A Game of Roads: The North Omaha Freeway and Historic Near North Side

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A Thesis

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Abstract

The Near North Side neighborhood of North Omaha has faced much turmoil during its one hundred and sixty years of existence. A once thriving and culturally significant community has been reduced to an area plagued with violence, poverty, and substandard housing. Through years of racial oppression and quarantine, peaking with the proposal and construction of the city’s North Freeway, the small community has slowly become a helpless shadow of its former self. In the last two decades, the city’s Urban Development Board, along with few city officials and willing members of the community, have attempted to correct the missteps and injustices of the past. These partnerships have aided in increased maintenance of old parks, proposed creation of new greenspaces, the construction of upscale single family housing in place of dilapidated multifamily and cramped housing, and created a revamped front for the historical business district along 24th and Lake Streets in hope of revitalizing the community and restoring the faith and trust of community members towards city officials. This extending of the olive branch may have come far too late. The North Freeway not only cut through the heart of this predominantly Black community, suffocating its business district, but it also continues to leave horrible byproducts like pollution, and increased rates of poverty, and crime. This study will look at the evolution of the Near North Side, its problematic relationship with the North Freeway, and an outlook on its future, given Omaha’s present trend towards being more of a pedestrian and community friendly city.
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I am a first generation Omaha native. My maternal grandparents moved from the small town of Mexico, Missouri, to Omaha in the early to mid-1950s; they were twenty-eight and twenty-nine years old. They were a part of the second Great Migration movement which followed the Great Depression, during the years 1940-1970. My grandfather worked at one of the Omaha meatpacking plants before switching to work for the Hertz Company. My grandmother was a member of the women’s work rights movement and worked for Omaha Public Schools. My parents moved to Omaha during their late teens, both moving here under different circumstances. My mother was sixteen when she moved to Omaha from Missouri to be with her parents and siblings after the death of her aunt. She attended Technical High School. Tech high, one of the predominantly African American high schools at that time, is today the headquarters for Omaha Public Schools. My father, as a teenager, would travel up here from Oklahoma in the summer to work with his brother at the meatpacking plant. After my father served overseas in the military, he relocated to Omaha permanently to help take care of his mother and enrolled at Omaha University, now University of Nebraska at Omaha. He earned a degree in Elementary Education and worked for Omaha Public School during the 1970s. Both of my parents moved to Omaha in the late 1960s after much of the civil rights and rioting periods in the city had run their course, but they were still able to recall the continued racial tensions and acts of prejudice among the different racial groups in the area.
When I asked my parents about their experiences living in Omaha, they recalled lots of great times. My father had greatly enjoyed being a coach for youth league midget football, basketball, and baseball teams in the area. They would talk about venues and parks where they would take my brothers, restaurants and ice cream shops that they would frequent, and time spent hanging out with family. But with these lighter stories there was also a sense of frustration. My parent’s spoke of past instances of police harassment, both experienced and witnessed. My father also talked about having experienced workplace discrimination as a teacher for Omaha Public Schools and experiences with housing restrictions. My parents talked about their experience with a realtor who attempted to alter and cancel the plans and loan for a house that they were having built, under the guise that the house my parents were building was too large for what they needed. This specific instance occurred in 1988, twenty-one years after the Federal Fair Housing Act was penned and over 40 years after redlining was ruled illegal in Nebraska. The Fair Housing Act of 1967 was enacted to end the practice of redlining and discrimination against minorities in the city, deeming those practices illegal (Yinger, p. 881). My parent’s frustrations with race relations in the city were also coupled with how they raised my brothers and me at home. As African-American parents raising four children in a city that was, and is, overtly racist, the challenges were never ending. On top of society already treating Blacks as second class citizens, there was the test of raising intelligent, talented, and independent children in a city where its history did not represent or respect them.

As insignificant as these story details may have seemed to my parents, they meant a lot to me. They helped me understand where I come from. They help me realize how far
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my family has come. They have also helped me recognize a growing problem with
African American history, preservation. I remember learning in school the concepts of
oral traditions and the significance in preservation of these stories. The stories are a vital
part of culture. They provide us with family identity, personal identity, and self-respect.
If not passed down, this history dies with our elder family members. An entire cultural
history of a family and even a racial community, erased with the death of an elder is a
tough thing to grasp.

I did grow up in North Omaha, but I did not grow up in the historic Near North
Side neighborhood. I grew up in a comfortable, middle-class family outside of the city
limits of Omaha, just to the north. I am aware that to most of my neighbors I am an
oddity compared to others that share my skin color in the city. Certainly, I grew up in a
different neighborhood than what was expected for a Black family and have virtually
defied every statistic and racial stereotype that has been thrown at me. I did not grow up
around violence, gangs, or drugs. My parents are married and all of my brothers and I
have completed high school. My father, oldest brother, and I have all completed college,
with me being the first in my immediate family to complete my Masters.

I have a lot to be proud of, and yet at the same time there is a bit of futility that
hits when one feels that their achievements are the very things that further create a barrier
between themselves and the rest of their cultural community. As an African American,
and as a Black child, we are taught that our achievements are not simply our own, but
that it benefits everyone else that we share race or culture with. To be one African
American woman who goes on to pursue a professional degree is to hopefully inspire all
African American females and males to do the same, but sometimes this cultural
responsibility can be a burden. Accommodating the cultural expectations of generations before me while also being expected to balance the current challenges of my own life, contribute to the betterment of lives of other individuals my race, and magically resolving the world’s race relations problems is an impossible job. As African Americans we are groomed to be superhuman in a world that does not even recognize us as human. To be Black and reside in a place that has already designated a role for you, decades before you were born, is an impossible and hopeless barrier to confront. Unfortunately it is a role that African Americans and White Americans both are at fault for scripting.

For twenty-nine years I have grown up in a city where I did not feel represented, not simply as an affluent African American, but as an African American Omahan. Because I am a first generation Omahan, my family history here was pretty much a dead end. Bits and pieces would change in stories, person to person, until it was impossible to determine which trace to follow. To top it off, family history is not something openly talked about in my family. Why should history only be told when prompted, why not see the importance of openly discussing it? This is especially pertinent when we can see that cultural history is currently an area that is lacking in the education system, yet it is a crucial part of understanding ones civil and human rights. In thinking back to my elementary through high school experiences, nothing about the local Omaha history that was taught to me mentioned the contributions and achievements of African Americans. Beyond famous athletes and musicians, there were no notable individuals brought up in my history or social studies classes that were specific to the Omaha area. Even in topics covering Malcolm X, my teachers would not refer to him as being an Omaha native and
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did not thoroughly discuss his background or historical involvement due to his association with the Black Nationalist movement.

Night after night I have sat and watched the news media cover instances of criminal activity, rampant gang violence, and poverty among one of the predominantly Black communities in the city of Omaha, and ultimately everywhere else in the United States. It was, and has been for a long time, a stereotype that North Omaha is a violent, gang infested and drug ridden part of the city. I attribute this to the fact that the majority of the Black community of Omaha lives in “North O” and that the media seemingly is able to fulfill these harbored stereotypes and use them as representations of not just the North Omaha community but, subsequently, the city’s African American community as well. Only after my junior year in high school and into my years as a college student did I find a sense of cultural significance and identity within Omaha. But this did not come easy. While majority history is being taught openly in schools, minority history is not. As an African American wanting to know the truth about her culture and its local history, I had to take it upon myself to find the information. Compared to the traditional White European standard of history that is being taught, historical accounts of African American significance in the city was much more difficult to find. After spending essentially my entire life being told what to think, as an adult it was my turn to seek out the truth for myself.

The city of Omaha has a strange mentality. Mildred Brown, the founder of the Omaha Star, also referred to the city as being a “backwards” place (Forss, 2013). I used to be confused when my Mom and Dad would say this to me. Having moved here in the late 1960s from Missouri and Oklahoma, they have grown to be more aware of the closet
manner in which Omaha handles itself. On my way home from campus I would notice how beautiful houses and buildings that likely were historical, were quickly reduced to rubble. The next year in its place would be a glass corporate building detracting from the nearby old brick mansions and buildings that had been built over 150 years ago, when Omaha had just become a city. Some few years later, the entire block would be leveled for the sake of making it into a greenspace. That always has disturbed me, the fact that the city seems to pride its ability to attract out-of-state travelers and corporations over preserving things of significant historical importance to its own citizens. However, after doing research for this paper, I can clearly see why and when the city started this habit of erasing its past.

“Wait, There are Black People in Nebraska?”

I cannot even begin to count the number of times that I have heard someone make this remark, or likewise look at me in disbelief when I tell them that I am from Omaha. “Um, yes, actually there are quite a few of us.” As if African Americans cease to exist outside of the Southeastern United States? I typically shrug it off, considering that I most frequently hear this from classmates that originate from Northern coastal states or from individuals I happen to converse with during my travels. In their minds, Nebraska is considered to be a state full of country bumpkins that ride horses and think they are cowboys, while also being staunch agriculturalists obsessed with corn and football. I can remember that one of my professors mentioned having this same idea when she moved here from New York. She admitted that it was somewhat of a culture shock to see so many people of color here.
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Omaha, Nebraska, is the home for a clear majority of the State’s African Americans. A whopping 69% of African Americans residing in Nebraska live here in Omaha, with 13% residing in Lincoln, our capitol city, and 18% living within rural areas and smaller cities scattered across the rest of the state (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2009). However, despite the fact that most African American Nebraskans live in Omaha, we only make up a mere 13.7% of the city and only 4.5% of the state (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2009). In comparison with other states, we are one of the lower ranking states in terms of percentage of African American residents. Out of 50 states, Nebraska ranks 32nd for number of African American residents (Census Scope, 2009). With that understanding, I guess I could see why someone would find it odd when I respond to them, “Yes, I am from Omaha, Nebraska.”

Even though I am amused by how often I have these encounters, I cannot help but translate them into the lived suppression that African Americans in Omaha experience every day. Not just in terms of contributions, but as a whole, the Black population of Omaha is often overlooked in terms of contribution to and significance in the city’s history. It would be nonsense to think that while Omaha developed and matured, its African American population ceased to do anything but exist, but outside of the civil rights movements here, nothing in the history of our culture says otherwise. It is as if we are permanently stuck in an era of fighting for civil rights and we cannot escape the spiraling loop. But what have we been doing the last 50 years? Our positive history is often erased with images of looting and rioting and replaced with fears exacerbated by biased media coverage of violent crimes and illicit drug activities that conveniently only occur in the “Black Saturated” parts of town. Our cultural achievements are continuously
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ignored in favor of institutionalized racism, inappropriate stereotypes, and status quo White supremacy (Graham, p. 23).

Omaha’s African American community has made many strides and faced many hardships to get to where it has today. Although our achievements are often overshadowed by the color of our skin and the association of an entire racial group with a seemingly deteriorating square mile of neighborhood, they can still be found in our city’s less talked about history. We go day in and day out unaware of our own personal histories, we let important accomplishments die with our elders because we are too busy to ask and they are too jaded to inform us. We are complacent with the negative representation of African Americans and their neighborhoods. We only seem to seek the truth once it is too late. Knowledge not only of one’s cultural history, but also one’s local history is a valuable asset to have. My generation and those that have followed have only seen one side of the North Omaha and Near North Side community. Unfortunately, our inability to comprehend the lively, empowering, and meaningful history of these areas and the people who reside there is furthered by our complacency, miseducation, and the current status of the area. Too often we are taught that one standard way of thinking is the right way; we are taught history from one perspective, and more than likely it is not from the viewpoint relating to our own.
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I. INTRODUCTION

North Omaha’s reputation has been plastered with images of random violence, gang activity, rundown housing, and abandoned businesses. Because of this imagery, North Omaha and its residents have essentially become recognized as the problem child of the city. Year after year we have watched our city expand farther and farther away from its center, engulfing all towns in its path, while the residentially occupied center of our city seemingly falls apart. It is a senseless annexation of land considering that our city is seemingly financially incapable, or unwilling, to properly maintain the “blighted” neighborhoods it already possesses. Our metropolitan area has seen a recent increase of new building construction, chuck full of fad-themed hipster bars, swanky art studios, and overly expensive loft homes that more appropriately belong on WASP-y beach fronts or in large downtown areas like New York. But look a few blocks north, just outside of this beautiful, and somewhat flashy, downtown area and it is instant night and day difference. Better yet, you could say that it is almost a Black and White difference.

The face of our beautiful city stands towering above the interstate, not only to lure one into its temptations, but to also distract them from its blemished past. It is a road that takes one high above the city’s dirty secrets, bypassing decades of oppression and violence that has managed to continue under the radar. Though one may read this and think that it is a silly thing to assume that an interstate and freeway system could ultimately have any sort detrimental of effect on an entire community, be it a racial community or not, I would have to urge you to reconsider. While it may be easier to place the responsibility back on a community for its own hardships, one must admit that certain actions and circumstances of history have proved to be significant in the creation
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of current socio-environmental injustices in cultural and racial minority groups. Those very roads that commuters frequent every day allow a distraction, an excuse, to ignore the deteriorating conditions of an entire community. The North Freeway essentially serves a purpose in diverting people away from the city’s harsh truth. As a city, as a nation, we are continually ignoring the incidences of cultural and racial injustices that don’t seem to involve us. Whether we like it or not, this makes us just as guilty for allowing and enabling whole minority communities to be subjected to undesirable environmental conditions, to lose their community viability, and ultimately to overlook their history.

Though the North Freeway currently serves as a major vein for traffic to quickly traverse the congested streets of the inner city, it also serves as a way of isolating the predominantly minority communities within the Near North Side, and the undesirable industrial leftovers in the eastern hook of the city away from the rest of the city. It also has created a racial, economic, and class barrier between others within its cultural community and city. Ultimately, the wall is permanent and will not be going anywhere any time soon. As the decades have passed we have been able to see, with the help of cultural perspective and history, that the North Freeway has a causative relationship with the area, bringing both positive and negative occurrences to the area.

