

**Suburbanization and the Magic City:  
Industry, Lifestyle, and Race in Birmingham, Alabama, 1871-1970**

by

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## Abstract

Since its founding in 1871, Birmingham's metropolitan area has experienced enormous growth. In the late-nineteenth century, the city's industrial origins influenced neighborhood development for working, middle, and elite classes, and established a pattern of outward residential growth. After World War II, nationally popular suburban lifestyle trends, and issues of race, replaced industry as new influences for Birmingham's expansion. These new influences, initiated a postwar wave of residential development, which created new suburban neighborhoods further removed from Birmingham's downtown. Using maps, pictures, newspapers, and census data, this thesis traces Birmingham's first century of neighborhood development from 1871 until 1970. Examination of Birmingham's residential development allows for understanding of the forces that shaped the metropolitan area's development and shows how its experience with suburbanization was characteristic of national suburban trends.

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## Introduction

By definition suburbanization is, “the process of land development on or near the edge of an existing city, usually occurring at a lower density than the central city.”<sup>1</sup> In mid-twentieth-century America, the continuous development of suburban neighborhoods drove residential development further away from the central city, decentralizing the urban core, and altering the nation’s residential landscape. The ubiquity of the suburbs has attracted great interest among historians who have interpreted America’s mid-century population shifts. Historian Kenneth T. Jackson developed a popular approach to suburban research that broadly studies all of the cultural, political, social, and economic influences that combined to induce mass suburban expansion.<sup>2</sup> Jackson’s description of suburban influence from *Crabgrass Frontier* accounts for the various components responsible for suburban growth including, “conspicuous consumption, a reliance upon the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Ames and Linda Flint McClelland, “Historic Residential Suburbs,” *Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places* (Washington: NPS, 2002), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 8.

More recent histories by Robert Beauregard and Jon Teaford have continued Jackson's approach by studying American suburbanization through broad trends of cultural, political, social, and economic influences. These broad histories tend to highlight suburban developments from major American cities in the Northeast and Midwest like New York, Chicago, and Detroit, often overlooking medium-sized cities outside of these regions.<sup>4</sup> Their popular comprehensive approach successfully identifies the general trends that influenced suburban development nationally, but much remains to be done in terms of accounting for variation within national developments, the influence of regional factors or preexisting patterns of residential development established by a city's local economy.

Other historians have situated suburbanization within a social or political context, a strategy especially popular among scholars who study the south. Kevin Kruse's *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* studies Atlanta's concurrent experience with the Civil Rights Movement and suburbanization.<sup>5</sup> In *White Flight*, Kruse's research frames suburbanization politically within the context of the Civil Rights Movement to argue that the rise of a new conservative ideology, as seen through white flight, ultimately helped southern conservatives identify with the Republican Party. Kruse's approach is limited to a social and political analysis, and it neglects the other mid-twentieth century cultural and economic variables.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Jon C. Teaford, *the American Suburb: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 45. For another broad history of American suburbanization see; Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).



Birmingham's most significant mid-twentieth-century histories have omitted suburbanization from the discussion almost entirely in favor of research that studies Birmingham's central role in the national fight for civil rights.<sup>7</sup> The absence of research on the comprehensive influences of suburbanization in Birmingham have forced the popular narrative that race independently pushed Birmingham's metropolitan growth between 1950 and 1970. While race is essential to the story of Birmingham's mid-century suburbanization, its presence has obscured other influences like industry and nationally popular lifestyle trends that have played similarly influential roles in shaping Birmingham's neighborhood development. Unlike past histories of Birmingham, that have neglected suburbanization or reduced it to a discontinuous political response to segregation, this research argues that Birmingham is representative of national suburban trends. It locates three major catalyst for suburbanization between the 1871 and 1970: industry, lifestyle, and race.

Chapter one traces the influence of Birmingham's industry on neighborhood development. Industry established early patterns of suburban development for Birmingham's working, middle, and upper classes. Chapter two examines sources of Birmingham's mid-century print culture that exposed and encouraged Birmingham's residents to adopt aspects of the new nationally popular suburban lifestyle. Chapter three argues that Birmingham's long history of racially segregated housing directly impacted the "Magic City's" suburban development. White fears of racial integration of public

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<sup>7</sup> Glenn T. Eskew, *But For Birmingham: the Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). For more on Birmingham during the mid-twentieth century reference; J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines, Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa University of Alabama Press, 2002); Bobby M Wilson, *Race and Place in Birmingham: The Civil Rights and Neighborhood Movements* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

facilities led many to abandon the inner city and seek refuge in the suburbs that mirrored the Jim Crow communities that the Civil Rights movement had challenged.

## Chapter One

### Industry and Neighborhood Development

In 1873, Elyton Land Company investor Colonel James Powell described Birmingham to his peers as “this magic little city of ours.” Powell’s description, which produced Birmingham’s popular nickname the “Magic City,” idealized the shared optimism of believers in Birmingham’s industrial potential.<sup>1</sup> Named after the industrial city of Birmingham, England, Birmingham, Alabama’s early growth was tied to industrial development, when John T. Milner chose the Jones Valley to intersect two trunk railroad lines for its unparalleled supply of coal, ore, and limestone, the raw materials required to make iron and steel. Birmingham’s natural resources attracted investors and land speculators, who built railroads, industries, businesses, and houses, and facilitated Birmingham’s transition from an agrarian society with industrial potential to a New South City.

Historian Don Doyle studied the rise of New South cities to argue that cities like Atlanta and Nashville developed from “New Men” who formed a new business class of merchants, manufacturers, and financiers committed to economic success. Doyle used Atlanta and Nashville as case studies to prove that urban centers in New South cities attracted a dynamic group of entrepreneurs committed to urban development and prosperity; and argued that the refusal of older coastal southern cities like Mobile and

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Connerly, *The Most Segregated City in America: City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 13.

Charleston to adopt modern business practices exposed these cities to economic stagnation.<sup>2</sup> In Birmingham, a large business class of investors, real estate developers, and manufacturers developed the Jones Valley and guided Birmingham into the twentieth century. As a regionally significant city, Birmingham's comparable size and influence makes it an ideal location to further examine the developmental history of New South cities.

As a New South city, Birmingham's early development was deeply tied to industry, as the natural resources that attracted local and outside financiers to Birmingham have also influenced its continued development. Birmingham's industrial influence is evident in the city's early development along transportation and water routes, and in the city's first municipal boundary, drawn to include all of the local plants, mills, and furnaces.<sup>3</sup> This chapter examines Birmingham's early neighborhood development to argue that the city's industrial origins influenced the outward residential growth of Birmingham's working, middle, and elite neighborhoods, establishing early patterns of development for continued suburban expansion.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship between industry, city development, and suburbanization has remained a popular topic among American historians who study industrial cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Pittsburgh.<sup>5</sup> Authors agree that turn-of-the-century

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<sup>2</sup> Don Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 87.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Shannone Lamonte, *Politics and Welfare in Birmingham, 1900-1975* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Walker and Robert D. Lewis, "Beyond the Crabgrass Frontier: Industry and the Spread of North American Cities, 1850-1950," *Journal of Historical Geography* 27, no. 1 (January 2000): 3-19; Fred W. Viehe, "Black Gold Suburbs: the Influence of the Extractive Industry On the Suburbanization of Los Angeles, 1890-1930," *Journal of Urban History* 8, no.1 (October 1981): 3; Howard P. Chudacoff and Judith E. Smith, *The Evolution of American Urban Society* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2000).

industrial suburbs acted as the first phase of suburban expansion in America, as working classes lived in peripheral industrial developments that laid the foundation for continued suburban development in the mid-twentieth century. Despite Birmingham's long industrial history and expansive metropolitan area, there is scant historical discussion on the relationship between industry and suburbanization in Birmingham. Most authors who study Birmingham focus exclusively on the city's industrial history and neglect the neighborhood development it caused.<sup>6</sup> This research contends that like other industrial cities in America, Birmingham's industry influenced an early wave of suburban expansion for the city's working, middle, and elite classes.

The relationship between Birmingham's industry and neighborhood development formed in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In this period, the Jones Valley transformed from the "Birmingham District," an industrial region with 16 independent satellite communities, to a New South city with Birmingham as the local epicenter of trade, transportation, and culture. Birmingham succeeded as the most successful of the Jones Valley's satellite communities due to its concentration of wealthy city boosters and proximity to local transportation and water lines. Birmingham's boosters played an instrumental role in the city's early development. At the-turn-of-the-twentieth century, city boosters initiated the "Greater Birmingham" campaign to annex surrounding satellite communities to Birmingham. In 1910, Birmingham absorbed the formally independent towns of East Birmingham, Woodlawn, East Lake, Avondale, Graymont (Smithfield),

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<sup>6</sup> Ethel Armes, *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama* (Birmingham: Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, 1910); George Cruikshank, *A History of Birmingham and its Environs: A Native Account of Their Historical Progress, Their People, and Their Principal Interests* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1920).

North Birmingham, Pratt City, and Ensley.<sup>7</sup> Birmingham's 1910 annexation more than doubled the city's population from approximately 45,000 to 132,685 residents. The 1910 annexation also changed the urban composition of the Jones Valley from a collection of independent communities to a rapidly developing New South city with a centrally located business district, and a series of neighborhoods and suburbs radiating outward from downtown in all directions.<sup>8</sup>

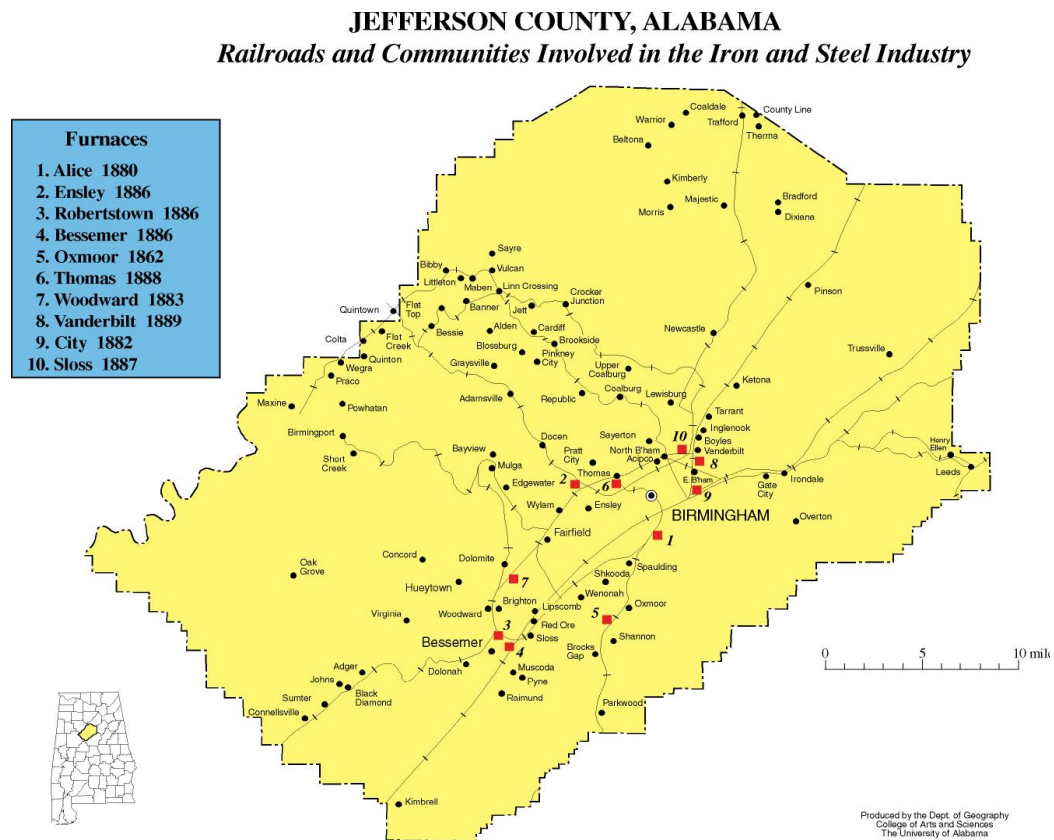


Figure 1:1. Map of Birmingham's Railroads and Communities involved in the Iron and steel Industry. Courtesy of the University of Alabama's online map collection.

<sup>7</sup> Lynne B. Feldman, *A Sense of Place: Birmingham's Black Middle-class Community, 1890-1930* (Tuscaloosa: University of Tuscaloosa Press, 1999), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Occupation Statistics for Birmingham, Alabama* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 538.

Birmingham's geographic location at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, in Alabama's Ridge and Valley Region also influenced where industry occurred and how the city developed. Birmingham is situated in the Jones Valley under Red Mountain. In the city's formative years, the local topography influenced land development in the valley, as most construction happened where the terrain was even, especially for railroads, businesses, and housing. Industrial companies and coal mining camps followed similar patterns, first developing adjacent to Birmingham and progressively growing north, east, and west of the city. As late as the twentieth century, the land directly south of the city remained untouched by industrial development as Red Mountain's uneven terrain complicated railroad and industrial construction. By the twentieth century, Birmingham's topography reinforced class distinction among the city's residents as land developers built exclusive neighborhoods up and over Red Mountain. These southern developments established Red Mountain as a class barrier between Birmingham's industrial valley and the fashionable neighborhoods up Red Mountain that overlooked Birmingham to the north.<sup>9</sup>

Due to Birmingham's origins as an industrial city, there has always been a great disparity between the district's poor working-class majority and the upper-class managers and capitalists. After 1910, when Birmingham absorbed neighboring satellite communities, industry remained the city's main employment source, and laborers, machinists, and millwrights accounted for 34 percent of all employed residents. Outside of industry, Birmingham's working class found occupation in agriculture, mineral extraction, transportation, and domestic service. By the early twentieth century,

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<sup>9</sup>Charles Butts, "Iron Ores, Fuels, and Fluxes of the Birmingham District, Alabama," *United States Geological Survey* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 11-12.

Birmingham's burgeoning industrial success established the city as a hub for other industries, including trade, transportation, and professional services. The concentration of industry attracted workers from surrounding rural areas into Birmingham, increasing the city's population. The industrial center also created a broad middle class of residents working as skilled and semi-skilled workers such as foremen, teachers, clergymen, salesmen, engineers, insurance agents, firemen and policemen, and in a variety of industries ranging from retail to transportation, manufacturing, and public service.<sup>10</sup>

Birmingham's population also included a diverse group of upper-class or professional-class residents. In 1920, the Federal Census indicated that Birmingham housed 882 physicians and surgeons, 328 lawyers and judges, 126 dentists, 81 authors, editors and reporters, and 99 inventors and draftsmen.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Birmingham's upper class consisted of the owners and presidents of local industrial, lumber, and automobile companies, bank and university presidents, real estate developers, editors, and politicians. Birmingham's strongly defined social classes impacted neighborhood development as neighborhoods developed near other neighborhoods of similar means, creating a class-based residential pattern. Over time, class and industrial influences established specific regions of the city as working class, middle class, and elite areas; resulting in "sector" neighborhood development.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920: Occupation Statistics for Birmingham, Alabama* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1928), 606-607.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 606-607.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 8.



