

URBAN RENEWAL AND THE INTERSTATE: Losing Charleston's Triangle District, 1956—1977

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Historians have increasingly highlighted the damage that the Interstate Highway and Urban Renewal initiatives have inflicted upon urban, minority neighborhoods. This project details how Interstate and Urban Renewal worked in tandem to destroy the Triangle District, a poor, majority-Black neighborhood in Charleston, West Virginia. The research draws upon publicized correspondence from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, archived video interviews, and dozens of newspaper articles to examine how the Interstate and Urban Renewal projects destroyed Charleston's Triangle. The desire to address crime and vice, to prioritize commerce, and to deliver on political promises fueled Urban Renewal and the construction of the Interstate, which contributed to racial tensions in Charleston and its Triangle District. While larger cities are often the subject of such studies, this project tells the lesser-known story of a smaller population center that is equally important to twentieth century American history.

Introduction

“Mister, I don’t live, I exist,” exclaimed a black, arthritic, retired coal miner and resident of one of Charleston, West Virginia’s long—lost neighborhoods.¹ Surviving from one Social Security check to the next, he inhabited “a 6x12—foot shack providing a \$27—a—month residence,” with “two tires stacked in a backyard which are serving as an outdoor toilet.”² This was life in the Triangle District.

Situated between Capitol Street and the confluence of the Elk and Kanawha Rivers sat this 57—block neighborhood, home to much of Charleston’s Black, working—class community. Within walking distance to industry and downtown, the Triangle furnished economic opportunity for immigrant and minority families. By day, these hard—working men and women toiled away in the city’s chemical and materials plants. By night, the area boasted a bustling and culturally rich nightlife. However, as industry declined following World War II, so too, did the Triangle.

By the 1960s, the Triangle District came under scrutiny from city officials as substandard housing conditions plagued tenants’ quality of life and “blighted” the

¹ Charlie Connor, “Cleanup Crews Face Giant Task: City is Awakening,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, March 10, 1961, 17.

² Connor, “Cleanup Crews Face Giant Task,” 17.

landscape. Dwellings were condemned and subsequently demolished. Agitation amongst City Hall officials over the conditions in the Triangle spawned ideas for an urban renewal project.³ All the while, the fate of the Triangle District became the center of debate over the route of three proposed interstates: I—64, I—77, and I—79. Debate about interstate routing and urban renewal raged on for two decades, during which frustration with bureaucrats and politicians, as well as violent backlash plagued the city. Why did the government seemingly dismiss the concerns of affected residents? How did this affect racial tensions? Finally, what happened to the Triangle District and Charleston in general? Drawing from newspaper articles, video archives, and government documents, this story of the Triangle, Charleston’s “city within a city,”⁴ tells of the sad loss of a beacon of culture that many called home. The desire to address crime and vice, to prioritize commerce, and to deliver on political promises fueled urban renewal and the construction of interstates, which contributed to racial tensions in the City of Charleston, West Virginia, and its Triangle District.

Historiography

In October of 1962, the American Society of Landscape Architects published conference proceedings that detailed how the freeway should serve a city environment.⁵ The findings worked with contemporary evidence to report that interstates bring both good and bad outcomes for cities. Among the notable negative impacts, the publication suggests that highways can be “needlessly unattractive” and can “irrevocably damage the basic urban pattern and amenities.”⁶ As for the positive influences, the article mentions that urban highways could help address the projected population increase of cities, whose growth was estimated at 50% through the fifteen years following the publication.⁷ At the same time, the conferees promoted interstates for their ability to “define the boundaries of existing or potential districts within the city.”⁸ They add that “when combined with urban renewal and redevelopment programs,⁹ it [the interstate] can be a powerful instrument in the rebuilding of cities.”¹⁰ While the authors contend that it is more acceptable to “uproot” businesses rather than people, they nonetheless argue that “blighted areas are the places for [prospective] freeway[s] to go” because the area surrounding the road can be “valuable for commercial or industrial development.”¹¹ The position taken by the Society of Landscape Architects is contradictory because their support for concurrent interstate and urban renewal projects stands at odds with their expected city population growth. As history shows, displacing residents for these public works projects decreases urban populations and initiates suburbanization. While one cannot fault the authors of the report for miscalculating urban population trends, in practice, their argument that

³ Tom Cummings, “Good Building Year but 1962 Should be Better,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, January 1, 1962, 17.

⁴ Anna E. Gilmer and James D. Randall, *Black Past* (Charleston: Randall, 1989): 103.

⁵ American Society of Landscape Architects, “Freeways in the Urban Setting,” *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 53, no. 1 (October 1962): 73—79.

⁶ American Society of Landscape Architects, “Freeways in the Urban Setting,” 74.

⁷ American Society of Landscape Architects, “Freeways in the Urban Setting,” 74.

⁸ American Society of Landscape Architects, “Freeways in the Urban Setting,” 74.

⁹ As was the case in Charleston.

¹⁰ American Society of Landscape Architects, “Freeways in the Urban Setting,” 74.

¹¹ American Society of Landscape Architects, “Freeways in the Urban Setting,” 77.

freeways should intersect decayed neighborhoods proves racially oppressive, as “blighted” areas were most often home to minority communities, such as in Charleston’s Triangle District.

A few years later, as the Interstate Highway System materialized, Robert E. Reiter approached the question of how to improve highways by examining the Federal—Aid Highway Act of 1956 and the subsequent amendments.¹² While the American Society of Landscape Architects argues that highways should be built in deteriorating neighborhoods, Reiter argues that such a practice is sociologically oblivious and unreasonably destructive.¹³ Explaining the near—sighted tactics of the Bureau of Public Roads, Reiter states, “That highway engineers are not trained to be sociologists is a fact of life that, nevertheless, need not preclude their recognition that freeways have a sociological impact.”¹⁴ Reiter mentions that the recognition of the interstate’s sociological impacts was only recent as of 1969, possibly due to fallout from the civil rights movement. While traffic was one of the chief justifications for interstates in urban areas, Reiter asks whether “rending whole neighborhoods asunder [. . .], scattering families, toppling established businesses, and setting up natural barriers between formerly cohesive segments of a community” is worth “decongesting” downtown streets.¹⁵ He further rebuts the traffic argument: “As shopping centers and high rise housing replace decaying, uninhabitable slums, the streets become more crowded and congestion results.”¹⁶ However, while the article rightfully highlights the shortcomings of the Interstate Highway System, it falls short of explaining the racial consequences imposed by urban interstate projects, despite promoting a sociological lens.

