in 1923. In addition to returning to his old job as rector, Goodwin was recruited by William & Mary President Julian A.C. Chandler to direct the school’s fundraising efforts to increase its small endowment. During the Civil War, in addition to being damaged when Union


\textsuperscript{30} Knight, “Paternalism and Segregation of Williamsburg,” 15-16.

\textsuperscript{31} W.A.R. Goodwin, \textit{Bruton Parish Church Restored and Its Historic Environment}, (Petersburg, VA The Franklin Press Co., 1907), 33, cited in Morrill, “The Development of Merchants Square,” 32.
soldiers set fire to the Wren Building (then referred to as the College Building), the private liberal arts college invested in Confederate War bonds that became worthless after the Confederacy lost the war. The school closed from 1881 to 1888, reopening with the assistance of public funds, and eventually became a state institution in 1906. With help from Goodwin’s fundraising, President Chandler oversaw the expansion of the College in terms of its enrollment, campus buildings, curricular offerings, and landholdings.\textsuperscript{32}

In Goodwin’s eyes, the town had slid even further away from its historic charm into “shabbiness” since he had last lived in Williamsburg. During the First World War, the nearby dynamite industry boomtown of Penniman spurred a wave of commercial speculation in Williamsburg that increased the number of “modern” structures in town. Additionally, the growing presence of the automobile and its impact on the landscape was a target of Goodwin’s scorn.\textsuperscript{33} Motivated by the changes in town since his first departure, Goodwin began to solicit philanthropists who would be interested in supporting a project to preserve Williamsburg’s colonial heritage.

Goodwin found a sympathetic ear to his idea in John D. Rockefeller, Jr., heir to the Standard Oil Company fortune. After courting the multimillionaire’s philanthropic interests for two years, Goodwin received authorization from Rockefeller to begin drafting a plan for the restoration of Williamsburg in 1926. Before, Goodwin had wavered between the idea of restoring the town completely or only a select number of buildings, but Rockefeller promised his participation only if the project would encompass the entire town. Anything less would not be


worthy of his involvement. Such a project would be unparalleled, as preservationists in Boston and Philadelphia could never imagine restoring the entirety of their booming metropoles’ historic areas. Williamsburg’s smaller size made a complete restoration feasible. All non-colonial buildings located in town were to be removed in order to make way for colonial-era recreations. The next year, the pair slowly began acquiring properties, with Goodwin acting as Rockefeller’s proxy. The project required that Rockefeller’s involvement be obscured from public knowledge in order to avoid property values skyrocketing, as had occurred when rumors about Penniman’s development spread. Accordingly, Goodwin operated under the excuse that the property acquisitions were related to William & Mary’s endowment.34

On Tuesday, June 12, 1928, over 150 Williamsburg residents—all of them white and most of them men—gathered at Matthew Whaley School in order to approve the town’s full cooperation with Goodwin’s plans for the Restoration. Since Matthew Whaley was a segregated white school, Black people were unable to attend or vote in the meeting. To make his case, Goodwin described the aspirations of his project:

> to make this city a national shrine. Benefits will come in spiritual, as well as material, ways. Every businessman will be benefitted. It should come as a source of pride to you to feel that you will have here the most beautiful shrine dedicated to the lives of the nation builders. We will be the custodians of memorials to which the eyes of the world will be turned.

To the surprise of the audience, Goodwin revealed Rockefeller as the benefactor behind the project. Though public opinion already favored the town’s cooperation with Goodwin, after the revelation of Rockefeller’s involvement only five members of the assembly voted against the restoration plan. Now kicked into full gear, the acquisition of properties and construction of

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34 Morrill, “The Development of Merchants Square,” 34-36.
colonial architectural recreations would be executed through the Williamsburg Holding Corporation (WHC).\textsuperscript{35}

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The treatment of Williamsburg’s Black residents during the Restoration paralleled the disregard shown for Black property owners and tenants when the federal government seized land to create military installations such as the Naval Weapons Station and Camp Peary. While most people displaced by the Restoration recognized that their living conditions improved upon moving, the process by which the WHC acquired property from residents and provided them relocation assistance varied heavily by race. On average, white property owners were compensated more than their Black counterparts. WHC realtors sometimes found it difficult to purchase property from Black residents and in one particularly egregious case, a Black family which declined to sell had a hole dug around their property that made it difficult to leave and enter their property. The hole was only filled in once the family agreed to sell.\textsuperscript{36}

White residents were resettled into new housing or newly-restored housing by the WHC at rates higher than their Black neighbors. Additionally, whites were more frequently relocated into the center of the town’s reconstructed area or allowed to live in their former properties until death. The six rental houses that the WHC provided for Black families used cheaper materials and offered less square footage than the houses constructed for whites. One Rockefeller associate communicated that the removal of Black-owned property along Duke of Gloucester Street was necessary to “clean up the street,” and Goodwin himself suggested that the exodus of Black people from the city would “take care of the housing issue.” Almost a decade following the restoration, the 1940 Census recorded a twenty-percent decrease in Williamsburg’s Black

\textsuperscript{35} Foster, “‘They’re turning the town all upside down,’” 103-113.
population from 1930. Black residents who did not relocate within the city moved out to Grove.\textsuperscript{37} Located up the road from Grove yet within York County limits, Carver Garden’s also became a destination for many families displaced by the Restoration when it was developed during the 1950s as one the first planned subdivisions for Black people in the area.\textsuperscript{38}

The comments by the Restoration’s executors not only speak to their contempt of Williamsburg’s Black community but also illuminate the racial dimensions of the aesthetic vision that motivated the restoration. Underlying the urge to restore the colonial heritage of the town was a need to legitimize and reinforce the past and increasingly-more-present white-dominated organization of society. The historical value of the buildings which the restoration sought to preserve was in part derived from their association with the powerful white men who dominated early American society as much as it was derived from the interest in the period’s unique design features. The reverence for Williamsburg’s colonial past—a historical construction that obscured the society’s reliance on the labor of enslaved Black people—was both nostalgic and instructive. In 1930, the local \textit{Virginia Gazette} published an editorial which predicted “Williamsburg will be the most attractive place in America for those who love old traditions and are proud of their Anglo-Saxon lineage and of the men and women who made America what it is today.”\textsuperscript{39} As historian Andrea Kim Foster argues, “the proposed shrine to ‘the lives of the nation builders’ would strengthen values in which whites continued to dominate town life, and would thereby perpetuate a belief in their exclusive right to do so. This result would not

\textsuperscript{37} Foster, “‘They’re turning the town all upside down,’” 179-186. Foster provides as the source of Goodwin’s quote: “Report and Recommendations,” Williamsburg Rockefeller Family Archives, Record Group 2 (OMR), Cultural Interests, Colonial Williamsburg, W. A. R. Goodwin, Box 155, Folder 1354, 4 February 1928, 6. Foster’s citation for the Rockefeller associate’s quote is provided in the first footnote of my text.

\textsuperscript{38} Dennis Gardner, oral history interview, August 7, 2007, Williamsburg Documentary Project Collection, Box 1, Folder 95, Swem SCRC.

be surprising in an atmosphere where whites valued African-Americans only for the work they could produce.”

Despite the fact that Black people formed a majority of the town’s population during the time period which figures like Goodwin and Rockefeller sought to recreate, their existence, both historical and contemporary, was erased—seemingly incongruent with the genteel and orderly society that the Restoration was in the process of constructing.

In a “City Plan of Williamsburg” prepared by the WHC for the planned acquisition of properties, the mapmaker used four categories to describe the town’s extant houses: Colonial, Republic, Modern, and Negro. While the first three categories denote historical periods, “Negro” is ahistorical and simply evaluates the value of houses by the fact that Black people lived in them. While sometimes “Negro” was paired with some of the other categories, the mere existence of “Negro” as a category and the corresponding lack of existence of “white” category demonstrates not only how housing was racialized, but how whiteness was viewed as default.

Figure 1. "Map of City of Williamsburg" (July 1929) likely prepared by George S. Campbell, an architect who worked under the direction of W.A.R. Goodwin for the Restoration. The map characterizes houses in Williamsburg according to four categories: Colonial, Republic, Modern, and Negro. (Courtesy of Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

40 Foster, “‘They’re turning the town all upside down,’” 107-108.
41 Knight, “Paternalism and Segregation of Colonial Williamsburg,” 22-23.
Emerging from a new environmental consciousness encouraged by the Restoration as well as an expectation that the restored area would serve as the economic future of the town, the Williamsburg City Council created a Planning Commission in 1930. That same year, the City commissioned a management consultant in order to study how the City might modernize its administrative structure, finances, and municipal services. Among the recommendations that the City enacted, a new charter approved by the Virginia General Assembly in 1932 changed the structure of the City’s governing body for the first time since the colonial era. The City Council now operated using a “council-manager” system whereby voters elected five council members who then worked with a professional city manager whom they appointed. The Planning Commission would serve an advisory role for the City Council in decisions related to future land development.

Real estate entrepreneurs had slowly made moves to develop suburbs by purchasing and platting subdivided land to the west of the historic core that the city annexed in 1915 and 1923—the first growth of the town limits since 1722. The expansion of William & Mary led by President Chandler during the 1920s and early 1930s drew speculators’ attention to the need to accommodate an emerging class of white professionals. Nonetheless, it was the mass relocation caused by the Restoration that truly catalyzed the settlement of the suburbs and, in effect, crystallized the patterns of racial segregation which had been stewing since the turn of the twentieth-century.

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To the southwest of the historic area, branching off Jamestown Road, Chandler Court, Pollard Court, and Texas (now Griffin) Avenue became white, middle-class neighborhoods while Braxton Court and the Armistead Avenue area to the northwest grew as Black suburbs. The latter served as one of the few areas of the city where Black residents were allowed to live, in addition to South Henry Street and the northeast portion of the city along Franklin Street called “White City.” White City got its name from the white color of its houses, six of which were originally developed by the WHC during the Restoration and rented out by Colonial

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45 Foster “‘They're turning the town all upside down,’” 184.
Williamsburg to chefs, chauffeurs, and bell captains that it employed.\textsuperscript{46} The northwest area, whose two major axes included Harris (now Armistead) Avenue and Scotland Street, was originally purchased and subdivided by “Cheap Store” owner Samuel Harris during the 1890s.\textsuperscript{47}

Later during the 1940s, Colonial Williamsburg helped develop Highland Park, a Black neighborhood to the northwest of the historic area beyond the Chesapeake & Ohio railroad tracks. Much like White City, the purpose of Colonial Williamsburg’s involvement in the development of Highland Park was to create housing for its Black employees to live close-by. Though many considered Highland Park to be part of Williamsburg, it fell just outside of the city limits within the jurisdiction of York County.\textsuperscript{48} In the 1950s, Colonial Williamsburg sold and moved the six homes it owned in White City to Highland Park in order to build maintenance and transportation support facilities.\textsuperscript{49}

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Even after the Restoration, housing continued to be a chief concern of local leaders. In the years following World War II, Williamsburg and York County established a Postwar Planning Commission—separate from the City’s Planning Commission—in order to address the area’s needs following the war. Leaders anticipated large changes due to the construction of nearby military installations Camp Peary and Cheatham Annex and the return of veterans back home. Noting the development of new white suburbs such as Matoaka Court, Indian Springs, Fort Magruder Terrace, Pinecrest, and Burns Lane, the commission’ 1945 annual report argued that “present housing is a patchwork of individual projects” which has been “handicapped by the

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\textsuperscript{46} Edith Heard, oral history interview with Daniel Sumerlin and Katherine Stubbs, May 3, 2006, Williamsburg Documentary Project Collection, Box 1, Folder 13, Swem SCRC.
\textsuperscript{47} Oxreider, \textit{Rich, Black, and Southern}, 10-12.
\textsuperscript{48} Carmines, “From Magruder to Highland Park,” 43.
\textsuperscript{49} Vernon Ross, “White City: It Was Not All About the Houses,” in the \textit{Before 1966} pamphlet prepared for the 20\textsuperscript{th} Williamsburg Reunion (2006). Presently, Mt. Ararat Baptist Church is the last remaining vestige of the old White City community. I accessed this pamphlet from the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library.
lack of comprehensive planning.” The report’s complaint suggests that the Planning Commission established in 1930 generated a minimal impact upon local development. Additionally, when discussing housing needs, the report cited a “negro housing survey” conducted by the U.S. Housing Authority in 1942 in order to assess if federal assistance was necessary. Of the approximately 200 families interviewed the report argued:

The survey showed clearly that there was overcrowding and congestion and that many of the dwelling units were not equipped with proper facilities…The survey indicated [however] that the lack of adequate housing for negroes was due more to the absence of a sense of responsibility on the part of the negro for his own welfare than to the financial inability to provide for himself. Many of the negroes at that time living in overcrowded or otherwise inadequate quarters possessed the necessary income to materially improve their conditions, if they chose so to do.

By blaming Black citizens for their poor housing conditions instead of acknowledging other possible factors such as the lack of housing areas that would accept Black residents or a lack of access to capital to make improvements due to discriminatory lending practices of financial institutions, the report demonstrates the dominant thinking of local white leaders at the time. As a conclusion, the report recommended the “immediate” adoption of a comprehensive plan for the City, along with the adoption of a zoning ordinance and housing ordinance.50

The City Council adopted its first zoning ordinance in 1947 and began efforts to create its first comprehensive plan in 1951.51 The City contracted Harland Bartholomew & Associates, a consulting firm helmed by notable urban planner Harland Bartholomew, to complete the plan later approved by the Planning Commission and City Council in 1953. Bartholomew greatly influenced the theory and practice of urban planning by pioneering ways to professionally plan

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51 Tuttle “From Oligarchy to Democracy: Governing Virginia’s First City,” p. 267.
neighborhoods segregated by race and class. Before starting his consulting firm, Bartholomew headed city planning efforts in St. Louis during the 1910s and helped engineer their 1919 zoning ordinance. While the Supreme Court case *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917) ruled unconstitutional racial zoning ordinances that demarcated specific parts of cities to specific races, Bartholomew crafted St. Louis’ ordinance in order to achieve the same effect. Bartholomew sifted out neighborhoods with single-family homes for middle-class whites and strategically arranged multi-family, commercial, and industrial land uses to keep Black residents away.\(^\text{52}\) Bartholomew promulgated this strategy as a mainstream practice in city planning through his consulting firm and published works, shaping the evolving profession to operate upon the “racial theory of property value.” This theory conceived of Black residents as threats to the higher property values of segregated white neighborhoods.\(^\text{53}\)

Williamsburg’s 1947 zoning ordinance reflected such a practice and further regimented local patterns of racial segregation. The northwest part of the city where Black residents lived was zoned as “Residence B”—allowing multi-family dwelling units—while white suburbs located off of Jamestown Road were zoned as “Residence A” which restricted residential development to single-family homes. Furthermore, commercial and industrial zones were placed adjacent to the northwest section’s residential areas whereas the white suburbs along Jamestown Road and further down Richmond Road enjoyed little to no proximity to non-residential zoning.\(^\text{54}\)

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\(^\text{54}\) City of Williamsburg, “Zoning Map,” May 1, 1947, Williamsburg (Va.) Area Ephemera Collection, Box 27, Swem SCRC.
Figure 3. The first zoning ordinance adopted by the Williamsburg City Council in 1947. The higher density allowed in Black areas compared to white areas, along with the higher concentration of commercial and industrial uses in proximity to Black areas work further regimented local patterns of segregation while also accepting the racial theory of property value as municipal planning policy. (Courtesy of Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary)

Figure 4. An aerial photo of Williamsburg during the 1940s. Compare the new development around the historic area with the zoning ordinance adopted in 1947. Highland Park, developed by Colonial Williamsburg north of the C&O railroad, was not located within Williamsburg’s city limits. (Courtesy of Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)
Half of the city’s $15,000 contract with Harland Bartholomew & Associates was paid for by Colonial Williamsburg.\textsuperscript{55} Such an investment in the planning process is demonstrative of Colonial Williamsburg’s significant interest in and influence over city affairs. In fact, it is likely that the City contracted Harland Bartholomew & Associates, which had an office located in Richmond, upon the recommendation of Colonial Williamsburg. The firm had consulted for Colonial Williamsburg for the 1948 plan of their visitor’s center. In its introduction, the Comprehensive Plan of 1953, adopted by both the Planning Commission and City Council, argued that the need to thoughtfully plan the development of Williamsburg was “a matter of more than local importance,” due to the Restoration’s “enhancement of national pride in the origins of our nation.”\textsuperscript{56} A later comprehensive plan noted that "Many of the proposals of the 1953 plan evolved directly from work done by Colonial Williamsburg and Harland Bartholomew & Associates in 1947 and 1948."\textsuperscript{57}

Alongside specific sections related to issues of traffic control, public buildings, and sewage treatment, housing—like in the 1945 Postwar Planning Commission report—featured as a chief concern of the 1953 plan. Declaring that “The single-family home, particularly when owner-occupied, provides the most desirable living conditions,” the plan admonished multi-family units such as “rooming and boarding houses, apartments or single-family homes converted to several apartment units” for their detrimental effects on the “value, character, and stability” of “good single-family or two-family neighborhoods.”\textsuperscript{58} These multifamily units were often inhabited by poorer members of the Williamsburg community due to their affordability relative to the cost of owning a single-family detached home. In general, Black citizens had

\textsuperscript{55} City of Williamsburg, Virginia, “Comprehensive Plan of 1953,” introduction.  
\textsuperscript{56} “Comprehensive Plan of 1953,” introduction.  
\textsuperscript{57} City of Williamsburg, Virginia, “Comprehensive Plan of 1981,” 2.  
\textsuperscript{58} “Comprehensive Plan of 1953,” 16; 53.
lower incomes than their white peers since they were relegated to lower-paying service jobs and excluded from management positions at the town’s major employers, Colonial Williamsburg and William & Mary. Additionally, they were not able to build wealth as easily as their white peers who did not face discrimination in accessing capital from major financial institutions. However, even homeowners in the middle-class neighborhood of Braxton Court in the northwest area would rent out bedrooms to boarders, particularly Black professionals who were not originally from Williamsburg, since lodging options available to Black people were limited.

The differentiation of various housing types by terms like “value, character, and stability,” exhibit the coded language used to express race- and class-based biases when making planning decisions. The coded nature of the 1953 plan’s discussion of housing becomes particularly evident when viewed in concert with the implicit racial segregation undergirding the 1947 zoning ordinance and the complaints of “overcrowded” Black dwelling units in the Postwar Planning Commission report. Further, the idealization of single-family detached houses at the expense of other forms of housing drew upon the racialization of housing practiced during the Restoration’s assessment and acquisition of properties. While coding its race- and class-based evaluation of housing types, the plan does address housing issues in explicitly racial terms:

Williamsburg, with its large Negro population, faces a serious housing problem. As a rule, people do not live in substandard housing by choice, but because they cannot afford anything better. As the incomes of the majority of the Negro families living in and near Williamsburg are too low to permit them to own or rent well-constructed modern homes, they are forced to occupy cheap and often substandard quarters. While the great majority of the poor housing in Williamsburg is occupied by Negroes, there are some white families who also live under unsatisfactory conditions. In the latter case, the substandard homes are scattered in contrast to the Negro substandard housing which generally is grouped in well-defined areas.

