

**Demolition Means Progress:  
Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan**

**(Volume 1)**

by

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For Bobby and Asha May,  
who sparkle and shine

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## Introduction

*The city of Flint salutes you,  
to General Motors, we raise our voice in song.  
The city of Flint salutes you,  
to General Motors, the hand of friendship strong.*

*The city of Flint salutes you,  
for the goal you've reached today.  
We are proud to be your neighbor,  
and we're glad that you came to stay.*

—Song honoring the fiftieth anniversary of the incorporation of General Motors, 1958<sup>1</sup>

*We Northerners tend to look down on the South from a moral valley; not a mountain top. In many ways the North is no better off than the South; its system of ghettoization and segregation is just as deplorable as Dixie's, and just as harsh and inhumane.*

—Whitney M. Young, Jr., Executive Director, National Urban League, ca. 1965<sup>2</sup>

On November 23, 1954, a celebration erupted in the industrial city of Flint, Michigan. At precisely 10:10 on that crisp fall morning, workers cheered, factory whistles screeched, and “aerial bombs” exploded in the sky as a sparkling sports coupe rolled off the final assembly line at a General Motors Corporation (GM) plant just south of the city. The gold-plated, gold-trimmed Chevrolet Bel Aire was GM’s 50 millionth car produced in the United States, and hundreds of journalists, automobile executives, and civic leaders gathered at the company’s Van Slyke Road assembly plant to bear witness to history. As workers put the final touches on the coupe, plant supervisors shut down the assembly line and summoned all present to hear speeches by GM President Harlow Curtice and

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<sup>1</sup> A 1958 film commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of GM’s founding features this song. See *Among Our Souvenirs* (General Motors Corporation, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> This undated remark is quoted in “A Flint Paradox,” *Circle* (May 1965), Urban League of Flint Papers, box 1, folder 8, Genesee Historical Collections Center, University of Michigan-Flint, Flint, Michigan (hereinafter cited as GHCC).



Chevrolet General Manager T. H. Keating. In an address broadcast by closed-circuit television to GM plants across the country, Curtice identified the golden vehicle as a symbol of industrial accomplishment unmatched in world history. “That car is the 50 millionth car produced by General Motors in the United States since 1908,” Curtice proclaimed. “Fifty million cars are more cars than any other country or any combination of other countries has ever produced. They represent a production feat that surpasses anything ever achieved by any other industrial organization.”<sup>3</sup> Like many of the revelers who had amassed to observe this historic event, Curtice viewed November 23 as a day to celebrate GM’s corporate progress, the triumphs of American capitalism and democracy, and the seemingly boundless consumer prosperity generated by the post-World War II economic boom. The Vehicle City of Flint and its nearly 200,000 residents were ready for a party.



Figure I.1. GM’s 50 millionth car, a Flint-made Chevrolet Bel Aire sports coupe, 1954. Courtesy of <http://www.55classicchevy.com/1955-chevrolet-50-millionth-car.html>.

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<sup>3</sup> “50 Millionth GM Auto Touches Off Big Celebration,” *Flint Journal*, November 23, 1954; “Curtice Praises Employees of GM,” *Flint Journal*, November 23, 1954.

Flint was a fitting place to celebrate GM's "Golden Carnival," the largest and most keenly anticipated bash in the city's hundred-year municipal history. In 1908, Flint industrialist William Crapo Durant founded General Motors. By 1954, metropolitan Flint—with nearly eighty thousand local workers on the corporation's payroll—was home to the greatest concentration of GM factories and employees anywhere in the world. During the weeks leading up to November 23, Curtice, Flint Mayor George Algoe, *Flint Journal* newspaper editor Michael Gorman, and other civic leaders had meticulously planned the festivities. In order to minimize traffic gridlock, corporate officials paid for free citywide bus service throughout the day. For his part, Buick General Manager Ivan Wiles sponsored complimentary babysitting services, which allowed thousands of new parents to participate fully in the event. To mark the occasion, nearly 150,000 people flocked to downtown Flint for a parade, music, dancing, and speeches. Following his address at the Van Slyke Road plant in suburban Flint Township, Curtice and other special guests boarded cars and buses bound for Saginaw Street in the heart of Flint's central business district. Joining Curtice and other honored guests for the parade were three hundred top GM executives, many of whom had arrived earlier in the day from Detroit courtesy of a privately chartered golden train. Once they arrived downtown, observers received commemorative golden feathers distributed by representatives from the Flint Chamber of Commerce. With feathers tucked in their fedoras, pillboxes, and ball caps, parade watchers enjoyed "a spectacle of magnificent color and beauty," complete with fireworks, bands, and eight thousand golden balloons floating overhead.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Symbolic Auto Touches Off Big Celebration Here," *Flint Journal*, November 23, 1954.

The Golden Carnival commenced within minutes of the Bel Aire's completion. Upon reaching downtown, Curtice and his guests made their way to a parade review stand in front of the luxurious Durant Hotel. A "three-bomb salute" greeted the Curtice caravan as it approached the hotel, followed shortly thereafter by ten additional "bomb blasts" that opened the parade. The highlight of the Golden Carnival, of course, was the new Bel Aire sports coupe, which sat atop the final float. Still, the hour-long event featured a variety of entertaining performances and spectacles designed to captivate just about anyone. Among the main attractions were nine marching bands from local high schools and colleges; five shiny white convertibles that previewed GM's 1955 line of automobiles; a display sponsored by the United Automobile Workers (UAW), Flint's largest labor union; a special float dedicated to "Mr. and Mrs. USA," which carried a young white family representing GM's loyal consumers; and performances by the "high stepping Dreyer sisters, national baton twirling champions."<sup>5</sup> Heralded by journalists for its scrupulous planning and military-like precision, the Golden Carnival was one of the most carefully orchestrated, lavish celebrations of mass production and consumption in American civic history. Indeed, one of the day's only unscripted moments occurred when an errant metal baton tossed by a Michigan State College twirler struck an overhead power line, raining red-hot sparks over a section of the parade route.<sup>6</sup> When asked by a *Flint Journal* reporter to comment on the event, L. A. Clark, a Flint resident for more than eighty years, stated, "I've seen everything that's happened in Flint but nothing half as big as this. It was 500 per cent better than anything I've seen before."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Spectacle Is Climaxed by 50 Millionth Car," *Flint Journal*, November 23, 1954.

<sup>6</sup> *Flint Journal*, November 23, 1954.

<sup>7</sup> "Brilliant Parade Tells General Motors Story," *Flint Journal*, November 23, 1954; "Windows, Trees and Roofs Crowded along Carnival's Line of March," *Flint Journal*, November 23, 1954.

The corporate and municipal officials who planned the Golden Carnival hoped that it would demonstrate the solidarity that connected Flint and General Motors, autoworkers and their employers, and loyal consumers with their trusted GM products. In order to strengthen those bonds, GM factory managers hosted open houses in all of their plants nationwide on November 23, providing citizens with unprecedented access to the company's industrial facilities. Following the parade in Flint, over 100,000 people dispersed to visit the nine GM complexes scattered throughout Genesee County. Because the Flint Board of Education cancelled school for the day, thousands of children accompanied their parents to the factories. Once inside the plants, children witnessed firsthand the marvels of modern automobile production, learned about the work environments of loved ones, and, perhaps, even caught a glimpse of their own future workplaces. Curtice and other corporate and civic dignitaries continued their celebration at the Industrial Mutual Association (IMA) auditorium just northeast of downtown, where GM hosted a Golden Carnival luncheon for three thousand invited guests. At the IMA gathering, Curtice announced a \$3 million gift from GM to fund the city's new cultural center. According to Curtice, a longtime Flint resident, GM's gift to the city was an expression of the corporation's desire to be a "good citizen of our plant communities and to assume the duties and responsibilities that good citizenship imposes."<sup>8</sup> Mayor Algeo bragged that Flint was the "envy of all other industrial cities in the United States." In the opinion of F. A. Bower, Buick's retired chief engineer, "The GM carnival was the greatest day in the history of Flint." "With Mr. Curtice at the head," Bower predicted, "both the corporation and the city of Flint are assured of great prosperity."<sup>9</sup> To Bower

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<sup>8</sup> "Curtice Announces \$3,000,000 Flint Cultural Center Grant," *Flint Journal*, November 23, 1954.

<sup>9</sup> "Consensus in Flint: Golden Carnival Great," *Flint Journal*, November 25, 1954.

and Algoe, the Golden Carnival seemed to mark the permanent triumph of industrial progress, consumer prosperity, and social opportunity in the Vehicle City. With its extraordinarily high wages, low unemployment, internationally renowned public schools, and high rates of home ownership, Flint was truly a remarkable sight on that golden November day.

The Golden Carnival was a festival of both truth and fiction. Although the splendor of the day made it difficult to detect, the 1954 extravaganza concealed just as much as it revealed about the texture of daily life in Flint, the relationship between the city and General Motors, and the corporation's commitment to prosperity and opportunity in its hometown. In their stories about the tribute, reporters from the *Flint Journal* saluted Flint's civic progress and the corporate triumphs of General Motors. On that same day, however, the newspaper's classified section featured Jim Crow advertisements from local citizens seeking white nannies, "Colored" tenants, and white homebuyers. Furthermore, when Harlow Curtice and his colleagues made their trek from the nearly all-white suburb of Flint Township to the Golden Carnival parade in downtown Flint, they traveled along Saginaw Street, the Vehicle City's most persistent racial fault line. As the float carrying the golden Bel Aire rolled north towards downtown, it passed by several all-white neighborhoods just west of Saginaw that carefully excluded African Americans. On the east side of the street, by contrast, sat Floral Park, one of only two areas in city where black citizens could obtain housing in 1954. Once they arrived downtown, Curtice and other GM executives viewed the parade from the grounds of the Durant Hotel, a whites-only establishment. After the parade, Curtice attended a whites-only luncheon at the IMA auditorium, where he announced GM's \$3 million gift to the city. The donation

funded a cultural center adjacent to the all-white Woodlawn Park district, a neighborhood that black people could visit, but only during the daytime. Beneath the glare of the Golden Carnival, Flint was among the most segregated cities in the United States; and the municipal officials and corporate executives who presided over the day's amusements were largely to blame for those conditions.

Flint was also a city teetering on the brink of disaster. During the decade preceding the Golden Carnival, tens of thousands of white taxpayers moved away from the city in search of newer and better housing in the racially segregated suburbs of Genesee County. Their departures caused major tax and service gaps in the increasingly black metropolis. Over the same period, GM and other local employers implemented a suburban investment strategy in Genesee County that redirected jobs, taxes, and capital from the city to the suburbs. The state-of-the-art Chevrolet assembly plant that birthed GM's 50 millionth vehicle was located not in Flint but in suburban Flint Township, five miles southwest of the city's downtown business district. Though few contemporaries noted the irony in GM's decision to feature a suburban plant in its celebration of Flint's place in industrial history, the significance of the company's capital decentralization campaign cannot be overstated. Ultimately, the suburban migrations of white homeowners and businesses severely undermined the vitality of Flint's booming postwar economy.

Tragically, F. A. Bower's predictions of stability and prosperity for the Vehicle City turned out to be false. By 1974, only two decades after the Golden Carnival, the popular mood in Flint had shifted markedly. During the oil shortages and inflationary crisis of the 1970s, American automakers saw their sales decline precipitously. With its

lineup consisting almost entirely of large, heavy, energy inefficient cars and trucks, GM suffered devastating losses during the oil shocks of 1973-74 and 1979. In January 1974, with over thirty thousand Flint residents out of work, the Vehicle City's unemployment rate stood at 15.1 percent, the highest in the nation.<sup>10</sup> Although GM had regained a substantial portion of its market share by 1978, the sales slumps and economic downturns of the 1970s and early 1980s marked the end of the postwar boom and the onset of a new era of mass deindustrialization in Genesee County. During the 1980s, Flint autoworkers suffered through a seemingly unending series of layoffs and plant closures that cut GM's employment in the region in half. Between 1955 and 1987, the company eliminated thirty-four thousand jobs in the Flint area.<sup>11</sup>

The lean years had only just begun, though. The high-tech and Wall Street booms of the 1990s did little to stem the loss of jobs from the Vehicle City. During the 1990s,

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<sup>10</sup> *Flint Journal*, October 8, 1974. See also, Bryan D. Jones and Lynn W. Bachelor, *The Sustaining Hand: Community Leadership and Corporate Power* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), esp. 191-228; James D. Ananich, Neil O. Leighton, and Charles T. Webber, *Economic Impact of Plant Closings in Flint, Michigan* (Flint: Regents of the University of Michigan, 1989); Steven P. Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned: Flint, Michigan, Confronts Deindustrialization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); and Theodore J. Gilman, *No Miracles Here: Fighting Urban Decline in Japan and the United States* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> On organized labor and the economic retrenchment of the 1970s and 1980s, see William Serrin, *The Company and the Union: The "Civilized Relationship" of the General Motors Corporation and the United Automobile Workers* (New York: Random House, 1973); Dudley W. Buffa, *Union Power and American Democracy: The UAW and the Democratic Party, 1935-1972* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984); Robert Reich and John Donahue, *New Deals: The Chrysler Revival and the American System* (New York: Times Books, 1985); Harry Katz, *Shifting Gears: Changing Labor Relations in the U.S. Automobile Industry* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1985); Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986); Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso, 1988), 95-126; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); Robert Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions, 1920-1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 201-211; Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 439-445; Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), esp. 192-223; Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), esp. 121-143; and Jefferson Cowie, "'Vigorously Left, Right, and Center': The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s," in Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the 70s* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 75-106.

GM's share of the automobile market continued to decline. In 1997, following the closure of the city's massive Buick City complex, Flint's largest industrial facility, GM's workforce in Genesee County dipped to thirty-three thousand. By 2002, that number had slipped even further to fifteen thousand. Unable to halt the outward flow of taxpayers and jobs, Flint's political leaders faced a deficit of over \$40 million at century's end and the looming prospect of state receivership. For many residents of the Vehicle City, the decline of the American automobile industry and Flint's emergence as the unemployment capital of the United States signaled the end of the once cordial relationship between General Motors and its parent city. "The new Flint paradigm should be that GM is a global corporation and it shouldn't give a hoot about Flint," asserted Bill Donahue of the Billy Durant Automotive Commission. By the close of the twentieth century, Flint—a city with more unemployed persons than autoworkers—was the "Vehicle City" only in name.<sup>12</sup>

The case study of metropolitan Flint that follows analyzes the interlocking histories of Jim Crow, mass suburbanization, and industrial decline. "Demolition Means Progress" explores the political, economic, social, and cultural developments of the mid-twentieth century that transformed Flint from a segregated industrial powerhouse into a hypersegregated Rust Belt metropolis. For much of the twentieth century, observers from

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<sup>12</sup> Greg Gardner, "Buick City's Demise," *Ward's Auto World* 33 (June 1997): 23-25. On outsourcing, job loss, urban deindustrialization, and the fate of organized labor in the 1980s and 1990s, see David Brody, "The Breakdown of Labor's Social Contract," *Dissent* (Winter 1992); Barry Bluestone and Irving Bluestone, *Negotiating the Future: A Labor Perspective on American Business* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* (London: Verso, 1997); Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (New York: New Press, 1999), esp. 127-209; and Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2000). On "market populism," class polarization, and the "New Economy" of the 1990s, see Aaron Bernstein, "Inequality: How the Gap between Rich and Poor Hurts the Economy," *Business Week* (August 15, 1994); Thomas Frank, *One Market under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000); and Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).



around the world looked to the partnership between Flint, the UAW, and GM as a microcosm of the American Dream of progress, prosperity, and democracy. Buoyed by the post-World War II expansion of the automobile industry and the unprecedented collective bargaining agreements won by UAW members, the Flint of the 1940s and 1950s was, for some workers, an “arsenal of democracy”—a city that delivered economic security, consumer abundance, and civic opportunity. Today, by contrast, Flint is internationally renowned for its shuttered automobile factories, crime, high unemployment rates, racial segregation, and shrinking population. After more than four decades of plant closures, population loss, and economic divestment, Flint has become a powerful symbol of the Rust Belt’s decay and the downward economic mobility of working-class and poor Americans. For some, the deindustrialization of Flint and other cities have come to represent the end of the New Deal “social contract” and the death of the American Dream. In truth, however, the Vehicle City’s long history of racial exclusions demonstrates that the postwar American Dream rested on equal parts fact and fiction.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Richard Feldman and Michael Betzold, eds., *End of the Line: Autoworkers and the American Dream* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988); and Michael Moore, *Downsize This! Random Threats from an Unarmed American* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1996). On big business, organized labor, and the post-World War II social contract, see Margaret Weir, Anna Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus*, 191-228; Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*; and Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). On industrial cities, World War II, and “arsenals of democracy,” see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 17-31. On postwar consumer culture, see Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); and Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

*The Mythology of Northern Racial Innocence*

“Demolition Means Progress” examines the grassroots and structural barriers to racial equality and economic opportunity in metropolitan Flint from the Great Depression to the present. Between the 1930s and the mid-1950s, racial segregation increased markedly in many of the schools and neighborhoods of Genesee County. Restrictive housing covenants, neighborhood violence, “racial steering,” and other private forms of racism and discrimination played an important role in maintaining Jim Crow in Flint and its growing suburbs. Yet deliberate government policies also sustained segregation in the Flint region. Corporate and elected officials maintained the color line in this spatially decentralized yet rigidly divided metropolis by imposing segregationist housing, urban development, and educational programs. A combination of grassroots racism, federal growth initiatives, and local public policies intensified urban poverty and racial segregation and inscribed those inequities spatially on Flint’s metropolitan landscape. A set of complex ideological and policy bonds connected Jim Crow schools, Jim Crow neighborhoods, Jim Crow workplaces, and Jim Crow development practices. The persistent segregation at the heart of Flint’s story challenges historians to abandon false dichotomies between the North and South. Given the pivotal role of the local government in maintaining racial inequality, the term *de facto* segregation best represents an ideological articulation of northern racial exceptionalism rather than a neutral descriptor of the region’s color lines.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On government policies and state-sponsored racial segregation, see Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), esp. 190-230; Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl, eds., *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Michael B. Katz, ed., *The “Underclass” Debate: Views from History* (Princeton: Princeton

During the past quarter-century, “new” urban and suburban historians such as Arnold R. Hirsch, Kenneth T. Jackson, Thomas J. Sugrue, and Robert O. Self, have rewritten the history of postwar ghetto formation. These scholars and others have conclusively demonstrated that planners, federal officials, local politicians, members of the private housing industry, and ordinary white homeowners deliberately segregated citizens by race. In addition, they have undermined notions of northern and western racial exceptionalism by exploring the extraordinary depths of grassroots white racism and the government-aided “resegregation” of metropolitan spaces.<sup>15</sup> Despite such seminal contributions, however, researchers have not yet fully explored the role of

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University Press, 1993); Charles Boger and Judith Welch Wegner, eds., *Race, Poverty, and American Cities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; John F. Bauman, Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylvian, eds., *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); and especially David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*; M. Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990); Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; David L. Kirp, John P. Dwyer, and Larry A. Rosenthal, *Our Town: Race, Housing, and the Soul of Suburbia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Peter Schrag, *Paradise Lost: California's Experience, America's Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); H. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*; Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); David Schuyler, *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Self, *American Babylon*; L. Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*; Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Kenneth D. Durr, *Behind the Backlash: White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Howard Gillette, Jr., *Camden after the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Amanda I. Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Robert M. Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Kruse and Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Freund, *Colored Property*.

municipal public policies in maintaining racial segregation; nor have they jettisoned the language of “de facto segregation” that upholds the mythology of northern (and western) racial innocence. In fact, many historians of northern and western cities continue to reify false regional dichotomies, namely by privileging non-statist, grassroots forms of racial discrimination over policy-driven segregation, and by employing the language of de facto segregation to describe a largely privatized, “northern version” of Jim Crow that simply did not exist. The framework of de facto segregation—with its narrow emphasis on private forms of racism and the “crabgrass-roots politics” of white homeowners—has allowed many historians to underestimate the central role of municipal planners, city commissioners, and other government officials in creating policies that maintained segregation. Only a few scholars have endeavored to explain with any precision how suburban and municipal governments, regardless of region, worked to uphold the color line. This dissertation constitutes one such effort.<sup>16</sup>

The notion of de facto segregation is a sacred and enduring myth in American society. The term first entered the political lexicon during the 1950s debates over school desegregation in the North and West. In the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, legal experts, political observers, and policymakers from a wide variety of ideological persuasions—including many activists committed to toppling Jim Crow—began using the terms “de jure” and “de facto” to

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*; Seligman, *Block by Block*; Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*; and Kruse, *White Flight*. On the “crabgrass-roots politics” of white homeowners, see Sugrue, “Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964,” *Journal of American History* 82:2 (September 1995): 551-578. Studies that do focus on government-sanctioned segregation tend to be national-level accounts of suburban development that revolve around federal rather than local housing policies. See, for example, K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*; L. Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*; and Freund, *Colored Property*. For an important exception to this trend, see Self, *American Babylon*, esp. 328-334.

denote distinctions between government-mandated racial segregation in the South and the private, extra-governmental “discrimination” that reputedly prevailed in the rest of the nation.<sup>17</sup> Adopting the same language as their historical subjects, many researchers have since employed the de jure category to characterize the statutory forms of segregation that existed in the Jim Crow South, reserving the de facto label for the ostensibly private, market-based, non-statist acts that resulted in segregation “in fact” in the North and West. The de jure-de facto distinction, which has always held that segregation in the North and West derived from the housing choices of individual citizens and/or discrimination in the private real estate market, masks the government interventions that maintained the color line in Flint and other cities across the nation. The de facto framework allowed municipal legislators, urban planners, school board members, suburban officials, and federal housing administrators in these communities to deny responsibility for the public policies that upheld racial divisions. Still, virtually every instance of allegedly de facto segregation in Flint’s schools and neighborhoods stemmed from state-sponsored education, housing, and urban development policies. The persistent vocabulary of “choice” that underlies most declarations of northern exceptionalism fails to describe the spatial and racial configurations that emerged in metropolitan Flint as a direct result of postwar public policies. Rather, the language of de facto segregation was part of a broader discourse of power on northern racial innocence that allowed both ordinary whites and elected officials to resist the moral, legal, and political demands of the civil

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<sup>17</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). On debates over the politics and legacy of the *Brown* decision, see James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

rights movement. While it is clear that the form and structure of Jim Crow has varied widely over time and across space in the United States, it is also true that postwar housing, education, and development programs produced a state-sponsored, public policy-driven pattern of Jim Crow in Genesee County and other communities nationwide. Flint's story is, then, a national story.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of de facto segregation has always hinged upon a series of displacements. During the postwar struggles over open housing and school desegregation in the North, defenders of the segregated status quo routinely employed the language of northern innocence to reassign and deflect blame for the color line. In Flint and other industrial cities, many whites insisted that segregation reflected personal preference unlike in the South, where the state required Jim Crow. Similarly, when civil rights activists in the Vehicle City challenged school segregation, members of the Flint Board of Education claimed that "racial imbalances" in their facilities were attributable solely to housing patterns. However, Flint's civic and political leaders also denied responsibility

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<sup>18</sup> A few scholars have critiqued the notion of de facto segregation. See, for instance, Gary Orfield, *Must We Bus? Segregated Schools and National Policy* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1978); Hirsch, "Containment on the Home Front: Race and Federal Housing Policy from the New Deal to the Cold War," *Journal of Urban History* 26:2 (January 2000): 159; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Hirsch, "Less Than Plessy: The Inner City, Suburbs, and State-Sanctioned Residential Segregation in the Age of Brown," in Kruse and Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History*, 33-56; and Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008). For the most definitive critique of the mythology of de facto segregation, see Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*; and Lassiter, "De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth," in Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds., *The End of Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). On northern racial exceptionalism, see Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); and Jason Sokol, *The Northern Mystique: Race and Politics from Boston to Brooklyn, 1947-2007* (forthcoming). Historians of the American South have written prolifically on race and regional mythologies. See, for instance, William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: Braziller, 1961); Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Knopf, 1970); William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*.

for residential segregation, asserting that the color line derived from the private inclinations of white and black renters and homebuyers. Beyond the regional displacement, then, there was also a public-private dimension to the discourse on de facto segregation. Those who argued that segregation in the North was de facto credited racially imbalanced schools and neighborhoods to private, non-governmental forces in the real estate, housing, and development industries. State actors and government policies, according to this formulation, were not responsible for the North's stark patterns of segregation.

The de facto framework has relegated important municipal policymakers to the historiographical margins of urban and suburban studies. That urban and suburban historians have almost completely ignored the practices of school boards in the North is perhaps the starkest manifestation of how the myth of northern racial exceptionalism has thwarted scholarly inquiry. Only a handful of monographs in the new urban and suburban studies literatures have explored school segregation within the broader fabric of northern Jim Crow. Assuming that segregation in the "neighborhood schools" of the North stemmed primarily from residential arrangements, scholars of metropolitan history have tended to privilege housing over education in studies of the North's postwar color lines. The story of community education in Flint begs for a different wisdom, however. While it is undeniable that segregated housing influenced school demographics in Flint and elsewhere, it is equally clear that local education authorities often played a decisive role both in maintaining segregation and in naturalizing the fleeting, racially constructed borders of "neighborhood school" districts. Although metropolitan history scholars have written very little about schools, they were crucial to the construction of the color line in

postwar Flint. Indeed, in Flint and other “school-centered” communities, racially gerrymandered schools were the essential building blocks for the broader public sphere. “Demolition Means Progress” aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the cultural beliefs, structural forces, and public policies that sustained urban racial and spatial inequalities in postwar America.<sup>19</sup>

### *Flint and the Nation*

This dissertation attempts to forge a metropolitan synthesis out of the theoretical and conceptual gaps that have divided scholars of urban and suburban history. By employing a metropolitan perspective and looking carefully at public policies, this account incorporates the methodological approaches of suburban historians. However, “Demolition Means Progress” is also a community-level case study. Many suburban historians have eschewed the case study approach, choosing instead to focus on federal policies and the growth of suburbs in the nation at large. These historians have argued persuasively that New Deal and postwar federal housing and development policies helped

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<sup>19</sup> On government-mandated segregation in northern schools, see Adina Back, “Exposing the ‘Whole Segregation Myth’: The Harlem Nine and New York City’s School Desegregation Battles,” in Theocharis and Woodard, eds., *Freedom North*, 65-91; and Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Desegregation, 1865-1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Schools are almost completely absent from Sugrue’s *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Hirsch’s *Making the Second Ghetto*, Self’s *American Babylon*, and most of the other seminal texts that have shaped the historiography of urban and suburban America. For an incisive critique of this elision, see Jack Dougherty, “Bridging the Gap between Urban, Suburban, and Educational History,” in William J. Reese and John L. Rury, eds., *Rethinking the History of American Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). There are, however, several important exceptions to this trend. See, for instance, G. Orfield, *Must We Bus?*; Jennifer L. Hochschild, *The New American Dilemma: Liberal Democracy and School Desegregation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-1981* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); J. Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kruse, *White Flight*; and especially Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*. On the importance of municipal politics, see Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); J. Mills Thornton, III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); and Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).



to solidify residential segregation in cities and suburbs throughout the nation. Often, though, this approach has reduced municipal actors to passive bystanders in a federally orchestrated saga. In Flint and other cities, local actors, municipal public policies, and place-specific conditions played an important role in shaping the structure of the color line, the implementation of federal policies, and the pace and trajectory of suburban development.<sup>20</sup>

This case study of Flint and Genesee County revises standard scholarly interpretations of federal housing and development policies. Unlike most histories of New Deal and postwar housing programs, which maintain that the national government reflexively privileged segregated suburbs over integrated urban areas, Flint's story demonstrates that federal housing administrators initially favored all-white urban neighborhoods over underdeveloped, hardscrabble suburbs.<sup>21</sup> The mortgage insurance policies of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) forced elected officials in the suburbs to develop urban-style utilities, services, and zoning codes in order to qualify for federally subsidized mortgages. During the 1930s and 1940s, while out-county officials worked to modernize their governments and build urbanized infrastructures, local lenders issued thousands of FHA-insured mortgages for homes in all-white neighborhoods inside of Flint. Because only a few of Flint's suburbs possessed the physical and legal accoutrements necessary to meet the federal government's rigorous standards, FHA administrators "redlined" most

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<sup>20</sup> For examples, see K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*; Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003); L. Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*; Wiese, *Places of Their Own*; and Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> For the most definitive statements of this position, see K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*; and Freund, *Colored Property*.

areas of the out-county. After World War II, however, growth-minded suburban officials worked feverishly to make their communities more appealing to federal underwriters, real estate investors, and residents. In the 1940s and 1950s, city, village, and township governments in the out-county implemented new land use plans, built new schools and roads, and funded major utility service improvements. By the close of the 1950s, the FHA had acknowledged these efforts by abandoning its suburban redlining policies, a decision that led to an unprecedented development boom in Flint's segregated suburbs.

The urbanization of governments and services in the out-county spawned a new spirit of political independence among white suburbanites. Mindful of the sacrifices they had made to improve living standards and property values, suburban officials and taxpayers vociferously opposed metropolitan government, annexation, and other urban growth initiatives. During the 1950s and 1960s, suburbanites chose to incorporate their communities rather than face the prospect of annexation. Regional disputes over land use, city boundaries, and municipal incorporation contributed to intense political fragmentation in Genesee County, which in turn left the city of Flint isolated from its neighbors and without room to expand. Ultimately, then, federal housing initiatives played a more important structural role in maintaining metropolitan inequalities than scholars have previously imagined. To be sure, federal and local housing policies subsidized segregation in the Flint area by rewarding white homebuyers over their black counterparts. Equally important, though, those same policies intensified city-suburban racial and economic chasms by motivating and empowering governments in all-white suburban areas to erect political barriers around themselves.

In *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, Robert Self effectively fuses the most compelling elements of urban and suburban studies into a new metropolitan synthesis. Notably, he argues that local struggles over the spatial and political reorganization of Oakland produced both “a black power politics of community defense and empowerment and a neopopulist conservative homeowner politics among whites.” The narratives of black power and suburban secession, Self maintains, “demand to be told as one.” Although this approach is compelling, the Flint case points to the limitations of both structural determinism and the black power-white secession dichotomy. Throughout the nation, the postwar decentralization of the metropolis produced intense conflicts over race, space, and power. However, local conditions and local actors decisively influenced the sort of politics that emerged from those disputes. In the company town of Flint, General Motors executives, often operating beneath the radar, actively shaped the agenda of the pro-growth suburban development coalition while severely undermining the political leverage of civil rights activists.<sup>22</sup>

Intense battles over race, space, and taxes were common in postwar Genesee County, but they never produced the hardened ideological movements that sprang from metropolitan Oakland. To be specific, the seeds of black power did not take root in the Vehicle City. In Flint, liberal and moderate civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League led the fights for school desegregation, open housing, and workplace equity. With few exceptions, civil rights and neighborhood activists worked within established political channels—indeed, often from inside of GM’s pro-growth coalition—to secure equality for black citizens. During the 1950s and 1960s, to cite one important example,

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<sup>22</sup> Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*; Self, *American Babylon*, 1-3; and Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*.

community activists in Flint’s North End ghetto endorsed calls for “slum clearance” and worked from within the GM-dominated alliance for urban renewal and freeway construction to obtain better housing for African Americans. Although a version of Self’s racially exclusive “industrial garden” also existed in Genesee County, the black freedom struggles in Flint and Oakland followed divergent paths. On the other side of the color line, Self’s teleological model of mass suburbanization and tax revolts cannot account for the pro-tax politics that took root in many areas of suburban Flint after World War II. Taxes played only a minimal role in driving the suburban migrations of homeowners and businesses in Genesee County. Once they arrived in the out-county, white homeowners often supported tax increases in order to fund new roads and schools, better sewer systems, and municipal water systems. By the late 1970s, many suburban homeowners in Genesee County had joined the tax revolt that flourished in California. However, the anti-tax sentiment of the 1970s represented a sharp break from the past. Indeed, the movement for suburban secession in Genesee County grew out of a pro-tax, pro-development, and always anti-integrationist suburban political culture.<sup>23</sup>

### *Beyond the Rust Belt Synthesis*

The histories of racial exclusion, suburban development, and industrial decline are intimately connected. Too often, however, scholars of the Rust Belt have narrated these developments separately. Flint was only one among hundreds of American cities that experienced mass deindustrialization during the second half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>23</sup> In a doctoral dissertation on race and metropolitan development in Miami, Florida, Nathan Connolly makes a similar argument about urban renewal. See Nathan Connolly, “By Eminent Domain: Race and Capital in the Building of an American South Florida,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008). See also, Irene Holliman, “From Crackertown to Model City? Urban Renewal and Community Building in Atlanta, 1963-1966,” *Journal of Urban History* 35:3 (March 2009): 369-386.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as layoffs and plant closures multiplied in the nation's northern and midwestern manufacturing sectors, a new discourse on corporate abandonment and the formation of the Rust Belt emerged among liberal journalists, artists, activists, and academics. In scores of books, articles, and cultural products, proponents of what could be called the Rust Belt Synthesis identified the 1970s and 1980s as a crucial turning point in American history. In 1982, at the behest of a group of trade union and community activists concerned about plant closures and unemployment, scholars Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison authored *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry*, perhaps the most detailed and widely read statement of the Rust Belt Synthesis. For Bluestone, Harrison, and a number of other academics and social commentators, economic crises in the "sunset" industries of the urban North came about in the 1970s because of foreign competition, declining profit margins, and economic stagnation. According to the various iterations of this model, corporations such as General Motors responded to increased foreign competition, rising energy costs, trade union militancy, and the economic recessions of the 1970s by closing plants in the Rust Belt and shifting capital and resources southward to the low-wage Sunbelt and points overseas. The capital migrations of the 1970s, many have argued, allowed corporate executives, at least for a time, to recoup the profit margins that they had enjoyed during the postwar economic boom. According to UAW President Douglas Fraser, GM's Rust Belt to Sunbelt capital shifts in the 1970s were elements of a broader "southern strategy" designed to increase corporate profits by depressing wages and crippling the labor movement.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> B. Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community*

The works produced by Bluestone, Harrison, Staughton Lynd and other public intellectuals have informed much of the discourse on the Rust Belt's industrial decline. Yet the most powerful and influential articulations of the Rust Belt Synthesis have sprung from the cultural arena, where artists—filmmakers in particular—have introduced the issue of deindustrialization to huge popular audiences. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, *Slap Shot*, *Breaking Away*, *Blue Collar*, *American Dream*, and a host of other films won critical acclaim for their powerful, ironic, and often humorous portrayals of the Rust Belt's industrial collapse. In 1989, Flint activist Michael Moore released *Roger and Me*, a blockbuster documentary film that brought the Vehicle City's story of deindustrialization to an international audience. As with other articulations of the Rust Belt Synthesis, the narrative of *Roger and Me* hinges on the Reagan Era as the key temporal pivot between the prosperous postwar period—in which workers and executives

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*Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982). See also, Staughton Lynd, *The Fight against Shutdowns* (San Pedro, California: Single Jack Books, 1982); Terry Buss and F. Steven Radburn, *Shutdown at Youngstown* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); John Portz, *The Politics of Plant Closings* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990); Dale A. Hathaway, *Can Workers Have a Voice? The Politics of Deindustrialization in Pittsburgh* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); and Steven C. High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). The body of literature on deindustrialization, urban decline, and the emergence of the Rust Belt is immense. See, for instance, John D. Kasarda, "Urban Change and Minority Opportunities," in Paul E. Peterson, ed., *The New Urban Reality* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1985); David Bensman and Roberta Lynch, *Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Ann R. Markusen and Virginia Carlson, "Deindustrialization in the American Midwest: Causes and Responses," in Lloyd Rodwin and Hidehiko Sazanami, eds., *Deindustrialization and Regional Economic Transformation: The Experience of the United States* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); John Cumbler, *A Social History of Economic Decline (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989)*; Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: A History of Labor in a Textile City, 1920-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Sugrue, "The Reorganization of Space and Work in Three Periods of American History," in M. Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate*, 85-117; Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of US Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Cowie, *Capital Moves*; and Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). On Douglas Fraser's critique of GM's "southern strategy," see *Flint Journal*, July 21, 1978. For a journalistic adaptation of the Rust Belt Synthesis, see Ross Laver, "A Shutdown Nobody Needs," *Maclean's* (July 27, 1998). According to Laver, "When Americans began buying imported cars by the shipload in the 1970s, the city's [Flint's] fate was sealed."

alike benefited from a growing economy and a private social contract—and the hard times that followed.<sup>25</sup>

Proponents of the Rust Belt Synthesis have told many important truths about Flint's recent industrial history. As Moore's film powerfully demonstrates, the capitalist revanchism of the 1970s and 1980s devastated the industrial economies of Flint and other Rust Belt cities. Moreover, Douglas Fraser was correct in arguing that executives from General Motors and other corporations shifted hundreds of thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in capital from the Rust Belt to the Sunbelt during the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the Rust Belt decline narrative errs on several analytical levels. In particular, this dissertation offers an earlier periodization for the emergence of Flint's Rust Belt crisis. In doing so, it builds upon the recent works of Sugrue, Jefferson Cowie, Self, and other scholars of deindustrialization and postwar urban change. As Sugrue argues in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, "The rusting of the Rust Belt began neither with the much-touted stagflation and oil crisis of the 1970s, nor with the rise of global economic competition and the influx of car or steel imports. It began, unheralded, in the 1950s." With its narrow temporal emphasis on the 1970s and 1980s, the Rust Belt Synthesis obscures the important postwar capital migrations that generated the first signs of economic crisis in

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<sup>25</sup> *Slap Shot* (Kings Road Entertainment, 1977); *Blue Collar* (TAT Communications Company, 1978); *Breaking Away* (Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1979); *Roger and Me* (Dog Eat Dog Films, 1989); and *American Dream* (Cabin Creek, 1991). For an insightful analysis of working-class culture and film in the 1970s, see Cowie, "The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America," 75-106.

<sup>26</sup> On the rise of the Sunbelt, see Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Richard M. Bernard and Bradley R. Rice, eds., *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth since World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Markusen et al., *The Rise of the Sunbelt: The Military Remapping of Industrial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Flint and other northern industrial metropolises. Furthermore, by framing urban plant closures and layoffs as the epiphenomenal outcomes of global economic restructuring and international market forces, proponents of the Rust Belt model have diverted attention away from the particular municipal contexts in which deindustrialization occurred. Yet municipal politics played a decisive role in driving the spatial reorganization of capital and work in metropolitan Flint. Moreover, the decline of manufacturing in the Vehicle City was not inevitable.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond its temporal inadequacies and analytical limitations, the Rust Belt declension narrative often depends upon a severely distorted view of postwar American culture. Many chroniclers of the Rust Belt have argued that Flint's declining fortunes stemmed directly from the "hypermobility" of capital during the 1970s and 1980s. Late twentieth-century plant closures and layoffs, according to this popular model, marked a fundamental historical pivot that distinguished the prosperous postwar boom years from the bleak, postindustrial future of the twenty-first century. In making such claims, the architects of the Rust Belt Synthesis often celebrate a postwar past that never existed for African Americans. With few exceptions, proponents of the Rust Belt model subscribe to a framework of urban decline that revolves too closely around the experiences of the white working class. For tens of thousands of white autoworkers in Genesee County, the twenty-five years following World War II were, in many ways, a golden era of job security, consumer affluence, and social progress. To many of these white workers, the 1970s seemed to mark the end of a prosperous epoch in American history. Yet for African Americans in Flint, the postwar decades were an era of limits and intense social

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<sup>27</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 6, 125-152; Cowie, *Capital Moves*, esp. 1-40; and Self, *American Babylon*, 23-60.



contestation marked by widespread employment discrimination and rigid racial segregation.<sup>28</sup>

### *The Metropolitan Vantage Point*

It is impossible to understand the origins of America's urban crisis without examining the complex, contentious, and often policy-driven relationships between cities and suburbs. Urban historians have argued convincingly for a new postwar periodization for the emergence of the Rust Belt and the roots of urban "hypersegregation." Furthermore, they have made a compelling case that ordinary urban whites played a major role in defending the postwar color line. However, city-centered historians have often neglected to employ the spatial and policy frameworks necessary to grasp the metropolitan scope of the urban crisis. Simply stated, suburbs—and the public policies that helped them to grow—are largely absent from the new urban studies literature. Scholars of postwar urban history

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<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Lynn Reuster, *Good Old Days at the Buick: Memories of the Men and Women Who Worked There* (Linden, Michigan: McVey Marketing and Advertising, 1990); and Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned*, esp. xxi. Like other proponents of the Rust Belt Synthesis, Dandaneau adopts the framework of corporate abandonment to narrate the decline of prosperity and opportunity in Flint. In this otherwise perceptive account, Dandaneau minimizes the significance of racial discrimination during the postwar era. In the book's introduction, for example, the author refers to the Vehicle City's "unprecedented abundance" and the "stability and harmony" that reigned in postwar Flint. Many urban and political historians have also adopted this optimistic perspective on postwar American culture. See Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row Press, 1984); Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Jim Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York City* (New York: Norton, 1990); Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991); Frederick F. Siegel, *The Future Once Happened Here: New York, D.C., L.A., and the Fate of America's Big Cities* (New York: Free Press, 1997); and Tamar Jacoby, *Someone Else's House: America's Unfinished Struggle for Integration* (New York: Free Press, 1998). For a trenchant critique of the racial politics of nostalgia, see Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*. See also, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Nell Irvin Painter, "The New Labor History and the Historical Moment," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2:3 (Spring 1989): 367-370; Herbert Hill, "The Problem of Race in American Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 24:2 (1996): 189-208; and Michael Eric Dyson, "The Labor of Whiteness, the Whiteness of Labor, and the Perils of Whitewashing," in S. Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman, eds., *Audacious Democracy: Labor, Intellectuals, and the Social Reconstruction of America* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1997), 152-172.

tend to view the metropolis from the bottom-up and the inside-out, focusing on grassroots racial conflicts inside central cities and the flight of whites and capital that ensued in the wake of those battles. This spatial orientation has played a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of the now familiar urban declension narrative. Because urban historians have viewed metropolitan cityscapes through a geographically circumscribed lens, too often they have reduced the roots of urban-industrial crises to the analogous narratives of white flight and corporate abandonment. Although historians of urban America and proponents of the Rust Belt Synthesis have often disagreed about the chronology of those crises, researchers on both sides of the temporal divide tend to agree on the metaphor of abandonment. In *American Babylon*, Self formulates a powerful critique of this model. According to Self, “The metaphor of flight, though accurate in many respects, shifts focus away from the complicated political production of suburban communities in place.” “Telling urban and suburban histories together,” he added, “moves us beyond generalizations like ‘white flight’ . . . to the specific context in which each was embedded.” By incorporating a broader spatial view and looking carefully at postwar metropolitan development, “Demolition Means Progress” seeks to push past the conceptual limitations of the white flight and corporate abandonment paradigms.<sup>29</sup>

Over the past forty years, journalists, social commentators, and academic writers have often referred to the postwar decades as an “age of white flight,” an era in which whites from across the socioeconomic spectrum abandoned increasingly integrated

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<sup>29</sup> For examples of this, see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*; Kruse, *White Flight*; and Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). The quotation is from Self, *American Babylon*, 2.

central cities for the racial exclusivity of suburbia.<sup>30</sup> On the surface, the striking postwar demographic shifts that created black majorities in Flint and scores of other American cities seem to bolster the explanatory power of white flight. Between 1950 and 2005, the number of whites living in Flint dropped precipitously, from 149,100 to 43,942, while the city's African-American population increased steadily from 13,906 to 62,433.<sup>31</sup> The overwhelming majority of white departures from Flint followed the city-to-suburb trajectory. As in other cities, whites in Flint's racially transitional neighborhoods often responded to integration by opting to sell or rent their homes to African Americans. In a recent study of the Flint Park neighborhood, to cite one example, Thomas Henthorn demonstrated that even whites with strong attachments to their homes, churches, and schools ultimately chose to move when black neighbors arrived.<sup>32</sup>

It is indisputable that white flight helped to drive the suburbanization of the United States. Still, this term cannot fully explain the multiplicity of forces that drove white departures from central cities. Tens of thousands of whites fled Flint when racial integration arrived in their neighborhoods. However, tens of thousands more departed the Vehicle City long before the first signs of neighborhood transition had appeared. The allure of home ownership and the pastoral ideal, increasing job growth in the suburbs, real and imagined fears of urban crime, the quest for better schools, and, crucially, local

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<sup>30</sup> On white flight, see Rieder, *Canarsie*; Gerald H. Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*; Seligman, *Block by Block*; and Kruse, *White Flight*.

<sup>31</sup> United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population, 1950: Selected Population and Housing Characteristics: Flint, Michigan* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1952). For the 2005 data, see U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey, 2005 Data Profile Highlights: Flint, Michigan*, available at <http://www.factfinder.census.gov>.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas C. Henthorn, "A Catholic Dilemma: White Flight in Northwest Flint," *Michigan Historical Review* 31:2 (Fall 2005): 1-42. On the nexus between homes, schools, and churches in metropolitan areas, see Clay Howard, "The Closet and the Cul de Sac: Suburbanization and Sexual Politics in Postwar California," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, forthcoming).

and federal subsidies for suburbanization, all existed alongside—and at times reinforced—racial avoidance as factors driving white suburban migrations. As well, urban renewal and freeway construction programs solidified the color line in Flint and other cities by simultaneously compacting black ghettos and subsidizing the departures of white city dwellers. By focusing primarily on the private inclinations and fears of individual citizens, the discourse on white flight obscures the broader array of housing and metropolitan development policies that enabled the growth of segregated suburbs and all-black ghettos.<sup>33</sup>

Closely related to the white flight model, the narrative of corporate abandonment also conceals a great deal about the geographic reorganization of power in metropolitan areas. With its overemphasis on regional dichotomies and its inattention to local investment patterns, the Rust Belt decline-Sunbelt growth binary masks the postwar suburbanization of capital that re-shaped metropolitan economies and city-suburb power relations throughout the United States. The suburbanization of industry intensified urban economic crises not only in “sunset” cities such as Flint, but also in Sunbelt metropolises such as Oakland, Charlotte, Miami, Los Angeles, and Memphis. By the dawn of the 1960s, the centrifugal migrations of businesses and taxpayers had created the first obvious signs of decay on Flint’s urban-industrial landscape. However, even during the

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<sup>33</sup> On urban renewal and freeways, see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, esp. 100-170; Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Mark Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-1989* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Owen D. Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Guian A. McKee, *The Struggle for Jobs: Liberalism and Local Activism in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Andrew R. Highsmith, “Demolition Means Progress: Urban Renewal, Local Politics, and State-Sanctioned Ghetto Formation in Flint, Michigan,” *Journal of Urban History* 35:3 (March 2009): 348-368.

worst of the 1970s and 1980s economic crises, many—though not all—of Flint’s suburbs remained economically vibrant. By incorporating a broader spatial view and looking carefully at postwar suburban development, this dissertation challenges the usefulness of the Rust Belt-Sunbelt dichotomy.<sup>34</sup>

Most urban history scholars have avoided the simplicity of regional development models and have readily acknowledged the importance of city-suburban divides. However, they too have framed capital migrations through the lens of corporate abandonment. Specifically, urban historians have tended to categorize all outward capital migrations—regardless of how far away companies moved—as examples of corporate divestment from central cities. City-to-suburb capital moves, many historians have charged, created “spatial mismatches” between deindustrializing majority-black cities and all-white job centers in the suburbs. At first blush, this seems to have occurred in Flint. In the 1940s and 1950s, GM officials and other members of the city’s pro-growth coalition invested heavily in new suburban developments. During this period, GM executives built several new plants outside of Flint and shifted millions of dollars in manufacturing capital from the city to its segregated suburbs. By 1960, many of the city’s automobile industry suppliers, retailers, and small business owners had followed suit. However, these outward capital migrations were not simply acts of secession from the city. Rather, GM’s postwar capital moves in Genesee County were part of a larger (and ultimately unsuccessful) metropolitan growth agenda to expand the city’s

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<sup>34</sup> On corporate abandonment, see K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, esp. 246-282; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, esp. 125-152; Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned*; and Cowie and Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins*. On the deindustrialization of urban areas in the Sunbelt, see Cowie, *Capital Moves*, 73-99; Sides, *L.A. City Limits*; Self, *American Babylon*, 23-60; and O’Mara, *Cities of Knowledge*, 182-222. For an insightful critique of the Rust Belt-Sunbelt model, see Allen Dieterich-Ward, “Mines, Mills, and Malls: Regional Development in the Steel Valley,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006).

boundaries through regional government and annexation. Building upon Self's metaphor of the industrial garden, this dissertation argues that single causal frameworks cannot fully explain either white homeowners' decisions to leave the city or the spatial calculus that drove corporate growth strategies.<sup>35</sup>

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This two-part case study consists of twelve chronologically and thematically arranged chapters focusing on the residential color line, school segregation, employment discrimination, suburban development, urban renewal, and deindustrialization. Part I, "Race and Space in a Company Town," explores the geographic and political structure of racial and economic inequalities in the Flint metropolitan region. The dissertation begins with a discussion of the 1908 founding of GM, the growth of the automobile industry, and Flint's rise as an industrial metropolis. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the city's rapid population growth spawned severe infrastructural crises, housing shortages, and public health calamities. The first three chapters of this study explore local and federal responses to the city's growth in the areas of housing and education and the racial, spatial, and economic considerations that drove city leaders' pro-growth development agendas. Chapter 1 addresses home construction efforts during the interwar era, the growth of racially restrictive housing covenants, the civic culture of Jim Crow in Flint, and the birth of federal redlining initiatives. The chapter closes with an extended analysis of how the Home Owners' Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing

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<sup>35</sup> On the suburbanization of industry and spatial mismatch, see John F. Kain, "Housing Segregation, Negro Employment, and Metropolitan Decentralization," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 82:2 (May 1968): 175-197; Boyle, "'There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can't Heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Automobile Workers, 1940-1960," *Labor History* 35 (1995): 5-23; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 125-152; and Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 57-130.

Administration formalized the practices of redlining in Genesee County. Chapter 2 investigates the origins and early development of “neighborhood schools” and “community education” in Flint. During the Great Depression, corporate executives and Flint’s political leaders struggled to maintain labor peace, civic harmony, and economic growth. In response to the turmoil of the 1930s, local manufacturer Charles Stewart Mott agreed to fund a citywide experiment in community education that helped to harden the city’s color line. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the structures of segregation and discrimination in Flint’s neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. These chapters illustrate how local and federal policymakers, corporate officials, and private citizens worked to formalize Jim Crow inside of the city limits.

“Demolition Means Progress” begins by focusing on developments within the city. In Chapters 5 and 6, however, the setting shifts to suburban Genesee County. These sections address how corporate growth strategies, federal housing and defense initiatives, and local public policies drove the spatial reorganization of capital and labor in postwar Flint. As well, they document how local elected officials in the out-county responded to grassroots and federal demands to urbanize suburban governments and services. Viewing the city and the suburbs as part of a single metropolitan entity, corporate executives and most members of the urban political establishment endorsed the suburban migrations of white homeowners and businesses. Flint’s city commissioners hoped to expand the Vehicle City’s boundaries and tax base through annexation and regional government. By the close of the 1950s, however, dissenters on both sides of the color line had emerged to challenge the spatial politics of Flint’s pro-growth coalition. Chapter 6, which analyzes the rise of suburban political consciousness in the 1950s, represents a turning point in this

narrative. In 1958, civic and corporate leaders unveiled New Flint, a plan for regional government in Genesee County. Despite GM's open endorsement of the proposal, suburban legislators and white homeowners revolted in opposition. Ultimately, suburban political activism helped to deliver a deathblow to New Flint and other Sunbelt-style metropolitan growth proposals supported by the city's corporate and political establishments.

Suburban homeowners were not alone in objecting to the machinations of the city's pro-growth leadership. Part II of this dissertation, "Civil Rights, Suburban Revolts, and the Roots of the Rust Belt," opens by addressing the struggles over civil rights in Genesee County. Chapters 7 and 8 analyze the local battles over open housing and school desegregation that exploded in the 1960s and 1970s. Although black activists won many important victories over Jim Crow during this period, policymakers, civic leaders, and ordinary white homeowners throughout the county consistently invoked the concept of de facto segregation to resist demands for desegregation. By the close of the civil rights era, African Americans in the city had still not triumphed in their quest to topple Jim Crow. Part of the difficulty, as Chapters 9 through 11 illustrate, stemmed from the fact that most white citizens and government officials in Genesee County remained steadfast in their commitment to defending the color line.

This dissertation takes its title from the struggles over urban renewal that unfolded during the long postwar era. Following the defeat of the New Flint plan, municipal officials, corporate executives, and downtown boosters sought desperately to create space in the city for new economic development. During the 1940s and 1950s, members of the city's pro-growth coalition had helped to build a more decentralized and segregated



metropolis. By the 1960s and 1970s, however, those same civic leaders were trying to replicate suburban growth in the city by tearing down “blighted” and “obsolescent” neighborhoods. Their efforts centered on razing the Floral Park and St. John Street ghettos. Demolition, many city builders claimed, was a sign of progress. Chapter 9 reveals how the city’s urban renewal and freeway construction programs—in spite of widespread black support for neighborhood clearance—ultimately hardened the color line and created a new political economy of Jim Crow and industrial decline. Chapter 10 turns to the struggles over race and residence that unfolded in Flint’s racially transitional neighborhoods during the 1960s and 1970s. By 1968, a momentous year for civil rights legislation, black citizens could claim protection from local, state, and federal fair housing laws. Nonetheless, elected officials and private citizens continued to uphold segregation through a combination of public policies and extralegal measures. Paying close attention to the post-1968 continuation of redlining and the enduring racial and spatial calculus that informed site location decisions for subsidized housing developments, this chapter argues that government-sponsored segregation outlasted the civil rights reforms of the 1960s.

Chapter 11 explores suburban defenses of racial and class privilege during the 1960s and 1970s. By the close of the 1960s, African Americans had desegregated many neighborhoods inside of the city, even piercing through the color line in Beecher and several other inner-ring suburbs. However, whites successfully defended segregation in the remainder of Genesee County. This chapter traces disputes over race, class, and land use in the out-county and explains how suburban governments used zoning, municipal incorporation, and other means to defend the racial and economic homogeneity of their

communities. The defense of the color line outside of the city was part of a wider campaign for suburban independence from Flint that unfolded during the 1960s and 1970s. In response to the threat of annexation and the specter of regional government, suburban taxpayers and policymakers moved to incorporate their communities. The incorporation of Flint's suburbs—which in many ways was the culmination of the FHA's original suburban development strategy—left the city's political leaders and residents in precarious economic positions.

“Demolition Means Progress” ends with the devastating plant closures and job losses of the late twentieth century. Between 1970 and 2000, GM executives implemented a major restructuring program in Genesee County. By century's end, layoffs and plant closures had reduced GM's local workforce to approximately fifteen thousand. The combined effects of corporate reorganizations, mass suburbanization, and capital divestment left the shrinking city and thousands of its unemployed residents on the edge of bankruptcy. To some observers, GM's decision to close plants and divest from Flint seemed to mark an apocalyptic moment in the city's history. Predictions that the city would become a ghost town turned out to be untrue, however. Despite the economic setbacks of the 1980s and 1990s, Flint's civic leaders continued in their efforts to revitalize and repopulate the city. Over the past two decades, civic boosters have waged an ambitious campaign to lure new developments and homeowners to the city. As in the postwar era, however, these efforts to renew the city have failed to deliver economic opportunities, spatial fairness, and racial equity to the post-Vehicle City and its growing black majority.

The story of Flint's still-evolving urban crisis is not a simple tale of how white flight and corporate abandonment caused one city's fall from a mythical era of prosperity and opportunity; nor is it a saga defined solely by the persistence of racial inequalities in modern American life. Rather, Flint's complex history of decline and renewal suggests elements of both continuity and change. The postwar decentralization of white homeowners and industry created economic turmoil in cities such as Flint and produced a fundamental shift in metropolitan power relations across the United States. Throughout the era of mass suburbanization, however, race served as a constant barrier to equal opportunity and first-class citizenship for African Americans.

Racial segregation in the North was neither innocent nor exceptional. The ossified patterns of Jim Crow that Flint activists confronted during the 1960s and 1970s had their roots in federal and local government policies that first took shape during the New Deal and postwar eras. State-sponsored barriers to racial equality, economic equity, and spatial justice emerged powerfully in the Flint region following World War II, thereby creating the three defining features of the Rust Belt: deindustrialization, urban sprawl, and rigid racial segregation. In Flint and Genesee County, municipal and federal housing, education, and development policies cultivated uneven consumer abundance, suburban overdevelopment, capital decentralization, and white racial privilege at the expense of civil rights and social equity. As in every other metropolitan area, municipal actors and local public policies played a major role in guiding the trajectory of Flint's postwar development and shaping the final resolution of conflicts over race and space. Nevertheless, Flint's history is in no way peculiar. Indeed, the story that follows is as

American as the golden Chevrolet Bel Aire sports coupe that rolled through the segregated streets of Flint on November 23, 1954.

## **Part 1: Race and Space in a Company Town**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **The Ghetto and the Master Builder**

In 1945, as Michigan's defense plants whirled and the United States inched toward victory in World War II, Carl Crow, the official historian of the Buick division of General Motors Corporation, penned a remarkable tribute to his employer and its hometown. Describing the close familial relationship between the city of Flint and Buick, GM's original automobile line, Crow wrote:

Buick is Flint and Flint is Buick. It is not far-fetched to say that the relationship between the city and the industry has been like that of a self-sacrificing father and a successful son. The people of Flint dug deep into the toes of their financial socks to bring the puny Buick enterprise to this community. They coddled and nurtured it through infancy and adolescence, and when it grew Flint also grew and was rewarded with security and prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

Like so many of Flint's legendary civic boosters, Crow believed that the Vehicle City, with all of its industrial might, was a microcosm of the American Dream of progress, prosperity, and opportunity.

By the time that Harper and Brothers publishing company released Crow's *The City of Flint Grows Up*, Flint and the nation as a whole sat on the cusp of the longest era of economic expansion and consumer prosperity in world history. Intoxicated by the

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Crow, *The City of Flint Grows Up: The Success Story of an American Community* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1945), vii.

frenzy of optimism that began at war's end, Crow reflected warmly upon Flint's place in the nation:

The history of the interesting and dynamic city of Flint has been worth the recording because it is more than the chronicle of an individual city. It epitomizes the history of America, an impoverished little nation of farmers, fishermen, and trappers which conquered the wilderness and became great because such a large proportion of its citizens were like the men who made Flint a great industrial city.

"America is a thousand Flints," Crow concluded, because this small midwestern city exemplified the growth, prosperity, and freedom that made the United States a beacon of hope for the wider world.<sup>2</sup>

Crow was not alone in celebrating Flint's accomplishments. Not long after Crow hailed Flint's industrial and civic progress, Robert H. Plummer described the city in equally glowing terms. During a 1953 speech to the Flint Optimist Club, Plummer, a guidance counselor from Flint Junior College, urged his audience to embrace GM's industrial progress and the many special virtues that made Flint a desirable place to live and work. "If you seek a fair city, look around you," he asserted. "Flint is the town of seven wonders." According to Plummer, the city's churches, schools, parks, and hospitals, along with its centralized geographic location near Detroit, constituted five of Flint's seven wonders. Flint's reputation for "Yankee Industry" and its "men of vision" were Plummer's final two wonders. In Plummer's estimation, hard work and extraordinary leadership helped to transform Flint into one of the "leading vehicle cities in the world"—a Fordist mecca where workers could "produce an automobile in 90 minutes from the time the frame goes on the assembly line until the car is driven off under its own power." When Plummer cheered Flint's men of vision, "those who built

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<sup>2</sup> Crow, *The City of Flint Grows Up*, 205.

industry with foresight, persistence, and long-range planning,” Optimist Club members no doubt understood that he was speaking of the pioneers of General Motors—men such as William Durant, Charles Stewart Mott, and other local industrialists who helped to make Flint the world’s second city of automobiles.<sup>3</sup>

The town of seven wonders is located seventy miles northwest of Detroit, in the heart of the nation’s midwestern manufacturing belt. Once a sleepy mid-Michigan hamlet devoted to lumber and carriage production, Flint rose to industrial prominence during the first three decades of the twentieth century. In 1908, the city became the manufacturing headquarters of the General Motors Corporation. On September 16 of that year, William “Billy” Crapo Durant, a Flint-based carriage maker and stock market speculator, founded General Motors as a holding company for automobile manufacturers. Within two weeks of the incorporation, he had purchased Flint’s Buick Motor Company, GM’s first automobile division. By 1910, the freewheeling Durant had acquired the Olds, Cadillac, and Oakland automobile companies. Sales in the American automobile industry exploded in the twenty years following GM’s incorporation, bringing windfall profits to Durant, Mott, and other local industrialists. Between 1908 and 1919, GM produced its first million cars for consumers. By 1929, that number had grown to ten million, and GM, with its aggressive corporate acquisition strategy, was well on its way toward becoming the world’s largest industrial corporation. As GM grew, so too did the Vehicle City. For dating back to 1905, Durant had recognized that Flint would play a

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<sup>3</sup> *Flint Journal*, March 19, 1953.

major role in GM's corporate ascent. "Flint is in the center of the automobile industry," he boasted, "a progressive city, good people, with conditions for manufacturing ideal."<sup>4</sup>

Very few Americans had even heard of Flint prior to the founding of General Motors. By the mid-1950s, however, the city had become virtually synonymous with automobile production. The growth of the city stemmed almost exclusively from the corporate triumphs of GM. In a 1955 report on Flint's economy, surveyors from the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago needed only one word to describe the city's economic structure: "The Flint economy, probably to a greater extent than that of any other city of comparable size, can be described in a single word. That word is automobiles."<sup>5</sup> In Flint, the car was king; and GM was the only game in town.

During the first half of the twentieth century, GM executives and Flint's civic and political leaders worked to build an industrial garden of modern factories and attractive residential neighborhoods inside the city.<sup>6</sup> Between 1900 and 1955, GM's local workforce grew at a frenetic pace as local executives opened new manufacturing and assembly facilities within the city. On the city's near north side—to the west of the gritty St. John Street neighborhood, the Flint River, and the Chesapeake and Ohio rail lines—

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<sup>4</sup> The Durant quotation is from Clarence H. Young and William A. Quinn, *Foundation for Living: The Story of Charles Stewart Mott and Flint* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 1. On the early history of General Motors, see Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., *My Years with General Motors* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964); Timothy Jacobs, *A History of General Motors* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Brompton Books, 1992); Axel Madsen, *The Deal Maker: How William C. Durant Made General Motors* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1999); and Farber, *Sloan Rules: Alfred P. Sloan and the Triumph of General Motors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, *1955 Annual Report: Growth and Prosperity in Five Midwest Cities* (Chicago: Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, 1955), 27. On the 1955 employment figures for Flint's GM plants, see Leo Donovan, "Flint Rides High on GM Overtime," *Detroit Free Press*, April 1, 1955. Also, see *General Motors Division Scrapbook*, v. 1-3 (LaCrosse, Wisconsin: Brookhaven Press, n.d.). All of the GM scrapbooks cited in this dissertation are located in the Flint Public Library's automotive scrapbook collection.

<sup>6</sup> I borrow the framework of the industrial garden from Robert Self. See, Self, *American Babylon*. See also, Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).



sat GM's massive complex of Buick manufacturing and assembly plants. With an employee roll that reached 27,400 in 1955, "The Buick" was Flint's largest employer and virtually a city unto itself. Flint was also home to two major industrial facilities operated by GM's AC Spark Plug division. At the southwestern edge of the Buick complex, on the corner of Harriet Street and Industrial Avenue, was GM's original AC Spark Plug plant. In 1940, AC officials opened a second Flint plant on the city's east side. By the mid-1950s, AC employed nearly twenty thousand workers who manufactured spark plugs, oil filters, and other automobile replacement parts at the two facilities. On Flint's west side, in a valley surrounding the Flint River, visitors at mid-century could find GM's Fisher Body 2 plant and a large complex of Chevrolet manufacturing plants known affectionately as "Chevy in the Hole." Nearly twenty thousand workers at Chevy in the Hole manufactured and assembled GM's top selling line of cars and trucks during the postwar era. Just to the north and west of Chevy in the Hole, on the corner of Third and Chevrolet Avenues, stood the General Motors Institute of Technology (GMI), an elite division of the company dedicated to training automobile engineers, plant managers, and corporate executives. Flint's fifth major industrial facility was the Fisher Body 1 plant, located on the city's far south side. By 1955, eight thousand workers at Fisher Body 1 manufactured automobile bodies for the north side Buick plants. An industrial marvel, Flint was home to more GM workers than any other city in the world.

As America's national obsession with automobiles took root in the early decades of the twentieth century, Flint and GM grew at breakneck speed, attracting tens of thousands of migrants to work in the city's smoke-belching factories. Between the turn of the century and the beginning of the Great Depression, Flint gained international

acclaim as GM's primary production center and the world's second largest manufacturer of cars, surpassed only by Detroit. "It is to the automobile," claimed the *New York Times Magazine* in 1937, "what Pittsburgh is to steel, what Akron is to rubber."<sup>7</sup> The city's rapid growth mirrored GM's rise to prominence. In 1900, only 13,103 people lived in Flint. By 1930, the Vehicle City's population had risen to 156,492.<sup>8</sup>

Over 80 percent of the city's residents in 1930 were native-born whites. Nearly two-thirds of these individuals—most of whom were Protestants—were originally from Michigan, while an additional 12 percent had migrated to the city from the nearby states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Approximately 12 percent of Flint's residents in 1930 were born in the South, most from the states of Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee. Foreign-born residents accounted for just 14.2 percent of the city's overall population. Among these immigrants, the largest portion hailed from English speaking sections of Canada, England, Scotland, and Germany. Unlike Detroit, where "new immigrants"—many of them Catholic—from Poland, Russia, Italy, Romania, and Greece comprised a third of the population, Flint's community of southern and eastern Europeans accounted for only 16 percent of the immigrant total. Only a small fraction of the city's total population—approximately 1 percent—were of either Hispanic or Asian descent. For their part, Negroes comprised just 3.6 percent of the Vehicle City's relatively homogeneous population.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Russell B. Porter, "Speed, Speed, and Still More Speed!—That Is Flint," *New York Times Magazine* (January 31, 1937).

<sup>8</sup> Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-37* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 102.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population 3:1* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), 1147, 1158; and Fine, *Sit-Down*, 102-103.

To boosters such as Carl Crow and Robert Plummer, Flint seemed to be the geographic embodiment of the American Dream—a city where hard work, “men of vision,” and human ingenuity made middle-class dreams and consumer prosperity attainable for all. Hoping to secure a piece of that dream, tens of thousands of migrants from big cities, small towns, and rural areas throughout the United States and the world packed their belongings and headed to Flint during the first half of the twentieth century. Most of these migrants knew exactly how they wanted to make a living. But where would they all live?

Housing the city’s growing population of workers presented Flint’s corporate and civic leaders with major challenges during the decades preceding World War II. In the 1910s and 1920s, GM executives and local real estate developers worked to resolve Flint’s housing crisis by building new neighborhoods and modern homes for migrant workers. Through racially restrictive deed covenants and other means, developers ensured that those new homes and neighborhoods were available only to white buyers, however. As with whites-only schools, parks, and workplaces, segregated neighborhoods fit comfortably within Flint’s broader civic culture of Jim Crow. For the first half of the twentieth century, restrictive housing covenants, discriminatory real estate practices, white violence, and other private forces converged to enforce rigid racial segregation in metropolitan areas such as Flint.<sup>10</sup>

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, federal and local policymakers began playing a more active role in shaping the racial contours of Flint’s residential housing market. New Deal home appraisal and mortgage insurance policies subsidized racially

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<sup>10</sup> Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares*; Kruse, *White Flight*, 42-104; and Seligman, *Block by Block*, 151-181. See also, Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; and Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

restricted housing, excluded African Americans from the federally insured home purchasing market, and helped to codify residential segregation in Flint and other metropolitan areas throughout the United States. Beginning in the 1930s, Washington-based administrators from the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) created national standards that shaped the ways in which local bankers, insurers, real estate brokers, and municipal policymakers weighed mortgage risks and measured neighborhood stability. Yet those same federal administrators willingly ceded a great deal of authority to local realtors, builders, municipal legislators, planners, lenders, and others on the ground who conducted housing surveys, created mortgage risk maps, and determined site locations for new housing developments. By the time Carl Crow wrote his tribute to GM and Flint, private housing discrimination, federal housing initiatives, and municipal public policies had combined to reinforce existing patterns of residential Jim Crow in Flint. The racial and spatial logic embedded within those policies remained in place throughout the postwar decades, an era in which Flint's civic and industrial leaders worked yet again to solve Flint's housing crisis.

### *Mapping Race, Space, and Value in Interwar Flint*

During the early twentieth century, international observers routinely heralded Flint's rise as a modern industrial metropolis. Hoping to recruit new workers to the Vehicle City, Billy Durant and other civic leaders promoted Flint as a "progressive" city where workers could earn high wages, buy new homes, and raise their families in wholesome midwestern surroundings. Yet beneath the glossy sheen of its Jazz Age image, Flint was

a gritty, unhealthy, and densely packed city that already teetered on the brink of urban crisis. As in Detroit, Chicago, and other early twentieth-century boomtowns, Flint's rapid and largely unplanned growth spawned a series of housing, city service, and public health emergencies that shocked the sensibilities of civic reformers. For tens of thousands of migrant laborers who worked at Flint's Buick, Chevrolet, AC Spark Plug, and Fisher Body plants, affordable housing was extremely difficult to locate in the decades preceding World War II. In the congested and unsanitary neighborhoods surrounding the city's auto factories, tents, boxcar apartments, cardboard homes, tarpaper shacks, and other "homes of the homeless" dotted the urban landscape. As one observer sarcastically noted about Flint housing in 1916, "they keep them [residents] so thick that their feet hang out the windows."<sup>11</sup> Even during the booming 1920s—a decade in Flint marked by relatively high wages, economic expansion, and GM-sponsored housing construction programs—living conditions in huge swaths of the city were appalling and substandard, with thousands of new migrants reserving cots at the YWCA, sleeping on rented chairs in hotel lobbies, and sharing beds by shift.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Ihlder, "Flint: When Men Build Automobiles Who Builds Their City?" *Survey* 36 (September 2, 1916), 549. Also, see Richard W. Judd, *Socialist Cities: Municipal Politics and the Grass Roots of American Socialism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 96.

<sup>12</sup> Elroy S. Guckert, "The Housing Status in Flint, Michigan," n.d., in Alexander C. Findlay Papers, box 1, GHCC.



Figure 1.1. “Homes of the Homeless.” Migrant housing near Flint’s Buick facilities, ca. 1920. Courtesy of Perry Archives.

The city’s severe housing crisis, which had first taken shape in the 1910s and 1920s, came to a head with the massive international economic depression of the 1930s. The Great Depression dealt a vicious blow to the American automobile industry and its workers. Automobile manufacturers in the United States responded to sagging consumer demand with production cuts that reached as high as 75 percent.<sup>13</sup> In Flint, the curtailment of manufacturing devastated the local labor market, generating unemployment rates that routinely approached 50 percent in the early 1930s. By 1938, the number of Flint families on relief had reached 19,658, more than half of the

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<sup>13</sup> Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus*, 127-155.

households in the city.<sup>14</sup> In the housing sector, the economic crisis generated a cascade-like effect in which lagging automobile production forced local banks to curtail lending, which in turn led builders to cancel new developments and homeowners to delay plans for home maintenance and the purchase of new dwellings.

By the mid-1930s, the Flint area's housing stock was among the poorest and most dilapidated in the United States. As later surveys would reveal, Flint was also among the most racially segregated and spatially fragmented cities in the nation. In January 1934, Elroy S. Guckert, director of the Flint Institute of Research and Planning, in collaboration with famed city planner Edmund Bacon, local real estate developers, GM officials, and federal officials from the Civil Works Administration (CWA), organized a detailed survey of the city's housing and economic conditions. CWA surveyors began by dividing the city into forty-one small districts, "laid out to be homogeneous economically and socially, to the extent permitted by other considerations." After creating and mapping the forty-one subunits—later incorporated by federal officials to map the city's census tract boundaries—CWA surveyors visited every dwelling unit in Flint between January and March of 1934. They found that nearly 15 percent of the city's thirty-five thousand housing units required major structural repairs and at least 2 percent of the city's housing—deemed uninhabitable by city building inspector Peter J. Weidner—warranted immediate demolition. Of the inhabited homes in Flint, more than 20 percent had no working baths and 13 percent lacked toilets. As well, Guckert and his associates learned that one in four Flint homes had no access to hot water, while at least 6 percent of city homes had no running water at all. "If cleanliness is next to Godliness," opined a

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<sup>14</sup> Chafe, "Flint and the Great Depression," *Michigan History* 53 (Fall 1969): 234.

local journalist after viewing the survey results, “another black mark is checked against Flint.”<sup>15</sup>

Beyond finding widespread dilapidation and unsanitary living conditions, CWA surveyors also discovered grave housing shortages. Citywide, CWA workers and local officials counted 35,248 dwelling units—nearly all of which were single-family, detached, wood-frame structures—with an average of over four persons living in each home. Because the city’s housing stock consisted primarily of small, one- and two-bedroom “workman’s cottages,” however, the average number of persons per bedroom in the city as a whole was 1.7, with several sections of the city posting occupancy rates in excess of two persons per bedroom. Guckert and his colleagues also noted that thousands of unemployed autoworkers had left the city during the early 1930s. While many returned to their birthplaces in the South, others acquired new lots and built their own homes in Flint’s largely undeveloped suburbs, where they grew crops and raised livestock to make ends meet. The outmigrations of unemployed autoworkers during the 1930s significantly reduced overcrowding in the city’s residential areas, but Flint’s housing shortage nonetheless persisted throughout the decade. During a 1930s address, building inspector Weidner noted, “Flint has always had a housing shortage, even during the worst of the depression.” According to Weidner and other local officials, the dearth of standard housing stemmed primarily from the city’s rapid, unplanned growth during the 1910s and 1920s—which had created severe housing shortages that lingered until well after World War II—and the almost complete collapse of the residential building

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander C. Findlay, *The Housing Situation in Flint, Michigan* (Flint: Flint Institute of Research and Planning, 1938). Also, see *Flint Journal*, April 4, 1937; Edmund N. Bacon, “A Diagnosis and Suggested Treatment of an Urban Community’s Land Problems,” *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics* 16:1 (February 1940): 72-88; and Fine, *Sit-Down*, 102-106.



industry during the 1930s. Between 1925 and 1929, local builders constructed an average of 1,786 dwellings per year in the city. That number dropped to an annual figure of only one hundred units between 1930 and 1936, however.<sup>16</sup> Conservatively, Weidner and other CWA investigators estimated that the city needed at least five thousand new homes to meet the housing needs of its nearly 150,000 residents. Upon completing the survey, Guckert promptly forwarded the results to federal officials in Washington. Guckert's survey, along with thousands of other local studies conducted throughout the United States, helped to shock federal officials into action to solve the nation's deep housing crisis.

Along with the charts, tables, and maps that formed the crux of the 1934 study, Guckert and other members of the CWA team also provided narrative reports on housing and neighborhood conditions in selected parts of the city. Specifically, Guckert drafted detailed reports on six residential neighborhoods that he believed represented the overall spectrum of housing and neighborhood conditions in the city. These in-depth reports on neighborhood conditions offer a revealing glimpse of the city's built and lived landscapes of the 1930s. Perhaps more importantly, however, the reports outline the calculus employed by federal and local surveyors in determining a neighborhood's desirability, property values, development potential, and quality of life.<sup>17</sup>

On the city's far north side, just south of the Carpenter Road boundary that separated Flint from Mt. Morris and Genesee Townships, CWA surveyors found District 1, a "low grade peripheral white section, started as a series of cheap subdivisions and inadequately provided with such urban facilities as sewers, sidewalks and paving." As in

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<sup>16</sup> Peter J. Weidner, "The Housing Problem in Flint," n.d., Findlay Papers, box 1, GHCC.

<sup>17</sup> Guckert, "The Housing Status in Flint, Michigan."

virtually all other residential enclaves on the city's largely underdeveloped suburban fringe, residents of District 1 were exclusively white and relatively uneducated, and the area's housing stock contained many one-room "garage houses" and other temporary, jerrybuilt homes of "flimsy construction." In describing the poor housing that ringed the city's borders, Weidner warned, "Now Flint is fringed on all sides with shanty towns and blighted areas."<sup>18</sup> Although this district and other outlying residential neighborhoods contained many new housing units, a plethora of open space, and low-density patterns of development—all positives under the CWA's rubric—Guckert assigned District 1 the lowest grade because of the area's poor planning and building standards, the lack of education among its residents, and the inadequacy of its utilities and other city services.<sup>19</sup>

Several miles south of District 1, on the city's west and near northwestern sides, CWA surveyors found two upper middle-class neighborhoods, Districts 22 and 38, along with several other high- and medium-grade white residential subdivisions. Unlike the working-class migrant neighborhoods that straddled the city's suburban borders, Civic Park, Mott Park, Glendale Hills, and other premier neighborhoods on Flint's west side had full access to municipal services and utilities, featured many new homes of sound construction, and contained a highly educated, economically stable mix of skilled auto workers, tradespersons, retail workers, and professionals. With over 98 percent of its homes in good repair, the west side's housing stock was among the most modern in the city. In Guckert's estimation, stability was both a physical and a social variable, however. For Guckert and his CWA colleagues, neighborhood stability stemmed not simply from access to utilities, newness of homes, or residential lot sizes, but also from

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<sup>18</sup> Weidner, "The Housing Problem in Flint," 2.

<sup>19</sup> Guckert, "The Housing Status in Flint, Michigan," 12-13.

the presence or absence of social homogeneity. Concerning its social stability, the west side of the city also fared well, containing a population that was “almost entirely white” with “few machine operators or unskilled workers” and virtually no immigrants from outside of northern Europe.<sup>20</sup>

Moving in a southeasterly direction from Districts 22 and 38, CWA officials located a number of older, transitional neighborhoods ringing the city’s downtown commercial core. In his report on District 29, for instance, Guckert noted that the once “aristocratic” Grand Traverse neighborhood had suffered from population loss, the conversion of large homes to rental units, and the spread of rooming houses and commercial structures. Beyond describing the “slow deterioration” of Grand Traverse’s older housing stock, Guckert also cited the “highly mixed” social composition of the neighborhood and its proximity to “more seriously depreciated sections” as factors shaping the neighborhood’s transitional status. Although the neighborhood featured many stately old homes and a relatively well-educated population with many skilled workers and professionals, the possible encroachment of Negroes, southern European immigrants, and other “undesirable” social groups—along with the neighborhood’s proximity to declining, inner-city residential areas—led Guckert to conclude, “The fate of the district is undecided.”<sup>21</sup>

Geographic proximity to either dilapidated housing or nonwhite neighborhoods did not always render a district transitional under the CWA’s rating schema. The presence of neighborhood barriers—whether topographic, economic, or social—persuaded Guckert on several occasions to issue a high rating in spite of an area’s

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<sup>20</sup> Guckert, “The Housing Status in Flint, Michigan,” 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> Guckert, “The Housing Status in Flint, Michigan,” 14-15.

location near “less desirable” residential districts. On the eastern edge of downtown Flint, Guckert found the Woodlawn Park neighborhood, District 16, the city’s premier and most exclusive residential enclave. Home to Charles Stewart Mott, GM’s largest stockholder, along with dozens of other top GM executives, Woodlawn Park featured a mix of elegant mansions and attractive brick and masonry homes. With nearly 95 percent of its homes constructed since 1924, Woodlawn Park contained the newest, sturdiest, priciest, and most carefully restricted housing stock in the city. Although Guckert noted that Woodlawn Park was close to an “older, undesirable section” to the north—home to hundreds of the black domestic workers who worked in the all-white area—the neighborhood nonetheless received a high grade because of its new housing, the educational level of its residents, the overall appeal and prestige of the district, and the abundance of high-end consumer products such as “mechanical refrigerators and oil burners” in the area’s homes. CWA surveyors failed to mention the racially restrictive covenants that barred Negro buyers from moving to Woodlawn Park in their narrative reports, but the presence of such agreements undoubtedly shaped Guckert’s conclusion that “the district may be considered today’s aristocratic section.”<sup>22</sup>

Several miles north of Woodlawn Park sat the “older, undesirable” District 5, the St. John Street neighborhood on Flint’s near north side. “District 5,” Guckert wrote, “is a deteriorated residence section, more than a third negro, adjoining and partly enclosing a part of the Buick factories.” Guckert classified the neighborhood as deteriorated based upon its older, more dilapidated housing stock, its reputation for gambling, prostitution, and other criminal activities, its large number of unskilled factory workers, and its ethnic and racial diversity. “Nativity is highly mixed,” Guckert reported, “with negroes largely

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<sup>22</sup> Guckert, “The Housing Status in Flint, Michigan,” 16-17.

from the south and a large number of white occupants from central, eastern and southern Europe.” “There is also,” he added, “a considerable number from Asia Minor and from Mexico.”<sup>23</sup> The quality of housing in St. John was superior to that in several more highly-rated sections of the city, and the neighborhood included many small business owners and professionals, yet Guckert nevertheless concluded that the presence of Negroes and other nonwhites, along with the area’s reputation for vice, were sufficient to warrant a rating of deteriorated. Race, though only one of many variables that surveyors measured in determining grades for residential areas, was an essential component of the 1934 CWA survey.

The CWA report confirmed that poor housing and poverty proliferated throughout the city during the 1930s. Still, Guckert and his colleagues found that the housing crisis hit especially hard in the St. John Street and Floral Park enclaves, the two inner-city neighborhoods that housed virtually all of the city’s six thousand black residents.<sup>24</sup> Yet in his narrative reports on neighborhood conditions, Guckert did not attempt to explain the correlation between housing quality and racial occupancy. The patterns of residential segregation and neighborhood deterioration that Guckert and his assistants found in Flint were anything but accidental, however.

*Building a Segregated Metropolis:  
Private Action, Public Policies, and the Culture of Jim Crow in Prewar Flint*

The St. John Street area contained the city’s largest concentration of poverty and its second-highest proportion of African Americans. Surrounded on three sides by the Buick

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<sup>23</sup> Guckert, “The Housing Status in Flint, Michigan,” 13-14.

<sup>24</sup> According to a 1938 survey, 85.8 percent of the Negro families in Floral Park and St. John received public aid. See Erdmann D. Beynon, *Characteristics of the Relief Case Load in Genesee County, Michigan* (Flint: Genesee County Welfare Relief Commission, 1940), 47.

factories, the Flint River, and a labyrinth of rail lines, the teardrop-shaped community formed the historical heart of the city's North End. Remarking on its near complete isolation, a writer for the *Flint Journal* once noted, "St. John is virtually an island in a city. On its west side the massive Buick complex is like a mountain range. On the east is the Flint River. There are few ways to get in and out."<sup>25</sup> On Flint's North End, unregulated industrial and residential building during the early decades of the twentieth century brought neighborhoods and factories into close geographic proximity, frustrating city planners, residents, and GM industrialists alike. In a 1958 study of Flint's Depression-era political culture, urban geographer Peirce F. Lewis remarked on the close relationship between poor planning and residential blight on the north side: "As Buick factory buildings spread along the Pere Marquette tracks, jerry-built houses mushroomed beside them, creating what are today Flint's most dismal slums."<sup>26</sup>

Based in part upon the presence of Negro residents and immigrant "aliens," both St. John Street and Floral Park received low ratings in the 1934 CWA survey. Yet the two neighborhoods were spatially, economically, and socially distinct. African Americans lived in Floral Park, District 9 in the CWA study, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, when free persons of color and former slaves first arrived in the neighborhood. Floral Park was located in the city's Ninth Ward, roughly bounded by Court Street on the north, the Grand Trunk Railroad tracks on the south, South Saginaw Street on the west, and Lapeer Road on the east. Prior to World War II, African Americans could find housing only in a small section of the neighborhood near the Grand

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<sup>25</sup> *Flint Journal*, September 2, 1970.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Janice K. Wilberg, "An Analysis of an Urban Neighborhood: St. John Street," University of Michigan-Flint, History Department, Student Papers, GHCC. See also, Peirce Lewis, "Geography in the Politics of Flint," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1958).

Trunk rail lines. Despite its rigid segregation, the Floral Park of the 1920s and 1930s was an economically diverse neighborhood of professionals, domestics, shopkeepers, and a growing number of unskilled and semi-skilled factory workers who worked at GM. Unlike householders from St. John—who suffered from extreme pollution, severe housing dilapidation, and spatial isolation—Floral Park residents benefited from the neighborhood’s prime location near downtown shops and the Thread Lake recreation area. The Clifford Street Community Center, Clark School, the legendary Golden Leaf nightclub, Lakeside Park, Quinn Chapel AME Church, and the Michigan Theater combined to anchor the south side’s intensely segregated yet bustling public sphere.

Poverty and substandard housing were common in Floral Park and the surrounding Thread Lake neighborhoods, yet black residents of the south side nevertheless enjoyed a privileged status that correlated with the neighborhood’s distance from the North End. In a study of black voting behavior in Flint, Peirce Lewis remarked upon the persistence of status distinctions between African Americans on the city’s north and south sides:

The difference in distance between the two areas was about three miles, but socially and economically, it was a difference between two worlds. As time passed . . . the economic differences grew less acute. Nevertheless, the physical distance still represented a considerable social barrier, with Thread Lake Negroes continuing to look on themselves as the custodians of Negro tradition in Flint, and in all ways superior to the upstart newcomers of the [North End’s] Buick neighborhood.<sup>27</sup>

Flint resident Willie Nolden offered a more blunt characterization of the class divides between North and South Enders: “When I was a kid, if you were from the North Side you were a nothin’. If you were on the South Side, you were somethin’. It was kind of a

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<sup>27</sup> P. Lewis, “Impact of Negro Migration on the Electoral Geography of Flint, Michigan, 1932-1962: A Cartographic Analysis,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55:1 (March 1965): 6-7.

class struggle between the North Side and the South Side.”<sup>28</sup> As the city’s black population soared during the 1940s and 1950s, Floral Park thus became a prized destination for thousands of southern black migrants seeking jobs at GM and a better life in Flint.

Floral Park, the nearby Thread Lake area, and St. John became popular destinations for African-American migrants during and after the 1930s in part because black home seekers in the Vehicle City had few other housing options. The North End’s peculiar urban and industrial geographies served to isolate St. John from the rest of the city. Still, thousands of white and black migrants found well-worn paths both into and out of St. John and Floral Park during the 1920s and 1930s. More than the Flint River divide, rail lines, and other geographic and industrial barriers, race, class, municipal policies, and discriminatory real estate practices shaped migratory flows to and from St. John and Floral Park. Indeed, a potent mix of local housing initiatives and racial antipathies combined to harden the city’s racial geography long before Flint residents knew anything about the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC), residential security maps, and federally sponsored “redlining.”

The intense racial segregation that kept whites and blacks separate during the Depression stemmed in large part from the countywide use of court-sanctioned racially restrictive housing covenants by builders, developers, realtors, and homeowners. From the 1910s through the close of the 1940s, virtually all new housing constructed in the city and its suburbs fell under restrictive deed covenants designed to preserve property values and protect living standards in white residential districts. General Motors played an

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<sup>28</sup> Ananthakrishnan Aiyer, ed., *Telling Our Stories: Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement in Flint* (Flint: Flint ColorLine Project, 2007), 26. See also, Rhonda Sanders, *Bronze Pillars: An Oral History of African-Americans in Flint* (Flint: Flint Journal and Sloan Museum, 1995), 10-22.



important role in the spread of such covenants through its local housing initiatives. Beginning in the 1910s, officials from GM and local builders designed restrictive housing covenants that formalized standards for new housing developments. Between 1910 and 1920, as the company struggled to meet the rising international demand for new automobiles, Flint's population rose from 38,500 to nearly 90,000. Embarrassed by the tent cities and shantytowns that surrounded their factories—and hoping to recruit and retain new migrant workers—in 1919 GM officials organized the Modern Housing Corporation, the first and only division of the corporation devoted to housing construction. Between 1919 and 1933, workers from GM's Modern Housing division joined other affiliated builders in erecting nearly three thousand new homes in three subdivisions on Flint's near northwest side. Later named Civic Park, Chevrolet Park, and Mott Park, GM's new neighborhoods, which all rated highly on the CWA survey, offered buyers a choice of twenty-eight different types of home designs constructed with a variety of sturdy building materials. The housing available in GM's subdivisions included bungalows as large as six rooms and two-story homes of up to seven rooms. All of the units in GM's Modern Housing developments included freshly seeded lawns, shrubbery, sanitary sewer and water connections, gas and electric service, and newly constructed streets and sidewalks. In their attempts to lure young families with children, GM officials persuaded members of the Flint Board of Education to construct two new schools for the children who moved to the Chevrolet, Civic, and Mott Park neighborhoods. To make the homes affordable, General Motors offered generous financing terms to new homeowners that included loans at 6 percent interest, down payments of only 10 percent, and monthly mortgage bills equal to 1 percent of the total

home loan.<sup>29</sup> In 1916, journalist John Ihlder, reflecting upon Flint's meteoric, haphazard growth, had asked, "When Men Build Automobiles, Who Builds Their City?"<sup>30</sup> With their Modern Housing Corporation initiative, GM officials attempted to answer Ihlder's pressing question.

Between 1919 and the early 1930s, thousands of working-class and professional families rushed to acquire GM's new houses. The homes were not available on the free market, however. Hoping to preserve future property values and a high quality of life in the new subdivisions, officials from GM attached stringent, legally enforceable deed and building restrictions to all of their lots and homes. Specifically, GM mandated that only single-family homes could be built in its new subdivisions and barred all commercial establishments, except home-based doctors' and dentists' offices, from residential streets. In addition, the GM housing covenants prohibited owners and renters from keeping livestock, selling liquor, and constructing outdoor cesspools or privies. These covenants also required racial segregation, stipulating that homes "could not be leased to or occupied by any person or persons not wholly of the white or Caucasian race."<sup>31</sup>

After constructing the homes, Modern Housing Corporation officials turned over the properties to the Arthur E. Raab Realty Company, the exclusive selling agency for all General Motors lots and homes. During the early 1920's, Raab and his associates published a widely circulated promotional brochure trumpeting GM's new subdivisions, "Flint's largest, finest, fully improved, close-in, restricted residential area; high and dry, being 100 feet higher than the downtown section and kept free from smoke and soot by the ever prevailing westerly winds." Regarding building and deed restrictions, Raab's

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<sup>29</sup> Dick Shappell, "Looks at Flint and Its People," *Flint Journal*, n.d. [ca. 1938].

<sup>30</sup> Ihlder, "Flint."

<sup>31</sup> Scott Peters, "History of Mott Park Community," (unpublished essay in author's possession).

literature reassured prospective buyers, “Each Home owner will have a Homesite at least 50 by 100 feet, with all improvements and with ample restrictions to protect his Home and to secure the maximum of beauty, utility and value. No shacks, huts or foreign communities will be allowed.”



Figure 1.2. Modern homes in a modern city. In 1927, workers from GM’s Modern Housing Corporation constructed this three-bedroom, one-bathroom home at 2514 Paducah Street on Flint’s west side. This house, along with all others constructed by General Motors, fell under deed restrictions that prohibited African-American occupancy. Photograph by Andrew R. Highsmith, 2004.

Arthur Raab and his colleagues sprinkled many references to modernity throughout their advertising circulars, reminding buyers that GM home sites provided “modern” homes with “modern” conveniences and assuring parents that children in the

neighborhood would have access to the finest, most “modern” schools. GM and Raab representatives believed that new homes complete with flushable toilets, electricity, water and sewer lines, and paved roads were indispensable components of modern living. By invoking modernity, however, they also made broader social claims about race, space, citizenship, and value. “Land values depend upon location, transportation, restrictions, improvements and rapidity of development,” the Raab brochures maintained. A modern house was not only a sturdy, sanitary, spacious dwelling with attractive furnishings, but also a home in a neighborhood protected from incompatible land uses and other noxious influences. Officials from Raab Realty and General Motors thus went to great lengths to ensure prospective homeowners that they would never have to live next to a chicken coop, and that nonwhites would never threaten their property values or quality of life by purchasing property nearby. Following the early twentieth-century principles of zoning and real estate, themselves reflections of a broader cultural consensus on racial exclusions, Arthur Raab and his employers at General Motors viewed residential integration as a grave threat to quality of life, neighborhood stability, and property values. Consequently, the covenants that governed all home construction, purchasing, and leasing in GM’s new subdivisions guaranteed new buyers that, henceforth, they would not have to live next door to a privy, a tavern, or a Negro.<sup>32</sup>

From the 1910s through the close of the 1940s, as builders, urban planners, and realtors rushed to meet the housing needs of the city’s new white migrants, restrictive housing covenants spread to both new and existing neighborhoods throughout Flint and its suburbs. In the elite Woodlawn Park enclave, the James A. Welch Company, a

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<sup>32</sup> Raab Realty Company, *General Motors Homesites* (Flint: Raab Realty Company, n.d.). On the origins of racially restrictive zoning and housing covenants, see Freund, *Colored Property*, 45-98. Also, see Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares*.

prominent local real estate firm, offered new home sites in “a district fully restricted and possessing the proper social atmosphere – where environs will always be pleasant and where values will steadily increase.”<sup>33</sup> “In Woodlawn Park,” Welch assured buyers, “no resident ever will be compelled to sell out and move because the property next door is being handled in a manner adverse to the well being of the whole district.” With the assistance of landscape architect William Pitkin, Jr., and renowned city planner John Nolen, Welch compiled a set of restrictions that he believed would preserve the high standard of living and inflated land costs in the area. Specifically, the housing covenants for Woodlawn Park stipulated, “No poultry, cattle, live stock, except watch dogs and family pets and driving horses, shall be kept. No bill board shall be erected or maintained. No building used for the sale of intoxicating liquors.” Recognizing the special needs of the neighborhood’s wealthy residents, Welch also crafted a racial restriction that allowed visits and overnight stays from service workers while still prohibiting black occupancy: “No negroes or persons of negro extraction (except while employed thereon as servants) shall occupy any of the land.” As in many other deed restrictions, Woodlawn Park’s housing covenant included the prohibition of Negro occupancy in a section devoted to nuisances.<sup>34</sup> In Woodlawn Park, as elsewhere, the use of racially restrictive covenants provided homeowners with the privilege of preselecting their future neighbors into perpetuity.

During the 1920s and 1930s, realtors and developers routinely referenced restrictive covenants in their marketing campaigns for new housing developments. In the

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<sup>33</sup> The quotation is from an undated promotional letter authored by James A. Welch and can be found in the Black History File, Perry Archives, Buick Gallery and Research Center, Alfred P. Sloan Museum, Flint, Michigan (hereinafter cited as Perry Archives).

<sup>34</sup> J. A. Welch Company, *The Weight of Evidence* (Flint: J. A. Welch Company, n.d. [ca. 1921]).

spring of 1930, George C. Kellar advertised lots for sale just to the east of Woodlawn Park, in the Brookside neighborhood, “one of the most desirable home building sections in Flint.” Like Welch, Kellar promised buyers “adequate restrictions to protect your home investment.” During that same year, realtor Don D. Waters marketed “beautiful homesites, adequately restricted – moderately priced,” for residents seeking to build new homes in the west side’s Glendale Hills subdivision. Hoping to reassure prospective buyers that their lots were safe investments, Waters and many other local realtors reminded purchasers that all of their home and lot sales were subject to the terms established by the segregated National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), “an organization governed by a code of ethics, conceived for the protection of property buyers, owners and sellers.”<sup>35</sup> As part of its code of ethics, NAREB prohibited member realtors from selling property to nonwhites in segregated white neighborhoods.

By the close of the 1930s, restrictive housing covenants had played a decisive role in making the Vehicle City one of the most segregated cities in the United States. In 1951, sociologists Donald O. and Mary S. Cowgill released the results of a national survey of housing segregation in 187 of America’s largest cities. Based upon block-level housing data from the 1940 census, the Cowgills’ study ranked Flint as the third most segregated city in the United States, surpassed only by Miami, Florida, and Norfolk, Virginia.<sup>36</sup> Though geographically ensconced within the industrial North, less than an hour’s drive from the Canadian border, the city of Flint was more segregated than

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<sup>35</sup> *Flint Real Estate and Home Builder*, April 1930, Black History File, Perry Archives.

<sup>36</sup> Donald O. Cowgill and Mary S. Cowgill, “An Index of Segregation Based on Block Statistics,” *American Sociological Review* 16:6 (December 1951): 825-831.

virtually every other city in the nation. “Flint,” African-American resident Angela Sawyer recalled, was “the new old South.”<sup>37</sup>

Racial segregation extended well beyond the sphere of housing, however. In addition to residential segregation, African Americans in interwar Flint faced an uncodified yet formal and rigid system of Jim Crow that kept whites and blacks separate at workplaces, in schools, and at most places of public accommodation. Prior to World War II, black workers found it nearly impossible to gain employment at General Motors, except as janitors or foundry workers. Likewise, retailers serving the city’s downtown business district refused to hire black salespersons and clerks until well after the close of the war. In the city’s “neighborhood schools,” housing segregation and widespread school district gerrymandering combined to keep black and white pupils rigidly segregated. Moreover, with few exceptions, white proprietors of local barbershops, restaurants, hotels, and taverns denied service to black customers until after World War II.<sup>38</sup> Downtown, at the famed Durant Hotel, managers refused to accept black occupants until 1954, when lightweight boxing champion Jimmy Carter broke the color bar.<sup>39</sup> “You couldn’t stay at any of the downtown hotels,” recalled Alvin Loving. You couldn’t eat in a downtown restaurant. This town! God, I didn’t know that existed anymore.”<sup>40</sup> At movie theaters, amusement parks, skating rinks, bowling alleys, and other places of

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<sup>37</sup> Angela Sawyer, interview by Wanda Howard, n.d. [ca. 1994], Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives.

<sup>38</sup> On pre-World War II segregation in barber shops, restaurants, hotels, and taverns, see, for instance, “Southernism in Flint,” *Flint Spokesman*, June 29, 1946; *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, July 27, 1953; John Hightower, interview by R. Sanders and W. Howard, March 22, 1994, Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives; and Albert Harris, interview by Robert Schafer, September 9, 1987, Oral Histories, 1987-1989, GHCC.

<sup>39</sup> On the desegregation of the Durant Hotel, see <http://www.flinthistory.com/history/timeline.shtml>.

<sup>40</sup> Alvin Loving and Mary Helen Loving, interview by R. Schafer, September 12, 1988, Oral Histories, 1987-1989, GHCC. See also Urban League of Flint, *Race Relations: A Problem of American Democracy* (Flint: Urban League of Flint, 1944); and *Urban League Recorder*, Urban League of Flint Papers, 1943-1950, box 1, folder 5, GHCC.

leisure, owners and managers either refused service altogether for African Americans or established designated days, times, or spaces to accommodate black customers.<sup>41</sup> During the Depression, for instance, black moviegoers could attend shows at the Michigan Theater near Floral Park, but only if they sat separately in the balcony, or “crow’s nest.”<sup>42</sup> Managers of the Industrial Mutual Association (IMA) auditorium north of downtown required visiting bands to perform two acts, one for white patrons from 9 p.m. to midnight, and the second, for African Americans, from 1 to 5 a.m.<sup>43</sup> The structures of Jim Crow were so thoroughly embedded in the city’s culture that the color line, for virtually all Flint residents, extended beyond death. Due to racially restrictive burial covenants, nearly all privately owned cemeteries in the county refused to bury black bodies until 1964, when Genesee County Circuit Judge Stewart A. Newblatt overturned the practice.<sup>44</sup> “Jim Crow was the rule in Flint, that’s plain as day,” Mary Helen Loving remembered.<sup>45</sup>

Private acts of discrimination, though often upheld by courts, helped to maintain strict color lines in the neighborhoods, restaurants, movie theaters, hotels, amusement parks, and taverns of interwar Flint. The city’s culture of Jim Crow did not derive solely from the private sphere, however. During the 1920s and 1930s, municipal officials helped to maintain segregation in the city’s schools, parks, and neighborhoods. Outside

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<sup>41</sup> On movie theaters, amusement parks, skating rinks, and bowling alleys, see “Charges Discrimination in Bowling Alleys,” *Flint Weekly Review*, September 14, 1961; and R. Sanders, “Good, Bad Times in Flint: A History of Two Families,” *Flint Journal*, September 30, 1984.

<sup>42</sup> Reverend Eugene Simpson, interview by W. Howard, May 27, 1993, Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives.

<sup>43</sup> On racial segregation at the IMA auditorium, see Charlotte Williams, interview by W. Howard, n.d. [ca. 1993], Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives; Dolores Ennis, interview by W. Howard, September 22, 1993, Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives.

<sup>44</sup> See “Cemetery Ordered to Accept Negroes,” *Flint Journal*, June 16, 1964; and Betty Brenner, “Burial in Area Formerly a Black or White Issue,” *Flint Journal*, February 25, 1993.

<sup>45</sup> A. Loving and M. Loving interview, September 12, 1988.



of the well-defined borders of St. John and Floral Park, black pedestrians and motorists in white residential districts faced near-constant harassment by officers from the Flint Police Department. Referring to the Flint River color line that divided St. John Street from the all-white east side, Reverend Eugene Simpson, pastor of the Mt. Tabor Baptist Church, remembered that during the 1930s, “Blacks weren’t allowed across the river unless they were going to school.” To the west of the Buick facilities, Saginaw Street was yet another carefully policed color line. As Simpson recalled of one west side street, “When I was a young boy coming along, Blacks weren’t even allowed to walk up and down Welch Boulevard . . . unless you were going to work for some white person.”<sup>46</sup>

Local school and recreation officials also adhered to the tenets of Jim Crow. At Central High School and other public school facilities in the city, members of the board of education prohibited black children from using swimming pools until 1944, when officials granted black boys an opportunity to use the pool once per week for segregated recreation.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, parks officials at Berston Field House and other public facilities maintained separate schedules for white and black swimmers during the 1930s and 1940s. Berston employees allowed black swimmers to use the pool on Wednesdays. To accommodate black residents the rest of the week, city officials operated outdoor sprinklers across the street from the field house. “We would always have access to the pool after it had been used by the white community,” north side resident Max Brandon remembered.

And when we finished using the pool that evening, all the water would be drained out. All the splash boxes would be empty. And the next day, the

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<sup>46</sup> Simpson interview, May 27, 1993.

<sup>47</sup> Urban League of Flint, “1944 in Review,” Urban League of Flint Papers, box 1, folder 5, GHCC. See also, Lois Holt and Ruth Van Zandt, interview by R. Schafer, October 27, 1988, Oral Histories, 1987-1989, GHCC; and *Urban League Recorder*, Urban League of Flint Papers, 1943-1950, folder 5, GHCC.

white community would have access to clean swimming water to swim in and clean splash boxes to step in before entering the pool.

Brandon and other black children also faced discriminatory rules at the Berston Field House Library, where black children could only access books during official, school-sponsored visits.<sup>48</sup>

Segregated schools, parks, and swimming pools fit comfortably within the city's broader prewar civic culture; and so too did minstrelsy and other Jim Crow performances. In 1940, George Oscar Bowen, the Flint Board of Commerce's official "songleader," published *Book of Songs*, a compilation of popular local anthems. Not surprisingly, Bowen's collection included patriotic standards such as "The Star Spangled Banner" and "Michigan, My Michigan." However, the pamphlet also contained the lyrics to minstrel songs such as "Old Black Joe" and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny."<sup>49</sup> In Flint, elected officials often joined members of the Kiwanis Club and other civic organizations in performing annual minstrel shows to fund anti-tuberculosis efforts and other charitable causes. During the 1933 Kiwanis show, Flint's mayor, Raymond A. Brownell, city commissioners Harry M. Comins and George A. Barnes, school superintendent L. H. Lamb, city parks chairperson Arthur H. Sarvis, and Forest W. Boswell, a member of the Flint Board of Education, donned "blackface and grotesque attire," hoping to raise funds for a children's health camp.<sup>50</sup> White leaders in the Vehicle City "blacked-up" on a regular basis to raise money for a variety of important charitable causes, but these

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<sup>48</sup> Max Brandon, interview by W. Howard, April 13, 1993, Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives. On segregated swimming, see also, Annalea Bannister, interview by W. Howard, November 2, 1993, Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives; and Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> George Oscar Bowen, *Book of Songs* (Flint: Flint Board of Commerce, 1940).

<sup>50</sup> On the Kiwanis minstrel shows of the 1930s, see, for instance, *Flint Journal*, January 6, April 9, 14, 25, 1933, January 4, 21, 28-29, February 1, 7, 1934, January 3, February 6, 14, 1935. The quotation is from "Kiwanis Paraders Ask Minstrel Show Support," *Flint Journal*, April 23, 1933.

minstrel routines were also spectacles of racial power. The maintenance of Jim Crow entailed more than simply segregating black and white bodies. “Jim Crow performances” black resident Mary Helen Loving asserted, “were used to remind black people of their position.”<sup>51</sup>

In the decades preceding World War II, white citizens of Flint united around a broad cultural consensus on the need for strict racial segregation. By the mid-1930s, when federal housing officials began taking an active interest in the local real estate market, private restrictions and municipal policies had converged to make Flint one of the most segregated cities in the nation. Deeply rooted in the civic and political cultures of Flint and other American cities, Jim Crow neighborhoods, schools, parks, shops, and workplaces predated the 1930s births of the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration. Nevertheless, through a series of pre- and postwar interventions in the local housing market, federal and local officials worked together to codify and formalize the cultural mandates for racial segregation in the Vehicle City.

*Tests of a Reject Neighborhood:*

*The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration*

Real estate broker Arthur Raab spent most of the 1920s serving as the primary agent marketing GM’s newly constructed homes in west Flint. During the early 1930s, GM began phasing out its home construction initiatives, however, and Raab turned his attention towards the CWA survey and other efforts to rebuild the depression-ravaged city. One of the study’s financial backers and a close advisor to survey coordinator Elroy Guckert, Raab authored a plethora of letters in 1934 and 1935 on the long-range

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<sup>51</sup> A. Loving and M. Loving interview, September 12, 1988.

importance of the CWA's efforts. Raab hoped that the survey and other federally sponsored studies would allow civic leaders to assess the nature and scope of the city's housing slump. More importantly, though, he and other local real estate developers believed that the survey would help municipal and federal officials design a plan of action for rebuilding Flint's housing stock. Within weeks of the survey's completion, Raab had contacted Flint City Manager J. M. Barringer and local GM executives Charles Stewart Mott and Harlow Curtice, imploring them to join a citywide steering committee to direct Flint's future growth. Raab sought to use the CWA survey as a guideline for mapping and planning the city's future. As a realtor, Raab clearly stood to benefit financially from any rebuilding efforts in the region. "The selfish interest," Raab admitted, "is, that my business being real estate, when the re-building comes, which must come, it means a return of the business about which I have a bit of knowledge come by through experience." Still, however, Raab sincerely believed that the city's future depended upon using "scientific" surveys to spur revitalization.

I love this city. My people were among its founders. My roots are deep in this soil. This city was once getting some traditions. I want to see it gather more and better. This Survey will lead to such. It can't help but do so. And, the City is more than a manufacturing center, it is a laboratory of human relationships; as such it fascinates me.<sup>52</sup>

Raab hoped that the CWA study would become a road map for resurrecting the Vehicle City from the ruins of the Great Depression.

It is unclear whether local GM executives accepted Raab's offer to form a steering committee to guide the city's reconstruction. Although Raab indicated in his correspondence that Mott, Curtice, and other GM representatives were deeply intrigued

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<sup>52</sup> The quotations are from Arthur E. Raab to Charles Stewart Mott, July 1, 1934, Charles Stewart Mott Papers, box 29, 77-7.6-1.16, GHCC.

by the prospect of such a body—and though GM executives and other industrial leaders convened regularly to discuss municipal affairs—no evidence confirms that Raab’s organization ever operated, at least publicly, in Flint. As with corporate leaders in other urban areas, General Motors officials in Flint participated quietly in the city’s political affairs. Local realtors, developers, and federal housing officials announced their interest in the CWA survey publicly, however. The Genesee County Real Estate Board donated \$500 to fund the survey program. Upon its completion, Flint realtors and developers began contacting Raab to view the survey files. On February 27, 1935, Raab informed City Manager Barringer that housing appraisers sought to use the CWA survey records as part of their property assessments. Hoping to gain a wider audience for the survey results, Raab instructed Barringer to place all of the “spot maps, tables, charts, graphs, etc.” in the municipal vault, “where they may be accessible to those who want the information they hold.”<sup>53</sup> In particular, Raab wished to make the CWA data available to realtors, appraisers, builders, and bankers, who he hoped would use the survey results to guide local redevelopment efforts.

Among the more detailed of the federally sponsored city surveys conducted in the United States during the 1930s, the 1934 Flint study also attracted attention from federal administrators in Washington, D.C. In June 1934, CWA officials in Washington directed Raab to forward the completed survey “at the earliest possible moment.”<sup>54</sup> Interest in the Flint survey among national-level administrators and policymakers signaled a radical shift in federal housing policies that was unfolding during the 1930s. Hoping to arrest the downward spiral of the nation’s home building, sales, and finance industries, federal

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<sup>53</sup> A. Raab to J. M. Barringer, February 27, 1935, Mott Papers, box 29, 77-7.6-1.16, GHCC.

<sup>54</sup> A. Raab to C. S. Mott, June 28, 1934, Mott Papers, box 29, 77-7.6-1.16, GHCC.

legislators crafted a series of policies during the mid-1930s that revolutionized housing markets across the nation. In June 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Home Owners' Loan Act, which created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, to help reduce housing foreclosures. As David Freund has shown, HOLC officials helped to stabilize local housing markets by "purchasing delinquent home loans from banks, S&Ls, and other lenders, and refinancing them with new long-term, low-interest, fully amortized loans." By 1936, HOLC officials had purchased and refinanced the mortgages of more than 20 percent of the nation's nonfarm, owner-occupied housing units.<sup>55</sup> Beyond stabilizing the nation's housing industry and stemming the rash of home foreclosures, the HOLC also helped to revolutionize the ways in which Americans thought about home finance, race, and the stability of neighborhood housing markets.<sup>56</sup>

After just three years of intense activity, the HOLC ceased its mortgage purchasing program in June 1936. Nevertheless, the HOLC's policies introduced millions of Americans to the concept of low-interest, long-term, fully amortized home mortgages. Prior to the HOLC's creation, private lenders in Flint and elsewhere effectively dissuaded many prospective home buyers by offering only short-term mortgages, often with large "balloon" payments due at the end of the loan. In a confidential report authored in July 1937, HOLC field agent Clark Waters estimated that 99 percent of the homeowners in the city of Flint had obtained their residences via ten-year home loans at 6 percent interest with a 10 percent down payment.<sup>57</sup> By

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<sup>55</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 111-112.

<sup>56</sup> On the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, see K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 195-203; Amy E. Hillier, "Redlining and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation," *Journal of Urban History* 29:4 (May 2003): 394-420; and Freund, *Colored Property*, 111-118.

<sup>57</sup> Clark Waters, "Confidential Report of a Survey in Flint, Michigan, and its Suburban Area for the Home Owners' Loan Corporation," 15, Record Group (RG) 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 24, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland (hereinafter cited as NA).

demonstrating that long-term, low-interest loans could help to prevent home foreclosures while still generating profits for lenders, the HOLC's policies radically altered the terms upon which bankers issued home loan mortgages. Significantly, HOLC administrators also designed a formal, racially biased mechanism for measuring risk, value, and stability in residential neighborhoods.

As part of its mortgage purchasing program, the HOLC devised a system for rating neighborhood stability, housing quality, and property values in residential districts. During the 1930s, members of the HOLC's appraisal department joined representatives from the agency's research and statistics division to create "residential security maps" for Flint and 238 other metropolitan centers across the United States. Designed to measure mortgage risk factors, housing conditions, and the overall desirability of residential districts, the security maps ranked neighborhoods on a descending scale from A to D. The neighborhoods with the most desirable and valuable housing received a grade of A, color-coded with green on the security maps, while "second-grade" B neighborhoods were colored blue. The least desirable residential areas earned C and D grades, with C neighborhoods colored yellow and "fourth-grade" D areas shaded in red. The term "redlining," used to describe the discriminatory home mortgage lending practices employed by bankers and federal housing officials during the postwar era, derived from the HOLC's use of red in mapping the least desirable, or D, neighborhoods.

HOLC officials often subcontracted with local realtors to create the residential security maps. In Flint, the HOLC employed the real estate firms of Keller, Murphy, and Van Campen; Leinoch and Humphreys; along with H. H. Darby, Claude Perry, Robert Gerholz, Chester Sibilsky, Mark Piper, and E. E. Burger, all of whom were "realtors of

experience and standing,” to create the city’s security map.<sup>58</sup> To assist the local realtors who served as map consultants, officials from the HOLC asked surveyors to classify neighborhoods based upon eight criteria. HOLC administrators instructed surveyors to measure and rank neighborhoods by the intensity of sale and rental demand; the percentage of homeowners; the age and type of buildings; economic stability; the social status of residents; the sufficiency of public utilities; accessibility of schools, churches, and business centers; and the building, deed, and zoning restrictions established to protect the neighborhood from inharmonious social groups and incompatible land uses. In order to receive an A rating, a neighborhood had to be only partially developed and situated within a new, well-planned section of the city, and its housing stock had to be in high demand regardless of the economic climate. HOLC surveyors relied heavily on local bankers to determine which neighborhoods were the best. An A neighborhood, a HOLC report maintained, was usually “synonymous with the areas where good mortgage lenders with available funds are willing to make their maximum loans to be amortized over a 10-15 year period.” Neighborhoods in the B category were usually fully developed and consisted of sturdily built yet not top of the line homes. “The second grade or B grade areas,” the HOLC’s instructions revealed, “are like a 1935 automobile – still good, but not what people are buying today who can afford a new one.”<sup>59</sup>

Implicitly, HOLC officials assumed that first- and second-grade neighborhoods would be all white. The HOLC made no explicit reference to the racial demography necessary for a neighborhood to obtain a rating of either A or B in its formal instructions to surveyors. In the descriptions of typical C and D neighborhoods, however, race and

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<sup>58</sup> RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 23, NA.

<sup>59</sup> RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 24, NA. See also Kenneth B. West Papers, box 1, folder 24, GHCC.



ethnicity played prominent roles. Besides containing more obsolete homes, offering poor access to transportation facilities, and providing inadequate utility service, third-grade areas, in the HOLC's calculus, often had no racially restrictive housing covenants and suffered from "infiltration of a lower grade population." Third-grade areas also contained a preponderance of "jerrybuilt" housing as well as "neighborhoods lacking homogeneity." At the bottom of the HOLC's continuum, fourth-grade D areas suffered from severe housing decay and the widespread influx of nonwhite residents. The least desirable neighborhoods, in the opinion of HOLC officials, "are characterized by detrimental influences in a pronounced degree, undesirable population or an infiltration of it, low percentage of home ownership, very poor maintenance, and often vandalism present."<sup>60</sup>

HOLC officials and local realtors visited and rated every neighborhood in Flint and its immediate suburbs during the summer of 1937. As they traveled through the area, surveyors carried one-page instruction sheets, which they used to complete "area descriptions" for residential districts. The instruction sheets reminded surveyors to assess the quality of each neighborhood's parks and recreation services, "scenic features," transportation infrastructure, zoning, residential restrictions, schools, churches, business centers, and utilities. Additionally, the HOLC instructed mapping consultants to search for nuisances, "such things as obnoxious odors, noises, traffic conditions, fire hazards from certain types of plants such as cleaning plants, refineries, slaughter houses, disposal and reclaiming establishments." According to the HOLC's instruction form, "infiltrations of lower grade population or different racial groups," along with the "encroachments of apartments commercial or industrial properties," were also nuisances

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<sup>60</sup> RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 24, NA.

that detracted from a neighborhood's rating.<sup>61</sup> To measure the favorability of an area's social characteristics, the HOLC asked surveyors to list the percentage of Negroes, foreign-born residents, and relief families in each neighborhood and to assess the risk of "infiltration" by these undesirable social groups. By the HOLC's explicit standards, racial and class segregation were essential components of residential security and neighborhood stability.

By the close of their 1937 study, the HOLC's surveyors and map consultants had divided the city and its immediate suburbs into fifty residential areas. Overall, the Flint region rated very poorly under the HOLC's criteria. Only two small residential enclaves received A ratings—a section of Woodlawn Park east of downtown and the elite Woodcroft Estates subdivision on Flint's far west side. Home to many of the city's top industrial executives, Woodlawn Park and Woodcroft Estates featured many elegant new homes with modern amenities and strict racial restrictions that kept both areas exclusively white. Only seven neighborhoods received B grades on Flint's residential security map. The blue areas included several neighborhoods adjoining Woodcroft Estates and Woodlawn Park, GM's Modern Housing subdivisions, and several other west side enclaves. Surveyors reported that the seven blue neighborhoods contained no Negroes, only a few foreign-born occupants, and "few—if any" families on relief.<sup>62</sup>

Of the remaining forty-one residential areas in metropolitan Flint, eighteen received a rating of C. Scattered throughout the city, these third-grade districts received their ratings for a variety of reasons that included substandard housing, the encroachment of rental units and commercial establishments, the presence of foreign-born and poor

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<sup>61</sup> RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 23, NA.

<sup>62</sup> RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 23, NA.

families, and proximity to factories, slums, and other nuisances. Significantly, none of the city's eighteen C-grade districts contained Negro residents. The HOLC's survey team viewed the presence of foreign-born residents—especially southern and eastern Europeans, Mexicans, and Asians—as a reliable indication that a neighborhood was in gradual decline. For example, regarding neighborhood C-10, a segregated working-class neighborhood east of the Flint River and St. John Street, an unnamed HOLC surveyor explained the yellow designation by writing, “Gradually declining—too many aliens.” Along with race and ethnicity, class also played a role in the HOLC survey. In a number of instances, surveyors colored all-white working-class areas yellow, or even red, based primarily upon the still dreary employment prospects for idled General Motors workers.<sup>63</sup>

Race was central to the creation of the residential security maps, yet it was only one of the factors that led surveyors to redline twenty-three of the fifty neighborhoods in metropolitan Flint. Of the three neighborhoods in the Flint area that contained Negro occupants in 1937, each received a grade of D. In explaining the rating for the still integrated St. John district, neighborhood D-12, surveyors noted, “Undesirables – aliens and negroes.” Related factors that led surveyors to assign C or D grades were proximity to Negro residential areas and the presence or absence of either physical or socially constructed barriers between “inharmonious” racial and ethnic groups. In all but one case, the all-white neighborhoods that bordered areas with Negro residents received either C or D grades. The sole exception was neighborhood B-6, which formed the western edge of Woodlawn Park. Populated primarily by business executives, the west side of Woodlawn Park was an all-white neighborhood of middle-class and wealthy property owners, many of whom lived in newly built single-family homes. Nevertheless,

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<sup>63</sup> RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 23, NA.

the western edge of the neighborhood bordered Lapeer Road, the dividing line separating Woodlawn Park from the integrated Floral Park area. As HOLC surveyors noted, neighborhood B-6 was, “Too close to ‘C’ and ‘D’ areas to the west.” Rather than assign the neighborhood a C or D grade, however, HOLC officials issued a B designation for the area, concluding, “Will hold up. Pride of ownership.”<sup>64</sup> West Woodlawn Park no doubt contained many proud homeowners, yet the neighborhood’s blue grade stemmed also from its racially restrictive housing covenants and the impermeability of the Lapeer Road color line that separated it from Floral Park. Indeed, during the 1930s and 1940s many black residents of Floral Park referred to Lapeer Road as the Mason-Dixon Line.<sup>65</sup>

Most historians of suburban development in the United States have argued that the HOLC’s residential security maps rewarded segregated suburbs over integrated urban areas.<sup>66</sup> For instance, David Freund has pointed out that nationwide, “The majority of the residential sections receiving the D rating had an African American presence.”<sup>67</sup> While it is undeniable that HOLC surveyors, and later FHA appraisers, privileged whiteness and penalized neighborhoods that housed racial and ethnic minorities, the Flint case suggests the need for a more careful, locally oriented analysis of the residential security maps and the FHA’s early mortgage insurance policies. Of the twenty-three Flint neighborhoods redlined by HOLC surveyors, only three contained Negro occupants. Moreover, of the all-white suburban districts surveyed in 1937, none received a grade of A. Among all of the suburban areas included in the HOLC’s Flint survey, only two small slivers of land in the city of Mt. Morris received B grades, with the rest of the municipality’s

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<sup>64</sup> RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 23, NA.

<sup>65</sup> On Lapeer Road as the “Mason-Dixon Line,” see C. Williams interview.

<sup>66</sup> K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 195-203. Also, see Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 60-62; Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven*, 179-193; and Freund, *Colored Property*, 111-118.

<sup>67</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 114.

neighborhoods earning either C or D ratings. For the entire city of Grand Blanc, located in south suburban Flint, HOLC appraisers issued a C grade, while warning of a “trend toward ‘D’ rating.” To all of the close-in residential areas that ringed the city of Flint’s borders, HOLC categorically assigned D grades.<sup>68</sup>

Beyond weighing racial and economic considerations, HOLC surveyors also paid careful attention to building and zoning codes, housing quality, utility services, tax rates, and the development of urban infrastructure. HOLC appraisers listed no African-American residents in their area descriptions of suburban Flint, but they did find thousands of poorly constructed homes that lacked municipal water, sanitary sewers, and other urban utilities. Such neighborhoods fared poorly in the HOLC surveys. For neighborhood D-22, a residential area in Burton Township just south of the city limits, surveyors explained their D rating with a few clarifying remarks: “Comparatively new section of cheap construction. Laborer’s homes. Outside the city.” Similarly, regarding neighborhood D-20 just beyond Flint’s southeastern border, a map consultant noted, “Cheap laborers’ cottages. Some as small as two rooms. Easternmost three streets are outside the city limits.” Under the HOLC’s rating system, Flint’s suburbs rated more poorly than neighborhoods in the city.<sup>69</sup>

The HOLC’s 1937 survey of Flint reveals several important truths about the complex relationships between race, space, and the processes of suburban development in Genesee County. HOLC surveyors looked askance at integrated neighborhoods wherever they existed. Still, though, those same surveyors also redlined virtually all of suburban

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<sup>68</sup> Area Descriptions for Mt. Morris and Grand Blanc, Michigan, RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 23, NA.

<sup>69</sup> Area Descriptions for Neighborhoods D-20 and D-22, RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 23, NA.

Genesee County, primarily because Flint's still underdeveloped suburbs lacked zoning codes, building regulations, and municipal services. By assigning low grades to suburban districts, appraisers from HOLC—and, later on, the FHA—offered a powerful inducement to township officials and suburban homeowners who wanted to bring modern urban services and housing investment to the out-county. Hoping to increase living standards and property values through the construction of both federally insured and privately financed housing, postwar suburban officials rushed to expand city services and build urban infrastructures in what were previously undeveloped agricultural areas. The rapid development of suburban infrastructure and the wave of suburban municipal incorporations that ensued during the postwar era would ultimately hold grave consequences for city officials in Flint who hoped to expand the city's territory through metropolitan consolidation, annexation, and other political means. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the HOLC's surveys did not reward all-white suburban areas in Genesee County with high security grades. Rather, the HOLC redlined suburban areas due to their poorly developed physical and political infrastructures. In order to receive federal support for housing development, the maps demonstrated, suburban officials would have to bring urban services and amenities to residents of outlying areas.

Federal officials relied heavily on the lending habits of local bankers when they rated residential areas. Beyond surveying neighborhood conditions, HOLC surveyors also measured lending practices throughout the city and its adjoining suburbs. The HOLC's reports on mortgage availability confirm that racial considerations figured prominently in the Depression-era calculus of local bankers. Included in each of the HOLC's neighborhood descriptions were sections on the availability of local mortgage

funds for both existing home purchases and new home construction. For every neighborhood in metropolitan Flint, appraisers measured the willingness of lenders to issue mortgages—using the categories “good,” “fair,” and “limited”—as a factor in determining security grades. In all but two instances, HOLC appraisers rated the lending activity as good in first- and second-grade neighborhoods. Among C-grade neighborhoods, the HOLC survey categorized lending activity as good in seven areas, fair in ten others, and limited in one subdivision. District C-16, the only third-grade neighborhood in which lending activity was limited, sat immediately south and east of the integrated Floral Park area. Regarding the region’s twenty-three D-grade neighborhoods, none of which received an investment ranking of good, surveyors determined that lending activity was fair in seventeen areas and limited in five. Included among the five redlined districts in which lending activity was limited were the racially transitional St. John Street and Floral Park areas, an integrated neighborhood bordering St. John, an all-white neighborhood immediately west of Floral Park, and an all-white subdivision of predominantly self-built homes just south of the Flint city limits. Long before the federal government took an active interest in the Flint real estate market, local bankers and developers had created their own maps and their own policies of racial segregation and inner-city divestment. With only slight deviations, HOLC and FHA surveyors employed that same racialized spatial logic in creating mortgage risk maps.<sup>70</sup>

Historians have hotly debated the importance and legacy of the HOLC’s residential security maps. While many scholars have argued that the creation of the security maps signaled an expansion of government-sponsored racial segregation, others

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<sup>70</sup> Area Descriptions for Flint, Michigan, RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1945-1940, box 23, NA.

have concluded that the HOLC's mortgage refinance program was in fact beneficial to thousands of African Americans and other residents of third- and fourth-grade urban neighborhoods.<sup>71</sup> During the 1930s, the HOLC refinanced thousands of black-owned homes in C and D neighborhoods. Nationwide, according to David Freund, African Americans held approximately 5 percent of the HOLC's refinanced mortgages.<sup>72</sup> In a report that accompanied the Flint residential security map, HOLC officials reminded federal administrators and local lenders alike that low-risk mortgages could be issued to residents of third- and fourth-grade neighborhoods: "We do not intend to imply," the report stated, "that good mortgages do not exist or cannot be made in the Third or Fourth grade areas." Nevertheless, the same report concluded that mortgages in C and D areas "should be made and serviced on a different basis than in the First and Second grade areas."<sup>73</sup> Hoping to forestall additional foreclosures, HOLC officials rated and appraised neighborhoods to determine the risk factors associated with mortgage lending. The creators of HOLC's Flint survey made explicit connections between racial segregation, housing values, and actuarial risks. Just as realtors, bankers, and builders had done for decades, the HOLC's city survey teams characterized both racial integration and proximity to Negroes and other nonwhites as a detrimental influence on real estate values, mortgage risk, neighborhood stability, and quality of life. Although HOLC officials did in fact invest in C and D neighborhoods, the agency also insisted that local lenders should adopt a more conservative approach to lending in low-grade residential

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<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, Beauregard, "Federal Policy and Postwar Urban Decline: A Case of Government Complicity," *Housing Policy Debate* 17:1 (2001): 129-151; Hillier, "Redlining and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation," 394-420; Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Freund, *Colored Property*, 111-121.

<sup>72</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 118.

<sup>73</sup> RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 24, NA.



neighborhoods. Race, though not the only consideration, played a central role in the HOLC's determination of these security grades. Indeed, every neighborhood in the city that contained any African Americans, regardless of the percentage or the economic status of residents, received a D rating, a distinction that rendered the entire area as a high actuarial risk. The racial and spatial considerations that informed the HOLC's city survey program—ultimately adopted and codified by administrators from the Federal Housing Administration and local lenders nationwide—constituted a new and explicit government mandate for both the development of suburban infrastructure and rigid residential segregation.

In a 2003 journal article on the HOLC's redlining practices in Philadelphia, historian Amy E. Hillier argued that the agency's critics have overstated the importance of the 1930s residential security maps. Among other things, Hillier claimed, "lenders were avoiding areas colored red before HOLC made its maps, that HOLC's maps were not widely distributed, and that lenders had other sources of information about real estate risk levels."<sup>74</sup> An analysis of the Flint security maps confirms many of Hillier's central claims. The HOLC's neighborhood descriptions and maps of Flint reflected a series of assumptions about race, real estate values, and mortgage risks that local lenders, realtors, and homeowners already subscribed to—and had enforced via the establishment of restrictive housing covenants—prior to the 1930s. In the Flint case, in fact, HOLC field representatives went so far as to incorporate pre-existing lending practices as part of their neighborhood rating rubric. Nevertheless, it is difficult to support the claim that local lenders, builders, and real estate brokers in the Flint area did not have access to the HOLC's findings. During the 1937 study of Flint, HOLC officials employed the city's

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<sup>74</sup> Hillier, "Redlining and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation," 394.

top mortgage lenders and real estate firms, all members of the city and county boards of real estate, to serve as mapping consultants. “These maps and descriptions,” a HOLC report maintained, “have been carefully checked with competent local real estate brokers and mortgage lenders, and we believe they represent a fair and composite opinion of the best qualified local people.”<sup>75</sup> Additionally, CWA surveyors, who made their findings widely available to local housing officials, employed the same racial logic as HOLC appraisers. Moreover, even if the maps themselves did not circulate widely, the logic embedded within the HOLC’s rating schema informed every firm in the city devoted to the lending, real estate, and building industries. Most important, however, is the fact that the HOLC maps reached officials from the Federal Housing Administration, who ultimately formalized the racial and spatial calculus that informed HOLC’s surveyors.

In June 1934, federal legislators passed the National Housing Act, which in turn triggered the formation of the Federal Housing Administration. Like HOLC officials, representatives of the FHA believed that the health of the private housing market depended upon the spread of long-term, low-interest, fully amortized loans. In order to further those aims, the FHA-insured mortgages issued by local lending agencies on new and existing homes. It is difficult to overstate the extent to which the FHA’s mortgage insurance program affected residential landscapes in cities such as Flint. Indeed, historians such as Kenneth Jackson have argued that the FHA exerted more influence on postwar Americans than any other federal agency. By reducing the mortgage risks of local lending institutions, the FHA induced bankers to issue more loans and reduce interest rates on long-term, fully amortized mortgages. In Flint and elsewhere, the results

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<sup>75</sup> See West Papers, box 1, folder 24, GHCC; and RG 195, Records Relating to the City Survey File, 1935-1940, box 24, NA.

of their efforts were astounding. Between 1934 and 1972, the FHA insured mortgages for eleven million homeowners and helped to increase home ownership rates nationwide from 44 to 63 percent.<sup>76</sup> In the Vehicle City, where single-family homes already predominated, the FHA's liberal mortgage insurance policies helped to push home ownership rates far above national averages. Just between 1942 and 1947, for instance, the proportion of homeowners in the city increased from 63 to 77 percent.<sup>77</sup>

Among its many legacies, the FHA helped to standardize building regulations, zoning codes, and other policies designed to protect residential neighborhoods from inharmonious land uses. Following in the HOLC's tradition, the FHA also established national standards for the appraisal of housing quality, neighborhood desirability, and mortgage risks. Like the HOLC's field agents during the 1930s, FHA appraisers and underwriters used a set of racially biased criteria in rating residential neighborhoods. Those criteria included measuring a neighborhood's economic stability and tax structure, the proximity of adverse influences and hazards, the quality of transportation and utility services, the area's geographic positioning vis-à-vis civic institutions and commercial facilities, and the neighborhood's social appeal. Following a basic mathematical formula, FHA mortgage underwriters studied and rated neighborhoods and established strict guidelines for local lenders on which sections of metropolitan areas were safe investments and thus eligible to receive FHA-insured mortgages.

In order to guarantee uniformity in its housing and neighborhood appraisal program, FHA officials drafted underwriting manuals and other widely circulated

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<sup>76</sup> K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 205.

<sup>77</sup> *Flint Journal*, May 7, 1948. On FHA policies and increased home ownership rates in Flint, see also, J. D. Carroll, Jr., *Housing Characteristics of Flint in 1950* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1952).

guidelines that outlined the agency's policies on insuring home mortgages. As with the HOLC, the FHA rated neighborhoods on a descending scale from A to D. Beyond measuring housing quality, the credit background of prospective buyers, and other ostensibly colorblind factors, FHA surveyors and underwriters also gauged an area's proximity to environmental hazards and other nuisances along with its degree of racial segregation. FHA officials did not always use the same color scheme as the HOLC in rating residential neighborhoods, but their racial, spatial, and economic logic was essentially the same. In a 1935 report on housing appraisals in Springfield, Massachusetts, for instance, nationally renowned real estate theorist Homer Hoyt, an official with the FHA's Economics and Statistics Division, offered advice on how to divide cities into homogeneous neighborhoods and how to locate "reject" neighborhoods. First, Hoyt suggested that appraisers should draw lines around the central business district, industrial areas, and areas that included apartment buildings with eight or more units. Next, Hoyt instructed surveyors to subdivide the city into single- and two-family residential districts according to rental values. "Having completed the rental map," Hoyt continued, "you are now to draw a blue pencil around all blocks in which there are more than 10% Negroes or race other than white; also indicate areas in which there are a considerable number of Italians or Jews in the lower income group." For Hoyt, neighborhoods marked by low rental values, dilapidated housing, and the presence of nonwhites were "undesirable for loan purposes." "On the other hand," Hoyt suggested, "where rents are high, the percentage of owner occupancy is high, the condition of the buildings good and there is no race other than white, there will be found areas that rate high for loan purposes."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Homer Hoyt, "Instructions for Dividing the City into Neighborhoods," RG 31, Housing Surveys,

Like their counterparts from the HOLC, FHA appraisers also rated neighborhoods based upon proximity to Negro residential districts and the presence or absence of physical barriers separating white and black spaces.

A neighborhood should be graded down even though it is now a very good neighborhood if it is in the path of a low-grade neighborhood that is growing in its direction. In estimating the stability of a neighborhood, the strength of the barriers dividing it from poor neighborhoods should also be considered.

