

**NEW DEAL HOUSING ON THE VIRGINIA PENINSULA:  
Challenging Jim Crow Paternalism at Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens**

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Fred Carroll

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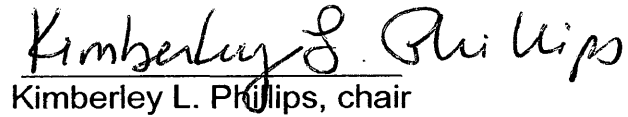
## APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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Fred Carroll

Approved by the Committee, May 2004

  
Kimberley L. Phillips, chair

  
Maureen A. Fitzgerald

  
M. Darlene O'Dell

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## **ABSTRACT**

Two New Deal housing projects built on the Virginia Peninsula in the late 1930s challenged Jim Crow strictures on race, space and class by giving working-class black families from Newport News, a bustling industrial city, an opportunity to own their own homes in the rural countryside. Such an opportunity disturbed the status quo of local race relations, as managed through a sense of genteel paternalism, by allowing black families to exercise the power of their pocketbooks to obtain a measure of equality and citizenship.

Swantown was a forty-one-unit segregated housing development built in 1935 in Warwick County mostly for black shipyard workers and their families. The families obtained mortgages with the aid of the Federal Housing Administration, which insured a local bank against potential foreclosures. Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock, the city's leading employer, pushed for the project by supplying homebuyers, selling undeveloped land to the builder and supporting bank loans.

Aberdeen Gardens was a 158-unit segregated housing development built in 1936 in Elizabeth City County by a series of succeeding federal agencies, most notably the Resettlement Administration. Built "by Negroes, for Negroes," the project sought to improve the lives of low-income black families by providing them with quality housing and plots for subsistence gardening. Hampton Institute provided local leadership by creating an all-black sponsoring committee, aiding with project planning and seeking endorsements from white business and political leaders.

Local white residents attempted to convert both projects to white occupancy. Swantown succumbed to those efforts following a trial on public nuisance charges related to failing septic tanks, while Aberdeen Gardens thwarted the opposition after promising not to expand its borders. This paper examines the role of federal agencies, local sponsors and black tenants in determining the fate of each development. It finds that inaction by the FHA and shipyard likely doomed black tenants' chances at Swantown, while active support by all involved with Aberdeen Gardens gave it a chance to succeed.

**NEW DEAL HOUSING ON THE VIRGINIA PENINSULA:  
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## INTRODUCTION

James and Myrtle Brown bought a newly-built stucco house outside of Newport News, Virginia, in spring 1936 on a street named after Confederate officer Jeb Stuart. They lived in Swantown, a forty-one unit, segregated subdivision built in rural Warwick County and home mostly to black shipyard laborers and their families. James worked for Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock, the leading employer on the Virginia Peninsula; Myrtle raised their three children. With federally backed mortgages, many urban black families, like the Browns, enjoyed a rare opportunity at Swantown to own the house they called home. That opportunity was short-lived. Less than a year after the Browns and other black families moved in, several white residents complained about them using faulty septic tanks, an all-white jury found them guilty of creating a public nuisance, a judge evicted them, banks foreclosed, and the Federal Housing Administration resold the houses with help from local Realtors — this time to white homebuyers instead of black ones. Today, Swantown remains a mostly white neighborhood. “They were just people who wanted something,” said Joyce Brown Wilkins, who was four years old when her parents left Swantown. “They wanted their children to have a home.”<sup>1</sup>

The Brown family moved into a brick house in 1938 in neighboring Elizabeth City County on Mary Peake Boulevard, which was named after a local freedwoman who taught the children of former slaves during the Civil War. The

house was in a 158-unit, segregated resettlement homestead built and supervised by a series of federal agencies, most notably the Resettlement Administration. It was eventually named Aberdeen Gardens. Federal officials described the development as a project “by Negroes, for Negroes.” Construction at Aberdeen Gardens occurred at the same time as work in Swantown. White challenges also threatened this project. In Washington, D.C., Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd criticized the entire homestead program as a waste of taxpayer dollars, and Peninsula leaders shared his views. Locally, white truck farmers attempted to thwart black occupancy by complaining to leading Peninsula businessmen that the project encroached on their properties. Unlike Swantown, Aberdeen Gardens remained a black neighborhood. James and Myrtle Brown lived there the rest of their lives, buying their house for \$3,075 in November 1946 as the federal government sold its resettlement projects. Today, mostly black families still live in Aberdeen Gardens, which is listed as a national landmark. “Everybody took pride in where they lived,” Wilkins said. “Everybody knew everybody, and it was a tight knit community.”<sup>2</sup>

Swantown’s failure and Aberdeen Gardens’ success represent on a local level the shortcomings and achievements of New Deal housing policies aimed at bettering the lives of low-income black laborers and their families. Fundamental differences determined the viability of each project before construction began. Three key factors included the degree of federal supervision and support, the level of advance public input sponsors sought from white political and business leaders, and the amount of advice sponsors sought from black leaders and

prospective occupants. Swantown was built with little federal oversight and apparently without broad-based support and input from either the white establishment or the black community, underscoring an insensitivity to local race relations that likely doomed the project. Meanwhile, Aberdeen Gardens was built with direct federal supervision, and the project's local sponsor, Hampton Institute, turned to both white and black community leaders for support before construction began, later renewing and reinforcing that support when faced with challenges that threatened the project's completion. Hampton Institute also sought and heeded advice from tenants when building and managing the development.

The two projects illustrate that the failure or success of New Deal housing projects for black renters and homebuyers nationwide depended largely on the degree to which federal and local sponsors considered and massaged the local nuances of racism. The spending of substantial federal tax dollars for the benefit of black families necessarily challenged the strictures of Jim Crow segregation, which made for separate but not equal accommodations, by openly contesting established boundaries concerning race, space and class. Successful construction required federal and local sponsors to balance two, often contradictory, goals. They had to assure the local white establishment of a significant decision-making role in the project and of a financial austerity suitable for a project benefiting society's bottom-tier citizens. They also had to satisfy the needs and desires of prospective black tenants and local black leaders who looked upon homeownership as a tangible symbol of race improvement and empowerment. Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens show how attempting to

reconcile the two aims jeopardized a project's success. A cursory overview of race relations across the nation in general and in Virginia and the lower Virginia Peninsula in particular during the 1930s begins to explain how the two projects came to be and how their fates were determined.

## CHAPTER I

### THE NEW DEAL AND BLACK VIRGINIANS

New Deal policies, whether addressing employment, welfare, housing or other issues, often promised help to the poor and disadvantaged, regardless of race, during the worst of economic times. That promise seldom materialized into actual aid for black Americans, who as a whole were disproportionately disadvantaged economically before the Great Depression. Blacks generally received less than their fair share of federal dollars, which were often divvied up by local administrators comfortable with the local dictates of discrimination, regardless of the political rhetoric coming from Washington, D.C. This was particularly true in the South, where many conservative politicians refused to participate in welfare and relief programs, which they viewed as federal interference in state affairs. "Inexorably discrimination stalked Negroes in every Federal program. Although real benefits flowed from the New Deal bounty, Federal agencies dared not challenge entrenched habits," writes historian George Brown Tindall in *The Emergence of the New South*.<sup>3</sup>

Blacks largely remained the first fired and last hired despite promises of new jobs and better wages associated with the early days of the New Deal. The National Recovery Administration, which was created in 1933 by the National Industrial Recovery Act, sought to stabilize different industries by regulating prices charged to consumers through the creation of codes of fair competition,

minimum wages, maximum work hours and union organization. Blacks joked that NRA stood for “Negro Removal Administration” or “Negroes Ruined Again.” The NRA raised prices on consumer goods that blacks bought, while it also encouraged Southern white businessmen, who refused to pay black laborers the same wage as white workers, to either ignore wage provisions or to fire black workers. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, which was passed in 1933 to artificially boost crop prices, displaced three million black sharecroppers and tenants as Southern plantation owners reduced their crop acreage in exchange for federal subsidies, which they spent on labor-saving machinery, such as tractors. The Federal Housing Administration, which was created in 1934 and backed mortgages at Swantown, effectively reinforced prevailing patterns of residential segregation and extended segregation to undeveloped areas.<sup>4</sup>

Other federal programs at least hinted at the oblique changes that would begin to undermine the South’s “entrenched habits” in later decades. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which was created in 1933 by the Unemployment Relief Act, initially banned racial discrimination, but the angry response of Southern whites quickly induced policy changes that allowed for continued wage disparities between black and white workers, reduced the government’s minimum wage and granted state and local officials more control in administering relief programs. The National Youth Administration probably promoted African American interests more than any other federal agency. It adhered to prevailing customs of discrimination by segregating its projects by race and by training a majority of its black students in trade skills and domestic

service, but it also hired black supervisors in every southern state and prohibited racial wage differentials. The Resettlement Administration and its successor, the Farm Security Administration, benefited southern blacks in a proportion equal to their percentage as southern farmers, despite a lack of resources and widespread opposition across the South. Aberdeen Gardens was one of the agencies' projects.<sup>5</sup>

Historian Harvard Sitkoff traces the roots of the civil-rights movement to societal changes due in part to New Deal policies. Blacks credited President Franklin D. Roosevelt with elevating national recognition of racial issues through government precedents, such as the hiring of black administrators and the creation of special offices that dealt exclusively with how a department's programs affected blacks. Some New Deal agencies at least acknowledged the prevalence and deleterious effect of racism to a degree previously unseen inside the federal government. As Sitkoff says, "These changes did little to ameliorate the continuity of racism staining the New Deal, but they would help transform the despair, the discouragement, the dreadful apathy of black southerners into a fighting conviction of a better world that could soon and surely be achieved."<sup>6</sup>

### **Virginia's New Deal: Fiscal Conservatism and Racial Paternalism**

In Virginia, fiscal conservatism and racial paternalism further diluted the limited New Deal benefits available to black families. The state's Democratic senators, Harry F. Byrd and Carter Glass, were among the earliest and most outspoken critics of the New Deal's liberal economic policies, their independence

bolstered by a single-party state political machine that controlled local politics through elected constitutional offices, such as sheriff, treasurer, clerk of courts and commissioner of the revenue. Historian Ronald L. Heinemann argues that the New Deal aided thousands of Virginians individually, but it contributed no long-lasting impact to the state overall. Heinemann attributes this to what he calls “progressive backwardness,” a term that broadly credits the state’s fiscal conservatism (as embodied in its popular pay-as-you-go road-building policy and abhorrence to tax increases), diversified economy and sense of rugged individualism for ameliorating the depression’s impact. Virginia ranked low in New Deal spending due to the mitigating effects of “progressive backwardness” and to the fears among politicians like Byrd and Glass of federal intrusion into state business, which harkened back to antebellum days. Even during the state’s worst economic times, the percentage of Virginians receiving direct relief was half that of the nation, with only two other states trailing it. The state contributed only \$1,094 to programs operated by the Civil Works Administration, even though more than 200,000 unemployed Virginians registered with the agency. Virginia did not authorize funds for direct relief from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration until after that agency was terminated. Overall, Virginia ranked twenty-seventh in total dollars spent in New Deal funding, and forty-third when figuring state spending on a per capita basis.<sup>7</sup>

Those people who struggled the most in Virginia before the Great Depression — sharecroppers, textile workers and urban slum dwellers — endured continued struggles in the 1930s. Blacks in particular suffered the

depression's full force. They began the decade holding jobs that paid them less than whites and living in houses more likely to be considered substandard. Black babies born in cities were twice as likely to die as white babies. Blacks were four times more likely to die from tuberculosis than whites, and they were four times more likely to be illiterate. As in other southern states, blacks in Virginia received less than their fair share of News Deal dollars, but Heinemann finds that they generally received a near equal share. Even so, federal aid did nothing to unhinge the status quo of institutional racism in Virginia since so few federal funds reached the black families living there.<sup>8</sup>

On the Peninsula, local officials adhered to the political conservatism that shaped the politics of their state leaders. U.S. Representative S. Otis Bland, a Democrat who represented the Peninsula, often cast votes that mirrored the positions of Glass and Byrd, opposing New Deal legislation between 35 percent and 39 percent of the time. In 1935, a delegation of Peninsula leaders visited Bland and Byrd in Washington, D.C., to oppose possible taxation legislation. Seventeen visiting officials attended the meeting, representing the Peninsula's top politicians and businessmen. Circuit Court Judge C. Vernon Spratley spoke the underlying belief that fueled the opposition these men held to most New Deal policies: "We believe the country's wealth lay in the stamina of its manhood, and we know that this stamina is weakened by the mush-cake softness of doles and handouts and devices for the taking from Paul, who works to give Peter, who chooses to be indolent and slothful."<sup>9</sup>

Virginia's racial paternalism complemented its fiscal conservatism. Like other Southern states, Virginia moved inexorably toward legalized discrimination after Reconstruction. Enforced by law and local custom, Jim Crow segregation solidified during the first two decades of the twentieth century. White leaders neglected the education of black children, stripped black adults of the ballot, winked at racially charged lynchings and separated blacks from whites in most public places. As the Progressive era ended, historian Edward L. Ayers writes that, "The sanctity of the growing system of segregation had to be ensured. Any breach came to seem to whites a breach in the natural order. New generations of whites became squeamish about black people in ways their grandparents could never have imagined — or afforded."<sup>10</sup>