59 Greenspan, Creating Colonial Williamsburg, 130.
60 Robert A. Braxton, oral history interview with Zach Meredith, February 27, 2019.
61 “Comprehensive Plan of 1953,” 89.
Here, unlike the 1945 postwar plan, the 1953 plan acknowledges the income disparity between Black and white residents of Williamsburg and its effect on Black citizens’ ability to access housing, however, it does so without critiquing—or indeed, even noting—the interconnected historic and economic dynamics which determined such a reality. Doing so would require introspection into the labor practices of local employers, along with the mechanisms through which the local government created and maintained segregated residential areas within town. As City Councilwoman Stella Neiman would later acknowledge in 1968 when Colonial Williamsburg President Carlisle Humelsine expressed a desire to improve local race relations, “If the major employers of unskilled labor in the area council could get together and agree not to pay such low wages that men—and women—cannot support their families it would be an enormous boon. This touches us where it hurts, of course, and perhaps the white community is not that committed as yet.”

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62 Stella Neiman, letter to Carlisle H. Humelsine, December 22, 1968, Stella Neiman Papers, Box 1, Folder 8, Swem SCRC.
Figure 5. A map marking the "Location of Negro Dwelling Units" from the City of Williamsburg's Comprehensive Plan of 1953. Note the location of Black communities relative to Colonial Williamsburg's restored area and William & Mary.

Figure 6. A map detailing the "Nature and Extent of Substandard Characteristics in Negro Housing" also from the 1953 plan. The data was collected through a study conducted by the Sociology Department at William & Mary.
Additionally, the plan neglected to analyze the effects of city’s discriminatory provision of services such as sidewalk installations, street pavements, curbing, and gutters—a common practice by local governments called “civic redlining”—which defined the condition of the neighborhoods just as much as the state of their housing stock. At a 1965 City Council meeting dedicated to the subject of substandard housing, Phillip Cooke, an insurance agent, criticized the city’s designation of Black neighborhoods as “slums and blighted areas” in the decades-long debate about local housing issues:

…the governing body of Williamsburg has apparently neglected the Negro race in this city. Every street in the city on which Negroes live that is not a thoroughfare is just gravel. However, just a short time ago, the city replaced several streets off Richmond Road which are not thoroughfares. Some of the streets are only two blocks, and white people live there.

We [Black people] are assessed for the same amount of money for taxes and we try to pay it. There is no reason the city should not do as much for us just because it is in an area where tourists do not come—some do when they lose their way and I’m sorry. They see a rough section.

Why should I build a $20,000 home if I have to drive through mud to get out…I might not have a slum house, but I would still be living in a slum area. If these conditions were corrected and nothing was done to the house, the area would look better, and it would probably inspire other improvements.

QuoVadis Wright, whose family owned a restaurant in the Triangle Block, the post-Restoration hub of Black-owned businesses in the northwest part of the city, recalled a similar indifference from local authorities when her grandmother requested a sidewalk to be put along the Black commercial area multiple times during the 1940s.

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65 QuoVadis Wright, “May 2, 2014,” handwritten narrative, QuoVadis Wright Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 14, Swem SCRC.
Nonetheless, the 1953 plan proposed three courses of action for the City to take in order to tackle the housing issue: first, the adoption of a housing ordinance through which the City could enforce minimum standards for housing; second, the annexation of Highland Park so that the City could enforce the housing and zoning ordinances upon the neighborhood’s properties; and third, the creation of a “housing and redevelopment authority.” As authorized by the urban renewal policies of the United States Housing Act of 1949, a housing and redevelopment authority could apply for federal money in order to acquire land and “prepare plans for the improvement or rehabilitation of slums and blighted areas.” The plan recommended that, after the authority acquired slum area properties and then eliminated the substandard housing conditions, the City allow private developers to replace housing units rather than create rent-subsidized public housing. As an example, the plan illustrated how such an intervention could be
deployed to redevelop the Black neighborhood along Scotland Street and Armistead (formerly Harris) Avenue in the northwest part of the city, including the Triangle Block where Wright’s grandmother had asked for a sidewalk to be placed.66

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It took sixteen years and another comprehensive plan for all three recommendations of the 1953 plan to materialize. The City adopted a housing ordinance in 1958 and annexed Highland Park in 1963.67 The latter was not actively sought out by the City but ordered by the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals when the City of Williamsburg sought to annex other land from James City County and York County. The court order aimed to balance out issues between the different jurisdictions related to their demographics and per-pupil funding contribution to local school systems.68

In the decade and a half that passed before the city activated a redevelopment and housing authority, the nationwide project of urban renewal was well underway in cities across the United States. Before 1973 when the Housing Act of 1949 was replaced, 2,532 urban renewal projects took place in 992 cities across the country, though its practice often continued to occur under new policy pretenses. It is estimated that urban renewal projects displaced about 1,000,000 people, about two-thirds of whom were Black. Mindy Thompson Fullilove, M.D. points out that, considering that Black people only formed twelve percent of the American population, Black people were five times more likely to be displaced by urban renewal projects based on their share of the population. Reasoning that the majority of Black people lived in segregated

neighborhoods, she estimates that urban renewal rooted out 1,600 Black neighborhoods. Black neighborhoods, as sites of complex social, political, cultural and economic networks, served invaluable roles for Black people living within the racist superstructure of American society.\textsuperscript{69}

Because of its disproportionate and violent impact on Black communities, many critics renamed the government program “negro removal.”\textsuperscript{70}

In the overwhelming majority of cases, urban renewal projects completely displaced all the people who lived in targeted sites since localities were allowed to turn acquired land over to private developers and, until the final years of the project, had minimal rules regarding how to relocate displaced persons. By 1967, urban renewal had destroyed an estimated 400,000 residential units but only replaced about 2.5 percent, or 10,760, with rent-subsidized public housing units on the sites of demolition.\textsuperscript{71} While most present-day criticism has been directed at urban renewal projects in large urban areas such as New York City or Chicago, housing authorities related to the Housing Act of 1949 spawned in localities big and small. In Virginia, housing authorities were established both in cities like Richmond, Newport News, Hampton, and Norfolk and relatively small municipalities such as Franklin, Norton, Wytheville, Waynesboro, Harrisonburg, and Hopewell—all did not carry out urban renewal projects, however.\textsuperscript{72}

Such was the context of housing policy when the City Council approved the 1968 Comprehensive Plan (also prepared by Harland Bartholomew & Associates) which repeated the recommendation for the establishment of a public redevelopment and housing authority. The issue of housing featured again as a main concern of the plan, though the new plan revealed more


\textsuperscript{70} Thompson Fullilove, \textit{Root Shock}, 20.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, 59.

about whom the city intended its housing interventions for, writing “Perhaps no other facet of Williamsburg’s appearance is more depressing than its areas of poor housing. Fortunately or unfortunately, as the case may be, most of this is hidden from the view of tourists, and largely hidden from residents of the new subdivisions also.”73 In a discussion of land use planning principles, the 1968 plan again demonstrated the primacy of Colonial Williamsburg in the town’s political economy:

The national benefits to be derived from public acquaintance with the restored colonial capital should override all other planning factors. This is Williamsburg, its reason being anything at all other than a very ordinary small city. Only one factor compares with Colonial Williamsburg in importance, and that is the College of William & Mary, itself part of the city’s colonial history…it should not seem harsh to say that other interests—real estate, commercial, industrial, or even homeowners should be subjugated to this main objective.74

The 1968 plan dropped the language of “Negro dwelling districts” and switched to singling out “problem areas,” though the specified housing areas were still majority-Black: the Armistead Avenue area in the northwest, the South Henry Street area, an area near the eastern edge of the restored area, an area in the southeast corner of the city, and Highland Park. The plan prescribed more diligent enforcement of the housing ordinance to address the housing issue. Additionally, the plan recommended intensive treatment for the South Henry Street and Armistead Avenue areas due to their “strategic locations” and higher prevalence of substandard buildings.75 To increase the urgency of the treatment, the plan argued that the Armistead Avenue area “holds the key for future development of the entire central area…the whole character must be changed” while proposing the development of commercial tourist amenities, new government

74 Ibid., 36.
75 According to page 71 of the 1968 plan, a building was substandard “if there was evidence of a sagging roof or walls out of plumb, if the foundations were crumbling, if the minimum floor area was less than 600 square feet (for a single-family dwelling), or if there existed a combination of factors indicating severe external deterioration (other than a need of paint) of chimneys, porches, siding, window sashes, and the like.”
facilities, and multifamily housing. Due to the supposed scale and urgency of the proposal, the plan suggested the activation of a “local public agency” to pursue an urban renewal program. In line with both local patterns of displacement of Black communities and national trends regarding urban renewal, the plan suggested no formal relocation process for uprooted residents due to the increased availability of standard dwellings in outlying areas. Whether or not the outlying areas were inside or outside the Williamsburg city limits was not a concern.\textsuperscript{76}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure8.png}
\caption{A map marking the "Problem Housing Areas" and the condition of individual dwelling units within them found in the 1968 comprehensive plan. The map and the 1953 plan’s map of “Negro Dwelling Districts” (Figure 5) overlap significantly, as well as reveal the disappearance of Black neighborhoods located nearby Colonial Williamsburg.}
\end{figure}

Even after the 1968 plan, political leaders did not take to the idea of a separate public authority as a tool to access urban renewal funds. City-appointed committees largely composed

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 72-73.
of elite white men—bankers, real estate agents, lawyers, Colonial Williamsburg executives—such as the Subcommittee on Substandard Housing and Community Development Committee expressed their desire to resolve the housing issue through the private market or a non-profit organization.\(^\text{77}\) When the City Council commissioned Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc. (HOME), a newly-established local non-profit to study how to best tackle the housing issue, their report recommended the activation of a public housing authority. Citing the 1968 plan’s estimation that 167 substandard dwellings existed within city limits, the non-profit communicated that they simply could not match the financial ability of a public agency which could channel federal funds for property acquisition in order to truly address Williamsburg’s housing needs.\(^\text{78}\) After HOME, Inc. presented its report, the council agreed to host a public referendum on the question of “Is there a need for the Redevelopment & Housing Authority to be activated in the City of Williamsburg?”

\(^{77}\) “Report by Vincent D. McManus, Chairman of the Committee on Substandard Housing, to the City Council,” Stella Neiman Papers, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 8, Swem SCRC.

\(^{78}\) HOME Inc., “A Report from Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc. to the Williamsburg City Council, May 8, 1969,” Stella Neiman Papers, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 8, Swem SCRC.
Public opposition to the establishment of a redevelopment and housing authority was unorganized and mainly focused on the potential cost to taxpayers that the authority might bring rather than any concern about displacement.\textsuperscript{79} In fact, a major talking point of those in favor of the authority was the authority’s potential to provide low-income housing within the city limits.\textsuperscript{80}

In a letter to the editor of the \textit{Virginia Gazette}, councilwoman Stella Neiman publicly denounced the lack of care that the consultants who prepared the 1968 had plan shown for the Black residents who would be displaced.\textsuperscript{81}


\textsuperscript{81} Stella Neiman, “Letter to the Virginia Gazette, July 14, 1969,” Stella Neiman Papers, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 8. Swem SCRC.
On December 2, 1969—a month later than originally planned due to an error by the City Council in publicly announcing the referendum—over two-thirds of voters approved the creation of the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority.\textsuperscript{82}

Chapter Two
The Authority in Action

Q: So is that when the businesses really started to die out, the black businesses, when the Restoration....

A: Yes, yes. That’s when the black businesses started dying out. And then the few that were here, the Redevelopment and Housing, they bought those out ... They couldn’t afford to [relocate].
—Doris Epps, oral history interview, 1986

It was with the citizen in mind—the elderly, the handicapped and low and moderate income families—that the Williamsburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority directed its public housing efforts.
—Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority, “Historic Community Goes Into Public Housing in Unique Fashion”

Following the December referendum, it took some time before the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority (WRHA) began fully operating. The City needed to appoint a board before the new governmental entity could start formulating a program to address Williamsburg’s housing issues. After a two-month search, the City Council appointed an all-male five-member slate: Phillip O. Richardson, owner of a local construction firm; Reverend C. P. Minnick; David Otey, a lawyer; Peter A. G. Brown, a vice-president of Colonial Williamsburg; and Hubert Alexander, a manager at Colonial Williamsburg—the first Black person to serve at such a level of leadership at the foundation. The lengths of each member’s appointments were staggered by a year, with Alexander’s appointment of five years the longest and Minnick’s of one year the shortest. Richardson would serve as chair, Minnick as vice-chair, and Alexander as secretary.

83 Doris Epps, oral history interview, August 4, 1986, James City County Oral History Collection, Box 4, Folder 86-001, Swem SCRC.
84 Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority, “Historic Community Goes Into Public Housing in Unique Fashion,” Folder: Dedication, WRHA Archives, Williamsburg, VA.
Figure 10. The petition demanding Black representation on local political bodies signed by twenty-four “concerned citizens.”
(Courtesy of Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary)
The appointment of Alexander was particularly significant since Black citizens had been excluded from serving on local governmental decision-making bodies in the city and surrounding counties for much of the twentieth-century. White state and local politicians’ subversion of Black electoral power loosened as the Civil Rights Movement secured protections against racist voter suppression tactics. The ratification of the twenty-fourth amendment in 1964 abolished the poll tax and the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed other disenfranchising practices such as literacy tests. In 1968, Phillip Cooke became the second Black person to run for Williamsburg City Council in the twentieth-century after McKinley T. Whiting’s bid in 1950.86 While he lost his first election, Cooke continued to try four more times in 1970, 1972, 1974, and 1976—each time, again, unsuccessfully.87 Though other Black candidates attempted runs after Cooke, it would take until the twenty-first century, with the election of C. Russell Tabb in 2000, for a Black council member to represent Williamsburg in the post-Reconstruction era.88

In addition to exclusion from City Council, Black citizens were kept off of Council-appointed boards such as the School Board or Planning Commission. In a petition dated June 4, 1969, twenty-four members of the Williamsburg community—including prominent Black figures such as Rev. James B. Tabb, Rev. Junius H. Moody, and Dr. J. Blaine Blayton—undersigned a criticism of this practice. The petition focused specifically on the denial of many citizens’ requests that Black people to be appointed to fill two open seats on the Williamsburg and James City County school boards:

86 “Council Primary Results Topic Of City Discussion,” Daily Press, April 6, 1950.
88 Phillip Burnham, “The Disappearing Black Community of Williamsburg,” The Voice Newspaper (Richmond, VA), March, 3, March 5, March 12, and March 19, 2008.
The Negro Constituency of Williamsburg and James City County has been systematically ignored and totally disregarded in all vital areas of policy making in the government of this area... We have waited 300 years! How much longer must we wait?

When orderly channels are closed to a people, what else is left for them to do but to adopt some alternate. This is a call for Whites and Blacks who are concerned with justice to use whatever pressure is necessary to see to it that all citizens of this area are given adequate representation in the government of our city and county.

We are concerned with action “NOW” not 1970, not four years from now but “NOW”. This may mean that some who are now on these boards gracefully resign and thereby make room for representation of the Negro--community.\(^89\)

City Council likely sought to assuage these concerns about Black representation in local government through Alexander’s appointment. Alexander and his wife, Bobbye, were both prominent Williamsburg citizens based in the town’s Black community. Alexander served as the chairman of Cooke’s 1970 campaign for council, helping put together a political advertisement in the *Daily Press* calling for Black representation on City Council that was endorsed by 200 members of the Black community.\(^90\) When observing City Council’s decision, however, it is important to also take into account that Alexander, who lived in Highland Park after moving to Williamsburg for work, was employed by Colonial Williamsburg. While his appointment was certainly a win for Black political representation, it is hard to disentangle Alexander from the larger pattern of Colonial Williamsburg and its aligned actors exerting considerable influence over the local policy-making process.

After visiting other housing authorities in the region to observe their various projects, the Authority established its own by-laws and capitalized its operating budget in the fall of 1970. The WRHA’s relationships with other regional authorities, particularly those in larger urban areas, became important to its future operations, as it received assistance in drafting federal grant

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\(^89\) “To Concerned Citizens of Williamsburg-James City County,” June 4, 1969, Stella Neiman Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Swem SCRC.
applications and, sometimes, even outsourced work that the WRHA did not have the employee capacity or policy expertise to complete.91

In the spring of 1971, the members of the WRHA board (except for Richardson, who abstained due to personal businesses interests in the area) approved the undertaking of surveys and plans of “The area bounded on the south by Scotland Street, on the east by Armistead Avenue, on the north by Lafayette Street and on the west by a vacant ravine,” located in the northwest part of the city. The surveys and plans were to be used for the Authority’s application to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, recently established in 1965, seeking funds to redevelop the area made available by the Housing Act of 1949.92 The WRHA’s focus on the described area followed the call of the 1968 comprehensive plan that the area was a “strategic location” and “the key for future development of the entire central area.”93

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Following the purchase and subdivision of land by “Cheap Store” owner Samuel Harris in the 1890s, the northwest area developed as a Black neighborhood in response to the combined forces of government-facilitated segregation and the mass relocation of Williamsburg residents caused by the Restoration. Featuring both commercial and residential land uses, the community was structured by the two axes of Scotland Street, running approximately east-to-west, and Armistead Avenue, running approximately south-to-north. As opposed to other Black neighborhoods such as Highland Park or South Henry Street, the area existed in very close proximity to white residences and businesses. The switch from a Black-occupied block to a

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91 The approval of a contract between in the WRHA and the Hampton Redevelopment & Housing Authority is captured in the minutes of a regular WRHA board meeting on August 13, 1973, WRHA archives. Mention of the Norfolk Redevelopment & Housing Authority helping revise an application prepared by the WRHA found in the minutes from a regular WRHA board meeting on April 12, 1971, WRHA archives.
92 WRHA Resolution 7, April 22, 1971, WRHA archives.
white-occupied block happened as one traveled eastward on Scotland Street and southbound down Armistead Avenue. Additionally, the area was in particularly close proximity to the restored area now managed by Colonial Williamsburg; by foot, it would take about six minutes to walk over to the western tip of Duke of Gloucester Street and by car, two minutes. It took even shorter to walk over to the brick wall flanking the perimeter of the College of William & Mary’s campus. 94

For a significant period of time, the street treatments that the City provided for roads running through the northwest area also varied by whether or not a block was Black or white. George Brown, who grew up on Armistead Avenue during the 1930s and 1940s, recalled that his childhood street was like “living out in the country.” If someone got roller skates as a toy, they had to go out to the pavement at the train station to be able to use them since the dirt road outside their homes was difficult to skate on. 95

Internally, the northwest area was divided by class. Braxton Court, a cul-de-sac located off the western half of Scotland Street, was a middle-class neighborhood purchased and developed by Black contractor Robert H. Braxton between the 1930s and 1940s. The residents of the neighborhood lived in well-sized single-family detached homes, eleven of which were built by Braxton. 96

The rest of the northwest area lacked the same social prestige as Braxton Court, creating a mixture of socioeconomic statuses. As in Braxton Court, most families owned their homes, though if they did rent, they rented from a Black landlord. To a large degree, the condition of homes reflected their family’s income. Brown recalled that the condition of the houses along

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94 I drew these figures from the estimations calculated by Google Maps.
95 George Brown, oral history interview by Erin Hegarty and Arthur Knight, December 19, 2017.
Armistead Avenue seemed “homebuilt” except for households where people had higher salary jobs that allowed them to take better care of the appearance of their homes, suggesting a linkage between housing conditions and a resident’s position within the area’s socioeconomic hierarchy. The largest concentration of poor families lived down the hill along Clay Street and the northern stretch of Armistead in an area called “Harris’ Bottom.”