According to Hoyt and other FHA officials, appraisers needed to consider not only the current social status of neighborhoods, but also its future prospects for resisting “the infiltration of undesirable elements.”<sup>79</sup> So that his instructions were unmistakably clear, Hoyt provided Springfield appraisers with a short list of criteria to distinguish “reject” areas from the “best,” safest neighborhoods for FHA investment. A reject neighborhood, Hoyt advised, was one that had “an intermixture of races and nationalities.” Once designated, reject neighborhoods were ineligible for FHA insurance. Conversely, A-grade neighborhoods could contain “no residents of a race other than white nor of a nationality on a lower economic scale than the old American stock.” In order to preserve the stability of property values in highly rated neighborhoods, Hoyt also stipulated that first-grade neighborhoods maintain proper zoning and deed restrictions to stop the “infiltration of undesirable races.”<sup>80</sup> Not at all peculiar to Springfield, Massachusetts, Hoyt’s instructions to appraisers ultimately found their way into the FHA’s official *Underwriting Manual*, which advocated racially restrictive housing covenants. In the

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General, 1964-1968, box 3, NA. Hoyt was also a well-respected author and intellectual who helped to popularize the notion that racial integration exerted a negative influence on property values. See, for instance, Hoyt, *One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago: The Relationship of the Growth of Chicago to the Rise in Its Land Values, 1830-1933* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933); and Freund, *Colored Property*, 120, 129, 210-211.

<sup>79</sup> Hoyt, “Instructions for Dividing the City.”

<sup>80</sup> Hoyt, “Tests of a Reject Neighborhood,” RG 31, Housing Surveys, General, 1964-1968, box 3, NA.

1938 version of the *Underwriting Manual*, FHA administrators famously informed appraisers, “If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same racial group.”<sup>81</sup>

From the mid-1930s through the post-World War II era, neighborhoods with African-American occupants simply could not obtain A and B rankings, often a prerequisite for receiving both FHA-insured mortgages and conventional home loans. When rating black neighborhoods that scored highly based upon ostensibly non-racial factors such as utility services and transportation access, Hoyt and other FHA officials instructed appraisers to crunch numbers to ensure a D grade. In his guidelines for Springfield’s appraisers, Hoyt revealed a glimpse of the social mathematics that made it virtually impossible for black people to obtain federally insured mortgages, even when their neighborhoods met the FHA’s rigid, race-conscious standards:

It is not necessary for all of these worst elements to be combined before a neighborhood is rejected, but some of the worst neighborhoods do have a great many of these worst elements in combination. All areas that have the lowest rents in the city, the greatest number of buildings needing major repairs, an intermixture of races, and which are generally regarded as vice or slum areas, should not be given a higher rating than one on stability of the neighborhood, protection from adverse influences, and appeal of the neighborhood. Such ratings will take off 44 from the total rating and almost assure the rejection of the neighborhood unless the score on all the other factors is perfect. *Since slum areas may frequently be rated as perfect with respect to adequate transportation and sufficiency of utilities and conveniences which would give them 25 points, it is necessary to rate stability, protection from adverse influences, and appeal of neighborhood no higher than one to avoid giving passing grades to sections that are unquestionably slums.*<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Federal Housing Administration, *Underwriting Manual: Underwriting and Valuation Procedure under Title II of the National Housing Act* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1939).

<sup>82</sup> Memorandum, Hoyt to Dr. Fisher, “Instructions as to Procedure in Rating Neighborhoods,” RG 31, Housing Surveys, General, 1964-1968, box 3, NA. The italics in the quotation are mine and not Hoyt’s.

According to both the explicit and implicit policies of the FHA, neighborhoods that contained black people were “unquestionably slums,” or well on their way towards becoming so, and therefore ineligible for federal mortgage insurance.

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In February 1967, over three decades after the creation of the FHA, the National Committee against Discrimination in Housing (NCDH) released *How the Federal Government Builds Ghettos*, a pamphlet that described how federal housing policies helped to sustain residential segregation. The publication included an essay by Richard and Diane Margolis, entitled “The Ghetto and the Master Builder,” which charged the FHA and other government agencies with being, “the prime carrier[s] of galloping segregation.” “Nearly everything the Government touches turns to segregation,” the Margolises wrote. “And the Government touches nearly everything.”<sup>83</sup> Through its massive mortgage insurance and neighborhood appraisal programs, the FHA became one of the nation’s primary, though not exclusive, sponsors of racial segregation.

The Margolises offered a fair assessment of the FHA’s racial policies. During the 1930s, federal officials created the HOLC and the FHA to attack substandard housing and to remedy deep crises in the real estate and development industries. Working alongside local bankers and other representatives of the private housing industry, those same federal officials designed and codified appraisal and lending policies that helped to solidify the color line in postwar Flint. Nevertheless, the FHA was only one entity in a broad constellation of private and governmental forces that sustained Jim Crow in the

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<sup>83</sup> Richard Margolis and Diane Margolis, *How the Federal Government Builds Ghettos* (New York: National Committee against Discrimination in Housing, 1967), 14-30.

Vehicle City. Furthermore, housing was only one venue in which the broader struggle over race and space unfolded in the twentieth-century metropolis. Educational policies, though most urban and suburban history scholars have devoted little attention to them, played an equally important role in maintaining racial and spatial inequalities in Flint and other metropolitan centers. In Flint, “community education”—the brainchild of Charles Stewart Mott, Flint’s leading citizen—played a decisive role in keeping neighborhood schools as segregated, and sometimes even more so, than the segregated residential neighborhoods they served.



## Chapter 2

### **Making Better Citizens and a Stronger Community: The Birth of Community Education and Neighborhood Schools**

Between the 1930s and the 1950s, the Vehicle City gained international acclaim for both its stylish cars *and* its neighborhood-based approaches to public education. As with the home mortgage financing programs of the HOLC and the FHA, Flint's system of "community education" grew out of the turmoil of the 1930s, a decade in which mass poverty, economic crisis, and class conflict engulfed Flint and the nation at large. In the city of Flint, industrial unionism, private property rights, and civil disorder emerged in the 1930s as key social and political issues that galvanized industrialists and urban reformers alike. In response to the UAW organizing drives and factory occupations that culminated in the famous Flint sit-down strikes of 1936-37, local GM industrialist and civic benefactor Charles Stewart Mott inaugurated a citywide health, recreation, and education program as a means to restore civil order, economic growth, and social harmony to a city rent by class conflict. Under the leadership of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, a powerful coterie of local civic leaders and industrialists forged a unique partnership with the board of education that brought millions of dollars in corporate-generated private funding to the public schools of Flint. On the strength of that partnership, the Flint Public Schools pioneered a system of community education that hundreds of cities across the country copied during the postwar period. Mott and other civic elites envisioned "community schools" as all-purpose "lighted community centers"

where trained professionals could educate rural migrants, promote public health and morality, combat communism and juvenile delinquency, and restore harmony and economic growth to a city in crisis.

The Mott program expanded its reach into thousands of homes and dozens of neighborhoods during the 1930s and 1940s, helping to preserve social order and economic growth during a tumultuous era of mass migrations and industrial conflict. Open during the evenings and in the summer, Flint's community schools offered hundreds of outreach programs, courses, recreational opportunities, and health initiatives for youth and adults alike of all races. Because of the tangible educational, recreational, social, and public health benefits it provided to working-class families and the poor, the Mott program was extraordinarily popular throughout Flint, especially within the working-class white neighborhoods that benefited disproportionately from its programming. Leavened by its successes, the Mott Foundation and its local boosters attempted to spread the Flint model of community education to the nation as a whole during the postwar era. On the strength of a massive, nationwide publicity campaign that brought many thousands of visitors to the city's schools each year, community education programs spread rapidly during the postwar decades, with hundreds of school systems copying the Flint model.

The Mott initiative defies simple characterization. Community schools were undoubtedly an early and extremely popular form of compensatory education for less advantaged families in the Flint community. Over the course of its nearly forty-year existence, the Mott program brought families together for community events, provided job training to the unemployed, taught illiterate citizens to read and write, and delivered

essential health care services to indigent children and families. Though its charitable contributions undoubtedly bettered the lives of thousands, the Mott initiative also institutionalized patterns of racial segregation, educational disadvantage, and economic inequality that helped to make Flint one of the most racially and spatially divided cities in the United States.

The Mott Foundation program propounded politically conservative visions of community, citizenship, and individual rights that consistently undermined the progressive values of the New Deal and the moral imperatives of the local labor and civil rights movements. Men such as Charles Stewart Mott and Frank Manley, the “father” of Flint’s community schools, envisioned community education as a privatized alternative to the social reforms of the New Deal and Great Society eras, and they viewed the free market and charity as legitimate alternatives to the welfare state. Its creators and proponents saw community education as a local pilot project that could be duplicated nationwide as a replacement for a government-sponsored social safety net. In stark contrast to the integrationist values that later drove the school desegregation movement, the creators of the Mott program also believed that successful community education depended upon segregation, both racial and economic. Believing that social harmony could only take root in homogeneous neighborhood groupings, Mott and his powerful contingent of supporters on the school board attempted to revivify the Flint community’s esprit-de-corps by first re-imagining and then reifying the social and spatial boundaries between its neighborhoods. In exchange for the foundation’s sponsorship, the Flint Board of Education redesigned its curriculum, reorganized its attendance policies, and refashioned its existing public school infrastructure to create segregated, neighborhood-

based “community schools” that also served as civic centers for each of the city’s neighborhoods. Flint’s system of community education served as a foundation for the ubiquitous social construct known as the “neighborhood school.” For racial conservatives such as Mott, who believed implicitly in the naturalness of racial and economic distinctions, true community schools depended upon exclusionary policies that sorted and separated citizens by race, space, and class.

*Mr. Flint Formalizes the Informal Partnership:  
Charles Stewart Mott, the Great Depression, and the Origins of Community Education*

The Great Depression dealt a vicious blow to the city of Flint. Along with the massive unemployment and poor housing that plagued working families during the Depression, the 1930s brought high rates of disease, poverty, delinquency, and a myriad of urban problems that further sullied the city’s once prosperous image. According to a 1934 government survey of twenty-two cities containing between 100,000 and 250,000 persons, Flint ranked fourth in the infant death rate, sixth in maternal deaths, and tenth in the typhoid fever and diphtheria mortality rates.<sup>1</sup> Dentally, the Flint of the 1930s was as unhealthy as any city in the country, with 90 percent of its children in need of professional treatment.<sup>2</sup> Flint’s poor statistical record in matters pertaining to public health belied the city’s carefully cultivated reputation for prosperity and modern living, a fact that made GM recruiters and other Vehicle City boosters positively squeamish.

In spite of the devastation it caused, the Great Depression failed to generate any sustained response from city officials and civic benefactors. During the early 1930s, the

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<sup>1</sup> Fine, *Sit-Down*, 102.

<sup>2</sup> Frank J. Manley, Bernard W. Reed, and Robert K. Burns, *The Community School in Action: The Flint Program* (Chicago: Education-Industry Service, 1967), 22.

city of Flint spent a paltry fifty cents per capita each year on public health programs, the lowest amount in the nation among cities of similar size. As one local reformer remembered, “The situation in Flint in the 1930s was sad indeed . . . and the health picture in the entire community, compared to others of its size, was one of the worst in the nation.”<sup>3</sup> The deadly combination of housing shortages, a feeble public health program, and rampant unemployment made the Flint of the Thirties an exceedingly unhealthy place for its most vulnerable citizens. It was a city whose “golden streets had turned to lead.”<sup>4</sup>

As the economic crisis unraveled, relief caseloads quickly overwhelmed the private volunteer agencies that had traditionally managed the city’s welfare programs. Churches, civic organizations, and local charities, as they always had, oversaw early relief efforts by sponsoring food drives, opening soup kitchens, and delivering free milk and food to the hungry. But Flint’s ad hoc private relief sector ultimately collapsed under the weight of the 1930s crisis, simply unable to meet the local demands for food, shelter, health care, and employment. With the onset of the New Deal in 1933, the federal government emerged to coordinate local relief efforts, effectively replacing Flint’s informal private sector. The shift from private charity to publicly financed aid programs marked a distinct turning point in Flint’s twentieth-century development. Regarding the local significance of the shift wrought by the New Deal, historian William Chafe concluded, “By injecting an outside influence, the state usurped local power, replaced voluntarism, forged a new structural apparatus to attack the Depression, and in the

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<sup>3</sup> Manley, Reed, and Burns, *The Community School in Action*, 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 101.

process fostered significant changes in the administration and philosophy of local relief.”<sup>5</sup> Though New Deal policies did not, in the end, return Flint and its citizens to prosperity—and although a disproportionate share of government stimulus funds privileged white citizens over African Americans—emergency federal initiatives in the areas of housing, public health, and hunger relief nonetheless marked a fundamental change in the local organization of welfare programs. Remarking on the shift from private to public forms of relief, one citizen noted, “The human care of dependents has gone past private agencies and is now a public job—a big job.”<sup>6</sup>

The New Deal policies of the 1930s signaled a paradigmatic shift in local approaches to poverty. Prior to the Depression, Flint’s industrial and civic leaders administered public aid out of a collective sense of *noblesse oblige*, and they tended to see relief not as a basic right for all citizens but rather as a two-pronged system of charity and self help that local benefactors either offered or refused at their own discretion.<sup>7</sup> For industrialists such as Charles Stewart Mott—who believed deeply in the virtues of self help, privatized charity, and laissez faire approaches to social welfare—the political transformations wrought by the New Deal struck a raw, exposed nerve. Seeing most forms of government aid for the poor as creeping socialism, Mott never made his peace with the New Deal and never embraced the bipartisan liberal consensus that allegedly shaped much of American political discourse during the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, from the onset of the New Deal until his death some forty years later, Mott fought an intense, fiercely local battle against the tenets of redistributive liberalism. Mott’s choice

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<sup>5</sup> Chafe, “Flint and the Great Depression,” 230.

<sup>6</sup> Chafe, “Flint and the Great Depression,” 235.

<sup>7</sup> Chafe, “Flint and the Great Depression,” 237.

of battlegrounds brought him and his millions to the neighborhoods and public schools of Flint.<sup>8</sup>

Flint's community education program bore the unmistakable philosophical imprint of its sole benefactor, Charles Stewart Mott, known locally as "Mr. Flint, First Citizen." Like most other automobile industry pioneers, Mott was a product of the Gilded Age, born in 1875 in Newark, New Jersey. His father, John Coon Mott, owned a successful cider and vinegar business and instilled in Charles an abiding love for both engineering and big business ventures. After graduating from the Stevens Institute of Technology in 1897 with a degree in mechanical engineering, Mott joined the U.S. Navy and served briefly in the Spanish-American War as a gunner's mate. Upon his return from battle, Mott reluctantly entered the family business, which by then had expanded well beyond fruit and cider production. Perhaps as a concession to his son's interest in heavy manufacturing, in 1896 John Coon Mott bought into a Utica, New York, wheel and axle business. Mott enthusiastically accepted a sales executive position with the Weston-Mott axle company shortly after the Spanish-American War, relieved to have found employment options outside of the fruit and cider industry.<sup>9</sup>

Originally a supplier of wheels and axles to bicycle and carriage companies, Weston-Mott began producing automobile wheels after the turn of the century. The younger Mott acquired a substantial portion of the company's stock from his family and quickly rose to become president and general manager. Under Charles Stewart's

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<sup>8</sup> On conservative ideological challenges to the postwar liberal consensus, see Kimberly Phillips-Fein, "American Counterrevolutionary: Lemuel Ricketts Boulware and General Electric, 1950-1960," in Lichtenstein, ed., *American Capitalism: Social Thought and Political Economy in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 249-270. Also, see S. Fraser and Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*.

<sup>9</sup> On Mott's early life, see Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 8-25.

leadership, the company grew tremendously, doubling the size of its factory and gaining business from automobile manufacturers across the country. News of the company's successes eventually reached the city of Flint, where carriage manufacturing tycoon Billy Durant and a cadre of soon-to-be General Motors executives were organizing the Buick Motor Company. Shortly after celebrating his thirtieth birthday in the summer of 1905, Mott received a business proposition from Durant, requesting that he move the Weston-Mott Company to Flint. Hoping to establish a wheel and axle plant adjacent to Flint's proposed Buick facilities, Durant offered Mott an enticing deal which included a large parcel of land on the city's north side, local stock subscriptions in the amount of \$100,000, and a guarantee that Buick would purchase all of its axles from Weston-Mott. Mott made the decision to move his axle and wheel business to Flint in September of 1905 after a whirlwind tour of the city and several weeks of negotiations with Durant and other local officials.<sup>10</sup>

Weston-Mott began its Flint operations in 1907. In the years immediately following Mott's arrival, the local automobile industry grew tremendously. After GM's September 1908 incorporation, Durant moved to acquire competing automobile companies and integrate its supplier networks. In 1913, Durant purchased the Weston-Mott Company, forever tying C. S. Mott to General Motors and Flint. With incredible business acumen, Mott accepted Durant's buyout offer in exchange for a sizable share of General Motors stock and a seat on its board of directors, which he occupied until his death in 1973. Although Charles Stewart tended to downplay his wealth, industry

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<sup>10</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 8-40.



observers reported that Mott's holdings in excess of \$50 million made him GM's single largest stockholder and one of the richest men in the nation.<sup>11</sup>

Mott made a fortune in boomtown Flint and helped to create thousands of new jobs for local workers. Nevertheless, the economic volatility of the automobile industry and the city's undeveloped infrastructure made it difficult for ordinary workers to secure decent housing and long-term economic security. Poor housing and working conditions, overcrowded schools, inadequate municipal water and sewage systems, and cramped living environments angered thousands of migrant autoworkers, contributing to a contentious political climate during the 1910s. Exacerbating matters, Durant's reckless corporate acquisition program, from which Mott benefited immensely, had, by 1910, left the cash-starved company on the brink of bankruptcy. In order to pay off GM's mounting debt, Durant obtained loans from eastern banks in excess of \$9 million. In exchange for the loans, GM's financiers insisted that Durant withdraw from management and that the company institute an austerity program of layoffs and speedups to increase profitability.<sup>12</sup>

Flint's Socialist Party successfully tapped into the popular discontent that accompanied the reorganization. In 1911, party members captured the mayor's office and three seats on the city commission. In response, Mott and a large group of Flint's leading citizens formed the Independent Citizen's Party—a bipartisan, ad hoc political organization created with the sole purpose of defeating municipal socialism. Flush with a sense of obligation to the city that had given him so much, the staunchly Republican Mott

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<sup>11</sup> By 1940, Mott had accumulated assets that included 2.6 million shares of GM stock, ten municipal water works, four department stores, the Mott Foundation building in downtown Flint, and nearly 50 percent of the stock of the U.S. Sugar Corporation. On Mott's stock holdings, see "Who Holds GM," *Time* (August 31, 1931); and "Many Happy Returns," *Time* (November 13, 1964).

<sup>12</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 51.

agreed to run for mayor in 1912 on the Independent Citizen's ticket. Promising to bring a "business administration" to city government, Mott defeated John A. C. Menton, the Socialist incumbent, in a landslide. In an editorial about the election, Flint's pro-business daily newspaper, the *Flint Journal*, remarked on the Vehicle City's brief encounter with municipal socialism and its subsequent turn toward capitalist efficiency: "The people of Flint were suffering from the hookworm in their city affairs until the Socialists pricked them and awakened the electors to the fact that Flint ought to have a business administration and an efficient city government."<sup>13</sup> The 1912 campaign marked the first of many political forays in which Mott sought to tilt a left-leaning city back to the right.

As a three-time mayor—elected in 1912, 1913, and again 1918—Mott fulfilled his promise of a business-friendly municipal administration. Mayor Mott oversaw the modernization of the city's accounting and records procedures, cost-cutting municipal purchasing measures, water delivery and sewer improvements, a new building code, road and bridge construction, and a complete reappraisal of the city's municipal assets. In recognition of the city's infrastructure and utility improvements, Chevrolet announced in 1912 that it would base its production on Flint's west side, a major political coup for an administration that sought to lure big business ventures to Flint. Not all of Mott's accomplishments were in the sphere of industry, however. Mott understood that political success in a predominantly working-class city such as Flint depended upon compromises between the interests of capital and labor. Though Mott did not consider himself a Progressive, he endorsed a variety of initiatives that his socialist and progressive opponents championed, including tougher meat and milk inspection ordinances and the preservation of public space for parks and recreation. During the 1910s, Mott also

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<sup>13</sup> *Flint Journal*, April 2, 1912.

experimented with the local philanthropic initiatives for the poor that would make him famous two decades later. Among other gifts to the city, Mott donated money to construct a modern hospital and set aside thousands of dollars each year to fund citywide recreation facilities and summer camping programs for underprivileged children. Through his early experiences in politics and philanthropy, Mott came to an understanding of his civic duties that ultimately drove the community education program:

It seems to me that every person, always, is in a kind of informal partnership with his community. His own success is dependent to a large degree on that community, and the community, after all, is the sum total of the individuals who make it up. The institutions of a community, in turn, are the means by which those individuals express their faith, their ideals, and their concern for fellow men.<sup>14</sup>

After three intermittent terms as Flint's mayor—and an unsuccessful run for governor in 1920—Mott returned to private life, secure in the knowledge that he and his supporters had met the challenge of socialism. Little did he know, however, that the 1930s would usher in another wave of political volatility that once again threatened corporate profits, industrial peace, and civic order.<sup>15</sup>

After losing his 1920 bid for governor, Mott returned to Applewood, his large estate near Woodlawn Park, to focus on philanthropy and his ongoing duties as a GM executive. Taking advantage of federal tax incentives for charitable giving, which allowed benefactors to deduct donations of up to 20 percent of their income, he established the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation in 1926.<sup>16</sup> Though the historical record is scant regarding the origins of the foundation, there can be little doubt that Mott's desire

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<sup>14</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, vii.

<sup>15</sup> For more on C. S. Mott's political career, see Mott Papers, box 7, 77-7.10-1.1, GHCC.

<sup>16</sup> On taxes and the financing of the Mott Foundation, see "Memorandum Regarding Charles Stewart Mott Foundation," n.d., Frank J. Manley Papers, box 3, 78-8.1-59a, Richard P. Scharchburg Archives, Kettering University, Flint, Michigan (hereinafter cited as Scharchburg Archives).

to establish a charitable foundation stemmed from a variety of competing motivations. Clearly, Mott wished to protect a large portion of his wealth from federal taxation. As evidenced by his many public remarks and at least one particularly angry diary entry, Mott loathed the progressive federal income tax and felt personally insulted by high taxes, believing that they penalized success and rewarded sloth:

The government has so governed my business that I do not know who owns it. I am suspected, expected, inspected, disrespected, examined, re-examined, until all I know is that I am supplicated for money for every known need, desire or hope of the human race, and because I refuse to go fall and go out and beg, borrow or steal money to give away I am cursed and discussed, boy-cotted, talked to, talked about, lied to, lied about, held up, held down and robbed until I am nearly ruined; so the only reason I am clinging to life is to see what the h--- is coming next.<sup>17</sup>

Wishing to limit the federal government's share of his wealth and, perhaps even more important, hoping to exercise direct control over its expenditure, Mott transferred a sizable portion of his stock assets to the foundation after its establishment. According to his biographers, the genesis of the Mott Foundation reflected "an engineer's kind of planning for the future, a way of organizing his help to the community and making it business-like—taking as much care in the spending of his money as he had devoted to earning it."<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the Mott Foundation was much more than a tax shelter.

When he established the charitable foundation, Mott had not yet formalized the philosophy that ultimately drove his philanthropic spending. Initially, he funded a range of local institutions, agencies, and programs that included Hurley Hospital, the Flint YMCA, the Rotary Club's Crippled Children's Program, Kiwanis Health Camp, the Flint

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<sup>17</sup> Dawn Olmsted, "Mott: The Man Revealed," University of Michigan-Flint, History Department, Student Papers, GHCC.

<sup>18</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 97. In 1959, an anonymous local trade unionist offered a harsh critique of the Mott Foundation as a tax shelter. Altruism, the author of the article argued, "is by far the smallest factor in the establishment of a foundation." See "Charles Stewart Mott: Flint's Benefactor?" *Searchlight*, June 18, 1959.

Community Fund, and the American Red Cross. Mott almost always favored self-help initiatives over direct assistance to the poor, and he had a predilection for recreational and child-centered programs, but he lacked a coherent philanthropic vision prior to the 1930s. That all changed in 1935, though, courtesy of another ambitious New York transplant named Frank Manley. Before arriving in Flint, Manley attended Michigan State Normal College in Ypsilanti during the 1920s, where he studied physical education under Wilbur P. Bowen, an early advocate of schools-based community recreation programs. A sports and recreation devotee, the young Manley saw recreation as a panacea for crime, delinquency, and a myriad of social problems. Manley exaggerated his philosophy only slightly when he remarked that “athletic participation was a sort of saving grace for all mankind.”<sup>19</sup> Carrying a boundless enthusiasm for his sports-centered worldview, Manley arrived in Flint in 1927 to work as a physical education instructor. After an impressive year of teaching and networking, Manley landed a job in 1928 as the citywide supervisor of physical education for the Flint Public Schools. In the process of overseeing physical education programs throughout the city, Manley developed a special concern for child safety and juvenile delinquency, issues that fueled his interest in community education.<sup>20</sup>

The Great Depression left Flint’s education system in deep crisis. As in other urban centers, decreasing tax rolls and declining population forced the Flint Board of Education to curtail both the length of school days and the duration of the school year. With neither a traditional school calendar nor an adequate system of recreation, thousands of unsupervised children often gathered for play on the streets, in the Flint River, and in other dangerous places. Consequently, juvenile delinquency and a “steadily

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<sup>19</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 113.

<sup>20</sup> On Frank Manley’s life and civic accomplishments, see “The Frank Manley Story,” *Flint Journal*, September 21, 1969.

mounting traffic slaughter” of child pedestrians became grave social problems in Flint’s crowded central city neighborhoods. Angered by the situation, Manley complained,

Every year we have eight or nine children killed while playing in the streets. Scores of others are becoming juvenile delinquents because we don’t like the way they utilize their leisure. Who’s to blame? We are, because we don’t give them any place to play but the streets, and we don’t provide any recreation or amusement for them.<sup>21</sup>

Espousing an almost religious devotion to the power of play, Manley believed that Flint could solve its delinquency and child safety problems if only civic leaders and school officials could sponsor neighborhood “tot lots” and summer recreation programs for children and their families. His early efforts culminated in 1934 with the Flint Plan for Recreation, a citywide program of neighborhood playgrounds, summer camps, sports leagues, and other forms of supervised recreation. In conjunction with federal work relief programs, which sponsored adult education, nursery schools, and community recreation, the Flint Plan for Recreation significantly reduced the juvenile death and delinquency rates in the city. Still, the Flint Plan nearly succumbed to bankruptcy at the conclusion of its first season. Unable to gain financial support from the city, Manley sought out speaking and fundraising engagements with a host of local civic and philanthropic organizations to advertise his initiatives.

In the summer of 1935, with the future of his program in jeopardy, Manley delivered a fateful speech to Charles Stewart Mott and other members of the Flint Rotary Club. Frustrated over his inability to gain financial support and adequate meeting space for community recreation, Manley chastised local Rotarians for their inaction in the face of Flint’s grave social problems. “I ridiculed those men for sitting so comfortably and

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<sup>21</sup> Paul W. Kearney, “Dancing in the Streets: Any City Can Use This Life-Saving, Blues-Curing Plan,” *Family Circle*, n.d., Manley Papers, box 1, 78-8.1-12a, Scharchburg Archives.

complacently in their club meetings while all Flint's social ills continued unabated," Manley later remembered.<sup>22</sup> Following the June Rotary meeting, where Manley spoke about the need for backyard tot lots, Mott invited the crusading physical educator to Applewood for a game of tennis. According to local legend, Mott informed Manley during their match that he was interested in funding a new boys club for Flint youth, to which Manley responded, "I think the boys' clubs are wonderful; it's just too bad we can't open the forty boys' clubs we have here in Flint." Pointing out nearby Central High School, which adjoined the estate, Manley articulated a blueprint for what was to become the Mott program of community education:

There's one [community center], I said [pointing to Central High School]. It's closed down at 4 o'clock, when a boys' club should be open. It's complete with two gymnasiums, a swimming pool, a cafeteria, shops—everything you would want in a boys' club, along with what you'd want for girls' club, mothers' club, family club, a complete community center. Only we can't use it. And that's just one. There are forty such schools in Flint—one within half a mile of every man, woman, and child in town. They all stand idle after 4 o'clock every day, because the Board of Education has no money to keep them open.<sup>23</sup>

As they discussed the issue, Mott surely recognized the origins of Manley's idea. During the 1910s, the Flint Socialist Party platform included a demand that "school buildings shall be open for the use of the public, when not in use for school purposes." Mott opposed the plan during the 1912 mayoral campaign, but he did so only out of opposition to the Socialist Party's managing the content of educational programming. When offered a chance to fund *and* oversee his own school-based recreation programs, Mott seized the opportunity.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 117.

<sup>23</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 118.

<sup>24</sup> On the socialist platform of 1912, see "Tide of Socialism Stemmed by C. S. Mott," *Flint Journal*, April 1, 1952. On the origins of community education nationally, see Mary Jean Seubert, "The Origin,

Appealing to the executive's personal frugality and deeply ingrained business sense, Manley suggested a pilot program that would limit capital expenditures by partnering the Mott Foundation and the Flint Public Schools for the purpose of sponsoring recreation programs in five public schools: Martin, Lowell, McKinley, Zimmerman, and Homedale. According to Manley's plan, the Mott Foundation would provide funds to open the five schools for after-hours and weekend use in exchange for a commitment from the board to provide building space, heat, light, and custodial service. Impressed by the plan—and ever cognizant of the access to power guaranteed by his personal wealth—Mott introduced the initiative by hosting a dinner party for the entire board of education. At the conclusion of the evening, Mott and Manley had, for an initial outlay of only \$6,000, convinced the school board to open five public school buildings—all of them in segregated, all-white neighborhoods—for the purpose of community recreation.

Though it originated as a recreational venture, the Mott program intended to meet the larger needs of the neighborhoods surrounding each of the pilot schools. As Manley remembered, "Activities of each school were designed to meet the recreational and educational needs of the particular area it served."<sup>25</sup> To further that end, the Mott Foundation organized school officials and community members from each of the schools into separate committees to identify the special needs of each neighborhood. The committees uncovered specific community problems, proposed recreation programs to ameliorate them, and then worked with school officials and the Mott Foundation to

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Development, and Issues of the Community Education Movement in the United States, 1935-1995," (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida Atlantic University, 1995); and especially Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy during the Progressive Era* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), esp. 48-67.

<sup>25</sup> Manley, Reed, and Burns, *The Community School in Action*, 29.



deliver programming for residents. Staffed primarily by physical education teachers, high school seniors, and community volunteers, the program proved to be an immense success in the pilot neighborhoods, attracting a weekly citywide attendance of 5,456 in its inaugural year. With a variety of activities that included athletic competitions, scouting, neighborhood square dances, and roller skating, the Mott program brought white children and their parents off the streets and into the schools to recreate in a safe, “wholesome” environment.

### *Civilizing the City*

Initially, Manley and Mott envisioned the Flint program of recreation as a remedy for the specific problems of juvenile delinquency and child safety. However, local events in 1936 and 1937 compelled Manley and Mott to reassess the nature and scope of the city’s urban problems and the remedial power of sports and leisure. On December 30, 1936, the Great Sit-Down Strike erupted in Flint. One of the most consequential labor struggles in American history, the strike pitted members of the newly formed United Automobile Workers against Mott and other General Motors executives in a battle for union recognition. The striking workers occupied local automobile plants for forty-four days during that frigid winter in order to win collective bargaining rights. On February 11, 1937, the bitter dispute ended when GM formally agreed to recognize the union and engage in collective bargaining with the striking workers. The workers’ victory served as a catalyst for a wave of industrial organizing drives throughout the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. The Flint sit-down strike also marked the birth of the UAW and its parent organization, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), as a force in both

industrial relations and American politics. Community education was Mott's local response to the social and political challenges of organized labor.<sup>26</sup>

Mott reacted harshly to the news of industrial organizing drives and factory occupations in Flint, believing that the sit-down strike was an illegal and discourteous violation of GM's property rights. In a later interview with journalist Studs Terkel, Mott insisted that the strikers should have been shot, and even killed, for refusing to leave the factories.<sup>27</sup> For a time in the late 1930s (and again in the 1960s), Mott became preoccupied with fears of lawlessness. At one point, he even considered investing in Elmer Carlstrom's "Up-the-Sleeve Tear Gas Gun" and other futuristic technologies designed to repress crime and civil disorder.<sup>28</sup> Where some held hope for a greater democracy in the rise of industrial unionism, Mott saw the CIO and the UAW as proto-socialist threats to private property and the rule of law. Like Manley, Mott hoped that Flint could triumph over the forces of industrial unionism with a sweeping program of community recreation, company-sponsored housing, and other forms of welfare capitalism.<sup>29</sup> As the victorious automobile strikes proved, however, the Flint of the late 1930s was a fractured and contested city in which GM and its local representatives could dictate neither the private values nor the public behaviors of workers. Deeply moved by

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<sup>26</sup> On the Flint sit-down strikes of 1936-37, see Henry Kraus, *The Many and the Few: A Chronicle of the Dynamic Auto Workers* (Los Angeles: Plantin Press, 1947); Fine, *Sit-Down*; Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus*; and Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned*.

<sup>27</sup> Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 134-135.

<sup>28</sup> Elmer Carlstrom to C. S. Mott, August 16, 1937, Mott Papers, GHCC. Carlstrom designed the up-the-sleeve tear gas weapon to be worn around the wrist, concealed by a coat or shirt. The tear gas gun, Carlstrom claimed, was an effective way to disperse "mobs and riots."

<sup>29</sup> On welfare capitalism, see Stuart D. Brandes, *American Welfare Capitalism, 1880-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); L. Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Margaret Crawford, *Building the Workingman's Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns* (London: Verso, 1995).

the social transformations wrought by the New Deal and sit-downs, Mott understood his philanthropy as one part charity and an additional part political counterattack.



Figure 2.1. “These Were Happy Days.” Charles Stewart Mott (seated in the center of the wagon) making a nostalgic statement at a parade through downtown Flint, ca. 1954. Courtesy of Flint Public Library.

Beyond the leftist threats that he associated with the New Deal and the sit-down strike, Mott also found the urban landscape of the 1930s deeply troubling. When he had arrived in Michigan in 1905, Flint was a small, relatively homogeneous city of native-born whites, many of whom found employment in the skilled trades associated with carriage making. Looking back nostalgically at turn-of-the-century Flint, men such as Mott saw a small, cohesive town linked by sidewalks and horse-drawn carriages—a socially intimate place where urban planning, transportation technology, architecture, ethnic homogeneity, and racial segregation combined to create a thick veneer of

community solidarity. By the mid-1930s, however, the city had become virtually unrecognizable to the automobile pioneers who had first organized General Motors—a diverse, fractious city of big cars, big factories, and big unions. Though the earliest incarnation of the Mott program had accomplished a great deal in reducing child traffic deaths and juvenile delinquency, the hydra of poverty, unemployment, and disease remained, stripping the city of its prosperous and modern image.<sup>30</sup> Socially, the Flint region had grown both numerically and geographically such that incoming migrants felt very little sense of community and neighborliness. “We must build back to community activities to get people to know their neighbors and bring about a wholesome, small-town atmosphere in a big city,” Mott claimed.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, the city’s deeply entrenched automobile culture—which Mott himself had played a major role in constructing—consistently frustrated his attempts to restore social harmony, cultural consensus, and neighborliness. As Mott noted in an especially revealing diary entry, car culture in the United States represented a significant obstacle to community building: “I live four months each year in Bermuda, where, thank heaven, automobiles are not allowed on the public roads and transportation is principally by horse-drawn vehicles and bicycles.” “At any rate,” he continued, “we are much more primitive than here in the United States and perhaps more civilized in our relations with other people.”<sup>32</sup> In the aftermath of the sit-down strikes, it became clear to both Mott and Manley that child safety and recreation programs could not, on their own, solve the myriad social problems that plagued Flint. As the Depression gave way to wartime mobilization, the Mott program entered a new

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<sup>30</sup> On the early successes of the Flint Plan of Recreation, see *New York Times*, October 25, 1936. According to the *Times* article, the Flint program helped to reduce juvenile delinquency by approximately 70 percent while nearly eradicating child traffic deaths in the city.

<sup>31</sup> “Mr. Flint at Work,” *Time* (September 22, 1952).

<sup>32</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 137.

phase of development that brought its expanded vision of community education to the entire city.

By 1937, the Mott program of recreation had expanded to reach twenty-two schools in neighborhoods across the city. Despite the impressive scope of the recreation program, however, Manley increasingly understood the limitations of the foundation's "bat and ball" approach to urban problems. "To know the child," Manley now believed, "the school had to know his total environment."<sup>33</sup> Acting on that realization, the Mott program increased its budget nearly five-fold and expanded its reach directly into the homes of community members. With the approval of Mott and the always-supportive school board, Manley hired a cadre of "visiting teachers" to investigate the home lives of the city's children. Much to their consternation, the visiting teachers discovered deep poverty, correctible diseases and ailments, and unsanitary living conditions in thousands of homes across the city. "Of what use were sports to a child in poor health or a child with a physical handicap," Manley concluded.<sup>34</sup> The visiting teachers also found—especially in working-class, Catholic, and migrant communities—living arrangements, family structures, and cultural practices that shocked their middle-class, Protestant sensibilities. Among other surprises, they discovered single parent families, working mothers, and extended family living arrangements in which multiple generations cohabited under one roof. In many migrant communities, the visiting teachers uncovered child rearing philosophies, cooking and cleaning styles, modes of worship, and other cultural practices that conflicted with the bourgeois, Victorian standards of civic elites. Even more disconcerting—at least for business Republicans such as Mott—the visiting

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<sup>33</sup> This quotation is from a Mott Foundation film promoting community education. *To Touch a Child* (Flint: Centron Productions, 1962).

<sup>34</sup> *To Touch a Child*.

teachers saw a working-class, increasingly heterogeneous city that had expressed both at the polls and in the shops an almost reverential devotion to the Democratic trinity of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the United Auto Workers, and the New Deal. Flint's problems, as Mott and Manley understood them, were more widespread than local elites had ever imagined.

Based upon the startling reports from visiting teachers, the Mott Foundation expanded its programs during World War II, adding a health center, a vocational training program, an adult homemaking course, and a Mother's Club for the domestic training of women. Simultaneously, the foundation shifted its political emphasis from the UAW-controlled city commission to the board of education. In recognition of the UAW's growing electoral power—which manifested itself most clearly in the ward-based elections for the Flint City Commission—the Mott Foundation sought to wield its authority in the at-large, citywide races for the board of education. As Manley noted,

What has happened during the years is that we've pretty much given up on changing the character of that august body [the city commission], and concentrated instead on getting the real leaders of our community on the board of education and in other influential positions. . . . The union is a pretty strong electoral force here in Flint.<sup>35</sup>

### *Race and the Birth of Neighborhood Schools*

The wartime expansion of the Mott program—facilitated by the foundation's successful strategy of electing sympathetic school board members—helped bring to fruition Manley's vision of a "school-centered" community in which public schools became the focal points for self-help, recreation, and community betterment. Yet it was not until the conclusion of World War II when the first community school pilot project opened in

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<sup>35</sup> Manley to Ray Cromley, July 27, 1959, Manley Papers, box 17, 78-8.2-319, Scharchburg Archives.

Flint. In a move that broke sharply with the racial precedent established under the recreation plan, the Mott Foundation chose predominantly black Fairview Elementary School for its inaugural demonstration program. Through its first decade of existence, the Mott program had operated exclusively in segregated, all-white schools, serving at most a handful of African-American residents who had slipped across Flint's rigidly enforced residential color line. Following the Detroit race riot of 1943, however, local officials feared an outbreak of violence in Floral Park, St. John, and along the borders of Flint's growing North End ghetto. Hoping to improve race relations in the city, the Mott Foundation responded with two rather incongruous initiatives. In 1945, only two years after the epic Detroit riot, the foundation opened the Flint Interracial Community Center, a facility designed "to work toward the improvement of better living, working, and playing conditions . . . between the races, in the fields of recreation, social, moral, and civic affairs."<sup>36</sup> Though the foundation launched the interracial community center with the expressed intention of bringing whites and blacks together to reduce racial tensions, its social value was almost entirely symbolic. Located near Fairview School in the center of the increasingly segregated St. John Street neighborhood, the interracial center offered only limited programming that typically revolved around music, boxing, and self-improvement workshops. During its short five-year existence, the center's overwhelmingly male visitors were almost exclusively black and Mexican residents of the surrounding neighborhood.

The Mott Foundation allowed the interracial center to continue until 1951, when it shuttered the facility and shifted its recreation programs to the segregated St. John Street

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<sup>36</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 165.

Community Center. In an unpublished report to the Mott Foundation's coordinating committee, the director of the center explained the decision to close:

It [Flint Interracial Community Center] was founded at a time when racial tension in Flint had reached the riot stage. Today, nearly five years after its program began, Flint is enjoying inter-racial and inter-cultural harmony seldom realized by an industrial community of wide racial diversity.<sup>37</sup>

Once satisfied that civic order had returned, the Mott Foundation abandoned its short and limited experiment with integration.

The Mott Foundation launched its second racially oriented initiative, the Fairview project, in 1947. The Fairview program represented a sharp turn away from even limited forms of integration. In fact, when they designed the Fairview pilot, foundation officials had dropped all pretense of racial integration in favor of an experiment in community improvement within a segregated neighborhood school.<sup>38</sup> The portion of the St. John Street neighborhood that surrounded Fairview was predominantly black by the close of World War II. In 1947, the school had an enrollment of 393 students, 92 percent of whom were African American. Home to approximately half of Flint's black residents and businesses, the St. John Street neighborhood was an economically diverse neighborhood of workers, professionals, and unemployed persons. Still, though, St. John was among the most polluted, overcrowded, and dilapidated communities in the city. In St. John, a local historian remarked, "Sooty pollution from the Buick foundry and dust from unpaved roads blighted what age and neglect didn't get first."<sup>39</sup> Residents of St. John inhabited the city's oldest homes and suffered disproportionately from disease,

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<sup>37</sup> Minutes, Mott Foundation Program Coordinating Committee, 1947-1963, quoted in Peter L. Clancy, "The Contributions of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation in the Development of the Community School Program in Flint, Michigan," (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1963), 168.

<sup>38</sup> On the programs of the Interracial Center, see Manley, "Long Range Program: Immediate Results," August 1946, Manley Papers, box 4, 78-8.1-59b, Scharchburg Archives. On the closing of the Interracial Center, see *Flint Journal*, April 15, 1951.

<sup>39</sup> R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 11.



crime, and poverty. In its annual report for 1947-48, the Mott Foundation described the social conditions that shaped educational outcomes for Fairview students:

In the Fairview District, the serious-minded parents who want better things for their children find life a continuous struggle to combat destructive influences. Children whose parents have long since bowed to prevailing conditions come to school in a poor state of nutrition and health, with serious behavior problems and little hope for the future.<sup>40</sup>

Still concerned about the prospect of riots and other civil disturbances, the Mott Foundation designed the Fairview project as a means to “lessen frustration and aggression” among African Americans. Mott and Manley hoped to do this by improving the social conditions in one specific neighborhood. More generally, though, the foundation’s strategy at Fairview and in other segregated black schools was to combat inequality by raising the living standards and intellectual capacities of a few select African Americans. As Manley noted, “It doesn’t mean that the races have to date or inter-marry . . . [but] we should put the Negro on our middle class level of thinking. We have to take out the good Negro and bring him along to our middle class.”<sup>41</sup> Like most white Americans at mid-century, Manley and Mott abhorred “social equality” between the races, believed that only “good” Negroes could be assimilated, and viewed racial inequities primarily as a function of black anomie and backwardness.

Prior to the launch of the Fairview pilot program, the Mott Foundation conducted extensive neighborhood surveys through home visits and community tours, using its findings to create in-service training in the fields of health and child development for the school’s teachers. Additionally, the foundation purchased new furniture, lights, artwork,

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<sup>40</sup> Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 172. See also Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, *Annual Report for 1947-48* (Flint: Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1948).

<sup>41</sup> Minutes, Mott Foundation Advisory Council Meeting, September 27, 1963, Manley Papers, box 10, 78-8.2-97d-1, Scharchburg Archives.

and educational materials to enhance the learning environment in the school building. Mott also funded a complete educational survey that resulted in numerous changes to the Fairview curriculum. For its part, the board of education approved a school orchestra, a series of enrichment field trips for students, an intensive physical education program, longer class periods, regular intelligence and achievement testing, and a smaller pupil-teacher ratio. In support of the more rigorous academic program, the foundation also organized a variety of programs to improve the health and wellness of community members. For the poorest students at Fairview, Mott subsidized physical exams and a free breakfast program along with an extended-day program for the children of working parents. Making Fairview a true community school, however, entailed bringing adults into the building. For parents and other adults in the attendance district, Fairview provided free meeting space and opened its doors during the evenings for homemaking courses, adult education, and recreation. Among the most important activities offered at Fairview, according to foundation officials, was the adult homemaking program, which taught mothers to plan and cook meals, clean house, and make clothing. Believing that knowledge, uplift, and moral reform were the keys to eradicating poverty in the St. John neighborhood, the school board and foundation officials deployed teams of visiting teachers to recruit poor mothers for its classes.

Beginning in the summer following the opening of the Fairview community school, the Mott Foundation launched a massive publicity campaign to spread news of its successes in the North End. Because the foundation released little data regarding the Fairview experiment, it is unclear whether the pilot project significantly improved health outcomes or reduced unemployment and poverty in the St. John Street community; no

evidence supports such claims. Yet in creating a vibrant community center for residents of all ages, the Fairview project was a rousing success. Hoping to publicize the results of the Fairview experiment, Manley and a growing number of disciples on the board of education designated the school as a “showcase” for residents across the city to view the successes of community education. By the close of the decade, hundreds of citizens had crossed the color line to see firsthand the community schools program at Fairview. The publicity campaign expanded well beyond visitations, however. As Manley later remembered, “Almost every organized group in the community had at least one speaker who discussed in detail what was taking place at Fairview.”<sup>42</sup> For black residents of the North End, it was obvious by 1950 that the Mott Foundation had planned to let the Flint Interracial Community Center languish; but it was equally clear by then that community education had emerged as the foundation’s new segregated paradigm for civic harmony and social uplift. In defense of the shift towards neighborhood schools programming, C. S. Harding Mott, son of Charles Stewart and vice-president of the Mott Foundation, said, “We cannot solve world affairs satisfactorily without first tackling our community problems. We believe we have the best chance for doing this at the neighborhood school.”<sup>43</sup> By the end of the Fairview experiment, the segregated neighborhood school had emerged as ground zero for community education.

### *The Spread of Community Education*

Mott was frugal by nature and never intended to fund Flint’s community education program on his own. Rather, he and Manley hoped to “grease the gears” of the existing

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<sup>42</sup> Manley, Reed, and Burns, *The Community School in Action*, 58.

<sup>43</sup> Minutes, Mott Coordinating Committee, 1947-1963, quoted in Clancy, “The Contributions of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation,” 169.

schools machinery through strategic donations to the Flint Board of Education and massive publicity campaigns aimed at the taxpaying public. In the five years following World War II, the foundation orchestrated its local public relations efforts almost exclusively for the purpose of raising additional public monies for Flint's perennially impoverished schools. Compared with other school systems of similar size, the Flint Public Schools typically ranked near the bottom in per pupil expenditures, teacher pay, and school construction outlays. A combination of factors including the city's rapid growth, its arcane system of local tax limitation, and the school board's "pay as you go" financing left the schools in deep crisis by the late 1940s.<sup>44</sup> Because of Michigan's restrictive tax limitation laws—enacted in 1932 to provide property tax relief during the Great Depression—property in Flint could not be taxed beyond a strict fifteen-mill limit for local purposes unless specifically authorized by voters. Prior to the postwar economic boom, the board of education found it exceedingly difficult to obtain popular consent to exceed the fifteen-mill limitation. Consequently, the city constructed no new public schools between 1929 and 1950 and operated a full ten-month school year only once between 1932 and 1946. Hoping to expand the community schools concept citywide by capitalizing on the successes of the Fairview project, supporters of the Mott program waged an aggressive school bond campaign in 1950. At a June 1 birthday celebration sponsored by the board of education, Mott announced a major gift to the Flint school system—a \$1 million donation to fund the construction of a four-year college in Flint.

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<sup>44</sup> Flint's 15-mill tax limitation policy, adopted on November 8, 1932, sharply reduced corporate taxes, resulting in a 45 percent decline in the funds available for public schools. On tax limitation and education in Genesee County during the Great Depression, see John L. Riegle, *Day before Yesterday: An Autobiography and History of Michigan Schools* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison and Company, 1971), 300. For a brief history of tax limitation, see Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (September 18, 1974), 235; and especially James E. Larson, *The City of Flint Tax Limitation Experiment* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1948).

Ever the practical businessperson, Mott offered the donation only on the condition that voters approve a new schools millage to fund four new elementary schools, building additions for three additional facilities, a new junior college, a new public library, and a new school administration building. After an intensive citywide campaign that gained immeasurable momentum following Mott's announcement, voters, by a four-to-one margin, approved an unprecedented \$7 million bond issue on June 6, 1950. Flush with desperately needed funds, the Flint Board of Education moved in the 1950s and 1960s to formalize the Mott program by implementing community education on a citywide basis.<sup>45</sup>

When Flint voters visited the polls in June 1950, they approved a school millage for the first time in the city's history, inaugurating what the *Flint Journal* dubbed a "golden era" of public education. The approval of the 1950 bond issue, along with the passage of four additional school millages in the next dozen years, allowed the board of education to proceed with an ambitious capital projects campaign that brought new school buildings and community schools programs first to the segregated white neighborhoods on the city's fast growing fringe and later to the predominantly black schools in the city's impoverished core. The board of education's postwar building strategy, which represented a substantial investment in the city's outermost neighborhoods, mirrored the broader decentralized patterns of private capital investment during the 1940s and 1950s that rewarded communities in accordance with their distance from the increasingly black inner city.

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<sup>45</sup> For more on school finance in Flint, see Franklin K. Killian, "Flint's Fiscal Capacity to Support Secondary and Advanced Education," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1949). See also, John Guy Fowlkes, "Excerpts from Report of the Expenditures, Business Management, and Salary Policies of the Public Schools of Flint," n.d., Manley Papers, box 1, 78-8.1-5b, Scharzburg Archives.

By the end of the 1950s, the school board had used its increased revenues to construct eight new elementary schools in the city of Flint. Out of the eight new elementary schools opened during the 1950s, only one, Stewart School, contained black pupils; it opened in 1955 with an 83 percent black enrollment. The remaining seven schools, all located in the segregated white neighborhoods that ringed the city's core, served a combined total of over five thousand students, none of whom was black. Although the all-white schools constructed in the 1950s—each of them fully equipped as school-community centers—quickly became the new public relations centerpieces for its program, the Mott Foundation went to great lengths to expand its community schools initiatives to the entire city during the 1950s and 1960s. For its supporters in Flint and elsewhere, the twenty years between 1950 and 1970 marked the historical apex for community education, a period in which the Mott Foundation persuaded not only the Flint Board of Education, but also thousands of white and black citizens to embrace a neighborhood schools paradigm for personal uplift and urban renewal. Echoing the popular enthusiasm for community education, the editors of the *Flint Journal* cheered the expansion of the Mott program. “Better education means better citizens,” they claimed. “Better citizens mean a better community. Better communities mean a better Nation, and a better democracy.”<sup>46</sup> For Mott and Manley, community education was a vehicle for building better citizens, healthier neighborhoods, and a stronger, more segregated community.

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<sup>46</sup> *Flint Journal*, June 7, 1950. See also Young and Quinn, *Foundation for Living*, 177.

*The Political Content of Community Education*

Within a year of the 1950 millage victory, the Flint Board of Education had opened Freeman School, the city's first elementary school designed specifically to accommodate community education programs. Located in the Farnumwood neighborhood near Flint's southern boundary with Burton Township, Freeman served an all-white, mixed income neighborhood just to the east of the city's massive Fisher Body 1 plant. The board of education trumpeted its newest ranch-style school—which opened on October 22, 1951—as the architectural and semiotic embodiments of community education. In recognition of its significance, the school board used Freeman's utilitarian design as the blueprint for all future school construction in the city, going so far as to publicize its specifications nationally for other interested school districts.

In order to accommodate both students and community members, Freeman sat on five acres of land and contained approximately 43,000 square feet of floor space, significantly more than in the older two- and three-story central city schools. Complete with a wooded grove for outdoor theater projects, picnic tables, and a large parking lot for off-street parking, the spacious grounds of the Freeman School signaled the board's embrace of the suburban ideals of open space, single-story architecture, and automobile-centered transportation. Designed to cater to a multiplicity of community needs, Freeman held eight traditional classrooms, two kindergartens, a gymnasium, library, arts and crafts room, a community conference room, health room, teachers' rest area, administrative offices, and a power plant.<sup>47</sup> Its gymnasium, envisioned as a primary site for community events in the evening and on weekends, was significantly larger than traditional school gyms, with space necessary to host community dances, roller skating, shuffleboard,

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<sup>47</sup> Manley, Reed, and Burns, *The Community School in Action*, 71-75.

volleyball, and badminton. For larger events, the gym had rollaway bleachers that could quickly add either floor space or seating depending upon needs. Equipped with public toilets accessible from the lighted play lots and ball fields outside the school, Freeman's interior design reflected the board's desire to bring the public into the school building. As with the gymnasium, Freeman's auditorium could accommodate large crowds for assemblies, town hall meetings, community plays, and other neighborhood events. The school library at Freeman also served as a public library branch for the Farnumwood community, open to all neighborhood residents during the evenings. Like Fairview, Freeman also contained a community room equipped with furniture, cabinets, cooking appliances, and a refrigerator. To promote good health among neighborhood residents, the board of education included a community health room at the new school, where indigent children and families could obtain periodic checkups. The design of the building, Manley and Mott recognized, was a clear "physical expression of an educational philosophy," signaling to community members the type of activities that its sponsors wished to promote. Perhaps less obvious to casual observers, however, were the political philosophies and social considerations that drove the burgeoning community education movement in Flint.<sup>48</sup>

According to its widely circulated promotional material, the purpose of the Mott program was "to discover and demonstrate means whereby a community can use its own resources to solve its own problems, thus helping to make the City of Flint a model

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<sup>48</sup> On the design of Freeman School, see Manley, Reed, and Burns, *The Community School in Action*, 69-76; Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, *Designing, Constructing, and Financing Facilities for a Community School* (Flint: Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, n.d.), Manley Papers, box 19, 78-8.2-436b, Scharchburg Archives.



community, worthy of emulation by others.”<sup>49</sup> To further that aim, the Mott Foundation coordinated a citywide program that consisted of eleven overlapping divisions, all of them operating under the broadly defined framework of “community education.” The Mott program included the Community Recreation Program, the Adult Education Program, Economics and Leadership Training, Experimental Programs in Curriculum Enrichment, the Graduate Training Program, Mott Camp, Big Brothers of Greater Flint, the C. S. Mott Children’s Dental Clinic, the C. S. Mott Children’s Health Center, the Stepping Stone Program, and the Flint Committee on Alcoholism.

The recreation initiative, which consisted of athletic leagues and courses in nearly thirty different sporting and leisure events, anchored the Mott Foundation’s evening and weekend programming. Offering everything from football and baseball to ice skating and square dancing, the athletics and recreation program attracted the city’s largest enrollments and was by far the most popular Mott division. However, the recreation program also served as a gateway to the adult education courses. Specifically, Manley envisioned recreation as a lure of sorts, a means to “bring people into the school so that their interest would draw them into projects which would lead to a better community.”<sup>50</sup> By the 1960s, Flint’s adult education program offered over twelve hundred courses in fifty-four community school centers in the city. With courses in traditional academic subjects, “cultural studies,” arts and crafts, sewing, home and family living, recreation, vocational and business education, and special courses for the disabled, the adult education program drew yearly enrollments of approximately fifty thousand and had a wide appeal throughout the city. For a nominal fee of between \$1 and \$3, depending

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<sup>49</sup> The quotation is from “A Description of the Activities of the Mott Foundation Program of the Flint Board of Education,” *Journal of Educational Sociology* 33:4 (December 1959): 153.

<sup>50</sup> See Manley, Reed, and Burns, *The Community School in Action*, 31.

upon the course, adults in Flint could attend evening and weekend classes designed “to improve the cultural and intellectual life of the community, to increase citizens’ knowledge of their economy, home roles and heritage, and to meet the special needs of the people.”<sup>51</sup> For thousands of Flint residents, special needs included treatment and support for alcoholism, which the Mott Foundation and the local Red Feather Agency coordinated through a separate program.

The Mott Foundation’s economics and leadership training initiatives were central to both the adult and child education programs of the Flint Public Schools. Designed for the Mott Foundation by the Industrial Relations Center of the University of Chicago, the community economics program offered conservative counterpoints to both Soviet-style communism and Keynesian economic theory through its “Economics of Our Community” courses and other offerings. Informed by Mott’s “common sense” opposition to “the New Deal and other wild goose activities,” the foundation distributed a series of pamphlets about local industries, entitled “The Work We Live By,” to describe the benefits of free market capitalism to Flint’s economy. Its conservative political content was both intentional and unmistakable.<sup>52</sup> Alongside its innovative economics initiatives, the Mott Foundation sponsored the Personalized Curriculum Program (PCP) for potential dropouts, the Better Tomorrow for the Urban Child Program (BTU) for black, inner-city children, and other experimental programs designed to uplift poor, underperforming, and underprivileged youth. The PCP and BTU emphasized vocational

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<sup>51</sup> Leaflet, “Divisions of the Mott Program of the Flint Board of Education,” n.d., Manley Papers, Scharchburg Archives.

<sup>52</sup> Flint Board of Education, *The Work We Live By*, 20 vols. (Flint: Flint Board of Education, 1958-1965). These are available at the Flint Public Library. See also, Joseph A. Anderson, “The Economic Value of the Community School Concept to Local Business,” *The Community School and Its Administration* 7:9 (May 1969).

training and “life skills” instruction, casting aside what Manley called the “intellectualism” of traditional education in favor of practical training courses for poor and minority children. “Educators these days are concentrating on geniuses,” Mott observed, “but we’re more interested in the hoi polloi . . . so we’re promoting education for people who haven’t had the opportunity to learn.”<sup>53</sup>

**The Mott Foundation Adult Education Program**

COOPERATING WITH THE FLINT BOARD OF EDUCATION  
OAK GROVE CAMPUS    FLINT 3, MICH.    PHONE 9-7649

Dear Parent:

We hope you can spare a moment or two to check over the study courses, recreation and hobby classes listed below. These classes have been scheduled to fulfill your desires for learning, fun, fellowship and personal advancement.

Most of the courses last for 10 weeks and the fees are small—\$1.00 to \$3.00 for most, except in the high school and college credit divisions where the charges are a little higher.

Registration for all classes will be held in the Central High School girls' gymnasium from 7:00 to 9:00 p. m., September 15, 16 and 17.

If you would like further information about any particular course, or if you would like a special booklet describing each class mailed to you, please call us at 9-7649. We will be glad to hear from you also if you have any suggestions for classes or hobby groups not already listed.

<p><b>COLLEGE CREDIT</b> Economics English Composition Accounting American Literature Political Science Anatomy and Physiology Psychology Psychology of Personality Sociology Music Literature Mathematics Business Organization Regional Geography United States History Speech</p> <p><b>HIGH SCHOOL CREDIT</b> All subjects</p> <p><b>PRE-HIGH SCHOOL COURSES</b> Reading Grammar Arithmetic Vocabulary Building Social Studies Writing</p> <p><b>CULTURAL</b> Correct English Creative Writing Children's Theatre Costume and Make-up Effective Job Relations Grapho-Analysis Group Piano Instruction Job Improvement Techniques Poetry Report Writing Chorus Singing Speeding Your Reading Spanish French German Acting and Directing Art Appreciation Music Appreciation Effective Speaking and Personality Development Public Relations Human Relations Your Family Tree Good Health for Better Living Great Men and Great Issues in our American Heritage</p>	<p><b>CULTURAL (continued)</b> Word Power Made Easy Woolfacts in Men's Clothing Positive Citizenship Improve Your Memory</p> <p><b>HOME AND FAMILY</b> Keeping Up Appearances Landscaping for Home Owners Driver Education Interior Decorating Family Fun Frozen Foods Cooking for Guests Friendship to Marriage Understanding Our Children Understanding the Retarded Child Let's Give A Party Legal Problems of the Home and Family</p> <p><b>ARTS AND CRAFTS</b> Leathercraft Peasant Painting Water Color Painting Oil Painting China Painting Fine Arts Workshop Gift Making Gift Wrapping Ceramics Textile Painting Father and Son Workshop Dresden Craft Photography Whittling and Woodcarving Furniture Upholstering Furniture Refinishing Woodworking Fly Tying Machine Shop Hobby Woodshop Hobby Amateur Radio</p> <p><b>SEWING</b> Introduction to Sewing Dressmaking Children's Clothing Clothing Remodeling Alterations and Fitting Furs Basic Patterns Tailoring Handmade Rugs</p>	<p><b>SEWING (continued)</b> Braided Rugs Hooked Rugs Belgian Bobbin Lace Needlecraft Millinery Knitting Slip Covers and Drapes Lamp Shades Quilting Leather Glove Making Crocheting and Embroidering</p> <p><b>RECREATION</b> Square Dance Instruction Square Dancing Parties Couple Dancing Instruction Social Dancing Instruction Social Dancing Parties Badminton Swimming Weight Lifting &amp; Body Building Judo Physical Fitness Bridge</p> <p><b>VOCATIONAL</b> Architectural Drawing Drafting Machine Drawing House Construction Sheet Metal Drawing Use of Framing Square Blueprint Reading Machine Shop Woodshop Shop Mathematics</p> <p><b>BUSINESS</b> Office Machines Shorthand Review and Dictation Shorthand Typing Bookkeeping Accounting Business Fundamentals Human Relations Training Successful Selling Comptometry Business Organization Penmanship</p> <p><b>SPECIAL EDUCATION</b> Braille Reading and Writing Lip Reading</p> <p>Cordially, <i>Myrtle Fatten Black</i> Director of Adult Education</p>
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Figure 2.2. Mott adult education leaflet, ca. 1950. Courtesy of Scharchburg Archives.

<sup>53</sup> “Mr. Flint,” *Time* (June 28, 1963).

The Mott Foundation offered a variety of short-term services to promote the health and well-being of indigent children. Mott Camp, located twenty miles from Flint on Pero Lake, served as a summer destination for impoverished boys where volunteers taught social and outdoor living skills. The foundation also sponsored the Big Brothers of Greater Flint, which annually recruited thousands of volunteer adult mentors “to help brighten—and sometimes reconstruct—the lives” of over a thousand fatherless boys. For girls, the Mott Foundation coordinated the Stepping Stone Program, designed to teach young women home management skills and “the art of gracious living.”<sup>54</sup> With programs in thirty-six schools across the city, Stepping Stones attracted an annual membership of nearly a thousand local girls. The C. S. Mott Children’s Dental and Health Clinics were among the most popular of the foundation’s programs. These clinics served students from across the city by offering preventative medical exams and early treatment for poor children. Though most children in the city were ineligible due to family incomes, the Mott Health Clinic served approximately 25,000 children per year through its pediatric facilities.

Mott officials worked diligently to record accurate data and attendance figures for each of their divisions. Yet because of the sheer popularity of their programming and the extent to which citizens enrolled in multiple classes simultaneously, it was almost impossible to track with precision the number and percentage of citizens who participated in Mott programs. Still, reasonable estimates suggest that well over half of the nearly 200,000 residents of postwar Flint enrolled in one or another of the Mott Foundation’s activities on an annual basis. “At our house,” a Mott participant pointed out, “we just take it for granted that we are all going to take Mott Foundation classes. If it weren’t for

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<sup>54</sup> “Divisions of the Mott Program.”

the Mott Foundation, this sure would be a different kind of town.”<sup>55</sup> As many observers noted, the foundation owed its ability to reach such a large number of local residents to its unique relationship with the public school system. In deploying its great wealth and resources to meet grassroots demands for health, education, and recreation programming, the Mott program revolutionized the role of the school in the process of community building. By opening the schools on weekends and evenings, and by bringing families and neighbors together for education, recreation, and community building exercises, the Mott program successfully transformed Flint schools into the lighted community centers that Frank Manley first envisioned during the Great Depression. Energized by their local successes, Manley and Mott moved in the 1960s to nationalize Flint’s model through massive recruitment and a rigorous publicity campaign.

From the start, Mott sought to create in Flint an imitable community whose efforts in civic improvement could be duplicated in other cities. Among the most significant of the Mott Foundation’s efforts in that arena was its graduate training program. In order to train community schools administrators, the Mott Foundation partnered with Michigan State University and other institutions of higher learning to launch graduate programs in community education. The graduate training program spread rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1978, the foundation had organized nearly one hundred community education centers in universities across the country. Though the graduate program was a key part of its publicity campaign, the foundation’s workshop and visitation program brought the message of community education to a national audience of policymakers. The foundation formalized its approach to public relations in 1957 by instituting regularly scheduled conferences and open houses designed to promote the concept of community

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<sup>55</sup> “Mr. Flint.”

education. Throughout the 1960s, these workshops and open houses attracted well over ten thousand visitors annually to the Flint schools, many of them superintendents and school board members from districts interested in the community education model. Although Michiganders predominated, visitors from every state in the nation as well as a number of foreign dignitaries came to Flint to observe its schools. By 1970, the foundation's publicity campaign had helped to spread community education programs to over three hundred school districts nationwide.<sup>56</sup>

Charles Stewart Mott's devotion to community education was part of a larger political project that reflected his most deeply cherished beliefs. Mott and his advocates on the school board believed that community education held the promise of solving vexing international problems such as poverty, crime, disease, and unemployment. At times, proponents of the program went so far as to posit community education as a complete solution to all forms of suffering in the world. As Manley and Fred Totten wrote in *The Community School: Basic Concepts, Functions, and Organization*,

We have so much faith in the power of community education that we believe that, if by some magic all schools could be converted into broad based service centers, within a few generations, human suffering and despair could virtually be eliminated from the face of the earth.<sup>57</sup>

At the root of the nation's social problems, they believed, were liberal social and economic policies that weakened the free market and rewarded the sloth and indolence of Negroes and the poor. Implicitly, Mott and Manley accepted the notion that poverty and want stemmed primarily from the personal deficiencies and educational shortcomings of

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<sup>56</sup> On the Mott Foundation's public relations campaign, see *Flint Journal*, October 3, 1956, September 19, 1957, March 8, 1959, October 8, 1970. The Manley collection contains a great deal of information on Mott Foundation advertising. See, for instance, Manley Papers, box 2, 78-8.1-16; box 3, 78-8.1-44 and 78-8.1-59a; and box 17, 78-8.2-319, Scharchburg Archives. For national coverage, see Karl Detzer, "Flint's Gone Crazy over Culture," *Reader's Digest* (March 1959), 184-188; and Kearney, "Dancing in the Streets."

<sup>57</sup> W. Fred Totten and Manley, *The Community School: Basic Concepts, Function, and Organization* (Galen, Michigan: Allied Education Council, 1969), xxv.

the poor. Through community education, they sought to construct a national model for self help, personal improvement, and private welfare that would simultaneously strengthen democracy and free enterprise. Mott saw the New Deal, and later the Great Society, as the greatest domestic policy threats to that promise. Imbued by their faith in the power of community education, Manley and Mott sought to transform the city of Flint into a “model city” whose programs could be copied anywhere. In time, they hoped to position community education as a viable replacement for the welfare state and the broader politics of redistributive liberalism. Such beliefs formed the core of Mott’s conservative worldview and informed both the philosophy and practice of community education in Flint.

Proponents of community schools in Flint criticized traditional curricula for being overly concerned with the intellectual aspects of education while devoting little energy to its practical uses. At its core, community education existed to help citizens become better, more efficient workers and to teach poor and working-class migrants how to assume personal responsibility for fulfilling their basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, and health care. Regarding the issue of hunger, Manley and the foundation’s cadre of visiting teachers blamed poor women for their laziness and roundly criticized “mothers who are too dilatory or too indolent to get up in the morning to prepare breakfast for their children.” Recognizing student hunger as an impediment to educational achievement, the Mott Foundation reluctantly sponsored free breakfast programs for a small number of children as part of the community education program. Yet as Manley acknowledged, the foundation offered such forms of direct assistance “for a limited time only—only for the time required to rehabilitate the mother and teach her the necessity for assuming the job

that rightfully belongs to her.” For foundation officials, the solution to the problem of hunger rested in the rehabilitation of poor mothers and not in government-sponsored relief programs. Similarly, in order to address the clothing needs of poor children, community schools officials distributed donated clothing to the needy on a limited, short-term basis. To solve the larger problem, the foundation offered adult education courses in sewing, clothing construction, and clothing care to teach women to make, maintain, and repair garments. With respect to housing and unemployment, again the Mott Foundation advocated a combination of private giving, volunteerism, short-term assistance, job training, and individual reform that anticipated Ronald Reagan’s approach to poverty in the 1980s. “The community school,” as Manley readily acknowledged, “involves itself rather extensively in the area of *home and family living*.” But it did so in a manner that rejected both the structural explanations of poverty and the efficacy of direct assistance to the poor. Instead, Mott and Manley focused their resources on reforming the attitudes and behaviors of poor people.<sup>58</sup>

Mott and Manley viewed the Mott Foundation’s health-related activities with special pride. During the late 1940s, when President Harry Truman and other Fair Deal Democrats advocated national health insurance, the Mott Foundation actively promoted its “Health Guard” plan for children, a program that brought preventative medicine into the public schools. To promote good health among the city’s youth, the foundation hired doctors and dentists to provide complete physical examinations to all of the children enrolled in the Flint Public Schools. In elaborate ceremonies held in school auditoriums, the foundation awarded special “Health Guard” badges to children who were “free from all correctible physical and dental defects.” For those with correctible ailments, the

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<sup>58</sup> Totten and Manley, *The Community School*, 12.



foundation provided counseling and guidance, but it intentionally withheld care in all but the most extreme cases. As with the child breakfast and homemaking programs, the Mott plan for health care hinged primarily on education, training, and targeted giving to only the most “deserving” of the poor. The Mott Foundation countered calls for national health care by promoting its Flint initiatives in other cities, advertising them as a free market answer to the specter of “socialist” medicine. “We want to preserve private medicine,” claimed Dr. Arthur Tuuri, director of the Mott Health Center. “We don’t want bureaucracy and inefficient medicine.” The Mott Foundation’s public health initiatives elevated prevention over guaranteed primary health care. As stated in 1949 by Dr. Henry Cook of Flint, a former president of the Michigan State Medical Society and an active proponent of the Foundation, “It is more important to teach people to take care of themselves than to take care of them.”<sup>59</sup>

Regardless of the social issue in question, the Mott program of community education offered itself as a national alternative to the tenets of redistributive liberalism. As a core aim, the community schools initiative sought to remind citizens that “to help one’s neighbors should be recognized and undertaken as a personal responsibility rather than as the official business of impersonal welfare organizations.”<sup>60</sup> Following that conservative logic to its political end, Manley and other community schools proponents in Flint loathed liberal and leftist leaders such as Walter P. Reuther and Martin Luther King, Jr., condemning them as “unscrupulous agitators” whose struggle for social equity could only be satisfied by “dragging down everyone to their level of misery.”<sup>61</sup> Community education was never solely a school policy, but rather an expression of a

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<sup>59</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, July 5, 1949.

<sup>60</sup> Manley, Reed, and Burns, *The Community School in Action*, 61.

<sup>61</sup> Manley, “Some Basic Assumptions,” n.d., Manley Papers, box 16, 78-8.2-366b, Scharchburg Archives.

profoundly conservative worldview that sought to alleviate suffering without any reallocation of the government's resources. As he often did, Manley expressed the foundation's philosophy in an anecdote:

We accept the idea that people of affluence have every right to fulfill their wants insofar as they are able, even though their wants may include luxuries, conveniences, travel, and services not available to people of lesser means. The community school can help people of affluence learn how to fulfill some of their wants just as it can help others learn how to fulfill their basic needs. There may be a tendency for people of great affluence to waste materials, capital, and services to a greater degree than others. Most people, even those in poverty, waste certain items. Some waste their money on non-essentials that could be used to buy food, while others waste time and opportunity. We all know that many people go to bed hungry each night. Many of us have seen enough food wasted at a banquet to feed many hungry people. So all of us, affluent as well as deprived, need to put our heads together and come up with some bold new ways of distributing goods and services in such a manner that those who "have" will not actually have their substance taken away, and those who "have not" will learn how to merit, conserve, and use that which is wasted and that which can be earned and purchased from those who "have." It is possible that community education can help find the solution.<sup>62</sup>

The Mott Foundation's fierce opposition to the welfare state renders troubling any notion of a postwar consensus that united liberals and conservatives around the tenets of the New Deal. To be sure, no such agreement existed in the Vehicle City. This is not to say, however, that Democrats and Republicans in Flint found no common ground on important political and social issues. Indeed, whites of all political persuasions and class backgrounds responded similarly to the rapid expansion of Flint's black population. In the 1940s and 1950s, Flint's African-American community grew exponentially as thousands of black agricultural workers from the South sought out new lives and opportunities. The growth of Flint's black population put extreme pressure on the rigid color lines that kept the city's schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods divided.

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<sup>62</sup> Totten and Manley, *The Community School*, xxvii.

Nevertheless, a combination of state-sponsored housing segregation, school district gerrymandering, and widespread employment discrimination helped to sustain Jim Crow during the long postwar era. Just as they had during the Depression, Frank Manley and Charles Stewart Mott would continue to play an instrumental role in maintaining educational Jim Crow during the postwar era.

## Chapter 3

### **Formalizing the Pigment Partition: Public Policies and Racial Segregation in Postwar Flint**

A combination of public policies and private racism continuously reconfigured the color line in postwar Flint, making it virtually impossible for white and black residents to live, learn, and play in integrated settings. By the end of the 1930s, privately orchestrated racial restrictions and newly created federal and local mandates for residential Jim Crow had converged to make Flint the third most segregated metropolis in the United States. Both before and long after World War II, local bankers, realtors, builders, white homeowners, and other non- and quasi-governmental actors played an important role in constructing what Dr. Albert Wheeler, president of the Michigan Conference of NAACP Branches, called the “Pigment Partition.”<sup>1</sup> Yet with the establishment of the HOLC and the FHA, the federal government and its local subcontractors from the private housing industry formalized and effectively codified the cultural prejudices and court-sanctioned housing covenants that had previously shaped the residential housing market. During the postwar era, private discrimination, federal segregation mandates, and municipal policies reinforced and recreated residential Jim Crow in Flint’s neighborhoods and schools.

Postwar federal housing policies restructured housing markets and reordered racial geographies in cities and suburbs throughout the United States. New Deal and postwar federal housing initiatives contained an explicitly anti-urban bias. In

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Albert Wheeler, “The Negro Community and City Hall,” January 16, 1967, Edgar B. Holt Papers, box 9, folder 58, GHCC.

metropolitan areas across the nation, policymakers from the HOLC and the FHA typically preferred to insure mortgages for new homes in suburban developments over existing structures in urban neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the story of federally financed housing discrimination cannot be narrated simply as a national development in which municipal actors played only subsidiary roles. Local actors and conditions played a key role in shaping the implementation of federal housing policies, the pace of suburbanization, and the spatial trajectory of metropolitan development. By framing the history of residential resegregation as one in which “the national is local,” many housing policy scholars have underestimated the agency of local actors who implemented federal housing programs and the place-specific political, economic, social, and cultural considerations that informed private and public housing policy decisions in all metropolitan areas.<sup>2</sup>

The Flint case suggests the need for a more balanced view of the relationship between federal and municipal housing policies. In the Vehicle City, local lenders, HOLC surveyors, and FHA loan underwriters initially favored all-white urban neighborhoods over the poorly serviced, predominantly jerrybuilt suburbs in Genesee County. During the 1940s and 1950s, federal mortgage insurance policies forced suburban officials to develop new urban services and build modern political infrastructures as prerequisites to gaining FHA subsidies. While suburban officials worked to urbanize the suburbs, federal and local officials rewarded all-white neighborhoods in the city with new housing developments and thousands of mortgages

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Freund, *Colored Property*, 1-42, 99-240, 328-381. See also, K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 190-218; and Bauman, Biles, and Szylvian, eds., *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes*. Robert Self makes a similar point in *American Babylon*, arguing that urban and suburban studies scholars have “understudied and undertheorized local municipal governments as important state actors.” See Self, *American Babylon*, 333.

for new homes. Viewing integration as a mortgage risk factor and a clear detriment to property values, housing officials in the public and private sectors denied black buyers the opportunity to purchase homes in neighborhoods outside of Flint's increasingly segregated, overcrowded, and dilapidated ghettos.

Segregated housing patterns played a key role in maintaining Jim Crow in Flint. Yet segregation also derived from the racial policies of the Mott Foundation, whose leaders helped to maintain Jim Crow both in Flint's schools and in the city's broader public sphere through community education and neighborhood schools. During the postwar decades, Mott Foundation officials and members of the Flint Board of Education manipulated school transfer policies, built new schools in segregated neighborhoods, and gerrymandered school district boundaries in an attempt to boost property values and maintain the color line. Although Flint's community education program emerged in an historical context in which issues of class and nationality dominated local political debates, the leaders of the Mott initiative always operated within a segregationist racial paradigm. As a consequence of the board's postwar policies, schools were, in many instances, even more segregated than the racially divided residential neighborhoods they served. Because schools served as the focal points for community activities throughout the city, the gerrymandering of boundaries affected nearly everyone in Flint, regardless of age. In Flint, segregated neighborhoods did not stem solely, or even primarily, from housing discrimination. Indeed, as much as subdivision lines, school attendance zones effectively created neighborhood boundaries and established the rules of membership and exclusion in the city's rigidly segregated public sphere. The public policies that maintained segregation in Flint's schools and neighborhoods reflected a broad cultural

consensus among whites that blamed racial integration for declining property values and weak community ties.

### *Federal Housing Policies and Postwar Urban Development*

Collectively, scholars of suburban development have made a compelling case that the FHA and members of local housing industries fulfilled their racially coded vision of the ideal, orderly, and growth-friendly metropolis by rewarding segregated suburban spaces over integrated urban ones. By systematically redlining inner-city areas and insuring home mortgages for millions of whites in segregated suburbs, many have argued, the FHA simultaneously orchestrated large-scale urban divestment and the resegregation of metropolitan America. When analyzed over the long term, those conclusions are difficult to dispute. Nevertheless, an investigation of Flint's postwar development suggests the need for a subtler, more locally rooted, and place-based understanding of the ways in which federal policies towards cities and suburbs changed over time.<sup>3</sup>

As with HOLC surveyors during the Depression, FHA officials in Flint initially looked disdainfully at huge swaths of suburban Genesee County. Federal appraisers paid special attention to the poor housing and inadequate utilities and services that suburban governments offered residents. In addition to requiring racial segregation, FHA officials also sought to use their mortgage insurance program to spur the development of modern suburban infrastructure. Racial restrictions were not sufficient to secure federally insured investment. FHA representatives also wanted suburban governments to develop better roads and schools, cleaner water, modern sewer systems, and sufficiently restrictive

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 190-230; Self, *American Babylon*, 23-60, 96-176; and Freund, *Colored Property*, passim.

building and zoning codes. At the onset of the post-World War II housing boom, the infrastructure of suburban Flint remained largely undeveloped, however. In the county as a whole, only the city of Flint and portions of Mt. Morris and Burton Townships could claim public water and sewer systems. According to the authors of a 1953 FHA report on Flint's housing market, "In the post-War years, home building became more firmly tied to water and sewer lines and to Government minimum property requirements for mortgage insurance." "This revived a concentration of building in the City of Flint," the report continued, "which is just now beginning to spill over its legal boundaries in a conventional urban sprawl."<sup>4</sup> During a 1947 interview with local reporters, realtor John W. Davis, president of the Genesee County Board of Real Estate, affirmed that mortgages tended to follow sewer lines. "Financing a home without plumbing is almost an impossibility nowadays," he stated.<sup>5</sup> For a multiplicity of reasons, the FHA in Flint and elsewhere exhibited a strong pre-determined preference for suburban over urban developments, but federal officials nonetheless withheld mortgage insurance from all but three suburban Flint townships during the 1930s and most of the 1940s, preferring instead to invest in communities that either possessed or had planned for modern physical and governmental infrastructures. According to a 1951 study of postwar home building conducted by University of Michigan researcher Tom Dinell, "Almost all FHA insured mortgages that are made in the Flint Metropolitan Area are made in the city." While municipal and township officials in suburban Flint rushed to dig wells, lay sewer lines, implement zoning codes, and lure private housing investors, the FHA, at least in its early

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<sup>4</sup> Federal Housing Administration, "An Analysis of the Flint, Michigan SMA (Genesee County) as of January 1953," ii, RG 31, Reports of Housing Market Analysis, 1937-1963, box 10, NA.

<sup>5</sup> "Elimination of Slum Districts Awaits More Sewer Lines," *Flint Journal*, January 5, 1947.



years, turned its attention towards segregated white neighborhoods in the central city and its most urbanized Jim Crow suburbs.<sup>6</sup>

The mortgage insurance program of the Federal Housing Administration—and, to a lesser extent, the home financing provisions of the 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, or GI Bill—helped to resurrect the dormant home building and sales industries of metropolitan Flint.<sup>7</sup> In 1933, just a year prior to the passage of the National Housing Act, the city of Flint issued a mere thirteen permits for new homes. Seven years later, that number had increased to 629.<sup>8</sup> By the close of the 1940s, builders were constructing nearly a thousand new homes per year in the city, and home ownership rates in Flint had increased to approximately 80 percent.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the racial and spatial calculus employed by HOLC and FHA appraisers ensured that Flint’s housing boom would reward, except in rare instances, only white homebuyers in segregated, carefully restricted residential neighborhoods.

The city of Flint issued a record number of building permits for new homes during the 1940s. Postwar building activity centered on the elite, carefully restricted neighborhoods of Woodlawn Park and Woodcroft Estates as well as the quasi-suburban, all-white neighborhoods that formed the inside edges of the city’s municipal boundary. In Woodlawn Park and the neighboring Brookside subdivision, both of which rated highly on the HOLC’s residential security maps, builders constructed 838 new homes in

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<sup>6</sup> On the Flint FHA office's early preference for city over suburban loans, see Tom Dinell, *The Influences of Federal, State, and Local Legislation on Residential Building in the Flint Metropolitan Area* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1951).

<sup>7</sup> Only a small proportion of Flint’s military veterans took advantage of the GI Bill’s housing program during the 1940s. See, for instance, *Flint Journal*, October 24, 1949.

<sup>8</sup> Federal Housing Administration, “Current Housing Situation: Flint, Michigan,” March 31, 1941, RG 207, Housing Monographs, box 6, NA.

<sup>9</sup> *Flint Journal*, May 7, 1948; Carroll, Jr., *Housing Characteristics of Flint in 1950*; and Federal Housing Administration, “An Analysis of the Flint, Michigan SMA (Genesee County) as of January 1953.”

the 1940s. Likewise, Woodcroft Estates and its adjoining neighborhood to the east gained nearly 750 new units. Previously redlined by the HOLC due to inadequate utilities and unplanned housing developments, the neighborhoods forming the city's outer edge rapidly acquired municipal services during the postwar era. In acknowledgement of the city's commitment to building new infrastructure, the FHA and local bankers rewarded Flint's outer-ring neighborhoods with a rash of postwar construction. During the 1940s, the city issued over four thousand new building permits for homes located in racially restricted subdivisions in the city's outermost census tracts.<sup>10</sup> Of these new permits, nearly half went to local developers Robert P. Gerholz and Gerald Healy, who together built sixteen hundred west side homes for white buyers on land previously owned by GM's Modern Housing Corporation. One of the city's most prominent real estate developers and civic leaders, Gerholz, at various points in his career, served as a trustee of the Urban Land Institute, director of the Michigan National Bank, and president of the National Association of Realtors, the Michigan Real Estate Association, and the United States Chamber of Commerce. Gerholz also served as a mapping consultant for the HOLC's 1937 survey of Flint and was thus an architect of the federal government's newly codified racial policies. During the 1940s, Gerholz actively implemented the federal government's redlining initiatives by building and selling new homes in neighborhoods available only to white purchasers. By 1958, the Federal Housing Administration had recognized Gerholz's contributions to the local real estate industry by naming him an official government advisor.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Carroll, Jr., *Housing Characteristics of Flint in 1950*.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Healy, interview by R. Schafer, August 7, 1987, Oral Histories, 1987-1989, GHCC. See also, W. P. Atkinson et al., eds., *Housing U.S.A: As Industry Leaders See it* (New York: Simmons-Boardman

FHA administrators and their local confidants such as Gerholz provided Flint's builders with explicit instructions on where, and for whom, to build new housing; and they also informed lenders which areas of the metropolis were safe for home mortgages. Just as important, however, federal guidelines designated the home sites and neighborhoods within cities and suburbs that were unsafe places for investment. Following both the FHA's explicit recommendations and their own pre-existing practices, Flint lenders and real estate developers constructed only a handful of dwellings for black buyers during the 1940s and 1950s. Between 1940 and 1947, the city's black population nearly doubled to approximately twelve thousand. Yet over the same duration builders erected only twenty-five privately financed new homes for black purchasers, all of them within the rapidly transitioning St. John and Floral Park districts.<sup>12</sup> In a 1941 column entitled "Democracy Is Out in Flint," an unnamed author from the *Brownsville Weekly News*, an African-American newspaper, described the FHA's neglect of black loan seekers, noting, "Flint colored people cannot secure an FHA loan to improve their property nor to build any."<sup>13</sup> "The colored people were positively fenced in," a 1946 editorial from the *Flint Spokesman*, another black paper, observed. "He was allotted the areas adjacent to the plants, where he was held in a vise-like grip. Fenced in by covenants and secret agreements, the Negro had to stay in his own juice."<sup>14</sup> By the close of the decade, the Flint Urban League's Charles Eason could confirm that little had changed: "It is difficult to persuade builders to construct for the Negro market because of

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Publishing Corporation, 1954). Gerholz was one of the editors of the 1954 collection. On Gerholz's appointment as an FHA advisor, see *Flint Journal*, June 18, 1958.

<sup>12</sup> Carroll, Jr., *Housing Conditions of Flint Metropolitan Area, April 1948* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1948); and Robert W. Schnuck, "Doubled Negro Population Creates Housing 'Squeeze,'" *Flint Journal*, January 3, 1947.

<sup>13</sup> "Democracy Is Out in Flint," *Brownsville Weekly News*, August 9, 1941.

<sup>14</sup> "The Third Ward Enigma," *Flint Spokesman*, May 11, 1946.

the popular myth it's not a good economic risk.”<sup>15</sup> Together, argued civil rights activist James L. Rose, “Discrimination and segregation form one of the vital lubricants in the operation of the housing market.”<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the postwar era, African-American activists challenged the prevailing notion among housing officials and white homeowners that racial integration had a detrimental effect on neighborhood stability and property values. In Flint, as in other cities, civil rights activists organized educational campaigns to demonstrate that black homeowners and renters were just as committed as whites were to upgrading their properties. In 1955, Flint Urban League officials Frank J. Corbett and Arthur J. Edmunds coordinated a citywide survey of black property owners, which they in turn forwarded to local builders, bankers, and real estate brokers. Corbett and Edmunds surveyed a large number of the 3,716 Negro-owned dwellings in Flint to measure the proportion of homeowners who had recently upgraded their properties. They found that one-third of the black homeowners surveyed had painted their homes in the last two years, while approximately five hundred of the homes had received new exterior siding. Moreover, they determined that half of the Negro-owned homes in the city featured “attractive” lawns and shrubs.<sup>17</sup> In spite of the best efforts of many black homeowners to improve their properties, however, Corbett and Edmunds concluded that local builders and bankers had largely ignored the black demand for new housing and home improvement loans.

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<sup>15</sup> Schnuck, “Doubled Negro Population.” See also, Flint City Planning Commission, *Recreation and Park Plan for Flint* (Flint: City Planning Commission, 1949), 53.

<sup>16</sup> James L. Rose, “Civil Rights in Housing in Michigan,” n.d., 5, in Olive Beasley Papers, box 9, folder 14, GHCC.

<sup>17</sup> Frank J. Corbett and Arthur J. Edmunds, *Some Characteristics of Real Property Maintenance by Negro Home Occupants* (Flint: Urban League of Flint, 1954); Allan R. Wilhelm, “Urban League Survey Boosts Negro Housing,” *Flint Journal*, January 18, 1955.

During the 1940s and 1950s, federal officials only rarely insured home mortgages for black buyers. When FHA representatives agreed to insure loans for blacks, they did so only after careful and often lengthy negotiations with builders and bankers. In Flint, those negotiations often hinged on finding developers willing to build for African Americans and securing segregated sites for new Negro housing developments. In 1944, the Flint Urban League launched an effort to secure federal financing for fifty new homes for black buyers in Floral Park. After finding no local builders willing to construct the homes, Urban League officials broadened their search, ultimately gaining a commitment from Merrill and Company, a New York City building firm. After ten months of site negotiations, the FHA agreed to insure the development on the condition that the new single- and two-family homes were constructed in a segregated, deteriorated residential area bounded by Twelfth Street, Fern Avenue, and Liberty Street.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, in 1949 the Veteran's Administration and local builder Ira MacArthur announced plans to build twenty-six federally backed homes for Negro veterans on Florida and Idaho Avenues in the northern half of the St. John neighborhood.<sup>19</sup> Reacting against the federal and local policies that circumscribed housing options and neighborhood choices even for veterans and well-qualified middle-class black buyers, Corbett and Edmunds observed,

The main deterrent in the Negro's efforts to improve his housing conditions is not the lack of interest in or desire for adequate and decent homes. Instead, it is the controls that restrict his housing opportunities to the extent that he can only live in the worse [sic] neighborhood in the city.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Urban League of Flint Papers, box 1, folder 5, GHCC; and *Flint Journal*, April 8, 1944.

<sup>19</sup> "Negro Homes Start Soon," *Flint Journal*, December 18, 1949.

<sup>20</sup> Corbett and Edmunds, *The Negro Housing Market—An Untapped Resource?* (Flint: Urban League of Flint, 1954), 22.

During the 1930s and 1940s, activists from the NAACP, the Urban League, and other civil rights groups challenged FHA officials to abandon their openly segregationist policies. In 1947, just a year prior to the United States Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which held that racially restrictive housing covenants were not legally enforceable, FHA officials deleted all references to race in the federal *Underwriting Manual*.<sup>21</sup> Two years later, during a speech to the Detroit Mortgage Bankers Association, FHA Commissioner Franklin D. Richards trumpeted the agency's new policies and encouraged lenders to give special consideration to loan applications from African Americans and other racial minorities. "I want to stress the fact that it seems to me that minority housing is a good mortgage lending field," Richards stated, "and that emphasis should be placed on meeting the demand for housing for this segment of our population."<sup>22</sup> In 1952, FHA commissioner Walter L. Greene went even further, informing Urban League officials, "FHA policy is to insure projects for open occupancy. We have done so in the past and we shall continue to do so."<sup>23</sup> Although civil rights activists won an important victory in forcing the FHA to revise its *Underwriting Manual* and disclaim restrictive housing covenants, Greene did not speak the truth. Indeed, federal housing officials would not abandon racial integration as a mortgage risk factor until well into the 1960s. As David Freund points out in *Colored Property*, FHA underwriters continued to recognize African Americans specifically and racially integrated neighborhoods in general as adverse influences on neighborhood property

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<sup>21</sup> *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1 (1948). See also, Freund, *Colored Property*, 207-211.

<sup>22</sup> "Address by Franklin D. Richards, Commissioner, Federal Housing Administration, before the Detroit Mortgage Bankers Association," December 8, 1949, RG 31, Speeches, box 31, NA.

<sup>23</sup> "Address by Walter L. Greene, Commissioner, Federal Housing Administration, before National Urban League, Cleveland, Ohio," September 2, 1952, 2, RG 31, Commissioner's Correspondence and Subject File, 1938-1958, box 4, NA.

values. Moreover, at the local level, most builders, realtors, and lenders maintained a strict adherence to segregated housing and discriminatory lending practices into the 1970s. In spite of the 1947 revisions to the federal *Underwriting Manual* and the subsequent remarks of FHA leaders, during the first half of the 1950s Flint builders constructed fewer than a hundred new homes for Negro occupancy—all of them within segregated black neighborhoods—out of nearly six thousand new homes built concurrently in the city.<sup>24</sup>

When confronted by civil rights activists who demanded better housing options for African Americans, federal housing officials accepted little responsibility for Jim Crow neighborhoods. Often, FHA administrators deflected blame towards local real estate developers, “the market,” and the private animosities of white homeowners. Representatives from the FHA maintained that local lenders, builders, realtors, and racist homeowners, in spite of the federal government’s updated recommendations, had willfully discriminated against black buyers and neglected the African-American housing market. During his 1952 speech to Urban League members in Cleveland, the FHA’s Walter Greene observed that bankers seemed unwilling to acknowledge the pent up purchasing power of African-American home seekers: “I have talked to many bankers as recently as the last few weeks and some of them seemed unaware of the new buying power of this group—and its fine credit record.”<sup>25</sup> Several years later, during a conference on Negro housing in Detroit, Albert M. Cole, an administrator from the Housing and Home Finance Agency, affirmed that racial discrimination “is not a federal problem,” stating, “The real problem lies with citizens, the businessmen, the builders, the

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<sup>24</sup> Corbett and Edmunds, *The Negro Housing Market*, vi.

<sup>25</sup> “Address by Walter L. Greene,” 6.

lenders, the realtors and the civic leaders.”<sup>26</sup> For their part, local builders, lenders, and real estate brokers charged the federal government with establishing strict national guidelines and “market rules” upon which all builders, lenders, and appraisers assayed mortgage risk and housing values. In truth, however, private *and* public housing policies worked in tandem to maintain rigid racial segregation and poor housing in the city’s growing black ghettos.

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Albert Cole was partially correct when he blamed Flint’s color line on private citizens. To be sure, individual acts of white supremacy helped to sustain Jim Crow in Flint and its suburbs. Yet deliberate federal and municipal public policies also bolstered segregation in the Flint region. When Cole displaced the government’s share of responsibility for segregation onto ordinary citizens, he deployed the language of “de facto” segregation to describe a privatized, regionally distinctive, “northern style” of Jim Crow that never in fact existed. Beyond obscuring the state’s role in upholding residential segregation, the de facto framework severely distorted broader public debates over the structure of segregation in the North. In particular, the discourse on de facto segregation relied upon a misleading distinction between public and private forms of Jim Crow. Moreover, the theory of de facto segregation established a false dichotomy among housing and schools. During the 1950s and 1960s, defenders of the color line often pointed to private housing discrimination to explain racial segregation in Flint’s “neighborhood schools.” Echoing Cole, officials from the Mott Foundation and the Flint Board of Education maintained

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<sup>26</sup> The quotation is from Corbett and Edmunds, *The Negro Housing Market*, 23. On federal officials’ critiques of discrimination in the private real estate market, see also, “Bad Housing Threatens City’s Future,” *Amplifier*, Winter 1956, Urban League of Flint Papers, box 1, folder 7, GHCC.



that any racial imbalances between schools were the products of the local housing market.

Without question, residential segregation played a major role in shaping Flint's school enrollment patterns. Occasionally, however, African-American homebuyers—especially professionals, skilled craftspersons, and business owners with ample funds—were able to pierce through the residential color line by purchasing homes up front in cash or through informal “land contracts.” Often, these black pioneers moved into all-white blocks on the borders of Flint's overcrowded ghettos.<sup>27</sup> In response to such moves, the Flint Board of Education routinely intervened to ensure that the city's public schools remained segregated. In fact, the community education policies of the Mott Foundation and the board of education were instrumental in upholding separate and unequal schools *and* neighborhoods. Although most scholars of urban history have ignored educational politics, school district boundaries were as important as redlining to the delineation of racial borders between neighborhoods.

### *Community Schools and the Magic Lines of Segregation*

At the first National Community Schools Clinic in 1959, hundreds of school officials, civic leaders, legislators, and researchers gathered in the Vehicle City to discuss the merits of community education. Fittingly, the Mott Foundation took the opportunity to outline for its visitors the core values of the community schools movement. In its report to the conference, the foundation offered a philosophical statement that identified urban

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 22-26. See also, William P. Walsh, *The Story of Urban Dynamics* (Flint: W. P. Walsh, 1967); and Social Planning Associates, *Diagnostic Survey for St. John Street, Flint, Michigan* (Flint: Social Planning Associates, 1969).

neighborhoods and community schools as the key spatial venues for the cultivation of civic harmony:

The Mott Foundation believes that world peace and understanding among men must begin in men's hearts; that neighbor must understand neighbor and that people must learn to live together in neighborhoods and cities before nation can understand nation and a world can live in peace.

"To this end," the statement continued, "people must be provided the opportunity at a grassroots level to learn to understand one another's problems, to work together and to find the means to improve themselves and their cities."<sup>28</sup> According to this formulation, justice and social harmony derived not from the transformation of economies, laws, or public policies, but instead from within individual hearts and minds.

As a consequence of its individualized, geographically circumscribed vision of social progress, the Mott Foundation identified the neighborhood school as the basic unit for the urban public sphere—the key social and educative space for personal and thus societal transformations. For Frank Manley and Charles Stewart Mott, community education existed for the sole purpose of creating "better" citizens who would in turn create "better," more productive, and harmonious communities. "Flint Community Schools are grounded in one basic human principle," Manley revealed: "People who have learned to live together in a neighborhood can live together harmoniously as a nation and as a world."<sup>29</sup> The philosophy driving the Mott program reflected a top-down commitment to social uplift that started on the white side of the city's color line.

With the community education initiative in Flint, the Mott Foundation demarcated neighborhoods within the city according to the attendance boundaries of its public

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<sup>28</sup> "A Description of the Activities," 153.

<sup>29</sup> "Philosophy of Flint Community Schools," Manley Papers, box 14, 78-8.2-270c-2, Scharchburg Archives.

elementary schools. Foundation officials believed that virtually all of the solutions to the city's social problems could be found within the ten square blocks of each elementary school district. Because foundation officials believed that ideal neighborhoods should be small, walkable spaces, they pointed to local elementary schools—not churches, union halls, civic clubs, or even junior and senior high schools—as the obvious geographic focal points for community development. Defining the spatial parameters of neighborhoods, identifying a community's problems, and then devising programs to refashion the hearts and minds of its residents, were thus central to the larger project of community education in Flint.

The Mott Foundation's vision of neighborhoods and the internal nature of their problems depended upon at least two great fictions, however. By framing social problems primarily in personal terms, the foundation denied the structural salience of both race and class in the construction of urban neighborhoods. From the 1930s onward, a powerful combination of racial discrimination and government-sponsored housing initiatives created a very rigid pattern of residential segregation in Genesee County. Residential Jim Crow—which, as much as any other factor, shaped the racial composition of Flint's community schools—effectively denied black citizens the right to attend schools and occupy housing in the neighborhoods of their choice. These structural barriers to fair housing were, to use the language of the Mott Foundation, “external” to the city's segregated black communities. Segregation and racial inequality in Flint and elsewhere stemmed from a combination of private beliefs and public policies that continuously reinforced one another. Yet in narrating neighborhood problems such as

poor housing, segregation, and blight in “internal,” personal terms, the Mott Foundation denied the structural barriers to free markets and open housing.

The second great fiction of community education stemmed from the geographic neutrality that the Mott Foundation assigned to neighborhood schools. In adopting and, in turn, naturalizing school boundaries as the legitimate, inviolable barriers between neighborhoods, the Mott Foundation and its supporters on the school board elided their role in maintaining state-sanctioned racial apartheid. Although an 1867 state law forbade racial segregation in Michigan’s public schools, the Flint Board of Education routinely redrew school attendance zones in the postwar period to maintain racial separation, in the process creating social and geographic constructs known as “neighborhood schools.” In a number of instances, the gerrymandered districts embraced racial exclusion at the expense of student proximity to school facilities. Neighborhood schools were not geographically neutral, colorblind entities.

The Mott Foundation was a key player in school districting decisions. In the mid-1940s, the Flint Board of Education reorganized its governing structure, granting official representation to the Mott Foundation by appointing Frank Manley to the position of Assistant Superintendent of Community Education. The Mott Foundation obliterated all but the most trivial distinctions between private civic interests and the public policies of the board of education through its community education program. As noted in a confidential 1956 survey of Flint schools, “Frank J. Manley is, for all practical purposes, the superintendent of Flint’s schools and through him the influence of the foundation is applied . . . to every sector of school programming.”<sup>30</sup> “It [the Mott Foundation]

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<sup>30</sup> Samuel Simmons and Robert Greene, “Flint Community Survey,” June 20, 1956, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 31, GHCC.

contributes directly to the school board” a 1968 *Time* magazine column pointed out, “but only after Mott and his aides study and approve of the board’s plans for spending the money.” “Let’s not kid ourselves,” one local observer added, “We want the money and are willing to make some concessions to get it.”<sup>31</sup> Although foundation officials helped to orchestrate the board’s segregationist policies, the racial gerrymandering of Flint’s schools nonetheless reflected a broad ideological agreement among whites in Flint on the desirability of racially homogeneous schools and neighborhoods. Through its neighborhood schools programming, the board of education nurtured and cultivated a vision of community solidarity that deepened the already strong white consensus on racial exclusion.

Prior to 1954, when the Flint Board of Education officially adopted and published boundaries for elementary and junior high schools, school officials created and altered school attendance zones using an ad hoc calculus that revolved around new housing construction, building capacities, travel times for students, natural barriers, safety factors, and race.<sup>32</sup> During that period, the board handled student transfers on an individual, case-by-case basis. “In the absence of an official policy,” a 1949 school board report noted, “applications for transfers have been considered more or less in accord with unwritten precedents stemming from a combination of past practice, custom, and administrative dicta.”<sup>33</sup> Race played a key role in shaping the practices and customs that informed student transfer policies.

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<sup>31</sup> “Model Use of Money,” *Time* (April 12, 1968).

<sup>32</sup> The Flint Board of Education adopted high school attendance boundaries in 1960. Prior to that year, students attended the high school of their choice.

<sup>33</sup> Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (July 14, 1949).

Postwar conflicts over the city's school boundaries often revolved around the St. John Street and Floral Park districts, the two inner-city enclaves that contained the overwhelming majority of Flint's segregated black population. The Floral Park neighborhood, located southeast of the city's downtown business district, contained a mix of business owners, professionals, domestics, and working-class black families, and its housing stock reflected the neighborhood's economic diversity. The poorer and more isolated St. John Street community—which occupied a narrow slice of land between the Buick complex, the rail yards, and the Flint River—formed the heart of Black Flint. Because Flint's pre-World War II black community remained relatively small and almost completely segregated within the areas served by the four elementary schools of the St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods, school officials only seldom employed racial gerrymandering prior to the 1950s. For white children who resided in these districts, the absence of codified school boundaries and student transfer policies allowed for easy, voluntary transfers to segregated white schools. Attendance and transfer policies exhibited no such fluidity when black families moved into segregated white neighborhoods, however.<sup>34</sup>

The first verifiable instance of racial gerrymandering occurred in 1935, when the board of education shifted the unofficial boundaries between Dort and Parkland elementary schools, two adjoining districts serving Flint's North End. In February 1935, in response to neighborhood tensions over the movement of a handful of black pupils from the integrated Parkland school district into the all-white attendance zone of Dort School, the board quietly shifted school boundaries one block southward, which resulted

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<sup>34</sup> Kenneth A. Mines to Clancy, August 29, 1975, Beasley Papers, box 16, folder 9, GHCC. On St. John and Floral Park, see R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 1-22.

in the immediate return of all of Dort's black pupils to Parkland. Though members of the Parkland School and St. John Street communities did not lodge any formal protests against the school board's action, and although the board of education never acknowledged the segregationist intent of its decision, the 1935 boundary move marked the first documented case of deliberate segregation in the Flint Public Schools. Scores more would soon follow.<sup>35</sup>

Prior to the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision, a powerful combination of state-sanctioned housing discrimination, white violence, and informal gerrymandering of school attendance zones had resulted in a highly segregated pupil geography in Flint that kept virtually all black students confined to a handful of inner-city schools. Out of the city's twenty-seven public elementary schools open in 1950, nineteen were all white, two were over 95 percent white, and two were over 95 percent black. Out of the four remaining schools, only Dewey and Jefferson, which served working-class neighborhoods bordering the North End, could reasonably be characterized as integrated, with black enrollments of 14 percent and 41 percent, respectively.<sup>36</sup> In spite of large black population increases in the 1950s, the racial geography of the Flint schools changed very little during the *Brown* era. In a number of instances, segregation actually increased during the 1950s and 1960s. By 1960, the Flint Board of Education operated thirty-five public elementary schools with an enrollment of nearly twenty-five thousand pupils. Out of the elementary schools open in 1960, sixteen were all white, six were at least 95 percent white, and three were at least 95 percent black, with one school posting an all-

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<sup>35</sup> Mines to Clancy, August 29, 1975. See also, Beasley Papers, box 28, folder 12, box 40, folders 22 and 23, GHCC.

<sup>36</sup> By the end of the 1950s, both Dewey and Jefferson had "tipped" to overwhelmingly black enrollments. See "Racial Distribution by School, K-12—1950-1968," Manley Papers, box 23, 78-8.3-31f, Scharchburg Archives.

black enrollment. Out of the nine remaining schools, seven tallied black enrollments of over 50 percent while the final two schools, Lincoln and Oak, posted black enrollments of 12 percent and 9 percent, respectively. Citywide, 6,490 black pupils attended Flint elementary schools by the end of the 1950s, yet not a single black student studied in a building that represented, within ten percentage points, the racial demographics of the system as a whole. Perhaps more revealing, over half of the elementary students in the Flint Public Schools attended completely segregated schools that contained pupils of only one racial group. The moral demands embedded within the Court's *Brown* decision did not, in any meaningful sense, affect public policy in the Flint Public Schools.<sup>37</sup>

School construction, location, and boundary decisions played a decisive role in maintaining the educational color line in postwar Flint. The 1950s witnessed a massive growth in elementary school enrollment, both in the increasingly black North End and in the all-white neighborhoods that ringed the city's central core. As in other cities, the Flint Board of Education provided large subsidies for segregation by constructing new schools within all-white, FHA-backed, suburban-style neighborhoods. Of the nine new elementary schools constructed during the 1950s, eight served all-white student bodies primarily on the urban fringe, while the ninth, Stewart School, served an overwhelmingly black student body south of Floral Park. Following the tenets of the community school philosophy, the board located its new elementary schools, as often as possible, at or near the center of both newly constructed and existing residential neighborhoods. The board's school location policies sought to ensure that all pupils in each elementary school district lived within one-half mile of their neighborhood school. On the strength of its unbroken string of successful millage campaigns, the board continued its neighborhood schools

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<sup>37</sup> "Racial Distribution by School, K-12—1950-1968."



construction policies throughout the 1960s, opening thirteen additional elementary school facilities primarily within segregated residential enclaves.<sup>38</sup> Among the elementary schools constructed during the decade, five had all-white enrollments while two contained black enrollments of less than 1 percent. Of the remaining six schools, only four opened with pupil mixtures that reflected the broader racial demography of the public school system at large. Due to pupil transfers, school redistricting, and the processes of racial succession in residential neighborhoods, however, these schools quickly transitioned towards segregation. Nevertheless, the Flint Board of Education accepted no blame for pupil segregation. In defense of its construction policies, board members, Mott Foundation personnel, and school Superintendent William J. Early maintained that “de facto” segregation in newly constructed elementary schools stemmed exclusively from segregated housing in the city. In a 1966 speech to the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, Early stated unequivocally, “The degree of racial imbalance that exists in some of the elementary schools in Flint Community Schools is a result of long-established patterns of housing segregation in the city of Flint.”<sup>39</sup> Early spoke the truth in linking housing and pupil segregation, but residential segregation could not explain the transfer and boundary policies that maintained artificial segregation on the city’s rapidly shifting racial frontiers.

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<sup>38</sup> Raymond L. Gover, “38 Million: Construction Program Had ‘Golden’ 10 Years,” *Flint Journal*, December 27, 1959.

<sup>39</sup> William J. Early, “Presentation to Civil Rights Commission of the State of Michigan,” December 1, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 29, folder 21, GHCC.

Elementary Schools	1950-51	1955-56	1959-60
Civic Park	0/899	0/879	1/831
Clark	474/645	559/582	611/614
Cody	0/555	0/724	0/742
Cook	0/514	0/591	0/557
Coolidge	0/517	0/815	0/525
Cummings			0/664
Dewey	65/463	355/710	474/712
Dort	0/615	251/739	626/949
Doyle	0/402	37/530	404/623
Durant-Tuuri-Mott	1/363	8/402	21/474
Fairview	385/393	524/535	531/531
Freeman		0/761	0/908
Garfield	0/699	0/776	0/679
Gundry		0/655	0/1,103
Hazelton	0/282	13/321	8/260
Homedale	0/759	0/809	11/830
Jefferson	181/440	660/776	954/980
Lewis	0/800	2/499	1/712
Lincoln	0/627	9/388	47/379
Longfellow	0/746	0/916	0/936
Martin	0/494	115/639	750/1,007
McKinley	0/460	0/734	0/852
Merrill		0/800	0/757
Oak	0/437	2/489	37/435
Parkland	394/395	585/591	615/618
Pierce		0/479	0/484
Pierson	0/883	0/916	0/909
Potter		0/864	0/1,386
Roosevelt	428/516	592/623	570/718
Selby			0/811
Stevenson	0/361	0/366	1/371
Stewart		440/530	621/819
Walker	14/475	190/542	207/412
Washington	0/933	0/699	0/572
Zimmerman	0/725	0/907	0/591
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,942/15,398</b>	<b>4,342/21,557</b>	<b>6,490/2,4751</b>

Table 3.1. Racial segregation in Flint elementary schools. Number of black pupils and total school enrollment, 1950-1960. SOURCE: "Racial Distribution by School, K-12—1950-1968," Manley Papers, box 23, 78-8.3-31f, Scharchburg Archives.

Shortly after the opening of Freeman Elementary, the city's flagship community school, the school board opened Pierce School in one of Flint's most exclusive and segregated east side neighborhoods. Located in a verdant setting just east of Woodlawn

Park, Pierce opened in 1952 with a 100 percent white enrollment. As in several other instances during the 1950s, the board had an opportunity to integrate Pierce from its inception by doing nothing more than adhering to the neighborhood schools policy that sent children to the schools closest to their homes. If the board had honored the geographic imperatives of community education, then the Pierce School would have drawn a significant number of black pupils from the Sugar Hill section of Floral Park, a predominantly middle-class black enclave immediately southwest of the new school. Prior to the construction of Pierce, students from Sugar Hill attended Clark School, a decaying, overcrowded structure with a black enrollment of over 95 percent. Yet when it established the Pierce boundaries, the board chose Gilkey Creek—a narrow, meandering stream that separated the segregated communities of Sugar Hill and Pierce Park—as its southwestern boundary.<sup>40</sup> The board’s decision allowed Pierce to open in 1952 with an all-white student body while the nearly all-black Clark School remained well over capacity. Upon learning of the gerrymandered boundaries and the mismatched enrollments of the two schools, a number of black parents from Clark requested pupil transfers to Pierce, citing both its greater proximity and its modern amenities.<sup>41</sup> Although Pierce did not reach full capacity until the early 1960s, the board, without explanation, refused all transfer requests from black pupils, granting them only to white students from Clark School. As a result of the board’s districting decisions on the near south side, neighbors from the same street at times attended different “neighborhood schools.” For Ruth Scott, Minnie Simpson, and other black residents on the south side, the fleeting,

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<sup>40</sup> On Gilkey Creek as a symbolic racial barrier, see Van G. Sauter and John L. Dotson, “How Flint Deals with Racial Problems,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 14, 1965.

<sup>41</sup> Black parents repeatedly sought to enroll their children at Pierce during the late 1950s and early 1960s. See Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (May 23, 1961), 330a-330c.

oddly shaped Pierce-Clark boundary line eviscerated the notion that a colorblind ideal of proximity drove the neighborhood schools and community education concepts. “They drew boundaries around houses,” Scott remembered, “down the middle of the street. . . . When blacks moved onto a street, they would change the boundaries.”<sup>42</sup> As a direct consequence of the board’s decisions in the 1950s, Pierce remained all white at the end of the decade while Clark’s black enrollment soared from 76 percent in 1950 to 99.5 percent in 1960.<sup>43</sup>

When the school board announced the opening of Stewart elementary in 1955, it again found itself facing the Pierce-Clark segregation issue. Located approximately one-half mile south of Pierce and three-quarters of a mile east of Clark, Stewart served the area south of the Lapeer Road residential color line in the eastern section of Sugar Hill. Prior to the opening of Stewart, the board refused all requests to send black pupils to Pierce, choosing instead to house nearly three hundred African-American students from the overcrowded Clark building in decaying frame houses known as the Crago and Elm Park temporary structures. Through the careful drawing of erratically shaped boundaries between the three schools, the board relieved overcrowding at Clark while maintaining racial homogeneity at Pierce. In order to exclude the integrated neighborhoods that bordered Sugar Hill from the Pierce district, the board once again violated its proximity policy by extending the Stewart boundary over a mile and a half to the north and east, resulting in an 80 percent black enrollment at Stewart while Pierce remained under capacity and all white. In effect, the construction of the Stewart School allowed the board to ease overcrowding at Clark by sending white pupils to Pierce and black pupils to

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<sup>42</sup> The quotation is from R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 117.

<sup>43</sup> Mines to Clancy, August 29, 1975. See also, Flint Board of Education, *Frequency Distribution of Pupils by Race* (Flint: Flint Board of Education, n.d.).

Stewart, regardless of their proximity to either.<sup>44</sup> For those white pupils who still found themselves enrolled at Stewart, school officials established separate classrooms for white and black children.<sup>45</sup> Edgar Holt of the Flint NAACP resorted to using supernatural metaphors in an attempt to communicate the geographic absurdity of Flint's neighborhood schools: "There were magic lines for racial discrimination. The Flint Board of Education used these magic – racial lines in establishing school boundaries as if they were sacred."<sup>46</sup> Flint's "neighborhood schools" were not neutral entities that corresponded to colorblind demographic and geographic forces. Rather, they were malleable, socially constructed institutions that reversed even modest breaches of the residential color line. Flint's neighborhood schools were geographic fictions.

The Flint Board of Education formalized school attendance boundaries throughout the city on February 9, 1954, just three months prior to the Supreme Court's release of the *Brown* decision. Though it would take nearly twenty years for the federal government to acknowledge their illegality, the 1954 boundary reorganizations represented a preemptive negation of the court's ruling that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Belying the later protestations of school board members and Mott Foundation personnel, the 1954 boundary decisions marked the unmistakable expansion of government-orchestrated segregation within the Flint Public Schools. As in other cities, Flint's school board maintained segregation most effectively in the smaller attendance zones that served elementary schools. In order to preserve

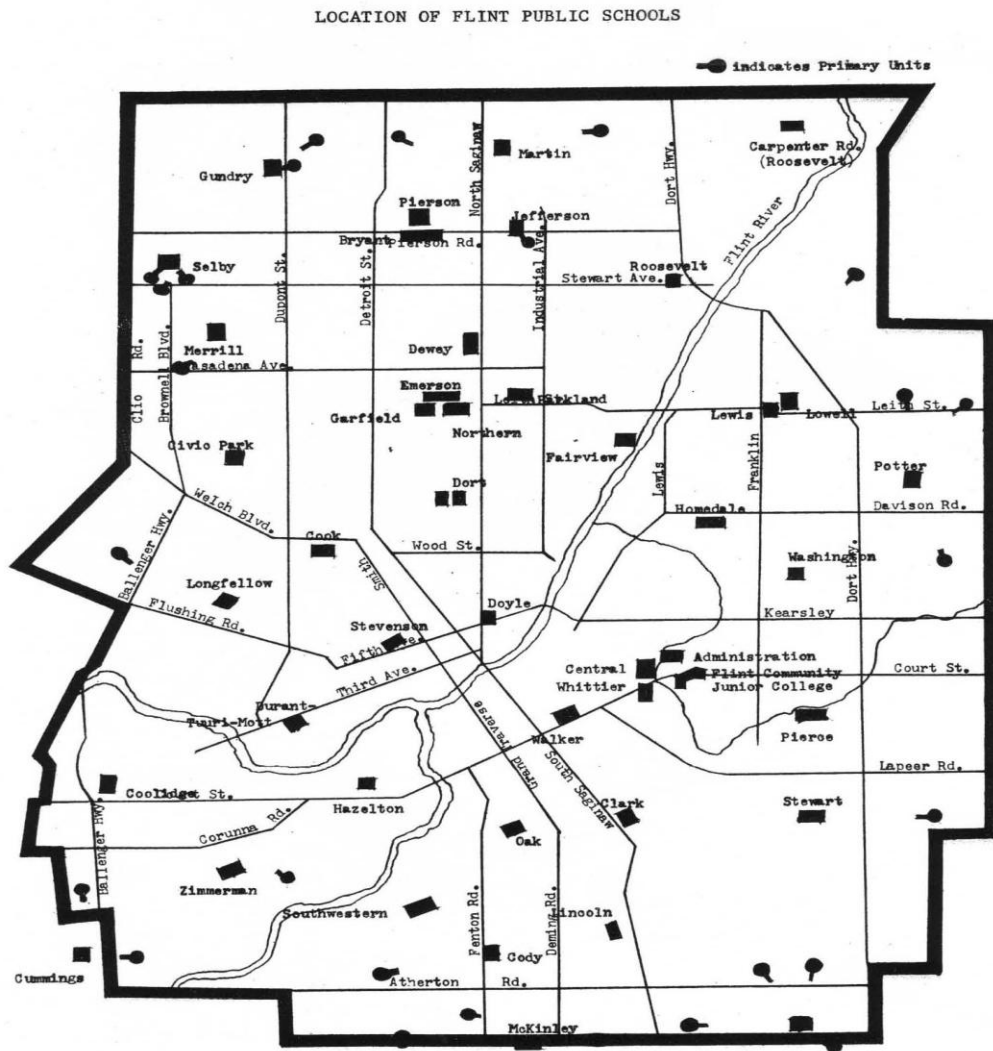
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<sup>44</sup> On the Pierce, Stewart, and Clark boundaries, see Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes and Reports* (July 19, 1955), 17-28.

<sup>45</sup> Affidavit of Edgar B. Holt, filed regarding the case, *Holman, et al., v. School District of the City of Flint, et al.*, Civil Action No: 76-40023, United States District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, Southern Division (1976). The Stewart case was not an isolated example of segregation within an integrated school. Black students in predominantly white schools often found themselves placed in separate classrooms. See Aiyer, ed., *Telling Our Stories*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Holt affidavit, 2.

segregation in the schools that serviced integrated and transitional neighborhoods on the border of Flint's North End, the board allowed racial transfers, altered school boundaries, tracked students, and constructed temporary classrooms.<sup>47</sup>



Map 3.1. Flint Public Schools map, ca. 1955. Courtesy of Scharchburg Archives.

<sup>47</sup> Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (September 10, October 8, November 5, 1953, February 4, 1954). See also, Mines to Clancy, August 29, 1975.

The use of temporary classrooms allowed the board to develop a novel and flexible approach to balancing student enrollments with the exigencies of racial segregation. On the northeast end of the city, the 1954 boundary plan split the integrated enrollment of Roosevelt School between the official school site on Thetford Road and a temporary structure located a mile and a half to the northeast. The board's plan assigned approximately six hundred pupils to the main school building, located in a majority-black neighborhood near the intersection of Stewart Avenue and Dort Highway, while assigning an additional fifty pupils to temporary structures located in a segregated white neighborhood on Flint's northern border with Genesee and Mt. Morris Townships. For the main Roosevelt building, the board drew attendance boundaries that resulted in a 95 percent black enrollment. To the temporary structures northeast of Roosevelt—which would later become part of the Carpenter Road School when it opened in 1965—the board assigned fifty white pupils and perhaps one black student. The 1954 plan effectively split the Roosevelt enrollment along both racial and geographic lines, establishing separate sites for the white and black students of a single school.<sup>48</sup>

A similar situation occurred in the late 1950s on the northwest side of the city, where the school board constructed temporary structures—known in Flint as “primary units”—as a means of preserving segregation in the face of racial transition and student enrollment increases. Unlike the temporary trailer classrooms erected by boards of education across the country during the postwar era, which typically sat on parking lots, ball fields, or on other land adjoining school buildings, Flint's primary units could be found scattered throughout the city's residential neighborhoods, often at significant distances from official school facilities. Primary units resembled single-family ranch

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<sup>48</sup> Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (February 4, 1954); Mines to Clancy, August 29, 1975.

homes, with each structure housing one classroom, and were virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding residential landscape. During the 1950s and 1960s, school board members promoted the units as fiscally sound solutions to the problem of overcrowding, arguing that they could be re-sold as single family homes upon the final resolution of enrollment crises. Because primary units allowed the school board to maintain pupil separation without shifting attendance boundaries, they were also useful tools for promoting racial segregation. Between 1950 and 1966, the Flint Board of Education constructed 116 such structures, primarily within the still booming white neighborhoods on the city's segregated fringe.<sup>49</sup>

During the postwar era, the north and northwest sides of the city became focal points for the black community's expansion. In order to accommodate Flint's demographic and population shifts, the school board constructed no fewer than forty-one primary units on the northwest side. Board members could have resolved both overcrowding and pupil segregation on the northwest side through limited boundary shifts between Martin, Jefferson, Pierson, and Gundry elementary schools, but instead they chose to construct primary units to relieve overcrowding. By the 1959-60 school year, the board's construction decisions had resulted in an especially glaring disjuncture between the Pierson and Jefferson Schools. Although only a half-mile separated the two facilities, Pierson contained an all-white enrollment of 909 pupils in a building intended to house 1301 students. By comparison, Jefferson—which claimed seven primary units—had an enrollment of 980 pupils, 954 of whom were African American, in a

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<sup>49</sup> "Primary Units Partial Solution to Flint's Classroom Shortage," *Michigan Association of School Boards Journal* (May 1955), Manley Papers, box 1, 78-8.1-12a, Scharchburg Archives. Also, see "Primary Units—An Answer to the Cost Problem," Manley Papers, box 2, 78-8.2-97b, Scharchburg Archives; and Lydia A. Giles, "Flint Portable Classrooms Aided Segregation," *Flint Journal*, April 16, 1977.



building constructed to hold only 906 children. Maintaining segregation on the northwest side and in other neighborhoods on Flint's constantly shifting racial frontier proved to be an expensive proposition.<sup>50</sup>

## PRIMARY UNITS-- an answer to the cost problem

How can 10,000 square feet of additional space be provided in elementary schools without using too large a portion of the educational dollar for school building purposes?

Flint's answer has been the use of primary units for children in the kindergarten, first, second and third grades. Typical of such buildings is the one pictured below. The use of this type of school housing in Flint was a happy "accident". In 1953 the Board of Education built the first primary unit in an outlying area with the idea of using it only as a temporary structure. However, the flexibility of its use and its highly favorable acceptance by children, parents and teachers moved the board to build many more. Flint now has 101 such buildings in use.

Here are some of the advantages:

- Primary units are neighborhood schools close to the homes of the younger children and provide a home-like atmosphere.
- They provide freedom of interference by older children and help ease the transition from home to school.
- They offer relief from the formal routine necessary in a large building.
- They relieve crowded conditions in present school areas and provide good facilities for new outlying areas.
- They can be constructed within four months rather than the 12 or 16 months required for a larger building.
- They can be built at a very reasonable cost to the taxpayers.
- They give school planners time to determine the long-range needs of a growing community.
- They can be converted and sold as "ranch" houses, enabling the board to re-use the money for a larger building.



Figure 3.1. Leaflet promoting Flint's primary units, n.d. Courtesy of Scharchburg Archives.

<sup>50</sup> "Primary Units Partial Solution to Flint's Classroom Shortage"; "Primary Units—An Answer to the Cost Problem"; Giles, "Flint Portable Classrooms Aided Segregation"; "Racial Distribution by School, K-12—1950-1968"; and "Location of Primary Units in 1957-58," Manley Papers, box 4, 78-8.1-93, Scharchburg Archives.

Black population increases between the close of World War II and the mid-1950s placed extraordinary pressure on Flint's residential color line. Prior to the war, Saginaw Street formed a nearly impermeable barrier between the solidly black and transitional neighborhoods of the North End and the segregated white neighborhoods on Flint's west side. As the St. John Street neighborhood reached its capacity in the 1950s, black families began relocating west of Saginaw Street, moving African-American pupils into previously segregated white schools. Such residential movements presented the board with several opportunities to integrate a handful of schools, especially in the junior high school districts that served larger residential areas. Yet the board continued its policy of segregation, shifting junior high boundaries to preserve the color line, just as it did for elementary schools. In April 1954, the board unveiled an official boundary plan for junior high schools. For Longfellow Junior High School—located approximately two miles north of the Flint River within a segregated west side neighborhood—the board drew an oddly shaped, zigzag boundary that pulled handfuls of white students into the Longfellow district while pushing black pupils into the neighboring Emerson area. The boundary line resulted in a 100 percent white enrollment at Longfellow that held throughout the 1950s. At Emerson, which also served portions of the west side in addition to the segregated black neighborhoods of the North End, the 1954 boundary created a substantially larger black enrollment of 23.9 percent, which by 1959 had increased to nearly 35 percent. As in other instances, the board employed a discriminatory transfer policy that allowed white students from Emerson to switch to Longfellow while denying Emerson's black students the same privilege. Spatially, the Longfellow-Emerson boundary resolution represented another clear violation of the

geographic principle of neighborhood schools, with both black and white students often traveling to the more distant of two “neighborhood schools.” A 1958 editorial from the *Bronze Reporter*, the city’s leading black newspaper, reflected upon the arbitrary boundaries that separated students by race: “If children were simply sent to the schools nearest them, we would find much fewer all-Negro and all-White schools.”<sup>51</sup>



Figure 3.2. Primary unit. Once a primary unit for public school children, this structure on Flint’s west side now serves as a single-family home. Photograph by Andrew R. Highsmith, 2006.

As black families from the overcrowded and deteriorating North End began to move north and west into previously segregated white neighborhoods in the late 1950s

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<sup>51</sup> “Racial Distribution by School, K-12—1950-1968”; Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (March 9, 1954); and *Bronze Reporter*, March 29, 1958.

and early 1960s, the board of education worked feverishly, if less successfully, to maintain pupil segregation. For its junior and senior high schools, which drew pupils from larger portions of the city, the board managed boundaries and transfers to minimize interracial enrollments. At the high school level, the board's attendance boundaries served to concentrate black pupils at Northern and Northwestern High Schools while diluting black enrollments at Central and Southwestern High Schools. In Flint and other smaller cities, school boards found it impossible to zone for complete pupil segregation at the junior and senior high school levels. For elementary school children, however, the board continued to plan for rigid segregation wherever possible. In the St. John neighborhood, outward black migrations due to urban renewal (see Chapter 9), along with the departure of the few remaining white children, resulted in numerical and racial enrollment mismatches between neighboring schools. Lewis and Fairview elementary schools, separated by approximately one mile on Flint's North End, presented stark demographic contrasts. Located west of the Flint River in the St. John district, Fairview had the capacity to hold 445 pupils, yet it contained only 305 students during the 1964-65 school year, 302 of whom were African American. By comparison, Lewis School, located just east of the Flint River in a working-class white neighborhood, contained five African Americans out of 882 pupils. With a capacity enrollment of only 661, Lewis was severely overcrowded in spite of its proximity—and easy access, via vehicle and pedestrian bridges—to Fairview. The school board refused to allow transfers between the two buildings, however, preferring instead to maintain a system of educational apartheid and pupil-teacher mismatches that undermined educational quality on both sides of the river.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> "Racial Distribution by School, K-12—1950-1968." On criticism of the Lewis-Fairview boundary, see

The pattern of overcrowded white schools adjacent to integrated and all-black facilities replicated itself across the city as the color line shifted to the north and west in the 1960s. Yet the school board refused to relieve pupil overcrowding by breaching the color line. Such refusals resulted in severe student-teacher mismatches between neighboring school districts. At Fairview, for instance, the movement of white students to the overwhelmingly white Lewis, Kearsley, and Homedale districts reduced the student teacher ratio to a figure of 27:1. Student-teacher ratios exceeded 36:1 at Kearsley, however. When parents criticized school officials for their inability to solve school overcrowding in the white neighborhoods surrounding the St. John community, the board of education drew from a pre-*Brown* political discourse that framed segregationist policies as a form of compensatory education for underprivileged black students: “Occasionally,” a board report asserted, “socio-economic factors make a lower pupil-teacher ratio desirable for a given school.”<sup>53</sup> On its own, such a statement could be read as a laudable attempt to level the educational playing field for disadvantaged children. Yet when viewed alongside the gross resource inequities between black and white schools and the clear evidence of gerrymandering, the board’s defense of lower student-teacher ratios at Fairview constituted a colorblind marketing strategy that sold compensatory education from within a segregationist paradigm.<sup>54</sup> As Superintendent Early noted in a 1966 speech, the board proposed solving segregation at some unknown

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Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (September 23, 1964). The board used primary units to maintain racial imbalances between Lewis and Fairview.

<sup>53</sup> Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* 13:122 (January 8, 1953). The quotation is from the board of education’s Staff Report Number 122.

<sup>54</sup> On resource inequities between black and white schools, see “Flint NAACP Fact Sheet,” n.d., Holt Papers, box 4, folder 13, GHCC.

future date by first improving the education and living standards of Flint's black community:

I suggest that we not overlook the importance of present efforts to greatly improve our inner-city schools. . . . Such efforts are being made not to persuade Negroes to accept segregation, but rather, to use education as the ladder out of poverty, substandard living, and with it, segregation.<sup>55</sup>

During the 1960s, the Flint Board of Education responded to the suburban migrations of white children, black pupil increases, and pressure from local civil rights groups to invest in inner-city schools by shifting construction initiatives from the segregated urban fringe towards the racially transitional northwest side. The opening of Bunche School, in 1967, and King School, in 1970, presented the board with another series of opportunities to further racial integration in elementary schools. Located near Forest Park on the city's near northwest side, Bunche claimed an attendance zone adjacent to that of Merrill School. Though separated by less than a mile, Bunche and Merrill contained radically different student bodies. Bunche opened with a black enrollment of 43 percent, which had nearly doubled to 75 percent by 1971. Merrill, by contrast, which served the still segregated neighborhoods west of Forest Park, contained a white majority of over 99 percent in the year that Bunche opened. Though Merrill's black enrollment increased during the late 1960s and early 1970s, primarily due to freeway and urban renewal relocations that brought over a thousand black families to the northwest side, it still held a large white majority of 86 percent in 1972.

In the Martin Luther King-Civic Park case, the processes of "tipping" and racial succession stemmed directly from pupil assignment policies. Just to the south of Bunche

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<sup>55</sup> Early, "Presentation to Civil Rights Commission." For more on school improvement expenditures in the inner city, see Lewis Morrissey, "Physical Improvements Abound at Flint Schools," *Flint Journal*, August 31, 1969.

and Merrill, the adjoining King and Civic Park districts had similarly dichotomous student bodies. Serving a transitional neighborhood just north of Bassett Park, Civic Park was moderately integrated in the late 1960s, with a steadily growing black enrollment that had reached approximately 10 percent in 1969. However, when the board opened King in 1971, it shifted half of Civic Park's black pupils to the new school. Less than a half-mile east of Civic Park, King opened with a black enrollment that exceeded 87 percent.<sup>56</sup> In recognition of the intentional gerrymandering that resegregated Civic Park and other integrated schools in the 1960s, the federal government later went so far as to acknowledge "the substantial duality of the Flint School System."<sup>57</sup> That the board of education named two of its racially identifiable new schools after the nation's leading integrationists must have represented a bitter irony for Flint's African-American community.

By the close of the 1960s, national civil rights laws and federal desegregation rulings had failed to alter patterns of government-backed segregation in the Flint schools. Of the forty-two public elementary schools open in Flint in 1969, nine contained all-white student bodies and three additional schools claimed fewer than ten black pupils. On the other side of the color line, ten of the city's elementary schools possessed black student majorities of greater than 90 percent. With a total elementary student population of 27,540, 39 percent of whom were African American, the district contained only five integrated elementary school buildings. Between 1951 and 1971, the number of black children attending majority-black schools remained essentially unchanged in Flint. In the 1950-51 school year, 86.5 percent of the city's black children attended schools in which

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<sup>56</sup> Morrissey, "Board of Ed. Orders Changes of Boundaries for Five Schools," *Flint Journal*, February 26, 1970.

<sup>57</sup> Mines to Clancy, August 29, 1975.

they were the majority. Twenty years later that number had only dropped by a single percentage point. Over the same period, the number of white children attending majority-white schools declined only slightly from 93.1 percent to 89.4 percent.<sup>58</sup>

The numbers tell only part of the story, however. Stark as they may have been, the glaring contrasts among schools at times masked the segregation of pupils that occurred within buildings. By 1960, a handful of African-American families had crossed the Flint River color boundary east of St. John. Like Lapeer Road and Gilkey Creek on the south side of the city, the Flint River was a powerful symbol of the city's rigid segregation. Homedale elementary, which served the working-class white neighborhoods east of the river and St. John Street, gained its first black pupils in the late 1950s. In 1959, eleven of its 830 children were African American. For second-grader Wesley King and perhaps other black pupils at Homedale, integration proved to be a frightful experience. After receiving complaints from white parents who opposed integrated education, an unnamed teacher decided to place King's desk inside a cramped and dark coat closet, physically removed from the other children. Once alerted by King's mother, the Flint NAACP responded with an unannounced visit to the school, where they confirmed the young boy's story. The sole black student in a class of thirty, King experienced an especially humiliating form of segregation from within an ostensibly integrated classroom.<sup>59</sup>

There can be no way of knowing how many black children experienced similar forms of racism. Fearful of reprisals and additional humiliation from unsympathetic teachers and administrators, black parents and students often declined to file reports on

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<sup>58</sup> Urban League of Flint, "Quality Education and Busing," December 21, 1971, Beasley Papers, box 40, folder 2, GHCC.