While the initial arguments for the North Freeway were for alleviation of traffic, given increased traffic and city expansion; expediting the transfer of livestock to the stockyards; and increased emergency routes for military, we took this for granted and overlooked the detrimental effects that it would have not just on the businesses in the surrounding community, but also the health concerns, increased crime rates due to urban isolation, and the overall viability of the housing and property markets in the nearby
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areas. Because of this, I feel that it is important to know the causative relationship that roadways have on urban culture, more specifically, the large role that the North Freeway has played in reshaping the Near North Side here in Omaha, Nebraska. It is easy for one to place complete blame on residents within a community for their hardships. The oppressed community does share some degree of the responsibility for its current state, but they should not be blamed for conditions where they do not have any control.

Communities and planners alike should take the time to become more aware of just how much roadways, their placement, and the hidden politics behind them can affect residents in the years to come.

The Near North Side and its African American community have faced much turmoil stemming from the racial tensions caused by the World War I era’s effects on the job market for returning soldiers, and the resulting Great Depression Era economic panics. Violence against Black citizens in the North were just as prevalent as it was in the South. Tiny little Omaha, at that time, was no exception. Many civil rights movements and tensions were raised here nearly a decade earlier than the most notable movements, influenced by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the Southern United States. Three decades of overt police brutality, community rioting, as well as outrage over restrictive and overcrowded living conditions, greatly affected the formerly thriving community in a way that proved to be detrimental to its business and residential community.

In the decades following the rioting, a final nail in the coffin was put in place with the North Freeway. The controversial project, initially proposed during the early 1960s, finally approved in 1978, and completed in 1988, became a concrete divider blocking off what was left of a viable community in a manner that could be said to have
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had more political reasons rather than reason of traffic efficiency. With the forceful
intrusion of the North Freeway came added health risks, and environmental concerns for
those residing in close proximity to the freeway. The downward spiral into poverty and
violence in the area seemed to have peaked during the late 1980s to late 1990s, leading
many to conclude that the isolation caused by the freeway has had an influence on the
rate of criminal activity and poverty in the area. In the last fifteen years or so, several
efforts have been made to correct the hardships imposed on the community by the city in
the past. Recent reconstructive and rejuvenation proposals have been reviewed and
approved, and, with the city becoming more “pedestrian community” oriented, there is
hope that, with community input, the once thriving historical community will be able to
regain its footing and reinvent itself. However, the verdict in the community still seems to
be out on whether or not these urban rejuvenation projects are truly helping or hindering
the community’s growth and whether or not valuable history, both scenic and
documented, is being maintained in the area. Only time will tell.

The city has been continuously oppressive to its African American residents,
especially those residing in the Near North Side area. The timing of the construction of
the North Freeway as well as the manner in which home were seized nearly two decades
prior, was a direct political move to forcefully take over the undesirable parts of town.
Though the North Freeway has continued to negatively affect the health and well-being
of individuals and their community in proximity to it, some of the responsibility for this
should also revert back on the residents themselves. The riots in the late 1960s in
conjunction with the timing of the interstate construction, put the neighborhood in an
unstable position of being unable to catch-up and rebuild itself. Along with this, a
community unable to recognize its rights, correct its faults, and agree with one another was unable to unite against the city of Omaha. In a way, this community has failed in the past by becoming jaded and complacent with the racial oppression of the area. If this does not change, the community will fall prey again to future large scale demolition, and the areas African American history may be lost.
II. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE NEAR NORTH SIDE

In order to understand fully just how much the Near North Side and North Omaha area has been affected by cultural injustice and the introduction of the freeway system, we first have to look into the history of the area. Without this context, one would simply assume that the Near North Side and its predominantly African American residents have always existed in their current condition. Given the awareness of the swift decline of housing and economic viability, and the steady increase in vandalism and theft in the area over the last five decades, it would be understandable that individuals, and even current residents themselves, are unaware of the condition and viability of the neighborhood prior to this downward trend. In order to fully evaluate the struggles and strengths of a community, you must dive deep into its history. You should not pass judgment based on face value, media depictions, and rushed superficial statistics. In order for one to accurately gauge the effects of environmental injustice in the African American community of North Omaha, you must see where we started off. In the following sections I will address the creation of the Near North Side and its neighboring communities, the racial tensions that further shaped it into the community that we currently recognize and the thriving business and social identity that it aspires to return to today.

Community Foundations

The city of Omaha, Nebraska, was founded in 1854 (Sorenson, p. 31). One of the first towns inhabited was a small quadrant located in the northeastern part of the city, known at that time as Scrip Town (Sorenson, p. 64; Bristow, p.51). This small industrial town was composed of migrant workers of the railroad and their families. The Near North Side was one of its resulting communities that formed in the area, along with the
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Gifford Park, Kountze Place, Prospect Hill, and Saratoga subdivisions (Larsen & Cotrell, pp. 25-26). Scrip Town was aptly named, given that the workers living in this neighborhood were paid with “scrips” or credit vouchers by their employers because of a shortage of money and the desire to keep workers dependent on their local industry (Nebraska State Historical Society, p. 261; Bristow, 2000, p. 51). Scrips were also used as legislative bribes, promising land in exchange for votes or other means of financial contribution (p. 51).

By the late 19th century, the Omaha area had established a rich railroad and industrial culture along with one of agriculture in the far Northern and Western part of the city. It had housed the Trans-Mississippi Exposition of 1898 in the now Kountze Place neighborhood (Wakefield, 1903), which quickly brought in potential residents and prospective businessmen to the Omaha area and secured it as a railroad transportation hub crucial in connecting the Eastern United States to the West (Luebke, p. 59). An all-African American expo was held in the same location during the closing months of the event (Bristow, p. 275). There, many African Americans skilled in trades such as artistry, architecture, engineering, and medicine, as well as other entrepreneurs, networked and promoted Omaha as the place to live, given all of its available opportunities (Calloway & Smith, p. 10). This led to a huge boom in the population of Omaha, and thus resulted in the rapid growth of the city. In the year 1880, there were only a reported 800 African American residents living throughout Omaha. By the year 1900, that number had risen to nearly 3,500 African American citizens (Taylor, p. 193).

Around the early 1900s, the Near North Side was home to residents of many differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds, such as Jewish, Bohemian, African American,
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Irish, and Italian immigrant and other migrant families (Street of Dreams, 1992).

Residents of the area during the early 1900s recalled this area as being a place where the “Black and other minority communities were more dispersed” and where children of all races openly played together (Johnson, 2012, p. XVII). At this time landowners were not restricted from buying property according to their ethnicity but instead were allowed to buy property as long as they could afford it. In addition to those who moved following the Trans-Mississippi Exposition of 1898, many other migrant workers were recruited to work for the Union Pacific Railroad as well as the growing meatpacking and stockyards industries that were beginning to bloom in South Omaha (Taylor, p. 205). These minority laborers were used as “strikebreakers” or workers to fill positions left open by White workers who went on strike after the companies refused to set up workers’ unions.

By 1910, the city of Omaha was growing at an alarming pace, with some individuals of the city growing concerned over the influx of immigrant culture (Taylor, p. 193). While there was a continued influx of Southern and Eastern Europeans moving to the city, there was also a surge of migrant culture moving in from the Southern United States (Frey, p. 2). As urban sprawl began to rear its head, the once prestigious Near North Side neighborhood slowly gained the identity of being the predominantly Jewish and African American poor part of town, with middle class and rich Whites and German immigrants moving west to the gold coast neighborhoods and to rural areas (Street of Dreams, 1992). Greek, Asian and Bohemian immigrants and few African American migrant workers began to move into the neighborhoods immediately south of the downtown area and adjacent to the stockyards and packing houses. The Near North Side was considered to be the place where Blacks, other minorities, and poor working-class
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White residents of the city of Omaha lived (Street of Dreams, 1992). Despite the rest of the city’s opinion of the area, the Near North Side thrived as a small, deeply connected little town within the city.

During the early 20th century the rest of America was reaching a breaking point in racial relations. With the United States’ entrance into World War I and many soldiers being deployed, thousands of industrial, meatpacking, and railroad jobs were being left open (Bish, p. 70). A majority of these positions were quickly filled by minorities, women, and other immigrant workers who relocated to the northern United States during the movement known as the Great Migration (Bish, p. 71; Calloway & Smith, 10). The Great Migration spans two eras occurring between the 1910s and 1970s in the United States. The Great Migration facilitated approximately six-million African Americans in moving from the racial violence and unrest of the South in search of equality and industrial jobs in the West, North, and Northeastern United States (Gregory, p. 22). The initial migration occurred during the 1900 to 1930 period with the entrance into World War I and the nation’s union strikes. Approximately 90% of African Americans in the United States lived in the south in 1900, within ten years one million of the almost two million had left for states in the north, west, and eastern United States (Forss, p. 2).

During the first phase of the Great Migration, many African Americans migrated north from their rural area homes in the southern states in search of fair and equal treatment as persons and as employees (Taylor, p. 204). These rural families were also influenced to leave due to crop failures in the south, which lead to a decline in employment opportunities (Forss, p. 4). Running from the increasing harassment, mob violence, lynching, and hate crimes, African American families and workers hoped to find better
paying jobs, safety, and better treatment in the northern United States. With World War I occurring and so many industries falling short on manpower, African Americans were able to quickly find decent paying jobs in the railroad and meatpacking industries. Northern-based factories and railroad companies would also send recruiters to find Black laborers in the south to fill in openings left by deployed soldiers (Forss, p. 5; Taylor, p. 194). African American residents moved into the nearby sections of town, predominantly the Near North Side neighborhood near the coal plant and railroad, and into the south Omaha neighborhoods near the stockyards, and meatpacking plants (Taylor, p. 204). The Near North Side now had a substantial population of working class individuals, and it became the predominantly Black minority part of town. The middle-class residents of the area began to move to newly constructed suburbs just outside of the city, opening up housing for more poor, working class, and minority families to move into the area (Street of Dreams, 1992).

Omaha was growing fast, and with the formation of suburbs, urban areas were beginning to be overlooked in favor of the newer areas of town. This movement outward away from the downtown areas was, and is, often referred to as “White Flight,” a movement of middle to upper-class White families away from the older areas of town that were becoming more inhabited by African Americans, ethnic minorities and immigrants (Street of Dreams, 1992). With the return of White soldiers from World War I, America found itself in an uncomfortable situation. Soldiers came back to find that their jobs had been taken by African Americans and other minorities, and at lower wages (Taylor, p. 204). As a result many returning soldiers faced joblessness due in part to the industries’ refusal to hire them back at their original higher wages, and because of their
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own personal disapproval of working alongside Black workers. Forced to take lower
wages, work equal job positions with Blacks, or face unemployment, the mounting
frustrations led to strikes among Whites.

In response, the meatpacking plants and several other industrial businesses in the
Omaha area would often use African American workers as pawns to discourage strikes
and riots among their White counterparts. These workers were referred to as
strikebreakers and were hired largely in response to the Whites who wanted unionization
and who refused to take back their jobs at the lower pay after returning stateside (Forss,
p. 5; Taylor, p. 204). This occurred in industrial towns and cities nationwide, not just in
the south, where heightened racial tension was the expected norm. As stressors escalated
so did the organized violence against black communities across the nation and
wholesome little Omaha did not escape this trend.

The Dirty Side of City Politics

Coupled with tensions arising from the massive demobilization of troops,
institutionalized fears of African-Americans were being used for political gains. To
distract Americans, increased media coverage of Black males attacking White females
were headlined in newspapers with exaggerated, grotesque, and often false details to
enrage the White community (Menard, Tom Dennison, The Omaha Bee, and the 1919
Omaha Race Riot, p. 152). Even the newly introduced horror genre films at the time
played a role in this. They portrayed African Americans as uneducated, primitive and
cannibalistic, and frequently associated African Americans with voodoo and cult like
behaviors (Horton, Price, & Brown, p. 1). The fictitious portrayals of African Americans
as savages did nothing but help exacerbate these fears among the White community. To
many White Americans, Blacks were considered subhuman and uncontrollable. The uprising of sensationalist newspapers did little to help this (Menard, Tom Dennison, The Omaha Bee, and the 1919 Omaha Race Riot, p. 152). White population’s inability to see through fiction to truth led to violent and brutal decades in the early to mid-20th century.

As in many other cities at the turn of the century, the introduction of gambling and bars into the nightlife scene brought its share of corruption. Omaha was not immune to this, as the growing downtown area became a sort of red-light district, full of brothels and other illicit activities involving networks of crime bosses and high ranking officials in the area (Bristow, p. 202). The Omaha Bee, one of the more prominent newspapers at the time and competitor with the Omaha World Herald, was notorious for its blatant statements and exaggerated, sometimes grotesque, depictions of Black on White violence, especially accusations of rape, and often served as a political tool to instigate mob behaviors in groups towards businesses, the mayor, and the Black community (Menard, Tom Dennison, The Omaha Bee, and the 1919 Omaha Race Riot, p. 156).