In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Birmingham District's working class residents lived near the many satellite towns built to accommodate the demand for industrial investment. Resident Ethel Armes described the frenzy of land speculators and businessmen that hoped to profit from the Birmingham District's early development:

As has been seen, there were dozens of real estate concerns in action, and now dozens more sprang up. Each tried to out boom the other... "Little Birmingham's" started out of the mineral region everywhere like mushrooms. A brand new sensation was born everyday. More blast furnaces, iron works, coal and iron mines that could ever see the light of day in 50 years were projected. The intelligence of even the most conservative businessman became utterly sunk in sensation.<sup>13</sup>

As Armes explained, the Birmingham District's satellite developments originated from the competitive desire of industrialists to capitalize on the region's local supply of coal, iron ore, and limestone. Satellite communities produced iron, steel, coke, and popular manufactured products like cast iron pipe and stoves, rails, and railway carts for regional and national distribution. Industry continued to expand in the Birmingham District, as industrialists continually added new blast furnaces to increase production capacity. In 1879, eight years after Birmingham's incorporation, 11 manufacturers in the Birmingham District had blast furnaces in production. Between 1886 and 1889, the height of the first iron boom, the region boasted 28 blast furnaces, marking a 50 percent increase in production in less than a decade. The success of the Birmingham District's early

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<sup>13</sup> Armes, *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*, 344.

industrial communities encouraged the continued development of new industrial operations, increasing the popularity of early industrial satellite communities.<sup>14</sup>

Ensley, founded in 1886 and located six miles west of Birmingham's downtown, was among the largest satellite communities in the Birmingham District. Tennessee Coal and Iron (TCI) acquired Ensley only a year before the 1893 economic depression that froze local industrial growth. In 1899, Ensley recovered from the depression and restored industrial production with four new blast furnaces and the production capacity to make steel, which led United States Steel Corporation to acquire TCI's Ensley operation in 1907. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Ensley also built cement, brick, lumber, and metal finishing mills. Ensley's union with United States Steel and the expansion of new industry attracted workers and initiated a period of intensive local commercial and residential development.<sup>15</sup>

In the early twentieth century, workers in satellite communities like Ensley lived in company-built housing, called "project housing," or in private neighborhoods adjacent to the mills built by land developers. Factories and mills built project housing inexpensively with wood framing and a standard design that produced continuous rows of identical houses. In Birmingham, the one-story, four-room, 28' x 28' cottage predominated as the most common design for project housing. Most project house cottages included a front porch that extended the width of the house and brick piers that raised the house four to five feet from the ground. Depending on the parent company,

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<sup>14</sup> Phillip A. Morris and Marjorie L. White, *Birmingham Bound: An Atlas of the South's Premier Industrial Region, 1850-Present* (Birmingham: Birmingham Historical Society, 1997), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Carter L. Hudgins and Marjorie L. White, *Village Creek an Architectural and Historical Resources Survey of Ensley, East Birmingham, and East Lake: Three Village Creek Neighborhoods* (Birmingham: The Birmingham Historical Society, 1997), 45.

some company neighborhoods in the Birmingham District also funded the development of schools, churches, lodge halls, and playgrounds; however, most company neighborhoods did not provide other civic amenities like paved roads or modern sewage systems. The overall substandard condition of project housing earned company neighborhoods a negative reputation for being a low rent district. In 1920, 77 percent of Birmingham's project housing tenants paid less than \$7 per month for rent.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 1.2. Project housing in Ensley. Date unknown. Image from *The Survey*.<sup>17</sup>

As an alternative to project housing, land developers built private subdivisions in satellite communities for working class residents. In Ensley, developers produced modest subdivisions like Tuxedo Park, Moro Park, Sewall, and Kelsko. Within these neighborhoods, the shotgun, double shotgun, and the bungalow prevailed as the most popular house types. Houses sat on narrow lots that ranged in dimension from 25' x 140' to 50' x 140', and most houses had between two and four rooms. Although private

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<sup>16</sup> Leifur Magnusson, *Housing by Employer in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 70-72.

<sup>17</sup> Graham Romeyn Taylor, "The Quarters," *The Survey: Social, Charitable, Civic: a Journal of Constructive Philanthropy* 27 (March 1912): 1539.

working class neighborhoods were more expensive than project housing and lacked many of the same amenities, workers favored private neighborhood living to project housing because it signified a degree of financial independence and allowed workers personal separation from industrial corporations.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 1.3. Single shotgun-type house from a private subdivision in Ensley, Alabama. Image courtesy of the Birmingham Public Library.

In 1910, Birmingham booster and real estate entrepreneur Robert Jemison, Jr. developed another satellite industrial community west of downtown. Unlike Ensley, Jemison planned the community of Corey as a model industrial town comprised entirely of improved company housing for United States Steel employees and their families. The Corey Land Company promoted Corey through *Jemison Magazine*, a quarterly periodical

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<sup>18</sup> Hudgins and White, *Village Creek*, 48-50.

devoted to Robert Jemison's Birmingham housing and real estate developments. Editorials from *Jemison Magazine* boasted Corey as "the model industrial city of the South," writing, "What Gary represents in the Northern industrial world, Corey represents to the South."<sup>19</sup>

Conceived from the notion that improved living conditions for employees would increase productivity, developers designed Corey to include the amenities of upper-class neighborhoods such as paved curvilinear streets with 16 miles of curbs and gutters, 20 miles of cement sidewalks, and 10 miles of storm and sanitary sewage.<sup>20</sup> Unlike other satellite communities where companies minimized cost by building continuous tracts of identical housing, plans for Corey encouraged a mix of modern single- and two-story housing types. An image from *Jemison Magazine* illustrates the range of prices and house plans for Corey, including cottages, bungalows, and two-story Tudor and craftsman-style dwellings, costing between \$1,500 and \$4,500.<sup>21</sup> For over a decade, Corey continued to expand, eventually encompassing 2,100 acres of suburban housing.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Corey the Model Industrial City of the South- To be a Revelation to the Entire Industrial World," *Jemison Magazine*, May 1910, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 177-180.

<sup>21</sup> "Corey the Model Industrial City of the South," *Jemison Magazine*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Michael W. Fazio, *Landscape of Transformations: Architecture and Birmingham, Alabama* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 86.

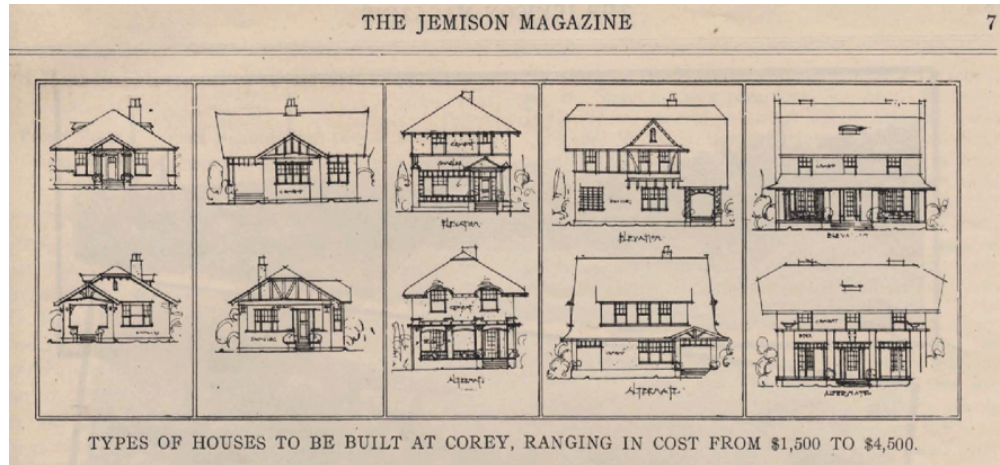


Figure 1.4. House designs for Corey advertised in the 1910 edition of *Jemison Magazine*.

In addition to Ensley and Corey, the Birmingham District included several other smaller satellite communities, including Pratt City, Thomas, and Bessemer. Like Ensley, these communities developed a mixture of project housing and private subdivision developments for workers. In the mid-twentieth century when suburbanization became nationally popular, developers in Birmingham expanded to existing working-class suburbs to accommodate the demand for suburban housing. Unlike other American cities where affordable housing often confined the working class to urban neighborhoods and reserved the suburbs for middle- and upper-class residents, early satellite communities established a trend of affordable, working-class housing outside of the urban core. The effects of satellite communities on later suburban development are evident from the ring of working-class suburban communities that developed after World War II along a northern curve from Trussville in the east, through Center Point, Gardendale, Fultondale, Pleasant Grove, and Hueytown in the west.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Eskew, *But For Birmingham*, 88.

Birmingham also maintained urban industrial communities adjacent to downtown, like East Birmingham and Avondale. These neighborhoods originated as independent communities and in 1910, the Greater Birmingham plan connected these to Birmingham, creating urban industrial neighborhoods. Sanborn maps from 1911 indicate that East Birmingham consisted almost exclusively of industrial and residential areas except for two schools and three churches.<sup>24</sup> The concentration of industry in East Birmingham drew many residents to the area creating what historian George Cruikshank called “a varied industrial district with a population largely composed of working people.”<sup>25</sup> Sanborn maps also reveal East Birmingham’s largest companies as Birmingham Coal and Iron (Vanderbilt Steel), East Birmingham Lumber Co. and Southern Iron and Commission Co. The neighborhood hosted other smaller industries like Birmingham Fertilizer Works, American Bolt co. and a brass works.<sup>26</sup>

East Birmingham’s workers lived in four residential subdivisions: East Birmingham, Klondyke, Lincoln City, and Greenwood. Land developers filled East Birmingham with subdivisions of standard grid-planned streets and modest single- and double-shotguns, bungalows, and T-shaped and Victorian style cottages.<sup>27</sup> East Birmingham’s neighborhood design and housing mirrored the simple, working-class origin of the neighborhoods with a variety of small house plans that ranged in size from three to four rooms and included minimal architectural ornamentation to restrict costs.

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<sup>24</sup> Sanborn Map Company, “Insurance Maps of Birmingham, Alabama 1911,” map, 1911, <http://sanborn.umi.com/al/0015/dateid-000005.htm?CCSI=2524n>.

<sup>25</sup> Cruikshank, *A History of Birmingham and its Environs*, 134.

<sup>26</sup> Sanborn Map Company, “Insurance Maps of Birmingham, Alabama 1911,” map, 1911, Sheets 459, 460, 461, <http://sanborn.umi.com/al/0015/dateid-000005.htm?CCSI=2524n>.

<sup>27</sup> Hudgins and White, *Village Creek*, 23.

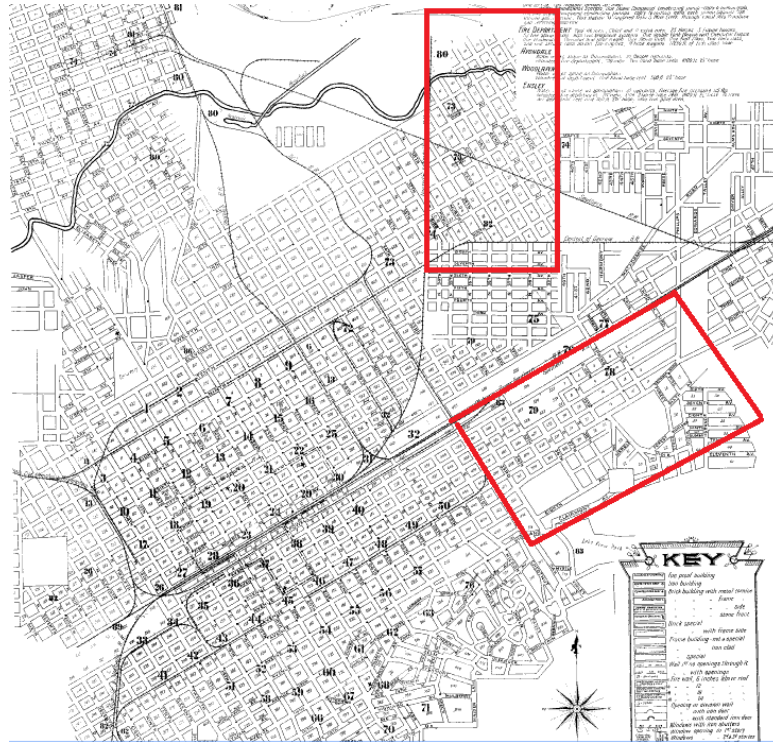


Figure 1.5: Map shows the proximity of East Birmingham (top) and Avondale (bottom) to downtown Birmingham - everything left of East Birmingham and Avondale. Image from 1902 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Birmingham, Alabama.

South of East Birmingham, and directly east of downtown Birmingham, Avondale also maintained a significant urban industrial presence. Avondale Mills opened in 1897 and remained the neighborhood’s largest employer throughout the twentieth century. Avondale Mills retained 130 project houses that accommodated approximately 600 employees and family members. In 1920, an article from *Survey* magazine reported on the dreary condition of Avondale’s project housing: “The company rows are built on a low flat of cinders neighboring the mill. The struggling patches of grass only heighten the barrenness which is relieved but little by straight rows of small trees along the front of the



cube-like houses.”<sup>28</sup> *Survey* also reported that Avondale’s project neighborhoods did not provide basic civic improvements, such as sidewalks, or agencies, aside from one school.

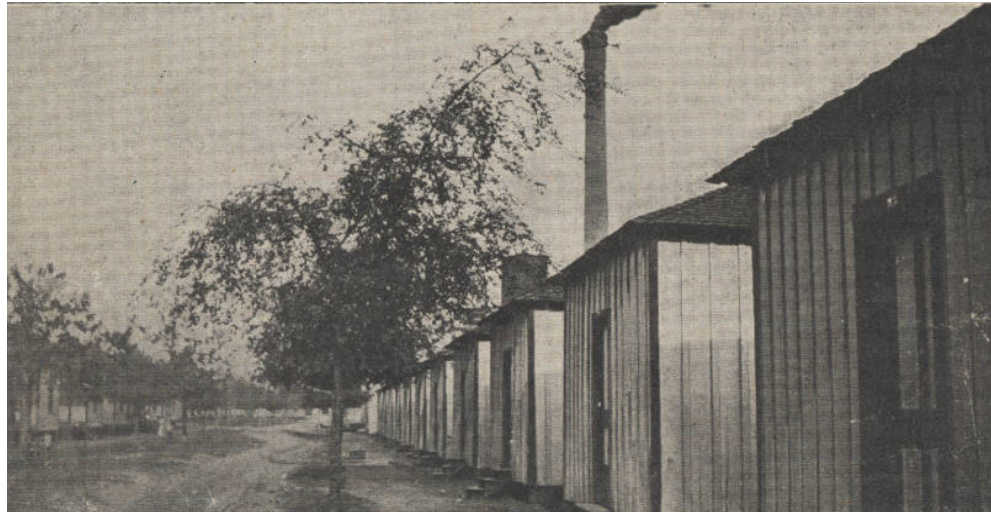


Figure 1.6. Avondale Mills project housing. Image courtesy of *The Survey*.<sup>29</sup>

Outside of Avondale Mills, Avondale’s residents worked for other smaller industries like the Avondale Smith Gin Company and Avondale Stove Foundry and lived in subdivisions around Avondale Park. Due to the working class character of the community, subdivisions developed along a standard grid-pattern plan, and contained mostly single-story modest house-types such as pyramidal cottages, bungalows, T-shaped cottages, and one-story frame dwellings. Avondale also developed several churches, schools, and a large park that attracted visitors from neighborhoods around the city. The city founders developed Avondale Park in the nineteenth century, and in 1910, the park underwent several improvements, including the addition of Birmingham’s first zoo. In

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<sup>28</sup> Taylor, “The Quarters,” 1467.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 1466.

1931, Avondale Park received a second round of renovations and added an open-air pavilion, amphitheater, rose arbor, and a picnic shelter.

As Birmingham's industrial production increased in the last decades of the nineteenth century, East Birmingham, Avondale, and other smaller urban industrial neighborhoods contributed to Birmingham's neighborhood development by negatively impacting the city's urban environment with pollution and noise. The existence of heavy industry in the city's central business district exposed the city's residents to the undesirable and sometimes dangerous effects of industry like smog, urban blight, noise pollution, and the constant movement of people and transportation. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Birmingham's industry initiated the residential separation of Birmingham's middle, upper, and elite classes who perceived downtown as an unfit environment for family development and child rearing. In 1890, a promotional pamphlet for the middle-class neighborhood of East Lake described the effects of industry on Birmingham and the motivation for suburban developments:

Its skies must be obscured by the smoke of furnaces, foundries, and factories; its streets must resound with the noise of locomotives, the rumble of wheels, and all the jar of busy traffic. It [Birmingham] will be an ideal place for business, but its center will be by no means the best location for homes.<sup>30</sup>

Over the last two decades of nineteenth century, transportation innovation facilitated Birmingham's first wave of suburbanization, by enabling residents to move away from downtown without becoming isolated from the city's resources, jobs, shopping, and recreation.