One example of the extremes to which race separation could be carried traced its origins to the Virginia Peninsula and the late arrival of a white Newport News woman in February 1925 to a dance recital at Hampton Institute, a technical and professional college in Hampton for young black men and women. A packed auditorium forced a distraught Grace B. Copeland to sit next to black patrons. The incident prompted her husband, Walter Copeland, editor of the *Newport News Daily Press*, to pen an editorial three weeks later that attacked the school for encouraging the mingling of the races and for teaching and practicing "social equality between the white and Negro races." Copeland cautioned that such equality was but a step toward mixed marriages. "Amalgamation would mean the destruction of the Anglo Saxon race in America and the substitution of a race of mulattoes. Rather than that should be, we would prefer that every white

child in the United States were sterilized, and the Anglo Saxon race left to perish in its purity." Copeland's cause was aided by his friend John Powell, a famed pianist and a founding member of the state's Anglo-Saxon Clubs, which sought absolute racial purity for whites. Powell pounced on the incident by publicizing it statewide and pressuring Governor E. Lee Trinkle to publicly condemn Hampton Institute. In January 1926, state Delegate Alvin Massenburg of Elizabeth City County (future home of Aberdeen Gardens) introduced a bill to prevent the mingling of blacks and whites in places of public entertainment, such as halls, theaters and opera houses. The Public Assemblage Act of 1926, also known informally as the Massenburg Law after its sponsor, sailed through both the House of Delegates and Senate with few dissenting votes. Governor Harry F. Byrd, who succeeded Trinkle and had not yet run for the U.S. Senate, allowed the bill to become law without his signature. The act was the first and only segregation law of its kind in the nation.<sup>11</sup>

Historian J. Douglas Smith sees the Massenburg Law not as an extension of the "natural order" of segregation, as many contemporary white Virginians fervently hoped, but as a defensive gesture taken to protect an eroding system of "managed race relations" that "emphasized a particularly genteel brand of paternalism." That system eroded as black Virginians redefined race relations themselves by abandoning en masse the suffocating, intimate paternalism and poverty of the country for the promise of better jobs, housing and education, first, in Virginia's cities and, ultimately, in northern cities. Once freed from the countryside's direct paternalistic oversight but tantalized by only partially fulfilled

prospects of better jobs and homes, urban blacks further altered race relations by directly challenging segregationist policies. Virginia's white elites — leaders in business, political and social circles — sought to maintain stability and order by enforcing segregation through civility, rather than race-baiting on one extreme and civil rights on the other. Such efforts imparted ruling white Virginians with a sense of enlightened leadership in race matters, even as black Virginians assumed their own leadership role.<sup>12</sup>

White elites frequently cited how few lynchings occurred in Virginia compared to other southern states as proof of their racial enlightenment. Historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage attributes Virginia's comparatively few lynchings, particularly in the urbanized Tidewater area, to economic reality rather than paternalistic tolerance. Virginia's modernizing and diversifying economy relied upon black labor, and lynchings could spark labor unrest, which was bad for business and bad for the elite Virginians who profited from those businesses. White elites sought to protect their privileged place in society by restraining the violent excesses of institutionalized racism while also resisting pleas from black leaders and laborers for more rights. Exaggerated paternalism allowed them to do so with a feeling of benevolence. However, as Smith notes, "In remaining devoted to a conception of race relations that encouraged black advancement but denied the possibility of equality, white elites ran up against a conundrum to which paternalism offered no solution." Black life in Depression-era Newport News illustrated the strong grip that paternalism maintained over race relations in

Virginia, while it also exposed the erosion of paternalism's power in the face of gradual economic and social changes.<sup>13</sup>

### **Urban Black Life on the Virginia Peninsula**

Founded in 1896 by railroad baron Collis P. Huntington, Newport News was a bustling industrial town built where the James River spilled into the Chesapeake Bay. The city's population nearly doubled between 1910 and 1920 as Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock, the city's economic engine, increased production to ready the nation for its entrance into World War I. The city's black population also doubled during that decade as rural black farmers and laborers moved to Newport News for better-paying shipyard jobs a few years before the Great Migration, a time after World War I when about five hundred thousand black farmers and laborers moved en masse to northern cities and, to a lesser extent, southern cities to escape the rural South's pervading racism and chronic poverty. Newport News struggled through the 1920s. The shipyard nearly shut down when wartime production ceased. The city's economic fortunes rebounded in the 1930s when a naval rebuilding program revived the area economy and helped the city avoid the worst of the Great Depression. "People were not reduced to selling apples in the street, bank failures were rare, and there were no bread lines," according to the city's centennial history.<sup>14</sup>

Newport News boasted a growing black middle class that strove to overcome a social system designed to lock it into an economically and politically inferior social position. Area businessmen formed the Newport News-Warwick

Business League in December 1937 to promote their businesses and draw new customers. Crown Savings Bank of Newport News was one of only three black-owned banks in Virginia in 1939. Resident Lavinia Marian Poe was the first black woman admitted to the Virginia bar. Thomas Newsome, a prominent black lawyer who also published the *Newport News Star*, the city's black newspaper, greeted national black leaders at his stately Queen Anne-style home. In 1934, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, the South's largest black-owned newspaper with 30,000 subscribers, mentioned Poe and Newsome, among several others, as possible candidates for City Council. (Despite the rumors, no black candidates ran.) Newport News was a city where black residents and visitors generally described race relations "as good or excellent," in large part due to the paternalistic oversight and pervading influence of the shipyard. Even so, the majority of Newport News' black residents suffered the poverty, illiteracy and inequality fostered by Jim Crow segregation across the South.<sup>15</sup>

In the workplace, Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock employed more black laborers — about three thousand in the late 1930s — than any other company in Virginia. Shipyard president Homer L. Ferguson perfectly illustrated how Virginia's white leaders relied on a heightened form of paternalism to manage race relations, giving blacks opportunities but not equality. Ferguson, a native of Waynesville, North Carolina, served as shipyard president from 1915 to 1940. State and federal officials regularly sought his comments and advice about black laborers. Progressive groups, such as the United Negro College Fund and the National Urban League, invited Ferguson to join their causes. He served as a

Hampton Institute trustee from 1928 to 1942 and also on the Virginia Commission on Interracial Cooperation. Ferguson called black labor a “great asset.” He advocated proper industrial training for black workers, and he urged Newport News officials to provide better schools and to build other municipal buildings to entice those workers to remain in the city rather than migrate to the North. Ferguson believed whites and blacks could work together in the same establishment, but he cautioned that “considerable care must be exercised in the selection of jobs.” He also cautioned that black laborers worked better in groups than alone. During the Massenburg Law controversy, Ferguson told a state Senate committee that Hampton Institute did not teach social equality, and he publicly promised that complaints about racial mingling during school events would be remedied or he and the other southern trustees would resign. Meanwhile, he and other community leaders quietly circulated word that residents should not involve themselves with the Hampton Anglo-Saxon Club, the local chapter of the statewide group that sought white racial purity. Such actions undermined the group’s local influence even as other chapters across Virginia crowed over their legislative success.<sup>16</sup>

Such progressive views on race may have ameliorated working conditions for black laborers at the shipyard, but they did nothing to end institutionalized discrimination there. The shipyard’s black employees continued to earn less than white co-workers, were relegated to semi-skilled jobs and were excluded from the shipyard’s apprentice school. A note in paycheck envelopes told black workers who to vote for on Election Day. The discrepancy between progressive

rhetoric and actual action to eliminate discrimination fits well the paternalistic beliefs that J. Douglas Smith attributes to Virginia's white elites, and that historian William H. Chafe describes among white elite businessmen in Greensboro, North Carolina. In Greensboro, Chafe finds that the city's largest, most powerful companies were among the most reluctant to integrate because top executives wanted to avoid conflict with their peers, hoped to protect existing class structures and failed to fully understand the reasoning behind black protests. Instead of integrating, white businessmen talked. According to Chafe, "Civility was what white progressivism was all about — a way of dealing with people and problems that made good manners more important than substantial action."<sup>17</sup>

Despite the shipyard's discrimination, the *Journal and Guide* reported in July 1937 that most black workers there opposed joining the Committee on Industrial Organization, a union headed by John L. Lewis. The article said, "Family life, and the welfare of schools, churches, social and fraternal agencies owe their growth and expansion to the shipyard payrolls." Among the reasons cited by workers for opposing the union: the Newport News shipyard paid better than shipyards in Brooklyn, New York and Philadelphia; it allowed black membership on the Employees Representatives Committee; and, it contributed to social and recreational opportunities outside the workplace. (For example, the shipyard spent \$50,000 to build a recreation center, which opened in 1937, for black residents.) Such concessions to black demands for more authority in the workplace fell far short of equal pay and job promotions, but they also presented worthwhile gains during a time of entrenched, legalized discrimination.<sup>18</sup>

The dual nature of the paternalistic beliefs held by Ferguson showed clearly in housing. The shipyard encouraged black workers to own houses by lending them money at low interest rates and by buying houses and reselling them to black workers at cost. However, Ferguson supported neighborhood segregation, viewing it as a way to protect black homeowners. He told U.S. Secretary of Commerce Robert P. Lamont in August 1930 that his company's experience with employing black workers "leads me to the conclusion that the policy of segregation in residential areas is wise and the only one to follow in order to avoid that friction which always results in the Negro getting the worst of it. Pride of race and pride in performance should be stimulated, and the resentment that arises out of a too close contact with white people in a competitive way would be lessened."<sup>19</sup>

Residential segregation often confined black families to the city's most neglected neighborhoods. Almost half of Newport News' black residents lived in an area called Bloodfield during World War I. Bloodfield had no sewer lines or garbage collection and was recognized as one of the state's largest slum districts. A 1919 municipal survey found dilapidated houses, filthy backyards, overcrowding and no indoor toilets or running water throughout the city's poorer sections, regardless of the occupants' race. However, the report noted that the worst of such conditions existed in black districts. "Many of the people there are actually at the present time living like animals," the survey's authors wrote.<sup>20</sup>

The report's language clearly reflected the bias of the improvement league that commissioned it. Leading white residents formed The Better Newport News

Association following a mass meeting called by the Rotary Club in 1919. The association, like other such progressive leagues in Virginia and across the South, approached municipal reform from the prospective of elite, business-oriented, conservative Democrats. As historian John Dittmer writes about Georgia progressives, “they were interested more in improving their own comfortable existence than in uplifting the masses, black or white.” Newport News’ white leaders concerned themselves with black neighborhoods only when problems there threatened white families and their homes. While the municipal survey recommended improving black housing conditions as a first step toward bettering the city, support for that suggestion did not stem from a general concern for the welfare of black residents. Rather, support emerged from the fear among white residents that unsanitary conditions in black neighborhoods could spread disease into their homes, as the report menacingly described: “The family wash sent to the negro laundress dries over the filth of a back yard, which may have several yard toilets, a good-sized garbage heap, and an open pump in close proximity. Conditions such as these must be entirely eliminated from every part of the city before the danger of epidemic and disease can be controlled.”<sup>21</sup>

Poor housing conditions for Newport News’ black residents differed little from conditions found in other southern cities. Douglas L. Smith summarizes federal studies from the late 1930s in *The New Deal in the Urban South*, finding that between 40 percent and 60 percent of city-dwelling southern blacks lived in substandard housing as compared to between 14 percent and 22 percent of city-dwelling southern whites. In Atlanta, one-third of black homes were deemed unfit

for occupancy. In New Orleans, blacks occupied two-thirds of the city's slum dwellings. In Birmingham, slum neighborhoods took up just 10 percent of the city's total area, but they housed half of the black population. Like others in the South, most Newport News black families could relate to the Arkansas boyhood home described by author Richard Wright in *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch*: "Our house stood behind the railroad tracks. Its skimpy yard was paved with black cinders. Nothing green ever grew in that yard. The only touch of green we could see was far away, beyond the tracks, over where the white folks lived."<sup>22</sup>

Slum dwellings were still common in many of Newport News' black neighborhoods two decades after the 1919 municipal survey called for improving substandard housing. For example, the report had recommended new sewers in black neighborhoods, but city officials ignored enforcement of a sewer connection ordinance, particularly in black areas, throughout most of the 1930s because property owners, who were mostly white, said they could not afford to pay the connection fee until the nation's depression eased. In October 1938, the City Council asked twelve faculty members from Huntington High School, the city's secondary school for black students, to examine living conditions in six to eight blocks of the city's worst slum district. Lutrelle F. Palmer, the high school's prominent black principal, headed the volunteer team. A Mississippi native, Palmer arrived in Newport News in 1920 and established himself as a community leader in the intervening years. He served on the Peninsula Interracial Committee and the Aberdeen Gardens sponsoring committee, and he headed

the Virginia Teachers Association, the statewide organization representing black schoolteachers. In an April 1938 interview with the *Daily Press*, Palmer said hundreds of houses in slum areas had no indoor toilets, and many also lacked outdoor privies. He said residents used newspapers to cover falling plaster and to block wind and rain from blowing into apartments. Submitted in December 1938, the faculty report repeated many of the findings listed nearly twenty years earlier by The Better Newport News Association. It described dangerous overcrowding among poverty-stricken families where, “A fire would not only wipe out most of the houses and destroy these people’s belongings, but persons living in the upstairs apartments would be easily trapped if a fire got headway downstairs.” The findings prompted the City Council to create a housing authority charged with spending federal dollars to raze decrepit houses and to build new ones.<sup>23</sup>

