A CITY OF OPEN SPACES: YAMACRAW VILLAGE AND THE PRESERVATION OF

PUBLIC HOUSING

by

ROBERT JAMES CARPENTER

(Under the Direction of Scott Nesbit)

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers Yamacraw Village, the oldest surviving public housing complex in Savannah, Georgia, which now faces demolition. Dialogues with residents reveal their ongoing concerns over housing availability and the loss of heritage. This historic landscape reflects both the imposition of segregationist policies, and concerted efforts to establish black institutions, offering an approach to preservation that values African American heritage. As scholars like Lawrence Vale have explained, American cities have used housing policy as a justification to demolish black neighborhoods only to later level the same areas once again. These redevelopments have been used to create more aesthetically appealing physical communities, while displacing the original residents, and Savannah risks repeating this tortured history. This thesis surveys the history of Yamacraw from Reconstruction through the end of the 20th century, highlights its cultural heritage, and foregrounds the experiences of the community.

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DEDICATION

To my sisters Mary and Caroline, and my father Eric,

for being a refuge in a time of need.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> The historic restoration that had gone on in downtown Savannah did not bring back what
> we know was true about the past when blacks and whites lived close together, sometimes
> in the same house, sometimes in different houses on the same property. Very often, the
> cottages where the servants lived had been destroyed, and property values had risen so
> high throughout these areas that black renters had been forced to find housing elsewhere.
> Black residents were almost completely absent from the restored areas.
>   -- W.W. Law, President, NAACP Savannah Branch, 1950-1976.[1]

In Savannah, Georgia, between the bustle of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and the

soaring arc of the Eugene Talmadge bridge, lies the neighborhood of Yamacraw Village. These

blocks of public housing buildings are surrounded by greenswards shaded by venerable trees, all

a short walk from the riverfront. Within a matter of years, this neighborhood on the west side of

Savannah's renowned downtown historic district may be leveled to make way for new

development. The complex was opened in 1941 under the authority of the local housing

authority as "the second federally funded housing project in Savannah."[2] Constructed from the

outset as segregated housing for African Americans, Yamacraw Village was built over the

historic neighborhood of old Yamacraw, which had been inhabited by African Americans and

European immigrants who were forcibly displaced. The current housing development has a

historically African American heritage, and is directly adjacent to the city's historically black

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1 Carole Griffith, *African-American Historic Places and Culture: A Preservation Resource Guide for Georgia*
(Office of Historic Preservation, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 1993), 24–26.
2 *Study and Investigation of Housing. Hearings before the Joint Committee on Housing. Proceedings at Atlanta, Ga*,
80th Cong., 1st sess., October 29, 1947, 1214; Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission, *Yamacraw Village
Section 106 Review*, by Melanie Wilson and Leah G. Michalak, 3. The street is named for one of the nation's
foremost advocates for black civil rights, and the bridge for one of the state's most staunch segregationist governors.
Such are the peculiarities of Savannah's commemorative landscape.

commercial district along West Broad Street, now renamed Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.[3]

Yamacraw is thus situated within an urban landscape shaped by the city's economic, cultural, and political history, and these surroundings are at once carefully preserved and constantly changed by new development.[4] Given that both the construction and demolition of public housing have historically been used as part of urban renewal programs that obliterated minority and working-class neighborhoods, the history of public housing is inextricably linked to the history of segregation, institutional racism, and discrimination against African Americans.[5]

For the past five years, after assessments showed poor health conditions in the development, the Housing Authority of Savannah has petitioned to demolish the neighborhood, and to relocate its residents into subsidized private units across the city. The Housing Authority has justified demolition as a result of the prohibitive cost of rehabilitation, as authorized under

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3 *Yamacraw Village Section 106 Review*, 4-6; Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission, SAGIS, Savannah, GA; 2023, https://www.sagis.org/map/.

4 John W. Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto: The Making of the Black Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865-1880," *Journal of Social History* 6, no. 4 (1973): 463–65; AEI Consultants, *Phase I Environmental Site Assessment* (Kennesaw, GA: AEI Consultants, 2021); AEI Consultants, *Limited Phase II Subsurface Investigation Report* (Kennesaw, GA: AEI Consultants, 2021); AEI Consultants, *Georgia Historic Preservation Division, Environmental Review Form* (Kennesaw, GA: AEI Consultants, 2020.

5 Modibo Coulibaly, David M. James, and Rodney D. Green, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized Low-Income Housing in the United States* (Praeger, 1998), 1–3, 13, 59; Leland Ware, "Plessy's Legacy: The Government's Role in the Development and Perpetuation of Segregated Neighborhoods," *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2021): 92–109, https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2021.7.1.06. Ware's article provides an overview of the history of segregated housing as a policy intentionally enforced by all levels of government in the United States. He argued that "local housing authorities constructed low-income housing developments in segregated, inner-city neighborhoods. Because urban renewal was intended to clear areas of concentrated poverty, low-income families and minorities were disproportionately affected. Public housing was expected to replace the homes that were razed, but the new projects did not have enough units to house the displaced families." Ware concluded that "the architecture of America's built environment reflects decades of government sponsored segregation." Ware, "Plessy's Legacy," 92–109. In their 1998 work *Segregation in Federally Subsidized low-income Housing in the United States*, Coulibaly, Green, and James presented the results of a comprehensive statistical study of racial discrimination in federal public housing. The authors rejected the idea that housing inequality was primarily the result of personal bigotry or "generalized white prejudice," and asserted the importance of "objective relations of production, distribution, and exchange giving rise to segregation." They also rejected the traditional interpretation of public housing as "a welfare program of income redistribution," and instead argued that housing initiatives have been "instruments of urban renewal," which from the 1930s onward were "used to solve urban problems not directly related to the needs of the poor." They found that despite the promise of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, public housing remained largely segregated, which they directly attributed to political decisions, concluding "that segregation by race and income have been an integral element of the Federal housing policy since its inception." Coulibaly, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized low-income Housing*," xii, 1-3, 13, 59.

Section 18 of the 1937 Housing Act.[6] Such drastic action is further warranted, the Housing

Authority claims, as a means of redressing the inequality present in the original construction of

Yamacraw Village.[7] Nevertheless, dialogues between the Housing Authority and the community

reveal residents' ongoing concerns over housing availability and the loss of cultural heritage.[8]

While residents who have lived in Yamacraw Village for two years may be eligible for

accommodations in any affordable housing which may or may not be built upon the site, the

Housing Authority has refused to consider any specific policies until the demolition is approved.[9]

Although the city's 2020 comprehensive plan aspired to an equitable housing policy as one of six

key community goals, and made a commitment to "achieve affordable, diverse, and safe

housing," the city government and Housing Authority have not fully reckoned with the history of

rhetoric used to justify sweeping redevelopment in the neighborhood.[10] This should be done by

gathering public input and rigorously applying preservation principles, to avert a repetition of the

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6 Housing Authority of Savannah, *Questions and Answers from Meetings with Yamacraw Residents*, October 2022. Hereinafter "Housing Authority" refers to the Housing Authority of Savannah, unless otherwise indicated.
7 Katie Nussbaum, "Housing Authority of Savannah Leader: Yamacraw Village Being Considered for Demolition," *Savannah Morning News*, May 13, 2021, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2021/05/13/yamacraw-village-could-be-demolished-savannah-ga-housing-authority/5073245001/; Katie Nussbaum, "Yamacraw Demolition Could Present Chance for Growth," *Savannah Morning News*, May 30, 2021, Access World News – Historical and Current; Bill Dawers, "Yamacraw Is the Answer to City's Affordable Housing Issue," *Savannah Morning News*, June 1, 2021, Access World News – Historical and Current; Bill Dawers, "Hold High Hopes for Yamacraw Village Redevelopment," *Savannah Morning News (GA)*, April 5, 2022, Access World News – Historical and Current; Zoe Nicholson, "'Willful, Intentional, Asinine Neglect': Yamacraw Living Conditions Spur Community Uproar," *Savannah Morning News*, February 1, 2023, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/local/2023/02/01/whats-going-on-with-the-request-to-demolish-yamacraw-in-savannah/69858536007/; Evan Lasseter, "Study Recommends Yamacraw Village Demolition," *Savannah Morning News*, October 1, 2023, Access World News – Historical and Current.
8 Adam Van Brimmer, "Push to Preserve Yamacraw Village More about Public Housing Site's Future than Its Past.," *Savannah Morning News*, May 26, 2023, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/opinion/columns/adam-van-brimmer/2023/05/26/protesters-challenge-yamacraw-village-public-housing-demolition-plans/70255846007/; Zoe Nicholson and Laura Nwogu, "Local Group Files Appeal to Halt Housing Authority's Demolition of Yamacraw, Kayton Homes," *Savannah Morning News*, February 22, 2022, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2022/02/22/residents-black-pastors-file-appeal-halt-demolition-yamacraw-village/6830550001/.
9 Nussbaum, "Housing Authority of Savannah Leader"; Nicholson, "'Willful, Intentional, Asinine Neglect.'"
10 Housing Authority of Savannah, *Annual PHA Plan*, 2023; Housing Authority of Savannah, *Questions and Answers from Meetings with Yamacraw Residents*, October 2022; Housing Savannah Task Force, *Housing Savannah Action Plan*, July 2021; Savannah City Council, Chatham County Commission, *Comprehensive Plan 2040 Summary*, 2020 Update, October 2021, 41-42.

displacement that accompanied the first demolition eighty years ago when three thousand people were removed from their homes.[11] This is all the more vital in Savannah, where struggles for social and economic justice have gone hand in hand with struggles for representation in official depictions of the city's history. In 1993, W. W. Law, former president of the Savannah NAACP, a lifelong member of First Bryan Baptist Church in the heart of Yamacraw, and a prominent preservationist, observed how in disregarding black heritage and disparaging the social and architectural merit of black neighborhoods, the preservation movement had created an inaccurate picture of the city's past.[12] Law's words echo long running efforts by the city's black communities to preserve their heritage by encouraging each new generation to carry on the struggle for justice, proposing a vision for preservation that acknowledges the physical and intangible black cultural heritage in Savannah's rich history.

Since its origins in the 1930s, public housing in the United States has been the subject of an immense body of scholarly work addressing the political and economic dimensions of housing programs, including the roles of race, class, and gender.[13] Lawrence Vale, one of the most notable historians of public housing, has extensively analyzed how recent rhetoric used by

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11 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1219. According to the data given by the most recent comprehensive plan, as of 2020 the City of Savannah had a population of 147,780, and the population of unincorporated Chatham County totaled 93,034. The city's population was 54% black and 39% white, while the county's population was 69% white and 23% black. The median household income was $41,093, with 22.9% of Savannahians living below the poverty line. The plan stated that "the proportion of cost-burdened homeowners and renters in Savannah is an indication that local wages are not keeping pace with rising housing costs (and likely cost of living) in the area, and that housing affordability is an issue for renters in particular." Savannah City Council, Chatham County Commission, *Comprehensive Plan 2040 Summary*, 2020 Update, October 2021, 10-13, 14, 15-16, 18-24, 25-26.

12 Carole Griffith, *African-American Historic Places and Culture: A Preservation Resource Guide for Georgia* (Atlanta, Minority Historic Preservation Committee, Office of Historic Preservation, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 1993), 24–26.

13 Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era*, Historical Studies of Urban America (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1–6, 199–202; Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, and Public Housing Policy*, Book Collections on Project MUSE (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 112–22, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=671437&site=eds-live&custid=uga1; Edward G. Goetz, *Clearing the Way: Deconcentrating the Poor in Urban America* (Urban Institute Press, 2003); *Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy*, Cornell University Press Complete eBook-Package 2014-2015; DG and UP eBook Package 2000-2015 (Cornell University Press, 2015).

housing authorities to justify demolition shares many ideas with the very programs they intend to reform.[14] In perhaps his most insightful and relevant work, *Purging the Poorest: The Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities*, Vale challenged common preconceptions about the political agendas that have driven local, state, and federal housing policy. Vale specifically "compares the slum-clearance and urban renewal era that created public housing" from the 1930s through the 1950s, "with the HOPE VI era of public housing clearance," which began in the 1990s, and argues that they share a "pattern of displacement and rationales for construction" based on a mutual agenda of poverty deconcentration. His overall argument is that both policies share common intellectual roots, similar agendas, and a top-down approach to redevelopment that relegates residents of public housing to marginal roles, ostensibly "for their own good."[15]

Vale's most significant contribution to the study of public housing architecture is his interpretation of "design politics" as a framework to understand the agendas of housing authorities. Through design politics, Vale argues, the aesthetics of architecture and planning are influenced by and contribute to urban redevelopment, which by its very nature demands political and aesthetic judgements. Through this political process "design becomes an expression of power." Both the urban renewal programs of the mid-20th century and contemporary housing policies like HOPE VI and the ongoing RAD program reflect a policy of poverty deconcentration, and Vale holds that this agenda has used by local governments and real-estate

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14 Lawrence J. Vale, "Public Housing and the American Dream: Residents' Views on Buying into 'The Projects,'" *Housing Policy Debate - Washington -* (United States: Housing Research, January 1, 1998); Lawrence J. Vale et al., "What Affordable Housing Should Afford: Housing for Resilient Cities," *Cityscape* 16, no. 2 (2014): 21–50; Lawrence J. Vale, *Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods* (Harvard University Press, 2002); Lawrence J. Vale, *From the Puritans to the Project: Public Housing and Public Neighbors* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=282383&site=eds-live&custid=uga1; Lawrence J. Vale, *After the Projects: Public Housing Redevelopment and the Governance of the Poorest Americans* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
15 Lawrence J. Vale, *Purging the Poorest: Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities*, Historical Studies of Urban America (University of Chicago Press, 2013), xiv-1, 1–30.

developers to disperse residents of poor neighborhoods in favor of more socially acceptable applicants housed in more aesthetically appealing structures.[16] Vale has insightfully argued that recent initiatives to demolish public housing in order to deconcentrate poverty are based on architecturally deterministic assumptions that demean majority low-income neighborhoods, and thus they accept the same principles as urban renewal programs that targeted working class and minority neighborhoods for demolition in the name of progress.[17] Indeed, in the 1940s, the Housing Authority of Savannah used rhetoric and imagery grounded in the city's colonial history to reconcile public housing to the city's utopian heritage, and frame destruction as an act of preservation. This cultural rationale for the destruction of Yamacraw is strikingly similar to present-day calls for deconcentration in Yamacraw Village.[18] Despite claims that redevelopment will have long term benefits, Vale maintains that displacing populations through unilateral action separates individuals from their homes, communities, and heritage, and far from redressing past wrongs, these policies continue patterns of injustice and inequity.[19]

As scholars of public housing have become more concerned with the loss of community and heritage entailed by demolition, at the same time, the field of preservation has become increasingly concerned with the economic consequences of preservation on marginalized communities. In response, leading figures within the field have placed intangible cultural heritage at the center of preservation. This focus insists that places gain their historic significance through their connection to ongoing cultural practices, traditions, and social transformation.[20]

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16 Vale, xi–xii, 30–32, 331–33.
17 Vale, 1–30.
18 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1213-1214.
19 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 330–33.
20 Steve Brown and Cari Goetcheus, *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Landscape Practice*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2023), 5–21, 55, https://www.perlego.com/book/3815344/routledge-handbook-of-cultural-landscape-practice-pdf?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&campaignid=15825112969&adgroupid=132780913155&gclid=Cj0K CQjwzdOlBhCNARIsAPMwjbwdPjPUA8Xg62Pf9BTrxlAPEEPMplqJMVNcFAkR-nQ3fVlpN1zWtu0aAkThEALw_wcB; Harold Kalman, *Heritage Planning: Principles and Process*, Second edition.

These changes in methodology stem from a desire to shed an elitist preoccupation with the lives

of the upper-class, resulting in a growing body of scholarship focusing on vernacular

architecture, landscapes, and art. As a naturally interdisciplinary practice, preservation

incorporates aspects of urban planning, social history, and African American studies.[21] Because

public housing has functioned at different points both as an instrument to displace African

American communities and as a center for community growth, the repeated pattern of

redevelopment in the history of public housing provokes difficult but vital questions about

displacement and cultural heritage. In *Purging the Poorest* and his later works, Vale implies that

proponents of de-concentration should understand that their efforts do not represent a new

(Routledge, 2021), 142, 226, 253; Antoinette J. Lee, "From Historic Architecture to Cultural Heritage: A Journey Through Diversity, Identity, and Community," *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 1, no. 2 (2004): 15–22; Leonie Sandercock, *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History*, California Studies in Critical Human Geography: 2 (University of California Press, 1998), 199–206, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=cat06564a&AN=uga.9916575223902959&site=eds-live&custid=uga1; Ned Kaufman, *Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation* (Routledge, 2009), 75–87.

21 A brief but informative survey of historic preservation's growing emphasis on intangible cultural heritage was published in 2004 by Antoinette J. Lee, who challenged preservationists who exclusively focus on historic architecture, which, she argued, had created a popular perception of preservation as connected to elite "architectural landmarks," and had led some preservationists to neglect vernacular architecture and cultural landscapes. Lee remained committed to the belief that "history is a remarkably potent force not only in preservation, but other areas of human activity." One of Lee's essential points was that preservationists must understand the cultural reinterpretation of history as an individual and social process, because "history is malleable: it can be rewritten, rethought, reinterpreted, reinvigorated, and resuscitated to illuminate contemporary challenges." She thus suggested a version of preservation that acknowledges subjectivity and a variety of viewpoints. Lee, "From Historic Architecture to Cultural Heritage," 15-22. For intersectional insights into the changing fields of preservation and cultural landscape studies, see the *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Landscape Practice*, published in 2023. Its introduction gives an overview of the key works of scholarship and pieces of legislation that have shaped the global frameworks for protecting cultural heritage, such as the Burra Charter of 1979. The compendium gives a comprehensive survey of regional, methodological, and practical approaches from around the world, and shares perspectives from other nations where studies of intangible cultural heritage have progressed farther than in the United States. For an accessible and introductory level overview to historic preservation, see Heritage Planning: Principles and Process, which summarizes the origins of preservation in the 19th-century and the key early thinkers who established many of the theoretical precepts of the field. For a brief summary of the legacy of racism within American urban planning, and the efforts of planners to foreground racial studies, see *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History*. For a specific look at recent efforts with historic preservation to address issues of equality and equity, see *Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation*, edited by Ned Kaufman, which describes the economic dangers to the heritage of marginalized populations, and critiques reforms within the organizations like the National Park Service to more accurately interpret the ethnic and cultural heritage of the United States.

paradigm, but rather are a reversion to the norm after the interregnum of the 1960s and 70s. Likewise, when deciding how to collaborate with residents of Yamacraw, planners and preservationists should take into consideration the parallels between present-day urban development and the justifications used to demolish African American neighborhoods through urban renewal. Therefore, in responding to cycles of demolition and displacement, they must take care that attempts to ameliorate past injustices do not themselves repeat historic patterns of discrimination. They must be sure that their advocacy, research, and outreach acknowledges the complexities of African American heritage, and above all they must respond to the demands and wishes of residents themselves.
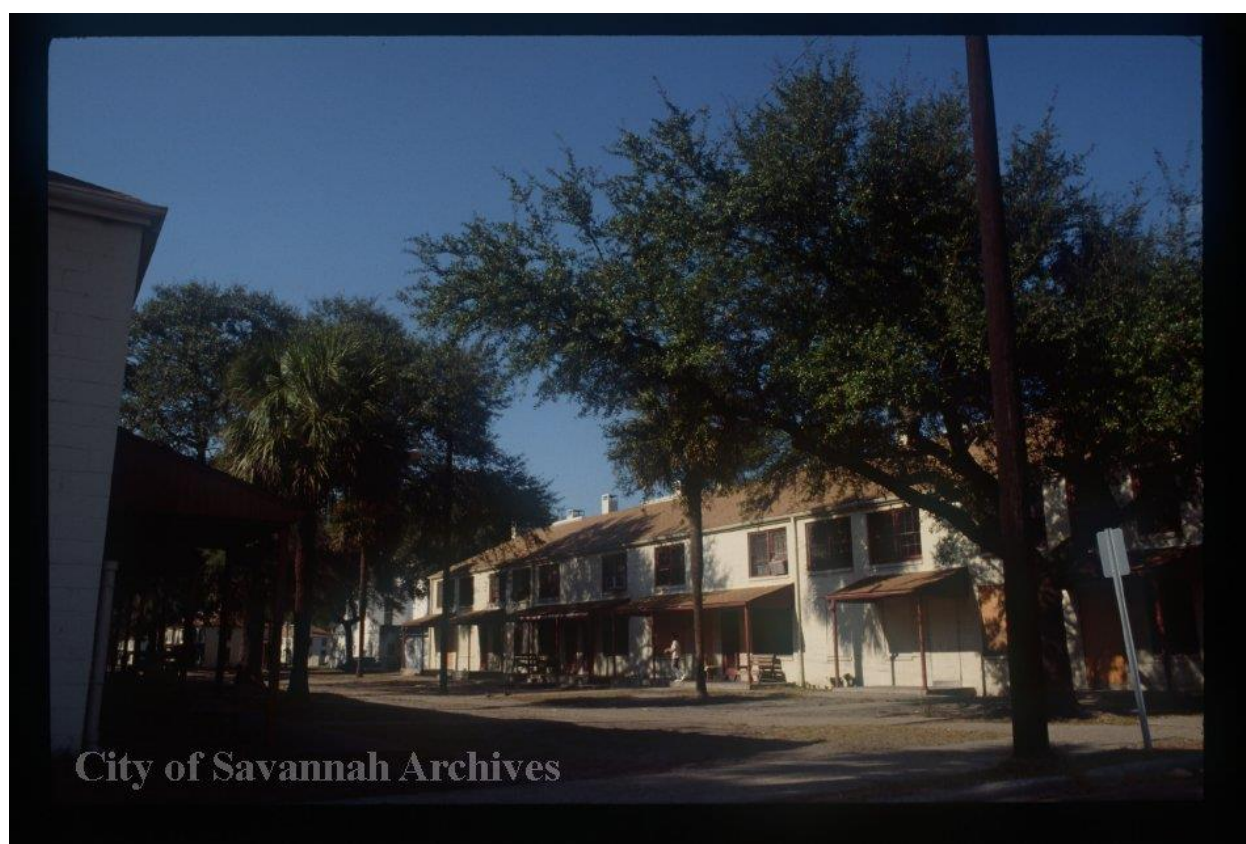
Figure 1: "Yamacraw Village," Record Series 8126-006_01-6-0202, Chatham County-Savannah MPC Historic Preservation Photographs. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

The Revolutionary Origins of Yamacraw Village

Yamacraw Village is located within the north, middle, and south Oglethorpe wards in downtown Savannah. As it now stands, the approximately forty residential buildings of Yamacraw Village occupy roughly thirty acres of land within the urban grid of downtown Savannah, bounded on the north by Bay Street, on the south by Oglethorpe Avenue, and on the east by Ann Street, while the western boundary is formed by the historic Savannah Ogeechee Canal. Bryan Street runs west to east across the northern half of the neighborhood, while Zubly street bisects the southern portion. Fahm street, the main thoroughfare of old Yamacraw, runs through the center of the housing complex from north to south. The southeast block between Zubly, Ann, and Fahm Street is now covered by contemporary commercial buildings, and to the south a row of commercial structures and a greyhound bus terminal separate Yamacraw Village from Oglethorpe Avenue. Across Oglethorpe Avenue there are contemporary hotel and apartment complexes, facilities of the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), and the primary city visitor center. Just across Louisville Road, the George State Railroad Museum and Tricentennial Park commemorate the antebellum and colonial eras of Georgia's history.[22] Historically, old Yamacraw encompassed the entire area between the river and Louisville Road, though by the late 19th century the northern end of Yamacraw was displaced by commercial and industrial facilities serving the city's expanding port.[23] With shipping facilities to the north, the historic Savannah Ogeechee canal and the towering Talmadge bridge to the west, an antebellum railroad complex to the south, and the West Broad Street commercial district to the east,

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22 *Yamacraw Village Section 106 Review;* AEI Consultants, *Phase I Environmental Site Assessment*; AEI Consultants, *Limited Phase II Subsurface Investigation*; AEI Consultants, *Georgia Historic Preservation Division, Environmental Review Form*; Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission, *SAGIS*. For further details on historic businesses in Yamacraw, and the lingering environmental hazards they might pose, see this series of reports compiled by AEI consultants for the Savannah City Government.
23 "Yamacraw," *Savannah Morning News*, September 3, 1880.

Yamacraw is situated within an urban landscape shaped by the city's maritime, mercantile

economy, which was inextricably linked with the institution of slavery in the antebellum area.

Today, directly across Bay Street to the north are the international style United States

Post Office and Fahm Hall of the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), and the land

between Bay Street and the River is now covered by commercial buildings, warehouses, and

high-end apartment complexes. Other contemporary hotels, apartment complexes, and SCAD

facilities enclose Yamacraw to the east, between Ann Street and Martin Luther King Jr.

Boulevard, to the South between Oglethorpe Avenue and Louisville Road, and to the southwest

across the canal. To the east lies the rest of the downtown historic district, and to the west are

vast shipping facilities and the neighborhoods of west Savannah.[24] Thus, Yamacraw Village is

already ringed by contemporary apartments and hotels serving the city's ever-expanding tourism

industry and an exclusive private university. Notably, while most of the downtown historic

district is covered by zoning categories that impose restrictions on hotel construction, the land

west of Martin Luther King Jr Blvd is zoned as Downtown Expansion (D-X) which permits the

construction of hotel complexes with over 75 rooms.[25] This designation, combined with the

ambiguity surrounding the Housing Authority's plans for redevelopment, has furthered resident's

concerns over the future of Yamacraw. These objections have not been allayed by statements

from local developers that Yamacraw is "a fantastic piece of real estate" that could become "one

of the finest urban centers in all of the country" with proper development.[26]

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24 *Yamacraw Village Section 106 Review;* AEI Consultants, *Limited Phase II Subsurface Investigation Report*; Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission, *SAGIS*.

25 Savannah City Council, Chatham County Commission, *Comprehensive Plan 2040 Summary*, 2020 Update, October 2021, 184-190; Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission, *SAGIS*.

26 Housing Authority of Savannah, *Questions and Answers from Meetings with Yamacraw Residents*, October 2022; Katie Nussbaum, "Yamacraw Demolition Could Present Chance for Growth," *Savannah Morning News*, May 30, 2021, Access World News – Historical and Current.

Figure 2: Yamacraw Present and Historic Boundaries, Esri Community Maps Contributors, Savannah Area GIS, © OpenStreetMap, Microsoft, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, SafeGraph, GeoTechnologies, Inc, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, NPS, US Census Bureau, USDA, USFWS

The area also includes well-known buildings with histories dating back to the first decades of American independence, including First Bryan Baptist church, a key landmark within Yamacraw itself and the only standing building in the neighborhood built prior to the demolition of Old Yamacraw, as well as First African Baptist, located directly to the east on Franklin square. Both churches trace their history to the end of the 18th century, when missionary George Liele and minister Andrew Bryan Established a lasting black Baptist community in the Georgia lowcountry. Members and leaders of the church have figured prominently as advocates for civil rights during Reconstruction, for equality in the historic preservation movement, and for justice for public housing residents.[27] Due east is the Scarbrough house, an early 1800s structure with an underrecognized history as a black elementary school between Reconstruction and the growth of the preservation movement in Savannah, which has been all but erased by the house's conversion into a maritime museum and event venue.[28] The city's recent section 106 review also acknowledges the conflicted legacy of the former housing administration building at 349 West Bryan Street, constructed as "a miniature replica of the main house at the Hermitage Plantation," though the authors maintain that it may have had "a positive role" for the neighborhood, and the building now houses a primary health care facility. While these prominent structures have been documented in databases such as the National Register and Historic American Buildings Survey, they require further analysis in the context of the adjacent housing buildings.[29]

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27 Henson, Steve. National Register of Historic Places Nomination: "First Bryan Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia," Atlanta, GA: Department of Natural Resources, 1977, Survey, Historic American Buildings, "First African Baptist Church, 23 Montgomery Street, Savannah, Chatham County, GA," Georgia--Chatham County--Savannah.