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<sup>30</sup> East Lake Land Company, *East Lake: A Residence Suburb of Birmingham, ALA.* (New York: South Publishing Company, 1890), 10.



Figure 1.7. 1907 postcard shows the polluting effects of Birmingham's blast furnaces. Image courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Birmingham was among the last of the New South cities to offer public transportation in the late nineteenth century. Horse-powered streetcars appeared in Boston as early as 1853, and in Nashville in 1860.<sup>31</sup> By 1871, when Atlanta began offering public transportation, Birmingham was still in its early stages of city development. In its first ten years, Birmingham hosted a growing population of 3,000, but the population was largely contained to the downtown as few satellite communities were established in the 1870s. In May of 1882, when Birmingham began to expand its industry, Birmingham started offering public transportation by horse railway lines. Birmingham's mule-powered transportation serviced the downtown central business district and the city's earliest neighborhoods, including Avondale and South Highland Avenue. In 1885, Birmingham's leading transportation companies, Birmingham Street

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<sup>31</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: the Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 21-28.

Railway Company and Birmingham & Pratt Mines Railroad, merged to form Birmingham Union Street Railway and operated as the city's largest transportation company.

In 1886, the invention of the steam dummy, a railcar with a steam-powered engine, allowed faster travel for Birmingham's white and African American residents. The advent of the steam engine allowed Birmingham's peripheral neighborhoods such as Ensley, North Birmingham, and East Lake convenient access to downtown. By 1890, thirteen different mule- or steam-powered transportation companies serviced Birmingham and the city's residents enjoyed one of the largest public transportation systems in the south at the time. Birmingham hosted thirteen different transportation companies because land developers financed private transportation franchises to help promote the accessibility of their neighborhood to downtown, as seen with Corey, East Lake, and Norwood.<sup>32</sup>

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the electric streetcar became an increasingly popular method of public transportation in America as cities like Boston, Atlanta, and Montgomery began to develop peripheral streetcar neighborhoods for middle and upper class residents. By the late 1880s when electric streetcars appeared in cities like Montgomery, Boston, Nashville, and Atlanta, Birmingham was more solidly established than it had been 20 years prior and was much quicker to adopt this new mode for public transportation. In 1890, Birmingham Electric Company merged with Birmingham Railway and Electric Company, and the merger produced ten miles of electric streetcar rails. In the twentieth century, Birmingham's electric streetcar system

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<sup>32</sup> Harold E. Cox and Alvin W. Hudson, *Street Railways of Birmingham* (Forty Fort: Harold E. Cox, 1976), 1- 35.

continued to expand to service Birmingham's surrounding suburbs. Birmingham's residents could travel 20 miles from East Lake in East Birmingham to Bessemer, an industrial suburb in the southwest corner of the Birmingham District. The convenience and affordability, at a cost of only five cents, of Birmingham's extensive public transportation network enabled the outward development of the city's working-, middle-, and upper-class neighborhoods because it connected residential neighborhoods to work, shopping, and recreation in different parts of the city.<sup>33</sup>

In 1886, Robert Jemison, Sr., a pioneer developer of Birmingham's street railway system, developed East Lake six miles east of downtown Birmingham to accommodate the demand for housing outside of the city's polluted core. East Lake differed from other late-nineteenth-century communities because it lacked an industrial presence. Instead, developers promoted East Lake as a "residence suburbs and pleasure resort," writing, "no large industries such as furnaces or factories creating smoke will be located at East Lake, but the place will be set apart for genteel homes and ornamented with parks."<sup>34</sup> The absence of industry hindered East Lake's early residential development. Birmingham's middle class homebuyers chose to live in other East Birmingham neighborhoods, where residents could easily live and work in the same community. The absence of industry also influenced the type of residents attracted to East Lake. In the nineteenth century, East Lake predominantly attracted professionals who could afford to live away from industrial work. As a result, East Lake's early development produced several expensive two-story Victorian homes with ornamentation and detailing. East Lake's early development also included community buildings and planned community spaces like schools, churches, and

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<sup>33</sup> Cox and Hudson, *Street Railways of Birmingham*, 1- 35.

<sup>34</sup> East Lake Land Company, *East Lake*, 12.

parks, a lake, hotel, zoo, and Howard College, which later moved to Homewood and became Samford University.

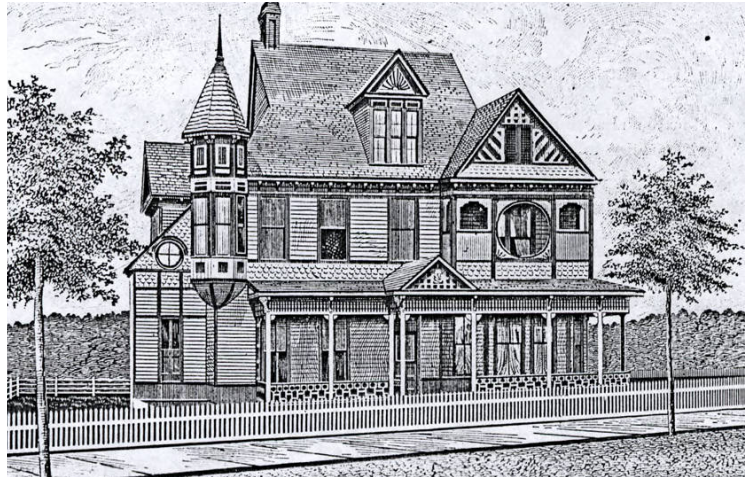


Figure 1.8. House from East Lake's first development in 1890. Image from 1890 East Lake promotional pamphlet.

In 1906, East Lake underwent a second wave of development when the East Lake Company created a free system of commuter streetcar lines that connected East Lake to Birmingham's larger transportation grid, making it easier for middle-class residents to commute to work.<sup>35</sup> The improved accessibility initiated a second wave of white middle class residential development. The later subdivision developed on a classic grid plan with spacious 50' x 165' lots that sold for \$400 and \$500. This grid plan differed from previous because of its large lots and variety of housing. East Lake's twentieth century housing development featured a variety of small and medium house plans and a wide range of styles, including Craftsman-style bungalows, Queen Anne Victorian cottages,

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<sup>35</sup> "South East Lake Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form, Alabama Historic Commission, July 3, 1997, 63.

and Spanish Revival, Colonial Revival, and Tudor-style houses. Although East Lake's second phase of development featured smaller houses than the neighborhoods nineteenth-century development, houses built during the second phase routinely adorned the façade and the porch with nonfunctional wood and brick detail, common to Victorian and Craftsman-style housing. The use of non-functional architectural ornamentation reflected the increase in disposable income from Birmingham's working class, and distinguished the neighborhood as middle class.



Figure 1.9. Single-story frame house from East Lake's second phase of development. Image from East Lake National Register of Historic Places nomination file.

Woodlawn, located 3.5 miles east of Birmingham, neighbored East Lake's western border. Like other middle class neighborhoods, Woodlawn experienced its first wave of residential development in 1887 when the East Lake Company developed

streetcar rails through Woodlawn to connect East Lake with downtown.<sup>36</sup> Woodlawn's proximity to East Lake and downtown made the neighborhood a popular half-way point for residents traveling in either direction. Sanborn maps from 1911 demonstrate how the Birmingham Mineral Railroad intersected Woodlawn in the early twentieth century, establishing a variety of mid-sized industrial operations in the neighborhood like rolling, planing, and saw mills.<sup>37</sup> Despite Woodlawn's industrial presence, the neighborhood never hosted heavy industry and Woodlawn attracted a population of middle-class and skilled working-class residents. The absence of project housing, and the predominance of privately developed residential suburbs also distinguished Woodlawn from Birmingham's industrial suburbs and urban industrial neighborhoods. Woodlawn's residential developments reflected the middle- and skilled-working class character of the neighborhood with lots that averaged 50' x 150' and popular early twentieth century housing like bungalows and late Victorian-style cottages. In addition to residential development Woodlawn maintained several shared public spaces like schools, churches, and public parks.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel J. Vivie, "Woodlawn Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form, Alabama Historic Commission, Nov. 17, 2003, 130.

<sup>37</sup> Sanborn Map Company, "Insurance Maps of Birmingham, Alabama 1911," map, 1911, <http://sanborn.umi.com/al/0015/dateid-000005.htm?CCSI=2524n>.

<sup>38</sup> Vivie, "Woodlawn Historic District," 2.



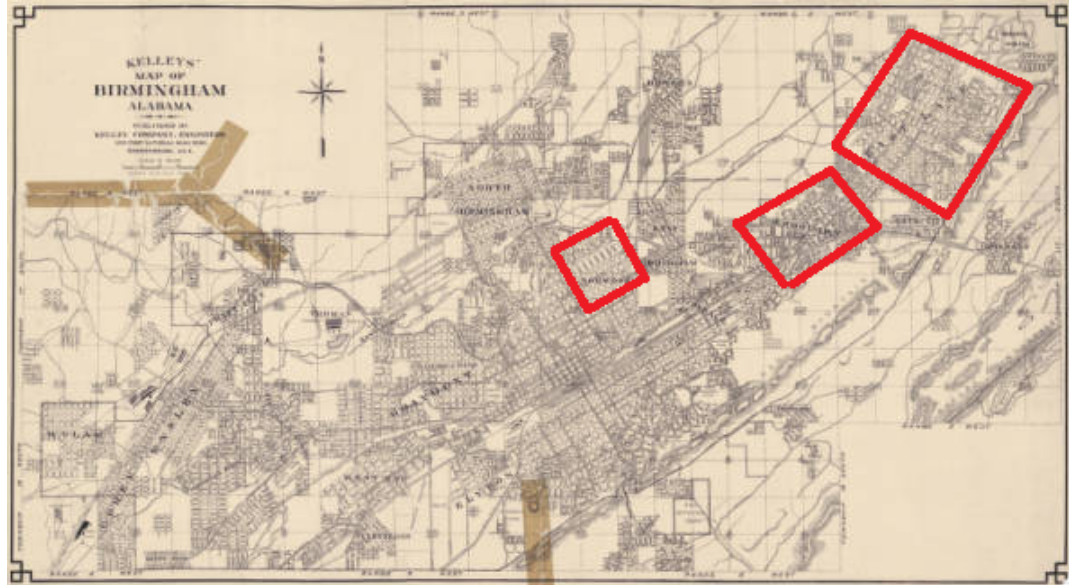


Figure 1.10. Map showing the location of Norwood (left), Woodlawn (center), and East Lake (right). .Map courtesy of Birmingham Public Library.

In 1912, Birmingham Realty Company developed Norwood along a range of hills between downtown Birmingham and the North Birmingham industrial community. Like East Lake, Norwood developed north of Birmingham to accommodate the demand for housing outside of the city's polluted center. Advertisers appealed to homebuyers looking to escape the heat and smog of Birmingham's Jones Valley with ads reading, "Forget It's High and Dry. No Pools To Breed Mosquitoes. No Malaria. No Dust. No Smoke. Everything To Make For Health."<sup>39</sup> As Norwood developed Birmingham Realty planned Norwood using a classic grid plan for the neighborhood's southern boundary to integrate with Birmingham's existing grid, and a curved boulevard design along the neighborhoods northern boundary. Lots located in the uniform grid pattern ranged between 50' x 150' and 60' x 150' and lots along Norwood Boulevard and Norwood Circle generally

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<sup>39</sup> Jeff Mansel, "Norwood Boulevard Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form, Alabama Historic Commission, Oct. 29, 2001, 23.

measured greater than 100' x 150'. The most popular architectural style in Norwood was the Craftsman-style bungalow. Birmingham Realty marketed Norwood to Birmingham's industrialists, upper-middle class, middle-class buyers. The houses' range of size, type, and style to accommodate various incomes and preferences reflected the neighborhood's social diversity. Although Norwood thrived for several decades, the noise from the Southern Railroad, and the heavy smoke from Birmingham and North Birmingham's industrial production eventually pushed many of Norwood's residents away from North Birmingham to other communities further outside the city that were less affected by industry.<sup>40</sup>



Figures 1.11 and 1.12. Houses built in the same decade show the variation of size and architectural style in Norwood. Photos courtesy of the Birmingham Public Library.

Birmingham's wealthy residents outside of Norwood in the early twentieth century lived in subdivisions along Highland Avenue south of downtown Birmingham. Developers built Highland Avenue along the plateaus of Red Mountain and the area's natural, irregular, and mountainous topography appealed to the turn-of-the-century desire

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<sup>40</sup> Mansel, "Norwood Boulevard Historic District," 25.

for spacious and natural living. Highland Avenue's developers, the Elyton Land Company, also promoted the raised plateaus of Highland Avenue as a refuge from the smoke, grime, and heat of industry in Birmingham's Jones Valley. In 1884, the Elyton Land Company developed Lakeview as a park and resort destination within the Highland Avenue district. The large park and man-made lake were Lakeview's main attractions, but visitors also came to Lakeview to stay at the hotel and enjoy the boathouse, pavilion, and outdoor theater. Lakeview's popularity persisted into the twentieth century, and in 1905, the Birmingham Country Club relocated to the area. The resort's many attractions increased exposure of the Highland Avenue district and popularized the area south of Birmingham.<sup>41</sup>

Elyton Land Company first developed Highland Avenue in 1887 as the first southern development for Birmingham's upper class families. Highland Avenue was the neighborhood's main traffic artery, from which the area's parks and subdivisions radiated outward. The neighborhood was designed on a natural, curved street plan with five subdivisions: Milner, Hanover, Rhodes, Chestnut Hill, and Country Club. The houses facing Highland Avenue are located on large estate lots, with smaller lots located off of Highland Avenue. The houses and estates in Highland Avenue hosted a wide range of architectural styles including the Craftsman, Colonial revival, Tudor revival, and Neoclassical styles. Steady development in Highland Avenue continued for the first two decades of the twentieth century, when Robert Jemison, Jr. began developing new

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<sup>41</sup> Daniel Vive, "Country Club Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form, Alabama Historic Commission Nov. 17, 2003, 19.

neighborhoods further south. After World War I, many of Birmingham's wealthy residents abandoned Highland Ave for new developments to the east and south.<sup>42</sup>



Figure 1.13. Image shows the houses along Highland Avenue in 1910. Image courtesy of the Birmingham Public Library.

In 1906, southeast of Highland Ave, and further up Red Mountain, Robert Jemison, Jr. began development on Mountain Terrace. Jemison developed Mountain Terrace as a 40-acre garden suburb with three subdivisions; Crescent, Glenview, and Cliff Road. Like other late-nineteenth and early twentieth century garden suburbs, Jemison built Mountain Terrace to accommodate the desire for upper class housing away from Birmingham's downtown. These suburbs differed from other turn-of-the-century neighborhoods for their coordinated land-use planning that included natural topography, curvilinear streets, irregular lots sizes, and controlled street set-backs. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the transportation advancement of railroads, streetcars, and later automobiles enabled the national popularity of garden suburbs among city elites. In Birmingham, the streetcar connected Birmingham's upper class residents with garden

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<sup>42</sup> Daniel Vive, "Country Club Historic District," 22.

suburbs like Mountain Terrace until the 1920's when commuters began to replace the streetcar for the personal automobile.<sup>43</sup>

In 1917, Robert Jemison, Jr. added a 300-acre addition to Mountain Terrace. Forest Park emerged as Birmingham's newest middle and upper class neighborhood. Highland Avenue to the east, Avondale to the north, and the future Mountain Brook to the south surrounded Forest Park on three sides. Like Mountain Terrace, Jemison's 300-acre development followed a natural curvilinear street plan, with tree-lined roads and a variety of lots sizes. Forest Park was comprised of three subdivisions: Glenwood, Mountain Terrace, and Altamont, located at the top of Red Mountain and overlooking Birmingham to the north. Due to the size of Forest Park, houses in the neighborhood ranged considerably in size, type, and style. The northern section of Forest Park that bordered Avondale contained mostly middle class bungalows and cottages, while the southern section of Forest Park, the Altamont subdivision, sat at the top of Red Mountain and overlooked Birmingham to the north and contained the neighborhood's Georgian and Federal Revival-style mansions.