Much of Harris’ Bottom was wiped out by the City in 1954 during the extension of Lafayette Street. The extension created a bypass to handle east-west traffic flow so that cars did not need to cut through the restored area in order to drive across town. The destruction of the neighborhood was welcomed, if not purposefully intended, by Williamsburg’s Comprehensive Plan of 1953 which stated that the area “contained numerous dilapidated houses occupied by Negroes. From studies made on housing conditions in Williamsburg, it is apparent that this area is ripe for redevelopment.” Referencing the plan’s proposal to redevelop the rest of the northwest area, the plan trumpeted that “there is an opportunity to combine a highway improvement with a redevelopment project thus clearing out a bad housing situation and making it possible for the City to receive some financial assistance from the Federal Government.” While at a much smaller scale, the City of Williamsburg utilized the same logic of highway planners who routed interstate highways through Black neighborhoods in large cities across America. Clay Street, an old residential lane, awkwardly jutted off the new thoroughfare with all eight of the homes that formerly sat to its south eliminated. 

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97 George Brown, oral history interview.
100 I discerned the amount of houses from Plate 19 of the Comprehensive Plan of 1953.
Many of the area’s residents spent their Sundays at First Baptist Church, one of the oldest Black Christian congregations in the United States. The church was originally located on Nassau Street on a block south of Duke of Gloucester. Unlike many other churches—both Black and white—First Baptist Church survived the WHC’s acquisition of properties and remained in its original location following the Restoration.\(^{101}\) In 1953, however, Colonial Williamsburg offered to purchase the church property and fund the construction of a new edifice on a site along

\(^{101}\) Rowe 128. Williamsburg Baptist Church, a prominent white church originally located on the western end of Duke of Gloucester, relocated to a site along Richmond Road due to the Restoration. See Morrill 38-39.
Scotland Street in between Braxton Court and the rest of northwest area. Though the church had hosted a groundbreaking ceremony for an addition to its Nassau Street structure just two weeks prior to the offer, church leadership accepted the offer and relocated the congregation into the new building that was completed along Scotland Street in 1956. (Later, in the 1980s, church members successfully proposed that Colonial Williamsburg reconstruct the original First Baptist Church structure as part of its living history museum; however, Colonial Williamsburg did not secure enough funding and the plans never materialized. Presently, the Nassau Street site only features an empty field of grass and a small marker noting it as the former site of the historic church.)

Along Armistead, the neighborhood also featured a Holiness Church.

Up the road from First Baptist Church, the commercial center of the neighborhood sat on a triangle-shaped piece of land often referred to as the Triangle Block. The Triangle Block was formed by the introduction of Prince George Street, branching southward off Scotland Street by about forty-five degrees and later intersecting with Armistead Avenue to its east. Before the Restoration, much of the property along the Scotland Street side of the Triangle Block was purchased by Martha and William Henry Webb, Sr. in 1911. The Webbs’ children and their spouses later operated and leased space to various businesses on the block including a grocery store, barber shop, and restaurant in addition to residential units which the Webbs themselves either occupied or rented out. The restaurant run by Virgie Williams (née Webb) served as a hangout for many Black people in the neighborhood and in Williamsburg, more broadly. The restaurant took on various names during its life such as the Triangle Restaurant, the Paradise

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102 Tommy L. Bogger, Since 1776: The History of First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, Virginia, Williamsburg, VA: First Baptist Church, 2005), 69-70; 95-96.
103 George Brown, oral history interview.
104 Will Molineux, “The Webb Family of Triangle Block,” 2015, QuoVadis Wright Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 13, Swem SCRC. Molineux wrote this report with information provided to him by QuoVadis Wright, daughter of Virgie Williams and granddaughter of William and Martha Webb. Interestingly, Wright was also the first baby ever delivered by Dr. Blayton.
Samuel K. Harris—not to be confused with the owner of the “Cheap Store”—operated a blacksmith shop in early decades of the Triangle Block.

In 1932, Dr. J. Blaine Blayton opened up his medical practice on the second floor of a building on the Armistead Avenue side of the Triangle Block. An Oklahoman who ended up along the East Coast by way of Howard University, Blayton first began independently practicing in Newport News a year earlier but found little work due to locals’ financial hardship during the Great Depression. After being recruited by some Williamsburg citizens who made the trip down to Newport News, Blayton became Williamsburg’s first Black doctor. Before, the white doctor in town, Baxter Bell, would only treat Black patients through the backdoor of his office. If they required more serious medical attention, Black patients had to drive to hospitals located in Newport News or Richmond.

Figure 12. An aerial photo showing the Triangle Block during its early years. (Courtesy of Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

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105 Edna Baker, oral history interview, March 13, 2005, Williamsburg Documentary Project Collection, Box 1, Folder 13, Swem SCRC.
106 Bryant, “Profile: J. Blaine Blayton.” Mention of black’s medical treatment “through the back door” found in Dennis Gardner, oral history interview, August 19, 2007, Williamsburg Documentary Project Collection, Box 1, Folder 95, Swem SCRC.
Charles Gary opened a dry cleaning and tailoring business in a building owned by the Webbs after being recruited to open up shop in the Triangle Block around the same time as Blayton. Later, Gary began renting from the downstairs of Blayton’s building on Armistead. After Gary was denied a loan to finance the construction of his own building on a piece of land he had purchased on Prince George Street, he formed a partnership with a friend only to, again, be denied a loan. After hearing about their plans, Blayton decided to join Gary and his partner who all then created a corporation named Colonial Investors, Inc. in 1940. The new corporation was able to secure financing for a brick building constructed at 607 Prince George Street. Blayton’s office and two-bed maternity hospital occupied the upstairs of the building, while
Gary’s West End Valet Shop shared the downstairs with Henderson’s Electric Shop and Georgia’s Beauty Shop, who both leased space in the building.\(^{107}\)

Aspiring to “do better by the community,” Blayton took out a new mortgage to build a larger medical facility next-door to the one he built with Gary. In 1952, the New Medical Center Clinic Hospital opened at 607 Prince George Street, featuring fourteen hospital beds and eight bassinets for newborn babies.\(^{108}\) Demonstrating both the building’s versatility and Blayton’s community-mindedness, the hospital hosted other uses at various points in time, including a laundry, beauty shop, collection agency, youth center, thrift store, and the anti-poverty James City County Community Action Agency.\(^{109}\) Until the construction of the Williamsburg Community Hospital in 1961— to which Blayton made one of the largest financial contributions—Blayton’s hospital was the only hospital in the area which provided medical care for Black people that did not treat them as second-class citizens.

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\(^{107}\) Charles Gary, typed narrative of the history Triangle Block development (untitled), undated, Charles Edward Gary Jr. Papers, Box 4, Folder 24, Swem SCRC.

\(^{108}\) Bryant, “Profile: J. Blaine Blayton.” The official name of the building as the “New Medical Center Clinic Hospital” is found in a program prepared by the WRHA for the naming ceremony of a public elderly housing as “The Blayton Building” which occurred in 2000. The program can be found in the Williamsburg Documentary Project Collection, Box 4, Folder 412, Swem SCRC.

\(^{109}\) Molineux, “The Webb Family of Triangle Block.” Information also found in a newspaper clipping of an article by Bill McLaughlin in the *Time-Herald Metro News*, August 18, 1976, found in the QuoVadis Wright Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 22, Swem SCRC.
Figure 14. An image of the Triangle Block along the Prince George Street side after Blayton’s hospital building was built. The caption written by QuoVadis Wright names the buildings from front to back: “The Triangle [Restaurant], Webb’s Grocery, Blayton Hospital, (unseen) Charlie Gary Cleaners, white corner building Henderson’s Electric Shop, Shearin Record Store (Mr. Rutherford’s [Rutledge] Building) tenant upstairs.” (Courtesy of Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary)

Figure 15. An aerial photo of the Triangle Block’s Scotland Street side. QuoVadis Wright’s caption reads “Black white aerial view of the area. Our house, Aunt Lizzie’s house, Dr. Blayton’s hospital and Clarence & Johnny’s Building. Uncle Clarence Webb’s grocery store, next to go…” (Courtesy of Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary)
Blayton grew to be a venerated figure within the Black community. He was not respectable enough, however, in the eyes of many members of the white community. Toward the end of the 1950s, Blayton and his family became the first Black members of the elite congregation at Bruton Parish Church upon invitation by the pastor. According to Blayton’s daughter Barbara, “The church had a fit. We did it over the summer while everybody was on vacation and when everybody came back they had a fit. Because most believed at that time there was a black heaven and a white heaven.” When white women wouldn’t move their knees to allow Blayton’s wife Alleyne to enter a pew, she said “I told your father the Lord wasn’t in this church.” When the growing Blayton family sought to move from their Braxton Court residence into a larger house along nearby Richmond Road no white people would sell to them, so the Blaytons built a new estate in Grove.

The businesses on the Triangle Block not only provided people everyday goods and services but provided an important experience for Black shoppers who often felt uncomfortable at white establishments. One woman recalled that “It was nice because you didn’t feel out of place, and the owners respected you and your money. In other businesses, you knew they didn’t respect you and that they were only after your money.” George Brown remembered that “something about the stores [in Williamsburg’s main shopping area] Merchant’s Square told you they were not for you” and that you had to be careful since shop owners might accuse you of stealing. QuoVadis Wright wrote that one day:

...as I walked up Duke of Gloucester Street from school, we passed a ladies shop. I admired this lovely looking hat sitting on a mannequin's head in the window. It was

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110 J. Blaine Blayton and Barbara Blayton Richardson, oral history interview, February 18, 1999, Williamsburg Documentary Project Collection, Box 4, Folder 412, Swem SCRC.
111 Barbara Blayton Richardson, phone interview with Zach Meredith, March 12, 2019.
113 George Brown, oral history interview.
called a skimmer, and it cost probably $2.50. I was becoming a fine young lady, so one
day I opened the door to go in the store. The door chime announced my arrival. I grabbed
the hat and was heading for the nearest mirror when a voice stopped me in my tracks. I
looked around to see steely eyes and a woman who said, "Do not put my hat on your
greasy head. If n-----s try on hats, my white customers won't buy em." I gave her the
money for the hat and stumbled out of the store as tears ran.

…We were self-contained in our own neighborhood. We relied on our churches and all
our own activities from clinics and baby-care to movies, sports, restaurants and
entertainment. We never really missed the white part of town.  

While the Triangle Block served as the major hub of Black-owned business in
Williamsburg following the Restoration, white-owned establishments eventually set up shop in
the area, particularly after integration. By the time the WRHA was activated, the block was
divided into four parcels of property, one of which was owned by William and Henry Rutledge,
two white brothers who owned a building on the corner Prince George and Armistead. Their
corner building was closest to other white businesses on the next block over along Prince George
Street. Their building housed their store, Colonial Typewriters, as well as an oriental rug shop
and delicatessen. Additionally, apartments were leased in the building’s upstairs. White business
owners also leased space from either Blayton, Gary, and the Webbs, who owned the remaining
three parcels on the block. By the time the WRHA began to act upon its plans to redevelop the
Triangle Block, the number of Black-owned businesses, five, was the same as the number of
white-owned businesses. 

114 QuoVadis Wright, “Recalling how the past paved the way for present,” Virginia Gazette, February 13, 2016,
Informal plans to redevelop the Triangle Block predated the WRHA’s undertaking of surveys of and plans for the northwest area and even earlier schemes proposed in the 1953 and 1968 comprehensive plans. QuoVadis Wright, who was the daughter of Virgie Williams, noted that:

my mother, whose father and mother bought and lived on the Scotland Street side of the block, recalled in the ‘40s the city council or governing body would say to her when ever she requested a side walk or paid her taxes, you don’t need a sidewalk, the city is going to take that property. They even went so far as to tell her “No need to fix up, repair, paint or do any thing to those buildings as the city is going to take your land.” She said she often said “50 years of paying taxes and we can’t get a sidewalk,” and the refrain was always the same “the city needs that property,” so being a normal Black women of her generation she cowed and knew there was no use trying to fight city hall or the zoning board or whoever was in charge and she made internal improvements but the outsides of the buildings fell apart, deteriorated and that was what “they” wanted to say, “your
property is in deplorable condition and we can’t pay much for it as you have let it run
down hill.”

Williams’ reaction to the threat of government acquisition of her land mirrored a similar pattern seen across the United States during the urban renewal era whereby the discussion of the government potentially acquiring property encouraged disinvestment. Not only would banks avoid lending money, but people themselves hesitated to repair or renovate their homes since they feared that the government was going to take their property anyway. The threat of government intervention did not discourage everyone from investing in the block, however, as demonstrated by the fact that Blayton took out a mortgage to build his new hospital in the early 1950s.

The 1953 comprehensive plan envisioned the Triangle Block as the site of a bus terminal, alongside the broader redevelopment of the northwest area (excluding Braxton Court) into new single-family housing built by private developers after a redevelopment and housing authority acquired all property in the area. Later, the 1968 comprehensive plan recommended the Triangle Block for “Tourist Commercial” land use, implying the displacement of the businesses that occupied the block. The 1968 plan’s recommendation for the Triangle Block to be repurposed to serve tourists speaks to how the area’s close proximity to Colonial Williamsburg shaped planning considerations. Alongside Colonial Williamsburg, the interests of the City itself considerably factored into official planning decisions. The central location of the northwest area surrounding the Triangle Block attracted the attention of the City, especially after 1967, when it built its new municipal building only a block away on North Boundary Street. Instead of

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116 QuoVadis Wright, handwritten narrative concerning her mother’s interactions with municipal officials, May 2, 2014, QuoVadis Wright Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 14, Swem SCRC.
117 Thompson Fullilove, Root Shock, 88-89.
redeveloping the rest of the northwest area into housing as the 1953 plan suggested, the 1968 plan envisioned a “municipal center” around the municipal building—a fire station, library, police station, auditorium, and surface parking lots—occupying both sides of Armistead Avenue that sat in between Scotland Street and the recently-extended Lafayette Street.119

Figure 17. The 1968 plan's sketch plan for a municipal center envisioned that the housing along Armistead Avenue could be replaced with parking lots and public facilities as part of a larger municipal center. In the same plan, the Triangle Block was proposed for tourist commercial use.

While resistance to the redevelopment of the Triangle Block would emerge later, the lack of replacement housing provided in the section of the 1968 plan and later planning studies dedicated to the idea of a municipal center (also assembled by Harland Bartholomew & Associates) were quickly rebuked. In fact, the reaction to the plans for the municipal center brought further urgency to the lack of quality low-cost housing available within the City and even factored into many citizens’ support for the activation of the WRHA. A planning subcommittee dedicated to the area surrounding the municipal building reported that “Reaction from the public was overwhelmingly opposed to the existing plan since it displaces citizens now residing in the area without developing definitive plans for relocating them.”

In the margins of her preliminary copy for the “Master Plan for the Area Surrounding the Municipal Building,” Neiman wrote “negro clearance” next to the plan’s observation that “very little space would be left for multiple-family housing” and that “the difficulties of relocation have not been reduced in recent years by availability of standard dwellings in outlying areas” as had been otherwise suggested in the 1968 plan.

Even Colonial Williamsburg, which had acquired property in the area and supported the development of commercial facilities for tourists, pivoted in support of residential use.

Thus, the beginning of the WRHA’s efforts to redevelop the northwest area—a sector of the city already shaped in part by other top-down processes such as mass displacement, government-facilitated segregation, and discriminatory provision of municipal services—was also linked to the project of creating a municipal center. In addition to centralizing municipal

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120 “First Report of Subcommittee on Developing the Master Plan of the Area Surrounding the Municipal Building,” November 26, 1969, Stella Neiman Papers, Box 3, Folder 4, Swem SCRC.
121 “Master Plan for the Area Surrounding the Municipal Building,” September 1969, Neiman Papers, Box 3, Folder 4, Swem SCRC.
122 “First Report of Subcommittee on Developing the Master Plan of the Area Surrounding the Municipal Building.”
services and facilities, the creation of a municipal center was viewed by the City as a way to enhance its “character,” particularly the parts of the city closest to Colonial Williamsburg and William & Mary.

In Williamsburg, “character” also had come to be defined in opposition to commercial, tourist industry businesses that popped up with the growth of Colonial Williamsburg in order to capitalize upon its success. The 1968 plan grumbled that “Williamsburg simply cannot permit its environs to develop as a great mass of motels, curio shops, restaurants, and general tourist ballyhoo…the distinctive character of Williamsburg must be maintained at all costs.” Nonetheless, the continued idealization of the owner-occupied, single-family home ensured that concerns about the appearance of the city continued to operate within the same racialized planning discourse established earlier in the twentieth-century.

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After plans and surveys for the northwest area were completed, HUD returned the WRHA’s first “workable program” with problems raised about specific codes and planning issues, in addition to concerns regarding the Authority’s relocation plan and citizen involvement. While residents of the northwest area had raised concerns in public forums since the idea of redevelopment was floated, it was not until after HUD’s concerns that the Authority established a “project area committee” named the Williamsburg Area Residents Organization (WARO) to allow citizens affected by the plan to formally participate in the planning process.

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123 “Comprehensive Plan of 1968,”
124 Regular Meeting of WRHA (August 9, 1971)
Through the WARO, headed by neighborhood resident Mary Morris, citizens were able to express their wishes for the redevelopment of the area, such as the desire for a combination of single-family dwellings, apartments, and townhouses and for people renting in the area at the time to have the privilege of purchasing homes—in fact, most residents in the area wished to purchase their own housing rather than rent. Participants in WARO meetings also expressed their desire for the construction of a park and recreational facilities as well as for the Triangle Block to remain a place for small businesses. Additionally, through the WARO, citizens received information about the protections for displaced homeowners and renters guaranteed by the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Act of 1970.  

Enacted amid concerns about urban renewal finally given attention by legislators in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the federal law was aimed at ensuring proper compensation and relocation assistance for property owners affected by eminent domain.