28 Joseph Smith, "The Antebellum Era, 1800-1865," in *Architecture of the Last Colony*. ed. Mark C. McDonald. Atlanta GA, The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, 2023. Survey, Historic American Buildings, "William Scarbrough House, 41 West Broad Street, Savannah, Chatham County, GA," Georgia--Chatham County--Savannah, Mitchell, William R. Jr, National Register of Historic Places Nomination: "William Scarbrough House, Savannah, Georgia," Atlanta, GA: Georgia Historical Commission, 1970

29 *Yamacraw Village Section 106 Review,* 12-13.
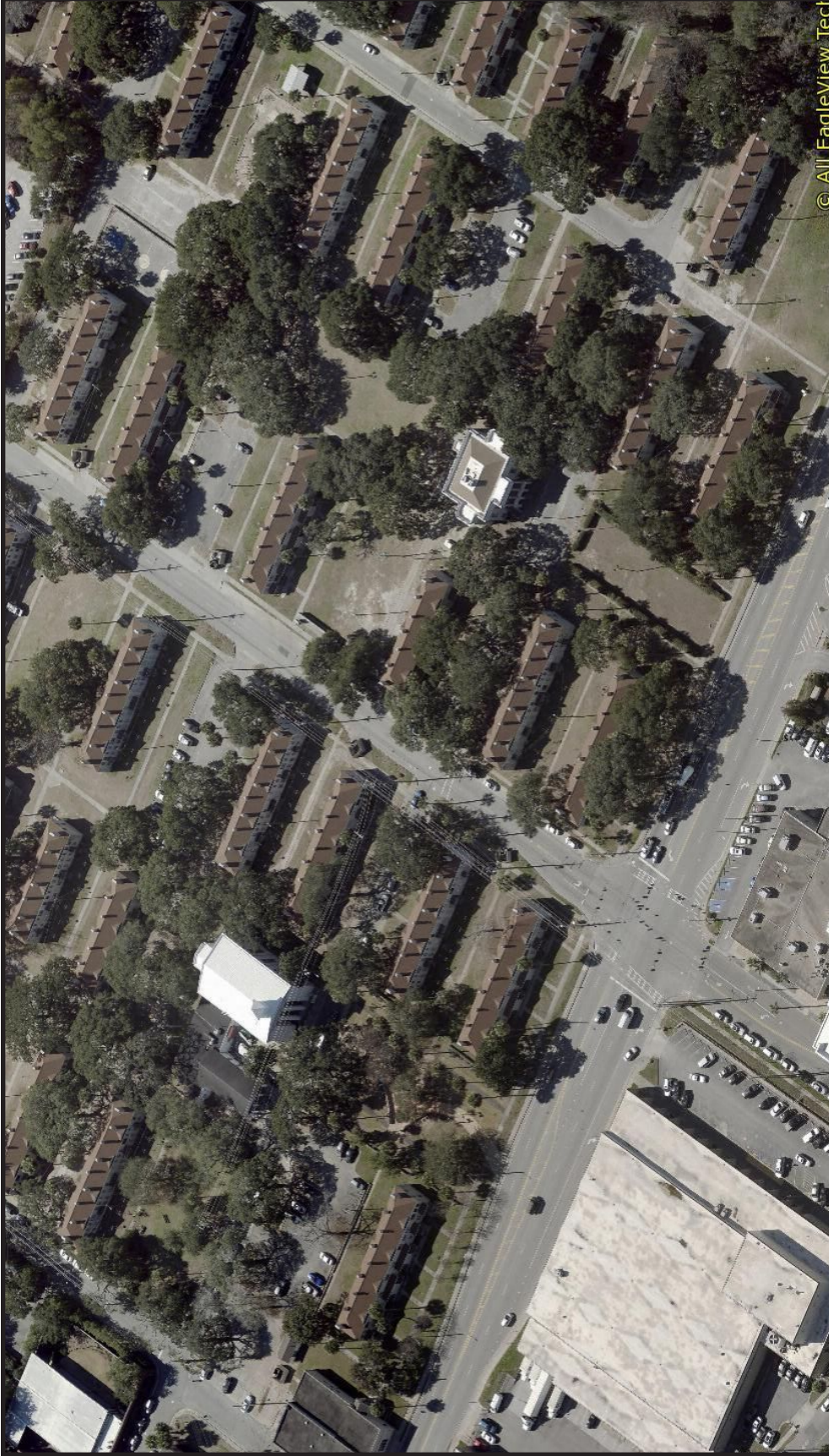
Figure 3: Yamacraw Village, Pictometry, from the north. First Bryan Baptist is at the center left, and the Former Administration Building is at the center right. Eagleview Technology Corporation.

Figure 4: "Yamacraw Village construction," Courtesy of Landmark Preservation.

The construction of Yamacraw Village was an early measure in a campaign of urban renewal which uprooted multiple historic black communities of west Savannah, erased existing structures in favor of a sanitized landscape that appealed to the white urban elite and potential tourists, and ultimately bypassed the black economic center of the city. Yamacraw Village is further distinguished by the language used by the Housing Authority to justify the demolition of old Yamacraw. They invoked the colonial heritage of the city as an inspiration, in a rhetorical strategy to rationalize the displacement of African Americans as an act of restoration. Thus, the cultural landscape of Yamacraw Village represents both concerted actions by black communities to establish lasting cultural institutions, and impositions by the state and federal government that

remodeled the area in accordance with segregationist policies.[30] Scholarship on changing trends

in urban planning and housing policy provides a framework to understand how different agendas

have physically reshaped the area to suit differing political motives.

The Rise and Fall of Public Housing

Public Housing in the United States has had a strange and cyclical development through

its 80-year history since the 1937 Wagner Steagall Housing Act. Despite its initial promise, the

public image of American public housing has often been defined by the demolitions of famous

complexes in major cities which had become infamous for terrible living conditions. Yet, in

contrast to prevailing negative narratives of public housing, over the past three decades many

scholars of public housing such as Vale, Gail Radford, and Edward Goetz have consciously

framed their work in opposition to the agendas of previous scholars and critics, whom they

accuse of taking a narrow view and ignoring alternate explanations for declining living

conditions in public housing.[31] A core question in this debate has been the relationship between

architectural forms and successful public housing developments, specifically the use of

modernist high-rise apartment complexes. In studying the history of public housing in large cities

such as New York and Chicago, authors like Nicholas Bloom and D. Bradford Hunt have

interrogated social and financial factors involving local politics, classism, and an overriding

desire to reduce costs which influenced the effectiveness of public housing architecture, contrary

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30 Savannah historian Charles Lwanga Hoskins recognized this duality in the formation of the city's black commercial districts, writing that "black West Broad Street and the fortunes of black life in general, cannot be understood without reference to segregation. It was segregation, completely rigid by 1820, which created and sustained it. White supremacy was unsympathetic to the plight of African-Americans." Hoskins, "Out of Yamacraw," 28-30.

31 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, xi–xiv, 1–32; D. Bradford Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing*, Historical Studies of Urban America (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3–13, 15–47, 121–75; Nicholas Dagen Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*, University of Pennsylvania Backlist eBook-Package 2000-2013 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 1–33, 51–68, 296–332; Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 1–26, 199–210; *Public Housing Myths*, 1–59; Audrey Petty, *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing*, The Voice of Witness Series (Voice of Witness, 2013), 1–24.

to the views of critics in the 1960s and 70s like Oscar Newman who advanced an interpretation that primarily blamed public housing's failures on the use of modernist style high rises.[32]

These criticisms became policy in the HOPE VI program of the 1990s, which financed the demolition of extant public housing units in favor of redevelopment into low-rise, mixed-income communities, and relocated residents through housing vouchers for residence in subsidized free-market units.[33] These policies of deconcentration and income-mixing are the explicitly avowed intentions of the Housing Authority of Savannah, as mandated by federal law.[34] Lawrence Vale has perhaps been the most prominent critic of these recent public housing initiatives. Over his body of work, Vale has critiqued different forms of mixed income housing and private-partnerships developed under the federal government's HOPE VI program.[35] His work *Purging the Poorest* provides a comparative analysis of projects funded through HOPE VI in Atlanta and Chicago, where mid-20th century housing complexes, themselves built over leveled neighborhoods, were once again demolished to make way for redevelopment. These cycles of government intervention and neglect have thus produced twice-cleared "slums" as part of social progress or, in the case of recent demolitions, in the name of rectifying past injustices faced by marginalized communities.[36] Scholars like Vale and Hunt have meticulously documented that contrary to common perceptions of public housing as a failed experiment in

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32 Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked*, 1–3; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 1–30; Goetz, *New Deal Ruins*, ix–xi, 1–21, 35–37, 112–22, 175–80.

33 For a detailed survey of history and results of the HOPE VI program, see Vale's "*After the Projects*," which provides comparative analysis of HOPE VI projects built over land previously cleared for earlier public housing projects. Vale structures the book around four examples with drastically different outcomes, each forming a different type of "governance constellation." Vale, *After the Projects*, 1-50.

34 Housing Authority of Savannah, *Annual PHA Plan, 2023*, 16-17; Housing Authority of Savannah, *Questions and Answers from Meetings with Yamacraw Residents*, October 2022. The Housing Authority's 2023 annual plan states: "the PHA's admission policy must be designed to provide for deconcentration of poverty and income-mixing by bringing higher income tenants into lower income projects and lower income tenants into higher income projects. A statement of the PHA's deconcentration policies must be in included (sic) in its annual plan [24 CFR 903.7(b)]."

35 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 1–31.

36 Vale, xiv.

government welfare, it was initially established during the New Deal as a service for the struggling working class. Hunt specifically asserts that despite criticisms of the "easily stigmatized and readily identifiable" nature of high-rises, such buildings were actually constructed according to a "progressive slum clearance agenda" which "adhered to modernist design ideas."[37] Vale particularly argues that widespread criticism of public housing for concentrating poverty is historically shortsighted, and ignores its origins as an instrument for "slum clearance" which sought to deconcentrate densely populated districts.[38]

The construction of Yamacraw village demonstrates many of these patterns, but as a low-rise complex, the development is more representative of the majority of public housing construction than well-known high-rises in major cities. The units were clearly constructed according to the segregationist structure of public housing of the time, and their proposed demolition reflects the historical progression of public housing policy towards decentralization.[39] At the same time, like recent mayoral administrations, the Savannah city government of the 1930s was fiercely proud of the city's heritage, and took steps to portray their public housing policies within a narrative of preservation and respect for the built environment, despite the obvious destruction slum clearance entailed. The early leaders of the Housing Authority of Savannah also downplayed segregation in their arguments, and expressed humanitarian motives supported by economic and financial justifications. In direct contrast to the dour news articles on Yamacraw published over recent years, there was a time shortly after its construction concluded when Yamacraw Village was seen at the highest levels of national housing policy as an example

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37 Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 141–42.
38 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 1–3, 331–32.
39 Vale, *After the Projects*, 10.

of "relief" for this "great and urgent national need," not a symptom of urban blight or decay.[40]

Instead, publications of the time abounded with shocking descriptions of conditions within

"Yamacraw, a vicious slum," and praised the new housing complex as a progressive

achievement.[41] Like the current city government, they too justified destruction as a means of

integrating Yamacraw into the urban economy while respecting the city's heritage, even as they

disregarded the community's history and agency.[42] In the city of Savannah, preservation is the

predominant design framework and nominally guides development, and as a consequence, the

language of cultural heritage has been part of the rationale circulated in the local media to justify

the demolition of Yamacraw Village.[43] By invoking the concept of cultural heritage in order to

downplay the consequences of demolition, and portraying redevelopment as a process of

restoration, city officials and media commentators have, intentionally or unintentionally, co-

opted the principles of preservation in order to obscure Yamacraw's complex history.

Lawrence Vale has maintained that the study of public housing is a key to understanding

social, cultural, and economic patterns within American society as a whole, and likewise, the

history of Yamacraw reflects the story of Savannah itself.[44] As a physical imprint of 20th century

segregation, and the history of black cultural institutions in Savannah, the simple architecture of

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40 *General Housing Act of 1945. Hearings before the Committee on Banking and Currency,* United States Senate, Part 1: Revised, S. 1592, A Bill to Establish a National Housing Policy and Provide for its Execution, 79th Cong., 1st sess., November 27, 28, 29, 30, December 4, 5, 1945.

41 *Public Housing* 2, no. 5 (July 30, 1940). "'Willful, intentional, asinine neglect': Yamacraw living conditions spur community uproar," Savannah Morning News, February 1, 2023; "Push to preserve Yamacraw Village more about public housing site's future than its past," *Savannah Morning News*, May 25, 2023.

42 *Study and Investigation of Housing,* 1211-1232.

43 Adam Van Brimmer, "Yamacraw Village Is to Be Demolished. What Is the Site's Highest and Best Use?," *Savannah Morning News*, June 10, 2021, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/opinion/2021/06/10/yamacraw-proximity-downtown-makes-good-location-mixed-income-project-housing-workforce-hotels/7513767002/; Nicholson, "'Willful, Intentional, Asinine Neglect.'"

44 In the introduction to his work *Purging the Poorest*, Vale declares that "public housing offers a window into the priorities of a society and the workings of a polity" including "the basic structures of inequality in the United States," and "the role and limits of the state…" and "fundamentally, what it means to control land." Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, xi–xii, 1.

Yamacraw Village reveals the complexities of public housing's political and cultural functions. While the financial and social justifications put forward by the Housing Authority closely follow trends across the country, early public housing in Savannah is set apart by the rhetoric of heritage used to justify its construction, which foreshadowed trends in public housing architecture and policy that have lasted to the present. Examining the history, culture, and architecture of the neighborhood, therefore, can reveal the adaptation of these housing buildings and surrounding landmarks to serve varying needs and varying political interests, and how residents of public housing have organized to resist displacement, demand fair government action, and defend the African American cultural heritage of Yamacraw Village.

Figure 5: "W. W. Law Installing Westside NAACP Youth Council Officers," Record Series 1121-100_0067, W. W. Law photograph collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Accordingly, the second chapter of this thesis considers the development of old Yamacraw as a cultural and economic entity from reconstruction through the end of the 19th century and addresses the economic pressures and political conditions of the 1930s that led to the creation of the Savannah Housing Authority. The third chapter covers the crucial era of the destruction of Old Yamacraw and the construction of Yamacraw Village from 1939 to 1941, and applies the works of Vale, Bloom, Hunt, and other scholars to critique the promotional efforts of the Housing Authority as a political effort to physically reshape Yamacraw to disguise the realities of segregation, obscure the consequences of displacement, and accommodate the city government's idealized perception of Savannah. The fourth chapter first studies the counter reaction from Savannah's black community, through legal challenges mounted by the Savannah NAACP under the leadership of W. W. Law, the ongoing spiritual leadership of First Bryan Baptist, and the everyday life of Yamacraw residents. The concluding chapter follows this history through to the present and the current struggle over the fate of Yamacraw Village and compares the stated commitments of the City Government and Housing Authority to their prior actions and their ongoing programs. Undoubtedly, this project would not have been possible without the support of community members who have advocated for a transparent resolution. This thesis seeks to foreground their perspectives on the heritage and future of Yamacraw.

CHAPTER TWO

OLD YAMACRAW, RECONSTRUCTION, AND THE NEW DEAL

And God said: Go down, Death, go down, Go down to Savannah, Georgia, Down in Yamacraw, And find Sister Caroline. She's borne the burden and heat of the day, She's labored long in my vineyard, And she's tired– She's weary– Go down, Death, and bring her to me.

-- *Go Down Death*, James Weldon Johnson, 1927.

With the fall of Savannah to the Union army in December 1864, slavery had formally come to an end in the city, and the now free black population of coastal Georgia sought to avail themselves of the political and economic advantages of freedom, in the face of resurgent white supremacy. Many formerly enslaved people left outlying plantations and sought refuge in the city, while others sought to assert their rights to the land they had worked for generations, ushering in an era of migration and economic reorganization as previously underground social and cultural movements emerged as public forms of expression and defiance.[45]

In January 1865 a group of clergymen representing Savannah's black churches met with General William T. Sherman in the Green-Meldrim house on Madison square to demand military protection for black civil rights, and the transfer of agricultural land to the formerly enslaved. They articulated the injustices perpetrated under slavery, their loyalty to the Union, and their vision for economic security. This delegation was composed of recognized community leaders, many of whom went on to play key roles as politicians, civil servants, and activists during

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[45] Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 465–70; Robert Eugene Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, [1st ed.]., An Exposition-University Book (Jericho, NY: Exposition Press, 1973), 3–5; Charles Lwanga Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat: Biographies of Early Black Savannah* (Savannah: Gullah Press, 2001), 19–20, https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=98c16484-afa3-4074-8261-a955f121202d%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLHNoaWImc2l0ZT1lZHMtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=uga.9926732793902959&db=cat06564a.

Reconstruction, including Garrison Frazier and Ulysses L. Houston, the former and serving

pastors of Third African Baptist, the congregation now known as First Bryan.[46] John W.

Blassingame, one of the first scholars to critically examine Savannah's black history, observed a

strong connection between participation in religious social institutions and political participation

during reconstruction, and analyzed a growing class of African American leaders who

challenged the framework of segregation imposed by racist state governments. He specifically

noted the role of black ministers in political mobilization and active participation in the state

Republican party. In the late 1860s, Houston was elected to the state legislature, along with

fellow pastor James M. Simms.[47] The black clergy of Savannah were often at the forefront of

social movements for equality and representation, and Yamacraw was a center for this activity.

Despite the initial support of the union army, these leaders faced entrenched racism from

white politicians and voters, and with the collapse of reconstruction, the state and city

government's increasingly enacted measures to punish black political participation. Even so,

black Savannahians sought to make their presence and political will manifest throughout the

city.[48] The city's famous squares became sites of racial conflict, as black Savannahians sought to

demonstrate their liberty through public assembly in the face of suppression. As recorded by

future Savannah mayor Thomas Gamble in his 1901 history of the city government, shortly after

the war in 1866 the city government attempted to segregate Forsyth Park by making it illegal for

any black person to enter the space. When this order was rejected by the US military authorities

who refused to condone discrimination public spaces on account of race, the city government

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[46] Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 95, 1270–134, 157–60; Charles Lwanga Hoskins, *Out of Yamacraw and Beyond: Discovering Black Savannah* (Gullah Press, 2002), 14–15; Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 7.
[47] Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 470–80; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 127–34.
[48] Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 471–74; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 130–40.

temporarily shut down the park entirely in protest of this imposed integration.[49] In 1868 the

police forcibly closed a demonstration in Chippewa square, leading to a riot outside First African

Baptist which was put down by force.[50] Perceiving the need for black self-determination and

defense against retribution from white elites, some black clergy and politicians sought to

establish black communities on land formerly held by slave owners, and organized black

militias, often drawing on their own experience in the Civil War. For more militant leaders like

Aaron Bradley, elected state senator in 1868, and Methodist minister Henry McNeal Turner, this

meant open and armed defiance, and they called on black Savannahians to defend their political,

land, and labor rights through protest, and if needed, violent resistance. More moderate black

leaders like Colonel John. H. Deveaux sought, and for a time obtained, official recognition for

black militia companies formed under the auspices of the US army as a means of providing

security and demonstrating the civic devotion of Black Savannahians.[51]

One of the most prominent of these social movements was led by Ulysses L. Houston of

First Bryan. Within the years immediately after the war Houston led a movement to form an

independent black community on Skidaway island, in order to demonstrate a claim to black

ownership of the land through labor and occupation.[52] James M. Simms, a preacher and teacher

who had endured persecution for running an underground school, became a key figure in the

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[49] Thomas Gamble, *A History of the City Government of Savannah, Ga., from 1790 to 1901; Compiled from Official Records by Thomas Gamble, Jr., Secretary to the Mayor, Under Direction of City Council, 1900. - Digital Library of Georgia*, 1900, 332, https://dlg.usg.edu/record/gsg_docs_1373; Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 10–11.

[50] Gamble, *A History of the City Government of Savannah*, 250–51; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 20.

[51] Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 11–16, 19; Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 477–79; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 19–29, 65–70, 138–39.

[52] For further details on the political careers of Houston, Simms, and other black pastors in postbellum Savannah, including Houston's pre-war participation in a musical group organized at Third African Baptist by Garrison Frazier, and Simms appointment as a federal judge, see Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, and "Out of Yamacraw and Beyond." For additional context, see Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," and Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah*.

state's Republican party, and persistently demanded black representation in political office.[53]

Despite these concerted political efforts, with the end of federal backing for reconstruction the state legislature passed increasingly discriminatory laws to curtail black civil rights. Attempts to claim agricultural land were curtailed under Andrew Johnson's administration, the state legislature sought to bar black representatives, and Savannah's black militia companies were forced to disband over between 1899 and 1905, as Savannahian historian Charles Lwanga Hoskins recounted, amid "a period of increased racism and deprivation."[54]

Enduring Communities in West Savannah

Between the end of Reconstruction and the New Deal, black Savannahians were disproportionately affected by illness, poverty, and incarceration.[55] Although at the time the city's black population remained a minority by a narrow margin, black Savannahians faced such consistently higher mortality rates that black deaths were the majority in annual mortuary reports.[56] In 1881, the city had an annual mortality rate of "23.69 per 1,000" for white residents and "44.59 per 1,000" for black residents. Two decades later in 1901, the ratio had narrowed but remained severely disparate, with a ratio of 18.92 among whites and 29.59 among blacks. By 1911, the ratio was 16.22 to 30.75.[57] Reports by the city physicians over this time judged the

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[53] Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 476–77; Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 17–18; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 127–34.

[54] Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 20–30, 127–30; Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 478–79.

[55] Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 467–68; Gamble, *A History of the City Government of Savannah*, 342–43, 313, 412–13.

[56] Edward C. Anderson, *Annual Report of the Mayor of Savannah* (Henceforward cited as *Annual Report),* 1867, 13; John Screven, *Annual Report*, 1870, 46-47, 68; Edward C. Anderson, *Annual Report*, 1873, 50-51; Edward C. Anderson, *Annual Report*, 1874, 7; John F. Wheaton, *Annual Report*, 1880, 20, 88-92; John F. Wheaton, *Annual Report*, 1881, 22-23, 105-114, Rufus E. Lester, *Annual Repor*t, 1885; 80-82, 104-105; John Schwartz, *Annual Report*, 1889, 195-196, 204.

[57] *Annual Report*, 1881, 110; Herman Myers, *Annual Report*, 1901, 170; George W. Tiedeman, *Annual Report*, 1911, 215. This "great disparity in the percentage of mortality between the white and the colored races" was extremely distressing for city officials, who were annoyed that it gave Savannah a mortality rate worse than the national average. They blamed the governments of other cities for drawing "invidious distinctions against Savannah in consequence of the large death rate," which the health officers blamed entirely on the black population for disregarding the city's "laudable liberality in providing for the necessities of the poorer class of citizens, irrespective

black population for "culpable negligence" in failing to improve unsanitary conditions in their

dwellings, and blamed black midwives for the disproportionate fatality rate of black newborn

children.[58] These elevated mortality rates were such a constant phenomenon that in 1889 the city

health officer commented that "As usual the death rate among the negroes was double that of the

whites, the number of deaths being 685, and annual ratio per thousand being 25.37. This ratio is

the lowest known, although it is susceptible of improvement (sic)."[59] Over the last decades of the

19th century, the city began to invest in Yamacraw's infrastructure including plumbing and

paving, but civic improvements in Yamacraw and nearby black neighborhoods lagged behind

predominantly white areas of the city.[60] Black public schools like the West Broad Street School

in Yamacraw remained perpetually underfunded and occupied inadequate and outdated facilities,

leaving a disproportionate number of black children without the opportunity for an education.[61]

The city government saw itself as blameless for these inequities, and they maintained that "the

death-rate … of the negroes is high and never will be as low as that of the whites" though "it is

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of color" by providing public dispensaries and two black physicians. *Annual Report*, 1881, 110; 1880, 20. They argued that counting white and black mortality together was "unjust in the extreme, and gives an incorrect idea of the health of such localities," and could only be resolved by "drawing the color line so plainly that the race ratio will be apparent to the most careless reader." *Annual Report*, 1881, 110. The city's official mayor's reports are replete with complaints over this "gross injustice" visited "upon cities similarly populated as is Savannah." *Annual Report*, 1885; 80-82. In 1900, the city health officer again argued that "it is unfortunate and unjust to the cities of the South that in the Federal mortuary reports no statement is made of this great disparity between the death rate of the two races … robbing the city of its distinction as one whose white mortality entitles it to a position among the most healthful cities of the world. The higher mortality among the negroes is due not to local conditions but to their mode of living, the neglect of ordinary care in diet, and the flagrant violation of health rules observed among the whites." Herman Myers, *Annual Report*, 1900, 3-4. The health officers maintained that justice to Southern cities demands that vital statistics should plainly show deaths per white and black races separately, and as this government is pre-eminently one of the white race, the standard of health should be classified therefrom." *Annual Report*, 1885, 80-82. They saw this ambition realized beginning with the 1900 census, which segregated mortality rates by race, though by 1923 the health officer again lamented how "we have the problem of a large negro population which keeps our mortality rate higher by comparison." Herman Myers, *Annual Report*, 1902, 167; 1923, 29. Despite this disregard for the value of black life in Savannah, the city's health officers saw themselves as benefactors through their "efforts to improve the sanitary surroundings of the negro population, and the free services of competent colored physicians provided by the city." *Annual Report*, 1900, 3-4.
[58] *Annual Report*, 1873, 50-51; *Annual Report*, 1880, 20; 1881, 22-23; 1889, 196, 204-205.
[59] *Annual Report*, 1889, 195-196.
[60] Gamble, *A History of the City Government of Savannah*, 279–313.
[61] Edward C. Anderson, *Annual Report*, 1875, 13; John J. McDonough, *Annual Report*, 1891, 211-212; John J. McDonough, *Annual Report,* 1892; 225-226.

within our power, and it is our duty, to prevent the high negro death-rate which has prevailed since the emancipation of these people," professing benevolence even as they neglected their role in segregation.[62] Conveniently, the city government's reports from this era never entertained the possibility that these conditions resulted from segregation and not from racial inferiority.[63]
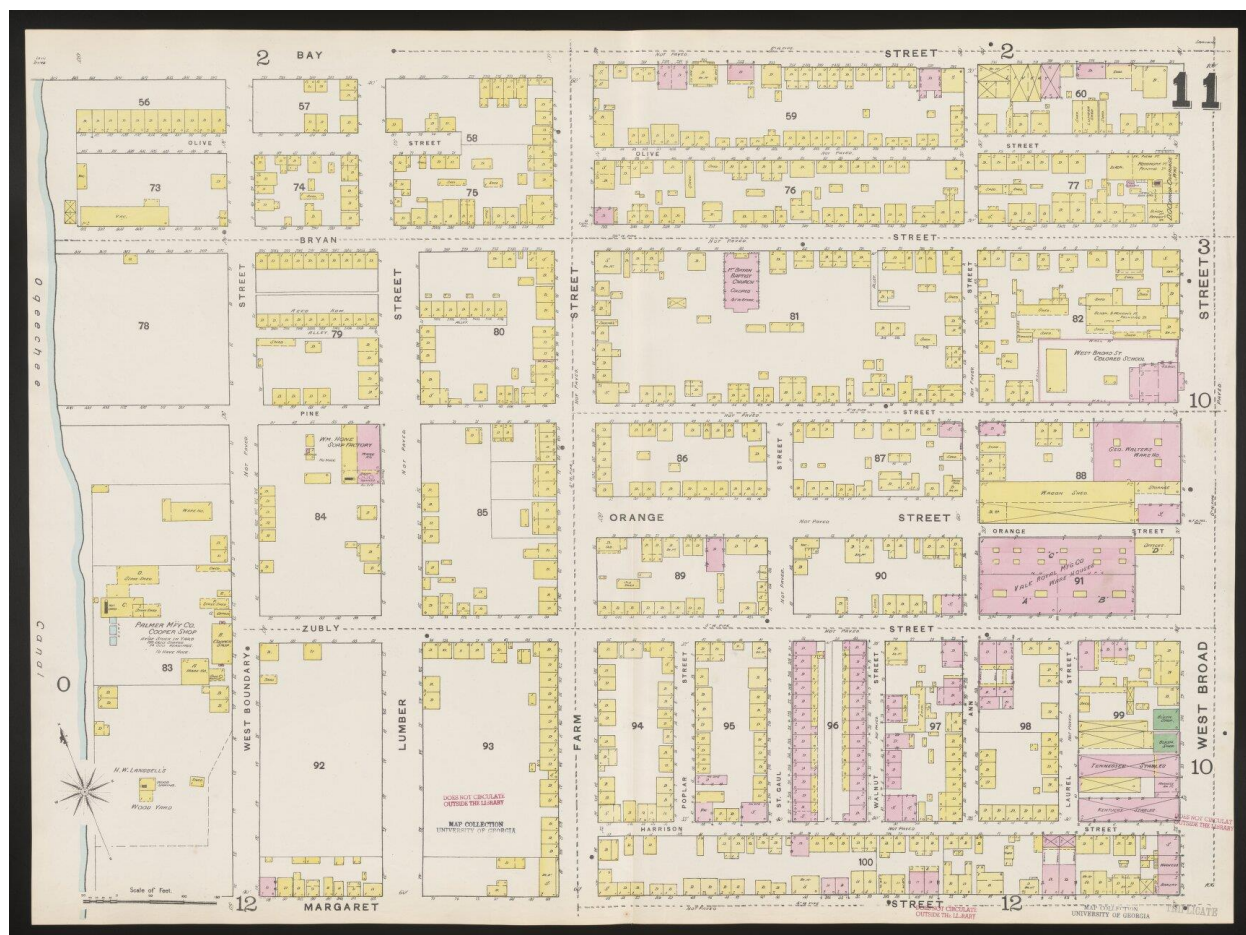
Figure 6: Sanborn Map & Publishing Company, "Insurance Map of Savannah, Georgia, 1888," 11, University of Georgia Libraries Map Collection, Athens, Ga., presented in the Digital Library of Georgia.

