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A Public History of Public Housing: Richmond, Virginia

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“At the end of the day, it isn’t where I came from. Maybe home is somewhere I’m going and never have been before.”

- Warsan Shire¹

“The fact is that American society has not yet come to grips with the question of public responsibility for the condition of life of the poor, the unfortunate, or the disadvantaged.”

- Eugene J. Meehan²

Introduction

In the archives of the Library of Virginia, 150 original black and white photographs from the mid-20th century chronicle the construction of three public housing projects in Richmond: Gilpin, Creighton, and Hillside Courts. Looking at the photos requires the viewer to step back in time, in many ways. One picture from 1940 features a horse, a ramshackle outhouse, and several pedestrians walking next to a construction zone. A large painted sign says, “Gilpin Court Slum-Clearance Project” and another advertises: “Model Negro Apartment.” The collection of pictures from Hillside and Creighton Courts shows ribbon-cutting ceremonies held on sunny summer days in 1953. While both ceremonies feature the same local dignitaries and Housing Authority officials on a bandstand, the notable difference between the pictures is that at Hillside, every person captured by the camera is white, whereas everyone at Creighton is black, except for the people on the bandstand. Other than that distinction, the photos illustrate similarly captive audiences, high school marching bands, serious Boy Scouts bearing American flags, and smiling residents taking the keys to their new apartments.

These images would probably surprise a current resident of public housing in Richmond, especially anyone from Hillside Court which has only housed a handful of white tenants over the last forty years. Everything from the careful landscaping, the sense of occasion at the ceremonies, the fancy dress of attendees, and spotlessly

clean, well-appointed apartments would seem incongruous today. My commute regularly takes me past Gilpin Court which advertised “Model Negro Apartment” in 1940. While it has not been appropriate to say “negro” for decades, neither would it be fitting to call the apartments at Gilpin “model.” The uniform brick exteriors of the apartment buildings are only distinguishable from each other by the broken blinds in some windows and the dripping air conditioning units of others. The archived pictures show that today’s poorly maintained housing projects are the very apartments built with pomp and circumstance on top of last century’s slums.

Richmond, Virginia, is full of contentious and uncomfortable histories. The city is a former capital of the Confederacy, a port where native Powhatan Indians were once displaced by English settlers, a place where African slaves were shackled and auctioned off in downtown markets, and the home of massive resistance to school desegregation in the late-1950s which forced the federal government to directly intervene. Competing narratives of public history show up in racial and socio-economic tension over seemingly innocuous school zoning changes or during regional elections. I believe that these conflicts are exacerbated and perpetuated by a great disparity in the living conditions of city residents; because these arguments are deeply rooted in historical injustice, they continue to bear bitter fruit. One such fruit is modern de facto housing segregation, where the racial divide is particularly clear.

Where oppressed people’s ancestors once lived was one problem, but where their descendants live today is quite another dilemma.

Rationale

At George Wythe High School, on the South side of the James River, almost all of my students are black. That is the norm in our city schools; out of the five comprehensive, public high schools in Richmond, only two have significant racial diversity and they are both over 82% black. The racial makeup of our student body has socio-economic implications, as one in three African Americans in Richmond today live below the federal poverty line.³ As a Title I school, we receive federal funding for programs and equipment that the local community cannot contribute on its own. Although all students in Richmond Public Schools receive free meals, transportation, and coverage of most field trip expenses, there is a persistent, community-wide belief that city government serially underfunds school operations. Students at George Wythe complain about dirty bathrooms, classrooms without technology, and no labs for science experiments. Last year, only 59% of Wythe’s senior class graduated and not a single Advanced Placement (AP) student passed an AP test.

Richmond Public Schools are socio-economically and racially homogeneous although the city is culturally diverse. This is largely because an estimated 30% of the city’s school-aged children currently attend private schools. If families who live in the city can afford tuition and provide transportation, they often choose to send their children somewhere other than their zoned school. High schools like George Wythe are where kids end up whose families can’t send them anyplace else.