The WARO served as the leverage point through which Black residents, particularly women, were able to favorably steer the actions of the Authority as it pursued the redevelopment of the northwest area. Edna Baker remembered her mother Fannie Adkins as one such woman:

The city or the state or somebody purchased the property for remodeling… My mother was determined that she wasn’t going to leave Williamsburg because she did not drive. And at this time she was by herself. And she said she didn’t want to go. A lot of them were buying their property and they were moving out and buying homes and they started new areas down there [in Carver’s Garden]. She said she did not drive and she did not want to move out of Williamsburg, first of all, because she could walk to church. And the A&P [grocery store] at the time was where the Post Office is [on the corner of North

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126 WARO, meeting minutes, February 15, 1972, and meeting minutes, March 28, 1972, WRHA archives. The minutes were included as supporting documents provided in a dossier to HUD by the WRHA during the federal department’s investigation of the WRHA during 1976.

127 Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock*, 68. Thompson Fullilove describes the context for the housing landscape before the legislation was passed: “The ratio of people to housing was doubling and tripling, until people couldn’t take it anymore, and civil insurrection broke out. Though somewhat less coherent than the Paris Commune or the Montgomery bus boycott, those insurrections represented an equally distinct mass movement, this time against the spatial squeeze the community was under… The American ghetto revolts of the 1960s were tightly linked to urban renewal according to the report of the National Commission on Civil Disorders, popularly known as the Kerner Commission.”
Boundary and Lafayette]…And she could walk to the A&P, and she could walk to church and she could walk to the doctor’s office. And she said that there was no reason for her to move out Williamsburg.

So she was a rebel I guess... They had this Virgie Williams, who was militant you call it... militant, nowadays. And this Virgie Williams whose family owned almost all of the Triangle, said she didn’t want to move. So [along with Hattie Sasser] we had these three ladies who would not move out of town and they rebelled...they were saying a ‘house for a house.’ Whatever your house had they were supposed to give you a house for your house.¹²⁸

During 1972, the WRHA formalized its redevelopment plans and successfully applied for funding for the “Armistead Avenue Area Urban Renewal Plan” from HUD through the Neighborhood Development Program (NDP). As was the case earlier, Richardson abstained each time the board authorized any action related to the northwest area due to personal business interests; however, sometimes official WRHA meetings were held at his construction company offices—even those in which the board adopted resolutions pertaining to the urban renewal area.¹²⁹

At first, the Authority fixed its attention on the housing stock surrounding the proposed municipal center along Armistead Avenue, leaving the redevelopment of the Triangle Block for action at a later date. Further, the Authority originally did not plan to establish a public housing program. It had only received enough money in the NDP’s first fiscal year—$500,000 total—earmarked for the acquisition of enough property in the area to later convey to a private developer who would then replace the demolished units with “low-cost” housing. In April 1973 the WRHA used nearly half of its available funding to acquire its first five parcels within the area that it had demarcated for urban renewal. Of the five properties purchased, all were owner-occupied except for a one-story concrete block apartment building on Armistead Avenue. While

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¹²⁸ Edna Baker, oral history, March 31, 2005, Williamsburg Documentary Project Collection, Box 1, Folder 13, Swem SCRC.
¹²⁹ WRHA, special meeting minutes, November 10, 1972, and regular meeting minutes, April 9, 1973, WRHA archives.
residents could remain in their homes by paying rent to the Authority until demolition, one family moved out to a new home purchased in York County.\textsuperscript{130}

The WRHA acquired two more parcels along Armistead in May, helping carve out an even larger chunk of land wedged in between the western side of Armistead and Lafayette. In order to resolve issues with property owners in the urban renewal area who had not signed sales contracts or who experienced difficulty presenting title to their land, the board authorized Alexander in his position as secretary to send letters communicating that “if agreement had not been reached and transactions are unable to be closed within ten days, the Authority would proceed with condemnation.”\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure18.png}
\caption{A map of the Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Area. The map records an evaluation of the condition of structures within the program area and denotes property that the Authority intended to acquire. (Courtesy of the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{131} WRHA, special meeting minutes, May 30, 1973, WRHA archives. WRHA acquired two more parcels of land (24K-45 & 24K-54) for $138,528
During this time, WRHA commissioners passed a series of resolutions directing its attorney to file petitions in court in order to condemn ten parcels on the same block of land whose owners had refused to sell. One of the property owners whom the Authority filed a condemnation proceeding against, Mattie Braxton (wife of Robert H. Braxton who developed Braxton Court), unsuccessfully contested the WRHA’s seizure of her property in court. Most property owners did not take legal action, however, since such a mode of resistance required substantial financial resources in order to afford a lawyer and court fees. Further according to Braxton’s grandson, Robert A. Braxton, “if there [were] any lawyers, the lawyers were on the side of the housing authority.”

The WRHA’s aggressive land acquisition methods paralleled the treatment of Black property owners during the Restoration and development of military installations in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, many area residents perceived that Colonial Williamsburg was involved in the urban renewal project, a claim which the WRHA board refuted as “erroneous information.”

Meanwhile, just as the Authority began receiving funding from the federal government, at the beginning of 1973 President Richard Nixon initiated a moratorium, or spending freeze, on all new HUD funding commitments, including urban renewal programs. Throughout the 1960s, public housing increasingly garnered a negative image in the national debate regarding the issues that afflicted American cities. Nixon himself characterized public housing sites as “monstrous,

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132 WRHA Resolutions 27-35, 42, and 43; WRHA archives.
133 WRHA v. Mattie Braxton, Virginia: In the Circuit Court for the City of Williamsburg and County of James City, 1973.
134 Robert A. Braxton, oral history with Erin Hegarty and Sarah Thoresen, April 13, 2017.
135 WRHA, regular meeting minutes, March 19, 1974, WRHA archives.
For many, the highly-publicized 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe, a public housing complex in St. Louis built less than two decades prior, exemplified the failure of public housing as a government program. In fact, Nixon had already implemented a moratorium on high-rise public housing buildings as one of his first acts when he entered office in 1969. Public debate ignored the systemic factors that determined the poor conditions afflicting public housing developments, and instead blamed building design and sometimes even the tenants themselves in order to cast the public housing program as a failure.138

Indeed, postwar state and federal policies successfully facilitated “white flight” from cities into suburbs, transforming public housing from a program primarily aimed at housing working-class and lower-middle-class families who were temporarily down on their luck into a “warehousing system” for poor people of color, particularly poor Black people. As the suburbs came to serve the housing needs of white middle-class Americans, the federal government largely abandoned the existing public housing stock. Acting upon the wishes of the real estate lobby, the federal government set income limits for tenants. The income limits further consolidated public housing projects as places occupied by the poor and their condition suffered as the loss of middle-class tenants impacted housing authorities’ operating budgets. The federal government declined to subsidize the losses of rental payments caused by the new income limits, effectively starving housing authorities out. Without authorities providing basic, necessary maintenance and repairs, public housing communities floundered as sites of dire poverty and criminality. Most Americans were not sympathetic to the idea of public housing—by then, an

extremely racialized and classed issue—and cared more about avoiding having to live near a public housing project.  

After the moratorium ended in the summer of 1974, Congress passed the Housing and Community Development Act which was signed into law by newly-inaugurated President Gerald Ford in August of that same year. The new act superseded most of the existing federal housing legislation, rolling the seven “categorical grant” programs that HUD had administered—including the Neighborhood Development Program through which the Authority received funds to acquire property for the Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Plan—into one “block grant” program which allowed for more flexible use of funds by recipients.

In addition to the Community Development Block Grant program (CDBG), as it was called, the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 created the Section 8 program through which the government would help house low-income Americans in privately-owned housing units by subsidizing their rental payments. The creation of Section 8 signaled a pivot away from the development of public housing projects in favor of units offered by the private market.

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The national discourse regarding public housing filtered down into Williamsburg as the WRHA moved forward with its plans to sell the chunk of land it had pieced together to a housing developer. Hattie Sasser, one of the women who were significantly involved in steering the Authority’s actions, informed the board that residents wanted the new housing in the area to be

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139 Rothstein, The Color of Law, 17-37.
141 Heathcott 370.
individualized and not “resemble a project.” With the help of Harland Bartholomew &
Associates, the WRHA divided its acquired land into nineteen single-family lots located along a
single road and allowed interested residents to select individual housing models from a pre-
fabricated home builder. The Authority sold lots to the contractor at reduced rates compared to
the prices of acquisition in order to ensure lower purchasing costs for the homes to be developed.
Construction began in 1975.

Of the first nine houses initially built in the neighborhood, seven were occupied by
residents who originally lived in the northwest area, much less than the number of original
residents who expressed interest in buying homes. It is unclear how many of the rest of the
nineteen lots also became occupied by original residents. Four of the seven relocated households
had to arrange for financing since the money they received from the WRHA as compensation did
not fully cover the up-front costs. Though multiple renters originally located in the
redevelopment area had expressed interest in buying a home, only one of the homes was
purchased by a former renter.

In February of 1976, the WRHA and City Council hosted a dedication ceremony for the
new neighborhood named Crispus Attucks Place in honor of Crispus Attucks, a Black man killed
in the Boston Massacre considered to be the first American casualty of the American Revolution.
The neighborhood residents, who had petitioned City Council to name the area Crispus Attucks
Place, also successfully advocated for the road running through the neighborhood to be named
Harriet Tubman Drive in celebration of the Black woman who famously led approximately
seventy enslaved people to freedom through the Underground Railroad. In prepared remarks for

142 WRHA, regular meeting minutes, March 19, 1974, WRHA archives.
the ceremony, councilwoman Shirley Low wrote of how residents shaped the WRHA’s actions by fighting against displacement caused by the original redevelopment plan:

I am sure a number of the people here will recall a public hearing held by the City Planning Commission in which we outlined a plan for this area, parking lots and all. A number of the residents told us in no uncertain terms that you did not want to move out of the city, particularly not out of this central part. Your response taught me a lot. I realized that no matter how attractive a plan is on paper if it displaces people and makes them unhappy we had better rethink what we are proposing. You will recall that the Planning Commission made a promise that no one would have to move out of this area who did not want to.

Low praised the residents of Crispus Attucks for their “courage to speak up against being replaced” and for their involvement in “helping to work out the details” as “good citizens.” Her final remarks rubbed some members of the audience the wrong way when she shared that:

Recently I pointed out Crispus Attucks to a friend from out of town. His response was: “well it looks fine now, but how long will it last. You know people don’t keep up areas like this for very long.” I replied that I had not one bit of worry about that. Too much pride, expense, and hard work had gone into Crispus Attucks to make it a project of which all the citizens of Williamsburg can be proud for any of us to allow it to deteriorate.  

While certainly Low intended to compliment the residents of Crispus Attucks such as WARO president Mary Morris and Sasser for their commitment to the project, her friend’s comment about “areas like this” demonstrates the negative perceptions many held of housing developed by the government—even that developed outside the publicly-owned and -operated housing model.

Of the neighborhood, the Daily Press wrote “The homes are in a project area of the City Redevelopment & Housing Authority, but that should not bring visions of typical public housing…It will not be a matter of crowded units housing large families with dozens of children to vandalize the new homes.”

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144 “Crispus Attucks Place,” event pamphlet, February 22, 1976, Will Molineux Collection, Box 2, Swem SCRC.
145 Dorsey, “Families Moving Into Homes In Redevelopment Area.”
With the development of Crispus Attucks to replace the housing demolished along Armistead Avenue, the larger plan for the creation of a municipal center neared completion. The City built its library a block away along Scotland Street in 1973, which it later expanded in 1982 to fit the northeast corner of Armistead and Scotland. A surface parking lot replaced much of the space in between the library and the police department, built in 1977, which faced directly opposite of the entrance into Crispus Attucks along Armistead Avenue. The City built a fire station along Lafayette in 1978 across from the police department. The WRHA had acquired the fire station site, originally occupied by houses, before conveying the parcel over to the City.

Figure 19. An aerial view of the northwest area captured soon after Crispus Attucks Place and much of the municipal center had been developed. (Courtesy of Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.)

146 “Comprehensive Plan of 1981,” 120-123.
147 WRHA, CDBG application, April 1975, “Community Development Plan Summary: Statement of Needs” WRHA archives.
As the plans for Crispus Attucks and the surrounding municipal center fell into place, the WRHA began directing its attention to the rest of the northwest area. In 1975, the Authority applied for a grant from the newly-established CDBG program in order to complete the plan set out by the original Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Plan. At the beginning of the process, Braxton Court and nearby properties along Scotland Street were ruled out for acquisition by the Authority after property owners pushed against any possibility of redevelopment. After a 1972 petition assembled by residents, the WRHA had already agreed that no property within the interior of Braxton Court would be acquired; however, property owners who fronted Scotland Street still felt threatened by a potential intervention.  

Phillip Cooke, who owned four properties along the street including the site of his business offices and the local NAACP chapter headquarters, expressed his and his neighbors’ frustrations at a May 1975 WRHA board meeting, arguing that while many of the buildings were crowded together, they were not substandard. While the Authority said that it had no immediate plans for acquisition, Cooke pushed against redevelopment, contending that “You don’t just destroy buildings, you destroy people too.” Albert Durant, who owned his late mother’s home along Scotland Street, was equally upset and filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice alleging that the WRHA was systematically forcing Black people from the urban renewal area.

Soon after Cooke’s board meeting appearance, the WRHA commissioners met with property owners and inspected the buildings in question. Afterwards, the WRHA resolved that no property running along the western side of Scotland Street up until First Baptist Church should be acquired. As was the case with the interior Braxton Court properties, the WRHA stated that their inclusion within the urban renewal area was merely in order to allow them to

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148 WRHA Resolution 11, August 10, 1972, WRHA archives.
rehabilitate their properties by taking advantage of loans and grants administered by the Authority.\textsuperscript{150}

Due to the flexible nature of the CDBG program, the WRHA’s grant application also included a variety of project proposals beyond the completion of the Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Plan. Seeking to “remove all blight and blighting influences in the City of Williamsburg,” the WRHA proposed interventions in Highland Park and other majority-Black residential areas located along South Henry Street and off Pocahontas Avenue (located to the southeast of Colonial Williamsburg).\textsuperscript{151} In the 1968 plan, Highland Park and the South Henry Street area were outlined as “Major Problem Areas” while the Pocahontas area was noted as containing multiple “deteriorating” dwelling units.\textsuperscript{152} In addition, the 1975 CDBG application requested money to fund the land acquisition for and construction costs of 100 new housing units. Specifically dedicated to housing elderly residents, 40 of the 100 units would be located in the Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Area, while the remaining 60 units, envisioned as low- and moderate-income multi-family housing, would be placed on a site within the South Henry Street area.\textsuperscript{153}

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The most contentious issue following the development of Crispus Attucks Place, however, was the WRHA’s plans for the redevelopment of the Triangle Block.\textsuperscript{154} At the beginning of the urban renewal process, the Authority promised to act upon housing in the area before intervening in the rest of the area. Various sketches created by Harland Bartholomew &

\textsuperscript{150} WRHA Resolution 49, June 17, 1975, WRHA archives.
\textsuperscript{151} WRHA, CDBG Application, April 1975, “Community Development Plan Summary: Short-term objectives,” WRHA archives.
\textsuperscript{152} “Comprehensive Plan of 1968,” Plate 8.
\textsuperscript{153} WRHA, CDBG Application, April 1975, “Community Development Plan Summary: Short-term objectives,” WRHA archives.
\textsuperscript{154} “An Outline History of the Triangle Block Development Process,” prepared by the WRHA, WRHA archives.
Associates during 1973 of possible schemes for the redevelopment of the Armistead Avenue area pictured the Triangle Block as a commercial area with new commercial structures and surface parking lots replacing many, if not all, of the original buildings. Interestingly, some of the sketches included Blayton’s hospital building.  

In February 1976, the Authority sent Charles Gary an offer for his property on the Triangle Block. In the letter, the Authority communicated that if an agreement could not be reached, the Authority would begin condemnation proceedings. Soon after, Gary—"semi-retired" since 1973 and only providing tailoring services twice a week—entered into a sales contract with the WRHA.  

Meanwhile, the Authority began recalibrating its plans for the rest of the block. Even non-governmental parties shared their own specific visions for the block’s redevelopment. The Williamsburg Board of Realtors proposed a total clearance of the land in order to build a “combination park and parking area” containing fifty metered parking spaces. Eventually, the WRHA settled on the idea of creating a park, citing nearby residents’ desire for recreational facilities to be developed in the area. Businesses could then be relocated in a new commercial area proposed on a site that replaced the remainder of Clay Street along Lafayette.  

Opposition to the park plan erupted as it came before the City Council for approval in August 1976. Dr. Blayton and his son, Oscar Blayton, published editorials in both the Virginia Gazette and Daily Press speaking out against the plan as a “devastating blow” to the Black community. Discussing the “startling decrease” in Williamsburg’s Black population during the

155 “N.D.P. for Armistead Avenue Area” sketches, part of a dossier prepared for the 1976 HUD investigation, WRHA archives.  
156 WRHA, letter to Charles Gary, March 17, 1976, Charles Edward Gary Jr. Papers, Box 4, Folder 24 & 26, Swem SCRC.  
157 “A Tailor-Made Gift for CW,” newspaper clipping found in Charles Edward Gary Jr. Papers, Box 4, Folder 4, Swem SCRC.  
158 “Triangle Proposal,” newspaper clipping found in QuoVadis Wright Family Papers, Box 7, Folder 22.
fifty years prior, the Blaytons argued that the Triangle Block was the last remaining commercial area in the city controlled primarily by Black people. Citing census data, they highlighted that the percentage of the Black population living in the city limits had decreased from 21.2 percent in 1940 to 13.3 percent in 1970. The Blaytons concluded their critique of the proposal by writing that “Denying blacks the control of the triangular block, without question, will remove black commercial activity from within the boundaries of Williamsburg, and with it, any hope of there being any increase in opportunity for blacks in this town.”  

Other members of the Black community, including Hattie Sasser and Mary Morris, did not agree. Morris argued that the businesses caused “lots of confusion” and that in the event that elderly housing was built in the northwest area, the park would be a nice amenity for residents.

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160 “Park Opposed as Forcing Out Blacks,” August 13, 1976, [newspaper unknown], [author unknown], Box 7, Folder 22, QuoVadis Wright Papers Swem SCRC. Hattie Sasser agrees with the park proposal in Daily Press, September 1, 1976.
Figure 20. Dr. Blayton's newspaper editorial criticizing the Authority's proposal to redevelop the Triangle Block into a park. 100 people showed up to the next City Council meeting to protest the proposal and successfully forced local leaders to envision any project related to redeveloping the Triangle Block as a way to preserve and promote minority-owned businesses in the City. (Courtesy of Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary)

About 100 people, Black and white, showed up to the next city council meeting to express their opposition to the park proposal. Newspapers recorded Black citizens’ arguments against the plan, which were quite similar to those expressed in the Blaytons’ editorials: the redevelopment of the Triangle Block would destroy Williamsburg’s last remaining area for Black-owned businesses, damaging Black residents’ pride and shuttering businesses who would not be able to afford relocation. Further, citizens in opposition asserted that redevelopment would decrease opportunity for young Black professionals who wished to stay in Williamsburg and open businesses of their own. Many speakers highlighted Blayton’s hospital building as of particular importance to the Black community.