The Omaha Bee also was suspected to be under political manipulation by Tom Dennison, a well-known businessman with control over the city’s casinos and bars, a sort of red-light district amid downtown Omaha (Bristow, pp. 202-204; Menard, p. 152). Dennison opposed the mayor’s attempts to rid the city of excessive gambling corruption, and it is alleged that he was responsible for orchestrating one of the most heinous crimes against a Black man in the history of Omaha, and thus influencing much of the city’s race relations, a lasting impact that can still be seen today. Leading up to the fateful day of September 28th, 1919, Dennison and his close associates, who wrote for the Bee, released a series of articles criticizing the Omaha Police Department, its Captain, and the Mayor
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handling of the Black on White violence in Omaha (Menard, Tom Dennison, The Omaha Bee, and the 1919 Omaha Race Riot, p. 156). He also used the paper as his platform to criticize Washington D.C.’s and other cities’ handling of the same types of crimes and resulting mob violence (p. 157). Dennison and his associates, led many White citizens of Omaha to fear that the local law enforcement and military support were incapable of protecting them from the violent, angry, lewd, and uncontrollable nature of Black citizens. Conveniently, an alleged assault on a young White woman would allow him to make his example.

One day in September of 1919, a young White couple that had been walking home was allegedly assaulted by a Black man. The accusation was that the Black man had attacked the husband, robbing him and knocking him unconscious, and then sexually assaulted and raped the wife (Bristow, p. 265). Initially, the woman had indicated that she was uncertain that she could identify the man’s face, given that there were several Black workers in the area and she “couldn’t tell them apart”. However, she later was able to make a positive identification (Menard, p. 154). Several historians researching the incident have found conflicting information in regards to the reports that were given by both the husband and wife and even found witnesses that claimed to have seen the pair in a heated argument outside their home, nowhere near the reported incident (Menard, p. 158). The consensus is that Will Brown was likely an innocent man caught in the middle of a gravely corrupt scheme. However, the woman identified Brown as the attacker, arrested, and taken to the Douglas County Courthouse.

Rumors circulated, with help from the Omaha Bee that Brown was going to be let go. This further enraged the already aggravated White community to the point where they
decided to form a large riot group to take over the courthouse, oust its mayor, and “justly punish Brown” since the Police Department had failed to do so (Menard, Tom Dennison, The Omaha Bee, and the 1919 Omaha Race Riot, p. 158). The mob firebombed and damaged the courthouse, forcing the habitants and employees to flee to the roof to be rescued (p. 158). After hours of torment and destruction, Brown was handed over to the mob, which beat him unconscious. Afterwards they hung him from the nearby lamp post, shot his swinging corpse hundreds of times, cut him down and tied his body to a car and drug him up and down the streets of downtown, before setting his mutilated body ablaze (p. 159).

A mob of nearly 25,000 people accumulated to watch Brown’s body burn (Bristow, p. 267). After the mob was done mutilating Brown’s corpse, they turned their anger onto the rest of the African American community, injuring several other people that night (Menard, Tom Dennison, The Omaha Bee, and the 1919 Omaha Race Riot, pp. 159-160). When the Army was finally called in, they insisted that African Americans in the northern parts of the city should stay in the Near North Side area, where they could better protect them from the mob violence (p. 160). While the military may have meant this in the temporary sense until the mobs dissipated, Omaha quickly began to enforce this martial law as a city wide covenant. The race covenant which, restricted African-Americans in the city to live in the defined area of the Near North Side, was not a formal law but was enforced by specification of “Whites only” in the housing deed as well as White residents who opposed African Americans moving into their neighborhoods. African American residents in the city that attempted to move beyond this area were often harassed, found burning crosses in their yard, were threatened, and even had their
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homes vandalized (Holland, 2014, p. 2). The Near North Side was defined by 16th Street along the east Omaha rail yards, Locust Street on the north, Cuming Street on the south, and 30th Street on the west (Johnson, p. 11). September 28, 1919, would mark the day that Omaha’s most well-known Black neighborhood took shape, and ultimately, set the tone for the area’s hardships well into the next century.

**Redlining and the Race Restrictive Covenant**

When Lt. Colonel Jacob Wuest and Fort Omaha were notified that assistance was needed to control the rioting mob at the Douglas County Courthouse, he informed the police chief that federal troops would not get involved unless formally initiated to do so by the War Department (Menard, p. 161). Because of this, it took until 10:45 PM that night until the Secretary of War activates the troops to help calm the riots. It was 2:00 AM the following morning after the mob violence had calmed before the approximately 1,600 infantrymen finally did arrive from Fort Omaha and Fort Crook, they instructed the African American citizens of Omaha to stay within the near North Side, where they could better protect them (Menard, p. 161). Several soldiers armed with machine guns, stood guard in the heart of downtown’s business district, the South Omaha African American neighborhoods, and the heart of the Near North Side, along 24th Street, in order to prevent growing mob violence against Black residents (p. 162). This protective isolation was enacted only for temporary safety reasons; however, it quickly became a type of martial law where African Americans were restricted to the Near North Side neighborhood.

Almost immediately, landlords and real estate developers began including racial parameters in their deeds. The Army’s decision to confine African American citizens in the Near North Side for protection was purposely misconstrued to suit the desires of
racent Whites in the city. Racist Whites who had been looking for a justification for segregation had finally found it. It would now be openly acceptable to have a Whites only covenant in the new suburban residential neighborhoods being built in the city (p. 164). Landlords and owners of rental properties would advertise homes accepting Whites only tenants, or indicating no Black or Negro tenants allowed. Omaha was quickly falling into the hold of segregation that many African Americans had fled the south hoping to avoid. While some African Americans were able to remain in their homes in other western, southern and northern parts of the city, many were harassed (Holland, p. 2; Forss, p. 139).

Housing discrimination was being used to control the spatial mobility of African Americans in Omaha during World War I (Exline, Peters, & Larkin, p. 65; Forss, p. 7). The practices of redlining and race restrictive covenants against African Americans were made worse by the National Housing Act of 1934 (United States Congress, 1934). The National Housing Act of 1934, also known as the Capehart Act, was established in response to growing economic concerns during the Great Depression. The Capehart Act helped to establish the first Housing Authority, the Federal Housing Administration, and home lending programs (United States Congress, 1934, pp. 1-3, 8). Under this Act the first low-income housing projects were constructed in the nation (Yinger, 1986). In 1938, four years after the Capehart Act was enacted, the Logan-Fontenelle Housing Projects were completed in Omaha. This housing project was built on the area between 20th and 24th Streets on the east and west with Seward and Paul Streets on the North and South (Forss, 2013). The projects were initially home to the many Czech, Italian, and German immigrant working-class families. It was meant as a transition home for poor families, only allowing families with maximum incomes of $2,000 per year, and charging them a
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mere $35 dollars a month as rent. Families that made more than this were asked to then find different housing (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1977, pp. 2-78). African Americans in the area saw the building of the projects as a huge benefit to them (Forss, 2013). Not only was there more housing to alleviate the crowding problem, but the efflux of immigrants and working class Whites into the housing projects meant that there would be more homes available in the area for purchase and rent to African Americans. Unfortunately, the increase of available housing did not come as expected. While more homes had become available, some of the landlords and sellers of these homes quickly added race restrictions to their deeds, making Blacks ineligible to purchase or rent (Forss, p. 8). In addition to this, in 1935, the Federal Housing Administration forced subdivision contractors and home builders to comply with race-restrictive guidelines, further endorsing the city’s racist covenant.

Mortgage companies, loan officers, and banks would refuse potential Black homebuyers loans and offer them increased premiums to deter them from buying certain homes located in areas dependent on the racial composition of the neighborhood (p.9). Over time, additional housing projects where built in the Near North Side, and with similar race restrictive covenants, just as the Logan-Fontenelle homes had done, but would take until the 1950s before African Americans were allowed to move into the Logan-Fontenelle housing projects (p. 141).

An Identity of its Own

As Jewish and other minorities moved up economically and out of the neighborhood, many Black workers took over their stores, restaurants, and places of
business that had been left behind. While the city’s race covenant was restrictive, the Near North Side functioned as a small town of its own, with a new face of Black-owned and run, community-based businesses centered in the heart of the neighborhood on 24th and Lake Streets (Calloway & Smith, 1998; Forss, 2013; Holland, 2014; Johnson, 2012; Street of Dreams, 1992). There were several clothing stores, restaurants, beauty parlors and barber shops, hardware stores, auto parts shops, along with law firms, doctor’s offices, accountants, and funeral homes, which were owned by and provided services to the local Black community members (Marantz, p. 95; Calloway & Smith, p. 37). There was a sharp rise in Black entrepreneurship; by 1924 there were approximately 125 businesses owned and operated by African Americans in the area (Calloway & Smith, p. 38). To African American residents confined by the racial covenants and redlining, these businesses gave a sense of power and pride over the potential monopolization that Whites had over other facets of life. The very dedication, patience, and work it took to run and maintain a business was in stark contrast to the racist stereotype of incompetent, indignant, and dependent Blacks.

The Near North Side is considered by some to be the birthplace of the jazz scene and African American musical expression in Omaha, during the 1920s and 30s. The street was home to many nightclubs and music venues like the Dreamland Ballroom, which was housed in the Jewel Building along 24th Street (Marantz, p. 95). The venue hosted a variety of music groups, bands, and musicians such as, Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Anna Mae Winburn, and locally born musicians, Wynonie Harris and Preston Love (Calloway & Smith, p. 41). Many performers stopped in the area due to its proximity to the Union Pacific mainline, on
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which they traveled while on tour (Marantz, p. 95). This seemingly vibrant age of
creativity and musical explosion could be said to be a period mirroring the Harlem
Renaissance for Omaha’s African American community.

The Great Depression and the Black Community

Despite the continued influx of African American residents stemming from the
Great Migration, along with the impending Great Depression, businesses in the Near
North Side community still continued to survive, though they were not completely
immune to the downward spiral of the economy at that time. Where African Americans
had already been restricted to certain menial and no-skill labor jobs due to no-hire
policies at certain companies, widespread layoffs at well-paying companies consequently
affected the White community somewhat more than the Black community (Calloway &
Smith, p. 37). The entrance of the United States into World War II in 1941, helped to
lessen the concerns of African American families. Black men and women were quickly
able to find jobs in the armaments industry. It would seem as if for once there was
actually a benefit to the racially motivated isolation of African Americans into the one
North Omaha district. The cultural dynamics mixed with the small town reliance proved
beneficial during a time when the rest of the larger cities were facing dire straits.

Despite the Black community’s ability to remain somewhat afloat amidst the rest
of the city’s and nation’s economic downturn, joblessness and the resulting poverty were
becoming more and more of issue. The issues revolving around housing and poverty in
the Near North Side were beginning to rear their heads. The one-square-mile, spanning
approximately 140 square blocks, were becoming overcrowded. Homes were beginning
to show their age with deterioration. Some of the houses that had been used as rentals
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were becoming problematic, with landlords refusing to rent to African Americans in
certain areas, while others failed to provide upkeep and fix plumbing and other crucial
issues for the African American residents of their properties (Forss, p. 9). Many families
who could afford only to rent their homes were finding themselves in slum-like
situations.

In 1937 the United States Housing Act was passed and allowed for government-
based funding to support public housing programs. This followed the Capehart Act of
1934, adding the aspect of government funding that was needed to complete the many
housing projects started in 1936 (Austin-Turner, et al., 2013). To Omaha and its African
American community, this could not have come at a better time. To combat the problem
of overcrowding due to the enforcement of the race-restricted covenant, the city built a
series of housing developments, starting with the Logan Fontenelle Housing Project in
the north-central section of the Near North Side. The projects were welcomed by the
African American community as a means of securing more housing, though, it was soon
realized that the conditions would not improve as quickly as the community had thought
(Forss, p. 48).
III. A DIVIDING LINE IN OMAHA: THE NORTH FREEWAY

The Near North Side had already entered into its own civil rights era in the 1930s and 1940s, addressing the racially restrictive covenants, workplace segregation, and housing issues of overcrowding and poverty. Some felt that Omaha was predecessor to the nation’s more publicly recognized civil rights movement. Many of the boycotts, sit-ins, and other non-violent tactics of protest, were used on the streets of Omaha nearly a decade before that of well-known protests in Montgomery in 1955, Birmingham in 1963, and Selma, Alabama in 1965 (Holland, p. 132). During the mid-1950s, civil rights and equal employment opportunity frustrations were mounting in Omaha. Though, the unity of the community was in perfect harmony, the rumor of an impending new freeway system, planned to cut right through the heart of the community, would certainly come as an ill-fated blow. While many other citizens in support of and anxiously awaiting, the freeway could see only the positive aspects and benefits of its construction, other members of the community were outraged and felt threatened by what troubles the new freeway system would bring (Forss, p. 162). The resulting abuses of eminent domain, along with half-hearted efforts at relocation and reimbursement to families displaced by the freeways placement’s brought more frustration and anger during a time when the patience of the community was at the breaking point.

As many in the community saw it, the proposed interstate would surely siphon the through traffic away from its business district, ultimately decreasing the number of potential customers, and leading to the demise of the community
Game of Roads (Calloway & Smith, p. 41). As others saw it, the freeway would also become a nuisance. While 24th Street traffic had become increasingly more congested for drivers, certainly a freeway would lead to diversion of traffic flow that routinely passed through the area. The construction of the freeway would also lead to increased vehicle traffic in the area of the freeway, prompting concerns over air pollution and noise levels in the nearby business and residential areas (Nowak, Crane, & Stevens, p. 119). The 1956 signing of the Federal Highway Act essentially gave cities and states the ability to barge into urban, low-income, and minority areas; primarily, predominantly Black neighborhoods. By labeling the undesirable areas as blighted, they could force families out of their homes and justify the quick construction of a visually appealing highway in its place (Strand, pp. 87-88).