<sup>59</sup> See Flint NAACP Newsletter, "Small Boy Kept in School Closet," Holt Papers, box 4, folder 4, GHCC.



discrimination and segregation within integrated schools. Nevertheless, the reminiscences of African-American citizens suggest that black pupils who crossed the city's educational color line suffered through indignities similar to those experienced by King. In a 1993 interview with local historians, Reverend Eugene Simpson of Flint's Mt. Tabor Baptist Church recalled an especially scarring incident from the mid-1930s that occurred while he was enrolled at Fairview School. One of only a small cohort of black students at Fairview at the time, Simpson regularly performed minstrel songs for his class at the request of his teacher. According to Simpson, "the teacher would have me stand in front of the class and I would sing, 'I'm a manish [sic] pickaninny, blacker than a crow.'"<sup>60</sup> As Simpson story reveals, the maintenance of Jim Crow entailed more than simply segregating black and white bodies. Jim Crow was also a daily, public performance.

The cases of Wesley King and Eugene Simpson may have been exceptional by virtue of their cruelty, but board-sponsored racial segregation and discrimination within ostensibly integrated schools was extremely common in the Vehicle City. Beginning in 1958, the Flint Board of Education and the Mott Foundation officially adopted the "primary cycle" and the "Strawman Procedure on Grouping," forms of pupil tracking that segregated students by ability levels. Following the dictates of the Strawman and primary cycle methods, Flint teachers ranked and separated children according to classroom performance, achievement tests, and intelligence quotient measurements. In a city where black children typically scored two grade levels below their white peers on achievement tests, tracking and other forms of "ability grouping" contributed greatly to

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<sup>60</sup> Simpson interview, May 27, 1993.

the segregation of pupils within school buildings.<sup>61</sup> Specifically, the board's adoption of the Personalized Curriculum Program (PCP), which sorted pupils into the Talented Child and the Better Tomorrow for the Urban Youth (BTU) programs, allowed school officials to maintain pupil separation by race and student performance under the guise of a colorblind assessment of achievement levels. As NAACP activists pointed out on a number of occasions, black children simply could not gain access to the city's gifted and talented programs, in part because the board implemented the vocational and life skills oriented BTU program in each of its majority-black schools.<sup>62</sup> According to Woody Etherly, Jr., who graduated from Northern High in 1962 and later served on Flint's city council, black students rarely found themselves in college preparatory tracks in the Flint Public Schools: "Most black folks they put on the track system. They'd train you to be able to go into General Motors but not to be able to go to college. That's the kind of system they had you on, taking home economics and gym."<sup>63</sup> Likewise, Charles Brooks lambasted the board of education for its curricular priorities for black children: "You tell us we need education and you stick a gym down our throat. We don't need a gym; we need a gym like we need a tornado in this town."<sup>64</sup>

By the close of the 1960s, the board of education's racial policies had significantly remapped neighborhood geographies throughout the city, undermining even

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<sup>61</sup> On the Strawman method, see Memorandum, "Strawman Procedure on Grouping," December 11, 1958, Manley Papers, box 9, 78-8.2-51k, Scharchburg Archives. On black students' achievement scores on standardized tests, see Rita A. Scott, "The Status of Equal Opportunity in Michigan's Public Schools," Holt Papers, box 9, folder 57, GHCC. According to a 1965 study conducted by the Flint NAACP, the average reading achievement level of sixth grade students enrolled in schools with 95 percent or higher black enrollments ranged from one to two years below grade level.

<sup>62</sup> "Negroes Charge Plot against Race in Two Community Programs," *Flint Journal*, January 14, 1965. Also, see John R. Davis, "NAACP Officials Renew Charges on Mott Program, Flint Schools," *Flint Journal*, February 11, 1965. On the BTU program, see also, Eleanor L. Elliott, "'Better Tomorrow for Urban Child' Is Outlined at Kiwanis Meeting," *Flint Journal*, March 26, 1965.

<sup>63</sup> The Etherly quote is from R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 112.

<sup>64</sup> Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (November 23, 1971), 550d.

the slightest shifts towards residential integration. Because schools served as the focal points for community activities, the gerrymandering of student boundaries affected nearly everyone in Flint, regardless of age. In Flint, housing *and* schools constituted neighborhoods. The government policies that created segregated neighborhoods and gerrymandered neighborhood schools nurtured an artificial sense of community solidarity among white civic boosters, media observers, and community schools participants. In a 1956 article on the Mott program, *Coronet* magazine echoed white optimism for community schools by labeling Flint the “Happiest Town in Michigan.”<sup>65</sup> In similar fashion, *Reader’s Digest* announced that “Flint’s Gone Crazy Over Culture,” while *Family Circle* magazine referred to Mott’s “life-saving, blues-curing plan” that had people “dancing in the streets.”<sup>66</sup> White support for community education reached a pinnacle by the end of the 1950s, but the white consensus on community education stemmed as much from government-sponsored segregation as it did from the innovative programming of the board of education.

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During World War II and the immediate postwar era, Mott Foundation officials and executives from GM boasted that new homes, community schools, and high-paying industrial jobs helped to transform Flint into an “engine of American progress.” Flint, these civic boosters claimed, was a model city of educational and industrial opportunity where all citizens could obtain economic security, self-improvement, and consumer prosperity. Like their Republican and pro-business counterparts, trade union leaders and

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<sup>65</sup> “Happiest Town in Michigan,” *Coronet* (June 1956).

<sup>66</sup> Detzer, “Flint’s Gone Crazy over Culture”; and Kearney, “Dancing in the Streets.”

members of the city's liberal establishment also heralded the special opportunities available to Flint's citizens. Union activism, they claimed, had helped to make Flint one of the most progressive and racially "open" cities in the United States. For tens of thousands of white autoworkers in Genesee County, the twenty-five years following World War II were, in many ways, an amazing era of job security and consumer prosperity. Due to the advance of community education, these decades were also marked by an expansive public culture organized around school-based activities. Yet for African Americans who lived in Flint, discrimination and segregation persisted. As in Flint's schools and neighborhoods, race played a key role in delineating the social and economic opportunities available to black workers. At mid-century, personnel supervisors from GM, downtown retailers, and other local employers maintained rigidly demarcated hiring and promotion policies that severely limited the employment options of black residents. During the 1950s and 1960s, black workers waged vigorous direct action campaigns against the residential, educational, and occupational color lines. Like the struggles that emerged over segregated schools and neighborhoods, battles over occupational discrimination and employment equity were key components of the black freedom struggle in postwar Flint.

## Chapter 4

### **Jim Crow, GM Crow: Black Workers and the Limits of Postwar Abundance**

The Great Sit-Down Strike of 1936-37 was an iconic moment in Flint's history. On February 11, 1937, after a violent, forty-four day strike that polarized residents of the Vehicle City, the fledgling United Auto Workers union and General Motors settled the dispute. After learning that GM officials had formally recognized the union and agreed to participate in collective bargaining, striking workers from Plant 4 of Flint's Chevy in the Hole complex triumphantly exited the factory for a long-awaited victory celebration with supporters, friends, and family. Roscoe Van Zandt, perhaps the only black participant in the Flint sit-down strike, stood at the head of the procession. In a photograph published by newspapers across the world, Van Zandt, wielding an American flag, led the victorious UAW delegation out onto Chevrolet Avenue and into the history books. Prior to exiting Plant 4, strikers had chosen Van Zandt to lead the workers from the factory. Though only a symbolic gesture, the workers' decision to honor Van Zandt demonstrated the very real ways in which industrial organizing undermined the foundations of the color line. Among thousands of trade unionists in Flint, the image of Van Zandt leading his white co-workers has become a cherished symbol of organized labor's ability to combat racial prejudice. In spite of its power and potential, however,

the iconic photograph of Roscoe Van Zandt conceals as much as it reveals about the mid-century experiences of African-American workers at Flint's GM facilities.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1940s and 1950s, tens of thousands of African Americans moved to the Vehicle City in search of good jobs, economic security, and first-class citizenship. Between 1940 and 1960, Flint's black population increased from 6,559 to 34,521.<sup>2</sup> Yet when black migrants arrived in the city, they quickly discovered that GM and other local employers were staunchly committed to maintaining the occupational color line. During and after World War II, black workers waged a fierce struggle for equal employment opportunities in Flint and suburban Genesee County. In the 1950s, that struggle centered on an unsuccessful campaign to win municipal fair employment legislation. Following the defeat of the Flint Fair Employment Practices Commission, African-American activists launched a vigorous direct action campaign against the discriminatory practices of General Motors officials and other local employers. By the dawn of the 1960s, the battle for employment equity had expanded beyond the shop floor to include a fight against urban deindustrialization and the flight of capital and jobs from the inner city to the segregated suburbs of Genesee County. Black workers in Flint fought not only for access to better-paying jobs, but also for the right to live and work in the high-growth areas of suburban Genesee County that had benefited from large postwar investments.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kraus, *The Many and the Few*; Fine, *Sit-Down*; and Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus*.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Chapelski, Wilfred Marston, and Mari Molseed, *1990 Demographic Profile of the Flint Urban Area in Comparative Perspective* (Flint: Project for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Michigan-Flint, 1992), 4.

*“The Hardest, Dirtiest, Lowest-Paying Jobs”*

Prior to World War II, African Americans comprised only a tiny fraction of the auto industry’s labor force. In 1910, automobile manufacturers employed fewer than six hundred black workers nationwide, less than 1 percent of the industry’s total domestic workforce. By 1940, that number had grown to 23,015, roughly 4 percent of the national total. Among the “Big Three” automakers—Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler—Ford consistently outpaced its competitors in the hiring of black workers, employing four times as many African Americans as any other firm in the industry. Of Ford’s ninety thousand black workers in Michigan in 1940, 12.22 percent were African American. By comparison, black workers at GM’s Michigan and Indiana facilities—home to the majority of the company’s Negro wage earners—constituted only 2.5 percent of the total laboring force.<sup>3</sup> The disparity stemmed in large part from the fact that General Motors, like many other automakers, adhered to a thoroughly decentralized management structure. At GM, as corporate vice president Louis Seaton once acknowledged, the individual divisions of the company exercised almost complete control over hiring decisions.<sup>4</sup> Because of GM’s decentralized management operations, black employment opportunities varied widely between plants depending upon past practices, the prerogatives of local executives and plant managers, white public opinion, and the status of the labor market. Nevertheless, across its many divisions, General Motors recruiters tended to hire black workers only for the least desirable positions. According to Lloyd H. Bailer, who conducted extensive surveys of the auto industry during the 1930s and 1940s, “the vast majority of Negro automobile workers are employed in the foundry, paint, and

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<sup>3</sup> Lloyd H. Bailer, “The Negro Automobile Worker,” *Journal of Political Economy* 51:5 (October 1943): 415-428.

<sup>4</sup> See Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 96.

maintenance departments (chiefly as janitors) or as unskilled labor.” Of GM’s 2,500 prewar black employees in Michigan and Indiana, two thousand worked in the foundries of Flint, Saginaw, and Pontiac. With few exceptions, the remaining five hundred worked as paint chippers, car washers, sanders, machine cleaners, scrap handlers, and janitors.<sup>5</sup>

During the 1920s and 1930s, GM supervisors maintained almost complete racial segregation in the city’s plants. At Fisher Body and AC Spark Plug—where the color line was most intense—the workforce was nearly all white with the exception of several black custodians. In 1941, AC Spark Plug employed approximately 3,500 local workers, yet only twenty-three were African American, all of them janitors. During the same year, Flint’s two Fisher Body plants, which had well-deserved reputations for “lily whiteness,” employed only six black workers as either janitors or car washers. On the eve of the war, approximately three hundred African Americans worked at Flint’s Chevrolet division complexes, all of whom served as either janitors, truck drivers, or machine cleaners. At Buick, African Americans fared slightly better. Outside of the custodial and maintenance departments, black job seekers at Buick could find employment only in Plant 70, the foundry, or in Plant 71, the cleaning room. In 1941, Buick employed approximately six hundred black workers within its foundry division.<sup>6</sup>

Foundry jobs were among the most unpleasant, dangerous, and difficult positions available in the auto industry. “That [foundry work] was the black man’s job,” remembered Charles Skinner. “That’s where you hid, that’s where you were supposed to be, in the foundry. . . . Those were the hardest, dirtiest, lowest-paying jobs that they had.

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<sup>5</sup> See Herbert R. Northrup, ed., *Negro Employment in Basic Industry: A Study of Racial Policies in Six Industries* (Philadelphia: Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, University of Pennsylvania, 1970), 52.

<sup>6</sup> The statistics in this paragraph are from Robert C. Weaver, “Detroit and Negro Skill,” *Phylon* 4:2 (1943): 131-143.



And that's where they placed us."<sup>7</sup> Although Buick officials proved more willing to hire African Americans than their counterparts at Chevrolet, Fisher, and AC, racial segregation within the North End plants was formal and rigid. According to Harry Rolf, a time study official at Buick, until the 1940s GM maintained a firm policy of refusing all transfer requests for black foundry workers: "No one was allowed to transfer out of the Foundry. If you were in the Foundry, that's where you stayed."<sup>8</sup> Reflecting back upon his experiences as a foundry supervisor at Buick, Melvin "Pudge" Van Slyke described the work conditions and the rigidity of the color line at General Motors facilities:

It was always hot, dirty work. That's why it was ninety percent colored. If a black person went to the employment office looking for a job, he would be sent to the Foundry. . . . The core room where the cores were made was mostly Hungarian and Polish. No colored at all.<sup>9</sup>

During the workday, foundry supervisors carefully policed the movements of black workers. According to Roger Townsend, Buick supervisors forcibly confined prewar black employees to their work stations and forbade them from exiting the foundry, even to use the bathroom: "Blacks were limited to the foundries part, they were not permitted to go beyond the imaginary line [that separated black and white spaces] even to use the bathroom. They had certain bathrooms that were off limits to them. Whites could naturally go there."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Skinner quotation is from Aiyer, ed., *Telling Our Stories*, 38-39.

<sup>8</sup> Reuster, *Good Old Days at the Buick*, 156.

<sup>9</sup> The Van Slyke quotation is from Reuster, *Good Old Days at the Buick*, 147. On the working conditions in the foundry, see *Flint Weekly Review*, April 24, 1953.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Townsend, interview by Michael Marve, May 1979, University of Michigan-Flint Labor History Project, box 5, GHCC.

### *World War II and the Double V Campaign*

World War II opened a vast array of new opportunities for black autoworkers. In Flint, Detroit, and other “arsenals of democracy,” the outbreak of the war created massive labor shortages during a period of unprecedented federal demand for new industrial products. In order to meet federal requests for tanks, aircraft, and other high-tech materiel, automobile manufacturers nationwide re-tooled their plants for war production, a process that created hundreds of new job categories and increased demands for skilled laborers. During the war, GM added 25,000 new jobs in Genesee County alone. Viewing the war as an opportunity to secure new civil rights protections, black labor activist A. Philip Randolph led a nationwide movement in the 1940s to demand a federal ban on employment discrimination. Concerned that Randolph and other civil rights protesters would undermine the government’s military preparedness, in June 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which prohibited GM and other government contractors from practicing racial discrimination in defense-related industries.<sup>11</sup> Although Roosevelt’s enforcement agency, the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), had little authority to combat discrimination, government negotiators from the Office of Price Management (OPM) and other federal agencies persuaded automobile executives to relax the color bar at defense facilities. In September 1941, OPM officials signed an agreement with automobile manufacturers and the UAW protecting seniority rights and mandating that existing employees receive priority treatment for all war-related job openings. At Buick, where the conversion to defense work resulted in the temporary closing of the foundry, the OPM agreement allowed

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<sup>11</sup> On Executive Order 8802 and the creation of the FEPC, see Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation and Harvard University Press, 2006), 22.

hundreds of unskilled and semi-skilled black workers to transfer to less arduous, higher paying positions on the assembly line. Motivated to act by a nationwide grassroots campaign for a “Double V” victory over fascism abroad and Jim Crow at home, federal officials successfully persuaded GM and other employers to weaken long-standing proscriptions against black employment.<sup>12</sup>

During the war, local GM executives recruited thousands of southern blacks to work in Genesee County’s auto factories. From 1941 to 1945, GM’s African-American workforce in the Flint area doubled. Likewise, between 1940 and 1960, the city’s black population grew to over thirty thousand. For black migrants such as Layton Galloway, who arrived in Flint in 1942 to work as a janitor at GM, World War II brought unprecedented opportunities for jobs on the assembly line and other positions outside of the foundry and custodial departments. “I went out to Plant 3 and went to work the same day,” Galloway remembered. “They needed workers. I started sweeping Plant 3. I did that for about four months, then went into production. My first job was putting small parts in bins.”<sup>13</sup> In 1943, Annalea Bannister shattered a major barrier—and raised quite a few eyebrows—by becoming the first African American to hold an office job at the AC Spark Plug facility on Dort Highway. “I was the first black girl to work in the office at AC Spark Plug,” Bannister recalled. “There were people walking past my office in droves trying to see the black girl.”<sup>14</sup> The war opened up the first opportunities for black workers to cross the color line that had formerly confined them to the most onerous jobs. As Anna L. V. Howard remembered, “It took WWII to put black men in the shop on production. Before, they were janitors and did menial work. My husband got a better

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<sup>12</sup> Bailer, “The Negro Automobile Worker,” 424-425; and Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 26-28

<sup>13</sup> The quotation is from R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 59.

<sup>14</sup> R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 59.

job. He came out of that foundry and got to be a finisher. That's what he always wanted to be."<sup>15</sup>

With few exceptions, job opportunities for African-American workers in Flint continued to expand after World War II. During the 1940s and 1950s, residents of the St. John neighborhood coined a term to describe the great migration of blacks to the Vehicle City: "the rush-in." For John Rhodes, the rush-in of newcomers signaled that a new era of possibilities had arrived for black workers in the Vehicle City: "Flint was crowded. Plenty of jobs. You could get a job anytime."<sup>16</sup> Rhodes's optimism reflected a broader strand of public opinion among Flint's black citizenry. Yet the postwar era was also a period of rising expectations among black workers, for World War II had inaugurated a new, more militant phase in the long civil rights era. After defending liberty abroad, thousands of black veterans returned to Flint and other cities with a renewed commitment to challenging Jim Crow at home. As Flint resident Dolores Ennis recalled, "Those young [black] men who served in the war, they were not going to come back and take less."<sup>17</sup> In spite of the gains made during the war, however, African Americans in postwar Flint confronted a corporation and a city government that had always offered less to black people. By war's end, the stage was set for a fierce battle over employment equity at General Motors and in workplaces throughout the city.

### *Municipal Politics and the Postwar Campaign for Employment Equity*

The postwar movement against employment discrimination in Flint centered on General Motors. Yet throughout the city, black activists challenged the racial barriers to equal

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<sup>15</sup> R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 61.

<sup>16</sup> R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 57.

<sup>17</sup> R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 60.

employment opportunities. During the early 1950s, civil rights and left-wing trade union activists fought for the passage of municipal fair employment legislation and the creation of a Flint Fair Employment Practices Commission (FFEPC). In a strategic maneuver, black supporters of the FFEPC allied themselves with the local leadership of the UAW-CIO in order to gain a favorable majority on the Flint City Commission. Although trade unionists possessed a great deal of electoral power in Flint, UAW-sponsored candidates consistently failed to hold a stable majority on the city commission. After holding a slim majority during the war, the UAW-CIO lost control of the commission in 1946 to a bloc of GM-backed supporters, only to win it back again in 1948. In 1950, General Motors executives united with Michael Gorman, editor of the *Flint Journal*, to support a pro-business slate of candidates for the commission. In a bitterly fought, polarizing election that pitted the UAW and its supporters against the GM-backed Civic Research Council, organized labor lost control of the commission in 1950. Although the UAW continued to endorse candidates during the 1950s, supporters of the FFEPC lacked the majority necessary to implement municipal civil rights legislation.<sup>18</sup>

The UAW's inability to maintain control of the city commission had grave consequences for supporters of workplace equity. In October 1951, Commissioner Robert Carter, a regional director for the UAW-CIO, introduced fair employment legislation for the commission's consideration. However, pro-business legislators rejected the bill in a six-to-three vote. Mayor Paul Lovegrove defended his negative vote by asserting that the FFEPC would drain the city's coffers of much-needed funds. Opponents of the legislation also claimed that it was impossible to legislate against racial

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<sup>18</sup> On the contestation between UAW members and GM officials to control the city commission, see *Flint Weekly Review*, November 15, 1946, June 11, 25, 1948, July 21, 28, November 10, 24, 1950, November 7, 1952, August 6, 1954.

prejudice. Angered by the defeat, on November 1 Carter published a blistering editorial in the *Searchlight*, the official newspaper of UAW Local 659. “The average Flint voter will not let these commissioners get away with this type of reaction,” Carter predicted. “Just remember that a group [General Motors] more powerful than us apparently is advising certain commissioners.”<sup>19</sup>

Carter misjudged the Vehicle City’s electorate. Throughout the early 1950’s, Flint voters consistently elected city commission candidates who opposed fair employment legislation. Undaunted by their losses, in 1954 supporters of the FFEPC organized the Citizens Committee of 100, a group comprised of one hundred of the city’s leading citizens, to lobby for antidiscrimination legislation. Early in 1955, members of the committee introduced a second proposal for a nondiscrimination law. On March 14, 1955, the city commission, by a six-two vote, endorsed the proposal on its first reading. Angered by the commission’s betrayal, AC Spark Plug manager Joseph A. Anderson and G. Keyes Page of GM’s Civic Research Council led a campaign to kill the legislation that included the leadership of the Flint Chamber of Commerce and *Flint Journal* editor Michael Gorman. On April 7, 1955, in an unmistakable show of force, General Motors supervisors from across the county packed the city commission chambers to witness the second reading of the fair employment ordinance. The FFEPC legislation went down to defeat on its second reading by virtue of a four-four deadlock.<sup>20</sup> When pressed to defend their positions, Mayor George Algoe and other opponents of the FFEPC pointed to three factors. First, they argued that education, not legislation, was the most appropriate means

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Carter, “City Commission Uses Phoney [sic] Excuses to Justify Their Votes against FEP,” *Searchlight*, November 1, 1951.

<sup>20</sup> “Tie Vote Kills FEP; General Motors Supervisors Pack Commission Chamber,” *Flint Weekly Review*, April 14, 1955. On the commission’s original vote, see *Flint Weekly Review*, March 31, 1955.

of combating discriminatory practices. Second, anti-FFEPC commissioners maintained that color-conscious antidiscrimination legislation was an unjust remedy for racial prejudice. Finally, opponents of the legislation, almost without fail, referenced their own personal abhorrence of discrimination and their “many friends” within Flint’s “colored community.” According to Harry Cull, the city clerk who recorded Algoe’s statement, “He [Algoe] stated he has many friends among the colored people in Flint and he appreciates them for what they are, not for their color.”<sup>21</sup> Mayor Algoe’s friendship was not enough, however, for proponents of fair employment legislation.

The demise of the FFEPC reminded many African Americans of Jim Crow’s essential compatibility with postwar American culture. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, black job seekers in Flint confronted near-daily reminders that virtually all of Vehicle City’s employers remained committed to the color line. During the late 1950s, the Hardy family, makers and distributors of Holsum Bread, and the Wittaker family, operators of a North End Dairy Queen, became two such exceptions. In 1956, the Hardy’s became the first white bakers in Flint to hire a Negro salesperson. To publicize the achievement, William Hardy, Jr., purchased advertising space in the *Bronze Reporter*. The Hardy’s ran a prominent photograph of the Negro employee in their ads along with a reminder that theirs was “The First Bakery to Hire a Negro Bread Salesman in Flint.”<sup>22</sup>

Among Flint employers, the Hardy family was somewhat exceptional, however. The *Flint Journal* published race-based classified advertisements for jobs and housing until the early 1960s. In the summer of 1957, the *Journal* ran a want ad seeking a “YOUNG WOMAN (WHITE)—to operate Dairy Queen afternoon and evenings.

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<sup>21</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, April 5, 1955.

<sup>22</sup> *Bronze Reporter*, n.d. [ca. 1956].

Experienced preferred, but not necessary. Apply in person, 1013 E. Stewart.” Angered by the notice, which sought a white employee for a store in a black neighborhood, William Hardy, Jr., and C. F. Williams, director of the Flint Civic Organization, helped to organize a boycott of the Dairy Queen. After a series of negotiations brokered by Williams and Glenora Roland, editor of the *Bronze Reporter*, the Wittakers quickly agreed to hire a black woman for the job.<sup>23</sup> For Hardy, Williams, and other activists, the Dairy Queen affair demonstrated that civil rights activists could successfully challenge the color line in North End workplaces through selective buying and other consumer-based strategies.

Following the 1957 boycott at Dairy Queen, activists in Flint set their sights on the downtown retail establishment. In July 1958, members of the Flint NAACP’s employment committee picketed in front of the Smith-Bridgman department store, the city’s largest downtown retail establishment, for refusing to hire black workers in positions other than maintenance. The Mott Foundation owned Smith-Bridgman, which maintained a well-deserved reputation for discrimination that lasted well into the 1960s. Frank Manley responded to the 1958 demonstration by spearheading the formation of the Flint Citizens’ Study Group (FCSG), an informal, secretive organization that brought together leading members of the city’s black and white communities. Comprised of “people interested in helping develop better understanding and relationships in the community, with minority groups,” the FCSG convened once per month for quiet negotiation over workplace discrimination in downtown Flint.<sup>24</sup> Because it emerged during the severe 1957-59 economic recession, when unemployment in the Vehicle City

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<sup>23</sup> *Bronze Reporter*, July 6, 1957.

<sup>24</sup> The quotation is from “A Summary of the Development of the Flint Citizens’ Study Group as of 3-25-1959,” Manley Papers, box 10, 78-8.2-84b, Scharchburg Archives.



reached its postwar peak, the FCSG also worked to create job retraining programs for unemployed black workers seeking new opportunities in the service sector. “What we’re anxious to do,” Manley asserted, “is something about training and retraining these people who are sitting around waiting to be called back to a job that will probably never exist again.”<sup>25</sup> Although job training and education were central components of the FCSG’s program—and though its leaders sought change in a “non-protest manner”—the FCSG nonetheless defined itself as “an action group, not just a discussion one.”<sup>26</sup>

The FCSG relied upon referrals from the Flint Urban League. As in other cities, the Urban League maintained a long list of black job seekers, complete with recommendations and resumes, which it routinely submitted to Manley and other FCSG members. After testing and interviewing candidates, white members of the FCSG quietly negotiated with employers on behalf of “deserving” black applicants. At the FCSG’s June 17, 1959 meeting, Dr. Donald Swank, who administered the group’s testing program, provided detailed descriptions of twelve black job applicants. On behalf of Ellen Marie Burton, Swank authored the following report:

BURTON, ELLEN MARIE—has good test results and recommendations, is excellent typist, attractive appearance, wants clerical or selling position. Recommendation: Dr. Swank will tell Miss Burton to see John Stout regarding possibly being employed at [J. C.] Penn[e]ys, after Dr. Swank has briefed Mr. Stout regarding the applicants [sic] qualifications.<sup>27</sup>

If prospective applicants performed well on Dr. Swank’s test and possessed strong recommendations, an “attractive appearance,” and stellar qualifications, white members of the FCSG would negotiate with local employers on their behalf.

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<sup>25</sup> The Manley quotation is from Manley Papers, box 18, 78-8.2-376, Scharzburg Archives.

<sup>26</sup> “A Summary of the Development.”

<sup>27</sup> Minutes, Meeting of the Flint Citizens’ Study Group, June 17, 1959, Manley Papers, box 10, 78-8.2-84b, Scharzburg Archives.

	Number of Negro Salesclerks
<b>Department Stores</b>	
Herbert N. Bush, Inc.	0
The Fair Store	0
Federal Department Store	0
King Clothing Company	0
Mill End Stores	0
J.C. Penney Company	0
Sears-Roebuck Company	3
Smith-Bridgman	0
<b>Five, Ten, and One Dollar Stores</b>	
Ben Franklin	0
Kresge	1
Woolworth	0
<b>Clothiers</b>	
Blackstone	0
Buckingham's	0
A.M. Davison	0
Richman Brothers	0
Leeds	0
Roberts	0
<b>Hardware and Housewares</b>	
Hubbard's	0
<b>Ladies Stores</b>	
Ferris Brothers	0
LaCroix	0
Lerners	0
Maas	5
Morrison's	0
Robinson's	2
Vogue	0
Winkelman's	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11</b>

Table 4.1. Downtown employment figures. The number of Negro sales clerks employed in downtown Flint during the 1959 holiday shopping season. SOURCE: Richard A. English, *Survey of the Number of Negroes Employed as Salesclerks in Flint during the 1959 Christmas Shopping Period* (Flint: Urban League of Flint, Industrial Relations Department, 1960), 6.

As an “action group,” the FCSG failed miserably. To test the efficacy of the FCSG’s program, the Flint Urban League commissioned a survey of downtown employers during the 1959 Christmas shopping season. After surveying twenty-six downtown retailers, Richard A. English found only eleven Negro sales clerks, all employed at just four establishments. Notably, English found that Smith-Bridgman, the

target of the NAACP's 1958 protest, had still not hired any Negro clerks.<sup>28</sup> The FCSG's policy of gradualism and private negotiation generated few employment opportunities for black workers. Even for members of the Urban League, who had maintained a firm commitment to quiet, negotiated racial change, the pace of progress in the Vehicle City was depressingly slow. In her preface to English's study, Edwyna Jones, the chair of the Flint Urban League's Vocational Services Committee, painted a pessimistic portrait of race relations in the Vehicle City: "We must face the fact that Flint continues to progress feebly in the development of better race relations. . . ." "Certainly," she continued, this study points out that that 'every man at his best job and for every job the best man' is at best a catchy phrase lost in a hodge podge of bias and bigotry."<sup>29</sup> As black activists in postwar Flint discovered, however, the bias and bigotry that sustained the color line often operated beneath the radar, hidden within a pervasive embrace of equal opportunity and colorblindness.

### *Jim Crow Must Go, GM Crow Must Go*

In or around 1964, an anonymous activist authored a short, untitled satirical play focusing on employment discrimination at General Motors. Set on "a day in January, 1964" at "an eastern division of America's largest corporation," the play features five actors: Mr. Smith, a personnel manager from GM; Mr. Bryant and Miss Fuller, Negro job applicants; Mr. Edward "Ed" Thornton, a white job seeker; and Charlie, a Negro janitor. The play opens in a GM employment office, where Miss Fuller, an applicant for a secretarial position, greets Mr. Smith beneath a sign reading, "General Motors – An Equal

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<sup>28</sup> Richard A. English, *Survey of the Number of Negroes Employed as Salesclerks in Flint during the 1959 Christmas Shopping Period* (Flint: Urban League of Flint, Industrial Relations Department, 1960), 6.

<sup>29</sup> English, *Survey of the Number of Negroes*, 2.

Opportunity Employer.” Miss Fuller, a graduate of Bryant and Stratton College with two years of secretarial experience, presents her application to Mr. Smith. After reviewing her credentials, Mr. Smith concludes, “There’s no question that you have the qualifications, Miss Fuller, but we had in mind a much older person, with more experience.” After promising to keep her application on file, Mr. Smith thanks Miss Fuller for stopping by and bids her farewell.<sup>30</sup>

The next applicant, Mr. Bryant, arrives shortly after Miss Fuller’s departure. An experienced millwright with six years of experience, Mr. Bryant had responded to a recently published classified advertisement for a millwright’s position at GM. Though impressed by Mr. Bryant’s credentials, Mr. Smith does not offer him the position. “After summing it up,” Mr. Smith announces, “you are exceptional.” “Unfortunately the millwright jobs have all been filled. It just so happens that we have an opening in the foundry for an iron pourer. The job’s a little hot and dirty but being a healthy Negro, you’ll be able to stand the heat.” Unemployed for over two years and desperate for income, Mr. Bryant has little choice but to accept the foundry position. After thanking Mr. Smith for his offer, Mr. Bryant exits the stage.

Following Mr. Bryant’s departure, Mr. Thornton, a white job applicant, enters Mr. Smith’s office. After overhearing Mr. Bryant’s interview, Mr. Thornton states, “I was thinking of applying for a millwright position, but I’ll accept a position in the foundry.” Looking through Mr. Thornton’s application, Mr. Smith responds, “Wait a minute, Ed. . . . I see you worked in a paper factory for six months – unemployed for over three years – then you worked for Minute Car Wash approximately one year. . . . What’s wrong with the job you have now?” “The job only pays a dollar an hour,” Thornton responds. “A

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<sup>30</sup> A copy of the script is located in the Holt Papers, box 6, folder 14, GHCC.

Negro can live on small wages even with a large family. I'm not married but it takes more for me to live like a white person's accustomed to." Persuaded by Mr. Thornton's explanation, Mr. Smith decides to offer Ed the millwright position: "Ed, I can work it so that you can be placed in a millwright job. Let's forget what happened here today. This colored boy had a little experience but we like to hire white men for the skilled trades."

As Mr. Thornton departs the scene, Charlie, a Negro janitor, enters Mr. Smith's office carrying a broom. While Charlie sweeps the floor, Mr. Smith says, "I hear that a bunch of agitators from out of town are stirring up trouble for the company." Charlie responds, "Are you referring to the demonstration at the Auto Show that the N-double A-CP is planning?" "Charlie," Mr. Smith asks, "when are you people going to wise up and stop this nonsense." "You know, as well as I do, that there are Negroes in all kinds of jobs around here." "Yes sir," Charlie replies, "but how many are there in the skilled trades and white-collar jobs?" Reassuringly, Mr. Smith answers, "Things like this take time, Charlie." "Rome wasn't built in a day." Frustrated by Mr. Smith's response, Charlie exclaims, "But it's been over a hundred years now, sir." "Charlie," Mr. Smith angrily asserts, "did it ever occur to you that all this agitation isn't making the U.S. look too good to the rest of the world?" "This country has done a lot for you people. You ought to show a little more appreciation." Stung by Mr. Smith's remarks, Charlie interjects, "Sir, no one loves America more than Negro people." After debating the issue for several minutes, Mr. Smith abruptly ends the discussion with the patronizing statement, "O.K. Charlie." As he prepares to exit the office, Mr. Smith reminds Charlie to empty all of the ashtrays in the office. The scene concludes with Charlie sweeping the floor of the office.

The origins of this play are a mystery. There can be no way of knowing who wrote it, its exact setting, or whether actors ever performed it publicly. Nevertheless, a copy of the script ultimately found its way into the hands of Edgar Holt, president of the Flint NAACP. If Holt distributed the script among African Americans in Flint, then it surely resonated powerfully with individuals who had firsthand experience with GM's employment policies. For although the play was fictional, it spoke volumes about the quotidian realities of Jim Crow within the world's largest corporation. Even during the height of the civil rights era, as the play suggests, GM's black employees tended to work in either foundry or custodial positions. In postwar Flint, GM often refused to hire black workers for skilled trades and managerial positions, regardless of their experience or qualifications. Additionally, like the character Mr. Bryant, thousands of African Americans in the Vehicle City experienced bouts of long-term unemployment during the 1950s and 1960s, even during periods of sustained economic expansion. When asked to explain their employment policies, officials from General Motors rarely exhibited the same candor as Mr. Smith, however. As indicated by the sign in Mr. Smith's office, by the 1960s GM officials in Flint and elsewhere had publicly embraced the principle of equal employment. If challenged by activists such as Charlie, corporate spokespersons offered colorblind defenses of the segregated status quo.<sup>31</sup>

GM officials are the primary targets of the play. Nevertheless, the play conveys a subtler point about the racial politics of the UAW through the author's decision to omit organized labor. Mr. Bryant and Miss Fuller surely understood the racial calculus behind Mr. Smith's decisions, yet neither of them sought protection from the union. Indeed, the

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<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Harold S. McFarland, "Minority Group Employment at General Motors," in Northrup and Richard L. Rowan, eds., *The Negro and Employment Opportunities: Problems and Practices* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Bureau of Industrial Relations, 1965), 131-136.

playwright never even mentioned the UAW. Though postwar observers often, and with good reason, ranked Walter Reuther and the UAW among the most consistent supporters of the black freedom struggle, activists in cities such as Flint understood the gaps between the formal policy positions of the UAW leadership and the day-to-day politics of its various locals.<sup>32</sup> The gulf between the UAW's national and local policies on racial discrimination was especially wide in the Vehicle City. Understanding labor's reluctance to challenge Jim Crow employment practices at the local level, black actors such as the fictional Charlie engaged in activism beyond the shop floor. By picketing auto shows and dealerships, passing out leaflets, filing claims with the state civil rights commission, and organizing protest marches against workplace discrimination, activists in Flint and other cities brought the issue of employment to a wider audience outside of the factory gates.

Like the fictional Mr. Bryant, black workers in Genesee County faced many obstacles in their attempts to challenge employment discrimination at General Motors. Once inside the plants, those obstacles remained. On the shop floor, struggles over civil rights often centered on the complex, often contentious relationships between black line workers, their supervisors, and UAW shop stewards. During the 1950s and 1960s, supervisors from Plant 2 at Chevy in the Hole developed a nasty reputation for the harassment of black workers. In March 1953, Raymond Walker, a shop steward from Plant 2, reported, "Management of Plant 2 is trying to run their plant like a concentration camp."

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<sup>32</sup> On Walter P. Reuther and the UAW's formal positions on civil rights, see Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, passim; and Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism*, passim. See also, Reuther, "Statement to the United States Commission on Civil Rights on 'Equality of Job Opportunity and Civil Rights,'" December 14, 1960, Beasley Papers, box 16, folder 15, GHCC.

All that is lacking is the electrically charged barbed wire. They are using every tactic known to man, including a member of supervision over each employee with stop watches, pencils, and paper breathing down the men's necks; making catty remarks, threats, intimidations, reprimands and penalties using the most vile Jim Crow and discriminatory tactics.

Nearly every day, as Walker noted, supervisors from Plant 2 invoked Shop Rule 29, a vague prohibition against "restricting output," to penalize black workers. On March 24, 1953, a supervisor from Plant 2 suspended Paul Kenny, a black honing worker, for restricting output. Kenny received a three-day suspension as punishment for the offense. The following week, on March 30, managers penalized Kenny yet again for violating Rule 29, issuing an even harsher one-week suspension. On both occasions, Walker confirmed that Kenny had produced a higher than average output for the day. Kenny's case was not an isolated example of racial harassment, however. As Walker noted in his report, "there are dozens more of such cases that I for one could report."<sup>33</sup>

A staunch defender of black workers, Raymond Walker was somewhat of an anomaly among shop committee representatives in Flint. At plants throughout the region, black workers often accused UAW stewards and other union officials of ignoring racial discrimination on the shop floor. In 1968, racial tensions flared again in Plant 2, when nine black workers filed a racial harassment claim with the state civil rights commission. One of the complainants, Clay Stuart, had received a disciplinary suspension for asking a white female co-worker what time she was going home. Stuart and his colleagues also charged Plant 2 managers with a long list of civil rights violations that included disregarding the seniority rights of Negro workers, suspending black men for talking to white women, sexually harassing black female employees, and unfairly punishing black

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<sup>33</sup> Raymond Walker, "Discrimination and Jim-Crow Tactics in Chevrolet-Flint," *Searchlight*, April 16, 1953.



employees for “restricting output.” According to Stuart and his co-workers, UAW officials refused to address civil rights infractions. “Union representatives,” they claimed, “show no interest in civil rights violations in the plant and are either reluctant to write grievances or compromise with management in cases of racial discrimination.” In her report on the case, Flint activist Olive Beasley, a local representative from the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, noted, “Negro men have reached the end of their tolerance of the treatment they received.”<sup>34</sup>

Unable to find sympathetic union and corporate officials to mediate grievances, black workers often found themselves in direct confrontations with plant supervisors. On January 3, 1956, black activist John Hightower came to blows with Terry Wilk, a white foreman at the Buick foundry. Hightower, a member of the UAW’s FEPC committee, routinely confronted Wilk, a man who had “for weeks, subjected workers to vile language and harsh treatment.” Prior to the January confrontation, Wilk had called Hightower a “nigger” on at least one occasion. In response, Hightower filed a grievance. Yet after a three-month investigation, officials from Buick and the UAW found that there was not enough evidence to punish the foreman. Remembering the initial incident, Hightower commented, “I turned and went around the corner and cried and became emotional because I’d just gotten out of the war and I said, ‘How could this person . . . be allowed to call me a nigger?’”<sup>35</sup> On January 3, during another especially heated exchange, Wilk called Hightower a “dirty, black, stinking nigger.” This time, however, Hightower took matters into his own hands, delivering a “smashing right cross to the jaw” of his supervisor. Years later, Hightower remembered the details of the

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<sup>34</sup> Memorandum, Beasley to Walter Green, December 27, 1968, Beasley Papers, box 44, folder 48, GHCC.

<sup>35</sup> R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 64.

confrontation: “I beat him severely. . . . I used to smoke a pear-witted pipe and I took my pipe out and I told him for the rest of your life here was a nigger you’d never forget.” Buick officials summarily fired both men as punishment for the incident.<sup>36</sup>

The experiences of Paul Kenny, John Hightower, and other black workers at GM’s Flint plants stood in stark contrast to the corporation’s official proclamations on employment discrimination. Throughout the postwar era, GM executives in Flint and Detroit openly endorsed the principle of equal employment opportunity. In 1965, Harold S. McFarland, the director of personnel services at General Motors, published an article on GM’s commitment to “minority group” employment. McFarland trumpeted GM’s record of racial fairness and affirmed the corporation’s willingness to abide by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which mandated nondiscrimination in employment. McFarland also pointed out that the automaker employed 44,000 “nonwhites,” who accounted for nearly 10 percent of the company’s domestic labor force. Moreover, McFarland asserted that GM maintained a strong commitment to hiring more black supervisors and recruiting African Americans for positions in engineering, management, and other elite job classifications.<sup>37</sup> For charitable observers of the automobile industry such as Herbert R. Northrup, Chairman of the Department of Industry at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, McFarland’s article represented “a good statement of General Motors policy by the staff official responsible for it.”<sup>38</sup> Yet among the corporation’s black critics in Flint, GM’s record did not warrant such high praise.

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<sup>36</sup> “Hightower Fired,” *Bronze Reporter*, January 7, 1956. See also, Hightower interview, March 22, 1994.

<sup>37</sup> McFarland, “Minority Group Employment at General Motors,” 131-136.

<sup>38</sup> Northrup, ed., *Negro Employment in Basic Industry*, 68 n. 28.

In 1964, just a year prior to the publication of McFarland's article, Herbert Hill, the NAACP's national labor secretary, organized sustained protests in fifty cities against employment discrimination at General Motors. Although he had planned to inaugurate the national demonstrations with a May 4 rally in Detroit, Hill gave a special exemption to activists in Flint who wanted to organize earlier protests. "We had so many complaints [from Flint]," Hill explained, "that we allowed them to demonstrate before May 4."<sup>39</sup> On Saturday, April 25, 1964, Flint NAACP President Edgar Holt led picketers who rallied at the north side Buick plants and in front of GM's flagship Buick dealership in downtown Flint. During the 1964 protests, where activists chanted "Jim Crow Must Go, GM Crow Must Go," Holt angrily denounced GM's record of employment discrimination: "GM like Rip Van Winkle has slept too long. The world and events have passed them by. Of course their machines are modern and pretty but their concern for humanity stinks worse than the manure of a thousand dinosaurs." What GM executives needed, Holt asserted, was to "open their doors and let freedom winds blow through."<sup>40</sup>

Edgar Holt's seething denunciation of GM Crow reflected the widespread frustrations of black workers in postwar Flint. In the two decades between the close of World War II and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, African Americans in Flint fought fierce battles against employment discrimination, segregation in automobile factories, and corporate divestment from the city. Yet for Holt and other activists those battles seemed to bring few victories. During the 1964 demonstrations against GM, Holt

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<sup>39</sup> On the NAACP protests, see Holt Papers, box 15, folder 6, GHCC; "NAACP Plans Protest of GM 'Discrimination,'" *Flint Journal*, April 12, 1964; "Job Bias Denied by GM, Target for Protest Rally," *Detroit Free Press*, May 1, 1964; and "Hundreds Picket GM to Dramatize Charges of Bias," *Detroit Free Press*, May 5, 1964.

<sup>40</sup> Holt Papers, box 2, folder 40, GHCC. See also, Wilhelm, "NAACP Pickets Buick Offices Here," *Flint Journal*, April 25, 1964.

and Sydney Finley, the national field secretary of the NAACP, held a joint press conference at which Finley reminded reporters of the lack of progress at GM: “Eighty percent of the Negro workers employed by GM are either foundry workers, toilet attendants, window washers, or performing some other menial task. We are cognizant of the facts of flagrant discriminatory practices.”<sup>41</sup> Although by the 1960s GM had a highly publicized policy of nondiscrimination, Finley and Holt pointed out that all of its plants and offices in Genesee County remained rigidly segregated.

Perhaps more than any other facility in the region, the General Motors Institute of Technology symbolized the hardness and persistence of the Vehicle City’s color lines. At GMI—which by 1966 had enrolled sixteen black students—many white faculty members and students vehemently resisted even token forms of desegregation. During the early 1970s, some students and at least one faculty sponsor organized the Stoner’s Society for the Preservation of White Supremacy, a group dedicated to expelling all black students and staff from the campus. Stoner’s Society members distributed insulting leaflets, issued death threats, and pressured the school’s administrators to end their limited experiment with desegregation. To dramatize their efforts, group members distributed a cartoon depicting a lynching and a “Nigger Application for Employment,” which asked imaginary black applicants to name their “motha” and “fatha” if known, list the number of their children on welfare, and answer how many words they could “jive” in one minute.<sup>42</sup> Upon learning of the harassment, Holt approached GMI’s administrators, who assured him of their commitment to nondiscrimination. Yet at GMI and other

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<sup>41</sup> The Finley quotation is from an undated article published by the *Flint Mirror* newspaper. See Holt Papers, box 15, folder 6, GHCC.

<sup>42</sup> See Holt Papers, box 6, folders 1 and 7, GHCC. The materials distributed by Stoner’s Society members are anonymous and undated.

corporate facilities throughout the region, Holt discovered a startling reluctance among local executives to combat even such overt forms of discrimination and racial harassment. Addressing the difficulties he encountered in communicating with GMI officials, plant managers, and executives, Holt wrote, “Most of the times [sic] we do not get common courtesy. We try without success to relay the corporation’s policy of fairness and equal opportunity but they think this applies to Mars.”<sup>43</sup>

In 1966, an investigation by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission revealed how little progress “non-white” workers in Flint had made at General Motors. At Buick during that year, non-white workers represented 15 percent of the hourly-rated workforce. Yet among Buick’s 7,499 salaried and skilled-trades employees, non-white workers comprised only 1 percent of the total. Of the 1,727 salaried and skilled-trades employees at Fisher Body 1, only twenty-one were nonwhite. Moreover, as in Detroit and other cities, African Americans in Flint found it nearly impossible to secure apprentice positions at General Motors. Throughout Genesee County, the company employed at least 359 apprentices, only three of whom were nonwhite. According to the authors of the 1966 study, who found few reasons for optimism, “the fact that General Motors has expressed its nondiscrimination policy in writing seems to have had little bearing on the effectiveness with which the policy has been applied, or on the extent to which Negroes have been employed or promoted.”<sup>44</sup> At times, the reasons offered by GM personnel managers who rejected black job seekers bordered on the absurd. In 1977, for instance, Holt wrote a letter to Laurence Vickery, GM’s director of employment practices, in which he complained about the extraordinary number of black job applicants

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<sup>43</sup> Holt Papers, box 5, folder 10, GHCC.

<sup>44</sup> Beasley Papers, box 44, folder 47, GHCC.

in Flint rejected for having “UTE,” a mysterious disorder that reputedly caused “curved backs.” “The number of blacks rejected for employment because of curved backs is phenomenally high,” Holt asserted. “Yet these same people [who are rejected] are athletes, Marines, and acceptable to other GM plants. The high number of blacks discharged for UTE is disgusting.”<sup>45</sup> Even in the 1970s, it seems, at least a few GM officials in Flint clung to eugenic explanations for discrimination.

		Buick	Chevrolet Assembly	AC Spark Plug	Chevrolet Engine and Metal Fabricating	Fisher Body 1	Ternstedt	Fisher Body Grand Blanc	TOTAL
<b>Hourly Workers</b>	White	14,380	2,200	9,050	4,000	5,617	4,500	2,601	<b>42,348</b>
	Non-White	2,219	700	1,050	800	825	500	499	<b>6,593</b>
<b>Salaried Employees</b>	White	4,449	568	2,686	690	913	919	620	<b>10,845</b>
	Non-White	51	7	14	10	10	11	5	<b>108</b>
<b>Skilled Trades Workers</b>	White	3,050	180	1,197	549	814	699	1,327	<b>7,816</b>
	Non-White	36	3	3	1	11	1	23	<b>78</b>
<b>Apprentices</b>	White	Unknown	N/A	148	75	49	59	25	<b>356</b>
	Non-White			2	0	0	1	0	<b>3</b>

Table 4.2. General Motors employment figures. The number of white (W) and non-white (NW) employees in selected job categories at seven General Motors facilities in Genesee County in 1965. SOURCE: Beasley Papers, box 44, folder 47, GHCC.

During the era of mass suburbanization, the struggle for work-related civil rights in Flint necessarily took on a spatial dimension, bringing the racial politics of suburban development into the forefront of fair employment debates. The struggle for employment

<sup>45</sup> See Holt to Laurence Vickery, April 8, 1977, Holt Papers, box 3, folder 43, GHCC.

equity in Genesee County took place on the shop floor, at city hall, in boardrooms, on the streets, and in the courts. Often, black workers such as John Hightower who experienced discrimination at work found that they had to circumvent shop stewards and other UAW officials. In the absence of a municipal FEPC, many black workers took their claims to Olive Beasley, the Flint representative on the Michigan Civil Rights Commission. During the postwar era, Beasley and other MCRC field officers received hundreds of complaints from black employees and unemployed job seekers throughout the region. Significantly, many of the complaints that Beasley processed arrived from black workers who had experienced job discrimination in Flint's growing suburbs. In May of 1966, for instance, Cynthia Higgins, one of only a handful of black employees at the Chevrolet National Parts Distribution office in suburban Swartz Creek, reported that her immediate supervisor, Don Stewart, had subjected her to threats, verbal abuse, and near "continuous harassment."<sup>46</sup> Several years later, in 1969, black workers at GM's Coldwater Road facility in Beecher formed an organization called "Equality for All" to protest against employment discrimination and poor union representation. Like workers in other GM facilities throughout the county, members of Equality for All charged GM officials with racial harassment, biased disciplinary actions, and employment discrimination, especially in the skilled-trades and white-collar sectors. Led by Anna Jean Miles and Sam V. Cade, Equality for All members also charged officials from UAW Local 326 with "unjust representation" and conspiracy to block promotions for black workers.<sup>47</sup>

Among African-American activists in the Vehicle City, the daily battles for employment equity were intimately connected to broader struggles over fair housing,

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<sup>46</sup> Beasley Papers, box 13, folder 38, GHCC.

<sup>47</sup> On the Equality for All group, see Beasley Papers, box 14, folder 29, GHCC.

deindustrialization, and metropolitan development. During the postwar era, as black workers fought to gain a foothold in local industry, a combination of municipal growth strategies, Cold War defense initiatives, corporate expansion efforts, and federal housing policies hastened the suburbanization of capital and labor. The postwar suburbanization of white homeowners, jobs, and industry created economic turmoil in Flint and produced a fundamental shift in metropolitan power relations in Genesee County. As evidenced by the increased complaints filed against suburban employers, the spatial reorganization of capital and power in Genesee County also gave rise to new civil rights struggles over urban deindustrialization, municipal divestment, and suburban residential exclusions. Civil rights activists were not the only opponents of Flint's metropolitan growth machine, however. By the close of the 1950s, the rapid but uneven growth of Flint's suburbs had produced a new political consciousness among white homeowners and suburban officials who sought independence from the central city and its problems.



## Chapter 5

### **Suburban Strategies: Building Flint's Industrial Garden**

In 1952, President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower appointed the president of General Motors, Charles E. Wilson, to the cabinet position of national defense secretary. When asked during his senate confirmation hearing if he could envision making policy decisions that would adversely affect GM, Wilson uttered a famous reply that revealed the operating ethos of the world's most powerful industrial corporation. "For years," Wilson said, "I thought that what was good for the country was good for General Motors and vice versa. The difference [in interests] did not exist."<sup>1</sup> Wilson viewed corporate and civic interests as one and the same. Moreover, Wilson and his GM colleagues believed that economic growth—wherever, whenever, and however it sprouted—was good for the United States and its citizens. Not unfairly, many Americans have since paraphrased Wilson's statement to read, "What's good for GM is good for America."

Wilson's remarks provide an excellent context for viewing GM's postwar corporate expansion initiatives and the dramatic yet unexpected effects they had on plant cities such as Flint. During and after World War II, GM executives devised an aggressive corporate growth strategy that centered on the spatial decentralization of automobile production. By building new plants in rural and suburban areas, Wilson and other executives in Detroit and Flint hoped to reduce production costs and tap expansive

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<sup>1</sup> "GM Matters Will Clear through Ike, He Promises," *Washington Post*, January 24, 1953.

new markets for their cars and trucks. As well, GM officials sought to take advantage of new federal and local subsidies designed to promote industrial and commercial expansion outside of central cities. GM's suburban investment strategy had profound and unforeseen implications for the city of Flint.

GM's suburban building campaign was part of a nationwide city-to-suburb migration of capital and labor that occurred during the postwar era. In the 1940s and 1950s, a combination of federal tax and defense initiatives, municipal growth policies, and corporate expansion strategies converged to drive the suburbanization of industry and retail in Genesee County. Over the same period, local real estate investors, municipal and township officials, and administrators from the Federal Housing Administration oversaw the rapid development of modern land use plans, new utility services, and other infrastructural improvements in suburban Genesee County. The modernization of Flint's suburbs triggered a prolonged housing boom in the segregated subdivisions of the out-county.

Local public policies played a decisive role in shaping the pace and trajectory of capital, labor, and population migrations. Accepting Wilson's statement as a truism, Mayor George Algoe and other civic and political leaders in the Vehicle City believed that Flint's future depended upon the construction of new factories, residential subdivisions, and retail outlets, even if those new developments were located outside of the city's boundaries. Flint's city commissioners subsidized the migrations of white homeowners and businesses by providing water and sewer lines to outlying plants, offering discounted utilities to suburban customers, and building new roads for long-distance commuters. As a general rule, GM's leaders, city commissioners, and other

members of Flint's pro-growth coalition embraced new housing developments and business growth wherever they took shape, viewing the city and its inner-most suburbs as part of an organic, metropolitan whole. Not all of the county's residents endorsed the city's metropolitan growth strategy, however. By the middle of the 1950s, cracks in the postwar growth consensus had begun to emerge on both sides of the color line.

### *Suburban Strategies*

At mid-century, Flint's industrial garden of factories and neighborhoods was largely an urban phenomenon. Prior to the Second World War, all of GM's major industrial facilities in Genesee County were inside the city of Flint, with most factories located adjacent to the city's rail lines and the Flint River. During the mid-1920s, however, GM executives began shifting their investments towards the city's urban fringe. In 1926, GM acquired the Fisher Body 1 plant via purchase, the company's fifth major industrial facility in Flint. Sitting just north of the city's southern border with Burton Township, approximately three miles south of Flint's central business district, the Fisher Body 1 plant was Flint's first GM factory situated on the city's urban-suburban fringe.<sup>2</sup> In due time, more factories and people would follow.

In 1940, officials from GM's AC Spark Plug division opened a second plant near the city's boundary line—a 156,000 square-foot facility on Dort Highway. Located on the city's eastern border with Burton Township, the AC facility, complete with employee parking, air conditioning, locker and shower rooms, and other rare amenities was, in the

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<sup>2</sup> On Fisher Body 1, see Donovan, "Flint Fattening up Fast," *Detroit Free Press*, April 1, 1955; and Benjamin Klein, "Fisher-General Motors and the Nature of the Firm," *Journal of Law and Economics* 43:1 (April 2000): 105-141.

words of one observer, “the most modern structure of its kind in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Although the new AC plant did not open until 1940, this and other pre-World War II capital migrations were many years in the making. Dating back to the 1910s and 1920s, the Buick, AC Spark Plug, Chevrolet, and Fisher Body plants that dominated Flint’s industrial landscape had very little room for expansion.<sup>4</sup> Hoping to open up new land for industrial development, in 1920 the Flint City Planning Board created *The City Plan of Flint, Michigan*. According to this master plan, “All new industries and similar undertakings should, if possible, be located in the large tract east of the city now definitely acquired and designed for industrial purposes.”<sup>5</sup> The Flint City Planning Board—which created the industrial district later occupied by the AC facility—thus played a key role in driving the shift towards suburban manufacturing. The 1920 plan did little, however, to free up new space in the city for factories. By the close of the 1930s, the city’s automobile plants were virtually landlocked, hemmed in on all sides by crowded working-class neighborhoods, roads, and shops. Though both the Fisher Body 1 plant and the new AC factory on Dort Highway were inside of Flint’s city limits, GM’s decision to operate plants on the city’s urban fringe foreshadowed the company’s postwar suburban strategy. Still, however, until the close of the 1930s, automobile production in

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<sup>3</sup> *AC Division Scrapbook*, v. 1, 1927-1948 (LaCrosse, Wisconsin: Brookhaven Press, n.d.); and *Michigan: Annual Survey of Industrial Expansions, 1955* (Lansing: Michigan Economic Development Department, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> On industrial land shortages in Flint, see Noland Rall Heiden, “A Land Use Sequence Study of the Dort Highway Area, Flint, Michigan,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1949); and Ronald Larson and Eric Schenker, *Land and Property Values in Relation to Dort Highway Improvements* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Traffic Safety Center, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> *The City Plan of Flint, Michigan* (Flint: Flint City Planning Board, 1920), 62.

Flint was an urban enterprise. Indeed, in 1940, less than 3 percent of GM's Flint area workers labored outside of the city.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1940s and 1950s, General Motors executives in Flint rethought their prewar strategy of industrial urbanism. During World War II and its aftermath, the American automobile industry and the industrial geographies of its plant cities underwent dramatic transformations. In the months following the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, automobile executives across the nation halted the production of vehicles for the civilian market, shifting their focus from automobile manufacturing to the production of guns, bombs, and other materiel. Initially, GM executives were reluctant to convert their facilities to government uses. By the close of the war, however, GM workers had delivered over \$12 billion worth of defense materials to the federal government.<sup>7</sup> In wartime Flint, autoworkers from GM's Buick, AC Spark Plug, Fisher, and Chevrolet divisions produced aircraft engines, machine guns, tanks, gun and bomb sights, armored cars, and a host of additional military items. Taking advantage of the city's highly skilled workforce and its well-developed industrial infrastructure, the federal government invested heavily in the economy of metropolitan Flint. Between 1942 and 1945, federal officials ordered the construction of two defense plants in suburban Genesee County. The first, a large plant located in south suburban Grand Blanc, produced Sherman tanks for the U.S. Army, while the second, located within Flint's sprawling Buick complex, produced aluminum

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<sup>6</sup> Basil G. Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1 (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1957), ch. 2, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Richard P. Scharzburg, ed., *GM Story* (Flint: General Motors Institute, 1981), 14. See also, Alan K. Binder and Deebe Ferris, *General Motors in the Twentieth Century* (Southfield, Michigan: Ward's Communications, 2000), 9-10. In a 1942 letter, Charles Stewart Mott noted, "G.M. production of war material is going up like a skyrocket." See C. S. Mott to Floyd A. Allen, April 2, 1942, Mott Papers, box 29, 77-7.6-1.1b, GHCC. On GM's reluctance to convert to military production, see Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979).

for the war effort.<sup>8</sup> By the mid-1950s, GM's Grand Blanc tank facility—redesigned following the war as a metal stamping plant—employed three thousand workers who produced parts for Fisher Body. During the Korean War, GM executives and federal officials oversaw the construction of two new suburban factories devoted to the production of jet engines. The largest of these, a massive, two million square-foot plant in suburban Beecher, just north of the city, employed nearly seven thousand workers. At the close of the Korean War in 1953, with federal demands for jet engines lagging, GM acquired the Beecher plant and converted it to an automotive hardware facility managed by the company's Ternstedt division.<sup>9</sup> By the end of the year, GM executives had purchased all of the government's major defense plants in Genesee County and resumed a full vehicle production schedule for the consumer market. Beginning with the new defense plants constructed in the 1940s and 1950s, GM executives affirmed their desire to decentralize automobile production in Genesee County.

Massive federal investments allowed the Vehicle City's economy to prosper during World War II. Nevertheless, Genesee County's postwar economic boom did not truly begin until the end of the 1940s. Between 1945 and 1948—and, to a lesser extent, then again in the mid-1950s following the Korean War mobilization—GM officials in Flint and other plant cities worked feverishly to modernize the company's plant infrastructure and resume the mass production of automobiles for the civilian market. By 1948, GM had returned to prewar levels of car and truck production and sat poised to

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<sup>8</sup> On the Grand Blanc tank plant, see Richard M. Langworth and Jan P. Norbye, *The Complete History of General Motors, 1908-1986* (New York: Beekman House, 1986), 169; and *Michigan: Annual Survey of Industrial Expansions, 1955*.

<sup>9</sup> *Buick Motor Division Scrapbook*, v. 1-3 (LaCrosse, Wisconsin: Brookhaven Press, n.d.). Also, see "Finally It's Official—Ternstedt Is Coming," *Flint News-Advertiser*, March 27, 1953; and *Ternstedt Division Scrapbook* (LaCrosse, Wisconsin: Brookhaven Press, n.d.).

capitalize on the pent up transportation demands of millions of American consumers. During the war mobilization, with no new cars and trucks available to replace the nation's aging stock of vehicles, the number of privately owned automobiles in the United States dropped from thirty million to twenty-two million. "Of the twenty-two million," reported a writer for *Fortune* magazine, 50 percent are 10 years old."<sup>10</sup> By the close of the war in 1945, consumer demand for automobiles had reached unprecedented levels. Well aware of the prospect of huge sales, in 1945 GM Chairman Alfred P. Sloan announced plans to spend \$500 million on a postwar reconversion and expansion program.<sup>11</sup> After seven years of limited production, Sloan's plans first bore fruit in 1949, when GM produced 2,800,000 vehicles and earned \$656 million, at the time the largest profit ever recorded by an American corporation.<sup>12</sup> Between 1946 and 1955, GM executives invested a total of \$3 billion on new construction, plant modernization, and other capital improvements, and the company's net annual sales mushroomed five-fold to over \$10 billion.<sup>13</sup>

As GM's primary North American production hub, the Flint metropolitan area received a substantial portion of the corporation's postwar investments.<sup>14</sup> Between 1940 and 1960, GM executives coordinated major expansions at nearly all of the region's existing plants and ordered the new construction of eight major industrial facilities in metropolitan Flint. Over the same period, GM's countywide employment rose to nearly eighty thousand. As one former Buick employee remembered nostalgically, "The money

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<sup>10</sup> The *Fortune* quotation is from Langworth and Norbye, *The Complete History of General Motors*, 173.

<sup>11</sup> *Annual Report of General Motors Corporation, 1944* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1945).

<sup>12</sup> On GM's postwar sales figures, see Ysabel Rennie and Robert Rennie, "Durant, Sloan Cited in GM Success Story," *Washington Post*, March 22, 1950. See also, Lawrence J. White, *The Automobile Industry since 1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 10-18.

<sup>13</sup> Public Relations Staff of General Motors Corporation, *1966-1967 Information Handbook*, Automotive Files, 70.26.3, Perry Archives.

<sup>14</sup> "GM Will Spend Billion on Expansion Plan," *Flint Journal*, January 19, 1954.

flowed like wine.”<sup>15</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s, hardly a month went by without the *Flint Journal* reporting on one or another of GM’s expansion projects in Genesee County.<sup>16</sup> Local executives earmarked substantial funds for the development of GM’s suburban plant infrastructure. By 1955, GM had converted its Beecher aircraft engine and Grand Blanc tank facilities to civilian production. In 1956, AC Spark Plug executives announced a major 225,000 square foot addition to their parts plant on Dort Highway. With the new addition, GM’s east side AC facilities crossed the border between Flint and suburban Burton Township.<sup>17</sup> One year later, Chevrolet relocated its service and parts distribution warehouse from Chevy in the Hole to the suburb of Otterburn—later absorbed by the municipal incorporation of Swartz Creek—ten miles southwest of downtown Flint.<sup>18</sup> GM’s most significant postwar capital investments, however, took place in southwest suburban Flint Township, where the company’s Chevrolet division constructed an ultramodern manufacturing, assembly, and corporate office complex.

GM’s Flint Township facilities, located near the intersection of Van Slyke and Bristol Roads just south of the city, were the showpieces of its postwar construction campaign. The Van Slyke complex first took shape in 1947, when GM’s Chevrolet division opened, under one roof, a dual-purpose body manufacturing and assembly plant. Equipped with a stunning array of modern conveniences, the two-in-one plant was a source of great civic pride. In an article commemorating the opening of the new

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<sup>15</sup> Reuster, *Good Old Days at the Buick*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, *Flint Journal*, August 31, November 29, 1951, July 1, 1953, January 19, 1954, June 23, 1955; and *Flint News-Advertiser*, January 21, 1954.

<sup>17</sup> *AC Division Scrapbook*, v. 1-3 (LaCrosse, Wisconsin: Brookhaven Press, n.d.).

<sup>18</sup> *Flint Journal*, March 4, 1954.



facilities, a *Flint Journal* reporter provided a detailed description of the many amenities available to workers at the Van Slyke complex:

Employee comfort and convenience has been given unusual attention in the design of the new Chevrolet-Fisher Body assembly plant at Van Slyke and Atherton Roads. . . . At the new plant the employee may park in a paved lot, enter the plant via a special employee entrance and descend to the basement of the assembly building without crossing any street or highway. In the employee locker room, steel lockers are assigned to each individual. Twelve wash fountains are available, as well as two tiled shower rooms. Opposite the locker room is the employee cafeteria, seating 800 and providing facilities for hot meals as well as a snack bar. Kitchen equipment is of the finest. Complete medical facilities in the well-appointed hospital include a short wave machine, special baths for physical therapy treatments and a thoroughly-equipped operating room.<sup>19</sup>

To celebrate the opening of the new 1,100,000 square foot Flint Township factory, Chevrolet general manager M. E. Coyle sponsored a parade in downtown Flint. At the celebration, over fifty thousand spectators, many of them children, lined the street and “engaged in a mad scramble for the 20,000 pieces of bubble gum and 20,000 balloons tossed by clowns from the sides of two gaily decorated trucks that preceded the parade.” Shortly after the complex opened, a *Flint Journal* reporter remarked upon the collective good will generated by GM’s new suburban plants, writing, “Addition of this new General Motors unit has opened up many new jobs, and Flint turned out in larger numbers to demonstrate its gratitude that this community was selected as the site of the assembly plant.”<sup>20</sup> Significantly, very few Flint residents seemed to notice, or care for that matter, that GM’s new plants were outside of the city.

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<sup>19</sup> On GM’s Van Slyke and Bristol Road facilities, see *Chevrolet Motor Division Scrapbook*, v. 1-3 (LaCrosse, Wisconsin: Brookhaven Press, n.d.). Also, see *Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of General Motors Corporation* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1948).

<sup>20</sup> *Chevrolet Motor Division Scrapbook*, v. 1; and “Keating Says Civic Co-Operation Has Maintained Flint as No. 1 Plant City for Chevrolet,” *Flint Journal*, October 28, 1950.

Nevertheless, the opening of the new suburban plants marked an important spatial shift in the local economy. Prior to 1947, Chevrolet workers manufactured automobile bodies and conducted final assembly operations at Flint's densely-packed Chevy in the Hole complex. After shifting operations to the Van Slyke plant in Flint Township, Coyle announced plans to terminate body production and assembly work at Chevy in the Hole. Six years later, in 1953, Chevrolet opened a third plant at the Van Slyke Road site. Originally designed as an aircraft engine facility, the third plant ultimately produced GM's popular V-8 engines. Shortly after opening the V-8 engine complex, GM opened a fourth plant—a stamping and frame manufacturing facility—at the Van Slyke compound.<sup>21</sup> As with the body manufacturing and assembly plants, Chevrolet's new, highly automated engine and stamping facilities replaced older, more labor intensive plants from the city's Chevy in the Hole complex. In a 1954 speech to the Flint Industrial Executives Club, Chevrolet general manager T. H. Keating reflected triumphantly on GM's new suburban plants, claiming, "Flint is the fastest-growing center in the automobile industry and shows the way when big things are doing in America."<sup>22</sup>

Coyle, Keating, and other GM boosters consistently failed to acknowledge the fact that virtually all of GM's major postwar construction initiatives in Genesee County occurred in suburban areas such as Flint Township. Yet city officials in Flint could not tax these new plants directly. The new suburban facilities contributed only indirectly—via jobs, wages, and other means—to the city's tax base. Nevertheless, Keating spoke truthfully when he identified the Flint region as the fastest growing automotive center in the United States. By the close of the 1950s, GM employed nearly twenty-one thousand

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<sup>21</sup> *Flint Journal*, August 31, November 29, 1951, July 1, 1953.

<sup>22</sup> The quotation is from *Chevrolet Motor Division Scrapbook*, v. 1.

workers in its new suburban facilities. In Flint Township alone, GM spent \$78 million on its postwar construction campaign and, by 1960, employed twelve thousand workers in its Van Slyke and Bristol Road plants.<sup>23</sup> Increasingly, automobile production in the Vehicle City was becoming a suburban vocation.

*“Love Your Neighbor”:  
Public Policies, Corporate Strategies, and Suburban Development*

Urban land shortages played a critical role in shaping GM’s suburban strategy. In describing the criteria that the company used for postwar plant construction, Frederick G. Tykle, the director of GM’s Argonaut Real Estate division, explained the urban land limitations that helped to drive the suburbanization of automobile production: “First of all, when we plan a new plant we look for a site of 250 or 300 acres. That automatically puts us more or less out in the country. There are no such sites left in cities.”<sup>24</sup> Though urban land shortages were a key factor in the suburbanization of auto manufacturing, a complex combination of corporate production interests and public policies drove GM’s shift towards the urban fringe.<sup>25</sup> Cheap land, the growth of automobile markets outside of cities, lower suburban tax rates, federal subsidies for industrial decentralization, UAW demands for large employee parking lots, readily available city services in the suburbs,

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<sup>23</sup> On GM’s postwar construction initiatives in suburban Genesee County, see *Chevrolet Motor Division Scrapbook*, v. 1; Donald Mosher, ed., *We Make Our Own History: The History of UAW Local 659* (Flint: UAW Local 659, 1993), 59-61; and *Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of General Motors Corporation*.

<sup>24</sup> “For Plants of Tomorrow, Country Club Air,” *Detroit Free Press*, n.d. [ca. 1955]. See also, R. Larson and Schenker, *Land and Property Values*.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, *Survey of Recent Industrial Move-Ins and Expansions in Michigan* (Lansing: Michigan Department of Commerce, 1967).

and convenient freeway access via Interstate 75 all shaped the suburbanization of the auto industry in Genesee County.<sup>26</sup>

Federal defense policies played a major role in the postwar suburbanization of industry. During the late 1940s, as concerns mounted about the possibility of an atomic attack against the United States, federal officials advocated a policy of industrial decentralization. In 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed into law the National Security Resources Act, legislation designed to foster “the strategic relocation of industries, services, government and economic activities.”<sup>27</sup> “Since there is no known defense against the atomic bomb itself except space,” a 1951 federal report concluded, “dispersion is one of the first considerations for strategic safety of industrial facilities.”<sup>28</sup> In order to speed the dispersion of industry, federal officials offered a variety of tax and loan incentives to General Motors and other defense contractors. As a prerequisite to receiving federal construction loans from the defense department, manufacturers had to demonstrate that their facilities were distant enough from central cities to render them safe in the event of a nuclear attack. For smaller urban areas such as Flint, federal guidelines stipulated that fifteen miles from the city center constituted appropriate dispersion. Yet officials from the defense department generally allowed manufacturers

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<sup>26</sup> On the postwar suburbanization of manufacturing and business, see K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 266-271; and Self, *American Babylon*, 23-60. On the issue of off-street parking, local members of the UAW actively pressured GM to expand parking facilities at its inner-city plants, even threatening at one point to unleash “something like a Boston Tea Party” if the company refused to honor demands for more parking. See *Flint Weekly Review*, October 3, 1953, January 15, December 10, 1954. On industrial location policies, see Eva Mueller, Arnold Wilken, and Margaret Wood, *Location Decisions and Industrial Mobility in Michigan, 1961* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 1962); Michael T. Oravec, *Locational Preferences of Manufacturing Firms: Flint-Genesee County, Michigan* (Flint: Economic Development Commission of Genesee County, 1974); and Keith Chapman and David Walker, *Industrial Location: Principles and Politics* (New York: Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> Morris L. Sweet, *Industrial Location Policy for Economic Revitalization: National and International Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 11. Also, see David Novick, Melvin Anshen, and W. C. Truppner, *Wartime Production Controls* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 412.

<sup>28</sup> Joint Committee on the Economic Report, *The Need for Industrial Dispersal* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1951), 1.

sole discretion over site selection, a loophole that allowed GM to construct most of its suburban Genesee County plants well within the fifteen-mile perimeter.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, most GM workers who commuted to work in suburban Genesee County did not have very far to travel.

Beyond Cold War defense legislation, federal taxation and procurement policies also served to hasten the suburbanization of manufacturing. In 1950, members of the United States Congress voted to amend the federal taxation code to allow defense contractors to deduct up to 100 percent of their capital expenditures on newly constructed facilities. To qualify for the government's accelerated tax amortization plan, eligible plants had to be located outside of urban centers. According to historian Margaret Pugh O'Mara, "Within six months of the establishment of this new program, over \$4 billion worth of tax amortization had been awarded to U.S. firms."<sup>30</sup> As one of the nation's primary defense contractors, General Motors was a major recipient of this largesse.

Three years after legislators approved the accelerated tax amortization plan, the Congress dealt another severe blow to northern industrial cities such as Flint. Shortly after taking office, President Eisenhower signed the Maybank Amendment to the 1953 Defense Appropriations Bill. Sponsored by Burnet R. Maybank, a powerful Democratic senator from South Carolina, the 1953 amendment helped to reshape the spatial organization of the American defense industry by requiring the government to purchase all of its defense materials at the lowest possible price. In the years following the Maybank Amendment's passage, employers in high-wage, heavily unionized cities such as Flint found it virtually impossible to compete with low-wage, non-union firms in the

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<sup>29</sup> For a detailed discussion of Cold War government policies and industrial decentralization, see O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge*, 28-45.

<sup>30</sup> O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge*, 31.

Sunbelt as well as suburban and rural employers nationwide. Consequently, between 1951 and 1984 the number of prime defense contracts per capita awarded to Michigan firms declined by approximately 75 percent. By 1983, the state of Michigan, once known as an “arsenal of democracy” during World War II, had slipped to thirty-sixth in the nation in defense production.<sup>31</sup>

During the postwar era, federal incentives for industrial dispersal dovetailed seamlessly with the GM’s long-range plans to decentralize automobile production. In their 1945 annual report to stockholders, GM officials unveiled plans to construct a nationwide network of branch assembly plants. “A better geographical distribution of assembly plants,” the report explained, “provides for more efficient operations and makes possible better service to dealers and to the consuming public.”<sup>32</sup> Several years later, in their 1948 annual report, GM executives elaborated on their desire to move from centralized economies of scale to more efficient, decentralized economies of place:

Greater efficiency in manufacturing and distribution, leading to lower costs and better products for customers, is a major objective of General Motors. Wherever possible, operations are decentralized with manufacturing plants in areas convenient to sources of material supply and manpower, and assembly plants in the vicinity of the principal markets for General Motors products.<sup>33</sup>

Corporate executives were especially interested in eliminating the high cost of shipping assembled vehicles to their far-flung network of dealerships. The economic calculus

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<sup>31</sup> On the Maybank Amendment, see Sweet, *Industrial Location Policy*, 13-15. On Michigan’s declining share of government defense contracts, see Markusen and Carlson, “Deindustrialization in the American Midwest,” 44-45.

<sup>32</sup> *Thirty-Seventh Annual Report of General Motors Corporation for the Year Ended December 31, 1945* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1946), 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Fortieth Annual Report of General Motors Corporation for the Year Ended December 31, 1948* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1949), 12. On the proliferation of branch plants, see Charles E. Edwards, *Dynamics of the United States Automobile Industry* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1965). The same economic calculations that drove GM’s shift towards decentralized branch plants in the United States also helped to fuel the company’s expansions overseas. See Frederic G. Donner, *The World-Wide Industrial Enterprise: Its Challenge and Promise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).

behind GM's strategy was simple. While a standard rail container could hold only four fully assembled automobiles, that same container could contain twelve partially assembled vehicles.<sup>34</sup> In 1965, the cost of shipping a fully assembled vehicle from Flint to cities on the Pacific Coast was approximately \$270 per unit. For GM executives, the construction of new assembly plants scattered throughout the nation—and, increasingly, the world—was significantly more profitable than concentrating production facilities in the state of Michigan. As GM Executive Vice President M. E. Coyle explained, “We have found that an area consumption of 400 cars and trucks daily for 200 days per year justified an assembly plant. This insured an annual volume of 80,000 units.”<sup>35</sup>

Between 1945 and 1955, GM aggressively pursued its decentralization strategy, opening new assembly plants in California, Georgia, Texas, Delaware, and Massachusetts. The dispersal of automobile assembly work had significant consequences for Michigan's economy. From 1950 to 1961, Michigan's share of the nation's automobile industry employment dropped sharply from 56 to 40 percent.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the decentralization of automobile assembly operations caused a ripple effect in which suppliers also sought out new plants closer to branch assembly facilities. In a 1959 forecast of the auto industry's future, economic analyst Neil Hurley issued a prescient statement on the dim future of automobile production in Michigan: “Although it will be decades before the primacy of Michigan as the nation's auto state will be seriously challenged, there seems little doubt that Michigan is losing its historic position of

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<sup>34</sup> See *Flint Journal*, November 20, 1957; Neil P. Hurley, “The Automotive Industry: A Study in Industrial Location,” *Land Economics* 35:1 (February 1959): 5; and R. C. Estall and R. Ogilvie Buchanan, *Industrial Activity and Economic Geography: A Study of the Forces behind the Geographical Location of Productive Activity in Manufacturing Industry* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1968), 181.

<sup>35</sup> The Coyle remark is quoted in Daniel H. Kruger, “The Labor Factor in Plant Location in Michigan,” in William Haber, Eugene C. McKean, and Harold C. Taylor, *The Michigan Economy: Its Potentials and Its Problems* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 1959), 257.

<sup>36</sup> See Mueller, Wilken, and M. Wood, *Location Decisions*, 53.

dominance.”<sup>37</sup> Workers in the city of Flint, GM’s North American production hub, stood to lose more than their counterparts in virtually any other city in the United States.

Many rank-and-file workers and UAW leaders viewed GM’s policy of decentralization as part of a broader “southern strategy,” a pernicious plan to increase profits by shifting automobile production away from the high-wage, pro-union cities of the North to the South and West, where wages were lower and trade unions weakest. According to the authors of a 1987 study on postwar industrial location policies, the quest for a cheap, pliant labor force drove GM’s southward capital migrations: “In the US, General Motors adopted a ‘southern strategy’ soon after the Second World War by diverting investment to states where the power base of the United Auto Workers was non-existent.”<sup>38</sup> Though GM’s board chairperson Thomas A. Murphy denied having a southern strategy, labeling it a “ridiculous” accusation, he nonetheless found it difficult to dispute the UAW’s charges.<sup>39</sup> Of the five new branch assembly plants that GM constructed between 1945 and 1955, all but one were located in either the South or West. During the 1970s, GM’s migration toward the Sunbelt intensified. Just between 1973 and 1980, General Motors opened thirteen new facilities in the South—four in Mississippi, three in Louisiana, two in Georgia, and one each in Virginia, Texas, Oklahoma, and Alabama.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the “southern strategy” framework obscures an even greater truth about GM’s postwar building strategy—namely, that virtually all of the corporation’s postwar domestic investments occurred either in rural areas or within the

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<sup>37</sup> N. Hurley, “The Automotive Industry,” 12.

<sup>38</sup> Chapman and D. Walker, *Industrial Location*, 116. Also, see Don Stillman, “The Devastating Impact of Plant Closures,” in *Working Papers for a New Society* (July-August 1978); and B. Bluestone and Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America*.

<sup>39</sup> John O’Connor, “Murphy Responds to Fraser Blast,” *Flint Journal*, July 21, 1978.

<sup>40</sup> “GM-Dixie Moves ‘Concern’ UAW,” *Flint Journal*, February 20, 1978.



racially segregated suburbs of large cities. Of the thirteen facilities GM constructed in the South during the 1970s, only one was located inside of a major city. A national phenomenon, the postwar shift of industrial resources from cities to suburbs and rural areas was even more pronounced than the Rust Belt to Sunbelt capital migrations. The suburbanization of automobile work in Genesee County was a case in point.

A variety of political, economic, and social forces drove the suburbanization of auto work in the United States. Chief among them, however, were local public policies. Only a few scholars have addressed the subject of capital decentralization from a local perspective, but municipal public policies were the *sine qua non* of GM's suburban strategy in Genesee County. In order to operate their suburban facilities, GM plant managers required large quantities of water, sanitary sewers, police and fire protection, and other municipal services generally unavailable in Flint's underdeveloped suburbs. Between 1945 and 1960, as GM shifted its capital investments towards the suburban fringe, corporate officials pressed city commissioners to extend water and sewer lines to their suburban plants. During the 1940s and early 1950s, the Flint City Commission had no formal rules on providing water and sewer service to suburban homes and businesses. Lacking a clear policy, city commissioners reviewed all petitions for water and sewer "hookups" on an ad hoc, case-by-case basis.<sup>41</sup> Over the objections of many UAW-CIO officials who opposed corporate subsidies, city commissioners approved water and sewer connections for all of GM's major suburban facilities.<sup>42</sup> Commissioner Carl Delling and others who approved of the hookups argued that GM's new suburban plants, regardless of

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<sup>41</sup> See *Flint Journal*, October 11, 1949.

<sup>42</sup> On UAW-CIO opposition to the commission's policies, see, for instance, *Searchlight*, April 17, 1952; and *AC Sparkler*, October 29, 1953.

their location, stimulated the local economy and provided jobs for Flint residents.<sup>43</sup> Like other growth-minded citizens, Delling viewed the city from a metropolitan perspective.

The city commission's willingness to subsidize GM's suburban plants was a source of controversy in postwar Flint. Even prior to building its suburban plants, General Motors used well over half of the city's annual water supply. The decision to grant water and sewer hookups to GM's new suburban plants threatened to deplete the city's water resources and overburden its waste treatment facilities. According to Flint's public works and utilities director Ted Moss, a consistent opponent of the commission's policies, the city simply did not have the capacity to provide services to GM's suburban plants. In May 1953, under severe pressure from city engineers and UAW-CIO activists, the Flint City Commission abandoned its earlier ad hoc policy and formally denied water and sewer services to suburban customers. Nevertheless, GM officials consistently won special exemptions for city services from sympathetic commissioners.<sup>44</sup> By 1961, General Motors executives had persuaded the city commission to extend water and sewer lines to seven of its suburban complexes. Although they were few in number, critics of the commission's policies loudly denounced the city's pro-suburban utilities policies, arguing that they only helped to speed the flight of industry from Flint. As City Commissioner Robert Egan lamented in 1957, costly suburban water and sewer extensions only helped to "send the plants away from Flint."<sup>45</sup> In April 1952, after city commissioners voted to provide water and sewer lines to one of Chevrolet's new plants

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<sup>43</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, July 8, 1957.

<sup>44</sup> "Commission Hints Shift in Policy," *Flint News-Advertiser*, March 26, 1954. Also, see Memorandum, Herman D. Young to Ted Moss, August 6, 1953, City Manager Files, Office of the Flint City Clerk, Flint, Michigan (hereinafter cited as City Manager Files).

<sup>45</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, July 8, 1957.

on Van Slyke Road, Robert Clark, the director of Flint's CIO political action committee, denounced the city's pro-business policy:

In taking this action the city fathers are completing the cycle and it now appears that General Motors plants outside the city are going to enjoy all of the major services rendered by the city, including fire and police protection; water and sewage disposal—everything except the doubtful privilege of paying city taxes.<sup>46</sup>

Beyond providing water and sewer services to suburban plants, the city commission also subsidized GM's suburban development campaign by maintaining a stratified rate structure for water customers. Unlike Seattle, New York City, Chicago, and other major cities where customers purchased water at a uniform per cubic foot rate, the city of Flint maintained a complicated three-tier plan with separate rates assigned to residential, commercial, and industrial users. Residential customers purchased water at a rate of thirty-two cents per one hundred cubic feet of water for up to 10,500 cubic feet. By contrast, industrial customers obtained their water at the rate of twenty cents per hundred cubic feet for all water in excess of 105,000 cubic feet. The city's rate policy, which rewarded the largest consumers of water, constituted a large subsidy for local industrialists. Between September 1959 and January 1960, for instance, industrial customers used 53.7 percent of Flint's water output but paid only 37.2 percent of the city's water revenue. Over the same duration, residential customers contributed 51.9 percent of the city's water revenue while using only 34.5 percent of the total water purchased. Although the city charged suburban water customers a special premium for service, the commission's discounts for industry offset the higher costs that GM and other suburban industrial consumers paid. For Temple Dorr of the Taxpayer's Protective League, the city's "love your neighbor" policy towards GM and other industrial water

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<sup>46</sup> "Flint Taxpayers 'Pay the Shot,'" *Searchlight*, April 17, 1952.

customers in the city and suburbs constituted an unnecessary burden for the residents of Flint. “We, of our organization, believe that we should love our neighbor,” Dorr conceded. “But I don’t think we should love our neighbor to the extent that if his house needs a coat of paint that we buy the paint and put it on, too. And that’s just what we’re doing on this water and sewer problem.”<sup>47</sup> Corporate officials and other defenders of the city’s utility policies countered critics such as Dorr by pointing to GM’s commitment to the region and the company’s role in generating growth for the Flint area economy. “We have to live here,” Commissioner Craig asserted, “and without GM Flint wouldn’t exist.” “I’ve made a wonderful living here,” he added, “and I think most of us have and we can thank the industry that has provided that. I don’t believe in taxing or throwing them out of business.”<sup>48</sup> Municipal subsidies for suburban growth, GM boosters asserted, benefited the entire region.

Between 1945 and 1960, a combination of public policies and corporate strategies converged to bring unprecedented economic development to suburban Genesee County. Embracing growth wherever it occurred, city officials and civic leaders in the Vehicle City issued an avalanche of postwar tributes and salutes to the industrial achievements of General Motors. In 1954, on the eve of GM’s Golden Carnival celebration, Flint Mayor George Algoe described the special bond between Flint and GM: “The City of Flint . . . is proud, justifiably so, to be the birthplace of GM, and it is appreciative, deeply so, for what GM has meant to the City. . . . As a good neighbor, GM’s record in Flint is truly memorable.”<sup>49</sup> Four years later, Flint citizens celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of General Motors. During the celebration, local author Clarence Young

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<sup>47</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, July 12, 1960, 1829-1851.

<sup>48</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, February 10, 1960, 1581.

<sup>49</sup> *Flint Journal*, November 22, 1954.

reflected effusively on the seemingly unlimited opportunities that GM had made available to city residents: “Flint, 1958—a good place and time to be alive. . . . A better place and time? There never was one. . . . General Motors . . . stands today the proof, the source, the root of infinite opportunity, here, now, in Flint.”<sup>50</sup> Looking back upon GM’s meteoric twentieth-century rise to industrial supremacy, a feat made possible only by the enduring partnerships between corporate executives, Flint city officials, and ordinary citizens, Clarence Young and other 1950s Vehicle City boosters believed that they had many reasons to celebrate. They applauded all of GM’s plants, even those outside of the city, because they viewed Flint through a broader spatial lens and rejected distinctions between the Vehicle City and its suburbs.

Without either annexation or some form of metropolitan government, the distinctions between the city and its suburbs mattered greatly, however. For many residents, the 1950s civic tributes to GM masked an important and frightening reality that few in the city seemed willing to acknowledge. Specifically, Temple Dorr and other local critics believed that GM’s postwar suburban building strategy marked the initial phase of the deindustrialization of Flint. Dorr and other skeptics had many reasons to make such claims. Of the eight new industrial complexes opened by GM in Genesee County between 1940 and 1960, none was located within Flint’s municipal boundaries. Further, in many instances, the jobs created by GM’s suburban construction campaign were not new, but rather they replaced existing jobs performed by workers in the city’s aging turn-of-the-century plants. In 1969, Charles Minshall, a surveyor from the Battelle Memorial Institute, described what appeared to him as a new economic paradigm for

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<sup>50</sup> Young, *Big-Crossing-Place: Flint ~ General Motors ~ 1958* (Flint: Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1962).

Genesee County in which corporate expansion no longer guaranteed commensurate job growth:

Major expansion is already occurring in General Motors activities in Genesee County without comparable increases in employment. For example, between 1957 and 1967, General Motors' employment in Genesee County increased 3.2 percent. Yet during this time, Chevrolet, Buick, and Fisher Body all carried out large expansions. . . . Automobile production may be expanded without a corresponding increase in employment.<sup>51</sup>

In a number of cases, GM's postwar expansions actually coincided with sharp declines in employment, primarily due to automation. At the North End Buick plants, for instance, the number of hourly-rated employees dropped from 27,500 to 10,000 between 1955 and 1961.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, from 1955 to 1960, employment at AC Spark Plug declined from 12,000 to 9,100.<sup>53</sup> During a 1963 meeting of the Flint City Commission, City Manager Thomas Kay acknowledged the growing trend towards automation and urban job losses:

Fewer and fewer men are now producing more and more automobiles and, as the job supply in our basic industry dwindles, our population continues to increase. From a high of 87,000 manufacturing jobs in this area in 1955 we have dropped to barely 70,000 and this trend will continue.<sup>54</sup>

To thousands of workers at Chevy in the Hole, Buick, Fisher Body, and other General Motors facilities in Flint, the company's suburban strategy seemed to amount to a zero-sum spatial game in which "new," highly automated suburban jobs came at the expense of "obsolete" urban jobs.<sup>55</sup> Most urban and suburban historians have accepted the validity of such critiques, framing the postwar era as an epoch in which corporations

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<sup>51</sup> Charles W. Minshall, *Genesee County Economic Conditions Conclusions Report* (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Memorial Institute, 1969), 3-15.

<sup>52</sup> *Flint Weekly Review*, March 2, 1961.

<sup>53</sup> *AC Sparkler*, April 15, 1960.

<sup>54</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, March 4, 1963, 88. On automation in Flint area plants, see James R. Custer, ed., *Applied Automation* (Philadelphia: Chilton Company, 1956), passim.

<sup>55</sup> For a critique of automation in Flint's GM plants, see *Flint Weekly Review*, January 12, 1961.

quietly abandoned central cities.<sup>56</sup> In reality, however, the situation in Genesee County was much more complex.

General Motors was the largest employer in postwar Genesee County. As such, its suburban strategy played a decisive role in reshaping metropolitan employment and residential patterns. Between 1940 and 1957, the proportion of GM's local employees working in the suburbs increased from 8 to 33 percent.<sup>57</sup> The suburbanization of auto work was part of a much broader postwar shift towards industrial, residential, and commercial decentralization that transformed the spatial arrangement of capital and power in metropolitan Flint. From 1940 to 1955, the proportion of Genesee County's non-GM industrial plants located in the city of Flint declined from 94 to 74.3 percent. Over the same time, the number of non-GM industrial plants in the four suburban townships surrounding the city increased from seven to 119. "Industrial development is increasing disproportionately in the areas beyond the city limits," one researcher concluded, "which means that taxable wealth is being added more rapidly in the fringe than in the city."<sup>58</sup> Outside of Flint Township, the county's largest beneficiary of new industrial growth, the urbanized suburbs of Swartz Creek, Beecher, Fenton, and Grand Blanc—along with the townships of Mundy, Grand Blanc, and Burton—gained substantially from the suburbanization of manufacturing. By the close of the 1960s, Burton Township could claim a portion of GM's AC Spark Plug plant on Dort Highway, Genesee Cement Products, Atlas Concrete Pipe, Moore's Iron Works, Dort Manufacturing, Mead Containers, and the General Foundry Corporation. In south

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<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*; and Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

<sup>57</sup> Amos H. Hawley and Zimmer, "Resistance to Unification in a Metropolitan Community," in Morris Janowitz, ed., *Community Political Systems* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1961), 153.

<sup>58</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 4.

suburban Fenton, where local Chamber of Commerce officials embarrassed their Flint counterparts by creating the county's first industrial development committee, tool and die manufacturing and aircraft engine finishing operations grew rapidly during the postwar era.<sup>59</sup> In Fenton and other high-growth suburban areas, the flourishing of highway-oriented industrial parks played an important role in the growth of manufacturing. By the early 1980s, the county was home to fifteen industrial parks, but only three of them were in the city of Flint.<sup>60</sup> Throughout the metropolitan area, the exodus of capital from Flint brought newfound wealth and power to previously impoverished municipalities and townships in suburban Genesee County. In Flint Township, for instance, the opening of GM's \$78 million Van Slyke Road complex brought a financial windfall to the Carman school district. By 1960, GM's Chevrolet division paid 80 percent of Carman's school taxes, and the district could boast of a per pupil property tax valuation that doubled the city of Flint's.<sup>61</sup>

Just as manufacturers migrated from the city to the suburbs after World War II, so too did retailers and service professionals depart from Flint's downtown and neighborhood shopping districts. Occupying a narrow, one-mile long sliver of land centered on Saginaw Street south of the Flint River, Flint's central business district was the retailing and services hub of mid-Michigan prior to World War II. Anchored by major chain stores such as Sears, J. C. Penney, Smith-Bridgman, Woolworth, and Kresge, Flint's downtown shopping district was also home to scores of locally owned restaurants, offices, taverns, clothiers, furniture warehouses, hardware outlets, and grocery stores.

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<sup>59</sup> On the growth of suburban industries in Genesee County, see Minshall, *Genesee County Economic Conditions*, 3-40.

<sup>60</sup> *Flint-Genesee County, Michigan: Data Profile* (Flint: Flint-Genesee Corporation for Economic Growth, n.d. [ca. 1983]), 35.

<sup>61</sup> See Civic Research Council of Flint Files, box 1, folder 2, GHCC.



Though the city's downtown retailing district maintained its market dominance over its neighborhood and suburban competitors throughout the 1950s, the postwar era brought the first signs of distress to Saginaw Street. In 1930, Flint's central business district accounted for over 15 percent of the city's total property valuation. Between 1930 and 1951, however, the downtown's share of the city's overall property valuation declined to 10 percent.<sup>62</sup>

As downtown merchants lost business to suburban and neighborhood rivals, the number of retail and office establishments on Saginaw Street began a long, steep decline. From 1948 to 1954, the number of retail stores operating in the central business district decreased by thirty, a drop of 6 percent.<sup>63</sup> In 1958, there were five movie theaters in downtown Flint, but by 1963, that number had dropped to three. Over the same duration, the number of grocery stores in the Saginaw Street shopping district declined by over 5 percent. In total, between 1958 and 1963 the number of retail shops in downtown Flint dropped from 464 to 383, a dip of over 17.5 percent.<sup>64</sup> More significant, perhaps, was the sharp postwar decline in downtown-based health services. Between 1940 and 1950, the number of general medical practitioners in downtown Flint dropped by 21 percent while the number of surgeons practicing in the central business district declined by 10 percent.<sup>65</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s, downtown merchants and professionals increasingly eyed the suburbs for new development, hoping to tap into expansive new markets for their products and services.

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<sup>62</sup> Deil S. Wright, *Central Business District of Flint, Michigan: Changes in the Assessed Valuations of Real Property, 1930-1951* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1953).

<sup>63</sup> Hawley and Zimmer, "Resistance to Unification in a Metropolitan Community," 155.

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *1963 Census of Business, Major Retail Centers, Flint, Michigan* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942), table 1.

<sup>65</sup> Hawley and Zimmer, "Resistance to Unification in a Metropolitan Community," 155. On the twentieth-century history of downtown business and shopping districts, see Fogelson, *Downtown*; and Isenberg, *Downtown America*.

*The Rise of Suburban Homeownership*

The post-World War II decentralization of factories and retail outlets occurred coevally with a dramatic increase in Flint's suburban population. In 1930, just over a quarter of Genesee County's 211,641 residents lived outside of Flint. During the 1930s, that proportion increased to a third. Between 1940 and 1960, however, the population of suburban Flint exploded, rising from 76,401 to 177,373. By 1960, nearly 60 percent of the county's 374,313 residents lived outside of the Vehicle City.<sup>66</sup> As stores and factories migrated from the city to outlying areas, thousands of white families sought out homes and neighborhoods in suburban Flint, where they could live closer to their workplaces, friends and family, and new shopping centers. Likewise, the growth of Genesee County's residential suburbs encouraged local manufacturers and shopkeepers to open new branch plants and retail outlets closer to profitable suburban markets. In Flint and other central cities, the suburbanization of capital and labor were mutually reinforcing processes.

The demographic shifts that occurred in Flint were part of a nationwide mass migration from cities to suburbs that accelerated during the second half of the twentieth century. At mid-century, only a small fraction of Americans, approximately 25 percent in all, lived in suburban areas. By 1990, however, a stable majority of Americans—and a sizable majority of Genesee County residents—lived in suburbs.<sup>67</sup> The mass exodus from cities to suburbs was one of the most significant and consequential spatial, political, and cultural migrations in American history. Suburbia, according to historian Kenneth

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<sup>66</sup> Region V Planning and Development Commission, *1985-2010: Population Allocation Study* (Flint: Region V Planning and Development Commission, 1984), passim.

<sup>67</sup> William Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1992), 33. See also, Kruse and Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History*, 1.

Jackson, was not only a “planning type,” but also a “state of mind” deeply rooted in American culture. During the nineteenth century, prominent intellectuals and planners such as Andrew Jackson Downing, Catherine Beecher, and Frederick Law Olmsted championed private homes, large residential lots, verdant landscapes, and semirural living arrangements.<sup>68</sup> Following in that tradition, millions of twentieth-century Americans embraced single-family homes, automobile ownership, and the virtues of “country living” near urban job centers. During a 1949 panel discussion on suburban growth in Genesee County, social scientists from the University of Michigan attributed Flint’s increasingly decentralized patterns of development to a restless, “pioneering spirit” among Americans. “The pioneering spirit, the same attitude which caused people to move to Michigan from New York generations ago, is the chief cause for Flint persons moving outside the City limits,” the panelists claimed.<sup>69</sup> Mass suburbanization was not simply a manifestation of cultural ideals, however; nor was it the inevitable outcome of new transportation technologies, free markets, and Americans’ love for open space, ranch-style homes, and bucolic landscapes.

In Flint, as in other metropolitan regions, the rise of the suburbs depended upon political interventions into the market economy. Over the course of the postwar era, the FHA exerted a dramatic influence on the residential real estate and home construction industries. Through its offer of mortgage insurance to qualified buyers and lenders, the FHA induced private banks to grant millions of long-term, low-interest, fully amortized mortgages on new and existing homes. Not all Americans benefited equally from FHA investments, however. Believing that African Americans exerted a detrimental effect on

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<sup>68</sup> K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 4, 45-86; and Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, 18-154.

<sup>69</sup> Homer E. Dowdy, “‘Pioneering Spirit’ Credited with Aiding Fringe Growth,” *Flint Journal*, March 11, 1949.

property values and neighborhood stability, appraisers and underwriters from the FHA, with few exceptions, refused to guarantee mortgages in racially integrated areas and withheld mortgage insurance from most black buyers. Moreover, FHA guidelines on minimum lot and home sizes, construction standards, “noxious influences,” and “neighborhood appeal” privileged low-density, primarily residential suburbs over high-density, mixed-use urban areas.<sup>70</sup>

Crowded, ethnically and racially diverse city neighborhoods, according to FHA’s explicitly anti-urban and pro-segregation standards, were intrinsically less desirable than all-white suburban subdivisions with large lots and new single-family homes. Nevertheless, federal mortgage insurance policies did not reward all low-density residential suburbs with new investment. The FHA withheld mortgage insurance from outlying “rurban” areas that possessed inadequate civic, social, and commercial centers, poor utility services, insufficient transportation networks, and overcrowded schools. Though few scholars have written about the relationship between federal mortgage insurance policies and the development of suburban infrastructure, the FHA’s utility and service stipulations decisively influenced the uneven patterns of development that occurred in postwar Genesee County. In suburban Flint, FHA requirements on infrastructure and services exerted a strong influence on home sales figures, investment decisions, and building patterns. Specifically, FHA standards required suburbs to meet minimum governmental, service, and utility requirements as a prerequisite to receiving federal mortgage subsidies. At the close of World War II, however, only three urbanized suburbs satisfied the FHA’s infrastructure requirements. Consequently, Flint’s federally sponsored building efforts during the 1930s and 1940s centered on fully serviced, all-

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<sup>70</sup> See K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 190-218; and Freund, *Colored Property*, 99-240.

white urban neighborhoods located just inside of the city limits. During the postwar era, suburban officials in Genesee County developed new zoning and building codes, built new roads and schools, and worked to provide water and sewer services in their efforts to improve living conditions and secure new private and public investment dollars.

Modernizing Flint's suburbs and making them attractive to investors was no easy challenge. Between 1900 and 1950, Flint was the eleventh fastest-growing city in the United States. This rapid population growth, fueled almost entirely by GM's seemingly insatiable need for new workers, quickly spilled over the city's borders. Because the city grew so quickly during the early twentieth century, new suburban settlements tended to emerge in a chaotic and haphazard spatial progression. In his 1916 essay on Flint's unplanned development, journalist John Ihlder painted a depressing portrait of sprawling development patterns and poor housing options in the Vehicle City. While touring Flint and its suburbs, Ihlder found "a family of seven in a two-room shack on the river bottoms, a family of five in one inside room of a down town block, three shifts in a Polish lodging-house in the North End," and other egregious examples of dilapidation and overcrowding. Ihlder also uncovered widespread land speculation in Flint. During the 1910s and 1920s, thousands of land speculators descended upon the city, hoping to earn a profit from the area's untapped—and largely unregulated—real estate market. Exaggerating only slightly, Ihlder wrote, "In Flint there are two great industries, the manufacture of automobiles and the selling of land." Throughout the city and its immediate suburbs of Genesee, Mt. Morris, Flint, and Burton Townships, speculators and developers purchased farms and large tracts of vacant land and hastily subdivided them into individual residential lots. By 1924, speculators had subdivided land far in excess of

demand, leaving fifty-three thousand vacant, subdivided residential lots available for purchase in the Flint area.<sup>71</sup> According to Ernest M. Fisher's 1928 study of land use patterns in nine urban areas, Flint had nearly twice as many lots per person as cities such as Cleveland and contained "a generally high ratio of lots to population – certainly many more than could be expected to have structures erected on them in the foreseeable future."<sup>72</sup> Although unscrupulous builders and land brokers operated in both the city and the suburbs during this period, Ihlder found that suburban developers were especially unprincipled. Inside the city, most speculators refused to sell lots less than thirty-five feet wide, and they usually attached deed restrictions to real estate contracts that required builders to construct homes worth no less than \$600. Often those deed restrictions required landowners to exclude African Americans. While most suburban developers also insisted on strict racial restrictions, speculators who owned land outside of the city did not typically require minimum lot sizes or building standards. Because the suburban townships surrounding Flint possessed neither building nor zoning codes, real estate speculators operated there with impunity. While visiting Genesee County, Ihlder noted the existence of many "tarpaper shacks" and other suburban shantytowns where developers "divided [plats] into smaller and smaller lots which are sold without restriction for \$1 down and 50 cents a week."<sup>73</sup>

Land developers and real estate speculators were especially active in and around Flint during the boom years preceding the Great Depression. Speculators carefully monitored the auto industry and acted quickly when GM executives and other local

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<sup>71</sup> Bacon, "A Diagnosis and Suggested Treatment," 74.

<sup>72</sup> Ernest M. Fisher, *Real Estate Subdividing Activity and Population Growth in Nine Urban Areas* (Ann Arbor: Bureau of Business Research, University of Michigan, 1928).

<sup>73</sup> Ihlder, "Flint," 549-550.

investors unveiled plans for new plants and other development initiatives. In July 1922, Billy Durant—by then ousted from GM and serving as the head of Durant Motors—announced plans to build a new automobile plant on Flint’s southern border with Burton Township. Durant’s new factory, later purchased by GM and reopened as the Fisher Body 1 plant, unleashed a speculative frenzy among landowners and investors in South Flint and suburban Burton Township. In August 1922, on the same day that Durant attended a groundbreaking ceremony for the new plant, county officials recorded the plat for Baker Park, a new subdivision located just south of the plant in Burton Township. Baker Park consisted of sixty-eight commercial lots and nearly eight hundred home sites. Within two months, Thomas M. Wheat had surveyed and filed the plat for Dixieland, a subdivision of four hundred residential lots just east of Fisher 1. By the close of 1922, surveyors and developers had platted four additional subdivisions—Baker Park No. 1, Bendlecrest, Newcombe Place, and Webber Place—in the area surrounding the Fisher 1 plant.<sup>74</sup> “In a little more than four months time,” surveying scholar Donald G. Richards observed, “some 3000 home sites and nearly 300 commercial lots had been created and the factory was not even operating yet.”<sup>75</sup> In interwar Flint, the booming residential real estate market in the suburbs was intimately connected to industrial expansions.

After surveying and subdividing the land, developers sold individual plots to those who sought to build new homes. During the 1920s speculative boom, well over half of the purchasers of suburban lots were either semi-skilled or unskilled workers, most of whom found employment at General Motors. Many of these migrants could not

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<sup>74</sup> Carroll, Jr., *Urban Land Vacancy: A Study of Factors Affecting Residential Building on Improved Vacant Lots in Flint, Michigan* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1952), 11-16.

<sup>75</sup> Donald G. Richards, “The Greater City and the Wishing Well,” *Surveying and Land Information Systems* 59:4 (December 1999): 221-229.

afford to hire professional builders to erect homes on their new lots. Prior to World War II, self-building was thus an extremely common practice in suburban Flint. To cite one example, a 1949 study estimated that between 25 and 40 percent of the homes in Burton Township were owner-built structures. In north suburban Genesee Township and several other sections of the out-county, self-built homes comprised well over half of the overall housing stock well into the 1950s.<sup>76</sup> Upon purchasing their lots, self-building suburban homesteaders typically erected their houses in stages, working in the evenings, on weekends, and during the annual summer layoff from GM. Initially, many of these migrants constructed garages, barns, tarpaper-covered huts, and other temporary structures to live in until their homes were ready for occupancy. In 1915, for instance, nearly 10 percent of the residential construction permits issued in the city of Flint were for barns, garages, and other temporary living quarters. Although most townships in Genesee County did not maintain adequate records of residential construction, Ihlder and other observers during the 1910s and 1920s still noted a significantly higher frequency of garage homes and other self-built structures in suburban Flint.<sup>77</sup>

Historian Becky Nicolaides, in her study of the Los Angeles suburb of Southgate, found that suburban self-builders often took a great deal of pride in their newly built homes.<sup>78</sup> In suburban Flint, many self-builders no doubt felt the same way. Nevertheless, the structures erected during the interwar era tended to be small, sparsely furnished, and ill equipped for modern conveniences such as indoor plumbing and electricity.<sup>79</sup> Describing the 1920s conditions in South Flint and Burton Township,

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<sup>76</sup> Dinell, *The Influences of Federal, State, and Local Legislation*, 22-24.

<sup>77</sup> Ihlder, "Flint," 550-557.

<sup>78</sup> Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, 9-119.

<sup>79</sup> Ihlder, "Flint," 550-557.



Donald Richards wrote, “Infrastructure was built only after a sufficient number of homes had been erected to warrant construction.” “Until then,” he continued, “the lot owners made due with a rutted path that served as a street.” “Their toilet was a humble outbuilding at the rear of the site; their water supply was drawn from the ground by a well.”<sup>80</sup>

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Flint’s rapid growth produced a ripple effect in the local real estate market. As shortages of safe and affordable housing emerged, residents competed with one another to find whatever homes they could. “There are few [housing] standards,” Ihlder acknowledged, and “each [migrant] gets what he can.”<sup>81</sup> Driven by high consumer demands, real estate costs soared dramatically during the interwar decades, even for substandard homes and lots. Under these conditions, tens of thousands of Flint residents sought out small plots of land in suburban Flint, where land was inexpensive, taxes low, and building regulations minimal.<sup>82</sup> Between 1910 and 1930, Flint’s rough-hewn suburbs grew steadily as white migrants erected self-built homes, barns, and garages in fields and newly platted subdivisions just beyond the city limits. During that period, Flint’s suburban population increased from 26,005 to 55,149. Most suburban migrants did not move more than a few miles from the city limits. Of the over fifty thousand residents who lived in suburban Genesee County in 1930, nearly half resided in the townships of Burton, Flint, Genesee, and Mt. Morris, which formed a contiguous border around the city.

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<sup>80</sup> D. Richards, “The Greater City and the Wishing Well,” 226.

<sup>81</sup> Ihlder, “Flint,” 553.

<sup>82</sup> Walter Firey, *Social Aspects to Land Use Planning in the Country-City Fringe: The Case of Flint, Michigan* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Agricultural Experiment Station, 1946), 9.

Flint's suburban migration intensified as the Great Depression unfolded. Unable to afford the cost of living in Flint, thousands of idled autoworkers left the area altogether, many of them returning to their birthplaces in Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, and Kentucky. Others, however, left behind their homes, rooming houses, and apartments in the city for new plots of undeveloped land in the suburbs. The city of Flint's total population declined by five thousand during the course of the decade. By contrast, Flint's suburbs gained over twenty thousand new residents over the same period. Like those who settled before them, many of Genesee County's Depression-era homesteaders built homes for themselves, cultivated gardens, and practiced other forms of self-provisioning to make ends meet during the prolonged economic downturn of the 1930s.<sup>83</sup>

By the early 1930s, local and federal housing officials had taken notice of the migratory patterns of unemployed autoworkers and the harsh living conditions that existed in huge swaths of suburban Flint. Upon receiving the results of the 1934 Civil Works Administration survey of housing, city building inspector Peter J. Weidner bemoaned the fact that Flint was surrounded with "shanty towns," "garage houses," and other "blighted areas." "Because there are no building regulations outside of the City," Weidner claimed, "people build any old way." "Fire hazards, health measures and permanent values are ignored. The result is shack towns and sub-standard housing." CWA surveyors counted 1,417 garage homes in Flint alone. Though the CWA surveyors did not list the number of temporary homes outside of the city, thousands of garage houses and shacks also dotted Genesee County's suburban landscape during the Depression. Beyond enabling the spread of disease, juvenile delinquency and "immoral"

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<sup>83</sup> Region V Planning and Development Commission, *1985-2010: Population Allocation Study*, passim.

conduct, shack homes, in Weidner's opinion, "lower the value of surrounding properties and stand in the way of a logical residential development." Beginning in the 1930s, Weidner and other city and suburban officials joined federal housing administrators in waging a campaign against suburban blight and the "horse-and-buggy" structure of government in the townships.<sup>84</sup>

During the Depression, housing conditions worsened dramatically in cities, suburbs, and rural areas throughout the United States. The Federal Housing Administration's strategies for improving housing and revitalizing the nation's real estate industry hinged on mitigating risk factors associated with the real estate market. By insuring lenders against home loan defaults, federal housing administrators hoped to induce bankers to issue more mortgages for new and existing homes. The FHA also sought to stabilize real estate markets and maintain high property values by standardizing deed restrictions, building codes, municipal services, and zoning practices. Before insuring mortgages, FHA administrators and local lenders measured the credit worthiness of applicants and surveyed homes and neighborhoods to determine whether a loan was a safe investment. Under the FHA's rules, sound mortgage investments were those "which could be effective for the best part of a generation."<sup>85</sup> According to both FHA and locally devised standards, racially integrated areas in the city were unsafe places for home loans. Consequently, the FHA "redlined" all-black and integrated neighborhoods such as Floral Park and St. John Street. However, lenders and federal officials also redlined many suburban neighborhoods that lacked building and zoning codes, utility

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<sup>84</sup> Weidner, "The Evils of a Housing Shortage," 2, Findlay Papers, box 1, GHCC; Weidner, "Some Real and Imaginary Stumbling Blocks in the Way of House Building," 1, Findlay Papers, box 1, GHCC; and Findlay, *The Housing Situation in Flint*.

<sup>85</sup> Federal Housing Administration, "An Analysis of the Flint, Michigan SMA (Genesee County) as of January 1953," 9.

services, and other modern amenities. During the 1930s and 1940s, FHA-backed building efforts thus centered on Woodlawn Park, Woodcroft Estates, Brookside, and other all-white neighborhoods inside the city that had access to water and sewer services, strict building and deed restrictions, zoning codes, and other modern services and amenities that sustained both racial segregation and high property values.

Areas such as Woodlawn Park and other elite neighborhoods in the city scored very highly under the FHA's rating schema. Intensive building in these areas helped to push home construction figures in Flint to unprecedented levels during the immediate postwar era. In 1932, city officials granted permits for only twelve new residential structures. By 1950, that number had grown to over two thousand.<sup>86</sup> Most neighborhoods in the city and the urban-suburban fringe did not fare as well as Woodlawn Park, however. Inside the city, the FHA found few neighborhoods that qualified for federally insured mortgages. In 1940, city planner Edmund N. Bacon published a study that explained why even all-white neighborhoods in Flint fared poorly under the FHA's property appraisal standards. During the 1930s, there was no shortage of land available for home construction in Flint. Using data from the CWA survey, Bacon found that there were 28,526 subdivided vacant residential lots in the city. These lots covered over three thousand acres within the city limits and accounted for nearly half of the subdivided lots in Flint. According to Bacon, however, "at least 80% of these vacant lots lie in the peripheral belt where the houses are in the poorest condition." Though they were inside of the city and often serviced by municipal utilities, lots in the city's outermost neighborhoods were too close to "inferior houses" that detracted from

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<sup>86</sup> Carroll, Jr., *Housing Characteristics of Flint in 1950*; and Federal Housing Administration, "An Analysis of the Flint, Michigan SMA (Genesee County) as of January 1953."

property values. “By the principles of good business, expressed by the FHA, as well as sound common sense,” Bacon concluded, “it would be poor judgment to pour good money for new construction into the bottomless pit of a blighted neighborhood.” “This insecurity of neighborhoods, resulting from scattered development and rapid spread of blight, is one of several factors that makes mortgage lending in Flint a high-risk proposition.” Hoping to minimize mortgage risks, the FHA declined to insure loans in risky all-white neighborhoods.<sup>87</sup>

In 1951, Tom Dinell, a researcher from the University of Michigan, published a study that affirmed many of Bacon’s findings. Dinell’s work focused on the FHA’s influence on local building practices in and around Flint. Like Bacon, Dinell found that Flint had a surplus of vacant, subdivided lots suitable for new home construction. In 1947, Flint contained 61,973 residential lots, nearly 40 percent of which were still vacant. The majority of the twenty-four thousand available residential lots had been subdivided during the speculative boom of the 1910s and 1920s. Only a small portion of these lots met the qualifications for FHA-backed mortgages, however. Less than 10 percent of Flint’s vacant residential lots—2,226 parcels in all—were located in neighborhoods that the FHA rated as either “excellent” or “good.” Conversely, over 80 percent of the city’s available residential lots were in either “poor” or “reject” areas. Moreover, the FHA excluded an additional 6 percent of the city’s vacant lots from mortgage insurance because they were situated in or near “special” districts inhabited by Negroes. By the early 1950s, the FHA and local lenders had thus redlined over 90 percent of the vacant, construction-ready properties inside the city.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Bacon, “A Diagnosis and Suggested Treatment,” 79-81.

<sup>88</sup> Dinell, *The Influences of Federal, State, and Local Legislation*, 60-75.

	City of Flint	Burton, Flint, Genesee, and Mt. Morris Townships	Balance of Genesee County	TOTAL
1930	360	827	552	1,739
1931	122	119	79	320
1932	12	150	100	262
1933	13	68	45	126
1934	20	143	95	258
1935	68	225	150	443
1936	261	302	201	764
1937	257	585	390	1,232
1938	138	437	291	866
1939	439	739	493	1,671
1940	629	543	362	1,534
1941	720	753	502	1,975
1942	250	389	259	898
1943	356	115	77	548
1944	301	152	101	554
1945	243	181	121	545
1946	705	739	493	1,937
1947	875	876	584	2,335
1948	658	679	453	1,790
1949	978	538	359	1,875
1950	2,015	775	525	3,315
1951	1,035	667	450	2,152
1952	1,400	700	475	2,575
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11, 855</b>	<b>10,702</b>	<b>7,157</b>	<b>29,714</b>

Table 5.1. Residential dwellings constructed in the Flint metropolitan area, 1930-1952. SOURCE: Federal Housing Administration, "An Analysis of the Flint, Michigan SMA (Genesee County) as of January 1953," RG 31, Reports of Housing Market Analysis, 1937-63, box 10, NA.

The FHA redlined these vacant properties for a variety of reasons. Some of the ineligible properties did not yet have utility services available, while others received low grades because they sat on small lots or were too close to dilapidated homes, factories, or commercial strips. As well, local and federal underwriters ruled that nearly fifteen hundred of the city's vacant properties were ineligible for mortgage insurance because they were near structures inhabited by black people. Though FHA policies helped to trigger a building boom in the city's most exclusive all-white neighborhoods during the 1930s and 1940s, real estate developers quickly exhausted the number of federally approved lots in Flint. Indeed, by the start of the 1950s, there remained only a handful of lots in the city that qualified for FHA mortgages. "High standards set by the Federal Housing Administration," a *Flint Journal* article concluded, "have cut considerably the number of acceptable lots within the City."<sup>89</sup>

Prior to the 1950s, most of Flint's suburbs also failed to meet the FHA's exacting standards. Lenders and federal underwriters looked favorably upon the racial composition of the suburbs, and they also endorsed the single-family, owner-occupied, large-lot homes that predominated outside of the city. Nevertheless, suburban Flint contained thousands of ramshackle homes that lacked sewers, fresh water, and electricity. Moreover, mortgage underwriters and neighborhood surveyors looked askance at the sprawling, disorganized nature of development in the out-county. During the 1930s and 1940s, suburban "slums" and shantytowns drew as much, if not more, attention from local and federal housing officials as impoverished, predominantly black urban

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<sup>89</sup> Dinell, *The Influences of Federal, State, and Local Legislation*, 60-75; *Flint Journal*, March 11, 1949, March 23, 1952. See also, Heiden, *Flint City: A Study in Population Distribution, Past, Present, and Future* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1947); Carroll, Jr., *Urban Land Vacancy*; and Jack Jordan, *Economic Aspects of Vacant Land in Flint, Michigan* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1950).

neighborhoods. Even in carefully restricted suburban subdivisions that contained professionally built homes and middle-class occupants, the close proximity of “shack towns” exerted a negative influence on property values and residential security grades.

### *Weeds in the Garden*

Suburban slums and unplanned development in the out-county drew heavy criticism from social commentators, researchers, and members of the urban planning establishment. During the 1910s, John Ihlder expressed consternation over land speculation and the disorganized developments that had sprouted in suburban Flint. Likewise, Depression-era observers such as Edmund Bacon bemoaned the unregulated, self-built shacks that blighted the landscape of Flint’s innermost suburbs. During the 1930s and 1940s, social scientists and housing officials in Flint viewed “spreaditis” and decentralized suburban developments as urgent problems to be solved through sound planning and other forms of government regulation.

Yet those planners suffered many defeats during the first half of the century. In 1946, researcher Walter Firey published a study on land use patterns and social life in the suburbs of Genesee County. In his report, Firey asserted that unplanned development had resulted in an “unorderly and wasteful use of land.” “All around Flint,” he wrote, “there are hundreds of acres that stand idle.

Billboards notifying of ‘Lots for Sale—\$1 Down, \$1 a Week,’ street signs that have no streets, sidewalks that have no houses, great expanses of land grown up to weeds, squatters living in tents and trailers—these are the tangible symbols of what has resulted from unguided settlement in the fringe area.



In sharp contrast to those who idealized postwar suburbs, Firey and other researchers documented substandard living arrangements in neighborhoods throughout the out-county. Quoting from a social service case report, Firey described one especially egregious instance in which a family of eight lived in a “single room paper shack” just north of the city:

The condition of the living quarters occupied by this family is almost indescribable. The room is set on the rear of the lot and the outside paper covering flaps in the wind. Outside some boards have been converted into a shed where a pig is kept. Inside there are two beds and a cot which serve as sleeping quarters for the group. There is a large heating stove and a rather good cooking stove, but the chimneys lead into open holes in the roof where the rain pours in during wet spells. . . . Bedding on the beds is stiff with dirt and the whole room carries a disagreeable odor. Water is not available for a distance of three blocks and the family have no car.

While Firey admitted that the case report described “the extremity of blight” that existed in Genesee County, thousands of suburban families lived under similarly harsh conditions.<sup>90</sup>

Prior to 1950, Flint’s suburbs were disproportionately occupied by unskilled workers, the unemployed, subsistence farmers, and other low-income groups. By the close of the 1940s, well over 50 percent of Flint’s suburban residents were either semi-skilled or unskilled factory workers. The harsh living conditions that predominated in many outlying areas were a reflection of the broader class demography of suburban Flint. In 1940, over half of the homes in the suburban fringe had no running water, while nearly three-quarters lacked indoor toilets.<sup>91</sup> Firey included detailed descriptions of several working-class subdivisions in suburban Flint in his 1946 report. These accounts provide

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<sup>90</sup> Firey, *Social Aspects to Land Use Planning*, 24-25.

<sup>91</sup> Israel Harding Hughes, Jr., *Local Government in the Fringe Area of Flint, Michigan* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1947), i.

an intimate glimpse of the living conditions and land use patterns that predominated in suburban Flint at the close of World War II.

The first two neighborhoods that Firey described were the Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights subdivisions in south suburban Flint. Located in Flint Township just to the south and west of the Fisher Body 1 plant, the contiguous areas of Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights—platted out of farmland in 1927 and 1929, respectively—were all-white, working-class subdivisions. The two neighborhoods consisted of small, cheap lots with a heavy concentration of inexpensive homes, many of them owner-built structures. Because many of the residents of Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights had migrated to the Vehicle City from the lower Mississippi valley, Flint citizens often referred to the area derisively as “Little Missouri.” Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights, like other working-class subdivisions in suburban Flint, experienced high turnover rates due to the vicissitudes of the local economy. When GM sales boomed, the neighborhood quickly filled with migrants in search of work. During economic downturns and the annual summer layoff, however, the neighborhoods emptied rapidly as workers sought out new employment opportunities. Like their Depression-era forebears, a sizable number of residents in Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights kept livestock and engaged in subsistence gardening to help feed their families. When Firey interviewed members of the community in 1945, residents complained of “congestion in the neighborhood, of the lack of running water, and of the small lots.” While most residents appreciated the affordable housing available in their neighborhoods and enjoyed living close to the city, many others, especially long-term occupants, criticized the transient nature of the community and the dilapidated homes that lowered property values. There were, for instance, three

large trailer camps near Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights that housed an ever-changing assortment of migrant laborers, many of them single men. The trailers, according to many residents, detracted from the quality of life and home sales prices.<sup>92</sup>

Firey chose to write about Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights because they typified the conditions that existed in many other working-class neighborhoods. At mid-century, there were dozens of working-class and migrant neighborhoods surrounding the city. Nevertheless, each suburban neighborhood possessed its own social dynamics and operated under its own particular set of development rules. To illustrate this fact, Firey also studied the suburban neighborhoods of Dayton Heights and Thornton. Situated immediately west of the Flint city limits in Flint Township, Dayton Heights and Thornton took shape in the early 1920s, when developers subdivided the Michael Lavelle and Mary Stockdale estates. As in Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights, GM workers predominated in the two all-white neighborhoods. Nineteen of the thirty residents that Firey interviewed worked as either shop operatives or laborers. Unlike Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights, however, the Thornton and Dayton Heights subdivisions featured several deed and land use restrictions. In Dayton Heights, builders could construct no homes worth less than \$3,000. Homeowners in Thornton had to abide by a much more modest \$600 minimum for new dwellings. Despite these rules, Firey found a wide range of structures in each neighborhood and noted that “restrictions have not always been effective.” In fact, Firey discovered “a number of two-room houses, basement houses,

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<sup>92</sup> Firey, *Social Aspects to Land Use Planning*, 27-37. See also, Beynon, *Characteristics of the Relief Case Load in Genesee County*. On southern migrant communities in the urban North, see James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

and even tents” in Dayton Heights and Thornton, “all of which testify to some degree of blight in the neighborhood.”<sup>93</sup>

Beyond their qualms about housing standards, residents of Dayton Heights and Thornton also complained about poor utilities, unpaved roads, and the lack of public transportation available to community members. “On the other hand,” Firey observed, “the residents speak with satisfaction of the fresh air, open yards, low taxes, and the possibilities of finding security on their small acreages.” Open yards were especially important to residents of Dayton-Thornton because many homeowners looked to the land to provide security during economic downturns. “That’s one of the reasons we came here,” claimed one resident. “My wife and I talked it over and we figured that when I get laid off we’ll have something to live on. . . . I’ve planted some trees and some berries and we’ve got a hundred chickens. We’re counting on this after I lose my job.” Economic uncertainty was a harsh fact of life in Flint’s working-class suburbs.<sup>94</sup>

Not all of Flint’s mid-century suburbs were dominated by shop workers, however. Firey and other postwar observers also found many middle-class enclaves in suburban Flint. The final two subdivisions described in Firey’s report, Suburban Homesites and Witham Place, were located in Burton Township, straddling Lapeer Road just east of Flint’s city limits. Suburban Homesites and Witham Place were relatively exclusive subdivisions that housed primarily managers and professionals. Of the twenty-three residents that Firey interviewed, thirteen were employed as professionals, managers, business owners, or clerks. Only two of the residents Firey met were shop workers. The housing stocks in Witham Place and Suburban Homesites consisted of “substantial

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<sup>93</sup> Firey, *Social Aspects to Land Use Planning*, 27-37.

<sup>94</sup> Firey, *Social Aspects to Land Use Planning*, 27-37; and Beynon, *Characteristics of the Relief Case Load in Genesee County*.

homes, some of them even costly,” and the neighborhoods were carefully restricted by race and class. Deed and building restrictions in Witham Place prohibited garage homes, tarpaper roofs, dog kennels, billboards, and all non-residential structures. In Suburban Homesites, property covenants forbade business establishments, dwellings costing less than \$3,000, multiple dwellings on single lots, and billboards. Both subdivisions also barred property owners from selling homes and lots to “non-Caucasian” persons. Like residents of Thornton and Dayton Heights, homeowners in the Witham Place and Suburban Homesites subdivisions enjoyed fresh air, open space, and gardening. Yet the “gentleman farmers” who lived in Witham-Suburban Homesites engaged in gardening more for pleasure than out of necessity. “We’ve had more fun experimenting with different things [in our garden], and it’s given us health and satisfaction,” one resident claimed.<sup>95</sup>

Most residents of the Witham Place and Suburban Homesites subdivisions seemed to enjoy their new surroundings in suburban Flint. Yet these middle-class suburbanites still expressed many misgivings about suburban living. Some residents, especially homemakers, indicated that they felt isolated from friends and families living in Flint. Others complained that their homes were too distant from grocery stores, movie theaters, and other consumer and cultural attractions in the city. As well, many homeowners in Suburban Homesites-Witham expressed fears over the unplanned developments that had sprouted near their subdivisions. In particular, residents worried about the possibility of shoddily constructed homes and unrestricted neighborhoods detracting from their property values and quality of life. Neighborhoods such as Suburban Homesites and Witham Place, in Firey’s estimation, were “an asset to the

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<sup>95</sup> Firey, *Social Aspects to Land Use Planning*, 27-37.

whole community.” “But, in the absence of zoning by which lower-investment land uses might be kept out,” Firey warned, “such neighborhoods have all too frequently been invaded by tiny dwellings, service stations, and roadside stands.” Even carefully restricted neighborhoods such as Witham Place and Suburban Homesites were not immune to the encroachment of blighting influences:

A common phenomenon is for one side of a street to be platted and built up as a high-class residential district, protected by deed restrictions as to land use and type of building. Then a shrewd land developer will plat out the opposite side of the street, unload the lots at prices that are only possible because of the value of the adjoining neighborhood but which are still far less than they should be in order to maintain a high type of residential use. These lots may be sold without restrictions as to use and occupancy, and before long the insidious blight of shacks puts in its appearance. Property values depreciate all around, stable residents desert the neighborhood, and physical deterioration sets in.

The specter of blight was an ever-present concern among suburban homeowners, even in completely segregated areas.<sup>96</sup>

When Walter Firey ventured out into the neighborhoods surrounding Flint, he uncovered a diverse suburban landscape that included new subdivisions with stately homes, urbanized working-class neighborhoods with small lots and self-built structures, and isolated squatter camps that housed migrant workers. “The area surrounding Flint, in Genesee County, is a typical country-city fringe,” he wrote. “It is characterized by small part-time acreages, platted suburbs, blighted ‘shack towns,’ gracious country estates, trailer camps, and other typical fringe manifestations.” During the 1940s, suburban Genesee County was a heterogeneous landscape of homes, farms, factories, commercial outlets, and open space. Flint’s suburbs were not at all diverse in terms of race, however. In 1940, there were only 109 African Americans residing in suburban Genesee County.

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<sup>96</sup> Firey, *Social Aspects to Land Use Planning*, 24, 27-37.

A decade later, that number stood at just 154.<sup>97</sup> Following the racial logic of the FHA's policies, local builders and lenders denied black buyers the opportunity to purchase new homes and lots in the suburbs. Moreover, homeowners and neighborhood associations followed the FHA's recommendations and established deed restrictions that explicitly prohibited black occupancy. In poor and working-class areas such as Fentonlawn and Romaine Heights, where racially restrictive deed covenants were uncommon, FHA insurance policies and private forms of discrimination by builders, lenders, realtors, and homeowners helped to enforce rigid segregation. From the perspective of white homeowners, however, racial integration was only one of many blighting influences that threatened property values. During the 1940s and 1950s, suburban officials and members of Flint's housing and real estate industries responded to the FHA's mandates and the grassroots demands of suburban residents by bringing new infrastructure and services to the out-county. They hoped that urban services and amenities, in conjunction with careful restrictions on land use and occupancy, would improve property values and the quality of life in outlying areas while simultaneously making the suburbs more attractive to investors from the governmental and private sectors.

The suburbs that Walter Firey visited in 1945-46 were far from idyllic places. Indeed, at the close of World War II, very few areas of suburban Genesee County resembled the finely manicured, prosperous, and always-friendly suburban neighborhoods portrayed in popular postwar television shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. In virtually every instance, new suburban developments brought together a mix of strangers from throughout the metropolis and beyond. Between 1945 and 1948, nearly half of the families residing in the Flint

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<sup>97</sup> Chapelski, Marston, and Molseed, *1990 Demographic Profile of the Flint Urban Area*, 4.

metropolitan area changed residences. Just over half of the families who moved during that period relocated from the city to the suburbs. Once they arrived in their new communities, suburban neighbors often battled with one another over land use, zoning, septic tank leaks, and school tax campaigns. Regardless of the differences they may have had, however, most suburbanites did agree on a few things. When asked to explain why they chose to live in the suburbs, residents of the fringe cited home ownership more than any other factor. According to a 1956 study of taxes and home ownership in Genesee County, nearly 90 percent of household heads in suburban Flint either owned or were purchasing their homes, as opposed to 75 percent of city dwellers.<sup>98</sup>

Suburban residents also left the city because they desired more space and privacy, better schools, and larger gardens. Some families relocated to the suburbs for lower taxes, but anti-tax migrants only comprised a small percentage of Flint's suburban population. In February 1946, the *Flushing Observer* ran an editorial entitled "Drift to the Country," which explained why village leaders in west suburban Flushing and other outlying areas expected to grow after the war:

The idea of owning and occupying a home in some rural neighborhood and traveling daily to one's job in some city, is likely to be popular. The family thus located can add to its income by gardening, keeping chickens, and perhaps pigs, and some may be able to raise some crops for sale in the markets.<sup>99</sup>

Several weeks after the editorial ran, almost as if on cue, developers from Hillcrest Builders Corporation announced plans to construct a new, "nicely restricted" subdivision in Flushing.<sup>100</sup> Although postwar suburban migrants rarely cited racial concerns when

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<sup>98</sup> Zimmer and Hawley, "Home Owners and Attitude toward Tax Increase," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* (Spring 1956): 66.

<sup>99</sup> *Flushing Observer*, February 21, 1946.

<sup>100</sup> *Flushing Observer*, April 11, 1946.



asked why they left the city, most agreed that African Americans should be excluded from suburbia.