Palmer and the housing authority symbolize, much like Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens, how the promised help offered by New Deal policies typically eluded southern blacks, even when they made noteworthy gains. Palmer told a *Daily Press* reporter in April 1938 that the two housing projects showed that black families wanted and would care for good housing if given the opportunity to leave the slums. By the time Palmer submitted the slum survey eight months later, white families had replaced black families in Swantown, and black families hesitated to move into Aberdeen Gardens amid uncertainty about its future. The creation of a housing authority seemed a blessing to black residents in 1938, but they would complain decades later that city officials used the authority’s powers

only to demolish dilapidated buildings, not to build new houses, often forcing black families to leave the city. Palmer himself battled discrimination on another front, spearheading the Virginia Teachers Association as it cooperated with lawyers affiliated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the statewide pursuit of equal pay for black teachers. The bitterest lawsuit occurred in Newport News, where the School Board refused for more than two years to comply with a court order issued in January 1943 to equalize teachers' salaries. Compliance came only after the School Board was held in contempt of court. In May 1943, Palmer was fired from his job along with two other black principals and three black teachers active in the salary-equalization movement. Palmer had worked in the school system for twenty-three years.<sup>24</sup>

## CHAPTER II

### SWANTOWN: Moving In

Two Philadelphia contractors, M. Alexander Lavery and Donald M. Love, filed a plat map in the Warwick County courthouse in June 1935 for a forty-one-unit subdivision called Swantown. Lavery and Love were principal partners in Southern Homes, a Richmond-based contracting firm established specifically to build Swantown. Lavery was president and majority shareholder. Love was treasurer and construction supervisor. The subdivision was located just outside Newport News city limits at the crossroads of newly built State Highway 168 and Martin's Hundred. It was about one mile north of North Newport News, a small neighborhood of black families, and about one mile east of Hilton Village, the nation's first planned urban development, which had been built in 1918 with federal dollars for white shipyard workers. Swantown took its name from the Swann family, an extended black family that reportedly once owned the land and lived nearby along the railroad tracks opposite Hilton Village.<sup>25</sup>

Two key players ensured Swantown's construction — shipyard president Ferguson and the Federal Housing Administration. Ferguson and Lavery were friends (as Love later alleged in a bankruptcy lawsuit), and Ferguson asked Lavery to build the houses. Ferguson served as president of the Newport News Land Corporation, which sold the subdivision's twenty acres of undeveloped land to Southern Homes for \$2,750. Shipyard executives had formed the land

company in 1921 to buy Hilton Village from the federal government and later resold the houses to white shipyard workers. Ferguson also served as president of the First National Bank of Newport News, which issued promissory notes backing Southern Homes' land purchase and issued mortgages to black homebuyers. Samuel H. Plummer, who succeeded Ferguson as bank president, and Fred H. Skinner, a Newport News lawyer and Ferguson's brother-in-law, served as trustees for the mortgages. The shipyard also ensured a large pool of potential homebuyers. A 1935 community directory shows that the majority of Swantown's future tenants worked in the shipyard and moved to Warwick County from Newport News.<sup>26</sup>

The Federal Housing Administration made twenty-year mortgages to Southern Homes and black homebuyers financially feasible by insuring 80 percent of each \$2,000 mortgage, protecting the First National Bank from total financial loss should foreclosure occur. Created by the National Housing Act of 1934, the FHA emerged from the failure of two earlier housing programs — President Herbert Hoover's Federal Home Loan Bank Act of 1932 and Roosevelt's Home Owners Loan Corporation — to restore a free-falling real estate market. An average of one thousand foreclosures occurred daily nationwide in 1933, and half of the nation's twenty billion dollars of national mortgage debt was in default. The FHA sought to jumpstart the stagnant housing industry by insuring mortgages, thereby giving risk protection to skittish financial institutions that hesitated to approve loans because of high foreclosure rates. The agency also made home-improvement loans. The FHA provided quality

controls by requiring developers nationwide to conform to its property and construction standards. It made mortgages easier to repay by issuing long-term loans with locked low-interest rates. At a time when the typical mortgage was paid over twelve years, about 70 percent of FHA mortgages in 1935 allowed homebuyers between seventeen years and twenty years to repay their loans. Historian Gail Radford calls the FHA “the most important of several Depression-era federal agencies aimed at pumping life back into the housing market by restructuring its financial underpinnings.” Housing starts rebounded in 1934 for the first time in eight years, and they continued to climb until World War II. The FHA insured \$4.4 billion worth of mortgages between 1934 and 1940, guaranteeing loans for four of every ten houses built in urban areas in 1940 alone.<sup>27</sup>

However, black homebuyers benefited little from an agency that routinely discriminated against African Americans and advocated racially homogeneous neighborhoods into the 1960s. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights reported that the FHA insured mortgages on 2,761,172 housing units between 1935 and 1950, but blacks occupied only fifty thousand units — or about 2 percent of the total — in strictly segregated neighborhoods found mostly in the South. (Half of the black-occupied units were built during World War II for defense workers.) This happened during a fifteen-year time period when the FHA insured 30 percent of all new construction. As economist Robert C. Weaver wrote in 1948, “FHA’s chief contribution to Negroes was to complicate the ultimate solution of their housing problem.”<sup>28</sup>

The prevalence of lily-white suburbs ringing older cities stemmed, in part, from the residential segregation propagated by FHA administrators with ties to private-sector banking and real-estate interests. Most homebuilding occurred on undeveloped land outside city limits, and most mortgages went to white homebuyers. Agency officials turned to the FHA's *Underwriting Manual* when determining whether a single house or a proposed subdivision satisfied lending criteria. During the FHA's first sixteen years, the manual advocated the use of racially restrictive covenants, which were legal clauses in deeds that prohibited the sale of houses to minorities. The manual also allowed agency officials to deny mortgage insurance if they concluded a project undermined a neighborhood's stability by mingling "inharmonious racial groups."<sup>29</sup>

In conflict after conflict, "inharmonious" came to mean anything that upset white homebuilding, banking and real estate interests. Weaver reported that a Los Angeles builder and a leading city bank wanted to build housing for black tenants during World War II, but a FHA underwriter pulled the agency's support after nearby white property owners complained. The underwriter argued that surrounding properties were bound by racial covenants, which made the project incompatible with the area. That underwriter later refused to alter his decision, even after he was shown real estate records that proved the properties carried no such covenants. FHA officials also rejected an application to build wartime housing in Chester, Pennsylvania, for black shipyard workers. The project's backers submitted four possible housing locations. Three sites either abutted or included slum areas occupied by blacks, which disqualified them for financial

backing. A FHA official rejected the fourth and most suitable site because it lacked existing utilities, schools and transportation. Weaver argued that agency officials could have raised such objections on most FHA-approved projects, and he alleged that a leading financial institution that wanted to build a nearby whites-only housing project pressured the FHA to reject the application. The FHA inflamed already tender race relations in Detroit in the early 1940s, for example, when it stopped insuring mortgages for homebuyers that moved into neighborhoods near a federally sponsored public-housing project being built for black tenants. Ultimately, controversy about the public-housing project sparked two race riots, prompting one prominent social worker to blame the FHA for providing the economic impetus for the clashes.<sup>30</sup>

FHA administrators gave two ready excuses for their discriminatory actions — local race relations and income levels. The “neighborhood composition guideline” followed by FHA administrators prohibited them from selecting buyers or tenants that altered established racial patterns. Advocacy of continued residential segregation imposed income-related handicaps on black homebuyers by confining them to marginal or blighted neighborhoods where neither the FHA nor local lending institutions would invest. This occurred at a time when the typical black family earned roughly one-third of the annual income earned by white families in small southern cities like Newport News. FHA administrators prided themselves on a low foreclosure rate, which was maintained by following the conventional lending practices of private financial institutions. They often refused to approve mortgages for black applicants by concluding that the

prospective homebuyers did not make enough money to justify receiving a mortgage.<sup>31</sup>

Agency administrators routinely denied discrimination when pressed by black leaders. M.R. Young, FHA executive secretary, responded to a letter from Roy Wilkins, the NAACP's assistant secretary, that questioned the lack of federally-insured mortgages for black homebuyers by writing that, "While it may be true that many Negroes and many neighborhoods can not meet our required standards, it is also unfortunately true that the same condition exists among people of many other races and the neighborhoods in which they live." Young made such a claim even though earlier in the letter he remarked that he could not tell Wilkins how many FHA mortgages blacks had received because "we do not even keep our records on a racial basis." Such empty denials did little more than obfuscate the existence of the FHA's pervading institutional racism.<sup>32</sup>

Even so, Swantown offered a tremendous opportunity, giving forty-one black families a chance to rent or own a brand new house. Nationwide, only about 23 percent of blacks owned the houses they occupied in 1940, compared to about 46 percent of whites. In Newport News, homeownership rates by race were 21 percent and 37 percent, respectively. A *Daily Press* article indirectly attributed low homeownership rates to a virtual cease to home construction throughout the 1930s, which created a shortage of suitable homes. Real estate agents estimated that only between 3 percent and 5 percent of houses were vacant. Newport News' housing crunch worsened as World War II approached, and the country's military buildup triggered more work at the shipyard, which

employed almost 10,000 workers in 1939. The housing shortage and the military buildup at least partially explain the particularly low homeownership rate among the city's white residents compared to the nationwide average.<sup>33</sup>

Built on one-quarter acre lots, Swantown's stucco houses came in two styles — two story or bungalow — and featured three bedrooms, a living room with a fireplace, linoleum floors and indoor plumbing. Southern Homes told the *Daily Press* that a homebuyer could pay a portion of the \$400 down payment by working 180 hours to earn \$90, which was deducted from the down payment and was used to furnish the house with items such as furniture, curtains, bed sheets, towels and cooking utensils. Homebuyers could then work more to further reduce the down payment or pay \$310 in cash. The newspaper reported that homebuyers' relatives helped to build houses if work at the shipyard prevented the buyer from participating. In one instance, three sons built a house for their parents. Federal and local officials claimed the houses, which sold for \$2,400, could have sold for \$3,500 on the open market. New homeowners swelled with pride. Langston Powell, who was the four-year-old son of shipyard laborer John Powell and his wife Rosa, recalls few details today about living in Swantown, but he remembers longing to "get back uptown" to brag to friends about his new home. "We felt like we were really somebody who was worth something," Powell said. "You weren't renting. You were buying. That was a big deal to our father."<sup>34</sup>

### Swantown: Moving Out

Swantown began to unravel about one year after construction started and just four months after First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt toured the black neighborhood, telling reporters in April 1936 that, "I hope to return sometime and see the extent to which the resettlement projects here have consummated their development." Five prominent white residents, including a truck farmer, two storekeepers and a funeral home operator, filed a public nuisance complaint in August in Warwick County Circuit Court against the FHA, Southern Homes and black tenants. Only one complainant, farmer Stephen R. Maney, owned property that bordered Swantown. (Some Warwick County residents contended that Southern Homes failed to heed informal segregation boundaries when building Swantown. C.M. Elvin, of Morrison, asked the *Daily Press*, "What is Newport News going to do about the white property owners whose property was wantonly depreciated by the settlement being built in a supposedly white restricted district? Why did it have to be put in a community of white residents anyhow?") The complaint alleged that human sewage overflowed from undersized septic tanks into Newmarket Creek, eventually flowing into a ditch that carried the sewage into lakes at a public park and then into the James River. The five county residents blamed Southern Homes for installing septic tanks smaller than those mandated by county zoning law, the FHA for financing mortgages to houses with inadequate septic tanks and the forty-one tenants for flushing their toilets. The complaint tapped a deep-seated fear among southern whites by raising the specter of an epidemic sparked by blacks, whom doctors into the twentieth

century often described as more disease-prone than whites because of inherent inferior racial traits. As late as the mid-1930s, the *Journal and Guide* attempted to refute such unscientific beliefs by reporting on medical studies that showed no difference in the susceptibility of blacks and whites to tuberculosis and by urging city leaders to reduce the risk of disease in black neighborhoods by giving black residents equitable access to health and sanitation services used by white residents.<sup>35</sup>

A grand jury indicted the defendants a month later, touching off nearly a year's worth of negotiations involving officials from the FHA, Southern Homes, Warwick County, Newport News, state highway department and Maney. The talks proved fruitless. Bankruptcy proceedings began against Southern Homes less than two weeks before the trial started. The company owed more than \$40,000 to creditors, and it possessed virtually no assets. That outstanding debt might explain why the company pulled out of an agreed-upon remedy just before the trial. The solution called for Southern Homes to fix the septic tanks after the highway department agreed to reroute its ditches, and Maney agreed to grant a right-of-way over his land to accommodate the changes.<sup>36</sup>