Nevertheless, with the fall of slavery Savannah's black community was able to claim a greater level of ownership over its neighborhoods and institutions through the establishment of

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[62] *Annual Report*, Herman Myers, *Annual Report*, 1905, 157.

[63] For a summary of population growth and mortality rates within the Savannah City limits from the Civil War to 1900, see Thomas Gamble, *A History of the City Government of Savannah*, 342-343, which summarized the findings of previous mayoral reports. A reader should also note that the city limits were maintained by the city government for the express purpose of excluding the black populations of outlying areas, preventing them from influencing the city's entrenched white political class, as recorded in Gamble, *A History of the City Government*, 250-251.

independent black churches, businesses, and schools, despite the animosity or at-best apathy of the city's government and white population. Previously underground schools and persecuted teachers were able to form recognized educational institutions such as the famous Beach Institute.[64] Some influential black leaders retained government posts after reconstruction, including John H. Deveaux who served as a customs official until his death in 1909.[65] Over the same period the black workforce expanded into multiple fields, and black craftsmen saw particular success as carpenters, masons, and engineers, providing the labor and expertise for the construction of new buildings to house growing spiritual and secular black institutions.[66] "For example," Perdue recounted, "Negro carpenters and mechanics built the First Bryan Baptist Church with little supervision from whites except for the architectural plans," while the Reverend James Simms himself was regarded as "one of the best carpenters in the city and was put in charge of renovating the woodwork at the First African Baptist in 1885."[67] Over the late nineteenth century fraternal societies like the Odd Fellows and Masonic Lodges expanded alongside women's societies, acting at once as clubs, aid societies, and unions for the expanding proportion of black skilled laborers. Perdue documented that "by 1880" black Savannahians "had organized 193 clubs and mutual aid societies," contributing to a "rich social life."[68] Black business men and women were able to expand their holdings, creating a vibrant stretch of

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[64] Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 470–74; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 11–12; Hoskins, *Out of Yamacraw*, 50–55.

[65] Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 138–39.

[66] Citing Blassingame's research, Perdue observed this "greater differentiation" in the black workforce and found that "while Negro men were working at 58 different occupations in 1870, they were working at 92 such occupations in 1880. Negroes made up fifty percent of all laborers, draymen, porters, bricklayers, coopers, and cotton samplers in Savannah in 1870 in 1880. In addition, "apprenticeship of young blacks to skilled Negro Artisans led to an increase in led to an increase in the percentage of Negroes in the trades." Perdue further recorded that "in 1870, there were 66 blacks operating 41 different kinds of businesses. By 1880, there were 253 Negroes operating 41 kinds of businesses. Some of them owned small manufacturing concerns." Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah*, 108-119.

[67] Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 108–11.

[68] Perdue, 88, 105.

theaters, performing halls, beauty parlors, and shops in West Savannah along West Broad Street, developing black traditions of dress and style that dated from before the Civil War.[69]

Figure 7: F. B. Johnston, "Fahn Street, West side, Savannah, Chatham County, Georgia," 1939, Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Although individual neighborhoods increasingly became identified as primarily white or black by around 1900, the city remained comparatively integrated through the late 19th century. Blassingame examined census data and contended that while "in the late 1870s the color line became somewhat more rigid," there was not yet a clearly defined segregationist regime, and that "residential segregation during this period seems to have been based as much on class and

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[69] Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 464–67; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 13–15, 20–40.

economic status as on race."[70] Blassingame lists Yamacraw as one of these predominantly black

neighborhoods, but reiterates that "blacks, however, were not restricted to these areas." Unlike

scholars who focused on black Americans being pushed into "ghettos," Blassingame instead

focused on the social mobility and "community infrastructure" provided by cities. His work

documented similar trends within comparatively segregated and integrated late-19th cities

centuries, leading Blassingame to claim that "housing patterns may be, in fact, ancillary rather

than central to that experience," and called for closer analysis of black society and culture within

cities as "enduring communities" instead of "enduring ghettos."[71]

    Indeed, the city government's institutional neglect was challenged by continuous efforts

of black clergy, educators, and writers to improve the living conditions of black Savannahians

and preserve places of cultural significance. In 1888 pastor E.K. Love of First African Baptist

and pastor James M. Simms of First Bryan Baptist published histories of their churches.[72]

Although their accounts contributed to a long running debate, which has lasted to the present,

over which church represents the original black Baptist congregation of Savannah, they clearly

display the ability and intention of black leaders in Savannah to tell the city's storied history

through black voices. Another dramatic step for the formation of Savannah's black community

was the establishment of John H. Deveaux's *Savannah Tribune*, which offered a counter

narrative to the constant discrimination faced by black southerners in mainstream papers. From

1889 on the paper was run by Sol C. Johnson, who purchased it in 1910 and remained editor

until 1954, becoming one of the city's most prominent advocates for black political rights and

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[70] Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 481–83.
[71] Blassingame, 481–83.
[72] Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 40–41; Hoskins, *Out of Yamacraw*, 60–61; Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 29.

cultural expression. [73] The ability of Savannah's black community to determine its own public image has been a consistent ambition of local political leaders from reconstruction, through the Civil Rights movement, and to the present day with the question of Yamacraw Village.

Class and the Politics of Civil Rights

This ongoing movement for black political empowerment was not always cohesive or marked by uniform solidarity. As decades passed after the end of slavery, economic stratification led to a growing social gulf between the majority of the black population and an upper-class black elite who attained financial prosperity, had access to social and educational opportunities outside the deep south, and held the majority of influential positions within the city's black-owned educational institutions by the turn of the century. Amber N. Wiley observed this intersectional aspect of African American history in "The Dunbar High School Dilemma," an essential work on the preservation of African American culture, which gives a crucial and nuanced analysis of educational architecture. Wiley recounts the decades-long struggle over the preservation of Washington DC's Dunbar High school, which was originally built in 1916 and demolished to make way for a new structure which opened in 1977.[74] Proposals for a new school

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[73] Hoskins, *Out of Yamacraw*, 40–41; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 138–39, 299–293. For a study of the *Tribune*'s politics, see Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 138-139. While Deveaux was undoubtedly a consistent advocate for civil rights, he achieved this level of influence through his political stance as a "moderate realist," and Sol. C. Johnson continued his policy of outspoken but "middle of the road" politics, as Hoskins recorded. Blassingame, too, concluded that through the end of the 19th century "men such as John H. Deveaux, editor of the Savannah *Tribune* and member of the legislature in 1872, and most of the ministers were centrists, insisting on the necessity for racial pride, uplift, constant struggle to obtain civil rights and racial cooperation." Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto, 477.

[74] Amber N. Wiley, "The Dunbar High School Dilemma: Architecture, Power, and African American Cultural Heritage," *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 20, no. 1 (2013): 95–96, 101, 113, 116, 119, https://doi.org/10.5749/buildland.20.1.0095. Wiley's work is an insightful study of the preservation of sites transformed by changing social and political movements embodied in architectural preferences. She recounts the decades-long struggle over the preservation of Washington DC's Dunbar High school, originally built in 1916 as the "successor of ... the first public high school established for blacks in the nation." Wiley places these debates within the historic context of Washington D.C, which acted as an essential culture hub for African American education and supports her arguments with comprehensive knowledge of desegregation. Her work centers on the debate surrounding the demolition of the old school in the 1970s due to "a need for better recreational facilities." Wiley studied the opposing coalitions in the widely publicized debate and noted that many educators favored replacing the historic structure, while "preservationists, local historians, and many alumni" opposed demolition. She

were based on opposition to the legacy of discrimination and colorism within the black

community, yet proponents for preservation were equally motivated by civic pride, producing a

"battle for the representation of what black Washington was." Thus, this conflict revealed

longstanding, competing cultural movements within urban African American communities, both

stemming from a belief in black political agency and the importance of passing on a heritage of

resistance. By emphasizing the difficult and conflicting decisions made by black educators,

students, politicians, and voters, Wiley places black residents of Washington D.C. as the key

historical actors of her narrative, and she refuses to treat urban black communities as monoliths

without diversity of beliefs and principles.[75] In consequence, publications like the *Tribune* are by

no means an unbiased reflection of the realities faced by black Savannahians. Hoskins found that

while Sol C. Johnson adopted political "militancy" in his outspoken support for the Republican

Party, his paper also expressed classist attitudes. Johnson and other black elites held "middle of

the road" social opinions, and his editorials often chided working class blacks for low moral

standards. Hoskins insightfully remarked that media like the *Tribune* "both reflected and

influenced" black Savannahians, etc.[76] Similarly, Historian Robert E. Perdue held that "more

often than not the political leaders set the tone of the black community and articulated the desires

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analyzes both the concerns of each side, as "advocates of demolition believed a new building would address the needs of an economically depressed urban community," and remove a "symbol of an era of exclusionary practices within the African American community." Wiley argued that the conflict displays "a complex shift in black political empowerment that was embodied in a new attitude toward the built environment." More modern forms of activism like "the black power movement," Wiley asserted, advocated for "a new vision of the future," which involved reforming existing urban infrastructure, and objected to the design of Dunbar "...because it embodied the taint of classism and colorism in the African-American community." In contrast, opponents of demolition, many of them alumni, defended the old school as a symbol of black prosperity and resilience. Far from a physical legacy of segregation, they perceived the school as the physical symbol of "a popular ideal of communal uplift based on a shared past." Rather than side with one viewpoint, Wiley concludes that both buildings were emblematic of the prevailing progressive of their time, and both sought to "redefine monumentality." Wiley, "The Dunbar High School Dilemma," 95-101, 105-112, 113-119.

[75] Wiley, "The Dunbar High School Dilemma," 95-101, 113-119.

[76] Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 288–93.

and interests of their followers." Such figures held influence over the community and were in turn influenced by changing opinions among the majority of the black population.[77]

In contrast to the first generation of leaders who emerged at the beginning of Reconstruction, the leaders of the 1880s and 90s like Richard M. White and Lous M. Pleasant "reflected a new type of leadership compared to the old style Savannah Negro population," Perdue concluded. As Perdue explained, "they were college graduates and articulated the interests of their people in an urbane manner."[78] Although all black Savannahians were negatively affected by discrimination, the political disparity produced by decades of intensifying voter suppression additionally disenfranchised poor and working-class black Savannahians who lacked the economic and cultural influence of the financial elite.[79] In the 1980s historian Karen L. Kalmar sharply criticized upper-class black leaders who "like the dominant whites, they seemed to think the average Black merited only casual concern" as the New Deal brought an unprecedented level of federal financial aid to the city. Kalmar documented that by 1934 only 5% of the city's registered voters were black, "despite the fact that they constituted 40 per cent (sic) of the population." Since working class blacks were denied the ability to form a voting block to elect "politicians sensitive to the needs of the average Black," Kalmar held that "in the

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[77] Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 52.

[78] Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 67–68. In Perdue's interpretation, some moderate black leaders like Richard H, White, and advocate for public and a prominent member of state republican party, were sincere civil rights advocates who "put the Republican party and the welfare of his people above political demagoguery," but Perdue lambasted other black elites like Louis M. Pleasant, who "became even more prominent in the Republican party" and by 1880 was one of the most influential black leaders in the city along with Deveaux, with whom he both clashed and collaborated in state politics. Perdue alleged that Pleasant was "more interested in pushing himself to the top than in the advancement of blacks," and that he and Deveaux "felt they were above the common blacks, and definitely constituted a different class." Although Pleasant was eloquent and effective, Perdue held that "in fact he voiced the interests only of upper-class Negroes" and was "in every sense of the word he was the henchman of white Republicans who used him to hold the Negro populace in line." Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 54-55, 62-63.

[79] Karen L. Kalmar, "Southern Black Elites and the New Deal: A Case Study of Savannah, Georgia," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (1981): 341–42.
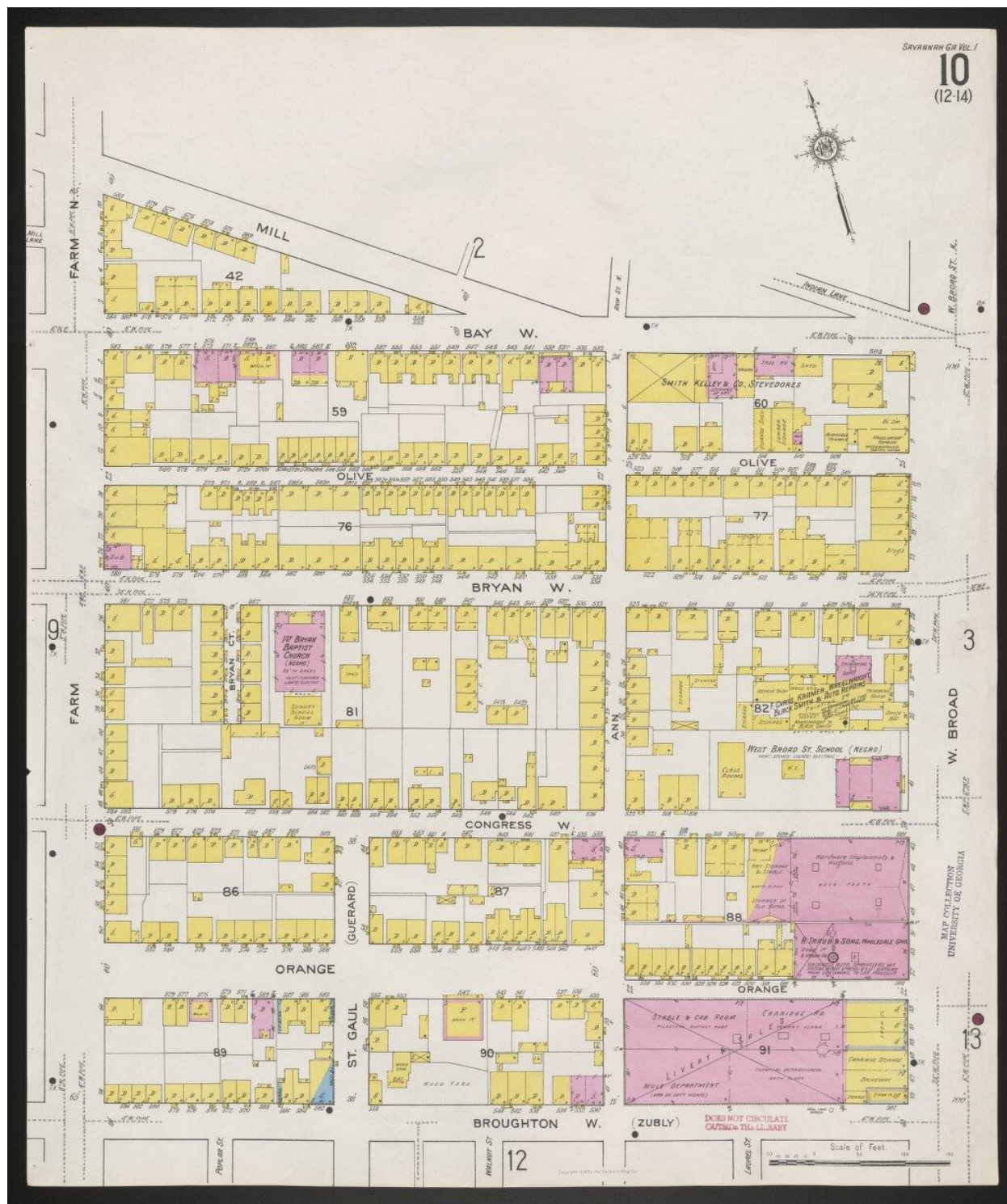
Figure 8: Sanborn Map & Publishing Company, "Insurance Map of Savannah, Georgia, 1916," 10, University of Georgia Libraries Map Collection, Athens, Ga., presented in the Digital Library of Georgia.

absence of political clout," political influence in the black community was determined by access to the social circles of an elite made up of educators, social workers, lawyers, and journalists."[80]

Consequently, Kalmar described the leaders of the early 20th century as a "Nonmilitant Bourgeoisie," reluctant to directly challenge the institutions of white supremacy, who "were in no hurry to change the status quo." She saw Sol C. Johnson himself as a prime example of this recalcitrant generation, noting that "almost every issue of the *Tribune* contained criticisms of the New Deal," and she implied that Johnson was unable to accept the changing relationship of the major parties to the civil rights struggle.[81] Likewise, Perdue observed that "John H. Deveaux often expressed the views of more affluent Negro Savannahians on the issue of race relations," and held classist sentiments that disparaged both poor blacks and whites.[82] Under both Deveaux and Johnson, the *Tribune* promoted a middle-class "American pattern of family life and traditional sex mores," and combined this moralistic rhetoric with a political ideology of self-reliance. Perdue even alleged that colorism was prominent among the elite black families of Savannah, where "possession of 'white blood'" was a marker of status between "mulattoes," and "full blooded Africans(s)."[83] Despite these strong biases, the *Tribune* provided a forum where black Savannahians could see recognition of their identity and humanity, without the filter of racial animosity present in other papers that demeaned their importance and heritage.

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[80] Kalmar, 341–43.
[81] Kalmar, "Southern Black Elites and the New Deal," 342–43. In using Johnson's views as signs of an anti-militant stance, Kalmar did not sufficiently examine the reasons for this enduring political loyalty which emerged through the extraordinary investment of reconstruction-era black leaders in building the state Republican Party as an instrument for radical change. Through their efforts Savannah became "a stronghold of prominent Republicans and Negro leaders" against the opposition of the white-dominated Democratic party in Georgia. For a more substantial analysis of the *Tribune*'s connections with the Republican Party, and the rift that formed between black and white republicans over the late 19th century, see Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah*, 37-38, 40-41, 52,67-68, 68-75.
[82] Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 31.
[83] Perdue, 91–93.

The body of official material produced by the city government from the turn of the century establishes a policy of at-best neglect towards economic and physical improvements in Savannah's black neighborhoods, and more typically vehement racial discrimination founded on racist assumptions of black ignorance and intransigence. In contrast, the voices of black Savannahians from the postbellum era reveal a continuous heritage of resistance and organization, suggesting a diametrically opposed narrative for Savannah's history, and a different picture of what it means to preserve its heritage. Thus, although the city's white population succeeded in establishing a segregated, violent regime, and class-conflict increased within the black population, the postbellum era invigorated traditions of political organization, social mobilization, and cultural celebration that endured through the 20th century.

Proud Neighbors and Substandard Homes: Federal Housing Policy in Savannah

By the end of the 1930s Savannah faced a housing crisis. The local economy was already in decline in the 1920s, and Kalmar wrote that (even) by 1933 "the citizens of Savannah, Georgia, had experienced more than a decade of economic difficulties," which she credited to falling demand for the agricultural and maritime shipping supplies that generated commerce for the city's port. In addition, the great depression had only exacerbated rising unemployment and poor living conditions.[84] The newly formed housing authority reported that nearly half of the city's residences were "substandard" and lacked modern utilities. These housing deficiencies disproportionately affected the city's black population, who occupied 78% of the city's substandard homes, largely in traditional neighborhoods like Yamacraw.[85] Kalmar, too, viewed

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[84] Kalmar, "Southern Black Elites and the New Deal," 341.

[85] *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1211-1214. In 1947, the Housing Authority estimated that in 1939 "out of 28,701 dwellings in metropolitan Savannah, 13,941, or 48.5 percent were substandard," 3,156 with white inhabitants, and 10,875 with black residents," and that "in 1939 about 93 percent of Savannah's substandard homes were "tenant-occupied."

the economic situation in apocalyptic terms. She wrote that for "the 40 per cent of Savannahians who were black, the depression was nothing short of catastrophic," as increasing competition for labor combined with longstanding discrimination favored white workers, and amid the depression black workers made up 70% of the city's 25% of unemployed laborers.[86] The Federal aid and incentives offered through the New Deal offered the chance to confront these social and economic issues, but many elite black leaders showed limited support for black workers, and the implementation of these policies was left to the discretion of local white officials who were determined to use federal aid as a means to intensify segregation.

The city government's racist regime, largely unchallenged by the federal government, was exacerbated by "weak leadership within the black community."[87] While black Savannahians of all socioeconomic classes were deprived of equal access to local political influence, upper-class black Savannahians were more likely to shy away from calls for any radical change that may have jeopardized their relative prosperity and generally favored incremental reforms. Kalmar held that the traditional black elite did seek employment opportunities for working class black Savannahians, they did not apply this zeal for reform to the working conditions black workers faced in projects administered by the vehemently segregationist white authorities.[88] With the exception of a few "labor organizers" and critics in the media, working class black Savannahians had few leaders to advocate for racial equality in the management of federal aid programs. This typical approach was demonstrated through the role of Benjamin F. Hubert, president of the Georgia State Industrial College, in the WPA excavation and destruction of the pre-colonial Irene Mounds. Hubert had applied for "FERA assistance to construct a community

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[86] Kalmar, "Southern Black Elites and the New Deal," 341.
[87] Kalmar, 341.
[88] Kalmar, 341–45, 349–53.

house on campus," and personally wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt explaining the need for federal aid

to support "several hundred skilled workers, brickmasons included, who were unemployed."

Although Hubert "demanded that the project be constructed exclusively by black skilled workers

because, as he explained, "what colored people need is that those who are unemployed may be

able to keep their self respect working at something of permanent value until industry will be

able to absorb their labor again," Yet Hubert neglected to act when confronted with direct

evidence of abusive working conditions faced by black female laborers in federal programs, as

he had adopted a "forceful" but "limited militancy," which focused on "obtaining jobs for skilled

laborers" without directly confronted local white officials.[89]

Unions and labor organizations continued to provide social services and support for black

workers during the depression. At the end of the 1930s, the local chapter of the Workers Alliance

of America (WAA), No. G 1774, advocated for the rights of black workers by publicly

confronting "gross racial discrimination" in New Deal programs including malaria control

projects and a city-run sewing room intended to provide employment for women. Kalmar wrote

that "not until late 1939 did an organization appear that, to bolster its own ends, secured modest

gains for the average Black," and she argued that unlike the established black elite, the WAA

was committed to directly challenging the power of white elites. Kalmar found that such critics

were viewed as "outsiders" even in the black-operated media, while the WAA was undermined

by lack of state support for unions. Though the WAA saw some success, Kalmar concluded, the

results of its advocacy were sporadic and limited, and thus "despite these gains, Negroes

remained subject to the whims of white supervisors."[90] Even so, organized labor continued to

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[89] Kalmar, 341–45, 349–53.
[90] Kalmar, "Southern Black Elites and the New Deal," 350–53.

foster some of the most radical factions within the city's black population.[91] For unemployed black workers, neighborhoods like Yamacraw provided a social support structure in the absence of strong municipal aid programs during the economic decline of the 1920s and 30s.

A 1935 WPA survey estimated that the population of West Savannah's census tracts ranged from between 80% to 99% black, and the population of Yamacraw was 70% & to 80% black.[92] A 1937 study of Yamacraw by Benjamin F. Hubert recorded that the population was 98% black, though many of the local businesses were white-owned. Nevertheless, the same study found that despite poor living conditions that had earned it the description "the 'toughest section' in Savannah," the residents demonstrated confidence in their community, and "were proud of Yamacraw. They were proud of their neighbors."[93] By 1938, when surveyed by the Savannah unit of the WPA Georgia Writers Project, the city's expanding commercial facilities had encroached onto the edges of the neighborhood, but Yamacraw's residents retained a close culture supported by numerous churches including First Bryan Baptist. This survey, part of the larger effort by the Federal Writers Project to record the memories of black Americans who had lived through slavery, was one of the only significant pre-war efforts to study Yamacraw's culture.[94] The interviewers recorded the recollections of elderly citizens past in order to study

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[91] Coulibaly, James, and Green, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized Low-Income Housing in the United States*, 6. Similarly, Coulibaly Et. al suggested that contrary to the prevailing understanding of the time, held by thinkers like Robert Parks, that residential segregation resulted from internal prejudices which produced "inevitably antagonistic racial groups," discrimination in the 19th century was "far from irrational" from the perspective of white workers seeking to protect their own "economic security," "correctly or not." Thus, they argued, Parks and "many other early-twentieth century observers of race relations similarly minimized or ignored labor market competition between black and white workers." Coulibaly, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized low-income Housing*," 6.
[92] Hoskins, *Out of Yamacraw*, 18.
[93] Hoskins, 58.
[94] *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (University of Georgia Press, 1986), 21–22. The results of the project were published in the 1986 collection *Drums and Shadows: Survival studies among the Georgia coastal Negroes*, one of the few dedicated cultural studies of Yamacraw in this era. The volume contains an expanded foreword by Guy B. Johnson and an introduction by Elliot P. Skinner, emphasized the importance of the coastal south as a formative location for African American culture, literature, and art, along with an appendix documenting parallel traditions practiced in Africa, and an explanation for the near-phonetic transcriptions of the interviewees' speech. Although slanted by racial prejudices and shaped by a focus on using

Figure 9: F. B. Johnston, "Yamacraw Market, 101-105 Fahm St, Savannah, Chatham County, Georgia," 1939, Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

African cultural legacies within the black culture of Savannah, and found that Yamacraw's

residents maintained traditions of medicine, magical powers, and conjuring which descended

from African practices.[95] Despite Yamacraw's integrity as a community, the city's white elite

saw it only as a representation of economic decline. The visibility of poor black neighborhoods

near commercial districts and along highways aggravated municipal officials who sought to

construct an image of Savannah as a modern, progressive city.