The Federal Highway Act of 1956

With the rapid growth in the population of automobile owners and the growth of the city’s mass transit MAT bus line, came the need for improvements to the roadway system (Koster, 1997, p. 4). Across the United States, frustrated drivers and the increase of auto accidents led to safety concerns and the need for updated and more efficient roads. Likewise, with the huge population growth, increased demand for roadways for extended travel and transfer of goods beyond state borders, as well as the need for roadways that could sustain the weight of heavy armored vehicles for the Army and other military defense, also raised concerns (Weingroff, p. 6). The increasing instability and lack of roads, coupled with concerns over safety, had been addressed by the Federal Bureau of Roads during the 1930s to early 1940s (Silbur, 1986), however with the post-
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World War I era Great Depression and the demands of World War II mounting, the construction and repair of roadways was halted (Koster, p.5; Silbur, 1986; Weingroff, p. 6). Many of Omaha’s road construction, including the Historic Mormon Bridge linking Iowa and Nebraska via Highway 680, was halted due to the steel shortage as a result of wartime needs (Silbur, 1986).

The steel shortage lasted from WWII to almost the end of the Korean War in 1952 (Beattie, 2015). In turn, many roads were ignored or became essentially obsolete until the late 1940s to 1950s, when road safety concerns were increasing around the United States (Weingroff, p. 4; Strand, p.87). As of 1956, 6,000 miles of Nebraska’s approximately 10,000 miles of roads were paved. This left about 4,000 miles of road as unpaved, narrow, dirt or gravel roads (Silbur, 1986), however, those numbers did not specify the location of the roads and whether they included rural area roads along with major roadways in total mileage. With the increasing number of car owners came growing demands for auto-friendly cities and roadways throughout cities and the United States as a whole (Strand, p. 87).

Omaha was no exception. By the mid-1950s the city had grown to approximately three times its size since the 1920s and included 43 total subdivisions in comparison to its previous 10 (Larsen & Cotrell, p. 80). Omaha, like the rest of the nation, was growing tired of the congestion and inconvenience of roads previously constructed for trolleys, and wooden wheeled cars. In 1949, the state of Nebraska had a reported 694,684 drivers and automobile owners. By 1956, there were a reported 793,173 auto owners and drivers in the state (US Department of Transportation). This 14% increase in a seven-year period may look insignificant; however, given that automobiles were much larger, heavier, more
affordable and thus, more accessible, the rate of auto production compared to the slow pace in road reconstruction was troubling (Koster, pp. 10-15).

Efforts towards fixing the nations roadways began back in the early 1900s. In 1919, then Lieutenant Colonel Eisenhower had become increasingly aware of the poor condition of U.S. roads during a convoy set up from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. The initial purposes of this convoy trip were to test the Army’s vehicles given the rugged nature of the roads, recruit persons along the way to become mechanics and drivers for the military, celebrate the winning of the war in Europe, as well as reinstating support in the good roads movement (Weingroff, p. 10). In a 3,200 mile trip that today would take approximately two to three days drive time straight through, it took the convoy a total of 62 days (Silbur, 1986). Eisenhower had noted that the road conditions along the Lincoln Highway, which convoy had traveled, were still set up for those who traveled by horse and buggy and that most if not all roads were grossly outdated and unsafe for travel (Weingroff, p. 4). Only after having witnessed the use of the German Autobahn by Nazi military in the 1930s did he have a more conceptualized idea of how America’s roadways needed to be improved (Weingroff, p.13; Silbur, 1986). Not only did he envision these improvements as a benefit to military travel and security, but also for the increased need of efficient and safe roadways for an increasing amount of automobile travel.

Eisenhower became president in 1952 and a mere four years later signed one of the biggest breaks for the U.S. Department of Transportation and, subsequently, all state organized transportation and roads departments. In 1956 he signed a revised Federal-Aid Highway Act, noting that the United States as a whole had been far behind in terms of road development and maintenance, leading to what he refers as hopeless congestion
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across cities of any size (Weingroff, pp. 15-17). After the signing, President Eisenhower explained how his experiences during WWII affected his decisions:

After seeing the Autobahns of modern Germany and knowing the asset those highways were to the Germans, I decided, as President, to put an emphasis on this kind of road building...The old [1919] convoy had started me thinking about good, two-lane highways, but Germany had made me see the wisdom of broader ribbons across the land. (Weingroff, p. 17)

In 1956, then President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, opening the door for an almost 43,000 mile network of interstate and highway systems to be built (Strand, p. 88). A nation-wide eruption of construction began in the months following the signing, with repairs and new proposals for freeways, highways, and interstates across the nation. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 had been an amendment to previous Federal-Aid Acts where the federal-aid amounts had previously risen from twenty-five million dollars at a fifty-fifty cost share with the states. The 1956 documented an aid increase up to 175 million dollars at a cost sharing level of 60% state responsibility and 40% federal share (Koster, 1997, p. 15). The network of roads as we know it today, was originally inspired by the Nazi Military’s use of the Autobahn in Germany during World War II (Weingroff, p. 10). While this should have potentially raised a red flag, given the horrendous circumstances behind the Nazi Military’s use of these roads, the United States Department of Transportation could only see these roads in terms of efficiency and not in terms
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of detriment to the poor families whose homes and livelihoods would fall prey to the new interstate system.

The Freeway Argument: Purpose, Proposals, and Outrage

Meanwhile, amid the boycotts and sit-ins and housing concerns, Omaha’s African American business community in the Near North Side was thriving. By the 1960s, however, the increasing frustration over Police harassment in the area had led to a series of riots (Marantz, p. 71). The area was beginning to weaken, with a cultural split forming between peaceful protestors and those who wanted a more radical and militant approach (Forss, 2013, p. 146). The discussion of a new freeway in the area did not sit well for many residents in the area, as many were split on the prospect of how it would affect the businesses on the 24th Street corridor and the value of their homes. Some felt that the argument for alleviating traffic was unfounded. The congested traffic on 24th Street provided a way to advertise the businesses and shops in the area for free to those who commuted downtown to work (Street of Dreams, 1992). Even though the area was predominantly African American, some Whites and racial minorities who frequented the area would still use services that were available in the area due to their convenience (Street of Dreams, 1992). While the Black citizens of Omaha were often denied services at White-owned businesses, Black-owned businesses in the area provided services to all customers regardless of race (Street of Dreams, 1992). This showed that Black business owners were able to prioritize the success of their business and livelihood over the irony of serving their White counterparts. Those White patrons where likely not individuals that favored the city’s segregation, or they were individuals that had previously lived in
the area when it was a cultural enclave for minorities and immigrants and had emotional ties to the area (Street of Dreams, 1992).

African Americans in the area viewed the need for roads and the possibility of an interstate in the area with mixed emotion. On one hand, individuals saw a need to have an interstate built in order to connect them to other parts of the city. Some saw the interstate construction partnered with the reimbursement or relocated housing efforts, as their opportunity to get out of the area (Nall, p. 10). The race-restricted covenants once reinforced by the federal government had been deemed an illegal practice in the city after 1940. However, many residents, including my parents, would attest to the fact that redlining was still occurring well into the 1990s. With the introduction of the freeway and compensation for their houses being in the right-of-way, upper lower-class and middle-class African Americans would finally be able to relocate outside of the area to larger homes. For some African Americans they would finally be able to move into an updated home, given that many of the homes in the near North Side area were about a 100 years old and many restoration and home improvement services would not cater to African Americans, let alone those living in that part of town.

On the other side of the argument, many residents had a sense of dread about the impending freeway. They saw it as an immediate threat, where already crowded living conditions, due to lack of housing, would further be compounded with the razing of houses in the path of the freeway (Exline, Peters, & Larkin, p. 68). Also, by diverting traffic to the interstate there would be a huge decrease in the amount of traffic going through the 24th Street business district. This decrease, some felt, would surely starve the businesses that were dependent on commuter traffic. Several in-home businesses and
activity centers in the proposed path of the freeway also shared the skepticism, unsure of the fate of their businesses. Homes would be bulldozed without certainty of a suitable replacement. The Spencer Homes Project was located between 27th and 28th Streets. By 1977 all of its seventy-five single family units were destroyed, with residents forced to move into the other nearby projects, due to the lack of availability of smaller family homes in the area (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1977, pp. 2-31, 2-72). Around the US there was increased suspicion about the placement of these roadways and how they tended to cut through the poor and minority concentrated parts of town. The seizure of urban, poor neighborhoods occurring simultaneously with the government cutback in funding public housing during the early 1960s, and the use of freeway construction as a tool to remedy blighted areas, cast a negative light on the freeway system (Exline, Peters, & Larkin, p. 68).

Interstate 580, known since its downgrade as the North Freeway, began construction with much opposition and controversy during the 1960s and was completed in the mid-1980s. Plans for the freeway, however, were established during the 1950s, although some would argue that it may have been even earlier as a result of the race riots during 1918 to 1919 (Silbur, 1986). The North Omaha Freeway connects to Interstate 480 at Dodge Street just northwest of the downtown area and conspicuously dumps off at the entrance of the Fort Omaha campus, the former Marine, Navy and Army base, before merging into the north 30th Street thoroughfare. Today, Fort Omaha caters to predominantly African American Students as it serves as Metropolitan Community College. My father, who moved to Omaha in 1968, recalled learning about the plans for
the interstate while in college and recollects learning about the rumored alternate 1920s proposal from one of his professors:

One of the other professors had somehow gotten ahold of the video, and had showed it to his students. His class was all White. He showed it to my teacher but I don’t think he knew that my teacher was going to show it to us. There were about three or four Black students in my class. But he had talked about the Interstate 580 section and the plans for it with my Professor, who watched the film and it made him mad, angry. He did not think that what they were doing was right, taking over and bulldozing people’s houses. I do not know if he lived in the area or not, but he felt that we needed to see it. You could tell that we weren’t supposed to see it and that it was made for government officials to see. You could tell that the plan for the [North] Freeway wasn’t just about alleviating traffic. Not only that, but that this plan had been sitting probably since the 1920s or so. It wasn’t something new created during the 50s, but they will tell you that, that and to improve heavy traffic. No, it was about the city wanting a straight line for the Military to have access the Black neighborhood if there was another riot. If you just look at the interstate doesn’t it look somewhat odd that it leads right to and stops at their doorstep?

My father had been in the military during the Vietnam Era and was likely familiar with military practices and preventative measures taken to curb rioting behaviors. Because of his former military background and the US’s move toward wanting to establish and improve military defense routes, he believed that this video supported the argument that the North Freeway was initially planned 1920’s. On one hand, this
suggests that the freeway plan was created as a means of protecting African American residents of the Near North Side from White mob violence. On the other hand, given that my father recalled watching this video in the early 1970s, it also could support the argument that the freeway plan was revisited as a preventative measure following the race riots in 1966, 1968, and 1969.

Certainly, it was something that I had noticed growing up here, and anyone who has lived in Omaha and has driven in that area notices the odd way that the road is constructed and how difficult it is to maneuver those two blocks surrounding the Fort Omaha Campus, 30th Street traffic, and the oncoming interstate. Though I was unable to locate a copy of the film that my father had referenced, there have been several instances and evidence that back up the argument that the planning and placement of the North Freeway had already been determined prior to the 1950s, more than likely during the 1920s (McNichol, p. 62; Silbur, 1986). Much of the evidence also shows that these plans were initiated by the increasing amount of violence and rioting targeting Black neighborhoods around the nation and the lack of viable roads to accommodate heavy military equipment needed to quell the mob violence. However, with the timing of the proposed Interstate 580 and the location of access roads into the Black community, it is likely that the need for military intervention was again considered with the occurrence of the riots in the Near North Side Neighborhood during the 1960s. Also, many feel that the freeway was a means for Whites to completely bypass the Black neighborhoods of the city.

The Red Scare, a period lasting from 1919 through the 1950s, led to increased surveillance of United States citizens, especially those who were considered to have acted
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against American values or “un-American” behaviors. The House Un-American
Activities Committee lead by members if the CIA and fueled by citizen paranoia of
communism, openly targeted groups and individuals who supported integration and anti-
segregationist movements (Forss, p.10; Holland, p.90 ). During the 1950s and even into
the 1960s, many African American civil rights leaders, organized civil rights groups, and
well known persons in the community were targeted and accused of promoting
communism or being communists. Several local Omaha individuals and groups were
targeted using this list, including the DePorres Club, a group of Creighton students and
community members who worked to promote racial equality in the workplace, and the
community, Mildred Brown, who’s newspaper discussed heavy issues of racism in
Omaha, promoting the “double V” campaign and the “don’t buy where you can’t work”
boycott.

The initial proposals justifying the construction of Interstate 580 argue about the
need for better military access roads to downtown areas and African American
communities for increased protection and enforcement if needed (Silbur, 1986).
Certainly, Omaha’s Red Summer incident of 1919 would have benefited from the
increased number of military present to prevent violent crimes against Blacks, if in fact
that was the true intention of building those roads. The argument for and construction of
defense highways would not be openly considered for almost another 30 years at this
point, despite the sensible argument and immediate need for protection of African
Americans and their communities from mob violence at that immediate instant.

North 30th Street serves as connector to Interstate 680 in the northernmost section
of the city, but the quality of the freeway quickly drops off at the entrance of Fort Omaha.
Hypothetically, a 30th Street alternative route should have been selected as the most efficient. Since 30th Street already had been expanded to a two lane highway it would have been expected that it could have been brought up to code and widened to three lanes until it reached the entrance ramp for I-680. Alternatively, the Interstate could have been a full conversion of the existing 30th Street thoroughfare, as it easily meets up with the southern section of US 75 and I-480 East. Though a sensible alternative, this route was also considered problematic by the planning department (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1973, pp. 2-14). Likewise, the 16th street corridor was mentioned briefly in the environmental proposal draft. 16th Street followed the railroad right-of-way and would have fulfilled the straight-through road option that the proposal noted as being a requirement. However, there was no further consideration given to this route after the initial 1973 draft proposal (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1973, pp. 2-36). As part of the final Environmental Impact Statement, a letter from the Assistant Secretary for Environment, Safety, and Consumer Affairs, recommended changes and processes that needed to be done in the acquisition of valid noise pollution data as well as improved methods of property acquisition and resulting community support and communications during and after construction:

The challenge for the Near North Side is to build a neighborhood structure for the future, possibly using the North Freeway and its interchanges as influence in achieving meaning and organization to the residential Areas.' This statement indicates that the burden of rebuilding a neighborhood structure, the burden of
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maintaining amenities and rebuilding neighborhood structure should not be placed solely on the community, but should be shared by the agency responsible for the disruption. Every effort should be made to reduce or eliminate the adverse effects of this facility on any community in Omaha. The EIS [Environmental Impact Statement] should document proposals, developed with community participation, which will reduce these impacts. (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1977, pp. 8-12)

In addition to this, it was noted that the acquisition of property prior to the approval of the final statement went against the regulations of the National Environmental Policy Act (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1977, pp. 8-13). It would appear that the razing of houses and the use of eminent domain to do so, in the near North Side community during the 1960s was done without prior approval.