The weeklong trial began in May 1937 with Judge Frank Armistead amending the indictment by dropping the FHA from the lawsuit apparently because the agency was not directly involved with Swantown's construction. The judge told jurors they could acquit Southern Homes and the black tenants if they faulted the state highway department for not properly maintaining ditches on State Highway 168, causing water to back into Swantown's ditches and flood the

sewage system. Also, jurors could not blame Southern Homes for violating county zoning law since the county Board of Supervisors did not pass a law regulating the size of septic tanks until about eight months after Southern Homes began construction. The jury deliberated for four hours. It found Southern Homes and construction supervisor Love guilty and fined them \$1,000 and \$500, respectively. The jury also found thirty-eight black tenants guilty, fining them a penny apiece. In his ruling, Armistead wrote that the homebuyers and renters were “only technically guilty and are the victims and are the victims of circumstance.” The judge reportedly paid their fines.<sup>37</sup>

One week later, Armistead issued an eviction order that required Swantown’s tenants to leave their homes by the day after Independence Day unless the sewage problem was fixed. A *Journal and Guide* reporter visited Swantown soon afterward. Thirteen families had already left, including four whose houses sold at a foreclosure sale. Neighbors said those four families could afford their monthly house payments, but they decided to stop paying when Southern Homes failed to fix the septic tanks and make other repairs. Residents complained about shoddy houses with leaky roofs and hollow walls. They claimed that Southern Homes officials had promised to fix the septic tanks if tenants agreed to pay about half of the \$16,000 price tag. The residents paid, but Southern Homes made no repairs.<sup>38</sup>

Complications bogged renewed negotiations to fix the sewage problem. Between the tenants’ convictions and evictions, Maney and federal officials could not reach a right-of-way agreement. Plans called for two new ditches across

Maney's land — one to drain State Highway 168 and one to drain Swantown. Maney preferred one ditch. Abner H. Ferguson, acting FHA administrator and general counsel, promised publicly to "make every effort to relieve the present unsatisfactory conditions at Swantown and avoid eviction of present occupants," but he cautioned that his agency could provide no direct help until the houses went into foreclosure. "Out of a total of about \$825 million of mortgages which the administration has accepted for insurance," Ferguson said, "the Swantown project is the only one that is in real difficulty." The FHA foreclosed on eighty-eight houses in 1937, and thirty-eight of them were in Swantown.<sup>39</sup>

Evictions occurred as scheduled. A later court order allowed five families to stay beyond the deadline while they looked for housing elsewhere. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a government-lending bank, eventually bought the houses for the FHA at foreclosure auctions. The FHA paid less than \$2,000 to 208 defaulting homeowners nationwide in 1938. That figure coupled with local financial tallies following the foreclosures indicate that Swantown's homeowners most assuredly lost the money they invested in their houses. In March 1938, Maney agreed to sell an easement over his property for \$850. He allowed two ditches on his property, and it is possible that this was the same remedy he had rejected months earlier when black families still lived in Swantown. The FHA began nearly \$40,000 worth of renovations soon afterward. The last black homeowners, Charles and Susie Gayle, moved out in August 1938. The couple had replaced their septic tank and had continued to pay their

mortgage. They swapped their house in Swantown for one in Aberdeen Gardens.<sup>40</sup>

Swantown's swan song officially came in September 1938 when two leading Newport News real estate firms — Murray & Padgett and Hundley & Applewhite — announced they would sell the renovated houses to white homebuyers only. They also changed the subdivision's name to Warwick Village. The firms had close ties to the FHA and First National Bank of Newport News. Realtor Ambrose A. Padgett headed a local committee created in April 1938 by the FHA with hopes of melding local business interests with federal housing aims. Thomas J. Hundley and Archer A. Applewhite served on the board of the Warwick Land Company with Samuel H. Plummer, bank president and trustee for Swantown's mortgages. Hundley was married to one of Plummer's sisters. The views of these men likely carried significant weight in deciding to convert Swantown to white occupancy. The FHA's Ferguson had earlier told a congressional committee that the agency conferred with its state director, local lenders, and local real-estate agents when deciding how to dispose of foreclosed properties.<sup>41</sup>

The racial conversion was an economic success in an area with a tight housing market. The houses sold in three days. Billed as Newport News' newest suburb, Warwick Village houses sold at a starting price of \$2,000, with an acceptable down payment of 10 percent. The FHA once again insured mortgages issued by the First National Bank. Property records show that twenty-two homebuyers took out mortgages worth \$1,800. Assuming 10 percent down,

that means they paid less than black homebuyers did before renovations. Many of Swantown's former tenants moved back to Newport News. A handful moved into Aberdeen Gardens, another controversial segregated housing project built by the federal government on the Virginia Peninsula.<sup>42</sup>

## CHAPTER III

### **ABERDEEN GARDENS: Opportunity**

Harold L. Ickes, U.S. Secretary of the Interior, set aside \$245,000 in March 1935 for the Newport News Homesteads (later renamed Aberdeen Gardens) through the Division of Subsistence Homesteads after more than a year's worth of planning. The project was backed by Hampton Institute, a sponsoring committee of black community leaders, and with endorsements from leading white Newport News and Hampton officials. Ickes expected the money to buy two hundred acres about 2.5 miles outside of Newport News in Elizabeth City County and to build one hundred houses for struggling black families. Ultimately, the federal government built 158 houses at a cost of more than \$1.3 million. Plans called for three-, four- and five-room brick houses. Tenants could eventually become homeowners over twenty to thirty years, but they would initially rent their homes and then have the option to make mortgage payments or rent-to-own. Plans called for the construction of an entire community, including a park, playgrounds, community center and a cooperative store to be organized and operated by tenants. Each house would come with a garden, orchard, chickens and pigs. Tenants would share twelve mules and twelve milking cows.<sup>43</sup>

Federal officials hoped Newport News Homesteads, called a subsistence homestead project, would lift low-income black tenants "to a higher social and health level" and give them "a new economic stability" by offering them good

housing at a reasonable price and enough land to grow gardens that could provide food more cheaply than grocery stores. Officials justified the project by citing a survey of two hundred black families in Newport News. The survey found that the average weekly income for black workers in Newport News had dropped by \$6 to \$14 per week. Many black laborers worked only two or three times a week, but they paid high rents to live in substandard houses that were at least a half-mile from garden plots. Black residents seemed to embrace the federal project, with a waiting list of applicants doubling the number of proposed houses. William Peddrew, a Newport News plumber and Hampton Institute graduate, praised the project when his family was one of the first ten to move into a house in November 1937. "It was impossible for me to have a garden and to raise chickens where I was. Besides, we look forward to better living standards in our own home, and we are not so crowded here."<sup>44</sup>

Aberdeen Gardens was an exceptional project in two ways. First, no other suburban resettlement project was built for blacks during the New Deal, despite plans for others. Second, Aberdeen Gardens boasted careful design, planning and construction by black architects, engineers and laborers. "This project derives one of its most significant features from the fact that it is a project by Negroes, for Negroes ... I have every confidence that the future history of the Newport News project will be a record of achievement and advancement by members of our colored population," said Charles E. Pynchon, general manager of the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation. Hillyard Robertson, a black architect from Howard University, was the project's top designer. Black engineers

oversaw construction by a black work crew from the Work Projects Administration. The project's community manager, William R. Walker Jr., was the only black supervisor to run a New Deal homestead without white oversight. While Swantown tenants lived on streets named after Confederate officers, Aberdeen Gardens residents lived on streets named after prominent deceased black Virginians, such as Maggie Walker, a Richmond businesswoman, and Matt N. Lewis, founding publisher of the *Newport News Star*. Extensive black involvement in conceiving and supervising the project did not escape local criticism. An August 1936 editorial in the *Daily Press* scoffed at the project's black management. "There were 376 Negroes at work yesterday, to say nothing of the one who strutted a badge bearing the label 'Special Officer.'" <sup>45</sup>

Despite such racially charged claims, support for black involvement traced back to Aberdeen Gardens' two main sponsors, which — like Swantown — included a prominent local institution and a federal agency. Hampton Institute, guided by the leadership of Arthur Howe, school president, and William M. Cooper, director of extension education, exerted a steadying local influence when uncertainty surrounded Aberdeen Gardens as succeeding federal agencies planned and re-planned the project during its formative years. Founded in 1868, the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, which was renamed Hampton Institute in 1930, taught classes in reading, writing and arithmetic to young black men and women, while it also prepared them for jobs as teachers, farmers, clerks and skilled tradesmen. Union General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the institute's first president, defined the school's mission when he said, "The thing to

be done was clear — to train selected Negro youths who should go out and teach and lead their people, first by example, by getting land and homes; to give them not a dollar that they could earn for themselves; to teach respect for labor, to replace stupid drudgery with skilled hands, and in this way to build up an industrial system for the sake, not only of self-support and intelligent labor, but also for the sake of character.” The school evolved over the decades, offering its first bachelor degree in agricultural education in 1923, receiving formal accreditation as a standard technical and professional college in 1927 and awarding its first masters degree in education in 1934. According to *The Negro in Virginia*, most students enrolled in the School of Education during the 1930s, specializing in mathematics, English, French, physical education, science, social studies or public school music. Other students enrolled in the Department of Agriculture, which readied them for farming, teaching or extension work, or they enrolled in the Trade School, which taught such skills as carpentry, welding, plumbing and printing. Hampton Institute’s mission echoed the economic progress, black self-help and interracial cooperation espoused by its most famous graduate, Booker T. Washington, in his Atlanta Compromise. Virginia’s white elites frequently praised Hampton Institute, seeing its mission as a logical extension of their exaggerated sense of paternalism. Such beliefs obscured Hampton Institute’s role, through such controversies as the Massenburg Law and Aberdeen Gardens, in gradually eroding Virginia’s system of managed race relations.<sup>46</sup>

Home construction seems a natural fit for Hampton Institute during the 1930s given the respect other African Americans held for black college graduates, who tended to subscribe to the ideology that all blacks, regardless of class distinctions, deserved equal access in all areas. At a time when most black students never finished high school, a college graduate was held in particularly high esteem. College graduates often became leaders in the black community because their careers as teachers, doctors, lawyers and ministers reinforced their assumed position of leadership with actual civic involvement. Henry Louis Taylor Jr. and Song-Ho Ha argue that the crucible of industrial urban living and racial discrimination created a racial consciousness that encouraged African Americans “to think and act as a people with a common history and destiny, despite being fractured along class and gender lines, and spatially dispersed.” This led to what Preston H. Smith II calls “social democracy,” the dominant belief among black intellectuals during the Great Depression “that all individuals regardless of class should have equal enjoyment of all essential social goods.” Thus, Aberdeen Gardens matched three forces within the Peninsula’s black community that did not always align: the ideological interests of the educated elite, who served as the project’s sponsors; Hampton Institute’s mission of practical self-help and economic advancement; and, the goal of homeownership held by black workers who often lived in the area’s most dilapidated rental housing. With local support established for a project like Aberdeen Gardens, organizers now needed a prospective funding source.<sup>47</sup>

A series of government agencies provided federal support and dollars for Aberdeen Gardens. Tucked into the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, New Deal legislation that sought to stimulate economic revival by establishing business codes of fair competition that effectively fixed prices and wages, was an obscure section that set aside \$25 million for “subsistence homesteads.” The money went to Ickes at the Department of Interior, who created the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in the late summer of 1933. Federal officials were in contact with Howe at Hampton Institute by October. Historian Sidney Baldwin says New Dealers tapped “three historical streams of thought” when conceiving the subsistence homesteads program. They drew upon Jeffersonian visions of agrarian independence, the back-to-the-land movement of the nineteenth century, and American traditions of sectarian communal living, such as the religious colonies founded by the Shakers. Federal officials decided to create four types of communities — experimental farm colonies, homesteads for stranded industrial workers, garden homes for industrial workers near existing cities, and homesteads for part-time industrial workers. The homestead projects mixed the practical concern of affordable and adequate housing with liberal social engineering aimed at bettering the lives of the poor. By June 1934, thirty of the thirty-two projects to be completed were planned. The two not yet on the drawing board were both in Virginia — the controversial Shenandoah Homesteads, which built houses for mountain farmers pushed off their land for the creation of the Shenandoah National Park, and Aberdeen Gardens, which was drafted in March 1935.<sup>48</sup>

The newly created Resettlement Administration absorbed the Division of Subsistence Homesteads just two months after federal officials announced plans for Aberdeen Gardens. The Resettlement Administration also consolidated the land-use programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, farm-debt adjustment program managed by the Farm Credit Administration and rural rehabilitation projects undertaken by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Resettlement projects inherited by the massive new agency were still in their infancy and were of far less importance, according to Tindall, than the agency's efforts to encourage land-use planning, remove submarginal land from agricultural production and award rural rehabilitation loans and grants for land and farming equipment purchases. The Resettlement Administration completed ninety-nine resettlement communities — sixty-one of them in the South — before the Farm Security Administration absorbed it in September 1937.<sup>49</sup>