In 1924, Jemison bought 152 acres of undeveloped land at the top of Red Mountain to connect his Forest Park development to Shades Valley. Shades Valley was the valley south of Birmingham's Jones Valley that would later become Mountain Brook, Vestavia Hills, and Homewood. Jemison developed the 152-acre property into Redmont Park, a neighborhood of mansions on elegant estate lots along the crest of Red Mountain. Despite the small size of Redmont Park, it was among Jemison's most important purchases, as it connected Forest Park to Shades Valley and opened up new opportunity

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<sup>43</sup> Robert A. M. Stern, David Fishman, Jacob Tilove, *Paradise Planned: The Garden Suburb and the Modern City* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2013), 17, 48, 180, and 181.

for development over Red Mountain in Shades Valley.<sup>44</sup> In 1926, Jemison developed the prestigious Mountain Brook Estates. Like Forest Park, and Redmont Park, Jemison planned Mountain Brook Estates to include all of the design elements of a traditional garden suburb including, large elegant homes, naturally landscaped lots, and curvilinear tree-lined streets. By the start of the great Depression, Mountain Brook Estates replaced Highland Avenue, Forest Park, and Redmont Park as the most fashionable destination for Birmingham's elite.

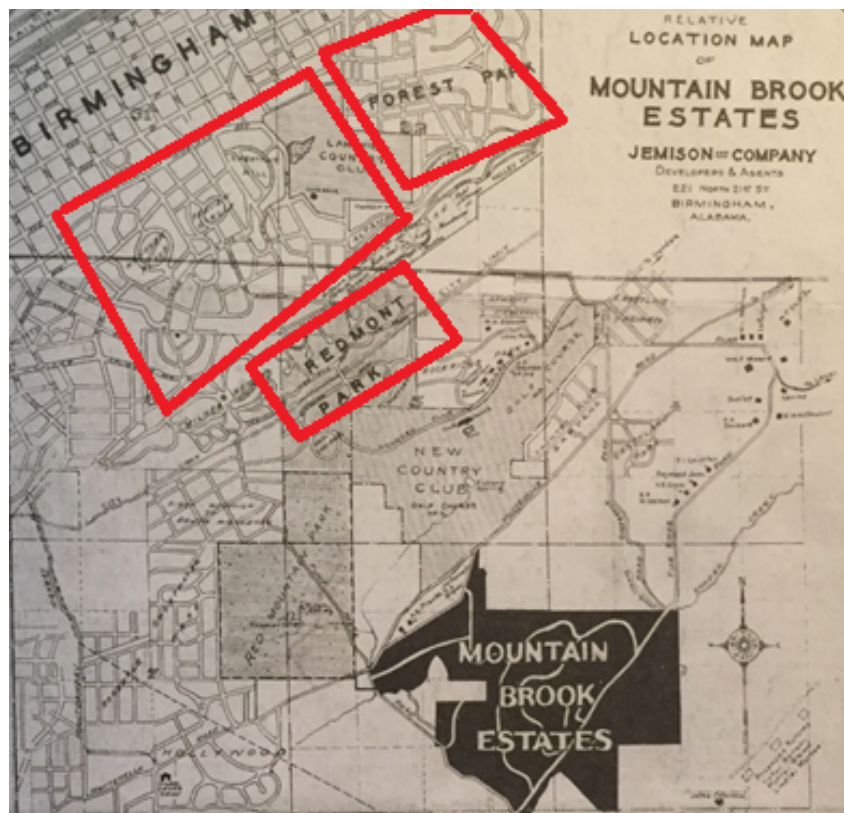


Figure 1.14. Map shows the proximity of Highland Ave (top left), Forest Park (top right), Redmont Park (bottom center) to Mountain Brook. (Everything below Redmont Park). Map from *Jemison Magazine*.

<sup>44</sup> Fazio, *Landscape of Transformation*, 105.

Examples of working-, middle-, and upper-class neighborhoods demonstrate that Birmingham's origins as an industrial center influenced the city's neighborhood development and established an early pattern of outward residential development. After the 1920's when Robert Jemison, Jr. developed Mountain Brook, Birmingham paused its neighborhood development for almost two decades. During this period, Birmingham experienced high construction costs that slowed residential development. In response to high construction costs, the Birmingham Realty Company advertised "simplicity houses" in the city's elite neighborhoods. Designed as small starter homes that would later be converted into garages or servant quarters, simplicity houses offered an affordable way for Birmingham Realty to sell lots in fashionable neighborhoods without compromising the neighborhoods property value.<sup>45</sup>

After the 1920's, the Great Depression hit Birmingham and the city endured a decade of severe economic instability that rendered house construction financially infeasible for many. Immediately after the depression years, America entered World War II, and residential construction paused nationwide while the government reserved construction materials for the war effort. Despite material shortages, magazines and advertisers like Kelvinator Electrical Appliances and Youngtown Kitchens encouraged Americans to plan for their post-war dream home with ads that read, "We're planning our postwar home now," and "My dream is still a dream...but not for long." After the war,

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<sup>45</sup> J. N. Cornelius, "The Simplicity House: Alabama Realty Firm Devises Unique Plan to Encourage Home Ownership" *American Builder* 29 (August 1920): 90; M. T. Holder, "Beating Building Costs in Birmingham: Alabama Building and Realty Company Solves Housing Problem and Laughs at High Cost of Homes" *Building Age* 43 (September 1921): 33.

house development resumed and residential expansion found new motivation from the nationally popular suburban lifestyle circulated in print culture.



## Chapter Two

### Dreams of Suburbia: Birmingham, Alabama, 1945-1970

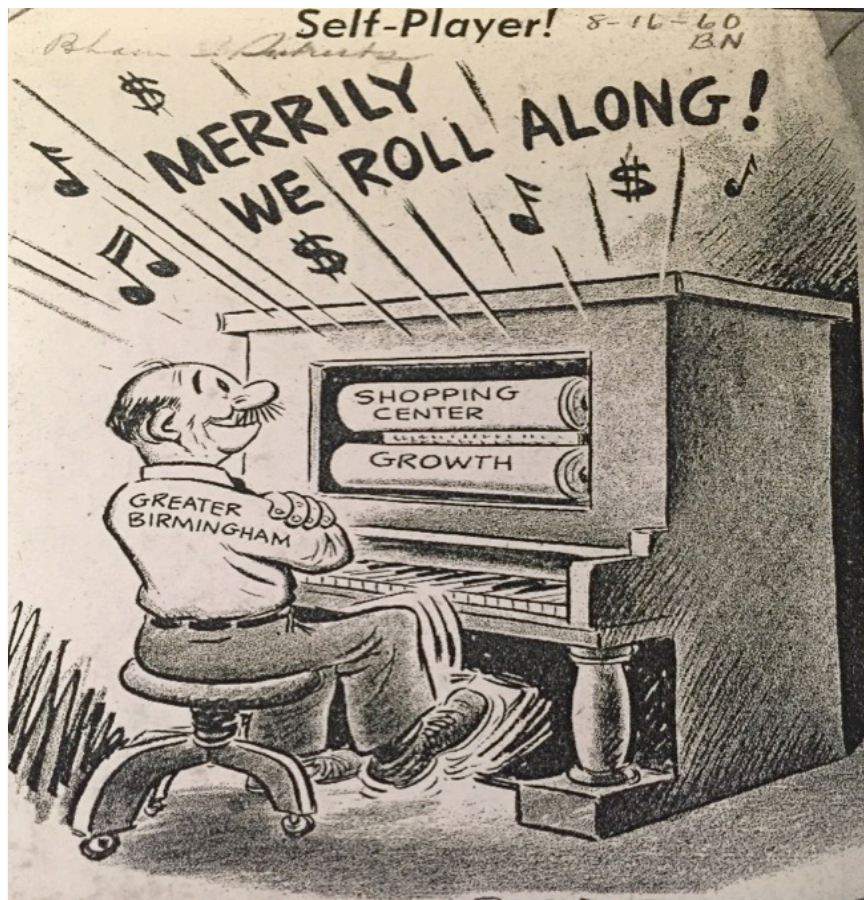


Figure 2.1 “Self-Player!” suggests that Birmingham’s development was carrying on self-sufficiently in 1960 when Charles Brooks designed this cartoon for the Birmingham News. Image Courtesy of the Birmingham Public Library.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Brooks’ cartoon is limited, as Birmingham’s working poor and African American populations were not equally affected by mid-century suburbanization as the city’s middle and upper-class white residents.

Birmingham, Alabama's rapid mid-century suburbanization is illustrated in the Charles Brooks editorial cartoon shown above.<sup>2</sup> Titled "Self-Player!," Brooks' cartoon suggests that by 1960, greater Birmingham's development was carrying on self-sufficiently. Census data from the period confirms that during the 1960s 39,977 people abandoned downtown Birmingham, causing an 11.7 percent population decrease and marking the city's largest population loss of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Birmingham's middle-class residents moved to suburbs outside of the city to the east, north, and west, near old satellite industrial towns. Moderately priced suburban communities like Fultondale, Center Point, Midfield, Pleasant Grove, Helena, Trussville, and Hueytown boomed in the 1950s and 1960s due to subdivision development. Many of Birmingham's elite residents moved south of the city beyond early twentieth-century suburbs like Forest Park, Highland Avenue, and Redmont Park into new mid-century suburban developments like Mountain Brook, Homewood, Vestavia Hills, and Hoover.<sup>4</sup>

Birmingham's mid-century population change represented larger regional and national trends as cities experienced the effects of suburbanization and the birth of a new suburban lifestyle that transformed the way Americans thought about housing, family, privacy, status, transportation, style, and consumption. By 1980 the Federal Census indicated that more than 40 percent of the national population, over 100 million people, lived in newly developed suburban areas.<sup>5</sup> In addition, between 1950 and 1980, eighteen

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Brooks, "Self-Player!" *Birmingham News*, Aug. 16, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Eighteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1960: Population Statistics for Birmingham, Alabama* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1963), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to map of Jefferson County on page 9 of chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 4.

of America's twenty-five largest cities, experienced population loss comparable to Birmingham's as a result of suburbanization.<sup>6</sup>

Historically, mid-century suburbanization has attracted the interest of historians interested in the links between residential patterns of American culture. In *Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth T. Jackson argues that the suburbs represented the crossroads of American culture, including basic consumerism, reliance on automobiles, distinct space for family and work, and a tendency towards exclusion on the basis of race and wealth.<sup>7</sup> Robert Fishman also studied America's postwar suburbanization and agreed that the suburban ideal included a world of leisure, family life, and a union with nature, that appealed to middle and aspiring middle-class residents seeking distance from work, working-class housing, and the polluted urban environment.<sup>8</sup> This study examines postwar print culture in Birmingham, Alabama to show how Birmingham residents bought into aspects of new nationally popular lifestyle trends. As chapter three will discuss, race played an important role in shaping postwar suburbanization in the southern city, but this chapter will argue that the transformation of the urban landscape in Birmingham was driven as much by larger national economic and social changes, including increased automobility and availability of credit, and the arrival of new modes of distinction based on consumerism and changing ideas of "private" and "public" (particularly in terms of family).

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<sup>6</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Twentieth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1980: Characteristics of the Population: U.S. Summary* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), 200.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, 4.

The postwar lifestyle advertising trends specific to Birmingham are reflected in advertisements and classified listings published in the *Birmingham News* and the *Birmingham Post Herald*. The *News* proved especially useful for its unrivaled distribution and advertising influence throughout the mid-twentieth century. By 1966, the *News* claimed the title of Alabama's largest medium for advertising, with a following of nearly one million readers in and around Birmingham, and a full- and part-time staff of 800.<sup>9</sup> Many of Birmingham's residents saw the *News* as the city's most trusted news and advertising publication.

Advertisements from the *Birmingham Post Herald* also shed light upon how advertisers promoted Birmingham's suburban expansion. Beginning in 1950, Birmingham's residents received the *Post Herald* in the morning, and the *News* on evenings and weekends. In 1950, continued financial difficulty forced their merger. The *Post Herald* and the *News* entered a joint operating agreement that permitted both papers to continue working as independent publications, allowing Birmingham residents the benefit of two different news perspectives. The Birmingham News Company financed both papers and established shared circulation, printing, and advertising. While the *Post Herald* contained fewer display advertisements and classified listings than the *News*, these newspapers combined constituted the largest advertiser in the city.<sup>10</sup>

To advertise with the *News* or the *Post Herald* companies and individuals had the option of buying an individual display advertisement or a classified listing. Large

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<sup>9</sup> Clarence B. Hanson, "The Story of the Birmingham News: A Good Newspaper" (Presentation, Newcomen Society in North America, Birmingham, AL, May, 1967), 17; Emily Jones, *The Birmingham News: Our First 100 Years* (Birmingham: Birmingham News Co., 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Hanson, "The Story of the Birmingham News," 18.

businesses like department stores, subdivision developers, and real estate firms used the larger, more expensive display advertisements, while individual owners and real estate agents relied on the less expensive classified listings. These listings consisted of 20 to 30-word, condensed paragraphs, providing only the most necessary information. Within the allotted space, home sellers described what they felt were the most appealing aspects of for-sale homes. In Birmingham, advertisers most commonly promoted aspects of suburban living related to family, privacy, status, and affordability.

Of the four described components, advertisements most frequently promoted suburban neighborhoods as ideal destinations for families. Suburbs appealed to families because their location outside of the downtown area distanced “vulnerable” wives and children from an increasingly unhealthy and dangerous environment. In the mid-twentieth century, America’s cities earned a reputation for being dangerous, unhealthy, and poverty-ridden places. Urban renewal, slum clearance, and highway development accelerated the notion of the perilous city, through residential displacement that confined the city’s poor downtown in public and low-income housing.<sup>11</sup> In the postwar period, families from the middle and upper classes responded to the ghettoization of downtown by buying into new suburban developments outside of the city, seen as better suited for family life and child rearing. Advertisers capitalized on suburban safety by specifically targeting parents in ads and listings. Examples of this strategy from the *Birmingham News* implored parents to consider their family when buying a house with ads like, “Give

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<sup>11</sup> Peter C. Baldwin and Howard P. Chudacoff, *Major Problems in American Urban and Suburban History: Documents and Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 157.

your kiddies a chance to roam,” “For The Children’s Sake” and “Raise your children in an area they will be proud to live in and play in.”<sup>12</sup>

Advertisers also appealed to homebuyers with families by adding descriptions of new suburban floor plans and rooms specifically designed for family enjoyment and convenience. In the mid-twentieth century, most houses built in suburban developments were Ranch houses. The Ranch house appealed to modern consumers for its informal, unpretentious design that promoted a greater degree of family togetherness. The Ranch houses’ open, rambling, floor plan produced “U,” “T,” and “L” shaped designs, with new interior zoning dividing these homes into separate “private” and “public” spheres. Architects relegated the private spaces including bedrooms and bathrooms to one side of the house, and on the opposite side, open floor plans connected the kitchen, dining room, and family room, eliminating isolation and allowing continued interaction throughout most of the house. The Ranch house introduced new types of residential spaces that facilitated modern ideas about casual, family living like, eat-in kitchens, dens, and playrooms. The *Birmingham News* promoted these new residential spaces with advertisements featuring, “New 1-story brick Ranch With Den and Playroom,” and another ad for a home in Vestavia Hills promoted its, “30-Ft. Playroom.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Give your kiddies a chance to roam,” *Birmingham News*, March 15, 1964; “Your kids will thank you,” *Birmingham News*, Oct. 24, 1962; “For the Children’s Sake,” *Birmingham News*, March 15, 1964; “Raise your children in an area they will be proud to live in and play in,” *Birmingham News*, Oct. 14, 1964.