The Times-Herald quoted the opinions of various tenants, most of whom opposed the plan. Dr. Joseph L. Jones, who operated a medical office in Charles Gary’s building, said that the issue was not the condition of the buildings but the nuisances—loitering and littering—that were
attracted by some of the Block’s businesses, specifically a snack bar and two delicatessens. Jones stated that he perceived “no difference in the looks” of buildings on the Triangle Block and other commercial blocks located along Prince George Street operated by white landlords. White business owners Louis Galanos and Henry Rutledge also opposed redevelopment. Galanos called the plan a “rip off deal,” and Rutledge said it would be impossible for his business supply store to relocate in a “beneficial” way.\footnote{Bill McLaughlin, “Black Block –[clipped off],” \textit{Times-Herald Metro News}, August 18, 1976. See also: “Elimination of Block Opposed,” \textit{Daily Press}, Aug 12, 1976.}

In response to the opposition voiced against the park proposal, the City Council asked that the WRHA further study the issue. The Authority asked owners and tenants of the Triangle Block to meet at the end of August to discuss the commercial area’s future. The discussion attracted more than 70 people who all packed into the courthouse meeting room where it was held. David Otey, now chair of the WRHA board, expressed that he resented allegations of racism and explained that the park proposal emerged from suggestions area residents offered at WARO meetings which Triangle Block property owners and tenants did not attend.

Representing owners and occupants of the Triangle Block, Oscar Blayton offered three proposals as alternatives to the park plan with the goal of maintaining the area as a place for Black-owned businesses: rehabilitation by individual owners, rehabilitation by a government-funded non-profit community development corporation, or rehabilitation by the WRHA. All three proposals allowed for Blayton’s hospital building and the adjacent Gary property to remain in place, but Blayton stated that the community development corporation option was preferred. Since many citizens in Williamsburg desired more parking for automobiles in the downtown area, Blayton’s proposals suggested that the Webb Estate property could be used to construct a surface lot.
In response, WRHA member Peter Brown asked why property owners now wished to improve their buildings when they could have done so before the Authority proposed redevelopment, to which Blayton said that his family had tried. Alleyne Blayton asserted that “We want to keep this block if we have to go to the Supreme Court,” while emphasizing the need for Williamsburg to attract young Black professionals. Hubert Alexander, still the only Black member of the WRHA, insisted that the “blight on the Triangle has to be corrected” and that the Authority had “bent over backwards” to work with residents. The WRHA concluded the meeting by asking Harland Bartholomew & Associates to put together an updated study of the Triangle Block considering the possibility of rehabilitation through a community development corporation.\(^\text{162}\)

While the new study was underway, the WRHA continued to move forward with the acquisition of property on the Triangle Block. Al Siff, the WRHA’s consultant from Harland Bartholomew & Associates, claimed that the City’s instruction to restudy the area did not preclude the Authority from continuing activities related to the block. At the WRHA’s next meeting in September, commissioners authorized condemnation proceedings for the Rutledge brothers’ property after the pair declined WRHA’s offer for their building at the corner of Prince George Street and Armistead Avenue.\(^\text{163}\) In order to secure enough land required for federal and state funding for the proposed elderly housing site, the Authority had also condemned two parcels owned by the Rutledges along Scotland Street that they used for off-street parking mandated for businesses by municipal code. Acquiring the Rutledges’ Triangle Block property

allowed the WRHA to avoid any possible damage claim filed against the WRHA for taking away parking for their business.\textsuperscript{164}

The board also reviewed a request by Charles Gary to be released from his sales contract with the WRHA so that he could instead sell his property to Colonial Investors, Inc., the landowning corporation now managed by Dr. Blayton and his son Oscar. Such a move provided Gary certain tax advantages and fulfilled his preference that his land remain in the hands of a Black owner. Siff expressed resistance to Gary’s request, reasoning that complying would be “like giving your trump card away.”\textsuperscript{165}

The WRHA declined Gary’s request and completed the purchase of his property in November, the first of the Authority’s land acquisitions on the Triangle Block. Around the same time, the WRHA and the Rutledges neared an agreement for the purchase of their parcel. Additionally, the Authority began the process of entering a sales contract with members of the Webb Estate who earlier, without legal representation, had contested the Authority’s condemnation proceedings as “not fair.” No offer was yet extended to Colonial Investors, the last of the block’s four property owners, who had made clear that they were not interested in selling to the Authority.\textsuperscript{166}

While the protests against the redevelopment of Triangle Block led by the Blayton family had not been able to stop the Authority from acquiring land on the block, they successfully shifted the discourse surrounding redevelopment. Their advocacy, highlighting the disappearing Black presence within the city limits, altered the trajectory of plans for the block and forced the

\textsuperscript{165} “Condemnation Action Authorized By Board.”
Authority to consider maintaining the presence of Black-owned businesses within the downtown area as a major policymaking priority.

The WRHA’s plans for the redevelopment of the Triangle Block came under investigation by HUD in the summer of 1977 after Alleyne and Oscar Blayton complained to the federal government. The investigation was largely handled by the WRHA’s executive director, Herbert Mallette. Mallette, just recently hired for the position in May 1977, was the Authority’s first Black executive director. For the investigation, Mallette submitted a series of responses and documents in response to HUD’s inquiries about the processes contributing to and the justifications for the WRHA’s proposal for the Triangle Block. Mallette explained that:

In the original preliminary land use studies of the NDP project the Triangle Block was a particularly difficult design problem and has continued to be one to this day. As with any irregular parcel surrounded by streets but particularly a triangular parcel of limited size it is virtually impossible to satisfactorily resolve the problems of adequate off-street parking and safe ingress and egress. In this particular area where new residential development will occur across Scotland Street at substantial cost we are faced with the problem of attempting to continue commercial reuse without generating environmental influences that are adverse to that residential use.

Mallette refuted the idea that the WRHA lacked concern for the Black community by highlighting the involvement of the WARO and the development of Crispus Attucks and maintained that the idea to redevelop the block into a park evolved from discussions with both the WARO and Crispus Attucks residents. Further, he assured HUD that “the Authority is responsive to and in sympathy with the objective of minority business enterprise,” while arguing that “The basic position of the Authority is that the personal and corporate interests that exist in the Triangle Block must not preclude either the public and neighborhood interest…[or] the

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167 Barbara Blayton Richardson, phone interview, March 12, 2019.
realization of opportunities that exist for minority business development opportunities on the proposed commercial use area” located on Lafayette Street.\textsuperscript{168}

After HUD did nothing following the investigation, the Authority finalized the purchase of the Webb Estate property in December 1977 and reaffirmed its intention to acquire the Colonial Investors property—now the last of the block’s privately-owned parcels—at a later February 1978 meeting. The WRHA commissioners now planned to raze the entire block and allow the proposed community development corporation to develop a new commercial building for “minority” businesses, rather than replacing the commercial area at a different location along Lafayette Street. Nevertheless, Colonial Investors still opposed total demolition, with Oscar Blayton arguing that rental costs for a new building would prevent most Black business owners from opening up shop. Commissioners pushed back against Blayton’s protests, arguing that it would not be fair to acquire all property except for one parcel and that they doubted a redevelopment project that kept Blayton’s hospital building while changing the rest of the block could be carried out aesthetically.\textsuperscript{169}

The Blaytons’ continued opposition kept the idea of rehabilitation alive and, in February 1979, Harland Bartholomew & Associates produced a financial feasibility study for the rehabilitation of Blayton’s hospital and the Gary Building by a community development corporation. The study, however, proved to be the final rationale used by the WRHA for razing the entire block, as commissioners decided that the cost to fix up each property proved too much and not a justifiable use of public money.\textsuperscript{170} A month later, the Authority initiated condemnation proceedings for the Colonial Investors property, spurring a legal battle with the Blaytons who

\textsuperscript{168} WRHA, “Statement,” July 1, 1977.
successfully challenged the original amount of compensation.\footnote{“Housing Authority To Handle Redeveloping Triangle Block,” \textit{Daily Press}, March 23, 1979. Information about the legal battle regarding the price of compensation learned from Barbara Blayton Richardson, phone interview, March 12, 2019.} Almost three years after the City Council meeting where 100 citizens came out to oppose the park proposal, the WRHA now had consolidated its ownership of the Triangle Block.

In the same year, CDBG funds capitalized the Williamsburg Area Development Corporation (WADC), a community development corporation with which the Authority had agreed to cooperate in the construction of a new commercial building on the Triangle Block dedicated to “minority” entrepreneurs. Later composed of mostly Black community leaders and some white citizens, the WADC asserted at the beginning of its communications with the WRHA that “We feel that the board as constituted is the only community group that represents the will of the area residents and tenants.”\footnote{Williamsburg Area Development Corporation, letter from to the WRHA, May 7, 1979.} A 1982 roster of board members included Dr. Blayton, Mary Morris, Hattie Sasser, Rev. Junius Moody, Rev. James Tabb, and Esterine Moyler who all, along with others, served under WADC President Bobbye Alexander, wife of Hubert Alexander.\footnote{Williamsburg Area Development Corporation Board Members, August 24, 1982} After negotiations in 1980, the WADC, WRHA, and City Council agreed upon a lease structure that would allow displaced businesses to relocate within the new building, as well as designating the Authority responsible for the new building’s development as a “turnkey project.” The three parties selected Spencer Scott and Associates, a Black-led architecture firm based in Hampton Roads, to design the building. The WRHA would erect the building with a loan from the City and, when construction was finished, the WADC would then purchase the building from the WRHA.\footnote{WRHA, “An Outline History of the Triangle Block Development Process.”}
At the same time, the WRHA continued its efforts to improve housing conditions in the city. The Authority formalized its plans to rehabilitate neighborhoods outside of the northwest area with the adoption of a “Williamsburg Redevelopment & Conservation Plan,” that superseded the Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Plan through which it had administered its housing interventions before. Highland Park and the neighborhood around Pocahontas Avenue were designated as “conservation areas” and the Armistead Avenue area re-designated as an “urban renewal and conservation area.” In the new conservation areas, the WRHA improved street conditions, redeveloped houses in particularly poor condition, and administered loans and grants for area residents to rehabilitate their properties. While WRHA staff first observed that “there is a great deal of suspicion about government programs because many of the people in target areas were moved originally from the Camp Peary area and they fear losing their homes again,” the popularity of the rehabilitation program grew over time.

Earlier, the Authority had indicated a desire to intervene in the South Henry Street area since the extension of the once-dead end road to the newly-developed state highway VA 199 made the area “the newest entrance to the city.” It decided not to, however, after concluding that the neighborhood would be adequately redeveloped with the planned construction of the National Center for State Courts and new William & Mary Law School facilities. The abandonment of any major action by the WRHA along South Henry Street spelled the end for the idea of siting a complex of 60 low-to-moderate income housing units in the area.

178 WRHA and City Council, minutes from joint meeting, January 31, 1978.
Instead, the WRHA located three different sites throughout the city for new housing development—Highland Park, Mimosa Drive, and New Hope Road—in addition to the site on the northwest corner of Scotland Street and Armistead Avenue that had already been chosen for new elderly housing. When the Carter Administration increased federal financing available for public housing development after taking office in 1977, the WRHA jumped at the opportunity to tap into the new funding stream rather than incentivize construction by a private developer as occurred with Crispus Attucks. Though HUD regulations guarded against the old practice of using public housing to perpetuate racial segregation, the Authority’s four site selections were still informed by Williamsburg’s established hierarchies of race and class due to the stigma surrounding public housing. Highland Park and (historically) the northwest area were Black neighborhoods while Mimosa Drive was a working-class white neighborhood and New Hope Road, a developing commercial area surrounded by newly-built garden style apartments. It is more telling, perhaps, to note that no wealthy or middle-class white neighborhoods were considered or selected by the Authority.

Of the three low-to-moderate income sites, only the Highland Park proposal resulted in displacement. Five Black families rented houses from Colonial Williamsburg, who owned the land targeted for development. While the Authority had already acquired much of the elderly site under the Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Plan, it began the acquisition process for the rest of the site and the three other sites at the end of 1977.

The Highland Park site proved to be the most controversial of the Authority’s selections. Sometime during the process, Hubert Alexander called a meeting with his neighbors in the

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179 “Preliminary Site Report” Information about Colonial Williamsburg having title found on page 4 of the “Narrative on Selection of Low and Moderate income Housing Sites.” The first time that acquisition came up for approval the WRHA could not vote since one commissioner was missing and, of the four present, two—Alexander and another commissioner—worked for Colonial Williamsburg and were obligated to abstain.
neighborhood’s Union Baptist Church to discuss the matter. Despite opposition voiced by many attendees, Alexander communicated that the Authority was going to build the apartments no matter what. In March 1980, over two years after the acquisition of the site, 100 neighborhood residents signed a petition presented to City Council that argued that it was against federal regulation for the Authority to place public housing in the predominately Black neighborhood. Residents also lamented that the development would double the neighborhood’s population and increase traffic. City Council members defended the site selection by pointing to its approval by HUD and dismissed neighbors’ concerns as being raised too late, since changing locations would jeopardize federal funding for the Authority’s public housing program. Mayor Vernon Geddy Jr. pointed out that no objections were raised in earlier public meetings related to developing public housing on the site, such as the rezoning of the parcel to allow for a higher density.

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180 Carmines, “From Magruder to Highland Park,” 45. Carmines does not include the date of the meeting. Though people who lived in Highland Park at the time that I spoke to remembered the meeting as very contentious, none of them remembered its exact date.

Similar, albeit smaller, neighborhood-based opposition to public housing development arose against the Mimosa Drive site selection, located on a dead-end road branched off South Henry Street. Mimosa Drive residents complained that the units would double their street’s population, overextend their already inadequate public services, and affect their overall quality of life. Residents in Coves, the adjacent upper-middle-class white neighborhood raised environmental concerns about possible mudslides aggravated by development on the site’s terrain, as well as danger for children likely to play along slopes nearby. In response, the WRHA contracted four ecological experts to study the area in order to allay Coves residents’ concerns.¹⁸²

¹⁸² WRHA, “Historic Community Goes Into Public Housing In Unique Fashion.”
The site along New Hope Road, a parcel of land located to the east along Williamsburg’s busy Richmond Road, was surrounded by multi-family apartments and commercial land uses and stirred little to no opposition to its selection.

The Authority began construction of the four public housing sites—a total of 104 units—in August 1980, with each site built and occupied in phases. Within the context of the federal government withdrawing support for its public housing program in favor of Section 8 vouchers, WRHA’s public housing units went against national policy currents. Indeed, the four sites were among the last public housing units built as explicitly new units within the housing market rather than as replacements for public housing sites that were demolished and redeveloped as later took place during HUD’s HOPE VI program. All four sites were finished by June 1982 and the Authority contracted tenants for all of its units by October of the same year. In a letter to Williamsburg’s city manager, Executive Director Mallette bragged that:

> The public housing offered citizens is unique in that four (4) scattered sites were utilized in lieu of a single high density site. By the use of the scattered public housing sites the Authority has been able to more effectively blend the traditionally unacceptable aesthetics of high density public housing into an acceptable harmonious relationship with the character of the City of Williamsburg.

To a certain extent, Mallette’s talk of the scattered site model was true—each public housing site was composed of low-rise buildings whose use of brick building material and reference to a simple gable roofline drew upon the idealized aesthetic of vaguely-historicist single-family homes that informed much of the planning discourse in Williamsburg. In terms of their design in reference to their surrounding neighborhoods, however, only the elderly housing site was fully integrated into the existing street layout.

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Indeed, the same stigma about public housing that informed site selection manifested itself in the design of the low-to-moderate income housing developments and how they fit within their immediate community. The fourteen-unit site located on Mimosa Drive elbowed off its residential street with none of its six buildings fronting the road in the same manner as neighboring privately-owned homes. The design of the twenty-four-unit Highland Park site barely attempted to connect with the gridded layout of the surrounding neighborhood, opting rather to organize its twelve buildings around a separate circular street and newly-developed access road that led in-and-out of the neighborhood. The design of New Hope Road’s seven-building complex featuring twenty-eight units hooked off the end of its dead-end street and did not attempt to connect to the site’s surrounding commercial and apartment buildings beyond its entrance off the public access road.
The WRHA structured priority for potential tenants by whether or not they already lived within Williamsburg’s city limits, and less so, if they worked in Williamsburg but lived nearby. Accordingly, of the first tenants, 59 percent had lived in Williamsburg before. Internally, the initial demographics of the 66 low-to-moderate income housing units compared to the 38 elderly units varied significantly. While the elderly housing site was 38 percent Black and 62 percent white, the other three developments featured almost a third less white tenants proportionally—Mimosa Drive was 64 percent Black, 22 percent white, and 14 percent Asian; Katherine Circle was 77 percent Black and 23 percent white; and New Hope Drive was 83 percent Black and 17 percent white.\footnote{Dorsey, “Williamsburg Public Housing Operates With Few Problems.”}
Soon after the construction of the Mimosa Drive site, property owners along Mimosa Drive and in Coves pushed City Council to “downzone”—or lower the density allowed by the zoning code—empty parcels of land in their neighborhoods that were zoned to allow for future apartment construction. In a *Daily Press* editorial, one citizen involved in the process wrote, “It is gratifying that Williamsburg city officials have demonstrated their concern for the city by protecting small, single-family neighborhoods. Mimosa Drive homeowners are also indebted to the citizens of other single-family neighborhoods for their staunch support. Together we can and did make a difference.”186

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As Williamsburg’s four public housing sites came into full operation, plans for the new commercial building on the Triangle Block became formalized. While the WRHA agreed with WADC’s original proposal that the building consist of 9,000 square feet—1,000 for restaurant space, 4,000 for retail, and 4,000 for office—projected construction costs whittled the building down to 7,885 square feet. The proportions of the different types of space to be leased in the building shifted accordingly—1,526 square feet of restaurant space, 3,386 of retail, and 2,973 of office.187

Likewise, as development costs increased, so did the rent. While the WADC had proposed that rent would be between $5 to $6 per square foot in its early communications with interested businesspeople such as Charles Gary, when construction of the building neared completion leases doubled.188 In an August 1983 letter, WADC informed Gary that office space

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188 Williamsburg Area Development Corporation, letter to Charles Gary, November 9, 1979, Charles Edward Gary Jr. Papers, Box 4, Folder 24, Swem SCRC.
would cost $9 per square foot, professional/retail space $10 per square foot, and food service space $12 per square foot. Further, the size of spaces inside the building proved to be potentially prohibitive, with the smallest space numbering 1,087 square feet. When development of the new building finished in 1984, no business owners who were displaced by the redevelopment relocated inside the new building.