Uncertainty stalked Aberdeen Gardens from initial planning through construction. Howe originally wanted the project built closer to Hampton, but sponsors could not find enough qualified black tenants to support construction. Sponsors struggled to find a suitable tract of land at an affordable price near Newport News, and they eventually settled for property farther from the city than initially intended. The size of the project fluctuated greatly, going from ten houses to twenty-five to fifty to one hundred during early planning. Howe wrote worried letters to top federal officials in September 1935, seeking assurances that the new Resettlement Administration intended to complete the project. Greater pitfalls awaited once construction began.<sup>50</sup>

### **Aberdeen Gardens: Challenge**

Local complaints about Aberdeen Gardens surfaced publicly in February 1937, several years after initial planning and about one year after workers had cleared trees for construction. A *Daily Press* article reported that the Virginia Peninsula Association of Commerce, essentially a regional chamber of commerce, had passed a resolution that asked federal and state officials to convert Aberdeen Gardens into a white-occupancy project since white farmers surrounded the property. Four days later, the *Daily Press* published a second article correcting the initial report. Sherrod N. Vaughn, PAC secretary-manager, said the group had passed a resolution that asked federal officials only to *study* whether Aberdeen Gardens should convert to white occupancy. Vaughn also said a PAC committee would review plans for Aberdeen Gardens before the group decided whether to take further action.<sup>51</sup>

Supporters quickly rallied around the project. Lorenzo C. White, of Hampton Institute, sent a letter to the *Daily Press*, writing that converting the project could discourage future interracial cooperation. He asked what prevented whites from forcing “all Negroes or all Jews or all red-headed people” off the Peninsula and out of Virginia if they succeeded in altering Aberdeen Gardens. “The resolution seemed to show that the P.A.C. was dead set on shattering the hopes of the many struggling Negro families who have come to think of Aberdeen as their first opportunity to escape from slum conditions.” The black press did not accept the corrected news report at face value. The *Journal and Guide* pointed out that the correction ran four days after the original story, even

though Raymond B. Bottom was both *Daily Press* publisher and PAC president. The *Journal and Guide* suspected that the real reason for the correction stemmed from white real-estate agents who worried that a whites-only Aberdeen Gardens would siphon prospective clients and possible profits.<sup>52</sup>

Unlike Swantown, Aberdeen Gardens had strong support in Washington, D.C. Liberals considered friendly to African American interests headed the Resettlement Administration, even though — like officials at other federal agencies — they usually adhered to established discriminatory and segregationist policies. Will W. Alexander was named administrator of the Resettlement Administration in January 1937 when the agency was transferred to the Department of Agriculture. The son of an Ozark farmer, Alexander had served as president of Dillard University, a black college in New Orleans, and he had headed the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in Atlanta for twenty-five years. The Resettlement Administration, especially under Alexander's leadership, displayed real concern for southern blacks by insuring rehabilitation loans, which was the agency's main function, roughly proportional to their numbers as farmers. (The figures do not compare as favorably when looking solely at low-income farmers, which was the group most directly aided by those loans.) "That the racial discrepancy is not greater is the result of pressure exerted by the Washington and regional offices on the local offices to grant loans to needy farmers irrespective of color," Richard Sterner observed. Unlike the FHA, the Resettlement Administration employed an advisor for black affairs, Joseph H.B. Evans, who rebuffed the PAC resolution. "The thing is too absurd to even

discuss,” Evans told the *Journal and Guide*. “That project was planned by Negroes, engineered by Negroes and is being built by Negroes and will be occupied by Negro tenants. Make no mistake about that.”<sup>53</sup>

Noteworthy strides for equality, though, did not exist to the same extent on the agency’s resettlement homesteads as they did in the loan program, perhaps partially explaining why federal officials refused to convert Aberdeen Gardens to white occupancy. Federal officials had planned Aberdeen Gardens in 1935 at a time when none of thirty-one projects under construction accepted black tenants. By 1940, 1,393 black families lived on thirty-two homestead projects, including smaller scattered farm sites, in thirteen southern states. Those families accounted for about 25 percent of all tenants living on government homesteads when black families made up about 37 percent of all low-income farm families. Aberdeen Gardens was unique because it was the largest project, and it was located in a border state. Only five other projects — one each in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina and South Carolina — planned for more than 100 houses. Of the 32 projects, only four were planned for border states — one each in Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Missouri.<sup>54</sup>

Localized racism prevented many black families across the nation from moving into planned homestead projects. More than two hundred black residents applied to live in a project built in Arthurdale, West Virginia, but the community manager refused to consider their applications, saying that only “native white stock” could live there. Petitions signed by 1,100 white residents from three townships halted plans to build a black project in Dayton, Ohio. White residents

blocked efforts to find a suitable location for a black-occupied homestead in Indianapolis, forcing officials to abandon their plans.<sup>55</sup>

In some situations, federal officials only partially heeded protests from neighboring whites. They proceeded with plans to build black-occupied homesteads, but they separated the houses from nearby white-owned farms by preserving an undeveloped tract of land between black and white properties. Such a "greenbelt" was created at Aberdeen Gardens. The PAC committee recommended in March 1937 that Aberdeen Gardens remain a black-occupied project since so much work had already occurred, but it also urged federal officials to not extend the project beyond its existing boundaries. The committee criticized the Resettlement Administration for inflaming local race relations by ignoring earlier white protests and even accused the agency of ignoring concerns among black leaders anxious about building black-occupied houses so near white farms. The association's board of directors unanimously endorsed the report, and board president Bottom mailed it to Alexander in Washington, D.C. In an accompanying letter, Bottom wrote that, "We feel your office recognizes the need that no Federal project fly in the face of local sentiment." Howe expressed his surprise at several of the committee's findings in marginalia on his copy of the report. He doubted that black leaders had concerns about neighboring white farms, noted that the first white protests occurred one month earlier, and he wondered how close many of the protesters actually lived to the project. However, Howe supported the report's recommendation since it did not alter existing plans and seemingly quelled protest. "Believe something along lines

indicated will be best for all concerned,” he wrote. The Resettlement Administration followed the report’s recommendation. To avoid future controversy, Howe and the all-black sponsoring committee created an interracial advisory committee for the purpose of improving public relations and keeping the general public better informed about plans for Aberdeen Gardens.<sup>56</sup>

The second public challenge to confront Aberdeen Gardens attacked the project indirectly, but it foreshadowed the federal government’s abandonment of resettlement projects in the 1940s. Homestead projects had long drawn the ire of conservative congressmen who criticized their exorbitant costs and compared them to Soviet-style collectives. Senator Byrd attacked the Resettlement Administration in July 1937 from his perch atop the senate reorganization committee for “sinful and absurd waste” of taxpayer dollars. Byrd focused his opposition primarily on the Shenandoah Homesteads, which was built in the same part of Virginia as his hometown, but he took broad swipes at all homestead projects. Figures pulled together for Byrd’s committee estimated that the houses at Aberdeen Gardens cost \$9,233 apiece. The estimate prompted many critical editorials from the *Daily Press* decrying Aberdeen Gardens as an extravagant waste of money and questioning the project’s future. Such criticism resulted in little immediate change in the nation’s capital, but it seemingly dampened already dwindling interest regarding Aberdeen Gardens among local black residents. Sponsors struggled to find additional tenants as the first ten families moved into the project in November 1937. Many black families wondered whether charges of financial waste at Aberdeen Gardens, coming after efforts to

convert it to white occupancy, could result in it becoming another Swantown, which sat mostly empty at the time. Aberdeen Gardens remained about one-fifth vacant in June 1940. Ultimately, the Federal Public Housing Authority assumed responsibility for Aberdeen Gardens. It sold most of the houses between 1946 and 1948, mostly to its black renters, including five former Swantown residents. Only then — about ten years after construction started — could Aberdeen Gardens' black tenants feel truly secure in their homes.<sup>57</sup>

## CHAPTER IV

### “THOSE WHO CAME IN FROM THE OUTSIDE...”

A *Daily Press* editorial published in September 1937 perhaps best stated why Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens encountered opposition from white residents. The editorial renewed the newspaper’s criticism of Aberdeen Gardens’ expensive houses and tacitly acknowledged the chilling effect of Swantown’s conversion to white occupancy. “In the unfinished state of the project, it cannot hope to attract homeowners. The experience of Swantown has been a bitter lesson to many.” The editorial derided the federal government for impractical planning, poor management, and wasteful spending, speculating that the project could become “the greatest white elephant this community has ever possessed.” The editorial then explained why such a promising project failed in the eyes of so many of the newspaper’s white readers. “Those who came in from the outside, who did not know either local conditions or the people with whom they had to deal, have not been able to fit their ideas successfully into community life here.” A more in-depth examination of the reasoning behind why black families wanted those houses and why white residents opposed black homeownership helps to explain why New Deal housing programs nationwide engendered such controversy. In essence, housing projects for black tenants posed challenges to existing Jim Crow strictures regarding race, space and class by relocating poor black families to areas considered outside their established boundaries, thereby

threatening the social and economic interests of white residents of all classes and eroding Virginia's brand of race relations managed through benevolent paternalism.<sup>58</sup>

Kenneth L. Kusmer suggests studying black urban history through a basic framework that examines the influence and interaction of structural, internal and external forces on the black community. Structural forces are overarching, nonracial forces, such as a city's demographic shift or growing industrialization. Internal forces describe how blacks seek to influence or are influenced by structural and external forces "through the retention or creation of cultural values or institutions that are indigenous to the black community." Internal forces also describe black attitudes and behaviors toward whites. External forces represent white attitudes and behaviors toward black residents, "particularly to the manner in which the behavior of whites impinges upon blacks." The complex interplay between the three forces means none operates independent of the others.<sup>59</sup>

Kusmer's framework overlooks a crucial dimension that must also be considered when studying black urban history: the power of economic and social divisions in shaping interactions among blacks and between blacks and whites. Robin D.G. Kelley urges scholars to avoid falling into the trap of viewing the "black community" as a singularly focused monolith rather than a fractured community with internal competing interests that vary according to occupation and income. On the Virginia Peninsula, a common desire for homeownership between black leaders and black laborers did not necessarily translate into an automatic embrace of Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens. This class division

displayed itself most noticeably at Aberdeen Gardens where completed houses sat vacant, despite assurances from black leaders of white acceptance, because black laborers did not want to jeopardize their personal economic standing on a project that had assumed the appearance of a risky venture. While legalized segregation sought to exaggerate the frequently scant economic differences between poor blacks and poor whites in the name of white supremacy, sweeping changes across the South were making it more difficult to maintain that facade, as evidenced in part by the ability of black families in Newport News to purchase their own homes.<sup>60</sup>

Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens came amid the upheaval of urbanization and industrialization as cities throughout the South grew in size and economic significance. David Goldfield argues that plummeting crop prices, exhausted soil, boll weevils and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's discouragement of sharecropping practices nearly completed the weaning of the South from its agrarian roots in the 1930s. Rural blacks, aided by the growing availability of automobiles and electricity, had already shown their opposition to the rural South's suffocating paternalism and poverty by voluntarily moving to cities. The 1870 decennial census identified one in six black Virginians as a city-dweller. By 1930, one in three black Virginians lived in cities. However, no panacea awaited black laborers, even during World War I when the U.S. Shipping Board reserved jobs and instituted wage controls for black laborers at Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock. Urban migration loosened the binds of rural paternalism, but residential segregation and workplace discrimination

limited the economic and social opportunities of black city-dwellers alienated from family, friends and the familiar pace of rural life. Virginia's tradition of "progressive backwardness" complicated the changes underway by stripping cities of the adequate financial resources required to aid the needy and to alleviate overcrowding in slum districts.<sup>61</sup>

The editorial pages of the *Journal and Guide* consistently advocated federal housing programs that promised better housing for black families, explaining in general terms why the black community valued homeownership. "Home-owning is a fundamental creed of the true American — whether it be a shack in shanty town, a boat-house on the river, a cabin in the cotton, or a pent-house in the metropolis. A nation endures in proportion to the quality of its homes and the characters which emerge therefrom." Historian Earl Lewis argues, in *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia*, that Norfolk blacks changed how they attempted to undermine Jim Crow restrictions between 1900 and World War II. Into the early 1930s, black residents worked to undermine entrenched Jim Crow restrictions by more often demanding greater rights in their homes and neighborhoods rather than at work, where they mostly held the worst jobs, earned less pay and were denied promotions. They saw opportunities to push for better roads and better housing, but they did not see such opportunities for higher pay and better jobs. Lewis argues that the Depression began a gradual shift in that balance, encouraging black residents to push for improved status equally at the workplace and at home. "For Norfolk's black residents, the issue was more than autonomy — their success in carving

out some social and psychic space exemplified their determination to achieve power in whatever way possible.”<sup>62</sup>