<sup>13</sup> “New 1-Story Brick With Den and Playroom,” *Birmingham News*, March 15, 1964; “30-Ft. Playroom,” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 13, 1964; Richard Cloues, *The Ordinary Iconic Ranch House*, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation Division, 2011.

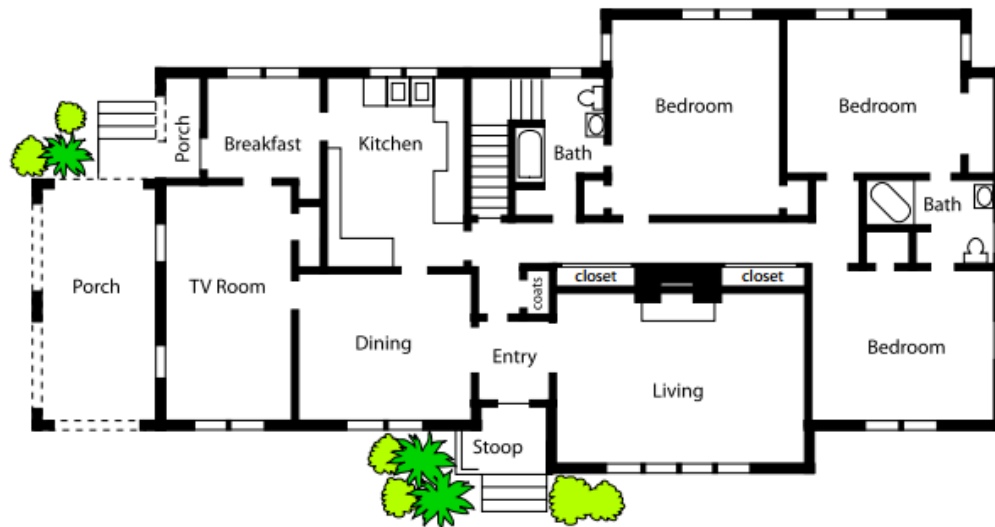


Figure 2.2. Basic mid-twentieth century house plan shows the separation of public and private spaces with the bedrooms on the left side of the house and the public spaces on the right. Image Courtesy *The Ranch House in Georgia: Guidelines for Evaluation*.

In addition to new interior spaces, Birmingham’s suburban neighborhoods also utilized residential outdoor space differently than before. The peripheral location of suburban developments allowed developers and landscape architects ample space to incorporate site topography into the design of suburban neighborhoods. As a result, suburban owners used the lawn as a buffer zone that balanced public and private space and created the allusion of privacy among a crowded neighborhood. The balance of public and private spaces, which Robert Fishman called “the essence of mature suburban style,” became an integral element to suburban design, and an important tool for advertisers.<sup>14</sup> To appeal to homebuyers interested in privacy advertisers commonly featured property descriptions using classified headlines like, “Land! Lots of Land!!” and

<sup>14</sup> Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, 147.

“House for Yard Lovers!”<sup>15</sup> Other ads described the acreage of a suburban property or used descriptive wording like “wooded,” “shaded,” and “private” to depict a house’s outdoor space. Advertisers promoted Birmingham’s hilly topography as scenic and secluded. One home listed as “Over the Mountain” advertised, “VIEW-VIEW-VIEW” and other listings promoted scenic and skyline views of the city.<sup>16</sup>

The middle and upper class suburbs south of Birmingham benefitted from the area’s mountainous topography, which inadvertently facilitated a greater degree of privacy as houses were built further apart and at varying elevations. Neighborhood planners in “Over the Mountain” communities also utilized garden suburb planning techniques that further promoted privacy such as, curvilinear streets, irregular lot sizes, and natural setbacks. Combined, the natural landscape south of Birmingham and the sophisticated landscape design techniques offered Birmingham’s “Over the Mountain” residents a greater sense of privacy than residents living in the traditional grid-patterned neighborhoods of the Jones Valley.

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<sup>15</sup> “Land! Lots of Land!” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 13, 1964; “House for Yard Lovers!” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 13, 1964.

<sup>16</sup> “VIEW-VIEW-VIEW!” *Birmingham Post Herald*, Oct. 24, 1962.





Figure 2.3. Cover of the 1966 Birmingham Parade of Homes advertising “Indoor-Outdoor” Living. Image courtesy of The Greater Birmingham Association of Home Builders Archive.

In the mid-twentieth century, the car, like the yard, evolved into an integral component of the suburban lifestyle. Because most suburbs were wholly residential, residents required a car to get to work, school, the supermarket, drugstore, and more causing automobile sales to boom as suburban neighborhoods became increasingly popular. New-car sales quadrupled between 1946 and 1955, and by the end of the 1950’s three-quarters of American households owned at least one car.<sup>17</sup> During this period, some American families for the first time owned two automobiles. The interdependent relationship between the personal car and the suburb is visible in the basic design of suburban neighborhoods where paved residential roads and driveways provided

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<sup>17</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 123.

convenient access to each individual home.<sup>18</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, cars became so important to suburban living that architects and developers designed houses that integrated the car to the house by adding carports and garages, essentially making the car a part of the house and family.

Due to the importance of private automobiles, *Birmingham News* ads routinely noted when a house included a driveway, carport, or garage. The popularity of automobiles also meant that developers could build suburban neighborhoods further from the downtown. “Over the Mountain” suburbs ranged between from 5 to 10 miles from downtown Birmingham, and suburbs east, west, and north of downtown averaged between 10 to 20 miles away from downtown. The increase in highway miles between urban and suburban areas presented advertisers an opportunity to reinforce that suburbs were far enough away to be safe, but not so removed to be inconvenient. An example from the *News* that read, “Country Quiet Yet Convenient” reinforced the important relationship between safety, convenience, and accessibility so common to suburban house listings.<sup>19</sup>

Advertisements from the *News* also suggested that status played a significant role in determining the popularity of the suburbs. One *Birmingham News* headline featuring a home in the elite suburb of Mountain Brook asked readers, “Champagne taste?”<sup>20</sup> A similar headline from an advertisement in Homewood’s Hollywood subdivision advertised “Luxury Home,” and a listing for another nearby house asked, “Want to be

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<sup>18</sup> Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> “Country Quiet Yet Convenient,” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 22, 1963.

<sup>20</sup> “Champagne Taste?” *Birmingham News*, March 15, 1964.

envied?”<sup>21</sup> Classified advertisers also regularly employed language such as “exclusive” and “sophisticated” to assign added status to houses or neighborhoods. The notion of the suburb as a private haven for society’s affluent residents originated in the nineteenth century, when early suburbs functioned as private retreats for social elites. Although the affordability of mid-century suburban homes diversified modern suburbs, the illusion that a home purchase represented one’s wealth and status remained a powerful marketing tool.

Mid-century spending habits exacerbated issues of status and the suburban desire to “keep up with the Joneses.” America’s postwar economic prosperity augmented the disposable personal income, and influenced an increase in consumer spending as Americans bought the houses, automobiles, furnishings and appliances essential to the postwar suburban lifestyle. Robert Beauregard proved the increase in mid-century American consumption with statistics that found in 1960, 90 percent of American households owned television sets and between 1948 and 1970, annual sales for dishwashers rose from \$200,000 to 2.1 million, and sales for lawn mowers increased from 1.1 million to almost 5 million.<sup>22</sup> In 1950, the advent of the credit card enabled widespread consumption and popularized the financial philosophy of “buy now pay later.”<sup>23</sup> Increased advertising, consumption, and spending power promoted the mid-century desire to upgrade one’s house, car, and furnishing to live the modern lifestyle.

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<sup>21</sup> “Luxury Home,” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 13, 1964. “Want To Be Envied?” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 22, 1963.

<sup>22</sup> Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 114.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

In addition to increased consumer spending, trends in household furnishings and modern appliances intensified the importance of status to suburban living. Rampant mid-twentieth century consumerism fueled the popular belief that the newness of a house, automobile, or household appliance increased the items value and efficiency. Advertisers employed terms like “new” and “modern” to appeal to status-minded homebuyers with listings such as: “New House- Just One Year Old!” and “Modern Updated Kitchen.”<sup>24</sup> Overall, mid-twentieth-century advertising promoted “new,” as companies and manufactures participated in a united campaign to persuade Americans to update their old houses, cars, furniture, and appliances. Terms like “new” “modern” “contemporary” “reliable” and “efficient” appeared repeatedly in advertisements to promote the idea that modern and new were convenient and fashionable. Modern amenities common to suburban homes like air conditioners, washing machines, ovens, electric mixers, and dishwashers reinforced the suburban ideal as fashionably new. Mid-century housing also employed a new, simple and modern interior aesthetic.<sup>25</sup> Houses adhered to a distinct minimalistic interior style, often using built-in shelving, wood paneled walls, linoleum flooring, and sleek curvilinear furniture to maintain a modern and informal appearance. New fashion trends reinforced the importance of “new” to suburban style.

Despite trendy new promotions, most mid-century neighborhoods were filled with colonial-revival-style ranch houses. Popularized earlier in the century by the public opening of Colonial Williamsburg, the colonial revival-style became the most popular

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<sup>24</sup> “New House- Just One Year Old!” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 13, 1964; “Modern Updated Kitchen.” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 13, 1964.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Kevin Chapman, “The Ranch-Type House: Evolution, Evaluation, and Preservation” (master’s thesis, University of Georgia, 2007); Alan Hess and Noah Sheldon, *The Ranch House* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 2004).

housing in America. Colonial revival-style housing enabled suburban consumers a nostalgic and “real-world” alternative to the ultra-modern twentieth century designs featured in print advertisements.<sup>26</sup> Federal Housing Administration loan officials also preferred traditional architectural style like, colonial revival-style houses to modern designs, as traditional styles were considered a better resale investment.

After World War II, FHA loans became the most popular way to finance a new home because the government promoted homeownership by offering FHA and Veterans Administration (VA) backed mortgages, allowing more Americans to afford their own home. FHA loans covered up to 80 percent of a home’s value, and could be paid off over 20 years at a 5 to 6 percent interest rate by low monthly payments. The government ensured the national accessibility of FHA loans by guaranteeing low financial risk, and partial repayment of defaulted loans to banks that offered FHA loans and as early as 1935, over 70 percent of the country’s commercial banking resources offered FHA loans. To offset some financial risk, FHA officials worked to control the size, style and location of qualifying houses. The FHA set the minimum sizes for American housing, with some houses as small as 700 square feet, like the American Small houses; and preferred to approve traditional styles of architecture to modern styles. The FHA also rated loans based on “neighborhood stability” and preferred to offer FHA loans to houses in white, middle-class, suburban neighborhoods, where there was a smaller chance of declining property values.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Clifford Edward Clark, *The American Family Home: 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 187-189.

<sup>27</sup> Wright, *Building the Dream*, 241-242.

The Veterans Administration also created a mortgage guarantee program in 1944 as a part of the GI Bill of Rights. VA loans enabled veterans to borrow the entire value of a house without a down payment, and had fewer restrictions on the style or location of qualifying houses. Although these loans were popular among veterans, they were easier to obtain for white veterans than African American veterans for various reasons. By 1951, 2.5 million homes had been financed with FHA and VA loans.<sup>28</sup> These loans transformed America from a nation of renters to a nation of homeowners in less than a decade. The popularity of VA and FHA loans also changed residential housing in America, as homeowners increasingly preferred the single-family dwelling to past styles of housing like apartments, townhouses, and duplexes.

Increased loan support also expanded the popularity of the suburbs by enabling a larger group of working and middle class homebuyers to afford the new suburban lifestyle. Before loan support and credit, the price of living outside of the city in a new home with a new car and new appliances excluded many lower-middle class American's, such as skilled laborers, mechanics and carpenters, from participating in suburbanization. After 1950, however, new loan options, credit, and a selection of some smaller more affordable American Small houses and Ranch houses increased and diversified the number and class of Americans who could afford to participate in suburbanization. Due to the importance of affordability to suburban success, the *Birmingham News* relied on economic pulls to attract potential buyers. Advertisements promoted the affordability of suburban living with advertisements that guaranteed housing would be "FHA approved"

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<sup>28</sup> Leo Grebler, *The Role of Federal Credit Aids in Residential Construction* (Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1953), 16.

and that “100% GI loans accepted.”<sup>29</sup> Other financially driven advertisements from the *News* directly addressed veterans, writing, “Mr. GI and family, does this fit your needs?” “Attention Mr. GI,” or “GI Special.”<sup>30</sup> These advertisements also targeted non-veteran audiences with promises of affordability that offered “No money down,” and “small monthly payment options.” Two other price-conscious listings referred to for-sale properties as, “A Whiz Bang Value,” and “A legal steal.”<sup>31</sup> These advertisements played upon the aspirational desires of many working and middle class families who saw purchasing a home in the suburbs, regardless of its size or style, as a significant step towards achieving their dreams of upward social mobility.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to changes in loan financing, mass-produced housing ensured that the single-family home remained as inexpensive as possible. Between 1950 and 1970, 1.2 million housing units were built on average each year, the vast majority as suburban single-family dwellings.<sup>33</sup> To accommodate the growing housing demand, builders borrowed from the practice of Ford Motor Company to mass-produce housing, employing assembly line procedures to standardize production and increase the efficiency of time, labor, and costs.<sup>34</sup> This process allowed construction across the entire site at one time, from site preparation to foundations to framing. Developers employed standardized

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<sup>29</sup> “100% GI Loans Accepted,” *Birmingham News*, May 23, 1954.

<sup>30</sup> “Mr. GI and family, does this fit your needs?” *Birmingham News*, May 18, 1960. “Attention Mr. GI,” *Birmingham News*, May 23, 1954. “GI Special,” *Birmingham News*, May 23, 1954.

<sup>31</sup> “A Whiz Bang Value,” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 22, 1963. “A legal Steal,” *Birmingham News*, Sept. 22, 1963.

<sup>32</sup> Wright, *Building the Dream*, 257 and 260.

<sup>33</sup> Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, 192.