Under the increased economic pressure of the great depression, city governments

throughout the nation in the late 1930s faced the question of what forms of government action

would provide the most effective remedies to insufficient public utilities and serves. Amidst the

New Deal and enthusiasm for public intervention, the beliefs of a collection of progressive

intellectuals, reformers, and politicians formed into a united movement for federal housing

assistance, which culminated with the Housing Act of 1937, which incentivized local housing

authorities by "providing Federal aid for the construction of low-rent housing to replace

slums."[96] Although the current era of federally subsidized public housing in the United States

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cultural survival as a tool for anthropological study, the WPA project provides the only substantial record of interviews with black residents of Savannah in the 1930s, including residents of Old Yamacraw before its demolition, as well as the "Old Fort" neighborhood on the east side of the historic district, itself demolished to make way for public housing in 1950. The introduction, written in 1940 by Mary Granger, described how "today waterfront industries have pushed the Negro district southward from the bluff, but it is still so close to the river that some of the small shanties rattle when winds roar across the water."

[95] *Drums and Shadows*, 24–28.

[96] For further details on the politics behind the 1937 housing act, see Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 187-204. The 1937 law remains a subject of extensive debate among public housing scholars. Gail Radford maintained that Bauer originally envisioned a federal housing policy that included labor unions and worker's collectives, providing for both an adequate national housing standard and "self-determination" by residents. Radford held that Bauer's progressive vision was "compromised away," resulting in a "two-tier housing system" in which federal subsidies for middle-class housing are widely accepted, while housing assistance for the poor is denigrated Vale, too, described the act as "a battered product of compromise," since "while the letter of the law promised to assist those with the lowest incomes, the program rarely reached them." Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 10. In contrast, Hunt disputes allegations that "conservative amendments" "crushed" the intentions of the bill, arguing that instead "the core progressive agenda survived largely intact." Hunt instead attributes the law's shortcomings to the very limitations imposed by the "market failure ideology" of reformers, which Hunt argues limited the ability of housing authorities to adapt and "limited whom the project could serve," leading to cost-cutting decisions that would "undermine the long-term sustainability of the very projects they built and thus subvert the progressive, idealistic vision behind the 1937 Housing Act." See Hunt's work for further details on the "coalition of reformers" who

began here, the housing movement cannot be understood simply as an immediate response to the

economic pressures of the great depression. The most significant early proponents of public

housing were more heavily influenced by the philosophy and artistic approach of European

modernism as applied in post-World War I housing initiatives in Germany, France, and the

United Kingdom, which represented a more drastic form of state intervention into the housing

market. Groups of urban theorists such as Lewis Mumford's Regional Planning Association of

America envisioned remade city landscapes composed of compact modernist design and

collectivist living environments. Much of the 1937 housing act was written by Catherine Bauer,

who articulated an incisive critique of free-market speculative development in her 1934 work

Modern Housing which went on to become the seminal work of the housing movement. The

fundamental ideas behind the housing movement originated within progressive circles, but the

implementation of public housing in the United States was heavily determined by institutional

segregation. The law as passed relied on an alliance between reformers like Bauer and more

conservative politicians who, while sympathetic to the plight of poor Americans, primarily saw

public housing as a means to improve local economic conditions, and desired to avoid

competition with free-market construction.[97] The result was a federally-backed policy of "slum

clearance:" the wholesale demolition of impoverished neighborhoods, to be replaced by model

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imported "European modern housing ideas" as tools for "alleviating slum conditions." Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 15-33. For the influence of housers like Catherine Bauer who were "enthralled by European Modernism," and their concerns over the implementation of affordable housing through USHA, see Bauman, "Row Housing as Public Housing," 425-429.

[97] Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 1–6, 59–83, 181–200; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 15–40; Vale, *After the Projects*, 9–10; Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked*, 20, 36, 54–56, 68; Catherine Bauer Wurster, *Modern Housing* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), XV–XVII, 18–60, 95–98, 124–28, 154–73, 176–87, 237–54; Catherine Bauer Wurster, *A Citizen's Guide to Public Housing* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Vassar college, 1940), 45–54, 70–88, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009077285; H. Peter Oberlander and Eva Newbrun, *Houser: The Life and Work of Catherine Bauer* (UBC Press, 1999), 124–35; John F. Bauman, "Row Housing as Public Housing: The Philadelphia Story, 1957–2013," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 138, no. 4 (2014): 426, https://doi.org/10.5215/pennmaghistbio.138.4.0425.

communities designed to produce model citizens.[98] In doing so, many city governments

displaced integrated populations and replaced them with segregated communities.[99]

As scholars of urban history have re-evaluated the origins of federal housing policy over

the past twenty years, Lawrence Vale has consistently challenged accepted narratives of public

housing. In *Purging the Poorest* and his more recent work *After the Projects*, Vale has framed a

striking set of comparisons between the slum clearance housing policies of the 1930s and 1940s

and the HOPE VI era of the 1990s and 2000s, which revived poverty-deconcentration,

implemented through mixed-income development and public-private housing partnerships. With

the establishment of the HOPE VI program in 1992 and a "demolition only program that lasted

from 1996-2003," federal policies led to the demolition of 157,000 units and the displacement of

250,000 people, 80 percent of whom were African American.[100] Vale analyzed Atlanta and

Chicago as key examples of both mid-20th century slum clearance and late-20th century public

housing redevelopment, as both cities' razed "slum" neighborhoods to construct high-density

"superblock" housing developments, only to condemn those very developments decades later to

make way for low-rise neighborhoods constructed with traditional residential architecture.[101] In

examining these two eras of federal policy, Vale identifies a shared "missionary impulse," and a

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[98] Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, xi–22; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 15–33, 44–49; Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked*, 49–68; *Public Housing Myths*, 1–21; Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 1–6, 29–57; Kevin Fox Gotham, "A City without Slums: Urban Renewal, Public Housing, and Downtown Revitalization in Kansas City, Missouri," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 60, no. 1 (2001): 302–5.

[99] *Public Housing Myths*, 1-8, 30-50, 200-210, Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 40-60, Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 7,10. Scholars such as Lawrence Vale have also analyzed how public housing functioned as a mechanism of racial segregation, by breaking up integrated areas and substituting rigidly segregated communities. For a specific study of race in Chicago's public housing, see D. Bradford Hunt's Blueprint for Disaster, where Hunt critiques previous studies of race, including the influential works of Arnold Hircsh, who studied how the CHA was used as a tool of racial segregation. Hunt argues that although there was certainly prevalent racism in the CHA, scholars have ignored the influence of class, and he observes that "poor white residents were the first to experience this "concentration of poverty." Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 53-56. For additional information on the role of public housing in displacing black communities and concentrating segregation, see Gotham, "A City Without Slums," 302-305.

[100] Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 1–10, 22–29; Goetz, *New Deal Ruins*, 7–8, 112–19.

[101] Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, xi–xiv.

desire to remake the fabric of cities under the belief that urban ills can only be fixed by clean-slate demolition. Although the motives of these informal social experiments have changed from segregation to income-mixing, Vale asserts that they share the same unilateral approach to redevelopment that ignores the social fabric of public housing.[102]

Furthermore, Vale argues that the first official public housing programs in the 1930s were not intended as welfare for the poorest Americans but were instead meant to function as a temporary assistance for "upwardly mobile poor." Vale even argues that "it is not such a great leap from nineteenth-century homesteading to Habitat for Humanity."[103] Lawrence Vale divided the 20th century saga of federally backed public housing into three eras of policy and management: from 1935 to 1960, 1960 to 1990, and from 1990 to the present. Vale posits that between 1960 and 1990 the U.S. government adopted a "welfare" agenda intended to provide aid to individuals in critical need of housing.[104] Bloom observed a similar transition in the NYCHA from a "municipal service" to "welfare" and back to an "affordable housing" agency.[105] Yet in the decades before and after this interlude, Vale maintains, the majority of public housing has been framed as assistance for the economically mobile working class, while intentionally excluding and de-concentrating the poorest Americans.[106]

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[102] Vale, 332–33.

[103] For an overview of changing urban philosophies in the United States have affected housing, see Bauman, "From Tenements to the Taylor Homes." In his introduction, influential scholar John. F. Bauman framed a contrast between "enduring elements" in American culture of free enterprise and the history of federal housing policy. Bauman argued that the United States has lacked a coherent housing policy, but also argued for the existence of a "community building tradition" which was present in colonial America, 19th century reform movements, and 20th century federal aid programs, though these programs have often been intrusive and paternalistic, as seen through "model tenements." Bauman, "From Tenements to the Taylor Homes," 1-16, 260.

[104] Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 2–3. Coulibaly also described the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as a turning point between "early" and "modern" eras of housing policy and asserted that despite the end of formal segregation there had been "no significant improvement" in the racial equality of public housing. Coulibaly, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized low-income Housing*, 3.

[105] Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked*, 68; Coulibaly, James, and Green, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized Low-Income Housing in the United States*, 3.

[106] Referencing the work of Michael Katz and Herbert Gans, Vale interprets public housing policy as a result of American concepts of "deserving," "undeserving," and "working" poor, as these cultural definitions of poverty were

It was during this early period of public housing that the Housing Authority of Savannah formulated its plans for its housing complexes. Following state enabling legislation to carry out the provisions of the Housing Act, Savannah constituted the HAS on January 1, 1938, with Fred Wessels, a "realtor and insurance executive" as its first chairman, and W. H. Stillwell, a "prominent realtor" as its executive director. Stillwell declared that the housing authority's purpose was to ensure "that families making $15 a week, more or less, could enjoy decent homes with modern conveniences," because "only by providing good homes at rents within the means of low-income families is it possible to get rid of slums. Before razing a shack, the community must see that the family inside it gets a better place to live."[107] The ultimate product of this initiative was to be the reimagined community of Yamacraw Village.

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used as moral rationales for displacement. Vale acknowledges that there are "legitimate reasons for excluding some people from government subsidized housing" but maintains that "poverty itself, should not be considered a crime." Vale pointed to the words of Nathan Straus, USHA administrator from 1937 to 1942 when it was "absorbed into the wartime housing authority," who defended the housing act and asserted it did provide for lowest-income families while maintaining that "public housing is not relief and is not charity." Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 3-6, 11-12.

[107] *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1214.

CHAPTER THREE

SLUM CLEARANCE IN A HISTORIC CITY

The bulldozer rumbled into motion; the steel cable stretched taut, and there was the crackle and screech of splintering wood and loosening nails. The shack collapsed. Dust drifted upward. Slum clearance had begun in Savannah.[108]

So the Housing Authority of Savannah recounted the 1939 construction of Fellwood homes, the city's first public housing development, built as segregated dwellings for African-Americans. When viewed in retrospect, this passage seems rather foreboding, but it was not meant to be read this way at the time. On the contrary, this was meant as an inspiring statement of the power of government initiative to effect social progress, endorsed by none other than Nathan Straus, administrator of the United States Housing Authority. The now-demolished Fellwood Homes development was intended as a preliminary measure to enable the construction of Yamacraw Village. The Housing Authority portrayed this as a great new beginning, but none of the public housing units built in west Savannah were constructed over undeveloped land. The existing residences and businesses of the neighborhood had to be leveled first.[109]

Although the smaller Fellwood Homes project was constructed first, it was intended as a prelude to the larger Yamacraw Village development, which was the primary object of the Housing Authority. As Stillwell explained to the committee, "The authority had already decided that its biggest project would involve the demolition of 784 substandard dwellings in the Yamacraw district," which would mean the "dumping of some 3,000 people into an already

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108 *Study and Investigation of Housing,* 1214.
109 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1214; Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission, *Yamacraw Village Section 106 Review*, by Melanie Wilson and Leah G. Michalak, 3.

congested housing market, and it was essential to ease the strain on evicted families by building the 176 homes at Fellwood first." The housing authority acknowledged that the "election of largely undeveloped land on Bay Street extension for the site of Fellwood Homes aroused criticism locally because, it was argued, this was not slum clearance," but they maintained that this measure was necessary, because "in the long run, slum clearance can proceed only to the extent that new homes are provided."[110] Federal publications reiterated these claims, lauding the Housing Authority for working to "relieve housing congestion in Yamacraw, a vicious slum." This reiterates that the construction of Fellwood was intended as an initial measure to enable the construction of Yamacraw Village "within the slum itself."[111] Despite the blatantly segregated nature of this scheme, the Housing Authority shied away from blatant racism in their public reports, and instead focused on poverty, maintaining that "there is no longer-any doubt about how slums are created. Every bad house is the product of inadequate income," which has left "50,000 people … to live without bathtubs, or without modern toilets, or without a sound roof."[112] Architecture, they reasoned, could provide a solution to many of these ills.

The Yamacraw Village housing units were constructed from 1940 to 1941. Designed by the "Associated Architects of Savannah" including Cletus W. Bergen, the buildings were constructed with walls of "superrock (sic) concrete blocks, manufactured with slag as aggregate," with an exterior stucco coating. The buildings were finished with hipped roofs, decorative quoins, and small porches over the front doors, and the lots were landscaped with palmetto trees. The complex was the second of three public housing complexes built in Savannah

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110 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1216.
111 *Public Housing* 2, no. 5 (July 30, 1940), US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Division of Construction and Public Employment, *Building Permit Survey, 1939, Volume V, Southern Atlantic Cities*, 77th Cong., 1st. Sess., Bulletin No. 689 (Washington, DC, 1942).
112 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1214.

before 1947, beginning with Fellwood Homes with 176 units, followed by Yamacraw Village

with 480 units, and Garden Homes with 314 units.[113] The units were built over an area

previously occupied by a collection of residences referred to by the city government as "slums"

and dismissed on insurance maps on "shanties."[114] Two prominent structures held central

positions within the complex: the newly constructed administration building, designed as a

replica of the neoclassical Hermitage plantation mansion, and the historic First Bryan Baptist

church building, both facing Bryan Street to the north. The space beyond Bryan Street in front of

each building was intentionally left open in Yamacraw Village's plan, giving passersby on Bay

Street an unobstructed view of the two structures. First Bryan had been formally chartered in

1867 as "First Bryan Baptist Church," and in 1873 an older "wooden meetinghouse constructed

by Andrew Bryan" was demolished to make way for the current building designed by "John B.

Howard, city surveyor and civil Engineer," and built by local black carpenters, engineers, and

construction workers.[115]Although the church itself remained following the demolition of Old

Yamacraw, "a wooden prayer chapel, which used to be behind the church, was demolished in the

1940's during construction of project housing."[116] During the 1940s and today, the church

congregation remained active in community organization and preserving the area's heritage.[117]

As a physical legacy of the efforts of black organizers, activists, and workers in the decades after

emancipation, buildings like First Bryan and First African are constant reminders of black

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113 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1216-1217.

114 Sanborn Map Company, "Insurance maps of Savannah, Georgia, 1888," University of Georgia Libraries Map Collection, Athens, Ga., presented in the Digital Library of Georgia; Sanborn Map Company, "Insurance maps of Savannah, Georgia, 1898," University of Georgia Libraries Map Collection, Athens, Ga., presented in the Digital Library of Georgia.

115 Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 477; Study and Investigation of Housing, 1215.

116 National Register of Historic Places Nomination: "First Bryan Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia;" Survey, Historic American Buildings, "First African Baptist Church." Further details of these two churches' history are available on their respective websites.

117 *Savannah Tribune*, November 11, 1943, *Savannah Morning News*, May 30, 1952, "Yamacraw Village, intentionally neglected, needs to be protected," *Savannah Morning News*, June 11, 2021.

Savannahians' perseverance through a collective struggle for survival against the repression of segregation. These two central structures, the administration building and the church, represent varying processes of institutional influence, as one was imposed by the housing authority, and the other instituted through the efforts of the residents themselves.

Figure 10: "First Bryan Baptist After the Demolition of Yamacraw," Courtesy of Landmark Preservation.

Public Housing and Architectural Determinism

The function of architecture has played an outsized role in academic studies of public housing across the latter half of the 20th century, to the detriment of social and economic studies. The most influential contemporary scholars on the subject, including Vale, Hunt, and Bloom, have all rejected these overwhelmingly negative, environmentally deterministic interpretations of

public housing, and have instead focused on the social and cultural trends that neglected public housing and left its residents without economic and political support. Furthermore, they have demonstrated that past critics ignored the voices of residents themselves. Bloom contended that "architects and planners were the first to lump together public housing and urban ills," …and criticized both architects who "became so obsessed with the negative influence of design on behavior … that they rarely factored in growing evidence of basic public housing management failure," as well as social critics who let their "obsession with exposing broader social injustice" lead them to "downplay … housing administration as a factor."[118] As a result, architecture figures prominently in the 2015 anthology *Public Housing Myths*, a collaboration by prominent scholars including Vale, Bloom, and Hunt which set out to counter popular misconceptions, apply an international and interdisciplinary framework, and amplify the voices of residents. The authors' core contention is that while the history of public housing in the United States does include failures such as Cabrini-Green in Chicago or Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, scholars have put unjustified focus on these well-known "high rise" developments, while ignoring that the majority of remaining units were "low-rise complexes ... in small towns and cities." These authors are especially critical of Oscar Newman, whose works were widely used to justify condemnation of high-rise, modernist style public housing. Studies depicting public housing as a failed policy, the authors contend, have ignored factors such as racial diversity, the lack of correlation between crime rates and public housing, and examples of successes in public housing. They resolve that public housing "includes a range of institutions, actors, and aims, depending upon a particular context."[119] They conclude that public housing was "one of the most complex undertakings of

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118 *Public Housing Myths*, 2. Bloom had more fully described this argument in his 2009 work Bloom *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*.
119 For a study of public housing in the "postwar urban redevelopment" era that reflects this focus on architecture and poverty concentration during the postwar era, see Kevin Fox Gotham's "A City Without Slum." Gotham

twentieth century public administration," and that contrary to the opinions of architectural critics, "designing and building lovely complexes, even when it did happen, guaranteed little."[120]

While these authors acknowledge the deficiencies of public housing architecture, they and other scholars such as Gail Radford have attributed these failures to USHA's desperate attempts to cut costs in order to avoid competition with the FHA, as directed by administrators like Nathan Strauss, undermining the vision shared by Bauer and other reformers who hoped for widespread, reliably maintained public housing. These scholars all differ slightly in their assessment of public housing architecture. Nicholas Bloom, who has studied the comparative success of the New York City Housing Authority, presents a positive outlook on NYC's high rises, and has criticized both architects who "rarely factored in growing evidence of basic public housing management failure," as well as social critics who "downplayed housing administration as a factor."[121] Hunt is more circumspect in his critique. While he felt that Chicago's high-rise public housing towers were "damage, rendered in concrete, to the city's fabric," he was careful to note that their modernist plans were trimmed to "minimalist designs" under the pressure of cost considerations, resulting in a readily identifiable "government housing" aesthetic that failed to deliver on "modernism's true possibilities."[122] Radford too felt that "the bleak, alienating architecture of housing built under the Wagner Act, often blamed on the influence of modernism, was to a large extent the result of very low budgets."[123] While each author has a unique opinion, their works suggest a consensus that modernist architecture and high-rise plans were not

challenged studies of public housing that primarily see housing policy as a federal issue, arguing that this approach failed to take into account the significance of local business and economics, and the influence of "real estate officials and downtown business elites, in the programmatic design of public housing" through "the role of public-private partnerships." Gotham, "A City Without Slums," 285.

120 *Public Housing Myths*, 1–7; Gotham, "A City without Slums," 285.
121 Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked*, 1–5.
122 Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 44–45, 152.
123 Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 191–93.

themselves to blame, but poor implementation and policymaking hampered public housing's effectiveness, and these aesthetic details became an easy target for critics who ignored or failed to understand the longer institutional history of housing assistance.[124]

Although Vale does not specifically focus on architecture, he critiques the "interdependent" relationship of design, planning, and policy, which he labels "design politics."[125] This intersection of "design politics" describes the inextricable politically informed aesthetic choices and aesthetically informed political choices inherent in urban redevelopment. Vale is particularly critical of the application of New Urbanism to public housing, in which architecture with a veneer of historicity is applied to housing developments to obscure harm to African American communities and the upheaval of the urban landscape. Vale rebukes the "historicized architecture" endorsed by planners like Peter Calthorpe, which "provides a safe window into the past, without engaging anything that actually transpired on the site."[126] Vale prioritizes the term design over architecture, because design can also encompass decisions regarding capacity and density that alter the composition of resident populations, and thereby determine the continuity between the community of residents before and after demolition. Furthermore, Vale notes that the political attention and economic possibilities provided by slum-clearance appealed to local governments, although such institutions had "diverse and conflicting priorities."[127] Vale does not ignore architecture, but he strongly critiques an excessively

124 Bauman also addressed this growing "disillusionment" with public housing and declared that during the cold war "public housing in America, in almost any form, bore the stigma of the European functional Bauhaus architecture, and, thus, of feared European socialism," rendering it an easy target for political attacks. Bauman, "Row Housing as Public Housing," 426.

125 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 30–32.

126 Vale, 330–32.

127 Vale, 7–10; Coulibaly, James, and Green, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized Low-Income Housing in the United States*, 7–9, 24-25, 29, 31–33; Gotham, "A City without Slums," 286, 296–97. For further details on the control "local financial elites" exercised over site placement through urban renewal, and their economic motives, see Coulibaly, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized low-income Housing*, 7-9, 24-25, 29, 31-33. Kevin Fox Gotham is extremely critical of private developers' influence on housing policy and emphasizes the role of developers in pushing for state governments to support "public acquisition of slum land in blighted areas for clearance and resale

architecture focused study of housing that ignores "a larger realm of politics, policy, social

relations, and management."[128] Instead, Vale frames design not as a key factor in determining

residents' behavior, but as a viewpoint to understand the political and cultural agendas of

Housing Authorities, governments, and developers.

<div align="center">Open Spaces: The Design Politics of Yamacraw Village</div>

The publicly stated agenda of the Housing Authority of Savannah in the 1940s is

certainly no mystery. The housing authority had the opportunity to make their case to the federal

government in October 1947, at congressional hearings held in Atlanta, Georgia. Although the

most substantial testimony at the hearing was given by representatives of the Atlanta city

government, when they finished speaking W.H. Stillwell, the executive director of the housing

authority, rose to present a statement for the record. Stillwell began his statement with

observations about the increasing cost of public housing construction, which he credited to "a

different caliber of construction," suggesting both the Housing Authority's pride in providing

modern accommodations and its need for further federal assistance.[129] After a short opening

statement and some obligatory flattering, Stillwell presented a prepared statement with the

evocative title "Oglethorpe was Right: A tale of two Centuries."[130] Opening with the presence of

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to private builders." Gotham labeled this approach privatism, meaning "the underlying commitment by the public sector to enhancing the growth and prosperity of private institutions." Gotham, "A City Without Slums," 285-286, 296.

128 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, xi–xii.

129 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1211. Stillwell reported that "in a recent survey that we made of the building that had been done in Savannah in the last 20 months prior to September of this year, there were 701 dwelling units built, and it is significant to note that the cost of the buildings that were erected in 1946, the average cost is $4,125, and for this year it was $7,375."

130 By 1947, after ten years of operation, the Housing Authority oversaw "970 low-rent slum clearance project units … 314 of which are occupied by white tenants and the balance by Negro tenants." These units, the Housing Authority proudly declared, "were substantially built in slum areas and replaced 1,003 substandard dwelling units." They also acknowledged that although the city had grown, the overall situation had not substantially changed since 1939. Stillwell estimated that by 1947, out of Savannah's "32,516 dwelling units … 12,537 are substandard, and of these "substandard" dwellings, 3,078 had white residents, and 9,459 had black residents. *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1211-1212.

Nathan Strauss at the construction of Fellwood Homes, this dramatic, narrative account

conveyed this excitement felt by housing reformers. In this, the "first published report" of the

HAS, the authors maintained that "avoiding technical treatment, the report tells the history of

slum clearance, low-rent housing, and war housing in language that will interest city officials and

the public generally." Although to some extent "Oglethorpe was Right" was a financial report, it

was primarily a move to justify the actions of the Housing Authority to skeptics, whether those

skeptics were critical of the financial cost or the human cost of slum clearance. As a result, they

declared that "anecdotes and many facts about people have been included." As they implicitly

petitioned Congress for additional funding, the city housing officials strove to depict a human

triumph that justified any social disruption from population displacement.[131]
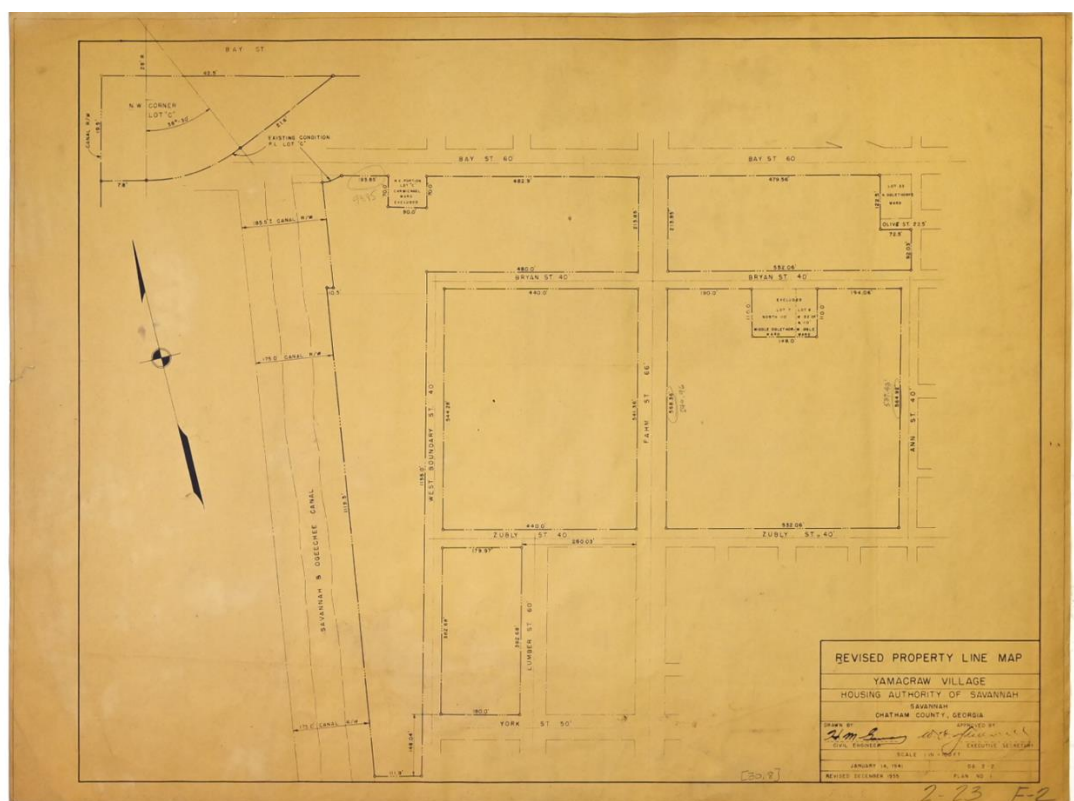
*Figure 11: "Yamacraw, Revised Property Line Map," 1941, Record Series 3121-010, 30.7, Engineering
Department Retrospective Plans and Designs Collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.*

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131 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1212-1213.