A large number of George Wythe students live in federally-subsidized public housing and our school zone includes the 402-unit apartment complex called Hillside Court. Hillside, sitting in a post-industrial region of the city’s South Side, is bordered by razor-wire fencing, a wide access road, and a neighborhood of rundown mid-century cottages. A well-worn footpath indicates pedestrian traffic out of the apartment complex and to a corner grocery store several blocks away. Among Wythe students, there is a popular moniker for Hillside: “The

Bottom,” which students signify with hand gestures and their clothing. Outsiders may link “Bottom Life” to drugs, crime, and poverty, but Hillside Court’s residents share important bonds: many of their extended family members live in the apartment complex and their lives are highly interconnected, not just by a history of struggle, but by daily interactions and shared celebrations.

With this curricular unit, I explore the history of Richmond’s public housing with seniors in my Government classes, some of whom are Hillside residents. First, we look at the development of our nation’s public housing, then Richmond’s, and lastly, at Hillside Court specifically. The unit culminates in an oral history project and collaborative community service project in the apartment complex. These endeavors sharpen students’ research, interview, and interpersonal skills, and deepen the connections they see between classroom learning and their daily lives.

Ideally, this study also equips students to notice when local leaders make public policy decisions, especially those that pertain to housing. As they learn the story of Hillside alongside the story of public housing in other US cities, they realize that while many of our city’s problems can be traced to Richmond’s colonial past, more recent events and decisions have determined the plight of today’s public housing residents across the nation. Particular federal, state, and local housing policies have reaped results that were neither accidental nor incidental. Ultimately, this truth can empower students to work for social justice in our city.

Content Objectives

The History of U.S. Public Housing

An international, modern housing movement took place in the 1920s. In London, Paris, Vienna, New York, and Chicago, housing activists began to call for public housing in the midst of what was perceived as market failure in their cities. In other words, a shortage of private housing provoked activists to push the state to proactively plan for growth by constructing new and improved centers of urban residential life. Just as city governments planned public parks and provided municipal water, the activists felt that governments should also take on public housing projects. These projects would target the working class and would provide affordable housing in a new kind of urban community that was walkable, family-friendly, and vibrant.⁴

Widespread unemployment and economic instability brought on by the Great Depression led the American public to become more receptive to what had been the territory of housing activists a decade before. Public housing would provide shelter for displaced people as well as construction work for able-bodied men. President Roosevelt’s New Deal promised to the masses what private industry could not: economic relief, recovery, and reform of the systems called into question by the Depression. Congress commissioned the Public Works Administration (PWA) to build several major housing projects for working class families who could not find affordable housing: the Carl Mackley Homes in Philadelphia, Harlem River Houses in New York, Lakeview Terrace in Cleveland, and Techwood Homes in Atlanta. The PWA apartments set a high standard of quality construction, access to amenities, and even landscape design that was rarely met in the following decades.⁵ Additionally, President Roosevelt signed into law the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937, which created the United States Housing Authority (USHA).

To states who opted in, the USHA would provide long-term interest-free loans to newly created regional public

housing authorities (PHAs); however, policymakers intended public housing to be locally funded and regulated. States enacted legislation to set up the terms of their regional housing authorities, and provided the framework in which public housing operated, but it would be tenant rents and not direct federal taxpayer subsidy that financed the bulk of public housing. Initial site selection hinged on the blighted-ness of an area; if it was deemed a “slum” by the local housing authority, the PHA used the policy of eminent domain, which required it to financially compensate homeowners, then to clear the land and construct public housing. Urban Studies Professor Christopher Silver writes that eminent domain was used by Richmond’s Housing Authority to select private properties that were poorly-maintained and close to the commercial district, which almost always meant that black people’s homes were chosen for demolition.⁶ In other cities, especially in the North, poorer immigrant neighborhoods were often those slated for slum clearance.

While slum clearance created some local controversy and criticism, housing projects of this era were also welcomed by many low-income tenants because the apartments featured both central heat and indoor plumbing. In 1941, the Richmond Housing Authority’s Annual Report stated: “Heat, hot and cold water, electricity for lighting, gas for cooking and refrigeration are included in the rental ... tenants ... will be charged the cost of such excess use.”⁷ Public housing of this era offered household conveniences that most low-income residents had not experienced before.