The 1977 Nebraska Roads and Department of Transportation proposal suggested several alternative placements and these alternate routes were noted in consideration for the location of Interstate 580. By late 1977, Omaha had decided to not improve the existing Interstate 480 connector, thus resulting in Interstate 580 being downgraded to the North Freeway. The North Freeway had a series of alternative paths with four of the six proposed paths being researched for consideration. The initial three alternative paths involved a west placement along 30th Street from Interstate 480 to Interstate 680, central placement between 27th and 28th Streets starting at Interstate 480 and ending at Interstate 680 via connector to North 30th Street, and an east placement along the railroad right-of-
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way along Carter Lake and 16th Streets (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1975) (Figure 1). Another alternative, involved a no build option, where nearby Interstate 29, located to the east of downtown Omaha, in Council Bluffs, Iowa, would be used as an I-680 to I-480 connector instead. Though the no-build alternative would have cost the city little to no money and would not have required the razing of houses, most opposed the Iowa detour option (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1977). The east, west, and central alignments were also evaluated in terms of expense, with the central alignment being the cheapest, though also affecting the most individuals in terms of possible displacement. Though the Department of Transportation and the State Department of Roads evaluated each of these alignments, the southernmost section of the North Freeway segment had already been decidedly placed within the Near North Side’s center between 27th and 28th Streets from Cuming to Ames Streets (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1973, pp. 2-18) (Figure 2).

In reviewing these reports, not only was the original purpose and intent of the construction of the interstate not truthfully depicted in terms of coming to an agreement with citizens displaced by the structure, but also that several of the environmental impact statements may have not been as detailed as needed to fully inform citizens residing in the area of the risks to living in such proximity to the traffic structure. Certainly, as time has progressed, more and more traffic has flooded onto the freeway. While the initial finalized proposal, drafted and signed in 1977, had attempted to predict traffic flows for
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1985 and 1990 using only the difference in traffic flow between 1950 and 1970, looking back these values were grossly underestimated.

In a response to the proposal, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a series of letters requesting additional research and explanation be done to address the problems of environmental disturbance, such as noise pollution and erosion concerns. According to their response letters, the proposal missed several key pieces of evidence and included several arbitrary factors that seemed to distract from the severity of the issue. Two issues proved to be problematic with any of the route alternatives that the Department of Roads had planned, first, the plan to address noise concerns from passing traffic as traffic volumes increase, and secondly, the amended air quality and pollution report only included information relating to 1970 values, and did not factor in the potential increase of ozone and particulates given an expected increase in automobile traffic in the area over time.

Research has been conducted on the placement of roads and the nearby communities affected in terms of environment and health concerns (Nowak, Crane, & Stevens, 2006; Vette, et al., 2013; Woodrow, Longley, & Kingham, 2015), housing viability (Allensworth, 1975; Decker, Nielsen, & Sindt, 2005), displacement (Lupton, 2014), and poverty. Also, research has looked at the uncanny relationship between the occurrence and types of violence with proximity to major freeways and interstates (Huff-Corzine, Corzine, & Moore, 1991) (Tinuoye, 2014). While several communities were bulldozed during that time to make way for the freeway, it is blatantly obvious that communities with poor and minority residents were targeted. In 1975, homes in the Near North Side and northeast Omaha area were appraised at $5,000 less than houses in south
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Omaha, and up to $28,000 less than homes located in southwest Omaha (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1977, pp. 2-38). More specifically, neighborhoods with a high number of poor Black families are often targeted by the State Department of Roads (Strand, p. 87). This manner of selection is not just a matter of coincidence; it has political undertones. Residents of these areas would be right to be fearful of the government, especially given the government’s abuse of eminent domain. Poor individuals who could not afford to contest the city’s plans could and would ultimately have their houses and property snatched right from underneath them. Black homeowners isolated to the Near North Side neighborhood had ultimately no choice but to watch as nearly 800 single-family housing, apartments, and multifamily homes, were seized and razed to make way for the interstate.

The city’s Planning Department would often hide behind the word blight and the fact that it was doing the community and the city a favor by tearing down the eyesore of abandoned and unkempt houses, and vacant lots, while diverting potentially problematic congestive traffic away from the residential streets (Strand, p. 93). But what the city failed to disclose were the environmental concerns, economic effects, and complaints with concerns of the displaced and affected African Americans living in the area. The draft final project proposal for the North Freeway (1975) evaluates the number of houses and individuals at risk of being displaced along with the number of available houses and building permits for single-family and multi-family homes in the area. Three apartment buildings as well as 56 homes that are located within the Spencer Housing projects, were demolished (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway
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Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1975, pp. 2-74). Between 1973 and 1975, 753 homes were demolished and only 26 building permits were granted, with two of them being for multi-family homes in the northeastern part of the city (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1975, pp. 2-31). The report goes on to argue that the number of available homes and building permits were sufficient to compensate for the 753 households being demolished, though this argument overlooked the issue of finding homes in the nearby area as well as situations involving the lax enforcement of the Fair Housing Act (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1975, pp. 2-32; Austin-Turner, et al., p. 55; Yinger, p. 891). Four churches were demolished as well, and while two of them were noted to have been in the process of rebuilding, the other two churches likely did not relocate due to the inability to find a suitable site near the area. In addition there were 25 businesses including: an iron works company, an auto parts and salvage company, a propane company, a boat construction and repair shop, a feed store, two auto body shops, a telephone company, a TV repair shop, substation, an attorney’s office, an insurance agent’s office, a used car lot, two gas stations, an income tax service, a barber shop, a fiberglass company, and a florist (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1975, pp. 2-72,73).

The report offers a thorough explanation about the system in which families and individuals would be compensated for their homes, however, one might question whether the method of appraisal and compensation was done honestly in the case of Black homeowners. Some Black residents would argue that they were fairly compensated while
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others argue that Black families were given unfair compensation, if any, compared to White counterparts in the area (Yinger, p. 892). What the proposal does not mention is that the appraisers were taught to swindle Black and poor minority homeowners out of the value of their homes. They would appraise the home and not tell the owner the appropriate value first hand; instead they would instead take that information to the city and provide them with the information and negotiators would lowball residents on their price. Ultimately, if a resident did not reach an agreement, the tool of eminent domain was used, especially in the circumstance of a house in an area where others had already given into the city’s demands (Strand, p. 87).

In reviewing the final draft of the Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed construction of the North Freeway project section between Lake and Hamilton Streets, major overreaches by way of purchasing and razing houses in the construction’s right of way were done prior to approval to build the freeway in the area. It would appear as if they used the freeway to “clear out blight” before that specific route was even suggested. Secondly, having been exposed to courses in environmental research and statistics, I found that the report is grossly understated in terms of the gathered data as well as the methodology in which it was gathered. To access appropriately the impact on a given variable the traffic levels should have been monitored among other areas; also, noise levels should have been measured over a period of time, not simply on one day. A month-long series of alternating intervals and times during the day also should have been tested and reported, as travel fluctuates at certain times of the day, week, month, and even year. Likewise, weather conditions and potential obstruction, as well as specific location of these noise preceptor devices should have been noted in the research report. The
weather conditions of the day may have distorted the values. Similarly, alternate routes caused by the disturbance of the construction and pending freeway may have led to a misrepresentation of the traffic volumes. Thirdly, the air quality report was not thoroughly done, nor was additional amendments added to the final report. There is a possibility that may have been placed into a separate report of its own, though that proves problematic considering that the information would potentially prove to be very significant to the argument against building the freeway.

One of the initial letters from the Department of Roads clearly states that the razing of houses and acquisition of land should not have occurred without prior project approval. This was noted in the response letter dated 1977, where the houses in the area had already been claimed through purchase by eminent domain between the years of 1957 and 1977, when initial proposals were being made. (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1973, pp. 2-17) While the freeway project had been shot down several times before because of costs, the city went ahead with its plans anyway, acquiring all the houses in its path. There were approximately 68 homes that were still under negotiations, all of which were located in the near North side neighborhood. At that time there had still been discrepancy over the actual placement of the freeway. It would seem like a waste of money for a city to clear and make way for an interstate given that they did not know for certain where it would gain approval to place it. That is, unless the city never planned to use the other routes and merely suggested them as alternate routes knowing full well that they would be rejected for the most desirable of the three. That route would then ultimately be the route that cut through the predominantly Black part of town. The
desirable path fulfilled the city’s desires to clear out the blighted areas further setting back the Black part of town. It ultimately cut straight through the historical Black community, both dividing it and isolating it from the rest of the city. Not only were they unwarranted in using and abusing the law of eminent domain, but they did not admit to it in the report. Several times the report uses careful mention of the area as open fields of abandoned and dilapidated housing and buildings. It seems highly suspicious that in addition to these statements that it is noted that

This segment [Hamilton to Lake Streets] is being treated as a separate section due to previous right of way acquisition and land clearance, and no objections have been raised by residents of the local area to the use of the area as a highway facility. (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1973)

There is virtually no mention of objections or the voice of the community and resulting resolutions. The existing 30th Street corridor, also less well known as US route 73, was considered for revamping to become the North Freeway. Ironically, the city chose to not expand or make improvements to 30th Street because, as they put it:

The cost to move or relocate businesses and housing along the road would cost entirely too much, with nearly 1,000 established businesses and homes it would be cheaper to move it to an area that has less of a cost. Also, the location just to the east is the only other parallel and through street and would better serve the construction plans. (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1975, pp. 2-20)
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Frontage Road Development Company, the company responsible for the contract to build the roads released this statement in response to not choosing both the west alignment along 30th street and the route that would further connect north 30th street to Interstate 680, “we would destroy those homes and businesses the frontage road was attempting to serve.” What about the homes and businesses that were plowed through to build the highway? What was the defining factor that made them worth so much less than those further West or East? Yes, the homes that were demolished in the Near North Side were appraised at a lesser vale than those homes located in neighborhoods to the north, west and south, however, a greater number of individuals and homes were affected by choosing the central alignment which negates the cost benefit justification. The deciding factor was not just money, as the proposals openly state, but also race. The west alignment would have affected a large number of affluent Whites living in the north 30th Street area and their businesses would cost significant amounts of money to the city to reimburse them for their homes and business moves. The residents living in the north 30th Street neighborhoods of Florence and Miller Park were equally as concerned as the residents of the Near North Side on the proposition of a highway being built right through their backyards, so to speak (Omaha World Herald, 1983). These communities were able to contest the planning board for the Nebraska Department of Roads, and the northernmost section of the freeway that would have connected to I-680, and this section of the freeway was never completed. As for the residents in the Near North Side, they were unable to persuade the planning board into considering another alternative route that would not bisect the community. Residents whose homes stood in the path of the freeway were left with little choice but to sell their homes to the city, and to move elsewhere. The
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city would force its own hand, succeeding in securing its right-of-way straight through
the heart of the Black community, all while revealing the truth of its North Freeway plan.
Omaha’s plan for the North Freeway was never meant to benefit the Black community as
it was implied, but rather provide a means of travel that would bypass the Black part of
town while weakening the community.

A Community Voices Concern over the Freeway

There were several notable contesters to the drawn out and controversial North
Freeway project, surprisingly, not all contesters where African American residents of the
area. Several City Council members along with a State Senator, and even the Mayor,
were against the freeway and its placement through the dense residential area. Those who
opposed the Interstate 580 turned North Freeway, project included both White and Black residents of the city and many who did not reside in the Near North Side neighborhood.
In all, the section between interstate 480, which enters Omaha from Council Bluffs, Iowa,
and Sorenson Parkway, which serves as the current airport connector, took a total of
thirty-five years to be completed. Much headache and animosity has stemmed from this,
especially as more individuals have become aware of the alternative routes where the cost
would have been less and the residents of the Near North Side neighborhood could have been less affected.

There were several opponents of the North Freeway, however the most vocal
were State Senator Ernie Chambers, and Omaha Mayor James Dworak. The initial
opposition began with Mayor, Dworak, his Urban Planning Committee, and City Council
back in the early 1960s, revolving around the effect of third-party politics and the
exorbitant cost for all things surrounding the construction of the interstate (Douglas
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County Historical Society, 2015). It was well known that Mayor Dworak did not like the fact that much of Omaha’s political leaning, and development, was controlled by private business leaders and social giants. The cost of the interstate, as well as the system involving who would get to vote for it, created quite a debate against certain interest groups. His organization of an Urban Planning Board as well as a biracial committee aimed at evaluating instances of job and housing discrimination in the city, angered wealthy private business owners and city officials. The privately backed city government argued vehemently that the vote for the interstate should be a private vote only, whereas Mayor Dworak, his Urban Planning Committee and City Council lobbied for there to be an open vote among the citizens of Omaha (Douglas County Historical Society, 2015). The city found itself in a contradictory position considering that during this time there was also a vote to increase funds for redeveloping and restoring homes the area of the Near North Side. That bill, however, was shot down as legislators reasoned that it would be too expensive.

