Understanding Urban Renewal from a Different Perspective

Makonen A. Campbell
Clemson University, makonec@g.clemson.edu

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UNDERSTANDING URBAN RENEWAL FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Makonen A. Campbell
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Accepted by:
Orville v. Burton, Committee Chair
Lee Wilson
C. Alan Grubb
In 1958, the Charlotte City Council voted to demolish the community of Brooklyn for the purpose of creating a better environment for its residents and attracting business opportunities to the city. Over a ten-year period, over 9,000 residents would be forced to move to the outskirts of the city as the history of Brooklyn was erased. The history of urban renewal in Charlotte has been reported from the perspective of politicians, city planners, and businessmen who have touted the benefit of the city’s efforts. The historical literature has neglected to tell the story of those who were directly affected by the city’s initiative, and this work seeks to reveal the history of urban renewal from the perspective of those who were directly affected by its implementation. The city’s foray into urban renewal began with the community of Brooklyn, and the community’s history is intertwined with the development of the Downtown area. This work is informed by government reports, city council meeting minutes, oral histories, memoirs, and personal interviews, and establishes the history of urban renewal in three chapters. The first chapter explores the historical background of Brooklyn and the support systems that allowed the community to thrive under Jim Crow and racial segregation. The second chapter explores the local policies and community issues that caused concern for government officials and Brooklyn’s residents ultimately resulting in the community’s demolition. The third chapter draws conclusions about why the community was demolished and how the state of the community was perceived from multiple perspectives.
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When I first began this journey, I focused on the political aspects of urban renewal and how the program was implemented in minority communities. I was more interested in policy than how it was received by those who were directly affected by its implementation. As I began to conduct my research, it became evident that there was something that has been lost in the history of urban renewal. All of the academic literature focused on the success or failure of the program but neglected to lend a voice to the people that the program was designed to assist. Upon further examination, it became evident that there was a disconnect between what urban renewal was federally mandated to do, and how local governments implemented it. This conflict became more apparent when it was juxtaposed against the memories of those who were directly affected by its implementation.

This project uses the memories of the affected as a source to reveal a more unobstructed view of urban renewal between 1947 and 1969. The period is significant because it is a time when cities across the nation were beginning to implement urban renewal. The Brooklyn community serves as the focal point for this study because it was the first community to undergo urban renewal in Charlotte and was the most significant African American community in the city during this period. The memories of former residents of Brooklyn offer unique insight into their lives, before, during, and after urban renewal. This approach not only provides a different perspective on how urban renewal was implemented but it also humanizes those who were directly affected, and how the community perceived it.
As my research began to develop, an analysis of the evidence revealed that the history of Brooklyn was more than the history of urban renewal in Charlotte. It showed a history of social and economic segregation, institutionalized racism, neglect, and indifference that resulted in the identification of Brooklyn with blight, and slum conditions. Because of this evidence, I began to focus on the experiences of African Americans living in urban areas. The overall objective of this study became concentrated on using the memories of former residents, coupled with factual events, to reshape the view of African-American communities during urban renewal.

The first issue that I had to contend with, as I researched for this project, was defining memory and understanding how the difference between collective and public memory differed in the accounting of urban renewal. In this thesis I refer to memory as the “interpretation of primary source material” as viewed by individuals who expressed strong thoughts and feelings” about a particular subject or event that occurred in their lives.\(^1\) This stance on memory allowed me to convey what was relayed to me in interviews as source material that further informed my thesis. All of the residents experienced their community in different ways, and their socio-economic status within the community determined this. Many of the individuals that I interviewed espoused an affinity for Brooklyn that bordered between romantic and nostalgic. They offered an idealistic view that contradicted what local government and media reports claimed about the community. Much of this was backed up with photographs, journals, and memoirs that shed light on a different aspect of the community.

\(^1\) Tumblety, *Memory and History*. 3.
Together, these individual memories created a collective memory of Brooklyn that is based on a shared consensus that the local government was responsible for the conditions that existed there. Over the course of eighteen months, I have spent over one hundred hours conducting personal interviews of over thirty former residents of Brooklyn. They have all shared their experiences, memories, photographs, and views of Brooklyn and its place in the history of Charlotte. The manner in which the collective memories of Brooklyn have been formed can be debated. However, I have come to believe that the memories of urban renewal are based in the way that the local government treated its minorities; the lack of a thorough explanation of what the city was trying to achieve with urban renewal, and what its obligations were to the residents of Brooklyn.

Public memory consists of the memorialization of significant events in the form of media and government reports, statues, commemorative plaques, and annual events that reinforce the public meaning of the events. The public memory of Brooklyn offers insight into how outsiders viewed the community of Brooklyn but also provides a view of how its former residents have attempted to keep its memory alive. In reading through the various newspaper articles and city council meeting minutes, it was clear that there was a sense that the community was viewed negatively by people who were not familiar with the community. These memories became the overwhelming narrative of Brooklyn and sparked a desire to understand the community from the perspective of people who resided within it.
The second issue that I faced in my research was filtering through the subjective and objective views about Brooklyn and urban renewal. Exploring the history of urban renewal in Charlotte became a sociological, and anthropological study of people using their memories as a source of reference. What I discovered was that memories were consistently subjective. I also understood that it was necessary to compare the memories of events against factual evidence to provide a more objective assessment of history. I wanted the memories to serve as a dialogue between the factual evidence and how those who were affected by urban renewal understood what was occurring within their neighborhood.

The overall objective of this study is to use the memories of former residents, coupled with factual events, to reshape the view of African-American communities during urban renewal. The study of Brooklyn provides a unique view of former residents who have left written, and oral records of their community that refute the idea that these communities were the root of crime within the city, blighted, cultureless and therefore unredeemable. By exploring the former resident’s memories, an intimate picture of life in an African-American community, thriving under segregation, and the looming threat to their community’s existence can be understood in the overall context of the history of Charlotte, and the development of the Downtown area.

During the period in which I conducted my research, I was fortunate enough to receive expert assistance and guidance from several professors in the Clemson University History Department. These people include Dr. Paul C. Anderson, the Graduate Coordinator, for taking a chance on this old soldier and assisting me in becoming a
historian. Without his guidance, I would have never entertained the idea of exploring modern history.

I am forever indebted to my thesis committee. Their patience, understanding, and timely criticism allowed me to create a work that speaks to the heart of how I understood urban renewal and its effects on minorities living in the community of Brooklyn. Dr. Vernon Burton proved to be an adept mentor who set the example for me and how I conducted my research for this project. Dr. Lee Wilson provided me with the legal aspects of history that allowed me to understand the legalities of urban renewal and how it was implemented. Dr. Alan Grubb served as the anchor for my research and was always willing to serve as sounding board for all of my theories and ideas about urban renewal. Without all of these individuals, this project would not have been successful.

_Understanding Urban Renewal from a Different Perspective_, is a project that has become a passion and none of this would have been possible without the support of my wife, Marta, my children, and my extended family. They have supported me throughout this endeavor; even when the workload became overwhelming, they were always there to provide me with inspiration and a push to get me going again. Words can’t express the gratitude and love that I have for all of you, and I can only say “thanks” for always being there for me when I needed you.
INTRODUCTION

If a tourist were to walk through the historic Second Ward district of Charlotte, NC, also known as the government center, they would notice Marshall Park situated across the street from the government building complex. Adjacent to the park is a small high school gym; this gym has a plaque in front of it that serves as a reminder of one of two African American high schools that that existed in the City of Charlotte from 1923 until its demolishment in 1969. The Second Ward High School served as a pillar in the community of Brooklyn and was the last remnant of the community to be demolished under urban renewal. Marshal Park sits on the bones of the largest African American community in Charlotte, and the Second Ward High School plaque serves as the only reminder that this community once existed.

The present conditions of race relations in Charlotte are deeply rooted in the racial division of the city. Long-standing arrangements of the communities have resulted in minority populations being located in the western half of the city while the eastern portion of the community has historically been majority white. The city’s inability to cope with the racial tensions that have existed in Charlotte for several decades resulted in the re-segregation of schools and riots. These riots were motivated by the shooting of Keith Lamont Scott, an African American shot by city police officers. Understanding how those racial patterns developed and the effects of urban renewal on African American communities is the crux of this thesis and helps in the understanding of how urban renewal factors into the maintenance of a segregated city.
The community of Brooklyn serves as the focal point for this thesis. It was the first community to undergo urban renewal in Charlotte, with many of its former residents not understanding why the community had to be dissolved. The period between 1947 and 1969 serves as the focus for this thesis because this is when city planners first began to disrupt the community; this disruption led to the decline of the community. The decline and demolition of Brooklyn was precipitated by local policies, negative narratives, and residential emigration, all of which contributed to a condition of blight that was perceived as a threat to the entire city. I argue that social and economic support systems within the community enabled it to thrive for a period of time. However, once the city began to pursue urban renewal, those systems broke down, resulting in a community unable to coalesce around a common issue or resist the city’s efforts at implementing urban renewal.

In 1958, the Charlotte City Council authorized a study that would gauge the level of blight that existed within the city. “Thirty-two of the fifty-three census tracts within the city” showed that over 44,600 residents lived in conditions that were substandard or “blighted.” This meant, that in 1960, nearly one in five residents were living in substandard conditions. The community of Brooklyn serves as the focal point for this thesis because it was considered the most blighted community in the city. It was the first community to undergo urban renewal in Charlotte with many of its former residents not understanding why the community had to be dissolved. The period between 1947 and 1969 serves as the focus period because it marks the period when the city planners first

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began to disrupt the community and the decline in the community. The decline and
demolishment of Brooklyn was precipitated by local policies, negative narratives, and
residential emigration, contributing to a condition of blight which was perceived as a
threat to the entire city. I argue that social and economic support systems within the
community enabled it to thrive for a period of time. However, once the city began to
pursue urban renewal, those systems broke down resulting in a community unable to
coalesce around a common issue.

Furthermore, issues that the community faced such as, reported high rates of
crime, health concerns, and the lack of investment in the infrastructure of minority
communities facilitating blighted conditions which exacerbated concerns about the
community and the threat of blight, justifying the city’s efforts to remove the community
at the cost of displacing thousands of African Americans. I explore the motivating factors
in implementing urban renewal and how the community reacted to them. By focusing on
the urban renewal of Brooklyn between 1957 and 1969 and its effects, this thesis
provides a different perspective and will enrich the literature on the history of urban
renewal. By adding memories of those residents who were directly affected by the city’s
efforts, this thesis also expands the literature on urban history and urban renewal.

This study seeks to understand urban renewal from the perspective of the
dispossessed. Those who were directly affected by urban renewal have differing
memories and recollections of city efforts that, when juxtaposed against archival records,
studies, reports, and statistical evidence, offer a new understanding of urban renewal that
has not been thoroughly explored by historians. With this information, this study shows
that the community of Brooklyn was indeed a community in decline but that decline was facilitated by local city officials’ neglect and ambivalence to the state of the conditions which African Americans were living and by urban renewal policies themselves.

Urban renewal was a series of federal, state, and local policies that enabled local governments to use federal funds, and the use of eminent domain, to acquire private property. It began with the introduction of the Federal Housing Act of 1949, which looked to universal home ownership and the clearance of blighted communities as a means of providing every American with a suitable environment to raise their families in. President Truman, by signing this act, equipped “the Federal Government, for the first time, with effective means for aiding cities in the vital task of clearing slums and rebuilding blighted areas.” The act also made provisions for federal funding that would be used to demolish any residential areas that were deemed a “slum” by the local government. This, however, required that the local government conduct blight studies to confirm blighted conditions within a particular area or neighborhood. Other significant acts of legislation would add weight to the plans to utilize the Second Ward area for the purpose of creating a center city area. These legislative acts would arrive in the form of the Housing Act of 1954, broadening the parameters for Urban Renewal and providing federal assistance for rehabilitating the blighted areas. Local governments used these acts to further push their agenda as a non-invasive effort that would help the residents of

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Brooklyn as they searched for suitable housing. It was a way to minimize the political fallout that would occur once the Urban Renewal efforts picked up steam.

