"So Rude and So Crude": Charlotte's History with Urban Renewal and the Annihilation of the African American Community and Culture of Brooklyn, 1960-1970

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Abstract. This article aims to highlight the impact of urban renewal on African American communities in Charlotte between the 1950s and 1970s, specifically the Brooklyn community. The work also identifies the numerous facets of culture that existed in the Brooklyn community and how urban renewal led to the destruction of that culture. Previous research has examined the impact that urban renewal has had on inner cities, on different ethnic groups, and how white city leaders used urban renewal to continue residential segregation. My research investigates the specific impact of urban renewal on African American culture, analyzing the effect of the destruction of the physical community of Brooklyn on the community's culture. This paper relies heavily on my analysis of an oral history project by Dr. Karen Flint, which includes over forty interviews with former Brooklyn residents. The project also interviewed several of the white leaders who pushed the urban renewal project forward, illustrating how these white leaders remained blind to the significance of Brooklyn's culture to destroy the community. My paper concludes that Charlotte's white leaders' inherent racism led to the destruction of Brooklyn's physical community, contributing to the forced displacement of residents and led to the destruction of the pre-displacement culture. This research is important both to recognize the strength and significance of the Brooklyn community's culture and to understand how racism in Charlotte's past has shaped the current residential landscape of Charlotte.

Keywords: Urban renewal, 1960s, Charlotte, North Carolina, racism, culture.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy promised to employ the Housing Act of 1954 "to provide decent housing for all of our people."[1] While this was a lofty goal, the opposite in fact occurred throughout the nation. Local redevelopment commissions completed surveys that deemed certain areas as blighted, and then federal funding with little oversight was provided to white city officials in southern cities to demolish these blighted areas. By 1973, urban renewal programs had destroyed 600,000 housing units and displaced two million people.[2] Under the leadership of Vernon Sawyer, the Redevelopment Commission of Charlotte stated their plan to "turn decaying sections of our city into pleasant, profitable neighborhoods."[3] Charlotte's white leaders, including Sawyer and Charlotte mayor, Stan Brookshire, embodied the southern spirit that was blind to the systemic oppression faced by African American communities. The fact that these "decaying sections of the city" turned out to be Brooklyn and other historically Black communities was not a coincidence. A strong religious community, a vibrant business district, and residents who looked after one another connected the community and created the culture of Brooklyn. Charlotte's white leaders could justify the destruction of Brooklyn by remaining blind to the vibrant culture and fictive kinship that fused the tight-knit community.

The destruction of Brooklyn's culture fits the definition of "ethnocide," a term created by Raphael Lemkin in 1944. Lemkin coined the term as a synonym for genocide to clarify that killing members of a group was unnecessary to carry out their destruction.[4] Early scholars of genocide argued that cases of ethnocide could only exist within broader cases of genocide. These scholars argued that when a group of people were killed, their culture was eliminated along with the physical being. Ethnocide did not receive widespread scholarly acceptance until 1970 when French ethnologist, Robert Jaulin, argued that culture could be destroyed while keeping the people.[5] Simply put, ethnocide is the erasure of a people's culture without physically eliminating the people. In the case of Brooklyn, white elites utilized urban renewal to destroy the physical community, leading to the forced displacement of residents and the erasure of the community's culture. African American culture has been strengthened through centuries of oppression to a point where it could be argued that Black culture is America's strongest culture. Charlotte's white leader's use of urban renewal, and forced displacement, to accelerate Brooklyn's loss of culture proves that even the strongest culture faced difficulty remaining intact when faced with forced displacement. This innate racism apparent in Charlotte's white leaders drove them to utilize federal urban renewal funds to destroy the entire Brooklyn community, which I argue led to the erasure of the pre-displacement culture.