The chief target of the Housing Authority's animosity, and the central object of this report, was Yamacraw itself. They declared that "the worst slum area was the Yamacraw section, traversed by United States No. 17, the main highway to Florida. Thousands of winter tourists concluded that all Savannah was like Yamacraw, and lost no time in getting away from Georgia's oldest city." For the HAS, the presence of Yamacraw within the city's public image was as problematic as the physical housing conditions of those who lived there.[132] Just as today's city officials consider Yamacraw to be out of place within the stately, historic city, their counterparts of eighty years based their agenda on the city's unique character, and presented old Yamacraw as an unhealthy aberration from a wiser system inherited from the colony's founders.[133]

Savannah, Stillwell proclaimed, was "planned…to be a city of open spaces." In contrast to the urban landscape that developed over the late 19th century, "a population density of only 10 families to the square mile was projected when the first 130 colonists landed on February 12, 1733, to develop 24 square miles of pine woods." In Stillwell's recounting, Oglethorpe envisioned "a park-like town" comprising "50-acre tracts, divided in three parts, one-eighth acre for a house and garden in the town, 47 acres near the town, and 45 acres on the outskirts." Nevertheless, Stillwell bemoaned, "during the next 200 years Savannah lost much of General Oglethorpe's stamp. The great squares at proper distances remained (to the annoyance of speeding motorists), but many of the spacious residential lots were carved into small plots and covered with shacks offering no more conveniences than the first settlers enjoyed and a good deal less protection against cold and storm." Yamacraw Village was promised as the solution to this problem, not a symptom. The stated philosophy behind Yamacraw Village, therefore, was not to concentrate poverty within a ghetto on the edge of the city, but to deconcentrate the city's

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132 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1214.
133 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1213

"full quota of slums," and replace the old neighborhood with a modernized housing development that complemented the city's design.[134] Pointing to Oglethorpe's plan for "a square tract of 15,360 acres, expecting to accommodate 250 families," USHA reasoned that "this ample provision of over 60 acres per family is a far cry from the overcrowded conditions resulting from Savannah's later growth" and claimed that "public housing projects are helping to restore the city to its founder's original intention."[135]

In reality, the layout chosen for Yamacraw does not fully adhere to any of the influences cited by the Housing Authority. Even in the early 1930s the most cutting edge developments of Europe had begun to lay out units which all faced the same direction within an enclosed "super-block," to maximize the amount of light in living areas and access to outside space.[136] In contrast, the buildings of Yamacraw Village are laid out in rows racing each other across narrow yards fronting on streets carrying traffic through the development, with rear lots between each pair of facing rows.[137] Furthermore, the Housing Authority's reverence for 18th century planning

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134 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1213-1214. The Housing Authority's assessment was that "Oglethorpe's 60 by 90 lots had 5,400 square feet for each house. By 1939 the average for single-family structures was only 1,032 square feet, roughly 25 by 40. Savannah had developed a full quota of slums."
135 *Public Housing* 2, no. 5 (July 30, 1940).
136 Bauer Wurster, *Modern Housing*, 45–49, 52, 178–80; Catherine Bauer Wurster, "The Social Front of Modern Architecture in the 1930s," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 24, no. 1 (1965): 50–52, https://doi.org/10.2307/988280; Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 61–63; Eric J. Sandeen, "The Design of Public Housing in the New Deal: Oskar Stonorov and the Carl Mackley Houses," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (1985): 645–67, https://doi.org/10.2307/2712614.
137 For details on European modern housing in the early 1930s, see Catherine Bauer Wurster, *Modern Housing*. The *Zeilenbau* plan adopted in Siemensstadt outside Berlin was designed around "thorough orientation of dwellings for maximum sunlight" to allow for plentiful open space and dense occupation. Produced by leading German modernists including Walter Gropius, the Zeilenbau model consisted of parallel rows of identical apartment buildings within an enclosed super-block. In 1934 Bauer hailed such developments where "the open space flows around the buildings, and yet the whole is urbane and orderly." Bauer Wurster, *Modern Housing*, 178-180. Bauer was never a devotee of modernist design purely for aesthetic reasons. By the 1950s she had come to believe that USHA had failed to apply modernism beyond a surface level and that artistic modernism as a whole had strayed from its social roots. As early as 1945 she reiterated that pressing economic concerns were "much more fundamental" than questions of architectural style. In Bauer's view, the fading relevance of modernist architecture was not a failure of its core rational principles, but rather the abandonment of a scientific approach in favor of a "purely aesthetic" modernism, demonstrating a failure to adapt these foundational motives to the radically changed urban environments of post-World War II society. Bauer, "Social Front," 50-52.

is belied by the simple fact that Yamacraw does not follow the layout of the Oglethorpe plan in any meaningful way. The city's famous squares form intersections of pedestrian and vehicle traffic surrounded by inward facing buildings featuring a diverse mix of private businesses and residences together with civic and cultural institutions. Yamacraw's layout intentionally isolates residential, business, and civic functions, and discourages pedestrian traffic along intersecting streets. Architecturally speaking, therefore, the housing units of Yamacraw Village are a curious combination of European modernist design plastered with trappings of the Antebellum south mixed with typical early 1900s suburban construction.

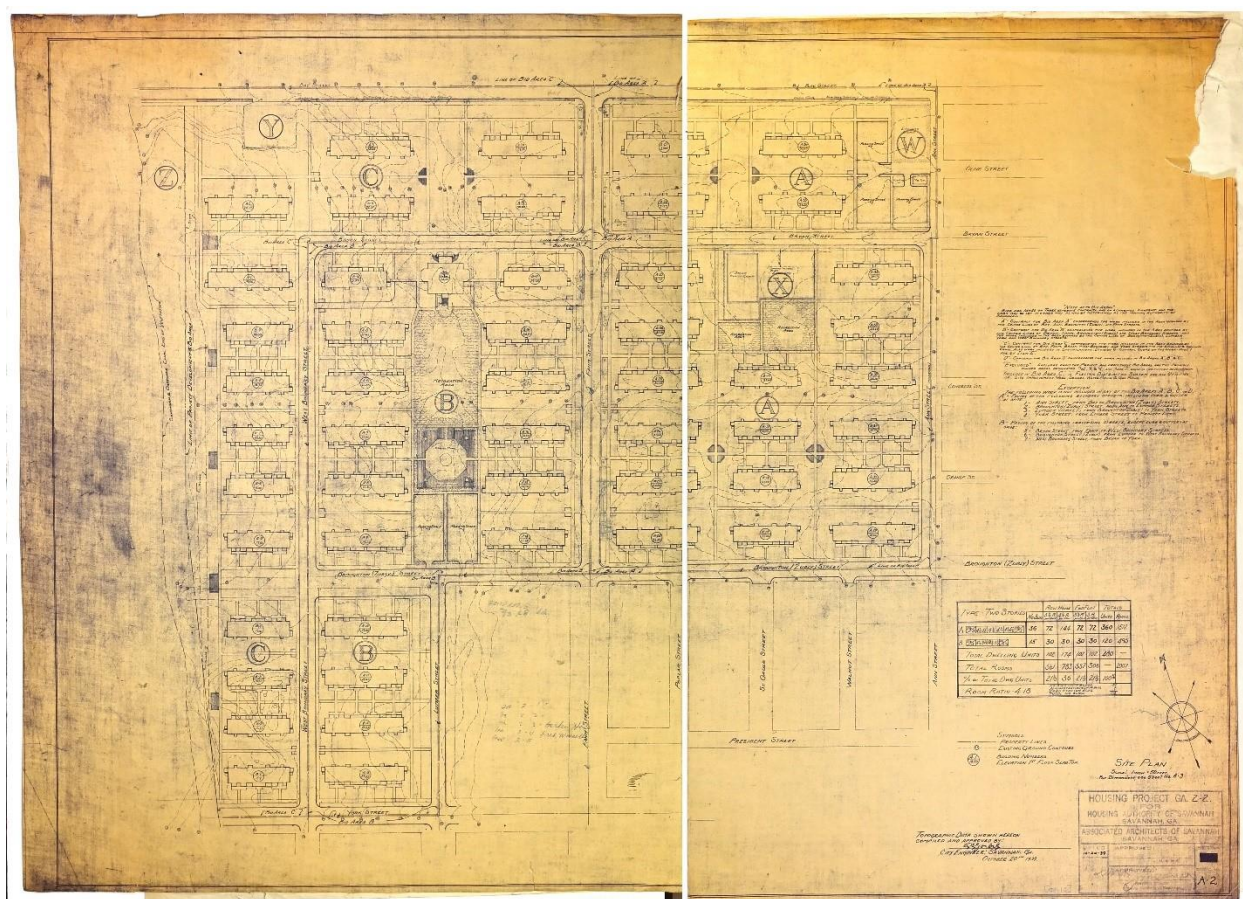
Figure 12: "Yamacraw Village Housing Project Ga #2-2," 1939, Record Series 3121-010, 30.10, Engineering Department Retrospective Plans and Designs Collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Where the Housing Authority of 1940 went to great lengths to promote the achievements of Yamacraw Village, over recent years when local news sources have covered protests against

demolition, reporters have dramatically described the current insanitary conditions.[138] The

Housing Authority has resolutely maintained its stance that the area is economically unviable

and that rehabilitation is cost-prohibitive.[139] The city's current assessment is directly at odds with

the housing authority's original depiction of Yamacraw, which it proudly recounted how "more

than 5,000 citizens turned out to inspect Garden Homes Estate and Yamacraw Village in the

spring of 1941. Flanked by palmettos and lawns, tile white buildings of Yamacraw were a

shining contrast to the shacks that had once covered the area. The only structure preserved was

the First Bryan Baptist Church, founded in 1758 and one of the oldest Negro churches of the

Nation."[140] The housing authority also hailed their victory in the "battle of the blueprints," as

they described it, between local and federal officials over the architecture of the envisioned

housing units. During the planning phase, the Housing Authority recounted, "the Washington

officials closely supervised architectural plans and urged local authorities to build so-called

modern housing," but "the Savannah Authority objected. Flat roofs might be suited to California

or New York, the commissioners said, but Savannahians had preferred pitched roofs for 200

years and saw no reason to change. Public housing, they maintained, should reflect local

traditions."[141] They proclaimed how "A replica of the old home on the hermitage plantation, the

building and the new homes around it made the Florida tourists stare" at the transformation from

138 Brimmer, "Yamacraw Village Is to Be Demolished. What Is the Site's Highest and Best Use?"; Brimmer, "Push to Preserve Yamacraw Village More about Public Housing Site's Future than Its Past."; Nicholson, "'Willful, Intentional, Asinine Neglect.'"

139 Housing Authority of Savannah, *Annual PHA Plan*, 2023; Housing Authority of Savannah, *Questions and Answers from Meetings with Yamacraw Residents*, October 2022; Housing Savannah Task Force, *Housing Savannah Action Plan*, July 2021; Savannah City Council, Chatham County Commission, *Comprehensive Plan 2040 Summary*, 2020 Update, October 2021. "'Willful, intentional, asinine neglect': Yamacraw living conditions spur community uproar," Savannah Morning News, February 1, 2023; "Push to preserve Yamacraw Village more about public housing site's future than its past," *Savannah Morning News*, May 25, 2023; "Study recommends Yamacraw Village demolition," *Savannah Morning News*, October 1, 2023,

140 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1217.

141 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1216-1217.

"ramshackle cabins" to "a park-like group of modern homes."[142] The Housing Authority even

attributed declining crime rates to this architectural plan, declaring that "the wide open spaces of

the new Yamacraw Village are ideally suited for the pursuit of lawbreakers," making it so safe

that "the thud of a sprinting policeman is practically unknown."[143]Although their report

acknowledged modernist influences, the Housing Authority was careful to present Yamacraw as

the result of local traditions, though their definition of heritage excluded the craftsmanship of

black laborers and artisans, and presented black Savannahians as passive recipients of aid.

The Housing Authority went beyond the exterior appearance of the homes to celebrate

the interior utilities of the units, which were "like any good home, and are equipped with

refrigerators, kitchen ranges, built-in bathtubs, hot-water heaters, circulating space heaters,

window shades and screens, laundry sinks, and kitchen work tables." Officials were especially

proud of the solar water heating system for Yamacraw village, which was self-contained and

independent of the electrical grid.[144] The construction contractors, too, advertised their

contributions to progress in exalted terms, from refrigerators and plumbing to the concrete blocks

used to construct the units, declaring that "Yamacraw Village, rearing its massive beauty above

the spot where once stood slums, bears testimony to the progressive spirit that motivates

Savannah." This optimism also encompassed construction materials. In 1940 A federal public

housing bulletin described how "USHA dampproofing standards were tested … when newly

erected concrete block walls in the three Savannah projects satisfactorily withstood winds "from

80 to 90 miles an hour." The bulletin boasted of the prior preparation of the walls with "mastic-

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142 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1214.
143 One can only imagine Jane Jacobs' reaction to such a statement.
144 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1217-1225. An article in the *Savannah Morning News* painted an image of inviting interiors, describing how "green and rust predominate in the bedroom on a background of ivory furniture," while each kitchen was furnished with a "red and white breakfast set, with matching curtains; the gingham tablecloth cost only 25 cents. *Savannah Morning News*, "Yamacraw Village Opening," 1941

asbestos," "plaster," and "asphalt primer," and how in a subsequent inspection "we could find no evidence in any of the buildings where the water had penetrated the masonry."[145]

Yamacraw Village as a National Exemplar

This excitement was not merely the bluster of a local government. USHA and later the FHA saw fit to include Yamacraw as an example of their achievements. A 1941 press bulletin on public housing, which included a memorandum from Nathan Strauss on the relationship between federal and local housing authorities hailed Yamacraw as an example of the agency's accomplishments. The agency justified "slum clearance" based on research into unsanitary conditions in these neighborhoods, which the agency contended placed undue costs on government utilities and health services, resolving that "society has come to realize that it can no longer afford the consequences of poor housing and slum conditions."[146] The bulletin presented "before" and "after" images of Yamacraw, contrasting the "substandard building which formerly occupied the site of the project homes, where "newspapers were tacked to 2 x 4 uprights for partitions," with the "Yamacraw Village houses that replaced the slum dwellings at left." The plain stucco walls and hipped roofs of the new buildings were judged worthy examples of national housing policy, not condemned as shameful relics.[147] In hearings in 1945, Philip M. Klutznick, Commissioner of the Federal Housing Authority, proudly presented photographs of Yamacraw Village as evidence of successful slum clearance, and proof that federal housing assistance had a positive influence on "localities." Referring to old Yamacraw as "a rather famous southern slum." Klutznick further justified the program as a minimal intervention, since "The Federal Government merely renders assistance to local housing authorities to clear slums,

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145 *Public Housing* 2, no. 17 (October 22, 1940).
146 *Public housing* 2, no. 25 (January 11, 1941), 2.
147 *Public housing* 2, no. 25 (January 11, 1941), 2.

and to rehouse families of low income that come from substandard housing conditions in decent housing, as illustrated here."[148] Throughout these statements, federal agencies reiterated the Housing Authority's claims that Yamacraw Village embodied progressive, individualistic government aid, based on the city's original values.[149]

Government publications of the time abound with statements from Housing Authority officials, but the voices of black Savannahians who inhabited the units are all but absent. Any community input in "Oglethorpe was Right," was selectively edited for publicity and restricted to architectural details. Declaring that "in many cases the tenants have been the teachers," the housing authority explained they would adopt features including asphalt tile floors and "additional storage space and extra closets" to alleviate "crowded living spaces." Further study would thus ensure the housing authority could "build even better in the future."[150] Furthermore, officials maintained that the local black community embraced the development, citing the testimony of unnamed "pullman porters (who) live in Yamacraw Village," who reported of public housing in other cities that "they ain't any of them touch Yamacraw."[151] "Not only the tenants but the entire community rejoices that Savannah won the battle of the blueprints." Yet the

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148 *General Housing Act of 1945. Hearings before the Committee on Banking and Currency,* 242. Klutznick reported that as of June 30, 1945 Savannah reported 970 active public housing units, and stated that the Savannah city government had applied for $7,600,000 in assistance for a five year low rent housing program encompassing 1,680 units.

149 For further details on the politics of federal housing aid during the New Deal, see Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, and Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster.* Vale specifically emphasizes the longstanding conflict within American culture and politics over state intervention and assistance as tools to ameliorate poverty, and suggests a historical conflict between the ideas of "housing as a moral good" and desire to maintain individual self-determination. Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 1-2. Along the same lines, D. Bradford Hunt also argued that for New Deal progressives the chief concern for housing was that, "market failure ... had failed at providing reasonable housing at affordable rents." At the same time, Hunt argues, they asserted that public housing should "not 'compete' with legitimate private enterprise." Hunt critiqued "these limits … defined by reformers" who accepted them as "first principles." Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 8-11.

150 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1228.

151 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1216.

authority provided no results of community surveys, no interviews with residents of old or new

Yamacraw, and no statements from leaders among local political and religious institutions.

The Housing Authority noted that demolishing old Yamacraw entailed population

displacement, but quickly dismissed it as a necessary side-effect of housing reform. They

observed that "statistically minded visitors noted that although large-scale housing developments

often mean more families per acre, the 480 homes of Yamacraw represented a reduction of 39

percent from the 784 families formerly on the site. The open spaces symbolized a return to the

wise planning policies of General Oglethorpe."[152] When Philip M. Klutznick was asked what

would happen to current inhabitants of "slum" areas, and if they would receive a preference in

new housing units, Klutznick maintained that former occupants received preference, but gave

few details on this process, what evidence supported these claims, whether the FHA had studied

the outcomes of former occupants, or whether any measures had been taken to preserve the

cultural aspects of displaced communities.[153] A 1941 Department of Labor profile of Yamacraw

also maintained that each "slum dwelling" was replaced with new construction, despite the

Housing Authority's admission that this was not the case.[154] These statements supports Lawrence

Vale's observations that while the "high modernist hopes of the mid-twentieth century state"

were "bathed in a rhetoric of uplift," they displaced existing communities in favor of more

socially acceptable applicants, and thus "substituted one community with another one,"

remodeling neighborhoods while shattering communities.[155] Likewise, for all these cheerful

anecdotes, the Housing Authority used statistics to assess "slum" communities purely as

collections of interchangeable individuals with no consideration for the integrity of communities,

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152 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1217.
153 *General Housing Act of 1945. Hearings before the Committee on Banking and Currency,* 225.
154 *Building Permit Survey*, 427.
155 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 7.

dismissing the human community of neighborhood's like Yamacraw in favor of sanitized

physical neighborhoods that portrayed the city in a better light.

Figure 13: "Yamacraw Village, 1953," Record Series 1121-057_0287, V. & J. Duncan Postcard Collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Building a Segregated Savannah

Despite its lofty rhetoric, "Oglethorpe was right" carefully equivocates concerning

segregation. Although it acknowledges that Savannah's public housing developments were

segregated, the report is careful to treat this as a mundane fact and omits any protest against this

institutional racism. When describing the first tenants of Yamacraw, for example, their racial

background is never mentioned. While the report repeatedly acknowledges the disparity in living

conditions between white and black populations of the city, and even declares the need to

improve living conditions for black residents, it never examines the role of segregation in

producing these conditions. Official statements from federal authorities also casually dismissed

the division of housing into "national or racial groups" as a question for "authorities located in particular cities," avoiding any responsibility for the segregation that defined Savannah's public housing.[156] Through such silences, racial inequality was depicted as an unchangeable reality. Nevertheless, this inequality can be seen in the different architecture applied to Garden Homes for white Savannahians and the Fellwood and Yamacraw for black Savannahians. Where Fellwood and Yamacraw were constructed with plain outer walls, Garden Homes received brick outer walls that put it more in line with the city's urban character. As Vale observed, housing was thus a justification for destroying communities as a progressive measure while also enforcing residential segregation under the pretext of progress.[157] By destroying the integrated communities of the postbellum era, the Housing Authority attempted to mold the city into the segregated vision of white supremacy. Evidently, Yamacraw Village was designed with racist principles in mind, but to argue that Yamacraw is a blight upon the city's cultural heritage from a racist era of American history, and thus deserves summary demolition, one must ignore the inherited agendas that are still present in today's public housing rhetoric.

The housing units of Yamacraw village, now disparaged by the city government as derelict remnants of a backward era and a disgrace to the historic city, were originally designed to show harmony between the city's historic heritage and modern future. Far from a backwards looking, impersonal project, Yamacraw Village was originally presented by the housing authority as a forward-looking, modern solution to the 1930s housing crisis that embodied sound architectural principles which had been abandoned in a senseless rush of development. This act of "creative destruction," was meant to return Yamacraw to the supposed model of the Oglethorpe plan, thereby uniting it with the physical fabric and cultural heritage of the historic

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156 *General Housing Act of 1945. Hearings before the Committee on Banking and Currency*, 264-265.
157 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 12–14, 331–33.

city, rather than impose a physical separation between public and private housing.[158] By

invoking Oglethorpe, the Housing Authority implicitly appealed to the charitable, humanistic,

aims of the original Georgia charter, and Oglethorpe's personal desire to ameliorate the crushing

symptoms of poverty by providing industrious residents with opportunities for self-improvement.

These were the very motives declared by proponents of the 1937 Housing Act. Yamacraw

Village was thus intended to return the city's environment, and perception in the minds of

tourists, to a positive vision stripped of sights that challenged the city's self-image.

Unlike the modernist, superblock towers assailed by the likes of Oscar Newman and

defended by Bloom and Hunt, Yamacraw Village was designed from its inception as a low-rise,

park-like development. Its use of ostensibly historic design language is strikingly similar to the

vision of public housing proposed by advocates of the HOPE VI program and the New Urbanism

movement.[159] Crucially, the units of Yamacraw Village were not built to reflect the extant urban

fabric of the city. Instead, they were meant to reflect an extrapolated outcome of the Oglethorpe

plan, imagined as an open plan housing complex. Furthermore, constructing the administration

building as a facsimile of the antebellum Hermitage Plantation evoked a sanitized vision of pre-

civil war South, not the idealism of the Oglethorpe plan, and created a collection of images

intended to appeal to locals and tourists, drawing from a time of deep racial oppression. Thus,

the city's housing "reforms" of the 1930s and 1940s addressed not only the physical reality of

the city, but also the popular, imagined image of the city. Then as now, the proximity of the

"substandard" Yamacraw neighborhood to the city's core threatened the city's popular image,

and now as then, the proposed solution is to utterly obliterate evidence of this era.

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158 Vale, 332–33.
159 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 332-33. Lawrence J. Vale and Shomon Shamsuddin, "All Mixed Up: Making Sense of Mixed-Income Housing Developments," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 83, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 56–67.

CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICAL AND HISTORIC REPRESENTATION

> When we finished the Freedom Struggle in the 1960s and 1970s, we realized we had to put an end to the tearing down of the black community and the moving of blacks out of the inner city. In the name of urban renewal or in the name of providing low-rent housing, all of the old neighborhoods where blacks had lived were being demolished. Yamacraw, the Old Fort, Frogtown, CurryTown--all these areas were lost. This was very depressing because some of the oldest housing that remained in the city and some very exciting buildings from an architectural point of view were the plain houses with peaked roofs, two or three stories high, where the blacks lived. No effort was made to preserve anything in these communities except, sometimes, the church.
>
> <div align="right">-- W.W. Law, 1993.</div>

In 1993, W.W. Law made this declaration to defend the preservation of the historic Beach Institute and the surrounding neighborhood, a center for black culture and secondary education in late 19th and 20th century Savannah.[160] Law, who served as president of the Savannah chapter of the NAACP from 1950 to 1976, had a deep and abiding interest in Savannah's history and culture, which he saw as fundamental to the struggle for civil rights.[161] With the social upheavals of the Great Depression and the Second World War, the middle of the 20th century saw a resurgence of defiant activism for racial equality in Savannah. In the 1940s the Reverend Ralph Mark Gilbert, pastor at First African Baptist, had "revitalized moribund NAACP and led the modern civil rights movement in Savannah," into the early 1950s, working alongside his successor as NAACP president, W. W. Law.[162] Gilbert and Law were among the most influential figures of the group Kalmar identified as "a new generation of more militant

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160 Griffith, *African-American Historic Places and Culture*, 1993, 24–26.
161 Record Series 1121-102, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Savannah branch records. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.
162 Hoskins, *Out of Yamacraw*, 41–43.

black leaders" who succeeded Johnson and other leaders of the early 20th century. Kalmar

pointed to the local "activism" of the 1960s, as part of the broader national civil rights

movement, as the influence which ultimately levied federal intervention to dismantle

institutionalized segregation in Savannah.[163]

The records of the Savannah Branch of the NAACP and the memories of residents

themselves are essential sources for understanding the evolution and culture of Yamacraw from

1941 through the 1990s.[164]Across the latter half of the 20th century, in the face of persistent

neglect from the city government, residents of Yamacraw and the congregation of First Bryan

sought to achieve equality under the law and economic security, and persisted through their

cultural, social, and religious traditions.[165] Under the leadership of Ralph Mark Gilbert and W.W.

Law, the mid-20th century Savannah NAACP engaged in a concerted effort to expand the reach

of black-owned and oriented anti-racist media through the city and region. They recognized that

this would require expertise and representation in the expanding medium of television. While the

Housing Authority's leadership sought to use housing policies to control the official narrative of

the city's history, Savannah's black community did not silently accept this vision for the city's

future. Under Law' leadership, cultural heritage was a key component of the Savannah

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163 Kalmar, "Southern Black Elites and the New Deal," 353.

164 Any records left by Housing Authority from this era are either unavailable or inaccessible. In the absence of virtually any such records on the administration of Yamacraw Village, the testimonies of black Savannahians are the most substantial evidence of this era in Yamacraw's history.

165 Throughout the 1940s the *Savannah Tribune* documented musical social events like musical performances and parties, political assemblies such as rallies and protests, and family gatherings like marriages, birthdays, and church services which held at First Bryan and in the newly inhabited units of Yamacraw Village and records the service of residents in the Second World War. "Heavenly Bound Glee Club to Sing at St. Philip Monumental," *Savannah Tribune*, October 14, 1943; "Some Savannah Area Men serving in the U. S. Armed Forces," *Savannah Tribune*, October 21, 1943; "His Church in $5,000 Rally," *Savannah Tribune*, November 11, 1943; ""Two candles," *Savannah Tribune*, December 23, 1943.