The history of urban renewal has been mired in failures of federal, state, and local policies to realize the transformation of urban areas into city centers that would promote growth in businesses, jobs, and tax revenue. Urban renewal has failed, resulting in the removal of minority groups from urban dwellings and making it synonymous with, and colloquially referred to as, “Negro removal.” Much of the history of urban renewal has been recounted by conservatives and liberals who have competed in the academic literature on the subject, neglecting to tell the stories of those who were affected by it. Statistical analyses and studies have been quoted, touting the ills of urban renewal. However, very little attention has been paid to the African American experience during urban renewal. Communities were neglected by their local government, denied the most basic of services, forced into artificially constructed boundaries based upon their race and social standing, and then blamed for the conditions of their communities.

Criticism of urban renewal efforts can be found in academic journals, books, and a multitude of policy studies. Much of this criticism has been focused on the failure of the program, and its effect on minority communities, with one study reporting that “the effects on individuals and families displaced by the project [were] likely to be severe.”4 The studies that were conducted compiled information that was made available through the Urban Renewal Administration, representing interests that did not include the voices of those who were actually affected. However, the voices of those affected by urban

renewal in Charlotte, North Carolina, have been maintained at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, as part of an oral history project. Archival records also exist of interviews that were conducted by the Charlotte Observer, chronicling the experience of more than sixty families who were directly affected by urban renewal. These voices offer a unique perspective on how urban renewal was received, the perception of the community, and how former residents were informed of the city planner’s decision to condemn the community without a vigorous debate about the validity of the claims of “blight” or its effects on the community.

Conservatives have argued that communities were responsible for the state of their environment. Dr. James Q. Wilson, an expert on public administration and highly regarded political scientist, argued that there were three issues that cities, like Charlotte, had to contend with: “poverty, race, and culture,” which reinforced the idea that residents of impoverished communities were themselves responsible for the condition in which they lived.\(^5\) Conservatives presented statistics and studies that supported the idea that cultural differences made African Americans more prone to poverty, which then resulted in blighted communities. This alone was enough justification for many to move forward with the demolishment of these communities. Liberals often countered these conservative assertions, by arguing that federal, state, and local governments were responsible for the failure of urban renewal. A lack of appreciation on the part of urban renewal advocates and planners for the social and economic situation of the dispossessed, and the limited

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amount of affordable, decent housing available, hindered a process that was already painful for those affected.

Between 1949 and 1969, the nation experienced a sharp social change that would have far reaching effects on the entire African American population. The Civil Rights era coincided with over four hundred cities and towns introducing urban renewal as a means of maintaining a social and racial divide, whether intentional or not. As urban renewal was destroying African American communities, it was also erasing their history, their sense of place, and ensuring that racial divides, which had already been established, remained. Progressive ideas about urban renewal proved to benefit only one portion of the population, while producing conditions that were exacerbated by neglect, disenfranchisement, and a lack of understanding of how the fate of communities were intertwined with these changes.

**Historiography**

Tom Hanchett argues that the social issues Charlotte has to deal with have their roots in urban renewal, as well as the need for its residents to separate themselves by race and economic status. His book, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte 1875-1975* serves as the nexus from which this thesis has been developed. The community of Brooklyn being the first community in Charlotte to experience urban renewal, its dissolution caused a further division of the city by race.

Hanchett’s narrative explores the development of Charlotte from a small trading town into the second largest financial center in the nation, one of the largest and fastest growing cities in the South. Hanchett argues that Charlotte was a distinctly Southern city,
molded by the forces of urban change, resulting in the development of distinct communities separated by race and class. He suggests that this separation of race and class did not occur rapidly, but over a gradual period as whites emigrated to the suburbs, leaving African Americans in urban areas that quickly became depressed.

Hanchett devotes a considerable portion of his work to tracing the evolution of Charlotte through maps, pictures, and public policy records that document the implementation of urban renewal. He argues that the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC) was instrumental in creating the conditions that facilitated the deterioration of African American communities. His work suggests that the patterns that emerged between the 1940s and 1950s were a result of demographic and economic changes. He compares the changes to what was occurring in the North, but suggests that the changes in Charlotte remained distinctly Southern. This was because, he suggests, Charlotte remained a sharply racially divided city sense local city officials’ and businessmen desired to maintain the status quo in the face of the civil rights era and the desegregation of the business areas and school system.

Hanchett credits the city planners and engineers for the design of Charlotte, but only devotes two chapters of his study to the social, political, and economical racism that shaped the city. He also overlooks the memories of its residents and focuses simply on the development of the city. His study is technical in nature, whereas my efforts focus on the lives of the residents and seeks to record what was going on through interviews and an examination of past transcripts of oral accounts of life in Brooklyn. By exploring memories of Brooklyn, a comparison can be made against factual evidence to create a
complete picture of a community, before, during, and after the launch of the urban renewal efforts that would demolish the community and scatter its residents to the West Side of Charlotte.

Robert C. Weaver’s lectures on the failures of urban renewal, *Dilemmas of Urban America*, describe how to instead ensure the success of urban renewal. He argues that urban renewal was a failure because city officials believed that it would “solve the economic and tax problems of our cities.” He further suggests that local officials’ hopes of forcing the poor into better housing were ill conceived, because of a failure to consider their economic means. This resulted in a lack of available low-income housing for those who were displaced. He references the West End of Boston as an example of this phenomenon.

In his lectures, Weaver traces the evolution of urban renewal from public housing policies to the adoption of eminent domain as a method of retaining the economic health of cities. He further suggests that urban renewal had a negative effect on minority communities because of the destruction of key social and economic structures that sustained these communities before those living in the community were forced out of their homes. Weaver is optimistic about the potential of housing reform and cites the “liberalization of attitudes toward open occupancy” as indicators of change in communities that were previously closed off to minorities. He acknowledges that class

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7 Ibid., 81.
has remained a hindrance to the eradication of slums in urban areas and suggests that the only way to keep Negroes out of slums is to “raise their economic and social level.”

Alex Coffin’s narrative, Brookshire & Belk: Businessmen in City Hall, on the other hand, illustrates how in his view two “farsighted politicians” focused on the future of Charlotte as the city grew into a metropolis.\(^8\) This study focuses on the period between 1961 and 1977, exploring specific periods during each mayor’s term. Coffin explores the local government’s role in the growth of Charlotte, local attitudes towards urban renewal, and race relations in the city, during the Civil Rights era. Coffin reveals how Brookshire felt about urban renewal and the benefits that he thought it would bring to the city in businesses and tax revenue.

Brookshire & Belk: Businessmen in City Hall also offers a view of race relations and the issues that shaped the manner in which the city grew and supports the argument that Hanchett offers in Sorting Out the New South: that Charlotte was a city working through race issues in a particularly Southern way. Brookshire stated in his mayoral campaign that “race relations and crime were closely intertwined, low-income, underprivileged areas breed crime,” an assertion that betrayed a certain disdain towards Charlotte’s lower-class citizens.\(^9\) Local city officials believed that lower class citizen were why Brooklyn was a community in decline and the officials wanted to find ways to change the environment in which African Americans were living.

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9 Alex Coffin, *Brookshire & Belk, Businessmen in City Hall* (Charlotte: The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1994), 49.
Coffin suggests that Brookshire insisted that the downtown area was in a state of disrepair and, with the help of the Charlotte Builders Association, he developed plans for urban renewal. By exploring the connections between Brookshire and the Charlotte Builders Association, Coffin acknowledges that there is a link to the mayor and policies that would allow the businessmen who supported him to take advantage of the African American community. Where his work diverges from my study is that he does not take into account the local policies or conditions that facilitated the conditions that Brookshire would find so dire. Understanding those policies provides insight into why the community was viewed as blighted, the causes of that blight, and how the city’s “modern city” agenda outweighed the needs of the community.

T. J. Woofter conducted a study entitled *Negro Problems in Cities*, in which he seeks to understand the patterns of African American migration and the limited availability of housing within urban areas. He argues that the migration of African Americans to urban areas resulted from the preference to move to “sites near the centers of social, economic, and religious life.” He discounts the belief that African Americans chose to move to the city to be closer to white society. He assumes that African Americans have a choice of where they live when, in reality, their options are limited due to economic and racial discrimination. He argues that “many white persons resent negro intrusion into a [white] neighborhood.”

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11 Ibid., 77.
Woofter reinforces the notion that African Americans were being taken advantage of, because of their limited access to adequate housing. “The rent of negro dwellings is a plain indication of the exploitation of negro neighborhoods.” Not unlike the neighborhoods that existed in Charlotte, the thirteen cities that Woofter analyzed provided evidence that landowners profit off of communities they viewed as lesser than. They refused to upgrade housing units and charged high rents for African Americans. The buildings and public facilities in African American communities were in no better shape than the residential areas. The idea of “separate but equal” did not reflect reality. Schools were dilapidated, with rudimentary heating and plumbing; roads remained unpaved, with no drainage systems to prevent the stagnation of water after it rained. These were the conditions that the residents of Brooklyn had to contend with. By looking at Woofter’s analysis of the general treatment of African Americans within cities, a comparison can be made between how local governments exacerbated conditions and how communities were later designated as slums.

In *Race, Culture, and Urban Renewal*, the authors, Avila and Rose, argue that slum clearance was necessary in order to attract middle class, white Americans back to urban areas. They suggest that the city of the future should be a place where the residents would “no longer, encounter hostile, awful-smelling, and uncooperative newcomers who refused to dress properly, speak well, and seek high-paying jobs.” The themes that tie their work together revolve around race primarily. “Race eclipsed class as the primary

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12 Ibid., 121.
expression of social conflict in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.” Segregated communities were engineered by city planners, engineers, local politicians, and financial institutions, as a means of maintaining the status quo. Economic and social “apartheid-like” policies served as tools that were used to reinforce the status of a white powerbase that controlled the flow of jobs and resources.

In the majority of urban centers, large minority populations exist. Whether in the Northern parts of the country or the South, these populations were seen as living in blighted communities characterized by dilapidated housing, and deplorable conditions, that needed to be removed from their locations in order for cities to revitalize their urban centers. Rose argues that the “ideas about removing members of lower-income groups from rights of way were embedded in favorable ratios and in (misleading) metaphors about the lifecycles of cities that were simultaneously ‘dying’ and ‘ripe.’” For Charlotte, the city government and the local newspapers perpetuated a narrative of Brooklyn as an unrecoverable community; this narrative is similar to the narrative allowing African American communities in Baltimore to be demolished.

Avila and Rose explore the importance of highways and toll roads in the urban renewal process. In 1956, the federal government began financing construction for Interstate Highway systems that ran through the center of cities, creating relief for the city streets and in cities like Baltimore, remove “the decay encroaching on the city’s high priced business districts.” The Interstate Highway projects also had an effect on the

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14 Avila and Rose, “Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal,” 338.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
uptown area of Charlotte, with one of the highway projects running directly through the center of the Second Ward area, where Brooklyn was located. The history of the city center in Charlotte revolved around the agricultural and textile industry that dominated the Charlotte economy. Charlotte was a hub for the region, and, by building a highway system that facilitated commerce, the city was placed in a prominent position within the region. This meant that the city could attract better businesses and, by revitalizing the uptown area, the city could realize a potential economic windfall. Avila and Rose are correct that city planners, in concert with city engineers, created the landscape that fostered the urban environment.

Avila and Rose expand on their idea that by looking at suburbanization and the financial policies that pushed minority groups to urban areas, the effect of which was that communities remain segregated. They explore the myth that African Americans were able to access the same opportunities as their white counterparts, and dispel the myth that race was not a factor in why fewer African American lived in suburban areas than urban areas. Although it’s hard not to believe that economics also played a serious part, this may have been a subtler form of racism that had secondary effect of segregation.

In the 1940’s, Charlotte made a concerted effort to present itself in a different light. The city was viewed as progressive in the way that it handled its social issues, but Charlotte was no different than any other city in the country. Urban renewal would expose Charlotte for what it was, a deeply southern city, and shatter this belief that it was progressively different from the rest of the South. Racism, political, social, and economic, was in fact present in the day-to-day lives of African Americans living in
Charlotte. Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino’s *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* supports my theory that the Civil Rights era created an environment that fostered resistance to integration by white communities. The authors’ edited work provides a comparative analysis that seeks to understand the larger issues that existed within the nation. They argue that “Significant popular support for meaningful levels of racial integration never existed at the local level.” Government policies facilitated urban renewal, with local governments supporting efforts to funnel African Americans into the city centers and away from white suburbia.