Understanding what denotes a culture is necessary to recognize the erasure of one. Barrett Holmes Pitner's definition of a culture is "a collection of people in a specific place who work together to survive in perpetuity."[6] While Pitner provides a general definition, the richness and complexity of African American culture demands a deeper explanation. Centuries of oppression and exploitation during slavery and Jim Crow created a necessity to create a strong culture to combat these injustices. While African Americans fought to survive slavery, they fabricated music, dances, and religions to strengthen cultural ties within their communities. Even after slavery, whites still viewed African Americans as inferior and created new social and physical isolation practices. Segregation continued the need for African American communities to realize strong cultures to combat the systemic oppression they faced. Ideas of fictive kinship were still popular among Blacks during the nineteenth century in Charlotte. Harassed by hardships and struggling to find enough decent housing, Brooklyn residents took in and cared for many people outside of their immediate family.[7] Alfred Alexander, son of civil rights activist Kelly Alexander Sr., recalled how "the neighbors pretty much would watch out for everyone's children."[8] During Brooklyn's existence, the religious, social, educational, and economic centers worked in unison to create a cohesive culture that aided in providing safety and kinship in the lives of former residents of Brooklyn.

Establishing a more socially-inclusive and culturally-aware history of urban renewal is also necessary to realize how white business leaders utilized the federal initiatives to achieve their desired outcome of a racially divided Charlotte. Before the 1954 Housing Act, the 1949 Housing Act focused on "redevelopment" versus "renewal." Redevelopment consisted of clearing blighted communities and selling the land to private investors for new development projects. The new idea of renewal was introduced to emphasize the renovation of existing housing rather than large-scale neighborhood clearance. Due to a lack of federal oversight in the 1950's, white leaders were able to utilize federal funds to beautify their cities while neglecting the welfare of displaced citizens. Progressive idealists began to voice apprehension to urban renewal projects as the number of displaced residents continued to grow while low-income housing options stayed the same. To avoid a confrontational backlash, federal officials presented a new focus on renewal and rehabilitation of blighted areas rather than clearance and redevelopment. This change in policy came from evidence that clearance of low-income areas and the displacement of its residents only overcrowded existing low-income areas. This, in turn, created an environment for the growth of slums rather than the removal of slums.[9]

During the height of urban renewal projects in the 1960s, economic rea-
soning frequently outweighed the social impact these projects had on displaced
residents. An early optimist of urban renewal programs such as Robert Weaver
believed that raising tax incomes with redevelopment programs would provide
funds for social welfare assistance. More recently, scholars of urban history such
as Thomas Hanchett have uncovered how a multi-generational legacy of racism
stemming from the Jim Crow era influenced local leaders to institute policies to
disenfranchise and segregate Black communities in southern cities. Contempo-
rary scholars agree that the practice of urban renewal did little more than dis-
place mainly Black communities and replace them with mainly white business
districts or higher income housing. However, there are few works that directly
focus on how urban renewal led to the elimination of Black culture which ex-
isted in destroyed communities. Growing up during the Jim Crow era allowed
Charlotte's city leaders to remain desensitized to the cultural significance of the
Brooklyn community to the entire African American community of Charlotte.

Historians have analyzed the federal initiative of urban renewal, which
encouraged white leaders in the South to reshape cities to protect a legacy of
racism and segregation. Scholars of urban history between the 1950s and 1980s
divide into two schools of thought: those who view urban renewal as an eco-
nomically, politically, and socially positive practice and those who argue that
the entire practice was racist, unjust, and targeted mainly poor Black commu-
nities. Robert Weaver and John Lindquist reflected the optimism of the 1960s
by predicting that the federal urban renewal policy would raise property and
tax values. Conservatives used this "market force" ideology to back justifica-
tions of urban renewal in the mid-1900s. William Collins and Katherine Shester
represent a small percentage of modern scholars who continue to focus solely
on economic arguments as ideal for urban renewal as a positive. This school of
thought provides evidence of poverty reduction and employment growth, ar-
guing that urban renewal has strengthened local economies in the past and can
once again. Still, these scholars have failed to explain the disappearance of Afri-
can American culture. Economic justification remained the standard during the
height of urban renewal projects; however, strong opposition to these projects
has always existed.