With very few exceptions, American cities were deeply divided by race along geographic and institutional lines. Although the 1917 Supreme Court’s *Buchanan v. Warley* decision had declared “regulation of land use according to race an unconstitutional application of police power,” social mores and racial prejudices created different districts in which whites and non-whites worked, worshiped, and lived.⁸ Even light-skinned people who had migrated from abroad but did not speak unaccented English became ghettoized into distinct ethnic enclaves. Richmond was typical in this way, yet sociologist Thomas J. Woofter wrote in a City Planning Commission report in the 1920s: “it seemed at the time that most of the Negro residential areas were to be zoned so that they could be invaded by business and manufacturing establishments ... the Negroes of Richmond have a density of 46 per acre, and much higher than most of the other Southern cities ... in the central downtown sections this density is much greater.”⁹ Consequently, zoning practices supported racial and ethnic divisions in cities such as Richmond, and the areas in which black people in particular were allowed to live were more overcrowded, restrictive of economic opportunity, and harmful to human health.

In the first half of the 1940s, America’s involvement in World War II stalled the construction of public housing. Simultaneously, a steady influx of southern black people to cities in the north and west was creating a critical need for more housing. This wave of migration from 1915 to 1970, now called the Great Migration, carried roughly six million people out of the south. The city of Chicago, as one example, began the era with 44,103 black residents and had over one million by its end.¹⁰ Migrants often left the horrors of the rural Jim Crow south only to end up in neglected tenements in racially-segregated ghettos of the urban north.

Whereas Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit all saw a 600% increase in their black populations prior to 1940, Richmond, Virginia had a comparably slower growth rate. It was not until 1960 that an increase in blacks “substantially altered Richmond’s white-black balance.”¹¹ The city therefore differed from other southern and northern cities with large black populations; it was instead the growth of war-time industries that expanded the commercial areas of downtown Richmond. Local law and social convention forced black people to live in a tightening nexus of streets into which they were confined.¹² Whether American cities were overcrowded due to the Great Migration, or because their commercial districts expanded during World War II, the socio-economic and racial tensions created in the early 1940s engendered a new generation of public housing policies and

practices.

As marriageable young veterans of World War II returned home by the hundreds of thousands, the US government responded to a new push for affordable housing in two significant ways. First, it passed the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act, or the "GI Bill", which guaranteed, among other things, low-cost, low-interest home loans to veterans. Five years later, the 1949 Housing Act expanded the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loan program and provided incentives to regional housing authorities to construct public housing in their cities. Whereas Americans were accustomed to paying half of a property's value as a down payment, these policies introduced initial payments of only 10-20%, and 30-year, as opposed to 15-year, loans.¹³ These changes opened the door to home-ownership for urban working class people and, by 1960, more families owned homes than rented them for the first time in American history. Ultimately, the FHA financed around 30% of all new homes in the 1950s.¹⁴

On top of affordability, the conveniences of suburban life in this era were also historically unprecedented. During the early 1950s, new suburban neighborhoods were constructed on the fresh margins of municipalities, such as the archetypical Levittown of New York. The federal government began granting funds to states for wastewater treatment; municipalities laid sewer lines and separate waste water lines for the first time. Individual homeowners no longer bore the brunt of responsibility for their own waste removal. Additionally, in 1953, the first modern electric power line was installed by American Electric Power. Large-scale municipal services and newly-affordable home appliances like washing machines provided some Americans with a higher standard of living, particularly in the gridded and tidy streets of the suburbs.

Just as legislators had hollowly promised "separate but equal" treatment of black and white Americans under Jim Crow laws in the south, the benefits of this era's housing boom were not felt evenly throughout American society. Although black and white soldiers had shared a common enemy and a common victory in World War II, they fought in segregated ranks. Now back from war, black veterans found that their GI Bill-guaranteed mortgages were still only useful in certain sections of their home towns. Suburbs like Levittown were built exclusively for white families, on the outskirts of town. New public housing projects, on the other hand, were generally built in existing city centers, on the soil of demolished, formerly blighted residences. These projects were also race-restrictive; they were either intended for all white or all black residents. And though public housing was created to serve all low-income earning Americans, it is remarkable that between 1934 and 1962, the government underwrote \$120 billion to the FHA for the construction of new housing but only 2% went to housing built specifically for black or Latino people.¹⁵

Alongside the race-restrictive practices allowed by the federal government, local policy decisions intensified housing segregation in cities across the country. Zoning ordinances of newly-incorporated suburbs often did not allow the construction of low-income apartments. Restrictive covenants barred single women, Jews, and non-whites, from buying homes in particular neighborhoods, though they did not bar other light-complexioned European migrants. Although they had borne the brunt of ethnically-based derision and stigma in American cities for decades prior, these immigrants were now allowed to assimilate into white society. The restrictive covenants' authors rationalized that their use would protect real estate values and preserve social stability.