Lassiter argues that the South was not distinct, and nor were its views different from those cities found in the Northern and Western regions of the nation. The myth of Southern exceptionalism served as a means for the nation to deny its culpability in the manner that it treated minorities. It did so by framing the issues as a distinctly Southern problem. In doing so, the civil rights movement in the South garnered more attention and fostered more resistance against integration of neighborhoods. This resistance to integration, coupled with the theory of *de facto* and *de jure* segregation, prevented the nation from addressing the issue of race and its role in fostering the status quo through policies and acts. This work supports my claim about the role that race played in maintaining racial segregation, about how real change was hindered, and racism’s direct impact on African Americans living in Southern urban areas.

Racial pressures, such as economic and social segregation, forced the residents of Brooklyn to form a tightknit community. In Charlotte, they created a community that

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became, as Mrs. Vermelle Ely states, “a society that mirrored the larger white community,” capable of self-sustainment in the form of a black business district, schools, and libraries.\textsuperscript{18} As a way of keeping the memory of Brooklyn alive, Mrs. Ely produced a pictorial history of Brooklyn that captured every aspect of life within the community. Her work is nostalgic in terms of how she depicts the lives of African Americans and she comments that “many black citizens still claim they would have been content to remain in their familiar homes and neighborhoods.”\textsuperscript{19} The book relies heavily on personal photographs and archival records to illustrate what life was like prior to urban renewal. Through these pictures, Ely attempts to humanize the residents of the community and show that the community was not a slum, nor was it devoid of cultural value.

Ely places emphasis on the role that religion played within the community.\textsuperscript{20} The religious leaders of the community held positions of authority and often looked after members of their congregation to ensure that they were taken care of. Festivals and celebrations reinforced the bonds of community. My study uses Ely’s pictures to reimagine what life was like, and to identify and explore places that no longer exist. These memories can be used to garner an understanding of what made Brooklyn such a tightknit community, and how economic differences within the community affected how the former residents viewed their community and the urban renewal efforts that would come to pass.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} DeGrandval Burke, \textit{The Brooklyn Story} (Charlotte: Afro-American Cultural and Service Center, 1978).
Class is an aspect of urban renewal that has not yet been discussed regarding the history of Brooklyn. The focus has thus far been on race issues and the legal policies that allowed urban renewal to be implemented. However, by exploring class as it relates to urban renewal, another layer of the initiative can be studied and understood. Richard C. Wade assessed urban ghettoes and believed that there “we find separation; instead of mutual respect, we find mutual fear; instead of hope for a better future, we find expectations of increased contention,” and that this fear sharply divides cities into segregated enclaves. In *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1968*, Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser argue that federal and local governmental policies to combat blight exacerbated the conditions of an already “disadvantaged, and resource poor black underclass.” The focus of their study is centered on Atlanta, Memphis, and Richmond, because they represent different regions, bringing different perspectives for understanding how self-contained communities develop within cities.

In Silver and Moeser’s analysis of these three cities, they reveal that African American communities believed that their interests were best served by maintaining control of their economic and political capital, regardless of how limited it was. This allowed political leaders within the community to focus on specific initiatives that affected the communities immediately. This included urban renewal projects, housing and highway construction, and the desegregation of schools. Because the community was confined to a specific area, this allowed many of the political leaders to mobilize their

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22 Ibid., 164.
base to advance their agenda. These powerbrokers were made up of the clergy, prominent businessmen, and upper class African Americans. Ironically, this would create divisions between the upper class, the middle-class, and the poor of the community. Silver and Moeser offer a unique aspect of urban communities and claim that when the middle-class were able to move to the suburban areas of the cities, they jumped at the opportunity, leaving behind the poor, which serves as an indicator that the communities were not as strong as they were reported to be.

J. Timothy Opelt and J. Tighe conducted a study on the implementation of urban renewal in Asheville, NC and how the residents who were directly affected by the renewal perceived it. They argue that the community was scarred by urban renewal efforts and that the lasting legacy of urban renewal has made it difficult for Asheville to move forward with future revitalization plans. *Collective Memory and Planning: The Continuing Legacy of Urban Renewal in Asheville, NC* offers a case study that differs from that of the Brooklyn neighborhood because of the focus on urban renewal efforts. Although Asheville did not have a large African American population, it targeted the African American community for urban renewal. Tighe and Opelt argue that the city planners learned from the “first wave of cities that made urban renewal so infamous.”

The local leaders engaged the community, unlike the local leaders of Charlotte, but there is no evidence that the city’s discourse with the community affected the designs. Tighe and Opelt contend that “Asheville’s black leadership had yet to coalesce,” which could

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have attributed to the marginalization of the community members when they met with local leaders and city planners.24

Their work acknowledged some commonalities in my research findings. Even in small towns, landowners and private developers heavily influence city planners. The city conducted a blight study that found 85 percent of the community in a state of dilapidation and disrepair. Sixty percent of the community was demolished and the city focused on rebuilding government housing for the poorest of the community. There is no evidence that the community outreach was sincere, nor did the residents of the community believe that their input was taken into consideration. Some contention is exposed in the way that the residents remember the urban renewal efforts. Tighe and Opelt reveal that some of the residents believed that one day, without warning, the bulldozers arrived and started demolishing homes. This, they believe, could be attributed to the resident’s distrust of political figures and the city’s efforts, resulting in a lack of engagement and understanding of what was occurring around them. “There are as many views on the extent to which the community was involved as there are households in East Riverside.”25

In contrast, city planners believed that they did everything possible to include the community in their efforts. The East Riverside urban renewal projects lasted from 1968 until the mid-1970s. This places it within the same period as Charlotte’s urban renewal efforts. Although the urban renewal efforts in Asheville point to success in the effort, African Americans were disproportionately removed from their homes, with many of the poor being forced to move into government housing. The similarities between East

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24 Ibid., 49.
25 Ibid., 56.
Riverside and Brooklyn are evident, but the differences in the way that each city conducted their efforts and the amount of input the community had speaks to the marginalization, or perceived marginalization, of the minority group. Although this study provides insight into how the community perceived urban renewal in their community, it did not go far enough in creating a convincing picture of a community at odds with the history of urban renewal, nor did it take into account how those memories may have changed over time. My study focuses on the residents that lived in Brooklyn, and, through interviews and oral testimony, I seek to reveal how memories of urban renewal mark the period, and how the perceptions of urban renewal have changed over time.

John C. Weicher conducted a study on urban renewal, entitled *Urban Renewal: National Program for Local Problems*. In his study, he argues that urban renewal efforts were a failure. He suggests that urban renewal projects were “economically inefficient, [with] their costs outweighing their benefits.”²⁶ Weicher focuses on the legislative actions that supported urban renewal, the planning that took place, the effects of renewal on the poor, and the concerns about the efficacy of the program. He suggests that alternative means of addressing blighted communities would best serve the city and affected communities.

Weicher reveals that the government did not support rehabilitation efforts as a means of ridding communities of blight. There were funds available to rehabilitate communities, but the federal government placed caps on how many housing units could be rehabilitated. Instead of backing these efforts, city officials realized that they could

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gain more financial support by pursuing urban renewal. Urban renewal was viewed as a means of improving social conditions and needed to focus on “improving housing conditions” as a starting place.  

27 Weicher suggests that the “causes of these undesirable conditions are extremely complex.”  

28 My study parallels Weicher’s study, focusing on the policies that created the environment that allowed blight to exist. I explore the idea that the conditions of blight were subjective. Neither in Weicher’s study nor in any of the historical works that have been mentioned has a rubric been created for testing blight. When blight is mentioned, it often has a racial undertone. The communities in Charlotte that were determined to be the most blighted were places where African Americans were concentrated. An aspect of Weicher’s study that warrants special attention is the idea that urban renewal did nothing to change the community. It only “changed the housing conditions.”  

29 I argue that urban renewal not only changed the housing conditions, but also disrupted communities, scattering the former residents to the outskirts of cities to piece together lives that had been lost.

_ Urban Renewal and the End of Black Culture in Charlottesville, Virginia_ aims to offer a voice to African Americans who were affected by urban renewal in Charlottesville. James Saunders and Renae Shackleford explore how Vinegar Hill, the only African American community in Charlottesville, developed into “a country style slum.”  

30 They argue that Vinegar Hill was located on prime real estate and, as integration

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27 Ibid., 35.  
28 Ibid., 34.  
29 Ibid., 35.  
occurred, city officials believed that it was no longer necessary to allow a minority community to exist within Charlottesville. Charlottesville voted on a referendum to dissolve the community because of the “unsanitary and unsafe inhabited dwelling accommodations” pushing residents into low-income and public housing.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Urban Renewal and the End of Black Culture in Charlottesville, Virginia}, like this thesis, uses oral histories to offer insight into how affected people viewed the integration of schools, their disenfranchisement from the political process that would have given them say in the fate of their community, and the speed with which the city quickly demolished their homes, replacing them with a highway. By exploring the memories of those who were affected, differing opinions about the city’s efforts emerge. Saunders and Shackelford offer observations on memory as a source, noting that the time between urban renewal and interviews colored the recounting of life in Charlottesville. Their study offers a voice for the marginalized as a way of reconciling differing historical accounts of urban renewal.

By exploring the history of Brooklyn, I seek to advance an understanding of how memory has affected the perception of this forgotten community. This thesis has four chapters focusing on social and economic networks within the African American community of Brooklyn, the role that local policies and community issues had on the decline of the community, the African American urban experience during urban renewal, and the impact of racism and negative narratives on urban renewal in Charlotte.

By focusing on the residents of Brooklyn and its history, I explore how memories shape the perception of urban renewal and its implementation. Scholars have thus far viewed the history of Brooklyn through a prism focusing on blight or racism from one point of view. The historiography has either focused on urban renewal as a failed effort to create “model” cities or on the racial policies that existed to marginalize the affected community. The members of the community have not been factored into the equation. By combining the elements of the neighborhood’s history and placing them in context, an understanding of the history of this community, and how urban renewal has affected it, can be advanced.

The core of my study is centered on recorded oral histories, transcripts of former residents’ oral interviews, and personal interviews that I conducted with former residents of Brooklyn. Through these efforts, I recorded and analyzed how residents perceived Brooklyn and how their memories have changed over time. I use the interviews and oral testimonies to recreate the lives of the residents before urban renewal.

Chapter one establishes the historical background of Brooklyn between 1947 and 1957, through the memories of former residents. It examines the use of economic and social systems to resist the economic and social “apartheid-like” policies and norms that existed in Charlotte during this period. It sheds light on how the community was viewed by its residents and how social and economic systems created a sense of a tightknit community.

Chapter two explores the local policies and community issues that helped to cause a decline in the community. This chapter covers the period between 1916 and 1969,
examining how redlining had a lasting effect on the status of the community, how a lack of resources exacerbated social conditions; and how high crime rates and increased health concerns for the community caused a fear of blight in the city. This chapter also focuses on the social changes occurring within the city during the civil rights era in order to understand the racial issue political debates that occurred at city hall, on who was advancing the urban renewal efforts, and on the motivations behind their implementation.