The second school of thought included social activist Jane Jacobs, a well-
known critic of initial urban renewal programs from the 1950s. Her scholarship
argues that urban renewal programs' "top-down" structure led to their ineffec-
tiveness and effectively led to "the sacking of our cities."[10] Herbert Gans fur-
thered this argument in 1972 by stating that redevelopment plans benefitted
local redevelopment officials at the expense of the displaced residents.[11] The im-

pact of an absence of federal guidance on communities razed by urban renewal projects was never properly resolved, and local governments could forcibly displace thousands of culturally-connected minority communities with federal funding. Since the rise of skepticism of big government in the 1980s, scholars have arrived at a majority consensus that views urban renewal as a negative. Historians such as Brent Ryan and John Rennie Short have examined urban renewal programs' negative social and economic outcomes in specific cities. Hanchett and other contemporary scholars agree that white desire to maintain racial segregation had an overwhelming impact on plans to change and modernize cities. This paper argues that Charlotte's white leaders were oblivious to the culture in Brooklyn, which led to the use of urban renewal to destroy the community and to satisfy a racially-driven desire to maintain segregation in Charlotte. Concentrating on the cultural elements within the Brooklyn community rather than focusing on urban renewal policy allows this paper to add to the history of urban and African American studies.

Senator Robert A. Taft was an influential senator from Ohio during the 1950s whom scholars regard as one of the most influential legislators never to become president. Taft was also vocal in his belief that the only justification for providing federal funds for redevelopment was if this plan provided "everyone in this country with decent housing."[12] Taft took this even further by stating that if economic conditions did not allow displaced residents to afford decent housing, the federal government should provide subsidies to provide housing for the displaced. While Taft was arguing to justify the expenditure of billions of federal dollars, the social implications he mentioned were important. Not all federal officials were worried about urban renewal's impact on poor Blacks residing in slum areas. One federal official went as far to say that urban redevelopment provided city officials with "a good opportunity to get rid of the local niggertown."[13] This blatantly racist statement epitomizes how white city leaders continued to keep the racist ideologies from the Jim Crow era alive. Charlotte's leaders' failure to utilize urban renewal funds for social welfare purposes shows how city leaders misused the federal funds Charlotte received. The racial implication of this misuse becomes clear through the realization that white leaders erased the African American community of Brooklyn only to place Charlotte's government district on the land where the community once stood.[14]

Seventy years before the urban renewal program bulldozed Brooklyn, the Black elites of Charlotte, also known as the "better class," lived there.[15] During Reconstruction, and for a short time preceding it, Black and white "better classes" often created alliances that worked to raise the economic status of Charlotte. This intermingling of races solidified Charlotte's status as a New South

city. These civil race relations in the South only offered a brief interlude before the twentieth century ushered in the Jim Crow laws, furthering African Americans' disfranchisement.[16] As white supremacy continued to spread, the melding of races ceased, and communities and business districts became either all-white or all Black. White Charlotte businessmen pushed African American businesses out of downtown to strengthen this segregation. They placed restrictive covenants on lots in suburban areas denying ownership to anyone of the "colored race."[17] Due to disfranchisement from Jim Crow laws, communities of color lacked simple infrastructure such as paved streets, streetlights, curbs, and gutters.[18] Decades of diverted investment created a lack of infrastructure, allowing Brooklyn to deteriorate into what Charlotte's Mayor, Stanford Brookshire, described as "disgraceful crime-and-disease-ridden slums in the shadows of the uptown office buildings."[19] Charlotte's white leaders constantly tried to portray a narrative that viewed Charlotte as a uniquely southern city. However, their reasoning to eliminate the Brooklyn community was analogous to the reasoning Birmingham's City Commissioners provided to destroy the blighted community of Avondale, Alabama. The "blighted neighborhoods visibility to Birmingham's white elite" made the white elite uncomfortable on their drives to and from work.[20] Brookshire and fellow white city leaders in Charlotte focused on, and propagandized, the deterioration of select parts of Brooklyn to justify their decision to demolish the entire community.