A third racially-divisive practice of the time was "red-lining," which originated with a Home Owners' Loan Corporation assessment of property values in the 1930s. Until the 1960s, realtors and mortgage lenders systematically rated properties as either "red, green, yellow, or blue" based on such factors as terrain, type and age of buildings, sales and rental demand, as well as the "threat of infiltration of foreign-born, negro, or lower grade population".¹⁶ This practice of red-lining doomed some urban neighborhoods to slow property

devaluation for decades, and usually along racial lines.

Public Housing in Richmond, Virginia

In 1933, before Richmond's Housing Authority was formed, Mayor John Bright encouraged a group of white businessmen and philanthropists to conceive of a slum clearance plan to renew a blighted part of downtown. This group named themselves the Sunshine Housing Corporation and, if funding had not fallen through, would have been responsible for the first major urban renewal project in Richmond. Notably, their plan was met with some resistance by leading black citizens because of its proposed placement adjacent to the city's thriving black commercial and residential area, Jackson Ward. The African American neighborhood, called both "Black Wall Street" and "the Harlem of the South" by Southerners after the Civil War, was home to many notable citizens and celebrities. In hopes of dissuading the Sunshine Housing Corp. from basing their urban renewal project in Jackson Ward, here are the prescient words of real estate developer Samuel P.B. Steward, in a 1933 letter to William H. Schwarzschild, president of the city's Chamber of Commerce:

My opinion, and that of the great majority I have talked with, is that despite your good intention and high hopes, you are about to plant ... what is likely to become the most undesirable section of the city ... We think that by ignoring the colored people as this corporation is doing at present and saying in effect 'Just come out and rent wherever we fix for you,' coupled with colored people's own private thoughts of certain locations ... is likely to cause those who are able to pay to go slow about moving over. The rift raft will have applications piled up and waiting with the money paid in advance for the first month. After this your apartments will be gone the way of some other rows and 'quarters.'¹⁷

Steward ended his letter with this sentence in capitalized letters: "COLORED PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE THE SAY AS TO WHICH PLACES ARE MOST DESIRABLE TO THEM." He sent a copy of his strongly-worded letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the end, the Sunshine Housing Corporation and its plans did not materialize; therefore Steward's concerns were never addressed by Schwarzschild. By allowing white city leaders with business interests to determine which areas of Richmond were blighted, City Hall set a precedent that created an imbalance of power between white and black city residents for decades to come.

In December of 1935, at the peak of the Great Depression, 25,000 residents of Richmond were unemployed. Christopher Silver writes that black and white workers alike were receiving relief when "the bottom dropped out of the construction sector and ... the slowdown exacerbated an already acute housing shortage." African Americans gradually spread out into deteriorated areas abandoned by whites, which created a higher concentration of low-income earners in the city center.¹⁸

As the economy began to stabilize, in October of 1940, Richmond's modernizing new Mayor, Gordon B. Ambler, established a regional housing authority, the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA). Operations began at a quick clip and RRHA broke ground in Jackson Ward for slum clearance and the construction of its first conventional public housing complex, Gilpin Court. However, the Housing Authority's Annual Report less than one year later begins this way:

The Housing Authority of the City of Richmond unfortunately experienced in its infancy a very drastic transition - the transition from peace to war. The demands created by the war have

required many changes in plans and procedure, and the need for housing war workers has necessitated the Authority's departure from its original purpose of the slum clearance program to a more pressing war purpose. This conversion is supported by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's message to Congress on May 27, 1942.¹⁹

The report goes on to explain how the construction of Gilpin Court was halted by a shortage of vital building materials. Construction was only able to resume when the Housing Authority aligned Gilpin's development with the war effort by preferencing war workers over other applicants. The federal government required that Richmond's Housing Authority reserve housing exclusively for war workers' families for ninety days after receiving the first application. Page 3 of the report notes: "Although this leaves a small percent of sanitary and uncongested living accommodations to rectify the deplorable slum housing conditions in Richmond today, it is at least a beginning." Tables indicating rental prices for 1-4 bedroom apartments in the complex show a significant difference between the rent set for war workers versus "the low income non-war worker group." While the starting rent plus utilities for 1 bedroom unit is \$24.00 for war workers, it is only \$14.50 for non-war workers. The annual income limit for a war worker ranges from \$1,100-\$2,010 and from Less than \$700-\$1,200 for non-war workers. It clearly profited Richmond's fledgling Housing Authority to give priority to war workers and their families. The decision to offer shelter in Gilpin Court, sitting on top of the demolished homes of displaced black people, to the families of workers moving into the city to work in war-related industries reflects specific war time realities of scarcity and tight budgets. However, it seems an inauspicious beginning for RRHA, whose very existence was born out of the pressing need for better living conditions of the black people in downtown Richmond.