More than twenty years after the American Society of Landscape Architects released their findings, historian John Bauman discusses the role that race played in federal works initiatives, such as urban renewal and the Interstate Highway System.¹⁷ Using the city of Philadelphia as a case study, Bauman argues that urban renewal exacerbated neighborhood decline for a population that was majority Black.¹⁸ Following World War II, Bauman details how the Great Migration led to Philadelphia having the country’s third largest Black population.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Bauman says this growth “paralleled [. . .] a concomitant white population boom in the sprawling suburbs.”²⁰ Consequently, white people moved into “new, low—density tracts of single—family dwellings,” while Black families “jammed the high—density row housing,” which was often “substandard.”²¹ The City of Philadelphia addressed inadequate housing by tapping into funds from the Federal Urban Renewal Program, in hopes that it would not only improve living conditions but also serve a “didactic” purpose.²² However, Bauman reasons that social and economic forces broke the

¹² Robert E. Reiter, “The Impact of the Federal Highway Program on Urban Areas,” *The Urban Lawyer* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 76—88.

¹³ Reiter, “The Impact of the Federal Highway Program on Urban Areas,” 76—77.

¹⁴ Reiter, “The Impact of the Federal Highway Program on Urban Areas,” 77.

¹⁵ Reiter, “The Impact of the Federal Highway Program on Urban Areas,” 88.

¹⁶ Reiter, “The Impact of the Federal Highway Program on Urban Areas,” 88.

¹⁷ John F. Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

¹⁸ Bauman, *Public Housing*, pp. XII—XIII.

¹⁹ Bauman, *Public Housing*, 84.

²⁰ Bauman, *Public Housing*, 86.

²¹ Bauman, *Public Housing*, 86—87.

²² Bauman, *Public Housing*, 116.

promise of urban renewal. Instead of serving as an opportunity for disadvantaged Black residents, racial segregation and classism ensured that “everything [was] in its place.”²³ In other words, the failure to equally disperse public housing (in White neighborhoods, for example) hindered opportunity for Philadelphia’s Black community. While Bauman effectively illustrates how urban renewal had adverse racial motivations and outcomes, the argument only focuses on a particular federal program. In reality, the decline of minority neighborhoods and the explosion of suburban sprawl did not exist in a vacuum. For example, Bauman fails to question the impact of the section of Interstate 76 known as the Schuylkill Expressway that 1) wiped out the prominent Black neighborhood of Nicetown and 2) separates the majority—Black North Philadelphia from the wealthy Mainline section. Moreover, interstate construction and urban renewal in large cities is well documented.

For instance, in a more recent publication, *Folklore of the Freeway* author and urban historian Eric Avila highlights Los Angeles and New Orleans as cities significantly impacted by the Interstate Highway System, while also shedding light on their respective “freeway revolts.”²⁴ He argues that minority groups in these cities have used cultural means to reclaim the spaces dominated by the highway. Avila uses examples of artists in Los Angeles and its Chicano communities and their fight to win the rights to paint murals on the bridges and retaining walls of freeways.²⁵ Elsewhere, Black musicians in New Orleans have increasingly taken to the streets to recultivate the musical traditions and parade culture once unimpeded before the arrival of the interstate.²⁶ New Orleans communities have additionally fought to establish parks underneath highway bridges. However, Avila’s argument is geographically limited. While he discusses some northeastern interstate projects and their impacts, Avila does not cite any northern cultural responses to the interstate, highlighting locations in the South and southwestern United States instead. Many examples of northern resistance to proposed interstate routes are more well known, but they are also primarily wealthy White movements.²⁷ While Avila is correct that the cultural revolts are significant, it is also worthy of exploring how the civil rights movement contributed to the freeway revolt, particularly in terms of marches and lawsuits.

It is generally accepted among urban historians that the Federal Urban Renewal Program and the Interstate Highway System had negative effects on urban Black neighborhoods. However, to date, many associated publications lack a comprehensive narrative combining urban renewal and highways with urban decline, emphasizing one over the other. Furthermore, historians have effectively documented the mid—twentieth century decay of America’s most populous cities, leaving the smaller urban areas underrepresented in their narratives worth telling. This paper will provide an analysis of how both urban renewal and the interstate led to pushback, at times violent, from Charlestonians, as well as telling of the subsequent annihilation of the majority—Black Triangle District, Charleston’s “city within a city.”

²³ Bauman, *Public Housing*, 116.

²⁴ Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

²⁵ Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway*, 150.

²⁶ Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway*, 157.

²⁷ See Greenwich Village, Princeton, and Boston. Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway*, 31—39.

Interstate Debate: Commerce vs. People

On June 29, 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Federal—Aid Highway Act into law. Also known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, this legislation undoubtedly pivoted the course of American society. Supporters of the bill, which was the largest government spending program of its time, hoped the 42,000 miles of road would burgeon the post—war economy and facilitate troop movement in the event of foreign invasion. As a result, the expanse of infrastructure that followed connected cities in more efficient ways and initiated suburbanization. However, the Eisenhower Interstate System also sparked many negative outcomes for the communities it did or did not serve. One of the most glaring misdeeds of the interstate system proved to be its detrimental effect on urban communities, notably the destruction of Charleston’s Triangle District.