<sup>34</sup> Heather B. Barrow, *Henry Ford’s Plan for the American Suburb* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015), 12.

house designs and framing plans so that resources could be prepared in advance to production. Standardization also allowed consistent dimensions, making building components, like windows and doors, interchangeable between units. Other advancements in construction science, like slab-on grade poured concrete foundations, electric hand tools, and new construction materials helped to increase the availability of materials, the rate of house production, and the presence of single-family neighborhoods in America. After World War II, the government funded research in building technology and construction science to stimulate house production. Government research produced new housing materials like, plywood, laminated wood roofs, welded-steel roof trusses, steel-frame wall panels, and gypsum-board ceilings. To alleviate America's postwar housing shortages, the government also funded research on prefabricated housing, vastly increasing the postwar rate of home production.<sup>35</sup>

Levittown in Long Island, New York exists as the best example of mid-century house production efficiency. Between 1947 and 1950 Levittown, created 10,600 residences that housed over 40,000 people. Levittown broke the process of house construction into 27 separate stages, and used specialized crews for each step of production. In its peak production years, Levittown completed a new house every 15 minutes. The efficiency of the Levittown construction process allowed the Levitt family to sell their American Small Houses at reasonable prices, a quality that appealed to many young families and war veterans. As Levittown communities prospered, builders nationwide applied Levittown techniques to mass-produce other types of housing like the Ranch house. One author noted that in 1950 at the height of house production, builders

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<sup>35</sup> Wright, *Building the Dream*, 244-245.



and developers started an estimated 1,250,000 houses, most of which were Ranch houses.<sup>36</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, the advent of mass-produced housing introduced new interior and exterior residential architectural concepts to a national audience, and ultimately influenced the popularity of suburban living.<sup>37</sup>

The Birmingham-based magazine *Southern Living* also played a significant role in shaping Birmingham's mid-twentieth-century urban landscape, by distributing a monthly periodical that elevated southern suburban living above other lifestyles.<sup>38</sup> In February of 1966 *Southern Living*, a subsidiary of, *Progressive Farmer* published its first issue. Issues featured regionally focused sections on travel, home, food and entertainment, fashion and grooming, outdoor recreation, and garden and landscape. The southern element of the magazine is reiterated throughout each issue beginning with the publication title, "Southern Living: The Magazine of the Modern South," the table of contents which reads, "Edited by Southerners for Southerners," and the articles and stories that follow covering life in the eleven southernmost states.<sup>39</sup> Despite the magazine's attempts to emphasize southern distinctiveness, the advice and editorials featured in the periodical are characteristic of lifestyle values that were nationally popular in the mid-twentieth century. *Southern Living* helped make national trends more

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<sup>36</sup> Diane Suzette Harris, ed., *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 144, 146, 206.

<sup>37</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 158-167.

<sup>38</sup> The National Parks Service defines a cultural landscape as, "a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values."

<sup>39</sup> *Southern Living* eventually expanded its definition of Southern to include 15 states, and also occasionally featured the Caribbean, Mexico, and Washington DC in the magazine's travel segments.

appealing to a region that saw itself as particularly distinctive throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

*Southern Living* started with an initial paid subscription of 250,000. During the first year of publication the magazine cost 35 cents for an issue, \$3 for an annual subscription, \$5 for a two-year subscription, and \$7 for a three year subscription, and an additional \$2 per year for subscribers outside of the south. In 1976, the magazine experienced immediate success and reportedly posted twice the profits of *Playboy* and double the bottom line of the *New Yorker* and *New York Magazine* combined.”<sup>40</sup> During the initial decade of publication, *Southern Living*’s annual ad pages rose from 268 to 1,265 with revenue growth from \$555,890 to \$13,845,000.<sup>41</sup> The popularity of *Southern Living* exposed a broad audience to the advantages of southern suburban living, which inevitably influenced the popularity of suburban homes, neighborhoods, and lifestyles in Birmingham.

During the mid-twentieth century, *Southern Living* promoted suburban styles of housing by exclusively featuring houses in suburban settings. The monthly “home” column offered advice on housing for different types of suburban living featuring articles and floor plans in articles like, “Modern Home with an Air of Seclusion,”<sup>42</sup> “Built for Entertaining,”<sup>43</sup> “A House for Young Moderns,”<sup>44</sup> and “Modern in Styling and

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<sup>40</sup>Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, and Todd W. Taylor, *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, and People, Movements, and Motifs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2002), 834.

<sup>41</sup> Sam G. Riley and Gary W. Selnow, *Regional Interest Magazines of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1991), 293.

<sup>42</sup> “Modern House With an Air of Seclusion,” *Southern Living*, June 1966, 32.

<sup>43</sup> “Built for Entertaining,” *Southern Living*, Aug. 1966, 25.

Livability.”<sup>45</sup> Editors marketed nationally popular suburban housing trends to southern readers by promoting floor plans that benefited modern family living. One floor plan explained, “The kitchen carport wing is designed with step saving in mind” and “The bedroom wing is restful and private because it is separated from the active part of the house by closets and entry.”<sup>46</sup> Articles also featured other popular mid-century design characteristics like the integration of indoor and outdoor spaces, or the benefits of patios and decks. Many articles also endorsed the natural setting of suburban neighborhoods by discussing privacy and safety of suburban neighborhoods in articles with titles like, “Get away from it all.”<sup>47</sup> These articles also included pictures, floor plans, and blueprints of *Southern Living*’s fashionable designs for sale for \$5 to \$15. Blueprint sales further facilitated the development of suburban housing in Birmingham and spread the popularity of suburban style.

In addition to endorsing suburban housing, *Southern Living* also featured other components of suburban living like gardening and lawn care to promote the suburbs as the residential ideal for southerners. Such promotions spawned new industries in the region as farmers abandoned traditional growing practices to state nurseries and exotic tree farms to supply suburbia’s growing demand for landscaping plantings. The prominence of lawn care products and advice in *Southern Living* acts as an inadvertent advertisement for the suburbs because the well-kept lawn functioned as a primary characteristic of suburbia. Throughout the magazine articles comment on every part of

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<sup>44</sup> “A House for Young Moderns,” *Southern Living*, Sept. 1966, 34.

<sup>45</sup> “Modern in Style and Livability,” *Southern Living*, July 1966, 50.

<sup>46</sup> “A House for Casual Entertaining,” *Southern Living*, May 1966, 24.

lawn care including lawn disease, pruning, shrub training, and bulb storage, and more. In the magazine's inaugural issue Don Hastings Jr. wrote an article called "Shade Trees" that read, "There's something lacking in a southern house without trees – trees for beauty, trees for shade, trees for fruits and nuts, even trees for little boys to climb." The article went on to describe the different trees appropriate for suburban homes and suggested the proper distance from the house and driveway to plant trees for optimal shade.<sup>48</sup> Another column from an advice segment suggested home builders should obtain a cutout of their lot and house plan and test the house in different parts of the plot to customize the location of their home and optimize privacy and to save trees for shading. The authors wrote, "Sometimes it will become readily obvious that the home needs less front yard, with more area in the back for family privacy, children to play, gardening, or pets. A house does not have to sit in the exact center of a lot."<sup>49</sup> These articles are illustrative of the importance *Southern Living* placed on gardening and landscape, which reinforced the necessity of the suburban lawn to readers.

In addition to editors and writers highlighting the lawn in articles and column, advertisers also commonly featured lawn care equipment and products. Advertisements for lawn mowers and grass seed promoted the suburban lawn with colorful ads that illustrated perfectly groomed yards and boasted convenience and efficiency. *Southern Living* also routinely featured other primary components of suburban lifestyle like cars and modern appliances in articles and advertisements. Advertisements for items like cars,

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<sup>48</sup> Don Hastings Jr., "Shade Trees: A final Touch for a Southern Home," *Southern Living*, Feb. 1966, 74.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Bruce and Henry Smith, "Landscaping: Hints for New-Home Builders," *Southern Living*, Jan. 1967, 48.

televisions, and range ovens corresponded to the magazine's articles promoting house plans with carports, garages, dens, family rooms, and modern kitchens with new appliances.

Advertisements and editorials from *Southern Living*, the *News* and the *Post Herald*, show how Birmingham's residents bought into features of America's new postwar suburban lifestyle. Although advertisements and editorials only suggests that Birmingham's residents responded to ads that endorsed aspects of suburban living, the inclusion and consistent use of content promoting the suburbs among different types of print culture, proves that advertisers, real-estate agents, and publishers identified the suburban lifestyle as a primary attraction for Birmingham's mid-twentieth century homebuyers. Although lifestyle played a central role in shaping Birmingham's postwar urban landscape, the next chapter will discuss how issues of race also determined Birmingham's suburban development in this period.

## Chapter Three

### Race and Suburbanization in Birmingham, 1871-1970

Historically race has been central to the study of southern cities. Historians Blaine Brownell and David Goldfield contend that the relationship between black and white has formed one of the major themes- and possibly *the* central theme- of southern history.<sup>1</sup> In *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers*, Goldfield identified three pillars of southern history that are essential to understanding the south and southern cities: the south's distinct rural lifestyle, colonial economy, and race.<sup>2</sup> Like Goldfield, Howard Rabinowitz used race to study southern city development in the last half of the nineteenth century. Rabinowitz argued that after 1865 large numbers of freed slaves migrated from rural to urban areas and acted as a source of instability in southern cities. These cities responded to black urban migration with a series of racial policies like segregation, which Rabinowitz argued shaped the growth of southern cities.<sup>3</sup>

Since its founding in 1871, race has been central to Birmingham's development. Questions of race became especially important during the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century when the city earned a violent reputation in literature and media as

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<sup>1</sup> Blaine A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield, *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1977), 15.

<sup>2</sup> David Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern Cities and Region 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 17.

a racist center for white massive resistance to integration. The Magic City lived up to this reputation during the 1960s, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. labeled Birmingham as “the most segregated city in America.” Images of police dogs, fire hoses, and bombings that filled the pages of local and national journals only reinforced the city’s bad reputation.<sup>4</sup> These violent and racially motivated events transformed Birmingham’s narrative from a city known for its booming iron and steel industry to a city branded by white on black violence, local government malfeasance, and racial tension. Justly, historians have increasingly focused on Birmingham as a case study for the Civil Rights Movement and twentieth-century race relations.

Historians have used various approaches to analyze Birmingham’s general role in the Civil Rights Movement and to trace the city’s history of racial inequality; however, few historians have closely studied the relationship between Civil Rights and suburbanization in Birmingham. J. Mills Thornton’s *Dividing Lines* heads a popular approach to Birmingham histories, which examines the political development of Birmingham’s white municipal government and black resistance groups, arguing that black and white leaders shaped the outcome of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham. While political accounts comprise a majority of the literature on Birmingham, interpretations like Thornton’s primarily focus on “white flight” as the principal example of racial housing segregation. This approach often fails to place the events of the 1960s into the broader context of the city’s long history of segregation that

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in the *Norton Anthology of African America Literature*, Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 1997), 1864.

has been integral to Birmingham's city planning since industrial owner's segregated housing in the late-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

Urban historian Charles Connerly's *The Most Segregated City in America* offers the best account of Birmingham's urban and suburban history as it relates to race relations in the mid twentieth century. Connerly studies urban planning measures like racial zoning, urban renewal, and slum clearance to argue that control over urban space played an important role in shaping race relations in Birmingham from the 1880s through the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and after. Connerly wrote on the connection between race and urban space, "Fundamentally, the battle for civil rights in Birmingham, as well as other cities was fought over who controls the land, with whites attempting to limit where and under what circumstances blacks could live."<sup>6</sup> Like Connerly, this research will consider Birmingham's long history of racially discriminatory urban planning practices to argue that *de jure* and *de facto* segregation established a foundation for racially segregated housing that sustained in the mid-twentieth century with the events of the Civil Rights era.

In Birmingham, the separation of housing by race originated in the late-nineteenth century when Birmingham first established racially segregated housing for industrial workers. During Birmingham's early years, historians note that industrialists preferred to hire African American laborers because they cost less and were believed to be more capable than white men of performing the difficult, hot, and dangerous work required to

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<sup>5</sup> Thornton, *Dividing Lines*; Eskew, *But For Birmingham*.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Connerly, *The Most Segregated City in America: City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); for more on race and neighborhood development in Birmingham, see Bobby M. Wilson, *Race and Place in Birmingham: The Civil Rights and Neighborhood Movements* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000).



manufacture pig iron and steel. Birmingham's industrial workers lived in company housing or "project housing" in Birmingham near or adjacent to industrial centers. Within these industrial neighborhoods African American laborers lived segregated from white and immigrant workers.<sup>7</sup>

Glenn Eskew discussed the inequality of black project housing, writing, "Speculators bought tracts of marginal land and crammed them full of 'nigger houses,' a cheap investment that reaped a rich reward by exploiting a captive black work force dependent on segregated rental housing."<sup>8</sup> While conditions of project housing varied depending on the company, all accounts agree that industrialists provided better accommodations for white workers, often constructing housing for black workers with substandard materials like unseasoned pine and tarpaper roofs. While conducting an early twentieth century study on industrial housing by employer in the United States, Leifur Magnusson reported on the poor conditions of black company housing in Birmingham:

The Negro quarters in one town, for instance, immediately adjoin the waste heap of the furnace, the heap towering high above the house. The smoke from the furnaces blows over them, as the houses face the east, and the prevailing winds are from the west or southwest.<sup>9</sup>

Charles Connerly summarized the inequality that characterized Birmingham's working class housing by highlighting the unfortunate irony of Birmingham's industrial situation, which required African American laborers to meet extraordinary production demands for

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<sup>7</sup> Magnusson, *Housing by Employer in the United States*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Eskew, *But For Birmingham*, 64.

<sup>9</sup> Magnusson, *Housing by Employer in the United States*, 72.

low wages, and rewarded these same employees with second-class citizenship and inferior living conditions.<sup>10</sup>



Figures 3.1 and 3.2. White (left) and black (right) housing from the same industrial community, taken in the same year. Image Courtesy of *Housing by Employer in the United States*.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Birmingham's working class residents who lived outside project housing lived in racially mixed neighborhoods adjacent to industrial centers. Neighborhoods like East Birmingham, Avondale, and Ensley offered Birmingham's working class an affordable opportunity to leave the overbearing atmosphere of industrial company housing. Not surprisingly, the racial inequality experienced in project housing extended to housing outside of the industrial town, where racial and economic prejudices confined African Americans to substandard housing in inferior areas, such as along creek beds, railroad lines, or alleys, where residents experienced issues of flooding and noise pollution. Smithfield resident H.G.

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<sup>10</sup> Connerly, *The Most Segregated City in America*, 34.

Cole remembered the condition of black independent housing, and as late as the 1930s he explained, “I counted the brick buildings black people lived in in 1936 and I counted six.”<sup>11</sup> As Cole reported to the *News*, independent African American housing from before World War II rarely included brick building. Most black housing consisted of small, wooden shotgun type houses built one room wide and three-to-four rooms deep with little distinction between the different rooms and no privacy. In addition to the inferior locale and materials used in African American neighborhoods, these areas also suffered from a lack of modern city conveniences like streetlights, paved streets, sidewalks, and sewage services.<sup>12</sup>

*De facto* segregation and the lack of city support for adequate African American housing worsened as the twentieth century progressed. By 1910, Birmingham city aldermen had segregated public transportation and adopted legislation that formally denied Birmingham’s black residents the use of city parks. The disparities between Birmingham’s white and black residents persisted and in 1926 the city commission approved Birmingham’s first racial zoning ordinance. Birmingham’s racial zoning ordinance decreed that under section 9 and 10 of Article II, Birmingham’s black and white residents were restricted to live in separately designated neighborhoods. Section 9 read, “In ‘A-1’ [single family dwellings] and ‘B-1’ [multifamily dwellings] residence districts, no building or part thereof should be occupied or used by a person or persons of

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Leyden, “History Haunts Housing Projects,” *Birmingham News*, December 21, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Connerly, *The Most Segregated City in America*, 20.

the Negro race.” Section 10 decreed the opposite, prohibiting white residents from living in black zoned areas of Birmingham.<sup>13</sup>

The map below from Bobby Wilson’s study of Birmingham’s black housing opportunities illustrates the racial boundaries established in Birmingham’s 1926 zoning ordinance. The black shaded areas show how the city confined over 30 percent of the total population to roughly ten cramped neighborhoods within the city bounds.<sup>14</sup> Wilson’s map also proves how city government located African Americans along the transportation and water lines, where noise and flooding continually affected local resident’s quality of life. The location of these communities on water and transportation lines also ensured that African Americans lived near industrial centers, since production efficiency required industrial areas convenient access to water, as well as local and trunk rail lines. Birmingham’s racial zoning, which Glenn Eskew called, “a spatial manifestation of white supremacy,”<sup>15</sup> remained part of Birmingham city law until 1951, when informal forms of racial zoning replaced the 1926 zoning law.

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<sup>13</sup> Connerly, *The Most Segregated City in America*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Eskew, *But For Birmingham*, 64.