The next phase of conventional public housing in Virginia's capital began ten years later, with construction of Creighton Court for blacks in the East End, and Hillside Court for whites on the South Side. In keeping with contemporary projects in New York, Chicago, and St. Louis, Richmond's two new apartment complexes offered modern amenities, were priced affordably, were managed efficiently and were well-maintained by the local housing authority. One point of contrast between larger cities' apartment complexes and Richmond's was the size and scale of their projects. While both the Pruitt-Igoe Apartments in St. Louis and Hillside Court were constructed in 1952, Pruitt-Igoe was composed of 33 11-story buildings and sat on 57 acres. Hillside Court comprised 68 two-story buildings and sits on a far smaller parcel of land. The high-density, high-rise tower design of Pruitt-Igoe, requiring near-constant elevator servicing, is often cited by critics of conventional public housing as one reason for its decline and ultimate demise only 20 years after its construction.²⁰

A 1958 report prepared by RRHA for the General Assembly of Virginia reveals interesting insights about how the authority related to its residents. The report lists several ways in which RRHA sought to manage its housing projects: establishing fair maximum income limits and minimum rents, practicing good housekeeping and operations policies, standardizing charges for repairs beyond "normal wear and tear," and encouraging pride and initiative in its residents. The report also shows RRHA's concerns with establishing respectability by disciplining "welfare families, 'problem families' and illegitimacy." It enforced stringent rules regarding children born out of wedlock, sometimes forgiving instances in which the child was born before the family became a tenant, but providing automatic eviction when a current tenant gave birth to an illegitimate child.²¹ Housing authorities conducted unannounced "spot checks" to detect messy households or to find evidence of men living in unwed women's apartments.²² While this treatment of unmarried women shows the paternalism inherent at the time, it also indicates a major societal shift in family life. In 2006, one third of Richmond's households of all income levels were headed by a single mother, and a 2013 report showed that 59% of RRHA

families are currently headed by a single mother.²³

In mid-20th century Richmond, with the national trend of suburbanization as a backdrop, RRHA's original efforts to house a diverse range of families seeking temporary affordable housing began to shift with changing city demographics. Richmond's neighboring Henrico County saw a 36% population increase during that decade, then a 105% increase during the next, as white families left Richmond for the benefits of life in the flourishing suburb. In *Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race*, Christopher Silver wrote, "Although the county lacked certain urban services, lower taxes, the absence of blacks, and the desire for political independence overshadowed the benefits of city stature for its middle-class citizenry."²⁴ This phenomenon, known as "white flight," happened across the nation and hastened the deterioration of formerly thriving cities in ways that were not entirely unforeseeable.

Two important pieces of legislation, the Civil Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act, make manifest the zeitgeist of the American 1960s; both laws originated in the moral force of the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 addressed unequal treatment of citizens under the law but did not specifically address unfair housing practices. It was followed four years later by the Fair Housing Act, signed by President Johnson. He did not get Congressional support for the Act until the nation's conscience was pricked by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. Congress voted the bill into law only four days after that shocking murder. A paper released by the HUD Policy Development and Research Department succinctly states, "Ironically, while ending legal discrimination by no longer allowing racially segregated projects, the Civil Rights Act ... contributed to the movement of whites out of projects when they became racially integrated."²⁵

