

Urban Renewal in Harrisonburg

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What Happened in Harrisonburg Happened Around the Country

More than 1,200 municipalities participated in the program.

- Cleared 156 sq miles.
- Destroyed 450,000 dwelling units
- Displaced 114,000 businesses
- Displaced 1.3M people
 - *Majority non-white, tenants.*
 - *Disproportionately poor and elderly.*

Why was Urban Renewal Attractive to Cities like Harrisonburg?

Federal Grant and Loan Program

- Housing Act of 1949
 - Focused on improvements to affordable housing
- Housing Act of 1954
 - Emphasized private investment
- Paid for most ($\frac{2}{3}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$) of the cost of redevelopment

Urban Renewal in Harrisonburg

Two projects, Northeast (R4) and Wolfe St (R16)

Adjacent land, similar goals:

- Create more parking spots.
- Widen Mason St.
- Expand Harrisonburg's commercial district.
- Eliminate “substandard” housing.



The goal was to turn a predominantly Black residential neighborhood ...



... into a White commercial district.

What did the City Do?

Demolished 181 buildings to clear roughly 40 acres:

- 225 dwelling units
- 23 businesses
- 2 churches

Displaced 215 households (710 people)

- Most were African American
- Most were tenants

Where Did the Former Residents Go?

Using city directories, we were able to track some but not all displacees

Many moved into new public housing:

- The first 10 tenants moved in Oct. 1960.
- At least 52 (probably more) of 1st generation of public housing occupants were renewal area displacees.
- Few alternative housing options open to Black displacees.



How Did Urban Renewal Help Harrisonburg?

- **Urban renewal sparked a commercial expansion:**
 - Downtown investment boomed in the immediate aftermath of urban renewal.
 - *Sales of renewal land paid City's redevelopment costs.*
 - Tax revenues rose.
- **Urban renewal caused construction of public housing:**
 - Improved housing conditions for some displacees.
 - *Among the owners of renewal area rental property was one of the city's most notorious slumlords.*

The map depicts a city block with a grid of streets. The streets shown are East, West, North, and South. Key locations marked include the Salvation Army, W.T. Grant, Vacant, Peoples Drug, Pickway Shoe Mart, Goodyear store, Glen Shomo Tire, Safeway, State A.C. Store, Valley Distrs. Inc., Mick or Mark, Rockingham Mill, Schaefer Capitol Disc., State Employment Comm., DC Heatweld, I-hour Valet, Parking Lot, Valley National Bank, Spotswood Bank, and a large area labeled 'Vacant'. The map also shows a river or canal running through the block and a railroad line (C.W.R.R.) crossing the area.

How Did Urban Renewal Hurt Harrisonburg?

Homes and community were sacrificed to a temporary commercial boom.

- African American population bore a disproportionate share of this loss.

Unanswered Questions

Lack of surviving documentation means:

- We cannot identify all of the people displaced by urban renewal. (Nor do we know where some of them moved.)
- We cannot assess whether individual owners were financially harmed by seizure of their property.
- We do not know whether relocation translated into higher housing or transportation costs for tenants.
- Did urban renewal play a role in the decline of Harrisonburg's Black population between 1960 and 1970?

Key Recommendations

- **A thorough search of HRHA document holdings** to determine whether additional urban renewal or public housing documentation still exists.
- **Community outreach** focused on filling in the blanks.