On November 19, 1957, the *Charleston Daily Mail* first reported on the future interstate network that would serve the city.²⁸ The Federal Highway Administration (FHA) designated numbers and outlined a rough path for the highway. The West Virginia portion of Interstate 64 would stretch from Huntington in the south, across to Charleston, and southeast through Lewisburg to the Virginia state line. This route roughly followed the existing US Route 60 but would increase the volume of traffic, with four lanes and up to six through Charleston. Two north—south roads would also serve the city: I—77 and I—79. Such a prospect stirred immediate backlash. As more details were released, the *Charleston Gazette* released a spread detailing the proposals.²⁹ Debate centered on whether I—64 should bypass Charleston or run through the city. Seven miles of road—miles 52 through 59—were at the heart of the debate. The bypass proposal directed the interstate around the city starting at mile marker 52, while the through—route solution had the road going through about four miles of the city of Charleston. Thomas Stafford of the *Charleston Gazette* spoke frankly: “There’s only one way to build the east—west interstate expressway in the vicinity of Charleston, and that’s through the city.”³⁰

According to Stafford, supporters of the downtown route cited traffic congestion as a justification. A Bureau of Public Roads study mentioned by the article states that 85% of the traffic inbound to Charleston had a destination within the city. Proponents of the downtown route alleged a bypass would only increase traffic issues, but cloverleaf and parallel exits in the city would keep cars moving at higher speeds and gradually discharge traffic at various points. This solution was purported to accommodate between two and five times the amount of travelers at “greater though safer speeds,” an apparent oxymoron. In fact, figures from the Automotive Safety

²⁸ “Interstate Road Gets Numerals,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, November 19, 1957, 21.

²⁹ Thomas F. Stafford, “A Super—Road, Yes! But Where?: In City Routing Heart of System,” *Charleston Gazette*, December 1, 1957, 13.

³⁰ Stafford, “A Super—Road, Yes!,” 13.

URBAN RENEWAL AND THE INTERSTATE

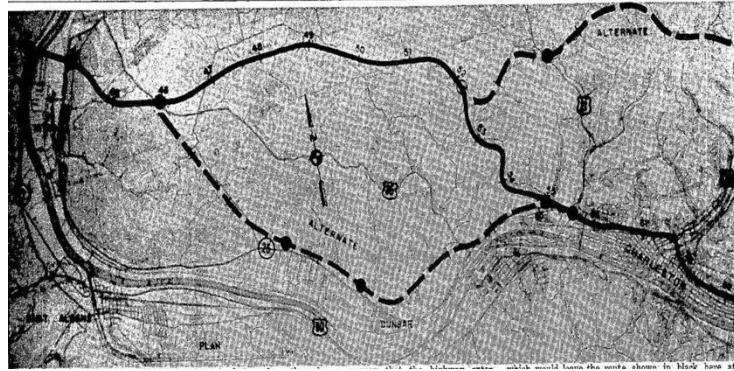
Foundation put the decongestion argument into question: highways carry *three* times more traffic at *twice* the speed and nearly *five* times the accident rate.³¹

The *Charleston Gazette* also invoked the original intent of Congress that

interstates should run in proximity to the central business districts so as to bring economic benefits.³² Addressing concerns about property, Stafford stated that values of units already close to constructed highways have tended to increase, meaning greater tax revenue. He conceded that a bypass route would cost less, but Stafford added that downtown routes pay for themselves in many ways, such as the gas savings that drivers would make and new business for local establishments. But what about the residents who would be displaced?

Don Marsh of the *Charleston Gazette* wrote on the cons of the proposed through—route.³³ For one, the highway would render a substantial portion of city land uninhabitable, forcing residents from their homes and perpetuating a housing shortage. According to a construction expert interviewed, a six—lane highway would require a minimum right—of—way of 110 feet, while each interchange would need between six and eight acres of land. Given an already scarce amount of developable land due to the hilly terrain, the amount required for the highway was expected to exacerbate an already present land shortage. Marsh argued that the loss of land and houses would reduce fiscal income for the city, but also that the interstate would reduce the property values of adjacent homes, further harming citizens and tax revenue. The second downfall of the through—route laid in its cost compared to the bypass. The downtown interstate had an estimated cost of \$61,009,000,³⁴ while a bypass would have been \$19,842,000³⁵—less than *three* times as expensive. The alternate bypass route to the north would also go through cheaper and less developed land.

Regardless of the debate, comments from State Road Commissioner Patrick Graney suggested a decision would be made in the distant future.³⁶ Graney emphasized the opinion of city officials and citizens in outlining how the routing



Map of I-64 Bypass or Through—Route in Charleston, Image, Charleston Gazette, December 1, 1957.

³¹ A. Builder, “When Our Roads Reach Capacity,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, August 19, 1959, 10.

³² Federal—Aid Highway Act of 1956, Pub L. No. 84—627, 70 Stat. 374 (1956).

³³ Don Marsh, “A Super—Road, Yes! But Where?: Foes Cite Loss of Land, Money,” *Charleston Gazette*, December 1, 1957, 13.

³⁴ USD 2022: \$647,025,413.10

³⁵ USD 2022: \$210,432,530.39.

³⁶ John G. Morgan, “A Super—Road, Yes! But Where?: Officials Suggest Decision Far—Off,” *Charleston Gazette*, December 1, 1957, 13.

question would be answered. First, the State Road Commission convened a nine—person committee composed of members from the City Planning Commission, the City Council, and the Chamber of Commerce. Robert Spilman Jr. from the Planning Commission added that the group was primarily focused on exploring the feasibility of the downtown route. Spilman assured with certainty that the interstate would follow Washington Street on the west side of the Elk River, though more contention surrounded the path on the east side, home to the Triangle District. The leading proposal for east Charleston had the interstate being elevated above the New York Central System train tracks, which the State Road Commission ultimately dismissed because of cost. There was also suggestion of the highway running near Piedmont Road, Charleston General Hospital, and the iconic Daniel Boone Hotel, through which I—77 would eventually also be placed. Spilman finished by saying that the interstate commission would only recommend a route that would receive sufficient public support and would be logical from economic and engineering viewpoints. If, and only if, all the downtown routing options failed the aforementioned qualifications, the commission would subsequently pursue a bypass route.