Dr. Blayton and Gary both lamented how the Authority and WADC fell short of their commitment to keep Black-owned businesses on the block. The *Daily Press* quoted Gary saying, “They took our buildings with the idea we could pay reasonable rent and go back in; $10 to $12 is not reasonable.” Dr. Blayton said “People who have been here for generations feel they have been displaced.”

The one-story brick building sat along Prince George Street with storefronts facing both the street and the surface parking that took up the rest of the block. The first business to open in the redeveloped Triangle Block was Laney’s, a jewelry store owned by a white woman. Unlike a white businessman who was displaced during redevelopment and attempted to relocate in the building, the owner of the jewelry store’s application to lease space in the building was accepted since—according to affirmative action policies—white women qualified as minorities due to their gender. Along with Laney’s, two Black-owned businesses served as the original tenants of the building. Herbert Mallette, newly-retired from serving as the Authority’s executive director, opened an office supply store. Al Johnson, who was recruited from his restaurant management

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job at Colonial Williamsburg, leased half of the building out for his Japanese restaurant named Sakura.¹⁹¹

While the WADC worked to recruit business throughout the construction process and initially controlled who could lease space in the building, it did not receive ownership of the building after its completion. The community development corporation likely did not receive enough funding to afford the new building. Nonetheless, the WADC remained active in matters related to the Triangle Block. In 1986, the WADC hosted a dedication ceremony where they officially named the block the “Harris-Webb Triangle Block” in honor of Samuel K. Harris and William Henry Webb, Sr., both of whom were among the earliest business owners in the block’s history.¹⁹²

Figure 24. The WADC hosted a dedication ceremony in which the designated the block as the “Harris-Webb Triangle Block,” after Samuel K. Harris and William Henry Webb Sr., two entrepreneurs from the Triangle Block’s early history. The annotation is authored by QuoVadis Wright who collected the news clipping. (Courtesy of Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary)


In the span of almost a decade and a half, the Authority radically reshaped the landscape of Williamsburg, particularly the parts of the city in which Black citizens lived and owned property. The WRHA redeveloped land—more often than not acquired through the threat of eminent domain—in the northwest area in concert with the City’s municipal center project, though proposals for redevelopment of the area by government powers had been suggested for many decades prior. Nonetheless, the eventual development of projects in the neighborhood such as Crispus Attucks Place and the Triangle Building were shaped by the organizing efforts of Black activists such as Mary Morris, Hattie Sasser, and the Blaytons just as much as the projects were imposed by the WRHA. The Authority also used federal funds to finance the construction of an elderly public housing site in the northwest area, much more integrated into the neighborhood than the three other public housing communities for low-to-moderate income tenants developed in peripheral locations during the same time. The stigma against public
housing that informed the design of the WRHA’s four sites matched national policy currents as the federal government continued to withdraw funding for the construction of new public housing units and limit funding for their maintenance—a trend that would impact the WRHA as it continued to operate into the future.
Chapter Three
A Second Wind

The Braxton Court revitalization, would you say it was probably restitution? Man, [quoting Fats Waller] ‘one never knows, do one?’ Some people feel the way that the Triangle was treated, that was not well. Some people say no, that decimation wasn’t the case. But that was something that went on back at that time. Now things are very, very different as a result of what happened there. Some people paid for it and some people are now reaping the rewards, so is it equalizing out? To a degree.

—Robert A. Braxton, oral history interview, February 27, 2019.

Small-town feel vs. affordable housing
— Daily Press headline, April 14, 2007

The WRHA entered a period of dormancy in the years following the completion of its four public housing sites and the Triangle Building. Amid the federal government’s withdrawal from the public housing program, the Authority did not pursue any major action for a decade and a half under the leadership of Sheila Griffith. Griffith, who was a Black minister from Hampton, replaced Herbert Mallette as the Authority’s executive director. The WRHA not only declined to formulate a new policy program but also failed to adequately maintain the projects it had spent the past decade and a half developing.

Other than performing routine maintenance, the Authority largely neglected its four public housing sites and the Triangle Building. As a result, mistrust between tenants of WRHA-owned properties and the WRHA grew. At a 1991 WRHA board meeting, thirty residents from the Highland Park, New Hope Road, and Mimosa Drive public housing sites spoke out against the Authority’s mismanagement and called for Griffith to resign. In addition to frustrations about dysfunctional stove burners, broken light fixtures, leaky ceilings, and gaps in between doors and their doorframes, tenants complained that the Authority was not informing them about federal “Resident Initiatives” grants available for them to use for day care, education, and other “self-
improvement” programs. During the meeting WRHA chair Stuart Spirn barred any complaints about housing conditions, arguing that the commissioners were only concerned with the administration of policy rather than questions of day-to-day-management, and stopped public discussion after an hour.193

Mistrust of the Authority extended to its management of the Triangle Building as well. A year earlier in 1990, Al Johnson and Herbert Mallette filed a complaint with HUD’s Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity Office against the WRHA in regard to a promise to advertise the Triangle Building made during its development. In response, commissioners discussed the allegations privately in an executive session and decided that the complaint was unfounded.194

While the WRHA owned the Triangle Building, the WADC continued to exist into the early 1990s. On July 4, 1991, the WADC blocked off the three streets surrounding the Triangle Block for the “372 Afro-American Expo,” a festival in commemoration of 372 years of Africans and their descendants in North America. According to Al Johnson, who co-chaired the planning of the event with Hattie Sasser, the 372 Afro-American Expo was the first public celebration of Black culture and achievement ever put on in Williamsburg and the surrounding area. Featuring arts and crafts exhibits, musical performances, and food, the event centered around a “Where They Are Now” exhibit. The exhibit tracked the careers and successes of three-hundred Black students who graduated from local schools “without any local recognition.” With its focus on young Black professionalism, the exhibit echoed the concerns about the lack of professional opportunities for Black youth in Williamsburg raised during the redevelopment of the Triangle

194 WRHA, regular meeting minutes, August 16, 1990. Because the content of the complaint was not listed in minutes, I learned that Johnson and Mallette were the ones who filed the complaint regarding the promise to advertise through a phone interview with Al & Liz Johnson in March 2019.
Block. After the expo, the WADC stopped functioning substantially and eventually fizzled out.

The 372 Afro-American Expo allowed for the reclamation of the Triangle Block by Williamsburg’s Black community, albeit only for a brief amount of time. After the redevelopment of the block, the only two Black-owned businesses to lease space in the new building built by the WRHA were Johnson’s Sakura restaurant and former WRHA Executive Director Herbert Mallette’s The Write Place. Many people assumed that The Write Place was owned by the white man employed by Mallette to run the store, however, since Mallette moved away from Williamsburg soon after opening it. Sakura and The Write Place lasted well into the late 1990s and towards the end of their years found themselves increasingly having to compete with large national chains. Sakura and The Write Place never found the company of other Black-owned businesses during their tenancy in the Triangle Building since the WRHA’s already-diluted commitment to maintaining the Triangle Block as a place for “minority entrepreneurship” all but diminished after the end of the WADC.

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The City lost faith in the ability of the WRHA in response to its years of mismanagement and neglect. In 1995, the City itself applied for CDBG funds for the rehabilitation of Wales, a historically-Black neighborhood located off Ironbound Road that was annexed into Williamsburg from James City County nearly a decade earlier in 1984. With the money received, the City

196 Sharon Scruggs, oral history interview with Zach Meredith, November 9, 2018; James Gurganus, oral history interview with Zach Meredith, February 1, 2019.
197 Sharon Scruggs, oral history interview.
opted to enlist Housing Partnerships, Inc., a local non-profit, to carry out the rehabilitation project, rather than the Authority.199

Soon after, the WRHA fired Griffith in 1996—five years after tenants had called for her resignation at a WRHA board meeting. In her place, James Gurganus, a white man who previously headed the nearby Chesapeake Redevelopment & Housing Authority, took over as interim executive director and was later hired full-time.200 In the face of years of built-up disorganization and mismanagement, Gurganus and his staff were forced to confront the WRHA’s dysfunction. A HUD assessment of the Authority’s public housing management returned poor results—its properties lagged far behind in HUD’s nationwide efforts to modernize the country’s public housing stock—and an audit of its finances revealed a disturbing number of issues.201 Some even feared that HUD would have to take over the WRHA’s public housing program.202

Tenants of WRHA property had to live with the consequences of the Authority’s negligence and without any serious repair efforts in response to tenants’ complaints, conditions only worsened. After the WRHA’s leadership changed, a former tenant of an unnamed housing community submitted an anonymous message to the Virginia Gazette’s “Last Word” section complaining that “The former Redevelopment Authority did not take care of the apartment or the property. The grass was up to the doorknobs, and the needs of the tenants were not addressed. It’s not necessarily a low-income neighborhood and shouldn’t be labeled a bad

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201 Tracy Blevins, “Housing mismanagement comes to light at last,” Virginia Gazette, June 28, 1997; see also WRHA Resolution 149.
202 Sharon Scruggs, oral history interview.
neighborhood.” According to Sharon Scruggs, a local white entrepreneur who served on the WRHA board during the late 1990s and early 2000s:

[The housing sites] were trashy, fairly unkempt, you know. They just were slummy. They were like slums, they weren’t nice. I wouldn’t wanna live in one, you know. And there was a lot of crime…But no one from the previous board and management had been putting it out there to get that under control. It was just kind of a “uh… it’s too big a problem.”

Even the playground equipment at some of the sites was in such poor condition that it was almost too dangerous for use. Some members of the New Hope Road public housing community took to calling their apartment development “No Hope,” reflecting the impact of the Authority’s inaction had on their quality of life.

Although the WRHA cited the poor condition of pre-existing buildings on the Triangle Block as the rationale for its redevelopment, a similar deterioration afflicted the Triangle Building under the Authority’s watch. A tree grew on top of its roof after debris that collected over time was never cleared off. The roof often leaked, and, in one instance, the building’s foundation settled, causing the plumbing to stop up. Some commissioners even floated the idea of tearing the building down, only about fifteen years after its construction.

Under Gurganus’ leadership, the WRHA slowly began to make necessary repairs on its properties using federal grants. Through phased rehabilitation, the Authority replaced the roofing, exterior siding, windows, air conditioners, refrigerators, oven ranges, cabinets, doors, flooring, and interior lighting of all of its units. Additionally, the WRHA installed new exterior lighting, sidewalks, and playground equipment at its public housing sites. Calls requesting

203 “Housing project,” Last Word section, *Virginia Gazette*, in the WRHA archives’ news clippings scrapbook.
204 Sharon Scruggs, oral history interview.
205 James Gurganus, oral history interview.
206 Sharon Scruggs, oral history interview.
207 James Gurganus, oral history interview.
maintenance shot up to 1,000 in the first year that the Authority began repairing its properties, demonstrating how the Authority’s prior negligence stifled tenants’ sense of control over their housing conditions. The WRHA became so responsive that maintenance work was completed within twenty-four hours of a request. The Authority also invested in repairing the Triangle Building and, through that, created a revenue stream from commercial leases to supplement HUD funding for its public housing program.

An increasingly-active WRHA also meant a stricter relationship between the Authority and its tenants. Twenty-two tenants moved out in 1997. The WRHA reevaluated individuals’ rents for the first time in a while and, in many cases, raised them to more accurately reflect residents’ income levels. The Authority used the increased revenue collected from rent to supplement HUD grants for the property repair program’s financing. Further, operating within the national “War on Drugs” that began in the 1980s, the Authority implemented a “Three Strikes, You’re Out” policy regarding the use of drugs. The policy was two strikes more than the one-strike rule President Bill Clinton ordered public housing agencies adopt in 1996. Nine tenants were evicted as a result.

While the WRHA’s anti-drug use stance emerged partly in response to some tenants’ concerns about drugs and crime, the “Three Strikes, You’re Out” eviction policy illuminates how residents of public housing encountered far more government surveillance compared to property-owners and residents of private rentals. At the elderly housing site along Scotland Street, the

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211 “Housing rehab began with fresh new image.”
Authority installed cameras to monitor exterior doors and hallways in order to stop residents from sneaking in “street people” and drug dealers.213 At the New Hope Road development where the drug problem was perceived to be the worst, the Authority built a fence at the edge of the woods to prevent drug dealers from a nearby neighborhood from entering the property.214

In addition, the reenergized Authority developed a variety of programs less explicitly focused on housing or development that residents could take advantage of. Gurganus collaborated with a teacher from Matthew Whaley Elementary School to create opportunities for elderly housing residents and students to befriend each other and participate in joint activities. Students performed a musical concert at the residents’ building. Before the students sat down to take their standardized tests, residents made encouraging posters and cheered them on.215

With a grant from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (VDHCD), the Authority partnered with the Peninsula Home Builders Association to provide free job training for public housing residents and income-eligible Williamsburg citizens. One of the projects used to train students was the relocation of a home from North Boundary Street into Crispus Attucks Place. Though neighbors originally resisted the introduction of the home into their neighborhood on grounds that it didn’t match Crispus Attucks’ “character,” the structure was eventually located in one of the neighborhood’s last remaining empty lots in 1998 and filled by a moderate-income homeowner.216 The relocation occurred around the same time that the WRHA became concerned that three houses had become rental properties in the neighborhood that it helped develop twenty years earlier.217

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213 James Gurganus, oral history interview.
214 Ibid.
217 Blevins, “Housing agency aims to shore up Crispus Attucks,” *Virginia Gazette*. 
The WRHA also reestablished the Resident Advisory Council at each public housing site. Through the councils, Gurganus asked residents to come up with new names for the developments which, up until then, did not go by a name distinct from the streets that they were located along. He thought that new names—no more “No Hope”—would boost residents’ pride and build off the improvement of conditions achieved through modernization. As a result, Mimosa Drive became Mimosa Woods. New Hope Drive became Sylvia Brown Apartments in honor of longtime resident Sylvia Brown who Gurganus described as “the glue that held New Hope together. She was a very straightforward person, she took no mess from anybody, I don’t care how big they were or how big the group was. Didn’t matter to her…Sylvia was the—like I said, she was the cornerstone for that community.” Brown organized Christmas parties and Easter egg hunts for the children in the community, yearly traditions that continue into the present.

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218 James Gurganus, oral history interview.
Sylvia Brown Apartments in March 2019. In the early 2000s, the WRHA renamed the public housing community after a longtime resident Sylvia Brown who was described as the “cornerstone” of the community. (Photo by author)

The elderly housing site became the Blayton Building in honor of Dr. Blayton. Given that just two decades earlier the Authority had taken Blayton’s property across the street through eminent domain proceedings, the name choice was ironic. Nonetheless, the dedication of the building in Blayton’s name followed earlier precedent of memorializing Black history upon Black community members’ suggestion. Such was the case with the dedication of the Triangle Block as the Harris-Webb Triangle and the naming of Crispus Attucks and Harriet Tubman Lane.

The WRHA hosted a dedication ceremony celebrating Dr. Blayton and his legacy in June 2000 where he himself, 94 years of age, unveiled the new sign for the building. Blayton’s daughter, neighbors, colleagues, and friends all spoke at the ceremony with remembrances of the man whom the dedication pamphlet prepared by the WRHA described as “dedicated to the health and well being of his fellow man.” The pamphlet included brief narratives about the history of
Dr. Blayton and the building now named after him, both of which glossed over the contentious political process through which the Triangle Block and the surrounding Armistead Avenue area were redeveloped.  

Figure 27. The pamphlet from the dedication ceremony of the Blayton Building. (Courtesy of Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William & Mary)

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220 WRHA, Dedication of the Blayton Building pamphlet, June 16, 2000, Williamsburg Documentary Project Collection, Box 4, Folder 412, Swem SCRC.
The inscription of Black history upon the northwest area’s landscape continued across the street from the Blayton Building when a local organization, the Friends of African American History, lobbied City Council to rename the Triangle Block after Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and permit the construction of a monument to King on the block.²²¹ King had visited Williamsburg and spoke at First Baptist Church in 1962. The advocacy of Friends paid off and, in May 2001, Mayor Jeanne Zeidler signed a proclamation to name the Triangle Block the “Martin Luther King, Jr. Triangle.”²²² The proclamation replaced the earlier designation of the block as the “Harris-Webb Triangle Block” by the WADC in 1986, though such a title had virtually fallen out of recognition among the Williamsburg public by then. With permission from the Authority, the Friends placed a two-plank temporary marker at the corner of Prince George and Scotland Street advertising the site as the future location of a monument to King.²²³

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²²¹ Willie P. Parker, oral history interview with Ben Bowery and Samantha Nichols Gonzalez, April 19, 2017.
Figure 29. The Society of Friends of African American History organized the erection of the memorial to the Triangle Block's pre-redevelopment entrepreneurs as well as the designation of the block as the "Martin Luther King, Jr. Triangle Block." For the past eighteen years, a temporary sign has marked the "Future Site of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial." On at least three occasions, vandals have broken the marker. (Photo by author, March 2019)

Figure 30. The nine entrepreneurs listed on the Triangle Block memorial: James B. Blayton, Thomas Wise, William Webb, Samuel K. Harris, Charles Gary, Clarence Webb, Virgie Williams, Norman Jones, and Earl Henderson. (Photo by author, March 2019)
At the same time, the Friends also began efforts to memorialize more entrepreneurs who owned businesses on the Triangle Block before redevelopment. In 2001, the Friends facilitated a meeting at First Baptist Church where participants identified and discussed entrepreneurs who ought to be listed on a monument. After approaching Gurganus about their plans, the Authority offered its ten-foot marquee sign at the corner of Prince George and Scotland to be repurposed for the Friends’ memorial. With the sign, the Friends replaced the panels that advertised businesses and attached plaques naming and describing nine different entrepreneurs from the block’s history. In May 2004, the Friends hosted a dedication ceremony for the unveiling of the monument, joining the marker for the future MLK monument at the corner of Prince George and Scotland. The temporary marker remains into the present, eighteen years since it was first placed due to the Friends’ difficulty securing enough funding. While awaiting funding, vandals have broken the marker on at least three occasions.

As the Authority fixed up its properties and got its internal operations in order, it began working towards its largest and final housing development project on Strawberry Plains Road. The City had been eyeing the redevelopment of the majority-Black neighborhood along

224 Erin Hegarty, Samantha Nichols González, and Benjamin Bowery. “Redevelopment of the Triangle,” (Esri Story Map). William & Mary Center for Geospatial Analysis, https://cga-wm.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=723122cd4a364732b8e0e1cd13fc6469. This multimedia “story map” was the product of a joint independent study during Fall 2017-Spring 2018 that emerged from the Spring 2017 iteration of the Williamsburg Documentary Project where students first began exploring the history of the Triangle Block. See footnote 34 for additional information.