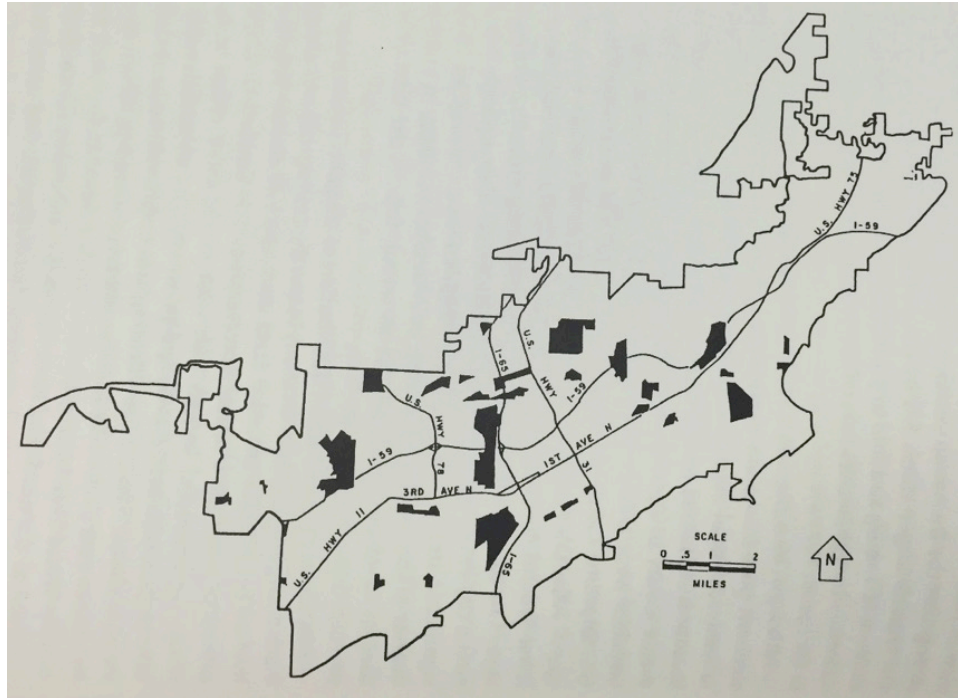


Figure 3.3: The black shading denotes the sections of Birmingham zoned for African American use in 1926. Image from “Black Housing Opportunities in Birmingham, Alabama.”

Nationwide, cities also used the process of redlining to manipulate neighborhood development and confine minority populations to specific areas of the city. After World War II, the Home Owners Loan Association (HOLC) created security maps of cities to evaluate real estate investment risk. Within these maps, four categories were identified and titled, First, Second, Third, and Fourth with corresponding code letters, A, B, C, and D and color-coded green, blue, yellow, and red. Neighborhoods colored green indicated the most stable areas of a city and neighborhoods with redlining represented an area where banks would not invest. Unsurprisingly, HOLC appraisers developed a neighborhood rating systems that undervalued dense, racially mixed, or aging neighborhoods. Redlining excluded minority and low-income populations from loan support and made these populations vulnerable to inflated loan rates by banks and lenders

who exploited this discriminatory process.<sup>16</sup> The 1933 HOLC security map of Birmingham illustrates the inequality of this process as appraisers redlined Birmingham's traditionally black and low-income neighborhoods around the Central Business District, while the city's affluent white neighborhoods south of downtown received the best markings.

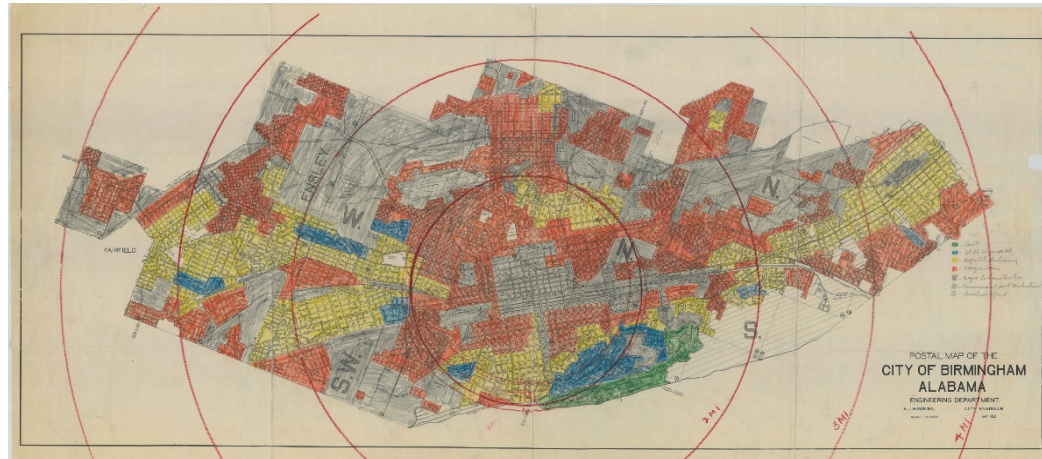


Figure 3.4. 1933 Home Owners Loan Association security Map of Birmingham, AL. Image Courtesy of the National Archives.

After 1950, the preservation of segregated housing became a popular issue when African American's sought housing outside of traditionally black neighborhoods to escape issues of extreme overcrowding and substandard living conditions. African Americans looking to move from black neighborhoods had two choices for improving their living condition: move outside of the city to newly developing peripheral neighborhoods, or move into the old areas of traditionally white neighborhoods. Historian Andrew Weise noted the popularity of postwar African American suburbs, adding that unlike other southern cities, Birmingham escaped the postwar model of the "second

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<sup>16</sup> Gregory D. Squires, *From Redlining to Reinvestment: Community Response to Urban Disinvestment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 2-4.

ghetto” through suburbanization.<sup>17</sup> African American suburban neighborhoods expanded around Birmingham after World War II and throughout the twentieth century as an alternative to Birmingham’s downtown African American neighborhoods, which saw periods of economic decline throughout the Civil Rights Movement and the mid-twentieth century. Bobby Wilson further explained that African Americans were motivated to relocate from traditionally black neighborhoods to new suburban neighborhoods:

Because of available land, privately developed black housing subdivisions have provided black households with new housing without having to invade white neighborhoods. Many of these subdivisions were built outside, but with proximity to the central city. This may explain why Birmingham was one of the few metropolitan areas with a substantial black suburban population prior to 1970.<sup>18</sup>

For those African Americans unwilling or unable to move outside of downtown, moving into white neighborhoods was the sole alternative for escaping overcrowded black neighborhoods. Although a legal solution after 1951, moving into white neighborhoods proved difficult for Birmingham’s black residents due to informal racial zoning that persisted throughout the twentieth century in the form of threats and intimidation by segregationist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, an organization that promoted white supremacy. The transition of African Americans into white neighborhoods initiated much of the racial neighborhood tension that persisted throughout the Civil Rights Movement. The described tension gave name to neighborhoods like “Dynamite Hill,” the section of North Smithfield that segregationists

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<sup>17</sup>Andrew Weise, *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 210.

<sup>18</sup>Bobby M. Wilson, “Black Housing Opportunities in Birmingham, Alabama,” *Southeastern Geographer* 17, no. 1 (May 1977): 51.

commonly bombed after World War II, when blockbusters sold previously white property to black residents on Center Street, which divided the black neighborhood of Smithfield from the predominantly white neighborhood of Graymont.<sup>19</sup> White segregationists reacted to the development of black housing along Center Street by regularly bombing black properties. In 1963, segregationists bombed prominent Civil Rights attorney, Arthur Shore's house on Center Street. No one was injured in the blast but the explosion destroyed Shores' garage, two cars, and damaged the interior of his house.<sup>20</sup> The Shores incident was not an isolated event, as racially motivated bombings occurred regularly between 1945 and 1965 while Birmingham's black and white residents fought over the highly contested North Smithfield area.

Compiled census data from 1950 illustrates the poor condition of African American neighborhoods prior to 1951. Data from the census reveals why African Americans fled black neighborhoods in this period. Reports from 1950 illustrate that 20 of Birmingham's 58 census tracts contained more than 50 percent black households. Of these 20 tracts, the census recorded that 75 percent of African American households contained no private bath or were logged as dilapidated. The census also indicated that at least 10 percent of households in majority African American tracts lacked running water. In addition to the lack of modern amenities in black neighborhoods, these areas experienced extreme overcrowding, as Birmingham did not zone enough black neighborhoods to accommodate the city's black population. The census reporting that by

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<sup>19</sup> Block-busting occurred when land speculators exaggerated the threat of racial integration to convince white home owners in predominantly white neighborhoods to sell their homes. Blockbusters resold these houses at inflated prices to black home buyers.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Holmes and Norman Ridenhour Jr., "No One Injured By Blast on Center Street" *Birmingham News*, Aug. 21, 1963.



1950 in five of the majority black census tracts, 25 percent of households reported more than 1.5 people living per room per house.<sup>21</sup>

Census tracts with Majority (> 50%) African American dwellings		Majority African American tracts				Majority African American tracts	
		>50% of dwellings dilapidated		>75% of dwellings dilapidated (%)		>25% of dwellings with 1.5 or more persons per room	>25% of dwellings with 1.5 or more persons per room
Black	White	#	%	#	%	#	%
20	38	15	75	5	25	5	25

Table 3.1. 1950 Federal Census of Housing and Population for Birmingham, Alabama. Information derived from the 1950 United States Census of Population and Housing.

Other city planning measures like urban renewal and slum clearance also worsened race relations in Birmingham. Urban renewal first became popular in 1949 with Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, which promoted “slum clearance and community redevelopment.” Title I offered federal financial assistance to locally initiated slum clearance and urban redevelopment undertakings.<sup>22</sup> Urban renewal remained popular through the 1960s when President Lyndon B. Johnson enacted nearly 200 pieces of legislation through the Great Society program to attack America’s poverty and improve the national quality of life. As a result of Johnson’s legislation, cities received additional federal funding for slum removal and the repurposing of affected areas. Appropriately termed urban renewal, this process cleared the city’s low-income housing typically

<sup>21</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1950: Housing Statistics for Birmingham, Alabama* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1953), 18-28.

<sup>22</sup> *Urban Renewal: Title I of Housing Act of 1949 and Related Laws as Amended Through Sept. 1, 1968* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968).

occupied by immigrants and African Americans. Critics of this program have accused city governments of using urban renewal to control minority populations, by clearing unwanted neighborhoods and displaced low-income residents in the name of civic improvement.<sup>23</sup>

In Birmingham, urban renewal exacerbated the city's overcrowding issues and forced many of Birmingham's black residents to seek alternative housing in other white neighborhoods and in black suburbs outside the city. Urban renewal projects primarily impacted Birmingham's low-income African American residents. In 1948 and 1949 alone, Birmingham's black residents lost 1,200 dwellings to urban renewal and the city's public housing developments absorbed only a fraction of those displaced.<sup>24</sup>

Birmingham's Southside urban renewal represented the single largest redevelopment project. It displaced 523 black and 92 white families by clearing a twelve-block low-income residential district to build a new medical complex for the University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB).<sup>25</sup> The UAB project so clearly singled out Birmingham's low-income black residents that representatives from the NAACP came to Birmingham to help oppose expansion of the medical center and "the use of federal funds to foster segregation."<sup>26</sup> Birmingham followed the Southside redevelopment project with three other African American neighborhood redevelopment projects in Titusville, Avondale, and Ensley's Tuxedo Junction.

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<sup>23</sup> Herbert Gans, "The Human Implications of Redevelopment and Relocation Planning," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 25, no. 1 (1959): 15-26.

<sup>24</sup> Eskew, *But For Birmingham*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>26</sup>"NAACP Heads Here to Oppose Expansion of Medical Center" *Birmingham News*, June 24, 1953.

Collectively, the Titusville, Avondale, and Tuxedo Junction projects affected 272 acres of African American communities, displacing approximately 7,600 of Birmingham's working class black residents.<sup>27</sup> These projects are detailed in the 1959 Housing Authority of the Birmingham District report, a twenty-two-page document detailing the cost and benefits of Birmingham's 1958 housing projects.<sup>28</sup> The report's depicted urban renewal in a positive light and included images that suggest these projects affected a diverse group of Birmingham's black and white families. However, the report's details, including the neighborhood affected and the average family income, suggest that the city primarily targeted low-income African American neighborhoods for urban renewal projects in 1959.

In the mid-twentieth century, Birmingham's residents also adopted white flight as a new method for racially segregating housing. White flight occurred when white residents abandoned urban neighborhoods for newly developed suburbs to escape the violence of the Civil Rights Movement, and the integration of urban neighborhoods, schools, and public facilities. Participants of white flight preferred new suburban neighborhoods for their ability to preserve segregation with majority-white neighborhoods, new independent school systems, and segregated public facilities. The success of white flight in Birmingham's southern suburbs is indicated in Federal Census reports that show low numbers of African Americans in Birmingham's popular white suburban communities. The census recorded that in 1960 "nonwhite" residents accounted for 30.5 percent of Birmingham's population of 194,788, while surrounding suburbs

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<sup>27</sup> Eskew, *But For Birmingham*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> "Housing Authority of the Birmingham District 1959," from the *Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor Collection 268*, Birmingham Public Library Archives.

showed significantly lower figures of nonwhite residents. Census records from Homewood show that 13 percent of the city's 6,290 residents were nonwhite, while the census indicated nonwhite residents comprised 1.4 percent of Mountain Brook's 4,298 residents.<sup>29</sup> In Birmingham, advertisers and realtors helped maintain racially segregated suburbs.

Birmingham's newspaper advertisements reflected local efforts to maintain existing racial segregation patterns in the city's new residential areas. Newspaper classified listings from Birmingham's largest news sources, the *Birmingham News* and the *Post Herald* listed separate house advertisements for "colored" and non-colored readers. Publishers and advertisers used different language to describe housing features in colored classified listings suggesting that advertisers thought white buyers were entitled to newer, nicer housing than black buyers. One house in Honey Suckle Park advertised, "Rancher, brick and cedar shakes. Entrance hall, 6 rms., bath, gas forced air furnace, Burglar bars, insulated, weather striped, insulated, lot, chain link fence."<sup>30</sup> Other colored advertisements offered minimal aesthetic description with ads like, "1221 1st Court West, 5 rooms, priced at \$5,750, terms or cash," or "4 large room home, double sink, bath."<sup>31</sup> Unlike ads from the non-colored section that featured a home's modern appliances, design, and convenience, colored advertisements highlighted security features and basic information.

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<sup>29</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Eighteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1960: Population Statistics for Birmingham, Alabama* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1963), 9.

<sup>30</sup> "Honey Suckle Park" *Birmingham News*, March 15, 1964.

<sup>31</sup> "West End" *Birmingham News*, March 15, 1964. "Wylam" *Birmingham News*, October 17, 1954.

The bulk of colored advertisements also confined black buyers to specific areas of town where African American neighborhoods historically existed. Examples include Smithfield, Avondale, Collegeville, Titusville, Southside, North Birmingham, College Hills, Ensley, Pratt City, and Bessemer. Few colored advertisements listed properties in racially transitioning neighborhoods, where in the latter half of the 1960s black residents began to occupy the fringes of white neighborhoods like Woodlawn, East Lake, East Birmingham, and Hueytown. No colored listings featured houses in middle-class neighborhoods like Roebuck or Forest Park, or “Over the Mountain” communities like Mountain Brook, Homewood, Vestavia Hills, and Hoover. The type of properties listed for sale also distinguished colored and non-colored advertisements, as many of the colored advertisements featured rental properties and multifamily units, like apartments and duplexes. In contrast, white properties predominantly featured single-family dwellings and very few rental properties.<sup>32</sup>

Realtors shared many of the same racial prejudices as advertisers. One *News* article titled, “Real, Imagined Barriers Keep Many Communities Segregated” perfectly described the dog-whistle techniques Birmingham real estate agents used to dissuade black home buyers from buying in white neighborhoods without showing explicit racial prejudice.<sup>33</sup> The author of this article chronicled the events of an open house from a middle class white neighborhood in Birmingham where a white female realtor showed a for-sale house to two potential male buyers. The author described the first man as a casually dressed white man in a tan sedan, and the other man as a young black man

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<sup>32</sup> Information derived from the *Birmingham News* and the *Birmingham Post Herald*.