Chapter three evaluates the status of the community from 1957 until 1969, focusing on emigration, the blight study, and the lack of public outcry about the city’s efforts to begin urban renewal. This chapter seeks to understand why the community began to decline and what the residents believed was the root cause of the decline. This chapter also addresses negative narratives and the validity of them, as well as how these narratives affected the opinions of African Americans and the Brooklyn community. Finally, the chapter explores outside opinions to attempt to reconcile them with the resident’s memories and offers an opinion on the decline of Brooklyn.
CHAPTER 1: HOW SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SUPPORT SYSTEMS ENABLED A COMMUNITY TO GROW AND THRIVE

The dissolution of the Brooklyn community coincided with a shift in Charlotte’s social and economic dynamics and the Civil Rights era. Between 1950 and 1960, the city saw a growth in its African American population, while it was becoming a burgeoning metropolis. The influx of African Americans arriving from South Carolina reflected the growth occurring across the nation, in cities such as Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, and New York. Charlotte was distinctly Southern in the way that it dealt with race relations, by keeping the city divided into pockets. This lack of interracial interaction resulted in the creation of a black business district that buttressed the community of Brooklyn and supported the surrounding areas, by catering to African Americans. Urban renewal drastically changed the community, by fracturing the social and economic structures that supported Brooklyn, sending the community into a deep decline that would result in the exodus of its residents to the West Side, reshaping the spatial boundaries that were well entrenched in this Southern city.

This chapter explores Brooklyn between 1947 and 1957, as a means of understanding how the social and economic structures that existed buttressed the community against a neglectful government. The black business district was well established by this point, and black businesses provided services to the African American community that the city was incapable of providing or simply refused to provide for its citizens due to their location or identity. The use of memory as a source can shed light onto the community itself and how residents interacted with one another to create a sense of closeness that could only be born out of their shared experiences under segregation in
the South. Within this chapter I explore the collective memories of Brooklyn and how its residents perceived their community. Understanding their perceptions are key to understanding their attachment to, and providing them with a voice in the history of Brooklyn.

The population of African Americans living in Charlotte between 1947 and 1958 was divided between six communities: Cherry, Biddleville, Greenville, First Ward, Third Ward, and Brooklyn (located in Second Ward). Brooklyn was the largest African American community in the city. It was also the oldest community, having been born out of the necessity for affluent white residents to maintain living quarters near their homes when the center city was predominantly white. As the city began to expand and grow in population, the white population moved into areas such as Dilworth and Myers Park, south of the downtown area. This “white flight” resulted in the opening up of housing for African Americans to move into. The issue with white flight is that it resulted in a decline in services to the now mostly African American areas.

Brooklyn was circumscribed by the Southern Rail Road Yard to the west and Sugar Creek to the east. Its southern boundary ended at East Morehead Street and its northern boundary began on East 4th Street, directly behind City Hall and the County Court House. This mostly African American community resided in an area that was artificially constructed to keep minorities contained within a 238-acre area. African Americans created an entirely independent community that was capable of thriving without ever having to leave Brooklyn. They occupied land that was deemed valuable by
“farsighted men who had declared that [Brooklyn], because of its proximity to the center city, must sooner or later be utilized by the white people.”

Residents of Brooklyn showed an attachment to the community that was born out of the economic and social systems that sustained the community. Mrs. Obenia Burris commented on her life in Brooklyn, before urban renewal forced her to move out, stating that “in Brooklyn we had all the conveniences that poor people could have at the time. That was home for me and growing up there made it all that much more important to me.

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32 Hanchett, Sorting out the New South City. 249.
My parents were from Brooklyn, growing up in the same house that I grew up in. It was hard to see it go.”

The 1940s and 1950s saw a large influx of African Americans moving north to escape from the lack of employment and Jim Crow laws that prohibited African Americans from receiving a standard public education or jobs that paid livable wages. The common historical reference tends to focus on the migration to Northern cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York but this is not entirely the case. Charlotte also saw an influx in its African American population from South Carolina, as indicated by the interviews that I conducted with members of the Brooklyn community. A large portion of those interviewed came from South Carolina and, by viewing birth certificates of over fifty residents who died, and thirty-two interviewees, I estimate that over 50% of them were from South Carolina.

Over 1.5 million minorities migrated to the North, North Central, and Western states, in search of employment and to escape from Jim Crow laws, which were entrenched in the everyday lives of African Americans living in the South. Between 1950 and 1970, the “combined population of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County nearly doubled, rising from 197,052 to 354,656 residents of which 76 percent were white, and 23.6 percent were black.” This was also a period in which African Americans were beginning to see progress on the economic front, “with job opportunities opening up

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more rapidly than there were qualified persons to fill the positions.”

The jobs that were added were in the service and retail industry, with a demand for “clerks, sales, personnel, and bank tellers.” Many of the residents arriving from South Carolina were not qualified for those jobs, so the job market, although promising, remained dire for African Americans who were uneducated or unqualified for those positions. However, the service and labor industry sustained those who arrived in Brooklyn.

Artis Brown’s family moved to Charlotte in 1951, when his father found work as a brick mason. The Browns were from Fountain Inn, SC and Charlotte was only 110 miles away from Fountain Inn. Artis provided the story of how his family came to live in Brooklyn. Detailing the reasons why they moved to the city.

My father was a farm hand before we move to Charlotte. It was a rough living because of the dangers that came with being black in the south. He had a few friends who had already moved up there and they were telling him that there were jobs that he could work that paid a dollar an hour. So, he packed up one day and told my mother that he was going to get us out of Fountain Inn.

In the fall of 1951, Artis Brown’s father called for his wife and children to come to Charlotte, NC. He knew that there were better opportunities for employment in Charlotte and decided to take a chance on moving to the “Big City.” Artis’s father feared for the welfare of his family, because there was a large Ku Klux Klan presence in Fountain Inn. When Artis arrived in Charlotte, he was struck by the bright lights and bustling of people moving across busy streets, rushing to the bus stop or trolley, which was something that he had never seen before. He was excited and couldn’t wait to see his

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37 Ibid.
new home. The truck that they had ridden in pulled up to the front door of a grey, one
story house, situated just off of McDowell Street. As his father began to pull their
belongings out of the truck, he told them that he had found a job paying good money.

The front porch of the Brown family’s new home was built on brick columns and
had a crawl space that was just large enough for a small child to crawl under. As he
walked into the house, his father showed him where he would be sleeping. His bed was in
the front room, right next to the front door. The door had a screen on it that allowed for a
breeze to move through the house. His mom and dad slept in the middle room, and to the
rear of the house was the kitchen. Right outside of the backdoor was a spigot from which
to draw water for washing, cleaning, and cooking. It was a large space compared to
where they had come from, and there were so many children running around the
neighborhood that Artis couldn’t wait to get outside. He was excited about exploring the
new neighborhood and anxious about meeting the new kids. As he stood out back, taking
in the sights, sounds, and smells, his father called to him, letting him know that it was
time to come in and get cleaned up. It had been a long trip, but, now that they were
settled in, dinner was being prepared and there was school tomorrow. His father was
standing on the porch, looking out at the houses across the street while he smoked a
cigarette. He was happy that he had his family back together, and that they were safe.

Richard Sherman noted in *The Negro and The City* that “Negro workers were
concentrated in in the lowest skilled and lowest paid occupations,” which can be
attributed to the economic disparities that existed nationally. For Artis’s father to find
employment that offered him a trade skill made his odds of entering the working middle-
class better. Working as a brick mason was a step up from that of a farmhand, and the wages were better. In Brooklyn, he knew that he could find work around the city as long as they were hiring African Americans.

The establishment of economic support systems naturally evolved from the neglect of the municipal government to provide the same quality of services that it was providing for the rest of the city’s white population. Prior to urban renewal, Brooklyn was the financial and cultural center for African Americans living in Charlotte, providing services that African Americans could not enjoy outside of the community and employment opportunities beyond the service industry, for a small portion of the community. The “black business district” was a feature of the community that was born out of necessity. Brooklyn’s business district was parallel to the white business district on Trade and Tryon Street, but “Downtown interests shunned black storekeepers,” resulting in a community that, as W. E. B. Du Bois observed about most African American communities during Jim Crow, “consisted of a cooperative arrangement of industries and services that tended to become a closed economic circle largely independent of the white world.”38,39

39 Hanchett, Sorting out the New South City. 116.
The Alexanders and Griers owned family-run funeral homes that serviced the entire African American population in Charlotte. They also served as an ambulance service for the Good Samaritan Hospital in Third Ward. The Alexander hotel was the only hotel that would cater to weary African American travelers travelling into Charlotte. Its clientele included prominent African Americans and celebrities, including James Brown and Duke Ellington. El Chico’s and Rudean’s were popular restaurants that served the community with good food at low prices, and also operated as late-night places, where students from Johnson C. Smith University held fraternity parties.
Willie Spencer and his brother Robert grew up on Alexander Street, a few blocks away from Second Street and McDowell. On Friday nights, they would talk their father into giving them a little bit of spending money so that they could watch a movie.

*There was a lot to do in Brooklyn if you had some money. We knew that Friday was payday for daddy so we waited by the door for him to come home. As soon as he was through the door we were hounding him. Normally he would press a few dollars in our hand and we would be out the door. We would grab a bologna sandwich from El Chico’s before heading to the Lincoln Theater to catch a movie.*

James Steele remembers Second Street as a place that was filled with black-owned businesses, restaurants, diners, and cafés, but he also remembers all the churches in Brooklyn.

Johnny Williams was an African American who started working in Brooklyn as a lather at a construction site in the 1930s. He eventually saved enough money to purchase a home on South Alexander Street, where he and his wife housed lodgers who were new to the city. Johnny became well known in the community, because he owned and operated the largest grocery store in Brooklyn, at a time when grocery stores in the community were primarily owned by whites. At Johnny’s Grocery Store, groceries could be bought on credit, if patrons could not pay directly for their groceries. This was a common practice in Brooklyn, and it was one of the ways that poor people were able to put food on the table when money was in short supply. Johnny’s Grocery Store was where you could find children hanging out, drinking sodas, and waiting for the movies at the Lincoln theater to begin.

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Although the black business district accounted for a small portion of the employment in Brooklyn, it offered the community representation in an economic market that was closed off to the majority of the community. Successful businessmen had clout within the community and were the spokespeople for the city’s African American population. Dr. Leaks, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, listened to the stories that his grandmother would tell him about Brooklyn. She was able to sum up what the community meant to African Americans who did not live there, sharing with him that “blacks that were not from the neighborhood considered it theirs.” Segregation had limited what blacks were able to accomplish socially and economically, outside of their communities. In Brooklyn, people were able to see the possibilities of what an education could do for an individual, how an industrious person could become self-sufficient and successful in their trade, and what success looked like.

Not only was Brooklyn the “black business district” for the city, it also provided the labor force for the service industry. The Domestic Laundry Service was an African American owned laundry service that worked outside of the community. African American professionals had their offices on 2nd Street, along with pharmacies that provided health services to everyone. As a way to offset the cost of services, doctors were willing to accept payments for services rendered. Families sometimes bartered for services and goods. There was a viable economy that existed in Brooklyn that catered to the community’s needs. The amount of industry in Brooklyn made it a point of destination for African Americans who
lived in the other black communities around the city. Willie Spencer recalled that “If you were black and you came to Charlotte you had to come to Brooklyn.” James Steele stated in an interview that you could “find everything you needed, except for clothes, in Brooklyn.” This offset some of the effects of “economic disparities that were strengthened by informal economic policies;” however, the community itself was only accountable for a small portion of employment.

Churches were extremely important in maintaining social ties within the African American community. Churches governed much of the activities within the community and served as a way to create a sense of community. There were thirteen churches in Brooklyn and all of the congregations were active in their respective churches. The community was governed by church bells on Sunday, and much of the weekend activities were centered on preparation for attending services. Churches offered the residents a way to stay informed about what was occurring in the community and a chance to commune over a meal, which was often provided in a potluck fashion. For some, this was the source of the only nutritious meal that they would receive for the week.

William Wylie recalls the manner in which his family prepared for church beginning on Saturday morning:

It was a ritual. It would begin on Saturday afternoon and would take all day. We would heat water up for the washbasin because we didn’t get indoor plumbing until later and would take turns taking a bath. Sundays were the one day that you would be clean since we were only able to wash up through the week. It would
The pastors were considered leaders within the community and many of them went out of their way to take care of the children. One pastor would make sure that little girls had enough money to get their hair done at the beauty shop before attending church on Sunday, while another would ensure that families had enough food on the table. These religious centers also served as cultural centers, where information was passed to one another. If someone needed to know something, they could find out in church. When the city started pushing for urban renewal, the church was where they found out about ongoing developments that would affect the community.