225 James Gurganus, oral history interview.

226 Benjamin Bowery, “Rethinking Memorialization at the Triangle: Names, Monuments, and Multimodality in Efforts to Memorialize the Williamsburg Triangle Block,” undergraduate research paper, College of William & Mary, 2017. This paper was part of the portfolio of final papers prepared at the end of the Spring 2017 iteration of the Williamsburg Documentary Project class in which a group of students explored and documented the history of the Triangle Block. The author was a member of the class and first began researching the redevelopment of the Triangle Block as part of this group.

Strawberry Plains Road soon after it was annexed into Williamsburg in 1981. The road that the neighborhood sat along functioned as one of the main pathways for through traffic in the city before the completed extension of Route 199 in 1999. While the beltway around Williamsburg that the extension created took traffic off the “secondary road,” it intensified attention to the Strawberry Plains Road area and other former outskirts since the undeveloped land surrounding then became primed for new development.

The Comprehensive Plan of 1989—the first plan prepared by consultants other than Harland Bartholomew & Associates—argued that either a private developer or the WRHA should acquire properties in the area in order to create “owner-occupied low and moderate income housing similar to the Crispus Attucks community.”

The City’s desire for the Authority to develop new Crispus Attucks-like housing emerged from a recognition of the growing cost of homeownership in Williamsburg. While the next comprehensive plan from 1998 agreed that Williamsburg was becoming increasingly unaffordable for non-wealthy citizens to live in, it continued to privilege owner-occupied single-family detached homes as the ideal form of housing. Amid a highly racialized and classed discourse around housing, the 1953 plan had earlier argued that “The single-family home, particularly when owner-occupied, provides the most desirable living conditions,” and that multi-family unit housing development jeopardized the “value, character, and stability” of “good single-family or two-family neighborhoods.”

The 1998 plan, while recognizing that “it has been unable to provide sufficient owner-occupied, affordable single family detached housing to local wage earners desiring to live in the City,”

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again rejected new multi-family housing development since “the City provides more than its ‘fair share’ of multi-family housing,” in comparison to James City County and York County. The use of the phrase “fair share” expressed the undesirability of multi-family housing developments—WRHA-operated public housing included—while also ignoring the fact that the counties encompassed a far larger, less urban land area than Williamsburg and could more easily accommodate low density development.

The plan attempted to resolve the contradiction between privileging owner-occupied single-family homes and seeking affordable housing within Williamsburg’s limited land area by proposing that thoughtful planning could “sensitively blend the apparent incongruity between providing housing for low wage earners and keeping City’s goal of not increasing current disproportionately large supply of high-density, multi-family housing stock.”232 Accordingly, the 1998 plan envisioned the redevelopment of the Strawberry Plains area by the WRHA as a site where the creation of new, owner-occupied, low to moderate income housing could occur.

The rhetoric surrounding redevelopment differed notably from previous plans that guided the WRHA’s redevelopment of the northwest area during the 1970s. The 1989 plan advised that “This redevelopment plan should take place only if the families who currently live in the area are adequately compensated for their property, and are given the opportunity to relocate within the planning area.” Additionally, the 1989 plan asserted that the “rural character” of the area, far removed from downtown Williamsburg, ought to be preserved.233

Concerns regarding the “rural character” were articulated in the 1998 plan’s discussion of the Strawberry Plains area which listed “Community Character, Urban Design, and the Environment” as its first objective before housing and transportation objectives. Under the

overriding goal to “Protect and enhance the natural and built environment of the City,” the plan specified that development needed to preserve trees and protect nearby watersheds such as College Creek and Lake Matoaka. An artificial lake abutting the western side of William & Mary’s campus, Lake Matoaka and its surrounding woodlands were owned by the College. Beyond ecological concerns, William & Mary featured heavily in the plan’s concerns for the Strawberry Plains area, which sought to “Integrate future development with the William and Mary Master Plan,” “Preserve the land granted to College in the land exchange as passive open space,” and “Maintain woodland area to buffer development from the surrounding William and Mary property holdings.”

In the redevelopment project’s early stages, the *Daily Press* reported that “City officials plan to transform the dilapidated and run-down homes in the Strawberry Plains community—the city’s most blighted area—into a new neighborhood with affordable housing.” While William & Mary originally asked that the project be delayed since they were also interested in acquiring property in the area, the strongest opposition came from individual professors at the College who expressed a variety of anxieties about the new development’s environmental impact on Lake Matoaka and its surrounding woodlands. Sharon Scruggs recalled that the professors’ environmental concerns were sometimes coded with biases:

> The big pushback we had on Strawberry Plains was from the College of William & Mary. There are whorled begonia in the back of that, and they’re very rare, and we went on a hike back there to see the whorled begonia that the College oversees, but it’s not on College property, it’s private property. And they actually came out with a statement that they were sure that those people weren’t going to respect that area and those kids would be plowing through the woods and destroying the whorled begonia. We’re like ‘um… What are *those* people and *those* kids?’ you know? This is kind of shocking coming from the College of William & Mary. And so we just had to do a little PR thing to convince

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236 Blevins, “Project moves forward to build affordable homes,” *Virginia Gazette*, February 27, 1999
these professors, you know, that these are good people. If you simply tell them about it and explain what your concerns and priorities are, certainly they’d be respected. And we never heard any more about it since.\textsuperscript{237}

Additionally, many proponents of the WRHA asserted that a private developer could just as easily develop the area and would not be held to the same strict environmental regulations that a governmental entity faces.\textsuperscript{238} Despite an environmental impact assessment that did not project any significant impacts, environmental-based opposition continued into the early stages of the project and pressured the Authority to take additional steps to make the project environmentally-friendly.\textsuperscript{239}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Figure 31.} Master Plan and Site Layout for the Strawberry Plains Redevelopment Area. This plan overlays the lots that the WRHA planned to develop with the existing site layout, including houses that the plan intended to keep or demolish.
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{237} Sharon Scruggs, oral history interview.
Many of the existing property owners resented any government plan that involved giving up land that their ancestors had owned for generations. However, their hesitation never amounted to any widespread mobilization against the project like that seen during the Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Project nor was it as public as the William & Mary professors.240

In 1999, the WRHA applied for CDBG funds available from the Virginia Department of Community and Housing Development and in 2000, began a master plan for the area. The City was eager to assist the project and pledged funds for property acquisition, water and sewer improvements, water and sewer connection fees, sidewalk extensions, and development of a park.241 Before grant money came in from VDHCD, the WRHA fronted much of the costs related to the preparation of the area through clearance, grading, and implementing infrastructure improvements.242

While property owners in the area hesitated to participate in the redevelopment project, they benefitted from better protections than those given those whose property the WRHA acquired in the Armistead Avenue area during the 1970s. For existing home owners, the WRHA offered to rehabilitate their houses, give them a new house in the redevelopment area, or relocate them to a house elsewhere in the City that held an equal property value. Further, the Authority relocated residents much more sensitively; in one instance, Gurganus delivered food twice a day to an elderly man temporarily placed in a hotel during rehabilitation. Most property owners opted to stay in the area after its redevelopment. The Authority rehabilitated five homes in the area,

240 Gurganus and Joan Andrews, another employee of the WRHA who shared an oral history, touch upon this suspicion in their oral history interviews, however, it would be best to hear the perspective of some of the actual original property owners to more accurately evaluate this assertion. Gurganus: “this [woman] was very elderly and she did not want to leave, and she actually-- her new house actually was on a little piece of property that belonged to her daddy. That was her big issue, that I was stealing her daddy’s property from her.”
241 WRHA Resolution 161, April 15, 1999
242 James Gurganus, oral history interview.
demolished four buildings, and funded two property owners’ relocation into new houses.\textsuperscript{243} Though each home faced different levels of deterioration, the rehabilitation of homes greatly improved living conditions for area residents. The WRHA connected all the homes to city water and sewage free of charge and renovated the houses as needed.\textsuperscript{244} Nonetheless, some residents felt that the Authority did not follow through with some of its promises or installed things with shoddy workmanship.\textsuperscript{245}

With the nineteen acres of the land surrounding residents’ homes that it acquired, the Authority subdivided the Strawberry Plains area into small lots and developed 63 new single-family detached homes. The houses, finished in 2004, were arranged along six new streets and cul-de-sacs. The authority sold 57 of them to low-to-moderate income buyers and six to over-

\textsuperscript{243} James Gurganus, “Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority Accomplishments, August 1, 1998 – June 30, 2007,” unpublished. Gurganus typed this of actions taken by the Authority during his tenure as executive director after he retired to keep track of its accomplishments. The list, with some handwritten annotations by Gurganus, was gifted to the author by Gurganus at a meeting between the two on January 14, 2019.

\textsuperscript{244} Gurganus remembered a man who no longer required an oxygen tank after the WRHA rehabilitated his home: “when I went into his house, one day he was cleaning, getting things off the shelves and everything, and he had four or five cans sitting up on his wooden shelf, and once he took them off, there was this, there was a light colored yellow where those cans were sitting. Because he had kerosene lights, he had kerosene stove, couple of them, and the soot from those had just… the ceiling was very dark. He had that old plywood sheathing on the ceiling that was a quarter inch thick stuff, so it had no insulating value, and he didn’t have any insulation. He had no insulation under the house, he only had a place about that tall, to get under his house, so most of the work was done from the interior. By taking the floors up, they could put in new piping and sewage, and all that cause he again had a septic tank. So, he got his new house and he came home central air and heat, his new kitchen with a stove and refrigerator, and his new sink and his counter, which were—the other ones were made out of formica, and he told me the next morning when I went by that he had stayed up all night walking from room to room looking at his new home. And that he was so happy, and he came home after about a month and a half, he came home from the hotel where I was feeding him twice a day, and he gained ten pounds, and his doctor said he was in the best health he had been in year, and he threw his oxygen bottle in the back seat of the car. And I don’t know that he ever used it again … And after it was done, he was ecstatic, and I saw him one day on his porch, and I asked him, ‘how come you sit on this porch all day long, I never see you gone anymore.’ He says, ‘I’m staying right here in my new house and if people want to see me, they can come see me in my new house.’ So he said, ‘I am so happy.’”

\textsuperscript{245} Joan Andrews, oral history interview, October 10, 2018. Andrews, who came on to work for the WRHA at the end of the Strawberry Plains project recalled that “Another homeowner—his house was rehabilitated. Several of them, their houses were rehabilitated. One was supposed to get a washer and dryer hook-up—he had no washer and dryer hook-up, the money was spent but there wasn’t anymore money left in the pot to give him a washer and dryer hook-up. Another person, his bathroom had been completely renovated, but his bathtub and his toilet were caving in, so, and the toilet was leaking onto the vinyl flooring and it had—the bathtub, from the plumbing, was leaking all over the vinyl flooring and it—the bathtub plumbing was leaking all over the vinyl flooring and it had discolored the entire floor. And the Authority was ignoring his claims, and when I took charge of Strawberry Plains, we came back in and we made that right.”
income buyers. In addition, the neighborhood featured a new municipal park as well as a holding pond meant to allay concerns about water pollution.\textsuperscript{246} The WRHA attached an owner-occupancy restriction to all the properties, requiring purchasers to live in their homes for five years before receiving full ownership. Additionally, if the new home owners ever decided to sell, the restriction guaranteed the Authority “first-right-of-refusal” before any other interested parties had the chance to buy the houses.\textsuperscript{247} The Authority attached restrictions to the properties in order to prevent the houses from turning into rental properties—particularly rental properties for William & Mary students, whose desire to live off-campus was already eating into Williamsburg’s limited supply of affordable housing.\textsuperscript{247}

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Around the same time as the Strawberry Plains project was underway, the WRHA entered an agreement with James City County to lend its ability to acquire properties through eminent domain in order to assist the County’s first affordable housing project, a three-story complex of affordable units for seniors.\textsuperscript{248} The targeted area, Ironbound Square, was also a majority-Black neighborhood located a mile north of Strawberry Plains. Notably, the area sat across the street from New Town, a 365-acre master-planned development conceived of as a new “town center” for Williamsburg and the rapidly suburbanizing James City County.\textsuperscript{249} Developers had long eyed the tract of property titled to the local landowning Casey family after plans for Route 199’s extension fell into place.\textsuperscript{250} Designed according to “new urbanism” design principles of walkability; mixed residential, business, and commercial development; and neo-

\textsuperscript{246} Gurganus, “Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority Accomplishments, August 1, 1998 – June 30, 2007,”
\textsuperscript{247} Joan Andrews and James Gurganus oral history interviews.
\textsuperscript{248} WRHA Resolution 183, September 19, 2002.
\textsuperscript{249} “About New Town Williamsburg,” https://newtownwilliamsburg.com/about.
traditional architecture, New Town sought to replicate the experience of a downtown area while providing ample parking to accommodate cars.\textsuperscript{251} From the perspective of many locals, much of Williamsburg’s downtown had been lost to tourist-oriented businesses.

Before, the land across the street from Ironbound Square was undeveloped woodland and fields. Now, however, plans for New Town’s massive development attracted new attention to the neighborhood. The County’s redevelopment project bore striking similarity to previous projects of the WRHA, nearly all of which had also taken place in Black neighborhoods in order to either improve housing conditions, locate new affordable housing, or both. In addition to creating affordable senior housing (now named Parker View) and new single-family homes, County officials framed the redevelopment of Ironbound Square as a way of removing “blight” and improving housing conditions in the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{252} The Authority enacted eminent domain on James City County’s behalf multiple times throughout the course of the project which reached completion in 2008.\textsuperscript{253}

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Meanwhile, the WRHA returned its attention to Braxton Court and Scotland Street in the northwest area to further pursue its affordable housing development program. During the Armistead Urban Renewal Plan, Black residents persuaded the Authority not to intervene in their middle-class neighborhood. As one of the few remaining Black neighborhoods left in Williamsburg, Braxton Court had again attracted the City’s attention both due to its historic significance and the fact that many of its houses were turning into student rentals due to the

\textsuperscript{252} Sashin, “New Town begins to take shape, supervisors told.” The article writes “Across the street from New Town, the county’s Ironbound Square redevelopment plan is also progressing, county officials informed supervisors at the work session. As part of the project to remove blight and improve housing conditions in the neighborhood, 45 to 50 new single-family homes are being built.”
\textsuperscript{253} WRHA Resolutions 188 & 190 (July 24, 2003); WRHA Resolutions 200-207 (November 23, 2004); WRHA Resolutions (April 28, 2005); WRHA Resolutions 222-225 (February 22, 2007).
neighborhood’s proximity to William & Mary’s campus. The 1998 comprehensive plan recommended that the site be nominated to Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places, writing:

Braxton Court is significant as an early twentieth century neighborhood developed and established by African Americans. This distinction is significant because many of the subdivisions created in the City in the early twentieth century specifically excluded African-Americans through restrictive covenants. Since several of the other, earlier African-American communities are now gone, this is one of the few surviving neighborhoods established by African-Americans in the City…While this neighborhood has remained a predominately African-American community, recently Braxton Court and the older vernacular houses on Scotland Street in the immediate area have begun to attract college students.\footnote{Comprehensive Plan of 1998, Section VIII, 13.}

City officials argued that many of the student rental properties were managed by absentee landlords who allowed the neighborhood’s housing stock to deteriorate due to their neglect.

In February 2003, the WRHA adopted a resolution in support of a “Braxton Court Neighborhood Comprehensive Community Development Project” in partnership with the City of Williamsburg. While the City would apply for CDBG funding through VDHCD, the Authority committed some its own capital funds in a joint effort to maintain the neighborhood’s affordable housing stock through the rehabilitation of existing homes and upgrading of the area’s infrastructure.\footnote{WRHA Resolution 185.}

As the WRHA involved itself in the area again and solicited the participation of neighbors in the project, antipathy directed toward the Authority for its actions during the 70s and 80s reemerged. Oscar Blayton, who led similar efforts against the total redevelopment of the Triangle Block, once again spearheaded the resistance against the Authority. Joan Andrews, who worked for the WRHA during the project recalled that:

he didn’t even wanna include his rental house, that is on Braxton Court, in the Braxton Court block grant because of his distrust for the Authority, and how they had previously
dealt with the properties all around his property. He wanted nothing to do with us, he didn’t like how curt they were. He attended a lot of the meetings that were held at First Baptist Church and the City’s—in the Stryker Building … he didn’t like anything about the Board of Commissioners, the current board at that time, and he had no love for the executive director.

I contacted him myself, several times, he was very nice to me. But he was definitely opposed to the project. And he told me, “young lady, when you talk to some of the other individuals in Braxton Court, you’ll find out my dissatisfaction with the Housing Authority.” Then when I went and interviewed and took applications to try to get participants in the block grant and got to talk to some of the older residents on Braxton Court, I learned about the distrust and why he didn’t trust the Authority. Because the way things had been developed over on Crispus Attucks and, um, handled.

…the Triangle Building—he wasn’t happy that it wasn’t occupied by African Americans like had previously been, African American businesses. He didn’t like that the Authority had promised to put up the placard, Martin Luther King thing, and it didn’t go up right away.256

Robert A. Braxton, whose grandfather Robert H. Braxton had originally developed Braxton Court, acted in the opposite manner of Blayton. Braxton, who had not lived in Williamsburg full-time for a few decades, returned to his grandfather’s home after becoming interested in the community development project. Braxton decided to run for City Council in 2006 and became the second Black council member in Williamsburg’s post-Reconstruction era.257 Representing the neighborhood on council, Braxton helped secure the trust of some of his neighbors who then partook in the project. While all Braxton Court residents benefitted from infrastructure improvements such as curbing, guttering, and placing overhead wires underground, only five of the neighborhood’s seventeen houses were rehabilitated through the program. Of the five houses, one remained occupied by its owner, while two were sold to low-to-

256 Joan Andrews, oral history interview.
257 Robert A. Braxton, oral history by Erin Hegarty and Sarah Thoresen, April 13, 2017.
moderate income families, one was sold to an over-income family, and one was rented out to a low-to-moderate income family.  

Immediately to the west of Braxton Court along Scotland Street, the Authority acquired for redevelopment two parcels of land with four “deteriorating structures” stretching back into an alleyway. With the acquired properties, the Authority planned to build a mixed residential and commercial building. The four existing buildings included Phillip Cooke’s insurance agency office which had served as the first headquarters of the Williamsburg area’s NAACP chapter when his father, Herbert L. Cooke, owned the building. Dealing with Phillip Cooke’s estate—not particularly enthused about selling—the Authority secured the acquisition of the property after promising that the redeveloped property would include a plaque recognizing the history of the site and even mimic the design of the old building’s front door. After the Authority cleared the two parcels and sold the land to a private developer, a brick commercial building composed of two retail spaces went up in 2012. According to the agreement between the Authority and Cooke’s son, the new development features a plaque marking the site as the initial location of the local NAACP and marking the building as the “Herbert L. Cooke Building.”