The immediate concern of citizens was the delay in the routing decision. Residents expressed uncertainty about remodeling, selling, and developing in the Charleston area while highway officials mulled over their options.³⁷ The reluctance to build continued to grow as Commissioner Graney informed the public that engineering studies would continue to go on for months.³⁸

Finally, on June 27, 1959, the engineering firm released their study. The *Gazette* reported, “The engineers recommended a thru—city route on the basis of a nationally—approved method of road—user benefit analysis,” which compared the annual savings of drivers to the annual price of the highway.³⁹ Their benefit ratio predicted the city route would save drivers \$1.45 to the bypass’s \$1, despite the initial price tag being three times higher. Vogt, Ivers, Seaman, and Associates, the consulting firm that authored the report, assured that despite the clearance of 1,400 buildings and a \$30.1 million difference from the bypass’ cost, the I—64 through—route would best serve the city.⁴⁰ The engineers also cited the alleviation of city traffic as another recommending factor. On the following day, while addressing the Charleston Rotary Club, the head engineer Robert Williamson told the group that those “who oppose a through—city route often base their opinions on mere beliefs or prejudices or sheer lack of information.”⁴¹ But what more information did homeowners need than the prospect of their houses being destroyed?

Many residents contributed to the discussion on the interstate. Writing his reaction to a rendering of an interchange released by the engineering firm, one Charleston resident complained, “It’s a bunch of spaghetti [. . .] It’s a mess. It’s ugly.”⁴² He further noted that the massive scale of the interchange would take away highly desirable land, raising already high prices across the city and hindering

³⁷ John G. Morgan, “No Location Set for Interstate 64: City Holds Key to Route Plans,” *Charleston Gazette*, April 17, 1958, 17.

³⁸ “City Interstate Location Not Due Till End of the Year,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, April 17, 1958, 4.

³⁹ The method of analysis was endorsed by the American Association of State Highway Officials and the Federal Bureau of Public Roads. John G. Morgan, “City Route Urged for Highway,” *Charleston Gazette*, June 27, 1959.

⁴⁰ USD 2022: \$308,700,00.

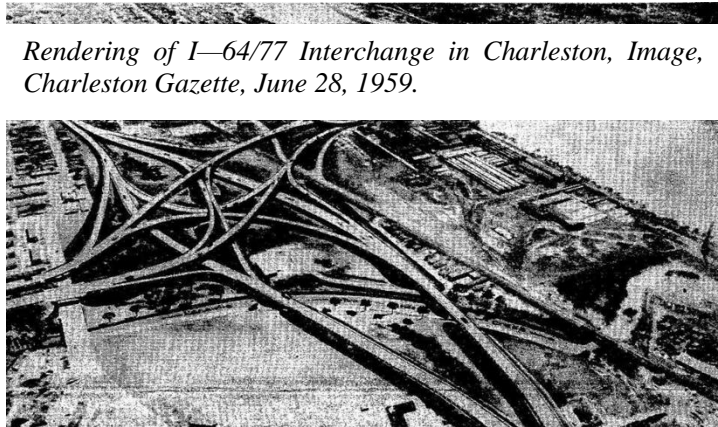
⁴¹ John G. Morgan, “City Route Urged for Highway,” 17.

⁴² “Proposed 64 Interchange Lashed,” *Charleston Gazette*, June 28, 1959.

URBAN RENEWAL AND THE INTERSTATE

economic opportunity. Illustrating the historical context, another citizen asked if “a bypass would not be more desirable in the event of an atomic attack.”⁴³ Remarkably taking a position, the *Charleston Gazette* editorial board blasted the engineers for not sufficiently exploring the possibility of a bypass, nor taking into account the inevitable development around a bypass, nor the costs of displacing what the editors believed would be 4,000 residents, which would likely alter the benefit ratio.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, in the *Daily Mail*, the editorial board came out in support of the downtown route, saying that the temporary inconveniences would not outweigh the long—term benefits.⁴⁵ Citing the letters to the editor being received by both newspapers, the *Daily Mail* estimated that there were ten bypass supporters for every one through—route supporter. Though most residents appeared to unite against the downtown route, it carried the backing of the Chamber of Commerce. What citizens truly thought would be revealed at a public hearing to be held within sixty days of the engineering report. However, just over a month later, the state of Charleston took a dramatic turn.

On August 13th, the *Daily Mail* reported that Mayor Copenhaver, an opponent of the downtown interstate route, suffered a fatal heart attack in his bathtub.⁴⁶ Copenhaver was a two—term Republican mayor who was set to be reelected. The City Council promptly appointed John Shanklin, a veteran council member, to serve as the temporary mayor, a move that would thwart efforts to move the interstate north of the city. Just a few weeks after Copenhaver’s Passing, the *Daily Mail* editors wrote the following:



Rendering of I—64/77 Interchange in Charleston, Image, Charleston Gazette, June 28, 1959.

It was one of the late Mayor’s parting shots that Interstate 64 through the city would erect a Chinese Wall separating it into distant and inaccessible camps. With no disrespect to his memory, it is worth recalling something about that structure. It did, in fact, serve as a barrier to protect the Chinese from the Mongolian hordes. But it did something else. It also served as the main artery of transportation and commerce whereby the civilized Chinese maintained their position against the barbarians.⁴⁷

⁴³ John G. Morgan, “Engineers Answer Queries: Motive Explained on In—City Route,” *Charleston Gazette*, July 10, 1959.

⁴⁴ “By—Pass for Interstate 64 Not Thoroughly Explored,” *Charleston Gazette*, July 2, 1959, 6.

⁴⁵ “What Alternatives Do the Opponents Offer If Interstate 64 Does Not Come Through?” *Charleston Daily Mail*, July 3, 1959, 4.