Flint's industrial gardens had their share of weeds. Thousands of Flint families jumped at the chance to buy houses and lots in the verdant landscapes of suburban Genesee County. Yet when they arrived in their new homes and neighborhoods, homeowners who had grown accustomed to urbanized infrastructure and services were often frustrated by the lack of amenities in the out-county. At mid-century, most residential areas in the suburbs lacked paved roads, garbage collection services, public water and sewers, zoning and construction codes, and plat regulations. As late as 1956, only 22 percent of the roads in Flint's innermost suburbs were paved.<sup>101</sup> Additionally, police and fire services were almost non-existent in Flint's postwar suburbs. "In such basic services as water and sewage disposal," one study claimed, "the 'rurbanite' too frequently finds that he is on his own initiative; he must provide his own well, pump, and septic tank or go without running water and flush toilets."<sup>102</sup> During a July 1948 meeting of the Genesee County Board of Supervisors, Argentine Township Supervisor Charles Markley presented a report from the Board of County Road Commissioners on the problems associated with unplanned suburban growth. According to the report, the postwar surge in home building in the townships surrounding Flint created "a very serious problem not only from a highway standpoint but as it relates to drainage, sewers, water, fire control, schools, and other facilities desired by the people who wish to have all the conveniences that were afforded them while living in the city." The report also noted

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<sup>101</sup> Zimmer and Hawley, "Home Owners," 68.

<sup>102</sup> Hughes, Jr., *Local Government*. This quotation is from a 1947 lecture delivered by Arthur W. Bromage, a professor of political science at the University of Michigan. Hughes included the transcript of Bromage's talk as a supplement to his report. See also, Betty Tableman, *Intra-Community Migration in the Flint Metropolitan District* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1948), i-ix.

that suburban officials were receiving “increased criticism” from suburban residents who feared that unregulated growth was “seriously affecting their investments.”<sup>103</sup> “The needs of township settlers for urban services have reached crisis proportions in many Michigan areas,” a 1951 report concluded.<sup>104</sup>

### *The Modernization of Suburbia*

During the 1940s and 1950s, policymakers in suburban Flint worked with federal officials, lenders, and builders to boost property values in new subdivisions and resolve the mounting service and utility crises in Genesee County. Following the FHA’s explicit recommendations on housing and land use restrictions, township supervisors and suburban city council members developed new master plans, zoning codes, and building regulations. By 1955, twenty-four of the twenty-nine governmental units in Genesee County had enacted zoning ordinances that established minimum home and lot sizes, land use guidelines, and basic building standards for new structures. These zoning codes also severely limited—or prohibited altogether—apartment complexes, rooming houses, and other multiple-family housing units.<sup>105</sup>

Federal housing administrators also used their mortgage insurance program to force developers and suburban officials to provide urbanized services to newly built subdivisions. Just in 1947, village councilors in south suburban Fenton purchased a road grading machine, a two-ton truck, a snowplow, and a gravel loader to improve services for residents. Throughout the course of that year, Fenton officials used the new

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<sup>103</sup> *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors, Genesee County, Michigan*, April 1948.

<sup>104</sup> Tableman, *Governmental Organization in Metropolitan Areas* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1951), 83.

<sup>105</sup> See, for instance, *Flint Journal*, September 28, 1955.

equipment to pave two miles of roads, lay over a mile of new sanitary and storm sewers, and build six blocks of new sidewalks. In order to meet the FHA's standards for new development, officials in suburban townships and villages had to prove that new sewers, sidewalks, schools, roads, and water would be available for residents. If suburban governments could not satisfy local and federal underwriters, then the FHA canceled its support for new residential projects. In 1952, the FHA threatened to withdraw financing from the Fairfield Addition—a proposed new subdivision of one hundred restricted building lots in northwest Fenton—until village officials had provided sewers, sidewalks, and water service. “The FHA stands ready to finance these buildings,” a local journalist pointed out, “providing that Fenton can guarantee such municipal services as sewer, water and sidewalks. . . . However, the FHA demands that these services be available before construction starts.”<sup>106</sup> In Fenton, as in other townships and villages throughout the county, the FHA's regulations on services and utilities forced officials to abandon “pay as you go” financing and enact new taxes and bonding measures to fund development. The FHA rewarded those commitments by offering mortgage insurance to new residential developments.

Some suburban officials balked at complying with the FHA's infrastructure and service regulations. One such example occurred in the far northern suburb of Clio. Like other suburban areas, Clio grew rapidly during the immediate postwar era. Between 1930 and 1940, Clio's population increased by 14 percent. Because a large portion of Clio's new residents were children, the population of the schools increased at an even faster rate. Between 1925 and 1951, the enrollment in Clio's schools increased by 103

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<sup>106</sup> *Fenton Independent*, May 1, 1952.

percent.<sup>107</sup> Hoping to alleviate school overcrowding, members of the Clio Area Study Committee, on several occasions during the 1950s, recommended new taxes to fund two new elementary schools and major repairs to the district's high school. In 1956, Clio voters—many of them farmers opposed to sprawling new development—rejected a bond proposal to fund the study committee's school improvement plan.<sup>108</sup> Likewise, Clio voters opposed new taxes to build new water mains and sewer lines. Anti-tax sentiment in Clio helped to bring new construction to a virtual standstill during the late 1950s. In January 1957, the Clio Chamber of Commerce organized a meeting with Oren Stone, the director of Flint's FHA office, to discuss the lagging construction industry in the Clio area. In spite of the town's advantageous location near Flint, its good roads, and the variety of shops and stores in the community, Clio had not kept pace with Fenton and other booming suburban areas, Stone claimed, because the city did not provide adequate schools, water, sewage disposal, and storm sewers. Moreover, Stone informed Chamber members that the Clio City Council had not used its annexation powers wisely, allowing new developments to sprout outside of the city limits. At one point during the discussion, one of Stone's associates scolded Clio officials and voters for neglecting to modernize the city. If Clio citizens did not want to pay taxes for improvements, the FHA representative offered, "They should sit down and get their horse and buggy back and keep on living in the past." Under the FHA's stringent guidelines, Stone and his colleagues averred, new development would simply not occur without urbanized

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<sup>107</sup> *Clio Messenger*, November 21, 1951.

<sup>108</sup> *Clio Messenger*, December 26, 1956.

infrastructure. If Clio officials and residents declined to make such improvements, then they could not expect to benefit from the postwar housing construction boom.<sup>109</sup>

The situation in Clio was not an aberration. In Mt. Morris, Flushing, and several other suburbs, tax-conscious voters and fiscally conservative township supervisors initially balked at funding schools, sewers, and other infrastructure improvements. Over time, however, resistance to new taxes and development waned as homeowners' frustrations with hardscrabble living mounted. For many suburban officials and out-county residents, the suburb of Davison represented a model for development. The suburban city of Davison, located eight miles east of Flint, grew faster than any other area of Genesee County during the fifteen years following World War II. On April 19, 1946, the *Davison Index* newspaper ran a column that listed the many construction projects that were underway in and around the city. The projects included a new roller rink and bowling alley, the St. John's school and convent, a business office operated by the Leffler Gravel Company, a Davison Dairy outlet, a new grocery store, a storefront office operated by the Plymouth-DeSoto agency, Munsell Restaurant, a new hardware shop, and several new medical offices. In addition to the new commercial developments, the article also described a booming residential real estate market. In 1946, developers Bob Wisler and Harry Hill platted land and sought FHA approval for an exclusive new subdivision on the site of the Davison fairgrounds. This proposed new development—restricted to white occupants living in homes of at least \$3,500—was to feature new streets, sidewalks, sewers, and water service. Later that year, O. L. Adams offered lots for sale in a newly platted subdivision on Davison's west side. In July 1946, City Superintendent Donald R. Smith announced plans to lay blacktop over two miles of dirt

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<sup>109</sup> *Clio Messenger*, February 6, 1957.

roads in Davison—the city’s first large-scale road paving initiative.<sup>110</sup> All of the new development, the *Index* article conceded, had created a massive workload for members of the Davison City Council. Just to accommodate the rash of new zoning requests that they received in 1946, the city council increased its meetings to twice per month.<sup>111</sup>

In October 1946, the FHA approved the subdivision plans submitted by Robert Wisler and Harry Hill. Later renamed Rosemore Park, the new subdivision received the FHA’s full backing. Rosemore Park consisted of 133 carefully restricted residential lots, each no smaller than 66 by 132 feet. Before selling the lots, Wisler and Hill agreed to install sewer hookups, water lines, and graded, gravel streets. As well, Consumers Power Company pledged to connect each of the new properties to the gas and electric grids. In order to insulate the subdivision from nearby traffic on Clark Street, the FHA required Wisler and Hill to construct a sixteen-foot planting strip that bounded the neighborhood on the south side. In addition, the FHA insisted that all new homes in Rosemore Park face toward the center of the subdivision. Hoping to minimize traffic, a prime FHA concern, Wisler and Hill also agreed to construct only one entrance into the subdivision. Upon purchasing new lots, buyers who required federal financing could either choose from a list of home designs or submit their own blueprints to the FHA before commencing with construction. According to the FHA’s strictly enforced rules, no homes costing less than \$6,000 could be built in Rosemore Park.<sup>112</sup>

New lots sold quickly in Rosemore Park and other new FHA-backed subdivisions in Davison. By 1954, Rosemore Park was fully occupied. Between 1946 and 1949, developers added the Adams, Daniel Allen, and George P. Hill subdivisions to the city’s

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<sup>110</sup> *Davison Index*, July 5, 1946.

<sup>111</sup> *Davison Index*, April 19, 1946.

<sup>112</sup> *Davison Index*, October 4, 1946.

growing list of new residential developments. On July 8, 1949, the *Davison Index* published another column that boasted of the city's growth:

There has been no other town in Genesee County that has gone so extensively into the building project. Fenton has a few new homes but most of them have been built previous to the last year or so. Growth in Clio, Flushing, and Mt. Morris, to mention a few, seems to be momentarily at a standstill; yet, day after day, another basement is being dug and a house frame erected here in Davison.

According to the city's boosters, homebuyers sought out property in Davison because, "It is already a prosperous town and is also conveniently located. There are many good businesses in Davison of every variety. . . . House to house mail delivery is now serving all residents; and there is a [sic] excellent public school system." As well, boosters explained the growth by pointing to Davison's well-equipped fire department, modern utility services, newly paved roads, and its growth-friendly city government. Unlike their counterparts in Clio, Davison's postwar civic boosters embraced new development, even when it required higher taxes and new layers of government. "Each new resident in Davison means increasing prosperity for the town," the *Index* promised. "For more residents in Davison means more patrons of the home town business firms, and there is no greater preventative against a financial slump as normal buying and selling." Though the July column failed to mention federal housing policies, Davison's growth and the health of its consumer economy were closely connected to the new infrastructure and housing starts sponsored by the Federal Housing Administration.<sup>113</sup>

Taxpayers and local officials did their part to support development and protect property values in Davison by passing new building and zoning regulations, annexing neighboring land, funding new schools for children, and keeping the suburb entirely

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<sup>113</sup> *Davison Index*, July 8, 1949, December 30, 1954.

white. Davison enacted its first zoning ordinance in 1940, several years prior to the city's major postwar expansion. The original ordinance contained only three zoning districts: residential, commercial, and industrial. In 1948, the Davison City Council developed a master plan and passed a revised zoning ordinance which expanded the number of restricted land use districts from three to eight. Under the new ordinance, Davison officials strictly limited the areas of the city in which developers could erect multiple family housing, commercial establishments, and industrial facilities.<sup>114</sup> The 1948 zoning ordinance was part of a larger pro-growth campaign waged by civic leaders, school board members, and the Davison City Council during the 1940s and 1950s. In 1951, eighty-eight local business owners and professionals organized the Davison Area Chamber of Commerce.<sup>115</sup> Also that year, the Davison Public Schools absorbed the nearby Townsend School District. Three years later, area voters overwhelmingly endorsed a plan to combine Davison's schools with twelve rural school districts surrounding the city. The consolidation, which dramatically increased local tax revenues, generated funds to expand Davison High School, build a new elementary school on the city's northwest side, and construct a new stadium and athletic field.<sup>116</sup>

The Davison City Council did not hesitate to annex new land in order to meet FHA standards and capture new developments that grew outside of the city limits. In September 1953, developers announced plans to build Manford Heights, a new subdivision just south of the city limits. On May 10, 1954, city council members voted to annex the proposed ninety-acre subdivision. As part of the agreement, the council also

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<sup>114</sup> *Davison Index*, October 29, 1948.

<sup>115</sup> *Davison Index*, May 17, 1951.

<sup>116</sup> *Davison Index*, August 5, December 30, 1954. Throughout Genesee County, suburban school consolidations were extremely common during the 1950s. On school consolidation efforts in Flushing, for instance, see *Flushing Observer*, January 19, 1950.



agreed to provide homes in Manford Heights with water, sewers, and roads.<sup>117</sup> In response to the successful annexation and the city's utility agreement, the FHA offered its full support to the project and agreed to underwrite homes for approved buyers in the proposed neighborhood. Within weeks of receiving the FHA's endorsement, builders from Blackford Brothers Construction Company, Rasak Home Builders, and other local firms began erecting 190 new homes in the subdivision. On September 12, Flint area bankers, Davison City Council members, FHA administrators, and local residents attended an official ceremony to mark the opening of Manford Heights. During the celebration, which featured tours of the Aristocrat, the Woodland, and several other model homes, the developers heralded the modern amenities available in the new houses and the "rigid restrictions" designed to maintain property values and a high standard of living in the neighborhood. According to the property restrictions, all lots in the neighborhood had to have a minimum frontage of sixty feet. Moreover, builders in Manford Heights could erect only single-story, contemporary-styled homes with a minimum floor area. As well, Manford Heights had only curvilinear streets named exclusively after varieties of evergreen trees. In keeping with the forest theme, the builders added exterior finishes of "pre-painted cedar shake trimmed with painted plywood and colorful brick" to the model homes. Inside, the Aristocrat, the Woodland, and other model homes featured pine paneling, "range-vent hoods in the kitchen . . . as well as a 'Waste-King' Garbage disposal unit, copper plumbing throughout, forced-air heat, divided basement with added strength to insure proper upper wall support, and automatic hot-water heaters." In order to protect their large capital investments, developers enforced strict building regulations in the neighborhood and selected

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<sup>117</sup> *Davison Index*, May 13, 1954.

respected real estate agent Frank Hachtel to handle all marketing and sales. Though by the early 1950s the FHA could no longer advocate racially restrictive housing covenants, Hachtel—like all other realtors serving the Davison community—accepted as gospel the notion that racial integration detracted from neighborhood stability and property values. As a reflection of that belief, Hachtel and his colleagues in the real estate industry refused to show homes and lots in Manford Heights and other suburban subdivisions to African Americans.<sup>118</sup>

During the 1940s and 1950s, local growth initiatives and federal housing and development policies combined to spur an unprecedented economic boom in and around Davison. As 1954 came to a close, the editors of the *Davison Index* paused yet again to reflect upon the city’s growth. “Davison is recognized today as the fastest growing area in Genesee County and one of the fastest growing communities in the State of Michigan,” they wrote.

The pattern of Davison’s future was stamped years ago when leaders changed from a village to a city, established a modern school system, set up a zoning ordinance and building code, built a modern, large capacity sewage disposal plant to make Davison the most logical building site in the county, and created a Chamber of Commerce.<sup>119</sup>

The newspaper editors were correct. By embracing urban-style government, population growth, and the federal government’s new, highly restrictive rules for suburban development, Davison’s civic leaders transformed their city into an attractive place for white homeowners, shopkeepers, and investors. Between 1940 and 1950, Davison’s population increased from 1,397 to 1,745, a jump of nearly 25 percent. In the 1950s, government officials tightened building and zoning regulations, enlarged the city’s school

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<sup>118</sup> *Davison Index*, May 13, June 3, September 9, 1954.

<sup>119</sup> *Davison Index*, December 30, 1954.

system, annexed new land in Davison Township, and granted new services and utilities to homeowners. In exchange for these commitments, private lenders and FHA officials endorsed the construction of hundreds of new homes and businesses. By the close of the decade, Davison's population had more than doubled to 3,761. As new residents moved there, businesses followed suit. Just between 1947 and 1960, the number of privately operated businesses in Davison increased by fifty-nine, a gain of 93 percent.<sup>120</sup>

Davison was not alone. After World War II, most of Flint's suburbs experienced dramatic growth. During the 1940s, all but one grew in population. With few exceptions, Flint's innermost suburbs—especially those that met the FHA's requirements for zoning, building restrictions, schools, water, roads, and sewers—grew faster than areas that lacked municipal utilities and other urbanized governmental services. In the 1940s, the populations of Mt. Morris and Burton Townships grew by 109 and 66 percent, respectively. Similarly, the townships of Genesee and Flint each posted population gains in excess of 40 percent during the decade. Even in north suburban Clio and other areas of the out-county where voters clung to “horse and buggy” governments, the postwar era brought impressive growth statistics. Between 1940 and 1950, Clio's population climbed from 1,711 to 1,963.<sup>121</sup>

By the mid-1950s, civic boosters in Davison had claimed success in their quest to build a model suburb. “The die has been cast and Davison is headed down the broad highway of unlimited expansion,” the *Davison Index* predicted. Amazed by the changes unfolding around them, Davison's civic leaders expressed an unbridled confidence in the future. Most residents and officials in suburban Genesee County did not share that sense

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<sup>120</sup> Region V Planning and Development Commission, *1985-2010: Population Allocation Study*, passim. See also, *Davison Index*, January 14, 1960.

<sup>121</sup> Region V Planning and Development Commission, *1985-2010: Population Allocation Study*, passim.

of optimism, however. Throughout the county, suburban officials struggled mightily to meet the growing service needs of new homeowners, shopkeepers, and investors. Township supervisors and suburban city council members found it almost impossible to satisfy all, or even most, of the wishes of residents. Thousands of residents who relocated to Flint's suburbs wanted new schools and roads, more shopping centers, stricter building and zoning regulations, clean water, modern sewer systems, police and fire protection, and other costly urban services. However, in many instances suburban officials were simply unable to provide the services and utilities that their residents expected. Further complicating matters, many other residents preferred smaller, less intrusive government and loathed the growth that was occurring around them. These anti-growth homeowners fought to keep their taxes low and restrict new developments. Rarely did either side get what they wanted, though. During the 1950s, suburban frustration reached a boiling point as new residents and new problems continued to pour into the cities, villages, and townships surrounding Flint. Throughout Genesee County—and, indeed, the nation as a whole—a growing chorus of voices bemoaned the overdevelopment of suburban areas and the political chaos that seemed to accompany unrestricted growth. Meanwhile, civil rights activists in Flint were busy organizing against the underdevelopment of the city and the racial exclusions embedded in mass suburbanization.

### *The Birth of Metropolitan Solutions*

During the long postwar era, critiques of metropolitan “spreaditis” dovetailed with a nascent political discourse on urban deindustrialization and the inner-city crises that

seemed to be brewing in America's central cities. For their part, white suburbanites in Genesee County were never as happy as they seemed on television. Likewise, many African Americans in the city resented the postwar growth of suburbs, though from a very different perspective than their white suburban counterparts. In 1969, William R. Morris, the NAACP's national director of housing programs, released a bulletin to all local branches that reinforced the link between urban deindustrialization, black unemployment, and suburban housing segregation. Morris's communiqué, entitled "Suburban Plant Location and Equal Housing Opportunity," explained how the suburbanization of industry created spatial barriers between black urban neighborhoods and suburban job centers. "Centers of employment in manufacturing industries are increasingly located in suburban and outlying parts of metropolitan areas," Morris argued, "while the black and the poor continue to be contained in inner cities, physically separated from many jobs they could fill."<sup>122</sup> That same year, Jeanne R. Lowe described the link between black unemployment and housing discrimination in an article published in the *Saturday Review*: "The Negro faces an employment handicap experienced by no other worker in our history—the denial of residence reasonably near his job." Between 1954 and 1965, Lowe reported, well over 50 percent of all industrial and commercial construction in the United States took place outside of the nation's central cities.<sup>123</sup> The sprawling of the United States, these critics charged, had created new forms of social inequality on a metropolitan scale.

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<sup>122</sup> William R. Morris, "Suburban Plant Location and Equal Housing Opportunity," Beasley Papers, box 41, folder 11, GHCC.

<sup>123</sup> Jeanne R. Lowe, "Race, Jobs, and Cities: What Business Can Do," *Saturday Review* (January 11, 1969). See also, David Vizard, "Half of Flint's Black Teens Believed Jobless," *Flint Journal*, March 22, 1979.

William Morris and Jeanne Lowe were correct. In Flint and many other metropolitan regions, African Americans could not obtain housing of any kind, except under the rarest of circumstances, in high-growth suburban areas. Across the country, the shift towards suburban and rural investment had profound and unexpected implications for central cities such as Flint and their growing African-American populations. Echoing the arguments of Morris and Lowe, many scholars of urban history have concluded that the combined forces of capital decentralization and whites-only suburbanization created a condition of “spatial mismatch.” According to this model, the suburbanization of industrial jobs and white taxpayers left African Americans in cities such as Flint with fewer employment opportunities, blighted and abandoned neighborhoods, and a declining standard of living. Proponents of spatial mismatch also argue that the suburban migrations of capital and labor accelerated urban crises by eviscerating the tax bases of central cities. As this theory suggests, African Americans trapped in the ghetto by residential segregation paid a disproportionate share of the costs associated with suburban development.<sup>124</sup>

Spatial mismatch was a very real phenomenon in postwar Flint. In 1939, the city of Flint contained 95 percent of the taxable wealth in the metropolitan area. By 1956, however, suburban migrations had driven that figure down to 79 percent.<sup>125</sup> The mass suburbanization of white homeowners, industry, retail, and services created many tax and service gaps for city officials, business owners, and residents who remained in the city. Moreover, African Americans, more than any other group of citizens, bore the weight of the economic asymmetries created by the post-World War II decentralization of capital.

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<sup>124</sup> On spatial mismatch, see Kain, “Housing Segregation,” 175-197; Boyle, “There Are No Union Sorrows,” 5-23; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 125-152; and Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 57-130.

<sup>125</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 4.

Nevertheless, the theory of spatial mismatch conceals a great deal about the racial implications of capital migrations and almost completely obfuscates the metropolitan growth agenda that fueled both suburban residential development and GM's decentralization strategy. The notion of mismatch also subsumes the local particularities of job seeking among urban residents, especially in relatively small, automobile-centered cities such as Flint. In the postwar era, the Vehicle City's per capita automobile ownership rate was higher than in any other major city in the United States.<sup>126</sup> According to one 1957 study, there were slightly less than two citizens, of any age, for each of the 137,200 cars registered in the metropolitan area. Virtually every family in the city owned at least one vehicle.<sup>127</sup>

Most black workers at General Motors, even when their plants relocated to suburban Genesee County, could—and did, in fact—commute to work. At GM, plant suburbanization did not coincide with declining black employment figures. According to a 1965-66 Michigan Civil Rights Commission survey of GM's hourly-rated workforce in Genesee County, the percentage of black workers in the corporation's Flint plants was roughly the same as in its newer suburban facilities. Of the two GM plants in Genesee County that employed the smallest proportion of black workers, AC Spark Plug and Ternstedt, one was in the city while the other was in the north suburbs.<sup>128</sup> To be sure, black workers faced intense racial discrimination at all of GM's facilities in Genesee County. However, employment discrimination resulted more from the company's personnel policies than from geographic mismatches. Likewise, black job seekers in all-

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<sup>126</sup> See Richard Hebert, "Flint: GM's Mark of Excellence," in Hebert, *Highways to Nowhere: The Politics of City Transportation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1972), 8.

<sup>127</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 14.

<sup>128</sup> For the MCRC study, see Beasley Papers, box 44, folder 47, GHCC.

white suburbs found it nearly impossible to secure employment. In 1965, for instance, only two black workers found employment outside of the domestic service industry in the all-white suburb of Flushing.<sup>129</sup> Yet results such as this were less a function of spatial mismatch than an indication of how deeply entrenched racism was among white employers in both the city and the suburbs. Indeed, black workers needed to look no farther than their own neighborhoods or the readily accessible department stores in downtown Flint to discover how rigid the postwar color line could be in the arena of employment.

Proponents of spatial mismatch often employ metaphors of flight and abandonment to describe human and capital migrations from cities. In many cases, the theory of spatial mismatch hinges on the notion that all outward capital migrations, no matter where employers and white taxpayers relocated, were part of a zero-sum contest between cities and their suburban and rural competitors. According to this binary framework, cities suffered because they “lost” factories and shopping centers to their suburban and exurban rivals. There can be little doubt that suburban developments drew capital, taxes, and resources away from the city. Nevertheless, the opening of new plants, shopping centers, and subdivisions just across Flint’s border was not the equivalent of building new facilities overseas or far away in the Sunbelt. For workers in Flint, to whom precise distances mattered immensely, the suburbanization of industry and commerce presented few geographic obstacles to employment. Moreover, when viewed from the perspective of local GM executives and Flint’s political leaders, the implications of postwar suburban development were even less consequential. Among the local

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<sup>129</sup> Beasley, “Weekly Report, Flint Office Activities,” April 1, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 15, GHCC.



industrialists, civic leaders, and booster journalists who embraced metropolitan development, GM's suburban strategy and the rise of Flint's suburbs were of very little significance. Men such as Clarence Young, who viewed the city and its suburbs as part of an organic, regional whole, believed that Flint would always be "the greatest work-maker, wage-payer, idea-market ever known," even if GM built its "empire of progress" outside of the city limits.<sup>130</sup> Young believed this because he and other members of Flint's growth coalition viewed the city through a metropolitan lens. When GM executives built new plants outside of the city, they did so under the assumption that the city of Flint would one day absorb those factories. This fact became apparent during the massive economic downturn of the late 1950s.

During the 1950s, the city experienced three major economic recessions that brought the implications of GM's suburban strategy and the overdevelopment of the out-county to the center of local political culture. The severest of the three recessions occurred between 1956 and 1959. In the peak production year of 1955, nearly thirty thousand Buick workers in Flint produced slightly fewer than 800,000 vehicles, a division record. By 1958, however, that production figure had declined precipitously to 232,000.<sup>131</sup> During the 1956-59 economic slowdown, dubbed the Eisenhower Recession by the president's Democratic opponents, General Motors laid off nearly thirty thousand workers in Genesee County, causing unemployment to increase to 10 percent. Among African Americans, unemployment reached nearly 20 percent during this period. In 1957, the federal department acknowledged the severity of the crisis by reclassifying

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<sup>130</sup> Young, *Big-Crossing-Place*, 2.

<sup>131</sup> Reuster, *Good Old Days at the Buick*, 1-10.

Flint as an economically depressed area.<sup>132</sup> Hoping to arrest Buick's downward spiral, in the fall of 1957 General Motors President Harlow Curtice delivered what he hoped would be a humorous, uplifting address to local Buick officials. "I am certain that you are wholly dissatisfied with the status quo," Curtice acknowledged, "which, as the darkie said, is 'the hell of a mess we all is in.'"<sup>133</sup> Curtice's racial remarks probably lightened the mood at the 1957 event, but they did little to revive the economic fortunes of the city. By the spring of 1958, GM had idled nearly one in two Buick workers in Genesee County.<sup>134</sup> Though workers at Buick, the city's largest employer, suffered the brunt of the downturn, tens of thousands of autoworkers throughout Flint lost their jobs during the late 1950s slump.

Desperate for solutions to the economic recession, Curtice, Joseph Anderson, and other local GM officials rallied behind a Sunbelt-style campaign to bring new economic growth to Flint. That plan arrived in 1958 in the form of "New Flint," a proposal to consolidate the entire Flint region under a single government. In the short term, GM executives hoped that a larger city would resuscitate the region's failing economy. Yet New Flint was also part of a broader, long-term development agenda that sought to overcome the growing gulfs between the Vehicle City and its suburbs. New Flint represented a metropolitan approach to solving both underemployment in the city and overdevelopment in the suburbs. For a brief period during the late 1950s, debates over New Flint highlighted the links between urban crises and suburban chaos while helping

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<sup>132</sup> "Flint Classified as Depressed Area as Unemployment Rises," *Flint Weekly Review*, May 30, 1957.

<sup>133</sup> Harlow Curtice, "Remarks at Buick Announcement Dinner," September 10, 1957, Harlow Curtice Papers, box 5, 91-1.3-9, Scharzburg Archives.

<sup>134</sup> "Last Layoff of 2200 Means More Than 50% of Buick Workers Idle," *Flint Weekly Review*, March 6, 1958.

to illustrate the interconnectedness of the grassroots anger that brewed on both sides of the color line.

## Chapter 6

### **Chaos in the Suburbs: The Life and Death of New Flint**

Social critic Lawrence Lader abhorred the disorder he found in America's postwar suburbs. In the October 1958 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*, Lader published "Chaos in the Suburbs," a polemic against "Paradise Lost" in suburbia. While conducting research for his exposé, Lader visited Genesee County and many other metropolitan areas throughout the United States, where he spoke with scores of angry suburbanites and overburdened government officials. During their conversations with Lader, these citizens painted extremely unflattering portraits of life on the crabgrass frontiers of suburban America.<sup>1</sup> In sharp contrast to those who reflexively embraced and uncritically celebrated mass suburbanization, Lader and many of the citizens he interviewed believed that the unplanned rush to the suburbs had created unnecessarily harsh living conditions in new suburban neighborhoods. More importantly, however, Lader contended that the unregulated rise of the suburbs had generated a profound crisis in American democracy. The new suburban crisis of the 1950s, according to Lader, stemmed from the "chaos of conflicting local governments, all squabbling over responsibilities instead of working together for the benefit of the whole metropolis." In suburbia, Lader warned readers, "Armies of horse-and-buggy governments, moving in foolhardy isolation and without foresight, are duplicating services, shunning

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow the term "crabgrass frontier" from historian Kenneth Jackson. See K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*.

responsibility, and throwing away your money.” A harsh critic of governmental waste, Lader viewed metropolitan government as the only lasting solution to substandard living and suburban anarchy.<sup>2</sup>

To illustrate his critique of suburban inefficiency, Lader documented the confusing array of governments and agencies that existed in several of the nation’s major metropolitan centers. In and around Miami, Florida, Lader found a web of independent local governments that seldom worked together for the common good. In Dade County alone, for instance, there were “26 different police forces, a sheriff’s office, a highway patrol, and county park police, in addition to a bevy of constables serving the justices of the peace.” According to Mrs. Cyril Smith, president of the Miami League of Women Voters, the proliferation of overlapping bureaus and agencies in Dade County confused ordinary civilians and government workers alike. After witnessing a fire erupt near a busy intersection between two jurisdictions, Smith reported, “A sheriff’s patrol car and a West Miami police car rushed to answer the alarm. Then they argued about which municipality should be called to put out the fire while the building burned to the ground.” At times, as Smith’s story illustrated, governmental polarization in metropolitan areas produced hazardous and potentially deadly service gaps. Furthermore, even when the fragmentation of suburban governments endangered neither private property nor human life, the labyrinthine nature of local government in metropolitan areas such as Dade County was simply confusing and inefficient. In the greater Miami area, to cite another of Lader’s examples, there were no uniform speed limits to guide motorists as they traveled through the metropolis. As well, Dade County, like most other metropolitan

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Lader, “Chaos in the Suburbs,” *Better Homes and Gardens* 36 (October 1958), 10-17, 121, 129, 166.

areas in the United States, lacked area-wide building codes, tax policies, and commercial licensing guidelines, which created numerous problems for entrepreneurs, investors, and business owners. “Isn’t it fantastic that for my 50 restaurants I have to get 26 different sets of licenses?” the owner of a hamburger chain complained. Governmental inefficiency and “red tape” not only hurt citizens, Lader charged, but they were also anathema to economic growth.<sup>3</sup>

In metropolitan Seattle, Washington, Lader discovered more than sixty-seven overlapping water supply districts, each with its own independent fee and service structure. Even more polarized than Miami and Seattle, metropolitan Pittsburgh contained no fewer than 612 units of local government. By the late 1950s, there were 174 major metropolitan centers in the United States. Within those densely populated, urbanized regions, there were an astonishing 15,658 local governments. Although the greater Flint area covered only twelve square miles of land during the 1950s, it contained at least forty-five separate units of government, each with its own governing authority, tax levy, and administrative structure.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the nation, Lader and other postwar critics of suburbia encountered thousands of examples of metropolitan political fragmentation that wasted tax dollars, undermined property values and quality of life, and threatened public health standards.

In suburban Flint, Lader uncovered an especially egregious example of the dangers that accompanied unplanned development. Lader reported that sanitary services in Genesee County were appallingly substandard. “Frequently throughout the year, Flint literally is surrounded by an open sewer,” admitted a local journalist. Because two-thirds

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<sup>3</sup> Lader, “Chaos in the Suburbs,” 10-17.

<sup>4</sup> See Hughes, Jr., *Local Government*, 7.

of the governments in the county did not possess modern sewage disposal systems, children living outside of Flint often played dangerously close to open cesspools. In north suburban Mt. Morris, one mother observed, “Children are coming home with sewage clinging to their clothes.” The central problem in Miami, Flint, and other cities, Lader maintained, was that suburbs had exploded in population without any coordinated metropolitan planning efforts:

We have plunged into a radically new way of life. Our sleepy suburban towns have become virtual cities—sprawling municipalities around the central city. Yet we are still attempting to meet the crushing problems of suburban chaos with a horse-and- buggy system of government that belongs to the last century.

Like a growing number of Americans during the 1950s, Lader believed that cities and suburbs were part of a larger metropolitan polity and that the problems generated by sprawling suburban development necessitated regional political solutions. The controversial New Flint proposal was a manifestation of Lader’s political viewpoint.<sup>5</sup>

Lawrence Lader’s article identified a rarely acknowledged facet of postwar suburban culture in the United States. During the Eisenhower Era of the 1950s, both critics and defenders of suburbia often painted simplistic, grossly inaccurate portraits of suburban affluence and conformity.<sup>6</sup> In reality, however, very few postwar suburbs resembled the idyllic, lush places portrayed in popular culture. Moreover, suburbanites were not always conformists, and seldom were they as optimistic and happy as Ward

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<sup>5</sup> Lader, “Chaos in the Suburbs,” 10-17.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950); C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951); William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956); and Vance Oakley Packard, *The Status Seekers: An Exploration of Class Behavior in America and the Hidden Barriers That Affect You, Your Community, Your Future* (New York: D. McKay Company, 1959). For a review of some of this literature, see Nicolaides, “How Hell Moved from the City to the Suburbs: Urban Scholars and Changing Perceptions of Authentic Community,” in Kruse and Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History*, 80-98.

Cleaver and other iconic television characters made them seem. In Flint and elsewhere, suburbs were not monoliths of prosperity and contentment. During the 1950s and 1960s, white homeowners and business proprietors received many federal and local subsidies to move from Flint to the segregated, fast-growing suburbs of Genesee County. Once they arrived, however, many suburban taxpayers found unexpectedly poor living conditions and work environments in their new subdivisions, plants, and shops. Hoping to satisfy FHA regulations, state health standards, and the service demands of ordinary taxpayers, suburban governments built millions of dollars worth of new infrastructure during the postwar era. In order to build and maintain good schools and roads, safe water supplies, sanitary sewers, and a high standard of living, these governments floated bond proposals and levied new and higher taxes on suburban homeowners and businesses. Ever cognizant of the tax burdens they had accumulated by building new infrastructure, many homeowners in the out-county developed a fiercely independent political consciousness in the 1950s and 1960s. That consciousness exploded in opposition to the New Flint plan.

The battles over New Flint brought white homeowners and township officials into open conflict with GM executives, Flint city commissioners, and other members of the Vehicle City's pro-growth coalition. Because GM's postwar suburban strategy depended upon a metropolitan spatial vision for development, the corporation offered its full support to New Flint and other forms of regional government. In 1958, GM officials helped to launch the New Flint campaign, a Sunbelt-inspired economic growth initiative to enlarge the city's boundaries and create a unified and more efficient metropolitan government. Although GM executives actively supported New Flint, thousands of white



homeowners and suburban officials revolted against the prospect of a new “super city” and the “super tax dollars” they feared it would require. Opposition to New Flint united taxpayers from across Flint’s diverse suburban landscape. In Flint Township and other industrialized suburbs, voters rallied against what they viewed as a plant-grabbing plan. Even in largely residential suburbs, however, voters who were mindful of the high service costs of suburban development organized to block metropolitan government. By the close of 1958, suburban opponents of regional government had helped to defeat the controversial proposal.

Though only rarely articulated in public, unspoken racial fears also informed the opposition to New Flint. The campaign against New Flint was not an example of white suburban backlash against the civil rights movement, however. In fact, the suburban revolt against New Flint clearly preceded the wave of open housing and school desegregation campaigns of the mid-1960s. Instead, the controversy illustrated how the rapid and uneven growth of Flint’s suburbs—by itself, and without much provocation from civil rights agitators—produced a new, increasingly conservative, and explicitly anti-urban and anti-integrationist political consciousness among white suburban residents. The demise of New Flint also set the stage for a series of hostile annexation drives and metropolitan desegregation campaigns during the 1960s and 1970s that further inflamed suburban opposition to the city of Flint and its nascent black majority.

### *Studying Suburban Growth*

The New Flint Proposal of 1958 grew out of an unusual partnership between academic researchers at the University of Michigan, corporate growth boosters, and concerned

citizens in the Flint metropolitan region. In the fall of 1946, an interdisciplinary team of scholars affiliated with Michigan's Horace Rackham School of Graduate Studies and the Institute for Human Adjustment organized the Social Science Research Project (SSRP), "a novel experiment with the dual purpose of providing field research for graduate students in the social sciences and providing information to the people of the Flint Metropolitan Area."<sup>7</sup> Between 1946 and 1960, professors and graduate students affiliated with the SSRP produced over twenty detailed reports and several major publications on metropolitan development in Genesee County. Under the direction of Arthur W. Bromage, Amos H. Hawley, Basil G. Zimmer, and other scholars devoted to regional governance, graduate student researchers from the SSRP focused much of their attention on the fraught and complex relationships between Flint and its suburbs and the problems associated with the rapid development of the urban fringe.

Not surprisingly, SSRP researchers found that the city's innermost suburbs—namely, the four townships contiguous to Flint, along with the suburban municipalities of Mt. Morris and Grand Blanc—had all experienced rapid growth. The populations of the four townships bordering Flint climbed by an average of 55 percent in the 1940s, while the city itself grew by only 7.7 percent.<sup>8</sup> By 1950, Flint's share of the county's overall population had declined to 60 percent.<sup>9</sup> Suburban growth continued apace during the 1950s. Between 1950 and 1960, suburban Genesee County added seventy thousand new residents. The populations of Mundy Township, Grand Blanc Township, and several

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<sup>7</sup> "Annual Report of the Social Science Research Project, 1949," Manley Papers, box 5, 78-8.1-124, Scharchburg Archives.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, Jr., *Local Government*, i-v. See also, Kenneth VerBurg, Abram P. Snyder, Edmond W. Alchin, et al., *Report to the Michigan State Boundary Commission on the Proposed Cities of Burton, Carman, and Genesee* (East Lansing: Institute for Community Development and Continuing Education Services, Michigan State University, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 1.

other inner-ring suburbs nearly doubled over the course of the decade. Although the central city also gained new residents during this period, suburban growth was six times that recorded in the Vehicle City.<sup>10</sup> Along with federal mortgage subsidies, the suburbanization of industry and retail helped to drive this residential migration. As GM and other area employers opened new facilities in suburban Genesee County, the pace of outmigration intensified as white workers sought out new homes for sale in recently opened subdivisions close to their workplaces and new commercial establishments.

The quest for land and new homes fueled suburban growth. In 1948, SSRP researcher Betty Tableman authored a study on migratory flows in the Flint area. Based upon interviews that she and others conducted with 517 families in the Flint metropolitan region, Tableman's report demonstrated that the desire for home ownership was instrumental in driving the mass migration to the suburbs. "Movement in the fringe is predominantly a movement from rental housing toward home ownership," she concluded. In 1955, three-fourths of Flint residents either owned or were purchasing the homes in which they resided. Outside of the city, however, homeowners and home mortgage holders comprised approximately 90 percent of the population.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the allure of home ownership, several push factors also contributed to suburban migration. Many of the residents Tableman interviewed claimed that they had left Flint because of their dissatisfaction with the quality of housing, traffic congestion, "urban blight," high building costs, and small residential lots. When asked to explain why they chose their present neighborhood in the urban fringe, suburban residents overwhelmingly indicated that the quality and availability of housing and land outside of

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<sup>10</sup> Region V Planning and Development Commission, *1985-2010: Population Allocation Study*. Also, see *AC Sparkler*, June 12, 1958.

<sup>11</sup> Tableman, *Intra-Community Migration*, i-viii; and Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 2.

Flint was the most important factor shaping their decision to relocate. As well, large numbers of residents cited the larger lots available in the suburbs, the prestige of a suburban address, and their desire for more open space. Significantly, taxes played only a minor role in the suburban migrations of the 1940s and 1950s. According to Tableman and other SSRP researchers, only 23 percent of suburban residents cited lower taxes as an important factor fueling their desire to move. Over time, this number would diminish even further.<sup>12</sup>

In 1955, SSRP researchers released the results of a more extensive survey of the factors driving suburban migrations in Genesee County. According to the 1955 survey of approximately seven hundred area residents, nearly 50 percent of fringe dwellers cited housing, in a variety of capacities, as the primary reason they selected their current suburban neighborhood. These suburban residents pointed to home ownership, more than any other variable, as the central concern shaping their decision to migrate. When asked about their reasons for leaving Flint, residents of the urban fringe mentioned urban blight, lack of privacy and space, and the “unwholesome” living conditions in the city. Though most white residents of Flint’s suburbs agreed that their neighborhoods should exclude African Americans, “white flight” played only a minor role in driving 1950s suburban migrations. Indeed, only 1.6 percent of the fringe residents polled for the 1955 survey claimed that they had relocated to the suburbs because of the presence of Negroes in their old city neighborhoods. Likewise, less than 1 percent of suburban residents claimed that racial factors influenced their decision to choose their current residence. When SSRP researchers asked suburban homesteaders what they liked about their new

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<sup>12</sup> Tableman, *Intra-Community Migration*, i-viii. See also, Tableman, *Governmental Organization in Metropolitan Areas*.

neighborhoods, none mentioned the fact that their subdivisions barred Negroes. Although racial prejudices undoubtedly shaped whites' perceptions of "urban blight," "neighborhood filth," and the dangers of city living, Flint's neighborhoods and schools nonetheless remained rigidly segregated throughout the 1950s, a fact that tended to mitigate the significance of racial panic selling and other forms of white flight from the city. In most cases, white residents of both the city and the suburbs accepted racial segregation as a default condition and never seriously considered even the possibility of living in an integrated neighborhood. Though dear to their hearts, racial segregation was not foremost in the minds of the suburban residents that SSRP researchers surveyed. As a result, only a small fraction of Flint's suburban residents referenced race a primary factor when they discussed their decisions to relocate.<sup>13</sup>

### *Suburban Anger*

During the 1950s, tens of thousands of white families living in Flint packed their belongings and headed off to the rigidly segregated suburbs of Genesee County. They moved to acquire newer and better housing, more space and privacy, and because they had grown tired of their cramped living quarters, urban pollution, crime, traffic congestion, and the unwholesome cultural atmosphere of the city. Upon arriving in their new subdivisions, thousands of these migrants found much to like about their new living arrangements. According to the 1955 SSRP survey, a third of suburban residents cited "friendly, helpful, and congenial neighbors" as the thing they liked most about their communities. An additional 17.6 percent reported that they most appreciated that their

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<sup>13</sup> *Flint City – Fringe Survey* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1955), 1-14.

neighborhoods were “quiet, clean, safe, and wholesome.” When asked to name something they disliked about their new suburban neighborhoods, 43.3 percent of the SSRP’s survey respondents could not name anything at all.<sup>14</sup>

Still, however, a clear majority of new homeowners in the out-county found that suburban living was not all that they hoped it would be. In their surveys of suburban residents and officials, SSRP researchers uncovered surprising degrees of unhappiness and frustration. Though the quest for better housing, open space, and bucolic surroundings had fueled the migration to Flint’s urban fringe, new residents of Genesee County’s growing suburbs found that conditions there were more difficult than they had anticipated. In many cases, the squalid living arrangements that Walter Firey described after World War II persisted into the 1950s. “The fringe,” noted a rather pessimistic 1957 report, “is deficient in virtually all of the services required for reasonably efficient and sanitary urban living.”<sup>15</sup> In 1954, a survey of suburban housing warned that weak zoning and building codes had created “potential slums” outside of the city. “In many cases,” a 1955 *Flint Journal* article added, “families are permitted to move into homes that have curtains strung up instead of partitions, no doors on bathrooms and bedrooms, no finished flooring, the electrical wiring in but little else.”<sup>16</sup> Several years later,

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<sup>14</sup> *Flint City – Fringe Survey*, 1-14.

<sup>15</sup> Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification in a Metropolitan Community* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1957), 65. On the poor quality of services in Flint’s suburbs, see Hughes, Jr., *Local Government*; Zimmer and Hawley, “Approaches to the Solution of Fringe Problems: Preferences of Residents in the Flint Metropolitan Area,” *Public Administration Review* 16:4 (Autumn 1956): 258-268; and Emerson J. Elliott, Charles B. Hetrick, and Stanley W. Johnson, *Urban-Fringe Problem in the Flint Metropolitan Area: A Study of Services and Attitudes* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1957).

<sup>16</sup> “FAS Says Practice May Develop Slums,” *Flint Journal*, September 28, 1955.

geographer Peirce Lewis claimed that in the Flint area, “the edge of the city is marked by what is euphemistically called ‘sub-standard housing’—in fact rural slums.”<sup>17</sup>

During their 1950s surveys, researchers from the SSRP encountered suburban dystopias in cities and townships throughout the out-county—places where thousands of white homeowners not so silently fumed about foul tasting well water, poorly drained septic fields, bumpy roads, taxes, unplanned development, and mediocre, overcrowded schools.<sup>18</sup> To thousands of unhappy fringe dwellers, it seemed that Flint’s suburbs had grown too quickly and chaotically. Unchecked growth, many feared, was undermining suburban tranquility, lowering property values, and creating severe infrastructural crises. Moreover, SSRP researchers found that GM’s suburban investment strategy had created massive tax and revenue imbalances between the townships and municipalities of Genesee County. In industrialized suburbs such as Beecher, which claimed GM’s large Ternstedt facility, corporate taxes funded over three-fourths of the cost of schools and local government. Likewise, GM’s new plants on Van Slyke Road provided a financial bonanza for Flint Township and allowed board members from the Carman School District to increase per pupil expenditures to among the highest in the county. In the Carman district, school officials in the late 1950s could claim an amazing \$39,773 in taxable property for each pupil. Only a few of the fringe’s sixteen suburban school districts possessed substantial industrial and commercial tax bases, however. Unlike Carman, the Genesee School District in north suburban Flint received its taxes almost exclusively from homeowners, most of whom were shop workers at GM. In that district,

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<sup>17</sup> P. Lewis, “Geography in the Politics of Flint,” 20.

<sup>18</sup> See Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 3.

school officials drew from a significantly smaller tax base of \$4,821 per student.<sup>19</sup> During the postwar era, Flint's suburbs developed in a highly uneven fashion, and many suburban communities never experienced the tax revenue boom created by new industrial and commercial developments. By publicizing the shared frustrations of suburban residents, SSRP researchers hoped to generate support for metropolitan government, their solution to the problem of "spreaditis."

Lawrence Lader's vivid description of "open sewers" and other unsanitary conditions in Flint's suburbs embarrassed and angered suburban officials in Genesee County. Nevertheless, his claims were accurate. There were few regulations on garbage disposal in Flint's postwar suburbs. As late as 1957, only two of the four townships surrounding the city offered rubbish disposal services. In many areas of the out-county, homeowners burned, buried, or simply dumped their garbage in open fields or wooded areas. Furthermore, sewers were almost non-existent in suburban Genesee County. Outside of the city of Flint and the north suburb of Beecher—which contracted with the city for sewage disposal—homeowners relied on either outhouses or private septic systems. As suburbs grew, septic system failures and effluent seepage into local wells, ponds, and rivers became pressing public health problems.<sup>20</sup>

Septic seepage was a harsh and disgusting reality in Flint's postwar suburbs. In his 1947 study of local government in suburban Flint, Israel Harding Hughes claimed, "Septic tank effluent flows from the townships through Flint in nearly every direction." Carman Creek was a prime example. Hughes found that the malodorous water in Carman Creek contained large amounts of partially diluted sewage. The poor water

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<sup>19</sup> *Flint Journal*, July 8, 1958. See also, Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Hughes, Jr., *Local Government*, 47-50; E. J. Elliott, Hetrick, and S. Johnson, *Urban-Fringe Problem*; Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 3; and *Flint News-Advertiser*, January 22, 1954.



quality in Carman Creek shocked public health officials, offended the sensibilities of nature lovers, sickened untold numbers of suburban water drinkers, and created a major nuisance in the downtown Flint area, where the creek emptied into the Flint River. Hughes discovered that dangerous levels of septic tank effluent polluted virtually all of the drainage areas around the city. Septic system failures and effluent seepage into private wells and streams occurred for a variety of reasons including insufficiently large drainage fields, non-absorbent soils, runoff, and improper maintenance. The relatively impervious clay soils that predominated in many parts of Genesee County presented a special problem for septic tank users. According to one report, “the prevalence of heavy clay soils results in surface drainage of much of the effluent and subsequent seepage into wells.” Even when the systems worked correctly, however, the overdevelopment of the suburbs brought neighbors closer together and, with that, wells and other water sources invariably came into greater proximity with privies and septic drainage fields. It was common, noted Homer E. Dowdy in a 1953 *Flint Journal* column, to find “wells and septic tanks or privies on lots sometimes no wider than 30 or 40 feet.” “What some people thought was a move out of town for healthful conditions has turned into the opposite.” “Sewage is a problem plaguing the fringe,” Dowdy and others concluded.<sup>21</sup>

Though the Genesee County Health Department was in charge of regulating septic systems and outdoor privies in the out-county, the rapid growth of the suburbs made it impossible for county health officials to monitor improper sewage disposal and septic system failures. Concerns over septic seepage and well contamination were thus

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<sup>21</sup> Hughes, Jr., *Local Government*, 47-50; Dowdy, “Time Has Come to Attack Problems of City’s Growth,” and “Area Population Growth Outruns Fringe Facilities,” in *Where’s Flint Going? The Metropolitan Area: A Look at Problems Confronting Flint and Its Neighbors* (Flint: Flint Journal, 1954); and Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 3.

widespread in suburban Flint. According to one 1950s study, at least a third of the residents of suburban Flint expressed “distinct dissatisfaction” with the sewage facilities in their neighborhoods. Many more were simply unnerved by the manner in which suburban governments and homeowners handled human waste. By 1954, suburban sewage disposal problems had become so severe that the Michigan Water Resources Commission ordered governments throughout the out-county to install modern sewer systems by the beginning of 1958 or face the prospect of stiff fines.<sup>22</sup>

Among suburban residents, the quality of water services in the out-county was another major source of anxiety. At the end of the 1940s, just over half of Flint’s one hundred thousand suburban residents possessed both running water and toilets inside of their homes.<sup>23</sup> In the north suburban city of Mt. Morris, which operated one of the only public water systems outside of Flint, residents enjoyed plentiful supplies of high-quality municipal drinking water.<sup>24</sup> Still, the overwhelming majority of suburban residents who had access to fresh water relied upon private, backyard wells.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the county, even in areas that operated government-owned wells, effluent contamination was a major cause of worry. As well, homeowners and public well operators in suburban Flint often complained about falling water tables and insufficient water supplies, poor water pressure, and smelly, briny-tasting water. In a 1954 report on suburban development, Dowdy pointed out, “Wells are running dry and whole communities are concerned about

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<sup>22</sup> Dowdy, “Flint Area Study Leads the Way for Medium-Sized Communities,” in *What’s Going on Here?* (Flint: Flint Journal, 1954); and Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification*, 44. See also, E. J. Elliott, Hetrick, and S. Johnson, *Urban-Fringe Problem*; and *Flint News-Advertiser*, January 22, 1954. On septic systems in postwar American suburbs, see Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> Tableman, *Intra-Community Migration*, ii.

<sup>24</sup> *Genesee County Herald*, May 21, 1947.

<sup>25</sup> Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification*, 43-45.

an adequate water supply.” Four years later, SSRP researchers warned, “An acute water shortage looms in the near future.”<sup>26</sup>

The 1950s water crisis was especially severe in the northwestern suburb of Flushing. Between 1940 and 1950, the village of Flushing and Flushing Township added 1,422 new residents, an increase of over 25 percent.<sup>27</sup> During the early 1950s, the growth of Flushing continued unabated. As new residents dug private wells and tapped into the village’s antiquated community water system, the water table fell rapidly and homeowners began reporting shortages. By 1953, an especially dry year in Genesee County, the area’s water supply had reached a “critical stage.” In response, the Flushing Village Council approved a plan to dig a new community well and implemented a water rationing program for area residents.<sup>28</sup> These plans failed to solve the water crisis, however. At 10:30 a.m. on January 29, 1954, Flushing ran out of water and the area’s public water system shut down completely. Hoping to avert a potentially devastating public health crisis, the village council searched for new wells and implemented “Operation Tanker,” a plan to purchase and transport water from Flint via large trucks. For the remainder of the year, as village officials desperately searched for a new source, workers labored around the clock to deliver Flint water to thirsty customers in Flushing.<sup>29</sup>

For most Flushing residents, the \$7,000 that it cost to run Operation Tanker was money well spent. Yet hauling water from Flint was only a short-term solution to the community’s long-standing supply and delivery problems. On November 23, 1954, the

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<sup>26</sup> Dowdy, “Flint Area Study Leads the Way”; Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification*, 43; and *Flint Weekly Review*, June 26, 1953.

<sup>27</sup> Region V Planning and Development Commission, *1985-2010: Population Allocation Study*.

<sup>28</sup> *Flushing Observer*, December 31, 1953.

<sup>29</sup> *Flushing Observer*, February 4, 11, August 19, 1954. The Flushing case was not isolated. A similar shortage occurred in the nearby suburb of Clio a decade later. See *Clio Messenger*, August 5, 1964, March 17, 31, April 7, 1965.

Flushing Village Council passed a major new water infrastructure program. The \$300,000 project, which included a new community well, water mains, pumping equipment, a 750,000-gallon storage tower, and a well house, was the largest and costliest development ever undertaken in village history. In order to fund the new system, the village council issued revenue bonds and increased fees for water customers. Although Flushing's shortage was more severe than in other areas of the county, suburban governments across the metropolitan region confronted similar water crises during the 1950s. These emergencies forced village, city, and township governing bodies to develop expensive new urban infrastructure projects.<sup>30</sup>

The year 1954 was a momentous and pivotal one in Flushing, Michigan. Not surprisingly, the water emergency drew a great deal of attention from local observers. For many homeowners, the system's failure served as a grave reminder that the village simply could not sustain unlimited population growth. Yet the 1954 emergency did little to slow the pace of new home construction in and around the village. In 1954, builders broke all existing records by erecting fifty-nine new homes in the Flushing area, most of them located in the Bonnie View Gardens subdivision.<sup>31</sup> Because the Flushing Village Council acted quickly to resolve the water shortage, these new homeowners, as well as existing residents, could expect a stable and safe supply of drinking water into the foreseeable future.

Sewers, however, were another matter entirely. Prior to the mid-1950s, Flushing, like most other suburbs in Genesee County, had no publicly financed sewer system. Instead, homeowners used outdoor privies or septic systems, or they relied upon private

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<sup>30</sup> *Flushing Observer*, December 2, 1954.

<sup>31</sup> *Flushing Observer*, January 6, 1955.

drainage lines that emptied into the Flint River. In the fall of 1946, the Federal Works Administration approved a grant of \$130,000 to help fund a sanitary sewer system in Flushing. However, between 1946 and 1950, Flushing voters narrowly rejected two ballot proposals to raise the village's portion of the cost for new sewers.<sup>32</sup> Despite the setbacks, members of the Flushing Village Council persisted in their efforts to gain the necessary two-thirds majority of voters needed to approve the project. In March 1952, voters in Flushing, by a margin of just one vote, endorsed a \$165,000 bonding proposal to construct sewer lines and a waste treatment plant.<sup>33</sup> Convinced that they lacked a strong public mandate for the project, village officials waited until 1954 to implement the sewer program. In that year, just as the water crisis was unfolding, state officials from the Michigan Water Resources Commission threatened punitive action against Flushing and other suburbs that did not operate sanitary sewer systems. Soon after that, the FHA entered the fray. Reacting quickly to the state's announcement, the FHA ruled that it would approve no new home loans in Flushing until the village council had built a modern sewer system. Within days of the FHA's announcement, the Flushing Village Council had agreed to construct a new system—including sewer mains, an interceptor, and a disposal plant—by no later than January 1, 1957. In response to the council's pledge to act, the FHA lifted its ban in January 1955.<sup>34</sup>

The threat of losing FHA mortgage subsidies played a decisive role in shifting public opinion in favor of the new sewer project. For the most part, frustrated residents ultimately supported the village council's decision to undertake infrastructural improvements. As well, civic boosters in the area breathed a collective sigh of relief

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<sup>32</sup> *Flushing Observer*, September 26, 1946, March 16, 1950.

<sup>33</sup> *Flushing Observer*, March 13, 1952.

<sup>34</sup> *Flushing Observer*, January 13, 20, 1955.

when the FHA rescinded its prohibition of mortgage insurance for the village. Flushing boosters argued that the new improvements, while costly, were essential to maintaining growth and prosperity in the village. Local builders and other real estate investors agreed wholeheartedly. In 1956, the year after the resolution of the sewer crisis, the village issued construction permits for forty-one new homes, the second-highest total in Flushing history.<sup>35</sup> In June of that year, builders from the Labian Homes development company purchased full-page advertisements in the *Flushing Observer* to announce that new bi-level homes were available for sale in the Labian Terrace subdivision. Homes there contained many modern amenities such as built-in ranges, circuit breakers, garbage disposals, kitchen vents, spacious closets, and “DeLuxe” forced air heating. In large, bold print, the Labian Terrace advertisements also reminded potential buyers that the subdivision had the FHA’s full backing and that new homes in the neighborhood featured “All the conveniences of the Big City,” including city water, city sewers, school bus service, and paved streets. In a matter of years, the sleepy little village of Flushing had become a modern, independent city in all but name. The decision to incorporate as a home rule municipality was only just around the corner.<sup>36</sup>

### *Modernizing Suburban Government*

Like their counterparts in Davison and other growth-friendly suburbs, village officials in Flushing moved relatively swiftly during the 1950s to build new infrastructure and urbanize services for residents and business owners. In order to satisfy grassroots

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<sup>35</sup> *Flushing Observer*, January 3, 1957. On the relationship between sanitary sewers and new development, see also, “Dividends from Sanitary Sewers,” *Genesee County Herald*, September 13, 1961. An editorial in this issue of the newspaper argued that sewers brought increased revenue to suburban areas in the form of higher property values, new building starts, and industrial development.

<sup>36</sup> *Flushing Observer*, June 7, 1956.

demands for better services and to meet the stringent regulations of the FHA and the state water resources department, suburban officials in the out-county launched a number of major water and sewer projects during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1956, there were nine public water systems operating in Genesee County. Two years later, a third of Flint's suburbs possessed modern sanitary sewers. By the close of the decade, suburban officials had made great strides towards solving the short-term water and sewer crises in the out-county. These solutions cost millions of dollars, however. Between 1940 and 1956, government spending in the four townships surrounding Flint increased from a yearly average of \$8,000 to more than \$161,000. New water and sewer projects, school and road building campaigns, and other service and infrastructural improvements accounted for a major portion of the increased expenditures.<sup>37</sup> Still, however, Flint's suburbs simply could not accommodate all of the residential and business growth that occurred in the 1950s. At a 1956 meeting between local government officials, representatives of the nine area water agencies unanimously agreed that water shortages were certain to develop in the near future. "Our supply is adequate for today," they indicated. "But the future forebodes trouble." Throughout the county, private and public well operators continued to complain about dry wells, septic tank effluent, and salty drinking water.<sup>38</sup>

Inadequate water and sewer systems were only two of the many problems that new residents and business owners confronted in Flint's postwar suburbs. For most suburban families, clean water and properly functioning waste disposal systems were essential components of modern living. Yet residents also desired good schools and roads, fire and police protection, streetlights, parks, libraries, and other amenities that

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<sup>37</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Dowdy, "Most Flint-Area Communities See Water Shortage in Future," *Flint Journal*, March 18, 1956; and *Genesee County Herald*, October 22, 1958.

they had enjoyed in Flint. These suburban taxpayers also wanted local government officials to enact restrictive zoning and building codes to control residential growth, exclude poor residents and substandard housing, and protect property values. Between 1946 and 1955, twenty-three of Flint's suburbs adopted zoning ordinances. Suburban villages and cities such as Fenton, Flushing, Davison, Grand Blanc, and Mt. Morris were the first to adopt restrictive planning measures. By the mid-1950s, however, rural and semi-rural townships throughout the county had also adopted such ordinances. As part of their modernization efforts, members of the Flushing Township Board adopted a zoning plan in 1954. That same year, board members enacted a restrictive building code for new residential developments.<sup>39</sup> Under the new building and zoning codes adopted in the 1940s and 1950s, suburban governments established minimum lot sizes and construction standards for residential structures. The zoning codes in Flint and Flint Township established minimum lot sizes of five thousand square feet for most residential structures. Throughout the remainder of the county, however, minimum lot sizes were much larger. For instance, the 1947 zoning code for the city of Mt. Morris required lot sizes of at least 12,075 square feet for new homes. Residential lots in more rural areas of the out-county could be no smaller than twenty thousand square feet. The building code in Flushing Township, to cite one example, stipulated that all new homes had to sit on lots of at least one hundred by two hundred feet.<sup>40</sup>

Zoning codes and building regulations ultimately helped to bolster property values in new subdivisions while simultaneously preventing thousands of African

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<sup>39</sup> *Flushing Observer*, December 17, 1953, January 14, 1954. See also, Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 2, ch. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 2, ch. 10.



Americans and poor whites from moving to the suburbs.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, planners and other local government officials found it virtually impossible to control the 1950s building boom. Across the county, new subdivisions and shopping centers seemed to sprout overnight where farms and forests had once stood. School officials found it especially difficult to accommodate the growth of suburban Flint. At the close of World War II, schools in the out-county were still largely rural institutions. In 1947, there were ten one-room schoolhouses, twenty-eight two-room schools, and nineteen school buildings with three or more rooms in the twenty-six school districts that served the four townships surrounding Flint. All of them, according to SSRP researcher Israel Hughes, “suffer from lack of that broad tax base which educators agree is necessary for good modern schools.”<sup>42</sup> To be sure, postwar suburban growth provided a larger tax base for funding suburban schools. As well, officials in Davison and other school districts achieved more efficiency through consolidation and other political remedies. Between 1920 and 1955, a flurry of consolidations reduced the number of school districts in Genesee County from 137 to 36. These consolidations allowed school officials to deliver more cost-efficient services to students and taxpayers.<sup>43</sup> Still, though, the postwar Baby Boom resulted in massive enrollment increases throughout the county that overwhelmed teachers and school superintendents. Although the post-World War II spike in childbirths increased school enrollments everywhere, suburban residents were far more likely to be parents than were their counterparts in Flint. While only 10.7 percent of Flint’s residents were under the age of five, nearly 15 percent of the residents in Flint’s innermost suburbs

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<sup>41</sup> On the politics of zoning and residential exclusion, see Freund, *Colored Property*, 45-98, 213-240.

<sup>42</sup> Hughes, Jr., *Local Government*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 2, ch. 9.

were pre-school aged. By the mid-1950s, dozens of suburban officials throughout the county had declared that their schools were in crisis.<sup>44</sup>

In the spring of 1958, M. D. Crouse, the superintendent of schools in Flushing, announced that Flushing High School was “filled to capacity.” According to Principal Bertrand Long, the high school had actually surpassed its enrollment limit. In the high school’s home economics room, thirty-two students crowded into a space designed to hold only twenty people. The study hall facilities, built to house a maximum of 140 pupils, often contained in excess of two hundred students. “We cannot house adequately house our students now,” Superintendent Crouse warned. “We are definitely in trouble.” At Flushing High School, there was only one teacher per 33.6 students. While Flushing’s schools were among the most overcrowded in the county, they were by no means unique. Throughout Genesee County, school buildings and classrooms were filled well beyond their capacities. In the Mt. Morris and Beecher systems, for instance, the student-teacher ratios were 50:1 and 44:1, respectively. On May 26, 1958, residents of the Flushing Community Schools district moved to resolve the crisis by voting in favor of a \$1.5 million bond proposal to construct a new high school. During the 1950s, voters in dozens of suburban areas followed the same route and approved tax and bond proposals to hire new teachers and build new schools. However, school officials found that new buildings were often full within years of opening. In schools throughout the region, suburban children attended study hall in gymnasiums, took shop classes in converted coal sheds,

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<sup>44</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 1.

and learned to read in tents and rented banquet halls. Surely, these schoolchildren could have attested to the fact that Flint's suburbs contained few "bourgeois utopias."<sup>45</sup>

During the 1950s, academics from the Social Science Research Project helped to document the unforeseen problems that had accompanied suburban growth and attempted to publicize the gravity of Flint's burgeoning suburban crisis. The SSRP culminated in 1957 with the release of the *Flint Area Study Report*, a comprehensive, multivolume assessment of suburban public opinion and the pitfalls associated with unplanned development in Genesee County. The author of the *Flint Area Study Report*, Basil Zimmer, confirmed virtually all of the findings presented in the earlier reports. Zimmer found that suburban residents were far less happy than most social commentators had presumed. Complaints over the quality of the water supply, sewers, and schools, were foremost among the concerns of suburban residents. According to Zimmer, however, these were only a few of the bevy of things that angered suburban homeowners. In 1957, only 25 percent of suburban residents were happy with the quality of police protection in their neighborhoods—a surprisingly large figure in light of the fact that only four full-time police officers serviced the four townships contiguous to Flint. Less than half of the suburbanites that Zimmer and his associates polled were "very satisfied" with the garbage disposal services offered in their communities. Road conditions were also a source of discontent. A mere 17 percent of household heads living in the urban fringe reported that they were "highly satisfied" with their local streets and roads. Likewise, just 12 percent of Zimmer's suburban respondents were happy with the street lighting services in their subdivisions. Suburban residents were especially dissatisfied with library services and

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<sup>45</sup> *Flushing Observer*, May 1, 22, July 10, August 7, 1958, August 2, 1959. See also, Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 2, ch. 9. I borrow the term "bourgeois utopias" from Robert Fishman. See Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*.

the number and quality of parks and other recreational facilities available in the out-county. Moreover, one of every two household heads in suburban Flint believed that their neighborhoods lacked adequate public transportation. Regardless of the issues in question, suburban residents informed Zimmer and his SSRP colleagues that they were displeased with the governmental services and amenities available in their communities. With few exceptions, these unhappy homeowners, many of whom had formerly resided in the city, wanted to bring the conveniences of urban living to their new neighborhoods.<sup>46</sup>

Suburban residents' desires for urban services were not simply empty wishes. In most instances, homeowners expressed a determination to fund new infrastructure and services through higher taxes. As in most other metropolitan areas in the United States, the tax structure in Genesee County favored suburban taxpayers over those residing in the central city. During the postwar era, local governments in the out-county received a significant portion of their revenues through sales tax returns from the state of Michigan. In Genesee County, residents living outside of Flint paid approximately 42 percent of the local sales tax receipts yet received nearly 50 percent of the county's sales tax returns. Because suburban areas received a disproportionately large part of their revenue from sales tax returns, local officials in the out-county were able to keep residential property taxes extremely low during the Depression and the early postwar era. Additionally, low taxes in the suburbs resulted from the fact that village and township officials required

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<sup>46</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 1, ch. 3. See also, *Flint City – Fringe Survey*, 1-14; and Zimmer, *Demographic Handbook of Flint Metropolitan Area* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Human Adjustment, University of Michigan, 1955); Zimmer and Hawley, "Approaches to the Solution of Fringe Problems," 258-268; Zimmer and Hawley, "Property Taxes and Solutions to Fringe Problems: Attitudes of Residents of the Flint Metropolitan Area," *Land Economics* 32:4 (November 1956): 369-376; E. J. Elliott, Hetrick, and S. Johnson, *Urban-Fringe Problem*, 1-46; Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification*, 41-45; and Zimmer and Hawley, "Suburbanization and Some of Its Consequences," *Land Economics* 37:1 (February 1961): 88-93.

only minimal revenues to fund the basic services provided to suburban taxpayers. According to one study conducted during the mid-1950s, only 18 percent of suburban homeowners in Genesee County paid more than \$100 per year in local property taxes. Even among wealthy suburban homeowners whose residences were worth more than \$15,000, nearly 60 percent paid less than \$100 each year in property taxes.<sup>47</sup>

On average, suburban residents paid lower taxes than their counterparts in Flint. Nevertheless, assessments varied widely across the county depending upon property valuation policies, the number of industrial and commercial facilities in the taxing unit, and the services provided to residents. Assessors in Flint taxed residential properties at a rate of 85.75 percent of the state's equalized value. However, in Burton Township, which claimed a number of valuable industrial and commercial establishments, local tax officials could afford to assess residential properties at only 19.95 percent of their value. Similarly, Flint Township, which received most of its taxes from GM's plants on Van Slyke Road, assessed properties at only a fraction of their market worth. By contrast, city officials in Davison, who relied almost exclusively on residential and commercial tax revenues to fund local schools and government, could not provide the same subsidies to homeowners. In Davison, municipal authorities assessed properties at 59.1 percent of their value. The higher property tax assessments in Davison reflected both the lack of industrial facilities in the area and the city's strong commitment to providing urbanized services in a largely residential suburb.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v.1, ch. 7. See also, Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification*, 51.

<sup>48</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v.1, ch. 7; Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification*, 49-51.

Scholars of postwar metropolitan history often describe suburban white homeowners and taxes in starkly oppositional terms.<sup>49</sup> However, the history of postwar suburban development in Genesee County severely undermines this analytical framework. Beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s, suburban officials in Genesee County increasingly followed the Davison and Flushing models by raising taxes and fees to meet the growing infrastructure and service needs of suburban homeowners. By and large, suburbanites welcomed their new tax burdens. At best, the quest for lower taxes played only a minor role in driving the postwar suburban migrations of white homeowners in Genesee County. Once they arrived in their new subdivisions, suburban homeowners pressed local government officials to build new schools, sewers, and roads—even if that translated into a higher tax burden. In 1948, SSRP researcher Betty Tableman found that less than a quarter of suburban homeowners moved to the out-county in search of lower taxes.<sup>50</sup> By 1955, that number had declined significantly. During the spring and summer of that year, SSRP members interviewed 670 homeowners in Genesee County on their attitudes towards taxes and services. Of the suburban homeowners they spoke with, only 4 percent cited lower taxes among their reasons for moving to the suburbs. Furthermore, nearly 70 percent of the fringe residents interviewed supported tax increases. “Contrary to popular belief,” Zimmer and his colleague Amos Hawley wrote, “the fringe residents are much more receptive to the payment of higher taxes than are central city residents.”<sup>51</sup> The overwhelming support for higher taxes reflected the growing consensus among suburban homeowners that services

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<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*; and Self, *American Babylon*, 96-131. Self argues that suburban development was “predicated on maximizing property value and keeping taxes low.”

<sup>50</sup> Tableman, *Intra-Community Migration*, ii.

<sup>51</sup> See Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 3, ch. 18; and Zimmer and Hawley, “Property Taxes and Solutions to Fringe Problems,” 369-376.

and infrastructure in the out-county were insufficient to meet FHA standards, public health mandates, and the service needs of growing families.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, tens of thousands of suburban residents in Genesee County embraced higher taxes in exchange for better schools and urban services. Without hesitation, village councils, township boards, and school officials usually accommodated those wishes. In 1947, Israel Hughes found that nearly half of the residents of suburban Genesee County paid a higher overall millage rate than citizens in Flint. These higher rates derived in part from the practice of undervaluing suburban properties for tax purposes. More importantly, however, suburban homeowners saw their millage rates and tax payments increase in the postwar decades because of special, voter-approved levies to fund water projects, sewer systems, and new teachers and school facilities.<sup>52</sup> Schools were paramount in shifting the suburban tax structure. “The school tax, in all areas,” SSRP researchers concluded, “is the major burden placed on property owners since the revenue needs are much larger in respect to education, than for any other function of government.” Taxes in suburban Flint varied widely, correlating closely with population, the size of the tax base, the rate at which officials assessed properties, and the willingness of voters to endorse tax increases earmarked for schools, sewers, and other capital improvements. Even within local political jurisdictions, voters paid differential payments that varied considerably depending upon the school district in which their property was located. Regardless of the location, however, taxes rose dramatically in suburban Flint during the 1950s. In a number of cases, suburban homeowners shouldered a significantly higher burden than city residents, primarily due to the cost of financing schools. For instance, the owner of a \$20,000 home in the city of

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<sup>52</sup> Hughes, Jr., *Local Government*, 27.

Flint paid a total of \$195 in school and county property taxes in 1955. In Flint, school taxes accounted for three-fourths of the overall \$195 payment. During the same year, owners of \$20,000 homes in Burton Township's Atherton School District paid \$251, of which 80 percent went towards the cost of operating schools. Unlike the Carman school system, the nearby Dye School District of Flint Township received no taxes from GM's Van Slyke complex. Consequently, homeowners in the Dye area who inhabited identically valued structures in 1955 paid \$218 to fund schools and \$36 in county property taxes, for a total tax payment of \$254. "When services are considered," Homer Dowdy asserted, many suburban residents "find they're now paying as high taxes as their City friends. . . ." "Their millage in some cases is just as high as in the City, although assessed valuations are not." On a per capita basis, government in suburban Flint was more costly than in the central city. Few suburban residents objected to that, however.<sup>53</sup>

### *The Birth of Suburban Identity*

When they left Flint, most suburban migrants knew only basic facts about their new communities. The most careful homebuyers no doubt conducted research on property values, investigated zoning restrictions, and measured the quality of a neighborhood's housing stock and utility services prior to purchasing new homes. Other families visited local schools and inquired about taxes before investing their hard-earned money in new homes in suburban subdivisions. For most suburban homesteaders, however, the search for real estate in Genesee County hinged on the quality and affordability of particular homes in discrete neighborhoods. Few suburban homebuyers had either the time or the inclination to conduct extensive research on the governmental services available in the

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<sup>53</sup> Dowdy, "Area Population"; and Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification*, 50.



suburbs—or, for that matter, on the broader political structures of their new cities, villages, and townships—before they moved. Even fewer residents understood with any precision what it meant to be a resident of a place such as Flushing, Mt. Morris, or Burton Township. Prior to the 1950s, prospective suburban migrants and new residents of the out-county had yet to form explicit identities as suburbanites.

In the 1950s, suburban identities in Genesee County began to coalesce as homeowners—both on their own and collectively—worked to mitigate the unsatisfactory living conditions in the out-county. After moving to their new subdivisions, most suburban homeowners were surprised and disappointed with the quality of suburban infrastructure, low property values, and the lack of urban amenities available to residents. Anger and frustration over substandard services and living conditions brought residents together politically and socially, helping to trigger a new sense of civic identity among suburban homeowners. Parents who were upset over pupil overcrowding joined their local PTA and worked to support new taxes to fund school construction. Homeowners joined neighborhood associations and block clubs in order to police their subdivisions, maintain racial segregation, protect property values, and exclude low-income rental units. Concerned residents united to urge their township supervisors to put up new streetlights, build water and sewer systems, and pave dirt roads. As tax rates climbed to fund such improvement efforts, residents of the out-county began to see themselves and their communities in a different light. The urbanization of Flint’s suburbs spawned new forms of civic engagement and a new independent political consciousness among residents of suburban Genesee County. The creation of water and sewer service districts, the establishment of school attendance boundaries, and the drive to develop infrastructure

helped suburban residents to attach meaning to their new status. Moreover, these campaigns to urbanize the suburbs forced migrants to forge new identities as members of specific social and political units.

This nascent suburban identity manifested itself in a variety of complex and often contradictory ways. During the late 1940s and 1950s, suburban retailers and boosters across the county launched major public relations campaigns to persuade residents to patronize local stores instead of shopping in Flint. In 1948, merchants in Fenton unveiled the new slogan, “Buy, Build, Believe in Fenton,” to boost local sales and tax revenues.<sup>54</sup> A year later, the *Fenton Independent* published a full-page advertisement that informed readers, “You get more for the dollar you spend in Fenton.” The advertisement offered seven reasons why Fenton residents should do business with local merchants. In addition to pointing out that village residents could save on gasoline and parking fees by shopping closer to home, the advertisement appealed to the civic pride and shared financial interests of local community members. “Your money spent in Fenton provides better jobs for people who work in Fenton.” Equally important, the advertisement also informed readers that a healthy local economy provided many benefits to taxpayers. “Your money spent in Fenton comes back to you in the support of your village schools, your churches, your clubs . . . in fact every project that requires money and maintenance.” “Increased retail business,” the advertisement continued, “will either lower your contribution to any given Fenton project or make the project better financially.” The architects of this public relations campaign believed that Fenton residents, by shopping locally, strengthened the civic bonds that united residents into a coherent, distinct

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<sup>54</sup> *Fenton Independent*, n.d. [ca. December 1948].

community. “Beyond the money advantage,” the advertisement concluded, “you have the satisfaction of being on the team that is Fenton.”<sup>55</sup>

Like the grassroots agitation for new sewers and school tax levies, suburban shopping campaigns were essential components of community building. As such, they were exceedingly common during the postwar era. On December 4, 1952, business owners in Flushing announced the “Shop Flushing First” initiative to lure holiday customers. In a full-page advertisement that ran in the *Flushing Observer*, sponsors of this effort urged residents to “deal with the folks you know” rather than the unknown proprietors in downtown Flint.

Just figure the savings you make by doing your Christmas shopping with the local merchants in Flushing. You save money by shopping here where prices are fair and the values the best. . . . You save the expense of gasoline and parking. By taking advantage of the convenience of doing all your gift buying here in Flushing, you save time and effort also.<sup>56</sup>

Through their participation in such campaigns, suburban shoppers no doubt gained a heightened sense of civic pride and a stronger emotional and financial attachment to their new communities. At the same time, school levy and local consumer campaigns reminded suburban homeowners that their civic and financial interests were no longer synonymous with those of Vehicle City residents. Indeed, community solidarity in the cities, villages, and townships of suburban Flint derived as much from the feeling that suburbanites shared a distinctive identity vis-à-vis Flint residents as it did from any positive sense of civic pride in new suburban communities. Though suburbanites often fought among themselves about how best, or whether at all, to modernize their new

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<sup>55</sup> *Fenton Independent*, n.d. [ca. December 1949].

<sup>56</sup> *Flushing Observer*, December 4, 1952.

governments, all residents of the out-county could agree on at least one thing—by choice, Flint was no longer their home community.

Many suburban residents envied Flint’s community schools and the high-quality services available to Vehicle City residents. By advocating improved schools and modern community water systems, suburban activists sought to replicate the services they had enjoyed in the city. Yet those same individuals were vehemently opposed to annexation. During their 1955 survey of Genesee County, SSRP researchers queried suburban residents on their feelings towards annexation, city-suburban cooperation, and other political solutions to the service and infrastructure crises of the out-county. Among the suburban residents polled, only 9.1 percent endorsed annexation. Only a slightly larger minority of suburban residents, approximately 28 percent, expressed support for some form of cooperative governmental arrangement between the city of Flint and the surrounding townships. Talk of annexation was especially irksome to suburban residents. In 1957, Basil Zimmer and Amos Hawley reported the startling fact that nearly two-thirds of suburbanites in Genesee County would never, under any circumstance, vote for annexation. In survey after survey, suburban homeowners made it clear that they wished to obtain city services without actually becoming part of the city of Flint. For Zimmer and his colleagues, this meant that any solution to the “fringe problem” would have to come through other, more creative means.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 3, 17-18; Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification*, 48.

*The Battle over New Flint*

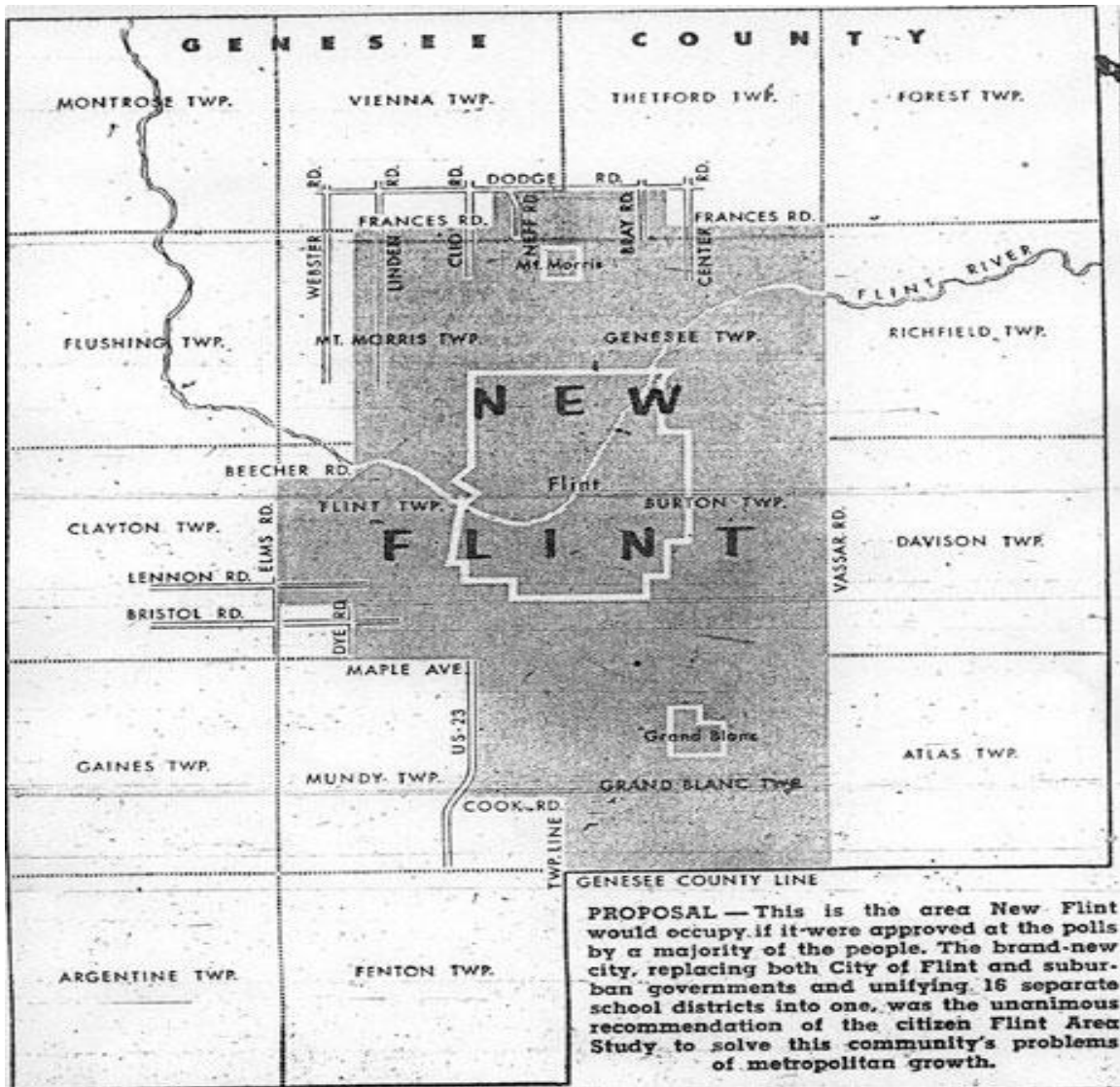
Basil Zimmer and his colleagues from the Social Science Research Project believed that they had an answer to suburban anger and other manifestations of unplanned metropolitan development. According to Zimmer, the fringe problem derived from a mismatch between the limited resources of out-county governments and the increasing desire for urban services among suburban employers and homeowners. Residents and business owners wanted better schools and roads, clean water, sanitary sewers, and planned industrial growth, yet their arcane township governments did not possess all of the taxing power required to fund such development. “The headless organization that law and tradition have made townships has bred inertia, inefficiency and inadequacy of services,” Homer Dowdy observed.<sup>58</sup> Fortuitously, as Zimmer believed, the problems of the urban fringe dovetailed perfectly with widespread concerns in Flint over the suburbanization of homeowners and industry. Although the city possessed the municipal services required to sustain new subdivisions, shopping centers, and industrial plants, it lacked the necessary land for expansion. Undeveloped land was still plentiful in suburban Genesee County, however. “The city of Flint has the service and the Flint area has the space to form a perfect union for the benefit of all,” proponents of metropolitan government claimed.<sup>59</sup> Seeking to unite the city and suburbs over a shared set of problems, Zimmer and his colleagues proposed New Flint, a plan “that would establish a single governmental structure over the present and future densely settled urbanized area.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Dowdy, “Area Population.”

<sup>59</sup> “Presentation for the New City of Flint.”

<sup>60</sup> Zimmer, *Flint Area Study Report*, v. 3, ch. 21.



Map 6.1. Map of New Flint boundaries, 1958. Courtesy of *Flint Journal*.

From the outset, proponents of metropolitan government faced stiff opposition in industrialized suburbs. In rapidly developing areas such as Flint Township, home of GM's \$78 million complex of Chevrolet plants, anti-Flint sentiment was especially pronounced. Fearing that Flint city commissioners would attempt to annex the GM plants on Bristol and Van Slyke Roads, which funded 80 percent of the township's Carman School District, in 1954 Flint Township Supervisor Arthur R. Markham led an

unsuccessful ballot initiative to incorporate the area into the city of Westhaven.<sup>61</sup> The 1954 incorporation measure, along with several additional aborted attempts, failed in large part because voters wished to preserve what was left of the area's semi-rural character. As well, many Flint Township homeowners declined to support the effort because they feared the potentially astronomical costs associated with incorporation. Moreover, residents blocked the incorporation move because they concluded that city governments were too bureaucratic and far removed from the day-to-day concerns of ordinary residents.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, Markham's staunch opposition to both annexation and metropolitan government received widespread support from taxpayers in Flint Township. Seeking to preempt future drives towards suburban incorporation, advocates of metropolitan government sprang into action during the mid-1950s by organizing the Flint Area Study Group and the New Flint Planning Committee. Following several years of additional research and planning, proponents of New Flint officially unveiled their proposal in 1957.

The New Flint plan sought to unite twenty-six governmental units within the urbanized area of Genesee County into a single city with a unified school district and a regional planning agency. The proposed new city, over 162-square miles in total area, included the cities of Flint, Mt. Morris, and Grand Blanc, the townships of Grand Blanc, Genesee, and Burton, along with portions of Flint, Mt. Morris, Mundy, Vienna, and Thetford Townships.<sup>63</sup> Well aware of suburban public opinion on annexation, advocates of the New Flint plan framed their proposal as neither an attempt to consolidate existing

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<sup>61</sup> Dowdy, "Proposed Westhaven Much Like Livonia," in *Where's Flint Going?*; Dowdy, "300 Flint Township Residents Hold Meeting in Utley School," *Flint Journal*, August 6, 1956.

<sup>62</sup> Hawley and Zimmer, *Resistance to Governmental Unification*, 53-59.

<sup>63</sup> Dowdy, "Reasoning Behind 'New Flint' Plan Given," *Flint Journal*, October 27, 1957; "Committee for 'New Flint' Outlines Plans, Proposals," *AC Sparkler*, June 12, 1958.

governments nor a scheme to acquire new land for the city. Rather, the New Flint proposal asked voters in all affected areas to create a new city altogether. By creating a new and much larger city, Zimmer, Sheldon LaTourette, and the other architects of New Flint hoped to stimulate economic growth, modernize the county's infrastructure, deliver greater governmental efficiency, and ensure parity for all taxpayers and schoolchildren. "With its 26 separate governments," a New Flint publication noted, "the present Flint Community is like an automobile consisting of a Chevrolet engine – Cadillac body – Ford transmission – Buick chassis – and Chrysler wheels. . . . But, it can virtually be Aladdin and his magic lamp bringing PROGRESS – SECURITY – OPPORTUNITIES for each and every one of us!"<sup>64</sup>

Understanding the cleavages that divided urban and suburban voters, New Flint supporters crafted a sophisticated marketing campaign that they hoped would appeal to city dwellers and suburbanites alike. For residents of industrialized suburbs such as Burton and Flint Townships, who most feared losing their GM plants, New Flint advocates promised to bring new sewers, clean water, fire and police protection, and paved roads. In residential suburbs, however, where homeowners alone bore the cost of schools and infrastructure development, proponents of New Flint focused on education, offering a unified school district with equalized educational expenditures and taxes. "Plants now located in townships belong to all the people in the community," Zimmer asserted at a New Flint Rally in Mt. Morris, "not just to those who happen to live on one side of the road and therefore in one school district and not another." Inside the city, the New Flint marketing campaign centered on economic growth, the recapture of "runaway"

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<sup>64</sup> "Presentation for the New City of Flint." Also, see "Why a New City?" Manley Papers, box 4, 78-8.1-67, Scharzburg Archives.



plants, and the preservation of urban manufacturing: “In the NEW city of Flint there will be ample room and facilities to entice new industries and the expansion of present industries for the benefit of all,” New Flint supporters claimed. “Industrial development has reached its peak in the Flint area unless a more favorable atmosphere can be created.” At a July 1958 rally held in Mt. Morris, New Flint supporter Lewis Shegos urged voters to endorse the plan out of concern for their children: “Think about where your boy is going to get a job if we don’t create the conditions for bringing in industry.” Moreover, supporters of metropolitan government argued that Flint, a city whose products helped to drive suburban development across the nation, had a special duty to help solve regional development problems. “It has been said . . .,” Dowdy wrote, “that, since Flint has contributed so greatly to suburban living by helping motorize America, it has an obligation to contribute to the solution of suburban problems.”<sup>65</sup> New Flint boosters believed that they could sell their plan to virtually all of the region’s constituencies.<sup>66</sup>

With its emphasis on governmental efficiency and economic growth, the New Flint plan attracted strong support from GM executives and other members of the city’s pro-growth coalition. Indeed, the leadership of the New Flint Planning Committee included Harding Mott, vice-president of the Mott Foundation, AC Spark Plug executive Joseph Anderson, “Oz” Kelly of the Manufacturers Association of Flint, and local business managers from Consumers Power Company. “We need one government unit that should include all of Genesee County,” Anderson claimed. “Just think of all the

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<sup>65</sup> Dowdy, “Flint Area Study Leads the Way.”

<sup>66</sup> “Three Tell New Flint Advantages,” *Flint Journal*, July 8, 1958; and “Presentation for the New City of Flint.” See also, “Why a New City?”

money that would save.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Mayor George Algoe and his colleagues on the Flint City Commission unanimously endorsed the measure.<sup>68</sup> Wishing to create new jobs, Robert Carter, the regional director of the UAW, and Norm Bully, president of the Flint CIO, also offered their endorsement of the New Flint plan.<sup>69</sup> Among black residents, the New Flint proposal failed to generate similar enthusiasm, however, in part because neither the Flint Area Study Group nor the New Flint Planning Committee had any black members. The Flint NAACP and Urban League chapters took no formal position on the issue, and many black voters, even those who saw the promise of a larger new city, resented New Flint’s designers for shutting them out of the planning process. Throughout the mid-1950s campaign for a new city, advocates of regional government consistently failed to address the special concerns of black voters. In particular, African Americans in the city feared that a New Flint, significantly larger and whiter than the Old Flint, would undermine black political power by diminishing the black portion of the electorate.

Undeterred by black ambivalence toward the new city, New Flint supporters aggressively canvassed white voters in the city and suburbs for their support. In suburban Flint, proponents of New Flint engendered a hostile response among homeowners and government officials. In the fall of 1957, shortly after the release of the proposal, Earl H. Swift, a county supervisor who represented the south suburb of Grand Blanc, expressed his opposition:

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<sup>67</sup> This is from an undated speech that Anderson gave in the 1950s. See Joseph A. Anderson Papers, Perry Archives.

<sup>68</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, March 10, May 19, 1958. See also, *Flint Journal*, September 16, 1958.

<sup>69</sup> “Personnel of New Flint Committee Represents Area Cross Section,” *Flint Journal*, n.d. [1958]. The author of the article neglected to mention that the New Flint Committee had no African-American or women members.

I'm not for it. I think we can run our own business without Flint coming in. The only reason Flint wants Grand Blanc is because of the [GM] tank plant. . . . Flint's got to the place where they can't expand anymore and this deal is all to their advantage, not to ours. I've talked to a lot of people and found only one in favor of it.

John R. Dickenson, a supervisor representing Flint Township, concurred with his colleague, claiming, "The biggest majority out here are against it [New Flint]. They moved out to get away from the city as it was."<sup>70</sup>

Swift and Dickenson were correct in anticipating the grassroots suburban response to New Flint. Indeed, very few suburban residents rose in support of the plan. Beginning in the spring of 1958, New Flint activists circulated petitions to have the proposal placed on the fall ballot. The simmering suburban opposition to New Flint exploded yet again in April 1958, when Carman School District Superintendent Frank Hartman vowed to fight against the plan.<sup>71</sup> Following Hartman's announcement, school district and township officials in Grand Blanc, Burton Township, Beecher, and Flint Township united in quick succession against the initiative. In order to increase support for the measure, Zimmer and other New Flint supporters hosted a series of meetings throughout the county in the spring and summer of 1958. Much to Zimmer's consternation, thousands of suburban officials and residents attended the informational meetings to voice their opposition. On April 10, at a New Flint meeting hosted by Sheldon LaTourette in Mt. Morris Township, an unidentified woman denounced the plan: "Flint doesn't need us and we don't need Flint." Towards the end of the meeting, another unnamed skeptic invited LaTourette to visit new schools in the suburb of Beecher, home to GM's massive Ternstedt plant: "There is not one thing in New Flint that can help us in

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<sup>70</sup> "Area Opposition Develops to Proposal for Greater Flint," *Flint Weekly Review*, November 14, 1957.

<sup>71</sup> "Carman Educator Vows to Fight 'New Flint,'" *Flint Journal*, n.d. [April 1958]. Also, see *Flint Journal*, March 19, 1958.

Beecher.”<sup>72</sup> At meeting after meeting, suburban residents from across the county turned out by the hundreds to condemn the creation of a new city.

By the summer of 1958, suburban opponents of metropolitan government had formed the New Flint Resistance Committee (NFRC). Led by Louis Traycik, a resident of Grand Blanc, Carman Schools Superintendent Frank Hartman, and Joseph Parisi of the Michigan Township Association, members of the NFRC charged that New Flint, a scheme to steal suburban resources and “subjugate our suburban people,” would only bring higher taxes, unmanageable government bureaucracies, and poorer schools. “Super cities,” NFRC petitions claimed, “mean super tax dollars.”<sup>73</sup> Already having voted to fund community water systems and new school facilities, residents in Mt. Morris and other urbanized suburbs viewed with great skepticism any plan that threatened to raise additional taxes—especially when those taxes were to fund either existing or forthcoming services. “We’ll eventually have sewers and things anyway,” Flint Township Supervisor Dickenson maintained.<sup>74</sup>

Significantly, many opponents of New Flint argued that a metropolitan government would forever undermine their new civic identities as suburbanites. After attending a March meeting in Grand Blanc, *Flint Journal* reporter Lou Giampetroni described how the development of self-conscious suburban identities was undermining support for New Flint: “At the meeting there was not as much an indication of being ‘against New Flint’ as there was ‘for Grand Blanc.’ Those at the meeting indicated that

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<sup>72</sup> Gordon Gapper, “Newness of ‘New Flint’ Stressed,” *Flint Journal*, April 11, 1958.

<sup>73</sup> Lou Giampetroni, “Petitions Seek to Ban New Flint Election,” *Flint Journal*, June 10, 1958; “New Flint Foes Outline Opposition to Platform,” *Flint Journal*, October 8, 1958.

<sup>74</sup> “Area Opposition Develops.”

they wanted to keep their identity as a community.”<sup>75</sup> Similarly, at an anti-New Flint rally held at Davison High School, Traycik argued, “We are trying to retain local democracy. If this thing goes through you’ll lose the common touch.”<sup>76</sup> Whether they were pro-suburban or anti-Flint, thousands of suburban residents united around the NFRC to block the New Flint initiative.

The New Flint proposal generated an especially vigorous backlash in the suburb of Swartz Creek. Enraged by the plan, voters there seceded from both Flints, existing and proposed, by incorporating as a city. Prior to 1958, Swartz Creek, located ten miles southwest of downtown Flint, was an unincorporated, predominantly residential area consisting of parts of Gaines, Clayton, and Flint Townships. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Swartz Creek area was among the fastest growing residential suburbs in the county. In 1957, GM provided a major boost to the local economy by opening a new Chevrolet parts and service plant in the area. Fearing that members of the Flint City Commission would attempt to annex the new facility, residents of these three townships attended a series of meetings in the fall of 1957 to discuss the possibility of incorporation. Local residents Paul Spaniola, John Pajtas, and other supporters of incorporation moved quickly to mobilize concerned property owners upon learning of the New Flint proposal. In November 1957, one hundred residents attended a public meeting to discuss incorporation. Shortly after the meeting, those who supported a new city formed the Swartz Creek Incorporation Study Committee. Within weeks of the November meeting, members of the study committee and other supporters of incorporation were drawing boundaries for the new city and collecting signatures to have the measure placed on the

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<sup>75</sup> *Flint Journal*, March 13, 1958.

<sup>76</sup> “Township Association Members Sponsor ‘New Flint’ Protest,” *Davison Index*, July 10, 1958.

ballot. On March 7, 1958, proponents of the new city submitted petitions for an incorporation election to the county clerk. After certifying the petitions, the clerk scheduled an election for August 5, 1958.<sup>77</sup>

Throughout the spring and summer of 1958, proponents of the home rule city of Swartz Creek waged vigorous campaigns both for municipal incorporation and against New Flint. The editors of the *Genesee County Free Press*, a weekly newspaper serving the area, led the campaign for the new city. In the months leading up to the election, the *Free Press* printed a series of articles detailing the many benefits of incorporation. The editors maintained that incorporation would preserve the area's tax base and provide funds to pave new streets and sidewalks, build new schools, provide better police protection, and lure new development. The quest for more modern, urban-style services played a key role in driving the Swartz Creek incorporation campaign. Nevertheless, for most residents of the Swartz Creek area, the single most important issue to be resolved in the August election was the fate of the GM plant. "We must incorporate now to keep the tax base backing of the Chevrolet Plant in our school district," members of the incorporation study committee urged. In response to such pleas, New Flint boosters quickly pointed out that the boundaries of the new megacity included neither the proposed city of Swartz Creek nor GM's new warehouse facility. Not convinced by such reassurances, incorporation activists in Swartz Creek argued that New Flint, if implemented, would ultimately lead to the annexation of the Chevrolet facility and the evisceration of the area's tax base. "If this city incorporation fails to pass, there is a possibility the plant will be annexed to Flint. If this happens our backing per school child will DECREASE 50%. We need this plant! We must vote YES!" Fears over losing the

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<sup>77</sup> *Genesee County Free Press*, December 5, 1957, January 9, March 27, April 3, 17, 24, 1958.

plant at some future date drove hundreds of Swartz Creek residents to the polls in the summer of 1958. On August 5, Swartz Creek voters declared their independence from Flint by endorsing the incorporation measure. Two days after the election, the *Genesee County Free Press* celebrated the victory and looked ahead to the city's future: "There are bound to be problems [that] arise, and the difficulties to be surmounted should not be minimized but we at last have the tools to work with to solve our own problems. . . . We are in an enviable position as far as a tax base is concerned and by using common sense and making haste slowly we can start to solve our problems."<sup>78</sup>

The incorporation of Swartz Creek came as a stunning blow to supporters of regional government. Nevertheless, because Swartz Creek was not included in the New Flint boundaries, the campaign for a new metropolitan polity continued. Throughout the summer of 1958, New Flint supporters collected petitions from voters to have the initiative placed on the November ballot. Despite strong grassroots opposition in suburban Genesee County, the well-funded supporters of New Flint had little difficulty collecting the required signatures. In August, New Flint advocates submitted their petitions for certification to the Genesee County Board of Supervisors. Led by Supervisor Thomas E. Bell of Mt. Morris Township, suburban opponents of New Flint formed a clear majority on the county board. Fearful of losing electoral support, political power—and perhaps even their jobs—if New Flint became a reality, township representatives on the board of supervisors formed a solid block against the New Flint measure. Although the board's legislative affairs committee had determined that the New Flint petitions were valid and legal, Bell nonetheless urged all suburban supervisors to reject the initiative. On August 12, suburban supervisors delivered Bell a major

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<sup>78</sup> *Genesee County Free Press*, April 24, May 1, 8, 22, 29, June 12, 19, 26, July 3, 10, 24, August 7, 1958.

political victory by denying the New Flint petitions. Acting against the advice of their own legal counsel, county supervisors, by a vote of twenty-five to thirteen, declined to place the New Flint proposal on the fall ballot.<sup>79</sup>

Following the August vote, members of the New Flint Planning Committee filed an emergency appeal with the Michigan Supreme Court. In a widely circulated press release, committee members urged the court to overturn the board's decision: "The supporters of New Flint firmly believe that the people have the right to vote on this proposal. They have legally petitioned the Board of Supervisors to grant them their rights."<sup>80</sup> Members of the NFRC responded to the charges by invoking the constitutional principles protecting the rights of minorities. "The American concept of justice in government grants no given majority the power of indiscriminate transgression upon the rights of its ranking minorities," a NFRC statement countered.<sup>81</sup> After agreeing to hear the New Flint appeal, justices on the state supreme court hosted a hearing on September 9. On behalf of the county board of supervisors, attorney John G. David argued that consolidation, rather than incorporation, was the only legal means of forming New Flint. Furthermore, David reminded the justices that incorporation was legal only in unincorporated areas. Because New Flint included already incorporated cities such as Grand Blanc and Mt. Morris, David urged the court to rule against the New Flint ballot initiative.

On October 8, 1958, the justices delivered a mortal blow to the New Flint plan. In a unanimous decision authored by Justice Harry F. Kelly, the court accepted David's

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<sup>79</sup> "Bell Will Lead Battle against 'New Flint' Vote," *Flint Journal*, August 6, 1958; "Supervisors Act against Legal Counsel," *Flint Journal*, August 12, 1958.

<sup>80</sup> *Flint Journal*, August 13, 1958.

<sup>81</sup> *Flint Journal*, October 2, 1958.



arguments on consolidation and refused to order the November election.<sup>82</sup> Although Kelly's legal opinion kept alive the possibility of a new consolidation campaign, the October ruling marked the unofficial end of the movement for metropolitan government in Genesee County. For regardless of the openings left by the court's decision or the machinations of New Flint's powerful devotees, suburban voters had clearly triumphed over GM executives, local growth boosters, and metropolitan activists by voicing their strong opposition to metropolitan government. New Flint was dead, and, to many city boosters, Old Flint seemed to be dying.

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During the postwar era, suburban homeowners and their governments in Genesee County underwent striking changes. These transformations emerged from a combination of grassroots demands for services and the top-down policy initiatives of corporate leaders and elected officials. In the 1940s and 1950s, federal and local housing and economic development policies exerted intense pressure on suburban officials to modernize their "horse and buggy" governments. Simultaneously, new suburban homeowners demanded better, urban-style services from their local elected officials. The urbanization of suburban governments helped to generate a secessionist spirit among white suburbanites in Genesee County. The polarizing battles over New Flint illustrated—and, ultimately, widened—the growing rifts between urban and suburban voters and politicians in Genesee County. In the decade following the New Flint defeat, the relationships between Flint and its suburbs deteriorated even further as city officials devised new strategies to

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<sup>82</sup> *Taliaferro v. Genesee County Supervisors*, 354 Mich. 49, 92 N.W. 2d 319 (1958); "Plea to Force Nov. 4 Vote Is Rejected," *Flint Journal*, October 8, 1958.

enlarge the city's boundaries, recapture suburban industry, and assemble developable urban land. Those efforts centered on the Flint City Commission's two-pronged strategy to annex suburban factories and shopping centers and clear "blighted" residential land in the city through urban renewal. For their part, suburban officials responded to the prospect of annexation by rushing to incorporate into either cities or independent "charter townships." In the 1960s, political battles over space, jobs, and taxes produced a fractured metropolitan region with a rigidly segregated, rapidly deindustrializing, and increasingly black central city at its core.

Secessionist political sentiment among suburban opponents of New Flint did not originate as a backlash against the perceived racial threats of metropolitan government. During the 1940s and 1950s, suburban migrants almost never cited race as one of the factors that informed their decisions to leave the city. Of the city dwellers who moved to suburban Flint between 1945 and 1960, the overwhelming majority left behind neighborhoods that were still all white. Moreover, white suburban opponents of the New Flint proposal seldom inserted race, at least not openly, into the political debates over metropolitan government. Race did not play a central role in driving the movement to defeat New Flint. Rather, the opposition to New Flint resulted from the spatial and political reorganization of the metropolis orchestrated by a combination of pro-growth federal and local development policies, corporate growth strategies, and the grassroots efforts of local homeowners to urbanize their local governments. Nevertheless, this did not mean that suburban residents in any way supported the opening of their neighborhoods and communities to African-American families. To the contrary, white

homeowners in suburban Flint were as committed as their counterparts in the city to maintaining rigid residential and school segregation.

During the 1950s, race simmered beneath the surface of political debates on annexation and metropolitan government. In the decade following the defeat of New Flint, the racial fears of suburban white homeowners exploded into the open, however. Though very few suburbanites mentioned African Americans when they denounced New Flint, within a few short years of its defeat white opponents of annexation were making open appeals to race. What had changed? Prior to the 1960s, the racial caste system that prevailed in postwar Genesee County had yet to come under sustained attack from civil rights activists. Because suburbanites and proponents of New Flint were equally committed to maintaining racial segregation, few suburban residents perceived that regional government posed any threat to Jim Crow. During the 1960s, however, black activists mounted a direct attack on the region's residential and educational color lines. The 1960s desegregation campaigns brought the issue of race—and the racial implications of whites-only suburban development—into the center of local political debates in both the city and the out-county.

**Demolition Means Progress:  
Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan**

**(Volume 2)**

by

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## **Part 2: Civil Rights, Suburban Revolts, and the Roots of the Rust Belt**

### **Chapter 7**

#### **“Our City Believes in Lily-White Neighborhoods”: The Campaign for Open Housing**

The spatial reorganization of metropolitan Flint engendered political upheavals both in the all-white suburbs and among African Americans living inside the central city. In 1958, suburban opponents of metropolitan government organized a successful legal and political movement to block the New Flint proposal. While suburban homeowners, village councils, and township boards worked to consolidate their independence from Flint, civil rights activists in the city were preparing to launch major campaigns for open housing and school desegregation. The open housing movement began quietly in the 1940s and 1950s, exploded across the city in the 1960s, and reached a denouement in 1967-68. Prior to the late 1960s, fair housing activists in Flint met stiff resistance from local housing officials, white homeowners, and members of the Flint City Commission. In the summer of 1967, however, as urban riots exploded in the Vehicle City and in nearby Detroit, Flint activists forced reluctant city commissioners to pass a municipal fair housing law. A year later, open housing supporters defended the city's new law in a hotly contested referendum campaign. The 1968 victory made Flint voters the first in the nation to endorse open housing at the polls. In the wake of the 1968 referendum, civic boosters, many of whom had done little to support open housing, cheered the city's

historic civil rights milestone, arguing that the new law made Flint one of the most progressive and “open” cities in the United States. Despite such claims, however, the 1968 referendum did little to undermine the economic, political, and social foundations of the color line. By the close of the decade, the battles over open housing had yielded a polarized, politically fractured metropolitan area sharply divided along racial and spatial lines.<sup>1</sup>

### *Postwar Politics and the Origins of Flint’s Fair Housing Movement*

Like many politically moderate African Americans in the Vehicle city, Urban League officials Frank Corbett and Arthur Edmunds embraced the private market as a solution to the city’s postwar Negro housing crisis. During the 1950s, Corbett, Edmunds, and other Urban League officials sought to persuade developers, lenders, and realtors that individual black buyers as well as African-American communities were safe investments for the city’s booming real estate industry. In 1954, Corbett and Edmunds published *The Negro Housing Market: An Untapped Resource?*—a pamphlet designed to stimulate interest in Negro housing among builders and mortgage lenders. Their study uncovered thousands of unhappy black citizens who desperately wanted, and could afford to purchase, new homes. By the mid-point of the decade, there were 17,800 African Americans living in Flint, a figure that represented nearly 10 percent of the city’s population. The city’s segregated black neighborhoods featured the most dilapidated and overcrowded housing in the region. Among the African-American householders living in the city, 56 percent shared their homes with either related or unrelated individuals. On

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Self makes a similar observation about the relationship between the spatial reorganization of the metropolis and the grassroots politics of white and black activists. See Self, *American Babylon*, esp. 1-20.

average, black-occupied homes consisted of 2.6 bedrooms, with each room housing 1.7 persons. Over 67 percent of the dwelling units in which African Americans resided contained no private bathroom. Although two-thirds of the city's black families owned their own homes, Corbett and Edmunds nonetheless found that over 50 percent of the city's black families desired to move to a new neighborhood. Of those who wished to move, over 40 percent sought to purchase a new or existing home. Prospective black homebuyers, according to the Urban League's survey, could afford on average slightly more than \$1,100 for a down payment on a new or existing home. Based upon the results of their 1954 study, Corbett and Edmunds called for a citywide initiative to construct new homes for Negro purchasers. Well aware of the entrenched barriers to federally insured housing, Corbett and Edmunds hoped to prevail upon local members of the private housing industry to tap the largely ignored yet potentially profitable African-American housing market.<sup>2</sup>

Members of the city's housing industry reacted swiftly and harshly against the claims of Corbett and Edmunds. Within weeks of the study's release, local builders I. A. MacArthur and Eino Rajala had angrily denounced the Urban League's findings. Pointing to several unsold homes that they had speculatively built in Floral Park and St. John, MacArthur and Rajala maintained that black buyers were simply not interested in purchasing new residences. "Negroes can go to any builder if they want a home constructed," Rajala stated. "It looks like they're content to live under present circumstances." In response, Corbett pointed out that the handful of new homes constructed by Rajala and MacArthur were all in the ghetto, most of them situated near older, more dilapidated structures in the segregated Floral Park and St. John districts.

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<sup>2</sup> Corbett and Edmunds, *The Negro Housing Market*, 1-23.

Corbett added that many of the homes were located in a designated flood plain adjacent to the Flint River. “It all boils down to what the builder has to offer for the price he asks,” Corbett observed. For Corbett and Edmunds, both staunch believers in the market imperative, the handful of homes that local builders marketed to black buyers were not worth the risk to their hard-earned savings. Unwilling to lodge a structural critique of the home financing industry, Corbett and Edmunds failed to mention the difficulties that black purchasers faced in securing home loans during their debate with local builders. Yet black buyers—even those who had accumulated significant savings and desired to remain in their segregated neighborhoods—faced near insurmountable obstacles in obtaining financing for the purchase of new and existing homes. For their part, developers such as Rajala and MacArthur interpreted the unsold homes in St. John and Floral Park as an indication that black citizens desired no new housing. In reality, however, black citizens faced systematic barriers to both home financing and neighborhood choice that effectively concealed from the market a groundswell of African-American demand for new, better, and unrestricted housing throughout the city and suburbs.<sup>3</sup>

The debate over Negro housing conditions and the potentialities of Flint’s black housing market raged during the 1950s and 1960s. A year after the 1954 dispute, the Flint Urban League revisited the housing shortage during a citywide conference on neighborhood living conditions. Hoping to continue the debate from the previous year, the Urban League invited Rajala to address the conference formally. During his presentation, Rajala once again denied that there was a Negro housing shortage:

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<sup>3</sup> “Claim Negroes Not Interested in Homes,” *Flint News-Advertiser*, April 16, 1954.



As for Negro housing, I have a bad taste in my mouth about it. There is only one reason why every Negro in the city of Flint does not have a house, the one reason being they do not want to buy it. There are new homes that have been vacant for months, unsold. I am sure we all know the reason. The people would rather buy a larger house on Fifth or Sixth Street [in Floral Park], rent about two rooms to fifteen people and exploit the property to the last cent, taking out every penny, and not putting back a single cent for maintenance.

Conflating need with blacks' ability to purchase, Rajala reaffirmed his position that there was no housing crisis for African Americans in Flint.<sup>4</sup>

Other speakers vehemently disagreed with Rajala's observations. Following Rajala to the rostrum was John W. Davis, manager of the Davis Realty Company and a former president of the county board of real estate. Though as a realtor Davis was an unlikely spokesperson for civil rights activists, he nonetheless echoed the Urban League's position. In fact, Davis directly contradicted Rajala, arguing that there was a strong demand for new and used homes among the city's black residents. Davis asserted that there were many black buyers, but that they were unable to purchase homes "due to the fact that they cannot find a lending institution willing to make the loan." "Mortgage money for the purchase of used homes," he continued, "is practically impossible to get at the present time." Even in the rare cases where the FHA made commitments to finance homes for black buyers, Davis maintained, banks often insisted upon restrictive conditions including higher down payments and shorter repayment schedules. Such policies were prohibitive for many black buyers. Unlike Rajala, then, who blamed black people themselves for poor housing, Davis suggested that local lenders played an

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<sup>4</sup> *Housing Conditions in Flint, Michigan: Proceedings of a City-Wide Conference on Housing, November, 1955* (Flint: Urban League of Flint, 1955), 11-12.

important role in maintaining segregated, inferior housing conditions in the city's black ghettos.<sup>5</sup>

Flint Urban League Director Rosa L. Kimp addressed the conference following Davis's remarks. Still angered by Rajala's spiteful speech, Kimp delivered an emotional presentation. "We are living for the most part in compressed segregated neighborhoods whose boundaries are well defined," Kimp charged. "Again I say without fear of contradiction that this segregated living pattern is forced!" Building upon Davis's critique of local bankers, Kimp indicted the entire housing industry—including federal officials, lenders, builders, brokers, and landlords—for the "shameful" state of Negro housing in Flint. Kimp, a longtime resident of the Vehicle City, also bemoaned the fact that white newcomers, "come in and live anywhere they wish, with the only test being their ability to pay for the houses they occupy," while "Negroes who have spent all of their lives here and who have made and are making invaluable contributions to the enrichment of our city [are] being denied the opportunity to live in decent homes and surroundings."<sup>6</sup>

The Urban League's public relations efforts during the mid-1950s helped to bring the discriminatory policies of lenders, real estate brokers, and builders into the forefront of Flint's burgeoning fair housing campaign. During the 1950s and 1960s, activists and ordinary black citizens alike confronted near-daily reminders that local bankers, realtors, builders, appraisers, landlords, and white homeowners were as committed as FHA officials to maintaining Jim Crow housing patterns. By the close of the 1940s, civil rights activists had won important victories against racially restrictive housing covenants

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<sup>5</sup> *Housing Conditions in Flint*, 13-15.

<sup>6</sup> *Housing Conditions in Flint*, 17-20.

and openly segregationist FHA policies. Yet members of both the federal and local housing industries continued to uphold the color line through a variety of less explicit tactics that included mortgage redlining, blockbusting, and racial steering.

The severe postwar housing shortages that plagued African Americans in Flint stemmed in part from the city's delayed efforts to implement a public housing program. Unlike New York City, Detroit, Chicago, and other cities that adopted public housing in the 1930s, Flint did not inaugurate a public housing program until 1964, when citizen relocations due to urban renewal and freeway construction projects forced the city to provide subsidized housing for displaced persons. Hoping to secure the long-term growth of the private housing industry, builders, realtors, and mortgage lenders played a decisive role in thwarting public housing in the Vehicle City. During the late 1930s, and once again in the late 1940s, civil rights and trade union activists aggressively lobbied city officials for public housing. On both occasions, the Flint City Commission responded to public pressure by voting to create a public housing commission. Yet in each instance, builders and real estate developers launched polarizing referenda campaigns to block the city's efforts. In 1939, and again in 1950, voters responded to the builders' claims that the city did not need federally subsidized, "socialist" housing by voting overwhelmingly to abolish the programs.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the Depression-era and postwar campaigns for public housing, builders such as Robert Gerholz consistently denied that African Americans suffered from either racial discrimination or housing shortages. During the 1949-50 debate, Gerholz commended builders for meeting the postwar housing needs of Flint's growing population, claiming, "Vacancies are beginning

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<sup>7</sup> On the public housing referenda of 1939 and 1950, see *Flint Journal*, January 22, 1939, January 1, 1940, November 23, 1949, September 13, 15, 1950, March 3, 1959.

to show up.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Davis, when he was president of the Genesee County Real Estate Board, argued that public housing was unnecessary because there was still a surplus of low-cost, FHA-insured homes available in the suburbs.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, even when confronted with irrefutable evidence of the city’s housing shortages, Gerholz and other representatives from the building and development industries promised to redouble their efforts to construct low-cost housing for all of the city’s newcomers, regardless of race.<sup>10</sup> Builders such as Gerholz believed that the market would accommodate the housing needs of African Americans.

Using a combination of private funds and federal subsidies, Gerholz and other developers constructed thousands of new residences in the Flint area during the housing boom of the 1950s and early 1960s. Yet builders, bankers, and realtors made only a handful of those new homes available to African-American buyers, virtually all of them within the confines of Flint’s rapidly deteriorating St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> Largely excluded from both the private and federally insured home purchasing markets, all but a few of the city’s black newcomers in the 1950s sought to acquire rental units. However, local and federal housing policies also contributed to a severe crisis in the city’s rental market, which placed an added burden on thousands of black home seekers. Between 1942 and 1948, as home ownership rates in the city soared to nearly 80 percent, five thousand rental properties disappeared from Flint’s housing

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<sup>8</sup> See *Flint Journal*, January 18, 1949. On Gerholz’s opposition to public housing, see also, *Flint Journal*, January 10, 1949.

<sup>9</sup> “Real Estate Board Reports,” *Flint Journal*, January 16, 1949. See also, “Need for Federal Housing Program Debated at Hearing,” *Flint Journal*, January 28, 1949.

<sup>10</sup> See *Flint Journal*, February 19, 1949.

<sup>11</sup> On builders’ refusals to construct integrated housing developments, see Memorandum, Beasley to Burton I. Gordin, August 3, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 11, folder 32, GHCC.

stock.<sup>12</sup> Hoping to capitalize on the booming real estate market that the FHA and private banks had helped to create—and frustrated over the city commission’s limited experiment with rent control—thousands of white landlords throughout the city placed their rental homes for sale during the 1940s and 1950s. According to Flint CIO official Jake Waldo, who investigated complaints of mass evictions in 1943, landlords evicted between eight and twenty Negro renters per week during the war.<sup>13</sup> Because of these evictions, housing shortages multiplied and living conditions for African Americans deteriorated sharply. In the fall of 1943, the *Flint Journal* noted that desperate home seekers in St. John had converted dozens of abandoned storefronts into temporary shelters while hundreds of other black migrants “doubled up” with friends and relatives in apartments.<sup>14</sup>

By the close of the decade, the mismatch between the city’s growing black population and the decline in rental units had provided enough of an incentive for the area’s remaining landlords to subdivide single-family homes into tiny apartments. Local landlords rented “kitchenettes” and other small apartments for exorbitant rates. Between 1940 and 1950, the median monthly rent in the city increased from \$25 to \$47, one of the largest increases recorded in the United States, while the number of apartments that leased for less than \$30 per month declined by 75 percent. During the first half of the 1950s, median rents in the city increased yet again, jumping to \$75 per month by 1955.<sup>15</sup>

Citywide, Flint’s overall vacancy rate declined during the 1940s from 2.5 to less than 0.5

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<sup>12</sup> “Ratio of Home Ownership Climbs 14 Percent in 5 Years,” *Flint Journal*, May 7, 1948.

<sup>13</sup> “City Officials to Investigate Shortage of Houses for Negroes,” *Flint Journal*, October 22, 1943.

<sup>14</sup> *Flint Journal*, November 12, 1943.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Downing and Peter Borwick, “Post-War Housing Trends in the Flint Metropolitan Area and Future Outlook for the Sales Market,” April 27, 1949, RG 31, Reports of Housing Market Analysis, 1937-1963, box 10, NA. See also, Carroll, Jr., *Housing Characteristics of Flint in 1950*; and *Housing Conditions in Flint*, 8. Median rents in Flint remained among the highest in the state of Michigan throughout the 1950s. See *Flint Journal*, June 10, 1959.

percent. In the St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods, where the city's growing but still segregated black community competed for an even more limited number of overcrowded rental units, the vacancy rate was negligible. "It is next to impossible," Urban League official Charles Eason charged in 1947, "to find a Negro home in Flint today where there is not some doubling up."<sup>16</sup> To postwar author and activist Frank Gillespie, who felt "fenced in" by Jim Crow housing, Flint seemed to be a "city whose name is analogous to its character."<sup>17</sup>

The housing shortages and neighborhood deterioration that plagued Flint's African-American community during the 1940s worsened dramatically during the 1950s and early 1960s. Between 1940 and 1955, Flint's African-American population tripled to nearly eighteen thousand. By the close of the 1960s, the city's black population had grown to nearly thirty-five thousand. Yet over the same period the boundaries of the city's segregated black neighborhoods remained essentially fixed, with all but a handful of African Americans living in St. John, Floral Park, and other increasingly overcrowded, segregated, and polluted neighborhoods along Saginaw Street, which formed the north-south center line of the city. As living conditions deteriorated in the city's overcrowded ghettos, black activists launched a citywide campaign to draw the community's attention toward substandard housing conditions and forced segregation. In 1952, George Friley, a black restaurateur from St. John, addressed members of the Exchange Club at the Durant Hotel. Friley reminded club members that in spite of sharp black population increases, "No provision has been made for additional Negro housing." "Negroes," Friley charged,

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<sup>16</sup> *Flint Journal*, January 3, 1947. On overcrowded housing and the practice of "doubling up," see, Urban League of Flint, "Monthly Activities Report, November 1943," Mott Papers, box 1, 77-7.9-8, GHCC.

<sup>17</sup> Frank L. Gillespie, "What Makes Flint Tick?" *Flint Spokesman*, October 12, 1946; and Gillespie, "Political Factors in the Third Ward," *Flint Spokesman*, November 9, 1946.

“can walk into any bank in town and if they’ve got the down payment can receive funding for any automobile they want to buy. But let them try to borrow money to buy a house. In most cases they can’t.”<sup>18</sup> A year after Friley made his remarks, the Flint Urban League’s Arthur Edmunds issued a formal request to the Flint City Commission to investigate Negro housing conditions, noting that the housing shortage for black citizens had reached “critical proportions” and that “large numbers of families are unable to secure any type of adequate living quarters.”<sup>19</sup> “Today the supply of rental housing is so short,” wrote Edmunds and Frank Corbett, “that it is virtually impossible to rent an unfurnished three room apartment, even in slum areas, for less than \$18.00 per week. Unattached single dwelling rental units are unavailable at any price.”<sup>20</sup> Alarmed by the burgeoning housing crisis and the chorus of black voices demanding reform, in 1954 the city commission complied with the Urban League’s request by creating a fifteen-member housing study committee. The commission also ordered City Fire Marshall Elwood Rutherford to hire two full-time employees to conduct code enforcement inspections throughout the city.

Commencing in the spring of 1954, Rutherford’s home-to-home inspections were the first conducted since the city suspended its code enforcement program during the early years of the Great Depression.<sup>21</sup> As they toured the city, Rutherford and his fellow inspectors recorded housing and fire code violations and substandard living conditions in dozens of neighborhoods. In Floral Park, St. John, and the broader North End, however,

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<sup>18</sup> Dowdy, “Big Car Called Negro Buyer’s Only Outlet,” *Flint Journal*, October 3, 1952.

<sup>19</sup> “Negroes Ask House Survey,” *Flint Journal*, November 17, 1953. See also, “City Investigation of Flint’s Bad Housing Conditions Requested,” *Bronze Reporter*, November 21, 1953.

<sup>20</sup> Corbett and Edmunds, *The Negro Housing Market*, v.

<sup>21</sup> Lee A. Kaake and Donn D. Parker to Members of the Flint City Commission, April 19, 1954, City Manager Files.

they found the most dilapidated, overcrowded, and dangerous housing stock in the city. In December 1954, Rutherford encountered eleven persons, including seven children, living in a North End basement on East Philadelphia Avenue that was accessible only by a trap door.<sup>22</sup> That same week, inspectors visited a five-room bungalow on Elm Street that housed twenty-four people, including four separate families and one single adult male.<sup>23</sup> In October 1955, city fire inspectors discovered nineteen people living in a five-room basement apartment at 1214 Hickory Street.<sup>24</sup> Several months later, Assistant Fire Marshall Luces visited a North End home at 814 Lomita Avenue, where he found twenty-two persons living in a five-room house.<sup>25</sup> Upon visiting such dwellings, Marshall and his associates issued fire and building code citations and, in extreme cases, ordered the eviction of persons inhabiting overcrowded, unsafe structures. In the spring of 1954, Rutherford cited the owners of a property on the corner of McClellan and North Streets, just west of St. John and the Buick plant, for faulty wiring, improper room partitions, and insufficient egress routes. Within weeks of the inspection, a fire had erupted in the home, leaving its fourteen occupants homeless.<sup>26</sup>

Faulty wiring, leaky roofs, broken windows, and other preventable hazards were exceedingly common within the city's densely populated black neighborhoods. So too were devastating fires such as the one that erupted on McClellan Street. During the mid- and late-1950s, members of the Flint Urban League, the NAACP, and block clubs from St. John and Floral Park commissioned housing surveys, chided slumlords, challenged city commissioners and fire inspectors to enforce the city's housing code, and implored

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<sup>22</sup> *Flint Journal*, December 3, 1954.

<sup>23</sup> *Flint Journal*, December 3, 1954.

<sup>24</sup> "Find 19 Persons Living in Basement; 14 Ousted," *Flint Journal*, October 21, 1955.

<sup>25</sup> *Bronze Reporter*, February 4, 1956.

<sup>26</sup> "Move to Eliminate Hazards Beginning to Show Progress," *Flint Journal*, May 16, 1954.



local builders, realtors, and lenders to jettison the racial and spatial calculus that limited housing options for blacks. Nevertheless, during the 1950s Frank Corbett, Arthur Edmunds, and other activists who quietly pursued reform through the city's traditional political channels won few victories over Jim Crow. In August 1956, local UAW official Robert Carter bemoaned the city commission's inattention to slumlords and the proliferation of poor housing. "They [city commissioners] have not done one single thing to clean up or eliminate slums in this area," Carter observed. "They have not made one step toward reasonably priced rental units in this city."<sup>27</sup> By the dawn of the 1960s, widespread anger over the persistence of substandard housing, residential segregation, and the poor public health outcomes that accompanied those conditions had erupted into the open, fueling a hotly contested struggle over fair housing and slum clearance that exposed both the depth of Flint's racial fault lines and the intransigence of those who led the city's private and public housing industries.

The 1960s opened with the long-anticipated release of Flint's master plan for development. Drafted by the Cincinnati firm of Ladislav Segoe and Associates, the 1960 plan recommended complete clearance for the St. John neighborhood and a large portion of Floral Park.<sup>28</sup> Citywide, Segoe planners found that 20 percent of Flint's housing was dilapidated; in St. John, however, that figure exceeded 60 percent.<sup>29</sup> Although clear majorities of St. John and Floral Park residents supported the city's planned slum clearance and relocation efforts, the threat of losing precious dwelling units in Flint's already overcrowded ghettos provoked an intensified direct action campaign for open

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<sup>27</sup> *Flint Weekly Review*, August 23, 1956.

<sup>28</sup> Ladislav Segoe and Associates, *Comprehensive Master Plan of Flint, Michigan, and Environs* (Cincinnati: Ladislav Segoe and Associates, 1960).

<sup>29</sup> "Segoe Planner Gives Report," *Flint Journal*, June 10, 1959; Dowdy, "St. John St. Area Has 'Top' Priority," *Flint Journal*, June 26, 1960.

housing. Shortly after the master plan's release, as the city commission moved to implement its North End and Floral Park clearance initiatives, members of the Flint NAACP and Urban League began quiet negotiations with city officials and representatives from the *Flint Journal* over the explicit racial designations used in the newspaper's real estate advertisements. After several years of stalled negotiations, in 1963 Flint NAACP President Richard Traylor threatened to unleash a boycott of the newspaper. In April, as Traylor prepared to picket the newspaper's downtown headquarters, *Journal* negotiators Carl Ludington and Ed Mitchell agreed to prohibit all racial and religious designations from classified real estate advertisements.<sup>30</sup>

Within months of their spring victory, Traylor, Edgar Holt, and other NAACP officials had drafted a municipal open occupancy ordinance banning racial discrimination in real estate sales, leasing, and financing transactions. They submitted the proposal to the city commission in the fall of 1963. On October 3, Flint's open housing advocates suffered their first of many legal and political setbacks when Michigan Attorney General Frank Kelley ruled that municipalities, under the state's new constitution, could not legally enact open occupancy ordinances.<sup>31</sup> While open housing activists throughout the state worked to create legal challenges to Kelley's opinion, the Flint NAACP and local supporters of fair housing shifted their attention towards confronting racial discrimination in the private real estate market. During the summer of 1964, the Evergreen Valley subdivision became a significant flashpoint in that struggle.

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<sup>30</sup> See "Flint NAACP Protests Racial Housing Ads," *Bronze Reporter*, April 6, 1963; "Flint Journal Picket Averted," *Bronze Reporter*, April 20, 1963; and Minutes, Board of Directors, American Civil Liberties Union, Greater Flint Chapter, May 1, 1963, Holt Papers, box 9, folder 27, GHCC.

<sup>31</sup> "NAACP to Continue Drive for 'Occupancy' Law Here," *Flint Journal*, October 4, 1963.

*White Realtors, Blockbusting, and the Evergreen Valley Campaign*

Evergreen Valley sat two miles east of Floral Park on the city's southeastern border with Burton Township, bounded by Gilmartin Street, Center Road, Lippincott Boulevard, and Lapeer Road. First developed in the mid-1950s as an all-white subdivision, Evergreen Valley was an attractive neighborhood featuring mature trees, spacious lawns, neatly trimmed shrubs, and approximately 525 new homes, most of them valued at between \$15,000 and \$50,000. In July 1963, Evergreen Valley quietly received its first black occupant, the result of a sale brokered by African-American realtor Connie Childress. The following spring, however, local realtors began an aggressive and hotly contested campaign to bring additional black buyers to the neighborhood. During the spring and summer of 1964, realtors visited homes in recently integrated blocks and aggressively solicited homeowners to place their properties for sale. In Evergreen Valley, the process of "blockbusting"—whereby realtors encouraged white homeowners to flee desegregated neighborhoods—occurred in several stages.<sup>32</sup> First, realtors identified the sections of the neighborhood that contained new black homeowners. After locating the desegregated blocks, realtors then contacted each homeowner on the streets in question and asked them to place their homes for sale. Upon gaining new listings, realtors then asked the black families who had recently moved in to forward along the names of interested black buyers. During the summers of 1964 and 1965, realtors showed scores of homes to prospective black buyers but refused to show any homes to whites. After showing homes to black customers, blockbusting realtors often returned to visit the white homeowners living nearby who had not yet placed their houses for sale, hoping that the visible

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<sup>32</sup> Blockbusting predated the 1960s controversy in Evergreen Valley. On earlier blockbusting campaigns, see, for instance, *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, March 14, 1955, 1059.

presence of black buyers in the neighborhood would elicit a change of heart. Throughout 1964 and 1965, many white homeowners in Evergreen Valley received anonymous phone calls urging them to sell, found leaflets left on their porches advising them of the dangers of integration, and suffered through numerous visits from blockbusting realtors who warned them that they would soon be living in a predominantly black neighborhood.<sup>33</sup>

White and black homeowners in Evergreen Valley did not accept blockbusting passively. In March 1964, over 250 Evergreen Valley residents attended a meeting to discuss racial transitions and the preservation of property values in the neighborhood. Three months later, an integrated audience of nearly three hundred Evergreen Valley residents viewed and discussed *All the Way Home*, a 1957 film directed by Lee R. Bobker focusing on the basic unfairness of residential segregation.<sup>34</sup> By the fall of 1964, hundreds of residents committed to remaining in their homes had formed the Evergreen Valley Association (EVA).<sup>35</sup> With the support of white and black activists from Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME), a small direct action group devoted to fair housing, members of the EVA organized a campaign to halt panic selling and placed yard signs in front of homes throughout the neighborhood reading, “This House Is Not for Sale – We Like Our Neighbors.” “You can’t shock us with a Negro anymore,” claimed white resident and EVA officer James H. Rae. “We can handle ourselves now.” In spite of their best efforts to halt white panic selling, however, Rae and other EVA members fought a losing battle in defense of residential integration and neighborhood stability. According to a 1966 housing opinion survey conducted by the Michigan State Highway

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<sup>33</sup> “Attempt Blockbusting in Evergreen,” *Flint Mirror*, October 1964; Memorandum, Beasley to Arthur L. Johnson, January 25, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 15, GHCC.

<sup>34</sup> Robert L. Feinberg, “Subdivision Is Adjusting to Racial Issue,” *Flint Journal*, June 24, 1965. See also, *All the Way Home* (Dynamic Films, 1957).

<sup>35</sup> “Evergreen Valley Group Formed,” *Flint Journal*, September 18, 1964.