Newport News’ black residents seem to have generally followed this outline of protest, although Lewis somewhat overstates the distinction between workplace and home. (For example, the spheres of home and workplace united at Swantown since most families appear to have qualified for tenancy based on their shipyard employment.) Even so, homeownership was a life-defining goal — as the parents of Joyce Brown Wilkins and Langston Powell attested to upon moving into Swantown — at a time when only one in four urban blacks owned a house. Families at Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens willingly gave up the comforts of established black neighborhoods and of readily available transportation, either from friends or buses, in order to own a house, to carve out their own “social and psychic space” in comfortable, inviting surroundings. Dorothy “Dot” Dorsey was eleven years old when her parents, Roger and Annie Mae Gayle, rented a house at Swantown. “It was nice up there,” Dorsey said. “The only thing was there were no businesses. You had to have a car or walk. And we walked.”<sup>63</sup>

Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens tenants sought to protect their stake in their homes. Swantown tenants said neighbors stopped making house payments and willingly went into foreclosure to protect what they could of their investment after Southern Homes swindled about \$8,000 and failed to make needed house repairs. Aberdeen Gardens residents petitioned the Farm Security Administration, which succeeded the Resettlement Administration, in May 1938

to change contract language in their leases. They wanted to remove a clause that required residents to keep their houses in “good order and repair” since typical lease agreements only called for tenants to maintain “reasonable order and repair.” Residents also asked for lower rents, the first year’s rent to count toward equity in the houses, and the placement of three homesteaders on the project’s sponsoring committee.<sup>64</sup>

Black homeownership challenged Jim Crow inequality in one of the few tangible avenues available — through what Grace Elizabeth Hale calls the “politics of consumption.” Homeownership allowed black families to assert their equality, to define themselves as Americans fulfilling the American dream. Urbanization and industrialization created a national mass market that encouraged people to identify themselves by what they could buy. The increasing dominance of this culture of consumer capitalism catered to individual desire and pleasure, giving people at least the appearance of greater freedom through their choice of consumer goods, according to William Leach. Legal and extra-legal discrimination prevented blacks from attaining equality in jobs and education, and segregation confined where blacks lived. However, Jim Crow restrictions could not stop black families from buying what they wanted, although it made many purchases more difficult by restricting their income. Across the South, black men and women could walk into a general store and buy the same brand of household goods as white men and women, subverting the ideology of white supremacy. Hale writes that, “Few African Americans may have retained the vote, but many had something whites wanted, at least a few dollars to spend.

Between the end of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth, whites' efforts to enforce black inferiority in these new spaces met African American resistance and insistence on their right to make purchases."<sup>65</sup>

Whites understood that no purchase by blacks asserted the subversive power of consumer politics more forcefully than buying a house, which, unlike other goods, imbued its owner with the legal rights and economic solvency that Jim Crow segregation sought to strip from southern blacks. Homeownership afforded blacks the legal rights due real property under common and constitutional law, which protected houses from illegal seizures and required warrants before entry by authorities. Also, a well-maintained house tended to increase in value, providing black homeowners with a source of money independent of white oversight. Throughout the Depression, many working-class whites found themselves competing with black laborers for jobs and housing in burgeoning industrial cities, despite formal and informal discrimination. Consumer politics and homeownership further disturbed already anxious working-class and middle-class whites by visibly showcasing that some blacks enjoyed greater material wealth than some whites. According to Hale, "Segregation then could never reattach racial and class identities, could not make middle-class blacks poorly clothed, poorly educated, and poor spoken and thus more easily identified by whites of all class as inferior."<sup>66</sup>

The architects of New Deal housing policies clearly recognized the real and symbolic power of homeownership. Radford argues that New Deal housing policies established a two-tiered system. The Federal Housing Administration,

which helped homebuyers finance purchases by insuring low-interest, long-term mortgages, represented the top tier. The FHA encountered little opposition from politicians or the general public because it provided indirect aid to mostly white, moderate-income homebuyers who often did not realize that federal assistance allowed a private lender to issue the mortgage. On the other hand, the United States Housing Authority, a federal agency created in 1937 to build publicly-owned housing projects for people unable to buy houses, represented the bottom tier. The 1937 United States Housing Act, which created the USHA, imposed spending caps on construction (an amendment proposed by Byrd) and tied new construction to slum clearance, which, in effect, reserved undeveloped suburban areas for FHA-backed home construction. Public-housing projects struggled to receive adequate funding because the general public generally viewed the projects as a government handout reserved largely for the poor, particularly poor blacks. Fiscal austerity and location limitations combined to create projects that looked exactly like what one architect feared they would look like — “those buildings which the government built to house poor people.” Author William Styron, a Newport News native, illustrated southern white resentment to the federal government helping black residents in his first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*. The story unfolds in a fictional city based closely upon Styron’s hometown, borrowing street names, describing similar locales and hinting at local scandals. In one scene, two men talk politics over whiskey and ice on a lazy Sunday afternoon. “What about this New Deal?” a visiting real-estate agent asks.

“Gonna give all the money to people who never worked for it, gonna give all the money to a buncha no-count niggers.”<sup>67</sup>

Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens exposed the growing fissures in Virginia’s paternalistically managed race relations. Crowded into slums and denied adequate wages, black tenants acted “in their own interests” and seized new housing opportunities. They sacrificed the comforts and ready assistance of established black neighborhoods to improve the lives of their families. Black tenants recognized the economic stability and bettered social position that homeownership provided, while the black community in general realized the corrosive power that homeownership posed to white supremacy by undermining long-standing economic and social restrictions through the “politics of consumption.” Home purchases also loosened the binds of white supremacy by allowing black homeowners to announce their economic solvency while also asserting their legal right to property ownership. Homeownership allowed Newport News’ black residents to claim a sense of citizenship by allowing them to pursue — as the *Journal and Guide* called it — “a fundamental creed of the true American.”

### **Swantown’s Failure**

Uncertain of their own financial footing during the Great Depression, white residents rebelled against the two housing projects. The projects disturbed white Virginians’ sense of genteel paternalism, already undermined by the anonymity of urban life, by giving black tenants a greater degree of self-sufficiency through

homeownership, albeit in segregated districts. Swantown, in particular, seemed to especially gail white residents by ignoring the federal government's two-tier housing policy and allowing black homebuyers to buy houses in the same fashion as thousands of white families across the state. White opposition built more gradually against Aberdeen Gardens. Aberdeen Gardens maintained, at least in the eyes of the white community, the more acceptable appearance of a public-housing project, as a government handout to poor black families. Black tenants rented before being allowed to hold mortgages. The project's larger size and its amenities, such as a community center, cooperative store and garden plots, also disassociated it from typical house purchases. Aberdeen Gardens' excessive cost, though, violated white Virginians' code of fiscal conservatism, opening the project to attacks from white residents who believed black tenants were receiving a greater share of federal tax dollars than they deserved. Battling racial conflict, both projects' success hinged on strong support from the federal agencies and local sponsors that built them and from the black tenants living in them.

That support failed to materialize at Swantown where the plausible deniability of a legitimate sewer problem seems to have provided a convenient cover for inaction by white sponsors. Unfortunately, newspaper articles, court records, government papers and property deeds only hint at the private discussions that ultimately led to the decision to convert to white occupancy. However, the details that are known show a lack of support from Swantown's financial backers — Southern Homes, Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock,

and the Federal Housing Administration — once prominent Warwick County businessmen filed a public nuisance lawsuit.<sup>68</sup>

Southern Homes offered virtually no help to the tenants, despite the firm's direct responsibility for the faulty septic tanks. Residents complained that the company built shoddy houses as well as installed undersized septic tanks, which the Federal Housing Administration conceded when it spent \$40,000 on renovations. Southern Homes also attempted to swindle black tenants before refusing to pay its share of repairs in a compromise remedy that its executives had proposed. Southern Homes executives showed the preeminence with which they held their own economic concerns, rather than those of the tenants, by filing for bankruptcy before the public nuisance trial began.<sup>69</sup>

Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock possessed the economic pull and political clout (more so in Newport News than in Warwick County) to protect Swantown's black tenants, but shipyard president Ferguson apparently took no public stand regarding the project. This seems fitting given Ferguson's belief in promoting segregated neighborhoods to avoid racially charged conflicts that could erode the status quo of Virginia's race relations. Ferguson said little publicly about the project, but he was the driving force behind-the-scenes to establish it. The *Daily Press* and *Journal and Guide* only fleetingly referred to Ferguson's involvement in Swantown. Neither newspaper explicitly detailed the key leadership role he assumed as the president of the land company that sold the property to Southern Homes, as the president of the shipyard that employed most of the future homebuyers, and as the president of the bank that issued

federally-guaranteed mortgages. Ferguson would have been comfortable in a dual role of public silence and private action, having done much the same thing during the Massenburg Law controversy in 1926 when he publicly promised to resign if Hampton Institute taught social equality while covertly undercutting local support for the white supremacists who advocated the law. The most direct ties linking Ferguson to Swantown during the time of the public nuisance trial stem from the selection of his son, William, as one of Southern Homes' lawyers and from a bankruptcy lawsuit filed by construction supervisor Donald Love, who accused Alexander Laverty, Southern Homes' president, of failing to collect debts owed by his friend Ferguson. Neither instance reflects strong, forthright advocacy for Swantown. However, it's not unreasonable to wonder to what degree Ferguson might have attempted behind closed doors to influence events in favor of the black tenants.<sup>70</sup>

The Federal Housing Administration made an effort to salvage the houses for black tenants, but federal officials listed a litany of reasons for a lack of government intervention, including failed negotiations with Southern Homes and farmer Maney, regulations that barred the FHA from repairing houses it did not own, and court-ordered evictions that set the stage for the locally preferred alternative of white occupancy. FHA officials then seemingly acceded to the wishes of white banking and real estate interests — a stance the agency commonly assumed (and was frequently criticized for by civil-rights leaders) wherever controversy confronted black-occupied housing projects. The FHA advocated segregated neighborhoods and opposed residential integration into

the 1960s, meaning officials were likely embarrassed by the Swantown debacle, and they likely preferred the least controversial way to fix it, regardless of public promises to return black tenants to their homes. Despite acknowledgement by a leading FHA official that Swantown was the agency's only project "in real difficulty," the agency's annual reports failed to mention it.<sup>71</sup>

Black tenants sought to protect their houses to no avail by pleading not guilty to the public nuisance charge and testifying in court, and by paying extra money to Southern Homes to fix the septic tanks. They then spurred the development's demise — well aware of the unwillingness of Swantown's backers to assist them in a dilemma not of their making — by voluntarily going into foreclosure to protect themselves from additional financial losses. Shoddy home construction and petty snubs, such as streets named after Confederate officers, might have eased family decisions to forgo monthly house payments. Abandoned to Jim Crow discrimination, the black tenants chose to cut their financial losses. Joyce Brown Wilkins, then a teen-age girl living in Aberdeen Gardens, once asked her mother as she worked in her kitchen whether she regretted leaving Swantown. "There was no need banging your head against a brick wall when there's nothing you can do about it," she remembered her mother saying.<sup>72</sup>

### **Aberdeen Gardens' Success**

Meanwhile, Aberdeen Gardens was defined by the action, rather than the inaction, of its sponsors. Recognizing the need for interracial cooperation under Jim Crow segregation, Hampton Institute corralled local support, black and white,

before the federal government even appropriated money for construction. Unlike the shipyard at Swantown, Hampton Institute was intimately involved in guiding Aberdeen Gardens' development. Howe advised an all-black sponsoring committee, which included educators from Hampton Institute and other leaders from the black community. The committee, which had an intimate and heartfelt connection to the people it sought to help, made suggestions to federal officials about the project's design, ensuring that future black tenants lived in a community that satisfied their needs and desires. The committee also sought and received endorsements of the project from leading white businessmen, such as Ferguson, and politicians, such as Byrd. The general public was aware of the project at least eight months before plans were formally announced because articles in the *Daily Press* detailed the search for a location and tenants. This early consensus building buffered Aberdeen Gardens against later white hostility. When threatened by protests from white truck farmers, the sponsoring committee created an advisory panel that included white members. The move quelled opposition by satisfying white demands for more information and a greater role in planning. The move also stunted later opposition about the project's cost.<sup>73</sup>

First the Resettlement Administration and then the Farm Security Administration proved invaluable allies, heeding the advice of local sponsors and outright rejecting white occupancy. Federal officials followed recommendations from the sponsoring committee and renamed the project Aberdeen Gardens and renamed the streets after prominent black leaders. Joseph H.B. Evans, the agency's black affairs advisor, strongly rebuked initial news reports calling for

white occupancy. Will Alexander and other top officials promised to defend the project, both publicly and privately. Federal officials and the sponsoring committee held a series of public meetings in October 1938 as black interest in the project lagged following Swantown's failure. They assured residents that the houses were affordable, and they promised not to convert to white occupancy. Aberdeen Gardens disturbed local race relations, but strong and active support from local and federal sponsors allowed the project to overcome white opposition.<sup>74</sup>

Most black tenants moved into Aberdeen Gardens after the turmoil about its construction receded. However, they lived in quiet uncertainty for several years, remembering initial white opposition to the project and what such opposition had accomplished at Swantown. Many tenants initially refused to move into Aberdeen Gardens, asserting their own authority over local and federal officials, black and white, until they received repeated assurances that Aberdeen would remain a black-occupied project. Unlike neighboring whites, the black tenants did not view the houses as a government handout. Better homes came at a considerable sacrifice. Families uprooted themselves from the security of established neighborhoods to move into houses that white residents did not want them to own. Also, the well-built houses were not cheap. Monthly rents ranged from \$11.25 to \$15.50, and monthly payments for tenants planning to buy ranged from \$17.32 to \$21.47. The rents were somewhat higher than the \$12.96 per month a government survey tallied as the average rent for black families. In comparison, Swantown's black homeowners paid \$13.20 per month on their

mortgages. Even with supportive sponsors, Aberdeen Gardens could not have succeeded without the sacrifice and determination of its tenants.<sup>75</sup>