⁴⁶ “Copenhaver Dies at Home After Heart Attack in Bath,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, August 13, 1959.

⁴⁷ “Not Altogether a Wall, the Interstate Could Serve to Liberate Our Traffic,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, August 19, 1959, 10.

The editorial board would go on to say that no such “civilized vs. barbarian” divide existed in Charleston. Nonetheless, the quote and its context allude to notable class and racial distinctions in the city at the time and symbolize a crucial turning point in the big interstate question. What followed the death of Mayor Copenhaver and the *Daily Mail*’s dog whistling was an unexpected revamping of the city of Charleston.

Urban Renewal: Vice and Crime

With the interstate debate raging on and City Hall under new leadership, the modern layout of Charleston began to materialize. Initially, City Councilman Shanklin supported the bypass route. As mayor, however, he walked back his previous approval, claiming he planned “to wait and see what develops before saying anything more.”⁴⁸ Assigning a city staffer to the project, Shanklin hoped to find out just how much a through—route would cost the city of Charleston, itself.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Mayor Shanklin also had plans to address the city’s apparent “vice problem.”⁵⁰

Both Shanklin and his late predecessor looked to rehabilitate the city and rid it of its perceived immoral behaviors. Their target: a 57—block area between Summers Street and the Elk River, otherwise known as the Triangle District, which harbored three times the normal disease and juvenile delinquency rate of the city and cost more for fire and police protection than it contributed in taxes.⁵¹ The City Council had disbanded and reinstated the Charleston Urban Renewal Authority (CURA) a few times during the 1950s but, towards the end of the decade, it was poised to take on a massive redevelopment project under Mayor Shanklin.⁵² Prior to the release of the highway engineering report, city planners and realtors sought to modernize when they agreed to discuss ways to address the “blight” of the Triangle District.⁵³ When CURA was revived in 1957, the group eyed the Federal Urban Renewal Program as the means of revitalizing residential neighborhoods cited for their substandard housing conditions.⁵⁴

A byproduct of the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954, the Federal Urban Renewal Program helped fundamentally alter urban landscapes across America. The 1949 law marked the first time Congress had addressed city slums, offering \$1 billion to aid cities in their efforts to acquire blighted areas for redevelopment.⁵⁵ The program became even more attractive in 1954, when Congress earmarked funds for 140,000 units of public housing and provided mortgages backed by the Federal Housing Administration.⁵⁶ After successfully applying for program funding, CURA tapped for the initial survey none other than Vogt, Ivers, and Seaman—the same engineers who recommended the downtown interstate that would similarly destroy the Triangle.⁵⁷ Initial plans for the renewal called for the leveling of all buildings within the

⁴⁸ “Mayor Alters Stand on Interstate: Comment Declined on Vice,” *Charleston Gazette*, August 19, 1959.

⁴⁹ “Mayor Picks Prober: Interstate 64 Study Ordered,” *Charleston Gazette*, October 1, 1959.

⁵⁰ “Mayor Alters Stand on Interstate.”

⁵¹ “City Cannot Ignore Slums, Economically or Socially,” *Charleston Gazette*, October 20, 1957, 14.

⁵² James A. Hill, “Charleston Gets Funds for Midtown ‘Face—Lift,’ Cash to Finance Initial Survey,” *Charleston Gazette*, October 7, 1959.

⁵³ Harry Ernst, “Urban Renewal Support Urged,” *Charleston Gazette*, June 11, 1959.

⁵⁴ Cummings, “Good Building Year but 1962 Should be Better.”

⁵⁵ Housing Act of 1949, Pub. L. No. 81—171, 63 Stat. 413, (1949).

⁵⁶ Housing Act of 1954, Pub. L. No. 83—560, 68 Stat. 590, (1954).

⁵⁷ Hill, “Charleston Gets Funds.”

URBAN RENEWAL AND THE INTERSTATE

neighborhood, with the exception of City Hall and the fire station.⁵⁸ City planners, realtors, and the Chamber of Commerce expressed interest in a shopping center and the general replacement of Triangle District residences with commercial and industrial establishments. The Municipal Planning Commission even suggested that razing the Triangle could give way to skyscrapers but would give existing large buildings “room in which to ‘breathe,’” an idea that carries heavy historical connotation.⁵⁹ Property acquisition was initially slated to begin in the summer of 1961, with re—building taking place in 1963.⁶⁰ After several delays, the first property was bought and demolished in 1962.⁶¹ Accordingly, the engineering firm was tasked with identifying the number of inhabitants that would need rehousing, which the federal program stipulated must meet or exceed previous standards.⁶² At the same time, the City Council moved to begin the urban renewal study, they also voted 14—8 to route the interstate outside of the city.⁶³ The Triangle was, nonetheless, under threat.

The midtown neighborhood was already in the red in 1937 when the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC)⁶⁴ published neighborhood assessments in Charleston.⁶⁵ HOLC designated every block that made up the Triangle neighborhood as “hazardous,” with its “mixed and colored” composition reported as a detrimental influence.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, the median income of a family in the Triangle District was roughly \$1,000 higher than that of a family from an urban area of the same region of the country,⁶⁷ possibly because industrial job opportunities were within walking distance.⁶⁸ HOLC also cites decent streets, schools, transportation, and proximity to the central business district as favorable influences on the Triangle. In spite of this, homes were still bulldozed, and residents were forced out.

While limited demolition had been occurring since 1962, a majority of the blocks had not yet been touched by urban renewal. In 1965, following the previous year’s mayoral election, Mayor Shanklin was poised to deliver on his promise to revamp the city. Members of the Triangle Improvement Council (TIC) led Shanklin on a tour of the neighborhood.⁶⁹ While many residences were deemed unsuitable for living, Shanklin assured community members that City Hall would not begin urban renewal of the Triangle until an adequate rehousing plan was pinpointed.⁷⁰ Given that

⁵⁸ Hill, “Charleston Gets Funds.”