Figure 14: "W.W. Law Presenting Gift," Record Series 1121-100_0073, W. W. Law photograph collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

NAACP's approach to activism in defense of black civil rights and social equality, and these salient issues were brought together in the case of public housing.[166]

Across his life, Law had a deep interest in Savannah's history and culture and served as a key member of numerous preservation organizations including the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network (GAAPHN), the Coastal Area Planning and Development Commission Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Georgia Heritage Trust Commission. Law was also a member of the Georgia Historical Society and the Georgia National Register Nomination Review Board. Law personally helped found local heritage institutions specifically intended to safeguard black cultural resources, including the King-Tisdell Cottage Museum, the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum, and the Savannah-Yamacraw Branch of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History (ASALH). In consequence, local historian Father Charles Lwanga Hoskins acknowledged Law as "the drum-major for African American history in Savannah," through his advocacy.[167] Indeed, as scholars like Amber N. Wiley, Jessica Taylor, and Amy Starecheski have observed, in many cases where disadvantaged populations have been excluded from mainstream preservation movements, grassroots traditions of record-keeping, community building, and preservation have emerged to protect the memories of significant experiences, such as activism and conflict of the Civil Rights movement. If the preservation movement wishes to be truly more inclusive, it must acknowledge and integrate the pre-existing knowledge, expertise, and wishes of African American communities.[168] As a lifelong member of First Bryan Baptist Church, Law would have

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166 Record Series 1121-112, W. W. Law personal papers. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia; Record Series 1121-102, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Savannah branch records. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

167 Hoskins, *Out of Yamacraw*, 9.

168 Wiley, "The Dunbar High School Dilemma," 95–96; Jessica Taylor, "'We're on Fire': Oral History and the Preservation, Commemoration, and Rebirth of Mississippi's Civil Rights Sites," *Oral History Review* 42, no. 2 (Summer/Fall ///Summer/Fall2015 2015): 231–36, https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohv056; Amy Starecheski,

personally witnessed the demolition of historic Yamacraw and the construction of housing units

designed to erase any sense of the neighborhood's past. The Housing Authority's policy of slum

clearance erased the organic urban landscape of Old Yamacraw and enclosed the church, a

physical embodiment of black political resistance to segregation, within a sanitized development

framed as a simplistic reflection of the antebellum south. In direct contrast, Law believed that

black history and culture warranted recognition in historic sites and memorials from all eras of

the state's history, not just the 20th century and the Civil Rights movement, and this heritage

included the history of Yamacraw and Yamacraw Village. As public support for public housing

waned through the latter half of the 20th century, Law and the NAACP worked to hold the

Housing Authority accountable to the residents it served.

Ongoing Segregation and Demolition

The idyllic vision of Savannah as portrayed by the Housing Authority, which obscured

the oppression of segregation, would not go unchallenged for long. Only a decade after the

construction of Yamacraw Village in 1952, when the Housing Authority demolished the "Old

Fort" community on the eastern edge of the historic district to make way for a segregated, white

public housing complex named Fred Wessels Homes, the Savannah chapter of the NAACP

mobilized and launched a lawsuit against the Housing Authority on behalf of eighteen black

Savannahians who were denied entry on the basis of their race, in a direct challenge to the entire

framework of segregated public housing.[169] Their case, argued by NAACP lawyers including

future U.S. District Judge Constance Baker Motley and future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood

Marshall, charged the HAS with unconstitutionally prohibiting black applicants from living in

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"Squatting History: The Power of Oral History as a History-Making Practice," *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 203–16.

169 *Heyward v. Public Housing Administration*, 135 F. Supp. 217 (S.D. Ga. 1955); "Savannah Segregation Suit by Negro Group Threatens Entire Public Housing Program," *House & Home*. 2 (October 1952): 37–37.

Figure 15: "NAACP Ball Park Demonstration," (W. W. Law is on the left side of the photograph), Record Series 1121-100_1112, W. W. Law photograph collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

the new development, and thereby displacing and shattering the extant community. This case would drag on for years through the court system until 1959, even though the process of litigation began as early as 1952, before the housing complex was even completed in 1954.[170]

In his correspondence with the NAACP legal team in 1952, Law emphasized the urgency of the situation, and the need to quickly resolve the case for the benefit of the displaced residents of the old fort. Motley and Marshall, who had more experience with civil rights cases, shared Law's sentiments, but argued that a circumspect approach was necessary for pursuing legal remedies in federal courts, and urged patience.[171] In 1955 the state courts granted a motion from the Housing Authority to dismiss the case and upheld "the legal doctrine of separate but equal facilities," as a matter of settled law. A brief reprieve was granted in 1956 when the federal courts reversed the summary judgment and remanded the case for further consideration, but in 1957 the state court again dismissed the case on grounds that no formal applications had been submitted, and black-only housing was available in Fellwood Homes.[172] The NAACP continued the case on behalf of a single plaintiff, Queen Cohen, who testified that while she had not directly applied, she was dismissively told that she would not be accepted anyway, but the state court's judgment was upheld in federal court in 1958, and case came to an end in 1959 when the US Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal.[173] This judgment that separate but equal housing was constitutionally sound would stand for another decade until it was implicitly overruled by

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170 *Heyward v. Public Housing Administration*, 238 F.2d 689 (5th Cir. 1956); *Heyward v. Public Housing Administration*, 154 F. Supp. 589 (S.D. Ga. 1957).

171 "National Office Incoming," Record Series 1121-102, box 24, folders 64, 65, box 29, folders 3, 4, 5, 10, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Savannah branch records. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia; "The Hub Protests White Housing Project in Fort," *Savannah Tribune*, August 8, 1951; "Former S. C. Legislator to Address Local NAACP," *Savannah Tribune*, October 22, 1953.

172 *Heyward v. PHA*, 135 F. Supp.; *Heyward v. PHA*, 238 F.2d; *Heyward v. PHA*, 154 F. Supp.

173 *Cohen v. Public Housing Administration*, 257 F.2d 73 (5th Cir. 1958); *Cohen v. Public Housing Administration*, 358 U.S. 928, 79 S. Ct. 315, 3 L. Ed. 2d 302 (Supreme Court of the United States 1959).

the case of *U.S. v. Jefferson County Bd. of Educ*.[174] Although state courts ultimately rejected the NAACP's case, and housing officials in these cases obscured racism under polite formality and the assertion that such segregation was "voluntary," the plaintiff's testimony reveals a system of discrimination that prevented black Savannahians from exercising their constitutional rights.

Furthermore, this is not the first time the housing authority has proposed demolishing Yamacraw Village, nor is it the first time they have faced resistance. Sixty-five years ago, in June 1958, a memo from W. W. Law's office objected to proposed urban redevelopment plans that would have designated Yamacraw Village a commercial redevelopment zone, cleared the housing complex, and displaced its inhabitants once again. They declared that "whereas Area #2 is also a residential section populated entirely by Negroes, and it is planned to develop it into one devoted entirely to commercial purposes" although other areas were available for such development. They demanded that the city urban renewal committee "revise its plans so that these areas will be used for public housing for low-income groups." Their appeal reflects the intersection of social, cultural, and historical issues, referencing both the cultural importance of the neighborhood's churches like First Bryan and the urgent public service provided by Yamacraw Village's low-income housing. They argued that removing the area's churches would be detrimental for the social and spiritual wellbeing of the area's inhabitants, since "it would be in the interest of the occupants of these projects to have the Christian influence of churches of their choice near to their homes." They demanded that the city invest resources to remedy poor living conditions and set aside land to provide missing amenities for Yamacraw's residents, including "recreational purposes," and that ideally, they would transfer land to local churches to fulfill these requirements. Furthermore, the committee argued that eliminating the public housing

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174 U.S. v. Jefferson County Bd. of Educ., 380 F.2d 385 (5th Cir. 1967).

units would shift the financial burden of upkeep in these districts from federally backed public

housing to a locally financed "urban renewal program," placing more costs on Savannahians.
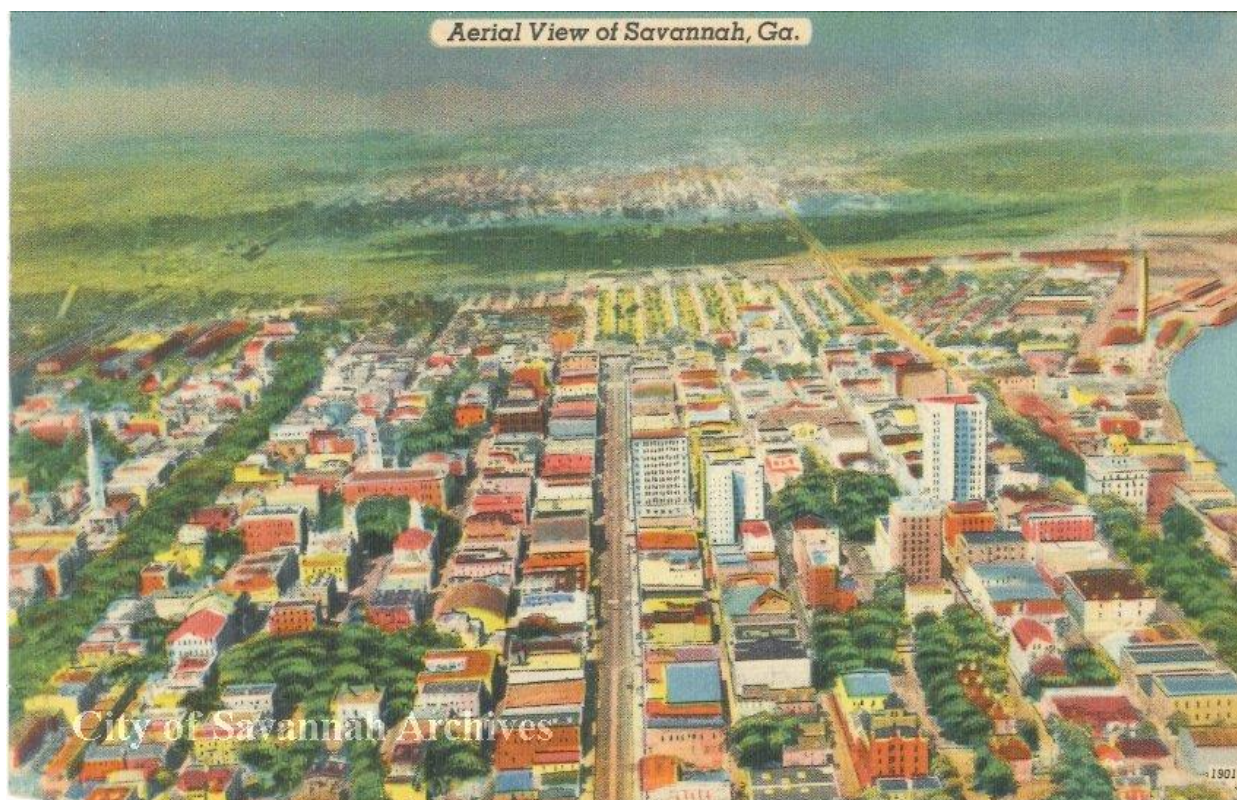
Figure 16: "Aerial View of Savannah, Ga," Record Series 1121-057_0012, V. & J. Duncan Postcard Collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Not only did the committee object to the prudence of these plans, but they also

vehemently protested the fact that once again, white authorities had intentionally excluded Black

Savannahians from decisions that would almost exclusively affect them. "The above proposals

… represent a large-scale clearance program affecting the home and community life of

approximately 5,000 negroes, yet, at no stage in the planning and development of these proposals

were negroes consulted or their opinions or desires solicited, and thus Negroes were not allowed

to assist or cooperate in the perfecting the plans as presented," the committee concluded. The

memo challenged the Housing Authority to take a more proactive and responsive approach based

on the actual needs of its tenants. The commission acknowledged the prevailing ideology of New

Deal era housing reformers that "the purpose of urban renewal and the public housing program is to eliminate slums," but maintained that the correct solution was investment and maintenance based on community feedback, not unilateral clean-slate demolition. Simple "democracy and fair play," they argued, demanded "the participation of all citizens in a program of such wide scope." Less than twenty years after the construction of Yamacraw Village, the area was again viewed as a troublesome "slum" that had to be cleared to preserve the city's reputation, ignoring the Housing Authority's involvement with Yamacraw's living conditions. Law and the NAACP rejected this interpretation of the area's history and demanded that the city and housing authority exert effort to maintain the obligations they willingly undertook a scant twenty years earlier.[175]

A decade later in 1969 the *Savannah Morning News* reported how the Housing Authority "dropped a surprise bombshell when it decided to pursue possible razing of the project off bay street and relocating the families in a new project." They received pushback from the community and experts on the same grounds of culture and community that have been raised by residents in the present day. The article, entitled "Historian to plea for Preservation," relayed how Walter C. Hartridge, the Housing Authority advisor on historic properties, the "chairman of historic site and monument commission," and a "leader in the historic preservation movement here," had spoken out against the proposal, declaring that "my sympathies lie with the people in the area," and that "human needs should be placed above land values." Hartridge appealed to the historic and architectural value of First Bryan Baptist as one of the oldest black churches in the nation, but he also based his argument on the needs of the community, describing the church as a "bulwark of spiritual strength." "Hartridge maintained that contrary to the Housing authority's claims, "Yamacraw is important as a community." In addition, Hartridge supported his argument

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175 "Housing Authority of Savannah, 1968, 1972-1973, no date," Record Series 1121-102, box 78, folder 18, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Savannah branch records.

on economic grounds, reasoning that "the downtown area needs residents," and that since

"industry … would be an impersonal use of the land," the housing project "should be upgraded,"

rather than demolished. This mix of cultural, economic, and humanitarian arguments is directly

reflected in the works of modern scholars of public housing.[176]

Integration and a Changing Vision of Public Housing

By the end of the 20th century, public housing was widely seen by scholars and the

mainstream media as a failed experiment and a driving force behind urban blight. Critics pointed

to the terrible living conditions, frequent crime, and substance abuse found with sprawling high-

rise public developments in major cities such as Chicago, Atlanta, and St. Louis, as evidence that

these complexes were fundamentally unworkable, and over the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, many

of these developments were eradicated in a series of high-profile demolitions.[177] In this second

era of public housing in the United States, Lawrence Vale has argued, federal legislation

intended to provide housing to elderly shifted the focus of public housing as a whole to the "least

advantaged and most economically disparate."[178] Under the influence of the Johnson

administration's "War on Poverty" agenda, and facing increasing pressure from the Civil Rights

movement, "most housing authorities had to accept a fundamental change of mission," Vale

alleges, which re-framed public housing as a welfare program and a "last resort." Although not

the motivation of housing authorities, these policy changes amounted to a "de facto decision to

concentrate the poor in public housing," quite contrary to the intentions of Bauer and other

progressive housing reformers. This policy consensus began to break apart almost immediately

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176 Kathy Kaeberle, "Historian Backing Residents," *Savannah Morning News*, November 12, 1969.
177 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, xi–xiv; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 3–13, 15–47, 121–75; Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked*, 1–33, 51–68, 296–332; Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 1–26, 199–210; *Public Housing Myths*, 1–59; Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 1–24.
178 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 16–22.

and the work of Roger Starr became a flashpoint in the debate over housing in the 1970s, as Starr

argued that more stringent tenant selection criteria were required for successful public housing.

More significantly, housing authorities began experimenting with public-private partnerships to

decentralize affordable housing, and privatization was officially endorsed by the Nixon

Administration with the establishment of Section 8, now known as "Housing Choice

Vouchers."[179] These criticisms of high-rise public housing, which in reality constituted a

minority of public housing developments, became the justification for deconcentration policies

that would become dominant in the 1990s through the HOPE VI program.[180]

The leading scholars in the field have specifically rejected these portrayals of public

housing residents as passive, immoral, or unambitious, and have worked to place the memories,

experiences, and testimony of public housing residents at the very center of scholarly debate and

public activism over the future of public housing in the United States. Due to the systematic

exclusion of black voices from the mainstream media under segregation, many preservationists

and historians studying African-American life in the 20th century have turned to oral history in

order to fill these archival silences.[181] In *High-Rise Stories*, one of the few full monographs on

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179 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 17–18, 20; Gotham, "A City without Slums," 292–97, 305. Gotham went farther in his analysis, declaring that "urban leaders and real estate elites considered the Acts less as a "housing" program and more of urban 'redevelopment' program." Gotham saw this as a manifestation of "privatism," which he defined as "cultural assumptions and social expectations that have shaped and constrained policy making and private and public actions within the political economy of urban redevelopment." Gotham, "A City Without Slums," 292, 297.
180 Out of the authors of *Public Housing Myths*, Yonah Freemark most directly attacks the narrative of housing failures in the 1960s and 1970s, through a close analysis of administrative decisions under the Nixon administration to attain the president's conservative domestic agenda. Freemark traces the political faultines that shaped public housing policy, and also addresses the conflict of the architecture and design philosophy of public housing in the 1950s. Freemark contends that while the Johnson administration had adopted policies of deconcentration and mixed-use neighborhoods, Nixon's administration highlighted conspicuous failures of public housing, while ignoring "the reforms and transformations that had occurred in the intervening decade." *Public Housing Myths*, 122-136. Gotham, in contrast, emphasized the concentration of poverty resulting from public housing, arguing that "No matter how much government officials proclaimed the Housing Act of 1949 to be a policy for a "decent home in a suitable living environment," the consequences of urban renewal were the removal of housing and the concentration of the poor in the central city." Gotham, "A City Without Slums," 305.
181 Taylor, "We're on Fire," 231–54; Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 1–20.

the oral history of public housing in the United States, Audrey Petty collated testimony from residents of infamous high-rises in Chicago.[182] The book was intended to emphasize the complex legacy of public housing and the ongoing poverty faced by many former residents, who had been displaced by initiatives that cleared public housing, ostensibly for the benefit of its inhabitants.[183] Petty placed full responsibility for these failures on the municipal authorities, since "from the 1970s forward, high-rise public housing was chronically neglected and mismanaged." This was shown through the life of Robert Taylor, one of "the CHA's first black board members," who "resigned in the 1950 out of frustration toward the city's recalcitrance toward integration of public housing." Both the construction and demolition of public housing, she argues, reflect environmentally deterministic assumptions about poverty, race, and society.[184]

The demolition of Chicago's public housing met with "skepticism and resistance," from residents, many of whom began activism against displacement, "voicing demands for the rehabilitation of public housing rather than their eradication."[185] Likewise, D. Bradford Hunt revealed that in the initial years of public housing after its creation in 1937, residents often had extremely positive receptions of the new complexes, and perceived access to public housing a sign of economic prosperity. Even when facing declining living conditions, Hunt found that residents often retain fond memories of the community bonds formed by the experience of

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182 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 12–14.

183 Alex Kotlowitz, author of the influential public housing history *There are No Children Here*, introduced the book with a foreword which juxtaposed the demolition of Henry Horner Homes with his first trip there in 1987 where he observed "intolerable conditions" and concluded that "these places were built on the cheap and then outright neglected by the powers that be." Yet instead of giving an entirely negative narrative, Kotlowitz juxtaposed the bleak living conditions in underfunded public housing complexes with the vibrant and resilient communities that formed "rich, vital neighborhoods," fostering a sense of community through their shared experiences, while also acknowledging that endemic violence ultimately "frayed the sense of commonweal for many residents." Though Chicago's high rise housing complexes undoubtedly suffered from institutional neglect, Kotlowitz saw their destruction as "essentially tragic," because for residents it represented the loss of significant spaces that shaped their memories of "coming of age" in the place where they "formed lifelong relationships with friends who were fighting the same fights." Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 11-13

184 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 17–18, 20.

185 Petty, 24–25.

persisting through adversity.[186]At the same time, Petty rejected an uncritical or simplistic

approach to public housing history, because "the truths of the matter belie such facile

conclusions." Petty concludes with the declaration that "in the face of (and in spite of) direct and

structural violence they resisted … sometimes, they even thrived." Given oral historians' interest

in the relationships between memory, place, and displacement, even when oral histories are not

concerned with preservation, the field's focus on collective memory naturally aligns it with

recent trends in the fields of preservation and cultural landscape studies.[187] Authors such as Fritz

Umbach, Alexander Gerould, and Rhona Y. Williams specifically questioned the role of

residents in shaping housing policy despite obstacles of institutional neglect and racism. They

pointed to activism by residents, particularly African American women, who mobilized against

racial discrimination, sought media attention for poor living conditions, and demanded stricter

punishment of criminal behavior, all in order to provide safer communities for families.[188]

With the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, the Supreme Court decisions

striking down segregation in HUD projects, the Housing Authority of Savannah was finally

obliged to consider the prospect of integration, after nearly 30 years of a dominant policy of

segregated housing.[189] Given the Housing Authority's legacy of discrimination, many black

Savannahians were wary of taking its professions of neutrality at their word, and demanded

additional guarantees for the rights of black tenants. In the summer of 1968, a group of black

clergymen responded to an offer from the Housing Authority, which had asked them to form an

advisory committee on the integration process to promote integration. The pastors replied that as

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186 Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 1–30; J. S. Fuerst and D. Bradford Hunt, *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago* (Praeger, 2003); *Public Housing Myths*, 47–63.
187 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 24–25.
188 *Public Housing Myths*, 60–70, 200–234.
189 *U.S. v. Jefferson County Bd. of Educ.*, 380 F.2d.

"citizens interested in the good future of Savannah" they were "certainly are not trying to harass you or any public service group." Although they adopted a conciliatory tone, they pointedly insisted that "the Housing Authority is still in defiance of the law and lawfully constituted authority." They also challenged the legality and wisdom of a committee composed entirely of clergy without participation from other civic groups such as "the Chatham Council of Human Relations and the League of Women Voters," since "this is not a 'clergy project" but one of patriotic citizens." They were not persuaded that the motives of the Housing Authority were genuine, given "statements appearing in the press, made by Authority members, impugning the motives of the clergy," which had "cast doubt on the sincerity of your efforts." They alleged that the Housing Authority was attempting to use black clergy to manipulate residents and shift the blame for their failures to integrate housing onto supposedly recalcitrant black leaders.

These pastors pointed to the city's failure to integrate Kayton and Frazier Homes, where "an entire neighborhood was destroyed and a completely new one created." This commission acknowledged "that most negroes are reluctant to move into all-white neighborhoods, and most whites are reluctant to move into all-negro neighborhoods, is not news to anyone. But if there are no truly integrated low-rent housing projects in this city where … both negroes and whites would be willing to live, the fault lies solely with the authority." Although the Housing Authority had professed adherence to integration, leaders at black institutions were resistant to attempts to co-opt their influence to disguise the city's complicity in segregation. In contrast, the Housing Authority maintained that their offer "was advocated with a sincere hope that such a committee could render valuable assistance in solving the knotty problem of "orderly integration" in Savannah public housing." They declared that "unless some steps are taken to 'educate' not only our tenants but applicants as well, we are contributing to the "COMPLETE GHETTOIZATION"

of Savannah's public housing units." While undoubtedly efforts to promote mutual understanding were required, the Housing Authority attempted to shift any blame for its own actions onto black leaders, and effectively stated that without cooperation they would not see themselves as responsible. Unfortunately, their response affirms a lack of genuine outreach to promote mutual understanding between white and black Savannahians.[190]

Preservation and Representation

Given this ongoing antagonism from white citizens and officials, Law recognized that the legislative achievements of the Civil Rights movement would not entirely overturn the legacy of decades of segregation, and that the NAACP had to continue its advocacy for social, cultural, and economic equality. Proportional black representation in the local media was another of Law's long-standing aims, and the local NAACP mobilized support for "black-oriented" programs and petitioned for equal opportunity employment in the local broadcasting industry. For Law, these media initiatives were never separate from the need for an accurate depiction of black culture and history, which he saw as a vital part of efforts to counter negative stereotypes and hurtful narratives that belittled black cultural achievements.

In 1974, the Savannah NAACP published an ultimatum which observed the severe lack of black representation in local media. Declaring that "The black community is an integral part of the Savannah community," they demanded equal opportunity of employment in the broadcasting industry and "substantial and proportionate programming" that reflected the interests and presence of African Americans in Savannah. The NAACP reasoned that local stations and broadcasters had an obligation to ensure fair hiring practices, and that their programing gave an accurate picture of the city's culture which acknowledged and humanized

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190 "Housing Authority of Savannah, 1968, 1972-1973, no date," Record Series 1121-102, box 78, folder 18, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Savannah branch records.

black Savannahians. Moreover, the NAACP asserted that this was their legal obligation under the Federal Communications Act of 1934, which the NAACP would pursue through legal action if necessary. The report cited multiple flaws that inhibited racial equality such as a "lack of energetic recruitment," and the "lack of consultation with blacks on programming interests." The result was the "denial of a forum of expression to blacks." Through such policies, the committee argued that local white-owned broadcasters had been "racistically assuming that whites can program and determine what is in the best interest of blacks."

Figure 17: "NAACP Activities," Record Series 1121-100_0714, W. W. Law photograph collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Thus, they demanded that local broadcasters "employ blacks in every department in all areas of media in proportion to the population." They also declared that "we demand more proportionate programming for blacks and other minorities in proportion to their population," with a minority advisory committee "providing a forum on black views." These changes would be in the "public interest" of all Savannahians, because "broadcasters in a democracy have an obligation to lead the audience by providing information that will equip them to better citizenship and by offering opportunities to enjoy the diverse cultures so as to broaden and cultivate taste." Given decades of negative stereotyping in the newspapers, over the radio, and on television, it was vital for the promotion of racial equality that the media provide for "the projection of a positive black image, news-wise," that would highlight the cultural, social, economic, and political achievements of black Savannahians from a personal to regional scale. Consequently, the committee "propose(d) a community interest spot-light on a 'beautiful people' … to balance the over-emphasis of the daily news on crime, destitution, and other negatives pertaining to blacks." In addition, the NAACP aspired to a socially engaged broadcasting industry that would hold "community television and radio workshops … operated at small cost in cooperation with schools … and service groups," forming a reciprocal relationship between the city's population and the media. Another NAACP memo concluded that radio was one of the most relevant communication mediums for the black community as it provided "programming meaningful to blacks in all time segments," including segments on black history. The proportionate and accurate programming outlined in this NAACP memo reflects Law's commitment to preserving Savannah's history and his hopes for its future. Acknowledging the realities of the past, which including both violent discrimination and black resilience, would challenge stereotypes, foster African American culture, and provide lessons to encourage a more

harmonious society. Crucially, these reforms had to be accomplished through collaboration between Savannahians of all ethnic backgrounds, which would allow black Savannahians to become the deciding voices on the public image of their communities and histories.[191]

In 1977, as a member of the Georgia Heritage Trust Commission established by the state governor in 1972, Law was a key proponent of establishing the "Savannah Bicentennial Park" on West Broad Street in West Savannah just south of Louisville Road, the historic southern boundary of the Yamacraw neighborhood, to commemorate the 1779 siege of Savannah by American and French forces. Beyond a simple memorial to military history and patriotism, Law originally conceptualized this park as a means to highlight the social significance of colonial Georgia's black community by commemorating the military service of black troops, including Haitian troops who served in the French military. The commission's minutes show that Law particularly emphasized the presence of archaeological resources throughout traditional black neighborhoods like Frogtown. Law argued for further research and commemoration of these events, not to displace black Savannahians or override their history, but to publicly acknowledge the continuity of the city's black community and culture. The expense of purchasing and preserving the Kettle Creek site, Law reasoned, was justified due to its relevance with present social issues, and its significance to the city's black history.[192] One of Law's ambitions was to demonstrate that black agency and resistance were by no means new phenomena for the city, and in reality had been present since the colonial and revolutionary eras, and this legacy continued to the present through communities like First African and First Bryan Baptist. Moreover, Law

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191 "Radio and television programs, 1971, 1974, no date," Record Series 1121-102, box 35, folder 11, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Savannah branch records.
192 "Information packet, February 18, 1977," Georgia Heritage Trust Commission, Record Series 1121-112, box 16, folder 15, W. W. Law personal papers. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia; "Meeting kit for meeting on January 7, 1977, sent December 21, 1976," Georgia Heritage Trust Commission, Record Series 1121-112, box 16, folder 20, W. W. Law personal papers.

articulated a vision of historic preservation that not only encompassed vernacular architecture alongside high-style buildings, but also appreciated the complexities of cultural heritage in a city so long defined by rigid racial segregation, where elegant urban design exists alongside memories of vicious discrimination, severe inequality, and democratic protest for social justice. In addition, Law's concept of a historic preservation movement in Savannah was not limited to interpretation of the past, but also recognized the importance of ongoing economic and social issues such as gentrification, displacement, and the need for educational and economic equality.

