Urban Renewal in Harrisonburg

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What Happened in Harrisonburg Happened Around the Country

More than 1,200 municipalities participated in the program.

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

Why was Urban Renewal Attractive to Cities like Harrisonburg?

Federal Grant and Loan Program

- Housing Act of 1949
  - Focused on improvements to affordable housing
- Housing Act of 1954
  - Emphasized private investment
- Paid for most (⅔ or ¾) of the cost of redevelopment

Urban Renewal in Harrisonburg

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

Adjacent land, similar goals:

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

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

. . . into a White commercial district.

What did the City Do?

Demolished 181 buildings to clear roughly 40 acres:

- 225 dwelling units
- 23 businesses
- 2 churches

Displaced 215 households (710 people)

- Most were African American
- Most were tenants

Where Did the Former Residents Go?

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

Many moved into new public housing:

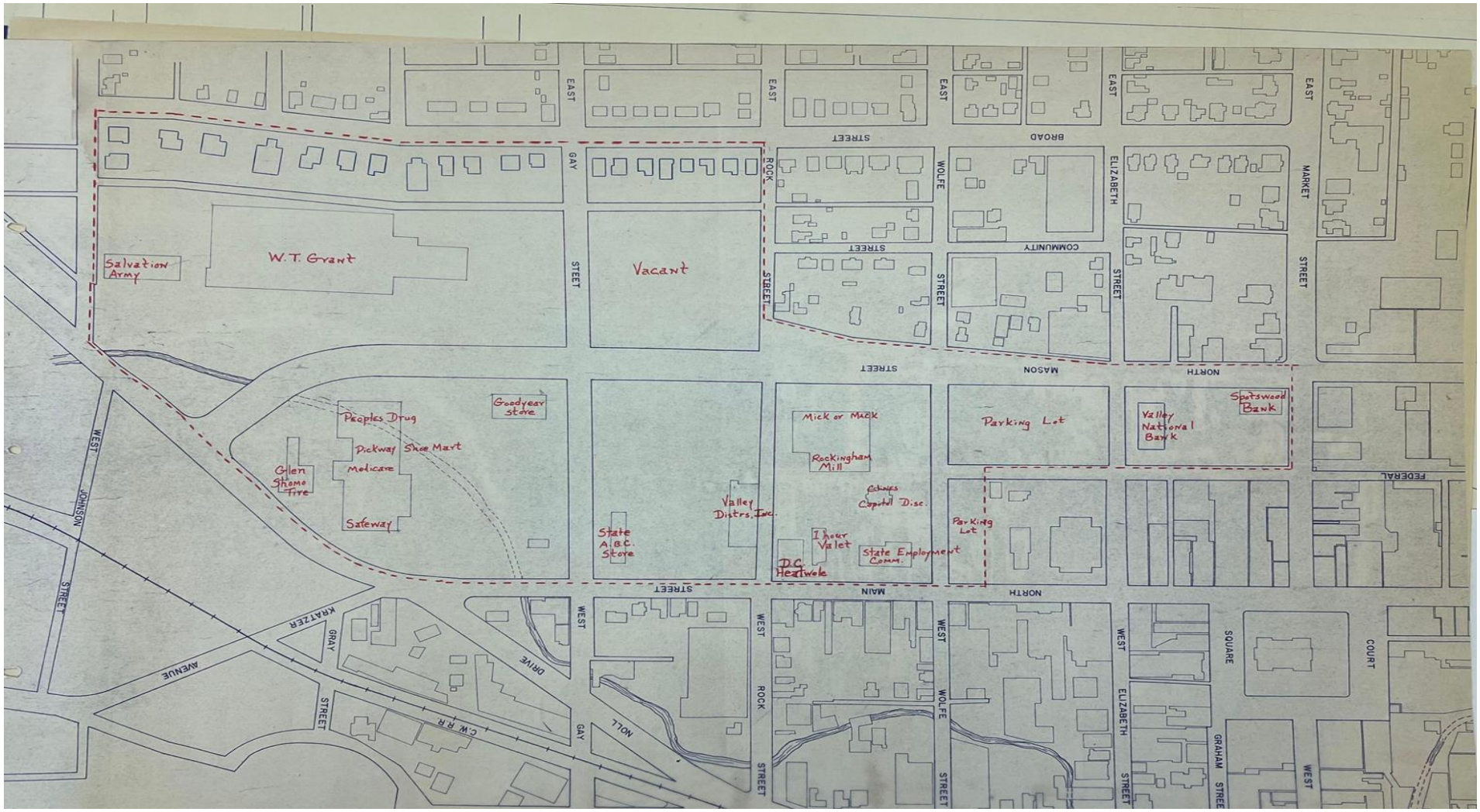
- The first 10 tenants moved in Oct. 1960.
- At least 52 (probably more) of 1st generation of public housing occupants were renewal area displacees.
- Few alternative housing options open to Black displacees.

How Did Urban Renewal Help Harrisonburg?

- **Urban renewal sparked a commercial expansion:**
  - Downtown investment boomed in the immediate aftermath of urban renewal.
    - *Sales of renewal land paid City's redevelopment costs.*
  - Tax revenues rose.

- **Urban renewal caused construction of public housing:**
  - Improved housing conditions for some displacees.
    - *Among the owners of renewal area rental property was one of the city's most notorious slumlords.*

The Immediate Aftermath of Urban Renewal



How Did Urban Renewal Hurt Harrisonburg?

Homes and community were sacrificed to a temporary commercial boom.

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

Unanswered Questions

Lack of surviving documentation means:

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

Key Recommendations

- A **thorough search of HRHA document holdings** to determine whether additional urban renewal or public housing documentation still exists.

- **Community outreach** focused on filling in the blanks.