Department, residents of Genesee County, when asked to select the most important factor in selecting a home, chose ‘the appearance of neighborhood’ over all other considerations.<sup>36</sup> For hundreds of Evergreen residents, even limited integration was a clear signal that the neighborhood was in decline. During the spring and summer selling seasons of 1964, approximately twenty additional black families moved to Evergreen Valley. By June 1965, the area’s black population had increased to 10 percent. Throughout the racial panic in Evergreen Valley, which stretched into the early 1970s, homeowner activists from the EVA waged an intense struggle to convince white homeowners to remain in the neighborhood. But as in hundreds of racially transitional urban neighborhoods across the United States, EVA members discovered that the willingness of white homeowners to fight blockbusting correlated closely to their proximity to black neighbors. Those living farthest from integration organized to fight panic selling, while homeowners living on integrated streets tended to move away in block-by-block fashion.<sup>37</sup> In June 1965, Frederick D. Lynch, a former officer with the EVA, acknowledged the difficulties his group faced in persuading white homeowners to remain in desegregated blocks: “Some people don’t mind having Negroes living in the neighborhood, but when a colored family moves next door they get jittery.”<sup>38</sup> Racial integration, as an unnamed Flint activist surmised, was all too often “the period between the moving in of the first Negro in a neighborhood and the exit of the last white.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission reproduced the survey results in *Housing – Genesee County* (Flint: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1971), table I-7.

<sup>37</sup> Memorandum, Beasley to A. Johnson, January 25, 1965; and “Subdivision Is Adjusting.”

<sup>38</sup> Feinberg, “Evergreen Valley Integration Smoothing; ‘Panic Selling’ Is Reported Declining,” *Flint Journal*, n.d. [ca. June 1965].

<sup>39</sup> *Flint Journal*, February 8, 1963.

Realtors played a decisive role in spurring racial succession in Evergreen Valley. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, as a growing number of African Americans sought out new housing options outside of St. John and Floral Park, white realtors either resisted or provoked residential integration based primarily upon a community's "integrity."<sup>40</sup> In neighborhoods such as Evergreen Valley, where black homeowners had already moved peacefully, realtors openly marketed homes, often aggressively so, to African-American purchasers. Yet in all-white neighborhoods where residents seemed to oppose integration, licensed brokers from the Flint Board of Real Estate worked to hold the color line by refusing to show homes to black buyers. In May 1965, a white homeowner from Evergreen Valley identified only as Mrs. Park, informed the state civil rights commission of a conversation she had recently had with a blockbusting realtor from Robert Gerholz's firm. According to Park, who lived at 1818 Valley Lane, a realtor from the Gerholz Realty Company contacted her in the spring of 1965 to inquire if she was interested in selling her home. During the conversation, Mrs. Park asked the female realtor if she had a white or Negro buyer in mind. When informed that a black buyer would purchase the property, Mrs. Park asked the realtor if she had considered showing homes to black buyers in Westgate, an all-white subdivision. The salesperson responded by stating that she "wouldn't dream of showing a Negro family a home in an unintegrated area."<sup>41</sup>

Because local realtors targeted only a few of the city's neighborhoods for blockbusting campaigns, racial transitions in Evergreen Valley and other "open" neighborhoods tended to occur rapidly. In the summer of 1965, with the neighborhood

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<sup>40</sup> I have adopted the "community integrity" framework from Kevin Kruse. See Kruse, *White Flight*, esp. 79-97.

<sup>41</sup> Memorandum, Beasley to Don Holtrop, May 26, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 36, GHCC.

still solidly white and a vigorous grassroots campaign to maintain integration already underway, black realtor Connie Childress, who had sold the first two homes to black buyers in Evergreen Valley, predicted that the subdivision would soon become predominantly black. “You can only delay or stall this [racial transition] unless other neighborhoods in the city become open to Negroes,” Childress offered. Childress’s prediction turned out to be accurate. By the close of the 1970s, the combined effects of blockbusting and white panic selling had produced a majority black neighborhood in Evergreen Valley.<sup>42</sup> Over time, dozens of other “open” neighborhoods followed a similar path from integration to resegregation.

The struggle to maintain racial integration in Evergreen Valley brought civil rights activists into direct conflict with realtors from the segregated Flint Board of Real Estate. Furious over the blockbusting campaign in Evergreen Valley and the slow pace at which realtors opened additional segregated neighborhoods to black buyers, in October 1965 NAACP officials launched a selective buying campaign against discriminatory white real estate brokers. Led by Robert W. Rawls, chair of the NAACP’s housing committee, the consumer campaign targeted brokers who “discriminate against Negroes when it comes to selling them a house in a predominantly white neighborhood.” “How does one know which white real estate broker discriminates?” the NAACP’s literature asked. “The answer is: They all do.”<sup>43</sup> During the spring and summer of 1966, HOME and NAACP activists intensified their campaign against local realtors, organizing pickets

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<sup>42</sup> “Evergreen Valley Integration Smoothing.” See also, Flint Department of Community Development, *Flint 1983 Profile* (Flint: City of Flint, 1983) 8-26.

<sup>43</sup> “NAACP Urges Negro Boycott of White Real Estate Dealers,” *Flint Journal*, October 14, 1965. See also, Morrissey, “Enforcement of Housing Code, Realtors Hit at Rights Hearing,” *Flint Journal*, December 1, 1966.

at Flint Board of Real Estate events and at subdivisions in the city and suburbs where realtors had discriminated against black buyers.<sup>44</sup>

In support of the NAACP's selective buying initiative, members of HOME launched a test campaign to gauge the willingness of white realtors to sell homes on the open market. On March 22, 1966, white homeowners Mary and Richard Hutchins met with realtor George Burgess, also white, from the firm of Hachtel-Pollock. Upon learning that the Hutchinses wished to sell their home on an unrestricted basis, Burgess informed the couple that he would not accept the listing because Hachtel-Pollock had a strict policy against "breaking" white neighborhoods. Moreover, Burgess revealed that selling homes without regard to race was a clear violation of both the NAREB code of ethics and the policies of the Michigan Corporation and Securities Commission, the state agency responsible for issuing real estate licenses and regulating the conduct of brokers. Burgess's fears were justifiable. On at least two prior occasions, the state securities commission had officially censured Michigan realtors for either showing or selling properties to Negro buyers in all-white neighborhoods.<sup>45</sup> Not wishing to jeopardize his standing as a licensed broker, Burgess refused to sell the Hutchinses' home. The day after the Hutchinses met with George Burgess, Annie B. Hubbard, an African-American purchaser, contacted an unidentified listing agent from Hachtel-Pollock regarding a home for sale on the city's northwest side. After discussing the home's specifications, Hubbard told the realtor that she wished to tour the property. In response to Hubbard's request, the realtor informed her that the house "cannot be shown to colored people only white

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<sup>44</sup> *Flint Journal*, August 26, 1966.

<sup>45</sup> J. Rose, "Civil Rights in Housing in Michigan," 4.



couples.”<sup>46</sup> Throughout the county, white and black buyers and sellers of real estate who wished to open up the housing market found that local realtors and government officials had constructed a seemingly impermeable barrier to residential integration. “I do not know of even one white community or white section of a city,” state civil rights commissioner Burton Levy wrote, “where a Negro citizen visiting a realtor chosen at random or a home advertised for sale would get the fair and equitable treatment that is theoretically required by law and this Commission.”<sup>47</sup>

Unlike most victims of housing discrimination, who typically refrained from filing complaints, Annie Hubbard and the Hutchins family made their grievances public. After receiving signed statements from the Hutchinses and Hubbard, HOME President George F. Plum forwarded their complaints to Governor George Romney, Michigan Attorney General Frank Kelley, Burton I. Gordin, the executive director of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, and dozens of local journalists in the city. In his June 7 letter to Gordin, Plum chided state civil rights commission officials for their “procastinatory [sic] and snails antics” in handling civil rights complaints from Flint.<sup>48</sup> Hoping to deflect criticism of his agency, Gordin responded to the June complaints by agreeing to organize hearings on housing discrimination in Genesee County. Held from November 29 through December 1, 1966, the Flint hearings on housing discrimination provided activists with a long awaited opportunity to publicize the public policies and private racial animosities that collectively undermined equal housing opportunity in the Vehicle City.

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<sup>46</sup> On the Hutchins family and Annie Hubbard, see Beasley Papers, box 50, folder 29, GHCC. On Hachtel-Pollock, see Beasley, “Weekly Report,” May 4, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 16, GHCC.

<sup>47</sup> See Burton Levy to Gordin, August 31, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 6, GHCC. On additional complaints against realtors, see Ronald O. Warner Papers, box 14, 95-1.1-322, Scharchburg Archives.

<sup>48</sup> George F. Plum to Gordin, June 7, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 50, folder 29, GHCC.

*Naming Names: The 1966 Equal Housing Hearing*

The Michigan Civil Rights Commission's 1966 hearings were the culmination of dozens of postwar surveys, protests, electoral efforts, and public relations campaigns waged by fair housing activists in metropolitan Flint. Civil rights reformers won an important political victory several weeks prior to the hearings when the Flint City Commission selected Floyd McCree to become mayor. McCree was Flint's first black mayor and, as many civic boosters advertised, the first African American selected to lead a major American city. Initially elected to the city commission in 1958, McCree, an employee of the Buick foundry who represented the Third Ward on the city's North End, was a strong advocate of municipal open housing legislation. However, under Flint's municipal charter, which endorsed a city commission-manager form of government, city commissioners appointed the mayor, who could claim no more power than any other legislator. Although the voters of Flint had not elected him as mayor—and though the mayoralty was essentially a symbolic position under the city charter—McCree's appointment nonetheless marked an important political victory for fair housing activists, especially those who hoped to push forward municipal open occupancy legislation.<sup>49</sup>

Hoping to capitalize on the widespread media attention that surrounded McCree's appointment, supporters of fair housing used the hearings to document the ways in which policymakers and housing industry officials had worked together to maintain residential Jim Crow in Flint. The practices of local realtors and other members of the Flint Board

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<sup>49</sup> On McCree's political career and the battle over open housing, see Chris Craig, "The Fight for Open Housing in Flint, Michigan," University of Michigan-Flint, History Department, Student Papers, GHCC; T. J. Bauswell, "We Won! Didn't We?" University of Michigan-Flint, History Department, Student Papers, GHCC; John Troy Williams, "Black Leadership in an Urban Setting," (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1973), 209-245; R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 276-309; and Aiyer, ed., *Telling Our Stories*, passim.

of Real Estate came under careful scrutiny during the commission's deliberations. During his appearance in front of the commissioners, the Flint Urban League's executive director John W. Mack testified that the city of Flint, with a segregation index of over 94 percent, was the most segregated non-southern city in the United States. Citing census reports, Urban League surveys, and a well-known national study of racial demographics published by scholars Karl and Alma Taeuber, Mack informed the commission that Flint's African-American population, despite comprising over 20 percent of the city's total, remained confined to just twelve adjacent census tracts along the north-south and east-west axes of Saginaw Street and Lapeer Road. Mack charged that members of the Flint Board of Real Estate had played a key role in maintaining the color line by using blockbusting, racial steering, and other tactics.<sup>50</sup>

Commission members received a number of discrimination complaints filed against local realtors in advance of the hearings. One such allegation came from Bruce Kelley, a white homeowner from Woodlawn Park who had filed a complaint in 1965 against the Davis Realty Company. During the Urban League's 1955 panel on Negro housing shortages, John W. Davis, a managing partner at Davis Realty, had spoken out against the redlining practices of local lenders. Yet just a decade later Davis found that his firm was facing several charges of racial discrimination. Shortly after agreeing to list his home with Davis Realty, Kelley charged, one of the firm's brokers asked him to sign a document stipulating that only Caucasian buyers could visit the property. Upon

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<sup>50</sup> Karl E. Taeuber and Alma F. Taeuber, *Negroes in Cities: Residential Segregation and Neighborhood Change* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965); Urban League of Flint, *Housing Committee Report* (Flint: Urban League of Flint, 1966), 1-8; and "African Americans in Genesee County: General Historical Perspective," 6-9, Beasley Papers, box 1, GHCC. On Mack's testimony, see Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC. On the Flint Board of Real Estate's opposition to open housing, see "Urban League Chief Raps Realtor Stand on 'Rights,'" *Flint Journal*, July 28, 1966.

refusing his realtor's request, Kelley received word that Davis Realty was no longer interested in selling his home. During his testimony, HOME President George Plum reinforced Kelley's charges, submitting seven sworn complaints against local realtors for refusing to list homes on the open market, ignoring non-discrimination instructions from home sellers, and blocking black buyers from touring homes in all-white neighborhoods. Plum alleged that representatives of Gerholz Realty Company were among the city's worst offenders. While serving as real estate "testers," Plum and his wife Sandra met with Mrs. Jimmie Peters, a broker from the Gerholz firm. As they toured properties for sale, Mrs. Peters informed the Plums that realtors from Gerholz, as a matter of official policy, made a point of ascertaining the racial identities of buyers before agreeing to show homes in white neighborhoods. Gerholz brokers, Peters guaranteed, would never "break a block" by selling homes in all-white areas to Negroes.<sup>51</sup>

According to Plum and the NAACP's Robert Rawls, GM's Argonaut Realty Company also played an important role in maintaining segregated real estate listings in the city. Argonaut Realty did not involve itself directly in sales, but as a service to GM's leaders, the company subcontracted with local real estate firms to list homes for corporate executives and other supervisory employees who had transferred to other plant cities. Despite the repeated requests of Plum and other fair housing activists, representatives from Argonaut, who declined to participate in the hearing, provided listings only to eight licensed firms from the Flint Board of Real Estate and refused to include nondiscrimination clauses in their home listings. Argonaut Realty, a GM official

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<sup>51</sup> Beasley to A. Johnson, May 7, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC; Bruce A. Kelley to Gordin, November 18, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC. On Plum's testimony regarding the Gerholz firm, see "Testimony Alleging Discrimination in Housing against Gerholz Realty," November 29, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC. Also, see Fred Tucker, "Testimony on Drew Realty," November 29, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC.

informed Plum, would not insist upon nondiscrimination either until the United States Congress passed an open housing law or “until some official body asks us to.” In order to circumvent the discriminatory policies of Argonaut, Davis Realty, and other local firms, Plum asserted, black buyers in Flint often had to resort to third-party purchases—in which sympathetic white buyers bought and then immediately re-sold properties to black buyers—and other forms of subterfuge. “In 22 years of being in the real estate business in Flint,” one Negro real estate broker added, “I cannot remember one instance of a Realtor voluntarily integrating any housing.”<sup>52</sup>

Several witnesses who testified during the 1966 hearings charged that the Flint Board of Real Estate was the “principal perpetrator” of housing discrimination and segregation in the county. During the hearings, black realtor Bertha Simms and four of her colleagues testified that the board systematically excluded African Americans from membership, denied nonwhite realtors access to the board’s multiple listing exchange, a real estate database available only to board members, and levied substantial \$500 fines against member realtors who “broke” all-white neighborhoods. By restricting its membership, Simms and other witnesses testified, the Flint Board of Real Estate concealed new home listings from black brokers, excluded nonwhites from important negotiations with local lenders and builders, and denied Negro “realists”—who, as non-members of the real estate board, technically could not claim the title Realtor—the opportunity to co-broker properties in all-white neighborhoods. On the rare occasions

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<sup>52</sup> “Public Hearing on Equal Housing Opportunities, Flint, Michigan,” Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC. On GM and Argonaut Realty, see “Testimony Alleging Discrimination in Housing against General Motors Corporation,” Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC. On HOME and third-party purchases, which were quite common in the Flint area, see Memorandum, Beasley to A. Johnson, August 26, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 15, GHCC; Beasley, “Weekly Report,” July 22, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 16, GHCC; C. Williams interview; Craig, “The Fight for Open Housing in Flint, Michigan,” 9; and “African Americans in Genesee County,” 6-9.

when black realists secured listings in restricted, all-white areas, Simms alleged, real estate firms would often intervene to protect the neighborhood by purchasing and then re-marketing properties to white buyers. Hoping to assure impartiality, the commission invited officials from the Flint Board of Real Estate to provide rebuttal testimony, but none of its members or officers appeared.<sup>53</sup>

Builders also received a great deal of criticism during the 1966 equal housing hearings. During his appearance in front of the MCRC, Plum recounted an attempt that he and his wife had made to conduct a third-party purchase for a Negro couple who sought a home in a newly developed all-white subdivision. In their negotiations over the purchase, the builder informed Plum that in order to prevent the house from being re-sold to Negroes he would have to sign a purchase agreement giving the builder an option on the property should it be re-sold prior to occupancy. Other witnesses who testified in front of the commission claimed that builders, like realtors, steered black clients towards either all-black or integrated subdivisions, “while the white market was diverted to all-white suburban subdivisions.” Confirming the charges made against local developers, the only builder who agreed to testify during the hearings admitted that, as a rule, “Builders refuse to build or sell lots to Negroes in new subdivisions.” “Realtors and builders, regardless of what they might say,” one African-American witness testified,

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<sup>53</sup> Bertha R. Simms, “Testimony Regarding Public Hearing on Equal Housing Opportunities, Flint, Michigan,” December 1, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 38, GHCC. Also, see “Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint: Findings and Recommendations Based on a Public Hearing Conducted on November 29 and 30, and December 1 and 9, 1966,” Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC. On the Flint Board of Real Estate’s exclusionary policies, see “African Americans in Genesee County,” 6-9; and Michael L. Kiefer, “Mack Tells Realtors Open Housing Still Isn’t Reality,” *Flint Journal*, October 23, 1968.

“form a solid block against integration of any all-white neighborhoods or neighborhoods where one or two non-white families have moved in.”<sup>54</sup>

Witnesses who testified during the 1966 hearings placed a great deal of blame on realtors and builders for maintaining segregated housing patterns in metropolitan Flint. Local policymakers, civic elites, and federal officials did not escape criticism, however. During his appearance before the commission, Mayor McCree testified that the city was woefully prepared to handle relocation efforts for black citizens slated to move due to freeway construction and urban renewal projects. The city planned to relocate nearly three thousand predominantly poor Flint families, over half of whom were African American, to make way for Interstate 475, a freeway interchange in Floral Park, and an industrial park in the St. John neighborhood. However, McCree testified that the Flint Housing Commission would have fewer than two hundred units of public housing available by the close of 1967. In describing Flint’s “dismal low-rent housing picture,” McCree also condemned housing commission officials for selecting public housing sites in already segregated black neighborhoods. Echoing McCree’s charges, Flint Urban League Director John Mack claimed that the city’s relocation office and its subcontractors from the Flint Board of Real Estate were steering dislocated blacks who were “too rich for public housing and too poor to move where they want to move” to either all-black or racially transitional neighborhoods.<sup>55</sup>

Residents of St. John Street and Floral Park who testified on living conditions within the city’s black ghettos provided some of the powerful evidence collected during the hearings. St. John and Floral Park had suffered from widespread public and private

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<sup>54</sup> “Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint: Findings and Recommendations,” 2-6. Also, see miscellaneous loose documents pertaining to the equal housing hearing, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 38, GHCC.

<sup>55</sup> “Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint: Findings and Recommendations,” 6-8.

divestment during the 1950s and 1960s and, as a result, contained some of the most dilapidated and overcrowded housing in the city. Residents of St. John charged that unregulated industrial pollution from GM's Buick foundry contributed to both neighborhood blight and mortgage divestment on the North End. According to Aileen Butler, a funeral home proprietor who appeared before the commission, the pollution from Buick was so intense that both the FHA and local lenders had effectively redlined the entire north side of the city, making it virtually impossible for black homeowners to secure loans for home purchases and repairs. Moreover, residents of both neighborhoods charged city officials with providing inadequate trash collection, code enforcement, and other municipal services, thereby rendering large sections of Black Flint "unfit for human habitation."<sup>56</sup>

Joining Butler and other witnesses from the North End were Cora Hollman and three other black women whose families received public assistance. Each of the women reported that they were unable to find standard rental housing in the city "that is not overcrowded, unsafe, or unsanitary." Hollman and the other women also charged that their landlords had refused to comply with code enforcement orders and had threatened eviction in response to even basic requests from tenants. Hollman, who paid \$75 per month in rent plus all of the utility bills for her residence at 405 Merritt Place, informed commissioners that her apartment had broken pipes and a blocked drain that had caused standing water to back up into the basement. The landlord refused to address the plumbing problems, however, telling Hollman that the city would soon demolish the house for urban renewal. Corroborating the testimony of Hollman and the three other

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<sup>56</sup> "Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint: Findings and Recommendations," 8-10. See also, Ailene Butler testimony, "Public Hearing on Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint, Michigan," November 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC.



women, a case worker from the Genesee County Bureau of Social Aid noted that nearly half of the seventy families she represented lived in either condemned houses, overcrowded apartments, or dwellings that were “obviously substandard, but whose owners will not repair them because they can easily evict the tenants and move in others.” Throughout the hearings, residents of St. John and Floral Park joined fair housing advocates in making direct connections between racial segregation and the substandard living conditions that landlords made available to poor families of all racial backgrounds. In one case, commissioners learned about a slum landlord who had threatened to replace his white tenants with black occupants in retaliation for their complaints about substandard living conditions. If the tenants did not cease their complaints, the landlord threatened, he would evict them and “put niggers in the house,” because he “could get more money per week out of the house if he had niggers in it anyway, and the niggers wouldn’t complain because they have no place to stay.” The city’s bifurcated real estate market not only made it difficult for African Americans to secure housing outside of the ghetto, but also undermined the ability of black tenants to negotiate with their landlords for better living conditions.<sup>57</sup>

Flint Fire Marshall Elwood H. Rutherford, who coordinated the city’s housing inspection and code enforcement programs, confirmed many of the charges witnesses made regarding substandard housing in the inner city. With only five full-time inspectors serving a city of nearly 200,000 residents, it was extremely difficult for municipal officials to monitor slumlords and other repeat violators of the city’s housing ordinance. “Complaints show by inspection that blight is reaching into nearly every section of the

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<sup>57</sup> “Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint: Findings and Recommendations,” 8-10. See also, Cora Hollman, “Testimony Alleging Discrimination in Housing against Dr. J. Donald Wilson, DDS,” Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC.

city,” Rutherford stated, “apparently caused by a complacent public and lack of code enforcement.” Rutherford also informed the commission that there were “outhouses attached to shacks, only minutes from City Hall” and scores of families citywide who lived in “unremodeled attics and basements.” Between March and December 1965, Rutherford and his inspectors visited 1,806 dwellings, where they found nearly three thousand code violations including 441 malfunctioning electrical systems, 147 inadequate plumbing facilities, and 107 illegal heating units. Just during February 1966, city inspectors unearthed six hundred housing code violations. Despite his best efforts to monitor housing conditions in St. John, Floral Park, and other dilapidated neighborhoods, Rutherford admitted defeat during the 1966 hearings. “Even with 100 or 1,000 inspectors, it would be impossible to keep up with the problem of deterioration.”<sup>58</sup>

Though witnesses tended to focus on local actors, the FHA also received strong criticism from several who testified during the commission’s fall 1966 proceedings. One African-American real estate broker charged the FHA’s Flint office with adopting a “lackadaisical attitude” towards enforcing President Kennedy’s 1962 executive order mandating nondiscrimination in federal housing programs. Black realtor Bertha Simms extended her colleague’s claim, stating that the FHA and VA subcontracted only with the Davis and Piper real estate firms, both of which refused to “break” white neighborhoods, to manage all FHA-owned rental and foreclosure properties in the county. Although Simms and other witnesses refrained from issuing a broader structural critique of the federal government’s racialized housing and neighborhood appraisal policies, their testimony regarding the FHA’s marketing and management plans for foreclosed

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<sup>58</sup> “Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint: Findings and Recommendations,” 8-10; and “Fire Department,” n.d., Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC.

properties highlighted a clear nexus between government administrators and the local housing officials who helped to keep the city segregated.<sup>59</sup>

The civil rights commission invited GM officials, representatives from the Mott Foundation, local builders and lenders, members of the Flint Board of Real Estate, and other civic and housing industry leaders to testify during the 1966 hearings. Largely, members of the city's local power structure chose to abstain from the proceedings, however, except in a few instances where commission members solicited rebuttals to direct testimony. GM official Charles Stewart Mott and Frank Manley, executive director of the Mott Foundation—who according to critics refused even to discuss fair housing legislation—reluctantly accepted the commission's request to rebut allegations that they had “sidestepped the issue of open occupancy.” Manley adopted a diplomatic stance, arguing that the Mott Foundation, as a tax-exempt organization, could not legally take any position on open housing or other political questions. Feeling more confrontational than his subordinate, Mott angrily denounced his critics while maintaining a neutral position on open housing legislation. “I have many friends in the Negro community,” Mott noted, “and nobody is going to get me to take a position that these friends would take exception to.” In response, state civil rights commissioner William Dwyer challenged the executive to take a position in favor of open housing, stating,

I think you have offended the Negro by not taking a public stand. Even your mayor lives in the ghetto. . . . I can't understand your unwillingness to offend some people. You are without a doubt the most influential person in Flint and to be such you must have offended some people.

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<sup>59</sup> Simms, “Testimony Regarding Public Hearing,” 1-6; and “Testimony Making Allegations against the Flint Service Office Federal Housing Administration,” December 1, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC. On the discriminatory practices of the Piper Realty Company, see Elliott Horton to Orville Pratt, February 19, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 50, folder 29, GHCC.

Bristling at Dwyer's suggestion, Mott replied, "That's too bad for you. I don't have to convince you."<sup>60</sup>

The 1966 equal housing hearings encouraged fair housing activists to move forward with their goal of implementing a municipal open occupancy ordinance. Through their boycott of the commission's proceedings, the corporate executives, lenders, builders, realtors, and housing industry officials who refused to testify hoped to deny legitimacy to the open housing movement. Their no-shows produced the opposite effect, however. Following the fall hearings, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission produced a summary of the proceedings that affirmed witnesses' charges of racial discrimination and substandard housing. Moreover, the commissioners issued a harsh rebuke to the civic elites who had declined to testify:

The failure of financial, commercial, industrial and other private corporations and organizations to be represented at the hearing tends to show that that segment of the community is, at best, disinterested in the resolution of the problems of housing discrimination and segregation in the Flint area. . . . Their silence on the question of equal housing opportunity serves to retard progress toward its achievement.

The editorial staff of the *Flint Journal* concurred, suggesting that the city's social conscience had "dozed" during the hearings.<sup>61</sup>

### *The Battle for Open Housing*

Civil rights commissioners hoped to spur the city's seemingly recalcitrant leadership into action by attaching a list of recommendations to their report on the fall hearings.

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<sup>60</sup> Morrissey, "Mott Foundation's Housing Stand Told," *Flint Journal*, December 10, 1966. See also, "Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint: Findings and Recommendations," 11-16; and Manley to Mr. Damon Keith, December 1, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 38, GHCC.

<sup>61</sup> "Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint: Findings and Recommendations," 11-19; "Did Flint's Conscience Doze During Hearing on Housing?" *Flint Journal*, December 8, 1966. See also, Beasley, "Weekly Report," November 2, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 16, GHCC.

Significantly, the commission endorsed the Flint NAACP's long-standing call for a municipal open occupancy law, encouraging city commissioners to "enact a comprehensive ordinance prohibiting discrimination in housing."<sup>62</sup> NAACP activists wasted little time in returning to the Flint City Commission. On February 13, 1967, civil rights activists descended upon city hall to urge commissioners to reconsider the open occupancy ordinance submitted by Robert Rawls in September 1966. Reminding commissioners that Flint was the most segregated city in the North, HOME member Leroy Davis implored the commission to put the weight of law behind fair housing. "It is incumbent upon this governing body to guarantee the same rights to everyone," Davis stated. Speaking in opposition to the proposal, Harry M. Rapaport, executive vice-president of the Flint Board of Real Estate, advised commissioners to reject the legislation, claiming that a fair housing ordinance would "create hostility because people don't like compulsion." Beyond the heated debates over the merits of the proposed ordinance, the February meeting also featured a dispute over the legality of municipal open occupancy laws. Citing Michigan Attorney General Frank Kelley's 1963 ruling in opposition to municipal fair housing law, City Attorney Charles A. Forrest advised commission members that the state's 1963 constitution prohibited municipal legislatures from passing open housing legislation. Flint's MCRC representative, Olive Beasley, contradicted Forrest's conclusions, informing city commissioners that other cities had passed similar laws and, furthermore, that Kelley had recently reversed his earlier decision. Wishing to delay their votes until receiving a definitive legal opinion on the NAACP's proposed ordinance, the city commission voted to refer the bill to its

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<sup>62</sup> "Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint: Findings and Recommendations," 15.

legislative committee.<sup>63</sup> On March 2, 1967, Kelley released a letter to the MCRC endorsing the legality of municipal open housing laws. Based in part upon a 1965 ruling by Washtenaw County Circuit Court Judge James B. Breakey that upheld the legality of such legislation, Kelley's change of opinion further fueled the fair housing campaign.<sup>64</sup> City Attorney Forrest refused to acknowledge Kelley's new directive, however, maintaining, "The attorney general can speak only through official legal opinions."<sup>65</sup>

Already dominating the headlines of the *Flint Journal*, the agendas of virtually every city commission meeting, and dinner table conversations in homes across the city, the issue of fair housing had become the most volatile political issue in the city by the spring and summer of 1967. Yet the city commission, much to the dismay of open housing activists, continued to postpone a formal vote on the proposal. During an April speech to local union members, Herbert Hill, the NAACP's national labor secretary, scolded Flint activists for not forcing a vote on open occupancy. "Your town is a Jim Crow town," he claimed. "When are you going to bust out of the ghetto?"<sup>66</sup> On July 17, Mrs. Marise Hadden chastised Flint's city commissioners for refusing to take a stand on open occupancy and warned them of the consequences of inaction:

Most Negroes as well as other minority groups are concentrated in old inferior housing in old inferior neighborhoods. Many of these dwellings are unfit for human habitation, but these citizens have little if any alternative and are forced to pay exorbitant rates for dilapidated, roach and rat infested facilities. . . . The past practices of the Federal government, the past and current policies and practices of real estate agencies and commercial home builders and the racial fears of white homeowners—which have been exploited by the opponents of fair housing programs have all contributed to a situation which is a disgraceful affront to our

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<sup>63</sup> Kenneth B. Moore, "Open Occupancy Backers Make Pitch for Ordinance," *Flint Journal*, February 14, 1967.

<sup>64</sup> On Breakey's ruling, see "Upset State Ruling Cited in Flint Action," *Flint Journal*, June 19, 1965.

<sup>65</sup> William E. Schmidt, "City Attorney Still Opposed to Housing Law," *Flint Journal*, June 2, 1967.

<sup>66</sup> Wilhelm, "NAACP Leader Says North Lags in Breaking Down Bias," *Flint Journal*, April 24, 1967.

common democratic heritage. . . . We have long since learned that the most deadly factor mitigating against desegregation—particularly in housing is equivocation on the part of authority figures at the top. Unless elected officials take a firm and positive stand [on open occupancy], dissident elements come to believe that their only rewarding means of protest is open violence and rebellion. Under these circumstances, it is guaranteed that they are going to rebel against life in the ghetto. . . .<sup>67</sup>

In spite of Hadden’s warning, the commission refused to act; and within a week, her grim prediction had come to pass.

In the wee hours of July 23, 1967, racial violence erupted seventy miles southeast of Flint in the city of Detroit. The fighting began after police officers arrested patrons of an after-hours African-American drinking establishment, or “blind pig,” located at Twelfth Street and Clairmount Avenue, but the violence quickly spread to black neighborhoods throughout the Motor City. The most violent and costly racial conflagration in United States history, the Detroit riot of 1967 raged for five full days, ultimately claiming nearly fifty lives and resulting in millions of dollars in property damage.<sup>68</sup> The violence also spread to Flint’s North End, where angry protesters gathered to vent their frustrations against police brutality, housing segregation, and racial inequality. On the evening of July 24, as the violence unfolded many miles to the south, hundreds of black protesters assembled at the corner of Leith and Saginaw Streets. During the night, a small number of North End rioters threw stones at cars, smashed windows, looted several commercial establishments, and firebombed at least seventeen stores and homes. Governor George Romney declared a state of emergency in Genesee County the following day. Hoping to stem the spread of violence, Romney assigned teams of state troopers to monitor checkpoints at the Flint city limits, prohibited the sale

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<sup>67</sup> Marise Hadden to Flint City Commission, July 17, 1967, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 12, GHCC.

<sup>68</sup> On the Detroit riots, see Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 259-268; and H. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?* 44-47.

of alcohol throughout the county, banned all non-officers from carrying firearms, and ordered the closing of all North End gas stations. Mayor McCree, civil rights leaders from the NAACP and Urban League, and respected neighborhood activists supported the governor's declaration by maintaining an around-the-clock presence on the North End, walking the streets, imploring young people to return to their homes, and helping officers to restore order to the city. By July 27, the North End disturbances had ended and city and state officials had restored a modicum of calm.<sup>69</sup>

The combined efforts of hundreds of city and state officials, police officers, civil rights leaders, and community activists helped to limit violence and the destruction of property during the 1967 Flint disorders. Nevertheless, the restoration of calm did little to remedy the grievances of thousands of housing reformers and North End residents. On July 27, just as city officials were declaring an end to the disturbances, nearly fifty activists, half of them white, attended a city commission meeting to demand a vote on open occupancy. Mindful of the housing inequities that had fueled civil disorder on the North End, downtown merchant Sydney Melet, owner of the Vogue clothing store; Saul Siegel, the executive director of the Greater Flint Downtown Corporation; Harold R. Stine, president of the Flint Board of Education; and Olivia Maynard, secretary of the Democratic Party's State Central Committee, all joined the July 27 mobilization for fair housing. The outbreak of violence and civil unrest forced all of Flint's civic leaders, many of whom had boycotted the 1966 equal housing hearings and kept quiet on open occupancy, to reevaluate the merits of a fair housing ordinance. To some, including Melet and Siegel, the July violence demonstrated that the city had a moral and legal obligation to protect civil rights in the arena of housing. For others, however, the civil

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<sup>69</sup> See *Flint Journal*, July 25-27, 1967.



disorders had the opposite effect, provoking even more hostility and resentment towards a nondiscrimination ordinance.<sup>70</sup>

Designed to appease racial conservatives and moderates on the city commission, the NAACP's open occupancy ordinance contained several loopholes that allowed for housing discrimination under certain circumstances. The ordinance would not apply to owners of two-unit apartments if the owner occupied one of the dwelling units, for instance. Nor would the ordinance cover religious institutions or homeowners who took in boarders. The bill did contain a controversial penalty clause for violators, however, which included punishments of up to ninety days in jail and/or a fine of up to \$300. Already openly hostile to any nondiscrimination legislation, Second Ward Commissioner Carl Mason and Fourth Ward Commissioner William Polk used the penalty provision—and the threat of a polarizing referendum campaign to repeal the law—to persuade the commission's racial moderates to oppose the NAACP's proposal. On August 14, the commission voted five-to-three to reject the ordinance.<sup>71</sup> Stung by the defeat, Mayor McCree obtained a "special privilege" to address the commission following the vote. "Last November this city commission saw fit to make me mayor," McCree stated, "and that was fine all over the country, very wonderful."

I thought here at last we have a local government willing to accept people on the basis of their ability and not because of race. And I have lived with this and I have preached this to my community. Tonight, however, I've changed my mind. I'm not going to sit up here any longer and live an equal opportunity lie.

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<sup>70</sup> K. Moore, "Need for Open Housing Is Urgent, Speakers Tell City Commission," *Flint Journal*, July 28, 1967. See also, *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, July 27, 1967, 423-429.

<sup>71</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, August 14, 1967.

In a move that surprised nearly everyone in the packed city hall chambers, McCree protested the commission's decision by resigning his post as mayor.<sup>72</sup>

The defeat of the open occupancy bill and McCree's shocking resignation provoked a firestorm of controversy, protest, and recrimination. Many civic leaders feared that the decision would unleash another round of disorders in the North End. The day after the commission's vote, the Mott Foundation, without specifically endorsing open occupancy, issued a press release endorsing equal opportunity for all. The editors of the *Flint Journal* went even further, endorsing open occupancy and imploring McCree to return to his post.<sup>73</sup> On August 17, dozens of white and black elected officials and appointees announced that they too would resign in a collective protest against the commission's vote. Among those who resigned were Nathaniel Turner, a member of the Hurley Hospital Board of Managers, five black members of the Genesee County Board of Supervisors, and three representatives from the Citizens Advisory Commission on Urban Renewal. On the day following the mass resignations, thirty-four supporters of open occupancy, most of them teenagers, organized a sleep-in demonstration on the lawn in front of city hall. Led by young activist Woody Etherly, Jr., the sleep-in protesters—carrying signs reading “Our City Believes in Lily-White Neighborhoods” and “We Don't Want Your Run-Down Property”—vowed to camp out on the lawn of city hall until the commission reversed its position.<sup>74</sup> Later that day, Harding Mott, by then president of his father's philanthropy, revised the foundation's earlier statement, expressing full support

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<sup>72</sup> Schmidt, “Open Occupancy Is Defeated; McCree Says He Will Resign,” *Flint Journal*, August 15, 1967. See also, “Democracy for Everyone except Negro,” *Flint Journal*, August 15, 1967; Memorandum, Gordin to Michigan Civil Rights Commission, August 18, 1967, Beasley Papers, box 5, GHCC. For the text of McCree's speech, see “McCree Resignation,” Beasley Papers, box 21, folder 16, GHCC.

<sup>73</sup> “Flint Needs Floyd McCree and Open Occupancy Law,” *Flint Journal*, August 15, 1967.

<sup>74</sup> Schmidt, “Open Occupancy Advocates Huddle at Soggy Sleep-In,” *Flint Journal*, August 19, 1967. See also, Woody Etherly, interview by W. Howard, April 1, 1994, Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives.

for open occupancy legislation and Mayor McCree. The political tides had begun to shift.<sup>75</sup>



Figure 7.1. Open housing demonstration. Youth picketers in front of the Flint Municipal Center during the 1967 fair housing sleep-in. Courtesy of Perry Archives.

The fair housing protests culminated on August 20 with a massive Unity Rally held in front of city hall. Fearing another outbreak of civil unrest, Governor Romney and Attorney General Frank Kelley attended the event, where both men expressed their support for the mayor and open occupancy. In his address to the nearly five thousand protesters, Romney assured Flint citizens that he and the attorney general both supported “the elimination of discrimination and social injustice in any form,” while reminding city

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<sup>75</sup> “Mott Foundation Asks Open Housing,” *Flint Journal*, August 20, 1967.

commissioners that state law did not prohibit cities from passing nondiscrimination legislation.<sup>76</sup> The largest civil rights protest in civic history, the August 20 Unity Rally helped to bring international attention to the struggle for open occupancy in Flint. On Tuesday, August 22, the Huntley-Brinkley television news program, which aired nationally on NBC, devoted a full ten minutes to covering McCree's resignation, the youth sleep-in, and the explosive controversy over open occupancy.<sup>77</sup>

The summer 1967 protests forced the editorial board of the *Flint Journal*, several key downtown retailers, the presidents of the Mott Foundation and the board of education, and other civic leaders to throw their support behind municipal fair housing legislation. On August 21, the day after the Unity Rally, the city commission held yet another hearing on open housing, attracting nearly seven hundred attendees; but this time a clear majority of the speakers endorsed the bill. Instructing opponents of fair housing to “step aside,” Reverend Earle R. Ramsdell, the executive director of the Greater Flint Council of Churches, warned, “Flint is in danger of becoming a sick society.”<sup>78</sup> Sensing that the momentum had turned in their favor, supporters of open occupancy intensified their efforts in the weeks following the August 20 mobilization. Inspired by the massive show of support for open occupancy, McCree—despite suffering from exhaustion and a painful ulcer that had sent him to the hospital during the previous week—rescinded his resignation on August 28.<sup>79</sup> After returning to office, the mayor opened a series of secret meetings with racially moderate commissioners, hoping to gain a favorable vote on a modified proposal. After a week of private negotiations, McCree had assembled a

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<sup>76</sup> See *Flint Journal*, August 21, 1967.

<sup>77</sup> *Flint Journal*, August 23, 1967.

<sup>78</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, August 21, 1967; and *Flint Journal*, August 22-24, 1967.

<sup>79</sup> K. Moore, “McCree Will Remain as Mayor,” *Flint Journal*, August 28, 1967; and Beasley to Levy, August 29, 1967, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 17, GHCC.

majority on the commission. In order to gain that majority, however, he agreed to several compromises that further weakened the ordinance. Namely, the new open occupancy proposal maintained special protections for religious institutions while expanding exemptions to include landlords who lived in buildings with five or fewer rental units. Moreover, the new bill also made it illegal and punishable to file false claims of discrimination.<sup>80</sup>

On Monday, October 30, after weeks of intense controversy and private negotiations, the Flint City Commission, in a close five-to-four vote, approved open occupancy legislation.<sup>81</sup> Though the law was a significantly weaker version of the NAACP's original bill, the commission's vote nonetheless angered white homeowners and realtors throughout the city. Within minutes of the law's passage, opponents had launched a petition drive to force a referendum on the issue. Led by Gerald A. Spencer, a member of the John Birch Society, the Committee to Repeal Forced Housing Legislation united a broad coalition of homeowners, developers, realtors, and racial conservatives who believed that the bill threatened the rights of all property owners.<sup>82</sup> Joining the opposition to open occupancy were at least fifty members of a local Ku Klux Klan chapter, who on October 14 held a small parade in downtown Flint.<sup>83</sup> Under the guidelines established by the Flint City Charter, Spencer needed to collect a minimum of 3,025 valid signatures from registered city voters within thirty days in order to force a referendum. By November 24, Spencer and his supporters had collected nearly six

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<sup>80</sup> K. Moore, "Occupancy Fight Forges New Power Bloc," *Flint Journal*, September 6, 1967. For daily coverage of the issue, see also *Flint Journal*, September 7-October 28, 1967. During the September and October negotiations over the fair housing bill, the *Journal* ran daily updates on the progress of the legislation. For the text of the legislation, see *AC Sparkler*, February 9, 1968.

<sup>81</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, October 23, 30, 1967.

<sup>82</sup> K. Moore, "Referendum Sought on Open Occupancy," *Flint Journal*, October 31, 1967.

<sup>83</sup> On the Klan rally in downtown Flint, see *Flint Journal*, October 17, 1967.

thousand signatures, however, more than enough to trigger a public vote on open occupancy. Upon submitting the petitions to the city clerk, Spencer read a prepared statement to reporters that outlined his opposition to the new law. “The issue,” Spencer noted, is whether “the government, right or wrong, has the power to tell a person how and to whom he must dispose of his property.” “It appears,” he continued, “that the advocates of forced housing will attempt to turn the citizens of Flint away from the real issue of ‘a man’s home is his castle,’ and redirect it towards racial bigotry.”<sup>84</sup>

After certifying the signatures, Flint City Clerk Lloyd S. Hendon ordered a referendum election for February 20, 1968. In response, the Flint NAACP organized a two-pronged campaign to protect open housing. While coordinating a massive voter registration campaign throughout St. John and Floral Park, the Flint NAACP, represented by attorney Glen Epps, also filed suit to block the February vote. Epps sought an injunction to halt the election, claiming that citizens had neither the right to discriminate nor the authority to vote on the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>85</sup> On January 24, 1968, Circuit Court Judge Anthony J. Mansour ruled against the NAACP. Three weeks later, on February 14, the Michigan Court of Appeals upheld Mansour’s decision, issuing a terse ruling that stated, “The right of referendum regularly pursued may not be restrained by an injunction.”<sup>86</sup> Out of legal options, members of the Flint NAACP, HOME, and activists from Friends of Fair Housing, an ad hoc group dedicated

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<sup>84</sup> The Spencer quotation is from K. Moore, “Petitions Filed Seeking Repeal of Open Housing,” *Flint Journal*, November 24, 1967. See also, Memorandum, Beasley to Levy, November 13, 1967, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 17, GHCC; *Flint Journal*, November 24-28, 1967; and Beasley, “Weekly Report,” December 31, 1967, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 17, GHCC.

<sup>85</sup> Beasley, “Weekly Report,” January 19, 1968, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 18, GHCC; and Giampetroni, “Housing Suit Pits Civil vs. Political Rights,” *Flint Journal*, January 21, 1968. See also, “Group Formed to Push Support for Fair Housing,” *Flint Journal*, January 5, 1968.

<sup>86</sup> “Court Rejects Request to Stop Housing Vote,” *Flint Journal*, February 14, 1968.

to defending the new law, spent the remaining few days attempting to shore up voters' support for open occupancy.

Over forty thousand citizens turned out to cast ballots in the open housing election of 1968. The election was one of the closest, most intensely debated affairs in Flint's civic history. Only the most optimistic proponents of civil rights believed that open housing would survive a referendum in Flint, an intensely segregated city with an overwhelmingly white electorate. Yet in a tally that surprised even Mayor McCree, who went to bed on February 20 believing that his side had lost, Flint citizens defeated the referendum initiative by a razor thin margin of thirty votes.<sup>87</sup> Prior to the February referendum in Flint, municipal open housing elections had been held in several cities including Berkeley, California; Seattle and Tacoma, Washington; Akron and Springfield, Ohio; Jackson, Michigan; and Columbia, Missouri. In each of the elections, voters had rejected laws mandating nondiscrimination in housing. The first city in the United States to approve open housing via popular vote, Flint once again gained national attention in the weeks following the election.<sup>88</sup> On February 23, UAW President Walter Reuther hailed Flint voters for building "one of the cornerstones upon which to build stable community relations, sound economic growth, a wholesome and healthful environment and social progress and justice."<sup>89</sup> According to Dale Kildee, a Flint representative in the state legislature who did little to support the open occupancy effort, the election

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<sup>87</sup> *Flint Journal*, February 21-28, 1968.

<sup>88</sup> Stanley D. Brunn and Wayne L. Hoffman, "The Spatial Response of Negroes and Whites toward Open Housing: The Flint Referendum," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 60:1 (March 1970): 18-36. See also, Michigan Civil Rights Commission, "A Summary of Municipal Fair Housing Ordinances," Holt Papers, box 9, folder 56, GHCC.

<sup>89</sup> "Housing Vote Is Praised by Reuther," *Flint Journal*, February 23, 1968.

demonstrated that “voters can be trusted to do what is right when they are well informed.”<sup>90</sup>

With very few exceptions, Flint’s political leaders—including Kildee and many civic boosters who took no active stance on the February referendum—embraced the open housing election. They claimed it was a victory for all of Flint’s people. Just a year after voters approved open housing, Mayor Donald R. Cronin, McCree’s successor, awarded a key to the city to Edwin C. “Bill” Berry, the executive director of the Urban League of Chicago. During his presentation, Cronin stated, “I’ve been asked what this key opens. It doesn’t have to open anything because everything in Flint is open to everyone.” With the passage of open housing, Cronin often boasted, Flint had become “the most progressive city in the country.” Berry was not convinced, however. During his speech, the Chicagoan mocked Cronin’s claims, noting that racism must not exist in Flint, “just every place else.”<sup>91</sup>

To many African Americans in the city, especially those who examined the election returns, the narrow February victory seemed to be far less demonstrative than Cronin assumed. In Wards 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9, which housed nearly all of the city’s black residents, open housing won by sizable margins. Yet in the virtually all-white Second, Fourth, Sixth, and Eighth Wards, voters overwhelmingly opposed the open occupancy ordinance. In the Fourth, Sixth, and Eighth Wards, not a single precinct endorsed open occupancy; and citywide, voters approved open occupancy in only forty-six of Flint’s 122 precincts. Without heavy black turnout in the North End, especially in the predominantly African-American Third Ward, where over 90 percent of voters endorsed

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<sup>90</sup> Wilhelm, “Vote in Flint May Boost State Open Housing Effort,” *Flint Journal*, February 22, 1968.

<sup>91</sup> “Flint League Chief Raps Cronin Claim,” *Flint Journal*, April 11, 1969.



open occupancy, opponents of the ordinance would have won a decisive victory.<sup>92</sup> According to a *Flint Journal* editorial assessment, “The results demonstrated . . . that the Negro does indeed have power at the ballot box.”<sup>93</sup> Rather than uniting the city around a shared commitment to fair housing and civil rights, the open housing referendum highlighted the depth of the city’s racial fissures.

Notwithstanding the claims of Mayor Cronin and other Flint boosters, the 1968 fair housing referendum left in place a harsh landscape of Jim Crow—an intensely divided metropolis fragmented along racial and spatial lines. Nevertheless, race relations in Genesee County had yet to reach their nadir. During the years following the 1968 open housing vote, struggles over school desegregation, urban renewal, white flight, deindustrialization, and annexation unfolded throughout the metropolitan area. By the mid-1970s, the campaign for school desegregation had taken center stage in municipal politics, providing African-American activists with an opportunity to test just how much power they possessed over municipal affairs.

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<sup>92</sup> Civic Research Council of Flint, “Analysis of Open Housing Referendum – February 20, 1968,” Warner Papers, box 11, 95-1.1-277, Scharchburg Archives. See also, *Flint Journal*, February 21, 1968; and Brunn and Hoffman, “The Spatial Response of Negroes and Whites,” 18-36.

<sup>93</sup> “Housing Referendum Proves Voting Is Vital to Negroes,” *Flint Journal*, February 27, 1968.

## Chapter 8

### **Confronting a Geographic Fiction: The Battle for School Desegregation**

More than two decades after the United States Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the federal government discovered school segregation in Flint. On August 29, 1975, federal officials from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) charged the Flint Community Schools with operating illegally segregated public schools in violation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Outlined in a lengthy letter to Superintendent Peter L. Clancy, the charges documented how school officials and members of the Flint Board of Education had constructed and for decades maintained a separate but unequal, dual education system through a combination of discriminatory hiring and teacher assignment practices, racially biased school location and pupil transfer policies, and deliberately gerrymandered attendance boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Although the leadership of the Flint Board of Education vehemently denied the charges and openly resisted federal desegregation mandates for nearly six contentious years, federal reports left little room for doubt about the existence of a long and complex history of Jim Crow education in the Vehicle City.

In the area of pupil assignment, HEW officials painted a stunning portrait of intentional, government-sponsored segregation in the heart of the liberal urban North. Beginning in the mid-1930s, when small numbers of black families first moved into all-

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<sup>1</sup> Mines to Clancy, August 29, 1975.

white attendance districts on the borders of Flint's overcrowded North End ghetto, the Flint Board of Education enforced a block-by-block attendance boundary policy that at times kept white and black neighbors in separate schools. During the 1940s and 1950s, as the city's black community expanded ever so gradually into previously all-white neighborhoods, the school board consistently redrew attendance boundaries to maintain educational apartheid, literally plucking black pupils from white schools and returning them to segregated "neighborhood schools." Ironically, the neighborhood schools to which black children returned were often outside of their residential neighborhoods. As the Second Great Migration intensified in the 1950s and 1960s, the board of education struggled to maintain its segregated schools in the face of large black enrollment increases and intense pressure from civil rights organizations. Many civil rights activists in the Vehicle City believed that open housing would help to solve the problem of school segregation. In 1968, Flint voters approved a fair housing ordinance that banned most forms of housing discrimination. Nevertheless, government records confirm that a clear "historical pattern of racially motivated student assignment" continued and even thrived in Flint throughout the civil rights era. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, with a startling degree of efficiency, Flint officials repeatedly redistricted schools either to reflect or at times even supersede the racial and economic geographies of the city's segregated housing market. Through its neighborhood schools initiative, the board of education successfully fused state-sanctioned forms of educational and residential apartheid into a powerful spatial and ideological monolith that undermined any claims of the North's historic innocence in the arena of race relations. In an era of widespread school desegregation in the South, northern school districts in shrinking,

deindustrializing cities such as Flint became the site for Jim Crow's most defiant and triumphant stand.<sup>2</sup>

The Mott Foundation and the Flint Board of Education, as an extension of their shared philosophical vision of community education, practiced deliberate racial segregation until well into the 1970s. Although liberal civil rights organizations in the city had long criticized the Flint Board of Education for operating unequal and segregated public schools, they articulated a critique of “de facto” segregation that proved to be exculpatory for the Mott Foundation, the school board, and other local policymakers. For the civil rights movement in Flint—burdened already by a dearth of financial and institutional resources—the liberal language of northern exceptionalism that crystallized false distinctions between state-sponsored segregation in the South and privatized, de facto segregation in the North, resulted in a delayed response to the board's segregationist practices. Indeed, it was not until 1975, several years after public, legislative, and legal opinions had shifted decisively against busing and other desegregation initiatives, that Flint activists filed their first of two unsuccessful federal desegregation lawsuits against the board of education. Those suits, though of immense symbolic value in undermining the legitimacy of de facto segregation, spawned only rhetorical commitments to desegregation among representatives of Mott Foundation and the recalcitrant board of education.

In the absence of judicial remedies, civil rights activists in Flint pinned their hopes for school desegregation on sustained local protest and federal enforcement of the

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<sup>2</sup> Mines to Clancy, August 29, 1975. I have adopted this framework from Thomas Sugrue. See Sugrue, “Jim Crow's Last Stand: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Suburban North,” (a public lecture for the Michigan Colloquium on Race and Twentieth-Century American Political Development), October 16, 2003, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

1964 Civil Right Act, which arrived after much delay in 1975. After years of inaction following federal investigations that commenced in the late 1960s, HEW finally ordered the Flint Board of Education to desegregate its schools in late 1975, sparking a citywide debate on race and community education. Stretching over a ten-year period in which the issues of busing and school segregation exploded in Michigan and elsewhere, Flint's desegregation crisis brought the issues of race, space, class, and neighborhood into the forefront of local political culture. For white opponents of the HEW mandate, who sought to preserve their own moral innocence by framing segregation only in private terms, both residential and school segregation were the colorblind outcomes of tens of thousands of individual, market-based housing decisions that resulted in legal forms of segregation. By refusing to acknowledge the government's role in the maintenance of inequality and segregation, both in schools and in neighborhoods, white opponents of desegregation occupied a tenuous political position that forced them to defend their racial innocence and the segregated status quo only by denying the past. Thousands of white families did just that, however, and crafted an incongruous defense of white racial privilege and homeowner prerogatives that rejected both segregation and its only remedies.

Unwilling to provide political and ideological leadership during the 1970s turmoil, and unable to accept the potentially devastating challenges that desegregation posed for community education, the Mott Foundation abruptly withdrew its support for the Flint schools as the desegregation crisis unfolded, leaving behind a massive funding shortfall and a rudderless educational power structure. Nevertheless, the school board continued to champion the neighborhood schools policies that had kept pupils segregated,

in the end agreeing only to a weak desegregation plan that relied upon magnet schools and other forms of voluntary desegregation. In a district that had already lost tens of thousands of white pupils to suburban systems and private schools, Flint's voluntary magnet program never overcame the legacies of spatial inequality and racial segregation that a powerful combination of discriminatory education, housing, and development policies had maintained and orchestrated for decades.

*"Keeping Them in Places": The Origins of the De Facto Critique*

By the mid-1960s, African-American parents and activists had risen formally to challenge the exclusionary foundations of Flint's community education consensus. Though black citizens had for at least two decades criticized the Mott Foundation's unequal allocation of resources in the community education program, not until 1964 did the first sustained critiques of school segregation emerge. As in other cities throughout the country, African Americans in Flint expressed a profound ambivalence on the question of school desegregation. For the greater part of the twentieth century, educational quality usually trumped racial integration as the central concern of black parents.<sup>3</sup> In 1964, however, local activists began to articulate a critique of community education and neighborhood schools that implicated segregation in the unequal educational opportunities provided to the city's black citizens.

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<sup>3</sup> Olive Beasley wrote extensively on black ambivalence about busing in Flint. On at least one occasion, she noted that black opposition to busing was "adamant" in many minority neighborhoods. See Beasley to Clarence Wood, March 29, 1976, Beasley Papers, box 38, folder 8, GHCC. On blacks' mixed feelings regarding integrated schools as a national phenomenon, see Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North*, 167-218. For an analysis of community attitudes towards educational quality and pupil integration in Michigan, see R. Scott, "The Status of Equal Opportunity," 11. On black complaints against inequality in the community education program, see "Report Criticizes Mott Program, Educational System, Community Ed. Program in Schools," *Flint Spokesman*, March 6, 1971.

In February of 1964, members of the Michigan NAACP's statewide civil rights committee accepted an invitation from the Mott Foundation to visit the community schools of Flint. Hoping to deflect the charges of discrimination and unequal resource allocation that had first emerged in the 1950s, the Mott Foundation hosted NAACP officials in an attempt to allay black skepticism about community education. Prior to the official visit, however, members of the Flint Citizens Information Committee (FCIC), an ad hoc local civil rights group, circulated an open letter to the NAACP visitors. The letter presented a blistering denunciation of the Mott Foundation's role in fusing inequality and segregation through community education:

This letter comes to tell you some things before you come visit the Mott Foundation because you will not get the facts when you come here. What you will get will be a planned "brainwashing session" about what they are doing to help regarding race relations. The fact is the Mott people use this community school as a means of segregating the Negro and "keeping them in places." The schools are in neighborhoods that are segregated and the people living there must attend that school. This is how they keep up segregated schools and segregation in general. But then they plan lots of programs with high sounding names for the so called "culturally deprived." This is their way of deceiving Negroes and other people to think they want to help them. This is very phony because if they were so interested in helping the Negro, why don't they give them better jobs, then they won't be so culturally deprived. . . . The Mott people really control all of Flint—The city, the schools, the banks and Flint Newspapers in general.<sup>4</sup>

The February letter, circulated internally within the Michigan NAACP, highlighted the connections between school segregation and the broader patterns of exclusion that separated African Americans from skilled jobs and other social opportunities. The letter also offered a sharp and accurate critique of the Mott Foundation's disproportionate power in shaping public school policies. Yet embedded within the document was a

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<sup>4</sup> Flint Citizens Information Committee to NAACP Civil Rights Committee, February 1964, Holt Papers, box 2, folder 47, GHCC.

contradictory statement on the nature of pupil segregation that provided both legal and political cover for local policymakers. In the opening paragraph, the letter writer argued that the Mott Foundation used community schools “as a means of segregating the Negro and ‘keeping them in places.’” In the next sentence, however, the letter implicated “neighborhoods that are segregated,” a passive voice construction that avoided naming the private *and* public entities that perpetuated racial segregation in the areas of housing, education, and employment.

The 1964 letter was especially revealing because it indicated how the language of de facto segregation shaped local analyses of the color line. Later that year, at a December 9 meeting of the board of education, Robert Rawls, the chairman of the Flint NAACP’s housing committee, succinctly stated the critique of de facto segregation: “The housing pattern directly influences the education of our children, creating segregation and, therefore, inferior schools.”<sup>5</sup> As most activists understood, virtually every instance of segregation in Flint’s neighborhoods *and* schools derived from government-sponsored education, housing, and urban development policies. Yet by adopting the de facto framework—which described the color line in private, non-statist terms—Flint’s liberal civil rights coalition provided the school board with an opportunity to evade its responsibility for maintaining segregation by erecting a false hierarchy that blamed Jim Crow schools on privately orchestrated housing segregation. Though black parents and activists understood and resented the board’s discriminatory boundary policies, the liberal language of de facto segregation focused on private forms of racism in the real estate market as the source of educational apartheid, in the process diverting attention away from thoroughly institutionalized forms of state-sanctioned school segregation.

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<sup>5</sup> Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (December 9, 1964).



The FCIC's 1964 letter reflected longstanding political and ideological contradictions within both American liberalism and the northern civil rights movement that had first emerged in the aftermath of the *Brown* decision. In the wake of the court's ruling, black activists in Flint and other northern cities immediately grappled with its local implications. Shortly after the justices issued their 1954 decision, the Flint Urban League published a commentary that illustrated the tension within civil rights discourse between an acknowledgement of rigid segregation locally and the belief that northern patterns of segregation were fundamentally distinct from those in the South. According to the Urban League, the *Brown* ruling did not pertain to Flint schools, regardless of their stark patterns of school segregation:

On the surface the [*Brown*] decision would have little effect on Flint since its schools are already integrated and have been for many years. . . . Over the past few years certain grade schools have progressed closer and closer toward being all Negro. Is this because of segregation in the public schools? No. Will the recent decision on schools affect this situation? No. . . . Flint is at the top of the list noticeably in the degree of neighborhood segregation. Each public school is organized to serve its immediate neighborhood. As the direct result of neighborhood segregation, some Flint schools inevitably are segregated.<sup>6</sup>

School board members and Mott Foundation officials did not feel threatened by such critiques because they failed to address the gerrymandering of districts that had undermined residential desegregation. In fact, the language of the Urban League's critical editorial differed only slightly from the defense of segregation offered by Superintendent William Early in 1966. Though neither the February 1964 letter nor the Urban League editorial used the term "de facto segregation," both documents signaled liberal acceptance of an inherently limited discourse on the nature of northern

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<sup>6</sup> William S. Price, III, "Implications in U.S. Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation in Public Schools," *Amplifier*, n.d. [ca. 1955].

segregation. In Flint and elsewhere, this discourse focused on private forms of discrimination at the expense of a critique of the public policies that maintained Jim Crow schools and neighborhoods. The language of de facto segregation possessed a discursive power in Flint and in other northern cities that served to delay and then deflect civil rights responses to government-sponsored segregation. For the thousands of African Americans in the city who saw no link between integration and quality education, the de facto-de jure debate meant far less than the equal allocation of resources. However, among integrationists and those non-aligned citizens who saw a connection between educational disadvantage and segregation, the de jure-de facto, public-private regional binary severely undermined the legal attack on segregated schools.

In the decades following the *Brown* verdict, the NAACP pursued an aggressive national strategy to extend desegregation to school districts in the North and West. Part of the NAACP's plan entailed drawing distinctions between legally constituted forms of segregation in the South and the housing-based school segregation that existed in the North and West. The strategic decision to make regional distinctions was not an inevitable outgrowth of the *Brown* litigation, however. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a great deal of debate within civil rights organizations over the nature of segregation outside of the South. In 1962, disagreements over the issue came to a head at a Columbia University civil rights conference, where Chicago attorney William Ming asserted that there was "no such thing as de facto versus de jure segregation." "For about forty years," Ming argued, "the pattern of school location was attributable to school boards whose intent from the start was to maximize or minimize Negroes in schools in

every city, town, and hamlet in the land.”<sup>7</sup> On the ground, civil rights activists in New York City, Chicago, and scores of other cities across the country waged similar debates over the structure of the segregation they confronted.

Assertions of de jure segregation in the North gained little traction within the leadership circles of the Urban League, the NAACP, and state civil rights commissions, however. In 1964, after meeting with Flint NAACP members, June Shagaloff, then an assistant to NAACP Director Roy Wilkins, revealed the organization’s analysis of “northern-style” segregation: “What is significant, is the growing realization that even though problems of imbalance and de facto segregation may not be the creation of boards of education and administrators, they have a responsibility to try to correct them.”<sup>8</sup> Desegregation leaders such as Kenneth Clark, Robert Carter, Shagaloff, and a host of national-level NAACP officials and legal advisors devised this regional strategy not because they were unaware of school district gerrymandering, but rather because they believed it would open up political if not legal space for an assault on segregated schools *and* housing in the North.<sup>9</sup> Quite the opposite occurred, however.

During the 1960s, the NAACP eschewed legal strategies in much of the North, preferring instead to win school desegregation through local electoral gains and political pressure on boards of education.<sup>10</sup> In Flint and elsewhere, the local NAACP followed the

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<sup>7</sup> Milton Bracker, “Rights Lawyers Widen Program,” *New York Times*, March 5, 1962.

<sup>8</sup> Darcy DeMille, “NAACP National Officer Confers with Flint School Officials,” *Flint Mirror*, October 1964.

<sup>9</sup> Several years before Shagaloff’s remarks on school segregation in Flint, Robert Carter, the general legal counsel of the national NAACP, testified in a hearing in Lansing on the issue of de facto segregation in Michigan. During the hearing, Carter stated, “Rigid patterns of housing discrimination exist today throughout this state. . . . With segregated housing comes segregated schools. . . . De facto segregated schools in the North are as deleterious to equal educational opportunities and educational growth as the dual school system in the South.” The Carter quotation is from the *Bronze Reporter*, December 9, 1961.

<sup>10</sup> See Lassiter, “De Jure/De Facto Segregation.” In the late 1950s and early 1960s, both Jack Greenberg, the director of the NAACP’s Legal Defense and Education Fund, and Robert Carter argued that political

national pattern by foregoing legal action against the board of education, preferring instead to wage political battles for open housing. As historian Matthew Lassiter has argued,

The de facto framework, originally devised by civil rights leaders as a strategy to extend the *Brown* mandate beyond the South, became not only a legal cover for national patterns of residential segregation but also a road map for southern cities seeking to escape meaningful integration through ‘northern-style’ approaches.<sup>11</sup>

The discourse on de facto segregation also concealed the school board’s practices of racial gerrymandering that maintained the educational color line. Imbued with the moral innocence bestowed upon it by its critics and defenders alike, “northern-style” school segregation—eventually adopted by school districts across the country—proved more resilient and adaptive than the statutory Jim Crow formerly practiced in Dixie.

The NAACP’s strategy for desegregating northern schools stemmed not only from internal tactical and policy decisions, but also from legal limitations imposed by federal courts. The NAACP experienced several important judicial defeats during the 1960s that underscored the legal and political obstacles to northern school desegregation. Although the NAACP won a 1961 federal desegregation case in suburban New Rochelle, New York, in which the plaintiffs asserted de jure segregation in the city’s public schools, a pair of 1963 federal rulings pertaining to segregated schools in Chicago and Gary, Indiana, effectively shielded the north’s neighborhood schools from judicial challenge.<sup>12</sup> In its 1963 decision in *Bell v. School Board, City of Gary, Indiana*, the

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and not legal actions were the most appropriate means for confronting northern school segregation. Lassiter quotes Carter as follows: “The method of securing state policy decisions outlawing de facto segregation and requiring local school boards to affirmatively eliminate that segregation seems to offer a faster method of statewide elimination of segregated schools than the more protracted method of court litigation.”

<sup>11</sup> Lassiter, “De Jure/De Facto Segregation,” 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Taylor v. New Rochelle Board of Education*, 288 F.2d 600 (1961).

Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that segregation in Gary's neighborhood schools stemmed not from intentional government policies but rather from segregated housing patterns.<sup>13</sup> By refusing to hear an appeal of the *Bell* decision, the United States Supreme Court sent a powerful message to an already reticent community of would-be litigators in Flint and elsewhere about the regional barriers to school desegregation in the North.

At the local level in Flint, negative federal judicial rulings, white defenses of neighborhood schools, and civil rights strategies that elevated political over judicial remedies all collided in the 1960s, effectively reaffirming an already strong consensus among both whites and blacks that school segregation derived primarily from private discrimination in the local real estate market. Consequently, activists in Flint and other northern cities shifted their attention from school segregation litigation to the open housing campaign. As part of that strategy, activists brought the issue of housing discrimination directly to the board of education. From 1964 to 1967, black parents and community members repeatedly picketed school facilities and attended school board meetings to insist that board members endorse the NAACP's open occupancy ordinance.<sup>14</sup> In 1966, the board of education responded to this pressure campaign by endorsing fair housing.<sup>15</sup> Though African Americans won a major victory in 1968, when voters approved the city's open occupancy law, the Mott Foundation and the board of education emerged from the 1960s largely unscathed. Protected by the language of de facto segregation, the Flint Board of Education continued to embrace its community schools model throughout the 1970s.

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<sup>13</sup> *Bell v. School Board, City of Gary*, 324 F.2d 209 (1963).

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (August 18, 1964, January 13, 1965).

<sup>15</sup> "Open Occupancy Issue Raised Again at School Board Meeting," *Flint Journal*, March 11, 1965.

The concept of de facto segregation first emerged in the 1950s within a liberal civil rights discourse on northern patterns of school and residential segregation. By the mid-1960s, however, racial conservatives had claimed the term as their own. For opponents of desegregation nationally, the de facto formulation provided discursive and legal space to defend segregation in the post-*Brown* era as an accidental outcome of colorblind neighborhood schools programs that segregated not by state action but by individual, market-based housing decisions. In a 1970 letter to a constituent, Flint's congressional representative Donald W. Riegle, Jr., an opponent of "forced busing," crystallized the regional distinctions that shielded Flint from school desegregation: "In dealing with segregation, a distinction has been made between de jure and de facto segregation. The former means intentional segregation. . . . De facto segregation results from housing patterns."<sup>16</sup> In the urban and suburban North, white parents, recalcitrant school boards, and other defenders of the segregated status quo seized on the de facto terminology to create specious distinctions between the public Jim Crow of the South and the private, "hearts and minds" driven segregation in the North and West. In spite of its original usage within the civil rights movement, the de facto defense of neighborhood schools and segregation became the rallying cry for northern opponents of desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s. Belying its reputation for civil rights advocacy, the *New York Times* repeatedly invoked de facto segregation as a means to discredit school desegregation initiatives in the North. In 1963, the *Times* printed an editorial defense of neighborhood schools and pupil segregation in New York City that anticipated the Nixon administration's later opposition to busing:

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<sup>16</sup> Donald W. Riegle, Jr. to Elizabeth Coy, April 7, 1970, Donald W. Riegle, Jr. Papers, box 14, folder 6, GHCC.

The problem of ‘desegregation’ in New York City’s public schools is entirely different from that in the South. . . . The city’s schools have always been integrated. . . . If the city is now threatened with boycotts in protest against ‘racially imbalanced schools,’ the root is not in any systematic policy of racial exclusion fostered by law or administrative policy but in neighborhood population patterns.<sup>17</sup>

Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the cultural, political, and legal resonance of de facto segregation changed dramatically, a fact that became apparent in Flint during the 1970s showdown over school desegregation.

Though African-American students, parents, and civil rights activists had often criticized the Flint Board of Education for segregation and educational inequality during the 1950s and 1960s, the city’s black community remained divided on the issue of integrated schools. During the 1963-64 school year, the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized massive student protests against pupil segregation in Boston, New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and dozens of other cities. Culminating in a massive one-day student boycott in New York City that attracted 300,000 pupils, the 1963-64 national demonstrations against school segregation in the North presented activists in Flint with a clear opportunity to escalate political pressure on the board of education. Yet the city remained relatively quiet. Committed foremost to protecting civil rights in the arena of housing, the local NAACP and Urban League chapters never mounted a sustained, organized, and collective offensive against Flint’s neighborhood schools. As local black writer Wylie Rogers noted retrospectively, “We were reduced to individual rather than organized efforts to deal with a problem we knew existed.”<sup>18</sup> In the judicial arena, the 1960s saw no legal actions filed on behalf of black children against school segregation in Flint. Instead, federal enforcement of the 1964 Civil Rights Act

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<sup>17</sup> *New York Times*, September 4, 1963.

<sup>18</sup> Wylie Rogers, “The Truth Gets Out,” *Flint Spokesman*, September 13, 1975.

arrived in Flint in 1975, when the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare charged the Flint Board of Education with perpetuating illegal forms of discrimination and government-sponsored segregation.

### *Delayed Justice*

Federal officials initiated school desegregation proceedings in Flint. However, they did so with a startling degree of reluctance. After announcing in 1967 that it planned to expand federal investigations of school segregation to eighty-four school districts in the North and West, HEW sent a team of investigators to Flint in 1968. Their goal was to determine “whether racial imbalance is the product of discrimination or of de facto segregation in housing.”<sup>19</sup> During their three-year investigation, HEW officials uncovered a long but familiar record of state-sanctioned school segregation in the Vehicle City that dated back to the mid-1930s. Hoping to capitalize on the citywide civil rights agitation that accompanied the investigations, the Flint NAACP contemplated filing a desegregation lawsuit against the board of education in 1971.<sup>20</sup> If it had done so, the local NAACP would have joined black parents and civil rights activists from the Michigan cities of Detroit, Pontiac, and Kalamazoo, who all won federal desegregation rulings in the early 1970s. Instead, the cash- and resource-starved group negotiated a Faustian compromise with school board officials, agreeing to delay legal action until the conclusion of HEW’s enforcement efforts and the resolution of several important federal desegregation cases. In spite of its de jure findings in dozens of northern and western cities, HEW refused to pursue federal enforcement proceedings in Flint and forty-five

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<sup>19</sup> *Flint Journal*, March 6, 1969.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Schwartz, “NAACP Mulls Possibility of Suit against Ed. Board,” *Flint Journal*, September 15, 1971; “Flint NAACP May Force School Busing Issue,” *Flint Spokesman*, May 1, 1971.



other school districts until a 1975 federal lawsuit by the NAACP forced the issue. In his 1976 ruling against the government, United States District Judge John J. Sirica determined that HEW had “failed to fulfill its duties and responsibilities” in the North and West through its non-enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which mandated the cutoff of federal funds for school districts that maintained illegally segregated schools.<sup>21</sup> Responding quickly to the NAACP’s July suit, HEW released its findings against the Flint Public Schools just one month later, in August of 1975. The arrival of the HEW report marked the official commencement of school desegregation in Flint.

HEW concluded its Flint investigation in 1970, yet it did not issue its findings against the Flint Community Schools until August of 1975. During the five intervening years, while African Americans in Flint awaited the release of HEW’s report, the issue of school desegregation swept like wildfire across the country. In a unanimous 1971 decision in the closely watched *Swann* case, the U.S. Supreme Court sustained countywide busing as a remedy for school segregation in metropolitan Charlotte, North Carolina.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, in a case that held important implications for northern school systems, the Supreme Court ruled in its *Keyes* decision that the board of education in Denver enforced a de jure form of segregation through the racial gerrymandering of attendance boundaries.<sup>23</sup> With its decision in the *Keyes* case, the Supreme Court undermined the legal basis of regional distinctiveness by finding a large school system outside of the South guilty of de jure segregation.

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<sup>21</sup> On the NAACP suit against HEW, see Ernest Holsendolph, “HEW Chief Sued on Segregation,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1975. On Judge Sirica’s ruling, see “Sirica Gives HEW Order on Schools,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1976.

<sup>22</sup> *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 402 U.S. 1 (1971).

<sup>23</sup> *Keyes v. School District No. 1, Denver, Colorado*, 413 U.S. 189 (1973).

In addition to the cases in Charlotte and Denver, lower federal courts also issued desegregation rulings in a number of northern cities in the early 1970s. With its deeply entrenched patterns of school and residential segregation, Michigan became a key legal and political battleground in the nation's school desegregation saga. In February 1970, U.S. District Court Judge Damon Keith found the nearby school district of Pontiac, Michigan, guilty of intentional segregation.<sup>24</sup> In response to Keith's ruling, which ordered the busing of pupils to achieve racial integration, Irene McCabe and other suburban white residents of Oakland County organized chapters of the National Action Group (NAG) and Save Our Schools (SOS), white protest organizations dedicated to blocking school desegregation. Activists from NAG and SOS were unsuccessful in their attempts to overturn Keith's ruling. Still, however, the two groups attracted thousands of white supporters in Genesee County and other areas of southeast Michigan. Although Flint had not been the subject of any school desegregation litigation, white parents and homeowners responded to the Pontiac ruling by forming chapters of SOS and NAG in metropolitan Flint.<sup>25</sup> The preemptive actions of local whites in Genesee County, who organized against busing before the school board had even contemplated such a remedy, affirmed the depth of white resistance to school desegregation.

Prior to 1971, no court had sustained cross-district metropolitan busing remedies for state-sanctioned school segregation in the North.<sup>26</sup> In the Pontiac and Denver cases,

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<sup>24</sup> *Davis v. School District of the City of Pontiac*, 309 F. Supp. 734 (1970). Pontiac is located in suburban Oakland County, approximately halfway between the cities of Detroit and Flint.

<sup>25</sup> In a September 1971 protest against school desegregation, five hundred white residents attended an SOS rally at Flint's Zimmerman School. See Michael J. Riha, "500 Attend Antibusing Meeting of SOS," *Flint Journal*, September 15, 1971.

<sup>26</sup> In the 1971 *Swann* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered metropolitan busing for the public schools of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Unlike most northern school districts, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg County schools were part of a single unified district. On *Swann* and the battle over school desegregation in Charlotte, see Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, passim.

federal judges had ordered busing, but only within single school districts. Had the Flint NAACP filed a desegregation suit in the early 1970s, federal courts likely would have acknowledged de jure segregation and ordered the Flint Board of Education to institute a busing program confined to the city's schools. It is unlikely that such a ruling would have succeeded in securing stable integration, however. Between 1950 and 1970, the proportion of black pupils in Flint's elementary schools had risen steadily from 12.6 percent to over 42 percent. By the time HEW issued its findings in 1975, the percentage of black pupils had surged to 50 percent. In all probability, a city-only desegregation remedy for Flint—as in scores of other cities where courts had ordered such plans—would have hastened white departures from the Flint Public Schools and the city itself.

In order to obtain lasting forms of racial integration in its schools, the city of Flint required a cross-district desegregation plan that included the nearly all-white suburban districts of Genesee County.<sup>27</sup> Because such a plan would have involved twenty-two independent school districts, proponents of integration had to rely on the courts to initiate metropolitan school desegregation in Genesee County.<sup>28</sup> Before Flint litigants had filed such a suit, however, the United States Supreme Court intervened by effectively invalidating cross-district busing in the urban North. In September of 1971, in the closely watched *Bradley v. Milliken* case, U.S. District Judge Stephen Roth found that “governmental actions and inactions at all levels, federal, state, and local” had contributed to unconstitutional forms of de jure segregation in metropolitan Detroit that

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<sup>27</sup> On busing and “white flight,” see G. Orfield, *Must We Bus?*; and Hochschild, *The New American Dilemma*. Both Orfield and Hochschild have argued that school desegregation tends to be most successful when it occurs on a metropolitan scale. Because metropolitan desegregation plans maintain black enrollments at a lower level than city-only plans, the tendency of whites to flee urban public schools actually declines as the scope of desegregation widens.

<sup>28</sup> On the balkanization of school districts in Genesee County, see Sandra Faye Urquhart Brown, “Taxpayer and Student Equity in Twenty-One Selected School Districts in Genesee County, Michigan, 1973-1983,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1985).

crossed both municipal and school district boundaries.<sup>29</sup> Roth's ruling, which ordered the state to construct a desegregation plan that included over eighty school districts in suburban Detroit, provoked a maelstrom of suburban opposition that rippled upwards through white suburbia, the state legislature, the United States Congress, and the White House. In the year following the *Bradley* decision, school desegregation emerged as perhaps the central political issue in southeast Michigan, fueling the growth of NAG, SOS, and other grassroots groups that sought to block the "forced busing" of white children.<sup>30</sup> Angry over rising crime rates, inflation, an increasingly large tax burden, declining living standards, and busing, white voters in both cities and suburbs moved sharply to the right in 1972, providing former Alabama governor and segregationist George C. Wallace with his margin of victory in the state's Democratic presidential primary. Wallace carried Genesee County by a substantial majority in the 1972 Michigan primary election.

The reaction to Roth's ruling in the judicial arena was similarly polarized. In a controversial 1974 decision that had profound implications for the desegregation process in Genesee County, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled to overturn Roth's metropolitan busing remedy.<sup>31</sup> Though it endorsed desegregation within the Detroit city limits, the Supreme Court's *Milliken v. Bradley* ruling all but halted the legal quest for metropolitan school desegregation in the North. The *Milliken* decision arrived a year prior to the release of HEW's findings on the Flint Public Schools. In the absence of metropolitan legal remedies, the battle over school desegregation within the city of Flint would ultimately

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<sup>29</sup> *Bradley v. Milliken*, 338 F. Supp. 582 (1971).

<sup>30</sup> On NAG and SOS organizing in Flint during the early 1970s, see *Flint Journal*, September 15, 21, December 8, 1971, January 18, February 16, 21, 1972.

<sup>31</sup> *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974). See also, Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System*.

hinge on the resolution of the HEW enforcement proceedings and a last ditch attempt from civil rights activists to win a favorable judicial ruling.

The federal government listed its charges against the Flint Public Schools under three broad and interlinked categories: discriminatory hiring and staff assignment policies for black teachers, unequal educational opportunities for students, and racially biased pupil assignment.<sup>32</sup> In response to the federal charges, the Flint Board of Education issued an open letter to the Flint community on November 3, 1975. Published in the *Flint Journal*, the board's letter signaled both its refusal to accept blame for segregation and its continued embrace of neighborhood schools. Though it admitted to having a "preponderance of schools that are racially identifiable," the board implicated segregated housing patterns and "white flight" as the key forces contributing to pupil segregation. "Segregation is not the result of deliberate policies or actions of the Flint Boards of Education of the last several decades," the letter maintained. As it had for over a decade, the school board employed the de facto framework to shield itself from criticism, arguing, "Segregation is basically the result of housing patterns, economic factors and social mores once widely accepted."<sup>33</sup> Emboldened by the recent court rulings, the resistance from within the Mott Foundation and the editorial board of the *Flint Journal*, and the harsh response to busing among whites in southeastern Michigan, the board listed seven restrictive criteria for the development of a school desegregation plan. Among the

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<sup>32</sup> In the area of personnel, HEW officials found patterns of discrimination and exclusion that made it extremely difficult for black teachers and other professionals to find employment in the city of Flint. Indeed, prior to 1943, the Flint Community Schools categorically refused to hire black teachers. During the postwar period, as large numbers of black workers migrated to the Vehicle City, Flint officials relaxed the color bar while maintaining a racially segmented employment policy that kept black teachers in either predominantly or exclusively black schools. HEW investigators also discovered a persistent, longstanding pattern of discrimination in Flint that denied black teachers the opportunities to teach beyond the elementary school level.

<sup>33</sup> "An Open Letter to the Flint Community from the Flint Board of Education," *Flint Journal*, November 3, 1975.

demands were two key conditions that indicated the board's basic opposition to all but voluntary forms of integration. First, the board insisted, "Any plan must have the involvement and support of the community." Perhaps more importantly, the board's letter also dictated, "Any plan must reflect the integrity of the community education concept." Moreover, the board refused to honor the desegregation timetable established by HEW.<sup>34</sup> With its open letter to the Flint community, the board of education embraced a colorblind defense of neighborhood schools predicated upon a fundamental denial of its past policies. In recognition of the board's recalcitrance, HEW rejected the premises of the open letter and forwarded the Flint case to its Office of General Counsel for the expedition of administrative enforcement proceedings.<sup>35</sup>

In the months following the release of the open letter, Superintendent Clancy and the board of education held hearings throughout the city and solicited position papers and other forms of input from school-community advisory councils, parent organizations, and other citizen groups. The school council reports reflected the city's deep racial and spatial divisions, containing a vast array of recommendations that ranged from SOS's uncompromising defense of neighborhood schools to proposals for extensive citywide busing and school clustering by grade level.<sup>36</sup> The Mott Foundation, which had played a decisive role in maintaining segregated schools in Flint, staked a rhetorical position of neutrality as the schools crisis unfolded, simultaneously defending neighborhood schools while attacking both segregation and "forced desegregation" through busing or other

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<sup>34</sup> On the board's refusal to follow HEW timetables, see Beasley, "Salient Community Issues for Commission Visit," November 24, 1975, Beasley Papers, box 6, GHCC.

<sup>35</sup> Craig Carter, "Flint Plan for Desegregation 'Not Acceptable,' HEW Says," *Flint Journal*, December 24, 1975.

<sup>36</sup> Ed Hayman, "11 School Councils Report at Hearing on Desegregation," *Flint Journal*, January 20, 1976.

means.<sup>37</sup> Echoing a familiar refrain, the foundation, as it had since at least 1968, maintained, “Rigidly segregated housing patterns contribute to maintaining de facto segregation in Flint schools.”<sup>38</sup> Superintendent Clancy, a former Mott Foundation intern, embraced neighborhood schools and freedom of choice desegregation as essential to maintaining the Mott program of community education. For their part, Flint NAACP officials abandoned their earlier wait-and-see position and endorsed a metropolitan desegregation plan for the twenty-two school districts in Genesee County. Nearly bankrupt and “running one day at a time” on a sharply curtailed austerity budget, the Flint NAACP could not muster the financial and human resources to mount the federal lawsuit necessary to trigger a metropolitan plan, however.<sup>39</sup>

On March 10, 1976, the Flint Board of Education released its voluntary, freedom of choice desegregation plan to HEW and the community at large.<sup>40</sup> Implemented at the start of the 1976 school year, the board’s voluntary plan had as its cornerstone a system of magnet and other specialty schools. Through school closings and school boundary reorganizations, the plan would force approximately four thousand pupils to transfer schools involuntarily, most to the next closest neighborhood school. However, the board’s proposal preserved neighborhood schools for the overwhelming majority of the city’s 21,607 elementary students. If elementary students chose not to avail themselves of thirteen specialty schools or desegregated neighborhood schools within their junior high school district, then, under the board’s plan, they could remain in the segregated

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<sup>37</sup> C. Carter, “Mott Foundation Backs School Desegregation,” *Flint Journal*, January 29, 1976.

<sup>38</sup> On the Mott Foundation’s phrasing here, see Beasley Papers, box 48, folder 30, GHCC.

<sup>39</sup> Judy Samelson, “NAACP’s Busing Demand Extended to All of County,” *Flint Journal*, January 18, 1976. On the Flint NAACP’s financial crisis, see Beasley to Althea Simmons, September 10, 1976, Beasley Papers, box 40, folder 23, GHCC.

<sup>40</sup> Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (March 10, 1976), 211a-211c.

facilities closest to their homes. At the junior and senior high school levels, the board's remedy was similarly flaccid. For those students and parents who chose segregated neighborhood schools over magnet schools and open academies, the board would not impose desegregation. In recognition of the board's weak desegregation initiative, Melvyn Brannon of the Flint Urban League remarked,

Knowing people are resistant to change, we think 98 per cent of the people will exercise that first option and remain at their present school. . . . I think the Flint Board of Education is being terribly, terribly, optimistic in thinking that people will voluntarily take advantage of the options.<sup>41</sup>

Equally unimpressed with the voluntary nature of the board's solution, HEW announced its opposition to the Flint plan in May 1976, proposing instead a limited system of mandatory school pairing for eight adjoining elementary districts.<sup>42</sup> While continuing negotiations with HEW, the board nonetheless moved to implement the hotly debated voluntary plan in the fall of 1976.<sup>43</sup>

The board of education continued to defend its neighborhood schools throughout the desegregation crisis. Though white parents and civic elites embraced the board's 1976 plan, it drew widespread criticism from within Flint's black community. Frustrated by the board's unwillingness to force integration and HEW's reluctance to withdraw over \$4 million in federal funding from the district for its noncompliance, black parents and members of the Flint Black Teacher's Caucus ultimately bypassed the local NAACP by pursuing legal action. On July 20, 1976, the parents of eight public school children joined members of the Black Teacher's Caucus in filing a metropolitan desegregation

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<sup>41</sup> C. Carter, "Brannon: Board Overly Optimistic on 'Option' Plan," *Flint Journal*, March 18, 1976.

<sup>42</sup> C. Carter, "HEW Rejects Flint's Plan for Schools," *Flint Journal*, May 26, 1976.

<sup>43</sup> For more on African-American opposition to the board's voluntary plan, see "Memorandum Re: Proposed Additional Input for Consensus Statement," March 22, 1976, Beasley Papers, box 36, folder 6, GHCC.



lawsuit against the Flint Board of Education, HEW, the state of Michigan, and twenty-one surrounding districts in suburban Genesee County. Unlike the HEW enforcement proceedings, which focused only on the Flint school district, *Holman v. School District of the City of Flint* sought to desegregate all of Genesee County's schools through a countywide desegregation plan.<sup>44</sup> In light of the judicial obstacles established by the Supreme Court's *Milliken* ruling, the plaintiffs in *Holman* faced a difficult battle. Specifically, the plaintiffs sought a de jure finding against the school districts of Genesee County based upon the regional gerrymandering of districts through property transfers, the long standing collaboration between districts through the Genesee County Skill Center and other cooperative endeavors, and cross-district pupil transfer agreements that allowed white children from the city to transfer from the Flint Public Schools to segregated suburban districts. By demonstrating that "acts of commission and omission" spawned de jure segregation throughout Genesee County, the plaintiffs in *Holman* sought to reverse judicial trends in the post-*Milliken* urban North.<sup>45</sup>

To meet the restrictive judicial requirements established by the *Milliken* ruling, Flint litigants had to demonstrate that segregation resulted from the intentional and collaborative acts of twenty-two independent school districts. Plaintiffs in the *Holman* case raised the issue of cross-district collaboration as a means of demonstrating the substantial unity among the school districts of Genesee County. To support that claim, lead attorney William Waterman—who had successfully argued for school desegregation in Pontiac—presented evidence that suburban school children participated in Flint Public

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<sup>44</sup> *Holman, et al., v. School District of the City of Flint, et al.*, Civil Action No: 76-40023, United States District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, Southern Division (1976). See also, Hayman, "Suit Demands Cross-District Busing in 21 Area Districts," *Flint Journal*, July 21, 1976.

<sup>45</sup> "Fact Sheet, *Holman, et al. vs. Flint Community Schools, et al.*," Beasley Papers, box 29, folder 22, GHCC.

School ventures through a variety of activities and programs such as Junior Achievement, the Youth Service Bureau, the Continuation School for Unwed Mothers, the Half Way House Juvenile Home, the Pineview Holding Facility, Boys Farm, Head Start, the Genesee Skill Center, the Genesee Vocational Educational Program, the Mott Community College Bilingual Program, and the College and Cultural Center. The suburban defendants contested neither the issue of cross-district collaboration nor the existence of racial imbalances, countering instead with a defense that surfaced repeatedly during the proceedings. Proving that segregated school districts collaborated on pupil programming was not enough, the defendants argued. Rather, the suburban defense in *Holman* revolved around the familiar issues of segregationist intent and the damage caused by Jim Crow.<sup>46</sup> Did suburban school districts intentionally segregate students? If so, could Waterman and his legal team identify specific instances in which school board policies had harmed or violated the civil rights of the eight student plaintiffs? The defendants maintained that if the plaintiffs could not prove specific, intentional examples of segregation—and if the court could not trace those acts down to the level of the eight child plaintiffs—then the case had no merit.

In the area of cross-district pupil transfers, the *Holman* plaintiffs contended that school superintendents in Flint and the suburbs often conspired to allow state-financed pupil transfers that brought white students from racially transitional neighborhood schools in the city to all-white suburban districts. The pupil transfer charges centered on the relationship between the Flint Public Schools and the Kearsley Community Schools, a predominantly working-class, all-white suburban district that sat on Flint's northeastern

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<sup>46</sup> On racial segregation and the notion of “psychic damage” to African Americans, see Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

border. Through their investigations, the plaintiffs uncovered an ad hoc arrangement that existed between officials in the two school districts. This interschool compact, plaintiffs charged, allowed hundreds of white pupils to transfer from integrated schools in Flint to all-white schools in the Kearsley district.

The claim had merit. Suffering from a severe lack of financial resources, officials from the tiny Kearsley system implemented an open residency policy in 1973. This policy allowed cross-district pupil transfers as a means of “filling empty chairs” while simultaneously generating pupil tuition payments and increased funds from the Michigan State Board of Education. According to Kearsley’s school superintendent Edward R. Hintz, the criteria for pupil transfers between Flint and Kearsley were exceedingly vague. “They would take our pupils if there was a special need,” Hintz stated, “like a youngster couldn’t get along with his peers in our school, and he wanted to go to Flint or Bentley or what have you because he thought he would make it there, and graduate, or we had some pupils or vice versa, a reciprocal type of thing.”<sup>47</sup> Though the program was nominally reciprocal and colorblind, Hintz and his colleagues in the Kearsley system only endorsed the movement of white pupils into the district. In response, defense counselors ridiculed the accusations of conspiracy:

Are Plaintiffs really alleging that 22 Boards of Education, 22 Superintendents, the Governor of Michigan, the Attorney General of Michigan, the State Board of Education, and the Superintendent of Public Instruction got together and planned to discriminate against Plaintiffs? If so, it should not be asking too much for Plaintiffs to disclose what hall was rented for that purpose and when the convention took place.<sup>48</sup>

Yet again, the defense argued that the existence of rigid pupil segregation was not enough to trigger judicial intervention. Due to legal precedent, the plaintiffs had to prove that

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<sup>47</sup> Deposition of Edward R. Hintz, July 13, 1977, *Holman, v. School District of the City of Flint* (1976).

<sup>48</sup> *Holman v. School District of the City of Flint* (1976).

school officials in Flint, Kearsley, and other districts intended to segregate students with their interdistrict transfer plans.

On the issue of property transfers between the Flint Board of Education and surrounding suburban districts, the plaintiffs argued that interdistrict land and boundary agreements consistently brought black pupils to Flint while relinquishing white pupils to suburban schools. Plaintiffs documented specific property transfers from 1955, 1962, 1967, and 1969 between the Flint Public Schools and the Flushing, Swartz Creek, Carman, and Westwood Heights school districts, which “allowed approximately several thousand white students . . . living in the Flint School District to attend schools in their [suburban] districts in order to avoid attending schools with black students.”<sup>49</sup> The defendants acknowledged the property transfers between districts while denying that such exchanges stemmed from any discriminatory or segregationist intent. Consistently, defense lawyers argued that the plaintiffs had to locate—in board minutes or in other written records—specific instances in which local officials collaborated to practice de jure segregation. In response to the broadly formulated, structural argumentation of the plaintiffs, suburban defendants in the *Holman* case employed a defense of de facto segregation that denied all but the most obvious, intentional, and documented acts of racial discrimination.

Suffering from severe financial and resource limitations, members of the Black Teacher’s Caucus tried in vain to raise funds within the black community to support the legal proceedings. Because the *Holman* case involved so many separate school jurisdictions, legal research for the case was both time and cost intensive. Not wishing to deplete its meager financial resources on a polarizing lawsuit that had little chance of

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<sup>49</sup> *Holman v. School District of the City of Flint* (1976).

succeeding, the Flint NAACP donated only \$500 to the plaintiffs.<sup>50</sup> As yet an added impediment, school boards and superintendents from the twenty-one suburban districts involved consistently refused to release school board minutes and other documents requested by the plaintiffs. In order to make their case, the plaintiffs required a vast array of materials that included attendance boundary maps, school location studies, property transfer documents, records pertaining to student test scores and teacher training, and the racial compositions for every school in the county dating back to 1940.<sup>51</sup> The defense's insistence on specificity and intent forced the plaintiffs to request large quantities of data. Nevertheless, Stewart A. Newblatt, the presiding judge in the case, looked askance at Waterman's requests for information. The plaintiffs, Newblatt claimed, were unfairly overburdening the suburban districts with too many requests for data.<sup>52</sup> Surprisingly, then, Judge Newblatt repeatedly chastised the plaintiffs for failing to produce the specific documentation of de jure segregation required for a properly pled complaint. In his 1980 decision to dismiss the suit "without prejudice," Newblatt wrote, "[the plaintiffs have] repeatedly pled broad, non-specific allegations which encompass numerous theories of racial discrimination." "Without indicating a position on the validity of such claims," he added, "the court does not believe that such a shotgun approach should be tolerated, particularly when plaintiffs have been afforded time and opportunities to refine their claims."<sup>53</sup> Members of the Black Teacher's Caucus and other supporters of metropolitan desegregation surely noted the irony in Newblatt's decision to dismiss. For the same judge who resisted the plaintiffs' attempts at discovery ultimately dismissed the case for a

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<sup>50</sup> Ernest Holman, interview by Andrew R. Highsmith, March 1, 2006, Flint, Michigan.

<sup>51</sup> Betsy Anderson, "Cross-District Busing Lawsuit Inching Along," *Flint Journal*, February 5, 1980.

<sup>52</sup> "Flint's Legal Battles Took Years to End," *Flint Journal*, October 14, 1984.

<sup>53</sup> B. Anderson, "Suit Seeking Flint-Suburban Busing Dismissed," *Flint Journal*, August 27, 1980.

lack of specificity. Newblatt's decision to dismiss the *Holman* case marked the end of any realistic plan of school desegregation for Flint and the remainder of Genesee County.

Judge Newblatt's decision, which effectively extinguished any hope for metropolitan desegregation, arrived four months after the final resolution of the HEW crisis. As the *Holman* case languished in the federal judiciary, HEW and the board of education continued to debate the merits of voluntary desegregation. Implemented in 1976 over the objections of civil rights activists and HEW administrators, the board of education's freedom of choice plan failed to reduce racial segregation in the city's schools. By 1978, 81.6 percent of Flint's elementary students still attended segregated schools while thirty of the city's thirty-seven elementary schools remained "racially identifiable." Barred by federal legislation from ordering busing to schools other than a child's neighborhood school, HEW lacked the power—and perhaps the will—to mandate a citywide pupil transportation plan. Instead, HEW officials implored the board to submit a backup busing plan while instructing the federal Department of Justice to prepare legal action against the Flint Board of Education.<sup>54</sup> As with HEW officials, investigators from the Justice Department had one overriding question, which they communicated directly to Olive Beasley, the Flint coordinator of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, in 1978: "Did you ever reach a determination as to whether the segregation [in the Flint Public Schools] was of a de facto or de jure character?"<sup>55</sup>

The board of education responded to the threat of litigation by joining the growing movement against busing. The *Flint Journal* editorialized definitively, "It is becoming apparent that extensive busing on the elementary level has failed to reduce

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Lewis, "Flint Told: Submit School Busing Plan," *Flint Journal*, May 9, 1978.

<sup>55</sup> Drew S. Days to Beasley, December 8, 1978, Holt Papers, box 12, folder 7, GHCC.

racial bias while being destructive of efforts to improve education.”<sup>56</sup> Buoyed by the local opposition to “forced desegregation,” the board ignored HEW’s threats of legal action and flatly refused its request to create a citywide busing plan. For their part, hundreds of white parents, fearing that legal action was forthcoming, responded to the mounting conflict over desegregation by placing their homes for sale and continuing to withdraw their children from the city’s public schools. Between 1971 and 1980, the total elementary school enrollment in the city declined by nearly 30 percent. Over the same period, the proportion of black pupils in the Flint schools increased to 59 percent.<sup>57</sup>

As in other cities, the long duration of the desegregation saga in Flint served to increase racial segregation by intensifying the white exodus from the city and its public school system. In the summer of 1978, white voters voiced their opposition to desegregation by rejecting a tax levy for thirty-four mills.<sup>58</sup> In an election that saw voters split sharply along racial lines, white opponents of desegregation joined the late 1970s tax revolt by rejecting the board’s appeal for additional funds. The loss was the board’s first tax defeat since 1948.<sup>59</sup> The measure passed in the four wards that contained the city’s heaviest black concentrations, but it lost decisively in the five wards with the largest white majorities. Even the local UAW political action committee, a perennial proponent of public school millages, refused to endorse the school levy of 1978.<sup>60</sup> Following the

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<sup>56</sup> *Flint Journal*, May 11, 1978.

<sup>57</sup> The drop in enrollments for the Flint Public Schools began in 1966, long before the inauguration of HEW’s enforcement proceedings. Between 1966 and 1981, the city lost approximately one thousand pupils per year, the overwhelming majority of whom were white. See “School Enrollment Expected to Drop in Flint for 5<sup>th</sup> Year,” *Flint Journal*, August 25, 1972. On white parents selling their homes in opposition to school desegregation, see *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, March 29, 1976, 116.

<sup>58</sup> On racial polarization in the 1978 millage campaign, see Beasley to Althea Simmons, May 15, 1978, Beasley Papers, box 40, folder 22, GHCC.

<sup>59</sup> C. Carter, “Flint May Repeat Bid for 34 Mills to Run Schools,” *Flint Journal*, June 15, 1978.

<sup>60</sup> On the UAW’s refusal to endorse the 1978 millage proposal, see Beasley to William H. Oliver, August 14, 1978, Beasley Papers, box 12, folder 36, GHCC.

June 12 defeat, the board of education announced that the city's schools would close indefinitely unless voters approved a second initiative on August 8, 1978. Fearing the shutdown of the city's public schools, voters narrowly authorized the millage by a margin of two thousand votes. Once again, the votes split sharply along racial lines. Underway since the 1950s, the city's slow march towards desegregation and a permanent black majority significantly eroded white support for community education.<sup>61</sup>

The 1978 millage elections highlighted the centrality of race in the fragile white consensus on neighborhood schools. When federal intervention threatened to dismantle Flint's cherished neighborhood schools, white taxpayers responded with acts of civic secession that reverberated upward to shape the final resolution of the desegregation crisis. Hoping to regain white taxpayers' support for public education, the Flint Board of Education resumed negotiations with HEW in the fall of 1978 with a renewed sense of urgency. As it had been since 1975, the key issue in the desegregation dispute was the board's refusal to mandate or even consider involuntary busing to achieve racial balance. Specifically, the school board declined to design a backup busing plan to implement in the event that magnet schools failed to reduce segregation. Lacking the authority to implement systemic desegregation, HEW officials continued to withhold funding from the board of education while modifying their insistence on a pupil transportation plan.

By the close of the 1970s, only a handful of white residents in Genesee County endorsed school desegregation. Even among African Americans in Flint, school desegregation was a controversial and divisive issue. Ultimately, HEW responded to the board's recalcitrance and the grassroots resistance of local whites by backing away from its busing remedy, choosing instead to speed the resolution of the conflict by endorsing

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<sup>61</sup> C. Carter, "Flint School and Library Taxes OK'd," *Flint Journal*, August 9, 1978.



the expansion of Flint's magnet program. Much to the dismay of local activists from the NAACP and the Black Teacher's Caucus, the board of education and HEW signed a crisis-ending consent decree in the spring of 1980 that closely resembled the board's initial voluntary plan.<sup>62</sup> In exchange for the school board's promise to expand the elementary school magnet program from thirteen to eighteen schools, HEW agreed to drop its enforcement proceedings and submitted a binding promise to the school board that it would not pursue any further legal action regarding desegregation.<sup>63</sup> To fund the expansion of the city's magnet program, the federal government agreed to release \$2.35 million to the Flint Public Schools that it had held in escrow pending the resolution of the negotiations. Although the agreement allowed the federal government to establish and monitor enrollment goals to measure the magnet program's success, the consent decree contained no provision for involuntary busing. Cheering the surprising and rather anticlimactic end of the desegregation conflict, a *Flint Journal* editorial concluded, "The Flint Settlement, whatever its merits and deficiencies, is based upon a realistic appraisal of what could be accomplished at this time."<sup>64</sup> Among those whites who uncritically embraced the Mott program of community education, forced integration was never a realistic solution to forced segregation. Federal approval of Flint's voluntary desegregation program signaled the triumph of the neighborhood schools that, for fifty years, had formed the heart of a segregated system of community education.<sup>65</sup>

Following the release of the 1980 consent decree, black critics denounced the accord as a step backward for integration and racial equality. In a protest in front of the

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<sup>62</sup> On the consent decree, see Flint Board of Education, *Official Minutes* (April 28, 1980), 291.

<sup>63</sup> As part of the consent decree, the board of education also agreed to forbid student transfers that undermined racial balance at magnet schools. On the HEW accord, see *Flint Journal*, May 1, 5, 1980.

<sup>64</sup> *Flint Journal*, May 5, 1980.

<sup>65</sup> B. Anderson, "Desegregation Pact: Now, to Implement It," *Flint Journal*, April 29, 1980.

Flint Board of Education headquarters, picketers from the NAACP and the Black Teacher's Caucus carried signs that read, "The Board of Education and Segregation Are Still Shacking Together."<sup>66</sup> Activist Claire McClinton condemned the resolution, noting, "It is a segregation bid. The students have been sold down the river."<sup>67</sup> For those African-American citizens who had attended segregated schools in the city of Flint, the language of the consent decree was especially disheartening. According to the agreement, which marked the unofficial end of federal enforcement proceedings in the city of Flint, the school board claimed neither legal nor historical responsibility for segregation in the Flint Public Schools: "The district denies legal liability in this matter and maintains that it has never and does not now operate its public schools in a racially discriminatory manner." With the stroke of a pen, the 1980 consent decree bestowed a moral and historical innocence upon the Mott Foundation and the Flint Board of Education by expunging their fifty-year record of intentional segregation. To citizens such as Minnie Simpson from the Clark School district, whose neighbors attended different public schools, or Wesley King, the boy who studied in a coat closet at Homedale School, the ultimate resolution of the desegregation crisis must have seemed surreal.

In the years following the conclusion of Flint's desegregation crisis, the Flint Board of Education implemented a voluntary magnet desegregation program that had little chance of succeeding. Just one year after the desegregation accord, principals of magnet schools in black neighborhoods reported their inability to meet interracial

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<sup>66</sup> B. Anderson, "Some Protest Settlement of Desegregation Suit," *Flint Journal*, May 1, 1980.

<sup>67</sup> David Fenech, "Nine Hired to Promote Racial Plan in Schools," *Flint Journal*, January 8, 1981.

enrollment goals.<sup>68</sup> In a move that only exacerbated the situation, the federal government, in 1981, cut nearly \$1 million from the board of education's desegregation budget.<sup>69</sup> In spite of vigorous recruiting and a board-sponsored publicity campaign designed to promote the social and intellectual benefits of a "magnetized" education, white families consistently chose to remain in their neighborhood schools, enroll in private schools, or leave the city altogether.<sup>70</sup> Between 1980 and 1992, the proportion of white pupils in the Flint Public Schools dropped sharply from 52.5 to 29.6 percent. Across the city, school principals routinely failed to meet the demographic goals established by the 1980 consent decree, especially in schools within black residential neighborhoods. As in other cities, Flint's public schools experienced a rapid transition from segregation to resegregation. African-American school board member Paul Newman conceded defeat in 1992 in a somber assessment of the desegregation process: "Our ability to integrate the school system as hoped is all but gone."<sup>71</sup> In the end, voluntary desegregation failed in the city of Flint just as it had in scores of American cities. Though it provided limited opportunities for interracial contact between small numbers of children, the board's magnet schools program never overcame the double-edged legacy of state-sponsored segregation and private racism that had shaped the community schools movement since its inception.

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<sup>68</sup> B. Anderson, "2 Mostly Black Schools May Miss Enrollment Goals," *Flint Journal*, September 29, 1981.

<sup>69</sup> On federal cuts to the city's desegregation budget, see B. Anderson, "Federal Money to Aid End of School Bias Is Cut," *Flint Journal*, August 21, 1981.

<sup>70</sup> The board also appointed a team of liaisons to promote the desegregation plan and ease racial tensions in magnet schools. Also, see Fenech, "Nine Hired."

<sup>71</sup> Marcia McDonald, "Busing Yields Mixed Results," *Flint Journal*, January 12, 1992.

*The Demise of Community Education*

Flint's history of community education was strange indeed. Beginning during the Great Depression as a class-oriented response to the specific challenges of mass migration, social disunity, and trade union militancy, the Mott program had evolved, by mid-century, into a nationally recognized model for neighborhood-based education that sought to counter the progressive values of both the civil rights and labor movements. Through its vocational programs, social services, and education programming, Flint's system of community education offered an alternative to redistributive liberalism that foreshadowed the policies endorsed by the New Right in later decades. As the city's black population expanded in the 1950s and beyond, Charles Stewart Mott, Frank Manley, and members of the board of education sought to preserve their vision of civic unity by maintaining rigidly segregated schools. School segregation was not simply an unanticipated consequence of discriminatory housing policies in the city, however. The segregation of pupils in Flint's public schools stemmed from both housing and the direct and intentional policy interventions of the Mott Foundation and the Flint Board of Education. The boundary, construction, and transfer policies that served to maintain Flint's educational color line derived from a seldom articulated but deeply resonant consensus among whites about racial differences, the maintenance of property values, and the preservation of neighborhood integrity. When civil rights activists emerged to challenge the exclusions that had held together Flint's system of community schools, the Mott program disintegrated, leaving in its wake a segregated and balkanized constellation of neighborhoods and schools.

Even under a voluntary plan, desegregation severely undermined the foundations of community education. The 1976-77 school year, which brought the first phase of desegregation to Flint, also marked the last gasp of the Mott program of community education. In 1977, the struggle over Flint's neighborhood schools took a surprising and dramatic turn when the Mott Foundation ended its official sponsorship of community education. On July 5, 1977, after several years of private, internal dialogue on the subject, the foundation announced that it had severed its formal ties to the board of education: "Except for administrative support grants, all present funding of FBE [Flint Board of Education] programs will be phased out within at most seven years." Foundation officials maintained that the school board could still solicit funds following the phase out, but the announcement made clear that "FBE and its requests will be considered in the same manner as other organizations and their proposals."<sup>72</sup> Between 1935 and 1970, the Mott Foundation donated nearly \$50 million to the Flint Public Schools. By the mid-1970s, it was sending approximately \$5 million per year to the board of education.<sup>73</sup> With the 1977 announcement, however, Mott officials ended their guaranteed financial support for the public schools of Flint. Announced just prior to the beginning of the 1977-78 school year, as the board continued to wrangle with HEW over the issue of voluntary desegregation, the Mott Foundation's decision sent shockwaves throughout the city. According to an April 1977 position paper authored by foundation trustees, the decision to cancel the forty-two-year relationship stemmed from a desire among foundation officials to transfer financial responsibility for community education to

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<sup>72</sup> C. S. Mott Foundation, Board of Trustees, "A Long, Fruitful Relationship: Position Paper on Mott Foundation Grants to Flint Board of Education," April 21, 1977 (unpublished paper in author's possession), 3.

<sup>73</sup> "Model Use of Money."

the taxpaying public. “If a program is assisted by a foundation long enough for its constituents to determine its value to them,” the trustees claimed, “the program should in most cases pass to them for on-going funding.”<sup>74</sup> By severing the official ties between the foundation and the public school system, trustees hoped to serve a larger purpose, though. The decision reflected a desire among trustees “to give FBE the freedom and encouragement to effect change in its program and to keep abreast of new challenges to an urban educational system.”<sup>75</sup> The city’s ongoing desegregation crisis constituted the greatest such challenge, of course, but the Mott Foundation wanted no part of it.<sup>76</sup> After sustaining a forty-year partnership with the board, the Mott Foundation announced the end of its community education initiative at the precise moment when the Flint Public Schools faced its largest, most intractable crisis.

The foundation’s decision to cancel its partnership with the Flint Public Schools raises a number of questions. Did the foundation abandon the public schools in response to HEW’s tepid assault on neighborhood schools? Was the withdrawal of financial support an indication of the foundation’s opposition to desegregation? For the thousands of black citizens who had criticized the Mott program for maintaining racial segregation and discrimination, the 1977 announcement confirmed the foundation’s fundamental opposition to desegregation and basic racial fairness. Although no direct evidence supports a connection between desegregation and the end of community education, the Mott Foundation had nonetheless played a key role in creating the artificial network of segregated neighborhood schools that dotted the urban landscape in Flint and hundreds of

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<sup>74</sup> “A Long, Fruitful Relationship,” 2.

<sup>75</sup> “A Long, Fruitful Relationship,” 3.

<sup>76</sup> For more on the Mott Foundation’s decision to withdraw support from the Flint Public Schools, see *Flint Journal*, July 5-6, 10, 1977.

other American cities. Moreover, through their defense of neighborhood schools, Superintendent Clancy and other foundation officials had formed the heart of resistance to HEW-mandated desegregation. If the foundation did end its community schools programming out of opposition to school desegregation, then it did so as an extension of the deep racial conservatism of Charles Stewart Mott, Frank Manley, and the local business leaders who governed the Mott Foundation's Board of Trustees.

Though born in 1875, Mott survived until 1973. During the last two decades of his life, Mott was an uncomfortable witness to the civil rights upheavals that brought Jim Crow to its knees in the South. Unlike the millions of Americans who saw the civil rights movement in the Deep South as an inspiration, Mott viewed desegregation as a grave threat to a social order that he wished to preserve. In 1956, as southern resistance to the *Brown* ruling was congealing in the U.S. Congress, Mott wrote warm letters of support to well known segregationists such as Senator James Eastland of Mississippi urging defiance. "I agree with all that you said, including 'State Rights' and Constitution," Mott revealed to the senator. "Certainly I agree with all that you said regarding the Negro Question."<sup>77</sup> Like Eastland, Mott opposed the Supreme Court's *Brown* ruling, viewing it as an immoral and unconstitutional assault on state's rights and racial gradualism.<sup>78</sup>

As civil rights protests intensified during the 1960s, Mott's defenses of segregation and "law and order" became more pronounced, leading him to move even further to the right politically. During the summer and fall of 1965, Mott exchanged cordial letters regarding community education with George Wallace, Alabama's

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<sup>77</sup> C. S. Mott to James O. Eastland, February 2, 1956, Mott Papers, box 29, 77-7.6-1.6, GHCC.

<sup>78</sup> In the mid-1940s, Mott publicly opposed federal subsidies for public education, labeling them "improper." See C. S. Mott to Genesee County Taxpayers Association, n.d. [ca. 1945], Mott Papers, box 18, 77-7.1-60, GHCC.

segregationist governor.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps both Mott and Wallace understood the essential compatibility of segregation and community education. As indicated by the timing of his correspondence with Wallace—occurring just months after Alabama state troopers had assaulted peaceful voting rights protestors in Selma—Mott was largely untroubled by open defenses of segregation and the forceful repression of dissent. Mott avoided the harsh language and tactics of Wallace and other demagogues, but his personal commitment to segregation in Flint and elsewhere was staunch; and his support for neighborhood schools and community education was an outgrowth of deeply cherished personal beliefs on the natural hierarchies that he believed distinguished whites from blacks. Like Mott, Frank Manley abhorred all but the most limited and gradual forms of voluntary desegregation, once stating, “I am one of the kind that thinks that this busing is for the birds.”<sup>80</sup> The two men most responsible for designing Flint’s neighborhood-based system of community schools sincerely believed that segregation helped to strengthen civic solidarity in postwar Flint. Anything beyond voluntary, gradual desegregation—and any proposal that undermined the city’s cherished neighborhood schools—threatened to destroy the delicate social fabric that Manley and Mott had spent their lives weaving.

Frank Manley died in 1972, just prior to Mott’s demise in 1973. Both men passed away before the commencement of school desegregation and the Mott Foundation’s abandonment of its community education initiative. However, the foundation’s decision to cancel community education would have surprised neither man. By the mid-1970s, black voters had elected several African-American candidates to the nine-member Flint Board of Education. Though unable to shift the course of desegregation, black and white

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<sup>79</sup> On Mott’s relationship with George Wallace, see Mott Papers, box 19, 77-7.8-12.4, GHCC. As evidenced by the exchange between the two men, Wallace was a proponent of the Mott program.

<sup>80</sup> On Manley’s opposition to busing, see Manley Papers, box 52, 78-8.7-1, Scharzburg Archives.



critics of the Mott Foundation and Superintendent Clancy constituted a vocal and burgeoning minority on the school board during the late 1960s and 1970s. In 1978, critics of the Mott Foundation gained enough votes on the school board to oust Superintendent Clancy. The prospect of the board's acquiescence in "forced desegregation" deeply disturbed both Mott and Manley because they saw segregated neighborhood schools as the foundation for community education. By the mid-1970s, it had become clear to foundation officials that their power to shape the board's desegregation policies had waned substantially. In light of the foundation's electoral defeats and its diminished political power, it is unlikely that the Mott Foundation's decision to withdraw funding from the board of education would have disheartened either man. Manley and Mott remained committed to the notion of community education throughout their later years, but both men had come to a new, broader understanding of the city's problems by the early 1970s.

Dating back to the 1930s, Manley and Mott had championed community education as a form of urban renewal that preserved social harmony, civic pride, and individual uplift through citywide educational programming. As Mott's close friend Joseph Anderson revealed, "He [Mott] was convinced that if we had a fine educational system, everything would follow."<sup>81</sup> But the postwar suburban migrations of white families and downtown businesses—which hastened the city's long, slow journey towards a black majority first in the schools and later in the city at large—convinced Mott to reassess the limitations of a schools-based approach to urban development. In order to reverse the city's deterioration and stem the outward migrations of the white

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<sup>81</sup> Riha, "The Mott Foundation Impact: A Tour Helped Shift the Focus in Flint," *Flint Journal*, June 13, 1982.

families, the Mott Foundation shifted its focus beginning in the late 1960s from schools to traditional urban renewal projects and other downtown-oriented development initiatives designed to lure businesses, industry, shoppers, tourists, and white homeowners back to the shrinking city. The Mott Foundation's urban redevelopment strategies changed dramatically in the era of open housing and school desegregation. For forty years, the Mott Foundation sought to renew the city by rehabilitating its people. With its decision to shift funding from schools to urban renewal projects, the foundation signaled the arrival of a new urban development paradigm that elevated place over people.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> I borrow the "place over people" framework from Bruce Schulman. See Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*. For a more sympathetic reading of the Mott Foundation's reorientation in the 1970s, see Karen L. Barger, "Off the Cuff: The Mott Foundation Is No Scrooge When it Comes to Flint," *Flint Magazine* (January 1978), 11-12.

## Chapter 9

### **Demolition Means Progress: Urban Renewal, Freeways, and State-Sanctioned Ghetto Formation**

On July 28, 1967, in the aftermath of major race riots in Detroit, Newark, and dozens of other American cities, President Lyndon B. Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Published in 1968, not long after Flint citizens had taken to the streets to demand fair housing and an end to police brutality, the commission's widely read "Kerner Report" included a remarkably probing statement on the nature of racial inequality in the United States: "What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."<sup>1</sup> With its language of racial atonement and its commitment to sweeping policy changes, the Kerner Report marked a watershed moment for black citizens and civil rights activists throughout the country. For Whitney Young of the National Urban League, the report confirmed, "The real problem [in the United States] is racism, the bigotry of white people."<sup>2</sup> The Kerner Report, as Young noted, attempted to reframe discourses on the nation's deepening urban crisis by addressing the role of white racism in maintaining racial, spatial, and economic inequalities.

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<sup>1</sup> *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 2. In acknowledgement of Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, who chaired the commission, many observers refer to the group and its publication as the "Kerner Commission" and the "Kerner Report."

<sup>2</sup> Sidney E. Zion, "Rights Leaders Support Criticism of Whites," *New York Times*, March 2, 1968.

As shocking as the Kerner Commission's findings were to white racial moderates across the nation, they came as no surprise to thousands of black residents in Flint's condemned St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods. Indeed, for more than a few black citizens of these two neighborhoods, the Kerner Report was simply too timid. The report, some Flint activists charged, failed to specify the direct role of federal, state, and, most importantly, local policies in maintaining the nation's color lines. On June 7, 1973, Olive Beasley of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission sent an angrily worded memorandum to Richard Wilberg, the director of urban renewal programs for the city of Flint. In her correspondence, Beasley reflected bitterly upon the relationship between urban renewal, municipal policies, and ghetto formation in the Vehicle City. Paraphrasing from the Kerner Report, Beasley identified Flint's municipal government as the primary gatekeeper for the city's segregated ghettos: "The City of Flint is deeply implicated in its ghettos, City of Flint institutions created them; City institutions maintain them."<sup>3</sup> According to Beasley and other critics, "the real problem" in the United States was not simply white racism and private bigotry, as Whitney Young had suggested, but rather white racism embedded within government policies. To Beasley, the history of urban renewal in Flint seemed to provide an especially revealing glimpse of how private racism and public policies converged to redraw the color line.

The words in Beasley's memorandum spoke directly to the post-World War II experiences of African Americans in Flint's Floral Park and St. John Street neighborhoods. Flint's postwar urban renewal program ossified the city's already rigid system of residential Jim Crow. During the 1960s and 1970s, officials from Flint's Urban Renewal and Housing Department, the Department of Community Development

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<sup>3</sup> Memorandum, Beasley to Richard Wilberg, June 7, 1973, Beasley Papers, box 21, folder 51, GHCC.

(DCD), and other local government agencies cleared three hundred acres of commercial and residential land in the St. John neighborhood, relocating nearly all of its three thousand black residents into segregated replacement housing. Much the same occurred in Floral Park, where city leaders demolished a physically deteriorated yet vibrant black residential enclave to make way for public housing units and a freeway interchange. These officials sought to create space for General Motors factory expansions, an urban freeway, and an industrial park. Because the city had failed in its bid to establish New Flint, proponents of urban renewal argued, the demolition of “blighted” neighborhoods was essential to creating new jobs and economic development.<sup>4</sup> Yet the St. John and Floral Park renewal projects created few new jobs and failed to stimulate the city’s beleaguered economy. By the close of the 1970s—despite the expenditure of millions of dollars and the creation of countless plans and proposals by city planners, business executives, and local activists—the St. John and Floral Park projects had yielded a city that visitors and investors shunned and that perennially led the nation in unemployment.

Plans for urban renewal and freeway construction helped to galvanize the movement for open occupancy in the Vehicle City. In 1960, city officials announced plans to demolish homes and businesses in Floral Park and St. John. In support of the redevelopment projects, executives from GM, municipal officials, and downtown boosters argued that urban renewal would provide the city and its residents with more jobs and a growth-oriented future. Designed to lure industry, retailers, and shoppers back to the city, Interstate 475, the I-475/M-78 freeway interchange, and the St. John Street

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<sup>4</sup> On social and political contestation over the multiple meanings and definitions of “blight,” see C. Gordon, “Blighting the Way: Urban Renewal, Economic Development, and the Elusive Definition of Blight,” *Fordham Law Journal* 31:2 (2004): 305-337; and Brian Robick, “Urban Blight and Community Reaction to the Gateway Center Redevelopment Project, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1946-1950,” (paper presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Planning History, Portland, Maine, October 25-28, 2007).

Neighborhood Development Project (NDP) formed the heart of the city's sweeping urban renewal program. Yet urban renewal in Flint was much more than a top-down corporate campaign for economic growth. Many civil rights and neighborhood activists also supported the redevelopment of St. John and Floral Park, viewing urban renewal as an opportunity to secure new housing, desegregation, and clean air. Nevertheless, by the mid-1970s, members of the city's pro-growth coalition had triumphed over local civil rights activists, ultimately presiding over a renewal program that valued short-term industrial growth and ghetto containment over housing equity. Through their direct and decisive interventions in the I-475 and St. John renewal projects, GM and other corporate interests in Genesee County exercised direct state power and effectively blurred the boundaries between public policy and private business interests.

During the postwar era, a combination of grassroots racism, housing and redevelopment initiatives, corporate investment strategies, and municipal divestment policies continuously recreated the ghettos that Flint's municipal leaders sought to demolish through urban renewal and freeway construction. By the late 1970s, officials directing the city's redevelopment program had inscribed new forms of racial and economic inequality onto Flint's increasingly deteriorated urban landscape, intensifying both urban poverty and African-American residential containment. The term *de facto* segregation in no way describes the racial, spatial, and property configurations that emerged with Flint's St. John Street and Floral Park urban renewal programs. Indeed, urban renewal helped to create a new political economy of race and property values that bolstered Jim Crow in the Vehicle City. For residents of these two neighborhoods, segregation, ghettoization, and resegregation arrived from below *and* from above.

*Freeways for Flint: The Highway as Assembly Line*

In the decade following the close of World War II—forty years before the series of automobile plant closures in Flint that inspired Michael Moore’s 1989 documentary film, *Roger and Me*—GM executives implemented their suburban strategy in Genesee County. Though it would eventually shift massive amounts of Flint-based capital towards the Sunbelt and points southward in Latin America, GM’s postwar capital migrations in the Flint area tended to travel on city-suburban axes. During the 1940s and 1950s, as Flint’s economy boomed and the company’s local workforce climbed above eighty thousand, GM officials developed a suburban-centered plant construction program that generated a sprawling regional network of modern, single-story manufacturing and assembly plants surrounding the city of Flint. Between 1940 and 1960, GM opened eight new industrial complexes in suburban Genesee County. The new factories formed a circle around the city that stretched from the southeastern suburb of Grand Blanc, through Flint Township and Swartz Creek on the city’s southwestern border, to the northern metropolitan district of Beecher and the eastern suburb of Burton Township. Because New Flint’s proponents failed in their quest to establish a tax-sharing metropolitan government, these capital migrations effectively diverted thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in tax revenues from the city to neighboring municipalities and townships.<sup>5</sup> Making matters worse, postwar residential and commercial developments in the city had left the Buick, Chevrolet, Fisher Body, and AC Spark Plug plants with very little room for expansion.

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<sup>5</sup> *Roger and Me* (Dog Eat Dog Films, 1989). On the movement of capital and deindustrialization, see B. Bluestone and Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America*; Cowie, *Capital Moves*; and Cowie and Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins*. On the suburbanization of corporate offices, research firms, and factories following World War II, see K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 267-269; Self, *American Babylon*, 23-60; and O’Mara, *Cities of Knowledge*, passim.

In contrast to the densely arranged, inefficient, multi-story structures that lined the city's industrial corridor along the Flint River and rail lines, the new suburban plants constructed after World War II signaled GM's preference for larger factory sites, single-story plant architecture, and freeway-centered production facilities. Embracing an aesthetic ideal that celebrated the harmony between industry and suburban homeownership—what Robert Self describes as the industrial garden—GM consciously modeled its suburban plants, wherever possible, after the surrounding residential landscapes.<sup>6</sup> According to the *Detroit Free Press*, “The new plants being built today all over the country resemble modern country club structures, with low, sleek lines graced by landscaping.”<sup>7</sup> Built in 1947, the Van Slyke Road Chevrolet-Fisher Body assembly plant in Flint Township served as the local showcase for GM's embrace of freeway industrialism, architectural modernism, and suburban aesthetics. Unlike the original Buick and Chevrolet plants in central Flint, which offered few amenities to suburban commuters, GM's Flint Township plant provided its growing cohort of suburban employees with convenient highway access, wide streets, and ample off-street parking.

Express highways were the lynchpin of GM's postwar suburban strategy. In order to link its decentralized operations throughout the Flint metropolitan region—and to facilitate new car shipments and parts deliveries from regional and national suppliers—GM aggressively lobbied federal, state, and local officials for additional highway construction.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, local GM executives desired an urban freeway running through the city of Flint that would connect the county's manufacturing, assembly, and supply plants both to one another and to Interstate 75, the north-south freeway that linked

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<sup>6</sup> On the industrial garden, see Self, *American Babylon*, 23-60.

<sup>7</sup> “For Plants of Tomorrow,” *Detroit Free Press*, n.d.

<sup>8</sup> On highways and the automobile industry, see K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 157-171, 246-271.



Flint and its suburbs to Detroit, Saginaw, and the nation. As well, local plant managers sought a freeway route that would directly link the Buick assembly facility on Flint's North End to the Fisher Body supply plant on the city's southern fringe.<sup>9</sup> Buick's sole supplier of automobile bodies, the Fisher Body 1 plant on South Saginaw Street dispatched fleets of trucks every twenty minutes bound for the North End Buick plants, thereby causing major road deterioration and unrelenting traffic snarls in St. John, Oak Park, and other inner-city neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> As evidenced by the periodic work stoppages at Buick that stemmed from delayed Fisher Body deliveries, traffic congestion between GM facilities represented a serious threat to the orderly production and distribution of automobiles.

Local GM officials believed that express highways were essential to efficient industrial production. In acknowledgement of the vital role that freeways played in automobile production, officials from the Michigan State Highway Department (MSHD) and the Michigan Good Roads Federation (MGRF) joined General Motors and its local boosters in promoting state and federal highways as key components of what was to be an unbroken regional assembly line in Genesee County. According to MSDH reports,

Highway transportation is a vital element in the automobile production process. The highway itself is as much a part of the assembly line as the cranes that lift motor blocks onto chassis at [Ford's] River Rouge [plant] or the conveyor belts that carry piston rings and gasoline tanks from stockroom to production line at Pontiac.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> On Buick's efforts to speed construction of I-475, see George R. Elges to George Ursuy, December 16, 1974, Riegler Papers, box 8, folder 36, GHCC. Elges was the general manager of GM's Buick division.

<sup>10</sup> On industrial vehicles and traffic snarls in central Flint, see Melissa Miskow, "The Highway Was Born in Flint: How I-475 Came to Be," University of Michigan-Flint, History Department, Student Papers, GHCC.

<sup>11</sup> Michigan State Highway Department, *Highway Needs in Michigan: An Engineering Analysis* (Lansing: Michigan Good Roads Federation and the Michigan State Highway Department, n.d.).

With the construction of efficient freeways, GM executives sought to produce a radical new space-time matrix for industrial manufacturing and mass consumption.<sup>12</sup>

GM officials and other automobile enthusiasts in the Vehicle City vigorously lobbied for the passage of the 1956 Federal Interstate and Defense Highway Act.<sup>13</sup> With its guarantee of large federal subsidies for the construction of a national system of interstate highways, the landmark 1956 legislation received a hearty endorsement from the Manufacturers Association of Flint (MAF) and the Flint Industrial Executives Club (FIEC). In the capital city of Lansing, freeway boosters from the MGRF heralded the legislation, predicting that the state's massive road construction program would have "a more profound and generally beneficial effect upon Michigan's development than has any single force or factor in the state's history."<sup>14</sup> To GM president and Flint resident Harlow Curtice, the expansion of smooth superhighways marked a human triumph of sorts over both space and time: "Man has grown wings and flies faster than sound. He travels hundreds of miles from sunup to sundown over smooth ribbons of concrete. He can live in one town, work in a second and shop in a third."<sup>15</sup>

For local plant managers and executives in Flint, the nation's highway program represented a long awaited Keynesian political intervention that promised to create new jobs and increase industrial efficiency while simultaneously spurring the mass

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<sup>12</sup> According to an undated MGRF report, "The [expressway system] will shrink distances as far as time is concerned for local and out of state motorists. For all practical purposes the map of Michigan will shrink one third to one half its present size when it is better serviced by a continuous system of expressways." See Frank Suggitt, *How Expressways Help Michigan and You* (Lansing: Michigan Good Roads Federation, n.d.), 6.

<sup>13</sup> On federal legislation and highways, see M. Rose, *Interstate*; Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997); and Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl*.

<sup>14</sup> Suggitt, *How Expressways Help*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> General Motors Corporation Public Relations Staff, *Adventures of the Inquiring Mind: Some General Motors Scientific and Engineering Contributions of the Last Half Century* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1957).

consumption of automobiles. At a February 1962 meeting of the MAF, Joseph Anderson, the general manager of Flint's AC Spark Plug plant, argued for the rapid construction of freeways across the nation, suggesting that modern superhighways would increase GM's profits by as much as 20 percent. As the birthplace and manufacturing headquarters of GM, Anderson added, "Flint should serve as an example for the rest of the country in the appropriate and efficient way of handling traffic and automobiles." Always concerned with expanding the company's market share, Anderson and other GM executives in Flint and Detroit also saw the construction of modern, efficient highways as the key to undermining public transit and creating a nation of automobile consumers. At the same February 1962 meeting of the MAF, Guy Bates, the plant manager of the Fisher Body facility in Grand Blanc, endorsed highway construction as a means to increase company profits at the expense of urban public transportation systems. Good roads, Bates suggested, weakened mass transit systems and drove automobile sales upward.<sup>16</sup> In postwar Flint, the shift from buses to private automobile transit triggered a 62.6 percent decline in the city's mass transit ridership and a massive increase in private automobile consumption.<sup>17</sup> Bates and other executives hoped that new freeways would help to continue that trend. For their part, the county's new motorists viewed paved superhighways as a means to reduce traffic fatalities, decrease vehicle maintenance costs,

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<sup>16</sup> On the Anderson and Bates remarks, see Minutes, Manufacturers Association of Flint, February 7, 1962, Manufacturers Association of Flint Files, box 2, 87-12, Scharchburg Archives. I have not provided an exact quote from Bates because the MAF transcripts only paraphrase his remarks on public transportation. According to Richard Hebert, who authored a trenchant critique of suburbanization and highway construction policies in Genesee County, federal transportation officials acknowledged privately that Flint represented "the most hostile environment you can find" for public transportation. See Hebert, *Highways to Nowhere*. Between 1956 and 1966, annual ridership on Flint's public buses declined drastically from 9,009,763 to 3,354,901 passengers. See American Academy of Transportation, *Origin-Destination Data*. For theories on GM's role in the decline of mass transit in Flint, see Harold Ford, "How GM Destroyed Mass Transit," *Michigan Voice*, October 1983; and Ron Cordray, "GM 'Monopoly' Called Streetcar-Killer," *Flint Journal*, February 24, 1974.

<sup>17</sup> Urban Land Institute, *Flint's Central Business District: Urban Land Institute Panel Survey* (Flint: Urban Land Institute, 1957).

enhance driving pleasure, and increase the efficiency of automobile transit. As the state's highway plans and Flint's pro-highway majority began to coalesce in the late 1950s, local GM executives and automobile enthusiasts looked to the corporation's future in Genesee County with great optimism.

*Crossroads: Floral Park and the Interchange*

In order to pursue its decentralized, highway- and trucking-dependent vision for industrial production, GM required open space for freeway rights of way and interchanges within Flint's densely packed urban core. During the 1950s, GM's freeway dreams dovetailed almost perfectly with broader civic concerns over urban blight and slums in St. John and Floral Park. Beginning in the late 1950s, GM and its supporters from the state highway department and the Flint City Commission waged a political campaign to link the city's industrial future to freeway and urban renewal projects that would raze St. John and Floral Park. By replacing segregated black neighborhoods with urban freeways, an interchange, and an industrial park, GM and local planners hoped, quite literally, to pave the way towards civic progress, long term economic growth, consumer prosperity, and higher property values in the city of Flint. In the minds of Flint's civic elites, neighborhoods such as St. John and Floral Park were the most significant obstacles to a stable economic future for the city.

On January 17, 1963, the MSHD released *Freeways for Flint*, a planning report that contained the state's rationale for freeway construction and its site location proposals for Interstate 475, M-78 (which later became Interstate 69), and their connecting interchange. According to the state's plan, I-475, a north-south urban spur freeway, and

M-78, an east-west route connecting Flint with Chicago and Canada, were to intersect via a large interchange in the Floral Park neighborhood southeast of downtown. With the interchange project, state and local officials hoped to link slum clearance with increased automobile production and the resurrection of the city's ailing downtown commercial core.<sup>18</sup> The MSHD selected Floral Park over other possible locations for the interchange because of its central location near downtown retail outlets, its poor housing stock and relatively low property values, and its preponderance of impoverished black families.<sup>19</sup> Though many statistics supported the highway commission's claims of blight—and although many Floral Park residents suffered from intense poverty and racial segregation—the neighborhood maintained a level of economic diversity, community vitality, and historical significance that belied the MSHD's monolithic portrait of dilapidation.