Jessica Taylor, an oral historian who has worked to preserve the heritage of significant locations in the Mississippi civil rights movement, including private residences that were subject to violent acts of retaliation through "white terrorism," maintained that neglecting vernacular architecture ignores such everyday structures which became "symbols of black autonomy and community" through the events of the Civil Rights movement.[193] Taylor's work thus reflects the growing emphasis on vernacular architecture within preservation.[194] Taylor adroitly noted that "oral histories teach us that civil rights history encompasses every black and white space in Mississippi, because agricultural landscapes, towns, stores, and homes—built for whites or for

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193 Taylor specifically focuses on her previous efforts to secure National Register listing for a "block of commercial buildings in Sunflower, Mississippi, that in 1965 were the backdrop for protests by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MDFP), an anti-racist "alternative to the Democratic party." Based on her extensive experience working in "the built landscape of the Mississippi delta," for the Samuel Proctor Oral History program as part of an "annual fieldwork trip to Mississippi" she observed the dialogue that occurred "between college students and civil rights activists." This process formed a "struggle over meaning," which Taylor depicts as "an extension" of the civil rights movement" as a process of defining black cultural identity. Taylor specifically challenged the notion of physical "integrity" as a criterion for preservation, because her proposal was rejected due to specific architectural alterations to these properties which supposedly compromised their connection to the past, even though "living memory painted 1960s Sunflower County convincingly and passionately," when residents were prompted by the extant built environment. Thus, Taylor addresses questions of place, memory, and association, writing that "my failure outlined a central schism between oral history as a people-based discipline and historic preservation's attachment to place." She reasoned that "our key disagreement, then, was over whether the meaning of the landscape remained while the landscape itself changed. It is a question that needs asking about civil rights sites across the country." This was especially significant in 2015, as an increasing number of significant sites were attaining the fifty-year qualification for the National Register. Taylor, "We're on Fire," 231-232, 254.
194 Taylor, "We're on Fire," 231–32.

refuge from white privilege—were all part of the Jim Crow system that the movement sought to destroy."[195] Furthermore, Taylor asserted that there is a distinct character to local preservation practices in the Mississippi delta. Based on her extensive experience, she found that "African Americans focus on convenient repurposing of seemingly unspectacular buildings and homes for creative and ephemeral ends. They see labor and construction over design, and they see their communities through the eyes of past and present African American laborers."[196] Thus, by adopting community-oriented practices, preservation can become an instrument to resist racism. As Taylor wrote, "civil rights veterans teach us that racism and economic oppression are alive in Mississippi, and their insistence colors the battle to preserve and recognize buildings and landscapes in impoverished towns."[197] One of Taylor's key insights is that cultural landscapes of the civil rights movement are inherently "tenuous," because "converting homes and churches into safe houses and meeting spaces was often a temporary and covert expediency."[198] Her work thus engages with the complexities of intangible cultural heritage, and Taylor further wrote that "historic preservation's traditional focus on tangible heritage … excludes communities … without sufficient integrity or purity of form dating to a set period of significance."[199] "The answer," she wrote, "is to reconstruct the meaning of place as the civil rights veterans see it, and to preserve their memories through the federal systems that codify and disseminate American

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195 Taylor, 254.
196 Taylor, 236.
197 Taylor, 241, 245–47, 248.
198 Taylor, 242–45.
199 Taylor gave a thorough criticism of the criteria used to exclude sites of important cultural movements from the National Register, including the requirement for clearly defined "spatial borders" for historic sites. She specifically critiqued the actions of the Mississippi State Historic Preservation Office in delisting numerous civil rights sites due to disasters such as hurricane Katrina or changes to their structure or surroundings. Taylor found that "the delisting process accentuates the point that the fifty year rule cannot keep up with the marginalization of poor demographics in older neighborhoods condemned to tenuous existence by floodwaters, hurricanes, and limited disaster resources." She concluded that "Mississippi needs to follow suit with other Southern states to rid the registration process of the arbitrary fifty-year rule and explore other conceptions and standards of historic integrity and sociocultural significance." Taylor, "We're on Fire," 237-238, 240-243, 251-253.

History."[200] Thus, Taylor specifically advocated for a preservation philosophy that accepts the ongoing transformation of historic structures as a vital component of their significance.[201]

Figure 18: "Laurel Grove South Cemetery - NAACP Negro Historic Restoration," Record Series 1121-100_0844, W. W. Law photograph collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

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200 Taylor, "We're on Fire," 253–55.
201 Taylor, 251–54.

Likewise, Amber N. Wiley's work on the demolition of Washington DC's Dunbar High

School foregrounds African American perspectives and affirms the intersectional nature of

African American history. Rather than foreground intrusive actions by white political factions,

she placed the actions of African Americans in Washington DC at the center of her analysis, to

prioritize the complexities of African American culture. Instead of presenting African Americans

as a monolith, she critiques the values held by individuals from different economic and social

backgrounds, and thereby emphasizes the diversity and conflict within the black society of the

20th century.[202] Wiley's work provides valuable instruction in avoiding methodological

shortcomings, and is a reminder for preservationists that valuing the diversity of American

cultural heritage also demands appreciating the perspectives of individuals and engaging with

communities on a social and personal basis.[203] These preservation efforts, begun and fostered by

W. W. Law, centered on First Bryan in the legacy of Houston, Simms, Johnson, and Deveaux,

reflect the long traditions of Black Savannahians working to sustain their heritage both by

preserving landmark structures like churches and by maintaining vernacular dwellings and

202 Wiley addressed these clashing political movements through the design philosophy of the new Dunbar High School building, which was designed amid the growing "popularity of monumental modernism." It "incorporated other progressive components," such as "spacious athletic facilities and up-to-date science labs," and "its architecture reflected a desire for an "open teaching environment" as part of a "new egalitarian approach to education." The "urban renewal" projects of the 1960s adopted a new architecture for education, emphasizing "open plans" and a "strong exterior," though Wiley found that this "fortified" nature, originally intended to "foster a sense of community," instead "reflected a post-riot anxiety." The new school was thus based on the sense that "Old Dunbar represented segregated, separate but 'equal' education and reflected a familiar architectural idiom," while "New Dunbar represented a search for a new, liberating modern design reflective of societal changes in the Civil Rights era." Wiley found that while class discrimination certainly existed, the Dunbar itself served students from a variety of economic backgrounds, but even so "the stigma of that perception, whether folklore or fact, worked in favor of demolition." Notably, one of the initiatives undertaken to document the old school involved an oral history project which collected accounts from Dunbar alumni, "as oral histories became more accepted for historians," though Wiley does not examine this in detail." Wiley credits their failure to save the old school to a "lack of tactical planning," since "the flood of rhetoric simply could not produce the tangible results." Wiley, "The Dunbar High School Dilemma," 95-96, 101-103, 105-112.
203 Wiley, "The Dunbar High School Dilemma," 95–98, 101–3, 114, 119.

reclaiming structures created by the intervention of segregationist authorities, transforming these landscapes into thriving communities and monuments to African-American cultural resilience.

The Commemoration of a Public Housing Landscape

As Savannah's local black institutions worked to preserve and promote the city's black heritage through the 1970s and 80s, academic historians began to examine black urban history as a crucial subject of analysis, on national, regional, and local scales. Two of the few detailed scholarly works on postbellum black history in Savannah were published in 1973: *The Negro in Savannah: 1865-1900* by Robert E. Perdue and "Before the Ghetto" by John W. Blassingame. Perdue's monograph provides an overview of late 19th-century black society in Savannah, while Blassingame focuses on cultural and economic mechanisms of resistance to white supremacy. Both works acknowledge the racism faced by black Savannahians and the role of black clergy in mobilizing political participation through the Republican party, though Perdue's work reiterates dismissive generalizations regarding the poor black communities of the south, while Blassingame provides a more critical view that challenges the assumption that black communities were passive and unable to take advantage of urban social opportunities.[204] Blassingame was well aware of the consequences of segregation for urban black populations and organizations, but his essential point was to challenge other scholars to critically examine black history through comprehensive studies of black demographics and migration trends.[205]

In her 1981 article "Southern Black Elites and the New Deal: A Case Study of Savannah, Georgia," Karen L. Kalmar provided one of the few pieces of scholarship to specifically critique the role of class conflict within Savannah's early 20th-century black community, based on

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204 Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*, 1–18; Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 476–77.
205 Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 481–83.

detailed research through the WPA archives.[206] Kalmar's work was undoubtedly significant, but

by focusing entirely on the institutions of the media and education, Kalmar did not acknowledge

the essential role of black churches as social anchors, and the influence of black Baptist

congregations in electing their own ministers as public representatives of their communities. By

fixating on examples of elite gradualism and marginal voices for radical change, she does not

closely question the everyday social life of Black Savannahians, and the role of churches in

preserving more radical traditions of activism. Churches like first Bryan were imbued with a

political legacy of resistance dating back to the early years of the American republic, energized

and strengthened by the black leaders of the reconstruction era, and carried on in the lives of

Rev. Ralph Mark Gilbert and W. W. Law and the present generation of residents. It is this

spiritual, social tradition that provides the cultural continuity between the radicalism of the post-

civil years and the growing civil rights movement of the 1940s and 50s.

The wider Yamacraw neighborhood received more direct official recognition a decade

later under the mayoral administration of Floyd Adams Jr., the first African American mayor of

Savannah, when the city government financially sponsored Charles Lwanga Hoskins to compile

two works dedicated to the city's black history. Through Hoskins' writings, Yamacraw received

further official recognition as a culturally significant district. Hoskins authored *Yet with a Steady

Beat*, which collated short biographies of influential black Savannahians, including Houston,

Deveaux, Johnson, and many others, and "Out of Yamacraw and Beyond," which provided a

broad overview of black cultural sites and resources throughout the city. Hoskins positioned his

work as the continuation of a longer tradition going back to figures like Sol C. Johnson, who

argued that instructing black youth in history was vital for encouraging cultural pride, and the

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206 Kalmar, "Southern Black Elites and the New Deal," 340.

more recent advocacy of W. W. Law, who established and personally conducted walking tours of

Savannah and Yamacraw in the late 1970s. Hoskins' work is well-researched, though he eschews

scholarly critiques, explaining that "the odyssey is presented with a minimum of interpretation,

in an attempt, to the extent possible, to retain our elders' perceptions of the Savannah

Experience," and writing that he intended to prioritize a depiction of Savannah via the accounts

of black residents themselves, and thus "to 'see' Savannah mainly through black eyes."[207]

Figure 19: "Yamacraw Village Playground Dedication," 1992, Record Series 0123-045_02-36-007, Public Information Office – Photographs, City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

With the formal establishment of Yamacraw Square in the open space across Bryan

Street from First Bryan Baptist (originally known as Strauss Plaza after the oft-maligned USHA

administrator Nathan Strauss), the city has begun to recognize the neighborhood's history and

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207 Hoskins, *Out of Yamacraw*, 1–14; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, i–vi.

the cultural and social significance of Yamacraw Village itself.[208] Through the efforts of the First

Bryan Congregation and the activism of the church historian Georgia Benton, the plaza was

renamed "Yamacraw Public Art Park" in 2006, and is now marked by elegant landscaping,

interpretive signage, and sculptures of sculptures of African-American children playing,

fashioned by African American sculptor Jerome Meadows.[209] This use of artwork as a form of

creative reinterpretation recalls the recent work of preservationist and digital historian Jennifer

Minner, who conceptualized "building just places" as an approach to unite institutional and

grassroots preservation initiatives, and called for awareness of the legacy of racism in residential

availability.[210] Georgia and LaRay Benton have founded nonprofits to support the church

community and Yamacraw's residents, and have been key figures in public discussions over the

future of Yamacraw Village, demanding accountability for the Housing Authority's past

discrimination, and measures to safeguard the integrity of First Bryan Baptist.[211] Given that

"preservation, as a profession that cares for the built environment" has not overcome a pattern of

"underrepresentation," Minner maintained that "creative placemaking efforts that employ artistic

practices … can also help to address the gaps and omissions in the extant building stock and

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208 AEI Consultants, *Limited Phase II Subsurface Investigation Report*. For scholarly evaluation and criticism of Strauss' fiscal policies, see Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 44-47, 128-129, 142, Bloom, *Public Housing that Worked*, 71, and Radford, *Modern Housing*, 191-193.

209 Staff Writer, "The Making of 'Yamacraw Square,'" *Savannah Morning News*, May 12, 2006, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2006/05/12/making-yamacraw-square/13836229007/.

210 Jennifer Minner, "Preservation That Builds Equity, Art That Constructs Just Places," *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 17, no. 2 (2020): 131–33.

211 Nwogu, "Local Group Files Appeal to Halt Housing Authority's Demolition of Yamacraw, Kayton Homes"; Edward Moody, "Local Residents Concerned over Historic Preservation Efforts in Yamacraw Village," *WSAV-TV*, January 31, 2023, https://www.wsav.com/news/local-news/savannah/local-residents-concerned-over-historic-preservation-efforts-in-yamacraw-village/; Brimmer, "Yamacraw Village Is to Be Demolished. What Is the Site's Highest and Best Use?"; Zoe Nicholson, "First Bryan Baptist Church Prepared to Fight for Land," *Savannah Morning News (GA)*, May 28, 2023, Access World News – Historical and Current; Georgia W. Benton, "Yamacraw Village, Intentionally Neglected, Needs to Be Protected," *Savannah Morning News (GA)*, June 11, 2021, Access World News – Historical and Current.

engage marginalized."[212] In December 2022, the park was officially designated Yamacraw

Square, recognizing it as equally important to the renowned squares that mark the city's historic

district.[213] Efforts are now underway to add a bust of Andrew Bryan to the square, also produced

by Meadows, thereby looking to both Yamacraw's past and its future.[214] The conversion of the

plaza from a memorial to federal intervention to a celebration of black heritage represents the

community's success in reclaiming the urban landscape and reinterpreting memorials through the

perspectives of Black Savannahians.

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212 Through the lessons she learned leading in several classes based around partnerships with local community art programs, Minner insists on an informed understanding of local cultural and economic conditions, including the heritage of African American communities, and also foregrounds awareness of the legacy of racism in residential patterns and economic justice. Minner presented the example of Confederate monuments that had been "recast through artistic intervention" to transform their symbolism and significance. Preservationists' engagement with tangible heritage, therefore, can become a tool for equity by recognizing the shared principles of preservation and the creative arts. Minner, "Preservation That Builds Equity," 132-136.

213 Will Peebles, "Yamacraw Art Park Is Now Savannah's 23rd Square," *Savannah Morning News*, December 9, 2022, Access World News – Historical and Current; City of Savannah Marketing and Communications, "City to Unveil New Sign and Art Restoration in Yamacraw Square," Savannah, GA, December 1, 2022, https://savannahga.gov/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=2697.

214 Zoe Nicholson, "Black Pastor to Be Immortalized with Bust in Yamacraw Square," *Savannah Morning News*, May 1, 2023, Access World News – Historical and Current.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

From Reconstruction through the New Deal and from the second half of the 20th century to the present, cultural and political trends at a national level have molded the physical and intangible heritage of the Yamacraw community. Despite the antipathy and apathy of the city government, in neighborhoods like Yamacraw black Savannahians formed churches, clubs, militia companies, corporations, unions, and schools that provided social services, community, and refuge from the violence of white supremacy. Through these institutions, black workers, educators, and reformers safeguarded black history and fought for change, combining preservation and advocacy in a future-oriented movement.[215] Yamacraw Village may have originated with a sweeping act of displacement, but its survival through cycles of demolition and reconstruction renders it an example of black Savannah's cultural resilience through political antagonism and apathy, and a vital historical resource for the city's 20th century history.

Since the demolition of the originally all-white Garden Homes development from 1941 as part of the HOPE VI program in 2000, the original Fellwood project has been demolished to make way for "sustainable Fellwood, and the 2010 and in 2010 the 1959 Robert Hitch Village development was leveled to make way for the "East Savannah Gateway" project.[216] Now that the

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215 Hoskins, *Out of Yamacraw*; Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto"; Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900*.
216 Jan Skutch, "Sustainable Fellwood Opens to Promise of a New Day in West Savannah," *Savannah Morning News*, May 29, 2009, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=pwh&AN=2W6443732344&site=eds-live&custid=uga1; Jan Skutch, "Savannah, Ga., Site Follows New Direction for Low-Income Housing," *Savannah Morning News*, January 19, 2003, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=pwh&AN=2W63718179747&site=eds-live&custid=uga1.

housing developments in west Savannah and the Old Fort district have been demolished or transferred to private ownership through the RAD program, Yamacraw is once again the most significant public housing development in downtown Savannah, and remains one of the most substantial and intact enclaves of the city's black history from 1940 through 1990, the key era of the Civil Rights movement and growing legitimacy of African American centered preservation movements.[217] Thus, Yamacraw provides valuable lessons on trends within African American history, urban history, and welfare history at local, state, and national levels.

Figure 20: "Yamacraw Village" Record Series 8126-006_01-6-0200, Chatham County-Savannah MPC Historic Preservation Photographs. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Pre-dating the famous high-rises of New York and Chicago by two full decades, Yamacraw Village is in truth a more representative example of the initial wave of US public

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217 Chuck Mobley, "The Old Fort Proves Durable," Savannah Morning News, April 8, 2007, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2007/04/08/old-fort-proves-durable/13800744007/.

housing policy before the appearance of physical decay and social division in the 1950s and 60s. Thus, if one were to apply the National Register criteria to Yamacraw Village, it would deserve recognition alongside the numerous public housing complexes that have been listed in increasing numbers since 2000.[218] As a historic site and continuing community, the neighborhood deserves recognition as a remarkable and representative example of mid-20th-century public housing architecture, a valuable archaeological resource, and for its place in the lives of prominent Savannahians and the city's African-American history. Understanding the cultural heritage of Yamacraw and its relationship with the Housing Authority of Savannah and the local chapter of the NAACP emphasizes the significance of public housing to the future of the city and its preservation movement. Unilateral demolition conducted without community consultation and comprehensive documentation would wipe out the neighborhood's integrity, and obscure archaeological resources which otherwise might reveal invaluable information on the city's pre-contact history, colonial era, postbellum black culture, and 20th century development.

The collective efforts of Vale, Hunt, Petty, and their fellow scholars have demonstrated that the history of the public housing movement in the United States has been one of fitful starts, half-measures, and attempts to restore poor neighborhoods to the conditions of a supposedly better past, informed by an inaccurate understanding of housing policy that ignores the persistence of aesthetic rhetoric that demeans black neighborhoods as a justification for using tools of the state to displace disadvantaged populations and re-make the urban fabric of the

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218 For examples of public housing complexes listed on the National Register, see: Goodwin, Gary V. National Register of Historic Places Nomination: "Griffin Park Historic District, Orlando, Florida," Tallahassee, FL: Division of Historical Resources, 1996; Ruark, Daniel. National Register of Historic Places Nomination: "Marin City Public Housing, Marin City, California," Marin City, CA: 2017; Ramsay, Emily. National Register of Historic Places Nomination: "Parkway Garden Homes, Chicago, Illinois," Chicago, IL: MacRostie Historic Advisors LLC, 2011; McGhee, Fred L. National Register of Historic Places Nomination: "Santa Rita Courts, Austin, Texas," Austin, TX: Fred L. McGhee & Associates, 2006.

nation's cities.[219] Even so, it would be foolish to completely equate today's political environment to the prevalent conditions of the Great Depression. As Vale noted in his conclusion to *Purging the Poorest*, urban conditions are drastically different, from the abolition of formal segregation to movements such as "downtown preservation" in the 1930s and the "downtown expansion" initiatives of the 1990s that have incentivized economic development.[220] Calls to summarily demolish Yamacraw Village on the grounds that its architecture represents racist policies to concentrate African-Americans, and therefore has no historic significance, are based on an outlook that perceives public housing as a fundamentally failed initiative, and not a significant historic development in American politics and society that must be recognized and interpreted even if necessity genuinely required demolition and reconstruction of a housing complex.[221]

The Future of Yamacraw Village

The section 18 application process has now lasted nearly five years, as the Housing Authority of Savannah has been unsuccessful in its applications to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which rejected its proposals for failing to meet HUD standards for stakeholder feedback.[222] The application was originally announced in 2020 following a 2019 capital needs assessment, and the Housing Authority had the intention to rehouse residents as

219 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, xi–xiv, 1–32; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 3–13, 15–47, 121–75; Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked*, 1–33, 51–68, 296–332; Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 1–26, 199–210.
220 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 331–32.
221 Vale, 1–32; Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 1–24; Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 1–31, 165–75; *Public Housing Myths*, 1–59.
222 Nwogu, "Local Group Files Appeal to Halt Housing Authority's Demolition of Yamacraw, Kayton Homes"; Sandy Keck Everette, "Restore Yamacraw Homes, Don't Demo Them," *Savannah Morning News (GA)*, March 28, 2022, Access World News – Historical and Current; Dawers, "Hold High Hopes for Yamacraw Village Redevelopment"; Moody, "Local Residents Concerned over Historic Preservation Efforts in Yamacraw Village"; Bill Dawers, "Savannah Is World-Renowned for City Planning. Why Are Several Key Downtown Sites in Limbo?," *Savannah Morning News*, April 17, 2023, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/opinion/columns/2023/04/17/savannah-land-use-policies-for-affordable-housing-in-historic-district/70115642007/; Nicholson, "First Bryan Baptist Church Prepared to Fight for Land"; Lasseter, "Study Recommends Yamacraw Village Demolition."

early as February 2022, if their application met its original timetable.[223] Official Q&A's provided

by the Housing Authority in response to resident feedback present demolition as a settled issue,

and although they have held meetings to discuss the application process, the answers are phrased

as explanations of predetermined outcomes.[224] In October 2020, when asked if current residents

would be able to return to Yamacraw in the future, the Housing Authority responded that "the

redevelopment plans for Yamacraw are still under evaluation. In the future, if the Housing

Authority decides to build new affordable housing units on the Yamacraw site, you may be

offered a new unit," providing no guarantee that current residents would be prioritized in any

new housing, and no process to even influence the Housing Authority's decisions.[225]

In the fall of 2020, the Housing Authority was "still evaluating options for the

redevelopment of Yamacraw," and in the spring of 2022, they had "not yet initiated a process for

redeveloping the site," and maintained that after demolition was approved they would "select a

developer and engage with community stakeholders to establish a redevelopment plan." After

two years of deliberation, in response to the simple question "does anyone know exactly what

will be redeveloped on the property at this time," the Housing Authority answered, "no, not

yet."[226] These dialogues treat stakeholder feedback as a minor detail sought after the fact, when

all significant decisions have been completed and the community is already displaced. Now, four

years later, Earline Davis, long-serving executive director for the Housing Authority of

223 Nussbaum, "Housing Authority of Savannah Leader"; Julia Gentin, "Yamacraw Residents Wait as Savannah Housing Area Continues to Deteriorate," *The Current*, June 28, 2024, http://thecurrentga.org/2024/06/28/yamacraw-residents-wait-as-savannah-housing-area-continues-to-deteriorate/.
224 Housing Authority of Savannah, *Annual PHA Plan*, 2023; Housing Authority of Savannah, *Questions and Answers from Meetings with Yamacraw Residents*, October 2022; Housing Savannah Task Force, *Housing Savannah Action Plan*, July 2021; Savannah City Council, Chatham County Commission, *Comprehensive Plan 2040 Summary*, 2020 Update, October 2021.
225 Housing Authority of Savannah, *Questions and Answers from Meetings with Yamacraw Residents,* October 2022.
226 Housing Authority of Savannah, *Questions and Answers from Meetings with Yamacraw Residents,* October 2022.

Savannah, has resigned from her position as of the end of June 2024, even as this very thesis was in progress.[227] Davis has previously justified the lack of a concrete redevelopment plan due to the ostensible difficulties posed by negotiating with a developer and contractors before their application was approved.[228] Davis's retirement and the involvement of a new consulting firm have once again left the future of Yamacraw Village uncertain. Without open and honest stakeholder engagement and a process that prioritizes the needs of residents, the Housing Authority risks repeating the same cycle of confusion and distrust once again.[229]

Most significantly, the housing authority and city government have failed to fully consider the opinions of residents. Without proper consultation with the community, the city risks repeating the tortured history of prior housing redevelopments that diminished the cultural heritage of urban landscapes across the United States through demolition and displacement. In her moving conclusion, Taylor insisted on the authority of local communities to determine the historic significance and character of their environment, and powerfully asserted that an

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227 City Council, "Agenda Plus - 6. An Appearance Recognizing the Service and Accomplishments of Earline Wesley Davis Upon Her Retirement as the Executive Director of the Housing Authority of Savannah.," savannahga.gov, June 27, 2024, https://agenda.savannahga.gov/publishing/june-27-2024-city-council-regular-meeting/1460_10406.html.Jan Skutch, "Sustainable Fellwood Opens to Promise of a New Day in West Savannah," *Savannah Morning News*, May 29, 2009, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=pwh&AN=2W6443732344&site=eds-live&custid=uga1.

228 Housing Authority of Savannah, *Questions and Answers from Meetings with Yamacraw Residents,* October 2022; Zoe Nicholson, "'Willful, Intentional, Asinine Neglect': Yamacraw Living Conditions Spur Community Uproar," *Savannah Morning News*, February 1, 2023, https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/local/2023/02/01/whats-going-on-with-the-request-to-demolish-yamacraw-in-savannah/69858536007/.

229 Gentin, "Yamacraw Residents Wait as Savannah Housing Area Continues to Deteriorate." Since this process began, the mayoral administration of Van R. Johnson has implemented measures to alleviate the financial pressures of the housing market as recommended by the Housing Savannah Taskforce in their 2021 *Housing Savannah Action Plan*, including the establishment of the subsidized, non-profit organization Housing Savannah which administers the Savannah Affordable Housing Fund, which collaborates with private entities to encourage private investment in affordable housing and subsidized market-rate housing. While these are significant additions to the city's housing policy as a whole, these initiatives of the city government are concerned with the collaboration with private sector, and thus have in of themselves no direct financial impact on properties owned and operated by the Housing Authority, and these local agencies have not had any involvement with the demolition application or activism by residents. Housing Savannah Task Force, *Housing Savannah Action Plan*, July 2021.

inclusive and accurate approach to preservation can only occur in conjunction with the testimony

of the individuals who helped define our cultural heritage.[230] Looking forward with optimism,

she expressed the hope that "as the designers and purveyors of public history and building

rehabilitation projects, oral historians and preservationists are poised to reimagine entire

historical landscapes."[231] A commitment to preservation demands that if the city government and

housing authority believe that Yamacraw Village is truly an irredeemable failure, they must put

forward a clear agenda to mitigate the consequences of demolition rather than use the rhetoric of

New Urbanism as a justification to repeat cycles of displacement and discrimination.

