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A Public History of Public Housing: Richmond, Virginia

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In the Library of Virginia’s archives, mid-20th century black and white photographs chronicle the construction of Richmond’s first housing projects. Looking at the photos requires the viewer to step back in time, in many ways. One picture features a horse, a ramshackle outhouse, and pedestrians next to a construction zone. A large painted sign says, “Gilpin Court Slum-Clearance Project” then advertises: “Model Negro Apartment.”

This curriculum unit reflects on the history of US housing policy, then focuses on public housing in Richmond, Virginia, and culminates with a student-led oral history project in Hillside Court. While many of my students call Hillside “home,” they are likely not aware that when the apartments were completed in 1952, they housed an all-white tenancy of working class families.

Today, there is no racial divide in Richmond’s public housing because nearly every resident for decades has been black. What socio-economic and political forces allowed for segregated public housing in the 1950s and the racial homogeneity of today’s housing projects? Why do future plans feature subsidized, mixed-income townhouses? In Richmond, as in many other American cities, the bitter fruits of de facto segregation come from historical housing policies and practices deeply rooted in injustice.

(Developed for Virginia and U. S. Government, grade 12; recommended for African American Studies and Urban History, grades 9-12)

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