<sup>33</sup> “Dog-whistle” originated as a political phrase used to describe veiled or coded speech that means one thing to a general audience, and something different to a targeted or specific subgroup.

dressed professionally and driving a foreign car. After both men viewed the house, the writer described how the real estate agent doubted the black man's ability to buy the house, despite his nice appearance and obviously expensive car. The agent then questioned the black man about his qualification for FHA or VA loan financing. The African American man revealed to the agent that he was prepared to pay for the house mostly in cash with only a small mortgage. Despite the man's ability to buy the house the article explained that the real estate agent directed the black man to another racially mixed subdivision nearby where homes were less costly. After the black man left the open house, the writer explained that the real estate agent doubted the man's ability to pay in cash, adding, "I just quoted him the list price. You can probably get this house for two or three, maybe even four thousand less." This story was characteristic of the experience black buyers encountered when buying homes outside of traditionally black neighborhoods. Birmingham's housing discrimination became so uncontrollable that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development sent testers to Birmingham to curb housing discrimination from real estate agents who purposely steered buyers to certain neighborhoods.<sup>34</sup>

The evidence of discrimination in advertising suggests how advertisers and publishers successfully preserved segregation in some parts of Birmingham by using a "dog-whistle" style of advertising to subtly convey that African Americans were unwanted in Birmingham's white neighborhoods. Real estate agents also employed "dog-whistle" types of discrimination, making it nearly impossible for African Americans buyers to accuse realtors of breaking the National Association of Realtors "Code of Equal

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<sup>34</sup> Brett Guge, Ralph Weaver, and Kitty Frieden, "Real, Imagined Barriers Keep Many Communities Segregated," *Birmingham News*, date unknown.

Opportunity.” The difficulty encountered when filing a formal complaint is understood in figures from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) which reported 217 housing complaints in Alabama in 1978, and found only 68, or 33 percent, of these complaints to be valid, likely because subtle discrimination was hard to describe and even harder to prove.<sup>35</sup>

Other factors helped accelerate suburbanization after years of formal and informal segregation practice established a local standard of racial separation. Fear of integrated public schools existed as a primary motivator for white families to move to suburban areas, especially after May 17, 1954 when United States Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruled that, “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”<sup>36</sup> Undoubtedly, the idea of school integration incited fears from many of Birmingham’s white residents who opposed race mixing. In reaction to *Brown v. Board* and in the years that followed, education and race played an important role in determining suburban expansion. White families moved outside of the Birmingham city limits to unincorporated suburbs with either separate school systems or carefully drawn whites-only boundaries. The absence of racial diversity in many of these areas, such as Mountain Brook, Homewood, Vestavia Hills, and later Hoover, preserved school segregation. As an alternative to moving outside of Birmingham, other families opted to enroll their children in private and parochial schools. As a result, the greater Birmingham area saw a marked increase in private schools and suburban school districts between 1950 and 1970.

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<sup>35</sup> Guge, Weaver, and Frieden, “Real, Imagined Barriers.”

<sup>36</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

Unsurprisingly, Alabama's city and state officials, including Governor George C. Wallace, advocated for the development of private schools to uphold school segregation. In 1963, the *Montgomery Advertiser* reported that Governor Wallace personally donated \$100 to two groups seeking to form private schools to avoid integrated public school. The West End Parents for Private Schools in Birmingham's West End received a donation from Wallace, as did a similar organization in Tuskegee. The *Montgomery Advertiser* quoted Wallace saying, "I would encourage people in Alabama and elsewhere to help these people in their courageous efforts to prevent the takeover of their schools by the federal government."<sup>37</sup> Another article from the *Birmingham News* featured advice to parents from the West End Parents for Private Schools after courts ordered West End High School to integrate. Ray McFall, the group's president, advised parents to obtain a transfer to another school in the city and return to West End while the city processed the transfer.<sup>38</sup>

Another article from the *Birmingham News* explained how parents from the West End Parents for Private Schools enlisted the help of state representative Malcom Bethea to aid the West End parent movement established to uphold school segregation. *News* writer Roger Thames quoted Bethea at a demonstration for parents and students who supported segregation. Bethea encouraged parents to lead the movement for private schools, saying:

When written objection has been filed with the school board by parent or guardian, no child shall be compelled to attend any school in which the races are comingled. In such a case a child shall be entitled to such aid for education as

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<sup>37</sup> "Wallace Writes Checks for 2 Private Schools" *Montgomery Advertiser*, Sept. 20, 1963.

<sup>38</sup> "Governor Wallace Aids Drive for Private School" *Birmingham News*, Sept. 20, 1963.



may be prescribed by law. If transfer to a segregated school is refused, further attendance at the integrated school is not required.<sup>39</sup>

The formation of parents' groups to fight segregated schooling as well as the presence of these groups in the *Birmingham News* suggests the importance of this issue to Birmingham's white parents during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when Birmingham first experienced public school integration.

In the years immediately following *Brown v. Board* several private schools opened on the fringes of Birmingham and in the city's suburbs to accommodate the increased enrollment demand for private schools. In 1956, Saint Rose Academy opened on Red Mountain, and in 1958 the Highlands School opened for admission in Birmingham. Additionally, Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic School built a four-room addition to accommodate their increased enrollment in 1955. Over the next two decades two other prominent Christian schools, Shades Mountain Christian School (1974) and Briarwood Christian Academy (1977), opened in Birmingham suburbs. Shortly after, in 1966, Mountain Brook established an independent school system, as did Vestavia Hills in 1970, and Homewood in 1972.

The map show below illustrates the effects of school integration on suburbanization. The red markers represent the private schools that developed in Birmingham after World War II, and the green markers show the public middle schools, junior highs, and high schools established in Mountain Brook, Vestavia Hills, and Homewood during the mid-twentieth century. This map also effectively illustrates the

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<sup>39</sup> Roger Thames, "Demonstration Called off after fatal bombing," *Birmingham News*, Sept. 16, 1963.

sheer number of schools that established in the years after 1954, likely to accommodate the students who could not be transferred to segregated schools.

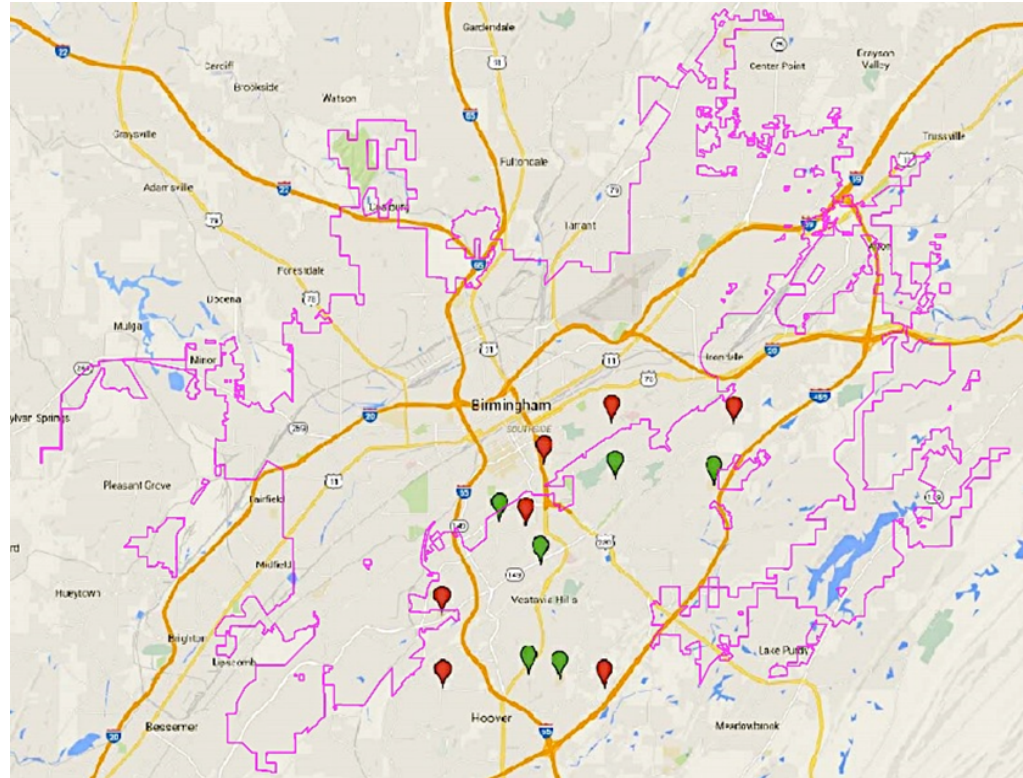


Figure 3.5. Red markers indicate private schools built after Brown v. Board and the green markers represent public school.

Similar to education, fear of integrated spaces also affected Birmingham's suburban development. On October 24, 1961 a Birmingham judge ordered the full integration of all sixty-seven of Birmingham's parks, thirty-eight playgrounds, four public golf courses, eight public swimming pools, the city zoo, and the art museum. Stubbornly determined to uphold segregation, Frank Wagner, the Birmingham City Commission and park director, closed Birmingham's public facilities on January 26,

1962 to evade integration.<sup>40</sup> Aside from Legion Field, the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, the Birmingham Zoo, Woodrow Wilson Park, and Vulcan Park, all other public facilities including parks, pools, and golf courses remained closed until June 29 and July 23, 1963, when golf courses, parks, and pools reopened as integrated facilities in time to accommodate summer crowds. An article from the *Birmingham Post Herald* titled “Golf Course Use Warning Issued” captured the mutual frustration that Birmingham Parks Superintendent Frank Wagner and city residents felt over the closing of Birmingham’s public facilities. Written three months before the reopening of Birmingham’s golf course the article described Wagner’s plea to Birmingham police to crack down on the illegal use of Birmingham’s Roebuck, Boswell, and Cooper Green courses.<sup>41</sup>

Residents in Mountain Brook, Homewood and Vestavia Hills did not feel the full impact of public facility closures due to the many established public facilities in these areas. By 1962 “Over the Mountain” residents had the choice of golfing at the Country Club of Birmingham (in Mountain Brook, 1926), the Mountain Brook Country Club (1929), the Hollywood Country Club (1926), or the Chase Lake Country Club in Hoover (1962). These communities also opened several public facilities in the years following Birmingham’s closures. In 1962 Vestavia Hills opened a YMCA branch in Shades Valley, and in 1965 Mountain Brook built a swim and tennis club. “Over the Mountain” communities also enjoyed their own public libraries and social clubs. The Club opened in the 1950’s but underwent several expansion projects, like the addition of the “Men’s Grill” and “Inn Room” in the 1960s to accommodate increased membership demands.

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<sup>40</sup> Thornton, *Diving Lines*, 254.

<sup>41</sup> “Golf Course Warning Issued,” *Birmingham Post Herald*, March 13, 1963.

While more difficult to measure than the effects of schooling or public facilities on suburbanization, fear also catalyzed Birmingham's mid-twentieth-century suburban growth. Charles Connerly noted how 50 bombings occurred in the Magic City between 1947 and 1966, writing, "bombings began in response to black efforts to nullify the zoning law that separated by race as well as land use."<sup>42</sup> In addition to bombings, Birmingham hosted many of the Civil Rights Movements chief players and events including social marches, demonstration, sit-ins, freedom riders, and more. An article from the *Birmingham News* read, "Man, don't go down there They'll kill anything white." The anonymous man spoke this line to reporter Charles Richardson while Richardson covered a downtown riot for the *News*. Richardson continued describing the riot, writing:

Negroes tossed stone and chucks of brick as motorists were caught in shock and surprise without warning, There were more sounds of breaking glass as stones and missiles crunched through auto windows...Several hundred people hooted and cat-called. Sounds of, "Hey, Charlie" rose from the mobs."<sup>43</sup>

Charles Richardson's account of this 1967 riot represents one of the countless articles on riots and demonstrations published by the *News* between 1950 and 1970. These stories increasingly characterized downtown Birmingham as an unstable environment where violent exchanges frequently transpired. Birmingham's apparent instability created another push towards suburbia, especially for families and elderly residents who sought reliably safe and quiet neighborhoods.

Birmingham's suburbanization is deeply tied to issues of racial exclusion and segregation. Outside of the mid-twentieth century, Birmingham has maintained a long

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<sup>42</sup> Connerly, *The Most Segregated City in America*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Richardson, "Bottles pop like fireworks in riot," *Birmingham News*, July 23, 1967.

history of racial segregation. Housing segregation began in Birmingham's founding years when white and black laborers lived in separate project housing neighborhoods. The segregation extended outside of industrial areas and quickly infiltrated all African American neighborhoods. In the twentieth century, zoning law, urban renewal, slum clearance, and white flight exacerbated the already widespread problem of segregation. The events of the Civil Rights Movement accelerated and popularized in Birmingham the residential patterns that have affected Birmingham since its origin.

## Conclusion

Issues of race and suburban lifestyle trends continued to influence neighborhood development beyond the period examined in this research. Like other American cities, Birmingham's expansion increased beyond the original postwar suburbs, as the city built new highways like I-459 and extended existing highways like I-65 to facilitate continued suburban sprawl south and east of downtown. Despite sustained growth throughout the twentieth century, this study breaks in 1970 when Birmingham's suburbs began developing as separate cities during a second wave of suburban expansion that produced edge cities and techno-burbs, like Hoover, Chelsea, Inverness, and Pelham.<sup>44</sup> Although technically part of Birmingham's metropolitan area, suburbs and techno-burbs became increasingly independent as new malls and office parks built throughout the 1970s allowed residents to live, work, and shop in the suburbs, rendering the city obsolete.

1970 is also significant as the decade that Birmingham began to seriously implement integration in schools and public facilities as major civil rights victories from the 1960s such as the Civil Rights Act and the invalidation of the Pupil Placement Act, made it increasingly difficult to delay integration. In response to integration, many of Birmingham's remaining white residents relocated to predominantly white suburban neighborhoods where newly built school systems and private schools preserved

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<sup>44</sup> Techno-burbs and edge-city are terms used by urban historians to describe America's second wave of suburban expansion. Historian Robert Fishman coined the term "techno-burb" and author Joel Garreau created the phrase "edge-city."

segregation. The steady loss of Birmingham residents to white flight caused enormous population loss in Birmingham and affected the city's urban landscape by decreasing the city's tax revenue and accelerating urban deterioration.

The 1970s also reflected a turning point in Birmingham's industry. During this decade, Birmingham experienced the disintegration of several iron and steel industries. The loss of industry initiated a period of economic transition as the city worked to restructure its economy. Birmingham's economic decline began in the 1960s when inferior iron ores, advances in metallurgy, and global competition from Germany and Japan, rendered Birmingham's industries overpriced and obsolete.<sup>45</sup> Throughout the late-1950s and 1960s, Birmingham's major manufactures including United States Pipe and Foundry Company (formerly Sloss-Sheffield), the Woodward Iron Company, and Tennessee Coal and Iron experienced declines in demand, and in the early 1970s, USP&F, Woodward Iron Company, and Avondale's Birmingham mill closed.<sup>46</sup> As Birmingham's former industries waned, The University of Alabama emerged in the late 1960s replacing industry as Birmingham's largest employer and facilitating Birmingham's transition from an industrial-based economy to a medical and service-based economy.<sup>47</sup> Changes to Birmingham's industry, as well as the arrival of the techno-suburb and the implementation of integration, transitioned Birmingham into a new period of urban development.

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<sup>45</sup> Fazio, *Landscape of Transformations*, 186.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

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