The Reconstruction of Public Housing

To transform preservation from a field that only deals with the past to one that embraces

community-led preservation as a counter to gentrification, Jennifer Minner proposed "creative

placemaking" as a framework for "equitable preservation" by balancing four aspects:

"community ownership and capacity," "inclusivity," "awareness of risk and benefits of

preservation," and an "incremental and actor-based approach to development." Community

organization and the arts can transform these fields into "vehicles as community development"

based on intangible cultural heritage and economic equity.[232] Indeed, the state of Georgia has at

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230 Taylor did not suggest that every structure related to the civil rights movement should be protected or preserved, and she acknowledged that "because they cannot all be saved and interpreted, the politics of preservation" could lead to "racial conflict due to white Mississippians' unwillingness to accept the equal legitimacy of black history." But she asserted that oral history helps commemorate a full understanding of history, because "to withhold the stories of poverty, oppression, and white ferocity for the comfort of visitors is to pretend that those stories do not ring true today and to continue a long history of suppression." Taylor, "We're on Fire," 241, 245–47, 248, 251-54
231 Taylor, "We're on Fire," 251–54.
232 Minner, "Preservation That Builds Equity," 131–37, 143–44. Minner based her pedagogy on Andrea Roberts' model of "deep engagement with local communities," and drew from Paolo Friere's framework of "transformative pedagogy" as a means of reimagining the built environment. In addition, Minner held that basing preservation on "constructivist modes of assessing historical significance" will act as a mechanism for empowerment." By reaching out beyond the limits of universities and professional organizations, preservationists can engage communities in preserving a sense of space that reflects present day realities. In addition, Minner stated that urban planning as a field has progressed further towards a framework for equity compared to scholars of preservation, citing Norm Krumhotz' framework for "equity planning." Another key methodological influence for Minner was Jigna Desia and Graham Haughton's "five kinds of equity," which she values "as a means to expand equity beyond vulnerable

times been at the forefront of bringing about a more inclusive framework for conserving the nation's cultural resources, and the State Historic Preservation Office has issued ground-breaking reports including the 1984 publication "Historic Black Resources: A handbook for the identification, documentation, and evaluation of historic African-American properties in Georgia," and "African-American Historic Places and Culture: A Preservation Resource Guide for Georgia," published in 1993."[233] This latter report set a national standard for surveys of African-American cultural resources by legitimizing vernacular architecture, cultural landscapes, and intangible heritage. Yet due to oversight or intentional exclusion, Yamacraw received no attention in the report save for this one brief mention by W. W. Law, although it already passed the fifty-year mark to become eligible for the National Register. If the state's community of scholars, professionals, non-profits, and government institutions dedicated to preservation wish to continue this tradition of innovation, they must recognize the urgent situation facing Yamacraw's residents, and recognize the historic complicity of housing authorities, developers, and preservationists in stigmatizing black communities, devaluing black neighborhoods, and obscuring difficult histories under the umbrella of preservation.

One of the few articles to directly address the role of preservation in the future of public housing is "Historically Affordable," published by Emily Milder in the *Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development Law* in 2016, which offered a "sketch" of the "bleak affordable housing landscape in Los Angeles," addressed the potential conflict between preservationists and housing advocates over "increased property values and gentrification," and

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people to nonhumans and highlight the connection between local and global." She proposes "a larger research trajectory that asks: How can city planning and preservation education engage with material care for the built environment, while advancing equity and social justice in communities?" Minner, "Preservation that Builds Equity," 133-136, 136-142, 145.
233 Griffith, *African-American Historic Places and Culture*, 1993.

suggests ways to build consensus around "concerns about social or economic justice."[234] Milder

posits "suggestions for enhanced collaboration" through a variety of institutional initiatives to

encourage more effective advocacy that respects the needs of public housing residents, including

"zoning reform," "joint advocacy" through joint workshops and conferences, and support for

"pre-emptive" applications for historic designation for housing developments, so "that its tenants

are far less likely to face the ordeal of mass eviction in the future."[235] Although Milder noted that

preservationists may clash with housing advocates over issues like renovation or residential

density, she maintained that these issues must be secondary to improving the quality of life for

everyone.[236] In the most recent comprehensive plan, the Savannah and Chatham governments

echoed many of these principles, and specifically made commitments to "incorporate affordable

housing strategies into current and future preservation plans, " to "identify where increased

flexibility in preservation practices is appropriate to retain existing affordable housing and

promote additional affordable housing," and to "complete surveys in areas that have been

234 Emily Milder, "Historically Affordable: How Historic Preservationists and Affordable Housing Advocates Can Work Together to Prevent the Demolition of Rent-Stabilized Housing in Los Angeles," *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law* 25, no. 1 (2016): 103–4.

235 Milder, who focused on preservation in Los Angeles, argued that while "historic preservation is a more firmly-established part of local planning regimes in the East Coast and Midwest," despite its comparative youth, the LA Office of Historic Resources (OHR) and Cultural Heritage Commission have adopted "broad minded criteria" which encompass "social history, commerce and industry, cultural significance, or ethnic heritage," and not only "structures of historic or architectural significance." In addition, she pointed to the achievements of the Los Angeles Conservancy (LAC), a private preservation organization which has made ground-breaking progress in documenting the city' Chicano and LGBTQ history. She considered how the LAC had "expanded their concerns to include architecture from the mid-twentieth century, as well as architecturally unremarkable sites of great cultural importance," and argued that this attention to vernacular structures as "worthy of protection and preservation," preserve "collective memory, understanding and storytelling," and has furthered a "forward looking, democratic approach to preservation…animated by social justice concerns." With the support of a detailed analysis of California's preservation legislation, Milder explored how advocacy and preservation groups might collaborate to seek status on California and Los Angeles' particular history designation systems, such as Historic-Cultural monuments (HCMs) and Historic Preservation Overlay Zones (HPOZ), and asserted that any such collaboration should facilitate the development of relationships with grassroots community groups and housing advocates animated by social justice concerns. "Although the legal circumstances of her examples are largely specific to California's particular laws and bureaucracy, she nevertheless reaffirms that preservationists must consider the preservation of a property's function and purpose, not only its exterior appearance. Milder, "Historically Affordable," 103-104, 105-106, 112-114.

236 Milder, "Historically Affordable," 117–31.

identified as at-risk or historically underrepresented."[237] If the city as a whole wishes to amend

past wrongs and adopt a affordable housing policy that respects Savannah's African American

heritage, it must do so by acknowledging the economic and cultural factors that drove past

initiatives such as slum clearance and poverty deconcentration, rather than once again labeling

the old approach as "obsolete" and wiping away all trace of past administrative failures. If

redevelopment is to include deconcentration, partnerships with private entities, or mixed-income

housing, current residents should be at the forefront of these discussions.

Despite Vale's intense criticisms of the HOPE VI program in *Purging the Poorest*, Vale

has taken a nuanced stance towards mixed-income housing as a whole. In a series of

collaborations with social policy scholar Shomon Shamsuddin over 2017, the two authors used

statistical analysis to analyze mixed-income developments, and argued that they can produce

positive results when they take the needs of local communities into account and prioritize the

agency of housing residents.[238] Their brief piece "All Mixed Up: Making Sense of Mixed-

Income Housing Developments," critiqued private-partnerships developed under the HOPE VI

program, and found that mixed-income housing can produce positive results for communities

and residents if developments prioritize maintaining the existing community with at minimum an

equivalent number of housing units.[239] They declare that previous research into mixed-income

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237 Savannah City Council, Chatham County Commission, Comprehensive Plan 2040 Summary, 2020 Update, October 2021, 78-81. The city-county comprehensive plan also avows an ambition to "continue to create innovative ways to connect people with places," through land-use policies including "walkable neighborhoods" and "corridor plans to protect the character of existing areas and ensure new development is compatible." The city government aspires to "provide for pedestrian oriented, mixed-use development, and a mix of housing types," through an inclusionary zoning policy to allow for "tiny homes," "prefabricated homes," and to "reduce housing vacancy and dilapidation conditions of housing stock." Savannah City Council, Chatham County Commission, *Comprehensive Plan 2040 Summary*, 2020 Update, October 2021, 55, 61-64.
238 Shomon Shamsuddin and Lawrence J Vale, "Lease It or Lose It? The Implications of New York's Land Lease Initiative for Public Housing Preservation," *Urban Studies* 54, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 150–53, https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015614248.
239 Lawrence J. Vale and Shomon Shamsuddin, "All Mixed Up: Making Sense of Mixed-Income Housing Developments," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 83, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 58–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2016.1248475.

public housing has been inadequate as it has examined a limited number of examples, stating that "we lack a comprehensive characterization of these projects."[240] They identify four key elements that influence a redevelopment's success: allocation, proximity, tenure, duration. Although chiefly concerned with empirical research, Vale and Shamsuddin did suggest that developments which retain a higher proportion of conventional public housing units compared to free-market units or units with a "shallow subsidy," distribute these units evenly throughout the development, and ensure long term support for these subsidies are more likely to find success and create a lasting mixed-income community. Even so, they acknowledged that "perhaps the most consequential remaining variable—and another not easily transferable to the language of project types—is the race and ethnicity of residents."[241]

In their 2017 work "Hoping for More: Redeveloping US Public Housing Without Marginalizing Low-Income Residents," an essential piece that pre-figures Vale's 2019 book "After the Projects," Vale and Shamsuddin analyzed Boston's Orchard Park public housing development as "a model" for future housing initiatives, and maintain that despite its public/private nature, it improved living conditions and safety, retained most of the previous housing capacity, and ensured residents in good standing would have a right to return to the new complex.[242] Crucially, the Boston Housing Authority prioritized community input through the redevelopment process, beginning with interviews before the application process commenced. This was possible through the partnership of the Orchard Park Tenants Association, who had representatives at all meetings and approved of the final proposal "as a joint application from the

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240 Vale and Shamsuddin, 58.
241 Vale and Shamsuddin, 61-63, 64.
242 Shomon Shamsuddin and Lawrence J. Vale, "Hoping for More: Redeveloping US Public Housing without Marginalizing Low-Income Residents?," *Housing Studies* 32, no. 2 (March 1, 2017): 226–30, 239–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2016.1194375.

BHA, the Orchard Park Tenants Association (OPTA) and the City of Boston."[243] Furthermore,

tenants were re-housed in new units in phases to avoid displacement, though this was possible

due to a large number of abandoned units, which is also true of Yamacraw Village.[244] Vale and

Shamsuddin still acknowledge the failures of the HOPE VI program, but highlight how these

programs can encourage more equitable housing so long as current residents have a decisive and

ongoing role in housing policy and management.[245]

A transparent and responsive participatory planning process must continually incorporate

and prioritize the voices of Savannahians who face the economic consequences of these

decisions. The Savannah city government has publicly recognized the significance of "inclusive

history," and "intangible histories," and has expressed a desire to redress historic discrimination

against African-Americans through "partnerships with community planning and housing

authorities in Chatham County and Savannah to combine preservation and affordable housing

efforts."[246] If city officials wish to implement these aspirations through actual policies, they must

fully and publicly recognize the social consequences of clearing the land and displacing its

residents. Ideally, redevelopment plans including the rehabilitation or demolition of existing

units would emerge from a consensus between the community and management after assessing

the long-term viability of a well-managed, physically maintained complex, not as a last resort

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243 Shamsuddin and Vale, 227–29.
244 Shamsuddin and Vale, 229–40.
245 The two authors have also positively evaluated the New York City Housing Authority's 2013 proposal for a "land lease initiative" to bring private investment to public housing, which was canceled in 2014. Despite legitimate criticisms of the plan, Vale and Shamsuddin argue that the initiative demonstrated positive developments within public housing, including "increasing residential density" and mixed-income housing without displacement. They also critique the "city as growth machine" theory and suggest that it has led to simplistic conclusions when applied to public housing, by conflating "use value and exchange value in opposition to each other." They assert that criticism is warranted, but "knee jerk" reactions overlook the nuance of the situation, although they caution that "planners must be careful that housing preservation plans involving private development do not become another step along the neoliberal path toward the end of public housing." Vale and Shamsuddin, "Lease it or Lose it," 152-153.
246 Savannah City Council, Chatham County Commission, *Comprehensive Plan 2040*, 2020 Update, October 2021, 263-275.

after living conditions have become absolutely intolerable. Setting aside any past recriminations, going forward the staff of the Housing Authority of Savannah must, in collaboration with the city government, seek to establish a reciprocal dialogue with residents, present all the various possibilities for redevelopment with the federal programs administered by HUD and discuss their advantages and disadvantages. Housing Authorities must then seek to take this feedback, respond to it, and make the opinions of residents a key element of their applications to HUD.

Figure 21: "The Afro-American Life and History Association Victory Party," Series 1121-100_0044, W. W. Law photograph collection. City of Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

One method to establish this relationship is to collaborate with resident's associations or local nonprofits as genuine partners with input and authority throughout the redevelopment process from its earliest phases through application through the final plans. Although this would entail compromises between different priorities held by the Housing Authority, community

members, and the varied opinions of residents, such a commitment to transparency would add legitimacy to the Housing Authority's claim that residents will have a voice in future redevelopment plans.[247] Any proposed changes must take into account residents' level of satisfaction with the administration, their concerns for safety, access to utilities, employment opportunities, and the cultural resources they wish to protect. Any decisions that would substantially alter the physical layout and surroundings of Yamacraw must be based on an accurate understanding of the evolution of federal housing policy and the latest empirical research on mixed-income development. Any projects that include demolition, rehabilitation, or reconstruction must be approached within the unique circumstances of Yamacraw itself.

In addition, comprehensive cultural resource surveys together with an oral history program would demonstrate a genuine commitment to the principles espoused in the comprehensive plan. In order to mend deficiencies within preservation practice, Jessica Taylor proposed a special junction between the works of preservationists and oral historians in documenting and interpreting spaces that hosted organization and endured violent retaliation through the civil rights movement. Asking her readers to consider how to "interpret a blighted neighborhood or building that is no longer there," she maintained that not only would oral history supplement preservation, "oral historians are gatekeepers to the knowledge of these places of power, positioned to help preservationists and the public identify their value and make the argument to save them for the future."[248] Taylor argued that these oral histories reinforce the importance of intangible cultural heritage, and in the case of the civil rights movement, reveal ongoing struggles for equality and economic justice that have been ignored or rejected by

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247 Nicholson, "'Willful, Intentional, Asinine Neglect.'"
248 Taylor, "We're on Fire," 231–32.

mainstream preservation efforts.[249] In the event of demolition, the preservation of such personal accounts would not only produce an invaluable resource for interpretation, but would demonstrate a willingness on the part of the Housing Authority for the public to judge its decisions on their own merits, and to appreciate their consequences for good or ill in a full historic context informed by the opinions of those most closely affected.

Among their justifications for demolition, the authors of "Oglethorpe was Right" made the incontrovertible observation that "public housing is much more than a fiscal proposition."[250] In the conclusion to *Purging the Poorest*, Vale calls on preservationists and urban planners to understand that their efforts to deconcentrate poverty represent a reversion to the housing policies of the New Deal era after the aberration of mid-20th century housing welfare, and calls for a process of "humane development" which would always retain the "political maximum number of low-income households."[251] When deciding how to best address the poor conditions faced by residents of Yamacraw, the Housing Authority of Savannah should undertake a more thorough consideration of the area's history that acknowledges the changing agendas of public housing, and the complex cultural heritage of Yamacraw Village.

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249 See Taylor, "We're on Fire," for a closer study of the potential of oral history as a tool for preservationists. Taylor argued that these oral histories reinforce the importance of intangible cultural heritage and reveal ongoing struggles for equality and economic justice that have been ignored or rejected by mainstream preservation efforts and many white preservation officials. Taylor declares that "oral historians and preservationists are privileged to work when their ideas and solutions have never been more important, and their paths never closer to crossing." Taylor, "We're on Fire," 251-254.
250 *Study and Investigation of Housing*, 1212-1213.
251 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 330–33.

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APPENDIX A

HISTORIC MAPS OF SAVANNAH

Figure 22: Savannah and Chatham County lots, looking south, 1777. "Yamacraw" is labeled due west of the city. "Copy of a certified copy of a Plan of the forty five and five acre lots in the township of Savannah lodged in the Surveyors Office of the County of Chatham [tracing and blueprint]," hmap1777s3, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

Figure 23: Savannah, 1818, facing south. "Yamacraw" is labeled over the wharf district west of West Broad Street and north of Indian Street. "Plan of the city & harbour of Savannah in Chatham County; state of Georgia: taken in 1818 / drawn & published by I. Stouf; engraved by Hughes Curzon & Co.," hmap1818s7copy2, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.
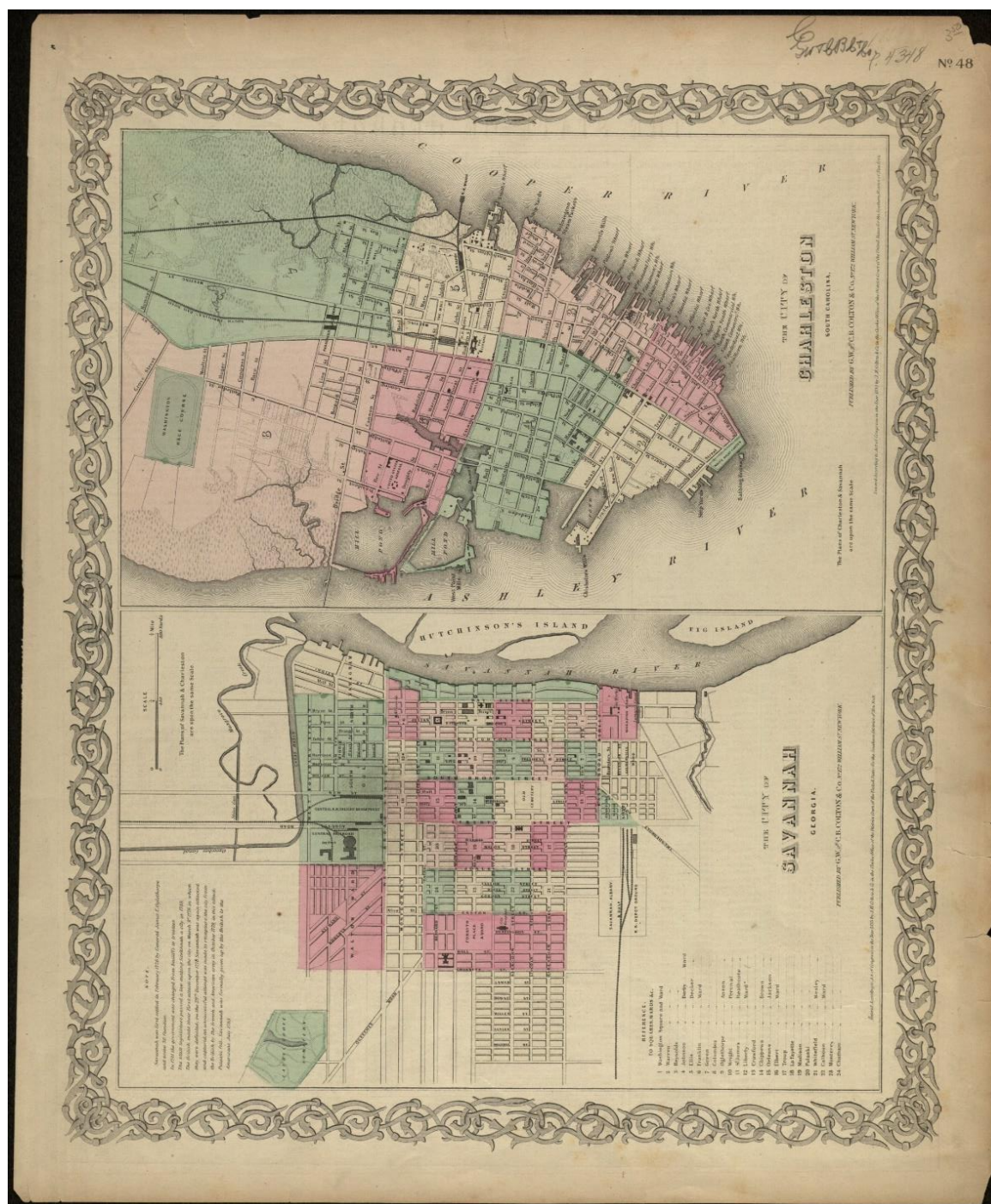
Figure 24: Savannah and Charleston, 1855, facing west. "Yamacraw" is labeled over the wharf district north of Bryan Street. "The city of Savannah. The city of Charleston," Hmap1855s3, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.
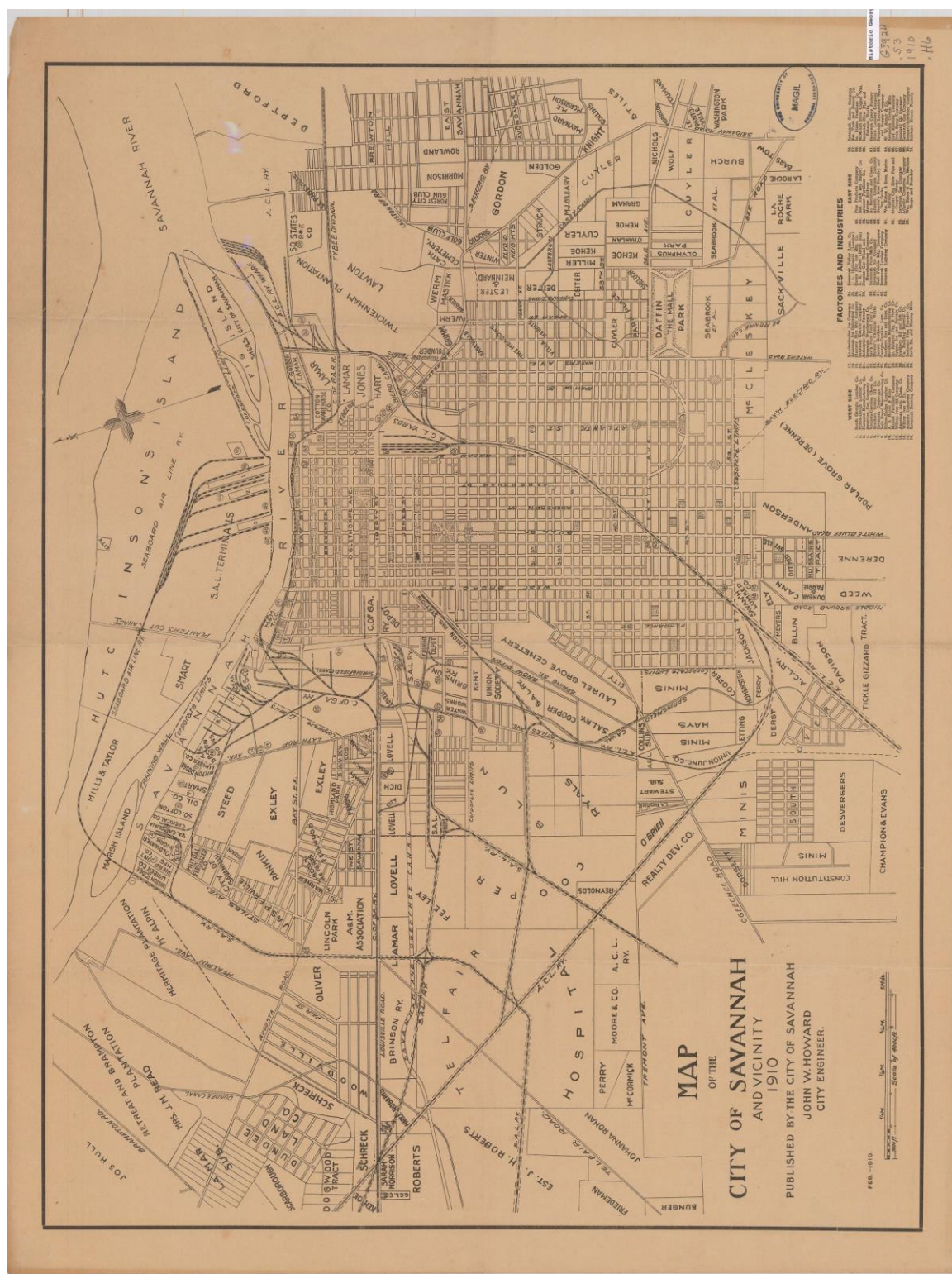
Figure 25: Howard, John W., "Map of the city of Savannah and vicinity, 1910," 1910, University of Georgia Libraries, Map and Government Information Library, Athens, Ga., as presented in the Digital Library of Georgia.
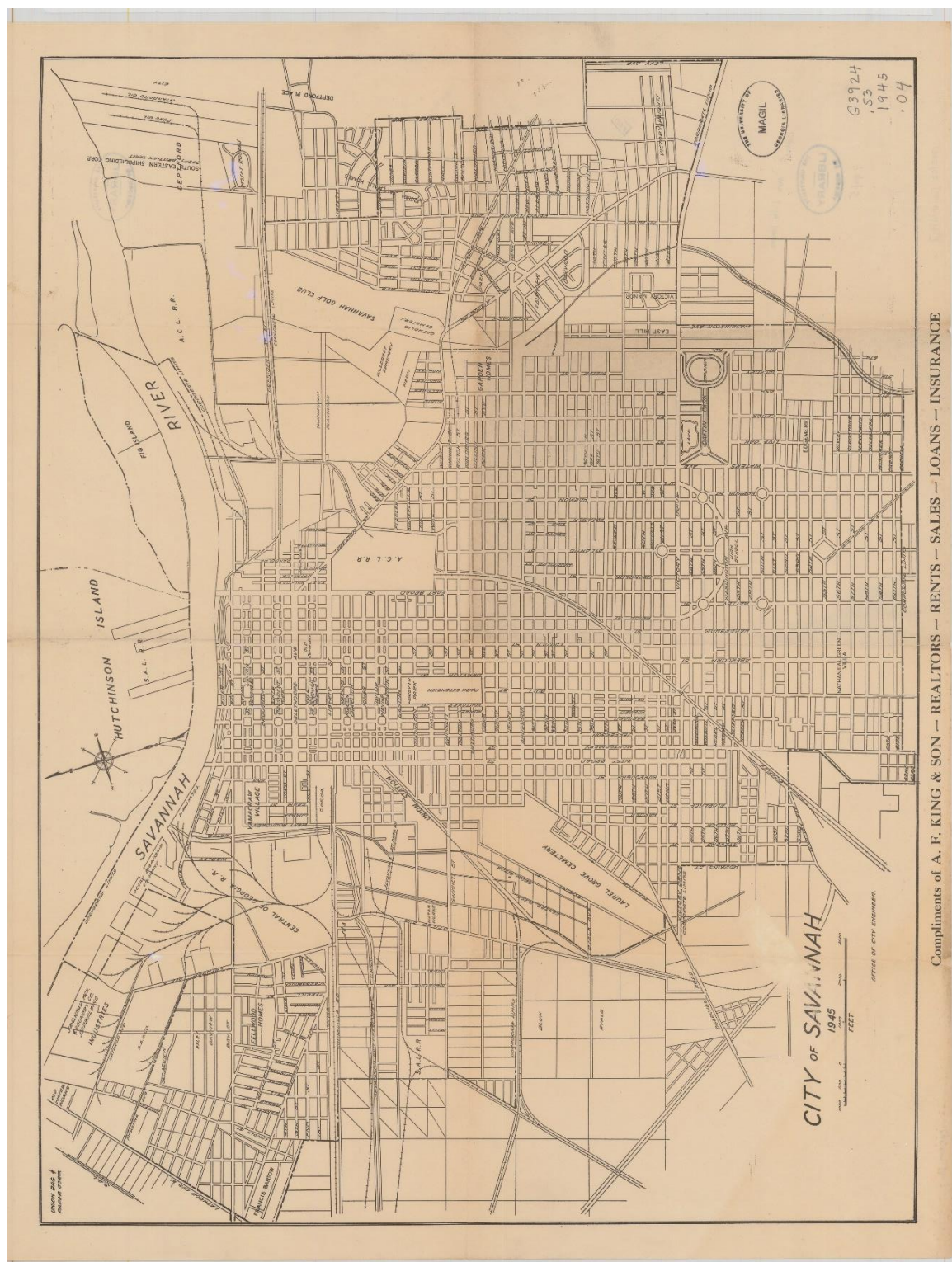
Figure 26: Office of the City Engineer, "City of Savannah," 1945, University of Georgia Libraries, Map and Government Information Library, Athens, Ga., as presented in the Digital Library of Georgia.