Two hundred businesses, schools, churches, and recreational facilities made Brooklyn the cultural, spiritual, educational, and economic center for Charlotte's African Americans. Brooklyn was, in the words of local Charlotte NAACP leader, Kelly Alexander Jr, "a community… not a ghetto in the most negative sense of the term."[21] Brooklyn housed the first high school for Blacks in Charlotte, christened Second Ward High School. Carver College was also an academic institution for African Americans housed in the basement of Second Ward High. Brooklyn's residents had access to the Brevard Street Library, organized in 1905 as the first "colored" library in Charlotte.[22] There were numerous recreational accommodations within the Brooklyn community, including branches of the YWCA and YMCA. Brooklyn's youth participated in social enrichment with the Boy and Girl Scouts of America. Churches were central to social life in Brooklyn; according to resident James Ross, there were "twenty-three churches big enough for people to remember."[23] All these elements together created a self-sustaining community within Brooklyn that allowed residents to find anything nearby.

Oral histories from Brooklyn residents help paint a picture of a collection of people working together and utilizing kinship to survive. The urban renew-

al program destroyed the home, and the community that Barbara Steele called home for twenty-four years. She recalled her time at Second Ward High School, where "the teachers were just like your parents."[24] Steele noted that teachers from Second Ward High were even willing to buy their students a pair of shoes or a dress, and she felt that "it was really like another home."[25] These teachers were contributing to the culture of Brooklyn by working together to help their students survive. Arthur L. Stinson was another former resident of Brooklyn who explained the connectivity of the fictive kinship culture of Brooklyn: "We were raised by the community. Not just our individual parents or relatives. We were a much closer unit as a family, and I think that my being raised by the whole community was a lot better system."[26] These descriptions of Brooklyn equate to a community that worked together to overcome the oppressive conditions and helped residents survive and excel. According to cultural historian, Theodore Downing, redevelopment projects make low-income residents the "unfortunate victims of other people's progress."[27] No matter how strong the culture in Brooklyn was, it was nearly impossible for residents to maintain the community's pre-displacement culture in the face of involuntary displacement.

Few white residents of Charlotte believed that clearing the buildings in Brooklyn would also effectively erase the community's culture. Don Bryant was a member of the Charlotte City Council in 1961 when Brooklyn's urban renewal was beginning. Bryant was also the only councilman to express the belief that residents of Brooklyn "had a culture all their own, they even had a language almost all its own."[28] When the executive director of the Redevelopment Commission of Charlotte, Vernon Sawyer, was asked about destroying the culture in Brooklyn, he replied, "the culture was so rude and so crude they couldn't defend it."[29] Sawyer's statement accurately represents the opinions that most of Charlotte's white leaders had of Brooklyn's culture. John Thrower was another member of the Charlotte City Council during the 1960s. During an interview with Thrower, he stated that "black people smell differently because they simply didn't have the facilities to remain clean."[30] Thrower's overtly racist statement shows that while urban renewal was being pushed to destroy the Brooklyn community, Charlotte's city council members embodied racist ideologies from Jim Crow. As bulldozers razed homes and businesses, the Brooklyn community lost physical and cultural foundations. Charlotte's whites may not have recognized Brooklyn's vibrant African American culture. Nevertheless, to most Brooklyn residents, Christianity and the churches were the strongest cultural elements within the community.

As was the case in many Black communities, a central element of Brooklyn's culture was religion. Before urban renewal bulldozed the Vinegar Hill section

of Charlottesville, Virginia, white elites viewed the community as "an American subsociety that functioned as an entity unto itself."[31] Brooklyn was no different; religion and the churches were a fundamental part of this subsociety. Every September, Bishop Charles Grace, also known as "Sweet Daddy Grace," from the House of Prayer for All People, hosted a parade in Brooklyn. This parade was the highlight of the fall for the community. Residents described the House of Prayer for All People as a church that cared for the entire community. The church's founder, Grace, specifically directed the efforts of the House of Prayer for All People at the low-income areas of Brooklyn as a way to help "the least of thine brethren."[32] Connie Patton recalled how, during hard times, the church "would feed people for five cents, they would get a bowl of beans and cornbread."[33] Patton also recalled how the church checked on anyone who got sick, "they were always there to help the people."[34] While Grace holds a special place in former inhabitants memories, the United House of Prayer for All People was not the only church influential to the culture in Brooklyn.