Prior to World War II, many black migrants to the Vehicle City favored Floral Park over St. John and the North End, due in large part to its proximity to downtown, the cleaner air on the south side of the city, and the neighborhood's great socioeconomic diversity. However, during the 1940s and 1950s, when planners first contemplated a network of freeways for Flint, Floral Park experienced a dramatic transformation of its racial and class demography. The pull of industrial jobs, economic security, and northern civil rights protections—along with the push factors of rural poverty and southern Jim Crow—combined to bring tens of thousands of southern black migrants to the Vehicle

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<sup>18</sup> On the decline of downtown retailing in Flint, see Urban Land Institute, *A Greater Flint* (Flint: Urban Land Institute, n.d. [ca. 1958]). By the end of the 1950s, Flint's downtown commercial district accounted for approximately one-third of the total retail business conducted in the metropolitan area. In comparison with other cities, downtown Flint's share of the total metropolitan retail market was disproportionately low. On average, downtown districts in comparably sized cities typically gained approximately 40 percent of the metropolitan retail market. See also, Larry Smith, *Flint, Michigan, Land Use and Market Absorption Capacity Study: Municipal Center GNRP* (Flint: Larry Smith and Company, 1964).

<sup>19</sup> On urban renewal, racial conflicts, and downtown retailing, see Isenberg, *Downtown America*, 166-254.

City following World War II.<sup>20</sup> Between 1940 and 1960, the city's black population soared from 6,559 to 34,521.<sup>21</sup> When the new southern migrants arrived in Flint, they discovered a rigidly segregated and poorly housed city that afforded black people few residential options. For Charles and Betty Hewitt, black migrants who arrived in the Vehicle City in 1959, Flint felt like a southern city: "When we came to Flint in '59, Flint was a segregated town. It was almost like a southern town."<sup>22</sup> With a residential segregation index that reached 94.4 in 1960, Flint ranked as one of the most racially divided cities in the country—more segregated, in fact, than the cities of Atlanta, New York, Memphis, Chicago, New Orleans, St. Louis, Little Rock, Los Angeles, Charlotte, Boston, and Birmingham.<sup>23</sup> In the postwar era, a combination of government-sponsored redlining, bank discrimination, racial steering, exclusionary zoning codes, and white violence channeled thousands of the city's new black migrants into Floral Park, St. John, and other formerly integrated working-class neighborhoods.

As black migrants moved into all-white blocks in Floral Park, white families fought to preserve the color line before departing the neighborhood. "When blacks would move into some areas, there were some hard feelings, and some problems," Billy Thompson remembered. "And, little groups would form and fight one way or the other about locations. There were a few cross-burnings and things of that nature that kept you

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<sup>20</sup> On the Great Migration of African Americans to the North, see James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*.

<sup>21</sup> Chapelski, Marston, and Molseed, *1990 Demographic Profile of the Flint Urban Area*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Aiyer, ed., *Telling Our Stories*, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Taeuber and Taeuber, *Negroes in Cities*, 32-34. In the Taeubers' study, the segregation index represents the percentage of nonwhites that would have to move in order to achieve racial integration. Flint's segregation index of 94.4 meant that, in 1960, 94.4 percent of Flint's nonwhite citizens would have had to relocate to achieve citywide integration.

on your toes.”<sup>24</sup> Although ruptures of racial violence were common on the city’s south side, white opponents of residential integration ultimately failed to preserve the color line in Floral Park. Over the course of the 1950s, residential integration triggered waves of white panic selling, block by block, that claimed all but a few of Floral Park’s remaining white residents. Simultaneously, as new housing options for the black middle class gradually opened in Sugar Hill, Elm Park, Evergreen Valley, and other subdivisions east of Floral Park, black professionals and shopkeepers began their own migration from the neighborhood. By the end of the 1950s, Floral Park had lost much of its racial and economic diversity, and its once stable housing stock began to show signs of significant deterioration.<sup>25</sup>

Between 1950 and 1960, the white population of Floral Park and the surrounding areas of census tract nine declined from 2,057 to 148, while the area’s black population doubled to 4,001. For the thousands of white and middle-class black families who departed Floral Park in the 1950s, the decision to leave their homes, churches, and schools was complicated and fraught with many conflicting emotions. Racial fears undoubtedly played a key role in driving the white exodus from Floral Park; but race was only one factor in a broader constellation of forces that drove decisions to relocate. The quest for cheap land, open space, modern housing, home ownership, and, to be sure, widespread support for racial segregation among whites—and the desire for class segregation among blacks—all contributed to the racial and economic transformation of

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<sup>24</sup> Aiyer, ed., *Telling Our Stories*, 42. For a discussion of cross burnings and white violence on Flint’s south side, see *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, February 17, May 5, 1958.

<sup>25</sup> Much of the dissatisfaction driving middle-class black migrations from Floral Park stemmed from the boom in low-rent multiple family housing units in the neighborhood. Prior to departing the neighborhood, many middle-class black homeowners pressured the Flint City Commission to block the construction of low-rent apartments in Floral Park. On black homeowner protests against low-rent apartments and cheaply constructed dwellings, see *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, December 16, 1957, August 7, 1958, January 4, 1960.

Floral Park. Taking advantage of federal mortgage subsidies for new and existing housing on Flint's suburban fringe and in the surrounding suburbs of Genesee County, white families virtually disappeared from Floral Park by the close of the 1950s, leaving behind scores of abandoned homes and shops. For black professionals, by contrast, the road out of Floral Park was difficult and circuitous. Until well into the 1960s, black homebuyers found it nearly impossible to obtain FHA mortgages. Still, however, hundreds of middle-class African-American families left Floral Park during the postwar era in search of newer housing in more economically and culturally homogeneous neighborhoods.

By 1960, Floral Park's black majority stood at over 96 percent, the highest in the city. Though it included many homes in excellent repair, Floral Park's housing stock suffered from high rates of dilapidation and overcrowding. In 1960, federal census officials categorized 28 percent of the area's homes as dilapidated or deteriorating, a figure that nearly doubled citywide averages. The median value of housing in Floral Park, at \$8,900 per home, was significantly lower than the \$11,500 recorded for the city as a whole. As in St. John, many families in the neighborhood suffered from poverty, unemployment, crime, and poor health. The average family income in Floral Park, which totaled \$5,167 per year in 1960, was nearly 20 percent lower than in the rest of the city. With nearly a third of its residents under the age of nine, and an exceptionally high number of households headed by single mothers, Floral Park's poverty hit women and children with a special intensity.<sup>26</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, city planners and state

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<sup>26</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Census of Population and Housing, 1960, Summary Population and Housing Characteristics: Flint, Michigan* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1961), tables p-1, p-2, p-3, p-4, h-1, and h-2. On women, children, and the gendered politics of urban poverty, see Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston:



highway officials marshaled these bits of census data and other statistical portraits to justify the Floral Park location for the freeway interchange.

Whites and blacks who advocated a Floral Park interchange hoped to score a civic victory against concentrated poverty and segregation while simultaneously improving the city's industrial and retail climate. In the Flint of the 1950s, especially in neighborhoods such as Floral Park, the future-oriented politics of industrial growth and consumer prosperity seemed to march in lock step with the struggle for housing equity and racial fairness. Indeed, many residents of Floral Park in the 1950s and 1960s looked to both civil rights activism *and* the interchange as remedies for poor housing and racial segregation. For thousands of south side residents, the city's freeway plans constituted an opportunity to seek better housing, home ownership, and upward social mobility.

For the twenty years that passed between the release of the MSHD's freeway plan and the conclusion of interstate construction, Floral Park residents and activists mobilized with great urgency to incorporate desegregation and fair housing into the city's transportation initiatives. The battles over Floral Park redevelopment did not receive the same attention as other local struggles that unfolded over urban renewal, however. Although the south side freeway interchange sparked major civil rights battles and intense racial and class contestation—and though the interchange was a centerpiece in the city's redevelopment initiatives—political debates over urban renewal in the North End tended to subsume those that erupted in Floral Park. Because of St. John's proximity to "The Buick," Flint's single-largest employer, slum clearance and industrial expansion on

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Beacon Press, 2005); and Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Also, see Tamar Carroll, "Grassroots Feminism: Direct Action Organizing and Coalition Building in New York City, 1955-1995," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006).

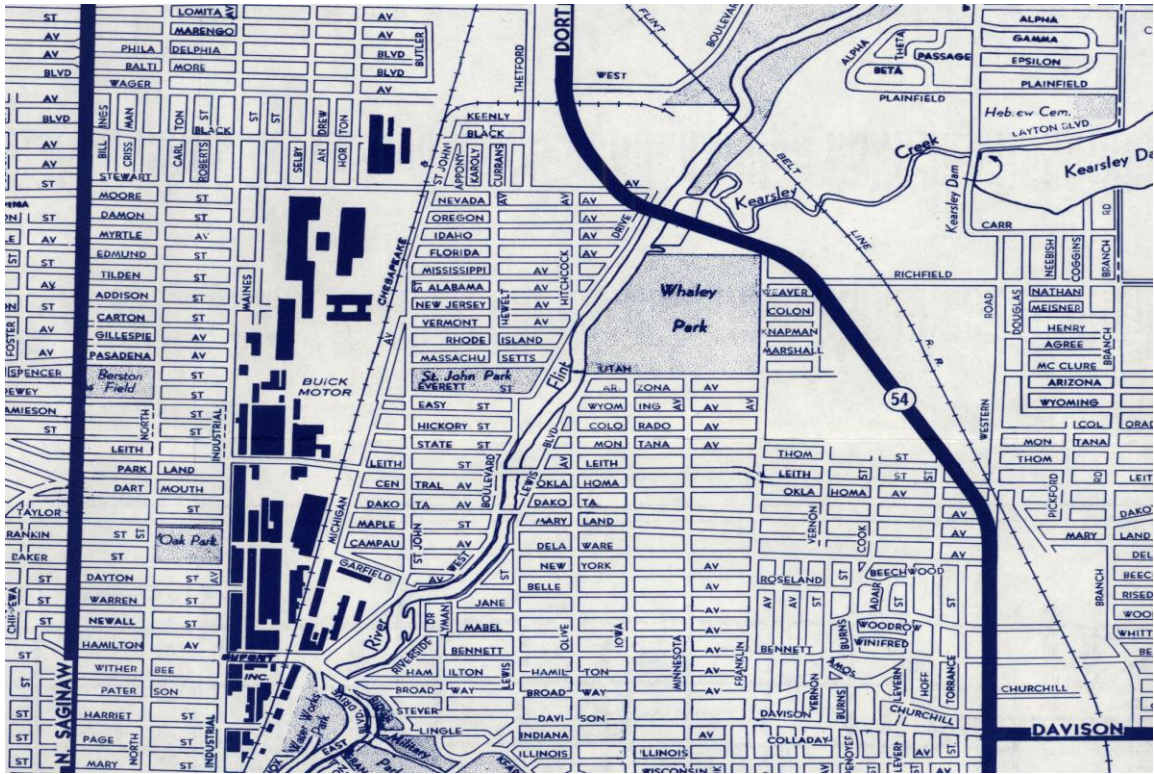
the North End affected tens of thousands of families throughout metropolitan Flint, even those living far away from the neighborhood. By the dawn of the 1960s, the North End's St. John Street Neighborhood Development Project had emerged as the political epicenter in the municipal campaign for urban renewal.

*Urban Islands, Industrial Mountains, and Fordist Rain: St. John Street*

GM's postwar suburban building strategy provoked a great deal of consternation among some city officials and civic boosters. During the early 1950s, when city officials first raised concerns over the suburbanization of industry, GM plant managers pointed to Flint's acute land shortages and poor transportation infrastructure. In particular, GM executives highlighted Flint's North End, where unregulated building had left homes and industrial facilities far too close together. Dilapidated North End housing, a 1963 study noted, served as "a deterrent to natural industrial development," and detracted from the city's prized image.<sup>27</sup> For GM executives, slum clearance in the North End promised to free up valuable land for an urban freeway and the expansion of its Buick facilities. Like their counterparts in Floral Park, thousands of black families in St. John viewed urban renewal as an opportunity to obtain new housing in more desirable sections of the city. During the 1950s and 1960s, an extremely fragile interracial, cross-class coalition for St. John and Floral Park renewal emerged. Black activists joined that coalition for renewal as part of the broader movement for open housing that was simultaneously taking shape in the city.

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<sup>27</sup> National Association of Real Estate Boards, *Flint Faces the Future: An Advisory Report to the City of Flint, Michigan* (Flint: National Association of Real Estate Boards, 1963), 5. On plant suburbanization and industrial land shortages, see R. Larson and Schenker, *Land and Property Values*.



Map 9.1. Flint's North End. A 1966 map of Flint's north side featuring GM's Buick Motor division, the St. John Street neighborhood (directly east of the Buick Motor plants), and the city's near northeast side (directly east of St. John and the Flint River). The Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad tracks, Garfield Avenue, and the Flint River formed the boundary of St. John. In 1960, African Americans comprised 95 percent of St. John's population. In the neighborhoods south of Whaley Park (and east of the river), whites represented more than 99 percent of the population until well into the 1970s. Courtesy of American Automobile Association (AAA) of Michigan.

By the end of the 1950s, St. John had become, ironically, the most blighted and coveted residential neighborhood in the city. Home to the world headquarters of Buick, St. John was unquestionably the most economically valuable section of Flint. However, the residents of St. John and the broader North End were among the poorest, most ill-housed citizens in the Vehicle City. Furthermore, after Floral Park, St. John contained the second-highest percentage of African Americans in the city. As in Floral Park, a combination of FHA mortgage subsidies, class tensions, and white racial antipathies helped to transform the North End's social geography during the 1940s and 1950s. In

1940, St. John Street had a white majority of 60 percent, composed primarily of southern and eastern European immigrants. Between 1940 and 1950, however, the number of black households in St. John nearly tripled. By 1950, the percentage of blacks in the area had more than doubled to 85 percent. Over the same duration, the neighborhood's white population declined by approximately 75 percent. At mid-century, the neighborhood contained 4,593 black residents and a white minority of 872. A decade later, when the city launched its freeway and urban renewal programs, African Americans comprised over 95 percent of St. John's residents.<sup>28</sup>

As black job seekers from the South arrived in St. John, shopkeepers, white homeowners, and black professionals departed by the thousands. They left behind scores of boarded-up homes and businesses and a decidedly poorer, more segregated, and homogeneous North End. To Michael Evanoff, a white resident who departed St. John after World War II, it seemed as though "the community was virtually taken over by black people." "With the population becoming disproportionately black," he claimed, "there followed friction and misunderstanding between the races . . . [and] eventually practically all of those who could move out of the area did so, both white and black."<sup>29</sup> Although whites in St. John opposed the neighborhood's black residents with near unanimity, many middle-class black property owners also looked askance at their new neighbors. Ruth Owens Buckner, an African-American resident of the south side,

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<sup>28</sup> The statistics in this paragraph are from census reports. See U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Housing, 1940, Supplement to the First Series Housing Bulletin for Flint, Michigan* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942), tables 1 and 3; U.S. Census Bureau, *United States Census of Population, 1950 Census Tract Statistics, Flint, Michigan, and Adjacent Area* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1952), tables 1, 2, and 3; U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Population and Housing, 1960*, tables p-1, p-2, p-3, p-4, h-1, and h-2. For firsthand accounts of life in St. John and racial transitions in Flint's North End, see R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, passim; and Aiyer, ed., *Telling Our Stories*, passim.

<sup>29</sup> Michael W. Evanoff, *St. John St.: An Ethnic Feature of the St. John St. Community, Flint, Michigan, 1874-1974* (Flint: Edelweiss Press, 1986), 324-325.

painted an especially harsh portrait of black southerners in St. John: “The doors [of St. John houses] were standing wide open, flies were going in and out and the men sitting around drinking. Lots of those who came didn’t have good morals so that carried on through the years. [Despite] people there who were good, more were bad.”<sup>30</sup> In the eyes of thousands of white families from St. John—and, indeed, among many middle-class black professionals—the Second Great Migration unleashed an unwelcome invasion of unrefined African-American job seekers who threatened property values, public safety, and civic morality.

The outward migrations of whites and middle-class property owners created both hardships and opportunities for St. John’s African-American householders. Despite widespread private capital divestment, bank discrimination, redlining, and racially motivated panic selling, postwar St. John was still the undisputed commercial and residential capital of Black Flint. With the Columbia Theater, the St. John Community Center, the nearby Berston Field House, and a host of black-owned clubs, shops, and restaurants, St. John was the focal point of the city’s segregated public sphere. “It was like being in a city of its own,” remembered former resident James Blakely. “Everything that blacks needed it was right in that area. . . . You didn’t have to go out of that quarter even on weekends.”<sup>31</sup> Housing a diverse mix of factory workers, domestics, small business owners, and professionals, the St. John Street community of the postwar decades was socioeconomically diverse.<sup>32</sup> “Black people had their businesses, they had their

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<sup>30</sup> The Buckner quotation is from R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> James Blakely, interview by W. Howard, August 11, 1993, Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives.

<sup>32</sup> On racial segregation and socioeconomic diversity in black neighborhoods, see Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences:*

restaurants, they had their nightclubs,” remembered Woody Etherly. “It was all right there in that community.”<sup>33</sup> Although in 1960 its median housing value of \$7,600 ranked among the lowest in the city, St. John was still predominantly a neighborhood of homeowners, many of whom found stable employment as custodians and foundry workers at the nearby Buick plants.<sup>34</sup>

Notwithstanding its economic diversity and vibrancy, St. John consistently ranked as the most impoverished, dangerous, overcrowded, and polluted section of the city. St. John had the dreadful distinction of containing Flint’s largest rat population, and its housing stock—consisting primarily of aging, wood-framed structures—was severely deteriorated. According to the authors of a housing survey published in 1960, nearly 90 percent of the homes in the St. John district had “major deficiencies,” while approximately 40 percent of its dwellings were dilapidated beyond repair.<sup>35</sup> In 1969, when the median yearly family income for Genesee County stood at \$9,200, the figure for St. John was only \$3,900.<sup>36</sup> For the black families that sought to leave St. John, a harsh mix of government-sanctioned housing discrimination, redlining, racial violence,

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*Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); M. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*; and Mary Pattillo, *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> R. Sanders, *Bronze Pillars*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> On housing values in St. John, see U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Population and Housing, 1960*, tables h-1 and h-2. According to a neighborhood survey from the late 1960s, owners occupied 56 percent of the dwellings in St. John Street. At 1.3:1, the owner-to-renter ratio in the St. John neighborhood was among the highest in the city at the time. See “Occupied Housing Units by Tenure and Race,” in G. Dale Bishop and J. Wilberg, *A Demographic Analysis of Neighborhood Development Project Areas: Flint, Michigan* (Flint: University of Michigan-Flint, 1972).

<sup>35</sup> *Flint Journal*, June 26, 1960. Also, see Harriet E. Tillock, “St. John Street Community Center,” Beasley Papers, box 2, GHCC.

<sup>36</sup> On the relationship between low household incomes, public policy, and substandard housing, see William G. Grigsby, “Housing Markets and Public Policy,” in James Q. Wilson, ed., *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), 24-49.

and poverty severely circumscribed relocation options. Noted one resident in 1963, “I loathe where I live, but I’m trapped.”<sup>37</sup>



Figure 9.1. St. John Street. A 1971 photograph of a smokestack from the Buick foundry, with the partially cleared St. John neighborhood and the Flint River in the background. SOURCE: *Flint Journal*, January 25, 1971. Photograph by Bill Gallagher. Courtesy of *Flint Journal*

Residents of St. John Street had many reasons to feel trapped. Because of its proximity to the massive complex of Buick factories, the St. John area received very little sunlight on most days. When sunlight did arrive over the towering multi-story plants, it had to pierce through dense clouds of soot and ash that emanated from Buick’s smoke-belching foundry. At the state civil rights commission’s 1966 equal housing hearings in Flint, Ailene Butler, owner of the North End’s Butler Funeral Home, painted a grim

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<sup>37</sup> *Flint Journal*, September 2, 1970.

meteorological portrait of life in St. John: “When we get a good sun-shiny day down there, we’re lucky.”<sup>38</sup> Unlike municipal officials in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and other cities who enforced strict smoke abatement programs during the 1940s and 1950s, members of the Flint City Commission’s Air and Water Pollution Committee generally abstained from regulating industrial pollutants until state and federal officials in the 1970s forced them to do so.<sup>39</sup> In a 1971 editorial published in the *Flint Spokesman*, a weekly African-American newspaper, neighborhood activist Charles Winfrey described how the Buick foundry produced “billows of smoke which emit soot like rain” over the St. John neighborhood.<sup>40</sup> On good days, when the factories hummed and the prevailing winds sent Buick smoke elsewhere, St. John residents could look beyond neighborhood deterioration and take pride in their homes, shops, schools, and churches. On the worst of days, though, when clouds of toxicity hung like a pall over the neighborhood, St. John was insufferable.

As much as any other factor, Buick pollution drove black demands for North End renewal. In St. John, Oak Park, Martin-Jefferson, and other north side neighborhoods surrounding the plants, industrial pollutants peeled paint from homes and cars, covered windows and windshields, soiled clothing and outdoor pets, and caused innumerable

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<sup>38</sup> See Butler testimony, “Public Hearing on Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint, Michigan.” Butler went on to become the first black woman elected to the Flint City Commission/Council. Also, see *Flint Journal*, May 29, 1971.

<sup>39</sup> On smoke abatement in Pittsburgh and St. Louis, see Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 31-32, 83-85. Also, see David Stradling, *Smokestacks and Progressives: Environmentalists, Engineers and Air Quality in America, 1881-1951* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Joel A. Tarr, ed., *Devastation and Renewal: An Environmental History of Pittsburgh and Its Region* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003). On the city’s refusal to regulate industrial air pollution, see Beasley, “Weekly Report from Flint,” January 16, 1968, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 18, GHCC.

<sup>40</sup> *Flint Spokesman*, May 29, 1971.



respiratory ailments and cancers among residents.<sup>41</sup> According to city health inspectors, St. John residents suffered the city's highest rates of asthma, infant mortality, and lung and throat cancer. During her 1966 testimony, Butler spoke at length about her personal experiences with cancerous pollution on the North End:

I lived in that area [St. John] practically all my life. Two months ago I had to have something removed from my throat and it was cancerous. My late husband Robinson, the funeral director, died with cancer of his throat. There is a heavy smog caused by the Buick factory which has been in existence for about eighteen years. The houses in this district are eaten up by a very heavy deposit, something like rust. If you paint your house, within six months after, it is covered with this heavy deposit. If you do not have a garage in this area and buy a car, the insurance is higher because of these deposits. We owned white Cadillacs, and within three or four months they'd have this heavy deposit—it looked like little gold...and it's very hard. You can hardly get it off your car. You can imagine what we go through down there breathing when this exists on just material things.<sup>42</sup>

In 1963, the authors of a neighborhood survey concluded, “The core section of St. John’s is an unfit environment for human habitation.”<sup>43</sup> Unwilling to regulate the emissions of GM, city commissioners and corporate officials presided over near-constant showers of smoke, soot, and ash that irritated lungs and depressed real estate values in the North End. In the late 1950s, the onset of urban renewal inaugurated another, more intense cycle of neighborhood deterioration that lasted until the St. John clearance project’s conclusion in 1977.

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<sup>41</sup> On pollution in the North End, see Memorandum, Thomas Kay to William Polk, n.d., City Manager Files; and *Flint Journal*, February 24, 1966, March 4, 30, September 4, 1969.

<sup>42</sup> See Butler testimony, “Public Hearing on Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint, Michigan.”

<sup>43</sup> National Association of Real Estate Boards, *Flint Faces the Future*, 16.

*Razing Ghettos and Raising Revenue: Assembling Flint's Urban Renewal Coalition*

Historians have often interpreted urban renewal and other postwar city rebuilding initiatives as manifestations of federal officials' embrace of "growth liberalism." With regard to urban matters, this term refers generally to a political philosophy of massive government intervention into the economic affairs of cities. Specifically, growth liberals during the New Deal and postwar eras advocated a set of "pump-priming" stimulus programs designed to expand metropolitan economies by subsidizing industrial and commercial growth and mass consumption. Though growth liberalism has proven to be an incisive framework for understanding the motivations that drove economic policymaking at the federal level, it is much less useful in explaining the complexities of local urban development politics in the postwar era. In Flint and other cities, the coalition for urban renewal was so vast, and so fractured by divergent political and economic interests, that growth liberalism falters as a comprehensive analytical framework. Indeed, scholars' use of the growth liberal framework in narrating the history of urban renewal has effectively silenced the historical voices of thousands of black activists in Flint and other cities who fought from within pro-growth coalitions to make redevelopment compatible with civil rights objectives.<sup>44</sup>

The government policies that produced Interstate 475, the Floral Park interchange, and the St. John Street urban renewal project grew out of a fragile, bipartisan coalition that united growth-minded Democrats and pro-business Republicans with racial integrationists, local trade union leaders, and black community activists. To be sure,

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<sup>44</sup> On growth liberalism, see S. Fraser and Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*; Markusen et al., *The Rise of the Sunbelt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*; Brinkley, *The End of Reform*; Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and L. Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*.

Flint's urban renewal and freeway plans drew support from a familiar cast of civic and corporate growth boosters. Local GM officials, Saginaw Street retailers, and Flint city commissioners applauded the passage of the United States Housing Act of 1949. With its promise of large federal subsidies for the municipal assault on urban blight, the landmark federal legislation, later amended in 1954, received a hearty endorsement from city planners, inner-city developers, and all who viewed St. John as a barrier to economic development and a burden to city taxpayers. However, demands for urban renewal also emerged organically from within the black communities of St. John and Floral Park as part of a broader struggle for civil rights, clean air, and fair housing. Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, civil rights and neighborhood activists in the Vehicle City sought and fought to link the city's slum clearance and urban development plans with a frontal attack on industrial pollution, neighborhood deterioration, and residential segregation.<sup>45</sup>

Support for I-475 and St. John Street redevelopment crossed racial, class, and partisan divides in Genesee County. The movement for renewal united a vast yet

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<sup>45</sup> On urban renewal, growth liberalism, and civil rights, see Harvey Molotch, "The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place," *American Sociological Review* 82:2 (September 1976): 309-332; John H. Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*; George F. Lord and Albert Price, "Growth Ideology in a Period of Decline: Deindustrialization and Restructuring, Flint Style," *Social Problems* 39:2 (May 1992): 155-169; George Lipsitz, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 47:3 (September 1995): 369-387; Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned*; Barbara Ferman, *Challenging the Growth Machine: Neighborhood Politics in Chicago and Pittsburgh* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996); Schuyler, *A City Transformed*; Fogelson, *Downtown*; Self, *American Babylon*; Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*; Gillette, *Camden After the Fall*; and Isenberg, *Downtown America*. On race, pollution, and urban politics, see Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). On the relationship between private enterprise and urban renewal, see Milford A. Vieser, "Urban Renewal: A Program for Private Enterprise," September 18, 1964, Manley Papers, box 14, 78-8.2-270 c-2, Scharchburg Archives; John D. Harper, "Private Enterprise's Public Responsibility," December 8, 1966, Manufacturers Association of Flint Files, box 5, 87-12.4-14, Scharchburg Archives; and Anthony DeLorenzo, "The Role of Business in Solving Social Problems," November 5, 1970, Anthony DeLorenzo Papers, box 2, 92-21.1-61, Scharchburg Archives.

unstable coalition that included representatives from GM, the UAW, the Mott Foundation, the Flint Chamber of Commerce, the editorial board of the *Flint Journal*, the real estate and development industries, the NAACP and Urban League, and frustrated black residents from the North End and Floral Park. Power relations within Flint's urban renewal coalition were profoundly asymmetrical, however. Represented locally by the Flint Industrial Executives Club, the Manufacturers Association of Flint, and the General Motors Plant City Committee, GM dominated Flint's highway and urban renewal coalitions. Though vocal in their demands for relocation, black residents of the St. John Street and Floral Park neighborhoods were the least powerful and the most institutionally disconnected proponents of slum clearance and relocation. Comprising less than 15 percent of the city's total 1960 population, African Americans, even those who viewed urban freeways and slum clearance with skepticism, had few options but to try to obtain racial fairness from inside of the city's urban renewal coalition.

Flint's fragile coalition for renewal and freeways united corporate executives, growth-minded city commissioners, and civil rights activists, who all embraced—for widely divergent reasons—the state's power to remake urban residential, commercial, and industrial geographies. By 1960, the city's pro-urban renewal movement had congealed around four major issues. First, the freeway, interchange, and neighborhood clearance projects promised to expedite the flow of traffic to and from the region's auto plants, thereby increasing industrial efficiency and reducing commuting time for workers. In a 1962 speech on the benefits of routing I-475 through the North End, Oz Kelly, a former mayor and executive director of the MAF, admitted that local manufacturers supported redevelopment primarily as a means to stimulate economic growth: “The

[freeway] route was designed to accommodate industry, the employees and the traffic generated by them.”<sup>46</sup> Second, advocates of interstate construction such as Richard Tavis, the executive director of the Greater Flint Downtown Corporation, argued that the freeway would spur downtown commerce and tourism by linking the city’s cultural and central business districts to the booming residential developments in suburban Genesee County. Without freeways and slum clearance, Tavis warned in a 1962 speech to MAF members, the city’s already ailing downtown core faced “economic strangulation.”<sup>47</sup> Third, local developers, trade union leaders, and civic boosters saw urban redevelopment as a means to combat blight while fostering economic expansion and industrial growth in the central city. By replacing the St. John Street and Floral Park communities with an industrial park, a freeway and interchange, and an expanded Buick facility, municipal officials sought to spur job growth and increase the city’s tax base by luring investors back to the city. Moreover, cost-conscious city officials hoped to use urban renewal to lure tax-generating industries to St. John and other North End neighborhoods that contributed the least in local property taxes. According to city manager (and future MAF spokesperson) Thomas Kay, the demolition of homes in St. John would eliminate tax and service gaps in the city and increase property values in the economically depressed North End. For those in Flint who subscribed to the gospel of economic growth, jumpstarting the economy and increasing the city’s tax base were the ultimate aims of urban redevelopment.

Men such as Oz Kelly and Thomas Kay never invited St. John and Floral Park residents to speak to the MAF or other powerful organizations about their vision for

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<sup>46</sup> Manufacturers Association of Flint minutes, February 7, 1962.

<sup>47</sup> Manufacturers Association of Flint minutes, February 7, 1962. On the link between road construction and increased property values in Genesee County, see R. Larson and Schenker, *Land and Property Values*.

development. Indeed, ordinary citizens found it exceedingly difficult to convene with city planners and corporate officials regarding North End and south side redevelopment plans. Nevertheless, the city's coalition for renewal was too broad and diverse to unite under the single aim of growth. Although growth advocates from GM, the MAF, and city hall loomed large in Flint's redevelopment coalition, black community activists and opponents of racial segregation also supported this vast program of demolition and redevelopment. In fact, the final rationale for renewal came from civil rights activists and residents of St. John and Floral Park, who saw clearance as an opportunity to combat segregation, poor housing, and the city's growing public health crisis on the North End.

*"The Death of Hypocrisy": Urban Renewal, City Services, and Civil Rights*

Scholars have tended to frame urban renewal and civil rights in starkly antithetical terms. Yet for a time during the 1950s and early 1960s, thousands of African Americans in segregated, impoverished neighborhoods such as St. John and Floral Park looked to redevelopment with a sense of guarded optimism. In fact, by clear majorities, residents of Floral Park and the St. John Street area supported neighborhood clearance and relocation. Though many residents felt a special attachment to their homes, churches, and businesses, the pollution, crime, high rents, and deteriorated housing in St. John and Floral Park were simply too much to bear for a large majority of residents.<sup>48</sup> During a 1964 meeting on housing segregation in Flint, St. John resident Lillian Huddleston explained why she and other North Enders supported redevelopment: "We feel as if we

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<sup>48</sup> On the ambivalent feelings of African Americans toward St. John Street, see Ennis interview, September 22, 1993.

were sewed up in a pocket, and we need Urban Renewal.”<sup>49</sup> For their part, liberal trade unionists and white integrationists also endorsed the call for urban renewal. In 1957, an editorialist for the *Flint Weekly Review*, the city’s leading left-labor newspaper, argued,

The real social need in Flint is to raze the ghettos, so that all of us can become more honest men. Until we do, none of us dare speak of the brotherhood of men. Neither should we throw stones at the Deep South, until we, ourselves, have removed ourselves from the segregated glass houses we love so well.<sup>50</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Flint chapters of the Urban League and the NAACP, along with dozens of African-American block clubs and thousands of ordinary black citizens, united in support of urban redevelopment. In 1955, Arthur Edmonds, the executive director of the Flint Urban League, issued a formal statement asking city leaders to “embark immediately on city-wide programs of slum clearance and urban redevelopment, using federal assistance to do so.”<sup>51</sup> The following year, Urban League and NAACP members joined St. John and Floral Park residents in delivering three petitions for slum clearance to the Flint City Commission. Citing the adverse effects of pollution, crime, overcrowding, and poor housing, petitioners asked the city to “secure immediately federal aid for slum clearance, urban redevelopment, and standard rental housing.”<sup>52</sup> “Flint badly needs programs of urban renewal, slum clearance and public housing,” a 1957 Urban League editorial added.<sup>53</sup> Well aware of the racism embedded within the city’s home mortgage market, petitioning residents urged city commissioners and private developers to focus on providing safe and affordable rental housing.

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<sup>49</sup> *Flint Mirror*, April 1964.

<sup>50</sup> *Flint Weekly Review*, October 3, 1957.

<sup>51</sup> The quotation is from *Amplifier*, February 1962, Urban League of Flint Papers, box 1, folder 7, GHCC.

<sup>52</sup> *Flint News Advertiser*, June 19, 1956. On black petitions for urban renewal, see also “Urban League Will Ask for Early Action on Slum Clearance,” *Flint Weekly Review*, December 6, 1956.

<sup>53</sup> *Amplifier*, Winter 1957, Urban League of Flint Papers, box 1, folder 7, GHCC.

Activists understood that in order to secure federal funds, municipal officials had to demonstrate that they could provide standard relocation housing to all persons displaced by government action. Because Flint's citywide vacancy rate hovered below 2 percent, city leaders had to develop thousands of low-income housing units as a prerequisite to the receipt of federal renewal funds. The severe housing shortages in the city threatened to delay plans for Floral Park and St. John redevelopment.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond calling for more affordable housing, St. John and Floral Park residents also demanded better housing and improved city services. In 1958 and 1959, St. John and Floral Park residents presented additional petitions for renewal to the city commission and organized a series of public protests to demand improved municipal services for their segregated neighborhoods. To demonstrate their commitment to quality city services *and* North End redevelopment, residents of Floral Park and St. John attended virtually every meeting of the city commission during the 1950s and 1960s. At these meetings, local activists such as Ailene Butler, Howard Simpson, Fred Dent, and Olive Beasley repeatedly charged commissioners with neglecting black neighborhoods. Though black citizens brought a wide range of issues to the attention of city commissioners, civil rights protests often centered on racial inequities in the city's street

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<sup>54</sup> Scholars have written little on the subject, but black support for urban renewal was not unique to Flint. See Connolly, "By Eminent Domain"; and Holliman, "From Crackertown to Model City?" Also, see the following articles from a 1958 special section of *Phylon Quarterly* devoted to urban renewal: B. T. McGraw, "Urban Renewal in the Interest of All the People," *Phylon Quarterly* 19:1 (Spring 1958): 45-55; and George B. Nesbitt, "Urban Renewal in Perspective," *Phylon Quarterly* 19:1 (Spring 1958): 64-68. On African-American support for urban renewal in Akron, Ohio, see John H. Lindquist and Charles M. Barresi, "Ghetto Residents and Urban Politics: Attitudes toward Urban Renewal," *Law and Society Review* 5:2 (November 1970): 239-250. On black support for urban renewal in Detroit, see Eleanor P. Wolf and Charles N. Lebeaux, "On the Destruction of Poor Neighborhoods by Urban Renewal," *Social Problems* 15:1 (Summer 1967): 3-8. On federal guidelines pertaining to replacement housing, see Terry J. Tondro, "Urban Renewal Relocation: Problems in Enforcement of Conditions on Federal Grants to Local Agencies," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 117:2 (December 1968): 183-227. On the city's low vacancy rate and the shortage of code-approved housing, see Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC; and Social Planning Associates, *Diagnostic Survey*.



cleaning, public safety, road paving, housing code enforcement, snow removal, garbage collection, pollution abatement, and street lighting programs. At a city commission meeting held on March 23, 1959, for instance, Charles Murphy reported that the city had abandoned its street cleaning program on Fifth Street in the northernmost section of Floral Park. According to Murphy, who moved to Floral Park in 1955, the city had neglected to clean Fifth Street for over two years, leaving the street littered with piles of rubbish and layers of caked-on grime.<sup>55</sup> Failure to deliver city services, protesters such as Murphy asserted, contributed greatly to housing deterioration, neighborhood blight, and private divestment from the city's all-black and racially transitional neighborhoods.

On the North End, the city's failure to combat police brutality and vice provoked sustained protests during the late 1950s and 1960s. Often outnumbering black protests against poor housing and industrial pollution, complaints against the Flint Police Department and its vice squad unit spiked dramatically beginning in the late 1950s. On scores of occasions, black protestors attended city commission meetings to demand better police protection, especially for black women on the North End. Because the vice squad only rarely arrested white addicts and johns, white men seeking drugs and black prostitutes cruised the red light districts on Michigan Avenue, St. John Street, and Industrial Avenue with near impunity during the 1950s and 1960s. Often propositioning or harassing unsuspecting women who walked the streets, white johns and racial voyeurs provoked community outrage and spawned widespread demands for better police protection on the North End. At the commission's meeting on August 8, 1955, St. John resident Roger Lewis reported that white johns from outside of the neighborhood had become so aggressive that "women can't stand by their own fences or in their own yards

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<sup>55</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, March 23, 1959.

without someone making vile remarks to them.”<sup>56</sup> Without white johns, addicts, and suburban thrill seekers, North End activists maintained, the city’s growing vice problem would virtually disappear.

White johns, drug users, and street criminals were only three among many sources of anxiety for black pedestrians in St. John. Charges of police brutality against both uniformed and plainclothes vice squad officers were exceedingly common on the North End during the era of urban renewal.<sup>57</sup> In September of 1958, police-community tensions in St. John exploded when two unidentified plainclothes police officers publicly assaulted and then arrested an unarmed black girl returning home from choir practice. Operating under the incorrect assumption that she was a prostitute, the two officers “manhandled and injured” the young woman and several members of her family in front of a group of onlookers. Outraged by the assault, black protestors from across the city packed city commission meetings and picketed the Flint Municipal Center for four consecutive weeks during the fall.<sup>58</sup> On October 7, the protests reached a climax when the NAACP and a group of black ministers staged a mock funeral service for the “death of hypocrisy, bad faith, and police brutality.” After a formal church service in front of city hall, the NAACP’s funeral procession marched north to the Flint River, where protestors ceremoniously dumped a casket into the water. Throughout the 1958 protests, residents from St. John and Floral Park challenged commissioners to provide equal police

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<sup>56</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, August 8, 1955. Because African-American activists attended and spoke at commission meetings on a regular basis, the city commission minutes are a good source of information on black demands for urban renewal and improved city services.

<sup>57</sup> On police brutality cases in postwar Flint, see “Flint Is Marching for Civil Rights,” Holt Papers, box 4, folder 5, GHCC; and “Our Reasons for Picketing City Hall,” Holt Papers, box 4, folder 17, GHCC. Also, see *Flint Journal*, July 7, 1967.

<sup>58</sup> On the fall 1958 demonstrations against police brutality, see “Supplement to the October 15<sup>th</sup> Minutes of the Flint Study Group,” Manley Papers, box 10, 78-8.2-84b, Scharzburg Archives.

protection, respect civil rights, and deliver fair and equitable municipal services to all of the city's neighborhoods.

General Motors executives and downtown boosters did not simply impose Flint's urban renewal program upon unwilling African-American communities. To the contrary, demands for urban renewal in the St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods were an integral part of the broader black freedom struggle in Flint. Many residents of St. John and Floral Park saw urban renewal as equal parts threat and promise.<sup>59</sup> Fearing the worst outcomes of redevelopment—resegregation, poor housing, and inadequate city services—black activists joined the city's redevelopment coalition in order to shape its priorities. Indeed, civil rights and neighborhood activists such as Charles Murphy and Roger Lewis did not wait for city officials to deliver North End renewal. Rather, they coupled their relocation demands with a grassroots campaign for improved housing and a more equitable distribution of city services.

*“Assigning the Blight Tag”: Planning for Ghettoes*

Planning for Flint's urban freeway and the St. John renewal project began in earnest in the late 1950s, when city commissioners hired Ladislas Segoe to create Flint's master plan. Segoe's plan recommended complete demolition and redevelopment for all of St. John and a portion of Floral Park. Segoe and his associates proposed replacing “low-value housing” in St. John and Floral Park with an expanded Buick facility, a Class A industrial park in St. John, a freeway exit ramp in Floral Park, and a north-south route for

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<sup>59</sup> On black public opinion and the “threats” and “promises” of urban renewal, see R. Weaver, *The Negro and the Ghetto* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1948); and Frank S. Horne, “Interracial Housing in the United States,” *Phylon Quarterly* 19:1 (Spring 1958): 13-20. Weaver, the first U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, was the first African American to hold a cabinet position in the United States. I borrow the “threats” and “promises” framework from Weaver's 1948 book.

Interstate 475 that would serve the central business district, the college and cultural facilities east of downtown, and nearly all of the region's auto plants. With its proposal to raze a section of Floral Park and the entire St. John neighborhood, Flint's master plan endorsed a massive reordering of the city's spatial and racial geographies.<sup>60</sup>

In 1960, when the city's freeway and urban renewal plans first emerged, Flint contained a white majority of 83 percent. Yet among the approximately three thousand families slated for relocation due to freeway construction, 60 percent were African American. Of the 1,193 St. John families that would have to move, the proportion of African Americans was nearly 100 percent. The families designated for relocation under the Segoe plan were disproportionately black, poor, and elderly, with approximately 85 percent of affected families earning less than \$6,000 per year, one-third on public aid, over one-half qualifying for public housing, and one-fourth senior citizens.<sup>61</sup> In St. John, which the Segoe plan slated as the city's top renewal priority, relocation presented extremely difficult challenges. According to one survey, nearly 60 percent of the St. John families designated for displacement had either "severe or multiple impediments to relocation" that derived primarily from poverty, old age, and racial discrimination.<sup>62</sup> In spite of the difficulties they faced, a large majority of St. John and Floral Park residents still expressed a preference for relocation, which in turn fueled civil rights concerns over resegregation. "The trick [with relocation]," noted the MCRC's Beasley, "is to prevent a new ghetto emerging."<sup>63</sup> African-American renewers in Floral Park and St. John hoped

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<sup>60</sup> Segoe and Associates, *Comprehensive Master Plan*. For more on Segoe's career as a professional planner, see David J. Edelman and David J. Allor, "Ladislas Segoe and the Emergence of the Professional Planning Consultant," *Journal of Planning History* 2:1 (February 2003): 47-78.

<sup>61</sup> In 1966, city officials estimated that 89 percent of the structures in the neighborhood were "substandard." See Wilhelm, "St. John Area Again Being Eyed for Renewal," *Flint Journal*, December 11, 1966.

<sup>62</sup> Social Planning Associates, *Diagnostic Survey*.

<sup>63</sup> Beasley to Brendan Sexton, August 3, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 1, GHCC.

that the relocation program, in conjunction with the fair housing campaign, held the potential to reduce residential segregation while substantially upgrading the housing options available to black families. As city commissioners debated the master plan's recommendations, black activists competed from within the city's urban renewal coalition to challenge the vision of urban renewal advocated by GM and downtown developers.

General Motors and the city's downtown development coalition played a key role in shaping the planning priorities of Flint's urban renewal and freeway programs. Following the release of the 1960 master plan, GM, the MAF, the Mott Foundation, and a host of additional corporate sponsors commissioned two studies of Flint—conducted by the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB)—to assess the state of the city and its urban development needs.<sup>64</sup> Both studies endorsed the construction of a north-south freeway as the centerpiece of a pro-growth development agenda. This agenda tied the city's economic future to increased industrial output, commercial and tourist development along the riverfront downtown, and a massive land reclamation plan designed to increase the city's tax base through a combination of slum clearance and neighborhood conservation. In describing the economic and civic benefits of urban renewal, the ULI and NAREB reports employed a colorblind discourse that avoided explicit references to race while framing slum clearance programs as remedies for the city's "diseased core," and "the sea of ugliness" in Flint's

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<sup>64</sup> National Association of Real Estate Boards, *Flint Faces the Future*; Urban Land Institute, *Flint, Michigan: A Report to Greater Flint Committee* (Washington: Urban Land Institute, 1967); and Michigan State Highway Department, *Freeways for Flint: Proposals for Location of I-475, M-78/21 Freeways in Flint* (Lansing: Michigan State Highway Department, 1963). On the Mott Foundation's financial backing for the studies, see Kenneth Peterson, "Mott Cooperation in Urban-Renewal Survey Is Sought," *Flint Journal*, January 17, 1963.

inner city.<sup>65</sup> “We seem determined in this town to destroy the beautiful,” complained one ULI investigator. “It is just incomprehensible that people who design beautiful automobiles, for instance, who are so design conscious in one area, can be so neglectful about the city around them.”<sup>66</sup>

In their 1963 study, *Flint Faces the Future*, NAREB surveyors insisted that Flint urgently needed urban redevelopment projects in order to reduce municipal expenses in the city’s segregated core. The NAREB study invoked the language of pathology, describing Flint’s black neighborhoods as avaricious, crime and disease infested spaces that were “devouring public funds at a rate eight times their tax contribution.”<sup>67</sup> Several years later, in an article that focused on life in the Cornelia Street section of the north side, *Flint Journal* reporter Jana Bommersback moved beyond the ULI and NAREB metaphors by attaching unpleasant anthropomorphic characteristics to the physical spaces of the North End, “where even the heavy smell of frying chicken or fish is overpowered by the strongest odor of the ghetto – the smell of decay.”<sup>68</sup> If, as the city’s planning establishment believed, blight, crime, and poverty were social pathogens, then urban renewal was the only appropriate “treatment” for the diseased North End.

The NAREB and ULI surveys of Flint championed urban renewal as a means to increase economic growth, municipal revenue, and consumer prosperity. Meeting the industrial needs of General Motors was of paramount importance to the NAREB and ULI

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<sup>65</sup> Michigan State Highway Department, *Freeways for Flint*, 24; Urban Land Institute, *Flint’s Central Business District*; and Urban Land Institute, *Flint, Michigan*.

<sup>66</sup> The quotation is from an unknown ULI surveyor and is in the Gerald Healy Papers, box 3, folder 30, GHCC.

<sup>67</sup> National Association of Real Estate Boards, *Flint Faces the Future*, 5. On the tax and services gap in the North End, see Flint Renewal and Housing Department, *Annual Report for 1965* (Flint: Flint Renewal and Housing Department, 1966), 5. On medical metaphors for urban renewal, see Civic Research Council of Flint, “Urban Renewal,” n.d., Civic Research Council of Flint Files, box 1, folder 15, GHCC. On racial discourse and the language of “black pathologies,” see D. Scott, *Contempt and Pity*.

<sup>68</sup> Jana Bommersback, “The Inside of Elizabeth Street,” *Flint Journal*, August 30, 1970.

investigators. “The job facing Flint’s planners and community leaders,” the ULI report concluded, “is [to] take care of existing industry by providing the facilities, utilities, services, and expansion opportunities that are being offered by communities across the country to attract new industry.”<sup>69</sup> Combating Flint’s rigid patterns of racial segregation, as ULI co-investigator Charles Fleetwood acknowledged, was not the primary aim of GM officials and downtown-oriented urban renewers. When asked during a 1967 hearing by an anonymous Flint resident how urban renewal could thwart “white flight” and promote integration, Fleetwood issued a response that jarred black proponents of redevelopment: “If you want a truly integrated nation, you have to raise the standards of these [black] people. That will be a long, laborious effort.”<sup>70</sup> Though the ULI and NAREB reports tended to employ only coded and indirect references to race, their ambivalent and at times oppositional stances towards racial integration were unmistakable to black observers in St. John and Floral Park. For Flint’s most prominent freeway and renewal boosters, the twelve neighboring census tracts that formed the heart of Black Flint represented a weighty tax burden for the entire city. In order to reverse neighborhood decline, NAREB joined the ULI, the state highway department, the Mott Foundation, and General Motors in recommending complete clearance and redevelopment for Flint’s most concentrated black enclaves.

Debates over freeway routing and the location of the interchange developed almost immediately following the release of the 1960 master plan. According to the Segoe plan, I-475 was to begin at I-75—near GM’s Fisher Body facility in Grand Blanc—and follow a northeasterly route until crossing the proposed M-78 highway via a

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<sup>69</sup> Urban Land Institute, *Flint, Michigan*, 15.

<sup>70</sup> Urban Land Institute, *Flint, Michigan*, 38.

large interchange located in an all-white, working-class section of Burton Township, three miles south of Floral Park.<sup>71</sup> After the Burton Township interchange, the freeway was to move northward toward the Fisher Body 1 plant on Flint's south side, and then on toward downtown, serving the central business district via a Floral Park exit ramp. From the Floral Park exit, Segoe's freeway meandered northward just east of the downtown commercial district towards the massive Buick manufacturing and assembly complex on the North End. Upon passing through the St. John Street neighborhood—the site for the proposed industrial park—the freeway continued its northerly course towards the suburb of Beecher, home of the GM-Ternstedt plant. After departing the nominally integrated, working-class suburb of Beecher, the proposed freeway turned westward before reuniting with I-75, which bypassed the city of Flint to the west. The 16.8-mile freeway, the M-78 interchange, and the St. John Neighborhood Development Project quickly became the focal points of a broad and hotly contested urban redevelopment program.<sup>72</sup>

The Flint City Planning Commission officially adopted the Segoe plan in January 1961. The freeway, interchange, and urban clearance program that ultimately followed did not reflect the master plan's recommendations, however. Shortly after the release of the Segoe plan, officials from the state highway department challenged the city's proposed interchange and highway routes. Specifically, state planners opposed the routing for M-78 and the I-475 interchange in Burton Township. The Segoe plan had envisioned M-78 as a suburban-oriented southern bypass for east-west traffic through metropolitan Flint. Consequently, the 1960 plan called for a Burton Township interchange with I-475, which would have spared Floral Park from complete clearance.

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<sup>71</sup> M-78 later became Interstate 69, an east-west freeway connecting Flint to Chicago on the west and Port Huron, Michigan, and the Canadian border on the east.

<sup>72</sup> Segoe and Associates, *Comprehensive Master Plan*.



Citing a variety of considerations that included property acquisition costs, the industrial and commercial needs of the region's GM plants and downtown retailers—as well as traffic studies which questioned the need for an east-west bypass route—MSHD officials instead proposed a less costly, more northerly and urban route for M-78 that served downtown Flint with a Floral Park interchange.<sup>73</sup> In February 1962, GM and the MAF endorsed the state's routing recommendations over those included in the master plan.<sup>74</sup>

Before submitting their revised plan to the Flint City Planning Commission, state planners conducted extensive studies to determine the impact of the new freeway and interchange locations on four local recreational areas: the Swartz Creek Valley Park, the Happy Hollow Nature Area, the Winter Sports Area, and Pierce Park. The state conducted the studies in response to protests from an all-white coalition of west side homeowners, golfers, environmentalists, and recreation enthusiasts who saw M-78 as a threat to the Swartz Creek Golf Course and other popular recreation areas. After determining that the new routes would not detrimentally affect these recreation areas, MSHD planners officially endorsed the new Floral Park interchange site in January of 1961. Throughout its early 1960s deliberations on the new interchange site, state highway commissioners avoided specific mention of Floral Park and did not publicly address the racial and class composition of the neighborhood. Moreover, the MSHD proposed the Floral Park interchange without releasing any in-depth studies of the neighborhood it proposed to clear. Instead, state highway officials employed a colorblind cost and benefits discourse to lobby city planners for the new Floral Park interchange

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<sup>73</sup> Michigan State Highway Department, *Freeways for Flint*, 8-24. On the discrepancies between the master plan and the MSHD freeway routing recommendations, see "A Report to the Flint City Commission on Proposed Expressway Construction," n.d., City Manager Files.

<sup>74</sup> Manufacturers Association of Flint minutes, February 7, 1962. See also, "Manufacturers' Association Clarifies Stand on City X-Ways," *Flint Journal*, November 28, 1962.

site. Specifically, they based their proposal on the neighborhood's low property values, its proximity to downtown, its compatibility with the city's code enforcement and slum clearance objectives, and, perhaps most importantly, the lower cost of the new interchange:

Freeways require land upon which to be built. The tax loss incurred as a result of their construction has to be balanced against the gains which will be achieved. . . . Freeway construction as carried out by the Michigan State Highway Department has been coordinated where possible with other programs aimed at the solution of urban problems – urban renewal, central business district revitalization, etc. In Flint, the location of the I-475 interchange in an area designated for urban rehabilitation is an example of such coordination.<sup>75</sup>

Within weeks of the Segoe plan's release, the state highway department had risen formally to challenge the suburban orientation of the city's planned road system. The state's freeway planners redesigned the I-475 interchange not only to minimize costs and expedite traffic, but also to conform to a much broader civic campaign to combat suburbanization by recapturing white migrants and motorists, luring new industry, removing black residents from the inner city, and revitalizing the city's commercial core.<sup>76</sup>

On January 17, 1961, representatives of the state highway department met with members of the city planning commission to lobby for the Floral Park interchange. The commissioners voted to endorse the master plan after a week of deliberation while reserving the right to alter its recommendations for interchange locations and freeway routing. "In adopting the major street plan," the commission asserted, "it is not intended to limit the location of relocated M-21/78 and I-475 to the specific route designated on

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<sup>75</sup> Michigan State Highway Department, *Freeways for Flint*, 24.

<sup>76</sup> In 1966, Leo Wilensky, Flint's urban renewal director, openly acknowledged that the city sought to bring whites back to the city through urban renewal. See John A. Ferris, "Staff Report and Recommendations," May 2, 1966, 17, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 45, GHCC.

said [master] plan. . . . This planning commission recognizes that the location of these routes is tentative at present and that some adjustment or change may be necessary in the plans for these routes.”<sup>77</sup> Two years later, the MSHD released *Freeways for Flint*, which contained the state’s formal routing recommendations. Embracing the freeway proposal as a potential boon to economic growth, the MSHD’s 1963 plan also contained a warning for any who might oppose freeway construction: “There is, of course, another alternative – and that would be to do nothing. To accept this alternative would be to insure that the growth predicted in Flint’s master plan would never take place.”<sup>78</sup> MSHD commissioner John Mackie directed the city commission to move rapidly on the state’s new plan. In January 1963, Mackie proposed a strict thirty-day limit for the city commission to discuss the revised freeway routes, promising to divert Flint’s freeway funds elsewhere if the city did not abide by his timetable: “If we do not receive concurrence within 30 days,” Mackie warned, “then the people who are now assigned to the Flint [freeway] study will be put to work on other urban freeway projects, and the funds allocated for the Flint freeway system will be used elsewhere.”<sup>79</sup> Upon learning of Mackie’s ultimatum, the city commission moved immediately to endorse the state’s revised plans for I-475, M-78, and the Floral Park interchange.

In adopting the state’s freeway and interchange plans, the Flint City Commission signaled its desire to incorporate transportation planning into the city’s long-delayed program of urban renewal. While MSHD planners were readying new interchange and freeway plans, the city commission voted in July 1962 to adopt a three-thousand-acre

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<sup>77</sup> Michigan State Highway Department, *Freeways for Flint*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Michigan State Highway Department, *Freeways for Flint*, 6.

<sup>79</sup> K. Moore, “Flint Told It Must Act in 30 Days,” *Flint Journal*, January 17, 1963; and “Funds Allotted to Flint X-Ways Eyed by Lansing,” *Flint Journal*, February 7, 1963.

urban renewal plan that consisted of seven project areas within the city. According to federal officials, Flint was the last city of its size in the entire Great Lakes region to commence with urban renewal and public housing programs.<sup>80</sup> Eager to move forward with the projects, the city commission selected retired suburban developer Charles Richert to direct Flint's urban renewal efforts. Submitted to the federal Housing and Home Financing Agency in February 1964, the city commission's General Neighborhood Renewal Plan for the Municipal Center (GNRP) codified the link between transportation planning, downtown revitalization, and the ongoing battle to reclaim black residential spaces for more efficient commercial and industrial purposes. Upon receiving the city's GNRP, federal officials noted that Flint's urban renewal program was one of the largest and most ambitious ever attempted in a city of its size. Massive though it was, Richert's initial urban renewal plan made no mention of St. John and the North End, however.<sup>81</sup> Though city commissioners and civic elites had eyed the North End for redevelopment dating back to the early 1950s, the 1964 GNRP covered only the central business district, the Floral Park interchange, and several neighborhoods adjacent to downtown. The release of the GNRP marked the first in a series of delays and defeats that stalled black attempts to win clean air and housing equity for North Enders.

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<sup>80</sup> Flint Renewal and Housing Department, *Annual Report for 1965*, 3. In 1949, the city commission moved to establish a housing commission in an attempt to construct a thousand units of public housing. In 1950, a circuit court ruling ordered the city to hold a referendum on the issue. Voters rejected the city's public housing initiative in September 1950. See Laura R. Wascha, "Public Housing Efforts in Flint Baset by Problems since 1949," *Flint Journal*, September 27, 1970.

<sup>81</sup> City Planning Associates, *General Neighborhood Renewal Plan for the Municipal Center of Flint, Michigan* (Flint: City of Flint, 1964). Also, see *Flint Journal*, June 20, 1964, November 19, 1972.

According to the NAREB and ULI studies and, more importantly, the city's master plan, the St. John project was the city's top redevelopment priority.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, Richert and his successor Leo Wilensky elected to eschew those recommendations, proceeding instead with urban renewal initiatives in the downtown commercial district and the middle-class, nearly all-white enclave of Central Park. When criticized by black residents seeking relocation from the North End, Wilensky and other officials from Flint's Urban Renewal and Housing Department and the Department of Community Development defended their decision by pointing to a lack of available replacement housing, cash shortages, and federal legal constraints pertaining to urban renewal finance.

An immediate and seemingly insurmountable impediment to urban renewal in St. John stemmed from the lack of affordable replacement housing in the city. Local officials had to present a "workable" plan for eradicating blight and rehousing displaced persons prior to obtaining federal approval for renewal projects. In the Central Park and downtown renewal districts, the city's plans called for widespread housing rehabilitation and only limited clearance and relocation. For St. John, by contrast, Richert and Wilensky had planned for complete clearance and the relocation of over three thousand predominantly poor black citizens. With no public housing program and an extraordinarily tight, racially segmented housing market, city leaders could not pursue St. John redevelopment until they had put in place a feasible plan for housing displaced

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<sup>82</sup> Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the *Flint Journal* reinforced the master plan's redevelopment priorities by reporting extensively on the neighborhoods most likely to receive urban renewal projects. See, for example, Dowdy, "St. John St. Area Has 'Top' Priority."

residents.<sup>83</sup> Providing affordable replacement housing was no small challenge in the Flint of the 1960s. According to Flint Fire Marshall Elwood Rutherford, the city's chief code enforcement officer, safe and affordable rental units in the city were almost impossible to locate in the 1960s. "Our records indicate virtually no rental vacancies or residential housing that will pass code standards," Rutherford admitted.<sup>84</sup> From the outset, the St. John project faced serious obstacles and major delays that would only multiply during the 1960s.

A related impediment to urban renewal in St. John stemmed from the federal government's complicated urban renewal finance policies. Under the guidelines established by the United States Housing Act of 1954, the federal government financed two-thirds of the cost of approved neighborhood development projects, leaving cities to fund the remaining one-third share. In order to finance their portion of development costs, municipalities could either pay in cash or employ "non-cash credits." To apply these credits, city officials had to demonstrate municipal investment equal to the local share of redevelopment costs in the neighborhoods slated for urban renewal. According to federal guidelines, local investments for roads, schools, flood control projects, sewers, and other public improvements all qualified as non-cash urban renewal credits. In Central Park and the downtown business district, the city had invested substantially

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<sup>83</sup> In the spring of 1963, Charles Richert, Flint's urban renewal director, acknowledged that the city would almost certainly have to embark on a public housing program prior to obtaining federal urban renewal funds. See "Need for Housing Authority Forecast," *Flint Journal*, March 22, 1963; and K. Moore, "Public Housing Issue Is Discussed by Flint Officials," *Flint Journal*, November 12, 1964.

<sup>84</sup> On Rutherford's report on rental housing, see Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC. On the city's low rental vacancy rate, see Social Planning Associates, *Diagnostic Survey*. On the lack of replacement housing in the city, see Thomas Yeotis, "Projection 1969," n.d., Warner Papers, box 15, 95-1.1-340, Scharchburg Archives. In a late 1960s speech to the GCDC, Yeotis, a member of the FHC, stated unequivocally, "Federal and state legislation clearly states that we are simply not going to build any highways, refurbish any cities, or create any model neighborhoods unless we can rehouse the victims of our progress in decent, safe, and sanitary housing. The facts indicate that we cannot at this time. . . ."

during the postwar decades, providing sufficient credits to finance the two urban renewal projects—which consisted mostly of spot clearance and neighborhood conservation—without any additional cash outlays. During the 1950s, however, city officials had never benefitted St. John, Oak Park, Martin-Jefferson, and other North End neighborhoods slated for renewal with such spending. Because city commissioners had invested so little in the North End’s infrastructure, they could not fund the city’s share of redevelopment costs there with non-cash investment credits. Instead, the city had to raise its portion of the redevelopment costs in cash, yet another factor that delayed the project’s commencement.<sup>85</sup>

By the mid-1960s, the city of Flint faced a very dire economic crisis that threatened the future of its nascent urban renewal program. Like other cities, Flint relied almost exclusively upon property taxes to fund virtually all of its municipal expenditures. Yet Flint’s outdated system of property tax limitation, a holdover from the Depression era, capped property tax rates at ten mills on all state equalized property valuations. According to one 1961 study of property tax rates in Michigan, Flint had the lowest rates in the state.<sup>86</sup> The city charter’s limitation on property taxes made it exceedingly difficult for municipal agencies to provide adequate city services to Flint’s growing postwar population. The situation reached crisis stage at the precise moment when the city was preparing its expansive urban renewal plans. In response to the burgeoning fiscal crisis, the city commission proposed to revise the city charter by implementing a 1 percent income tax for all Flint residents and a one-half percent earnings tax on all non-residents working in the city. Beyond funding additional city services and a wage increase for

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<sup>85</sup> On urban renewal finance, see Fogelson, *Downtown*, 370-380.

<sup>86</sup> On property tax limitation and the city’s fiscal crisis, see “Revenue Possibilities,” n.d. [ca. 1963], City Manager Files.

municipal employees, revenue from the city's income tax was to provide a \$17 million, "pay as you go" capital improvement budget designed to generate the necessary credits to fund urban renewal and freeway construction projects citywide. In June of 1963, voters rejected the charter revisions and income tax in a polarizing referendum. Facing a massive tax and services gap, the city commission cut nearly \$10 million from the city budget for the 1964 fiscal year.<sup>87</sup> Without an income tax or some other source of new revenue, the city's plans for North End clearance could not move forward.

As the city's economic crisis worsened in the wake of the June election defeat, the city commission voted again in December 1963 to implement an income tax. In response to the December action, anti-tax protesters—who received strong support from trade union members and the Flint AFL-CIO Council—launched a legal challenge, demanding that the commission either cancel the tax or submit it to a popular vote. After receiving a favorable circuit court ruling on the challenge, opponents of the tax won an opportunity to vote on the issue in September 1964. In order to ensure citizen approval for the new income tax, the commission endorsed a series of compromises intended to assuage voters. City commissioners promised to enact a three-mill reduction in local property taxes if voters approved the income tax. On September 1, 1964, voters, by a two-to-one margin, endorsed the commission's proposal. Though the new income tax enabled the city to escape its immediate fiscal crisis, the property tax reduction severely undermined the city's attempt to raise money for the St. John redevelopment project.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Rudolph H. Pallotta, "Service Demands Exceed Revenue, City Officials Say," *Flint Journal*, August 26, 1964.

<sup>88</sup> On urban renewal finance and the development of Flint's municipal income tax, see *Flint Journal*, May 17, July 16, 1963, January 7, 31, February 18, April 7, August 26, 29, 31, September 3, 15, 1964, March 9, 1965.



Federal finance strictures, municipal revenue shortfalls, and housing shortages all played a major role in the delay of the St. John project. Nevertheless, the colorblind dialogue on taxes and municipal resources masked a very real fear among city officials that white, working-class taxpayers—who formed a clear majority in the city—would revolt against massive government expenditures on the North End, especially those funds designed to disperse the city’s segregated black population. According to the Flint Renewal and Housing Department’s annual report for 1965, “The City did not have the cash nor was it willing to spend large amounts of money on a program [in the North End] that is very complex and controversial.”<sup>89</sup> Unable and somewhat unwilling to generate the public funding necessary to commence with North End renewal, the city turned toward the private sector to implement the St. John redevelopment project.

General Motors, the Mott Foundation, and other private entities were not passive actors in Flint’s urban renewal and freeway programs. To the contrary, Harding Mott, Homer Dowdy, and Thomas Jean of the Mott Foundation, Oz Kelly of the MAF, and local GM executives such as George Elges, Joseph Anderson, and Ronald Warner all participated directly in the planning and implementation of Flint’s redevelopment initiatives. GM officials rarely spoke publicly about the city’s freeway and urban renewal programs, however. Instead, GM executives pursued their North End development interests quietly through their representatives within the MAF, the Mott Foundation, and the Genesee Community Development Conference (GCDC). A private housing and renewal agency funded and organized by the Mott Foundation, the MAF, and General Motors, the GCDC, under the leadership of Homer Dowdy and Thomas

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<sup>89</sup> Flint Renewal and Housing Department, *Annual Report for 1965*, 8. On non-cash credits and municipal divestment in the St. John neighborhood, see *Flint Journal*, December 11, 1966, November 19, 1972.

Jean, sought to speed relocation and reduce the need for public housing by subsidizing the construction of low-income replacement housing units. “Our first proposal to the City of Flint,” Ronald Warner of the GCDC revealed, “was designed to eliminate further City ownership and construction of public housing.”<sup>90</sup> The GCDC conducted urban renewal surveys of the St. John neighborhood and managed much of the city’s relocation program for displaced persons. Beyond collaborating with officials from General Motors, the MAF, the GCDC, and the city commission, the Mott Foundation played a major independent role in promoting and implementing Flint’s freeway and urban renewal programs through direct cash grants to the city’s urban renewal department and by operating “community relocation sub-stations” in eleven of the city’s public schools.<sup>91</sup> Through their direct and decisive involvement in the creation and implementation of urban renewal policies, corporate leaders in Flint and Genesee County served as powerful arms of local government. In 1966, urban renewal official Leo Wilensky acknowledged the extent to which corporate economic interests shaped the city’s redevelopment agenda: “Urban Renewal itself is big business.”<sup>92</sup>

The stalled St. John project officially commenced in September 1967, when the GCDC, with support from the St. John Community Council, conducted a “diagnostic survey” of the neighborhood. After completing and publishing the survey, the GCDC and the MAF collaborated with Social Planning Associates (SPA), a Chicago firm, to produce the urban renewal plan for St. John.<sup>93</sup> The GCDC and SPA reports concurred

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<sup>90</sup> Warner to Elges, July 23, 1974, Holt Papers, box 7, folder 30, GHCC.

<sup>91</sup> On the Mott Foundation’s use of community schools to promote freeways and urban renewal, see Beasley Papers, box 11, folder 23, GHCC.

<sup>92</sup> Flint Renewal and Housing Department, *Annual Report for 1965*, 2.

<sup>93</sup> Social Planning Associates, *Diagnostic Survey*. On the collaboration between the MAF, the Mott Foundation, and the city’s Department of Community Development, see Genesee Community Development Conference, “The Genesee Community Development Conference: A Broad Plan of

with all previous urban renewal surveys in recommending complete clearance of the area. Following the release of the St. John surveys, the city commission, the Flint Department of Community Development, and a broad array of community organizations moved yet again to secure public financing for the city's portion of North End renewal costs.

In 1968, the city commission launched a \$5 million bond initiative to raise money for urban redevelopment in St. John and the neighboring enclave of Oak Park. In advance of the April 7, 1969 bond election, the city's urban renewal coalition rallied behind the Citizens' Committee in Support of the Oak Park Bond Issue, an ad hoc organization that advocated the passage of the measure.<sup>94</sup> Co-chaired by Saul Seigel, the executive director of the Greater Flint Downtown Corporation, and Edgar Holt, president of the Flint NAACP, the pro-bond committee formally united the city's vast and diverse urban renewal coalition. In the weeks leading up to the referendum, supporters of the St. John and Oak Park renewal projects launched a massive publicity campaign that drew financial and political support from the most powerful institutions in the city. The list of organizations that endorsed the bond measure included the MAF, the Mott Foundation, GM, the UAW, the Flint Chamber of Commerce, the *Flint Journal*, the Urban League of Flint, the Flint NAACP, the Executive Committees of the Genesee County Democratic and Republican Parties, the Flint Board of Education, and the Greater Flint Downtown Corporation. Supporters of North End redevelopment, mindful of the anti-tax sentiment that had stalled the city income tax in 1963, consistently reminded voters throughout the spring of 1969 that the urban renewal bond—which the city commission planned to repay

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Development," October 28, 1971, Holt Papers, box 7, folder 33, GHCC. Dating back to the early 1960s, the Mott Foundation participated in urban renewal surveys. See K. Peterson, "Mott Cooperation," *Flint Journal*, January 17, 1963.

<sup>94</sup> The citizens committee for renewal only used the term "Oak Park" in its official title, but the bond issue it endorsed was to fund renewal actions in Oak Park and St. John. See *Flint Journal*, February 19, 1969.

through already existing municipal revenue streams—would generate no new taxes for property owners. Referring to April 7 as Flint’s “Day of Decision,” the Citizen’s Committee in Support of the Oak Park Bond Issue framed the bond initiative as a referendum on Flint’s future:

A ‘YES’ VOTE ON THE OAK PARK BOND ISSUE MEANS PROGRESS, GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT, PROSPERITY, A MORE SAFE AND HEALTHY CITY, A BETTER PLACE FOR CHILDREN TO GROW UP, INCREASED OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL OUR CITIZENS. A ‘no’ vote means a dismal future, turning our backs on progress and opportunity – continued spread of blight, indifference, apathy, and hopelessness.<sup>95</sup>

Voters defeated the bonding proposal in a landslide. By an overwhelming three-to-one ratio, voters signaled their opposition to the prospects of new taxes and North End renewal by rejecting the bond.<sup>96</sup> In spite of the organizational strength of the city’s urban renewal coalition, the measure never really had much chance of passing. Crucially, only property owners in the city of Flint were eligible to vote in the April special bond election, a stipulation that effectively disfranchised over half of the city’s black community and all of its renters. The issue failed also because it galvanized thousands of property owners and working-class white voters who feared higher taxes, corporate-sponsored property seizures, and racial integration. Chaired by Saul Shur, a Flint Township resident who owned property on the North End, the Committee to Save Our Homes (CSOH) led the fight against funding redevelopment. Despite facing serious financial and public relations obstacles, Shur and the CSOH successfully mobilized white property owners from across the city, many of whom owned lucrative rental properties in

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<sup>95</sup> Citizens Committee in Support of the Oak Park Bond Issue, “Plant Seeds of Hope in Flint,” Holt Papers, box 9, folder 31, GHCC.

<sup>96</sup> For newspaper coverage of the 1969 urban renewal bond initiative, see *Flint Journal*, February 18, March 11, 18, 25-26, 30, April 1-5, 1969.

the North End, to defeat the April referendum. Throughout the spring of 1969, the CSOH described the urban renewal bond issue as a case of “David vs. Goliath,” a grassroots, populist battle against a land-grabbing, tax-increasing, corporate boondoggle for General Motors. Though both the pro- and anti-bond campaigns avoided open discussions of race, the CSOH successfully tapped into a potent combination of working-class economic frustration and white racial fear in generating opposition to the referendum. In an especially revealing leaflet that illustrated how race, class, and property ownership intersected in the April elections, the CSOH asked, in large, bold print, **“2,764 FAMILIES TO BE RE-LOCATED? WHERE WILL THEY GO? DON’T HURT POOR PEOPLE!”**<sup>97</sup>

Many opponents of the bond issue undoubtedly had a genuine desire to keep their homes and rental properties in the North End; and many more surely resented the very real prospect of paying higher taxes to fund GM’s expansion. Still, however, race played a central role in the 1969 election. Thousands of voters who opposed the 1969 bond referendum did so out of a desire to preserve segregation by maintaining the North End’s rigidly demarcated ghettos. Outraged by the subtle racial appeals embedded within the anti-tax, anti-renewal campaign, African-American city commissioner Fred Tucker, who represented the North End’s Fifth Ward, lambasted CSOH supporters for believing that “2700 of them [displaced African Americans] are going to move into your nice neighborhoods and drive your property values down, ruin your schools, start houses of prostitution and gambling joints, and marry your daughters.” “Those of you who feel you will escape by running to suburbia, beware,” Tucker continued, “because some of us are

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<sup>97</sup> CSOH campaign materials, including the leaflet cited here, are in the Holt Papers, box 9, folder 31, GHCC. On landlords’ opposition to urban renewal, see *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, August 14, 1972.

going out there too, and blight recognizes no border lines.”<sup>98</sup> The once vague prospect of North End renewal, made more real by the April election, generated passionate responses on both sides of the color line. Among African Americans trapped in the North End, urban renewal seemed to offer a long-awaited chance to weaken the walls that surrounded the ghetto. For thousands of property-owning white voters who mobilized against the bond issue, North End renewal was a non-starter for that very same reason.

By the close of the 1960s, the St. John urban renewal project faced an uncertain future. After waiting ten years for the commencement of property acquisition, North Enders increasingly viewed the city’s promises of relocation with skepticism. Looking ahead towards a bleak future in St. John, North End resident and activist Fred Dent contemplated what life would be like in a neighborhood surrounded by inhospitable and seemingly insurmountable spatial barriers: “We’ve already got a dirty river on one side and a dirty factory on the other. The expressway will be another barrier.”<sup>99</sup> Even though the city remained officially committed to clearing the neighborhood, municipal funding shortfalls, federal urban development cutbacks, white mobilizations against renewal, inadequate replacement housing, and spiraling rates of inflation combined to extend the city’s timetable for property acquisition and relocation. Furthermore, delays in the Interstate 475 project only exacerbated matters for North End residents seeking to relocate.

According to the state highway department’s original plans, Interstate 475 was to open in 1972. Between 1968 and 1974, the MSHD pushed back the I-475 completion date on five different occasions, however. Insufficient relocation housing, poor

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<sup>98</sup> Lawrence R. Gustin, “Problem of Oak Park Referred to City Manager,” *Flint Journal*, April 15, 1969.

<sup>99</sup> “The Case of the People vs. I-475—Express Ways or Walk Ways in 1990,” *Sound Off*, May 1974, Community Development Newsletters, GHCC.

construction weather, spiraling inflation that drove up construction costs, a series of strikes in the construction industry, a long dispute over the project's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and federal transportation cuts to fund the Vietnam War all served to delay the project during the 1960s and 1970s. In December 1966, property acquisition for both M-78 and I-475 virtually halted after the federal government announced a \$47 million, war-related cut to the state's freeway construction budget. One year later, the state announced a three-year delay due to inflation and soaring construction costs. Beyond the budgetary and housing shortfalls that delayed the I-475 project, state and federal investigations into the environmental impacts of the roadway on several neighborhoods and parks halted North End property acquisition and construction between 1972 and 1976. By 1974, the state had completed only the southern and northern portions of I-475, leaving open the 5.5-mile, central city section of the freeway that was to serve downtown, Buick, and the St. John Industrial Park.<sup>100</sup> Frustrated by the delays, residents from Central Park and other predominantly white neighborhoods near downtown joined North Enders in pressing the city to accelerate its property acquisition and construction programs. In an angry March 1974 letter to the *Flint Journal*, Sonny Calvo, president of the Central Park Property Owners Association, spoke for downtown merchants and thousands of central Flint residents from both sides of the color line in denouncing the I-475 delays: "All we are asking—and we don't have to be engineers to do that—is for those boobs [from the MSHD] to link up the two ends [of the freeway]

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<sup>100</sup> On the Interstate 475 property acquisition and construction delays, see *Flint Journal*, November 21-22, 1967, March 10, 1968, August 27, 1972, November 11, 1973, February 26, March 19, June 30, 1974, February 23, 1975; "I-475 Acceleration Task Force Report," October 25, 1974, Flint Area Conference, Inc. (FACI) Files, 91.136.94, Perry Archives; Riegle Papers, box 8, folder 36, GHCC; and Warner Papers, box 16, 95-1.1-373, Scharzburg Archives

already completed.”<sup>101</sup> The stalled progress of I-475 infuriated downtown business owners, GM, St. John residents, and tens of thousands of angry motorists; but the delays in the I-475 and St. John renewal projects created special hardships for the black residents of the North End. To many of those still stranded in St. John after fifteen years of renewal promises, the city’s inability to relocate residents seemed almost willful. Reflecting back upon the delays, Flint’s second African-American mayor, James Sharp, issued a harsh denunciation of the city’s property acquisition program: “The city designated those urban renewal areas. And they did so, I believe, with full knowledge that they would never ever buy them out.”<sup>102</sup> Already simmering, the deep practical contradictions between the politics of growth and the aims of local residents for improved housing and city services came to a head during the battles over the delay of the St. John and I-475 projects.

Financial assistance from GM could have significantly expedited the I-475 and St. John projects. Yet when pressed by city officials to donate cash for the clearance and relocation efforts, GM refused.<sup>103</sup> Dating back to the 1950s, GM had advocated for slum clearance in the St. John neighborhood. Specifically, the automaker wished to acquire approximately eighty acres of St. John Street land to construct factory expansions, employee parking lots, rail-loading facilities, and a coal-fired power plant. Through privately orchestrated purchase agreements with North End property owners, GM acquired most of the land it needed before the city had moved to assemble land for the St.

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<sup>101</sup> *Flint Journal*, March 18, 1974.

<sup>102</sup> James Sharp, interview by W. Howard, n.d., 43, Bronze Pillars Oral History Project, Perry Archives.

<sup>103</sup> In 1968, Flint Mayor Donald R. Cronin requested a \$5 million grant from GM President Edward Cole to fund North End renewal. See Cronin to Edward N. Cole, December 18, 1968, Warner Papers, box 9, 95-1.1-169, Scharchburg Archives; and “1968: Let’s Face It: A Memorandum from Flint to General Motors,” Manley Papers, box 22, 78-8.3-22, Scharchburg Archives.



John Industrial Park. With its short-term property acquisition agenda seemingly complete, the company refused to bankroll the St. John and I-475 projects, preferring instead to fund the GCDC's private housing and renewal efforts while waiting for municipal action in St. John. Lacking the necessary cash and public housing capacity, the city delayed St. John property acquisitions until 1970.<sup>104</sup>

While city commissioners pursued their more limited urban renewal plans in other sections of the city and searched for the will to raise funds and construct replacement housing for North End redevelopment, the massive St. John Street renewal project—along with large tracts of the St. John portion of Interstate 475—languished for a decade without any property acquisitions. During that time, GM executives and city commissioners presided over the almost complete destruction of the North End's housing stock and property values. In their 1963 report, *Flint Faces the Future*, NAREB officials had issued a stern warning to city officials that the premature announcement of clearance plans could trigger the spread of blight in neighborhoods designated for redevelopment. The key to mitigating neighborhood deterioration, NAREB representatives maintained, was to establish small project areas and minimize the time between the planning and implementation phases of urban renewal:

To designate more than a thousand acres in the heart of Flint for renewal treatment at a future date that is only vaguely defined serves to put the blight tag on a major section of the community. The result of such action in other cities has been that owners defer maintenance, cancel plans for new construction, and put off improvements because of uncertainty over what will happen to their property. In other words, the designation of an area long prior to treatment can serve merely to render more difficult the very problem which the urban renewal plan was intended to solve.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> On the impact of delays on the St. John Street project, see *Flint Journal*, March 2, 1972, February 10, 1974.

<sup>105</sup> National Association of Real Estate Boards, *Flint Faces the Future*, 13-14.

According to William Dolben, a member of the NAREB study team, the city's urban renewal plan virtually guaranteed the spread of blight on the North End: "What are these people [in condemned neighborhoods] going to do? Nothing. They will let their properties deteriorate."<sup>106</sup> As early as 1963, then, planners had warned city officials of the dangers associated with urban renewal delays. Despite the warning, however, city commissioners and officials from the DCD and the housing and urban renewal departments did nothing to block the spread of blight in the North End. Indeed, municipal divestment policies generated new, more intense forms of blight in the North End.

*"The City of Flint Is Stopping Every Thing except Decay":  
State Action and Ghetto Formation*

The St. John and I-475 projects never met the expectations of civil rights activists. In fact, at virtually every stage of its development, the North End's freeway and renewal programs intensified black poverty and the already entrenched racial and spatial boundaries between black and white residential districts. Although the city had first announced its freeway and North End renewal plans in 1958, it was not until 1970 that the city had produced the finances and the public housing necessary to gain federal approval for St. John Street redevelopment. Already well worn by the late 1950s, the St. John Street of the 1970s was among the most polluted and unlivable residential neighborhoods in the nation.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> K. Peterson, "X-Ways Called Key to Urban Renewal, *Flint Journal*, March 29, 1963.

<sup>107</sup> *Flint Journal*, March 4, 30, September 4, 1969. On St. John's air quality ratings, see *Flint Journal*, March 12, 1972.

The Interstate 475 and St. John property acquisition and relocation processes consisted of five stages: appraisal, negotiation, relocation counseling, and new home inspections, all of which preceded the final movement of families. Beginning in January 1965—and continuing through the early 1970s in St. John—officials from the urban renewal department, the DCD, and the Michigan State Highway Department assigned white appraisers and realtors from the segregated Flint Board of Real Estate to conduct property appraisals throughout the city. Over the protestations of black property owners in the St. John and Floral Park districts, appraisers calculated reimbursements not based upon the actual relocation costs for families, but rather by assigning “fair market values” to properties. Because of that policy, appraisers judged the overall condition of the neighborhood in assaying the value of individual homes and businesses. In assessing a property’s market value, appraisers considered the number of abandoned and boarded-up structures nearby, the quality of the neighborhood’s schools, and other factors beyond the control of individual property owners. As a Flint Urban League member noted in a position paper on urban renewal, “If the appraiser notes that many detrimental conditions exist within the neighborhood, the value of that property is automatically decreased.”<sup>108</sup> The policy of assigning fair market values to condemned structures penalized homeowners and shopkeepers—many of whom had invested substantially in their properties—for the larger processes of divestment from St. John and Floral Park.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Urban League of Flint, “Position Paper on Martin-Jefferson Urban Renewal District,” n.d., Beasley Papers, box 38, folder 11, GHCC. See also, Heathcott, “The City Quietly Remade: National Programs and Local Agendas in the Movement to Clear Slums, 1942-1952,” *Journal of Urban History* 34:2 (January 2008): 221-242.

<sup>109</sup> For personal accounts of how urban renewal penalized property owners who invested in their properties, see *Flint Journal*, December 21, 1966.

When assaying the market value of homes and businesses, urban renewal appraisers relied heavily upon external appearances. In the North End, appraisers often conducted assessments based solely on exterior-only, drive-by “windshield surveys,” a practice that also penalized St. John property owners.<sup>110</sup> Already stretched financially by high-interest land contract payments—and largely excluded from the home improvement loan market—black property owners in Floral Park and St. John tended to invest in basic, structural repairs at the expense of aesthetics and curbside appeal.<sup>111</sup> As Detroit planner William Walsh noted in a 1967 study of black homeowners in Flint, exterior inspections of North End properties exaggerated the extent of structural blight, further depressing appraisal values:

The last improvement is the exterior improvement which is the most apparent to the general market. This is of critical importance since it is the market perception of the area which affects the supply and demand and finally price. We have a situation then in which properties in the area are declining in value because they are being negatively perceived by the market while virtually all of the people are making major expenditures to improve the homes. The result is that physical improvement is not really economically feasible, and as this becomes recognized the residents stop putting money into the area. They lose confidence and the cancer of urban physical blight continues to grow.<sup>112</sup>

When black property owners challenged the city’s appraisal program, municipal officials generally responded unsympathetically. After receiving petitions from a large delegation of south side residents in the spring of 1966, city manager Thomas Kay denied

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<sup>110</sup> For more on “windshield tours” and housing appraisals, see *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, April 26, 1976. In their initial surveys of St. John, conducted in the late 1960s to determine which structures to clear, inspectors did not enter homes at all. According to the city’s initial report on the St. John project, “A 100% walk around-house survey was conducted by LPA of each structure in the project area, in order to determine its eligibility for clearance based upon structural condition.” See Flint City Planning Commission, *Urban Renewal Development Plan: St. John Street Renewal Area: Neighborhood Development Program 6* (Flint: City of Flint, Michigan, n.d. [ca. 1970]).

<sup>111</sup> On land contracts in St. John, see Social Planning Associates, *Diagnostic Survey*. According to this survey, a sizable majority of St. John Street homeowners purchased their homes via land contracts, which typically entailed high interest rates.

<sup>112</sup> Walsh, *The Story of Urban Dynamics*, 25.

the role of municipal policies in driving down property values, asserting instead, “Low property values for some properties are the result of injudicious purchases of property at inflated prices by the owners.”<sup>113</sup> In February 1969, six hundred North Enders descended on city hall to protest against urban renewal appraisals. In an impassioned plea to Kay and city commissioners, Fred Dent, a spokesman for the St. John Citizens for Improvement Association (SJCIA), addressed the fundamental inequities of fair market appraisals: “The majority [of North End residents] have kept their homes up despite the difficulty imposed by the damaging smoke from the Buick plant, and now they are being asked to start anew.” “If they must do so,” he continued, “they should receive enough money to buy another decent home in a convenient location.”<sup>114</sup> While still expressing a preference for relocation, leaders from the NAACP, the SJCIA, North End block clubs, and hundreds of ordinary citizens fought from within the urban renewal coalition to secure equitable property acquisition and relocation policies.

Municipal divestment policies, the withdrawal of private capital, and unregulated industrial pollution all helped to sustain blight in Floral Park and St. John. Yet in a sad irony, appraisers overlooked the city’s role in depreciating property values. Though the withdrawal of city services contributed to the spread of blight in many neighborhoods across the city, St. John experienced an especially harsh form of municipal divestment. Starting with the release of the 1960 master plan until the end of North End property acquisition in 1977, a combination of corporate and municipal policies contributed to the rapid deterioration of St. John. Because the master plan had prescribed complete clearance for the neighborhood, city commissioners had sharply curtailed housing code

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<sup>113</sup> On the Kay remark, see Beasley, “Weekly Report,” May 25, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 16, GHCC.

<sup>114</sup> Gustin, “North Siders Flock to Urban Renewal Parley,” *Flint Journal*, February 11, 1969.

enforcement, waste collection, and other city services for its residents, avoiding all but the most basic maintenance expenditures.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, the city refused to grant construction permits to St. John residents who wished to upgrade their properties. In November 1965, city commission members formalized their St. John divestment policy by passing a unanimous resolution instructing residents “not to spend large amounts of money in rehabilitation of their properties, but only those repairs necessary for ordinary maintenance.”<sup>116</sup> Sagging roofs, boarded-over windows, and trash-littered streets on the North End were not simply the results of neighborhood racial transitions, nor were they the cumulative outcomes of thousands of individual decisions made by neglectful renters, exploitive slumlords, and cash-strapped homeowners. In fact, municipal policies played a decisive role in the spread of blight on the North End. “Rather than renewing the [North End] area,” a Flint Urban League member asserted, “it appears that the city of Flint is stopping every thing except decay.”<sup>117</sup>

Already reluctant to invest in black neighborhoods, local bankers responded to the city commission’s 1965 decree by refusing to finance even basic repairs for homes in St. John. As one anonymous resident noted, “We are faced with a situation where you can borrow money for a Cadillac but you can’t get it to fix up homes.”<sup>118</sup> In her emotionally charged testimony during the 1966 equal housing hearings, future city commissioner

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<sup>115</sup> *Flint Journal*, December 11, 1966. On the curtailment of housing code enforcement and other city services, see Craig Hall, “The Origin, Rise, and Fall of the St. John Community: Memoir of an American Tragedy,” (master’s thesis, University of Michigan-Flint, 2001), 21-30; Flint Department of Community Development, *Annual Reports* (Flint: City of Flint, Michigan, 1970-1972); Morrissey, “Enforcement of Housing Code, Realtors Hit at Rights Hearing,” *Flint Journal*, December 1, 1966; and Testimony, “Public Hearing on Equal Housing Opportunities,” Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 21, GHCC.

<sup>116</sup> Memorandum, Wilensky to Kay, November 16, 1965, City Manager Files. See also, *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, November 1, 1971.

<sup>117</sup> The Urban League quotation (emphasis placed in the original document), is from Urban League of Flint, “Position Paper on Martin-Jefferson.”

<sup>118</sup> Wilhelm, “It’s 300 Acres of Uncertainty,” *Flint Journal*, June 30, 1967. This quotation is also included in J. Wilberg, “An Analysis of an Urban Neighborhood.”

Ailene Butler expanded the Cadillac critique by describing the relationship between urban renewal, bank policies, and racially segmented housing markets in a town that seemed to prioritize car sales over all else:

The banks will not loan to the residents money to repair homes, although they will loan them money to buy cars. . . . They give four or five thousand dollars to buy any kind of car they want, but they will not let the people in this area borrow money to do any work on their homes. . . . Most of these people are retirees of Buick and cannot purchase property elsewhere, or people who could only move by selling their property. The property down there has—there's no market value at all.<sup>119</sup>

Following the 1965 moratorium on home repair, homeowners and shopkeepers throughout the North End reported receiving notification that insurance companies had simply cancelled their policies.<sup>120</sup> Fearful of investing even moderate sums of money in condemned properties, homeowners and shopkeepers in the St. John area had little choice but to allow their properties to deteriorate. “The incentive to fix up the house is gone,” one anonymous St. John resident acknowledged.<sup>121</sup>

Industrial pollution and municipal divestment policies severely undermined the entire North End housing market during the long era of urban renewal. By the early 1970s, the situation had become especially acute in St. John. Just between 1972 and 1973, housing values in the city as a whole declined by over 10 percent, a drop fueled in large part by the collapse of the North End real estate market.<sup>122</sup> In a 1973

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<sup>119</sup> See Butler testimony, “Public Hearing on Equal Housing Opportunities in Flint, Michigan.”

<sup>120</sup> On the cancellation of insurance policies, see Newsletter, Flint Department of Community Development, September 1971, Community Development Newsletters, GHCC; Peter F. Yost, “Renewal Area Residents Air Insurance Gripes,” *Flint Journal*, n.d. [ca. October 1971]; and *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, August 30, 1971.

<sup>121</sup> The quotation is from Alvin Goldberg, “Relocation Problems Tied to Changes in Neighborhood,” *Flint Journal*, December 21, 1966.

<sup>122</sup> Newsletter, Flint Department of Community Development, “Save Our City Program Announced,” September 1973, Community Development Newsletters, GHCC.

communication to U.S. Senator Donald Riegle, Olive Beasley described how government policies had devastated the North End:

Promises made up to ten years ago for urban renewal have affected blacks. Citizens have been waiting up to ten years, unable to make changes in their homes, get building permits or improve their living conditions. The promised extensive rehabilitation of homes, even just to bring them up to code, has been stopped. Property values do not remain constant. Here, the U.S. government actions over the past years and the current delay, will further reduce minority property values.<sup>123</sup>

“How can I put more money in here when everything around me is getting worse?” a frustrated business owner demanded to know.<sup>124</sup>

On December 22, 1970, the Flint Department of Community Development’s Real Estate Division purchased its first property in the St. John neighborhood, a home at 1335 Rhode Island Avenue. After receiving a check for \$7,000, the homeowner, Mrs. Beneva Smith, a seventy-five-year old, relocated to the Flint Housing Commission’s Centerview Apartments.<sup>125</sup> By 1977, when the city concluded property acquisition in St. John, hundreds of black families had followed Smith’s path from homeownership to public housing. Low property appraisals also made it difficult for small business owners in St. John—including many white proprietors—to relocate to other sections of the city. In many instances, businesses simply closed for good following property acquisition. “I’m 52 years old,” asserted Joe’s Tavern owner Walter Christich, “and right at the stage where there’s no sense in going into debt. My building is [owned] free and clear and I’m being put out.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Beasley to D. Riegle, May 14, 1973, Beasley Papers, box 1, GHCC.

<sup>124</sup> *Flint Journal*, June 30, 1967.

<sup>125</sup> Newsletter, Flint Department of Community Development, January 1971, Community Development Newsletters, GHCC.

<sup>126</sup> “Meet the St. John Citizens District Council,” *Sound Off*, June 1974, Community Development Newsletters, GHCC.



Homeowners and shopkeepers in the North End often reported appraisals for their properties that matched those assigned to vacant parcels in white neighborhoods.<sup>127</sup> According to DCD reports from the early 1970s, property acquisition payments in St. John averaged less than \$8,000 per home; yet citywide, the median cost of private replacement housing was \$14,600 in 1970.<sup>128</sup> As Riegle noted, the urban renewal appraisal and property acquisition processes made it virtually impossible for St. John residents to secure adequate replacement housing: “Because of the undesirable conditions for residential living, the appraised value of these parcels is not very high. Particularly when it is necessary to convert this appraised value into safe and sanitary housing in some other location. It is virtually impossible.”<sup>129</sup> Years later, one anonymous Flint resident recalled the barriers that African Americans confronted in relocating:

Well, I guess they [the city] didn’t give a lot of money, and for the money that many of the residents were given, it couldn’t relocate them to other areas of Flint and because of the segregation that money wouldn’t be a down payment and get them across Saginaw [Street]. So a lot of those families relocated to where their money would take them.”<sup>130</sup>

For a large portion of residents in the St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods, many of them homeowners, public housing was the only available option.

After turning over their properties, displaced families faced the difficult prospect of finding new housing through either the private real estate market or some form of federally subsidized housing. In April 1966, the Department of Community Development, the state highway department, and the GCDC opened the Central

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<sup>127</sup> K. Moore, “Charges of Discrimination in Buying of Homes for Urban Renewal,” *Flint Journal*, May 24, 1966.

<sup>128</sup> Department of Community Development, *Annual Reports*; and U.S. Census Bureau, *1970 Census of Population and Housing, Census Tracts, Flint, Michigan, Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1972).

<sup>129</sup> D. Riegle to Henrik Staffroth, December 5, 1967, Riegle Papers, box 7, folder 18, GHCC.

<sup>130</sup> Aiyer, ed., *Telling Our Stories*, 37.

Relocation Office, a public-private collaboration to assist displaced families in obtaining replacement housing. Overwhelmed by the magnitude of the property acquisition, clearance, and construction projects, the DCD and the MSHD sub-contracted with the Mott Foundation and the GCDC to oversee virtually all aspects of the relocation program.<sup>131</sup> Only a small minority of white families sought assistance from the Central Relocation Office. Taking advantage of FHA-backed mortgages, the overwhelming majority of white families displaced by I-475 relocated to segregated private housing in suburban Flint, predominantly in the high-growth sections of southern Genesee County.<sup>132</sup> For displaced African-American families, especially the poor, the highly segmented housing market in Genesee County was, to quote the Mott Foundation's Thomas Jean, who also directed the Central Relocation Office, simply "vicious."<sup>133</sup> Aware of widespread white opposition to integrated relocation housing, representatives from the GCDC and the Central Relocation Office consistently avoided the issue of resegregation, however, preferring instead to manage relocation "with the hope that the question of integrated housing would best be solved without focusing on the question."<sup>134</sup>

In the private housing market, interested black homebuyers faced extraordinary difficulties in finding standard housing through local realtors. Long a foe of local civil rights forces, the Flint Board of Realtors—which, on a limited, voluntary basis supplied the Central Relocation Office with home listings from its multiple listing exchange—refused to show black realtors and purchasers its homes for sale in white residential

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<sup>131</sup> See Beasley to A. Johnson, November 18, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 15, GHCC.

<sup>132</sup> On freeway displacement and the suburbanization of whites in Genesee County, see Memorandum, Genesee Community Development Conference to Beasley, December 1, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 11, folder 25, GHCC.

<sup>133</sup> See Mott Papers, box 1, 77-7.9-6, GHCC.

<sup>134</sup> Memorandum, J. Rose to Gordin, January 25, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 11, folder 23, GHCC.

districts. In a 1966 memorandum to the state civil rights commission, relocation officials indicated that the Flint Board of Realtors only provided home listings in “predominantly Negro or integrated neighborhoods” for African Americans displaced by the freeway.<sup>135</sup> A year later, the MCRC acknowledged that the policies of the Flint Board of Realtors and local developers made it extremely difficult for black families to secure replacement housing:

The Commission notes that segregated housing patterns appear controlled and maintained by builders and members of the Flint Board of Realtors who refuse to show or sell properties in white areas to Negroes, whether so instructed by clients or not; decline to service open-occupancy listings and deny Negro real estate brokers membership in the organization itself and its subsidiary shared-listing system.<sup>136</sup>

If black buyers managed to circumvent the Flint Board of Realtors by discovering homes through third-party showings or other means, they still faced enormous difficulties in obtaining either traditional bank mortgages or federally insured financing.<sup>137</sup> Commenting on the discrimination that she and her family faced in attempting to relocate, Mrs. Robert R. Turpin of the Flint Human Rights Commission issued an especially poignant critique of the less than free market for local real estate:

Our one great desire and hope has been to approach a realtor or an owner with the same sense of dignity as any other citizen and to bargain for the purchase of a home in the normal channels of business, but this privilege, I regret to say, has been denied us, despite the fact that we have lived in Flint for nearly 26 years and have endeavored through all these years, to be reputable citizens. Just in recent months, since it was suggested that we keep a record of the refusals we have met, at least eight real estate agents have denied us the privilege to buy, and most of these have refused to grant us even a chance to inspect the home they advertised for sale.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Memorandum, Genesee Community Development Conference to Michigan Civil Rights Commission, December 1, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 11, folder 25, GHCC.

<sup>136</sup> Michigan Civil Rights Commission, “Flint Housing Hearing Recommendations,” March 9, 1967, Beasley Papers, box 11, folder 24, GHCC.

<sup>137</sup> On racial discrimination in mortgage financing, see K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 190-218; and Freund, *Colored Property*, passim.

<sup>138</sup> Flint Human Relations Commission, *1965 Annual Report* (Flint: City of Flint, 1966).

Though made aware of the housing situation in Flint by the state civil rights commission, the Flint city attorney's office did not enforce the city's 1968 fair housing ordinance on behalf of displaced families. Moreover, federal officials from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) declined to enforce the provisions of the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968, which illegalized the refusal to sell, rent, or finance dwellings based on race. In a remarkable forfeiture of authority, Chantland Wysor, an official from HUD's regional office in Chicago, informed the Michigan Civil Rights Commission that HUD had reassigned its civil rights enforcement officers in both Flint and Saginaw to other cities: "Flint-Saginaw will have to struggle along without my help. . . . I would suggest that you ignore everything I have said and do your eagle-eyed best to watch our programs yourself."<sup>139</sup>

The private acts of racist white homeowners and unscrupulous realtors contributed greatly to the hardening of Flint's color line. Yet the local implementation of public redevelopment policies also sustained racial segregation. Because of state action (and inaction), thousands of residents in Floral Park and St. John were unable to create wealth through property ownership. Unlike the Turpins, who possessed the financial means to purchase new housing in the exclusive Woodlawn Park district, well over half of the displaced families in the city required public housing to meet their relocation needs. In order to accommodate the nearly fifteen hundred indigent families displaced by the I-475 and St. John projects, city commissioners created the Flint Housing Commission (FHC) in 1964.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Chantland Wysor to Beasley, n.d., Beasley Papers, box 12, folder 37, GHCC.

<sup>140</sup> On the creation of the FHC, see *Flint Journal*, March 20, 22, 1963, May 6, 8, 12, July 10, 28, November 12, 1964, January 27, 1965.

Initially, FHC members planned to construct five hundred public housing units, all of them within the segregated black neighborhoods surrounding the Floral Park interchange.<sup>141</sup> Citing the high cost of land acquisition in other areas, the FHC refused to consider public housing developments in or near the all-white neighborhoods on the city's far west and south sides.<sup>142</sup> Yet after significant pressure from Beasley, the MCRC, the NAACP, and local fair housing activists, the city's public housing commissioners abandoned their original plan.<sup>143</sup> Instead, they designed a site plan for family housing that culminated in one project in Floral Park (Howard Estates), another in the equally segregated Gracelawn Cemetery neighborhood to the west of Buick (Aldridge Place), two additional complexes in isolated, largely unsettled areas on the city's urban fringe (Atherton East and River Park), and 183 units of scattered site housing, almost all of which were within all-black or racially transitional neighborhoods. At the Floral Park and Gracelawn Cemetery sites, the commissioners ensured segregation by locating public housing within already segregated black neighborhoods, a traditional practice employed by housing authorities in Chicago, New York City, and elsewhere.<sup>144</sup> Yet with the two site locations on the urban fringe, FHC policies created islands of segregated housing on

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<sup>141</sup> The city's initial 1964 GNRP also endorsed this proposal to construct public housing units in the Floral Park neighborhood. See City Planning Associates, *General Neighborhood Renewal Plan*. In 1966, FHC director Thomas Yeotis acknowledged that the housing commission intended to build all of its first five hundred units in predominantly Negro areas. See J. Ferris, "Staff Report and Recommendations," 3.

<sup>142</sup> J. Ferris, "Staff Report and Recommendations," 17. In order to obtain federal approval for its public housing sites, the city had to keep land acquisition costs to less than \$3,000 per unit. See Memorandum, Beasley to J. Rose, April 10, 1967, Beasley Papers, box 22, folder 17, GHCC.

<sup>143</sup> On the disputes over public housing sites, see J. Ferris, "Staff Report and Recommendations"; Memorandum, Beasley to J. Rose; "Statement of Claim," February 23, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 45, GHCC; Memorandum, Beasley to A. Johnson, May 24, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 45, GHCC; and Beasley, "Weekly Report from Flint," April 27, 1968, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 18, GHCC.

<sup>144</sup> See, for instance, Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 212-258; and Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*, 97-100, 114-128.

the city's most isolated, sparsely populated borders.<sup>145</sup> Pointing to the cost effectiveness of its sites, the massive housing shortages created by the construction of I-475 and the clearing of St. John Street, and the grassroots opposition of homeowners in already developed white residential districts, the Flint Housing Commission defended its site decisions with a colorblind defense of a race-conscious strategy.<sup>146</sup>

Dating back to 1962, when members of the Flint City Planning Commission first entertained a motion to rezone land at the intersection of Twelfth Street and Lapeer Road for “Negro apartments,” urban renewal and freeway relocation officials sought to develop segregated, medium-density public housing for displaced black families.<sup>147</sup> The freeway and urban renewal relocation program brought this plan to fruition. In 1977, when property acquisition concluded in St. John, the FHC conducted a census of public housing developments. During that year, the ninety-six-unit Howard Estates project in Floral Park housed only one white family. In the River Park project—built in a wooded, largely unsettled area on the city's northern border with Mt. Morris Township—FHC surveyors counted only eleven white families living in the 151-unit complex. When it opened in the spring of 1967, the Atherton East project—located in a sparsely inhabited district on Flint's southeast side—contained 188 families, 141 of which were African American. According to the FHC's report, the population of Atherton East included

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<sup>145</sup> In a 1965 meeting with MCRC members, Leo Wilensky outlined his belief that urban renewal should aim to “start moving Negroes to the periphery and suburbs – and encouraging whites to move back into the central city by creating [a] supply of adequate, attractive housing.” The remarks in this quotation are from a summation of Wilensky's remarks and are thus not his exact words. See Beasley to A. Johnson, August 26, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 15.

<sup>146</sup> On resegregation and the formation of “second ghettos,” see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*. On colorblind racial conservatism, see Lassiter, “The Suburban Origins of ‘Color-Blind’ Conservatism: Middle-Class Consciousness in the Charlotte Busing Crisis,” *Journal of Urban History* 30:5 (May 2004): 549-582.

<sup>147</sup> Giampetroni, “Negro Apartments Proposed—Planners Reject Zoning Change,” *Flint Journal*, November 14, 1962. See also, K. Moore, “Planning Body Approves Rezoning of Hospital Site,” *Flint Journal*, December 9, 1964.

seven hundred children. To accommodate the arrival of so many school-aged children, the Flint Board of Education opened the East Atherton School in 1967. Later renamed Manley School in honor of Frank Manley, the founder of community education, the new school sat immediately adjacent to the public housing complex. By the end of the 1960s, East Atherton was one of the most racially segregated and economically homogeneous elementary schools in the entire region.<sup>148</sup> When confronted by civil rights activists who objected to the site locations and racial composition of Flint's public housing developments, urban renewal director Leo Wilensky stated, "If I am worried about whether segregation will re-occur in these projects, it will paralyze our present efforts to relocate." Without hesitation, Wilensky, his successor Richard Wilberg, and other city officials defended their policies by using a language of colorblindness that only thinly concealed the color-conscious strategies of the urban renewal department, the FHC, and the board of education.<sup>149</sup>

Facing both long waiting lists for public housing and private housing shortages that drove vacancy rates down to less than 2 percent citywide, families in the path of the freeway could not mount an effective opposition to the FHC's site plans. By the mid-1970s, even freeway proponents from the partially cleared St. John district, fearful of finding no replacement housing at all, filed several unsuccessful lawsuits to halt the city's freeway and renewal programs. In 1974, Howard Simpson, president of the St. John Council, lamented, "We regret our antiprogressive posture in this attempt to save an area

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<sup>148</sup> Memorandum, Archie LeFlore to Beasley, November 21, 1977, Beasley Papers, box 22, folder 19, GHCC.

<sup>149</sup> Memorandum, Robert L. Adams to Beasley, November 5, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 47, GHCC. In a similar context, William Hill, an "intergroup relations officer" with the federal Public Housing Administration's Chicago office, reminded civil rights proponents in Flint that federal policies barred discrimination, not segregation. See Memorandum, Beasley to J. Rose, 4. Also, see *Flint Journal*, January 11, 25, 27, February 3, May 2, 1966.

that, frankly, is not worth saving. But this is the only neighborhood we have.”<sup>150</sup> Ultimately, all but a few black families in the path of the freeway moved to either segregated public housing or segregated private housing on the borders of Flint’s demolished ghettos. Only a handful of the five hundred black families who owned property in St. John prior to 1960 could afford to purchase homes in their new neighborhoods.<sup>151</sup>

For the families who lost their homeowner status through urban renewal and freeway construction, the apparent triumph of municipal growth liberalism came at a great cost. As GM president Harlow Curtice had noted back in 1957, however, “the price of progress is always trouble.”<sup>152</sup> By the 1980s, the Interstate 475 and St. John projects once supported by black residents came to represent two of the most crushing blows suffered by Flint’s civil rights activists. Reflecting back upon the history of slum clearance, fair housing activist Woody Etherly, who went on to become a city commissioner during the St. John saga, expressed profound regret for his initial support of urban renewal and freeways: “That’s one of my greatest disappointments in life . . . not having a true understanding of what the country was doing when they did the urban renewal or when they do expressways.” “If you go to any community as you travel,” he added despondently, “you will always find an expressway coming down in the heart of the black community.”<sup>153</sup> “People just don’t matter,” Olive Beasley concluded, “if those

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<sup>150</sup> “St. John Unit Opposes Plan for Freeway,” *Flint Journal*, May 22, 1974.

<sup>151</sup> Social Planning Associates, *Diagnostic Survey*, 49. Among the St. John residents displaced by the city’s urban renewal and freeway construction projects, home ownership rates dropped from 32 to 15 percent. See League of Women Voters of Flint, *Human Aspects of Relocation* (Flint: League of Women Voters of Flint, 1972).

<sup>152</sup> General Motors Corporation, *Adventures of the Inquiring Mind*.

<sup>153</sup> Etherly interview, April 1, 1994.



who call the shots want an expressway.”<sup>154</sup> Beasley’s words surely carried a special resonance for those who had firsthand experience with the St. John renewal program.

Despite initial support for slum clearance among black citizens and civil rights activists, the I-475 and St. John renewal projects ultimately intensified black poverty and residential segregation. The new social geographies that emerged as a direct result of Flint’s urban renewal and freeway programs were not cases of de facto segregation. Rather, urban renewal and freeway construction produced a policy-driven web of Jim Crow development in Genesee County that helped to make metropolitan Flint one of the most racially segregated, economically polarized, and spatially divided regions in the United States.<sup>155</sup> At every stage of the urban renewal process, a potent combination of public and private policies shaped the contours of the local housing market. Unregulated pollution, discriminatory appraisal and reimbursement policies, racial steering by realtors and relocation officials, segregated public housing complexes, local and federal non-enforcement of civil rights laws, and widespread white violence in transitional neighborhoods combined to maintain state-sanctioned residential apartheid in the Vehicle City. Nearly all instances of “urban blight” and de facto segregation confronted by the civil rights movement in Flint had their roots in government policies.

In 1973, when Olive Beasley lambasted Richard Wilberg, she had come to the realization that urban renewal in the Vehicle City was really a program of “Negro Removal”—an insidious plan to expand Flint’s commercial, industrial, and tourist economies by removing black residents from valuable inner-city land. Looking back

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<sup>154</sup> Beasley Papers, box 12, folder 37, GHCC.

<sup>155</sup> On the current racial demography of metropolitan Flint, see Myron Orfield and Thomas Luce, *Genesee County Metropatterns: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability in Genesee County, Michigan* (Minneapolis: Metropolitan Area Research Council, 2003); and Patricia A. Baird, *Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing in Genesee County* (Flint: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 2007).

upon the history of urban renewal, urban historians have generally reinforced Beasley's conclusions, arguing that growth hungry municipal officials used urban clearance projects to remove African Americans from the inner city, spur economic development, and make downtown commercial districts more appealing to white investors and suburban shoppers. By the close of the 1970s, activists such as Beasley could accurately characterize the St. John renewal project as an especially outrageous example of Negro removal and black residential containment. Yet it was not always clear to civil rights activists or the residents of St. John who had initially supported redevelopment that urban renewal would generate such poor outcomes.

### *Demolition Means Progress*

The economic growth that urban renewal boosters predicted would accompany I-475, the Floral Park interchange, and the St. John Industrial Park projects never materialized. At a combined cost of more than \$130 million, the freeway and the industrial park created few new jobs and generated only short-term private investment in Flint's manufacturing and commercial sectors. Moreover, as in other cities, the freeway and clearance projects removed hundreds of acres of taxable properties and facilitated the suburban migrations of both corporate capital and tens of thousands of white taxpayers.<sup>156</sup> For those who remained in the neighborhoods bordering the St. John and Floral Park clearance zones, the freeway and interchange undermined commerce and pedestrian traffic, inhibited movement between neighborhoods, and exerted a negative influence on long-established

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<sup>156</sup> Interstate 475 claimed approximately 434 acres of improved residential and business properties in the city of Flint. On Flint's interstate construction program and the loss of residents and taxable properties, see Thomas Sedgewick, *Study for Possible Utilization of Air Rights above Freeways* (Flint: Sedgewick, Sellers, and Associates, 1965), 1-11.

community ties. “The expressway has eliminated a lot of homes, and it has eliminated a lot of the community spirit,” observed Angela Sawyer.<sup>157</sup>

Residents of St. John and Floral Park were not the only Flint citizens who felt victimized by the city’s urban renewal and freeway construction programs, however. By the end of the 1970s, the city had removed over three thousand African Americans from the deteriorating residential neighborhoods surrounding downtown, relocating them in most instances to segregated public housing, racially transitional neighborhoods on the northwest and southeast sides, and isolated areas on the city’s urban fringe. By funneling St. John and Floral Park residents to recently integrated areas, the city’s relocation program triggered waves of panic selling in formerly all-white neighborhoods. Throughout the city and its innermost suburbs, white homeowners charged resettlement officials from the Flint Board of Realtors, the Genesee Community Development Conference, and the Central Relocation Office with promoting racial transitions in their neighborhoods. As black families arrived in Flint Park, Civic Park, and other previously segregated areas, racial conflicts, blockbusting, and white panic selling increased dramatically.<sup>158</sup> By the mid-1970s, racially motivated panic selling and white property abandonment had escalated to the point that the city commission entertained legislation to ban the use of “For Sale” signs throughout the city. On Flint’s northwest side, the city’s policy of racial steering drove white panic selling and severely undermined civil rights efforts to link urban redevelopment with residential desegregation. White flight, as many

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<sup>157</sup> Sawyer interview. In Floral Park, the freeway and interchange formed a large barrier between the FHC’s Howard Estates project and the downtown and cultural districts. On I-475 and the new spatial barriers between neighborhoods, see “City Withdrawing Support for Change in I-475 Route,” *Flint Journal*, March 26, October 26, 1971; Timothy Penn, “Hello Freeway, Goodby[e] Customers,” *Flint Journal*, September 4, 1977; Memorandum, Beasley to A. Johnson, August 16, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 11, folder 21, GHCC; and Beasley Papers, box 12, folder 37.

<sup>158</sup> On neighborhood transitions and white violence in Flint, see Beasley, “Civil Rights Developments,” September 6, 1979, Beasley Papers, box 16, folder 8, GHCC.

of these activists would soon discover, was as much a consequence of public policies as it was a reflection of private racism.<sup>159</sup>

On the North End, where the St. John Street neighborhood once stood, the freeway and urban renewal projects culminated in the opening of the St. John Industrial Park, a \$30.5 million project that planners predicted would create 3,600 new jobs.<sup>160</sup> In the end, however, the industrial park produced only five hundred new positions to replace the tens of thousands of local manufacturing jobs lost during the postwar era. Although the city had spent millions of dollars to acquire and clear properties in St. John, weak demand for urban renewal land sent North End real estate prices tumbling following the conclusion of clearance. For the leaders of GM's Buick division, who had aggressively promoted the north-south freeway dating back to the 1950s, the completion of I-475 in 1981 brought more efficient and timely deliveries from the Fisher Body supply plant. Yet those deliveries ended abruptly when GM shuttered the Fisher Body 1 facility in 1987. Ironically, the same freeway that GM workers and plant managers had demanded in the 1950s and 1960s actually hastened the demise of the city's historic Fisher Body 1 plant, the birthplace of the 1936-37 Flint sit-down strikes.<sup>161</sup>

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, GM officials developed a "just-in-time" strategy for producing and assembling automobiles. The just-in-time policy was a trucking and freeway dependent production arrangement modeled after the *kan-ban* system used in the Japanese auto industry. According to the *kan-ban* method,

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<sup>159</sup> On racial steering and white flight in northwest Flint, see Henthorn, "A Catholic Dilemma," 1-42; and Beasley, "Weekly Activity Report," January 20, 1974, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 20, GHCC.

<sup>160</sup> Memorandum, Dan McRill to Members of the Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, May 21, 1976, Beasley Papers, box 15, folder 29, GHCC.

<sup>161</sup> On the St. John Industrial Park, see Jones and Bachelor, *The Sustaining Hand*; and Gilman, *No Miracles Here*, 137-167.

manufacturing efficiency and higher per-unit profits depended upon smaller workforces, increased automation, decreased production time, and, crucially, spatially integrated manufacturing and assembly plants.<sup>162</sup> In order to reduce the high storage costs, damaged inventory, and production errors that accompanied the stockpiling of parts from suppliers, GM officials transformed the North End Buick plants and a portion of the St. John Industrial Park into Buick City, a centralized manufacturing and assembly complex that opened in 1985. Unlike GM's postwar suburban strategy, which required the centrifugal movement of capital, the just-in-time production model depended on the recentralization of production on Flint's North End. Consequently, GM shifted the stamping and body welding operations for Buick cars, previously completed at the Fisher 1 plant on Flint's south side, to the Buick City complex on the North End. The opening of Buick City, made possible only by the completion of I-475, rendered Fisher Body 1 obsolete. In 1987, GM closed the south side facility permanently, laying off 3,200 workers.<sup>163</sup>

In the absence of stockpiled supplies and parts, timely production at Buick City hinged on a constant stream of components delivered via interstate highways. Initially, Buick City's designers envisioned a North End complex that resembled Ford's massive River Rouge plant. "Our plan," revealed GM vice president Lloyd Reuss, "is to return to the original 1930s concept of what was then also called Buick City - a totally integrated

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<sup>162</sup> Toyota City was the model for Flint's Buick City development. On Buick City, see John Koten, "GM Plans to Rebuild Flint, Mich., Plants As a Car Factory in Style of 'Toyota City,'" *Wall Street Journal*, January 20, 1983; John Holusha, "New Ways at 2 G.M. Plants," *New York Times*, April 10, 1984; and Dale Buss, "GM Gears up Buick City in Its Biggest Effort to Cut Costs, Boost Efficiency at Older Site," *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 1985. Also, see *Flint Journal*, February 27, June 14, July 12, 1983, January 25, May 14, 25, July 6, November 22, 1984, August 1, 21, February 12, September 17, 1985, November 6-7, 1986.

<sup>163</sup> On *kan-ban* and the just-in-time method, see Arthur M. Spinella, "Buick City: Hawk Bares Talons," *Ward's Auto World* (June 1983); and Paul Eisenstein, "Aphrodisia for the Old Shop," *Monthly Detroit* (August 1983).

plant with steel entering one door and a car coming out the other end.”<sup>164</sup> Wherever possible, Buick City officials thus sought to lure suppliers to the vicinity of the St. John Industrial Park. Though several supply firms did in fact purchase land adjacent to Buick City, they created few new jobs. In a sad twist of fate, the freeway itself undermined GM’s plans to recentralize production on the North End. Citing the efficiency of Flint’s interstate highway system, all but a handful of Buick’s suppliers declined relocation proposals from GM and the city of Flint. Why relocate to Flint, many suppliers asked, when the freeways made the city so accessible?



Figure 9.2. “Demolition Means Progress.” A photograph of a sign hanging in front of GM’s demolished Buick City facility in Flint’s North End. Photograph by Andrew R. Highsmith, 2005.

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<sup>164</sup> Spinella, “Buick City,” 22.

Though General Motors invested \$300 million in its Buick City project, its existence was short lived. In 1986, just one year after Buick City opened, GM laid off thirteen hundred Buick workers.<sup>165</sup> In November 1997, after years of declining sales, GM officials announced plans to close Buick City altogether, citing consumer preferences for large trucks and sport utility vehicles over the large sedans produced by Buick.<sup>166</sup> Although still open for business, the industrial park's vacancy rate skyrocketed following the Buick announcement. Shortly after the plant closed in the summer of 1999, GM executives announced plans to raze the empty plants that had once employed more than twenty thousand local workers. On the fences surrounding the 235-acre complex, workers from MCM Management Corporation, an industrial services firm hired to demolish the plants, attached signs that read, "Demolition Means Progress." The city could not move forward economically, these signs suggested, until the old plants were destroyed. From their segregated public housing units far away from the ruins of their old neighborhoods, former residents of Floral Park and St. John Street surely noted the irony.

During the 1950s and 1960s, members of Flint's urban renewal and freeway coalition united around the broad principle that economic growth, consumer prosperity, social fairness, and civic progress depended upon the destruction of slums. Though they had once looked to redevelopment with a sense of hope, residents of St. John and Floral Park ultimately lost in their struggle to obtain racial, spatial, and economic equity through urban renewal. Between the late 1950s and the late 1970s, General Motors executives

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<sup>165</sup> "New G.M. Layoffs Announced," *New York Times*, November 9, 1986.

<sup>166</sup> On Buick's declining sales in the 1970s, see "Buick Sales in '74 Lowest since 1962," *Flint Journal*, January 7, 1975. Also, see Kenneth Bradsher, "G.M. to Close Car Factory, Delivering Big Blow to Flint," *New York Times*, November 22, 1997.

and Flint's political leaders first annihilated and then erased the St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods, replacing them with a freeway, an interchange, an industrial park, parking lots, a power plant, and weed-covered vacant land. For the thousands of African Americans who had attempted to shape the course of Flint's urban renewal program, I-475, the St. John Industrial Park, the empty factories, and the city's new segregated public housing complexes stood as monuments of defeat.

Interstate 475, the St. John Industrial Park—and later the concrete and steel ruins at Fisher Body 1 and Buick City—were the spatial and architectural manifestations of a principle that economist Joseph Schumpeter referred to in 1942 as the *creative destruction* of capitalism, the process through which new capitalist innovation destroys outdated, unprofitable economic structures.<sup>167</sup> In Flint, the creative destruction of capitalism required more direction than the invisible hand of the market could provide. Indeed, the twenty-year process of creative destruction, which substituted a freeway and factories for “slums” in St. John Street and Floral Park, depended on government intervention. Throughout the long era of urban renewal, public policies actively shaped market conditions and guided the path of creative destruction through Floral Park, St. John, and, decades later, Buick City. Ultimately, these interventions generated new spatial and racial configurations in Genesee County that signaled the arrival of the three most salient features of Flint's gathering urban crisis: deindustrialization, hypersegregation, and urban sprawl. In Flint, urban renewal, ghetto formation and re-

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<sup>167</sup> Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942). For urban spatial analyses of creative destruction, see David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For a recent biography of conservative Harvard University economist Joseph Schumpeter, see Thomas K. McCraw, *Prophet of Innovation: Joseph Schumpeter and Creative Destruction* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).



formation, suburbanization, and deindustrialization were all linked processes. Interstate 475, the Floral Park interchange, and the St. John Neighborhood Development Project helped to create a new political economy of Jim Crow.

Olive Beasley never shied away from fighting against such developments. In 1976, three years after she had charged Flint's municipal government with maintaining segregated ghettos, Beasley authored another blistering memorandum regarding North End redevelopment. Reflecting back on the creative destruction of St. John, Beasley wrote, "The whole history of urban renewal since [the] 1949 Housing Act and its subsequent amendments has resulted in a history of black removal from low income substandard housing in areas that are eventually redeveloped for higher income residents."<sup>168</sup> Throughout the St. John and Floral Park renewal processes, a powerful mix of heartfelt prejudices and public policies converged to limit the housing options of African Americans. Locally implemented housing and urban development programs played a pivotal role in driving neighborhood deterioration, falling property values, and racial segregation in the Vehicle City and other northern metropolises. For those reasons, historians should heed Beasley's words and consider abandoning the use of the term *de facto* segregation to describe the color line in cities such as Flint. Instead, scholars might consider analyzing *de facto* segregation as a cultural artifact—a historically constructed discourse of power that has upheld false notions of northern racial innocence by obscuring the state's role in maintaining national forms of Jim Crow.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Memorandum, Beasley to Helen Harris, October 27, 1976, Beasley Papers, box 28, folder 13, GHCC.

<sup>169</sup> On *de facto* segregation as a cultural construct, see Lassiter, "De Jure/De Facto Segregation"; and Highsmith, "From Community Education to Neighborhood Schools: Race, Region, and Jim Crow in Flint, Michigan," (paper presented at the 122<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Washington, D.C., January 3-6, 2008).

## Chapter 10

### **White Flight and Beyond: Residential Jim Crow in the Era of Open Housing**

Racial integration proved to be an elusive goal for Mrs. Rosaline Brown, an African-American mother who lived in northwest Flint. On May 11, 1975, the *Flint Journal* published an article by Michael J. Riha detailing Brown's unsuccessful quest to find integrated housing in the Vehicle City. In 1973, Brown, a homemaker, her two young daughters, Timeka and Danielle, and her husband Gary, a journeyman sheet metal worker, moved into a home on Greenlawn Drive in the nearly all-white Manley Village section of Flint's northwest side. A passionate integrationist, Brown hoped that her move to Manley Village would break down racial barriers by demonstrating that white and black families could live together harmoniously. More importantly, though, Brown embraced the move as an opportunity to teach her daughters how to appreciate diversity and interact effectively with white people. "I wanted to bring up my kids in an interracial setting," she stated. "I had all of these beautiful ideas. I felt that the only way to improve this world is to get to know people as persons." Most of Rosaline Brown's white neighbors held a less sanguine view of integration, however.

The Brown family's experiment in integrated living was brief. Just after the Browns arrived in Manley Village, real estate agents began an aggressive, door-to-door campaign to convince white homeowners to sell their properties to black buyers. "They were knocking on doors, leaving their cards and telephoning," Brown recalled. A careful

observer of her neighborhood, Brown could not remember a single white buyer visiting homes for sale on her street. By the spring of 1975, all but four of Brown's twenty-four white neighbors on Greenlawn Drive had sold their homes and moved away, many of them to segregated suburbs in the surrounding areas of Genesee County. "I could sit here and look up the street and see nothing but for sale signs," Brown reported. On several occasions, Brown's white neighbors informed her personally of their plans to sell. Often during these awkward encounters, Brown sensed that her departing neighbors wanted her to say something to assuage their guilt for leaving. Deeply hurt and insulted by the implications of white panic selling, Brown refused to placate her fleeing neighbors, however. "There's nothing I can say to ease your conscience," she usually told them. "That's between you and your God."<sup>1</sup>

On May 15, 1975, four days after printing the article about the Browns, the *Flint Journal* ran a follow-up story about racial transitions in Manley Village. This time, though, Riha approached the issue from the vantage point of Mrs. Patricia Montpas, a white mother of four who hoped to sell her house. Montpas and her husband Michael, a GM factory worker, had lived in their Manley Village residence for ten years. They had purchased their home in 1965 with a low mortgage interest rate of approximately 5 percent. Although by 1975 mortgage rates had nearly doubled to 9 percent, the Montpases still hoped to sell their home and relocate. Like hundreds of white homeowners who departed Manley Village and other northwest Flint neighborhoods in the 1970s, Patricia Montpas cited increased crime, inferior schools, deteriorating home maintenance, and declining property values as her primary reasons for wanting to move.

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<sup>1</sup> Riha, "Black Mother Says 'White Flight' Hurts," *Flint Journal*, May 11, 1975.

“It’s just starting to be overwhelming,” she claimed, “where I’m afraid to let my kids out of my sight.”

Leaving Manley Village was an expensive proposition for the Montpas family. By choosing to exchange a 5 percent home loan for a new mortgage at 9 percent interest, the Montpases paid a heavy premium for their decision to sell. Yet the cost of flight was well worth it for the Montpases and thousands of other white families who left Flint during the 1960s and 1970s. Echoing Rosaline Brown, Patricia Montpas claimed that unscrupulous realtors, white and black, fueled white panic selling and declining property values in Manley Village. On one occasion, Montpas met with a black realtor who advised her to sell her house immediately. “If you don’t want to lose everything, you’d better get out as fast as you can,” she remembered the realtor stating. “You know, the only thing moving in here is black trash.” Montpas did not specifically mention Rosaline Brown during her interview with Riha. Nevertheless, she went to great lengths to explain the very real fears about property values and public safety that drove her from Manley Village. “The number of rowdy, unsupervised youths walking the streets has increased. . . . It’s not imaginary.”<sup>2</sup>

Like the Brown family and their white neighbors on Greenlawn Drive, the Montpases felt a strong personal compulsion to seek out a new neighborhood during the 1970s. By acquiring new homes, both Patricia Montpas and Rosaline Brown sought to purchase safety and security for their families, better schools for their children, and a wealth-creating investment in real estate. Moreover, both families looked to the local housing market to provide access to the neighborhoods, schools, and lifestyles that they cherished. Manley Village no longer felt like home to Patricia Montpas because, in her

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<sup>2</sup> Riha, “Fear Drives Family from Flint Home,” *Flint Journal*, May 15, 1975.

view, residential integration brought higher crime rates and deteriorating property values. To Rosaline Brown, Manley Village was appealing precisely because of its racial diversity. While the local housing market afforded the Montpases the option of relocating to a more racially homogeneous and perhaps safer neighborhood, the white exodus from Manley Village left Rosaline Brown wondering whether she could ever purchase residential integration in the Vehicle City.

For many scholars and social commentators, the narrative embedded within the *Flint Journal* series on Manley Village is a familiar saga of “white flight.” In *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, historian Kevin Kruse contends that the mass migration of whites away from desegregated neighborhoods and schools constituted one of the most significant spatial and political migrations in American history. “Ultimately,” Kruse argues, “the mass migration of whites from cities to the suburbs proved to be the most successful segregationist response to the moral demands of the civil rights movement. . . .”<sup>3</sup> Patricia Montpas denied selling her home solely because of the changing racial composition of Manley Village, yet she acknowledged that race had played a role in her decision to leave. In northwest Flint, as in thousands of urban neighborhoods across the United States, racial fears, both real and imagined, figured prominently in the suburban migrations of white homeowners, especially among whites who lived in rapidly integrating neighborhoods such as Manley Village.

White flight was a potent, very real phenomenon that had far-reaching consequences in cities such as Flint. Racial panic selling helped to denude St. John and Floral Park of their white residents during the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s, white flight hit Evergreen Valley and other neighborhoods in the city. By the 1970s, whites in

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<sup>3</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 8.

northwest Flint were fleeing their black neighbors in Manley Village and other newly integrated subdivisions. Nevertheless, white flight—either as analytical framework, postwar metaphor, or academic shorthand—conceals as much as it reveals about quests to revitalize the city and, moreover, the broad constellation of public and private forces that drove both racial segregation and racial succession in the schools and neighborhoods of Flint and other urban centers.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, urban renewers and neighborhood activists did not abandon the Vehicle City. Instead, they proposed competing visions for a new and better Flint. After the New Flint defeat, downtown retailers and GM executives worked to build a new urban freeway, an industrial park, and a commuter-oriented downtown. In the neighborhoods, residents such as Rosaline Brown tried to stem white flight and stabilize property values. Ultimately, those efforts failed to halt the federally financed tide of suburbanization that enabled Patricia Montpas and thousands of other white homeowners to leave the city. Nevertheless, the history of downtown and neighborhood renewal campaigns highlight attempts to retake and remake urban space during an era of broad and complex demographic transformations. The multiplicity of forces that combined to reorder Flint's mid- twentieth-century racial geography simply cannot fit under the narrow rubric of white flight or any other single causal narrative of urban spatial and demographic change.

Residential Jim Crow outlasted the major policy reforms of the civil rights and Great Society eras. In Flint, the state of Michigan, and in the nation as a whole, 1968 was

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<sup>4</sup> On white flight, see Rieder, *Canarsie*; Gamm, *Urban Exodus*; Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*; and Kruse, *White Flight*. For critiques of and counterexamples to the white flight framework, see Self, *American Babylon*; Wiese, *Places of Their Own*; and Seligman, *Block by Block*. Also, see Highsmith, "Review of Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*," H-Pol, H-Net Reviews, May 2006, available at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=283951160842622>.

a momentous year for the fair housing movement. Two months after Flint's historic open housing vote, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibited many forms of housing discrimination. Shortly thereafter, Governor George Romney of Michigan followed suit, signing a tough open housing bill. By the summer of 1968, African Americans in Flint could cite three separate pieces of legislation that prohibited racial discrimination in housing. The combined weight of local, state, and federal laws did little to combat the discriminatory practices of federal housing administrators, white homeowners, realtors, lenders, and builders, however. During the 1970s, as thousands of black families sought out new housing opportunities outside of the inner city, the color line shifted towards Flint's northwest and southeast sides and the inner-ring suburb of Beecher. By limiting the housing options of black families from St. John and Floral Park, the city's urban renewal relocation and subsidized housing programs contributed to residential resegregation while helping to trigger white flight from racially transitional neighborhoods. As well, mortgage redlining continued to play a role in maintaining Jim Crow in Flint's neighborhoods. Although Washington legislators formally embraced open housing with the passage of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, the FHA and the federal department of Housing and Urban Development continued to bolster residential segregation during the 1970s through the Section 235 and 236 subsidized housing programs. The concentration of federally subsidized housing in northwest Flint and suburban Beecher undermined neighborhood stabilization campaigns and helped to push the color line beyond Flint's municipal boundaries.

*Jim Crow in an Open City*

The city of Flint and other major American cities experienced rapid racial and demographic transitions during the long postwar era. Between 1950 and 1970, as thousands of white families sought out new homes in suburban Genesee County, the city's white population declined from 149,100 to 138,065, a drop of 7.4 percent. Over the same duration, Flint's black population increased by over 286 percent, rising from 14,043 to 54,237.<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s, the combined effects of racial segregation, black population increases, neighborhood overcrowding, and plans for urban renewal in St. John and Floral Park helped to fuel the movement for open housing in the Vehicle City. By the close of the decade, thousands of African Americans from St. John and Floral Park were testing the city's commitment to open housing by seeking out homes and apartments in newer, less crowded, and more integrated sections of the city. With few exceptions, however, Flint's open occupancy law and the overlapping state and federal protections did little to combat discriminatory housing practices.

During the 1970s, neighborhood battles over race and real estate intensified in the Vehicle City. As they had in the postwar era, local lenders, builders, white homeowners, and brokers from the Flint Board of Real Estate played an important role in directing the spatial growth of the city's black population through redlining, racial steering, blockbusting, and other illegal and quasi-legal practices. Emanating primarily from St. John in the North End and Floral Park on the south side, the geographic expansion of the city's two primary black enclaves tended to occur in a rather linear, block-by-block, neighborhood-by-neighborhood progression. On the south side of the city, migrants from Floral Park tended to move along an easterly axis towards Lapeer Park, Evergreen

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<sup>5</sup> Kurt Gorwitz, *Minorities in Flint and the Remainder of Genesee County* (Flint: Kurt Gorwitz, 1984), 2-6.