Willie Spencer recalled what the weekends were like in Brooklyn:

*When I was younger we would party on the weekend, hanging out at the Lincoln Theater or on the block between Second Street and McDowell but we made sure to be up early on Saturday so that we could do our choirs. Once that was done, my mother would begin preparing for Sunday dinner. It was an all-day affair but on Sunday morning you made sure that you were at church bright and early because you knew that all them ladies had been cooking all day the previous day. Those meals were good and everyone would be there catching up on the events of the week. In that since church was a social a weekly social event.*

Church was the one place that was “capable of bringing everyone together for a common cause.”

The House of Prayer for All was located on Long Street and had the largest congregation in Brooklyn. It was headed by a grandiose gentleman by the name of C. M. “Daddy” Grace. The House of Prayer was known for its grand parades during their

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The parade would wind its way through Second Ward, with crowds gathering just to see Daddy Grace sitting on his throne.

*It was a good outlet for people, especially during the House of Prayer Convocation. They would have the greatest parade that you could see with the “shout” band marching and playing the best music you ever heard. The parade would be broken down into different acts that portrayed different scenes from the bible. The high steppers and walkers were the highlights of the parade because they really put on a show. Everyone in Brooklyn looked forward to the parade.*

One of the key institutions in the community was the school system. Second Ward High School and Myers Street Elementary accounted for the education of half of the entire African American population in the city. A 1960 census report indicates that 60 percent of the population residing in the Brooklyn area had obtained at least eight years of education, with 32 percent having attained some high school or college education. Education was considered a key factor in rising above poverty, with parents insisting that their children attend school. The result was that 98 percent of the school-aged children were enrolled in elementary and high schools. Adversely, this indicated that there was a large portion of the adult population who were functionally illiterate. This was due in no small part to the curriculum that was imposed upon the schools, which focused on trade jobs and the service industry. This subject is discussed in further detail in Chapter two.

Education was an important part of the social network that connected the community. There were significant changes occurring within the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System in 1957. Dorothy Counts was the first African American to integrate the Charlotte Mecklenburg school System, but not without significant protest. Parents were

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fine with continuing to send their children to Myers Street elementary and Second Ward
High School. David Goldfield argued in an essay about Charlotte, entitled “A Place to
Come To,” that “There was a concern in the black community that behind the
desegregation effort was an assumption that a black child had to sit next to a white child
in order to learn.”

Vermelle Ely graduated from Second Ward High School and also taught in the
community during the school desegregation period.

_The schools were “separate but equal” is what we were told but there was no
such animal. We were second-class [citizens] and that meant that they would not
have received the amount of resources that were dedicated to white schools. Even
though they were underfunded the teachers did everything possible for you to
learn._

Teachers were an important part of the lives of their students, often checking up
on their students when they missed school or going so far as to bring them food when
they could not afford to pay for their meals. They watched out for their wards, and were
always willing to talk to the parents about their children. There was no way that children
could escape the watchful eye of their teachers, when everyone was connected through
church activities, school, or work.

There were reports, generated by the Redevelopment Commission of the City of
Charlotte, noting that “many school aged children who weren’t in school,” in Brooklyn,
indicated that there was problem of truancy and neglect by its residents. However, the
1960 census reported that 98 percent of school-aged children, ranging from five to

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48 William Graves and Heather Smith, eds. _Charlotte, NC: The Global Evolution of a New South
49 Vermelle Diamond Ely, Price Davis, and John Funches, interview by Keith Mann, Charlotte,
eighteen years of age, were enrolled in school.\textsuperscript{50,51} In comparison to the national school enrollment rates, Brooklyn was well above the national average of 69.1 percent for African Americans and 72 percent for Whites.\textsuperscript{52,53} Education was a means of fighting against the racial and economic disparities that existed in Charlotte. A better education meant a better future.

Parents strived to ensure that their children were educated to at least the high school level. This was a great accomplishment for some, who saw their diplomas as a means of escaping the poverty that existed in Brooklyn. Education was a social ladder that allowed African Americans to seek better opportunities. Those who were able to afford to go to college often returned to either continue in the family businesses or start businesses of their own; some moved out of Brooklyn for better employment elsewhere.

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\textsuperscript{52} IPUMS (Ruggles and Sobek 1997).
Willie Spencer’s parents were adamant that he attend college when he graduated from Second Ward High School, but teachers also played a role in what students like him believed they could achieve. He graduated in 1964, but remembers the important role that teachers and school played in his life.

*The teachers were representative of the professional class in Brooklyn. They would work hard to make sure that we knew that we could do whatever we wanted. They were constantly pointing to all of the educational opportunities that were open to us. Johnson C. Smith, Barber Scotia, and Livingstone College were universities that blacks were encouraged to attend. Even if you didn’t go to college, that High School Diploma meant something to students and their parents.*

The position that the education system had within the Brooklyn community is evident in the way that former residents expressed their attachment to the school.

*When the school was demolished we lost something that gave us hope that we could do whatever we put our minds to. It also showed us that the city didn’t care about us.*

The position that the education system held within the Brooklyn community was evident by the way that former residents expressed their attachment to the schools. It was a part of their life and viewed as a means for African Americans to rise above the limits that were emplaced upon generations before them. In 1969, Second Ward High School was demolished and the reasons for its demolishment were understood, by residents, as a measure to ensure that white children would not be bused to all black schools. Lassiter noted that in Charlotte, the school board attorney stated that “we have not built schools to perpetuate segregation, but to serve neighborhoods,” and yet the schools that served the Brooklyn community received minimum funding, outdated curriculum, and outdated

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55 Ibid.
resources that were passed down from white schools.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, once schools began to desegregate, the fear of two-way busing was received with protest by suburban, middle-class whites who preferred “one-way desegregation” of schools over sending their children to black schools.\textsuperscript{57} This indicates that there was an understanding that the education that African-Americans were receiving in Brooklyn were not adequate for the city’s white residents and resulted in the schools demolition.

\textit{When the school was demolished we lost something that gave us hope that we could do whatever we put our minds to. It also showed us that the city didn’t care about us.}\textsuperscript{58}

Evidence indicates that the residents of Brooklyn depended on an economic and social support system to maintain their community within a segregated society. The social networks extended beyond the community and provided for migrants, who entered the community during population influx, by sharing networks and information about employment and housing. Education served as a means of ensuring that children were supplied with trade skills and the ability to read and write, giving them better chances at employment than the previous generation. Religion was a major factor in the maintenance of social bonds and a way to keep residents informed about what was occurring outside the confines of Brooklyn.

A broad view of the importance of economic and social support systems in Brooklyn establishes how the community was capable of thriving under a segregated system. Its residents depended upon these support systems to provide an economic base

\textsuperscript{56} Lassiter, \textit{The Silent Majority}. 135
\textsuperscript{57} Graves et al., \textit{Charlotte, NC}.
\textsuperscript{58} W. Spencer, interview by Makonen A. Campbell, Private Residence, December 24, 2017.
from which its residents were able to receive services that were unavailable to them outside of the community. In Brooklyn more than 80 percent of the community lived on less than 4,000 dollars annually with 60 percent of the community subsisting on less than 3,000 dollars.\(^5^9\) The ability to pay rent and buy groceries in a period where the unemployment rates were high were stressors for those living beneath the poverty line. The economic support systems supported the community through the grocery stores willingness to accept credit for food, and the health providers willingness to provide services for monthly payments. Those who provided services also depended on the community for support because it was a closed economy indicating that the residents kept those businesses open. The loss of one would naturally lead to the collapse of the other.

The social systems included education which served as a means of ensuring that children were supplied with trade skills and the ability to read and write, giving them better chances at employment than the previous generation. African Americans used these support systems as a means of resisting the effects of segregation and policies that were designed to reinforce white hegemony over a minority population. They were instrumental in the survival of the community and garnered support from the rest of the African American population which made Brooklyn the religious, economic, and cultural center for the city. Once the community was dissolved there was no longer a central location that garnered as much support within the African American community as Brooklyn did.

CHAPTER 2: LOCAL POLICIES AND COMMUNITY ISSUES AND WHAT THEY MEANT FOR THE COMMUNITY OF BROOKLYN

The Negro objects to being segregated because it usually means that he will receive inferior accommodations for the taxes he pays.\textsuperscript{60}

Booker T. Washington

The issues that afflicted African American communities, in light of this urban renewal, went beyond housing concerns. There were issues with the disenfranchisement of African Americans, white fear of encroachment by African American communities, the effects of racially biased economic policies, and the eradication of slums through policies that only seemed to center on African American communities. As Charlotte marched towards urban renewal, local policies and community issues began to converge, forcing city officials to take look at the conditions that minorities were living in, the effects of those conditions on their lives, and the ways that the city could address those issues, while remaining distinctly Southern.

This chapter explores how local policies and community played a part in the decline of Brooklyn. This chapter focuses on the period between 1916 and 1969, showing the indifference that city officials had towards Brooklyn, until social changes and the Civil Rights era forced city officials to address African American concerns. Further, this chapter examines the lasting effect redlining had on the state of the community, how a lack of resources exacerbated social conditions, and how high crime rates and increased health concerns for the community caused a fear of blight within the city. I focus on the political debates at city hall as a means of understanding the driving force behind urban

\textsuperscript{60} Charles E. Silberman, “The Negro and the City,”. \textit{Fortune Magazine} (1968), 21.
renewal efforts and the motivations behind its implementation in Brooklyn. I posit that the fear of encroachment of minorities into the communities of whites created concern that the city was forcing integration on communities that believed it would be detrimental to their way of life.

When Booker T. Washington commented on African Americans and segregation, he was commenting on the state of their communities, noting that they were not equal to the white communities that they were surrounded by. In Charlotte, the conditions of African American communities were recorded as far back as 1916, when the Charlotte Associated Charities attempted to expose the conditions of Brooklyn to city council. Their hopes were that the mayor and city officials would agree to the implementation of housing codes that would create a standard for the housing industry, raising the living conditions of poor and minority groups. Their efforts were met with stiff opposition, because it would have increased the overhead cost of maintaining housing, which had been designed specifically for exploiting African Americans’ inability to reside wherever they saw fit.

In 1937, the *Charlotte News* conducted an exposé on the conditions plaguing Brooklyn. The exposé depicted the conditions in graphic detail, showing parts of “Blue Heaven, where spider legged houses teeter aside the creek, jam-packed with negroes living four to ten persons in three rooms.”61 The majority of these houses had no running water or indoor plumbing, and it was not uncommon for outhouses to be located right along the banks of the creek. These conditions were further exacerbated by the redlining

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61 Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South City*, 237.
of African American communities, which dissuaded African Americans seeking to buy homes from taking out loans at exorbitant rates, and justified the continued neglect of housing in the community by slum and absentee landlords.

The perpetuation of second-class citizenship was predicated on the continued funneling of African Americans into segregated communities; this funneling was supported by “federal, state, and local governments actions to define where whites and African Americans should live.”62 While this chapter does not focus on the federal or state actions, they also had an effect on the ability of African Americans to find housing commensurate with their financial capabilities and social standing.

Contemporary redline maps help to illuminate how planners identified these communities. Redlining allowed the banking community to identify any minority community as an undesirable area for investment, and hindered the ability of property owners to improve their properties. This explanation for the conditions of the community does not excuse the owner’s responsibilities to their tenants; however, it provides insight into some of the roadblocks that can exacerbate an already deteriorating situation. Redlining was a practice first established by the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) to prevent foreclosure on home loans. Their practices and policies identified areas that qualified for loans, based on the racial makeup of the area. Areas that were predominantly African American were noted as such, and denied loans. Redlining maps clearly identify African American communities, but when compared against Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, a clearer view of the consequences of redlining are brought into focus.

The Sanborn Maps identify ownership of the redlined areas, and records indicate that white people owned much of the property in the Brooklyn area. Even if the property owners, black or white, wanted to improve the area, they could not receive funding to do so. It is possible that this motivated the property owners to sell their properties to the city, because it solved two issues: it prevented them from losing money if the city chose to declare imminent domain, and they were able to receive the most money for their properties.
Local governments used redlining as a means of denying depressed communities the same expenditures in services that were provided to wealthier, white communities.
Redlining ensured that African Americans remained in communities that were deemed high risk for investment, resulting in a decline in the condition of the communities, and a general neglect for infrastructure, housing, and sanitation of the community. Redlining, in essence, served as a means of keeping minority communities in a depressed state, until city officials and businessmen could find better uses for the properties.