Friendship Missionary Baptist Church was another culturally important church that looked out for the entire community, not just church members. Reverend John Lewis Powell had a lasting impact on former resident, Arthur Wallace Sr., and many other former residents of Brooklyn. Wallace described Reverend Powell as a humble man who visited sick residents on his own "instead of having somebody special" carry out the visit.[35] These personal visits demonstrated the Brooklyn community's strong sense of kinship. Within the church, there was a vibrant musical culture that included songs that had grown from centuries of oppression. Members could have joined four different choirs: a hymn choir, a children's choir, a senior choir, and the main choir. Wallace explained that the hymn choir was a strictly vocal group, and "the words told the story of the songs."[36] Religious hymns like the ones Wallace describes have existed in African American culture since slavery. The varied forms of expressions that former slaves employed worked to teach their children about the situation they were in and ways they could change it.[37] Another former church member, Walter Kennedy, recalled how once the community "found out the church had to leave Brooklyn, we [members] did a thirty-day continuous service."[38] This thirty-day service shows the Brooklyn community's unity and Friendship Missionary Baptist Church's importance. Christianity and the churches were the foundations of the culture in Brooklyn. The schools and recreational centers also held strong importance in the lives of Brooklyn's residents.

Second Ward High School opened its doors as the first high school in Charlotte for African Americans in 1923.[39] Connie Patton who attended Second Ward High, he recalled that it was the "greatest high school in the world."[40] Patton also

recalled that the ROTC program at Second Ward High, prepared young men to excel in life as productive members of society. Second Ward High had a fierce rivalry with another Black school in Charlotte, West Charlotte High School. Each fall, this rivalry came to a head at the annual Queen City Classic football game at Charlotte's Memorial Stadium. This football game brought Charlotte's entire African American community together for a night of friendly banter and fierce competition. However, it was not always about competition between Second Ward High and West Charlotte High students. Former resident, Christine Bowser, remembered how the best players from each school's bands filled The Birdland with great jazz music each weekend.[41] Second Ward High's building was also home to Carver College, a night school created for African American veterans returning from World War II. Along with advancing students' educations and lives, Carver College also improved the Brooklyn community. The Carver College Annual Report from the 1958-59 school year lists the different activities students participated in throughout the year. These activities included distributing food baskets to needy families, "a beautiful and fun-filled May Day," a track meet, and assisting Johnson C. Smith's drama department with two plays and three dances.[42] Events at Second Ward High School and Carver College help to portray the strong sense of pride in the tight-knit community and culture of Brooklyn.

Segregation played an integral part in concentrating these elements into the community of Brooklyn. Racial segregation enacted by Charlotte's white leaders only permitted African Americans to live and establish businesses in the racial zones that city leaders had created. Charlotte's white business elites, such as John G. Hood and William Henry Belk, were two of the first to participate in the creation of racially divided communities. Hood completed and sold a development project to Belk in 1910, which included twenty-seven shotgun houses and twenty-two undeveloped lots. The project was sold for $13,500 for what would eventually become nearly fifty shotgun houses marketed to low-income Blacks in Charlotte. By comparison, the average sales price of just one home in the white suburbs of Charlotte was $4,000.[43] The rise of shotgun home communities led to the concentration of all community elements residing within Brooklyn, strengthening the community's cohesive culture. Brooklyn was a place where African Americans across Charlotte came to worship, engage in social events, and enjoy recreational activities, and shop for nearly any good or service they needed. When Mayor Brookshire sledgehammered the side of a home in 1961 to launch the urban renewal program, he was also taking the first swing at erasing a culture that the residents of Brooklyn could never replace.