Valley, and points eastward. In the North End, where racial transitions were more rapid and widespread, black population expansion during the 1960s and 1970s followed a northwesterly route towards Flint Park, Civic Park, Manley Village, Forest Park, and other neighborhoods west of Saginaw and Detroit Streets.<sup>6</sup> Although St. John was closest to the all-white northeast side neighborhoods that surrounded Kearsley and Whaley Parks, only a small number of black families relocated east of the Flint River in the 1970s. African-American home seekers expressed a preference for the west side primarily because of the east side's reputation for racial violence and the extreme opposition to integration that had emerged from Kearsley and Whaley Parks during the open housing fight of 1967-68. As a rule, in fact, African Americans avoided seeking new housing east of the Flint River until the early 1980s. As well, most Flint realtors actively upheld the Flint River color line by refusing to show northeast side properties to black buyers. "We have a hard-core real estate board in this town that is very powerful," explained Leo Greene, director of Flint's Human Relations Commission. "It is hard to penetrate their policy of exclusion from certain white areas."<sup>7</sup>

As in Evergreen Valley, racial transitions on the northwest and southeast sides during the late 1960s and 1970s typically began with the arrival of one or more black renters or homeowners. Many of these black pioneers acquired their properties either through sympathetic brokers or via clandestine third-party purchases. Upon occupying their new homes, black residents of previously all-white blocks often faced hostility from neighbors. In May 1967, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bell, an African-American couple with

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<sup>6</sup> Henthorn, "A Catholic Dilemma," 1-42. See also, "Spatial Distribution of Non-White Families in Flint, Michigan, 1960-1968," in Social Planning Associates, *Diagnostic Survey*; and Genesee County Health Department, *Michigan Health Survey: Fourth Baseline Report, Flint City* (Flint: Flint City Health Department and Michigan Department of Public Health, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Kenyon, "Open Housing in Michigan."

several children, purchased a home at 3521 Sterling Street in a nearly all-white northwest side neighborhood close to Forest Park. The Bells were the second black family to acquire property on Sterling Street, following Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt Powell. Shortly after moving into their home, the Powells, who described their white neighbors as “totally aloof,” discovered that vandals had tied their front door shut and piled discarded Christmas trees on their front lawn. Opponents of integration intensified their campaign upon learning of the Bell family’s purchase. On May 14, 1967, unidentified vandals spread toilet paper around the lawn and smeared butter, mustard, catsup, eggs, red pepper, and shaving cream over the windows and doors of the Bells’ new home. Such acts of violence and vandalism were commonplace in Flint during the civil rights era. During the 1960s and 1970s, Olive Beasley and other members of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission fielded scores of complaints against similar forms of racial harassment.<sup>8</sup>

In most cases, acts of racial violence and vandalism directed against black homeowners quickly subsided. Rather than fight their new neighbors, most white homeowners on integrated blocks, at least for a time, worked to defend their property values and the stability of their neighborhoods while adopting a “wait-and-see” attitude toward their plans. In January 1968, just a few weeks prior to the open housing referendum, *Flint Journal* reporter Allan Wilhelm described the anxiety felt by white homeowners on Flint’s northwest side as they watched and waited for their neighborhoods to change:

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<sup>8</sup> Memorandum, Beasley to Levy, May 19, 1967, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 41, GHCC. On racial violence, see also, Beasley, “Weekly Report,” August 19, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 15, GHCC; Beasley, “Weekly Report,” August 4, September 29, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 16, GHCC; and Beasley to Executive Committee, Flint Urban Coalition, July 29, 1971, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 24, GHCC.

Watching moves of Negro families into previously all-white neighborhoods is akin to being a spectator at a gigantic human chess game. Earlier moves are studied with an eye to predicting the next. . . . For an increasing number of white families, the day is arriving when it is no longer a matter of watching and waiting in apprehension. There's a Negro on the block.

"I'm staying," a white homeowner on the northwest side told Wilhelm, "but I sure don't want to be the last white family on the block."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, activists and black homeowners on the northwest side and in other recently desegregated neighborhoods worked to dispel the notion that integration caused neighborhood deterioration and declining property values.<sup>10</sup> On many occasions, white homeowners on integrated blocks quickly discovered that their new black neighbors were genuinely committed to maintaining their properties. In the winter of 1968, a white homeowner who lived near Forest Park described some of the home improvements a new black neighbor of his had undertaken: "This guy had someone come in and prune the bushes and clean the lawn. He built a new garage and put up aluminum siding. It's almost a showcase." Confirming that this was not an isolated case, the white resident revealed, "This has happened more than once in our area."<sup>11</sup> By repairing roofs, building new garages, seeding lawns, and planting flowers, many black homeowners in northwest Flint and other contested areas of the city sought to increase their property values and maintain the excellent quality of life that had initially attracted them to their new neighborhoods. For their part, most white homeowners did not immediately flee desegregated areas, maintaining a strong preference for remaining in their homes. According to a 1973 study conducted by Flint's

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<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm, "People from Pawns," *Flint Journal*, January 21, 1968.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Urban League of Flint, *Housing: Every Man's Responsibility* (Flint: Urban League of Flint, n.d. [ca. 1968]).

<sup>11</sup> Wilhelm, "People from Pawns."

Human Relations Commission, for instance, more than 85 percent of the city's homeowners expressed a desire to remain in their present homes.<sup>12</sup>

Though integration often provoked hostility and misunderstandings, not all white families actively opposed residential desegregation. In some instances, white families even welcomed their new black neighbors. In 1972, the *Flint Journal* published a series of articles on whites and blacks who coexisted peacefully. In one such article, entitled "Harmony Street," Edith Sellars described the interracial experiences of Robert Craig and his family, who lived on an integrated south side block on East Seventh Street. According to Robert Craig's son Mark, who acknowledged that desegregation at times brought conflict, living in an integrated neighborhood was both exciting and enriching: "There's always something to do – sports, parties, fights, dances – lump it all together into one big ball of fun. They call me honkey and I call them nigger, but they know I'm their blue-eyed soul brother."<sup>13</sup> In another article on race relations, Sellars featured Mr. and Mrs. Michael DeVantier, a white couple who had specifically sought out housing in an integrated northwest side neighborhood near North Saginaw Street. Although the DeVantiers—who had adopted a black child—found no companies willing to sell them a homeowner's insurance policy and struggled to afford their expensive theft insurance premiums, they nonetheless maintained an abiding faith in the cause of racial integration. "We would never live in an all-white neighborhood," Mrs. DeVantier promised.<sup>14</sup> During the late 1960s and 1970s, thousands of Flint families like the DeVantiers and the Craigs, either by choice or through circumstance, found themselves living in integrated neighborhoods, and many of them vowed to remain in their homes in spite of changing

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<sup>12</sup> Riha, "Survey: Most Flintites Don't Want to Relocate," *Flint Journal*, September 4, 1973.

<sup>13</sup> Edith E. Sellars, "Harmony Street," *Flint Journal*, August 19, 1972.

<sup>14</sup> Sellars, "Couple Find Home in a Black Area," *Flint Journal*, August 19, 1972.

racial demographics. Old attitudes and perceptions about race and property did not die easily, however. In spite of their best efforts, most black renters and homeowners in newly desegregated neighborhoods, even those who had upgraded their properties, found it difficult to combat the notion that integration triggered higher crime rates, declining schools, and deteriorating property values. By the early 1970s, those fears, whether real or imagined, had erupted into widespread white panic selling on the city's northwest side.

Blockbusting and white panic selling hit the neighborhoods of northwest Flint harder than any other section of the city. As they had in Evergreen Valley, realtors played a prominent role in spurring racial transitions there. During the 1960s, desegregation triggered a sustained and especially intense blockbusting campaign in northwest Flint that reached as far west as DuPont Street and the Flint Park neighborhood. By the close of the decade, African Americans, once prohibited from living west of Saginaw Street, comprised a majority in many sections of Flint Park. Noted one white resident who moved away from Flint Park in 1972, "I guess if I had to call it anything I'd say it felt like we were invaded."<sup>15</sup> Cognizant of the speed with which Flint Park transitioned to a black majority, white homeowners living to the north and west of that area vowed to fight blockbusting if and when it arrived in their neighborhoods. In the spring of 1973, that fight erupted when blockbusting realtors began targeting homes near Flint's suburban borders with Mt. Morris and Flint Townships.

During the spring of 1973, blockbusting realtors aggressively targeted white homeowners in the neighborhoods bordering Flint Park. On March 26, Leo Macksood, a white homeowner and future school board member who lived at 1909 West Genesee

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<sup>15</sup> Henthorn, "A Catholic Dilemma," 1-42.

Street near the city's western border, attended a meeting of the recently renamed Flint City Council to protest the actions of local realtors. Macksood told council members that realtors had contacted him at least four times in the past ten days to ask if he wanted to sell his home. Assuring city council members that this activity was widespread, Macksood said, "I could have brought the whole neighborhood and they would have said the same thing." At least three of Macksood's neighbors quickly put their homes up for sale in response to the March blockbusting campaign. Acknowledging that the new for sale signs had caused him to consider selling his own house, Macksood revealed, "You get the feeling that somebody knows something you don't, and begin to think you better sell." During the March 16 council meeting, Macksood's testimony received an important endorsement from Joseph Conroy, one of only a small number of local realtors committed to open housing. Conroy, who lived just a mile away from Macksood, confirmed that blockbusting realtors had targeted his neighborhood as well and were using racial appeals to "create turmoil" on the northwest side.<sup>16</sup> A week after Macksood and Conroy testified, Robert W. Busha, the executive vice president of the Flint Board of Real Estate, visited city hall to rebut the charges of blockbusting. According to Busha, who acknowledged receiving several complaints of blockbusting, the intense real estate activity on the northwest side was neither illegal nor a violation of the board's code of ethics. It was perfectly legal, Busha explained to council members, for realtors to call homeowners, blanket neighborhoods with leaflets, and for brokers to go door-to-door soliciting home sales. Moreover, Busha denied that member realtors had made racial appeals during their encounters with white homeowners on the northwest side. Any

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<sup>16</sup> Riha, "Charge Is Made of Blockbusting," *Flint Journal*, March 27, 1973.

panic selling that was occurring on the northwest side, Busha claimed, resulted solely from the unprovoked racial fears of white homeowners.<sup>17</sup>

Busha's testimony did not sway white residents from the northwest side. During the spring and summer of 1973, homeowners organized dozens of block clubs and neighborhood associations to stem the tide of panic selling while simultaneously working on legislation designed to halt blockbusting. In June, property owners from the northwest side asked the Flint City Council to pass legislation banning nearly all real estate signs from single-family homes. The proposed legislation, modeled after a similar ban enacted in the city of Saginaw, immediately provoked criticism from both opponents and supporters of open occupancy. Speaking on behalf of realtors and property owners, Busha denounced the bill as a violation of free enterprise and the free speech rights of homeowners and real estate brokers. In addition, Busha joined Olive Beasley and other civil rights activists in claiming that the proposed ban on signs would make it easier for realtors and homeowners to discriminate against black buyers. "Without the safeguard of a 'for sale' sign," Busha argued, "the unscrupulous real estate sales person can deny the prospective minority buyer the opportunity to inspect and purchase in any neighborhood." Sensing the potentially negative political and legal ramifications of the proposed ban, city council members voted to table the proposed bill on June 19.<sup>18</sup>

The city council's decision to table the sign ordinance did not deter anxious homeowners on the northwest side. Following the defeat, Macksood, Conroy, and other homeowner activists returned to their neighborhoods to resume the grassroots campaigns against blockbusting and white panic selling. Their efforts centered on the organization

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<sup>17</sup> Riha, "Realtor Finds No 'Blockbusting' Activity Here," *Flint Journal*, April 5, 1973.

<sup>18</sup> See *Flint Journal*, June 4, 15, 19, 1973. On Beasley's opposition to the sign ban, see Beasley to Dr. Juliet Saltman, September 4, 1973, Beasley Papers, box 21, folder 38, GHCC.

of block clubs and neighborhood associations. During the late 1960s and 1970s, neighborhood activists in the city of Flint organized approximately 250 active block clubs.<sup>19</sup> Though they proliferated throughout the city, block clubs were most common in the racially transitional neighborhoods of Flint's north and northwest sides. Pitting "those who care against those who don't," the *Flint Journal* claimed, block clubs engaged in hundreds of neighborhood improvement projects. Among their many campaigns, neighborhood associations and block clubs organized clean-up drives, home repair projects, and community watch patrols.<sup>20</sup> As diverse as the neighborhoods and residents they served, the agendas of block clubs reflected the grassroots concerns of residents. Some groups such as the Nosy Neighbors Block Club, which operated in the nearly all-white Glendale Hills neighborhood on Flint's west side, focused almost exclusively on crime and neighborhood watch activities.<sup>21</sup> Other groups, however, engaged in more explicitly political activities by organizing protests against slum lords, pressing city officials to improve municipal services, and challenging builders to erect safer homes. In 1972, for instance, black homeowners from Whittlesey Street on the city's south side organized a block club to protest against a building contractor who was constructing a substandard FHA-insured home.<sup>22</sup> Equally political, the North Cook Block Club, which began serving north side residents in 1972, negotiated with shopkeepers for lower prices, pressed city council members to allocate rehabilitation

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<sup>19</sup> "Looks, Safety Are Priorities in Flint," *Flint Journal*, December 27, 1981. On the proliferation of block clubs, see also, *Flint Journal*, June 19, 20, 22, 1977.

<sup>20</sup> K. Moore, "Flint Block Clubs Are Waging War," *Flint Journal*, June 19, 1977.

<sup>21</sup> Carol D. Rugg, "On Guard," *Flint Journal*, June 18, 1981.

<sup>22</sup> K. Moore, "Flint Block Clubs."



funds for dilapidated homes, and converted an abandoned home into a community center.<sup>23</sup>

Block club activists on the northwest side of the city focused most of their energies on combating blockbusting and white flight. By 1976, white panic selling had swept across huge swaths of northwest Flint and was approaching the Anderson School neighborhood on the city's far western edge. Like their counterparts in Flint Park and other racially transitional neighborhoods, residents of the Anderson School area identified scores of examples of blockbusting that had piqued the racial fears of white homeowners. Reporting on one episode, homeowner activist Thomas Kayser informed newspaper reporters that a realtor, after selling a home to a black buyer, sent notes to neighbors asking them to welcome the new resident. Kayser told journalists that the note "also requested that if anyone thought of selling now or in the future, to please contact the real estate agent." In response to such claims of blockbusting, residents from the Anderson School district waged an active campaign to stabilize the neighborhood. In November 1976, Kayser and other concerned residents announced a campaign to place signs on front doors reading, "We're Staying."<sup>24</sup> Designed to assuage the fears of white homeowners and instill neighborhood pride, the signs went up in front of hundreds of homes on the northwest side in 1976 and 1977. Over time, however, white homeowners replaced those signs with the for sale signs which they had previously denounced.

Like the earlier efforts of homeowners in Evergreen Valley, the 1970s campaigns for racial stability on the northwest side and in other transitional neighborhoods in the city did not succeed. Between 1970 and 1980, Flint's white population declined sharply,

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<sup>23</sup> K. Moore, "North Cook Efforts Are Paying Off," *Flint Journal*, June 22, 1977.

<sup>24</sup> Riha, "Hundreds in Anderson Area Want it Stable, Integrated," *Flint Journal*, November 21, 1976.

from 138,065 to 89,470, while the city's black population increased from 54,237 to 66,164. By the close of the decade, white flight and black population increases had combined to produce a city that was over 40 percent African American.<sup>25</sup> On the northwest and southeast sides, areas that saw the largest black population increases, the demographic transformations were dramatic. Just between 1970 and 1975, the black population in census tract forty-two, which included the city's far northwest corner, increased from 13 to 71 percent. Over the same period, the black population of tract two on the city's northern border with Mt. Morris Township increased from 48 to 81 percent. Across the northwest side of the city, virtually every neighborhood posted similar figures. On Flint's southeast side, in the neighborhoods stretching east from Floral Park, white flight was equally intense. In tract forty-five, for instance, the African-American proportion of the population increased from 33 to 78 percent between 1970 and 1975.<sup>26</sup> Desperate to escape their changing neighborhoods, many white homeowners moved away before they could sell their houses, leaving behind thousands of empty structures. By 1979, nearly 10 percent of Flint homes were unoccupied. In some areas of the northwest side, vacancy rates surpassed 20 percent.<sup>27</sup> To Jack Litzenberg, the director of community development programs in the city of Flint, it seemed as though whites had simply abandoned the city: "While nearly everyone who is able flees the city, we are left with the poor, the elderly, blacks, and other minorities. We have 85 percent of the assisted housing in the county within Flint. We are your Ellis Island. We have been

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<sup>25</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *1970 Census of Population and Housing*, tables p-1 and p-2. See also, Urban League of Flint, *How Wide the Gap: A Report on the Conditions of Blacks in the City of Flint* (Flint: Urban League of Flint, n.d. [ca. 1976]); Gregory L. McKenzie, Diane deForest, Edwin Custer, et al., *Flint Update 1978* (Flint: Flint Department of Community Development, 1979), 1-13; and Department of Community Development, *Flint 1983 Profile*, 8-26.

<sup>26</sup> Urban League of Flint, *How Wide the Gap*.

<sup>27</sup> R. L. Polk and Company, *Profiles of Change* (Flint: R. L. Polk and Company, 1978).

abandoned.”<sup>28</sup> During the course of the decade, dozens of neighborhoods once off limits to African Americans shifted from segregation to resegregation with only limited periods of racial integration. The for sale signs, empty homes, boarded-up stores, and waist-high lawns that departing whites left behind were the semiotic manifestations of what was perhaps the most significant social movement and spatial migration in the city’s history.

The process of white flight, which claimed nearly all of Rosaline Brown’s neighbors in Manley Village, angered homeowners and renters on both sides of the color line. As she looked out at the for sale signs that sprouted all around her home, Brown felt insulted that so many neighbors feared her presence. Equally upset, many whites in racially transitional neighborhoods were angry at what seemed to them like an invasion of African-American home seekers. In July 1968, an anonymous white author composed a letter to Flint NAACP President Edgar Holt regarding the large number of black families seeking housing on the northwest side. “Why is it there is so much talk about the G[h]etto?” the author asked.

Still the Colored people make it a point to flock into one neighborhood. They have a right to go any where they please – I am white and have no objection to a Colored neighbor (some of my nicest friends are Colored) but I do not like the idea of living in a ‘G[h]etto.’ Must they all live in the same block?<sup>29</sup>

Clearly frustrated, the letter writer wondered why African Americans, in a city covered by so many fair housing statutes, continued to segregate themselves by race.

With neither a name nor a return address posted on the July correspondence, Holt never replied to the letter. But had he decided to do so, he may have delved into the long, complex history of the color line in twentieth-century Flint. Holt could have pointed to

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<sup>28</sup> *Flint Journal*, December 9, 1980.

<sup>29</sup> See Holt Papers, box 3, folder 35, GHCC.

the racially restrictive covenants that once excluded African Americans from white neighborhoods; the discriminatory practices of builders, lenders, realtors, and white homeowners that limited choices for black home seekers; the public policies that helped to build ghettos in St. John and Floral Park; or the racial violence that helped to enforce the color line during the pre- and post-World War II eras. The NAACP official might also have reminded the letter writer that federal housing policies mandated residential segregation during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Holt's imaginary reply need not have been entirely historical, however. Indeed, Holt could have pointed out that both private discrimination and state-sanctioned forms of residential segregation persisted even after the passage of open occupancy ordinances. As much as the individual preferences of black home seekers, the discriminatory policies and practices of white homeowners, realtors, lenders, builders, and government housing administrators reduced the housing options of African Americans until well into the post-civil rights era.

Historical monographs focusing on housing discrimination in postwar America tend to begin in the mid-1930s, usually with the 1934 establishment of the Federal Housing Administration, and end at some point in the 1960s, often with the urban riots of the mid-1960s or the passage of the 1968 Civil Rights Act.<sup>30</sup> Those chronological bookends have provided a useful framework for understanding the public-private partnerships that shaped and re-shaped the residential color line after World War II. However, even a cursory examination of evidence from Flint suggests the need to re-think the standard chronological frame used to narrate the history of postwar housing discrimination. By 1968, a combination of federal, state, and local laws had prohibited

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<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven*; Self, *American Babylon*; and Freund, *Colored Property*.

most forms of housing discrimination in Flint. In spite of such legal protections, however, the practices of redlining, blockbusting, and racial steering continued into the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond. As well, federal housing administrators who served the Flint region continued to orchestrate housing segregation until well into the 1970s. By taking a longer historical view, it becomes possible to understand why, in many instances, white flight and racial resegregation did not reach their peak until the 1970s.

In the spring of 1976, at around the same time that west side homeowner's were planning their "We're Staying" campaign against blockbusting, the Flint City Council held several hearings on mortgage redlining. On April 14, city council members heard testimony from local lenders and insurers who verified, "Conventional or privately insured loans are not readily available in many areas of Flint." According to Dennis S. Simms, a representative of Guardian Mortgage Company, by the mid-1970s, the city contained only a handful of "prime" residential areas—all of which were all white or nearly so—where homebuyers could obtain conventional bank mortgages. The rest of the city's neighborhoods, labeled "declining" by Simms and other local lenders, were ineligible for conventional loans. Explaining these restrictive policies, James B. Murray, president of Mid-Michigan Mortgage Investment Company, informed council members that banks often suffered financial losses when borrowers defaulted on loans in declining areas. "In a declining area," Murray revealed, "it may well be impossible to get enough [in sale prices] for a property to cover the loan. Therefore, the bank or lending agency takes the loss." Local lenders also informed council members that the rules governing the secondary mortgage market further contributed to redlining in the city of Flint. Because officers from the Federal National Mortgage Association, the Mortgage

Guarantee Investment Corporation, and other buyers on the secondary mortgage market were reluctant to purchase mortgages on homes in racially unstable or declining areas, several witnesses testified, lenders were discouraged from issuing loans in all but the most exclusive of the city's neighborhoods. In virtually every instance, those highly rated neighborhoods also coincided with the sections of the city where African Americans were least numerous.<sup>31</sup>

Ten days after holding its first hearings on redlining, the Flint City Council deliberated on the subject once again. On April 26, council members heard from open housing activists and community members who had firsthand experience with redlining. Morris Branch informed the council that Citizens Commercial and Savings Bank, a Flint-based firm, had rejected his application for a loan to purchase property at 1364 St. John Street. The bank denied the \$4,000 loan because the building received a low appraisal value of \$7,000, due primarily to its location in a declining North End neighborhood. Even though the property appraised for a higher amount than Branch had requested in his loan application, the bank denied the mortgage because of its location. In support of Branch's testimony, the Flint Urban League's executive director Melvyn Brannon charged that loan officers judged loan applications based largely upon the neighborhoods in which properties were located. If appraisers found poor schools, abandoned homes, a "change in user group," or poor city services in a neighborhood, then they lowered the appraisal value of properties in the vicinity. Because many local banks had established a \$15,000 minimum for mortgages, whole sections of the city with low property values were effectively excluded from conventional home financing. Elton Smith, another witness who testified during the April hearings, informed council members that Citizens

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<sup>31</sup> Riha, "Council Begins an Inquiry into Lending Practices," *Flint Journal*, April 15, 1976.

Bank had denied a mortgage to a person who sought to purchase his home at 3580 Rue Foret because the home was within six blocks of a boarded-up property. The combination of low appraisal values for structures in declining neighborhoods and mortgage minimums, Brannon and others asserted, played a decisive role in lenders' decisions to reject loan applications for properties in both integrated and predominantly African-American neighborhoods.<sup>32</sup>

Following the spring hearings, Flint Mayor James W. Rutherford appointed a special task force to study mortgage redlining. Released in May 1977 after an eight-month investigation, the task force's report found that redlining still plagued inner-city neighborhoods in Flint. Task force members reviewed bank records for 1975 and found that local lending institutions issued 2,195 mortgages during the year, only 252 of which were for properties in the city of Flint. The remaining 1,943 mortgages were for properties in suburban Genesee County. Of the \$45.1 million that local banks loaned for properties in 1975, only 10 percent benefited purchasers in the city. "After careful analysis of individual testimony and emperical [sic] evidence," the report stated, "the Task Force is convinced that mortgage disinvestment is occurring in Flint." Redlining and bank divestment were especially intense in the North End and other predominantly African-American sections of the city. Beyond rewarding white suburban buyers over African Americans living in the city, mortgage redlining also produced a ripple effect that shaped broader patterns of divestment from the inner city. During their investigation, task force members spoke with independent insurance agents operating in the city, who confirmed that at least half of the insurance firms in Flint refused to underwrite homes in

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<sup>32</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, April 26, 1976. See also, Riha, "Most Council Members Agree That Red-Lining Exists in Flint," *Flint Journal*, April 27, 1976.

the North End.<sup>33</sup> “When redlining begins, insurance becomes difficult to obtain and neighborhood businesses begin to leave,” an Urban League report stated. “Absentee landlords, apathetic to begin with, cannot obtain home improvement loans and thus let their houses fall into disrepair and ruin.”<sup>34</sup> Redlining, the task force concluded, was only one component in a broader constellation of forces that sustained racial segregation and urban divestment.

*Bringing Back the State:  
Federal Policies and Segregated Housing in the Post-Civil Rights Era*

Members of the mayor’s redlining and disinvestment task force unequivocally confirmed that racial discrimination in the private housing market persisted into the 1970s. Among open housing activists, however, the task force’s report provoked a broader discussion on the remaining barriers to desegregation and housing equity in the Vehicle City. On March 9, 1977, state civil rights officer Olive Beasley criticized members of the mayor’s task force for focusing too narrowly on redlining and other forms of lending discrimination. “My concern about the whole redlining issue,” Beasley wrote,

is that the focus is too narrow and relates only to practices of banks and other financial institutions which albeit they are primary factors represent only part of the problem that has to be addressed. Unless we look at the picture of total disinvestment in neighborhoods by both the public and private sectors we are addressing only part of the problem.

Housing discrimination, racial segregation, white flight, and divestment from inner-city neighborhoods stemmed not just from the practices of private corporations, Beasley

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<sup>33</sup> Flint, Michigan, Mayor’s Task Force on Redlining and Disinvestment, *Redlining and Disinvestment Study and Recommendations* (Flint: City of Flint, 1977). See also *Flint Journal*, December 16, 1976, May 5, June 28, 1977; and Amy C. Kantor and John D. Nystuen, “De Facto Redlining: A Geographic View,” *Economic Geography* 58:4 (October 1982): 309-328.

<sup>34</sup> Urban League of Flint, “Position Paper on Martin-Jefferson.”



argued, but also from the housing and neighborhood development programs implemented by federal and local officials.<sup>35</sup>

Beasley was correct. Dating back to the mid-1930s, redlining was only one among a host of private and state-sanctioned housing policies that upheld the residential color line in metropolitan areas. State-sanctioned housing segregation in the Flint area did not end in 1968 with the passage of local, state, and federal open housing laws. Nor did it cease in 1970, when former Michigan governor and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development George Romney pledged to combat FHA-sponsored racial segregation through the suburbanization of federally subsidized housing units.<sup>36</sup> Though Beasley did not mention any specific government programs in her letter, memories of the 1970s clashes over Section 235 and 236 housing in Flint surely informed her critique of the mayor's task force.

The architects of Sections 235 and 236 of the 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act hoped to restore racial and spatial equity to federally sponsored housing initiatives. The Section 236 program provided mortgage interest subsidies to property owners, builders, and developers who offered affordable rental housing to qualified low-income tenants. Under Section 235, the United States Congress authorized the expenditure of over \$5 billion to spur the development of nearly two million new and rehabilitated housing units for purchase by poor families. Specifically, Section 235 offered mortgage insurance to private lenders and developers who either rehabilitated existing homes or constructed new low-cost homes to sell to poor buyers. In addition, the program helped to defray the housing expenses of poor families by providing direct

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<sup>35</sup> See Beasley to Ruth Rasmussen, March 4, 1977, Beasley Papers, box 5, GHCC; and Beasley to Mrs. Priscilla Hildum, March 9, 1977, Beasley Papers, box 51, folder 33, GHCC.

<sup>36</sup> See "Romney Says FHA Backed Segregated Housing in '30s," *Flint Journal*, August 27, 1970.

mortgage subsidy payments to lenders who backed low-cost housing. Supporters of the 235 and 236 programs sought to combat segregation and assure equity in the private housing industry by subsidizing home ownership and affordable rental housing for African Americans and the poor and by inducing lenders and builders to develop low-cost housing in both central cities and suburban areas.<sup>37</sup> The goal of these massive programs was to open up new housing opportunities for the poor throughout metropolitan areas.

In Genesee County, the Section 235 and 236 programs did not live up to the high expectations of their framers. For private builders and lenders, Sections 235 and 236 arrived at an especially opportune time when rising interest rates and tightening mortgage markets had combined to depress new home construction.<sup>38</sup> Eager to acquire any business, local builders began taking advantage of the new federal subsidies almost immediately, especially those offered under the Section 235 program. Between 1968 and 1970, builders erected approximately 1,250 Section 235 homes in the Flint area. By 1974, nearly fifteen hundred poor and working-class families in Genesee County had acquired Section 235 homes, most of them of new construction.<sup>39</sup> With freeway construction and urban renewal initiatives in Floral Park and St. John claiming thousands of affordable housing units in the inner city, municipal officials and members of the Flint Housing Commission welcomed the addition of new low-cost homes and apartment

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<sup>37</sup> On the implementation of the Section 235 program in Kansas City, Missouri, see Kevin Fox Gotham, "Separate and Unequal: The Housing Act of 1968 and the Section 235 Program," *Sociological Forum* 15:1 (2000): 13-37; and Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2000* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 121-142. Also, see Marshall H. Medoff, "Race and Sex Discrimination in Housing: Comment," *Southern Economic Journal* 46:3 (January 1980): 946-949.

<sup>38</sup> On the late 1960s slowdown of the Flint housing industry, see "'Credit Crunch' Is Linked to Housing Shortage," *Flint Journal*, November 23, 1969.

<sup>39</sup> Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Federal Housing Administration, *Analysis of the Flint, Michigan Housing Market as of December 1, 1970*, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 40, GHCC.

rentals for the poor. Members of the FHC hoped that the Section 235 program would provide a path to home ownership for poor renters and, in the process, reduce long waiting lists for public housing. The FHC did not maintain a comprehensive record of move-outs, but available evidence nonetheless suggests that many public housing tenants took advantage of the Section 235 and 236 programs. Just during 1971, for instance, seventy-two families moved out of the Atherton East public housing complex into new Section 235 homes. Countywide, according to a 1974 study, one in four occupants of Section 235 housing had lived in public housing prior to acquiring their new homes.<sup>40</sup>

Many public housing tenants initially embraced the Section 235 program, hoping that it would provide an opportunity for a fresh start in a new, trouble-free home. For hundreds of families, quite the opposite occurred, however. From the outset, critics of the Section 235 program assailed federal officials and participating developers for their failure to adhere to local building codes, zoning regulations, and architectural standards. In March 1970, city commissioners Floyd McCree and Fred Tucker claimed that builders were erecting 235 homes on lots smaller than the city-mandated minimum of five thousand square feet.<sup>41</sup> Other critics charged builders with failing to adhere to the architectural guidelines mandated by the Section 235 program. The legislation required builders to avoid monotony by constructing homes of varying styles, but many builders simply ignored the rule. In one especially egregious instance, a Section 235 builder in suburban Flint constructed over two dozen virtually identical homes on a single street.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Flint Housing Commission, *Annual Report, 1971* (Flint: Flint Housing Commission, 1972), 8; and Leon V. Whitfield, *A Study to Determine the Characteristics of Homeowners and Multifamily Developments in Default on Federally Subsidized Mortgages* (Flint: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1974).

<sup>41</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, March 16, 1970, 130.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Peter Braestrup, "HUD's Biggest Housing Effort Runs into Trouble in Michigan," *Washington Post*, February 16, 1971.

The refusal of builders to comply with local building and zoning regulations provoked widespread anger among city and suburban legislators, many of whom charged that the Section 235 program was operating in open violation of local housing laws. By far, however, the largest number of complaints regarding the Section 235 program came from those who occupied the new homes and their surrounding neighbors.

Virtually all of the purchasers of Section 235 housing in Genesee County found flaws, many of them major, in their new homes. In May 1970, city commissioner Karbowski complained about newly constructed 235 homes in the racially transitional Evergreen Valley neighborhood. Claiming that developers there were constructing “\$6,000 homes and charging \$19,000 for them,” Karbowski challenged federal officials to visit his ward “to see what type of junk is being built.”<sup>43</sup> Two months later, city commissioners received specific complaints about a 235 home at 2006 Whittlesey Street in Evergreen Valley. The home, according to Karbowski and others who had inspected it, had many flaws including insufficient egress routes, poor windows, faulty and unsafe wiring, and two major leaks. The construction was so poor, Karbowski claimed, “An eight-year old child could knock out the sanitary pipes in the bathroom.”<sup>44</sup> On July 23, Flint Urban League member Willie Wheaton delivered a lengthy complaint to the city commission regarding fourteen newly constructed 235 homes on Chambers Street near Evergreen Valley. According to Wheaton, who had interviewed the homeowners, several of the fourteen homes had major leaks and faulty driveways. Hoping to take advantage of the one-year warranties that covered all Section 235 homes, residents of Chambers Street complained to the builder, but they received no response. Part of the problem,

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<sup>43</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, May 4, 1970, 274.

<sup>44</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, July 13, 1970, 443.

Wheaton reported, stemmed from the fact that Citizens Bank and other local lenders who issued mortgages on Section 235 homes did not require inspections prior to the occupancy of newly built units.<sup>45</sup> The Section 235 program got its name, many critics joked, because the homes, new or not, were worth only \$235.<sup>46</sup>

Federal audits and local investigations supported the claims made by critics of the Section 235 program in Flint. In December 1971, HUD officials released the results of a national audit of Section 235 housing. Based upon a detailed survey of homes in fifty-two sample cities, the federal audit revealed that 25 percent of newly constructed Section 235 units and 34.5 percent of existing units covered under the program suffered from faulty construction. To the great dismay of Secretary Romney and other proponents of the program, HUD surveyors discovered overhead lights without light switches, cracked walls, inoperable heating units, loose windows, roof leaks, sagging ceilings, and a host of additional problems—some minor, others severe—in both existing and newly constructed 235 homes. “We concluded,” the auditors wrote, “that many of these [Section 235] houses contained easily observable but unreported deficiencies that seriously affected safety, health, and/or livability.”<sup>47</sup>

A 1974 survey of subsidized housing sponsored by the Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission (GCMPC) painted an even bleaker portrait of the Section 235 program. According to the 1974 study, 91 percent of the Section 235 homeowners in Genesee County complained of problems with their homes. Of the 133 homeowners surveyed for the report, 83 percent reported construction-related defects

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<sup>45</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Commission*, July 23, 1970, 469.

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, Sawyer interview.

<sup>47</sup> “Audit Review of Section 235 Single Family Housing,” December 10, 1971, RG 207, Office of Undersecretary, Van Dusen, box 32, NA.

while two-thirds of the respondents cited plumbing problems. In spite of the widespread complaints, however, the study found that builders had repaired the homes of only 19 percent of the owners surveyed. Forced to absorb the repair costs themselves, many owners of Section 235 homes succumbed to bankruptcy and lost their homes to foreclosure during the economic recessions of the 1970s. Between 1969 and 1973, foreclosure rates in the county increased by 184 percent, due in part to the rash of mortgage defaults from Section 235 homeowners. By March 1974, more than one in four of the Section 235 homeowners in Genesee County had ceased making payments on their homes.<sup>48</sup>

The Section 235 experiment ended badly for hundreds of Genesee County families. After exhausting their meager savings, many of the homeowners defaulted on their payments and returned to the public housing complexes they had only recently left. In 1973, under heavy criticism from municipal officials and homeowners across the nation, HUD suspended the controversial program. Bitterness over the 235 program lingered long after its demise, however. For thousands of its participants nationwide, the Section 235 program was a reminder that the federal government had still not committed itself to providing adequate housing for the poor. Even more inflammatory, however, were the charges that the Section 235 program marked yet another example of government-subsidized racial segregation.

Opponents of Section 235 housing in Genesee County maintained that the program intensified both white flight and racial resegregation. In particular, critics argued that lax federal oversight allowed builders to concentrate 235 homes in already segregated black neighborhoods and in racially transitional areas of Flint and its

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<sup>48</sup> Whitfield, *A Study to Determine*, 1-12.

innermost suburbs. The Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission's 1974 survey of subsidized housing found that 875 of the 1,387 Section 235 dwelling units in the county were located in the city of Flint. Within the city, Section 235 homes were heavily concentrated in the racially transitional neighborhoods of the northwest and southeast sides. The construction of federally subsidized housing in racially transitional neighborhoods only fueled white panic selling and the suburban migration of white homeowners. Describing the situation in Flint Park and other northwest side neighborhoods, white homeowner Ben Wisniewski, an employee of the city's Department of Community Development, blamed the 235 homes for intensifying white panic selling:

They [Section 235 homes] were junk. The houses were cheap and put up quickly. They didn't look as nice as the other houses and then you had people moving in that weren't prepared to own their own home. They didn't have the resources to keep them up. . . . Within a very short time, the properties fell into disrepair. The grass wasn't cut, things like the screen doors would get broke[n] and just left that way. . . . If you lived next door to that you moved out.

"I don't think it was totally a black-white thing," added Bill Haley, a white resident of Flint Park. "For some people, sure. But a lot of people were just worried about their investment."<sup>49</sup> Hundreds of homeowners in Flint Park, Evergreen Valley, and other transitional neighborhoods responded to plans for 235 housing just as they had to blockbusting and racial steering: by fighting to protect their investments. When that failed to stop the influx of subsidized housing, they placed their homes for sale and moved away.

The framers of Section 235 intended for the program to disperse subsidized housing units throughout metropolitan areas. In support of that aim, officials from the

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<sup>49</sup> The Wisniewski and Haley quotations are from, Henthorn, "A Catholic Dilemma," 27.

FHA and HUD adopted an “informal guideline” to secure “widespread geographical distribution of subsidized housing units” in metropolitan areas such as Genesee County.<sup>50</sup> As with the construction standards and architectural guidelines, however, federal officials failed to enforce the geographic distribution aims of the Section 235 program. By an overwhelming margin, the city of Flint received the largest portion of Section 235 homes in Genesee County. Nearly two-thirds of the county’s 1,387 Section 235 units were inside the city. The remaining 512 units were located in suburban Genesee County, but they too were concentrated in small geographic clusters. Of the 512 subsidized units in Flint’s suburbs, 67 percent were located just across the city’s northern border in Mt. Morris and Genesee Townships. Within Mt. Morris and Genesee Townships, virtually all of the Section 235 units were in the racially integrated Beecher Metropolitan District, a small, unincorporated, working-class community that occupied five square miles of land just beyond Flint’s northern city limits. As in northwest Flint, the concentration of Section 235 homes in Beecher triggered angry conflicts, blockbusting campaigns, and widespread white panic selling that quickly transformed the racial geography of the inner-ring suburb. Unlike the neighborhood battles that unfolded simultaneously within the city, however, the 1970s battles over the desegregation of Beecher gained attention from federal officials in Washington and media outlets throughout the nation.

*“A Chunk of Transplanted City”: Beecher and the Suburbanization of the Color Line*

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, tiny Beecher, Michigan, became a national focal point in the debate over race and residence in suburban America. Bounded by Carpenter

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<sup>50</sup> See Eugene A. Gullledge to Frederick Deming, February 18, 1971, RG 31, Housing Production and Mortgage Credit, Correspondence, box 2, NA. See also, Yost, “Federal Guidelines Promote Integrated Housing,” *Flint Journal*, October 17, 1971.



Road, Dort Highway, Stanley Road, and Clio Road, Beecher was (and remains) an unincorporated metropolitan utilities and school district lying just to the north of Flint's city limits—an urban-suburban “no man's land” superimposed on portions of Mt. Morris and Genesee Townships. Prior to the construction of Section 235 and 236 units, Beecher was one of the only integrated communities in suburban Flint. Among its 25,000 mostly working-class residents were approximately 7,500 African Americans and 17,500 whites, many of whom worked at the nearby GM Ternstedt division plant. Virtually indistinguishable from the racially transitional northwest Flint neighborhoods that formed its southern border, the Beecher district, in the words of *Flint Journal* reporter Gene Merzejewski, was neither city nor suburb, but rather “a chunk of transplanted city” in the otherwise lily-white Genesee County suburbs.<sup>51</sup> Like northwest Flint, Beecher received thousands of new black residents during the 1960s and early 1970s, many of them arriving from public housing projects and the partially demolished St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods in the city. Hundreds of Beecher's black migrants moved into Section 235 and 236 homes and apartments, which first sprouted in Beecher in the late 1960s. In defiance of the federal government's informal guidelines on geographic distribution, local FHA representative Thomas Hutchinson initially contracted with builders to construct 716 subsidized homes and apartment units in Beecher, more than he allocated to all other Flint suburbs combined. For the nearly all-white suburb of Swartz Creek, by comparison, Hutchinson approved only six subsidized units. Moreover, in the nearby Flushing and Clayton Township areas, also all white, Hutchinson approved no subsidized housing at all. Despite containing only 5 percent of the county's overall

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<sup>51</sup> Gene Merzejewski, “Beecher Woes Now Minor Compared with Strife of ‘70s,” *Flint Journal*, October 5, 1984.

population, Beecher received 25 percent of the subsidized units that Hutchinson contracted for in Genesee County.<sup>52</sup>

The controversy over the concentration of subsidized housing in Beecher closely resembled the battles over race and residence that unfolded within transitional neighborhoods inside the city of Flint. Opponents of the 235 and 236 programs in Beecher argued that the geographic concentration of poor people and shoddily constructed subsidized housing in the district contributed to neighborhood blight, white flight, and racial succession. As in northwest Flint, builders tended to concentrate Beecher's 235 and 236 units in small, clearly defined areas. Of the over seven hundred 235 and 236 units that Hutchinson initially authorized for Beecher, 564 were located within the western half of the district. As well, only fifty-five of the Section 235 units were located on "scattered" sites within the area. In several instances, unscrupulous builders carved out new dirt roads in west Beecher, along which they erected dozens of architecturally indistinguishable 235 homes. On West Afaf Street, for instance, builders constructed thirty similar Section 235 homes, while West Genesee Street received a dozen virtually identical structures. Likewise, of the three Section 236 apartment complexes erected in Beecher, all were located within a three-block radius.<sup>53</sup> "It's what I call federally-aided ghetto creation," noted Mt. Morris Township supervisor and Section 235 critic Donald J. Krapohl.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond fielding criticism over the concentration of subsidized housing in west Beecher, local and federal officials also received a large number of complaints regarding

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<sup>52</sup> Braestrup, "HUD's Biggest Housing Effort."

<sup>53</sup> "Report to Joint Economic Committee on Beecher School District," May 25, 1971, 1-9, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 12, GHCC.

<sup>54</sup> Braestrup, "HUD's Biggest Housing Effort."

the poor quality and architectural monotony of Section 235 homes. “Many of the complaints,” a 1971 report revealed, “involved the lack of storm doors, screens, lawns, and in some instances, paved streets and roads.”<sup>55</sup> Because federal officials imposed a strict price ceiling on 235 homes—ultimately capped at \$21,000 for three-bedroom units and \$24,000 for four-bedroom houses—builders often failed to install eavestroughing and driveways, left lawns unseeded, ignored serious construction flaws, and otherwise cut corners in their attempts to maximize profits from the new units. Even Genesee Community Development Conference official Thomas H. Jean, a strong proponent of the initiative, acknowledged that builders erected “some very questionable housing under this program.” “We had some units built, for instance, that crowded a four-bedroom home into well less than 1,000 square feet. We had some units put up with inadequate driveways, no sodding, and things that this community should not be very proud of.”<sup>56</sup> Noting that “a typical floor plan crowded four bedrooms into 984 square feet,” a 1970 GCDC report admitted, “In short, much of the criticism of the [235] program is valid as it refers to quality of construction.”<sup>57</sup>

Like their counterparts in Flint, residents of Beecher’s 235 homes and the owners of neighboring properties protested to local and federal officials about the poor quality of the new units. “We were promised quality homes for low-income people, but all we received was an overpriced home of inferior quality,” complained Mrs. Vernon Dean, a resident of a 235 unit on Afaf Street.<sup>58</sup> Though the legislation that created the 235 and

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<sup>55</sup> “Report to Joint Economic Committee,” 7.

<sup>56</sup> Gerald A. Ziegler, “Some 235 Housing Criticism Based on Bigotry, Jean Says,” *Flint Journal*, n.d. [ca. 1971].

<sup>57</sup> Genesee Community Development Conference, *1970 Activities Report* (Flint: Genesee Community Development Conference, 1971), 9.

<sup>58</sup> Richard J. Meister, “Beecher: Coldwater Settlement to Community in Crisis,” VIII-6, Suburbs-Beecher File, Perry Archives.

236 programs required federal officials to inspect and approve each unit before occupancy, the Flint office of the FHA conducted only cursory inspections of new and used structures and seldom required builders to repair flawed or unfinished dwellings. Local lenders skipped inspections altogether. Following a September 1972 tour of Beecher, Donald Riegler, who at the time was the district's congressional representative, informed local reporters that Flint's FHA office had received three hundred complaints regarding substandard 235 units. "All 300," Riegler declared, "received little or no action by the Flint [FHA] office."<sup>59</sup> Unable to afford the repairs to their new units, many residents defaulted on their house payments and forfeited their homes within months of occupancy. As Section 235 homeowners abandoned their substandard units, Beecher's home foreclosure and vacancy rates skyrocketed. According to a 1971 report on subsidized housing in Genesee County, lenders reported that delinquencies and foreclosures on Section 235 units "were running three to four times" the average rates in the Flint metropolitan area.<sup>60</sup> By October 1971, at least 25 percent of the two hundred abandoned homes in Beecher were less than a year old.<sup>61</sup> Not all of the abandoned homes were left behind by bankrupt 235 residents, however.

During his 1972 tour of Beecher, Riegler also met with Mt. Morris Township officials, members of an anti-235 group called the Citizen's Consumer Council, and dozens of angry Beecher residents who resented the encroachment of substandard housing and poor people in the community. On Spring Valley Drive, Riegler viewed an attractive, conventionally financed home that had depreciated in value from \$36,000 to \$23,000 solely because of neighboring 235 units. The presence of 235 and 236 housing

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<sup>59</sup> "Riegler Claims Housing Will Take a Community Effort," *Genesee County Herald*, September 27, 1972.

<sup>60</sup> "Report to Joint Economic Committee," 8.

<sup>61</sup> Meister, "Beecher," VIII-6.

projects angered homeowners throughout Beecher and Mt. Morris Township, many of whom blamed the rash of subsidized housing construction and the influx of impoverished residents for declining property values and the district's severely overburdened schools. Section 235 families, many critics of the program correctly asserted, were poorer, paid less in property taxes, and had more children than most other households in the community. Approximately 50 percent of the purchasers of Section 235 homes in Beecher received public assistance.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the Section 235 and 236 programs generated large enrollment increases in the district's schools. According to a 1971 survey, the families who purchased Section 235 housing in Beecher had, on average, 3.6 children per family, far more than the district average of two children per household. Between 1966 and 1969, the overall enrollment in the Beecher public schools remained stable at approximately 6,500 pupils. In 1970, however, the school system's enrollment jumped to 6,879, an increase that stemmed primarily from the construction of new 235 and 236 units.<sup>63</sup> By 1971, Beecher's school superintendent Randall Coates had reported an increase of over a thousand pupils, a large majority of whom resided in federally subsidized dwellings. Of the new pupils moving into the Beecher school district, 70 percent were from families that received public assistance.<sup>64</sup> At Zink Elementary School, which served a large number of children from subsidized housing developments, the proportion of poor students rose from 8 to 28 percent just between 1970 and 1971. Over the same duration, increased enrollments forced Zink's administrators to open up three new classrooms in the basement of the school.

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<sup>62</sup> "Report to Joint Economic Committee," 6.

<sup>63</sup> "Report to Joint Economic Committee," 4.

<sup>64</sup> Braestrup, "HUD's Biggest Housing Effort."

Critics of the Section 235 and 236 programs in Beecher tended to frame their opposition to subsidized housing in economic terms. Frustrated homeowners blamed the 235 program and occupants of subsidized housing, white and black, for driving down property values and overburdening the district's schools with impoverished children. Beyond economic considerations, however, racial fears also played a prominent role in driving white opposition to subsidized housing in Beecher. Approximately 50 percent of the occupants of 235 and 236 housing in Beecher were African American. Though half of the new occupants of subsidized housing in Beecher were white, the concentration of 235 and 236 units in west Beecher caused several schools and neighborhoods there to "tip" towards black majorities. At Zink Elementary School, for instance, the percentage of black pupils rose from 49 to 56 percent just between 1970 and 1971. During the four years that preceded the arrival of subsidized housing, the Beecher school system had maintained a stable racial mix of pupils: 70 percent white and 30 percent black. By the early 1970s, however, the combination of black in-migration and white flight had pushed several schools and neighborhoods past the racial tipping point. "We had one of the model integrated school systems in Michigan," Superintendent Coates complained, "and now it is being ruined."<sup>65</sup>

As the subsidized homes and apartments went up and hundreds of new African-American families began arriving in Beecher, racial conflicts flared in the district's schools and neighborhoods. During the early 1970s, the construction of 235 and 236 units fueled widespread blockbusting, white panic selling, and numerous instances of racial violence throughout Beecher and Mt. Morris Township. Along with the demographic transitions set in motion by the new subsidized units, real estate agencies

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<sup>65</sup> Braestrup, "HUD's Biggest Housing Effort."

further stoked racial animosities and white panic selling by participating in blockbusting campaigns and otherwise funneling black homebuyers towards Beecher.<sup>66</sup> Angered by the influx of black residents, some white residents responded violently to the integration of their neighborhoods. On July 17, 1971, Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Hall, a black couple who resided at G-1139 West Genesee Avenue in Beecher, reported that Ku Klux Klan members had burned a cross in front of their home. In a note left behind, the cross burners warned, “Niggers get out while you still can.”<sup>67</sup>

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, cross burnings and other forms of racial violence intended to thwart residential integration and the spread of subsidized housing erupted periodically in the neighborhoods of Beecher. Disputes over race and space tended to be most intense in the Beecher schools, however. According to Anthony Bell, a black student at Beecher High School, African-American pupils in Beecher faced “constant provocation” from their white peers. The first major conflicts in the Beecher schools exploded in the spring of 1969. During the week of April 13, 1969—shortly after the one-year anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination—several major brawls between white and black pupils broke out at Beecher High School. On April 16, school administrators called in officers from the Genesee County Sheriff’s Department and the Mt. Morris Township Police Department to quell a “major confrontation” between white and black students.<sup>68</sup>

The fighting that occurred at Beecher High School was an extension of the battles over race and space that were simultaneously unfolding in the district’s neighborhoods. Just prior to the April disturbances, the Mt. Morris Township board had moved to block

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<sup>66</sup> Merzejewski, “Beecher Woes Now Minor.”

<sup>67</sup> On the 1971 cross burning in Beecher, see Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 24, GHCC.

<sup>68</sup> “Field Representative’s Notes,” Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 12, GHCC.

the construction of additional subsidized housing units. On April 4, at a meeting attended by over a hundred angry residents, the township board approved a one-year moratorium on residential building designed to halt the construction of additional subsidized housing in the Beecher district.<sup>69</sup> Just over a week later, as the racial tension mounted at Beecher High School, the board reaffirmed its position in front of a packed audience of two hundred predominantly white homeowners. Accusing builders of “consolidating the [subsidized] homes in one specific area,” one supporter of the ban urged developers “to spread them out” evenly across the county.<sup>70</sup> The April moratorium gained support from Superintendent Coates and other school officials, who complained that nearly a thousand new low-income students had inundated the district. Beyond contributing to school overcrowding, Coates argued, the 235 and 236 programs were fueling white flight and the quick transition from “integration to disintegration” in the district’s schools. Shortly after the township board’s vote, lawyers representing the A&E Building Company and Deventeen Investors Company, firms that had contracted to build an FHA-backed Section 236 apartment complex in the township, filed suit to end the building ban. On July 13, Genesee County Circuit Judge Phillip C. Elliott overturned the moratorium, ruling that the ban unfairly restricted private enterprise and that members of the township board did not have the authority to suspend building because of fears over white flight, high school taxes, and classroom shortages.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> “Curb on Building in Beecher Raises Legal Eyebrows,” *Flint Journal*, April 7, 1970; and “Ban on Building in Beecher Hot Potato,” *Flint Journal*, April 12, 1970.

<sup>70</sup> Ronald L. Froehlich, “Crowd Supports Board on Beecher Building Ban,” *Flint Journal*, April 14, 1970; and Froehlich, “Beecher Board Still in Favor of Building Ban,” *Flint Journal*, April 23, 1970.

<sup>71</sup> *A&E Building Company, et al., v. Mt. Morris Township*, Judge Elliott No. 16046 Opinion, State of Michigan, Circuit Court for the County of Genesee (1970). “Court Rules Beecher Building Moratorium Illegal,” *Flint Journal*, July 14, 1970; and “Township Declines Appeal of Beecher Case,” *Flint Journal*, July 30, 1970.



In the aftermath of Elliott's July ruling, Beecher school officials hurriedly began preparations for the 1970-71 academic year. To accommodate the approximately one thousand new students they expected to enroll in the fall, school board members and Superintendent Coates devised a plan for half-day school sessions and sought out new classroom space in church basements.<sup>72</sup> Hoping to quell the racial disturbances that had flared during the previous spring, the board also hired Paul Cabell, the first African-American administrator in the district, to serve as assistant principal at Beecher High School. Principal Robert Towns assigned Cabell the difficult task of handling student discipline and managing race relations between white and black pupils. Cabell's hiring was part of a larger strategy devised by Beecher and Mt. Morris Township officials to restore racial calm while simultaneously working to curtail subsidized housing and white flight from the district. Ultimately, the challenge of maintaining racial peace at Beecher High School would push Cabell past his emotional breaking point.

As Beecher school board members searched for ways to accommodate new pupils and keep the peace, members of the Mt. Morris Township Board continued their quest to halt the construction of additional subsidized homes. Township supervisor Krapohl and school superintendent Coates implored HUD and FHA administrators to conduct an investigation into the concentration of subsidized housing in Beecher. In February 1971, after receiving numerous complaints from officials in Beecher and Flint, Representative Riegle, and other critics of subsidized housing, HUD suspended its 235 and 236 programs in the Beecher area pending the results of a complete investigation.<sup>73</sup> Upon

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<sup>72</sup> "Building Moratorium Ends, Beecher Plans for Enrollment Jump," *Flint Journal*, n.d. [ca. July 18, 1970].

<sup>73</sup> Robert Lewis, "New '235' Housing Starts Delayed for Area Probe," *Flint Journal*, February 9, 1971; Ziegler, "Beecher '235' Probe May Trigger Investigations in Other Areas," *Flint Journal*, February 18, 1971; and Ziegler, "Krapohl Wants FHA Housing Stalled," *Flint Journal*, March 31, 1971.

learning of the situation that had developed in Beecher, HUD official Eugene A. Gulledge demanded to know why local officials in Flint had not adhered to the federal government's "informal" goal of dispersing subsidized housing.<sup>74</sup> Released in May 1971, the results of the HUD investigation confirmed nearly all of the charges made by critics of the 235 and 236 programs in Beecher. In particular, the HUD report affirmed Krapohl's and Coates's complaints that builders had saturated Beecher with more than its fair share of subsidized units. Moreover, the report acknowledged that many of the 235 and 236 units in the district were poorly constructed and architecturally monotonous and that the federal government's subsidized housing efforts in Genesee County threatened to create newly resegregated ghettos in Beecher. According to this candid report, many other areas of the county could have received subsidized housing, "but HUD did not attempt to direct locations of building activities." Beyond accepting responsibility for the situation in Beecher, HUD officials also blamed Thomas Hutchinson and the FHA's Flint office for the concentration of subsidized housing in Beecher. "There was apparently very little, if any, discussion between the Flint [FHA] service office supervisory staff and builders and community interests regarding fund allocations, site allocations and community problems," the authors of the report charged. Even after receiving numerous complaints from Beecher officials and occupants of 235 and 236 units, the Flint FHA office did not attempt to address construction flaws and the charges that government housing programs were fueling racial transitions.<sup>75</sup>

In a May 25, 1971 letter to Superintendent Coates, Secretary Romney admitted that poor federal oversight had contributed to the turmoil in Beecher. Romney also

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<sup>74</sup> Gulledge to Deming, February 18, 1971.

<sup>75</sup> See George Romney to Mr. Randall Coates, May 25, 1971, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 12, GHCC; and Ziegler, "HUD Beecher Report Called Surprisingly Candid," *Flint Journal*, May 31, 1971.

informed Coates that William C. Whitbeck, the director of HUD's regional office in Detroit, had "already put a stop on additional funding of Section 235/236 units in the Beecher District."<sup>76</sup> While this was welcome news to many frustrated homeowners, Romney's decision to cancel the 235 and 236 programs in Beecher did not end the racial conflagrations. Blockbusting, white panic selling, property abandonment, and racial confrontations continued unabated in the years following the cancellation of the 235 and 236 programs. At Beecher High School, racial tensions erupted yet again during the 1971-72 academic year. By February 1972, as one journalist wrote, "Something akin to anarchy prevailed at Beecher High. . . . Fires were set, windows were broken, youngsters were beaten and hundreds of students refused to attend class choosing instead to loiter in the hallways." Ultimately, it took two dozen police officers in full riot gear to end the February disturbances.<sup>77</sup>

Hired to curb the interracial brawling that had plagued Beecher High School dating back to the late 1960s, Paul Cabell tried to serve as an intermediary between the warring factions of white and black students. While performing in that capacity, Cabell drew harsh criticism from both sides of the color line. Militant black students referred to Cabell as an "Uncle Tom," maintaining that he favored whites and was insensitive to the grievances of Beecher's growing black minority. Cabell suffered the wrath of white students, too, who believed that he was partial to black members of the student body. Paul Cabell, *Life* magazine journalist Loudon Wainwright wrote, was "the man in the middle" at Beecher High School, surrounded on all sides by racial hatred. "He was the middle man suspended between both groups," noted black student Donnie Odom. "The

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<sup>76</sup> Romney to Coates, 1.

<sup>77</sup> H. Ford, "Paul Cabell: A Man in the Middle," *Flint Voice*, June 3, 1982.

black students called him ‘Tom’ and the white students called him ‘nigger.’ No one was on his side.”<sup>78</sup>

A steadfast integrationist, Cabell initially embraced his appointment at Beecher High School as an opportunity to improve race relations. Yet the seemingly ceaseless racial turmoil in the community and at the school quickly destroyed his optimism. Depressed by his inability to pacify the student body, Cabell sat down in his Flint home to write two notes—one for his wife Carlitta, and another “For Beecher.” In these final messages, written on the morning of February 24, 1972, Cabell admitted defeat in his quest to remedy the “unsolvable problem” of racism. Cabell also declared that the experience in Beecher had driven him to despair, forcing him “to totter precariously on the fine line between two cultures.” “For what do I isolate myself in the middle, never right, always wrong?” Cabell asked. In a direct appeal to racists and “hotheads” on both sides of the color line, Cabell insisted, “It is for you that I die.”<sup>79</sup> After finishing the notes, Cabell committed suicide with a shotgun.

Paul Cabell did not die in vain. In the weeks following his death, calm prevailed at Beecher High School. Yet Cabell’s suicide did little to stabilize the community and stem the outward flow of whites from the Beecher district. Between 1972 and 1977, the proportion of black students at Beecher High School doubled, rising to 70 percent. By the early 1980s, blacks held a clear majority in both the schools and neighborhoods of Beecher and the district’s housing stock, hit hard by property abandonment and poor

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<sup>78</sup> “Beecher: Ten Years after Paul Cabell’s Suicide,” *Flint Voice*, June 3, 1982.

<sup>79</sup> Loudon Wainwright, “The Man in the Middle,” *Life* (July 21, 1972), 55-66. See also, Tom Perry, “Tragedy of Paul Cavell [sic] Death Is Indictment of Community . . . if it Forgets,” *Flint Spokesman*, March 11, 1972; Penn, “Beecher Remembers the Goals of Paul Cabell,” *Flint Journal*, May 5, 1972; and “Frankness on the Race Issue,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 10, 1972.

upkeep, was among the most dilapidated in the county.<sup>80</sup> Throughout the 1970s crisis in north suburban Flint, local and national observers speculated as to why Beecher, and not other suburbs, had received so many units of low-cost government housing. Why Beecher? Perhaps more importantly, why not Fenton, Flushing, or other all-white suburbs that gained few, if any, subsidized units? As the controversy over the Section 235 and 236 programs unfolded in Beecher, community members offered conflicting answers to those questions.

For defenders of the 235 and 236 programs, the market was the key factor driving the locations of subsidized housing units in Genesee County. Developers and local FHA official Thomas Hutchinson argued that the demand for low-cost housing in Beecher was greater than in other suburban areas. In defense of his decision to allocate so many subsidized units to Beecher, Hutchinson told a journalist from the *Washington Post*, “Our deal, as far as I can see, is this: is there a market?”<sup>81</sup> Clearly, there was a market for low-cost in homes in Beecher. In areas such as Beecher, where Hutchinson identified a demand for affordable housing, the FHA gave builders the freedom to select appropriate sites for subsidized units. Moreover, Hutchinson allowed builders to self-regulate construction standards. In their defense, builders pointed out that a variety of additional factors drove construction decisions. Specifically, developers asserted that the federal requirement that all subsidized units have access to public utilities influenced their decision to construct 235 and 236 units in Beecher. Though unincorporated, Beecher provided its residents with water and sewer service and thus met one of the federal government’s key financing requirements. “If someone can tell me where I can get

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<sup>80</sup> See Whitfield, *Housing Market Analysis and Feasibility Study* (Flint: Genesee County Model Cities Development Corporation, 1972), IV-4.

<sup>81</sup> Braestrup, “HUD’s Biggest Housing Effort.”

financing,” offered James Walker, a builder of subsidized units in Beecher, “I’d be happy to build elsewhere.”<sup>82</sup> The federal government’s requirement that subsidized housing units have access to public water and sewer services surely placed limits on the potential locations for 235 and 236 housing projects. Yet Beecher was not the only suburban area that had access to such utilities. During the 1950s and 1960s, suburbs such as Flushing, which received no 235 and 236 units, built modern sewer and water systems. How, then, could local officials account for the discrepancies?

Although builders rarely addressed the racial, economic, and political factors that drove site decisions for 235 and 236 homes, they played a major role in determining which suburbs did and did not receive subsidized units. Investigators from HUD blamed unscrupulous builders and the Flint FHA office for saturating Beecher with substandard homes and more than its fair share of subsidized housing. Though not the only factor that influenced construction in the district, race played an important role in the site location decisions of local builders. According to at least one investigation, builders concentrated Section 235 and 236 units in Beecher because “the area was already integrated, a water and sewer system existed, and vacant lots were relatively inexpensive.” Furthermore, builders of subsidized housing preferred Beecher to other areas of the county because Mt. Morris Township had only minimal building and home inspection regulations, which helped to keep construction costs below federally mandated price ceilings.<sup>83</sup> During a 1972 speech to county planners, township supervisor Krapohl admitted that Beecher had a “very inadequate” zoning ordinance and no controls whatsoever on subdivision development. “Many lots were plotted in the 1920s with the 40’ and 60’ frontage,

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<sup>82</sup> *Flint Journal*, April 7, 12, 1970.

<sup>83</sup> “Report to Joint Economic Committee,” 6.

unpaved streets and very few sidewalks,” Krapohl revealed. “With this situation existing, the builders with commitments from the local HUD office had a field day.”<sup>84</sup> Because Beecher was already integrated, provided public utilities, and had weak construction and zoning standards, builders effectively colonized the area with poor housing and hundreds of impoverished black families. “This district has been the victim of what I call neo-colonialism,” charged Ira Rutherford, a black official in the Beecher school district.<sup>85</sup> Just as realtors had done for decades, builders of federally subsidized housing during the 1960s and 1970s identified northwest Flint and Beecher as black expansion zones. By funneling poor and African-American residents to black expansion zones such as Beecher, builders, local and federal officials, and other participants in the Section 235 and 236 programs helped to spread the city’s growing urban crisis into suburban Genesee County. But the color line would spread only so far.

Paul Cabell’s suicide and the racial controversy over subsidized housing in Beecher received a great deal of attention from both federal administrators and national media outlets.<sup>86</sup> For some observers, the transformation of Beecher revealed a frightening glimpse of the shape of things to come in suburbia. Among suburbs in Genesee County, the situation in Beecher was somewhat exceptional, however. By the close of the 1970s, African Americans in Genesee County had broken the color lines that formerly surrounded St. John Street and Floral Park. Yet with few exceptions, the color line remained intact in suburban Flint throughout the remainder of the century. During

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<sup>84</sup> “M. M. Township & City Could Get Fed. Monies,” *Genesee County Herald*, October 25, 1972.

<sup>85</sup> Merzejewski, “School Chief Says Beecher’s Woes Today Financial, Not Racial,” *Flint Journal*, October 5, 1984.

<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, “HUD Halts Building at Mich. Site,” *Washington Post*, February 8, 1971; Braestrup, “HUD’s Biggest Housing Effort”; Wainwright, “The Man in the Middle”; and “Frankness on the Race Issue.”

the two decades following the defeat of the New Flint plan, suburban officials and white homeowners consolidated their independence from the city and worked to harden the color line through a combination of restrictive zoning and land use plans, municipal incorporation initiatives, and other political means. During the era of suburban secession, public and private housing and metropolitan development policies helped to insulate most of Flint's suburbs from the racial integration that occurred in Beecher. Indeed, the racial conflicts that led to Paul Cabell's demise could have occurred in few suburban areas but Beecher.



## **Chapter 11**

### **Cities with Walls: Race, Class, and the Death of Metropolitan Solutions**

Paul Cabell's suicide and the Beecher desegregation crisis reminded many observers that suburbs were not immune from the racial and economic changes occurring in central cities. By the early 1970s, Beecher and scores of other inner-ring American suburbs had made quick transitions from integration to resegregation. Reeling from the cumulative effects of intense neighborhood conflicts, home foreclosures, racial panic selling, property abandonment, and private divestment, suburbs such as Beecher in no way resembled the homogeneous and prosperous suburban places portrayed in postwar cultural texts. In many ways, Beecher was far from unique. During the postwar and civil rights eras, Beecher and most other Flint suburbs were places of great socioeconomic, ethnic, and political diversity. Like Beecher, many jurisdictions in the out-county contained poor and working-class residents, substandard housing units, overcrowded schools, and foreclosed properties. In order to explain developments such as these, historians will need to develop a more complex suburban typology that accounts for the economic, racial, and spatial diversity of America's suburbs. Nevertheless, the racial transitions that occurred in Beecher set the area apart from much of the rest of the county. With only a few exceptions, the color line would hold in the remainder of Genesee through the close of the millennium.

In the 1930s and 1940s, private citizens and government officials excluded black citizens from suburban areas through restrictive housing covenants, violence, redlining, and other private and state-sanctioned measures. After World War II, white homeowners, federal housing administrators, members of the private housing industry, and suburban elected officials upheld residential segregation through a variety of old and new means. Racial violence, real estate discrimination, and redlining continued to limit the options of black home seekers during the postwar era. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, white homeowners and policymakers in the out-county devised a number of new legal and political strategies to assert their independence from Flint and defend the racial homogeneity of their suburbs. In Genesee County, suburban governments enacted restrictive zoning and building codes, exclusionary land use plans, and sought to incorporate their suburbs in order to modernize living conditions, maintain property values, and, in some instances, hold the color line. In a number of cases, suburban officials also devised restrictive land use regulations to exclude poor whites and defend the class homogeneity of their communities. During the political battles over New Flint, white homeowners in the out-county framed their opposition to the city in colorblind economic terms. By the mid-1960s, however, civil rights activists had directly challenged the foundations of the suburban color line, bringing racial issues to the center of suburban land use battles.

White homeowners' opposition to residential integration in suburban Genesee County was part of a larger postwar revolt against annexation and metropolitan government that gained momentum during the late 1950s conflict over New Flint. Following the defeat of the New Flint plan, elected officials in the Vehicle City, with the

full backing of GM executives, moved to annex suburban factories and shopping centers. In response, voters in the out-county launched several successful incorporation drives during the 1960s and 1970s. The incorporation of Flint's inner-ring suburbs left the city landlocked, surrounded by hostile suburban governments, and far removed from the county's remaining industrial and commercial establishments. With no room to grow and very little land left to develop, Flint, even with its many functioning auto plants, faced a series of economic crises beginning during the 1970s and 1980s that only the most pessimistic of forecasters could have envisioned. Yet the city and its residents would face those crises alone.

*The Suburban Defense of the Color Line*

In *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, historian Andrew Wiese documents the long and largely untold history of black suburbanization in the United States. At the end of the 1930s, more than a million black Americans lived in suburban areas. Between 1940 and 2000, that number grew to nearly twelve million. According to Wiese, black suburbanization constituted "one of the most important demographic movements in the twentieth-century United States." In spite of this impressive growth, though, Wiese found that scholars have essentially ignored the black presence in suburbia. Historians, he argued, have focused too narrowly on the suburbs inhabited by wealthy and middle-class whites and have ignored the racial diversity of suburban spaces. "The truth is," Wiese charged, "historians have done a better job excluding African Americans from the suburbs than even white suburbanites."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wiese, *Places of Their Own*, 1-5.

Wiese's critique is difficult to dispute. Since at least the nineteenth century, small numbers of African Americans in Genesee County have lived outside of the Flint city limits, many of them on small plots in the wooded, semi-rural areas south of Floral Park and Thread Lake on the city's southern border. During the twentieth century, those numbers increased as the city grew and attained industrial prominence. However, black suburbanization in Genesee County has always been extremely limited in scope and confined to discrete areas within the region. In 1940, only 109 African Americans, out of a total metropolitan population of over a quarter million, lived in suburban Flint. During the 1940s, Flint's suburbs added just forty-five additional black residents. At mid-century, the 154 African Americans living outside the city comprised only 0.2 percent of the population of suburban Flint. By 1970, the number of black suburbanites in the Flint area had increased to slightly over six thousand. In the 1970s, the African-American population of suburban Genesee County doubled to over twelve thousand. Still, the African-American proportion of Flint's suburban population remained under 5 percent until well into the 1980s. Furthermore, of the 12,680 African Americans who lived in suburban Flint in 1980, almost all resided in the Beecher district or in the four inner-ring suburban townships surrounding the city. With only a few exceptions, the rest of the county was (and remains) virtually all white. Although it is certainly true that historians have unfairly excluded African Americans from the history of suburbia, it is doubtful that they have done so with any more efficiency than white suburbanites in Genesee County.<sup>2</sup>

The post-World War II black freedom struggle in Genesee County was deeply rooted in city politics and battles over urban space. The 1960s campaigns against

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<sup>2</sup> Chapelski, Marston, and Molseed, *1990 Demographic Profile of the Flint Urban Area*, 4. See also, David V. Graham, "Affluent Black Families Are Finding Move to Suburbs Can Be Smooth," *Flint Journal*, October 14, 1984.

housing discrimination in Genesee County centered on neighborhood battles inside the city and the quest to obtain a municipal open occupancy ordinance in Flint. Nevertheless, the color line in suburban Flint also came under attack during the course of the decade. Black homebuyers and renters faced many obstacles in their attempts to secure housing in suburban Genesee County. As in Flint, redlining, racial steering, white violence, and other forms of state-sanctioned and private real estate discrimination made it difficult for black buyers to circumvent the color line. If black homesteaders managed to acquire properties outside of the city, they still faced stiff resistance from suburban whites.

Though most suburban residents abhorred racial terrorism, acts of white violence were nonetheless common in the out-county. In 1964, an African-American teacher named Jerry M. Beaty and two black friends moved into a home in the all-white Candy Lane Estates subdivision in Mt. Morris Township. Shortly after the move, neighborhood residents attacked Beaty and his housemates in an episode that local journalists referred to as the “Candy Lane Affair.” According to a *Flint Journal* report, “An explosive situation developed as irate whites gathered around the house. Windows were broken and imprecations shouted. Once, an effigy was left hanging from the porch.” For four consecutive days during the Candy Lane Affair, white mobs repeatedly harassed and threatened Beaty and his friends. After four difficult months in his new home, Beaty moved away from the violence in Candy Lane.<sup>3</sup>

That same year, racial violence broke out again in Mt. Morris Township when Mr. and Mrs. Willie Mosley moved into a home in the Julianna subdivision. Hoping to run the Mosleys out of the neighborhood, white vandals broke the windows of their house

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<sup>3</sup> See *Flint Journal*, February 5, 1967.

and threatened the couple.<sup>4</sup> In 1966, violence against African Americans erupted in the Ottawa Hills subdivision of south suburban Grand Blanc. In September of that year, the Matthews family acquired a newly built home in the neighborhood through a third-party purchase arranged by white buyers. In response, an angry group of whites picketed the property and harassed the black homeowners. Enraged by the Matthews's deceitful act, the developer who had built the house enlisted the support of black realist Connie Childress, who offered to buy back the home and re-sell it to whites. When that plan failed, the builder threatened Mrs. Matthews, telling her "she would be sorry she had moved in" to Ottawa Hills. The 1966 episode was not an isolated incident in an otherwise peaceful neighborhood. Several years after the Matthews family reported being harassed, violence flared again in Ottawa Hills against other black families who had moved to the subdivision. In 1974, a group of white youths "terrorized several black families in that neighborhood by throwing rocks through windows, painting obscenities on garage doors and erecting flaming crosses."<sup>5</sup>

In conjunction with the already rigid structural and policy barriers to open housing, acts of violence and harassment helped to keep the postwar color line in tact throughout most of suburban Flint. With the exceptions of Beecher, Mt. Morris Township, and several other well-defined areas of the out-county, Genesee County remained virtually all white throughout the civil rights era.<sup>6</sup> This occurred in spite of the repeated efforts of activists to desegregate suburban neighborhoods. In November 1965,

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<sup>4</sup> Beasley, "Weekly Report, Flint Activities Office," n.d. [ca. November 17, 1964], Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 15, GHCC.

<sup>5</sup> See Beasley, "Weekly Report," October 6, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 16, GHCC; Craig, "The Fight for Open Housing in Flint, Michigan," 10-12; and D. Graham, "Affluent Black Families."

<sup>6</sup> Beasley, "Weekly Report, Flint Office Activities," April 1, 1965, Beasley Papers, box 8, folder 15, GHCC.

Bill Hawkins, a member of the board of directors from Housing Opportunities Made Equal, announced that his group was going to launch a new campaign of racial “scatterization” in Genesee County. Hawkins and his HOME associates sought to achieve scatterization in stages. In the first phase of the plan, HOME activists hoped to achieve a modicum of integration by assisting up to thirty middle-class black families who wished to move from the city to the suburbs. By helping a small number of test families desegregate suburban Flint, Hawkins wanted to demonstrate that integration was not a detriment to property values. Ultimately, though, the goal of scatterization was to “make bigoted realtors, builders, and home owners change their policies to ones that are more morally and philosophically American.”<sup>7</sup>

Even though the plan was modest in scope, it generated strong opposition among suburban whites. Several months after Hawkins’s announcement, realtors from the Hachtel-Pollock firm turned away a black female purchaser who sought to buy a home in Davison Township, telling her that they were unable to show or sell homes in the area to Negroes. HOME members responded by picketing in front of the Belle Meade subdivision in Davison Township, where Hachtel-Pollock had a large number of listings. On Sunday, March 27, an interracial group of thirty protesters assembled for six hours in front of Belle Meade, carrying signs reading, “Someone Must Be The First To Sell To Negroes” and “Realtors—Segregators.” In the weeks that followed, HOME members returned to the subdivision for several additional protests.<sup>8</sup>

The spring demonstrations took township officials and realtors from Hachtel-Pollock by complete surprise and created quite a stir among local homeowners and

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<sup>7</sup> “HOME, Inc. to Intensify Operations,” *Circle* (November 1965), Urban League of Flint Papers, box 1, folder 8, GHCC.

<sup>8</sup> “30 Persons Picket Belle Meade Streets,” *Davison Index*, March 30, 1966.

brokers. Within weeks, however, the Davison Township Board had come up with a plan to block future mobilizations. On May 9, board members adopted a parade ordinance requiring all persons who wanted to march, picket, demonstrate, or gather in public to obtain a permit from the township. Furthermore, the ordinance stipulated, “No person shall intentionally lay down, stand, sit, or loiter in any public street, highway or sidewalk so as to interfere with the regular flow of pedestrian or vehicular traffic. . . .” Violators of the parade ordinance faced punishments of up to ninety days in jail and/or fines of up to \$100. By design, the Davison Township law was exceedingly vague, making no specific mention of civil rights protesters. Hoping to cloak the law in the language of colorblindness and civic order, board members instructed Davison Township Attorney William R. McTaggart, who authored the ordinance, to conceal the specific aims of the legislation. “I don’t know if I properly camouflaged it,” McTaggart later admitted. Apparently, he did. During their public deliberations on the matter, board members spoke only in abstract terms about the reasons for the vaguely worded ordinance. Many realtors did not appreciate the board members’ subtlety, however. During the May 9 board meeting, local realtors repeatedly pressed Davison Township Supervisor Walter Kingsley to explain whether the new law would end the picketing at Belle Meade. In response to the realtors’ persistent questioning, Kingsley reluctantly acknowledged that the board had designed the parade ordinance to prohibit civil rights protests in the township.<sup>9</sup> Though the ordinance infuriated Hawkins and other HOME members, many of whom pledged to defy the new law, the open housing demonstrations in Davison Township ended rather abruptly soon after the board passed the ordinance. Rather than

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<sup>9</sup> “Ordinance to Regulate Picketing Adopted by Davison Township; Subdivision Involved,” *Flint Journal*, May 10, 1966. See also, “Davison Township, Genesee County, Michigan, Ordinance No. 27,” Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 25, GHCC; and “New Law to Halt Pickets,” *Davison Index*, May 11, 1966.



face fines and jail time, HOME members sought out new opportunities in more hospitable areas. Those would be extremely difficult to find, though.

Like Supervisor Kingsley in Davison Township, most suburban whites in Genesee County preferred not to discuss the issues of race and open housing. By the mid-1960s, however, civil rights activists had made it impossible for suburban officials and homeowners to ignore the barriers to residential integration. During the 1966 equal housing hearings in Flint, state civil rights commissioners solicited testimony from Harold A. Draper, Jr., the chairperson of the Legislature Committee of the Genesee County Board of Supervisors. Specifically, the commissioners wanted to know why only two suburban census tracts in the entire county contained black populations in excess of 2 percent. In response, Draper readily acknowledged, “Equal housing opportunities do not today exist in Genesee County.” “Let it be admitted,” he added, “that the negro would not be welcomed by the vast majority of the residents of our all white residential areas.” At first glance, these seemed to be remarkable concessions from a suburban official. Yet Draper and his colleagues from the board of supervisors claimed no responsibility for the rigid segregation that existed in Flint’s suburbs. Articulating a classic defense of de facto housing segregation, Draper pointed to personal choice and economic factors as the key barriers to integrated housing. “The slow movement of our non-white population to the county is a matter of economics,” he argued. “The vast majority of our negro population cannot afford the cost of purchasing new homes in our county developments. Their present income, savings, and non-discriminatory credit limitations limits the price they may pay for a new home.” In the minds of Draper and many white suburbanites, segregation seemed to derive from a combination of personal factors—“partly through

fear, partly because they [Negroes] know they would not be wanted, and partly because they like to live with their own friends.” Because segregation was essentially a private matter, Draper maintained, “The Board of Supervisors do[es] not have any legal power to act as to legislation.”<sup>10</sup>

Draper’s testimony did not sway members of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission. Following the hearings, the commissioners recommended that all local governments in the county approve open occupancy ordinances. Within a year of the hearings, legislators in the already integrated cities of Flint and Mt. Morris had complied with the MCRC’s recommendations by enacting fair housing laws.<sup>11</sup> However, city, township, and village officials in the remainder of the county resisted the commission’s proposal. Emboldened by the fair housing campaign that was unfolding in the city, small numbers of suburban civil rights activists began to press their local governments to endorse open occupancy during the late 1960s. In September 1967, a young suburban activist named John C. McGarry urged members of the Fenton City Council to pass an open housing law. In an open letter to the community published in the *Fenton Independent*, McGarry referred to his hometown as a “white sanctuary,” pointing out “the well-known fact that there is not a single negro living in Fenton nor has there ever been one living here.” “An open housing ordinance in Fenton,” McGarry argued, “would show to interested negroes . . . that Fenton is officially willing to welcome them into our community.” Directly challenging government officials such as Draper, who had argued that open housing was not a problem in Genesee County, McGarry offered, “If citizens . .

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<sup>10</sup> Harold A. Draper, Jr., “Statement on Equal Housing Opportunity in Genesee County,” December 1, 1966, Beasley Papers, box 10, folder 38, GHCC.

<sup>11</sup> Memorandum, Gordin to Michigan Civil Rights Commission, September 22, 1967, Beasley Papers, box 5, GHCC.

. are correct in their contention that no problem of housing discrimination exists in Fenton, the effect of an open occupancy ordinance would only be symbolic, since there would never be any need to enforce it.”<sup>12</sup>

The response to McGarry’s call for municipal fair housing legislation in Fenton was harsh. On November 16, the *Independent* printed an editorial opposing open occupancy. “We do not feel that Fenton requires local open occupancy legislation,” the editors wrote. “There is just no need for it here. Sure, we have no negroes living here, but there is nothing to stop them from coming if they want.”<sup>13</sup> Undeterred by the editorial, McGarry brought his open housing idea directly to the Fenton City Council in April 1968. Council members declined to consider any such ordinance, however, telling McGarry that impending federal civil rights legislation would ultimately supersede local fair housing laws. In addition, at least one council member reminded McGarry that residents of the all-white community were adamantly opposed to integration. Out of respect for public opinion, the council member explained, Fenton City Council members would not implement an open housing policy.<sup>14</sup>

The Fenton City Council correctly gauged the public’s opposition to open housing. McGarry’s open housing proposals piqued the sensibilities of thousands of white homeowners in the south suburbs. According to white resident Robert Weishaupt, who authored an angry letter to the local newspaper in opposition to McGarry’s plan, open housing was a clear violation of the human and property rights of homeowners. “As

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<sup>12</sup> *Fenton Independent*, September 28, 1967. See also, *Fenton Independent*, November 23, December 14, 1967. McGarry was not unique among white suburbanites. On suburban support for open housing in metropolitan Boston, see Lily Geismer, “Don’t Blame Us: Grassroots Liberalism in Massachusetts, 1960-1990,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> *Fenton Independent*, November 16, 1967.

<sup>14</sup> “Fenton Man Makes 2<sup>nd</sup> Housing Plea,” *Flint Journal*, April 16, 1968.

do most open housing advocates,” he wrote, “John [McGarry] fails to understand that as government gains control over property it also gains control over those who depend on that property. Therefore property rights are human rights.”<sup>15</sup> Following the April city council meeting, reporters from the *Independent* surveyed local residents on the proposed measure. “I have lived here for 24 years and I have never heard of anyone being kept out of the city for any reason,” observed white resident Harold J. Butcher. “Fenton has always been an open city and anyone can live here.” Mrs. Richard Thenhaus concurred, stating, “Anyone who wants to can live here.” For Richard Rynearson, the issue was simple: “We don’t have a written ordinance to keep anyone out, so why do we need an ordinance to let anyone in?”<sup>16</sup>

Fenton residents were not alone in their opposition to open occupancy. During the late 1960s and 1970s, civil rights protesters in Genesee County and the nation at large forced suburban residents to address the persistence of the color line. White suburbanites held a range of views on racial integration. Like John McGarry, a few suburbanites embraced integration and open housing reform. By contrast, Robert Weishaupt and many others actively resisted civil rights legislation, viewing desegregation as a grave threat to white property rights and neighborhood stability. Though opinions on open housing and integration varied widely in the Flint metropolitan area, Genesee County had more than its share of racial extremists, some of whom occupied positions of authority in suburban government. In the fall of 1971, Burton Township Supervisor Joseph E. Uvick and his wife Constance, both of whom were white, found themselves embroiled in a major scandal when they refused to sell a piece of property to Mr. and Mrs. Nelson R. Kirkland,

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<sup>15</sup> *Fenton Independent*, April 25, 1968.

<sup>16</sup> *Fenton Independent*, May 2, 9, 1968.

a black couple. The saga began when the Kirklands, who lived in Flint's racially transitional Evergreen Valley neighborhood, approached a realtor regarding a \$10,000 lot that the Uvicks wanted to sell in Burton Township. Hoping to expedite the deal, the Kirklands deposited the full asking price in cash with the Uvicks' realtor. After learning that the buyers were black, the Uvicks, who happened to live next door to the vacant lot in question, refused to sell the land. On September 10, Joseph Uvick informed the Kirklands personally that he would not sell, claiming that his wife "was opposed to selling the property to blacks and had threatened to leave him if he consummated the sale." In response, the Kirklands filed a claim with the Michigan Civil Rights Commission. After several months of investigation, the commissioners ruled against the Uvicks and ordered them to sell the property to the Kirklands. The commissioners also directed the Uvicks to pay \$1,000 to the victims in order to compensate them for the humiliating experience.<sup>17</sup> Although the Kirklands ultimately triumphed over the Uvicks, victories such as theirs were extremely rare in Genesee County, where most acts of discrimination went unpunished. Yet such stark defenses of the color line were common in suburban Flint during the 1960s and 1970s. Several years after the Uvicks lost their case, *Flint Journal* reporter Ed Conway authored a story that focused on white responses to integration in Burton. "There are no black people around this neighborhood at all," one resident of South Burton revealed. "There aren't many blacks in south Burton because none are welcome." "What do I like about Burton?" another citizen asked. "There's no niggers here."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See *Flint Journal*, January 19, 1972, April 27, 1973.

<sup>18</sup> *Flint Journal*, June 29, 1978.

African Americans who searched for housing in suburban Flint found many such examples of virulent racism. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of white suburbanites rejected harsh appeals to race, preferring instead to claim a tenuous middle ground between calls for fair housing and open defenses of segregation. Most suburban moderates in Genesee County approached the issue of race abstractly and avoided speaking directly about the barriers to open housing in their own communities. As well, racial moderates in the out-county tended to frame the urban crisis and the color line as inner-city problems that individual citizens could address through personal acts of kindness rather than structural, legal, or political reforms. On April 10, 1968—as urban riots were exploding in response to Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination—the *Davison Index* ran its first ever editorial on racial prejudice. Aware of the significance of the occasion, the editors began the column by explaining the omission. “Since Davison has experienced no overt acts of racial prejudice, we have seen fit to avoid mention of it,” they wrote. Although the editors maintained their historical innocence, they still felt compelled to address the “holocaust of terror” that was occurring in America’s cities. The editors urged Davison residents not “to generalize and castigate the whole race for what a segment of the radical Negro minority have done to our nation.” Rather, the editorialists encouraged local residents to get to know Negroes personally. “We wonder how many Davison residents have actually had any kind of contact with a Negro; social, business, school, spiritual, recreational? There is an old adage that says that ‘we fear that which we do not know.’” “We would suggest,” the editorial continued, “that each white person seek out a Negro person to befriend. BEFRIEND, in any context that is required.

Materially, if necessary; spiritually if the need arises; counsel with him if he requests it. But, BE a friend.”<sup>19</sup>

Like thousands of other racially moderate suburbanites in Genesee County, the editors of the *Index* viewed segregation as a matter of the heart. Segregated schools and neighborhoods, they believed, stemmed from personal prejudices, racial misunderstandings, and moral shortcomings rather than public policies and discriminatory housing markets. Suburban governments, according to this formulation, were thus innocent of any wrongdoing even if the stain of prejudice tainted individual white souls. Following this logic, most suburban racial moderates stopped short of endorsing open occupancy laws in their own communities. Instead, they proposed a program of racial gradualism that hinged on convincing whites to accept African Americans as equals. In truth, however, segregation in the out-county, as it did in many parts of the city, derived from both personal beliefs and voter-approved public policies. By 1973, when voters and school board members in the City of Flagg faced down a proposal for open housing, this had become readily apparent.

In June 1972, an eighteen-year-old activist and future filmmaker named Michael Moore won a seat on the Davison Board of Education. At the time of the election, Moore, a well-known figure in the small city of Davison, was the youngest person ever to win an elective office in Michigan. By the early 1970s, he had already developed a strong reputation for left-wing activism. As a student at Davison High School, Moore often battled with teachers and administrators over issues relating to curriculum, free speech, civil rights, and school discipline. Although many adults in the community vigorously opposed Moore’s insurgent candidacy, newly enfranchised eighteen-year-old

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<sup>19</sup> “Prejudice Always Is a Personal Thing,” *Davison Index*, April 10, 1968.

voters—who had won the right to vote in 1971 with the passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment—turned out in droves to support his school board campaign. In the end, Moore easily outpolled all of his competitors during the 1972 race.<sup>20</sup>

Not long after taking office, the young activist asked school board members to endorse a proposal welcoming African Americans and other minority groups to the city of Davison. Moore's proposal read,

Now, Therefore, be it resolved that the Davison Board of Education publicly invites and encourages all members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities to come and reside in the Davison area and enhance the learning and living environment of the school district and help our students learn the true meaning of brotherhood.

The proposal elicited an angry response from local taxpayers and school board members, many of whom viewed Moore's move as a crass and divisive publicity stunt. "The welcome signs are out and always have been," noted Charles N. Mitchell, an opponent of the resolution. "At the rate we taxpayers have had to build new schools to accommodate those who have found our city and school system so attractive I do not feel it is necessary to have anyone go on record as extending a welcoming hand to anyone." On December 3, 1973, Moore's colleagues on the school board unanimously rejected the proposal. Moreover, within weeks of the December vote, residents of Davison had launched a campaign to remove the young iconoclast from office. Though he ultimately survived the recall effort, Moore lost his 1976 re-election bid in a landslide. In Davison—as Moore learned the hard way—residents and officials rejected fair housing proposals out of hand.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "Moore, Alger Win Seats on School Board," *Davison Index*, June 14, 1972.

<sup>21</sup> *Davison Index*, November 14, December 12, 1973. On the failed recall attempt, see *Davison Index*, March 27, September 18, 1974. Also, see all of the November and December 1974 issues of the *Davison*



Most city, village, and township governments in Genesee County actively resisted both grassroots and policy-driven efforts to desegregate suburban neighborhoods and schools. In Davison Township, the board's 1966 anti-picketing ordinance was an especially transparent attempt to halt the open housing movement; and so too were the efforts to remove Michael Moore from the Davison Board of Education. Such clear examples were far from rare. Nevertheless, opponents of desegregation seldom spoke openly about their racial animosities. Instead, racial fears percolated beneath the surface of local political debates. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, battles over site locations for Section 235 and 236 units and other forms of subsidized housing provoked intense, racially inflected hostility from suburban homeowners and officials. As suburban residents and policymakers watched and read about the racial transitions occurring in Beecher and Mt. Morris Township, many vowed to resist subsidized housing units in their communities. In April 1970, the editors of the *Fenton Independent* denounced a plan to build Section 235 units in their city, warning that subsidized housing would create "a slum area."<sup>22</sup> That same year, 150 residents in Davison Township organized against a developer's proposal to build a complex of low-cost townhomes. "What will it [the complex] be like 10 years from now?" one concerned resident demanded to know.<sup>23</sup> The following year, residents of the city of Davison mobilized after hearing a rumor that a builder planned to erect a Section 236 apartment complex. Although the rumor turned out to be untrue, the Davison City Council responded immediately and decisively by implementing the most restrictive zoning and building

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*Index.* On Moore's failed re-election bid, see Ann C. Emmons, "A 'Sore Thumb' Reminisces," *Flint Journal*, July 18, 1976.

<sup>22</sup> *Fenton Independent*, April 15, 1971.

<sup>23</sup> *Davison Index*, May 20, 1970.

ordinance in the county. Under normal circumstances, the Davison City Council only voted on ordinances after a ten-day waiting period. In this case, however, Mayor Judson S. Davis ordered an immediate vote on the building and zoning code, claiming that the rumored project constituted a “danger to the health, safety and welfare of the Davison community.” Concurring with Mayor Davis’s opinion, city council members immediately enacted new zoning and building guidelines. Davison’s 1971 code—designed specifically to restrict the construction of homes and rental units for low-income families—required developers to allocate at least 5,500 square feet of land for each three-bedroom apartment erected in the city. The law prohibited developers from building any more than 8.5 apartment units on each acre of land. Moreover, to block the construction of freestanding Section 235 houses, the Davison ordinance mandated that all single-family homes have a minimum of 1,096 square feet of living space on the ground floor.<sup>24</sup>

Two years after Davison legislators enacted their restrictive zoning and building code, members of the Grand Blanc Township Board passed their own multiple-family housing ordinance. Only slightly more lenient than the Davison law, the Grand Blanc Township code allowed a maximum of 9.3 apartments per acre. In 1973, board members in Vienna and Mundy Townships joined the movement against subsidized housing by voting to raise the minimum size requirements for new homes. Because the Section 235 and 236 programs required builders to abide by strict pricing guidelines, codes such as those passed in Davison and Grand Blanc Township effectively banned all low-cost, government-subsidized housing units. Indeed, most builders found that it was impossible to construct low-cost homes and rental units under the new codes. Over time, other

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<sup>24</sup> *Davison Index*, October 6, 1971. Also, see *Flint Journal*, September 29-30, 1971.

suburban governments followed suit by enacting their own restrictive zoning and building laws.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to passing zoning and building codes, suburban officials resisted subsidized housing and the incursion of African Americans by establishing prohibitive utility and service regulations. Even in cases where developers of Section 235 and 236 units could meet suburban building and density requirements, they found it extremely difficult to obtain water and sewer services. In 1970, an anonymous elected official in Genesee County described how local utility departments in the suburbs harassed builders who developed low-cost housing:

A contractor of ours will call up and say it's going to cost \$5,000 to run water to five houses. I get on the phone and call township officials. After several minutes of conversation they finally get around to asking who is going to move into the houses. I tell them, 'He's a factory worker, has two children and by the way he's white.' Then the price of the water hookups goes down.<sup>26</sup>

When suburban officials suspected that African Americans would move into subsidized units, they often increased the hookup charges and fees or threatened to deny service. By establishing restrictive lot and home size requirements and making utility costs prohibitively high for builders, suburban officials hoped to resist federal and local efforts to sprinkle "fair share" subsidized housing throughout the out-county. The results were impressive. According to one 1974 survey, fewer than two hundred of the nearly fifteen hundred Section 235 units that builders constructed in Genesee County were located outside of Beecher and Flint.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> On the Grand Blanc Township code, see *Grand Blanc News*, April 20, 1972. On Vienna Township, see Bryan L. Steffens, "Vienna Township Raises Minimum House Size," *Flint Journal*, January 19, 1973. On Mundy Township, see *Swartz Creek News*, March 1, 1973.

<sup>26</sup> *Flint Journal*, December 6, 1970.

<sup>27</sup> Whitfield, *A Study to Determine*.

The Section 235 and 236 programs generated great hostility among white suburbanites. However, most suburban residents loathed traditional public housing even more. During the 1960s and 1970s debates over urban renewal and freeway construction in Flint, civil rights activists from St. John Street and Floral Park fought a losing battle to have public housing units dispersed throughout the region. Although activists and displaced families demanded fair share public housing, the Flint city attorney's office, citing federal HUD regulations, repeatedly determined that the Flint Housing Commission could neither own nor lease public housing units outside of the city. Consequently, all of the public housing complexes operated by the FHC—which, by 1970, included 755 units—were located inside of the city limits.<sup>28</sup>

During the early 1970s, as the St. John clearance project unfolded, activists and regional planning advocates mobilized again to disperse public housing throughout the county. In December 1972, members of the Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission drafted a series of policy papers on the status of public housing in the out-county. Not surprisingly, the authors of these studies, Harold Black and Aaron Blumberg, determined that Flint's suburbs had less than their share of low-income housing. In order to disperse low-income residents throughout the county, Black and Blumberg supported the creation of a countywide public housing commission. They proposed that the commission oversee the construction of fifteen thousand units of subsidized housing spread evenly across the region. Mindful of what was occurring in Beecher, Black and Blumberg attempted to reassure suburban officials that “a planned allocation [of subsidized and public housing] will prevent any one community from

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<sup>28</sup> See Jay D. Denz, “Authority of Housing Unit Widened,” *Flint Journal*, May 7, 1970; and Denz, “Housing Unit Told It Can't Lease Units Outside City Limits,” *Flint Journal*, June 4, 1970.

having its facilities swamped by a sudden and uncontrolled influx of units.” Furthermore, they suggested that the racial fights and property abandonment that had occurred in Flint and Beecher would remain isolated if every county government received some units of subsidized housing.<sup>29</sup>

On September 6, 1973, a subcommittee of the GCMPC endorsed Black’s and Blumberg’s proposal for a county public housing commission. Hoping to preempt suburban opposition to the plan, Thomas H. Haga, the director of planning for the GCMPC, pledged that the proposed commission would not build any public housing units in the out-county without first gaining the approval of local officials. Still, however, Flint Township Commissioner Russell P. Zaccaria and other suburban representatives on the Genesee County Board of Commissioners immediately denounced the idea. “This was told us [before] in Flint Township,” Zaccaria claimed, “but the 236 program was shoved down our throats.”<sup>30</sup> In the weeks following the release of the GCMPC’s proposal, county commissioners and township boards moved quickly to exclude public housing from their communities. Officials in south suburban Grand Blanc Township were among the first to act. In March 1973, while GCMPC members were still deliberating on the issue, Grand Blanc Township Treasurer John Hrinevich devised a plan to block subsidized housing units. Hrinevich proposed that the board establish a minimum lot size of twelve thousand square feet for single-family homes to ensure that no detached, subsidized houses went up in the township. “One thing that leads to inner-

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<sup>29</sup> Harold Black and Aaron Blumberg, “Housing Plan: Refinement of Assignments and Initial Portion of Implementation Methodology,” December 1972, Beasley Papers, box 15, folder 22, GHCC; H. Black and Blumberg, “Implementation Methodology: P-330, Working Paper No. 1,” January 1973, Holt Papers, box 8, folder 12, GHCC; and H. Black and Blumberg, “Working Paper No. 2, n.d. [ca. 1973], Holt Papers, box 8, folder 11, GHCC.

<sup>30</sup> Dennis F. Herrick, “Zaccaria against County Housing Plan,” *Flint Journal*, September 20, 1973.

city type areas of subsidized housing are small lots,” he warned. After unanimously endorsing Hrinevich’s proposal, board members directed the Grand Blanc Township Planning Commission to prepare a new building code.<sup>31</sup> The following year, as the GCMPC moved forward with its controversial plans, members of the Grand Blanc Township Board voted unanimously to create their own public housing authority. By forming the Grand Blanc Housing Commission, board members hoped to establish their legal authority over the county in all matters pertaining to subsidized housing. According to Grand Blanc Township Attorney Lyndon Lattie, who drafted the ordinance and several others like it, the creation of a local housing authority in no way meant that public housing was in the works. To the contrary, Lattie argued that the establishment of the commission allowed local officials to preserve “a maximum amount of local autonomy” in deciding whether (or not) to construct public housing units.<sup>32</sup>

The GCMPC’s plan to create a countywide public housing commission set off a chain reaction of defensive political moves in suburban Genesee County. Like their counterparts in Grand Blanc Township, suburban legislators throughout the county voted to establish local public housing commissions in order to obtain veto power over the proposed county authority. In July 1974, board members in Mundy, Gaines, and Argentine Townships voted to establish public housing authorities.<sup>33</sup> Later that year, Lattie helped members of the Davison Township Board draft their own public housing ordinance. As he had in Grand Blanc Township, Lattie informed board members that the only way to stop the county from building subsidized units in their community was to

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<sup>31</sup> “Subsidized Housing Is Recommended,” *Grand Blanc News*, March 15, 1973.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Siegel, “Township Passes Housing Code,” *Grand Blanc News*, May 16, 1974.

<sup>33</sup> “Gaines, Argentine, Form Housing Authorities,” *Swartz Creek News*, July 11, 1974; “Mundy Twp. Approves Housing Ordinance,” *Swartz Creek News*, July 25, 1974.

establish a local public housing commission. “Without a local commission,” Lattie pointed out, “the county could determine when, where and how public housing came into the township and the Township Board would have no control over it.” In October, Davison Township officials followed Lattie’s advice and voted to create a public housing commission. Throughout the 1972-74 controversy, GCMPC planners consistently reminded suburban officials that they would not seek to build public housing units without first gaining consent from local officials. However, township board members took little comfort in such reassurances. Instead, legislators in the cities, villages, and townships surrounding Flint—all of them determined to prevent the “Beecherization” of their communities—preemptively blocked public housing before the GCMPC had even formed a regional housing authority. Sensing the depth of the opposition to their plan, GCMPC officials ultimately abandoned their effort to create a regional public housing authority. The GCMPC’s decision to drop the proposal for a countywide commission ensured that all of the county’s public housing complexes—and almost all of the region’s subsidized housing units—would remain in the city of Flint.<sup>34</sup>

Across the county during the 1970s, suburban planners and legislators successfully resisted plans for fair share subsidized housing. According to a 1980 survey of subsidized housing in the Flint metropolitan area, fourteen of the eighteen townships in Genesee County contained no government-subsidized rental units at all. Only five of the twelve incorporated cities and villages in the out-county had any subsidized rentals. Moreover, of the 1,735 subsidized rental units in total that were located in suburban Flint, almost all were restricted to elderly occupants. As of 1980, in fact, there were only 391

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<sup>34</sup> “Davison Twp. Forms Housing Commission,” *Flint Journal*, October 20, 1974. See also, Ed Backus, “Official Support Is Lacking on County Public Housing,” *Flint Journal*, November 30, 1972; and “Will Townships Form Housing Commissions?” *Flint Journal*, May 14, 1974.

subsidized rental units specifically reserved for low-income families in the whole of suburban Genesee County, almost all of which were in or near the Beecher area.<sup>35</sup>

By the close of the century, the racial landscape of private and public housing had changed very little. In 1997, Michigan State University geographer Joe T. Darden and Joshua Bagakas published a report on the impediments to fair housing in Genesee County. Like so many of their predecessors, Darden and Bagakas found that African Americans were severely underrepresented in every area of the county except Beecher, Mt. Morris Township, and the city of Flint. At century's end, this study argued, white racism, restrictive zoning and building codes, and real estate discrimination continued to play a major role in limiting the housing options of all African Americans, regardless of their class status. "Black socioeconomic mobility," Darden and Bagakas found, "does not guarantee freedom of spatial mobility." As well, the authors determined that the restrictions on subsidized housing in the out-county helped to sustain rigid patterns of racial and class segregation. Of the twelve public housing sites that existed in Genesee County in 1997, all were inside of Flint's municipal borders. Because black people were overrepresented in virtually all of Flint's public housing complexes, the exclusionary policies of suburban governments had a disproportionate racial effect.<sup>36</sup>

Darden and Bagakas marshaled an impressive array of statistics to support their claims of housing discrimination in Genesee County. Yet their findings only echoed the complaints that civil rights activists in Flint and elsewhere had been lodging for decades.

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<sup>35</sup> Region V Planning and Development Commission, *Subsidized Rental and Housing Rehabilitation Programs Available in Region V* (Flint: Region V Planning and Development Commission, 1980). See also, Whitfield, *A Study to Determine*.

<sup>36</sup> Joe T. Darden and Joshua G. Bagakas, *Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing in Genesee County Including the City of Flint: A Report Submitted to Genesee County and City of Flint* (Flint: Genesee County and City of Flint, 1997), esp. 24. See also, Baird, *Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing in Genesee County*.



In December 1974, Vernon E. Jordan, the executive director of the National Urban League, wrote a syndicated op-ed column on suburban discrimination that ran in the *Flint Journal* and scores of other newspapers throughout the United States. Entitled “Behind Suburbia’s Barricades, Where Few Blacks Are Allowed,” Jordan’s editorial provided historical context for the growing divide between majority-black cities and all-white suburbs: “There are two basic reasons why blacks did not join the movement to the suburbs—past and present racial discrimination in housing, and the suburbs’ intentional lack of housing opportunities for lower income families.” “Suburban governments,” he charged, “erect barricades behind which few blacks are allowed. Their zoning laws make it impossible to build on smaller lots or to build apartment housing.” Although Jordan focused on the racial barriers to black suburbanization, he concluded the editorial by expanding his critique of suburban exclusion. “The vicious cycle of housing discrimination and denial to equal housing opportunities has to be broken,” he warned, “before the country is permanently locked into rigid class and racial segregation.” By invoking class, Jordan pointed to the broader array of economic barriers that suburban governments had constructed during the second half of the twentieth century to exclude poor people. Indeed, as Jordan noted, many of the obstacles that suburban governments erected to prevent African Americans from moving to the suburbs also severely restricted the housing opportunities available to poor and working-class whites.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Vernon E. Jordan, “Behind Suburbia’s Barricades, Where Few Blacks Are Allowed,” *Flint Journal*, December 9, 1974.

*Suburban Land Use Planning and the Defense of Class Privilege*

During the postwar era, elected officials in suburban Genesee County received an extraordinary amount of pressure to urbanize government services and utilities in the out-county. Hoping to increase living standards and property values, ordinary homeowners, out-county employers, FHA underwriters, mortgage lenders, and state health inspectors alike pressed suburban policymakers to deliver more and better amenities to taxpayers. In the three decades following World War II, suburban officials in Genesee County worked aggressively to meet these demands for urban services by raising taxes and allocating millions of dollars for new schools and roads, modern water and sewer systems, and other infrastructural and service-related improvements. As well, cities, villages, and townships in the out-county adopted strict new zoning and building codes to preserve racial segregation, manage growth, and protect property values. In exchange for these commitments, local mortgage lenders and FHA officials gradually shifted their investment strategy from all-white neighborhoods in the city to segregated subdivisions in the suburbs.

By the end of the 1950s, residential building in the city of Flint had slowed dramatically. During the 1960s, new residential construction in the city all but halted. Between 1960 and 1968, the city of Flint lost an average of sixty-nine dwelling units per year—due in large part to property abandonment, the decline in new home construction, and urban renewal. In the suburbs, however, the building boom had only just begun. Though city-suburban construction imbalances were common in most metropolitan areas, they were especially stark in Genesee County. From 1964 to 1966, the number of new building permits generated each year for private residential construction in Flint dropped

from 1,084 to 742. Over the same period, the number of permits issued in the out-county increased from 2,247 to 2,877. By the mid 1960s, then, builders were erecting nearly four times as many homes each year in the suburbs as they were in the Flint. In 1966, new housing starts just in Flint Township exceeded those in Flint by over a hundred. The building mismatch between Flint and Flint Township reflected broader trends of residential decentralization that were occurring simultaneously throughout the county. During the 1960s, the urbanized townships surrounding Flint added an average of 244.8 new housing units per year while the freefall in Flint housing starts continued unabated.<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of the decade in question, the fastest growing cities, villages, and townships in Flint's postwar suburbs were usually those that offered public water, sewers, zoning, and other urban-style amenities. Whether in the 1940s or the 1960s, new building activity correlated closely with the opening of new roads, school construction, the modernization of utility services, and the establishment of land use plans. Nevertheless, the new residential developments of the 1960s and 1970s differed in many important respects from their mid-century antecedents. Specifically, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a sharp rise in the construction of low-cost mobile homes and multiple-family housing—structures with three or more dwelling units—in both cities and suburbs. During the immediate postwar era, builders in the Flint metropolitan area erected only a handful of multiple-family housing units. Prior to 1960, multiple-family units comprised less than 1 percent of the dwellings constructed in suburban Flint. In the 1960s, however, the desires of home seekers began to change. Though most homebuyers in Genesee

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<sup>38</sup> See Driker Associates, *Mount Morris Township, Michigan: Proposed General Development Plan* (Birmingham, Michigan: Driker Associates, 1969), I-15; and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Analysis of Flint, Michigan, Housing Market as of November 1967* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1967).

County continued to prefer stand-alone houses to multiple-family arrangements, increasing numbers of residents in the 1960s and 1970s chose lower-cost mobile homes, condominiums, apartments, and townhomes over single-family detached structures. In February 1970, planners from the Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission detected this market shift, noting, “multiple-family structures are increasing at a much faster rate than are single-family dwellings.”<sup>39</sup> Between 1960 and 1970, multiple-family housing units in Genesee County increased by 43 percent while the number of mobile home units doubled. By 1970, trailers and multiple-family units accounted for almost 20 percent of the dwellings in the county. Among the citizens who sought out these types of housing arrangements were thousands of whites who desperately wanted to leave the city but could not afford to purchase detached homes. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the shift toward mobile homes and “multiples” intensified as economic stagflation pushed the cost of single-family units beyond the reach of most ordinary autoworkers. In 1966, conventional mortgage lenders in Genesee County typically required a 10 percent down payment and offered loans at 8 percent interest. Over the next four years, local interest rates surged past 10 percent. In order to qualify for lower interest rates, lenders required homebuyers to make down payments of up to 25 percent. For many prospective homeowners, rising down payments and interest rates made the cost of a traditional home prohibitive. Still eager to leave Flint, though, thousands of working-class whites in the

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<sup>39</sup> Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, *Genesee County Land Use Conclusions Report, Genesee County, Michigan: Flint-Genesee County Comprehensive Land Use-Transportation Planning Study* (Flint: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1970), ch. 3, 25-41.

1960s and 1970s chose to trade their single-family homes in the city for smaller, cheaper, and more densely settled communities in the suburbs.<sup>40</sup>

The growth in mobile home parks and multiple-family housing in suburban Flint unleashed a wave of polarizing land use battles during the 1960s and 1970s. Race, as it did during the conflicts over public housing, often played a prominent role in suburban land use disputes. However, contestation over trailer parks, townhomes, and apartment complexes often brought whites of different class backgrounds into conflict with one another. Determined to preserve the social and economic integrity of their schools and neighborhoods, many suburban homeowners and legislators resisted the construction of affordable housing even when builders and realtors marketed those units exclusively to whites.<sup>41</sup>

The case of Fenton Township is instructive. During the 1950s and 1960s, intense battles over trailer parks and taxes erupted in that far south suburb. In the summer of 1955, a developer announced plans to construct a sixty-unit trailer park in the Lake Fenton section of the township. In response, homeowners and members of the Lake Fenton Board of Education urged policymakers in the township to deny the developer's building permit and re-zoning requests. While many homeowners objected to the development due to concerns about property values, school officials opposed to the

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<sup>40</sup> Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, *Genesee County 1990 Land Use-Transportation Plan: Flint-Genesee County Comprehensive Land Use-Transportation Study* (Flint: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1971), III-3. On the changing trends in the home building industry, see also, Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, *Density Study: Flint-Genesee County Comprehensive Land Use-Transportation Planning Study* (Flint: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1974). On rising interest rates and the declining affordability of single-family homes, see Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, *Housing – Genesee County: Flint-Genesee County Comprehensive Land Use-Transportation Planning Study* (Flint: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1971), ch. 3; and Braestrup, “HUD’s Biggest Housing Effort.”

<sup>41</sup> On trailer parks, see A. Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

project because they feared enrollment increases. On January 18, 1956, Harry S. Newcombe, the president of the school board in Lake Fenton, denounced the plan on behalf of the entire board of education. In a letter to the Fenton Township Zoning Board, Newcombe argued that trailer parks did not generate sufficient tax revenues to fund the enrollment increases they caused. Because state law in Michigan allowed trailer park owners and residents to pay less in taxes than the owners of single-family homes, Newcombe and the other school board members maintained, "...we wish to go on the official records of the Zoning Board as being unanimously opposed to the granting of any permit for the construction and operation of additional trailer parks in this school district."<sup>42</sup> Categorically, then, Newcombe and his colleagues objected to *all* trailer park facilities.

Prior to the mid-1960s, Newcombe and other opponents of trailer parks won few victories in Fenton Township. Committed above all else to stimulating new residential development—even when it arrived in the form of low-cost mobile homes—members of the Fenton Township Board endorsed the 1955 trailer park rezoning proposal. In 1962, the township board authorized an additional request to build a trailer park near Loon Lake.<sup>43</sup> These new developments infuriated many homeowners and education officials. By the mid-1960s, opponents of trailer parks had won a majority of seats on the township board. In 1967, the anti-mobile home faction approved a stringent trailer park licensing and inspection ordinance. Among other things, the law required trailer park proprietors to obtain annual licenses from the township. In order to gain and renew their licenses, park owners and residents had to submit to at least two formal inspections each year. The

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<sup>42</sup> *Fenton Independent*, January 26, 1956.

<sup>43</sup> See *Fenton Independent*, December 20, 1962.

law also stipulated that individual mobile home lots could be no smaller than four thousand square feet with at least ten feet separating each unit. Furthermore, the ordinance established that two-person units had to contain at least 250 square feet of “habitable space” and that each additional occupant beyond two required no less than a hundred square feet of extra living area. Effectively, then, the trailer ordinance established limits on family size. The intent of the new law, the *Independent* noted, was to prohibit all but the most “ultra-modern” and exclusive trailer parks. This was important, a 1968 *Independent* editorial suggested, because traditional trailer parks tended to attract disengaged, transient citizens, “the very type of people . . . who seldom participate in community affairs.” Although most residents of the township agreed that the board should regulate trailer parks, some community members viewed the new ordinance as unfair. According to John Mehall, the owner of the Lake Ponemah Mobile Home Resort, the ordinance’s minimum space requirements limited reproductive freedom and were a form of class discrimination. “You cannot limit the number of children a couple can have in a mobile home,” he argued, “without limiting the number of children a couple can have in a home in a subdivision.” If residents of single-family homes did not have to limit the size of their families, Mehall and other critics of the law charged, then neither should the occupants of trailer parks.<sup>44</sup>

The year after the Fenton Township Board passed its trailer ordinance, class tensions over land use erupted again in the community. In the spring of 1967, local landowner Alton B. Lifsey asked the township planning commission to rezone his property on North Fenton Road so that he could develop the area’s first “deluxe multiple housing development.” Anticipating that some homeowners and school officials would

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<sup>44</sup> *Fenton Independent*, January 27, February 17, 1966, May 30, 1968.

oppose the project, Lifsey assured commission members that larger families with school-aged children would not move into the complex. In order to minimize occupancy, Lifsey promised to restrict the development to apartments with no more than one or two bedrooms. Furthermore, he informed the commissioners that the rents he planned to charge would be “high enough to keep down larger families.” By describing the project as “deluxe,” the developer also made a subtler point about the class backgrounds of the renters he sought. In spite of Lifsey’s reassurances, several residents who lived near the proposed development raised objections. While some neighbors were skeptical about “Lifsey’s plan for birth control,” others argued that the apartments would lower the property values of nearby single-family homes. As well, some critics of the proposal suggested that a decision to approve Lifsey’s project would only encourage developers of less desirable, low-cost apartments to submit their own rezoning requests. Over the objections of these residents, however, the planning commission voted to approve Lifsey’s request. Soon after that, Fenton Township had its first deluxe apartments.<sup>45</sup>

The 1966-67 debates over trailer parks and luxury apartments in Fenton Township reveal a great deal about the politics of land use in the out-county. Like their counterparts in Fenton Township, most suburban officials did not reflexively oppose trailer parks and multiple-family housing units. Indeed, city, village, and township governments approved a record number of such projects during the 1960s and 1970s. In order to obtain government approval, however, developers had to convince local authorities that their projects would be a boon to the local economy. In most cases, this entailed demonstrating that proposed developments would exclude poor and working-class renters with children, even if those families were white. Such class-based

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<sup>45</sup> *Fenton Independent*, May 11, 1967.



restrictions deeply offended affordable housing developers and the thousands of working-class families who wanted to buy or rent low-cost housing in the suburbs. By the end of the 1960s, the strong market demand for affordable suburban housing had collided head-on with grassroots mandates for race- and class-restrictive zoning in the out-county, setting the stage for major land use battles in Flint's suburbs.

In February 1967, a fierce debate over zoning and mobile homes broke out in the far southeastern suburb of Atlas Township. The conflict began in response to a rezoning request submitted by Wilfred O. Dunkel and Jacob Kremski, representatives of Champion Home Builders. Dunkel and Kremski wanted to construct a six hundred-unit trailer park on 360 acres of land near the village of Goodrich. Prior to doing so, however, they needed members of the Atlas Township Zoning Board to rezone the land for commercial use. During the zoning board's February 8 meeting, over sixty residents of the primarily rural community spoke out against the \$2 million project. As in Fenton Township, homeowners and school officials led the opposition. According to one critic who spoke at the meeting, "More people in a community means more problems – not more blessings." Speaking on behalf of the Goodrich Board of Education, Mrs. Janet F. Hempton claimed that the school system could not accommodate any new pupils. "We don't have enough classrooms right now," she maintained. For his part, Dunkel went to surprising lengths to assuage Hempton's concerns about increased student enrollment. Early in the meeting, Dunkel informed audience members that he and other trailer park owners had an "unwritten law" of not allowing any families with more than three children. Later on, though, Dunkel revised his statement, promising that he would "guarantee there won't be more than one [child] in four [trailers]." Not convinced by

Dunkel's promises, most residents indicated that they would continue to fight the project. On March 29, 1967, the township zoning board unanimously rejected the rezoning petition. In explaining their vote, board members claimed that the township had neither the infrastructure nor the school facilities to accommodate a "trailer city."<sup>46</sup>

Suburban officials often relied on public opinion when they ruled on zoning disputes over trailer parks and multiple-family housing. In September 1967, fifty concerned homeowners from Burton Township attended a meeting of the Burton Township Zoning Board to denounce developer Leonard Chandler's plan to build a four-unit apartment building on Adams Road. Although all in attendance agreed that the four one-bedroom apartments would not contribute to school overcrowding, the homeowners charged that the project would undermine property values. In addition, most in attendance believed that approving Chandler's project would "open the area to other apartment dwellings, with no guarantee as to the quality of construction." Moved by the opposition, board members Homer Berry, John Turner, and Leslie Alward asked the audience to demonstrate, by a show of hands, their feelings towards the project. After all in attendance voted nay, members of the board summarily rejected Chandler's request.<sup>47</sup>

On several occasions during the late 1960s, suburban zoning boards ignored public opposition and voted to support low-cost housing developments. In response, homeowner activists organized petition drives and referenda campaigns. On November 11, 1968, the Fenton Township Planning Commission, over the objections of seventy homeowners, voted to endorse a rezoning request for a proposed trailer park on North Road. In their defense, the commissioners argued that the site was already zoned for

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<sup>46</sup> *Davison Index*, March 15, 29, 1967.

<sup>47</sup> *Davison Index*, September 27, 1967.

such use and that the land in question was far away from residential developments. At the same meeting, the commissioners also declined to reject a rezoning request for an apartment complex, choosing instead to study the issue further. Outraged by the commissioners' decisions, dozens of local homeowners organized a referendum campaign to halt the two developments. On November 13, nearly fifty "irate, indignant residents" attended a public meeting held by the Fenton Township Board to protest the planning commission's actions. Speaking on behalf of homeowners from the Alpine Shores subdivision, David Wright predicted,

As long as most of the people living in the township object, there will be no multiple dwellings. We feel it is not necessary to have them as long as we have good quality homes for a tax base. By going for multiple homes or mobile home parks, we will lose that [individ]uality.

"We are against it [rezoning] now and will be against it two years from now," another homeowner added. "We don't care how the area is redeveloped, just as long as it is not with multiple dwellings." Impressed by the public show of force, the township board voted unanimously to reject the rezoning request for the multiple-family apartments. While homeowners applauded the decision to reject multiples, many of these activists vowed to continue their campaign until the township board overruled the commission's favorable ruling on the trailer park. In opposition to the mobile home project, homeowners argued that the new units would overburden the township's sewer system and school facilities. In an editorial entitled "Any Place Else but Here," the *Independent* denounced both existing and proposed trailer parks in or even near Fenton Township, claiming, "It should just about be apparent by now that Fenton, Fenton Township and Tyrone Township do not want any more trailer parks." "Are you prepared to raise your taxes for operational costs while these freeloaders [in trailer parks] ride along?" resident

James Smeets asked. On February 12, 1969, the Fenton Township Board bowed to the public pressure and voted to deny the rezoning request.<sup>48</sup>

In July 1968, an equally heated dispute over zoning for trailers and apartments exploded in the nearby suburb of Davison. The row began on July 20, when Reverend Ronald J. Button and his son Robert asked the Davison Zoning Board of Appeals to rezone thirty-four acres of swampland on the city's outskirts from residential to commercial. The two men hoped to build an apartment complex and a "200-unit prestige mobile home development" on the vacant property. Anticipating resistance to the project, the Buttons worked hard to satisfy the fears of community members. In order to alleviate concerns about density, sanitation, and blight, the developers offered to plant trees and grass, pledged to lease spaces only to upstanding permanent residents, and promised to subdivide the property into larger, more expensive lots. Before announcing their intentions, the developers also gained approval for the \$1 million project from 90 percent of the residents who owned property nearby. Still, though, citizens of Davison responded negatively to the Buttons' plans. On August 9, a hundred residents asked the zoning board to deny the Buttons' request. Jim Butler, a spokesperson for the opposition, charged that the development "would destroy the flavor of the city" and that trailer parks were "noisy, unsightly, [and] filled with transients who have no civic pride." "Cities are made up of homes," he continued. "If I had wanted to live next to a trailer park, I would have moved near one."<sup>49</sup>

After deliberating on the issue, members of the zoning board agreed to endorse the project, arguing that the swampy land was not suitable for any other purpose. On

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<sup>48</sup> *Fenton Independent*, May 30, October 10, November 14, 21, December 12, 1968, January 9, 23, February 20, 1949.

<sup>49</sup> *Davison Index*, July 24, August 14, 1968.

October 14, the Davison City Council formally approved the project. In response, the homeowners began collecting signatures to force a referendum on the issue. Although opponents of the project easily obtained the 265 signatures required to trigger a citywide vote, the Buttons stalled their efforts by filing a lawsuit to block the referendum. After several months of legal battles, the dispute ended when the Buttons won a favorable ruling against the referendum. Ultimately, after a divisive campaign that raged for nearly a year, the Buttons triumphed in their efforts to build low-cost multiple-unit housing in Davison. Their development opened without fanfare in 1970.<sup>50</sup>

Although the Buttons won their dispute in Davison, the victory was a mixed blessing for those who supported affordable housing construction in the suburbs. Following the battle in Davison, homeowners in the out-county repeatedly used the threat of referenda and other grassroots protest strategies to block a number of affordable housing projects. For their part, suburban planners and legislators codified the popular resistance to low-cost housing by enacting strict building and zoning regulations. In July 1969, the Grand Blanc City Council passed a restrictive zoning ordinance to limit the construction of apartments and townhouses. The Grand Blanc law mandated that developers could build no more than thirteen units of housing per acre. According to local builder Dale Hicks and other critics of the legislation, the new density law effectively prohibited all but the most costly multiple-family complexes in the city.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, even if developers could satisfy Grand Blanc's rigid density requirements, the city council provided voters with a measure of veto power over all rezoning matters. Before rezoning any land in Grand Blanc, city council members, as a matter of official

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<sup>50</sup> *Davison Index*, August 21, October 16, 1968, January 29, March 5, 19, April 2, 9, 23, June 14, 25, 1969.

<sup>51</sup> Kay Semion, "Grand Blanc Zoning Law Approved," *Flint Journal*, July 10, 1969.

policy, first surveyed all landowners living within three hundred yards of the property in question. If 20 percent of the property owners objected in writing to the proposal, then rezoning required a two-thirds supermajority vote from the city council. In April 1970, thirty-five homeowners exercised their veto power by protesting a rezoning request submitted by developer Richard Bechtel. Bechtel, the president of Bechtel Construction Company, had requested the rezoning in order to build sixteen two-bedroom apartments and nine townhouses. After hearing from the homeowners, the lone supporter of the project on the Grand Blanc City Council could not muster the requisite two-thirds majority needed to approve the project.<sup>52</sup>

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, hardly a month went by without major confrontations erupting over land use restrictions in suburban Genesee County. When they learned of plans to develop apartments, trailer parks, and townhouses in their communities, suburban homeowner activists turned out in droves to express their opposition. In December 1969, residents of Burton Township mobilized a successful campaign to block a mobile home park in their community.<sup>53</sup> That same month, homeowners in Davison Township defeated a rezoning proposal for mobile homes in a referendum.<sup>54</sup> The following year, Burton taxpayers helped to nix five separate proposals to build trailer parks in the township.<sup>55</sup> By the spring of 1970, the fight over multiples had exploded again in the Davison area. In May, homeowners in Davison Township formed the Concerned Residents of Davison Township to block an FHA-backed condominium complex. As in other similar cases, the company that wanted to build the

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<sup>52</sup> "Citizens Turn Out – Bechtel Rezoning Turned Down," *Grand Blanc News*, April 30, 1970.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Moore, "Mobile Park Plan Balked in Burton," *Davison Index*, December 3, 1969.

<sup>54</sup> *Davison Index*, July 15, 1970.

<sup>55</sup> "Burton Turns Down Mobile Home Parks," *Davison Index*, May 6, 1970.

condominiums, Pulte Homes, required a zoning change from residential to commercial in order to move forward with the plan. In a full-page advertisement that ran in the *Davison Index*, the homeowner group denounced the rezoning proposal, claiming, “The structures will be of the four-family FHA low-cost type.” “Should this thrust be approved,” the homeowners charged, “expert observers believe that property values in the vicinity could drop, traffic hazards would increase and general crowding problems would result.”<sup>56</sup> Members of the Concerned Residents of Davison Township were especially displeased that buyers of the planned condominiums would only need to pay a small down payment of \$950 to purchase units. With such low down payments, the residents charged, the complex would invariably attract poor people to the township. In defense of the project, Supervisor Kingsley and others argued that the condominiums would yield increased tax revenues. Moreover, Kingsley pointed out that FHA closing costs would double the initial payments that buyers would have to make and that monthly maintenance and association fees would further increase the financial obligations of purchasers. The monthly fees and the requirement of a \$2,000 initial payment, supporters of the project maintained, “would preclude having a low-cost settlement.” Persuaded by Kingsley’s arguments, members of the Davison Township Board approved the rezoning proposal.<sup>57</sup> The board’s decision enraged hundreds of homeowners. Within a month of the vote, members of the Concerned Residents of Davison Township had collected nearly a thousand signatures in opposition to the project, more than enough to force a referendum.

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<sup>56</sup> *Davison Index*, n.d. [ca. May 15, 1970].

<sup>57</sup> *Davison Index*, May 20, 27, 1970.

In the referendum election, voters in the township decisively turned down the rezoning proposal.<sup>58</sup>

Suburban voters were not always successful in blocking apartment complexes and other forms of low-cost housing. In January 1970, homeowners in the north suburban city of Clio submitted referendum petitions to block the construction of a \$1.8 million 156-unit apartment and townhouse complex. As in virtually every other such case, the opponents of the rental complex argued that it would depress property values and cause school overcrowding. For their part, the developers insisted that the project would increase tax revenues and stimulate economic growth in the city. Furthermore, they contended that the project would not adversely affect property values due to its location near the city limits. Although the homeowners won their campaign to have an election on the issue, they ultimately lost their bid to block the project. On August 4, 1970, voters in Clio, in the city's first ever referendum election, endorsed the multiple-family rental project by a slim thirty-vote margin. In the Clio case, voters endorsed the project because they desired new tax revenues to support the city's government and schools. Moreover, they rejected the idea that a rental complex on the city's border would depress property values in the remainder of the community.<sup>59</sup>

The Clio case was not an isolated example. As interest rates soared and the cost of housing increased during the 1970s, multiple-family units continued to grow in popularity. Supporters of such housing countered their homeowner opponents with evidence that apartment complexes produced 3.6 times as much in taxes per acre as single-family homes. Moreover, they maintained that in virtually every instance

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<sup>58</sup> *Davison Index*, June 24, July 15, October 14, December 30, 1970.

<sup>59</sup> *Clio Messenger*, January 21, February 4, July 29, August 5, 1970.



municipal service costs for multiples were lower than for detached houses.<sup>60</sup> In some cases, suburban planners and legislators accepted the pro-growth arguments of developers and backed requests to build multiple-family housing. At times, even homeowners—especially those living farthest from proposed new developments—accepted the construction of townhomes and apartments as a necessary compromise to achieve economic growth. Nevertheless, the vast majority of homeowners in Genesee County agreed that there should be strict limitations on the type of multiple-family housing allowed in their communities. Proposals to build “deluxe” apartments and condominiums for middle-class and professional whites without children encountered far less resistance than developments that promised to attract African Americans, working-class families, and the poor.

Responding to the increased demand for affordable suburban housing, developers in the out-county rushed to build thousands of low-cost dwelling units during the 1960s and 1970s. Racial succession in Flint and Beecher, rising home mortgage interest rates, and the economic slowdown of the 1970s all converged to fuel the expanding market for suburban trailers and multiples. Urban racial panics helped to drive tens of thousands of white homeowners from the city to the suburbs, but economic factors severely limited the options available to fleeing whites. Under these conditions, suburban officials found themselves inundated with thousands of new building permit applications and rezoning requests for apartments, townhomes, and trailer parks. To suburban officials in Clio and elsewhere, the boom in multiples seemed to be the wave of the future. In their attempts to lure new development and higher tax revenues, some out-county policymakers endorsed the construction of multiples, especially when those developments catered to

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<sup>60</sup> *Fenton Independent*, July 16, 1970.

professional whites without children. If homeowners wanted new roads, schools, and sewers, these pro-growth suburbanites argued, then they would have to approve at least some units of affordable housing or expect significantly higher taxes. During a 1970 rezoning fight in the Davison area, Davison Township Attorney William McTaggart—who had authored the 1966 anti-picketing ordinance—made the case for accepting new development. “We cannot duck the responsibility of doing something to alleviate the tax situation. It can only be done by rezoning to attract tax dollars into the community. . . . The township board is trying to regulate property use for orderly growth.” “It’s not right for the township board to be subjected to referendum after referendum,” he continued, “when it is only trying to do a service to the community.”<sup>61</sup>

Ever cognizant of the racial situation unfolding in Beecher, realtors, developers, and pro-growth suburban officials sought to restrict most new developments to white buyers and renters. Nevertheless, homeowner activists revolted against virtually every attempt to build high- and medium-density housing complexes in their communities. Although suburban opponents of trailer parks and multiple-family housing were not always successful in blocking new developments, they accumulated an impressive number of victories during the 1960s and 1970s. Still, Genesee County had become one of the trailer park capitals of Michigan by 1970. During that year, there were 3,674 mobile home units in the county as a whole, most of them located in trailer courts and parks. However, 80 percent of those units were concentrated in Flint and the urbanized townships closest to the city. Of the thirty-two cities, villages, and townships in the county as a whole, nineteen had no mobile home parks at all. Similarly, most units of multiple-family housing in Genesee County were located in tiny geographic clusters. In

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<sup>61</sup> *Davison Index*, February 18, 1970.

1970, planners from the Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission counted 9,786 units of multiple-family housing in the region, 6,825 of which were in the central city. Nearly two-thirds of the multiples located outside of the city of Flint were in the urbanized areas of Flint Township and the city of Grand Blanc. Moreover, thirteen of the thirty-two governmental units in the county contained no units of multiple-family housing. Responding to the complaints of homeowners, suburban planners and legislators in these thirteen areas resisted the spread of multiples by establishing restrictive land use policies. When suburban policymakers voted to allow the construction of low-cost housing, they made sure to restrict it to small, discrete tracts of land. As of 1970, in fact, government planners had zoned only 803 of the 405,367 acres of land in Genesee County for either mobile homes or multiples. By 1975, builders had erected an additional 7,179 multiple-family dwellings, some of them in suburban areas that had previously blocked affordable housing. Still, though, nearly 70 percent of the units constructed between 1970 and 1975 were located either in Flint or in urbanized areas near the city limits.<sup>62</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s conflicts over multiples, the specter of the racial and economic transitions occurring in Flint and Beecher loomed large in the minds of suburban homeowners. However, suburban activists only rarely made direct references to race and class when they organized against affordable housing. One exception to this rule occurred in 1972, when the racial and class anxieties of suburban white homeowners

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<sup>62</sup> Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, *Genesee County Land Use Conclusions Report, Genesee County Michigan: Flint-Genesee County Comprehensive Land Use-Transportation Study* (Flint: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1970), esp. table A-1; and Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, *Single and Multiple Family Residential Construction Authorized in Genesee County since January 1, 1970-December 31, 1975* (Flint: Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1976). On mobile home locations, see Region V Planning and Development Commission, *Mobile Home Park Inventory: Occupied Sites* (Flint: Region V Planning and Development Commission, 1988).

exploded into the open during a fight over a low-cost housing development in the southwestern suburb of Gaines Township. The conflict began when builders from the Starline Construction Company received the township board's approval to construct a 230-unit subdivision of low-cost homes just west of Swartz Creek. In order to make the homes more affordable, Starline decided to build the houses on small lots with frontages of sixty feet and worked out an arrangement with the Farmers Home finance company to offer the homes for sale with no down payments. When homeowners learned about these terms, they mobilized in opposition. During a July meeting of the Gaines Township Board, forty residents shouted down E. Manuel Sarko, a representative from Starline. "Let's face it! He's building a ghetto!" one resident screamed. "We had to have a \$2,000 down-payment when we moved into our home," said another resident. "These people consider this cheap rent, and when they get a chance, they move out and leave the place to go to ruin." "You don't upgrade farmland by putting little boxes on it," shouted another resident. "Take your little boxes somewhere else. We don't want them." If people wanted to live in "little boxes," some in the group charged, then they should go to Flint or Beecher, where "there were plenty of these types of homes being abandoned . . . every day."<sup>63</sup>

Unlike homeowners in most suburban areas, the residents of Gaines Township were not successful in blocking the construction of low-cost housing. Nevertheless, their fight is worth noting because it illustrates a broader set of concerns that motivated suburban activists during the 1960s and 1970s. Suburban homeowners, along with many of their elected representatives, fought to defeat low-cost residential developments

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<sup>63</sup> Susanne Talt, "New Swartz Creek Subdivision Meets Opposition," *Grand Blanc News*, July 6, 1972; and *Swartz Creek News*, June 29, 1972.

because they accepted what thirty years of federal and local policies had taught them about property values. Specifically, they believed that low-rent housing attracted low-rent individuals—the sort of people who had helped to destroy neighborhoods, property values, and community integrity in Flint and Beecher. For many white homeowners, then, the struggle against low-cost housing was part of the broader campaign for independence from Flint and its problems. For that reason, suburban homeowners and policymakers fought just as hard to oppose annexation and metropolitan government as they did to block trailer parks and apartment complexes. Indeed, in the minds of suburban homeowner activists, these struggles were the same.