Senator Ernie Chambers, a lifelong resident of North Omaha and former barber in the Near North Side, as well as several other notable leaders in the Black community, voiced their disapproval and distrust of the freeway efforts. Senator Chambers often referred to the North freeway in figurative and emphatic terms, expressing how detrimental it was to the livelihood and stability of not only the neighborhood, but also the Black community itself. He has referred to the freeway as a “knife, cutting through the artery in the heart of the Black community” (Kotok, 1983). The imagery that Chambers used through his speech mimics the conditions of the Near North Side and Omaha Black community. The image of a cut artery, leading to major blood loss and loss
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of life, is synonymous with the freeway cutting through the neighborhood. Not only did the freeway facilitate the creation of more suburbs and White flight, but it also enabled a large number of African American residents of the area to move away, leaving behind a greatly disrupted socio-cultural dynamic that proved fatal for the stability and livelihood of the neighborhood (Kotok, 1983).

During a 1985 legislative hearing addressing the prospect of re-industrializing the area, Senator Chambers is quoted reminding his colleagues of the negative consequences of the North Freeway:

They said the North Freeway would promote economic development but all it did was displace people from their homes, raise unemployment because of the loss of local businesses and gave outside interests stronger control over the area
(Levenson, 1984)

Senator Chambers not only voiced many of the concerns and complaints of his district about the North Freeway, but he repeatedly attempted to halt the construction by challenging the state’s funding efforts (Omaha World Herald, 1983). In comparison to the other individuals in opposition to the freeway in the Near North Side, he has been by far the most vocal representative for the area. In 1983 the State legislature proposed a bill that would allow the Nebraska Department of Roads to use state funds to provide for utility costs for Metropolitan Utilities District, Omaha Public Power District, and Northwestern Bell, companies to relocate and adapt sewer pipes, power lines, lighting, and phone lines to accommodate the North Freeway. Senator Chambers brought up publicly the fact that the proposed bill was illegal, considering that it went against a Nebraska Law which clearly stated that state funds could not be used toward federal
interstate projects. However, the Legislature passed the bill anyway, and responded by changing the law so that the bill would not be in violation of it.

Brenda Council, a former Senator, School Board and City Council member, disapproved of the North Freeway and its resulting efflux of young African Americans from the area and city as a whole. She referred to the latter as “brain drain,” the systemic funneling of African Americans, especially students wanting to go to college, out of the area due to lack of upward mobility, available educational and economic resources, as well as subjection to impoverished living conditions which were further worsened by the North Freeway system. At this time nearly 40% of residents in the area, aged 25 and older were high school graduates (Kotok, 1983). In addition 28% of the areas 11,501 residents, 28% were on welfare with 15% of the residents being unemployed. The freeways presence would further add to the struggle of the decaying area, and potentially reverse the rehabilitation efforts that were currently being made in the area.

**Recognizing the Important Role of a Community in Planning Processes**

In the article review titled “Some Aspects of Socio-economic and Community Factors in Planning Urban Freeways” (1970), Kwame Annor, a Research Assistant with the Center of Applied Urban Research at University of Nebraska Omaha, discusses the controversial processes in interstate planning and contends that it is a process that needs strict review and standardization. Although he does not say so directly, he implies that too often the community is being left out of the planning process. While he urges city planning departments to build a better bridge of communication with these affected communities he also notes that there is an issue of community complacency that may hinder both sides from working together to resolve issues in an effective manner. Annor
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uses data collected from a study conducted by Stanford University in conjunction with the California Transportation Administration.

Annor first uncovers the layers of freeway study that need to be addressed when proposing plans for roadways (p. 1). In his review of Stanford’s research, he comes to the conclusion that there are three general conditions that affect planning conditions: (1) the level of freeway development, (2) community experience, and (3) program planning and evaluation (Annor, pp. 2-3). In terms of the level of freeway development, he understands this to have three levels, the first is the proposal to construct on the basis of serving demands of present automotive traffic; secondly, building freeways to serve urban sprawl and city growth; and the third is the extension of existing freeways into undeveloped areas as a way of drawing development to these areas (Annor, pp. 6-7). He goes on to explain that the community and individuals affected will have only proximal understanding of the policy and planning aspect of freeways (p. 10). Thus, individuals will understand the impact of a freeway only in terms of personal effect, be it congestion that they have experienced in the area or other roadways, or safety concerns that they have with existing traffic patterns. Only after the affected community sees potential significant issues where a freeway would serve to resolve it or benefit them, would one expect them to support the freeway project (p. 11). The acceptance of this reasoning comes in two parts, Annor (1970) explains, the fact that citizens will perceive an obvious need for greater freedom of movement in planning, and second, this resolves opinions resulting from having no previous experience in understanding and benefiting from the impact of a freeway (p. 11).
When Annor explains program planning and evaluation process, he acknowledges that there are specific areas that planners should expect to be problematic and should therefore proactively plan and do adequate research (p. 13). He adds that there should be a policy implemented where several alternate routes are considered in advance, prior to contracting and construction, as a way to both keep costs down and better establish support for communities affected (p. 19). However, he does add that in the case of right of way protection that this could in turn end up costing a significant amount of money, but that concerns over keeping project costs low should never outweigh the rights and the concerns of the individuals that live in these affected areas (p. 14). He also suggests that a new and standardized procedure of determining air and noise pollution should be adopted and implemented when research is completed for roadway placement (Annor, p. 21). On the social aspect, Annor (pp. 20-22) adds that in communities greatly disrupted by freeway placement the importance and changes of mass transit routes should also be taken into account during the planning process. He then concludes this point with the evaluation of types of approaches that engineers and planners need to take, as well as what factors to consider in alternate services (Annor, p. 22).

He introduces the concept of key players and third-party effects of road planning. Ultimately, it is the city planning board’s job to address all issues of concern and be representative of all of the community voices when in talks with planners and engineers. Likewise, it is in the community’s best interest, he says, to form its own committee and designate an appointee to present concerns to the representative board member. As he concludes, a community’s response to the stimulus of the freeway system is heavily dependent on the capacity, ability, and desire to change what exists in the community.
area outside of the advertised benefits. He once again addresses the issue that developers themselves need to change their manner of design planning and procurement of land and property. He breaks down the roles of each involved party in the planning process and suggests that there needs to be a balance where each party makes contributions and reviews. In his opinion, the three key actors in any sort of major road construction are the planning committee, the community, and the third-party. More specifically in this case, he considers the third-party to be the contractor. Often the opinions and financial backing of the third-party takes priority over the opinions and concerns of the community, in working with the planning committee. However, he suggests that the community should have the privilege of working directly with the third party and vice versa to determine alternatives. Fourth party interest groups should be limited, given their considerable political and financial weight, and their tendency to detract from the concerns of the community being affected. For instance, investors, or churches that may receive financial gain from the placement of a roadway, be it a new facility due to the razing of an old one, may have an ulterior motive for supporting and encouraging the freeway project in this case.

To conclude his argument, Annor addresses the issue of viewing something in terms of its benefits rather than its consequences (p. 23). More specifically, the use of the highway and freeway systems is marketed to the public as a problem solver, alleviating traffic, preventing danger in residential areas, over the recognition that there is also a causative relationship. The argument of practical necessity overshadows the consequences that follow the construction of these roadways. It is true that freeways alleviate traffic, but they also divert it from businesses that need the traffic; they lower
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housing values; and they generate undesirable byproducts such as noise and air pollution. The causative side is often overlooked in lobbying for support or addressing concerns with freeway planning.

It would appear that many of the same planning practices that Annor (1970) critiques are still in place today when it comes to the construction and planning of roadways. Initially, the plans for the North Freeway, formerly Interstate 580, were laid out to start construction in the late 1960s and early 70s. However, as we have seen, according to the documents made available, there was much controversy over the building of the freeway. The *Omaha World Herald* chronicled a series of setbacks involving the funding of the freeway, as well as the disorganization and animosity between the mayor, city council, and city planning boards themselves (Douglas County Historical Society, 2015). The city’s planning board wanted to make the freeway construction a private vote. Many citizens, and the mayor rejected the project, citing that it would be inappropriate to essentially override the right of the affected communities to have a say in what happens. Also, the project had an exorbitant price tag. Many in the community argued that the money spent on the razing of homes, placing displaced families into new housing, the actual construction, and the resulting utility and plumbing aftershocks, could have been applied to the Near North Side and greater Omaha area to update existing roads, fix up houses, clean up empty lots, and help curb crime, all at a much lower cost (Laden, 1983). It was also questioned whether the use of the freeway could really ever justify the amount that it cost.
Between 1960 and 1990, the Near North Side’s Black population had dropped from almost 30,000 to only 9,100 residents (Larsen & Cotrell, p. 308). This trend would continue slowly over time, only beginning to slow recently with the rejuvenation efforts in the area. Today, the Near Northside has grown in size, spanning from 16th street to Fontenelle Boulevard on the west and from Cuming to Pratt Streets in the north. But while it has grown in size, its population has dwindled. Of Omaha’s 55,000 African Americans, only 20,000 reside in the current definitions of the Near Northside; approximately 8,000 of this population including the African immigrant population of the area (News Desk, 2012; United States Department of Commerce, 2013). The hazard of the freeway mixed with frustration over the decaying appearance, lack of housing market, and increased criminal activity in the area drove residents to move further west to escape the area. But like most issues, simply running away from the problems and not addressing them has allowed the pollution, crime, and housing problems continues unrecognized by the city. Only now when there is a threat to the viability of the rest of the city, are we beginning to address the issues that have plagued this Black community for almost 80 years.

Environmental Injustice & Health Concerns

The construction of the North Freeway faced the same ridicules as several similar road construction processes passing through urban and predominantly African American residential areas in the United States (Gaylord & Bell, p. 32). Over the last 50 years, since their construction, there has been an increasing amount of research looking into the health and crime impacts that are byproducts of urban freeways. There is a huge correlation
between certain kinds of cancer and respiratory illnesses that greatly affect adults and children living very close to auto emissions (Lester, Allen, & Hill, p. 29). While vital statistics are often divided in terms of race, it would be important to consider that health conditions and or crime should not be gaged only in association with, or attributed to racial behaviors and groups. Instead, the public health statistics and crime reports should start taking into account the causative relationship that the surrounding major roadways have on two particular characteristics, namely, prevalence of certain illnesses and criminal activity.

Issues involving air and noise pollution are two of the more notable subjects of concern when planning roadways through or near to a community. How would a planning board go about addressing such concerns as well as how would they go about resolving them? These are questions that should ultimately rank highest in terms of roadway importance over the simple argument of efficiency. After all, a community’s health and well-being should be worth more than the few minutes saved driving on the interstate, right? To some individuals, however, this is not the case, the accessibility for the majority greatly outweighs the well-being of the minority (Davis & Bent- Goodley, p. 207).

John Callewaert’s article “The Importance of Local History for Understanding and Addressing Environmental Injustices” (2002) looks at the frequency of minority individuals living in toxic exposure areas. Callewaert argues that minorities with low-income face disproportionate amounts of exposure to environmental pollutants and hazards (p. 257). In addition to this, he argues that this group is also far more likely to live in close proximity to polluting industries, such as factories, railways, sewage treatment plants, landfills, and incinerators (p. 257). He adds the notion that the United
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States aids in further environmental injustices towards minorities and individuals with low-income on the basis of disregarding and or misreading a community’s history (p. 258). This is somewhat telling given that in many instances counter-arguments presented against discriminatory environmental injustice claims seem to seek the justification that residents in a given area reside there due to “choice” (Been & Gupta, 1997), seeking closeness to jobs and lower cost of homes. Been and Gupta (1997), like many city planning researchers, are quick to deflect the responsibility to the individual or the community. The area’s history then ends up an afterthought. If researchers and city planners would take the time to consider the area’s history, there would be more insight into why the residents of these areas are stuck in a position where making the choice to live in a toxic community over a non-toxic or lower risk area is not an option. It is easy simply to reason that an African American male who makes a low-income wage does so because of whatever choices he has made. It is easier to create a story based on statistics and assume that the individual must be in a low-income job because he does not have a degree or because he chose this job position. The researcher in this case does not seem to want to take a step beyond this assumption. If they had factored in the influence of racial history in the area, is likely that findings would have cast doubt on the conclusion that Blacks willingly choose and prefer to live in toxic communities. To further prove this point, Callewaert (2002) looked into the history of two toxic communities with predominantly African American and low-income minority residents. Two men responded during two separate interviews discussing environmental issues in African American communities, taking into consideration the history of the community in the
area, as well as the cultural history involved, puts the limitations residents’ experience in a whole different perspective.

One of the reasons that this area opened up is Columbus traditionally had segregated housing...Blacks were unable to buy homes in the Columbus area, but when this area opened up there was an opportunity for many Blacks to own their own homes.(p. 260)

Now the people who live here [Robbins, Illinois] were forced into buying in this area [during the 1950s] because they couldn’t buy land anywhere else...now because they bought here they cannot afford to sell their homes and move elsewhere, for one thing no one wants to live here next to a company that is an environmental pollutant. (p. 263)

These particular situations involves the Southside community in Columbus, Ohio, and Robbins, Illinois, where African Americans who moved into these areas, fleeing violence in the south towards the end of the Great Migration period, were restricted to living in communities within very close proximity to an incineration site, and cement industry, respectively, that had both been guilty of producing an abundance of pollution (p. 263). This pollution has ultimately left residents in the area bottlenecked into staying within their homes despite the knowledge of health risks due to toxins around them. The truth is that while these residents are aware that their health is in danger, they are stuck given that this toxic residential environment also drives down property values and creates disinterest among prospective homebuyers. A potential buyer’s knowledge of the hazardous areas makes it difficult, if not virtually impossible, for the residents to sell their homes and move to a safer, less toxic, environment.
Callewaert (2002) comes to three conclusions in his study: (1) there is a definite and pervasive trend of not only environmental injustice towards minorities and low-income communities but that the injustice to the former groups is better defined as an institutionalized environmental racism caused by race-restricted housing covenants. (2) Community history is a prevalent part of making effective planning choices and evaluating environmental injustices, as it accurately puts into context and takes into consideration all of the historical factors affecting the community. It would be easy to look at the community at face value and make detrimental decisions without considering all perspectives of the community’s situation. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, (3) awareness and engagement of community history alone, whether on the part of the community, city planning board, or court system, is not the only aiding factor in resolving, or beginning to address, environmental racism. Communities themselves, not third parties, not interest groups, must actively address these agencies, just as the agency or planning board must actively address the historical information and complete thorough and comprehensive analyses (p. 265-267). Community members must also be able to understand comprehensively how their history has affected their current situations and then articulate their concerns on their own behalf (p. 257).