⁵⁹ “Council Gets Proposal for Skyscraper Sites,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, August 16, 13, 1960.

⁶⁰ Charlie Connor, “City Hall Wanting Neighboring Land,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, March 30, 1960.

⁶¹ “Mayor Opens Urban Razing Project,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, June 5, 1962.

⁶² Hill, “Charleston Gets Funds.”

⁶³ Bob Mellace, “Route 64 Stand Called Fifty—Year Setback,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, March 30, 1960.

⁶⁴ HOLC is the government agency notable for its practice of redlining, which graded neighborhoods and predicted the risk of a resident defaulting on their mortgage.

⁶⁵ Home Owners Loan Corporation, *Map of Charleston, West Virginia*, Digital Map, University of Richmond Digital Scholarship Lab, 1937.

⁶⁶ Home Owners Loan Corporation, *Map of Charleston*.

⁶⁷ United States Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, *Family Wage or Salary Income in 1939*.

⁶⁸ Home Owners Loan Corporation, *Map of Charleston*.

⁶⁹ “Quick Remedy for Triangle Not in Sight,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, September 28, 1965, 13.

⁷⁰ “Quick Remedy for Triangle Not in Sight,” 13.

the Interstate 64 right-of-way fell upon many of these homes, the State Road Commission would also contribute to the relocation effort. Unlike most other urban renewal projects, Shanklin and stakeholders sought not to destroy the entire Triangle District, but rather to refurbish units that were still structurally sound, easing the relocation efforts.⁷¹ Ultimately, the plan to rehabilitate was abandoned. Shanklin suggested that renewal of this scale would take years. Meanwhile, the routing of the interstate was still in question. With another round of elections approaching, the city would need to have a referendum on the Mayor's handling of the interstate and urban renewal.

Backlash: Delivering on Campaign Promises

While Mayor Shanklin's jump started urban renewal, his successor accelerated it. Former city attorney Elmer Dodson was elected in April of 1967, signaling 24 consecutive years of Republican city leadership. Dodson campaigned on tackling the hurdles hindering the advancement of the downtown interstate and urban renewal projects.⁷² Having run against a City Council member, Charlestonians made it clear that they were displeased with the rate at which the projects were advancing and were looking for someone with a litigious, bullying spirit—that was Elmer Dodson. Dodson not only helped get Council on board with the downtown route, but he also wielded it as a weapon against the growing civil rights movement in the city.

Significant protests began in 1967. The State Road Commission had finalized plans for the interstate(s). Now, I-77 would merge with the I-64 proto-route, breaking off north through and following the Elk River with newly introduced I-79.⁷³ Although no new land would need to be acquired through the Triangle, it perplexed many residents to see the interstate plan being amplified instead of scaled back. With the interstate and urban renewal projects forcing people from their homes and a general housing shortage, the council member representing the Triangle District, Dr. Virgil Matthews, presented an *open housing* ordinance before the Council.⁷⁴ The proposal would bar landlords from restricting potential tenants based on their race. Mayor Dodson indicated his disapproval of the policy, citing his concerns over whether the city could enforce such a law, in spite of the fact that open housing had already been implemented in cities across the country. Others who argued against the ordinance claimed it violated their private property rights, while some complained that the policy would “bring about a rush of Negroes” and “racial disturbance.”⁷⁵ Despite being backed by civil rights leaders and an interfaith council of Charleston ministers, the measure was overwhelmingly defeated 17-8,⁷⁶ and rental discrimination was permitted until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, residents of the majority—Black Triangle District were left with few options after having their

⁷¹ “Quick Remedy for Triangle Not in Sight,” 13.

⁷² Charlie Connor, “Seven-Point Improvement Plan: Dodson First to Announce Candidacy for Mayor Post,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, January 5, 1967, 17.

⁷³ Bob Mellace, “Interstates to Displace 665 West Side Families,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, March 24, 1966, 20.

⁷⁴ Ray Evans, “Council Facing Housing Debate: Dodson Doubts City Authority,” *Charleston Gazette*, October 2, 1967, 5.

⁷⁵ “Report: Put Yourself in Their Place,” *Gazette Mail*, October 8, 1967, 13.

⁷⁶ “‘We Wash Our Hands of Responsibility for What Might Happen Now:’ Negro Leaders Consider Influence Eroded After Open Housing Defeat,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, October 3, 1967, 13.

⁷⁷ Civil Rights Act of 1968, Pub. L. No. 90-284, 82 Stat. 73 (1968).

URBAN RENEWAL AND THE INTERSTATE

homes bought out from under them in the name of urban renewal and interstate highways. Consequently, civil unrest related to equal rights and the racist development policy of the city began to unfold. Immediately following the failure of the open housing ordinance, 1,000 Charlestonians took to the downtown streets to protest the discriminatory housing policy.⁷⁸ In a letter to the editor, one Triangle resident expressed her disappointment: “My history also tells me that Lincoln freed the slaves, but any Negro will tell you this is not true. The Negro will not be free until he lives in America with the same rights as his white brothers.”⁷⁹ One Triangle community leader told the City Council, “We wash our hands of responsibility for what might happen now”—a foresightful exoneration.⁸⁰

With the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April of 1968, protests heated up during the summer. Triangle District residents gathered in the hundreds to protest unfair treatment and conditions.⁸¹ Complaints ranged from hostile police tactics, mistreatment by whites, unsuitable housing, and a poor job market for Black people. One resident told a *Gazette* reporter, “When we go home, there are roaches all over the floor and rats in our beds.” Another complained, “When you’ve got four years of college and a white guy with a grade school education gets a better job than you, it makes you mad.” Many attendees were, indeed, protesting the evictions of Triangle residents. Since approving the downtown interstate route, the State Road Commission now owned the properties of the 99 Triangle families within the right-of-way.⁸² The SRC assured tenants that they had over a year before they would be evicted. However, the city had relaxed their enforcement of minimum housing standards due to the prospect of inevitable destruction of the houses needing attention. The Council also blocked 19—5 a new and safer housing code, which prompted a “Rats and Roaches Rally” by Triangle community leaders.⁸³ As a consequence of weak housing policy, landlords in the Triangle ignored maintenance requests and general upkeep of their tenants’ residences. Due to the failures of City Council, Triangle residents, nonetheless, were more or less stuck in substandard housing. Mayor Dodson, however, turned his back.