By remaining ignorant of the strong culture residents of Brooklyn had cre-

ated, city leaders could utilize the term "slums" to depict Brooklyn as a place devoid of culture. Government bureaucrats who funded urban renewal defined "slums" as places with sub-standard housing which bred crime and disease. "Slums" and communities where African Americans lived became interchangeable to many white Americans.[44] Urban historian Kenneth Jackson argues that racial discrimination became so common that "socioeconomic characteristics of a neighborhood determined the value of housing to a much greater extent than did structural characteristics."[45] During the Jim Crow era, whites viewed African Americans as inferior, and in turn, these slum communities received few government resources. This racial prejudice was still present when urban renewal gained prominence in Charlotte during the 1960s. Segregation facilitated the creation of African American communities, and then decades of disinvestment in these communities led to the physical deterioration and creation of "slums." According to the blight study by Charlotte's Redevelopment Commission, the renewal program presented Charlotte's white leaders with an opportunity to displace 1,600 families from slum areas with "low tax returns, high crime rates, and low health standards." [46] Another study by the Redevelopment Commission indicated that once the urban renewal program cleared Brooklyn, the land would provide a "vital land development program, a vital building program for commercial and civic development and an improved major traffic system."[47]

Mayor Brookshire was committed and proud of using federal funds to erect brand-new buildings in the place of the Brooklyn community. In an interview with the *Charlotte Observer,* Brookshire noted, "I get a real kick driving through that area now just remembering what it was."[48] This quote from Brookshire shows that he was truly proud of what he had accomplished in the Brooklyn area. In his mind, he had saved Charlotte from a slum community labeled as a "center of disease, vice, crime, and dependency."[49] Brookshire believed in the fiction that eliminating this blight and replacing it with what would largely become Charlotte's government center was positive for everyone involved. Charlotte's white elites, including Mayor Brookshire, were racially blinded to Brooklyn's importance to Charlotte's African Americans, which destroyed the culture and community. This eagerness to rid Charlotte of Brooklyn represents how American culture has long been centered on obtaining wealth at the expense of human lives deemed inferior.

To stop the legacy of racial terror and disenfranchisement, African Americans around the United States rallied together for change. According to W. E. B. Du Bois, this group had "a strong, hereditary cultural unity, born of slavery, of common suffering, prolonged prescription and curtailment of political and civil rights."[50] The threat urban renewal posed to this cultural unity created another

justification to further the actions to gain equality. To achieve this equality, Civil Rights leaders focused on mobilizing Black communities, creating alliances with northern elites, and winning over the Supreme Court, White House, and National Democratic Party.[51] Kelly Alexander, Sr. was a member of Brooklyn's "elite" who was active in advancing Charlotte's African American communities. An event involving Alexander Sr. would prove that Charlotte was not a uniquely southern town. On the night of November 22, 1965, radical racists bombed his Brooklyn home with his family inside. This bombing illustrates how radical whites used violence to situate Blacks within the inherently racist image white elites fabricated for the race. Charlotte's leaders were worried about the city's reputation as racially progressive and used the short-lived unity of the bombings to limit an economic fallout.[52] Racial violence fueled African Americans' fight for equality while city leaders continued to optimize federal funds to employ urban renewal as a weapon against Black communities and displace Black citizens. It is obvious why many African Americans during these years justifiably referred to urban renewal as "Black removal."[53]

The lack of effort put into fair and just relocation efforts was a major downfall of urban renewal projects in Charlotte. City leaders claimed that rehousing was the top priority during the urban renewal program. Three separate city councilmen active during the urban renewal projects claimed that if people complained about relocation efforts, they never heard them.[54] However, interviews with former Brooklyn residents made it clear they were unsatisfied with their relocations. Barbara Steele recollected that "they really did not give us enough money to buy another home, that's what bothered me."[55] In an interview with the *Charlotte Observer,* Maggie Stinson explained to the interviewer that there is a difference between a house and a home and that she loved and missed her house in Brooklyn "because it was my home."[56] Placing more emphasis on relocating residents together rather than spreading them across the city would have better served Brooklyn's residents. The broad dispersal of Brooklyn residents' relocations furthered the erasure of the Brooklyn community's culture. As family members and friends found themselves living far apart, the day-to-day activities and community kinship that bonded the Brooklyn community started to vanish.