#### *The Life and Death of Annexation*

Like urban centers across the United States, the city of Flint grew tremendously during the first half of the twentieth century. By the mid-1950s, Flint could claim nearly 200,000 residents. Yet the city's boundaries failed to keep pace with its meteoric population growth. Between 1920 and 1960, the city's total geographic area remained fixed at just under thirty square miles. By contrast, the booming Sunbelt city of Houston contained over three hundred square miles of territory in 1960. A combination of restrictive state laws governing urban spatial growth, liberal municipal incorporation statutes, and suburban hostility to annexation helped to keep Flint's boundaries in place during the postwar decades. Unlike state legislators in Texas, North Carolina, and other Sunbelt states who endorsed liberal postwar annexation policies, lawmakers in Michigan

drafted a legal code that made it virtually impossible for cities such as Flint to expand their boundaries.<sup>64</sup>

Michigan's relatively lenient municipal incorporation statutes played a key role in halting the geographic expansion of Flint, Detroit, and other central cities. Under Michigan law, unincorporated territories seeking to become home rule cities had to contain at least two thousand residents and have a minimum population density of five hundred people per square mile. If any unincorporated geographic entity met those basic requirements, then residents favoring incorporation had to collect signatures from 1 percent of the area's duly registered landowners. After gathering support from the required number of qualified citizens, supporters of incorporation next forwarded the petitions to the county clerk, who held the power to order an election. If the clerk approved the petitions and scheduled an election, then incorporation required the support of a simple majority of qualified voters. Upon winning an election, proponents of incorporation then drafted a city charter, which also required voters' approval. Once incorporated, new cities could levy higher taxes, provide municipal services, and block all annexation attempts from adjoining municipalities.<sup>65</sup>

During the 1958 battles over New Flint, citizens in the southwestern suburb of Swartz Creek voted to incorporate to protect their Chevrolet warehouse from future

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<sup>64</sup> On annexation in Flint and the state of Michigan, see William O. Winter, "Annexation as a Solution to the Fringe Problem: An Analysis of Past and Potential Annexations of Suburban Areas to the City of Flint, Michigan," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1949); Jesse I. Bourquin and Albert G. Ballert, "Expansion of Michigan Cities and Villages in the 1940 Decade," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 36 (1950); Alvin D. Sokolow, *Annexation and Incorporation in Michigan: An Evaluation of the Boundary Commission Plan* (East Lansing: Institute for Community Development and Services, Michigan State University, 1965); and Louis C. Andrews, ed., *Annexation Procedures in Michigan for Home Rule Cities and Villages* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Municipal League, 1968).

<sup>65</sup> Ralph T. Jans, *The Urban Fringe Problem: Solutions under Michigan Law* (Ann Arbor: Bureau of Government, Institute of Public Administration, University of Michigan, 1957); Frank S. Sengstock, *Annexation: A Solution to the Metropolitan Area Problem* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Law School, 1960); and Leo F. Schnore, "Municipal Annexations and the Growth of Metropolitan Suburbs, 1950-60," *American Journal of Sociology* 67:4 (January 1962): 406-417.

annexation. In September 1959, Swartz Creek voters officially endorsed a new city charter. By the early 1960s, voters in several additional suburban areas had followed suit. In April 1963, the citizens of Fenton and Flushing approved incorporation proposals. Often, these incorporation elections hinged on local debates over utilities, services, and campaigns to secure new FHA-backed investment. In order to gain better services and modernize living standards, proponents of incorporation argued, townships and villages had to become home rule cities. Such was the case in Flushing, where supporters of incorporation purchased full-page newspaper advertisements asking voters to choose incorporation to “END SEPTIC TANKS” and “PLUG UP THE WELLS – GET PURE CITY WATER – QUALIFY FOR LOW-COST FHA LOANS ON MORTGAGES.”<sup>66</sup> Voters in these elections also knew that incorporation would forever protect their new investments from the prospect of annexation.

Beyond Michigan’s liberal municipal incorporation legislation, restrictive state laws governing annexation also limited the power of city officials who wished to acquire suburban land. As with incorporation, annexation attempts in Michigan began with a petitioning process that required signatures from 1 percent of the qualified property owners in the combined areas affected by the proposed boundary changes. Once they collected the signatures, supporters of annexation forwarded petitions to the county board of supervisors. If members of the county board could certify the authenticity of the petitions, then they ordered an annexation election. In order to achieve annexation, a majority of voters in both the city and the township in question—counted separately—had to endorse the plan. By requiring separate majorities in both the city and suburbs,

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<sup>66</sup> *Flushing Observer*, March 28, April 4, 1963; *Fenton Independent*, April 4, 1963; and Gail R. Light, “Areas Outside Flint Can Expect More Growth in ‘70s,” *Flint Journal*, December 31, 1969.

state law effectively provided suburban residents with veto power over annexation attempts. In September 1961, voters in Flint Township demonstrated their electoral power by voting three-to-one against a proposed annexation to the city of Flint.<sup>67</sup> Although GM executives had offered their “wholehearted endorsement” of the plan to annex the entire township—and though votes in favor of annexation far exceeded those against—the legal requirement of a separate majority in Flint Township proved decisive.<sup>68</sup> Annexation would have to come by other means.

Enlightened by the New Flint and Flint Township annexation defeats, Vehicle City officials altered their expansion strategy in the early 1960s. Specifically, they moved to circumvent their suburban opponents by “strip” annexing factories, shopping malls, and other uninhabited or sparsely populated lands. Regarding the annexation of uninhabited areas contiguous to the city—namely factories and shopping centers—state law in Michigan required only a simple majority of voters in the city and affected suburban areas, counted together. This loophole provided legal space for city officials to prepare annexation petitions for several major industrial and commercial facilities that ringed the city’s border. On November 14, 1961, City Manager Thomas Kay filed four separate petitions to annex 5,422 acres of predominantly industrial and commercial property in parts of Flint, Mt. Morris, Genesee, and Burton Townships. Specifically, Kay sought the four GM plants on Van Slyke and Bristol Roads, the Ternstedt division facility in suburban Beecher, Bishop Airport, the South Flint Plaza, the Northwest Shopping

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<sup>67</sup> *Flint Journal*, September 13, 1961.

<sup>68</sup> Dowdy, “Says GM for Annexation as Being Best for All,” *Flint Journal*, August 20, 1961.



Center, and a large residential area north of the city that city leaders had slated for commercial and industrial redevelopment.<sup>69</sup>

As with the New Flint proposal, the November 1961 annexation petitions received strong public support from the Mott Foundation, the UAW, the Chamber of Commerce, GM, and other members of the city's pro-growth coalition.<sup>70</sup> In August 1961, the plant managers of GM's four Flint Township facilities publicly announced their support for annexation to Flint.<sup>71</sup> During a 1961 address, AC Spark Plug executive Joseph Anderson pointed out that Flint had no more room available for industrial development and that annexation would make the entire area more attractive to GM and other employers: "The expansion of General Motors in the Flint area during the past 10 to 20 years has been possible because GM officials of Flint have been able to point out to other corporation officials that 'Flint solves its problems.'" "If a community holds a plant in a small area," Anderson warned, "industrial development will be cut off." "GM can't afford to go into an area that's going to do that sort of thing."<sup>72</sup> Harding Mott, Charles Stewart's son, echoed Anderson's claims, noting, "Without approval of these annexation proposals, Flint will be in a poor competitive position to attract new or expanded industry." "The future of the entire county," he added, "could be strangled by holding Flint's city-limits where they stand today."<sup>73</sup> Yet again, GM officials worked to solidify their metropolitan growth strategy by expanding the city's boundaries.

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<sup>69</sup> Pallotta, "Sections of Four Townships Are Involved in Move," *Flint Journal*, November 14, 1961.

<sup>70</sup> On the UAW's support for annexation, see *Flint Weekly Review*, November 16, December 28, 1961.

<sup>71</sup> "Text of GM's Statement Endorsing Annexation," *Flint Journal*, August 20, 1961.

<sup>72</sup> "AC Chief Says Annexation Would Keep Area Attractive to Industry," *Flint Journal*, n.d. [ca. September 14, 1961]. During the 1950s and 1960s, Anderson delivered dozens of speeches in favor of annexation. See, for instance, "Let's Capitalize on the Growth Potential of the Flint Area," January 28, 1964, Anderson Papers, Perry Archives.

<sup>73</sup> "Harding Mott Urges Approval on City Annexation Issues," *Flint Weekly Review*, February 15, 1962.

Under the leadership of Thomas Kay, Second Ward Commissioner James H. Darby, and Flint Mayor Charles A. Mobley, city commissioners unanimously endorsed the 1962 campaign. If the annexation bid failed, Mobley predicted, then all of the four townships surrounding the city would attempt to incorporate. Like the city's automobile executives, Mayor Mobley believed that suburban incorporation "would strangle prospects for growth and prosperity" in the landlocked city.<sup>74</sup> For his part, City Manager Kay urged voters to support annexation by invoking images of arcane historical cities surrounded by walls and other barriers: "History books have stories and pictures of cities with walls and, in American history, there were forts. The walls and forts fell as we became more civilized."<sup>75</sup> By employing the metaphor of the walled city, Kay hoped to appeal to a shared sense of purpose among city and suburban residents.

In spite of Kay's hopes, the 1961 and 1962 annexation battles demonstrated that clear majorities of township officials and suburban residents embraced the political and spatial barriers that separated Flint from its neighbors. The opposition to the 1962 annexation attempt brought together many of the same activists who had opposed New Flint in 1958. During the fall and winter of 1961, residents formed anti-annexation committees in each of the four townships surrounding the city. Predictably, opposition to the annexation drive was strongest in Flint Township, which stood to lose four GM plants and slightly less than two-thirds of its overall tax base of \$112 million. Under the leadership of Flint Township Supervisor Raymond Flavin and other suburban supervisors, members of the various anti-annexation committees throughout the county waged a spirited campaign to block Flint's attempt to "steal" suburban properties.

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<sup>74</sup> "Annexation Vote Is Called City's Last Chance," *Flint Journal*, February 21, 1962.

<sup>75</sup> "Annexation Gains Seen for Township and City," *Flint Journal*, n.d. [ca. February 1962]. See also, "Statement Made Regarding Annexation," February 19, 1962, City Manager Files.

“When Russia can’t get what it wants by negotiation,” Flavin charged, “they go out and take it.” “This is exactly what Flint is doing.”<sup>76</sup> In an attempt to rally parents from the Carman School District, Flavin repeatedly charged that the annexation would undermine the educational opportunities of suburban children. On December 28, 1961, after an unsuccessful attempt to block the annexation election, Flavin bemoaned the city’s attack on equal educational opportunities: “Flint Township is being crucified. . . . The people of my township have worked hard to give their children an education. Now you are trying to take the opportunity for education away from these poor children.” Many suburban voters believed that strip annexation—pitting greedy and powerful urban machines against innocent suburban families—made a mockery of the cherished American values of hard work and fair play.

Race also played an important role in the 1962 annexation saga. Many suburban activists perceived annexation as a grave racial threat. Though they framed their opposition to Flint within the values of the American Creed, some suburban residents feared that annexation—like subsidized housing—would generate an influx of black families to their neighborhoods. In March 1961, Lawrence B. Rice, the chairperson of the Carman School District Citizens Advisory Committee, offered a critique of annexation that appealed to the racial anxieties of Flint Township residents. In Flint Township, Rice claimed, “you can walk down any street and you don’t see any bars, any dives, and juke joints.”<sup>77</sup>

Not surprisingly, Flint officials triumphed in the 1962 annexation battle. On February 27, voters in Flint overwhelmed their suburban opponents at the polls. Needing

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<sup>76</sup> “Flint Township Spokesman Calls Flint Annexation Move Thievery,” *Flint Journal*, December 21, 1961.

<sup>77</sup> Jesse C. Hatcher, “Debate Flint Twp. Annexation,” *Flint Journal*, n.d. [March 1961].

to gain only a majority of votes in the city and suburbs, counted together, the city easily won the annexation elections for the four Flint Township plants, Bishop Airport, the Northwest Shopping Center, and the South Flint Plaza. The victory was a pyrrhic one, however. In Beecher and Mt. Morris Township, voters successfully blocked the city's attempt to annex GM's Ternstedt facility and a parcel of sparsely inhabited residential land. In total, the 1962 annexation campaign yielded the city 1,370 acres of land and increased the total assessed valuation of properties in Flint by over \$70 million. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the election, opponents of annexation in Flint and Mt. Morris Townships waged a successful counterattack against the city. Shortly after the 1962 vote, members of the Genesee County Board of Education determined that all school taxes paid by Flint's newly acquired factories and shopping centers would continue to fund the Carman and Westwood Heights School Districts. Lawyers representing the Flint Board of Education fought the board's ruling in court, but to no avail.<sup>78</sup> In addition to losing the school taxes generated by the newly acquired properties, the city also suffered a major blow to its public image during the 1962 annexation battle. Just a few weeks prior to the February elections, Spencer Carpenter, the chairperson of the Flint Township Anti-Annexation Committee, voiced the frustrations of thousands of suburban residents in announcing that he planned to sever all ties with the city of Flint. "If this is the way the city of Flint handles its matters," Carpenter threatened, "I don't want to ever be a part of Flint." "In fact, I'm ashamed to write Flint as a return address on postcards I send out."<sup>79</sup> Though Flint won an important victory in 1962, suburban bitterness over the annexation would linger for decades.

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<sup>78</sup> On the legal battle over school taxes, see *Flint Journal*, November 8, 1963, January 8, 1964.

<sup>79</sup> *Flint Journal*, December 21, 1961.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Flint officials continued their attempts to strip annex properties on the city's borders. In 1964, City Manager Kay filed a second round of petitions to annex GM's Ternstedt facility and a parcel of residential land in Genesee Township. As in 1962, however, the legal requirement of a separate majority in populated areas allowed suburban voters to defeat the measure. Unsatisfied with their victory, residents of Beecher waged a spirited but unsuccessful campaign for municipal incorporation in 1967. Following suit, members of anti-annexation committees in Flint and Mt. Morris Townships also sought to block further annexation attempts through incorporation. Although each of the three efforts went down to defeat, the 1960's drives for suburban incorporation demonstrated that suburban officials and homeowners were prepared not only to block annexation at the polls, but also to preempt future attempts by seeking incorporation. By the end of the 1960s, the movement for suburban secession in Genesee County was already well underway.

Suburban opposition to annexation did not deter city officials in Flint. Because the four townships surrounding Flint remained unincorporated, Thomas Kay and other municipal officials remained hopeful that they could annex factories, shopping centers, and unoccupied land on the city's urban fringe. On June 12 1969, *Flint Journal* reporter Lawrence R. Gustin leaked a report that Kay and others were "actively considering" a plan to annex a section of Burton Township that included the Eastland Mall and a portion of GM's AC Spark Plug complex. In addition to the Burton Township sites, Gustin also revealed that Flint sought to acquire a 115-acre parcel of vacant land in Genesee Township, which city officials hoped to develop as a horseracing track.<sup>80</sup> Although Gustin's report was speculative in nature, it nonetheless triggered an immediate response

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<sup>80</sup> Gustin, "Flint Considers Annexing Eastland Mall, AC Property," *Flint Journal*, June 12, 1969.

from officials in Burton Township. Hoping to forestall a surprise annexation bid, officials in Burton Township had already collected the required number of signatures to force an incorporation vote long before the June 12 announcement. Following the publication of Gustin's article, Burton Township Supervisor Uvick immediately rushed the petitions to Lansing, filing incorporation papers with the newly formed State Boundary Commission (SBC) on the evening of June 12.<sup>81</sup> Within hours of reading Gustin's report, Uvick had preempted his rivals in Flint.<sup>82</sup> By June 14, officials from Genesee and Flint Townships had also filed petitions for incorporation, all while City Manager Thomas Kay struggled to organize an annexation campaign within the city.<sup>83</sup>

In December 1969, at a boundary commission hearing held at Atherton High School, well over five hundred suburban residents—a majority of them from Burton Township—showed up to demand incorporation. According to newspaper reports, the crowd was so large that “when the meeting opened at 7:30, cars were lined up a half mile north of the school, unable to get into the parking lot.” During the meeting, boundary commissioners listened to dozens of pleas from residents who wanted to incorporate. Raymond Brown, a resident of Burton Township, maintained that incorporation was the only way to stop Flint's ruinous annexation bid. “If we lose a large portion of our tax base we must cease to operate as we are used to doing,” he claimed. “Strip annexation will leave us as orphans—country cousins. We want to be a man—a city.”<sup>84</sup> After

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<sup>81</sup> On the formation of the State Boundary Commission, see Maureen J. Pan, *Annexation Practices in Michigan: The City Perspective* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Municipal League, 1988), 5-6.

<sup>82</sup> Roger Van Noord, “Burton Officials Rush to Lansing; Seek City Status,” *Flint Journal*, June 13, 1969.

<sup>83</sup> Backus, “Genesee Township Seeks City Status,” *Flint Journal*, June 14, 1969; Daniel L. Dolan, “Flint Township Files Incorporation Petition,” *Flint Journal*, June 16, 1969. For analysis of the incorporation petitions, see VerBurg, Snyder, Alchin, et al., *Report to the Michigan State Boundary Commission*; and Dolan, “MSU Unit Reports on Area Annexation,” *Flint Journal*, March 8, 1970.

<sup>84</sup> Pete Stevens, “Burton's Drive Makes Impression,” *Davison Index*, December 10, 1969. See also, *Davison Index*, November 26, 1969, April 29, 1970.

reviewing the petitions and hearing from concerned taxpayers, members of the SBC ordered incorporation elections in Flint, Burton, and Genesee Townships.<sup>85</sup>

On April 13, 1971, voters in Flint and Genesee Townships rejected incorporation proposals. Fearing the possibility of huge tax increases, homeowners blocked the Genesee Township incorporation. Although the threat of losing manufacturing plants and developable land drove a substantial number of Genesee Township voters to support the proposed change, the measure nonetheless failed in a close race. In Flint Township, where the 1971 effort was solely a defensive maneuver to block future annexation attempts, voters also feared the high service costs that might accompany incorporation. Opponents of incorporation in Flint Township—many of whom had already voted to fund sewer lines, roads, schools, and water service—despised the prospect of new taxes as much as they loathed losing property to the city of Flint. Consequently, the incorporation measure lost there by a two-to-one ratio. However, in the crucial election in Burton Township, home of the Eastland Mall and part of GM's sprawling AC Spark Plug facility, voters strongly endorsed Uvick's plan to incorporate. In an aggressive campaign, Uvick and members of the Burton Citizens Committee pitted themselves as underdogs against land-grabbing politicians in Flint. "We will be gambling with our tax base if we don't do something about incorporation," Uvick reminded voters. Fearful of losing the township's two largest taxpayers, voters—even those who had a strong emotional attachments to the old Burton Township—responded by choosing incorporation. Although only Burton Township voters endorsed incorporation, the 1971 elections still left the city of Flint in a precarious position. According to Patrick Martin, the city's coordinator of economic development, Flint no longer possessed the land

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<sup>85</sup> See *Flint Journal*, April 2, 1971.

necessary to lure new investment. “If any large manufacturer wanted 100 acres,” he claimed, “we couldn’t begin to accommodate it.” Without room to grow, Martin and others believed, the city faced a dark future.<sup>86</sup>

The incorporation of Burton was a major setback to Flint’s civic and industrial leaders. Even though three of the four townships surrounding the city remained unincorporated in the aftermath of the 1971 elections, voters in those areas had made it clear that they were staunchly opposed to surrendering even vacant parcels of land to the city. Consequently, most members of the city’s political establishment interpreted the Burton incorporation vote as a signal that the era of annexations had officially ended. For six years after the 1971 defeat, Flint City Council members carefully avoided discussing the issue of annexation in their public meetings. However, the campaign to expand Flint’s boundaries and tax base was not yet over. On January 23, 1978, in a surprise move that shocked observers in the city and the county, Flint City Council member Michael McManaman—with support from two-thirds of his legislative colleagues and Mayor James W. Rutherford—launched one final annexation drive. The 1978 plan included nineteen separate proposals to annex 3,500 acres of vacant land, commercial properties, and industrial establishments in Flint, Mt. Morris, and Mundy Townships. McManaman’s proposal also included a bid to annex the Genesee Valley Shopping Center in Flint Township, the most valuable commercial development in the region. Shrewdly, McManaman and Flint City Attorney Richard Figura carefully divided the nineteen parcels of land such that none contained more than a hundred residents. They did this to avoid a popular vote, knowing that the State Boundary Commission, under

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<sup>86</sup> On the incorporation elections, see *Flint Journal*, June 25, 1972. For the Martin quotation, see *Flint Journal*, June 18, 1978.



Michigan's recently revised annexation code, possessed the authority to approve strip annexations without elections in areas containing fewer than a hundred residents. Anticipating suburban hostility to the proposal, McManaman preemptively defended the move, arguing, "We did what we felt was our obligation to do. We saw the opportunity to help the City of Flint's economy and we took it. If we didn't, I think we wouldn't be upholding our oath of office. We're supposed to do all we can as councilmen to serve the city." "Cities have to grow," former Flint City Manager Thomas Kay added, "and townships are the only places they can do it."<sup>87</sup>

Within hours of the announcement, homeowners and elected officials in Mundy, Mt. Morris, and Flint Townships were busy coordinating their responses. While Mt Morris Township Supervisor Donald Krapohl was confident that the boundary commission would summarily reject the petitions, he nonetheless threatened to fight the annexation bid "all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court if necessary." Flint Township Supervisor Raymond Flavin—ever mindful of losing the Genesee Valley Shopping Center—exploded in anger when he heard about the proposal. Perhaps remembering his inability to block the 1962 annexation of the township's GM plants, he exclaimed, "Though shalt not steal." "You don't just rob people. We'll show Flint exactly how low they are." Because Flint Township stood to lose 75 percent of its tax base if the annexation succeeded—significantly more than the other two townships involved—the reaction there was especially hostile. On January 25, in a joint statement released to the media, Flavin, Flint Township Secretary Beverly Hunt, and Richard Wood, the township's treasurer, pledged to "fight this land grab effort with every fiber of our

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<sup>87</sup> Riha, "Flint Tries Annexation Blitz," *Flint Journal*, January 24, 1978. See also, *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, January 23, 1978. See also, Rebecca O'Grady, "Flint Out of Room for Expansion," *Grand Blanc News*, February 23, 1978.

being.” Equally upset, Mundy Township Supervisor Edward Morey vowed to “fight hard” to stop Flint’s expansion efforts. On February 7, Flavin and other suburban policymakers unveiled a four-pronged strategy to resist the annexation effort. The plan included making a strong case against annexation to the State Boundary Commission, convincing state legislators to pass a new anti-annexation law, assembling a legal team to challenge Flint’s plan in court, and waging a retributive campaign to end cooperative political endeavors with the city of Flint. At the grassroots level, suburban activists organized Citizens to Stop Strip Annexation, wrote dozens of letters to local newspapers, and set up a booth at the Genesee Valley Shopping Center to collect petitions against the plan. Although suburbanites often disagreed with one another over land use questions, almost all agreed that Flint politicians were trying to commit an act of theft.<sup>88</sup>

After receiving McManaman’s proposal, state boundary commissioners agreed to hold a series of hearings in the summer of 1978. As local officials prepared for the impending battles, they carefully monitored the situation in Lansing, where state legislators from rural and suburban areas had already moved to block Flint’s annexation bid and other similar proposals statewide. The legislative efforts against Flint’s expansion plan centered on Michigan House Bill 4030, a proposal designed to protect specially designated “charter townships” from hostile annexations. Under the terms of the bill—introduced by state representative Thomas H. Brown, a Democrat representing the Detroit suburb of Westland—legislative bodies in “general law” townships could protect themselves from annexation by declaring themselves charter townships. In order to obtain charters from the state of Michigan—which provided townships with legal

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<sup>88</sup> *Flint Journal*, January 25, February 5, 7, 9, 12, March 1, 1978. See also, *Flint Township-Swartz Creek News*, January 26, February 8, 1978.

powers similar to those of incorporated cities—general law townships had to meet basic tax base, population, and public service criteria. If suburban areas met the state’s guidelines—as all of the three Flint suburbs in question did—then township boards could approve the status change by legislative action. Upon learning of Brown’s proposal, officials in Mundy, Flint, and Mt. Morris Townships immediately announced their intent to obtain charters. In April, state legislators approved the new charter township law, which Governor William Milliken then promptly signed. By June 15, the legislative boards in Flint and Mundy Townships had approved new charters. Shortly thereafter, members of the Mt. Morris Township Board endorsed their new charter. Meanwhile, in what amounted to a chain reaction, township boards in unaffected areas such as Genesee Township and Grand Blanc Township launched charter campaigns of their own.<sup>89</sup>

In spite of the townships’ ongoing legal status changes, the SBC moved ahead with its already scheduled deliberations. On May 31, the SBC rejected five of Flint’s annexation petitions, including the crucial bid to acquire the Genesee Valley Shopping Center. According to several commissioners who ruled against the city, the petitions were “sloppy,” poorly drawn, and full of major legal errors. Though depressed by the ruling, city leaders pledged to press on with the remaining petitions. At the next SBC hearing, held in July, Mayor Rutherford and other Flint officials argued that annexation was essential to luring new development back to the city. Just in the 1970s, they argued, Flint had lost at least three hundred businesses to neighboring suburbs, primarily because the city lacked space to accommodate corporate expansions. “Flint needs to grow,” Rutherford stated. “Flint’s like a boy too big for his britches. The city is going to run out

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<sup>89</sup> *Flint Township-Swartz Creek News*, March 18, April 13, May 11, 18, July 20, 1978. See also, *Grand Blanc News*, June 29, August 31, 1978; and *Flint Journal*, July 18, August 2, 1978.

of room pretty soon.” After pointing out that only 8 percent of the city’s land was suitable for new development, Flint planner Dennis Larkin also endorsed the annexation petition, claiming, “Annexation would provide the city with additional tax base which the city has lost to the townships over the years.” In opposition to Flint’s petitions, Flint Township Supervisor Flavin and the township’s attorney, John Etter, argued that the annexation blitz was a blatant and illegal land grab. If city officials wished to lure new development, the suburban critics charged, then they should clear more land in the city. In addition, Etter maintained that it would be unjust for the SBC to allow the annexation after Flint Township had already spent millions of dollars constructing new sewer lines and water mains. Most significantly, however, Flavin, Etter, and others argued that the annexation was no longer legal in light of the passage of House Bill 4030 and the townships’ decisions to establish new charters.<sup>90</sup>

Ultimately, the SBC denied virtually all of Flint’s requests for land. On October 17, the commissioners ruled that the Flint Township petitions were invalid due to the new charter township law. The following May, after several months of appeals and intense legal and political maneuvering, the commissioners issued another judgment against the city. In the May decision, the SBC rejected all of the petitions for Flint and Mundy Townships, once again citing the charter township legislation. The commissioners did not throw out the Mt. Morris Township petitions because officials there had not obtained a charter prior to June 15, 1978, the deadline for receiving full protection under amendments to House Bill 4030. However, after determining that the Mt. Morris Township Board had adequately serviced the land in dispute, the SBC rejected those

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<sup>90</sup> *Flint Journal*, June 1, 18, July 18, August 2, 15, 1978; *Grand Blanc News*, June 22, 1978; *Flint Township-Swartz Creek News*, February 8, March 9, 16, 23, April 13, May 11, May 18, July 20, 27, August 3, September 7, October 26, 1978.

petitions as well. In response to the SBC's anti-annexation rulings, Supervisor Flavin and other opponents of the annexation bid rejoiced. Repeating the phrase he had first uttered back in January 1978, Flavin jubilantly reminded his opponents, "Though shalt not steal!"<sup>91</sup>

Suburban officials in the out-county reacted exuberantly to the SBC's ruling against Flint. Flavin and his colleagues were especially pleased with the decision because they understood that it marked the end of the annexation era in Genesee County. The incorporation of Burton and the establishment of charter townships in the out-county left Flint without any additional room for expansion. Moreover, bitterness over the land disputes severely undermined the already strained ties between Flint and its suburban neighbors. In response to the annexation drive, county commissioners and township board members throughout the county voted to end most cooperative ventures with the city. By August 1978, for instance, the Region 5 Planning and Development Commission—a countywide land use agency—had lost nine of its ten member townships in response to the annexation fight. In 1981, legislative boards in the townships of Davison, Fenton, Mt. Morris, and several other out-county jurisdictions voted to cancel public bus routes between the city and suburbs.<sup>92</sup> As *Flint Journal* reporter David G. Graham noted during the 1978-79 disputes, "the era of cooperation . . . between the city and the out-county appears to be over."<sup>93</sup> In the end, the 1960s and 1970s disputes over annexation yielded a deeply divided region with a landlocked, shrinking city at its core.

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<sup>91</sup> Conway, "State Rejects Most of Flint's Annexation Bid," *Flint Journal*, May 10, 1979. See also, *Flint Journal*, January 10, 1981; and "Flint Township Wins Big Battle in Annexation War," *Flint Township-Swartz Creek News*, October 26, 1978.

<sup>92</sup> Ed Petruska, "Flint Township Joins Region 5 Exodus; City Domination Cited," *Flint Township-Swartz Creek News*, March 9, 1978; Fenech and Laurie Young, "3 More Townships Vote to Quit Region 5," *Flint Journal*, March 7, 1978; and Chris Burnett, "Townships Show Strength," *Flint Journal*, August 15, 1978. On the cancellation of bus routes, see *Flint Journal*, February 25, April 29, May 3, 6, 1981.

<sup>93</sup> "D. Graham, "Annexation Strains City-County Ties," *Flint Journal*, February 5, 1978.

For Mayor Rutherford and other Flint boosters, the SBC's decision could not have come at a more inopportune time. Indeed, just as the commissioners were assaying the merits of the annexation proposals, the nation's economy was sinking into another deep recession that would wreak havoc in the Vehicle City. Surrounded by a wall of hostile suburbs, the city of Flint faced the economic crises of the late 1970s and early 1980s in isolation.

## **Chapter 12**

### **“The Fall of Flint”: Decline and Renewal in the Post-Vehicle City**

The deindustrialization of Flint occurred in waves. During the 1940s and 1950s, GM executives and downtown business owners implemented their suburban investment strategies by building new plants and retail outlets near recently opened freeways and booming all-white subdivisions outside of the city. In 1958, members of the Vehicle City’s pro-growth coalition devised New Flint in an attempt to recapture those developments. When that plan failed on the shoals of a new suburban independence movement, the city’s political leaders looked to annexation and urban renewal to stave off economic decline. By the close of the 1970s, municipal officials had cleared hundreds of acres of residential land for industrial and commercial redevelopment, strip annexed a number of valuable suburban businesses, and constructed a new urban freeway and interchange, all in their attempts to lure white homeowners, tourists, jobs, and investors back to Flint. As well, city council members offered GM new tax abatements and other incentives to keep production facilities open. Still, municipal officials could not persuade the automotive giant and other local employers to maintain their Flint operations.

The nation’s post-World War II economic boom ended with the twin energy crises and “stagflation” of the 1970s. GM responded to the economic slowdowns of the 1970s by implementing a harsh austerity program that devastated Flint’s already ailing

economy. Between 1971 and 1991, the company surrendered approximately 30 percent of its share of the domestic automobile market, cut its workforce in the United States by 50 percent, and closed dozens of plants nationwide. Although automobile industry layoffs and plant closures created economic turmoil in many areas of the country, the city of Flint, with its strong trade unions, high wages, and obsolete industrial infrastructure, bore the brunt of GM's North American restructuring initiatives. During the 1970s and 1980s, the corporation slashed nearly forty thousand local jobs and reinvested heavily in new automated facilities in the Sunbelt and abroad. These long-distance capital migrations, which created spatial mismatches that even car-owning commuters could not overcome, led to an even greater human exodus from Flint. Between 1974 and 1982, Flint's population declined by a staggering 20 percent. Mortgage defaults and property abandonment reached all-time highs during this period.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the devastation caused by job losses and home foreclosures, Flint's municipal leaders continued in their efforts to revivify the city. Initially, their urban renewal program revolved around the plan to replace St. John and Floral Park with Interstate 475, the downtown freeway interchange, the North End industrial park, and Buick City. By the 1980s, however, the locus of the revitalization campaign had shifted toward the downtown business district. As the industrial crisis intensified, city council members and downtown boosters designed a series of proposals to remake Flint into a center for research and a first-class tourism and shopping destination. These efforts resulted in a flurry of new developments that included an automotive theme park, a shopping center, a high-rise office building, a waterfront "festival marketplace," a luxury

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<sup>1</sup> Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned*, 8; and John Greenwald, "How GM Broke Down," *Time* (November 9, 1992). On the population decline, see Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus*, 224.



hotel, and a branch campus of a major university, all located in or near the heart of the downtown business district. Within a few short years, though, most of these developments had fallen into bankruptcy. At century's end, they stood as vacant reminders of the city's failed experiment with urban renewal.

### *Rust Belt*

The flight of jobs and industry from the Vehicle City reached unprecedented proportions during the 1970s. The decade began on a sour note for city officials and tens of thousands of area workers. In September 1970, the UAW launched a grueling sixty-seven-day nationwide strike against GM. Though the strike ultimately resolved little, it cost local workers millions of dollars in lost wages and caused unemployment rates in the city to jump to nearly 50 percent.<sup>2</sup> That same year, the Genesee Valley Shopping Center opened in Flint Township. Executives from Sears-Roebuck, J. C. Penney, Hudson's, and Montgomery Ward promptly relocated their downtown stores to the new mall on Miller Road. Shortly thereafter, Smith-Bridgman, the Vogue, Woolworth, and several other downtown retail shops closed permanently. At around the same time, the famed Durant Hotel on Saginaw Street shut its doors as well, another casualty of the downtown business district's long, painful decline. Between 1967 and 1972, the new mall helped to depress sales in the central business district by 32 percent.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On the 1970 strike, see Serrin, *The Company and the Union*. On the local effect of the work stoppage, see "Ripples of Strike Spreading Farther," *Flint Journal*, October 30, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> John A. Larson, Tefvik F. Nas, and Charles T. Weber, *Methodology for the Study of Urban Economic Development in Flint* (Flint: University of Michigan-Flint, Project for Urban and Regional Affairs, 1986), 14. See also, "Flint, the Central Business District: A Report," n.d., Flint Department of Community Development Files, box 1, folder 10, GHCC.

The real shock arrived the following year, though. The energy crisis of 1973-74 dealt a severe blow to the area's economy. Throughout most of 1973, GM sales were strong. Overall, the company's dealers sold 6,512,000 vehicles during the year, breaking all previous records. On October 17, 1973, however, members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) announced an oil embargo against the United States and other nations that supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War. The OPEC action helped to deplete the nation's oil supply, caused fuel prices to soar, and drove consumer interest in smaller, energy-efficient Japanese cars to historic highs. With only a few compact vehicles in their lineups, American automakers suffered severe sales declines during the energy crisis. Between 1973 and 1975, domestic car and truck sales dropped from 12.6 million to 9.3 million units.<sup>4</sup> Sales at General Motors decreased by 23 percent in 1974 alone. During the first quarter of 1975, purchases of GM's cars and trucks fell to a thirty-year low. In their 1975 annual report to stockholders, the company's directors painted a bleak picture of the business climate:

Most people in the American automobile industry had never experienced anything quite like the beginning of 1975. Inventories of unsold cars were alarmingly high, production was sharply curtailed, two of every five hourly automobile workers were laid off, consumer confidence was never lower, and in showrooms across the country shoppers were few—and buyers were even fewer.<sup>5</sup>

The economic recession that began in 1973 seemed more like a depression to residents of Flint, Detroit, and other vehicle manufacturing centers. In December 1973, Buick General Manager George Elges reported that his division would lay off 5,675

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<sup>4</sup> Jones and Bachelor, *The Sustaining Hand*, 57. On the oil crises of the 1970s and the American automobile industry, see Ed Cray, *Chrome Colossus: General Motors and Its Times* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980). See also, Schulman, *The Seventies*; and Karen R. Merrill, *The Oil Crisis of 1973-1974: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> *General Motors Corporation Annual Report for 1975* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1976), 4.

employees, including the entire second shift of assembly workers.<sup>6</sup> Two months later, GM officials announced an additional round of layoffs affecting over fifteen thousand workers at the Buick and Fisher Body 1 plants.<sup>7</sup> By the close of 1974, GM's area workforce had dropped from its postwar high of over eighty thousand to only sixty-six thousand.<sup>8</sup> Within the city, joblessness reached a peak in 1975, when Flint's unemployment rate ranged between 15 and 20 percent.<sup>9</sup> Among young African Americans, the unemployment rate during that year approached 50 percent. "It is painfully obvious," civil rights activist Wylie Rogers noted, "that our community sits squarely in the teeth of the storm."<sup>10</sup> Several years later, the NAACP's former labor secretary Herbert Hill amplified Rogers's claims, stating, "It is evident that a permanent black underclass has developed, that virtually an entire second generation of ghetto youth will never enter the labor force."<sup>11</sup> Although many of Flint's suburbs continued to experience modest economic growth during this period, African-American workers found it extremely difficult to secure employment outside of the city. "Black kids are hemmed in," Flint NAACP official Floyd Clack explained. "If they can't find a job in Flint, they are out of luck. There is no way they can go out to Grand Blanc, Flushing or Davison

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<sup>6</sup> Gustin, "Elges Predicts Tough Times, Then Products Creating Jobs," *Flint Journal*, January 5, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> Gustin, "GM Layoffs to Affect 15,300 Here," *Flint Journal*, February 15, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> Gustin, "Estes: GM Outlays Cushion Area Layoffs," *Flint Journal*, December 13, 1974.

<sup>9</sup> Michigan Employment Security Commission, *Annual Planning Report for Flint SMSA Fiscal Year 1977: A Comprehensive Collection of Labor Market Information and Related Labor Force Characteristics for the Flint, Michigan, SMSA and the Flint CETA Consortium* (Lansing: Michigan Employment Security Commission, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> See Holt Papers, box 5, folder 9, GHCC. On black unemployment during the 1970s, see *Flint Journal*, March 18, 22, 1979; and *Flint, Michigan, 1977-78: Jobless Persons – Heads of Household* (Flint: R. L. Polk and Company, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> John Herbers, "Unemployment among Black Youth Continues to Rise," *Flint Journal*, March 18, 1979.

and find a job like white kids can. Racism is too deep in those areas and it just isn't going to happen."<sup>12</sup>

	GM Employees		GM Employees
1946	42,600	1966	76,700
1947	50,900	1967	72,600
1948	48,700	1968	74,900
1949	54,900	1969	76,700
1950	63,700	1970	60,500
1951	57,800	1971	69,500
1952	53,400	1972	68,900
1953	67,300	1973	73,900
1954	72,900	1974	63,200
1955	82,200	1975	59,600
1956	74,400	1976	67,300
1957	70,400	1977	73,600
1958	56,600	1978	76,900
1959	59,300	1979	76,000
1960	65,500	1980	62,600
1961	60,900	1981	65,700
1962	66,500	1982	55,400
1963	68,100	1983	58,000
1964	67,300	1984	61,900
1965	75,900	1985	62,600

Table 12.1. Average General Motors employment in Genesee County, 1946-1985. SOURCE: Thomas R. Hammer, *Evaluation of Development Potentials for Metropolitan Flint, Michigan* (Evanston: Northwestern University-CUED Institute, 1986), 2.

Michigan suffered enormous economic losses during the 1970s and 1980s. Within the state, the cities of Flint and Detroit were among the hardest hit by the crisis. In 1974, state legislators in Lansing passed Public Act 198 (PA 198) in order to generate new corporate investment in depressed urban areas. The new law granted municipal officials the authority to reduce tax burdens on industry. Specifically, this legislation gave city governments the power to abate up to 50 percent of a corporation's property

<sup>12</sup> Vizard, "Half of Flint's Black Teens Believed Jobless."

taxes for as many as twelve years on newly constructed industrial facilities. For the rehabilitation of outdated and “obsolete” plants, employers could receive property tax abatements of up to 100 percent.<sup>13</sup>

PA 198 had an immediate yet unforeseen impact on local economies in Michigan. From 1974 to 1983, municipal governments statewide granted 3,228 industrial tax abatements worth an average of \$2.2 million per firm. GM executives filed a flurry of abatement requests for each of their plants in Genesee County shortly after the new law passed. Desperate to stimulate new investment, members of the Flint City Council approved all of the company’s proposals. Following suit, officials in Swartz Creek, Genesee Township, and Burton also granted abatements to GM. By 1983, the Flint City Council had authorized fourteen abatements for the automaker on over \$400 million worth of local properties. When calculated on a per capita basis, the value of these abatements totaled \$2,937 for every resident of Flint. In 1978, former city manager Thomas Kay, by then a spokesperson for the Manufacturers Association of Flint, defended the council’s actions, declaring, “GM is Flint’s best citizen and deserves every break they can legally get.”<sup>14</sup>

Most city council members held a similar philosophy. By 1993, the city had granted thirty-seven of these tax cuts to General Motors.<sup>15</sup> Still, many Flint residents vehemently disagreed with the council’s decisions. Critics of the abatements argued that

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<sup>13</sup> Anthony Lupo, II, “Local Development and Tax Abatements,” (master’s thesis, University of Michigan-Flint, 2000). See also, Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *Municipal Government Economic Development Incentive Programs in Michigan* (Detroit: Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 1986); Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, *Tax Incentives/Tax Abatements in Southeast Michigan* (Detroit: Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, 1990); and Greg LeRoy, *The Great American Jobs Scam: Corporate Tax Dodging and the Myth of Job Creation* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Lupo, II, “Local Development and Tax Abatements.” See also, M. Moore, “GM Demands Their Taxes to Be Cut in Half . . . or Else,” *Flint Voice*, December 1978.

<sup>15</sup> Gilman, “Urban Redevelopment in Omuta, Japan, and Flint, Michigan: A Comparison,” in P. P. Karan and Kristin Stapleton, eds., *The Japanese City* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).

tax breaks for corporations did little to create new jobs and further impoverished the city during an already tumultuous economic period. Although tax reductions were not the sole source of Flint's declining economic standing, they nonetheless played a major role in depleting the municipal treasury. In 1973, the city of Flint received over \$44 million in revenue. By 1978, municipal receipts had fallen to slightly under \$40 million even though that was a peak year for GM sales and employment.<sup>16</sup> During a March 1986 meeting of the Flint City Council, former Davison school board member Michael Moore denounced the abatement program: "GM has absolutely no plan to not only create jobs here in the City, they plan to eliminate jobs. Why do you keep giving them little presents as they continue to pull jobs out of the City?"<sup>17</sup> "This old friend [GM]," wrote corporate critic Barry Wolf, "has used the city the way a pimp uses a whore."<sup>18</sup>

PA 198 required abatement recipients to invest in their local economies by erecting new buildings, rehabilitating old ones, or purchasing new equipment. Yet the law did not stipulate that these employers had to create new jobs. In fact, as Moore asserted in 1986, the wave of abatements issued during the 1970s and 1980s coincided with a net loss of nearly fifteen thousand local positions at GM. By the close of the 1970s, a potent combination of GM layoffs, tax abatements, federal spending cuts, and runaway inflation had helped to create a severe fiscal crisis at city hall. In 1980, Mayor James Rutherford announced that the city had a \$17 million deficit. To solve the budget mess, Rutherford authorized drastic cuts in city services that included a switch from weekly to bi-monthly trash collection. As the garbage piled up all over the city, Flint's

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<sup>16</sup> Tim Retzliff, "Moore to Flint? Suburban Omission in *Roger and Me*," (unpublished essay in author's possession).

<sup>17</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, March 10, 1986, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Barry Wolf, "Beware Sign Should Take Place of Welcome to GM," *Flint Journal*, January 28, 1981.

rat population exploded. In 1986, officials from the Genesee County Health Department revealed that there were more rats than people living in the city.<sup>19</sup> Despite these developments, Mayor Rutherford and others at city hall remained committed to “supply-side” municipal economics, arguing that the tax cuts would at least preserve existing jobs. As well, supporters of the abatements hoped to send a powerful message to corporate leaders that local officials could offer benefits to industry that rivaled the subsidies available in the Sunbelt. Speaking on GM’s behalf, Phillip Hoffman, a manager of the company’s local tax projects, informed city council members that abatements would help executives determine where to build future plants. “If there is a tax incentive available,” Hoffman told council members in January 1979, “that will enter into the annual operation costs of any new project and would be added to the bottom line.”<sup>20</sup> Statements such as these sounded like blackmail to GM’s critics.

Ultimately, tax breaks for General Motors did little to halt the outward flow of jobs from Flint. After suffering devastating market losses in 1974, GM sales and profits rebounded dramatically between 1975 and the first half of 1979. The company’s worldwide sales increased to 9.5 million units in 1978 while its local employment roll rose to seventy-eight thousand.<sup>21</sup> Flush with optimism, Buick’s general manager George Elges offered a bold statement in 1977 on Flint’s place in the automaker’s future: “Without question, Flint is the largest and most diversified supplier city in the entire GM

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<sup>19</sup> See Rutherford’s 1980 state of the city address in *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, December 18, 1980, 697-700. Rutherford’s decision gained international notoriety when Michael Moore addressed the sanitation department cuts in *Roger and Me*. See also, M. Moore, “Flint and Me,” *Money* (July 7, 1996), 86-87.

<sup>20</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, January 8, 1979, 6.

<sup>21</sup> *General Motors Annual Report: 1978* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1979).

pipeline and now fits into the overall corporation pattern in a more solid and secure manner than it ever did before.”<sup>22</sup>

Elges was no prophet, however. Just two years later, the combined effect of high interest rates, inflation, and a second worldwide energy crisis helped to drive the nation’s economy into yet another grueling recession. In 1980, GM’s sales declined by 17 percent and the corporation lost \$762.5 million, its first annual loss since 1921. By the end of the year, executives in Detroit had cut the company’s domestic workforce from 468,000 to 376,000.<sup>23</sup> The 1980 austerity measures were just the beginning, though. The following year, Roger B. Smith, GM’s chief executive, vowed to cut “megajobs” and make his company a “leaner, tougher, and better corporation.”<sup>24</sup> In his quest to make GM tougher, Smith oversaw the investment of over \$80 billion worldwide on new automated factories, product redesign, and plant modernization. To make the company leaner, however, he ordered a series of layoffs, plant closures, and tax protests that ultimately made him infamous.<sup>25</sup>

### *Tax Revolt*

Over the past two decades, scholars have carefully scrutinized the anti-tax revolts of the 1970s and 1980s. Often, historians have argued that this politically conservative, “neopopulist” rebellion drew its strength from millions of white suburban homeowners

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<sup>22</sup> Penn, “Flint Is Leading GM Innovation, Official Says,” *Flint Journal*, October 28, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> *General Motors Annual Report: 1980* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1981).

<sup>24</sup> *General Motors Annual Report: 1982* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1983). The Smith quotation is from Richard C. Noble, “GM Chief Says ‘Megajobs’ Could Be Lost,” *Flint Journal*, November 25, 1981.

<sup>25</sup> On Smith’s controversial career at GM, see Albert Lee, *Call Me Roger* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1988); and Maryann Keller, *Rude Awakening: The Rise, Fall, and Struggle for Recovery of General Motors* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989).



and other members of Richard M. Nixon's "Silent Majority."<sup>26</sup> In many of these accounts, the state of California takes center stage as the birthplace of the anti-tax "backlash" that ultimately swept through the nation. The history of the tax revolt in Michigan presents a more complicated narrative, however. In 1978, Golden State voters passed Proposition 13, a controversial law that cut property taxes by 57 percent. That same year, conservative activists in Michigan placed three separate tax limitation proposals on the statewide ballot. Voters decisively rejected two of the three measures, though, including the "Tisch Amendment," a plan similar to Proposition 13. Michiganders did endorse Proposal E, the "Headlee Amendment," by a slim margin, but this law was significantly less severe than the tax rollbacks enacted in California and other states. The Headlee legislation established a strict cap on state taxes and required local governments to obtain voter approval for new levies. Yet it also forbade state officials from cutting outlays to local governments below 1978 levels.<sup>27</sup>

With near unanimity, anti-tax protesters in Michigan viewed the 1978 election as a defeat. In 1980, Republican activists mounted a second campaign for tax reform by placing Proposal D, another version of Tisch, on the ballot. Once again, though, voters easily blocked the initiative. Undeterred by these setbacks, conservatives continued to fight for California-style tax relief during the last two decades of the century. Yet voters resoundingly rejected these proposals in virtually every instance. Between 1970 and 1992, Michigan citizens rejected eight of the nine anti-tax propositions that appeared on

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*; Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, 120-182; and Self, *American Babylon*, 256-327.

<sup>27</sup> On Proposition 13 in California, see Schrag, *Paradise Lost*, passim; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 238-239; and Self, *American Babylon*, passim. On the tax revolts in Michigan, see Beasley Papers, box 53, folder 26, GHCC; *Flint Journal*, April 11, July 7, August 21, September 17, October 3, 15, 26, November 9, December 7, 1978, February 11, April 11, May 20, July 29, 1979, August 28, September 17, 24, November 5, 1980, April 1, 26-27, May 21, 1981; and "The Jarvis-Headlee-Tisch Con Job," *Flint Voice*, September 1978.

the statewide ballot. In 1994, anti-tax crusaders won an important victory with the passage of Proposal A, a plan that limited property assessments and increased the state sales tax. Nevertheless, Proposal A, like Headlee, did not provide the sort of tax rollbacks that most conservative political activists endorsed.<sup>28</sup>

Evidence from Michigan suggests that historians have overstated the national significance of Proposition 13. At the very least, it seems clear that the anti-tax movement in Michigan never gained the same traction that it did in California. To be sure, thousands of white homeowners from the Flint area and elsewhere actively supported the statewide tax protests of the 1970s and 1980s. In the weeks leading up to the second Tisch vote, members of We the People ACT (American Citizens Tribunal), an anti-tax group based in Pontiac, held several large meetings in Genesee County. As many as three thousand area residents, many of them underemployed autoworkers, joined the group prior to the election. However, these activists usually found themselves in the minority, even during the height of the rebellion. Moreover, most Michiganders, even those who embraced the Tisch Amendment and Proposal A, viewed taxes with a profound degree of ambivalence. Tens of thousands of white homeowners loathed paying taxes to fund government programs for African Americans and the poor and resented the bureaucracies they found at city halls and in Lansing. Yet many more supported local taxes for schools, roads, sewers, and other infrastructure improvements. Consequently, the anti-tax coalitions of the 1970s and 1980s often disbanded within weeks of statewide elections as supporters with opposing local interests and viewpoints

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<sup>28</sup> On conservatives' disappointment, see Lawrence W. Reed, "The Headlee Amendment: Serving Michigan for 25 Years," August 4, 2003, available at <http://www.mackinac.org/article.aspx?ID=5574>. On Proposal A, see "Proposal A – Michigan Property and Sales Taxes, Adopted March 15, 1994," available at <http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/propa.html>. See also, "Referendums: Rising Impatience," *Time* (November 17, 1980).

went their separate ways. Indeed, six months after the 1980 Tisch defeat, *Flint Journal* reporter Bob Sherefkin noted that ACT had waned in popularity and that the tax protest movement was “losing steam” in the Flint area.<sup>29</sup>

In Genesee County, the anti-tax rebellion drew support from thousands of politically moderate and Republican-leaning white homeowners. However, General Motors was the undisputed head of the movement. In fact, at the precise moment when grassroots tax protests were faltering throughout the state, the corporate revolt was gathering momentum. In 1985, GM lawyers filed appeals against the company’s property tax assessments in more than two dozen cities nationwide. The challenge in Michigan, filed with the state tax tribunal, included a request for a \$178 million reduction in property appraisals for the company’s plants in Flint, Genesee Township, Grand Blanc, Burton, and Grand Blanc Township. Just in the city of Flint, where the appeal cited grossly inflated assessments dating back to 1982, GM sought to have its property valuations reduced from \$303 million to \$170 million, a 46 percent cut.<sup>30</sup> At stake was over \$30 million in contested tax payments. As with GM’s abatement requests, the property tax appeal generated a hostile response from a wide array of civil rights activists, public officials, and trade unionists. Even the editorial board of the *Flint Journal*, traditionally a staunch supporter of local manufacturers, publicly opposed the company’s position. Led by Michael Moore and local autoworker Mike Westfall, the campaign against GM’s tax appeal gained support from consumer critic Ralph Nader, actor Edward Asner, and other prominent liberal activists across the country. As well,

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<sup>29</sup> Bob Sherefkin, “We the People Wane: Tax-Protest Movement Losing Steam since April 15,” *Flint Journal*, April 27, 1981. See also, Julie Greenwalt, “Auto Worker Dean Hazel Leads a Tax Revolt, but the IRS Is Convinced it Has His Number,” *People* (April 6, 1981).

<sup>30</sup> “The Westfall Awareness Papers,” Mike Westfall Papers, box 1, folder 10, GHCC. See also, Dawson Bell, “GM Begins Drive to Ease Tax Bite,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 22, 1985.

Mayor James Sharp, Flint's first popularly elected black chief executive, vowed to fight on behalf of the city, stating,

General Motors is an important part of this City and Flint will do whatever necessary to help its facilities remain productive. But like its corporate and residential neighbors, General Motors must pay its fair share of taxes. We are not going to balance GM's budget on the backs of our school children.<sup>31</sup>

Mayor Sharp's battle against GM proved to be a costly endeavor. During the first year of the dispute, the city spent \$1.5 million just to cover legal fees and property appraisal expenses. As the costs mounted and the city sank deeper into economic crisis, municipal officials began a series of negotiations to resolve the imbroglio. In May 1988, Flint City Attorney Richard Figura announced an agreement on GM's appeal for the Fisher Body 1 plant. The settlement consisted of a tax refund of \$426,667 to be shouldered by the city of Flint, Genesee County, the Flint Community Schools, the Genesee Intermediate School District, and Mott Community College. Speaking to reluctant council members just prior to their vote on the proposal, Figura acknowledged that the payout would provoke bitterness among Flint's many unemployed workers. Nevertheless, he also pointed out that the city could not afford to maintain a sustained legal dispute with GM. With the city's tax base already ravaged by home foreclosures, layoffs, and impending plant shutdowns, all but the most strident of GM's opponents supported the measure. On May 25, 1988, city council members voted by a seven-to-two margin to approve the settlement.<sup>32</sup> Although the resolution of the Fisher 1 dispute left

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<sup>31</sup> "Sharp Stands His Ground on Tax Fight," *Eye Opener*, July 28, 1987. See also, Westfall, "Overestimating Wages: Is GM Covering Up Something?" *652 Technogram*, February 1982; and Westfall, "Things Changing in Flint—and Not Always for Better," *Flint Journal*, July 7, 1985.

<sup>32</sup> *Proceedings of the Flint City Council*, May 25, 1988, 167-168.

the appeals on GM's other facilities unresolved, the 1988 accord signaled the city's willingness to forego the courts in favor of negotiation.

After years of political fighting and the expenditure of nearly \$10 million on legal and appraisal services, Flint officials reached an agreement with GM in 1992. The final settlement called for the city to refund \$34 million and provide the corporation with a 30 percent reduction in property tax assessments. For their part, company officials agreed to drop the tax appeal, forgive all interest on the city's debts, and coordinate a long-term payment plan. With the city's treasury nearly bankrupt, Flint officials ultimately conceded defeat in what had become an unwinnable war of attrition. "GM wore us down," state Senator Joe Conroy admitted. "They won with deep pockets. We couldn't afford to fight them anymore."<sup>33</sup>

The property tax dispute coincided with a period of great harshness for American autoworkers. Roger Smith's 1980s restructuring campaign brought a new wave of plant closures to metropolitan Flint. Locally, GM's divestment program reached a peak in 1986 and 1987. In December 1986, Flint's Chevrolet V-6 engine plant closed permanently. Five months later, GM shut down one assembly line at the Chevrolet truck and bus facility on Van Slyke Road. Near the end of 1987, the company shuttered the historic Fisher Body 1 plant, where the sit-down strikes had first erupted.<sup>34</sup> Between 1978 and 1987, the combined effects of factory closures and layoffs reduced the automaker's Genesee County workforce from seventy-eight thousand to forty-eight thousand. With so few industrial facilities left in the city, members of the Manufacturers

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<sup>33</sup> Dawson Bell, "GM's Battle for Lower Taxes Grinds to an End," *Detroit Free Press*, February 14, 1992. See also, Deborah L. Cherry, "Genesee County's Struggle to Survive," (master's thesis, University of Michigan-Flint, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> M. Moore, "General Motors Pulls Out: In Flint, Tough Times Last," *Nation* (June 6, 1987).

Association of Flint voted to disband in 1987. Throughout this period of retrenchment, the Vehicle City's unemployment rate routinely exceeded 25 percent.<sup>35</sup>

Desperate to find work, nearly thirty thousand residents moved out of Flint between 1982 and 1987, many of them to Sunbelt cities such as Houston or Dallas. Just between 1985 and 1990, the city's population dipped by 8.6 percent.<sup>36</sup> As the migration unfolded, local bookstore owners began selling copies of the *Houston Post*, the *Dallas News*, and other southern newspapers with thick classified sections. Citywide, booksellers sold over a thousand copies of Sunbelt newspapers every day during the 1980s crisis. "The plain truth of the matter," claimed unemployed *Houston Post* reader Marcus Cleveland, "is that there's work down there and none up here. Period."<sup>37</sup> The mass migration from Flint to points southward created difficulties for employees of local moving companies, who could not keep their vans and trucks in the city. "All our equipment is down south," complained U-Haul employee Jerry Clark. "I don't have a third of the equipment that I had a year ago."<sup>38</sup>

The economic malaise of the 1970s and 1980s brought the city of Flint to the verge of bankruptcy. Plant closures, layoffs, and the departure of thousands of white homeowners denuded the city's once massive tax base, leaving city officials with budget shortfalls that seemed to grow with each passing year. That Mayor Rutherford had to cut

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<sup>35</sup> On the end of the MAF, see Michael B. Amspaugh, "Two Economic Organizations Making Plans to Disband," *Flint Journal*, August 12, 1987. On the job losses and unemployment, see *Flint Journal*, March 22, 1979; and Robin Widgery, *Shifts in the Flint Area Economic Structure during the 1980s* (Flint: Project for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Michigan-Flint, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> M. Moore, "General Motors Pulls Out"; and *Genesee County Market Profile* (Flint: Flint Journal, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> M. Moore, "The Houston Post—Flint's Fastest Growing Newspaper?" *Flint Voice*, March 20, 1981. On plant closures and layoffs during the 1980s, see David B. Crary and Carol Hogan, *Willow Run and Related Plant Closings: Causes and Impacts* (Ypsilanti, Michigan: Institute for Community and Regional Development, Eastern Michigan University, 1992), 3-31; and Lynn Ryan Mackenzie, "Capitalism, Power, and Community Well-Being: Developing a Model for Understanding the Effect of Local Economic Configuration on Cities and Their Citizens," (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Alex Kotlowitz, "The Exodus Has Begun," *Flint Voice*, February 6-19, 1981.

garbage collection services was only one indication of how dire the financial situation had become. Throughout the city, whole neighborhoods looked as though they had been abandoned. During a 1980 interview with a writer from the *Detroit News*, one unemployed worker explained why the city seemed so empty: “Flint is folding up. There’s nothing here, no opportunity. I don’t think there is going to be any. No way.”<sup>39</sup> Several years later, a young journalist named Alex Kotlowitz encountered even grimmer evidence that the city had fallen on hard times. Tacked in front of one North End home he found a handmade sign that read, “Night Crawlers \$.60 a dozen. Open 24 hours.”<sup>40</sup>

### *Flint’s “Great Leap Forward”*

Most of the residents who left the city during the 1970s and 1980s meltdowns never returned. Their departures spawned widespread fears about the fate of the Vehicle City. In 1984, Michael Moore went so far as to write an obituary for the city in which he warned that Flint was on its way towards becoming a “21st-century ghost town.”<sup>41</sup> For his part, Neal R. Peirce, a journalist from the *Detroit News*, referred to Flint as “Plywood City,” a place where “there are so few people about that you might think the neutron bomb had hit.”<sup>42</sup> Still, civic boosters and elected officials did not give up on their revitalization mission. By the early 1980s, the Floral Park interchange and Interstate 475 were complete. The two projects, which had been the centerpieces in the city’s earlier urban renewal campaign, helped to make Flint more accessible to commuters and other

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<sup>39</sup> For this quotation, see Rick Matthews, “What’s Good for GM . . . : Deindustrialization and Crime in Four Michigan Cities, 1975-1993,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Western Michigan University, 1997).

<sup>40</sup> Kotlowitz, “Life in the Slow Lane: Surviving in the Unemployment Capitol,” *Michigan Voice*, December 1983.

<sup>41</sup> M. Moore, “Dance Band on the Titanic: AutoWorld and the Death of Flint,” *Michigan Voice*, September 1984.

<sup>42</sup> Neal R. Peirce, “Will Mott Foundation Save Flint’s Ravaged Inner-City?” *Detroit News*, April 28, 1983.

non-residents. Yet the city still lacked the consumer outlets and cultural attractions necessary to lure new visitors and investors. Consequently, municipal leaders used the completion of the freeway to launch a second phase of urban development. Unlike the first wave of revitalization, which entailed removing thousands of black residents from their neighborhoods, this next stage of urban renewal centered on a bold effort to bring new people to the city's depressed downtown core.

Flint's downtown renewal drive began quietly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to popular legend, it originated in 1965, the year in which consumer critic Ralph Nader published *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-in Dangers of the American Automobile*. Nader's acerbic critique of the safety standards employed by automobile manufacturers ultimately led to the recall of the Chevrolet Corvair, a popular GM model designed to compete with smaller European and Japanese imports.<sup>43</sup> Several years after Nader's best-selling account hit bookstores, his supporters in San Jose, California, symbolically buried a Chevrolet to protest the selfish priorities of automobile manufacturers. In response to these attacks, Harding Mott, then the head of his father's foundation, allegedly proposed to build a national automotive hall of fame in downtown Flint to celebrate the motor vehicle's contributions to American life. Although no evidence corroborates this claim, Flint's leading citizens began holding private discussions on the matter within a year of the San Jose incident.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ralph Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-in Dangers of the American Automobile* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1965). See also, J. Patrick Wright, *On a Clear Day You Can See General Motors: John Z. De Lorean's Look Inside the Automotive Giant* (Grosse Pointe, Michigan: Wright Enterprises, 1979), 49-72.

<sup>44</sup> Kotlowitz, "AutoWorld: Working on the Line Is No Disneyland," *Flint Voice*, February 6-19, 1981. See also, "The American Autocade," n.d., AutoWorld Files, 91.136.1-1, Perry Archives.



In April 1970, twenty-nine of the city's leading executives, retailers, bankers, and developers met for a three-day conference to discuss Flint's future. They assembled at a lodge owned by the Consumers Power Company near Tippy Dam and the Lake Michigan shorefront. Harding Mott, the event's organizer, hoped that the meeting would generate new ideas on how private citizens could help to solve the city's problems. In a letter to invited guests, all of whom were wealthy white males, he outlined the significance of the challenges that faced Flint in the new decade: "The 1970s will undoubtedly be a decade of great importance for Flint. Whether we 'make it' as a city may well hang in the balance, and that balance could be tipped one way or the other by what the leaders of this community do at the outset of the decade. . . ." "Flint, frankly is in a war of survival," he warned, "and if we are to win it is going to take all the determination and dedication we have." Most of the city's leading executives responded to Mott's call and attended the Tippy Dam conference, where they discussed the idea for an automotive hall of fame, debated prospects for downtown renewal, and listened to a speech by Robert Pease, president of the Allegheny Conference, who had helped to orchestrate the city of Pittsburgh's well-known "Golden Triangle" redevelopment project. Although the meeting included discussions on a range of issues such as unemployment, health, culture, and civic leadership, downtown revitalization received top billing.<sup>45</sup>

By all accounts, the spring conclave was a major success. According to *Flint Journal* reporter Lawrence Gustin, "By the time the meeting broke up, the twenty-nine men were in an enthusiastic mood to solve problems." The mood was so euphoric that

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<sup>45</sup> Gilman, "Urban Redevelopment," 208; H. Mott to Warner, n.d., Warner Papers, box 16, 95-1.1-373, Scharchburg Archives; H. Mott to Healy, March 11, 1970, Healy Papers, box 2, folder 37, GHCC; "Specific Problem Areas: Tippy Dam," n.d., Warner Papers, box 16, 95-1.1-373; and Gustin, "Big Plans on the Horizon for Central Flint," *Flint Journal*, June 8, 1971. See also, *Flint Journal*, February 17, 1970, February 2, 14, June 6, 1971.

Mott later described it as “the spirit of Tippy Dam.” Upon their return to Flint, conference participants began holding weekly meetings to trade ideas for downtown redevelopment. In October 1971, they formed the Flint Area Conference, Inc. (FACI), “a nonprofit organization of civic and business leaders working with public officials in an effort to meet unfilled physical and economic needs of the community.” The group’s board of directors included Harding Mott; J. L. Gillie, an executive from Consumers Power Company; Alfred W. Hewitt, a chief officer of the Michigan National Bank; Oz Kelly, the head of the Manufacturers Association of Flint; as well as each of GM’s local plant managers. By design, it seems, FACI’s board members excluded representatives from labor and civil rights groups such as the UAW and the NAACP. Gustin later explained the group’s homogeneous composition, writing, “Since FACI will not be primarily devoted to solving social problems, no effort is being made to include all segments of the community.”<sup>46</sup>

The leaders of FACI believed that a revitalized downtown business district would have a beneficial effect on the rest of the region. They hoped that the rebirth of Saginaw Street would “act as a catalyst for a physical and economic resurgence of the central area of Flint – new businesses, new buildings, a new life, a new look.” FACI member and AC Spark Plug official Joseph Anderson was convinced that a vibrant downtown would generate a “renaissance of spirit, pride, and progress in the Genesee Metropolitan Area.”<sup>47</sup> To pursue those goals, the new group hired several planning firms to create *Centric 80: A Revitalization Strategy for Flint*. Released in February 1972, the report

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<sup>46</sup> Gustin, “Big Plans.” On FACI, see FACI Files, 91.136.93, 91.136.95, 91.136.96, 91.136.97, 91.136.117, Perry Archives.

<sup>47</sup> J. Anderson to Saul Siegel, February 25, 1972, FACI Files, 91.136.92, Perry Archives; and FACI Press Memorandum, February 28, 1972, FACI Files, 91.136.92, Perry Archives.

reflected the executives' desires to bring people back to downtown Flint. The plan recommended a new downtown campus for the University of Michigan-Flint (UM-Flint), an automotive hall of fame near the Flint River, and other "people generating" facilities and activities on the riverfront.<sup>48</sup>

Harding Mott and other members of FACI's board of directors welcomed the report's proposals. However, the economic recession of 1973-74 forced the group to shelve its downtown plans for several years. FACI leaders continued to meet privately, though, where they added new developments to their wish list. By the close of 1975, FACI, the Mott Foundation, and other civic groups had created a sweeping revitalization plan for the central business district that surpassed the modest recommendations included in *Centric 80*. In December, representatives from the Mott Foundation and FACI publicly announced their support for AutoWorld, a downtown automotive museum and theme park; Riverfront Center, which included a high-rise hotel, shopping complex, and convention center; a Flint River flood control and beautification program; and the Doyle project, a mixed-income housing development just north of the central business district. To help launch the enterprising plan, the Mott Foundation offered \$4.25 million in start-up grants and a firm commitment to future fundraising. Quickly, the mayor and city council members offered their full support.<sup>49</sup>

The collaborative efforts of leaders from FACI and the Mott Foundation helped to galvanize the city's massive downtown renewal program. Several months after the December announcement, the *Flint Journal* announced that Flint's "Great Leap Forward"

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<sup>48</sup> *Centric 80: A Revitalization Strategy for Flint; Report to Flint Area Conference, Inc.* (Flint: Lybrand, Ross Brothers, and Montgomery, 1972). See also, FACI Files, 91.136.92, Perry Archives.

<sup>49</sup> FACI Files, 91.136.95, Perry Archives; and Dolan, "Mott Grants Pose Community Challenge," *Flint Journal*, December 24, 1975. See also, *Flint Journal*, January 24, 1974, December 24, 1975.

was underway. The first encouraging signs of downtown redevelopment surfaced in 1977, when UM-Flint unveiled its first building just south of the Flint River.<sup>50</sup> In 1979, Riverbank Park, the waterfront beautification project, opened adjacent to the new campus.<sup>51</sup> At around the same time, the Windmill Place shopping center opened near downtown and the Mott Foundation purchased land just north of the river for AutoWorld. Shortly after that, the \$30-million Hyatt Regency Hotel, also on the waterfront, welcomed its first customers.<sup>52</sup> To persuade visitors and shoppers to patronize these new developments, FACI sponsored the “Buy Local” and “Flint Image Improvement” programs, both designed to publicize the pleasures of shopping downtown. As well, the group supported the “Flint Is Alive and Well” media campaign—which included billboards and other advertisements meant to polish Saginaw Street’s tarnished reputation.<sup>53</sup> Supporters of the downtown projects even created a rap music anthem,

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<sup>50</sup> Gustin, “Flint’s ‘Great Leap Forward’ Under Way,” *Flint Journal*, June 14, 1976. On the downtown campus, see *Site Investigation: Riverfront Site Proposal*, University of Michigan-Flint (Flint: Sasaki, Dawson, DeMay Associates, 1972); *Assembling a Riverfront Site for the University of Michigan-Flint* (Flint: Mayor’s Implementation Committee, 1972); William L. Pereira Associates, *University of Michigan-Flint Impact Study* (Flint: William L. Pereira Associates, 1974); Riha, “Downtown M: The Future Is Now,” *Flint Journal*, July 23, 1974; Pereira Associates, *Flint: The Center City; Plan and Program due to Development of the University Impact Area* (Flint: Pereira Associates, 1975); Bonny Kincaid, “An Economic Study of the University of Michigan-Flint on Flint and Genesee County,” (master’s thesis, University of Michigan-Flint, 1996); Robert W. Heywood, *A Work in Progress: Portrait of the University of Michigan-Flint* (Flint: Regents of the University of Michigan, 1996); and “Relocation of the University of Michigan-Flint Campus: An Unparalleled Opportunity for the Entire Flint Community,” n.d., Beasley Papers, box 46, folder 3, GHCC. On related projects, see Healy Papers, box 1, folder 18, GHCC; “Riverfront Center, Flint Michigan – Concept,” June 12, 1978, Flint Development Files, box 1, Perry Archives; Jack A. Litzenberg, “Urban Development Action Grant: Application for Assistance; Riverfront Center, City of Flint, Michigan,” October 27, 1978, Flint Development Files, box 1, Perry Archives; “Project Description: Urban Development Action Grant, Festival Marketplace,” October 31, 1983, Beasley Papers, box 22, folder 4, GHCC; and *Flint: New Life* (Flint: Flint Area Conference, Inc., n.d. [ca. 1983]).

<sup>51</sup> On the riverfront park and beautification program, see Katherine Ford Beebe, “An Evaluation of Three Urban Riverfront Parks: Lessons for Designers,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1984).

<sup>52</sup> *Flint Journal*, May 14, June 14, 1976, March 27, 1977, January 22, 1978, August 18, 1978, February 3, 1979. See also, Gilman, “Urban Redevelopment,” 204. On the grand opening of the Hyatt Regency, see Beasley Papers, box 36, folder 29, GHCC. See also, B. Wolf, “In the Shadow of the Hyatt: Flint’s Worst Neighborhood,” *Flint Voice*, November 13-24, 1981.

<sup>53</sup> See FACI Files, 91.136.114, 91.136.92, Perry Archives; Lord and Price, “Growth Ideology in a Period of Decline,” 155-169; and Beasley to Carl Bekofske, November 28, 1977, Beasley Papers, box 21, folder 31, GHCC.

“The Flint Booster,” to trumpet the new and improved central business district. The lyrics to the song illustrate the optimism that accompanied Flint’s Great Leap Forward:

Auto World and Buick City  
Will help Flint gain vitality

Mayor Rutherford is turning Flint around  
And things are happening downtown

Flint is getting back in the race  
We have a nice new Windmill Place

U of M Flint’s downtown Campus  
Has really helped all of us

We all can really have a lark  
At our splendiferous Riverbank Park

The ripple effect from Hyatt Regency  
Is spreading to every community.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout this period of frenetic development, over a half dozen major new attractions sprouted on or near the downtown waterfront, prompting *Flint Journal* reporter Lee Bergquist to remark, “There’s a whole lot of developin’ goin’ on in Flint.”<sup>55</sup> Each of the projects was part of a broad strategy to lure new residents, shoppers, tourists, jobs, and investors back to the shrunken city. The real showpieces of the downtown renewal campaign, however, were the Hyatt Regency Hotel, AutoWorld, and the Water Street Pavilion, a festival marketplace near UM-Flint designed by renowned developer James Rouse.<sup>56</sup> Of the three major projects, AutoWorld was the lynchpin of the overall program. After nearly two decades of planning, the \$73-million park opened with great fanfare in July 1984. The project, like most of the others downtown, drew financial support from a variety of public and private sources, including \$31 million from the Mott

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<sup>54</sup> See Holt Papers, box 12, folder 4, GHCC.

<sup>55</sup> Lee Bergquist, “There’s a Whole Lot of Developin’ Goin’ on in Flint,” *Flint Journal*, June 19, 1980.

<sup>56</sup> On Rouse’s career, see Isenberg, *Downtown America*, 255-317.

Foundation, \$36.5 million in public funds, \$4 million from local donors, and nearly \$9 million from Capital Income Properties, an east coast investment firm. For their part, General Motors officials contributed \$1 million to support the effort. In the weeks leading up to the grand opening, civic boosters raved that AutoWorld was the largest enclosed amusement park in the world. In truth, though, this development—operated by the Six Flags Corporation—was equal parts theme park, museum, and shopping center. Unlike the mall, though, it required an admission fee of \$8.95.<sup>57</sup>

Beneath AutoWorld's studded dome—which bore a striking resemblance to a stegosaurus's back—were a variety of attractions including a carousel and ferris wheel, shops and restaurants, a giant automobile engine, a carnival ride through “The Humorous History of Automobility,” an IMAX movie theater, and a mock assembly line operated by robots. The park also contained a huge replica of downtown Flint, designed to resemble Saginaw Street as it looked in 1900 (minus the dust, streetcars, and horse manure). This idealized version of the old downtown featured a flowing river, comfortable benches, soothing music, and \$500,000 worth of tropical plants and trees. Hoping to use the city's depressed economic climate to their advantage, promoters from Six Flags marketed the facility as an escape from the drudgery of life in Flint. “Visit AutoWorld,” one advertisement urged, “and leave the real world behind.” For many of the area's older residents, the downtown simulacrum was the highlight of the AutoWorld experience. According to some visitors, it brought back memories of “Old Flint,” the city that existed before the layoffs and plant closures (and perhaps desegregation). Joanne Ladd, a Burton resident who toured the complex, commented on how AutoWorld made

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<sup>57</sup> See *Flint Journal*, June 16-17, 23, August 29, October 3-4, 1980, March 20, April 10, July 8, December 20, 1981, June 18, July 9-10, August 1, 12, October 1, 1982, July 9, October 2, 11, 15, 1983.

her wistful for the Saginaw Street of her childhood: “The old time ‘flavor’ I remember of downtown Flint was there. It could only be topped if there had been a Kresge’s and that candy store where you could get a phosphate in a soda glass.” To some, though, AutoWorld only served as a reminder of how unattractive the real downtown had become. “Mostly,” another visitor claimed, “I just remember thinking that being in ‘Old Flint’ was a lot nicer than being in the present Flint.”<sup>58</sup>



Figure 12.1. Opening day parade at AutoWorld, July 1984. Courtesy of [www.toysaregoodfood.com](http://www.toysaregoodfood.com).

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<sup>58</sup> Flint Convention and Visitors Bureau, “AutoWorld,” in *A Visitor’s Guide to Flint*, n.d.; “AutoWorld: The Amusement Park That Couldn’t,” *Flint Voice*, April 30-May 13, 1982; Daniel Zwerdling, “And Then There’s the Disneyland Solution,” *Flint Voice*, July 2-15, 1982; M. Moore, “Dance Band on the Titanic,” *Flint Journal*, February 3, 1985; and “Flint, MI (Circa Now and Whenever),” (unpublished essay in author’s possession). See also, AutoWorld Files, 91.136.1-1, Perry Archives; and AutoWorld Clipping File, Perry Archives. The clipping file at the Perry Archives includes hundreds of articles from magazines and newspapers throughout the United States. The final quotation in this paragraph is available at [www.toysaregoodfood.com](http://www.toysaregoodfood.com). This site includes scores of reminiscences from people who either visited or worked at AutoWorld. On nostalgia for postwar downtowns, see Isenberg, *Downtown America*, 255-317.

Not everyone agreed that “Old Flint” and AutoWorld were worth celebrating. Several weeks after the opening, a group of Asian Americans objected to a display at the park that derided Japanese-made automobiles. The poster in question depicted “a car with caricatured Oriental features – buck teeth and slits for eyes reminiscent of World War II propaganda art – dive-bombing an aircraft carrier labeled ‘Detroit’ against a rising Sun background.” After receiving complaints from members of Citizens for Justice, an Asian-American activist group, Six Flags spokesperson Kathy Schoch defended the artwork, arguing that it was part of a “satirical display that documents attitudes towards the automobile.” Surprisingly, she also suggested that tourists could construe plenty of other things in the complex as offensive. To illustrate her point, Schoch pointed out another poster, this one featuring an image of “a used-car salesman in a loud plaid coat with a large nose that might be taken as a Jew.” “You’ve got to view it in context,” she added. “The pictures poke fun at all kinds of people – rednecks, housewives, and Texans. . . . We haven’t had any comments or complaints about it.” Despite Schoch’s reassurances, more than a few unsuspecting tourists found themselves deeply offended by AutoWorld’s displays.<sup>59</sup>

Many more, however, simply viewed the park as boring and overpriced. Prior to the July ribbon cutting, Mott Foundation President William S. White, a major supporter of the project, commissioned several studies to determine how many people would visit. Most experts predicted that the development would draw around a million customers per year. White was confident that this goal was attainable. Indeed, he assumed that throngs of tourists and locals would enjoy the amusement park, eat a meal downtown, and then perhaps shop at the Water Street Pavilion, which opened nearby in 1985. Some out-of-

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<sup>59</sup> Joe Swickard, *Detroit Free Press*, September 19, 1984.



town guests, he and others imagined, would even stay overnight at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.<sup>60</sup> These ideas turned out to be fanciful, though. By the fall of 1984, the crowds at AutoWorld had already started to dwindle. Although business often improved on weekends and around holidays, the park appeared empty on most days. For employees, most of whom earned the minimum wage, work at the facility was often monotonous. “I worked at ‘The Humorous History of Automobility’ and I still remember its inane theme song, which I had to hear 8 hours a day every day,” a former employee recalled. “I had to take the job because jobs were scarce and I wanted to save up enough money to get out of Flint. I snorted a lot of ground-up No-Doz during those days, just because the repetitiveness of the job put me to sleep.” “It is boring as hell,” UM-Flint professor Neil O. Leighton fumed. “Even my 16- and 12-year old sons found it boring, with the exception of the IMAX film.” According to one survey, 30 percent of the people who visited the facility indicated that they would not recommend it to their friends.<sup>61</sup>

To remain profitable, AutoWorld required a million paying customers each year. When it became apparent that this would not happen, the park’s financiers moved quickly to close it down. In December 1984, just six months after the grand opening, officials from Six Flags announced that the park would be open only on weekends through the remainder of the winter. A month later, investors closed the facility altogether.<sup>62</sup> The building reopened for several brief periods over the next few years, but poor attendance and the state’s depressed economy continued to frighten away tourists and investors. In

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<sup>60</sup> For an example of this optimism, see J. Anderson, “Tourism in Flint,” n.d., Anderson Papers, Perry Archives.

<sup>61</sup> The former employee’s quotation is available at [www.toysaregoodfood.com](http://www.toysaregoodfood.com). On the Leighton remark, see *Flint Journal*, January 21, 1985. On complaints about AutoWorld, see AutoWorld Clipping File, Perry Archives.

<sup>62</sup> See *Bay City Times*, December 21, 1984; and D. Graham, “AutoWorld Closing Tied to Dispute over Losses,” *Flint Journal*, January 20, 1985.

1994, AutoWorld shut its doors permanently. Following the closure, city leaders received several redevelopment proposals, including one advocating a new casino for the site. Voters rejected that plan in November 1994, however. Embarrassed by the failure, White and other representatives from the Mott Foundation demanded that the building be leveled to make way for new projects. In 1997, White got his wish when a crew of workers from Best Wrecking in Detroit tore down the facility. Hoping to assist with the marketing of the soon-to-be vacant land, WJRT broadcast part of the demolition on live television in an event dubbed, “Boom for Growth.”<sup>63</sup>

The AutoWorld fiasco severely undermined the city’s entire downtown renewal effort. By 1987, at least six of the stores in the new festival marketplace had gone out of business. Although the managers of the Hyatt Regency ran an aggressive advertising campaign to lure conventioners and other travelers, the luxury hotel remained virtually empty on most nights. By century’s end, the Hyatt, Water Street Pavilion, and Windmill Place had all fallen into bankruptcy.<sup>64</sup> Significantly, the UM-Flint campus and a new office building owned by the state of Michigan survived the downtown’s collapse. However, these two facilities failed to generate the customers needed to support downtown business owners. Part of the difficulty stemmed from the fact that tourists, suburbanites, and thousands of Flint residents clung to the notion that the central business district was dangerous in spite of evidence suggesting that it was the safest area in the city. Even among UM-Flint students, government workers, and others who frequented downtown, most preferred to do their shopping, dining, and partying elsewhere. This

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<sup>63</sup> For coverage of the park’s demise, see AutoWorld Clipping File, Perry Archives. See also, Gary Flinn, “A Tale of Two Failed Tourist Attractions,” <http://home.comcast.net/~steelbeard1/flinn071907.htm>. For photographs and recollections of the demolition, see [www.toysaregoodfood.com](http://www.toysaregoodfood.com).

<sup>64</sup> See Gilman, *No Miracles Here*, 77-183; Lord and Price, “Growth Ideology in a Period of Decline,” 155-169; and Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned*, 159-172.

was in part a reflection of the university's housing policies and the architecture of the campus, which militated against trips to downtown stores. Because the new school had no on-campus housing, virtually all students commuted to class by car, most from a distance of over six miles. Once they arrived downtown, students and faculty members parked their vehicles in one of several garages attached to classroom buildings by enclosed, climate-controlled "skyways." Likewise, workers in the state's new office building could avoid the street by using aboveground walkways. These overhead passages made it possible for students, faculty, campus visitors, and government workers to spend the entire day downtown without ever setting foot on Saginaw Street. Sadly, many never did.<sup>65</sup>



Figure 12.2. An elevated "skyway" at the University of Michigan-Flint. Photograph by Andrew R. Highsmith, 2005.

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<sup>65</sup> On fear of crime, architecture, and the privatization of urban space, see Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and M. Davis, *City of Quartz*.

Like AutoWorld, Water Street, the Hyatt Regency, and Windmill Place, scores of downtown restaurants and shops closed during the prolonged economic crisis of the late twentieth century. Even fast food establishments found it difficult to survive in Flint's depressed downtown core. In a 1986 report, researcher Thomas R. Hammer noted that there were none of these franchises left in downtown Flint. "In central Flint," he explained, "you simply cannot buy a Big Mac, Whopper, or Double with Cheese."<sup>66</sup> Willing to try almost anything to turn things around, city workers and business owners attempted to mask the downtown's decline by painting faux storefronts onto abandoned buildings. This act of desperation fooled very few people, though. In 1986, as unemployment surged past 25 percent, *Money* magazine released its "Best Places to Live in America" issue. Much to the chagrin of civic boosters, Flint came in last place.<sup>67</sup>

#### *Michael Moore and the Rust Belt Synthesis*

The intense local battles over layoffs, plant closures, property taxes, and downtown development helped to spawn a new generation of activists in Flint during the 1970s and 1980s. One such individual was Fran Cleaves, who in 1982 helped to build a shantytown called "unemployment city" in downtown Flint. Complete with tents and a soup line, Cleaves's village attracted hundreds of visitors who joined her in calling for a national moratorium on plant closings.<sup>68</sup> The most noteworthy of the city's new organizers was Michael Moore, however. After losing his seat on the Davison school board, Moore moved to the Vehicle City, where he founded the *Flint Voice*, an alternative weekly

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<sup>66</sup> Hammer, *Evaluation of Development Potentials*, 160.

<sup>67</sup> M. Moore, "Flint and Me." See also, M. Moore, "General Motors Pulls Out."

<sup>68</sup> Laurie White and Jack Stanzler, "The Voice of the Unemployed," *Flint Voice*, September 18-October 1, 1982.

newspaper. Later renamed the *Michigan Voice*, the newspaper attracted an extraordinarily talented pool of angry but funny young writers and activists including Ben “Rivethed” Hamper, a local autoworker and writer, and Kotlowitz, a journalist who went on to author several award-winning books on urban poverty and social inequality.<sup>69</sup> In “I, Shop Rat,” a 1982 *Voice* column, Hamper described his experiences as an underemployed GM operative:

Over the past two years I’ve been bounced back and forth from the bread line to the rivet line to the benefit line to the axle line so many times, I feel like some experimental human ricochet that GM is testing out just how much they can dribble one’s world before it drops right into the lost and found with a severe case of job lag.<sup>70</sup>

Moore and his colleagues won a wide following for their muckraking essays on unemployment, urban renewal, police brutality, plant closures, and other local topics. During the campaign to defeat GM’s tax appeal, Moore worked closely with Flint autoworker and UAW activist Mike Westfall, Ralph Nader, and Jim Musselman, an attorney with Nader’s Center for the Study of Responsive Law. It was during this period that Moore first considered a career in filmmaking. In April 1985, Nader wrote a letter to Roger Smith asking him to visit Flint to explain why he authorized GM’s tax appeal. The following month, Musselman attended a meeting of corporate shareholders, where he offered a similar invitation to Smith. To raise awareness about the situation, Westfall proposed making a documentary film about plant closures and layoffs in Flint with all profits earmarked for unemployed workers. Moore and Musselman supported the idea, but Westfall could not raise the funds necessary to begin filming. In 1987, Moore

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<sup>69</sup> See Ben Hamper, *Rivethed: Tales from the Assembly Line* (New York: Warner Books, 1991); Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); and Kotlowitz, *The Other Side of the River: A Story of Two Towns, a Death, and America’s Dilemma* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1998).

<sup>70</sup> Hamper, “I, Shop Rat,” *Flint Voice*, March 5-18, 1982.

revealed that he was going to begin work on his own film about Flint and General Motors, which he planned to title either “Dance Band on the Titanic” or “My Hometown.” Westfall and Musselman shared all of their research on GM and agreed to film interviews for the project. At some point in 1988, however, Moore decided to change the theme of the film. Instead of focusing on GM and its troubled hometown, the new version of the movie revolved around Moore’s personal quest to convince Roger Smith to visit Flint. Renamed *Roger and Me*, Moore’s revamped, more egocentric film arrived in theaters in 1989. Although Moore had clearly borrowed many ideas from Westfall, Nader, and Musselman, he failed to acknowledge them either in the film or after its release. Much to the surprise of his former colleagues, the movie quickly became one of the highest grossing documentary films in American history.<sup>71</sup>

*Roger and Me* follows Moore (Me) across the country as he attempts to meet with Roger Smith (Roger). Throughout the film, Moore hilariously stalks his elusive foe at shareholders’ meetings, the Detroit Athletic Club, the GM corporate headquarters, a yacht club, and other locations in an attempt to convince the executive to witness the devastation caused by GM’s plant closures in Flint. Interwoven throughout these comedic situations, however, are scenes of abandoned homes, tenant evictions, and interviews with local residents who reflect upon Flint’s declining fortunes and the fates of unemployed autoworkers. Like other articulations of the Rust Belt Synthesis, the narrative of *Roger and Me* turns on a series of juxtapositions between scenes of poverty and wealth, hope and despair, past and present. At several key moments in the film, Moore skillfully uses cutaway shots and other cinematographic techniques to contrast the Vehicle City’s prosperity during the postwar era with the gloom of postindustrial Flint, a

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<sup>71</sup> On the disputed origins of *Roger and Me*, see Westfall Papers, box 1, folder 26, GHCC.

city where the American Dream seems to be dying. During a January 1990 interview with television host Phil Donahue, filmed on location in Flint, Moore elaborated on the film's commentary on the American Creed: "Phil, you know, the American Dream used to be that if you worked hard, and the company prospered, you prospered. Now it's you work hard, the company prospers, you lose your job."<sup>72</sup> At the core of *Roger and Me* is a tragic story about the demise of the postwar American Dream.

Moore's film, perhaps the most iconic statement of the Rust Belt Synthesis yet produced, highlights the human implications of deindustrialization by focusing on the sense of alienation and abandonment felt by Flint's unemployed autoworkers. For Moore, GM's rejection of Flint—signified by the corporation's decision to close local plants while opening new ones in the Sunbelt and Mexico—marked the end of a prosperous era. Although the losses documented in the movie were very real, this theme of nostalgia is nonetheless deeply problematic in light of Flint's long and tangled history of racial division and metropolitan development. The film's stark contrasts between past and present serve to obfuscate both the processes of deindustrialization and the myriad ways in which Flint residents experienced corporate divestment. *Roger and Me* makes no mention of the postwar capital migrations that ultimately helped to impoverish the city. Nor does it address how racial exclusions shaped Flint's rigidly delimited opportunity structure during the postwar and civil rights eras. Instead, Moore's account frames the 1940s and 1950s as an epoch marked by growing prosperity, social opportunity, and GM's firm commitment to the city. By neglecting to address racism and the social and economic implications of the postwar suburbanization of capital, *Roger and Me* presents

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<sup>72</sup> Moore's quotation is from the official transcript of the January 29, 1990 episode of the Phil Donahue show, a copy of which is in the Westfall Papers, box 1, folder 26, GHCC.

a skewed narrative of abandonment that acknowledges the experiences of only white workers. In 1989, African-American historian Nell Irvin Painter reflected on this prevailing tendency among labor history scholars, left-leaning activists, and other proponents of the Rust Belt Synthesis. “The new labor history has a race problem,” she asserted.<sup>73</sup> Like the labor histories that Painter criticized, *Roger and Me* also has a race problem. For even in Flint, the place once known as the “town of seven wonders,” there was never a golden era of equal opportunity.

*Roger and Me* cost less than \$200,000 to produce. Still, it attracted millions of viewers and won extraordinary acclaim from an international audience of film critics. It won best documentary film honors from the New York Society of Film Critics, the National Society of Film Critics, the Los Angeles Society of Film Critics, and the National Board of Review. Viewers in Flint greeted *Roger and Me* with a mixed response, however. At the 1990 taping of the Phil Donahue show, Fran Cleaves’s husband Herbert, also an activist, spoke out in support of the film:

Phil, this town is not coming back on its feet. The reality is, what he [Moore] did, he put Flint on the map for everybody in the world to see that disgraceful kinds of things that’s happened to the people in this town. He did it. I’m glad he did it. We’re going to support you. And we are going to get 20/20 here. We want *Primetime*, NBC, ABC—you’ve got to bring them here! Bring them to Flint!<sup>74</sup>

Cleaves and many others embraced the publicity generated by the film and hoped that it would spur government officials to intervene on the city’s behalf. The films critics, though, feared that Moore had permanently sullied the city’s reputation. After viewing the controversial movie, Woodrow Stanley, the city’s third black mayor, denounced

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<sup>73</sup> Painter, “The New Labor History,” 369-370. For a similar critique, see H. Hill, “The Problem of Race in American Labor History,” 189-208.

<sup>74</sup> For the Cleaves quotation, see Westfall Papers, box 1, folder 26, GHCC.



Moore as a “pimp” and charged him with irrevocably damaging Flint’s public image.<sup>75</sup> If Flint’s problems derived from negative beliefs, as many civic boosters maintained, then *Roger and Me* surely dealt the city a knockout blow.

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Roger Smith and his colleagues met great resistance from Michael Moore and other Flint residents who opposed GM’s restructuring efforts. Yet even the company’s staunchest critics could not sidestep the fact that decades of corporate divestment had left Flint’s inner-city plants increasingly obsolete. Late twentieth-century job losses in the Vehicle City derived from a combination of poor sales, outsourcing, automation, and the shuttering of outdated facilities. In cities across the country, GM officials closed their oldest factories first. During a 1987 congressional hearing, GM President F. James McDonald revealed the criteria that corporate officials used to determine shutdowns. According to McDonald, the top two factors executives considered were the age of the factory and the “useful life” of the facility. In addition, McDonald admitted that “landlocked” urban plants, especially those of the two- and three-story variety, would be among the first to close.<sup>76</sup> With its dozens of older, multi-story industrial buildings, the island city of Flint could claim few state-of-the-art factories at century’s end.

The deindustrialization of Flint thus continued unabated during the 1990s. In May 1990, GM representatives announced that they were going to close and demolish

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<sup>75</sup> Hugh F. Semple, Sr., “Film Maker Seeks Investigation of Mayor’s Office,” *Flint Enquirer*, September 21, 1992.

<sup>76</sup> *General Motors Plant Closings: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Labor of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987). On automation and job loss in Flint, see Nader, “Robots, Robots Everywhere,” *Tri-City News*, November 18, 1981; and Westfall, “Man vs. Machine: Automation Comes to the Work Place,” *Alicia Patterson Foundation Reporter* (Spring 1984), Westfall Papers, box 1, folder 3, GHCC.

Plant 2A, formerly Fisher Body 2, at the Chevy in the Hole complex. Two years later, the company revealed plans to shut twenty-one factories nationwide including the Chevrolet V-8 engine facility on Van Slyke Road.<sup>77</sup> The most serious blow to the local economy occurred in 1999, however, when General Motors shuttered Buick City, GM's largest industrial complex in North America. During the mid-1980s, GM invested \$475 million to modernize and automate the factory. By the early 1990s, the independent market research firm of J. D. Power and Associates had ranked the North End behemoth as the highest-quality automobile plant in North America.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, rising demands for minivans, pickup trucks, and sport utility vehicles severely eroded Buick's share of the large vehicle market. Between 1980 and 1999, the number of Buicks sold in the United States declined from 720,858 to 445,611.<sup>79</sup> In their attempt to "rightsize" production, GM executives closed Buick City and shifted its operations to newly constructed plants in the Michigan communities of Hamtramck and Orion Township.<sup>80</sup> Several years after the Buick City demolition, journalists from the *Detroit Free Press* adopted the phrase, "The Fall of Flint," to describe the city's long, hard decline.<sup>81</sup>

For many local and national observers, GM's decision to close plants in Flint marked a major historical turning point between the end of Fordism and the rise of the Rust Belt. In reality, however, the plant demolitions were the culmination of GM's long and circuitous departure from Flint. Regardless, the shutdown at Buick City constituted one of the most devastating moments in the city's history. Dating back to 1904, when the

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<sup>77</sup> Mosher, ed., *We Make Our Own History*, 106-107. See also, *Flint Enquirer*, March 31, 1992.

<sup>78</sup> On the J. D. Power rankings, see Lisa Eddy, "General Manager of Buick Offers Encouraging News, Cites Longevity," *Flint Editorial*, August 15, 1991.

<sup>79</sup> Binder and D. Ferris, *General Motors in the Twentieth Century*, 191.

<sup>80</sup> On the closing of Buick City, see Gardner, "Buick City's Demise," 23-25; D. Buss, "GM's Company Town," *Automotive News*, June 28, 1999; and Gilman, *No Miracles Here*, 137-183.

<sup>81</sup> Bill Vlasic and Brett Canton, "The Fall of Flint," *Detroit Free Press*, December 11, 2005.

founders of the Buick Motor Company chose Flint as their manufacturing headquarters, the Vehicle City had staked its future on the success of General Motors, the growth of the American automobile industry, and the permanence of Fordism. During a 1953 “Flint Community Salute to Buick,” Chamber of Commerce members reminded residents of the unbreakable ties that bound Buick and Flint: “Buick and Flint . . . Flint and Buick. These are inseparable. They are linked traditionally in a strong kinship which has no parallel in America. Wherever Buick is known, so is known the name of Flint.”<sup>82</sup> For the tens of thousands of citizens who grew up believing those words, the closure of Buick City created a grave identity crisis. Pondering the psychological implications of the news, journalist Warren Cohen from *U.S. News and World Report* asked, “How can a town nicknamed ‘Buick City’ not make Buicks?”<sup>83</sup> Like chameleons, the “Buick City” and its residents would have to find new identities—and new jobs, thousands of them—for the twenty-first century.

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<sup>82</sup> Flint Chamber of Commerce, *Flint Community Salute to Buick* (Flint: Flint Chamber of Commerce, 1953).

<sup>83</sup> Warren Cohen, “The End of an Era for Autos,” *U.S. News and World Report* (July 12, 1999).

## Conclusion

### America Is a Thousand Flints

GM's retreat from Flint devastated all but the most sanguine of the Vehicle City's boosters. The Flint Area Conference quietly disbanded in 1988, its members disgraced by the failures of the Great Leap Forward. Several years later, in an article on deindustrialization, *New York Times* reporter Don Terry concluded, "The Vehicle City is running out of gas."<sup>1</sup> For his part, Michael Moore reaffirmed his earlier prediction that the city would soon cease to exist. "My fear," he admitted in 1999, "is that Flint is going to be one of the first ghost towns of the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>2</sup> At century's end, hope seemed to be in short supply in the Vehicle City.

Even in the face of such pessimism, however, many civic leaders remained confident about the city's twenty-first century fate. Many of those who believed that Flint's best days were ahead viewed GM's plant closures as a blessing of sorts—an opportunity for economic diversification and a chance to obtain a brighter postindustrial future for a city that had bound its future to America's ailing automobile industry for far too long. "Flint is like a Phoenix waiting to rise out of the ashes," claimed Gary Ford of the Chamber of Commerce. "The only thing working against us is our name." Ford and others vowed to fight on for a new and better Flint in spite of the gloomy prophecies that

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<sup>1</sup> On the end of FACI, see Gilman, "Urban Restructuring," 212. Don Terry, "A City Where Hope Runs on Empty," *New York Times*, February 26, 1992. See also, D. Buss, "City's Boom Replaced by a Hollow Thud," *Automotive News* (July 5, 1999); and "The Die Hard Economy," *Fortune* (April 29, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> D. Buss, "GM's Company Town."

proliferated at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Flint's political leaders and civic boosters largely failed in their efforts to stem the outward flow of jobs, people, and resources, however. Indeed, Flint recently celebrated its sesquicentennial and GM's hundredth anniversary amidst a deep, intractable, and seemingly permanent state of urban crisis.

### *Beyond Abandonment*

Regardless of the city in question, most accounts of the Rust Belt's collapse revolve around the closely related themes of white flight and corporate abandonment.<sup>4</sup> The prevailing wisdom regarding the "Fall of Flint" fits neatly into these analogous declension narratives. To Michael Moore and other cultural critics, the closing of Buick City represented GM's abandonment of Flint, the death of prosperity, and perhaps even the end of the city itself. As economic conditions deteriorated during the 1990s, apocalyptic visions of the city's future circulated widely, manifesting themselves on t-shirts, mugs, and caps reading, "Flint: Last One Out, Turn Out the Lights." In 2001, the Old 97's, a country music group, released "Buick City Complex," a song that grapples with the human implications of deindustrialization. The song's chorus imagines a bipolar future of romantic inhibition and terrifying loneliness in a dying city with neither jobs nor people:

They're tearing the Buick City Complex down.  
I think we're the only people left in town.  
Where are you gonna move, where are you gonna move?  
Do you wanna mess around?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> M. Moore, "Flint and Me."

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; and Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*.

<sup>5</sup> Old 97's, "Buick City Complex," from *Satellite Rides* (Elektra, 2001).

In a June 2007 column in the *Uncommon Sense* newspaper, local satirist “Mad Mac” asked, “When Flint finally closes next year, what will people in the future think about all the expressways, bridges, ramps, railroads, and the airport that all intersect here . . . where there isn’t anything?”<sup>6</sup> Mad Mac and other locals turned to gallows humor as a form of cultural protest against white flight and corporate divestment.

Journalists and academic researchers have adopted a similar approach to narrating Flint’s descent into urban crisis. In 1996, sociologist Steven P. Dandaneau published *A Town Abandoned: Flint, Michigan, Confronts Deindustrialization*, a book that focuses on boosters’ futile efforts to reverse industrial decline. Like most other chroniclers of the city’s recent past, Dandaneau employs the metaphor of abandonment to explain plant closures, job losses, and the dismantling of Flint’s urban empire.<sup>7</sup> The causal framework of flight has generated many useful insights for understanding Flint’s downward economic trajectory. It is undeniable that tens of thousands of whites deserted Flint and other major cities when integration arrived in their communities. Their departures reinforced the color line and severely impaired the city’s economic health. Likewise, it is impossible to dispute the claim that GM and other local employers shifted billions of dollars in capital and resources from the central city to the suburbs and the Sunbelt in the second half of the twentieth century. The outmigrations of white taxpayers, capital, and jobs devastated urban neighborhoods and wreaked havoc at city hall, where elected officials struggled to balance budgets and deliver services to a municipality whose population seemed to be in perpetual decline. By 2002, Flint’s fiscal crisis had become

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<sup>6</sup> “Mad Mac,” *Uncommon Sense*, June 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned*.

so severe that Governor John Engler appointed an emergency financial manager to run the bankrupt city's day-to-day operations.<sup>8</sup>

Still, the concept of abandonment is highly problematic, not least because General Motors and tens of thousands of white residents did not completely pull out of Flint and may never. Furthermore, civic boosters and neighborhood activists refused to relent in their struggles to revitalize the city. Even during the era of mass layoffs and plant closures, city leaders sought to renew Flint and searched, though often in vain, to find reasons for optimism.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, struggles over the fate of urban America continued to rage long after the majority of the nation's whites had moved from cities to suburbs. In 1997, just when the industrial nadir seemed to be at hand in Flint, a Mott Foundation researcher noted the hidden benefits of the city's awful reputation for crime, poverty, failing schools, and unemployment: "Flint's image is so bad it's good, in that any positive developments are bound to attract attention."<sup>10</sup> A decade later, Paul Wenstrom, a local Merrill Lynch executive, offered an even more hopeful assessment of the city's development potential: "I think businesses will realize this is a community with a terrific infrastructure in place. They might see this is an opportunity that's unmatched if you want a lot of land and a nice residence for not too much money."<sup>11</sup>

The most remarkable facet of Flint's postwar and recent pasts is not that white people, employers, and investors have turned their backs on the city, though many surely

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<sup>8</sup> On the state takeover, see Christofer Machniak, "2002 Year in Review," *Flint Journal*, December 31, 2002. Ed Kurtz, who Engler appointed as the city's emergency financial manager, remained in power until the summer of 2004. On the end of Kurtz's tenure, see Machniak, "Mayor Sets City Hall Party to Mark End of Takeover," *Flint Journal*, June 29, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, David E. Cole, *The Automotive Industry, General Motors, and Genesee County* (Ann Arbor: Transportation Research Institute, University of Michigan, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Hammer, *The Once and Future Economy of Metropolitan Flint, Michigan* (Flint: Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1997), 37.

<sup>11</sup> Dana Hedgpeth and Neil Irwin, "Out Like Old Flint," *Washington Post*, March 24, 2006.

have. Rather, it is the ways in which government officials, civic leaders, and ordinary residents have recreated and fortified racial and economic inequalities in their attempts to revitalize the region. The phrase “Demolition Means Progress” was not just an empty slogan. In fact, it expressed the operating ethos of the city’s political and economic leadership during the bulk of the twentieth century. In the shops, schools, and neighborhoods of Flint, civic leaders constantly tried to revitalize the city and its people by demolishing inefficient structures and institutions. During the Great Depression, members of the board of education and the Mott Foundation hoped to renew the city by re-making public schools into segregated community centers. In the 1940s and 1950s, federal housing administrators and local developers sought to reinvigorate the real estate market by sponsoring new, racially segregated subdivisions outside of the city limits. Their interventions helped to make Genesee County one of the most segregated metropolitan regions in the United States. For their part, GM executives and city officials worked to revolutionize automobile production by demolishing old urban factories and rebuilding new automated ones in all-white suburbs. When those efforts failed to create a renaissance, city leaders launched an ambitious plan to replace black neighborhoods with a freeway and new factories. Yet urban renewal and freeway construction initiatives ultimately undermined the city’s commercial and industrial economies and hardened the color line. In the end, each one of these renewal efforts yielded an even more impoverished and racially divided city. Flint was not empty, however.

Despite Michael Moore’s 1999 prediction, the city of Flint did not become a ghost town; and neither did other maligned cities such as Detroit, Baltimore, and Cleveland. Moreover, business owners and politicians did not surrender in their perennial quests to



bring homeowners, development, and jobs back to these shrinking metropolises. In Flint, their efforts hinged on a sustained campaign to create a better perception of the city and its people. Long before the release of *Roger and Me*, representatives of the Flint Chamber of Commerce, the Mott Foundation, and other civic groups argued that Flint's distressed economic climate stemmed directly from its poor public image. After the film's debut, the movement to refurbish Flint's reputation reached new heights. "A big part of the economic development problem," confirmed Mott Foundation researcher Thomas Hammer, "is a need to undo adverse perceptions about Flint and its environs."<sup>12</sup> In their attempts to polish Flint's image and repopulate the city, Ford, Wenstrom, and other civic boosters stand in a much longer tradition of urban renewal dating back to the Depression and post-World War II eras.

Like their postwar predecessors in the Sunbelt, Vehicle City boosters in the new millennium aggressively publicized Flint's pro-business economic climate.<sup>13</sup> Local leaders sought to lure new investors by advertising the city's two-tier wage structure, surplus labor, low taxes, and severely weakened trade unions. In 2004, editors from the *Flint Journal* trumpeted the fact that wages in the Vehicle City had fallen well below those in Detroit and other nearby cities. The editors, hoping to use "our well-known economic misfortune as an advantage," urged everyone in the city to "tell small manufacturers and other businesses how much this community has changed, that job-seekers no longer consider high wages a birthright, and moving here won't price them out

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<sup>12</sup> Hammer, *The Once and Future Economy of Metropolitan Flint, Michigan*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> On Sunbelt growth boosterism, See James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); and Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*.

of the market.”<sup>14</sup> Along similar lines, municipal officials waged a successful turn-of-the-century battle to have Genesee County included in “Automation Alley,” a cooperative venture bringing local governments and corporations together to combat southeast Michigan’s reputation for labor militancy and anti-growth economic policies. Today, signs announcing that Genesee County is an Automation Alley community greet motorists traveling on Interstate 75 as they enter the Flint metropolitan area.<sup>15</sup>

Civic leaders augmented their public relations blitz by waging a tireless campaign to retain jobs. As part of that effort, the Flint City Council continued to offer tax abatements and other incentives to support new and existing factories and commercial enterprises. The city’s renewed commitment to GM culminated in the mid-1990s with the creation of the Billy Durant Automotive Commission. In 1997, members of the commission presented a “living agreement” to General Motors, a lengthy proposal designed to make Flint and Genesee County more appealing to corporate investors. Led by Bill Donahue of the Genesee Area Focus Council, the group consisted of representatives from the Genesee County Board of Commissioners, the Flint Board of Education, the UAW’s Region 1-C office, Consumers Energy Company, the Flint-Genesee Economic Development Conference, the Flint Cultural Center Corporation, and the Mott Foundation.

Included in the agreement were formal pledges to GM in the areas of labor, education, health, government, and culture. On behalf of organized labor, Commissioner

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<sup>14</sup> “Wage Advantage: Low-Cost Work Force Now a Selling Point for County,” *Flint Journal*, December 7, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Kevin P. Balfe, *Analysis of the Metropolitan Flint Labor Market* (Evanston: Institute for Urban Economic Development Studies, Northwestern University, 1988), 39-59. On the Automation Alley initiative, see “Genesee County Joins Automation Alley as Foundation Member,” *PR Newswire* (October 21, 2003), 1; and <http://www.automationalley.com/autoalley/Automation+Alley>.

Ruben Burks, a regional director from the UAW, promised that trade unionists would work to eliminate all unnecessary obstacles to productivity and profitability, support new automated technologies, and allow GM to negotiate local work rules on a plant-by-plant basis. Members of the Flint Board of Education vowed to create better laborers by formulating “school-to-work” partnerships, developing career training tracks at all local high schools, and designing a curriculum that “puts all classroom learning in a workplace problem solving context.” Commissioners also agreed to inaugurate a countywide wellness campaign in order to reduce GM’s rising health care costs. Government officials assured executives that they would continue the tax abatement program, provide new water and sewer improvements to retain GM employment, and implement an aggressive road maintenance plan. Spokespersons from Flint’s Public Works Department sweetened the transportation deal by offering to repair or rebuild, with no questions asked, any ten roads in the city selected by GM plant managers. To help the company lure new executives to the Vehicle City, Larry R. Thompson, president of the Flint Cultural Center Corporation, promised to provide GM recruits with free passes to all of the center’s facilities. The covenant concluded with a strong, open-ended commitment to assist the automaker as it adapted to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century:

The competitive nature of the global automotive market place requires that automobile manufacturers adapt quickly to new challenges and opportunities. The same holds true for the communities in which manufacturers operate. The Greater Flint community stands ready to act as a full partner with General Motors by evolving institutions with the flexibility to respond to unanticipated trends and events, as well as articulated needs.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Billy Durant Automotive Commission, *A Living Agreement: A Presentation to the General Motors Corporation by the Greater Flint Community* (Flint: Billy Durant Automotive Commission, 1997).

This remarkable offer brought Flint's long, complex relationship with General Motors full circle. In an undated postwar letter to Harding Mott, AC Spark Plug executive Joseph Anderson once suggested that city leaders needed to do more to demonstrate their affection for the company. "G.M. is our main employer and bread winner," he wrote. "It pays ½ of our taxes. Over the years, G.M. has been very good for Flint. We need to constantly let G.M. know that we love and appreciate them."<sup>17</sup> With its impressive package of pledges and incentives, the Durant commission's covenant was an expression of civic love that harked back to Mayor George Algoe's proclamations during the 1954 Golden Carnival.

Ultimately, however, such promises have produced only mixed results. In 2004, GM announced plans to open a new \$300 million engine plant in the city and spend \$148 million to upgrade its existing truck and bus complex on Van Slyke Road. Four years later, many civic leaders rejoiced when executives confirmed that they would build an additional engine factory in Flint—this one for the Chevrolet Volt, GM's highly anticipated "plug-in" hybrid car.<sup>18</sup> These new automated plants helped to fill the massive tax void left behind by the closures of Buick City, Chevy in the Hole, and other local facilities. Yet they created few new jobs for city residents. As expected, GM adhered to its existing agreement with the UAW and awarded virtually all new positions to unemployed autoworkers—most of whom lived in the suburbs—from Buick City and other shuttered facilities in the region. Still, city council members and Mayor Donald J. Williamson offered millions of dollars in tax abatements and infrastructure improvements

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<sup>17</sup> J. Anderson to H. Mott and James Schaeffer, n.d., FOCI Files, 91.136.116, Perry Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Todd Seibt, "GM Money Makes Political Honey," *Flint Journal*, December 17, 2004; and Melissa Burden, "Volt to Power GM's, Flint's Future," *Flint Journal*, September 16, 2008. Due to the economic crisis that unfolded at the end of 2008, GM subsequently delayed its plans to build the new Volt plant.

to secure the new developments. In an attempt to dispel false optimism about the new plants, Second Ward Councilman Ed Taylor warned, “Nobody in Flint is going to get a new job. . . . Nobody [who works at the new factories] is going to buy a house [in Flint]. They aren’t going to shop here.”<sup>19</sup> Sadly, Taylor’s prediction turned out to be true.

GM’s new plants did not stop the deindustrialization of Flint. In fact, engineers unfurled the blueprints for the new factories at the same time that other, more labor-intensive manufacturing facilities in the region were closing. In the fall of 2004, a crew of workers from Detroit tore down Plant 4 from the mostly empty Chevy in the Hole complex on Flint’s west side. Plant 4 was the factory from which black autoworker Roscoe Van Zandt and his colleagues triumphantly marched following the conclusion of the Flint sit-down strikes. Prior to the demolition, thieves stole the two historical markers honoring the sit-downers that stood in front of the building. In response to the teardown and the loss of the signs, Sharon Huntley from UAW Local 659 remarked, “You just want to cry.”<sup>20</sup> The following November, GM executives fended off bankruptcy by unveiling an aggressive plan to close plants and eliminate thirty thousand manufacturing jobs in the United States. Among the factories slated for closure was the Flint Engine North facility, whose workers built V-6 engines near the demolished St. John Street neighborhood.<sup>21</sup> In 2006, production ended at the historic AC Spark Plug plant on Dort Highway, by then operated by Delphi Automotive Systems, a GM spinoff company. After hearing the news, Dale Mark, a GM retiree living in suburban Genesee Township, expressed shock that the sprawling complex had closed: “I never thought it would. I

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<sup>19</sup> See *Flint Journal*, October 21, December 1, 8, 16, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> *Flint Journal*, November 20, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Rick Haglund and Seibt, “GM Ax Falling on Local Plant,” *Flint Journal*, November 21, 2005.

thought they'd always need the things we made." Two years after the Delphi factory closed, it too met the wrecking ball.<sup>22</sup>

Public relations campaigns, tax abatements, living agreements, and other perquisites offered to investors have generated only minor economic development in the city of Flint and its struggling inner-ring suburbs. The county's southernmost communities—especially those bordering the booming high-tech corridor in Oakland County—benefited substantially from the Automation Alley program and a robust real estate market. Yet Flint and economically depressed suburbs such as Beecher continued to hemorrhage jobs, residents, and capital in the new century. By 2005, additional layoffs and plant closures had brought GM's local workforce down to approximately fifteen thousand. With so few jobs available, Flint's population continued to plummet, sinking to 113,000 in 2006. The city's housing vacancy rate that year approached 20 percent. Also that year, thousands of suburban homeowners—even those in southern Genesee County—began experiencing financial difficulties of their own when the housing and stock markets faltered and the nation's economy lurched toward recession. The gathering economic storm in the suburbs paled in comparison to the crisis in Flint, however.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> James M. Miller, "Flint's Spark: Spark Plug Production a Part of City for Generations," *Flint Journal*, April 9, 2006. See also, Ron Fonger, "Wrecking Ball to Fell Another Flint Giant," *Flint Journal*, April 1, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Don L. Boroughs, Robert F. Black, and Sara Collins, "Counties in Crisis," *U.S. News and World Report* (November 25, 1991), 52; M. Orfield and Luce, *Genesee County Metropatterns*; Bob Wheaton, "On the Grow," *Flint Journal*, January 30, 2005; Bernie Hillman, "Housing Boom Putting School Space at a Premium," *Fenton Press*, February 27, 2005; R. Sanders, "Burton's Boom," *Flint Journal*, May 1, 2005; and B. Wheaton, "Boom Town," *Flint Journal*, September 25, 2005. See also, *Flint Journal*, April 2, December 12, 2006, April 1, 10, 15, August 12, October 7, 2007, January 22-23, 27, May 16, 2008; and *Grand Blanc News*, January 27, 2008. On growth related to Automation Alley, see Tom Henderson, "Tech. Industry Remains a Bright Spot in the Region, Report Says," *Crain's Detroit Business* (November 10, 2008).

*Flint and the Fate of Urban America*

After experiencing four decades of uninterrupted deindustrialization, economic decline, and depopulation, Flint—like dozens of struggling cities nationwide—entered the new millennium in a severely weakened state. This seemingly boom-proof city continued to bleed jobs and residents even during the 1990s heyday of the “New Economy,” when it lost approximately 11 percent of its population. The bad news only mounted in the new century. Despite the city’s aggressive demolition program for blighted properties, census takers counted 6,720 vacant homes in 2000—nearly half of them condemned—out of 55,464 total housing units. Things looked gloomy downtown as well. Visitors to the city could not help but notice that the Saginaw Street business district—once the entertainment, commercial, and consumer capital of Genesee County—emptied at 5 p.m. each day as thousands of government workers, UM-Flint students, and other commuters left for their homes in surrounding suburbs. Downtown lot owners provided free parking during off-peak hours to lure new customers, but most area residents continued to do their shopping and dining elsewhere, many of them at the Genesee Valley mall in Flint Township and the bustling strip plazas nearby on Miller Road. Although several hundred UM-Flint students moved into new on-campus dormitories near the central business district in 2008—and though several coffee shops opened on Saginaw Street to serve them—there was still no viable consumer sphere downtown. As 2008 ended, there were no movie theaters, grocery stores, or pharmacies located in the city center, and most restaurant owners and shopkeepers on Saginaw Street closed their doors after dark.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The demolition program expanded in December 2004, when the Genesee County Land Bank received a \$5 million loan from the county to tear down additional abandoned properties. This represented a quadrupling of the Land Bank’s previous demolition budget. See *Flint Journal*, December 11, 2004. Also, see M. Orfield and Luce, *Genesee County Metropatterns*, 2-3; U.S. Census Bureau, *Profile of General*

The collapse of downtown Flint's consumer economy was a direct result of the decline of manufacturing and the exodus of federal funds, corporate capital, and private wealth from the central city. In 2000, Genesee County's average property tax base of \$47,919 per household was lower than in any other metropolitan region in the state.<sup>25</sup> This was primarily a reflection of the high unemployment rates in the city, which ranged between 13 and 18 percent. More striking, however, is the fact that over 40 percent of Flint residents over the age of sixteen—37,436 individuals—bowed out of the labor force completely in the new millennium. Per capita incomes in Flint, which stood at \$15,733 in 2000, were thus among the lowest in the nation. In 2006, officials from the U.S. Census Bureau confirmed that Flint was the poorest major city in Michigan (and among the most impoverished in the United States), with one in three residents living below the federally established poverty level.<sup>26</sup> The human implications of Flint's statistical impoverishment emerged most clearly in the early morning hours before trash pickups, when poor families arrived in neighborhoods to scour through waste bins in search of scrap metal, clothing, and furniture; or during the holiday season, when area food banks collected donations and distributed food to the needy. In December 2004, William Kerr, the president and chief executive officer of the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan, issued a

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*Demographic Characteristics for Flint City, Michigan* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2003); U.S. Census Bureau, *General Housing Characteristics for Flint City, Michigan* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2003); Nigel G. Griswold, "The Impacts of Tax-Foreclosed Properties and Land Bank Programs on Residential Housing Values in Flint, Michigan," (master's thesis, Michigan State University, 2006); and Christopher Swope, "The Man Who Owns Flint," *Governing* 21:4 (January 2008): 53. On the UM-Flint dormitories and downtown development, see *Flint Journal*, October 21, 23, 2006, August 18, 25, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> M. Orfield and Luce, *Genesee County Metropatterns*, 2; U.S. Census Bureau, *Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics for Flint City, Michigan* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Fonger, "Flint Tops Poverty List – Census," *Flint Journal*, August 30, 2006.



plea for assistance—a harrowing reminder that Flint’s economic crisis had not yet abated: “This is the greatest need we’ve ever experienced. . . . We need the help.”<sup>27</sup>

Poverty has always been an equal opportunity condition in urban America. In Flint, thousands of white residents earned wages at or beneath the federal poverty line at the turn of the century. Nevertheless, impoverishment in Flint and virtually all other American cities disproportionately affects African Americans, women, and children. In 1999, black city dwellers in the Vehicle City earned an average per capita income of \$13,670, while their white counterparts took home \$18,930. A 2003 report found that nearly 40 percent of the city’s mothers with children less than five years old were indigent. Moreover, 75 percent of Flint’s public school children were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. In 2008, the city’s schools were second only to Detroit’s in statewide levels of racial and class segregation. Startlingly, many of Flint’s elementary and junior high schools were more segregated that year than they were on the eve of the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown* decision. Flint was not alone, however. In fact, segregation and income stratification indices increased sharply in urban neighborhoods and school districts throughout the nation during the 1990s. In the cities of Milwaukee and Phoenix, to cite just two examples, school segregation along racial lines increased by approximately 6 percent just between 1992 and 1997.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Flint Journal*, December 1, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> M. Orfield and Luce, *Genesee County Metropatterns*, 1-7; U.S. Census Bureau, *Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics for Flint City, Michigan*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Race and Hispanic or Latino Summary File for County Subdivisions in Genesee County, Michigan* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2003). Also, see Keith Schneider, “Address Segregation in Land Use Plans,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 14, 2003; and K. Schneider, “Michigan Apartheid: Reforming Land Use Policy Can Help Most Segregated State,” April 17, 2003. This article, published by the Michigan Land Use Institute, is available at <http://www.mlui.org/growthmanagement/fullarticle.asp?fileid=16480>. On the nationwide spike in school segregation, see M. Orfield, *American Metropolitics: The New Suburban Reality* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), 49-64.

As they always have been, Jim Crow schools are in part a reflection of rigid housing segregation. However, the Flint Board of Education continued to play a role in upholding racial boundaries at the turn of the century. During the 1990s, the school system continued its drift toward almost complete segregation, freefalling enrollments, and financial collapse. Critics of the magnet program responded to the crisis by arguing for a return to more cost effective neighborhood schools. In 1991, white school board member Leo Macksood called for an end to the desegregation program and the limited forms of pupil busing that it required. “We need to get back to a sound neighborhood school program,” he claimed. “We’re going to the poorhouse in a school bus.”<sup>29</sup> Later that year, he raised the issue again: “There’s no way to desegregate the school system any longer. Why continue to pay millions maintaining a charade?”<sup>30</sup> In the post-integrationist era, Macksood and other critics of desegregation nationwide advocated a return to the neighborhood schools first pioneered by the Mott Foundation in the 1930s. By the turn of the century, a growing number of African Americans had joined him. In the grandest of ironies, the burgeoning neighborhood schools movement in Flint brought together white and black citizens who had stood on opposite sides of the desegregation question for over a generation. With support for neighborhood schools stretching across the color line, Flint’s voluntary desegregation program simply could not endure.<sup>31</sup>

In the spring of 2006, under the leadership of a newly appointed African-American superintendent, Walter Milton, Jr., the Flint Board of Education formally cancelled the magnet program and announced the reimplementation of neighborhood

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Francis, “School Board Mulls Dropping Most Busing,” *Flint Journal*, January 24, 1991.

<sup>30</sup> M. Francis, “Flint Magnet Schools Losing Attraction,” *Flint Journal*, March 17, 1991.

<sup>31</sup> On the resurgence of support for community education, see Aiyer, ed., *Telling Our Stories*, 128-129. On the decline of busing in the United States, see Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 301-329.

schools.<sup>32</sup> The decision garnered few headlines and spawned little controversy in a divided metropolis that had grown weary of integration. Still, the 2006 policy shift marked the ultimate triumph of racial apartheid. But this was not like the 1950s, when residents of the Vehicle City flocked to their community schools by the thousands to learn and play in a segregated public sphere. This time, there was no square dancing in the streets to honor Jim Crow's victorious return.

Declining white enrollments made racial integration all but impossible in the Flint Public Schools and other urban school districts. Such was not the case in many of the city's neighborhoods, however. Unlike Detroit, Gary, East St. Louis, and other virtually all-black cities of the Rust Belt, Flint was still home to a substantial number of whites in the new century. The nearly fifty thousand whites who lived in the city, most of them poor or working class, represented approximately 40 percent of Flint's overall population. Although this community continued to shrink at a steady clip, thousands of white homeowners who were anxious to leave remained trapped by mortgages worth more than the market value of their residences. Many of these would-be sellers chose to remain in their neighborhoods rather than face the prospect of huge financial losses in the depressed real estate market. In some instances, sagging property values helped to stabilize Flint's tenuous interracial balance. Nevertheless, a plethora of homes remained for sale inside the city—many at reduced prices—especially in those neighborhoods experiencing racial transitions. During the first eight years of the new century, thousands

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<sup>32</sup> Burden, "Funding Question Aside, School Reform Plan on Fast Track," *Flint Journal*, February 24, 2006; and Burden, "Board Approves Milton Reforms," *Flint Journal*, March 2, 2006.

of frustrated and frightened white families left Flint despite the financial incentives for staying.<sup>33</sup>

Most homeowners who departed Flint relocated to suburban Genesee County. With few exceptions, these suburbs remained virtually all white. In 2000, there were 311,198 people living in the twenty-seven municipalities, villages, and townships surrounding the Vehicle City. Nearly 90 percent of them were white while only 7 percent were African American. Of the 22,283 African Americans living in suburban Genesee County in 2000, almost three-fourths of them resided in Flint Township, Beecher, or Mount Morris Township. As well, two thousand blacks lived in the close-in suburbs of Grand Blanc Township, Burton, and Genesee Township. By contrast, the remaining twenty-two communities in Genesee County, with a combined population of 169,522, housed fewer than two thousand black people. In the south suburban city of Linden, home to approximately 2,800 people, there were two African Americans in the year 2000. Likewise, the northwestern suburb of Montrose contained two black people out of 1,619 residents. In the eastern suburb of Atlas Township, where 7,257 people lived, census takers found only twenty-four African Americans. The racial geography was equally polarized in the exurban and rural fringes of the Flint metropolitan area. In the Bavarian-themed city of Frankenmuth, home to 4,838 mostly wealthy white people (and the world's largest Christmas store), government officials counted thirteen African

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<sup>33</sup> "Where Homes Are Worth Less than the Mortgage," *New York Times*, November 10, 2008. See also, David Streitfeld, "A Town Drowns in Debt as Home Values Plunge," *New York Times*, November 11, 2008; Alan Zibel, "Home Sales, Prices Drop," *Flint Journal*, August 26, 2008; Brenda Brissette Mata, "Tough Housing Market Forcing Many Agents to Find Other Work," *Flint Journal*, October 5, 2008; Shena Abercrombie, "Rise in Vacant Houses Opens Doors to Squatters," *Flint Journal*, October 19, 2008; and Burden, "Buying Foreclosed Homes Can – Sometimes – Make Best of Bad Situations," *Flint Journal*, November 16, 2008.

Americans. Jim Crow remained an ever-present feature of the region's residential landscape in the twenty-first century.<sup>34</sup>

Sill, evidence from Genesee County and the nation as a whole suggests that it is long past time for a more nuanced typology for America's increasingly diverse suburbs. Although the suburbs and exurbs of metropolitan Flint remained rigidly segregated along racial lines in the new century, their class demographics were much more complex. In 2000, the exurban hamlet of Owosso, once an all-white "sundown town," was home to only twenty-seven African Americans who comprised 0.2 percent of the population. However, most of the city's 15,244 whites were solidly working class. The city's median household income of \$32,576 was nearly \$10,000 less than the national average. Owosso was not at all unique, though. In fact, for every Fenton Township—where median household incomes of \$71,094 dwarfed national averages by \$30,000—there were multiple suburbs such as Montrose, Beecher, and Swartz Creek, where residents earned salaries at or below national averages. Between the extremes of Fenton Township and Flint, an increasing number of formerly middle-class suburbs were dotted with bank-owned homes and boarded-up storefronts, all of them testaments to Michigan's deep industrial crisis. Despite its pockets of extreme wealth and capital, Genesee County—like most other metropolitan regions—began to experience the suburbanization of the urban crisis in the new century. In fact, racial and class diversity increased dramatically in the waning years of the twentieth century in hundreds of suburban areas throughout the

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<sup>34</sup> American Indians, Alaska Natives, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Latinos—along with those who identified themselves as either biracial or a member of an unlisted race—accounted for less than 4 percent of Genesee County's total population in 2000. See U.S. Census Bureau, *Race and Hispanic or Latino Summary File*.

nation, leading Myron Orfield and other policy experts to debunk the “myth of the suburban monolith.”<sup>35</sup>

The Vehicle City celebrated its sesquicentennial in 2005 amidst another punishing round of plant closures. Three years later, local citizens joined millions of Americans in honoring the hundredth anniversary of GM’s founding. Unlike 1954, though, when revelers at the Golden Carnival claimed that Flint was the envy of the world, these twenty-first century celebrations occurred under dark clouds of uncertainty. Toward the end of 2008, the stock market crashed and the nation’s economy sank into a deep recession. By November of that year, stock prices had plunged and home and vehicle sales had all but halted nationwide. In response, GM Chairman G. Richard Wagoner, Jr. and other American automobile executives declared that their companies were on the brink of collapse. Hoping to avert a potentially devastating series of bankruptcies and job losses, Wagoner and his erstwhile rivals from Ford and Chrysler requested an emergency “bridge loan” from the United States Congress to help their troubled corporations stay afloat. On December 10, members of the U.S. House of Representatives approved a \$14 billion bailout for American automakers. The following day, however, senators rejected the bill, pushing GM another step closer to financial insolvency. Although it is unclear whether federal officials will ultimately approve some sort of relief package—or, for that matter, whether General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler will survive the current economic crisis—it is almost certain that the future promises more job cuts and austerity for autoworkers and their communities. From coast to coast, cities, suburbs, and rural areas as diverse as Indianapolis; Doraville, Georgia; Wilmington, Delaware; Shreveport,

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<sup>35</sup> See M. Orfield and Luce, *Genesee County Metropatterns*, 3; and M. Orfield, *American Metropolitcs*, 28. See also, Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, passim; Wiese, *Places of Their Own*; and Kruse and Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History*.

Louisiana; Lorisdtown, Ohio; Los Angeles; Warren, Michigan; Spring Hill, Tennessee; and, of course, Flint and Detroit will experience significant job reductions as GM and other automobile manufacturers adjust to weak credit markets and falling demands for new cars and trucks. Still, it is difficult to imagine that Flint and its people could suffer any more than they already have over the past two generations.<sup>36</sup>

In December of 2005, writers from the *Detroit Free Press* painted an extremely unflattering portrait of the city's rusted landscape: "Parts of the city are eerily empty, with vast stretches of vacant land standing in silent testimony to the factories that were once there."<sup>37</sup> On the city's North End, where St. John Street and Buick City once stood, visitors in 2008 could find unobstructed postindustrial vistas and waist-high prairie grasses that bore a striking resemblance to a concrete-dipped Kansas. Today, the 235-acre Buick City facility—which once employed 28,000 autoworkers in its sprawling complex of factories—is a vast postindustrial wasteland of concrete and razor wire. The old AC Spark Plug plants on the city's north and east sides and the Chevy in the Hole complex in West Flint are also gone. Without question, deindustrialization has hit Flint as hard as any other city in the United States. In truth, though, postindustrial neighborhoods such as those in the North End are seemingly ubiquitous in cities and towns throughout the nation. Yet neither the city of Flint nor its people have disappeared; nor have they vanished from Detroit, St. Louis, Gary, Indiana, and other predominantly black cities that once formed the backbone of America's industrial economy.

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<sup>36</sup> On the economic recession of 2008 and the political negotiations over the bailout proposals, see *New York Times*, December 1-10, 2008. See also, *Flint Journal*, December 1-10, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Vlastic and Clanton, "The Fall of Flint."

At present, Genesee County is a landscape of Dickensian extremes. It is a region where unimaginable privilege and Gilded Age wealth coexist uneasily with Third World squalor and mind numbing hopelessness—a place where whites and blacks live and learn separately and unequally despite the poverty, despair, and want that know no color line. By nearly all accounts, and without a shred of hyperbole, Genesee County is one of the most racially segregated, economically polarized, and politically divided regions in the United States. Perennially, however, Flint competes for this dubious distinction with dozens of other cities that have experienced similar fates.<sup>38</sup>



Figure C.1. Buick City. Photograph by Andrew R. Highsmith, 2005.

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<sup>38</sup> M. Orfield and Luce, *Genesee County Metropatterns*; and K. Schneider, “Michigan Apartheid.”



Back in 1945, when Americans celebrated the conclusion of World War II and looked forward to a future of peace and prosperity, Buick historian Carl Crow claimed that the United States consisted of a thousand Flints.<sup>39</sup> His words ring true today. The America of 2008 is indeed a thousand Flints, but not in the way that Crow imagined. There are Flints in the economically depressed neighborhoods of Decatur, Illinois; East Palo Alto, California; Camden, New Jersey; Miami, Florida; and Erie, Pennsylvania. Flints can be found in big city ghettos on Chicago's south side and in struggling suburbs such as East Cleveland, Ohio, and Yonkers, New York. However, there are also thousands of Flints in the booming all-white subdivisions of Silicon Valley and the affluent suburbs of Boston, Seattle, Houston, and Charlotte. There are Flints in the Rust Belt and in the Sunbelt, for the conditions of racial, spatial, and economic inequality that defined the Vehicle City in the old and new millennia know no regional boundaries. Because it took the full weight of government at all levels—along with the efforts of millions of ordinary Americans—to build the walls that surround these communities, it will require an equally concerted movement to tear them down.

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<sup>39</sup> Crow, *The City of Flint Grows Up*.

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