The demolishment of African American communities is often foreshadowed by the construction of highways and thoroughfares, and the rezoning of neighborhoods for industrial uses, using local laws, policies, and federal funds to support these efforts. In 1947, city planners began working on the construction of Independence Boulevard and bulldozers began appearing in Brooklyn, plowing up roads and reestablishing the boundaries of the community. At first, residents were confused by the invasion of surveyors and city officials, who suddenly appeared in the community, knocking on doors and informing residents that portions of their properties were being pushed back for the city’s use.

This was the city’s first effort of appropriating property in Brooklyn, and it was a stark expression of the power that city officials held when it came to African American communities. Robert Parks remembered when the city began pushing residents out of their properties. His family lived on Alexander and Boundary Street, which was a more prominent part of Brooklyn, but the effects of the highway project were noticeable. When asked about the city’s efforts to take property in Brooklyn, Robert Parks stated that:

_We had no representation in the city government so they were able to do as they pleased when it came to our community. There were no discussions at the local_
Mrs. Lucille K. Tyson and her husband Dr. E. French Tyson lived at 829 Brevard Street, and witnessed the encroachment of the city’s efforts firsthand. Dr. Tyson was a physician who ran a successful practice from 1913 to 1950. The home that Dr. French bought for his wife was located in a middle-to-upper-class section of Brooklyn. Their front yard was well maintained, with rose bushes and honeysuckle lining the front porch. In the summers, they would both sit on the front porch, taking in the cool night air as they discussed the day’s activities. Mrs. Tyson felt powerless as the city forced her out of her home, writing in a letter to the Charlotte Observer that:

My thoughts may not mean so much, but I feel pretty blue and washed up today. Many times, I’ve looked out to see surveyors all around the place, our property staked off. Again, an official sitting in a parked car observing and figuring.

City officials forced residents out of their homes because the homes were located directly in the path of the highway construction project. Sitting on the front porch became a painful reminder of what they were losing, and there was no recourse for them to take except to lodge complaints with the Charlotte Observer in the form of letters. The Tysons had the means to withstand being forced out of their home, but it was painful for them nonetheless, as they moved their belongings from their Victorian home to a house Dr. Tyson was able to find within the same community. Even though he was financially well off, there was no way that he could move his family into the suburbs and feel safe, and so they remained in Brooklyn. The highway project that resulted in Independence

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Boulevard’s construction was the manifestation of rezoning efforts, taken by the Charlotte City Council, to designate the entire Second Ward as an industrial zone. This was the beginning of urban renewal, establishing a model for the use of eminent domain, which would eventually stretch directly into the heart of minority communities.

Vermelle Ely’s father was forced to move his property line back to make way for the throughway being built in Brooklyn. He and his wife were schoolteachers who had saved up enough money to purchase a house on East Stonewall Street.

*I never understood how we changed from living on East Stonewall Street to South Independence Boulevard but we did. The Street was our playground because they didn’t have places for us to go and play like they do now.*

The decisions being made about the community were not coming from within but from outside forces, which were focused on the larger picture of developing a downtown area that would sustain a large influx of business and commuters. Brooklyn was simply viewed as a hindrance to the process, which was subverted by running the highway directly through the community. This would have been unimaginable for communities in Dilworth or Myers Park. This is evidenced by the large outcry by residents who lived in Chantilly, Elizabeth, and Piedmont Park — all white neighborhoods. There were no public outcries about the placement of a highway through Brooklyn.

Tom Hanchett, a local historian, believed that city officials were intent on changing Brooklyn into a business district for whites because of its proximity to the center of the city, regardless of the African Americans who had established businesses

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and homes there. The highway project resulting in Independence Boulevard’s construction was the manifestation of rezoning efforts to designate the entire Second Ward as an industrial zone. Prominent African American figures, such as Zechariah Alexander, a retired funeral home director, and Thaddeus Tate, a businessman and civic leader, protested the construction of the highway through Brooklyn, but their protests fell on deaf ears.

There was no representation on the city council that would champion African American agendas. Brooklyn residents had no political power to push back against the city’s efforts, and the city officials who represented them viewed them as a hindrance to the future progress of the city, effectively placing them in a position that was not supportive to the community’s growth and development. Brooklyn, like many other African American communities, relied heavily on its professional businessmen and clergy to voice their concerns to the white power structure. However, the city council had already made their decision.

Post-War urban renewal officially began with the Housing Act of 1949. With this act, President Truman set into motion a series of legislative acts that would be used to force the poor and minority groups out of urban areas, under the auspices of creating opportunities for universal home ownership and the clearance of blighted communities. Local leaders began to use imminent domain, and the construction of highways and thoroughfares through minority neighborhoods, as a means of forcing home owners to

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66 Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South City*, 144.
sell their properties, reestablishing African Americans in areas marketed to them, which were located outside of the center city limits.

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) had far reaching effects on the country. Charlotte led the way with the desegregation of schools, but not without a cost. In the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement began to pick up steam. Several incidents occurred that had a damaging effect on the city as a whole. The first was the integration of the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System.

Second Ward School and Myers Street Elementary School were located in Brooklyn and were instrumental in educating a large portion of the African American population in Charlotte. These schools were overcrowded and underfunded, using a curriculum that was focused on equipping African American children with trade skills and skills useful for work in the service industry. Suburban communities had better, well-funded schools, offering classes that went beyond what was being taught at the local schools in Brooklyn. The disparity in education did not go unnoticed and when Brown v. Board of Education ruled that separate was not equal, parents saw a way of advancing the education of their children further than what they had previously been accustomed to.

In 1957, a young African American teenager walked through a sea of white faces to Harding High School. Signs read “nigger get out” and “we don’t want you in our schools,” and, as she walked by those signs, she remained focused on the path in front of her. A small, freckle-faced child ran up to her and spat on the dress that her grandmother had made for her to wear on her first day of school. The crowd was made up of mostly
children, but adults accounted for a portion of the crowd as well. As they stood yelling, “nigger go home,” the reality of race relations in Charlotte was on full display.

Figure 2.2. Dorothy Counts makes her way into Harding High School as onlookers. Dorothy Counts, the first African American to integrate the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System, as she walked to Harding High School for the first day of school, September 24, 1957

Dorothy Counts was the first African American to integrate the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System. As she walked to school, children spat on her, and adults yelled and called her “nigger!” The incident was reported throughout the nation. There was a palpable tension in the city that stemmed from the outrage and protest by whites, who felt that the city was forcing integration on a place that did not want it. Charlotte was viewed as a progressive city, but, in 1957, it was revealed that progressivism and “the Charlotte Way” were a façade. The social climate and fear of African American encroachment was on full display. The ramifications of Dorothy’s walk into Harding
High School on that day reverberated throughout the city. Social changes and racial tensions were rising, causing local city officials’ concern for the state of the city.

Although the schools were being desegregated, the city was not ready to push forward with such a progressive initiative. The backlash resulted in parents pulling their children out of schools, choosing to homeschool rather than having their children attend desegregated schools. The city promoted good race relations, while maintaining a spatial segregation that denied African Americans access to resources, such as well-funded schools, adequate public services in their communities, and incorporation into the job market, where African Americans would have been able to realize an increase in wages that would pull them out of poverty.

Other incidents that had the potential to affect Charlotte were lunch counter sit-ins and efforts to desegregate the transportation systems in Charlotte. “Charlotte has never had black militancy” that other cities had, but African Americans were beginning to push for rights that had been previously denied them. 67 This protest caught the eye of Stanford Brookshire who, as a city councilman and future mayor of Charlotte, saw this unrest and believed that it would have a “negative impact on Charlotte in the future.” 68

Students from Johnson C. Smith University were holding sit-ins at Belk’s, Ivey’s, and various other white-owned stores that refused to serve African Americans. Dr. Reginald Hawkins was a civil rights activist who fought for the desegregation of schools in Charlotte. When discussing the environment during this period, he recalled that Brookshire wanted him to use his influence to quell the disturbances.

67 Coffin, Brookshire & Belk, 44.
68 Ibid., 46.
The way I saw it was that the only people who were fighting for civil rights in Charlotte were black preachers, black women, and black children.⁶⁹

Mayor Brookshire viewed Hawkins as a militant who was capable of stirring up the African American community and even though he viewed Charlotte’s African American population a less militant than other areas such a Durham and Winston-Salem, he perceived any protests for racial equality as a threat to his vision for Charlotte. He looked to the racial issues that were plaguing Birmingham and Little Rock and his solution was to expedite urban renewal efforts in Brooklyn as a means of showing to the African American community that he was concerned about their inclusion as full citizens.

Mayor Brookshire was convinced that “low-income, underprivileged areas breed crime [and] Negroes as race are hampered in self-development by economic and social pressures.”⁷⁰ However, his efforts at removing slums, while exclusion in the economic, and educational development of African Americans persisted, only addressed the aesthetics of a problem that was plaguing the residents of Brooklyn. Hawkins continued to be a vocal opponent of segregation and proponent of full inclusion but the city’s efforts to redevelop Brooklyn for the purpose of business development served as proof that African American concerns were falling on deaf ears.

⁷⁰ Coffin, Brookshire & Belk, Businessmen in City Hall. 49.
CHAPTER 3: THE GOALS OF URBAN RENEWAL: HOW NEGATIVE NARRATIVES WERE USED TO JUSTIFY THE DEMOLISHMENT OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Figure 3.1. Residential areas in Brooklyn in 1954

Post-War urban renewal officially began with the Housing Act of 1949. With this act, President Truman set into motion a series of legislative acts that was used to force the poor and minority groups out of urban areas in the South, under the auspices of creating opportunities for universal home ownership. From its inception as a policy, Title I of the Federal Housing Act was designed to do three things: eliminate substandard housing and clear urban areas of blight; stimulate growth in the housing market, providing homes for Americans across the country; and creating suitable living conditions for American families. The mandate was distilled down, at the local level, to three aims: clearing and
redeveloping existing slums, rehabilitating blighted areas, and preventing good areas from becoming blighted.\textsuperscript{71} The reality is that state and local governments used federal funds to keep cities segregated, enabling powerbrokers to remove minorities from their homes for the sake of city growth, demolishing communities, and scattering residents to the outskirts of the cities.

In the late 1950s, Brooklyn began to experience a shift in its population. This was caused by an increase in available housing in communities located on the West Side of Charlotte, and a loosening of financial restrictions on mortgages. Access to mortgage loans created opportunities for African Americans to purchase homes at fair market prices, but only on the West Side. There were rumors that the city council was creating a planning commission, whose efforts would be focused on urban renewal in Brooklyn.

Urban renewal was an ambiguous program. It was based in progressivism, with an emphasis on the uplifting of the poor by removing them from conditions that were detrimental to morality, health, and the overall social wellbeing of the entire population. The concept of urban renewal was to clear cities of slums, in order to “reduce substandard housing, replace it with better housing; to retain or attract middle-class white families.”\textsuperscript{72} This was aimed at increasing the tax revenue as a means of “providing better education and social services.”\textsuperscript{73} Extending back to 1912, Charlotte businessmen and political leaders “had declared that [Brooklyn] because of its proximity to the center city must sooner or later be utilized for the white population.”\textsuperscript{74} From the beginning,

\textsuperscript{72} Weaver, \textit{Dilemmas of Urban America}, 43.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{The Charlotte Observer}, September 22, 1912.
Brooklyn was in the sights of the Mayor, City Council, and City Manager, who had made backroom deals that would ensure that Brooklyn was the first community to be demolished under urban renewal.

This chapter focuses on Charlotte’s efforts to use urban renewal to reshape the urban landscape, clearing Brooklyn of slums and relocating its residents to areas that were more suitable for the establishment of viable communities. It explores the motivations of the local government to declare Brooklyn blighted, and suggests that the Charlotte Observer played a significant role in perpetuating an image of Brooklyn that was both negative and detrimental to its existence. Finally, this chapter examines how the community became fractured, and the effects that urban renewal had on Brooklyn’s residents.