Hillside Court statistics from that era show that white flight's effects on its population bear with the national trend: it was 91% white in 1968, then 68.2% black in 1974, and 97.8% black in 1979.²⁶ But there is more to Hillside's story than that whites left the city and things fell apart. In fact, white flight was only one factor, albeit an important one, of the rapid deterioration of most American inner cities starting in the late 1960s. The United States' urban industrial economy was ending but city dwellers were accustomed to walking or taking the bus to work. Without accessible manufacturing jobs, residents of public housing in particular had less opportunity to find work because most did not own cars. As a result, a minority of tenants turned to earning money through illicit activities like drug dealing, which brought outside criminals and increased criminal activity into housing project communities. Finally, as cities around the country saw huge losses in their tax base, municipal services declined. Law enforcement, housing project maintenance, public school systems, even municipal park programs all suffered in weakening urban economies. In the late 1970s and 80s, other significant social forces frayed the social fabric of cities: an influx of returning Vietnam veterans, increases in gang activity, a major economic recession, and the obtainability of crack cocaine.²⁷

An interesting aspect of President Nixon's stance on public housing is that from 1968 to 1975, federally subsidized public housing units nearly doubled in number, from 687,000 to 1.15 million. This was in spite of the fact that he issued a freeze on most federal housing programs in 1973.²⁸ The federal government's display of disinterest reflected a nationwide ambivalence about state-supported housing programs. The freeze on federal dollars introduced financial austerity measures that local housing authorities imposed on public housing complexes; this translated into deferred maintenance, lower security, and fewer support staff for housing projects. In Richmond, for example, no conventional public housing was built after 1970. In St. Louis, the dramatic demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe towers in 1976 was publicized on national news media, and the American public has generally construed public housing as a failed experiment ever since. When Congress officially eliminated rent ceilings in 1981, which did very little to entice higher-income earners back to public

housing, it dealt something like a death blow to conventional housing projects.

News stories about Hillside Court during the 1980s and 1990s seem to fall within just a few categories: violent crimes, community center activities, costly modernization efforts, and tenant-led protests against RRHA plans. Two high-profile stories from the early 1990s show tenants actively addressing the disproportionately high rates of violent crime in their community in unconventional ways: First, Hillside Court residents received City Council support to make their streets “private,” thereby giving tenants the ability to restrict access to certain people. When a man who had been banned from Hillside returned to deliver diapers to the mother of his two children, he was forced to leave the community. He filed a lawsuit that ended up in the Supreme Court, where Hillside tenants’ attempt to “take back their streets” was deemed unconstitutional. Secondly, residents of Hillside mobilized against RRHA plans to evict anyone with connections to drug users or who owned firearms on the premises. When a mentally ill heroine user was arrested for possession, her family was going to be evicted from Hillside and the community protested. Of the three dozen people who showed up to a City Council meeting, the nine who spoke were all proponents of firearm possession and leniency in regards to drug users’ families. One man opined that criminalizing all who were related to Hillside Court’s most desperate few would only compound the hopelessness of people living in the projects. In 1992, a Richmond Times-Dispatch article featured an interview with a Hillside resident who claimed that he had slept with a gun under his pillow since the late-1970s. He expressed that he was within his rights and was not about to stop, especially as crime rates in the neighborhood had risen significantly. These stories expose an often overlooked dilemma for residents of conventional public housing: they cannot claim the same rights as private homeowners to legally possess firearms for self-defense or to bar particularly dangerous people from their housing complexes.

Currently, in Richmond’s six major public housing complexes: Gilpin, Hillside, Creighton, Fairfield, Whitcolm, and Mosby, the average occupancy is 8.5 years, and the average annual income of residents is less than \$9,000. Because 90% of RRHA’s local funding comes directly from HUD, federal housing policies significantly influence the quality of life for Richmond’s 4,000 tenants in conventional public apartments and the 3,000 recipients of Housing Choice Vouchers. All told, an estimated 10,000 people in Richmond are currently living in some form of RRHA-managed housing. The current demand for vouchers is so high and the federal program so popular that the waiting list has been closed for the last twelve years. When HUD opened the wait list for open enrollment via the Internet for one week in April, 2015, 25,000 applications were filed. While that number is high, to put the size of Richmond’s qualifying applicant pool in perspective: it has 3,000 vouchers to assign, but the city of Chicago alone manages 25,000.²⁹

Since the 1980s, alternative methods have been introduced by HUD to subsidize housing costs for low-income earning people without increasing conventional public housing stock. Alongside housing vouchers, a low income tax credit program, and a new iteration of urban renewal that replaces derelict public housing with mixed-income townhouses have diversified the kinds of housing assistance that low-income families can receive.³⁰ Still, the difficulties faced by tenants in public apartment complexes, whose urban grids yield pockets of high-density poverty and accompanying risk factors, continue to beg for attention.