Another objective of urban renewal included incorporating social services into blighted communities to assist with social and personal problems. In Charlotte, Mrs. Avery Hood was the head of the Redevelopment Commission's social department. Hood assisted families with moving after relocation and other social problems. In a report compiled by Hood, she accurately portrayed what many displaced families endured during relocation. Hood studied a random

group of fifty families, twenty-two of which could not be reached. The Relocation Commission relocated four residents to houses that Hood could not locate, and seven families had once again seen their new homes destroyed by either urban renewal or the highway department.[57] Hood's study proved the ineffectiveness of relocation efforts in Charlotte, which directly contrasted with the narrative Charlotte's white leaders created about relocation. The evidence of failed relocation efforts provided more indication that Charlotte's white leaders were uninterested in the welfare of Brooklyn's residents. Expert Peter Marris argued that relocation efforts rarely provided better housing, normally placing families in similar neighborhoods with higher rents.[58]

By 1973, members of the Charlotte City Council had yet to learn about the negative impacts urban renewal projects placed on the low-income citizens of Charlotte. During a city council meeting, Councilman Fred Alexander reminded Vernon Sawyer that "relocation in any area is the key factor." At the same meeting, Sawyer noted that the current urban renewal plan included provisions "for Rehabilitation and Conservation."[59] These provisions showed a push for renewal and conservation of neighborhoods which was starting to hinder full-scale redevelopment plans. This push for renewal came too late to save the community of Brooklyn, and today only three original buildings from the community remain standing. Walking through the twenty blocks that used to house the community of Brooklyn, someone would only see government buildings and a few hotels. Mayor Brookshire and Vernon Sawyer made such strong arguments that by clearing Brooklyn and erecting new buildings, the tax value of the area would be raised. However, it is hard to imagine that these buildings now in place of Brooklyn raised the tax value of the area: Mecklenburg County Courthouse, Mecklenburg County Central Detention Center, Mecklenburg County Government Center, Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office, and the Charlotte National Building. Urban renewal was an utter failure in the eyes of the African American community of Brooklyn. But for Charlotte's city leaders, it was a rousing success because they utilized over seven million federal dollars to create a new government district and rid the city of what, in their eyes, was a "blighted slum."[60]

The first step to overcoming the injustices that urban renewal caused in Charlotte is the acknowledgment of these injustices. In 2020, Vi Lyles, Charlotte's first female Black mayor, apologized during a city council meeting for the negative impact of urban renewal on the Brooklyn community. The public apology was a groundbreaking statement that former Brooklyn residents say is a great start to restitution. Reverend Willie Keaton, Chair of Restorative Justice CLT, agrees that the apology was a great initial step in gaining justice for African

Americans. Keaton also believes that if this apology is to have any true meaning, "the restitution needs to be equal to the crime."[61] By land-grabbing, destroying homes, and shutting down businesses, urban renewal eliminated opportunities for the accumulation of decades of generational wealth for Black families in Charlotte. Charlotte's Black leaders are now fighting for a restorative justice project which would allot funds to grant loans for Black-owned businesses and provide more affordable housing throughout Charlotte. Mayor Lyles' apology will spread awareness about Charlotte's history of systematic racism and how that racism has shaped the city's current landscape. Still, as Keaton points out, the apology is little more than empty words unless financial resources are provided to assist the remaining members of the Brooklyn community and their families. As Charlotte struggles to maintain a progressive persona, studying the city's past continues to prove that Charlotte has never been a uniquely southern town. The culture of the Brooklyn community no longer remains, but by studying the history of the community, the cultural importance that existed can be realized.

Notes

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