Attempting to keep his campaign promise to expedite the interstate and urban renewal projects, Dodson ignored the city’s responsibility to help relocate residents, a stipulation of the Federal Urban Renewal Program.⁸⁴ In order to continue the urban renewal project, the city of Charleston was obligated to submit a recertification proposal, which outlined their responsibility to provide assistance to residents in danger of eviction. Although the Charleston Urban Renewal Authority allocated money for relocation, residents received no more than monetary support. While many did need money to move, the real problem was *where* to move, since adequate and

⁷⁸ “Peaceful Demonstration Anticipated: 1,000 May March for Open Housing,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, October 9, 1967, 13.

⁷⁹ Ivin Lee, “Little is Asked,” *Gazette Mail*, October 8, 1967, 13.

⁸⁰ “We Wash Our Hands,” 13.

⁸¹ “Disturbance is Repeated in Triangle,” *Charleston Gazette*, August 7, 1968.

⁸² K. W. Lee, “Triangle Evictions ‘Out,’ Can Rent from SRC,” *Charleston Gazette*, August 6, 1968, 13.

⁸³ K. W. Lee, “Peaceful Rally in Triangle: ‘Rats and Roaches’ Code Protest Called,” *Charleston Gazette*, August 7, 1968, 5.

⁸⁴ “City Workable Program: Refusal to Aid Relocation, said Recertification Block,” *Charleston Gazette*, August 5, 1968, 18.

CRIMSON HISTORICAL REVIEW

affordable housing within the city limits was scarce. There was subsequent concern over whether the city's renewal efforts would be recertified by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Council member Matthews of the Triangle argued recertification was "out of sight" unless immediate assistance was given to the residents scheduled to be evicted. After the workable recertification proposal was indeed twice denied by HUD, the City Council created a special committee, which included the presidents of the NAACP Charleston Chapter and Triangle Improvement Council, the Mayor, and two City Council members.⁸⁵ The move to delegate to a committee was seemingly a step in the right direction, but as it turned out, the group was largely assembled for show.

After Council voted 19—5, a third recertification proposal was sent to HUD, disregarding the disapproval of Council member Matthews and the Triangle leaders.⁸⁶ Claiming that the proposal was once again fraught with error, Matthews cried out against what he believed to be false claims that the plan sought citizen input. Among the wishes of the Triangle residents were zoning stay R—1 and R—2 so as not to drastically increase the density of the neighborhood and the large number of commercial lots be made residential, but none of these requests were incorporated into the plan. Mayor Dodson dismissed Matthews' complaints, saying he was "not fooling with [the recertification plan] again," and indeed, he would not have to revise the plan.⁸⁷

In May of 1969, the Triangle Urban Renewal project was permanently approved by HUD, which dictated that proceedings continue without delay.⁸⁸ In accordance with the acceptance, the Charleston Urban Renewal Authority moved to make a series of decisions on the future of the area. The first and most shocking conclusion was that CURA would not consider rehabilitation of existing structures within the Triangle—every home and business in the Triangle would meet the bulldozer. In two years as mayor, Dodson kept his promise to expedite the enhancement projects facing the city, but he failed to keep his word on possible rehabilitation. While the interstate, itself, was to displace 300 residents in the Triangle, the updated renewal plan that nixed the option to rehabilitate would mean *all* 2000 of the Triangle's inhabitants would be forced elsewhere, but not without a fight.⁸⁹

Violent frustration towards the approved Triangle plan broke out on the evening of July 8th.⁹⁰ Rioters hurled firebombs at five businesses and broke into a few more, causing the Mayor and the police force to impose a curfew for the Triangle neighborhood. Earlier that day, twelve protestors were arrested for blocking a demolition.⁹¹ Police responding to the scene were greeted with a "human wall." Some even rocked the car of the Chief of Police, while he confronted the disturbance's alleged leader, Emerson Reed, a 21—year—old noted activist. The *Gazette* reported that Reed threatened to "burn down the city," which caused officers to threaten Reed

⁸⁵ Richard Grimes, "Conciliation Move by Council Delays Action on the Triangle," *Charleston Daily Mail*, February 20, 1969, 30.

⁸⁶ Sheri O'Dell, "Water Firm's Land Rezoned; Plan Updated," *Charleston Gazette*, April 22, 1969.

⁸⁷ O'Dell, "Water Firm's Land Rezoned."

⁸⁸ Richard Grimes, "Triangle Project Gets Green Light," *Charleston Daily Mail*, May 14, 1969.

⁸⁹ United States Court of the Southern District of West Virginia, *TIC v. Ritchie*, 324 F. Supp. 20, (1969).

⁹⁰ "Disturbances Hit Triangle; Curfew Clamped on Area," *Charleston Gazette*, July 9, 1969.

⁹¹ "Disturbances Hit Triangle; Curfew Clamped on Area."

and the protestors with tear gas, although none was used. Police, however, did sport riot gear and wield rifles with bayonets. As arrests were made, a bulldozer was pelted with rocks but, nonetheless, charged towards the first house, knocking it down with ease. Meanwhile, the arrested protestors were hauled off in front of a judge before their bonds were paid by sympathizers. In response to the unrest, Mayor Dodson told the paper, “Right or wrong—the work of demolition is legal and will continue.”⁹² The Federal Government said he was wrong.