It is estimated today that black Americans own only 1/8th of the assets that white Americans own and that whites are, on average, twice as wealthy as blacks.³¹ The history of housing policies makes this racial reality conceivable, if not ethically so. Local 2010 Census data revealed that while 10% of Richmond’s white citizens live in poverty, that number is 26% for blacks.³² By accepting opportunities allowed exclusively to them over the last century, white Americans were able to accumulate generational wealth which appreciated in the form

of real estate. Wealth came with power and privileges, some of which were: authoring housing policy in the 1930s, owning preferential housing in the 1940s, taking advantage of low FHA rates in the 1950s, moving to the suburbs in the 1960s, and accruing equity from homeownership in the decades ever since. In a similar historical review, African Americans have suffered collateral damage from housing policies and practices ever since the New Deal: coalescence of the Great Migration and the Great Depression in the 1930s, slum-clearance and urban renewal in the midst of World War II, suburbanization and white flight in the 1950s, then the risks and volatility of city life during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Throughout the last decades of the 21st century, America's cities were exhausted by the end of the urban industrial economy and offered little in the way of economic opportunities for the urban poor.

In regards to public housing policy, Rutgers University Professor of City Planning Norton Long asked in 1975: "How can the interests of powerless people be served except as a matter of grace and how can a graceless society institutionalize a rhetoric to which it pretends but to which it seems as yet radically ambivalent?"³³ Forty years later, these questions still resonate and hang in the air. Students at George Wythe High School, who grew up in or around Hillside Court, wonder why their school and homes, which come with government assistance, also come with disproportionately high rates of violent crime and a persistent cycle of generational poverty? They are the descendants of people who were historically denied any choice about their housing but have ended up in a similar situation today.

Instead of asking about the future of public housing from those who seem radically ambivalent, from strategic planning committees at City Hall, or Housing Authority dignitaries on bandstands, or even well-intentioned public school teachers, maybe my students should ask a different authority. Who would know best the needs of the 10,000 people receiving housing assistance in our city? It seems Richmond would do well to remember the words of Samuel P.B. Steward: "COLORED PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE THE SAY AS TO WHICH PLACES ARE MOST DESIRABLE TO THEM."

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21. Virginia Advisory Legislative Council, *Operations of housing authorities*, chaired by Mosby G. Perrow, Jr., January 9, 1958.
22. "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth", DVD, directed by Chad Freidrichs (First Run Features, 2011)
23. Housing Opportunities Made Equal of Virginia, Inc., *Fair Housing in Richmond, Virginia* (October, 2006), 19.
24. Silver, 235.
25. A. Stoloff, *A Brief History of Public Housing* (Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research), 6.
26. Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, *Characteristics of Tenants in Richmond's Low-Rent Housing* (Richmond, September, 1979), 18.
27. "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth", DVD, directed by Chad Freidrichs (First Run Features, 2011)
28. Yonah Freemark, *Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy*, eds. Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Fritz Umbach, and Lawrence J. Vale (New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), 125.
29. Leondra Brown-Turner, telephone interview by author, July 21, 2015.
30. Stoloff, 6, 19.
31. "The House You Live In," *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, DVD, produced by Llewellyn M. Smith (California Newsreel, 2003).
32. *Mayor's Antipoverty Commission Report*, chair Honorable Ellen Robertson (January 18, 2013), 18-19.
33. Meehan, 5.

Strategies

The history of public housing in the United States covers nearly one hundred years and its results have varied state to state, and city to city. To communicate the broad brush strokes of this history to students in a meaningful and memorable way, this unit incorporates lots of visual materials to convey the historic changes. Students view an original PowerPoint presentation using archived photographs of Richmond's first housing projects, archived film footage of President Johnson signing the Fair Housing Act in 1968, and the award-winning documentary film *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*.

Close readings of 4 archived news stories from *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* (1951-2013) provides great material from which to ask the questions:

1. Is there something about this that doesn't sit right with you?
2. Whose story is being told?
3. Who is being silenced?

The close reading discussion would end with an essay response to the prompt: "You are a journalist from Hillside Court who has been asked to write a news article for a local paper about Mayor Jones' proposal to tear down all public housing. Who would you interview and how would you go about choosing an interviewee? What do you think they would say about the Mayor's plans? How could your news story address popular stereotypes and misunderstandings about life in projects like Hillside? What would be the first paragraph of your news story?"