Urban renewal was propagated under the Federal Housing Acts and State Urban Renewal Laws, authorizing local municipalities to create commissions to determine where blight resided and the level of blight in targeted areas, and authorized the reclaiming of property for the purpose of redevelopment. In 1951, the state of North Carolina declared a “state of blight in urban communities,” authorizing the establishment of redevelopment commissions, which were mandated to acquire and develop plans for the redevelopment of blighted areas in the state.75 It was deemed necessary to “preserve cities and urban life against physical, social, and other hazards vital to the safety, health and welfare of the citizens of the State.”76 The focus of the law, however, was on property values, and not on the community that it would affect. Blight, according to the

75 The Urban Redevelopment Law. Chapter 160 A. Article 22. (1951, c. 1095, s. 1; c. 426, s. 75.)
76 Ibid.
Urban Redevelopment Law, could be stamped out, by removing the people from the area; this meant overlooking the social and economic causes that facilitated blight, as well as the economic and social circumstances of those who would be affected by such actions.

To understand how blight factored into the public policy and how the city of Charlotte viewed Brooklyn, blight has to be defined and placed into proper context with the social and economic landscape of Charlotte in the 1950’s. Blight was defined in the North Carolina Urban Renewal Law as the “predominance of improvements which by reason of dilapidation, deterioration, age, inadequate provision for ventilation, high density of population, and overcrowding,” as determined by a planning commission.\footnote{The Urban Redevelopment Law. Chapter 160 A. Article 22. (1951, c. 1095, s. 1; c. 426, s. 75.)} Although ostensibly race neutral, this understanding of “blight” had disparate racial impact when set into motion. Indeed, out of the several blight studies that were conducted, in Charlotte, most of them identified minor issues that the planning commission believed could be fixed through revitalization efforts. Brooklyn, however, would be declared a blighted area with no hopes of revitalizing the area.

Beyond the state laws facilitating urban renewal initiatives, the city instituted strict housing codes. The Brooklyn neighborhood existed for seventy-five years before these codes were instituted, with many of the buildings being several decades old. The buildings and homes had been built without any adherence to codes and, over time, had begun to deteriorate. Without access to financial means of repairing the homes and buildings, it was easy for the commission to identify these residents and buildings as blighted. It was necessary for the city to conduct an extensive study on the area to
determine the extent of the blight, which would also determine the amount of land that could be reclaimed for the governments use.

“Blight” was difficult to define. State law defined it as any combination of factors, including truancy, crime, infant mortality, juvenile delinquency, ill health, and the transmission of diseases, adding that “if two-thirds of any area presented the aforementioned characteristics, contributing to the conditions” that it could be considered blighted.78 It has been argued that the “statistical data on the amount of blight is very limited and unsatisfactory,” with the issue of urban blight being exacerbated by the federal government’s efforts to provide state and local governments with every means possible to remove blight from their cities. Studies support the view that urban blight, ironically, existed in cities that had “large [African American] populations.”79

I didn’t know anything about urban renewal until my grandparents were forced to sell their home. The word was that the city officials had made their decision on what they wanted to do with Brooklyn, and they used the term blight to describe where we were living. Our house was in a neighborhood where everyone owned their house. We’re talking about really nice houses with yards and old trees. There were areas where the housing was bad but we had some very nice houses in Brooklyn.80

Brooklyn posed a problem for the city because it contained 15 percent of the city’s African American population. If the city moved forward with urban renewal, there would have to be a place to relocate them; federal funding was key to buying back the 238 acres that made up Brooklyn. There was also a deep-seated fear of racial violence, which concerned then-Councilman Brookshire, who decided to run for mayor after

78 Ibid.
Mayor James Smith (1957-1961) stepped down. The city council conducted interviews of potential candidates to run the newly formed Redevelopment Commission and decided on Vernon Sawyer, a Korean War veteran and graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He served as the Assistant Director for the Norfolk Virginia Redevelopment Commission under Larry Cox, a figure who was instrumental in establishing national urban renewal laws. Sawyer was known for his work in clearing slums in Norfolk, Virginia, and Charlotte was looking for someone with experience to spearhead the city’s efforts.

Sawyer was hired by the city council in 1957, to serve as the Executive Director of the Redevelopment Commission and Director of Urban Renewal under Mayor Smith. His first tour of Brooklyn brought him to Blue Heaven, which was considered the worst area in Brooklyn. He was aware that Brooklyn was considered the worst slum in the area and that Mayor Smith was determined to use the land for attracting businesses to Charlotte. However, his concerns were centered on the conditions of the community, and what was needed to be done to move its residents to better areas.

When Sawyer stepped out of his Buick Roadmaster on 2nd and McDowell Street, he did not expect to find a community neglected by the city. His plan was to take his assistant with him and walk around the area, in order to gain a firsthand look at the conditions and assess where his work should begin. Mayor Smith directed him to oversee a study that would determine the depth of blight in the community. His initial assessment was that the community was in a dire state. In an interview, he offered the following account:
You couldn’t imagine the conditions that they were living in. I couldn’t imagine until I saw it. I saw conditions there that were worse than the ones I saw in Norfolk. You can’t find conditions anywhere today that would compare to what living conditions and Housing conditions were in Brooklyn. These would be considered third world living conditions and you can’t find any today because urban renewal eliminated them.  

Figure 3.2. 700 Block East Second Street, Brooklyn. City Hall can be seen in the background

Sawyer called what he saw in Brooklyn “rude, crude, unsanitary, and unsafe,” pointing to the thoroughfares that stretched through the middle of Brooklyn, with roads abutting the front of houses and threatening the safety of children who played in those front yards. This was just one of the unsafe conditions that he saw. Raw sewage, and refuse lined the ditches in Blue Heaven, and chickens were everywhere. Sawyer made note of the outdoor privies, lack of indoor plumbing, and the lack of protection from the elements, that were provided by the housing in the area. By the time he was finished with

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his walking tour of Brooklyn, he had already made up his mind about what he wanted to do and where he should focus his efforts.
Figure 3.3. The Community of Brooklyn c. 1958
When Sawyer returned to his office, he prepared a few notes and made a phone call to Larry Cox. Sawyer held a meeting with the commission, and as he stood over the city’s development plans, he described the best course of action for the redevelopment of the Brooklyn community. Sawyer said that he was “sympathetic to the people who were living in those slum conditions,” and wanted to improve their lives by providing them with better housing and opportunities, but he also saw a better use for the community of Brooklyn than the dilapidated housing that was currently there. The cost to repair all the housing in the area would outweigh the benefits; the backlash would be substantial, but it was necessary.

Robert Parks was asked about the surveys in Brooklyn that occurred in 1958. He stated:

_No one I know ever saw anyone coming around to assess our property or talk to the resident. A white person walking around Brooklyn would have been noticed, especially if they looked like they were on some sort of official business. They would have been challenged and neighbors would have talked about it. The idea of something this big going on would have made a lot of noise in Brooklyn._

In March 1958, Charlotte City Council received a report on the conditions within Brooklyn. The report was federally mandated, as stipulation for the granting of funds. The planning commission was tasked with conducting a survey of the community to determine if it was a candidate for urban renewal. In the report, the commission concluded that “the Brooklyn area was blighted in accordance with the North Carolina Urban Redevelopment Law.” This six-page report on the conditions of Brooklyn was

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damning in its assessments of the community. The report established that the community was developed according to building standards that were over seventy-five years out of date. All of the benchmarks that equated to blight were met. Housing was described as “primitive,” lacking in “protection from the elements”, and “deteriorated.”

Furthermore, the report declared that over 75 percent of the 1,689 buildings in the targeted area showed characteristics of blight. The report delivered the justification needed for the city council to move forward on a vote to demolish Brooklyn.

Margaret Alexander grew up in a middle-class family in First Ward, and later married Kelly Alexander, a civil rights activist and president of the North Carolina Chapter of the NAACP. They raised their family in Brooklyn, until they were forced to sell their home. She recalled that:

I was affected personally by urban renewal twice. The first time was when the city built Independence Boulevard and the second was when we were forced to sell our family home. I would not have called Brooklyn a slum. I never even knew anything about the Ghetto until I heard the term in high school. It didn’t occur to me that the area was a slum or anything of the sort. I raised my children in Brooklyn. Our family’s business was in Brooklyn. We always felt safe there. So, to find out that the city was moving blacks out was disappointing to say the least. Ultimately, I don’t think anyone was listening to us back then.

On January 9, 1960, the Charlotte Observer published an article entitled “Our Slums Are A Losing Proposition.” In the article, Joe Doster argued that Brooklyn was a burden on the city’s taxpayers. He was a proponent of urban renewal, and saw it as an opportunity to generate tax revenue for the city. In the process of advocating for urban renewal, he focused on the ills of the community, expressing concern that “no

\footnote{84 Ibid.}
bookkeeping method could break down the cost of police, garbage, fire, health and welfare service for Brooklyn.” His opinion was that it was too much of a burden on the city. The reality was that the police force was small and under-resourced, and health and welfare services were minimal. The only hospital available for African Americans, until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was the Good Samaritan Hospital. Other health services were provided by the county, which was used by all of the city’s poor residents. Doster’s editorial was squarely aimed at City Council, which was poised to make a decision on urban renewal in two weeks.

On January 18, 1960, Charles Freeman entered the debate about urban renewal in Brooklyn, stating that the city developers were making a mistake by allowing urban renewal to move forward. He accused the city council of misleading the public, arguing that their efforts were guided by “a clique of self-styled civic leaders with both the Charlotte newspapers being members of the clique and distorting the facts” about the realities of what was occurring in Brooklyn. The debate would continue for several hours, with Councilmen Dellinger, Smith, and Whittington expressing agreement that the city should take the federal money in order to see “if it is workable [in Brooklyn] before going into the entire program.

Councilman Myers stated that “it is our desire to do something about the blighted areas of Charlotte, which is a most disturbing factor,” and that he was prepared to vote on the matter that evening. At this time, African American opposition to urban renewal was

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86 Doster, “Our Slums Are A Losing Proposition.”
88 Ibid.
not present at this meeting. The citizens who were in opposition lived outside of Brooklyn and were merely concerned with the threat that urban renewal posed to their property should the city decide to extend its efforts beyond Brooklyn. The vote was cast, and the urban renewal plans were passed by a five-to-two vote.

Figure 3.4. First Major Steps: Slum Razing Project Approved by Council. “Moving expenses would be covered is all that I know about what’s going on at City Hall.” This is how Mrs. Fannie Woodard learned that urban renewal would force her out of her home in Brooklyn.
Kays Gary had been working for the Charlotte Observer as a columnist for nearly two years, and he had never once ventured into Brooklyn. He was assigned to investigate how the vote was being received and what the African American community thought about losing their homes. The vote was contentious, because public opinion was that the city was focused on creating revenue and did not care about the welfare of those who lived in Brooklyn. Even worse was the fact that the residents were not represented when the vote was taken. The reality was that “slum clearance had great political appeal. The notion that the inner-city environment trapped the poor evoked a sympathetic response across the political spectrum. To rally support for a national public housing program, public housing advocates inveighed against the evils of slums and promised that good public housing would eliminate them.”

Gary was curious about the community and decided to work on the assignment on foot. He knew that Brooklyn was considered the worst slum in the city and had a reputation for being a dangerous place. He met his photographer, Tom Walters, in the City Hall parking lot. They walked through the parking lot, crossing 4th Street, where Gary noticed that there were numerous gardens growing on the hilltop overlooking the neighborhood and chicken coops. As the two made their way through the path between City Hall and Brooklyn, they crossed 3rd Street, where a neat row of old shanty houses stood. They were in such close proximity to one another that a small child could barely fit between the houses. The front porches were held up by rotting beams of two-by-fours,

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and clotheslines extended across them. Children were walking down the street with their schoolbooks in hand. Some gave Gary a second look, but most of the children were focused on talking to their friends. He knew that Myers Street Elementary and Second Ward High School were not too far from 3rd Street, and that the majority of the “Negros” attended school there. This would be a perfect place to begin his interviews, and Gary was willing to talk to anyone who would give him insight into what was happening in the community.