Several other articles addressed the kinds of carbon emissions and linked them to increased incidence of respiratory (Vette, et al., p. 38), digestive, and mental illnesses as well as frequency of certain forms of cancer (p. 38). These toxic pollutants greatly affect everyone in the city, as the number of automobiles on the road increases and affect those closer in proximity at a much quicker rate. Decker et al (2005) explains the potential effects of automotive byproducts on unknowing communities while addressing the
deficiency in fulfilling the right-to-know laws. These right-to-know laws are set into place to protect homeowners and residents by informing them of regular Toxic Release Inventory reports from the Environmental Protection Agency; instead, many residents, especially Black residents, were not made aware of these reports nor how to access air quality information (p. 120).

Decker et al. (2005), reports that there are six predominant toxins that are created as byproducts of auto exhaust, they are: lead particulates and lead compounds, barium, hydrochloric acid, ammonia, xylene, and toluene (p. 113). Almost all of these cause some form of respiratory irritation and even failure. They have been known to cause cancer in individuals with prolonged exposure to large airborne concentrations stemming from automotive pollution (Douglas County Health Department, p. 8). In 2007, a report released by the Douglas County Health Department noted that the highest prevalence of fatal cases of asthma were among the African American Community, residing east of 42nd Street (pp. 3-7). The death rate of African Americans from Asthma complications was twice that of Whites, between 1990-2004 (Douglas County Health Department, 2007, p. 7).

Decker, et al, (2005) continues on to evaluate the relationship between property values and automotive pollutants, given the reports from the Douglas County Assessor’s office. In areas where there are industry, railroad right-of-way, and freeway in close proximity, the houses are valued at significantly less than houses that are close in proximity to one or none of these polluters (p. 127). With this, he adds that areas showing higher levels of toxic release tended to have a larger proportion of African American residents (p.114). To further support Callewaert’s (2000) earlier argument, the lack of
knowledge and easily accessible air quality, and Toxic Release Inventory information essentially creates a problematic escape for Black residents wanting to move out of these poor air quality areas. Decreased home value leads to decreased financial ability to purchase a better home in another area in town. Likewise, the availability of information to potential buyers in comparison to the lack of information provided to residents in a high toxic release area decreases the chance that people will want to buy homes there.

Staying in one’s home in a location where air pollution negatively affects one’s health can also prove to be financially draining and potentially lethal. Pattinson et al (2015) adds to this by looking into the importance of educating individuals and communities to air quality, and what constitutes safe verses unsafe values and their adverse health effects (p.156). Perceptions of air quality may differ given an individual’s educational background as well as their cultural background as well as one’s own understanding of an illness, and living conditions. Therefore, many individuals living in these communities do not realize that the proximity to a freeway is what is worsening health conditions. The Douglas County Health Department did indicate in their study that most of the adults and children live in close proximity to the freeway. Since this study there have been some active efforts to help curb auto emissions, such as planting more trees and shrubs along the interstate to aid in the removal of pollution and lowering the speed limit to 55 miles per hour or lower. The option to lower the speed limit was rejected. With more recent ozone quality reports from the Environmental Protection Agency, efforts are being done to convert the coal-powered North Omaha Power Plant to one functioning with wind and solar based energy. The combination of auto-emissions with those of the nearby coal plant have created a toxic air quality that has greatly increased the prevalence of asthma
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in the northeast Omaha area, as well as increasing ozone levels to above the acceptable limits set by the EPA. If Omaha does not do more to curb these auto and industrial emissions, they could be faces with stiff penalties in the event that the EPA decides to enforce a lower maximum ozone level.

**Cultural Dissonance and City Animosity**

The Near North Side is virtually synonymous with North Omaha. As the City has grown over the last three and a half decades, the African American population has also dispersed throughout the city. The city has grown exponentially since the 1950s. In the 1950s there were approximately 16,000 African American citizens living in Omaha; as of 2010 there were roughly 60,000 (United States Department of Commerce, 2013). Today, references to the African-American residents of the Near North Side have mostly become synonymous with North Omaha as a whole. Though there is an established cultural rift between African-American citizens living in the historic neighborhood from those who migrated elsewhere in the city, the fact of the matter is that important historical achievements and perceived cultural reputation of African American citizens of Omaha, native or not, have had their beginnings in the Near North Side.

Much debate and discussion has occurred over the current state of the Near North Side Black community as well as the total Omaha Black community. The confusing thing is that the highway has brought both negative effects and positive benefits to the African American culture here. On one hand, one can see how the introduction of the freeway has caused a decrease in property values and thus decrease in business ownership and viability in the area. One is able to see that this then directly leads to the occurrence of empty and run-down housing that often fuels and covers illicit drug activities as well as
how this condition leads extremely poor individuals to commit thefts and crimes as a last resort. On the other hand, for some African American residents, the compensation offered during the relocation efforts proved to be more than what was expected. Blacks who had been considered upper lower-class or middle-class, and those who simply wanted to move away from the area, were now able to move away from the crowded area due to the compensation and relocation efforts (Street of Dreams, 1992). With the federal Fair Housing Act having passed in 1968, this was considered to be a huge step forward. Not only was Omaha’s Black middle class now able to establish itself; ultimately, this set the ball rolling in terms of diversifying the city. However, this also set the ball rolling for animosity among different economic classes of African Americans in the city.

With the efflux of middle-class African Americans from the Near North Side, came the collapse of the social dynamic of the area. Some feel that the loss of the close-knit, dependent, and tiered community is what led to its demise (Kotok, 1983). The idea is that the Near North Side area thrived due to the contributions of all classes of African Americans working within one community, thus making the community stronger. A similar concept was offered by former mayoral candidate and legislator Brenda Council. In her terms, she referred to this phenomenon of “brain drain”. This occurs when young African Americans of urban areas move away, either to other parts of town or other states for education and opportunities of upward mobility. Instead of returning and using learned skills and resources as contribution to their communities, they simply leave and never come back (Fairchild & Tucker, 1982). This idea, of course, is often reflective of the middle-class and rich elite African Americans in the city, some from the area and even those who are not, who, after learning and recognizing the injustices and needs of
their racial community, instead choose not to be concerned with it because of their lack of proximity to it. A similar, but reversed system, is referred to as “brain gain” when referring to the sudden economic boom in several southern cities, one example being, Atlanta, Georgia, which over the last few decades have seen a sort of reverse great migration. This reverse migration has led major cities in the south to become predominantly African American (Frey, p. 3).

With this mindset it is easy then to see why there is a huge inner-racial divide in the city. Income disparities as well as generational values create barriers for racial unity in the city. The North Freeway serves as a tangible line between two seemingly opposing sides, the poor African Americans versus the middle-class African Americans in the city. With the further west expansion of the city, it is becoming a much larger divide with upper-class African Americans becoming a third player. In addition, many of the older residents of the area have either moved, or passed away, and the Near North Side is predominantly younger individuals falling under the age of 50. Older residents and younger residents in the area may disagree on the problems plaguing the area and have trouble coming together to reach effective resolutions. While younger residents may see the need for neighborhood changes through redevelopment, older residents who lived in the area during earlier development efforts may view this as contributing to the deterioration of the area.

All I had ever known about the Near North Side is what I was able to witness in person when visiting family or have had told to me by family members and news coverage. Though my parents and grandparents would mention all of the nightlife, and social venues, I never saw any of this when we would pass through the area. It was full of
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boarded up buildings with broken glass windows, overgrown yards, abandoned houses with condemned stickers stapled to the wood boards blocking the doors from entry. There was a gas station we would always pass that looked like it had caught on fire years ago, and even to this day it still stands there, completely untouched. But my opinion of the area is based only on what I had seen, and, as for most of the younger residents there now, that is all that they have ever known the neighborhood to be.

The problem with this, of course, is that without knowing what the Near North Side was before, there is no sense of urgency for the current younger residents to want to change anything about their community. What I mistook for complacency was really true inability to see that there is anything potentially deficient or wrong about the conditions of the area. To older residents of the area, the decline began with the riots in 1968, where a large section of the business district along 24th Street was burned to the ground following a visit from George Wallace, a staunch segregationist and presidential candidate. The Near North Side seemed to be unable to recover from this, with another riot the following summer in response to the Police murder of Vivian Strong. Today if one were to drive through the area, they would still be able see a few of the buildings that were set on fire during the riots. But for the majority of younger Near North Side residents today, the decline in last 30 years has gone unnoticed. A news article discussing the rash of unsolved homicides in the north Omaha area, quoted a young woman referencing what it was like living in the Near North Side amid the growing threat of violence “It’s always been like this” (Kotok, 1983). While older generations of residents can attest to a respectable and lively side of the neighborhood from the past, to younger generations, the neighborhood has always lived up to its unfortunate reputation.
The Gentrification Problem

This situation proves to be a double-edged sword. While certainly one can see that the cultural dynamic of the Near North Side and its economic stability were greatly affected by having multiple income levels and social classes of African American residents, one can also see how problematic it is to simply reason that by urging middle-income and wealthy African Americans back to the area that we can quickly resolve the current economic situation in the Near North Side. Either way that we approach a situation will prove detrimental to the community and will not necessarily resolve the current Black class divide created by the construction of the freeway in the heart of the community. If continued effort is placed into a Black-only means of gentrification, two undesirable results that will occur inadvertently that may further exacerbate racial tension in the city. First, not only would we be taking a step backwards in terms of our civil rights efforts, but secondly, we would be further displacing low-income and poor residents and families creating a much larger problem for the African American community.

Firstly, one must realize that efforts aimed at recreating the Black income class dynamic that contributed to the stability of the area in the 1930s, would essentially require us to willingly re-segregate ourselves. This plan seems contradictory to both the civil rights efforts that the Black community as a whole fought for in terms of equal job opportunities, integration of schools, as well as efforts towards ending racial discrimination in housing. For some to then present the argument that the demise of the Near North Side was due to Black middle-income families moving away from the area, and disrupting the cultural dynamic, implies the belief, that, the neighborhood was more
viable when Omaha was segregated. Also, it would imply that diversity is perceived as something that has hindered the viability of the Near North Side, or is a threat to the preservation of the area's cultural history. This attitude is what deters potential small business owners and entrepreneurs from opening businesses in the area. On the other hand, diversity through gentrification does not provide a definite solution to the race-relations problem. To simply put individuals of differing ethnic and racial backgrounds together gives the appearance of diversity, not functioning diversity itself. Gentrification of an area can potentially make matters worse leading again to segregation within the small community if no racial and cultural educational resources are offered to help bridge differences. The Black community that is already suspect of its White counterparts will ultimately re-unify and further seclude themselves unless they are able to perceive that gentrification efforts will prove beneficial to them in terms of historical preservation of the area and improved racial relations, which will hopefully spread out throughout the rest of the city.

Secondly, urban development plans have been very successful so far in taking empty lots and existing run-down properties and converting them into more efficient, safer, and more aesthetically pleasing housing. And while the efforts and benefits have not gone unnoticed, one must consider the negative effects that these newer housing divisions and complexes may have on the existing residents. Similar the understanding of the causal relationship between the North Freeway and depreciation of homes nearby, ultimately these newer houses would in turn have the same effect of older homes where residents are unable to pay for restorations and upkeep. While the city continues to add new developments and resource centers to the Near North Side and while new businesses
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begin to come back to the area, renting spaces in newly renovated buildings or building their own, areas that are in proximity are going to be under scrutiny because of their proximity to these much newer and much more aesthetically pleasing buildings. At first this does not seem problematic, but one has to remember that the majority of residents in the area fall below the poverty line in terms of income. With a large amount of newly constructed business suites and the small number of historical buildings remaining in a stable enough condition to be renovated, the historical aspect of the Near North Side neighborhood is slowly being erased rather than preserved. Century-old houses that would prove to be of great value, if instead, proper efforts of maintenance and restoration were encouraged, are being condemned and replaced with newer housing that does not necessarily fit with the identity of the area. The area certainly is being rejuvenated, so to speak, but it is being executed in an unorganized manner that serves more to replace rather than preserve the history of the area.

Rejuvenation and urban development efforts in the area will ultimately bring more residents and businesses back into the area. With improved housing standards, larger homes, and development of more parks and recreational areas for children in the area we can only hope that not only will the area become safer for its current residents, but also present a more positive impression to the rest of the city. But one also has to note that as the area becomes more populated and as more businesses move back into the area that the increase in property values will also lead to an increase in mortgage payments and rental fees for homes in the area; therein lies the conflict. While we would like this area to become what it once was, a thriving business and entertainment atmosphere, we also have to be careful at the manner in which we do it so that we do not further displace
people and create a bigger problem. To make the area highly desirable for businesses again also means that we may increase the financial burdens of individuals that reside in the older, undeveloped, and overlooked areas of the neighborhood.