Joyce Brown Wilkins, now seventy years old, recalls little of the racial conflict that hounded her family from Swantown to Aberdeen Gardens. She mostly remembers with fondness her childhood days in Aberdeen Gardens. All her neighbors had chicken coops and gardens and new furniture. They lived in new brick houses with big back yards and apple and peach trees. Classmates from elsewhere surprised her when they talked about houses without running water, indoor toilets, freezers or wringer washing machines. She remembers overhearing adults talk about how whites did not believe blacks should live in nice brick homes with so many amenities. "Growing up in Aberdeen, we thought we were rich," Wilkins said. "I think all the kids did."<sup>76</sup>

Wilkins alludes to the challenges Swantown and Aberdeen Gardens posed to Jim Crow strictures regarding race, space and class when she talks about Aberdeen Gardens' children believing themselves to be wealthy. The two housing projects gave black families an unusual chance to leave behind squalid slums with decrepit housing for well-built houses in new neighborhoods that promised better living conditions and appreciating value on investments. The houses violated the spirit of segregation by moving black families from established, resource-starved black neighborhoods into areas of nebulous racial orientation with extensive amenities. The houses violated white Virginians' sense of enhanced paternalism and belief in white supremacy by showcasing the ability of black families to achieve the same goals as white families if given equal

access to opportunity. Thus, white hostility ensued. Black families failed to overcome that racism at Swantown because they largely battled it alone within a system designed to handicap them every way possible. They triumphed over such racism at Aberdeen Gardens because their efforts were matched with support from local black and white leaders, as well as the federal government. Swantown illustrated business as usual during the Jim Crow era. Aberdeen Gardens served as one of many signals spotlighting the beginning erosion of paternalist-managed race relations and offered a glimpse of future strides in the realm of civil rights.

**TABLE 1**  
**Newport News population by year and race**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Percent black</b>
1910	20,205	12,935	7,259	36 percent
1920	35,596	21,466	14,077	40 percent
1930	34,417	21,120	13,281	39 percent
1940	37,067	21,772	15,283	41 percent

**Source:** Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. *Historical Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: U.S., 1790-1970*. Anne Arbor: ICPSR. Internet database, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>. Numbers taken from decennial censuses.

### ILLUSTRATION 1

Houses in a black section of Newport News in September 1936.



**Source:** Photograph by Paul Carter. In the Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection, U.S. Library of Congress (LC-USF33-010162-M3).

## ILLUSTRATION 2

A house in Swantown (now a neighborhood in Newport News) in June 2004.



**Source:** Photograph by the author.

### ILLUSTRATION 3

The kitchen in a house formerly occupied by an Aberdeen Gardens tenant in November 1937.



**Source:** Photograph by Arthur Rothstein. In the Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection, U.S. Library of Congress (LC-USF34-025990-D).

**ILLUSTRATION 4**

Row of finished houses at Aberdeen Gardens in October 1937.



**Source:** Photograph by John Vachon. In the Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection, U.S. Library of Congress (LC-USF33001015-M3).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Warwick County (Va.) Property Deed for James and Myrtle Brown (Deed Book 67, Page 437, Newport News Cir. Ct.); Hill Directory Company, *Hill's Newport News (Warwick County, VA) City Directory*, Vol. 1935; Joyce Brown Wilkins, interview by author, 19 June 2003, Hampton, Virginia, oral.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkins interview, 19 June 2003 and 24 November 2003; U.S. Department of the Interior, Division of Subsistence Homesteads, press release (13 March 1935) Hampton University Archives, Dr. Arthur Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1935); Elizabeth City County (Va.) Property Deed for James and Myrtle Brown (Deed Book 141, Page 10, Hampton Cir. Ct.).

<sup>3</sup> George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 545. For an overview of how the New Deal affected Southern blacks and race relations, also see Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue*, Vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 103-124; Douglas L. Smith, *The New Deal in the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 232-259.

<sup>4</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, "The Impact of the New Deal on Black Southerners" in *The New Deal and the South*, ed. James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 120-126; Biles, *South and New Deal*, 11-115; de Jong, Greta, "'With the Aid of God and the F.S.A.' The Louisiana Farmers' Union and the African American Freedom Struggle in the New Deal Era," in *Time Longer than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850-1950*, ed. Charles M. Payne and Adam Green (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 238-239.

<sup>5</sup> Sitkoff, "Impact of New Deal on Black Southerners," 124-127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Tindall, *Emergence of New South*, 611-612; Biles, *South and New Deal*, 137; Ronald L. Heinemann, *The Enduring Dominion: Depression and New Deal in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), ix, 10, 172-185, 70-71, 36. For an overview of how the Byrd political machine operated through county offices, see J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 1945-1966* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 9-22.

<sup>8</sup> Heinemann, *Enduring Dominion*, 36-37, 185; U.S. Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, *The Negro in Virginia* (New York: Hastings House, 1940; reprint, Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 1994), 374 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>9</sup> Heinemann, *Enduring Dominion*, 141; Speech by C. Vernon Spratley, 23 July 1935, Carter Glass Collection, Box 146 & 147, folder Hon. H.F. Byrd, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville.

<sup>10</sup> C.V. Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 2d. ed., rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 98; Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 432.

## [Notes to Pages 11 - 19]

<sup>11</sup> "Integrity of the Anglo Saxon Race," *Newport News Daily Press*, 15 March 1925, editorial; Richard B. Sherman, "The 'Teachings at Hampton Institute: Social Equality, Racial Integrity and the Virginia Public Assemblage Act of 1926,'" *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 95, no. 3 (July 1987): 275, 279-300; Sherman, "'The Last Stand: The Fight for Racial Integrity in Virginia in the 1920s,'" *The Journal of Southern History*, 95, no. 1 (February 1988): 82-85; J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 107-129; Howard V. Young Jr., "William Howard Taft and Hampton Institute," in *Stony the Road: Chapters in the History of Hampton Institute*, ed. Keith L. Schall (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 148-154.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 128-129, 3-17; John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 141, 158-159; Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 128-129, 3-17. Brundage documented two lynchings on the Virginia Peninsula during the fifty-year period he studied. Both took place in Warwick County, future home of Swantown. One occurred in 1881 and the other in 1900.

<sup>14</sup> Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), *Historical Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: U.S., 1790-1970* (Anne Arbor: ICPSR), Internet database, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>; Tindall, *The Emergence of New South*, 146-151; Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 44-46; John V. Quarstein and Parke S. Rouse Jr., *Newport News: A Centennial History* (Newport News: City of Newport News, 1996), 102-104, 114.

<sup>15</sup> "Business Men Organize in Newport News," *Norfolk (Va.) Journal and Guide*, 11 December 1937; U.S. Writers' Program, *Negro in Virginia*, 330; Quarstein, *Centennial History*, 123, 93; "Newport Newsians Ponder Chances of Electing Negro City Councilman; Race Once Held Elective Offices," *Journal and Guide*, 13 January 1934; Henry Lewis Suggs, "Black Strategy and Ideology in the Segregation Era: P.B. Young and the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 1910-1954," in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 91 (April 1983), 177; Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 138-139.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Writers' Program, *Negro in Virginia*, 345-347; Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 47, 127; *Daily Press*, 16 February 1926; Cerinda W. Evans, "Homer Lenoir Ferguson: Dean of American Shipbuilders," TMs, p. 117-119, 192-199 The Mariners' Museum, Newport News. Evans' account does not indicate if Ferguson accepted invitations for involvement with the United Negro College Fund and the National Urban League.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Writers' Program, *Negro in Virginia*, 345-347; Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 47, 138-139; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 8, 48-55.

<sup>18</sup> "3,000 Negro Workers on the Payroll," *Journal and Guide*, 10 July 1937; "Over 600 Present at Dedication of Recreation Center," *Daily Press*, 15 February 1937.

<sup>19</sup> Evans, "Homer Lenoir Ferguson," 114-119.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Writers' Program, *Negro in Virginia*, 370; The Better Newport News Association, *Report on Municipal Survey of Newport News* (Newport News: Better Newport News Association, 1919), 116-117.

<sup>21</sup> Better Newport News Association, *Report on Municipal Survey of Newport News*, 116-117; Evans, "Homer Lenoir Ferguson," 169; Dittmer, *Black Georgia*, 110; Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 30.

## [Notes to Pages 19 - 28]

<sup>22</sup> Richard Sterner, *The Negro's Share: A Study of Income, Consumption, Housing and Public Assistance* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943; reprint, Westport: Negro Universities Press, 1971), 185-209 (page citations are to the reprint edition); Smith, *New Deal in Urban South*, 234-235, 168; Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch," in *The Best American Essays of the Century*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan (Boston Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), 159.

<sup>23</sup> "Robust Health Enjoyed by City during Past Year," *Daily Press*, 2 January 1937; "Negro Educators to Begin Personal Part of Inquiry in Slum Section Saturday," *Daily Press*, 13 October 1938; J. Rupert Picott, *History of the Virginia Teachers Association* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1975), 111-112; Quarstein, *Centennial History*, 119, 128-129; "Palmer and Howe Believe Improved Homes would be Incentive for Clean-up," *Daily Press*, 24 April 1938; Newport News, City Council minutes, 21 November 1938, 5506-5507 and 19 December 1938, 5553-5555.

<sup>24</sup> *Daily Press*, 24 April 1938; Picott, *Virginia Teachers Association*, 111-120; Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 272-273; Doxy A. Wilkerson, "The Negro School Movement in Virginia: From 'Equalization' to 'Integration,'" vol. 2, *The Making of Black America: Essays in Negro Life & History*, ed. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 261-262.

<sup>25</sup> Warwick County Plat Map, Swantown, June 1935 (Newport News Cir. Ct.); "Low Cost Housing Project Here Attracting National Attention; Points Way to Depression Cure," *Daily Press*, 10 November 1935; Quarstein, *Centennial History*, 85, 87.

<sup>26</sup> Donald M. Love v. Southern Homes Inc. (Richmond, Va., Cir. Ct., 1937); *Hill's City Directory*, 1935; Quarstein, *Centennial History*, 107; Warwick County property deeds (Deed Book 67, Page 437, Newport News Cir. Ct.); Evans, "Homer Lenoir Ferguson," 171.

<sup>27</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes Inc., et al. (Warwick County Cir. Ct.); *Daily Press*, 10 November 1935; Gail Radford, "The Federal Government and Housing during the Great Depression," in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. John F. Bauman, Roger Biles and Kristin M. Szyvian (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 107-108; Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 86-89; Federal Housing Administration, *Second Annual Report of the Federal Housing Administration for the Year Ending December 31, 1935* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 21, 33-34; Robert C. Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948), 70.

<sup>28</sup> Robert D. Bullard, "Blacks and the American Dream of Housing," in *Race, Ethnicity, and Minority Housing in the United States*, ed. Jamshid A. Momeni (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 54; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1959* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1959), 463; Weaver, *Negro Ghetto*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, "With or Without Jim Crow: Black Residential Segregation in the United States," in *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, eds. Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 84-85; Hirsch, "'Containment' on the Home Front: Race and Federal Policy from the New Deal to the Cold War," *Journal of Urban History* 26, no. 2 (2000), 162-163; U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 463-470; June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf, eds., *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1997), 282-284, contains excerpts from the *FHA Underwriting Manual, 1938*.

<sup>30</sup> Weaver, *Negro Ghetto*, 218-220; Dominic J. Capeci Jr., *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 80.

<sup>31</sup> Sterner, *Negro's Share*, 60; U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 467-468; Hirsch, "Containment," 161.

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<sup>32</sup> M.R. Young, FHA executive secretary, to Roy Wilkins, NAACP assistant secretary, 18 October 1938, Folder, Minority Group Housing, 1938-1947, Commissioner's Correspondence and Subject File, 1938-1958, Federal Housing Administration, Record Group 31, National Archives II, College Park, Md.

<sup>33</sup> Bullard, "Blacks and American Dream," 58; ICPSR, *Historical Data*, Internet; "Many Homes Being Built over the Lower Peninsula," *Daily Press*, 18 April 1937; "Newport News Housing near Saturation but no Radical Increase in Rents Foreseen," *Daily Press*, 22 July 1934; Quarstein, *Centennial History*, 136-140.

<sup>34</sup> *Daily Press*, 10 November 1935; Langston Powell, interview by author, 30 October 2002, Newport News, Virginia, oral. A discrepancy exists among records. Contemporary news reports and court records identify Swantown tenants as homeowners. However, property deeds show that black tenants held title to only 15 properties while Southern Homes retained title of 26 other properties. I was unable to determine whether the homeowners believed they owned the property, knew they were renting or were renting-to-own.