Gary met Ms. Fannie Woodard as he was making his way across 3rd Street. She was standing on her porch sweeping when she saw him. He asked her if she had heard about the city council vote, to which she admitted: “I hadn’t heard about the vote until yesterday but there had always been talk of the city trying to move everyone out. All that I know is that our moving expenses would be covered, beyond that I don’t know where I am going to go if they take my home.” She showed him a brochure she had received in the mail several months ago, which attempted to explain what was occurring in the uptown area; however, she couldn’t read that well. She told Gary that urban renewal was what they were calling it, but she argued that there were worse places in some of the white neighborhoods and that they were trying to force African Americans out of the area.

Many of the former residents admit that they did not understand how this was happening, nor did they see any way to have their concerns addressed. The fears that Mrs. Woodard had were real and valid. She did not know where she was going to go, or how she was going to afford rent. City records portray the city’s efforts as an inevitable means
for realizing a modernized city center. However, former residents painted a different picture of their community and the neglect that the local government exhibited towards it. There were concerns that the city council sought to address in the redevelopment of Brooklyn:

1. There was bad housing in the area, as evidenced by the blight study.
2. The city needed highways and thoroughfares to become a transportation hub.
3. The city planners were making plans to establish a government center, and a portion of Brooklyn had been designated as a proposed site.
4. The property was valuable because of its proximity to the business center.

The mayoral election of 1961 ended with Stanford Brookshire taking the reins from Mayor Smith. It was Mayor Brookshire’s opinion that “race relations and crime were closely intertwined,” and he made the case for the renewal of Brooklyn, the largest African American community in Charlotte. He argued that African Americans were “hampered as a race in self-development by economic and social pressures,” confirming what residents of the community were all too painfully aware of. “Southern communities weren’t very liberal in the matter of race relations,” and in 1961 Mayor Stanford Brookshire remarked that “the blacks had to be somewhat appreciative of any efforts that I made to improve their status as citizens.”

As Mayor Brookshire looked out of the window of his office, he could see the amount of poverty that existed in Brooklyn. He believed that urban renewal was the best

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91 Coffin, Brookshire & Belk, 49.
92 Ibid.
way to change the social and economic disparity in Charlotte, and if the African Americans living in Brooklyn had to bear the brunt of his efforts to change, he was willing to accept the backlash that would undoubtedly come.

You have to remember, it was a different time. The white community had to accept that if I did anything for the blacks it was on my own and not paying back any political obligations. The blacks had to understand that I was making efforts to improve their status as status as citizens.94

Mayor Brookshire created a biracial Committee on Community Relations shortly after winning an election that saw him receive nearly none of the African American votes. He charged the committee to “look for solutions to the racial problems currently plaguing the nation, giving careful study to the educational, health, and employment of the disadvantaged.”95 The city planners determined that urban renewal would be conducted in five phases over a ten-year period, with the first project focusing on the area directly behind City Hall and the County Court House.

95 Waynick, North Carolina and the Negro, 53.
Mayor Brookshire received a report in 1963, on the progress of urban renewal. It painted a picture of progress with 105 families located in the first section to be developed being moved from their homes. Out of the 105 families, only seventy-five had been placed in standard housing units. The issue of housing was still a major concern for everyone facing removal, and this did not bode well for the city planners. The planners also had to contend with lawsuits and a land grab occurring within the community.
The threat of loss and potential for profit created a fracture within the community, which saw African Americans buying other African Americans’ properties and reselling them to the city for a profit. Those who weren’t able to move right away were resigned to the fact that they would have to wait to find out where they would be able to move. Dr. Reginald Hawkins advocated for public housing, which was eventually developed in First Ward. The issue with housing came from the standards placed on applicants. They had to fall below the poverty line in order to qualify for public housing. There was a rush for a limited amount of housing, even though urban renewal was displacing thousands of families.

Dr. Hawkins commented on this period in an interview, in which he stated that the city was not living up to its part of the bargain. This created tension within the community and exacerbated a desperate situation for African Americans, who were coming to the realization that they were going to have to find other places to live and that those areas would be outside of the outer rings of the city.

\textit{The city said that they were going to use money from urban development to give blacks jobs and adequate housing. It never came. The city’s efforts tore up the community. It had every black family who could afford it trying to build houses so that the city would pay them for the property. It had these “uncle Tom” Blacks buying other blacks’ property and reselling it for profit. It got really bad near the end.}^{96}

In 1964, Mayor Brookshire began to promote the idea that the racial climate in Charlotte had taken a turn for the better, citing numerous ordinances that had been

rescinded, which had “any reference to race or color.”\textsuperscript{97} His initiatives cleared the slums from the downtown area, but the cost was heavy. Those who were able to afford housing moved to places like University Park or Garden City. The poor were moved into public housing, in places like Earle Village. Don Bryant, a city councilman during Brookshire’s term, stated that while he “abhorred the slums of Brooklyn he believed that the initiative was poorly conceived and did nothing to prevent slums from growing elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{98}

\textit{Charlotte should take a good look at what they did to black families in Brooklyn. Brooklyn was the first place where urban renewal was used to push African Americans out of their homes. It devastated the community and we weren’t a part of that decision.}\textsuperscript{99}

The blight report was subjective and was meant to serve a specific agenda: to justify taking action against minorities living in Brooklyn. However, the report denied the local government’s culpability in creating the conditions in which minorities lived, which indicated that there was indifference towards the community, which exacerbated these conditions. What was ignored in the report was that the state of the community had been well-known to city officials, dating back to the early 1900s. The conditions in Brooklyn were well documented for decades, and nothing was done to improve those conditions. To be fair, observations appear to have only been in the depressed areas of the community, so an assessment that “all” of the homes were in poor condition can be attributed to a general assumption that if a portion of the group was living in poor conditions, then they all were living in poor conditions. This approach to assessing the

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{98} Coffin, \textit{Brookshire & Belk}, 73.
state of the community would be used decades later to justify its demolishment; it was acknowledged that the “worst housing tended to be in black areas.”

CONCLUSION

The only valid test of a city’s worth is the quality of the life of its citizens – Raymond King, Chairman, Redevelopment Commission of Charlotte, North Carolina 1968-1969 Annual Report

When Raymond King wrote these words, he was presenting an annual report to the Mayor and Charlotte City Council that reviewed the last ten years of urban renewal in Charlotte, North Carolina. Officially, the city’s efforts had begun in 1959, a year after the federally mandated blight study was completed. King expressed that the city was “obligated to Charlotte’s citizens and to their environment,” but local leaders had neglected the community of Brooklyn, well before urban renewal came to Charlotte. In essence, Brooklyn had been overlooked and the residents of the community were viewed as “other” by outsiders who were unfamiliar with the community and ignorant of the depth of disservice that had been done by the local government.

A group of young African American children sat on a hill overlooking the demolition of the old Second Ward High School. It was a warm summer day, and as the children sat enjoying cokes and watching the demolition crews work, one asked “I wonder which school I’ll be going to next year?” Times were changing and the students that believed that they would graduate from Second Ward High School someday found themselves beginning the process of transferring to other schools. It was July 1969, and

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100 Hanchett, Sorting out the New South City, 237.
the school had just graduated its last class a month prior to its demolition. The high school was a pillar in a community where students were encouraged to achieve despite of the conditions that they were all living in. As the children sat watching the clamor of demolition, neither one could remember a time before urban renewal, nor could they fathom the effects that it would have on the community. They were too young to remember the Brooklyn of the past, and the only connection that they could ever have to it would be through stories that were passed down from mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, and uncles whose memories kept the history of Brooklyn alive.

The collective and public memories of Brooklyn offer differing views of what Brooklyn represented to the city of Charlotte and those who lived in the community. For city officials, Brooklyn represented opportunities that would see the city’s prestige increase with the influx of businesses, jobs, and an increase in tax revenue that would provide the city with funds to continue its march towards modernization. To the residents of Brooklyn, the community represented a sense of place that was not controlled by Jim Crow and racism. It was a place where African Americans were free to live their lives without the constraints of racism. Throughout this thesis I have recalled the stories of the former residents and politicians who were either directly affected by urban renewal or responsible for its implementation. These memories, when couple with historical facts suggest that urban renewal was poorly implemented and misunderstood by those who were directly affected by it.

There were several issues that faced the residents of Brooklyn that were neither addressed by local city officials or taken into consideration when Brooklyn was
designated for dissolution. The first concern centered around the lack of adequate housing. Redlining and the inability to garner loans form financial institutions created conditions that resulted in the dilapidated, unkempt housing that was noted in the blight study. Redlining effectively prevented African American from building or buying in Brooklyn which stressed a housing market that was already strained by the large influx in its population. Because of the spatial segregation that already exited in Charlotte, residents of Brooklyn searched for housing that they could afford which, sadly was not in the best shape. If the housing standards that were implemented in the 60s were enforced, property owners would have met those standards or suffered fines for maintaining the homes in such a poor state. Since the community was designated for renewal, there was no incentive to make improvement on property that would ultimately be sold to the city for a profit.

The Second issue was the lack of investment in the infrastructure. The roads were in a state of disrepair, plumbing was inadequate, and the reports of raw sewage running freely through the streets indicated that the city planners wrote off the community because of its designation as an industrial zone, and sight for urban renewal. When these conditions are added to the health statistics that have been cited it can be understood that the high rates of tuberculosis, polio, and other diseases stems from the lack of attention that was paid to the infrastructure.

By implementing urban renewal, City officials believed that what they were doing would address these issues. They sought to show that the city was progressive in how it handled these concerns by insisting on implementing urban renewal as a way to alter the
social environment and provide African Americans with suitable living environments on the West Side of Charlotte. What they failed to understand was that many of the issues that they were trying to address were exasperated by their neglect of the community as a whole. Had its residents been included in the decisions that determined its fate city officials may have paid more attention to the issues that facilitated this decline.

What has been lost on the history of urban renewal is not that it was a failure in creating conditions by which citizens would be able to realize the American dream of a “decent home and a suitable living environment,” but that it was a tool used to clear minority groups from urban areas, in hopes of attracting middle class whites, and businesses back to the city. Its stated goals of slum clearance and blight removal were merely talking points by which local governments could use federal funds to support public projects that were not mutually beneficial to its citizenry. Don Bryant, a city council member admitted two decades later, that urban renewal “wasn’t a matter of ridding the city of slums, but merely moving them elsewhere.”

Robert Parks argues that the “city was exercising their power to reshape the city in a way that did not include African Americans and what they needed to be successful.”

Urban renewal was progressive in its goals to see every American in the nation enjoyed adequate housing and a clean environment to raise their families in. The reality of urban renewal is that although the federal government mandated that it be used to improve the lives of Americans, local governments viewed it as an opportunity to deal

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101 “Harry S. Truman: Statement by the President Upon Signing the Housing Act of 1949.”
102 Coffin, Brookshire & Belk, Businessmen in City Hall. Pg. 73.
with racial issues that stemmed from the unequal treatment of the poor and minority
groups who were the primary targets of urban renewal efforts. The history of Brooklyn is
intertwined with race relations, a search for equal treatment, and the changing social
environment that was occurring between the 1950s and 1960s. More specifically, the
history of urban renewal in Charlotte is rife with ulterior motives by the local power base,
a misunderstanding of the objectives of urban renewal, and a desire for African
Americans to receive the same opportunities in housing, jobs, and education as their
white counterparts.

The social, and economic environment that African Americans were living in
between 1957 and 1969 had an effect that was both psychologically traumatic, and
socially disruptive, erasing the history of people who had been connected to their
communities for generations. Studies were conducted, statistics gathered and analyzed,
and policies were created, that were aimed at solving the racial concerns of the day.
There was a fear that African Americans were encroaching on white neighborhoods
threatening to upend a social balance that sought to maintain white hegemony. In reality,
families that were several generations removed from slavery were “focused on providing
for their children and ensuring that their futures were better than the previous
generation.”\textsuperscript{104}

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