Washington Steps In

After a year of demolition, the US Department of Transportation intervened, ordering the State Department of Highways to cease demolition work in the Triangle. At issue was the process that the State Road Commission used to determine the interstate routing.⁹³ However, an executive action released by the Nixon administration earlier that year stipulated that state highway departments would receive funding only after adequate replacement housing became available.⁹⁴ The *New York Times* covered the story, highlighting Triangle leaders’ praise for the decision. One prominent resident, Benjamin Starks, publisher of the *Negro Beacon Digest*, told the *Times* that stones, firebombs, and car rocking would be “tame” compared to the response if the SRC continued demolition. Starks added that the city was engaging in “Negro removal,” citing an earlier article from the *Charleston Daily Mail* that hailed the projects for bringing “a long—need shift in the city’s population.”⁹⁵ In the meantime, the Triangle encountered more temporary success.

After originally losing a District Court lawsuit that aimed to permanently cease demolition in the Triangle, the Triangle Improvement Council won an appeal against the SRC and the Governor for an injunction.⁹⁶ Appealing to the Fourth Circuit, the higher court issued a *temporary* pause on the grounds that there was not enough housing for families to be relocated but, nonetheless, agreed with the merits presented by the SRC and the Governor.⁹⁷ Once again seeking a permanent injunction, TIC elevated their case to the Supreme Court, which upheld the rulings of the lower courts in a 5—4 decision: demolition would continue and the Department of Transportation had their hands tied. The *per curiam* opinion argued that only ten residents had yet to be relocated, accusing them of refusing housing that had been offered to them. A year prior to the decision, the West Virginia Human Rights Council contended that even though displaced residents came by places to live, the dwellings were scarcely adequate.⁹⁸ The majority additionally explained that because of a repeal to the section of the law under which TIC was suing, they also lacked standing.⁹⁹ However, the

⁹² “Fracas Blame is Leveled by Dodson,” *Charleston Gazette*, July 9, 1969, 4.

⁹³ Patrick McClintock and Kay Michael, “Cease Demolition, U.S. Orders State in Triangle,” *Charleston Gazette*, July 10, 1970.

⁹⁴ Donald Janson, “Charleston W. Va.: Homes or a Highway?” *New York Times*, July 13, 1970.

⁹⁵ Richard Grimes, “Shot in the Arm,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, February 17, 1969.

⁹⁶ “In Triangle, Court Stops Demolition,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, July 30, 1970, 4.

⁹⁷ TIC v. Ritchie.

⁹⁸ Richard Grimes, “Relocation Houses Inadequate: Glatt,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, October 8, 1970, 36.

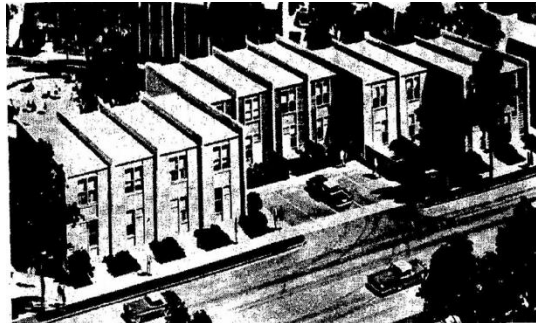
⁹⁹ The provision in question was Section 502 of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which required that State Departments of Transportation compile a relocation plan for residents in the path of

dissent rebutted, saying that a new federal legislation had effectively replaced the repealed language.¹⁰⁰ The minority opinion also stressed the elderly and low-income status of these residents and reminded of the “severe housing shortage” that faced Charleston. With the detrimental Supreme Court ruling, Triangle residents—the few that remained—faced no further recourse.

Conclusion: The Aftermath

On December 15, 1977, nearly two decades after the passing of the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, Governor John D Rockefeller IV cut the ribbon on the final stretch of I—64/77 in Charleston.¹⁰¹ About the same time, the former site of the Triangle District reached complete development, as urban renewal wrapped up.¹⁰² In total, both projects led to the displacement of 3,000 residents—more than 4% of Charleston’s population. In the Triangle District alone, 391 individuals, 227 families, and 124 businesses required relocating. Census data shows that the Triangle was home to 1,897 people, while in 1980, only 913 resettled after redevelopment—a near 50% decrease in population.¹⁰³ The final

makeup of the Triangle included 200 units of public housing, 100 units of senior housing, a new elementary school, new city park, and land for private housing and commercial establishments, including a shopping center.¹⁰⁴ Before and after pictures represent how the unique character of the neighborhood and its single-family homes transformed into blocks of a monolithic, concrete expanse



Typical Housing to be Created in the Proposed Triangle Urban Renewal Project, Photograph, The Charleston Gazette, January 31, 1969.

Charleston and its Triangle

District are an example of what many other American cities experienced during the mid—1900s. While urban renewal and the Interstate Highway System vowed booming economic opportunities and traffic decongestion, the sweeping federal programs failed to deliver their promise to *all* Charlestonians. City Officials leveraged crime and vice as excuses to decimate an entire Black neighborhood in the name of commercial development. When the Triangle organized, politicians who had long promised the reconstruction of Charleston’s “blighted” neighborhoods expedited the destruction of the dissenting neighborhood. In the end, no peaceful protest, nor violence, nor intervention from the Federal Government was enough to save the Triangle. At a time when the country was reckoning with racial oppression, Charleston is just one example of how urban renewal and interstate construction served against

a proposed interstate highway. The West Virginia State Road Commission filed their relocation plan only after the Triangle Improvement Council had filed suit.

¹⁰⁰ United States Congress, *Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970*, 42 U.S.C § 4601, (1970).

¹⁰¹ “Brooks/Broad Traffic Flow,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, December 15, 1977, 29.

¹⁰² Gilmer and Randall, *Black Past*, 103.

¹⁰³ Gilmer and Randall, *Black Past*, 104.

¹⁰⁴ Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats to Senator Jennings Randolph, Chairman of the Committee of Public Works, May 5, 1970.

URBAN RENEWAL AND THE INTERSTATE

the livelihoods of African Americans and incited civil resistance. While the culture of the Triangle District may be long gone, its history prevails.

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