<sup>35</sup> "Development of Swantown in Future May Bring New Visit from Mrs. Roosevelt," *Daily Press*, 5 April 1936; Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes Inc., et al. (Warwick County Cir. Ct., 1937); *Hill's City Directory*, 1935; Swantown Plat Map; "The Swantown Project," *Daily Press*, 17 August 1937, letter to the editor; "Sifting the News from Day to Day," *Journal and Guide*, 11 August 1934, column; "Environment, Health, Citizenship," *Journal and Guide*, 28 July 1934. Furthermore, all Warwick County court records are stored in Newport News Circuit Court. For an overview of how white Southerners came to consider tuberculosis the "Negro Servants' Disease," see Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 187-218.

<sup>36</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes; "Grand Jury Makes Nuisance Charges in Swantown Case," *Daily Press*, 22 September 1936; "Trial of Charges in Swantown Case Postponed to May," *Daily Press*, 6 March 1937; Love v. Southern Homes; "Convictions, Fines Conclude Hearing in Swantown Case," *Daily Press*, 29 May 1937.

<sup>37</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes; Warwick County Board of Supervisors, "Ordinance for the Disposal of Human Waste" (5 March 1936), *Proceedings of the Warwick County Board of Supervisors, January 1929-January 1944*; *Daily Press*, 29 May 1937; "Swantown Cleanup Proposed by FHA before Evacuation," *Daily Press*, 18 June 1937.

<sup>38</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes; "Evacuation of Swantown Ordered by Court Unless Nuisance Abated by July 5," *Daily Press*, 4 June 1937; "Tenants Begin Desertion of Swantown," *Journal and Guide*, 5 June 1937. Tenants said they paid \$190 down on their houses, as compared to the \$400 down payment cited by Southern Homes in the *Daily Press*, 10 November 1935.

<sup>39</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes; Love v. Southern Homes; *Daily Press*, 29 May 1937; "Officials Discuss Swantown Problem, Seek Right-of-Way for Surface Drainage Ditch," *Daily Press*, 19 June 1937; Federal Housing Administration, *Fourth Annual Report of the Federal Housing Administration for the Year Ending December 31, 1937* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 97.

<sup>40</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes; *Fifth Annual Report of the Federal Housing Administration for the Year Ending December 31, 1938* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 168; Warwick County Commission of Accounts records, 17 September 1937; Warwick County Right-of-Way Agreement (Deed Book 73, Page 31, Newport News Cir. Ct.); Warwick County property deeds; " 'Swantown' Now 'Warwick Village,' White Subdivision," *Daily Press*, 21 September 1938; U.S. Writers' Program, *Negro in Virginia*, 374.

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<sup>41</sup> *Daily Press*, 21 September 1938; *Hill's City Directory*, 1935; "Padgett to Head Local Committee on Better Housing," *Daily Press*, 34 April 1938; "T.J. Hundley, Veteran Realtor, Dies at Age 86," *Daily Press*, 11 December 1969; Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Banking and Currency, *Extension of Debentures Issued by Federal Housing Administration: Hearings before the Committee on Banking and Currency*, 75<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 26 January 1937, 16.

<sup>42</sup> "Warwick Village Residences Sold, Agents Announce," *Daily Press*, 27 September 1938; Warwick County property deeds.

<sup>43</sup> Press release, 13 March 1935, Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1935); Memo by William M. Cooper, 22 January 1935, Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1935); "200 Acres Purchased for Site," *Journal and Guide*, 9 March 1935; Nancy J. Martin-Perdue and Charles L. Perdue Jr., eds., *Talk about Trouble: A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 190-191.

<sup>44</sup> Press release, 13 March 1935, Howe Papers; "Homes will be Built for 100 Families Only," *Journal and Guide*, 18 May 1935; "Many Families Get Chance for Better Life as Model Aberdeen Project Opens," *Journal and Guide*, 6 November 1937.

<sup>45</sup> Martin-Purdue, *Talk about Trouble*, 190; Press release, 13 March 1935, Howe Papers; *Journal and Guide*, 9 March 1935; "Labor Will Clear Aberdeen Tract Starting Monday," *Daily Press*, 22 February 1936; Donald Holley, "The Negro in the New Deal Resettlement Program," *New South* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1972), 56, 62; "Resettlement at Aberdeen," *Daily Press*, 14 August 1936, editorial; "Aberdeen Street Names Will Honor Leading Negroes," *Daily Press*, 5 December 1937.

<sup>46</sup> Carolyn Haldeman-Hawkins and Louise Watson Todd, "Education: Import from the Onset," in *Hampton: From the Sea to the Stars, 1610-1985*, ed. James T. Stensvaag (Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1985), 101-103; Francis G. Peabody, *Education for Life: The Story of Hampton Institute* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1918), 99; U.S. Writers' Program, *Negro in Virginia*, 304; C.Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1951), 357-358; Ayers, *Promise of New South*, 324-326.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Louis Taylor Jr. and Song-Ho Ha, "A Unity of Opposites: The Black College-Educated Elite, Black Workers and the Community Development Process," in *Historical Roots of the Urban Crisis: African Americans in the Industrial City, 1900-1950*, eds. Henry Louis Taylor Jr. and Walter Hill (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 32, 36-38; Preston H. Smith II, "The Quest for Racial Democracy: Black Civic Ideology and Housing Interests in Post-War Chicago," *Journal of Urban History*, 26, no. 2 (2000), 132-134.

<sup>48</sup> Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 68-75; Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), 88, 93, 98, 113; Tindall, *Emergence of New South*, 433, 421-427; Arthur Howe to Rexford G. Tugwell, 20 September 1935, Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1935).

<sup>49</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 125-126, 143-145; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 75, 92-94; Tindall, *Emergence of New South*, 422-425.

<sup>50</sup> Cooper memo, 22 January 1935, Howe Papers; Martin-Perdue, *Talk about Trouble*, 190; W.H. Fippin, state land planning specialist with Resettlement Administration to Howe, 26 February 1936, Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1936); Howe to Tugwell, 20 September 1935, Howe Papers.

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<sup>51</sup> “Aberdeen Project Formally Opens in Task of Clearing,” *Daily Press*, 25 February 1936; “Resolution by PAC Asks Incorporation for Labor Unions,” *Daily Press*, 10 February 1937; “Corrects Report of Aberdeen Story,” *Daily Press*, 14 February 1937.

<sup>52</sup> “The Aberdeen Project,” *Daily Press*, 12 February 1937, letter to the editor; “Evans Scoffs at Idea of Racial Change in Virginia Housing Unit,” *Journal and Guide*, 20 February 1937; Henry Lewis Suggs, *P.B. Young, Newspaperman: Race, Politics and Journalism in the New South, 1910-1962*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 79-80.

<sup>53</sup> Holley, “Negro in New Deal Resettlement Program,” 61-62; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 122-123, 95-96; Sitkoff, “Impact of New Deal on Black Southerners,” 127; Sterner, *Negro’s Share*, 298-300; *Journal and Guide*, 20 February 1937.

<sup>54</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 200-202; Sterner, *Negro’s Share*, 307-309, 423.

<sup>55</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 200-202; Holley, “Negro in New Deal Resettlement Program,” 55-57.

<sup>56</sup> Holley, “Negro in New Deal Resettlement Program,” 63-64; Committee report to the Board of Directors of the Virginia Peninsula Association of Commerce, 9 March 1937, Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1937); Raymond B. Bottom to Will W. Alexander, 11 March 1937, Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1937); “Inter-Racial Body on Aberdeen Work Receives Approval,” *Daily Press*, 25 May 1937. Interestingly, two people directly involved with occupancy changes at Swantown were also involved with proposed changes at Aberdeen Gardens. Realtor Thomas J. Hundley, who was one of the real-estate agents to sell Swantown houses to whites headed the PAC committee that investigated the feasibility of white occupancy at Aberdeen Gardens. R.L. Turlington, a Warwick County storekeeper who signed the public nuisance complaint against Swantown, was a member of the PAC’s board of directors.

<sup>57</sup> Heinemann, *Enduring Dominion*, 123; Tindall, *Emergence of New South*, 708; Biles, *South and New Deal*, 48; “Byrd Charges Sinful Waste By Resettlement Regime in Homestead Projects in U.S.,” *Daily Press*, 5 July 1937; “Socialistic Settlements,” *Daily Press*, 3 September 1937; “Aberdeen Gardens,” *Journal and Guide*, 29 October 1938; Sterner, *Negro’s Share*, 423; *Grantor and Grantee Index to Deeds, Trusts, Miscellaneous Liens, Wills and Lis. Pendens, T-V, 1 January 1935 through 31 December 1954* (Hampton Cir. Ct.).

<sup>58</sup> “Note on Aberdeen,” *Daily Press*, 6 September 1937, editorial; Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth L. Kusmer, “The Black Urban Experience in American History,” in *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 105-106.

<sup>60</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “We are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” in *The New African American Urban History*, eds. Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1996), 193, 225-229.

<sup>61</sup> David R. Goldfield. *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 139-150; U.S. Writers’ Program, *Negro in Virginia*, 369; Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 89-90. For examples of how Southern blacks resisted segregation see Al-Tony Gilmore, “The Black Southerner’s Response to the Southern System of Race Relations: 1900 to Post-World War II,” in *The Age of Segregation: Race Relations in the South, 1890-1945*, ed. Robert Haws (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), 67-88; Liesl Miller Orenic and Joe W. Trotter, “African Americans in the U.S. Economy: Federal Policy and the Transformation of Work, 1915-1945,” in

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*Historical Roots of the Urban Crisis: African Americans in the Industrial City, 1900-1950*, eds. Henry Louis Taylor Jr. and Walter Hill (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 179.

<sup>62</sup> "Better Homes," *Journal and Guide*, 13 February 1937; Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 6-7.

<sup>63</sup> U.S. Writers' Program, *Negro in Virginia*, 369; Dorothy "Dot" Dorsey, interview by author, 23 October 2002, Newport News, Virginia, oral.

<sup>64</sup> *Journal and Guide*, 5 June 1937; Aberdeen Gardens petition, copy to Elizabeth City County Schools, 31 May 1938, Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1938).

<sup>65</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, "'For Colored' and 'For White': Segregating Consumption in the South," in *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, eds. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore and Bryant Simon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 162-163; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 6-8; William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993; Vintage Books, 1994), 3-12.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000), 2; Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 110-112; Joe William Trotter Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 147-152, 230-233; Robert Higgs, "Race and Economy in the South, 1890-1950," in *The Age of Segregation: Race Relations in the South, 1890-1945*, ed. Robert Haws (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), 89-90; Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 128-131.

<sup>67</sup> Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 1-3, 202-203; Radford, "The Federal Government and Housing during the Great Depression," 112-117; William Styron, *Lie Down in Darkness* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1951); Signet Books, 9<sup>th</sup> printing, 54.

<sup>68</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes.

<sup>69</sup> *Journal and Guide*, 5 June 1937; *Daily Press*, 12 September 1938; *Daily Press*, 29 May 1937; Love v. Southern Homes.

<sup>70</sup> Evans, "Homer Lenoir Ferguson," 119, 192; *Hill's City Directory*, 1935; Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 47, 127; *Daily Press*, 16 February 1926; Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes. Ferguson's name rarely appears in *Daily Press* articles about Swantown, with the most significant mentions occurring when the Swantown project is first described, when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visits and when Love files his lawsuit.

<sup>71</sup> *Daily Press*, 4 June 1937; Bullard, "Blacks and American Dream," 54; *Daily Press*, 19 June 1937; *Fourth Annual Report of the Federal Housing Administration*; *Fifth Annual Report of the Federal Housing Administration*.

<sup>72</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia v. Southern Homes; *Journal and Guide*, 5 June 1937; Joyce Brown Wilkins, 19 June 2003.

<sup>73</sup> Cooper memo, 22 January 1935, Howe Papers; "Colored Residents Await Loan Plans," *Daily Press*, 3 July 1934; *Daily Press*, 25 May 1937.

<sup>74</sup> "Newport News Homesteads now 'Aberdeen Gardens,'" *Journal and Guide*, 12 February 1938; "Aberdeen Streets Named for Virginia Race Leaders," *Journal and Guide*, 11 December 1937; "Officials

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Call Aberdeen Challenge to Race Pride," *Journal and Guide*, 22 October 1938; "Aberdeen Gardens," *Journal and Guide*, 29 October 1938, editorial.

<sup>75</sup> *Journal and Guide*, 22 October 1938; George S. Mitchell, regional director of the Farm Security Administration to Howe, 6 September 1938, Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1937); press release, 13 March 1935, Howe Papers, box 22, folder: Aberdeen Homesteads (1935); Warwick County property deeds.

<sup>76</sup> Joyce Brown Wilkins, 19 June 2003 and 24 November 2003.

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## VITA

### Frederick James Carroll

Frederick James Carroll was born in Peoria, Illinois on June 12, 1971. He graduated from Brimfield (Illinois) High School in that city in May 1989. He received his A.A. from Illinois Central College in 1991. He received his B.A. from Northern Illinois University in 1993 with a degree in history.

In September 2001, the author entered the College of William and Mary as a student seeking a master's degree from the Department of American Studies. He defended his thesis in June of 2004. He is currently working for the *Daily Press* as a reporter.