The unit culminates in a hands-on project that begins with oral history interviews and ends as voluntary community service. Students should know that public history is outward-facing; for everything that a public historian takes from a community, (personal stories, in this case) something needs to be given back. In writing about the Baltimore oral history project she undertook in the 1970s, historian Linda Shopes lists four rationales for projects of this kind:

1. The encouragement of cooperation between professional historians and lay people
2. The use of history to build community identity and pride
3. The presentation of community history to the public
4. The encouragement of appreciation and respect for the participation of nonelite (*sic*) groups in the community's history.¹

¹Linda Shopes, "Oral History and Community Involvement: The Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project," *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, eds. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 249.

Classroom Activities

From day one, this unit captures student interest by engaging them on familiar topics, then encouraging them to think critically and historically about what they already know. Students first complete a "Myth-Busters" style Pop Quiz about public housing. In the interest of challenging popular notions, the quiz includes surprises about how public housing was originally construed by the American people, how much money the federal government gave through FHA loans in the 1950s and why conventional public housing was popularly considered a failure by the 1970s.

Students provide material for a classroom gallery of images, song lyrics, clothing, movie excerpts and other pop culture references to "Bottom Life." As gallery visitors (classmates and peers) view the art work, each student is asked to either defend or decry the way it portrays life in public housing.

1. What can be known about the artist's intent?
2. What does the art work mean to you?
3. Does this representation of "Bottom Life" perpetuate stereotypes or promote better understanding about someone's complex reality?

Students listen to one recorded interview and then observe one oral history interview in class. After constructing a set of helpful guidelines for successful interviews, the class chooses a method for inviting former and current tenants of Hillside Court to participate in oral history interviews that they conduct themselves. Optimally, they locate residents of Hillside from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as more recent tenants. Likely, this process involves the use of social media and networking but clears the way for face-to-face interviews. Conducting the interviews increases student self-efficacy and makes connections between the historical events we have covered in class and today's tenants of Hillside Court.

The oral history interviews inform students' wider understanding of what the community members value. Students then create a survey-based community service project drawing from tenant responses to questions like:

1. Is there something in particular that my community is missing?
2. What would improve me and my neighbors' daily lives in Hillside Court?

All students, families, and community members who participate in the interviews are invited to participate in the culminating community service project. The tactile and interpersonal requirements of this project give students a unique opportunity to work alongside and form relationships with both neighbors and strangers.

This curriculum unit begins as work in a traditional classroom and ends with work in a public housing project; it is written for my students who are both at home in "the Bottom" and looking for a place at the top.

Resources

Bibliography for Teachers

1. Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Fritz Umbach, and Lawrence J. Vale, eds., *Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 2015)
2. "The House You Live In," *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, DVD, produced by Llewellyn M. Smith (California Newsreel, 2003).
3. Christopher Silver, *Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984)
4. Jerry Albarelli and Amy Starecheski, *The Telling Lives Oral History Curriculum Guide* (New York: The Columbia University Center for Oral History, 2005).

Reading List for Students

1. 2013 Mayor's Antipoverty Commission Report
2. Richmond Times-Dispatch articles:
 - a. June 29, 1952 "2 Public Housing Developments Slowly Nearing Completion," etc.
3. "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth", DVD, directed by Chad Freidrichs (First Run Features, 2011)

Materials for Classroom Use

1. PowerPoint presentation of archived photographs
2. Historical maps of Richmond
3. A current transit map of GRTC and available jobs

4. President Johnson signing the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (video clip)
5. Documentary film: "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth", DVD, directed by Chad Freidrichs (First Run Features, 2011)

Appendix

This unit implements Virginia's History and Social Science Standards of Learning for Virginia and United States Government 9a-9f. It serves as a case study for understanding how public policy is made by examining different perspectives on the role of government, describing how the national government influences the public agenda and shapes public policy, then how the state and local governments influence the public agenda and shape public policy, looking at the process by which policy is implemented by the bureaucracy at each level, analyzing how individuals, interest groups, and the media influence public policy, and formulating and practicing a course of action to address local and/or state issues. While these objectives may be taught without one particular focus of public policy, I believe that students have more to gain from the concreteness, singularity, relevance, and coherence of viewing the history of housing policy in the United States as it relates to the city of Richmond.

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