Other than the Strawberry Plains and Braxton Court projects, the Authority did not execute any other neighborhood-scale interventions and only performed token housing rehabilitation and development in various locations across the City. The larger projects that the Authority planned—the rehabilitation of a mobile home community along Quarterpath Road and the development of affordable “cottage style” senior housing units on the land between the Blayton Building and Crispus Attucks—never materialized. The landlord of the mobile home

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259 James Gurganus, oral history interview.
community sold the property to a private developer while the WRHA was studying the area. The plan for senior cottages died after the Authority presented it to an unsympathetic City Council.\textsuperscript{261} As various proposals for its development emerged in the 2000s, the field next to the Blayton Building, sometimes referred to as Crispus Attucks Park, became a contentious space between government officials and residents of Crispus Attucks. Neighbors resisted development proposals on the grounds that the green space which they often used for group activities and events was promised as a park for the neighborhood when the neighborhood was developed in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{262} The creation of new houses—always single-family detached homes—often involved redeveloping severely deteriorated properties or empty lots to then sell to low-to-moderate income homeowners.\textsuperscript{263}

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The retirement of Gurganus in June 2007 marked the end of the WRHA’s second period of actively shaping Williamsburg’s housing landscape as it reverted to a passive role of property management and maintenance under the leadership of his successors. Gurganus’ replacement, Janice Hillman, was fired after five months for embezzling Authority money.\textsuperscript{264} To fill the absence left by her removal, Sharon Scruggs, now chair of the WRHA board and Williamsburg City Manager Jack Tuttle recruited Andy Hungerman, a retired vice president from Colonial Williamsburg who did not have any prior experience related to public housing. As executive director, Hungerman largely followed the lead of the City. The largest project Hungerman supported as executive director was the proposed redevelopment of the Blayton Building site in

\textsuperscript{261} Joan Andrews, oral history interview.
\textsuperscript{263} Gurganus, “Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority Accomplishments, August 1, 1998 to June 30, 2007.” Locations included Pocahontas Street, Mimosa Drive, Dunning Street, Lafayette Street, and Harrison Avenue.
2011, for which the City and Authority partnered for a CDBG grant application to develop more than 50 new affordable elderly units. In phases, the project, which never materialized, would develop a new building on the field next-door, demolish the Blayton Building, and then build a new replacement building.\footnote{\textit{Council seeks grant toward replacing Blayton Building}, \textit{Daily Press}, May 11, 2011.} Otherwise, under Hungerman’s leadership, the Authority simply maintained its already-developed properties. Hungerman’s passive strategy matched the wishes of City leadership who had begun to resist any more development of new homes by the Authority.\footnote{Sharon Scruggs, oral history interview.} Due to the WRHA’s autonomy in developing new housing, Joan Andrews, who worked at the WRHA during the 2000s and early 2010s, felt that “I don’t think the city really wants us—wanted us.”\footnote{Joan Andrews, oral history interview.}

In 2009, the City of Williamsburg revised its charter to include a provision that allowed the City Council to substitute itself for the WRHA Board of Commissioners. Citing the desire for “flexibility in the future,” city leaders and Hungerman allowed the measure to pass through without any controversy between the City and the Authority nor any large public outcry.\footnote{Steve Vaughan, “Revised charter empowers city,” \textit{Virginia Gazette}, January 31, 2009.”} An editorial by the \textit{Virginia Gazette} remarked upon the relative ease by which the revision was adopted and speculated that the City could likely “bigfoot” the Authority in the future.\footnote{Bill O’Donovan, “Redevelop this,” \textit{Virginia Gazette}.}

Four years later, the City and the Authority adopted a joint Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) utilizing the new provision introduced by the revised charter. With the agreement of all WRHA commissioners, the two governmental entities agreed that the Authority should “functionally operate within the departmental structure of the City,” in order to better perform the expected functions of the Authority. Within the context of the Great Recession, the
MOU cited that “over the last several years funds from both the federal government and the state
government, which are necessary in order to successfully perform the Authority’s mission have
been greatly reduced, and as a consequence, the Authority has been financially strained,”
resulting in layoffs and general weakening of the WRHA’s operations. Joan Andrews asserted
that the financial strain was exacerbated by the management decisions of Hungerman, whom she
characterized as “the driving force” behind the MOU. Hungerman’s increase of WRHA staff
salaries invited financial troubles when, as Andrews recalled, “We hit [a] slump, didn’t sell
houses, didn’t have income coming in except for public housing [since] tenants in the Triangle
Building were bad, weren’t paying their rent on time.” As a result of funding constraints
hitting from a variety of levels, the Authority had begun receiving support services from various
departments of the City to supplement and properly carry out its operations. Anticipating that the
WRHA’s need for more support from City services would continue, the MOU sought to
formalize its growing dependency and clarify the relationship between the two.

While the MOU replaced citizens specifically appointed to the WRHA Board of
Commissioners with City Council members, the MOU established a Public Housing Advisory
Committee for citizens to serve on. Additionally, the MOU ensured that all WRHA property
should remain official property of the WRHA. While the Triangle Building would remain titled
to the WRHA, the City reassigned its operation and management to its Economic Development
Office. In exchange for managing the building, the MOU rerouted the building’s revenues away
from the WRHA’s public housing operations fund into the City’s general fund.

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270 Joan Andrews, oral history interview.
271 City of Williamsburg and Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority, “Memorandum of Understanding
between the City of Williamsburg and the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority,” February 11, 2013.
Though the WRHA and City worked closely throughout the WRHA’s history, the MOU resulted in a radical departure from the two governmental entities’ relationship. Essentially, after forty-three years as an autonomous entity, the Authority became an extension of the City Council and its members’ responsibilities. The restructuring of the Authority’s operations followed a second period of activity in which the Authority completed long-needed repairs on its properties and developed some of Williamsburg’s most recently-constructed affordable single-family units. While the redevelopment of Strawberry Plains and rehabilitation of Braxton Court continued the pattern of WRHA pursuing neighborhood-scale projects in majority-Black neighborhoods, the Authority’s actions were largely more sensitive than the earlier Armistead Avenue Urban Renewal Plan. Nonetheless, the unique controversies surrounding both projects demonstrated how race and class remained central to local housing and planning discourses. In the face of financial constraints brought upon by lackluster federal and state support as well as agency-level mismanagement, the MOU sought to sustain the key functions of the Authority—still operating 104 public housing units and the Triangle Building—into the future.
Conclusion

*Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.*


*Dull, inert cities, it is true, do contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else. But lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves.*


Currently, the City of Williamsburg—largely in control of the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority as of the 2013 Memorandum of Understanding—is in the process of implementing what it calls a “Downtown Vibrancy Plan.” Through the Economic Development Office, the City contracted the services of consultants to collect input from community members and stakeholders in order to formulate a plan “to redefine spaces in the downtown to create a vibrant, active urban environment,” and create interconnected nodes of social and commercial activity that they liken to outdoor “living rooms.”272 While appealing to the idea of creating a “vibrant” downtown experience for all Williamsburg residents, the plan is largely concerned with promoting commercial interests. The introduction of the “Downtown Vibrancy, Design, & Marketing Plan” submitted to the Economic Development Office in January of 2018 explained that:

The purpose of this project is to build a framework to guide the Williamsburg Economic Development Office and the Planning Department to develop a sustainable and vibrant downtown. The objective of the plan is to strengthen downtown’s appeal by creating a vibrant environment, to develop a sustainable implementation strategy to help generate momentum and to help the City and investors to make better decisions, manage risk, and improve the prospects for success. Additionally, the strategy is intended to enhance visitation and patronage of the downtown businesses, and build a sense of pride and

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project ownership within the community (residents and businesses) for ongoing management and implementation.  

Emulating the contemporary urban design strategy of “placemaking” utilized in localities across the world in order to create distinct local spaces, the Downtown Vibrancy Plan (DVP) recommends “permanent, built-environment improvements” in seven downtown areas. Downtown Williamsburg, defined by the plan, runs roughly north to south from the northwest area and municipal center through Colonial Williamsburg’s Merchant’s Square and down South Henry Street. The plan proposes projects such as a mixed-use housing, retail, and office development on a surface parking lot along South Henry Street; a City Park in the municipal center between the Williamsburg Regional Library and the Williamsburg Community Center; the creation of a “Restaurant Row” dining district along Scotland Street; and a redesigned Merchant’s Square to create greater connectivity between Duke of Gloucester and Prince George Streets.

Figure 32. The Downtown Vibrancy Plan's recommended redevelopment plan for the Triangle Block area.

273 “Downtown Vibrancy, Design & Marketing Plan,” 8
274 Ibid., 49.
In addition, the DVP identifies the Triangle Block area as a site for potential placemaking interventions, arguing that “The Triangle presents the best opportunity to create a new ‘local’ downtown and entertainment/gathering district in downtown Williamsburg.” In the DVP, a proposed LED-lighted gateway at the intersection of Scotland Street and Prince George Street opens up to a redesigned streetscape with redesigned traffic patterns to create a “more welcoming sidewalk atmosphere” for pedestrians and to allow the streets to be easily converted into an outdoor festival space. Also at the intersection, the plan recommends that “the MLK Memorial currently at this location should remain” (though the permanent MLK memorial has still not been built). Along Prince George up to Armistead, the plan envisions “micro-retail” kiosks and pavilions and a beer garden. Seeking to locate a small-scale “urban grocer” somewhere in the downtown area, the plan suggests that the entire Triangle Building be repurposed as a grocery store or for another “new use.” If the grocery store is not placed there, then the plan suggests that the Blayton Building site across the street would also be an ideal location.

*Figure 33. A rendering of the conversion of Prince George Street into a pedestrian-friendly street with micro-retail kiosks and pavilions from the Downtown Vibrancy Plan.*
The use of the Blayton Building site—either for the urban grocer or a new library building—would be part of a broader redevelopment of the property owned by the WRHA. On the empty grass fields flanking the Blayton Building along both Scotland Street and Armistead Avenue, the plan proposes two apartment buildings and a surface parking lot. Apartments, the plan states “are popular with a variety of residents, including young professionals and empty-nesters. Located in close proximity to the College of William and Mary, the apartments would also be well suited for college students.” In order to replace the elderly public housing units that would be eliminated by the demolition of the Blayton Building, the plan offers that the units could be placed in the new apartments or relocated “on- or off-site by HUD.”

Though the redevelopment of the Blayton Building has been suggested in years prior, the suggestion that public housing residents could be displaced from the current site for market-rate development greatly diverges from previous planning discussions.

*Ibid.*, 53-57
As of this writing, the final vision of how exactly to create a more “vibrant” downtown remains up in the air as the City is only in the preliminary stages of implementing the recommendations of the Downtown Vibrancy Plan. However, the proposals found in the 2018 plan raise concerns about the future of downtown Williamsburg, particularly the northwest area where consultants recommended some of the most intensive design interventions. With its suggestions of potentially finding a “new use” for the Triangle Building and relocating the elderly public housing units of the Blayton Building away from its current site in favor of apartments and a grocery store largely targeted for William & Mary students, “young professionals,” and “empty nesters,” the plan replicates the logic of displacement that undergirded past redevelopment plans for the northwest area.

Only thirty-five years after the completion of the Armistead Avenue Area Urban Renewal Plan, the redevelopment of the neighborhood is promoted by the DVP as a way to advance city-wide goals. Yet, elderly public housing residents are seen as incidental to the creation of a “vibrant” downtown and the WRHA’s commitment to dedicating the Triangle Building to Black-owned businesses is completely lost. The lack of consideration for the current businesses located in the building, even though they are not owned by Black people, continues the top-down planning logic of past interventions in the area. Tellingly, while the plan states that “Braxton Ct and Harriet Tubman Dr feel separate from neighboring civic center,” it does not offer any concrete ways to connect the neighborhoods with the rest of the city (perhaps a result of the consultants’ failure to adequately involve them within the DVP’s community engagement processes). This disjunction displays how even residents already living within the demarcated downtown area are not necessarily the intended audience the DVP.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ ibid., 39. On page 90, the plan displays a rendering of a “Pedestrian Network” of trails, some of which run behind Braxton Court and Crispus Attucks through the Blayton Building site. It is not explicitly discussed, however,
Figure 35. A "Street Types Map" from the Downtown Vibrancy Plan. The streets bounding the Triangle Block are proposed as "Premier Streets."

Since the process of implementing Williamsburg’s Downtown Vibrancy Plan is still within its beginning stages, a critique of the 2018 plan can open the discussion of how an acknowledgment of the history of the development of Williamsburg’s built environment might be used in able to inform more sensitive, ethical, and ultimately more effective planning strategies. Despite the 2018 plan’s emphasis on placemaking by imagining how current physical and social conditions downtown could be improved, it lacks an analysis of the historical

whether or not this is a proposal aimed at remedying the sense of disconnect that the plan identifies. Of the proposed pedestrian network, the plan argues that “the defined streets and trails will allow pedestrians to easily find their way throughout [sic] the downtown, aided by Walk Williamsburg Wayfinding signs, placed along trails and sidewalks. The string of open spaces and parks will also serve as destinations and give the downtown a gardenesque feel.”
processes and systems that have shaped the existing places that it targets as “activity nodes.” Given the violent manner in which the northwest area was redeveloped in the past as well as the integral role that neighborhood residents played in shaping its eventual development, a lack of acknowledgment of the prior history of the “new ‘local’ downtown and entertainment/gathering district,” is both limiting and concerning. It is seemingly paradoxical that the same street for which restauranteur Virgie Williams’ repeated requests for a sidewalk were denied by city officials is now proposed as a “Premier Street” for the city; however, a historical perspective can allow planners and designers to address such a contradiction.

While, historically, professional city planning globally, nationally, and locally in Williamsburg has in large part been used to protect and promote the interests of powerful actors at the expense of the communities they most oppress, Mindy Thompson Fullilove, M.D. argues in her book *Urban Alchemy: Restoring Joy in America’s Sorted-Out Cities* that systems-minded, community-based planning and urban design can be used to “restore” cities that have been engineered and shaped by race and class. Much in line with DVP’s vision for Williamsburg, she proposes that “Human beings create cities so that they will have a site for social and cultural interaction and development. Cities fulfill this function because people connect with each other and exchange goods and ideas.” However, in contrast to the Downtown Vibrancy Plan, Thompson Fullilove acknowledges the present reality of race- and class-based segregation facilitated by government action, arguing that “The sorted-out American city cannot do what it is meant to do, as division is antithetical to connection, conquering to exchange. It is this deep contradiction that rumbles in the guts of our cities: we feel the unease, suffer from the dysfunction, and act out the madness.”

The ongoing implementation of the DVP presents an opportunity for Williamsburg—and, because of how many people have been pushed out of city limits, its surrounding area—to begin the process of “un-sorting.” More specifically, a more historically-conscious and systems-minded plan might be used as a vehicle to recognize and start to reconcile the ways in which Williamsburg’s local government and institutions have created and perpetuate a society bracketed by racial and class hierarchies. While consultants fielded community input for the 2018 plan, their community engagement methods were far from robust. They only met with 59 community members whom they characterized as “industry groups, elected officials, city leadership, area businesses, residents, and individuals and students affiliated with William and Mary.” Consultants also sought information on public consumption patterns and preferences through an online survey that returned 241 responses. Data on participants’ race, gender, or socioeconomic background was not included.278 City Council continues to invite citizen input through public comment sessions, but a more in-depth community engagement process that intentionally includes people not often drawn into planning discussions as well as communities negatively impacted by previous planning efforts is imperative moving forward. If such a course is not actively pursued by the City, however, the history of WRHA shows that citizen activism organized outside the realm of formal political and planning processes can also be effective in shaping the eventual implementation of plans.

Relatedly, the fact that nowhere does the Downtown Vibrancy Plan discuss how race shapes downtown Williamsburg’s retail market or people’s experience of downtown is of


concern. Currently, there are no Black-owned businesses within the downtown area defined by the DVP, a reality directly linked to the displacement of businesses by the WRHA’s redevelopment of the Triangle Block. In future planning efforts, the City could consider ways that the Downtown Vibrancy Plan could be used to address local government’s role in their displacement and provide incentives for Black-owned businesses to return back to downtown Williamsburg. Such an effort would move beyond established efforts by citizens to memorialize Williamsburg’s historic Black commercial presence and confront the societal ramifications of local legislators’ actions. Additionally, “vibrancy,” an exciting yet vague term, can be further articulated by the City in its official rhetoric to include racial and socioeconomic diversity. By making such a concept of vibrancy central to planning discussions, the City could pursue diversity not only in terms of consumers but in terms of residents and businessowners. Since the Downtown Vibrancy Plan recommends new downtown residential development, the City should consider how to incentivize private developers to build affordable units in order to enhance downtown Williamsburg’s socioeconomic diversity. The commercial space in the Triangle Building that the Economic Development Office manages (originally constructed for such a goal), along with major proposals like Restaurant Row and the micro-retail pavilions along Prince George Street provide great opportunities for the City to devise policies to attract and support a diverse array of downtown businessowners.

Planning is, by definition, future-oriented. However, as the echoes of the Armistead Avenue Area Urban Renewal Plan found within the Downtown Vibrancy Plan demonstrate, a historical perspective is critical in order to address “past” but enduring systems and patterns that inform the present. There is still much to learn from the history of the Williamsburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority, the history of planning in Williamsburg, and the history of
the development of Williamsburg more broadly. If we seek to plan a better future for the Williamsburg area and its residents, we ought to keep the past—and how it calls us to action—at the forefront of our decision-making processes. Williamsburg prides itself as a place in which Americans can learn about themselves. By using planning to intentionally rectify historical wrongs and chart a more vibrant, inclusive civic future, Williamsburg has the opportunity to offer the nation a great new lesson.
I accessed primary source materials at a variety of publicly-accessible archives located in Williamsburg, Virginia. The Williamsburg Regional Library keeps many government documents as reference materials, including the City’s comprehensive plans. I also accessed WRHA minutes, resolutions, and other archival materials from the WRHA’s offices in the City of Williamsburg’s Municipal Building. The WRHA keeps a binder of *Virginia Gazette* newspaper clippings involving the Authority that also proved to be very helpful. William & Mary’s Swem Library Special Collections Research Center also provided a wealth of materials including but not limited to private correspondences, photographs, newspaper clippings, and transcribed oral histories. While I found newspaper clippings in various archives, I accessed the majority of media reporting from the online database of digitized *Daily Press* issues on [www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). In addition to public archives, I received a few historical documents from people that I met with to discuss my research project.

I took photographs of nearly every relevant document that I encountered in the archives; if you are interested in a looking at a digital copy of a document that I cited or interested in digging into any of the archives I accessed, please don’t hesitate to email me: zachmeredith@gmail.com.

**Books, Dissertations, Articles, and Theses**


Foster, Andrea Kim. “‘They're turning the town all upside down’: the community identity of Williamsburg, Virginia before and after the Reconstruction.” Dissertation, George Washington University, 1993.


Online Resources


Newspapers

Daily Press
Richmond Times-Dispatch
The Voice Newspaper
Virginia Gazette
Williamsburg Advantage