The Two faces of Urban Development

Many efforts and proposals have been put forth over the last 25 years aimed at restructuring the Near North Side as well as the older portions of North Omaha. Several plans have been showcased since 2011, involving the changing of the Near North Side and its 24th Street business district, into remodeled, pedestrian friendly, small communities (Alliance Building Communities & Nebraska Investment Finance Authority, 2011). Similar areas that have been recently converted to “20 minute walking neighborhoods” include historic Benson, Florence, and Dundee neighborhoods (Omaha by Design, 2013). These walking communities have been fairly successful at bringing small businesses back towards the heart of Omaha. However, though small businesses are returning to these areas, some may question whether or not these pedestrian family developments are truly a good thing. The results of such a change can be evaluated using the recent Mid-town Crossing development as an example.

Midtown Crossing, formerly recognized as the Turner Park neighborhood, is located approximately two miles southwest of the historic 24th and Lake Street district. One could have considered it to be in a similar state as the current Near North Side area. Turner Park’s park area was often considered to be an unsafe area prone to vandalism and theft, as well as a large open area full of unused space. The area, located at 30th and Dodge Streets had housed a run-down apartment building that could have mirrored the conditions of the housing projects located in the Near North Side. By 2006 the apartment
building had been demolished and the only things left in the area were a fast-food restaurant, a vacant office building, and several overgrown, unmaintained, and unused parking lots. The mansions located just to the north, were built during the early 20th century and had since been converted into apartments, much like the old mansions scattered in the Near North Side neighborhood, to accommodate lower-income residents and college students.

With the sudden movement towards a more pedestrian friendly, and eco-friendly Omaha, the selling point of Midtown Crossing was to have everything all in one place, or a “one stop shop,” where people could reside, shop, and seek entertainment all within a one-to-two block radius. In fact, the way that some of the condos were designed, residents do not have to leave their buildings at all. Completed in 2009, the area not only had entertainment venues, but it also housed upscale condos, restaurants, hobby stores, and a movie theater. The added perk for renters or homeowners who chose to move to the area was the fact that all of these things were easily accessible via private connectors through underground parking areas and walkways within the buildings. The idea was to also lure wealthy and middle-class individuals, as well as businesses, back to the area. At the same time, neighboring homes in the area and rental opportunities have skyrocketed in terms of price because of their proximity to the new, distinctly upscale area.

The initial construction began while I was an undergraduate at Creighton University, which sits equidistant between the Near North Side and Midtown Crossing. I can remember a few of my friends complaining at the time about the huge inflation in their rent due to the construction of the upscale lofts and the high end eateries that were moving into the area. While my friends where excited at the new social accommodations
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of the complex, they were also concerned about their ability to stay living in the area, given the large increase in their rent. A more relevant incident to the situation in the historical Near North Side was the condemning and destruction of the Clarinda-Page building, located at Turner Boulevard and Farnam (Burbach, 2014). This once landmark building has brought up concerns over the survival of neighborhood history when faced with business politics and acquisition of property. It was reported that, in 2014, a deal was reached with the owner of the Clarinda-Page apartment building and the nearby corporation Mutual of Omaha to tear down the previously designated landmark to replace it with an office park in addition to their Midtown Crossing complex (Burbach, 2014).

This example should be kept in mind when evaluating how to effectively redevelop the business district in the near North Side area along 24th Street without compromising the area’s rich, but fading, cultural history. While reading through the city’s recent urban development plans that have been considered and approved for the Near North Side area, I found a similar proposition for the 24th Street business district between Hamilton and Lake Streets. Similar to the character of the Midtown Crossing and Dundee business districts, and almost identical to the approved plan for street adaptations in the downtown area, the projections for the historic Near North Side business district are filled with pedestrian and bike friendly strip malls, and modern apartment housing. While the plan is visually appealing and would likely bring business interests into the struggling area, keep in mind the rental inflation concerns observed with the construction and opening of the Midtown Crossing complex. Converting the Near North side area into a pedestrian friendly district, all while upgrading to meet the city’s “upscale” esthetic standards, means widening the streets, laying down new utilities that
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can handle a larger frequency of potential customers or residents, as well as building new
easily accessible buildings. While this seems to be a simple project, given the number of
empty lots and run-down buildings, one has to consider that this also would mean more
condemning and bulldozing of existing homes and businesses, as well as the demolition
of culturally relevant buildings in the area that are beyond repair due either to lack of funds or due to lack of age specific replacement resources to properly restore the
buildings.

**Issues in Poverty and Violence**

The scarring process of seizing working-class Black families’ houses, followed by the
construction of the North Freeway has had detrimental effects on not only the Near North Side community as a whole but also on the struggle of the individual families that live in
the area. Between the years 2008 and 2010, Omaha became the city with the fifth highest
poverty rate among African Americans (Johnson, 2012, p. XVIII). Nearly 30% of African
Americans in the state fall below the poverty line, with 26.8% living in Omaha (United States Department of Commerce, 2013). As a result, 60% of the city’s African American children also fall below the poverty line (United States Department of Commerce, 2013). Despite many efforts by urban development teams, churches, and after school programs to improve the outlook of the area in terms of housing, jobs, crime rates, and academics, the near north side area’s impoverished community is steadily growing.

Debal SinghaRoy (2001), a researcher of social development in marginalized groups, noted that there is a certain degree of danger to and vulnerability of groups of individuals who have experienced exclusion due race (SinghaRoy, et al., 2001). These groups having repeatedly been excluded from employment opportunities over a series of decades due to
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their minority status, are prone to experience a much higher frequency of poverty, from which the racial group as a whole cannot recover (SinghaRoy, et al., 2001, p. 32). This would explain why the Black poverty rate of Omaha has increased over the last ten years while the poverty rate of other groups has had a decline. While other minority groups have faced hardships in the city, the African American community residing in and near the Near North Side has repeatedly faced circumstances of racial injustice including the abuse of mob violence, redlining, housing covenants, job discrimination, police harassment, and abuse of eminent domain prior to the construction of the North Freeway. In addition to this, SinghaRoy (2001) adds that extreme levels of social exclusion have significant consequences not only on the community but the individuals within it (p. 32). Secluded individuals will be more likely to suffer from low self-esteem and confused self-identity, and are also more likely to impose discrimination and acts of violence against others (p. 32).

Marcus Pohlman (1990) digs deeper into the issue of Black seclusion and the resulting state of poverty (p. 78). He argues that predominantly Black urban areas are suffering from a kind of “welfare state capitalism” caused by racial isolation and made worse by new developments and return of “privileged classes” to the area (Pohlmann, p. 78). Pohlmann explains that inserting privileged-class residents into an already super-exploited and underprivileged community creates chaos and greater instability, as those who are in the position of poverty cannot afford to keep up with changes accommodating the privileged-class (p. 78). In terms of Omaha, the added middle-income single family housing that was constructed on the former Logan-Fontenelle ground space, and the drive to bring middle-class African American families back to the area, have further impacted
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the low-income and impoverished residents. Likely, the introductions of new business hubs and community technology and resource center have also had some degree of negative impact. Businesses like these would not only serve the community but also open up potential job opportunities. However, if these facilities do not operate under a hiring policy that offers positions somewhat exclusively to residents of the area, then these companies are not contributing by way of employment opportunities for the unemployed in the area. Though we look at these additions to the neighborhood as benefits or improvements, we forget that they also have may have negative effects on the community. Similar to the North Freeway and its effects on the community, the efforts put forth to curb poverty may actually be what is allowing it to continue at an alarming pace.

With poverty often comes the trend of violence, and surprisingly, proximity to freeways and interstates also has an effect on the prevalence of violence and criminal activities (Huff-Corzine, Corzine, & Moore, p. 716; Mohl, p. 97). Researchers attribute the enactment of violent crimes as products of frustration and aggression toward an individual’s lived circumstances, such as poverty, oppression, and isolation; however they also noted that individuals living in poverty, whether extreme or not, are not predisposed to being more lethally violent than others (Huff-Corzine, Corzine, & Moore, p. 719). This suggests that violence in impoverished areas is due to other factors, not just the fact that the area is predominantly impoverished. It is more likely that the instances of violence that occur coincide with the lack of positive police presence to deter violent and criminal behavior, the amount of abandoned and vacant housing, which allows cover for
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criminal activities, as well as the lack of youth focused activities in the area that are not necessarily connected to a church or public school system.
V. CONCLUSION

The easternmost section of north Omaha had its humble beginnings as a frontier town supported by a financial system similar to the modern day government run welfare system. As time has progressed, the history of the area, including the near North Side, has evolved from one of a poor industrial town, to an enclave for poor and ethnic minorities, to a designated district for African Americans and poor Whites, and is currently the predominantly African American low-income area of the city. The Near North Side’s history tells the story of a low-income district whose community thrived with the diversity of racial minorities, but slowly deteriorated when the dynamic of the cultural diversity in the area was lost. The opportunity for upward mobility of other ethnic minorities in the area coupled with the racist attitudes towards Blacks in the city, created a demographic shift in the area leading to its reputation as a low-income and impoverished district. With the addition of the freeway, the efflux of middle-class residents, including middle-class Blacks, further compounded this disruption in the cultural dynamic in the area. The location of the freeway itself, lent to further isolate the disrupted dynamic of the Near North Side.

The North Freeway and its placement in the heart of the Black community has proven to be detrimental for the area in terms of neighborhood vitality. Many will argue that the community’s involvement in the riots of 1966, 1968, and 1969, is the cause of the current state of the struggling business and residential district. But, one should also consider that the drawn out process of razing of houses and displacement of citizens that was happening in the area prior to, during, and after the riots, was contributive to the anger and frustrations of this oppressed community. In 1919 the community had time to
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reestablish itself and recover following the Will Brown incident. With the process of
erazing homes and businesses in the area, picking up in the 1970s, the Near North Side
had little time or financial ability to recover while combating the freeway project. The
timing and placement of the North Omaha Freeway put the final nail in the coffin, so to
speak, for the historic Near North Side neighborhood.

One could wonder if the situation would be different if the rumored freeway project
from the 1920s, had been completed. Would the cultural dynamic of the area been able to
better accommodate and adapt to the freeway system back then. Would the construction
of the freeway have been welcomed by the Near North Side community as a benefit,
given is purpose as a military access road to protect the citizens in the area from mob
violence? It seems suspicious that the freeway plan had been initially proposed as a
necessity during the 1920s, or even during the 1950s, though the actual construction
phase of the project did not start until 1983. The necessity of the freeway outweighed the
necessity of repairing the damage done to the Near North Side during the riots. Even
though the community and the Mayor felt that money going towards the stalled freeway
project would better serve to make immediate community improvements, private
business owners and investors in the city wanted the freeway to cater to the upper-class
individuals who had moved into the suburbs in the western sections of the city. The
freeway would bring back the money, so to speak, and thus preserve private businesses
that were located downtown; but rich Whites in west Omaha did not want to have to drive
through the poor Black parts of town to get there.

The Near North Side’s 24th Street is now a sad shadow of what it used to be.
During the last ten years minor improvements have restored positive Black identity into
the historical area along 24\textsuperscript{th} Street. Additional business space was renovated near 24\textsuperscript{th} and Hamilton, with an educational resource center, a youth activity center, a small distributing center, and Habitat for Humanity relocating their headquarters there. At the historic 24\textsuperscript{th} and Lake Streets, some of the historical buildings were able to be renovated into new office and small business spaces. Sculptures and murals honoring Preston Love, Mildred Brown, Malcom X, have been added to help recognize native Omahans who have made contributions to the area, while helping to educate the younger generations and preserving the area’s history.

Though the Freeway’s presence has dealt a huge blow to the stability of the Near North Side community, the last decade has been one of development in the area, creating jobs, mixed-income housing, and plans for future endeavors aimed at curbing the rapidly growing poverty and homeless rate in the area. It would seem that some of the negative effects of the freeway are starting to dissolve as younger residents, older residents, and the city’s urban planning departments are working together, with other private funded urban development programs joining in, being more inclusive of community concerns and grievances in order to reach an agreement on needed projects in the area. One example of this is with the new Prospect Village Initiative. Differing from most urban development strategies, the Prospect Village Initiative aims to provide grants to qualifying home owners and families, so that they may pay for restorations and other improvements on their homes. The program is partnered with the Omaha Healthy Kids Alliance and is aimed at enabling homeowners, who otherwise would not afford it, to make their homes more efficient and remove health hazards. In comparison to the city’s urban development efforts that condemn homes, but not necessarily replace them, this
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program aims at restoring these homes, minimalizing the displacement of residents in the area. Additional urban development efforts have brought in new single family housing to accommodate upper low-income and middle-class residents to stay within or return to the area. Several new Black business owners have relocated to the area, opening restaurants. There is surely a possibility that the area could once again be the thriving community that it once was, however, it is also true that this outcome will require more gentrification efforts to increase racial diversity in the area. While some African American residents of the area may still have animosity towards development and racially diverse gentrification of the area, the truth is that in order to reverse the effects of the negative reputation that has gained, there needs to be a good faith effort towards inclusion of other cultural and racial groups in the area with efforts to slow criminal activity to prove otherwise. While the Near North Side business district has flourished in the past with a growth of Black owned successful businesses and practices, the area will need to become more inviting for potential customers in order for these new small businesses to survive, especially now considering that the area does not have a large chain store or restaurant in close proximity to provide competition for small businesses.

**Knowledge of Community and Cultural history is essential**

The most important lesson that one could learn from reading about the history of the Near North Side and the struggles of its the African American residents, is that the knowledge of said history is an essential part in maintaining the viability, reputation, and successes of the neighborhood, its residents, and the cultural group as a whole. Whether one lives in the area, or is a part of the African American community or not, the history
of this area, and its people is a valuable thing that enables us as a city to see how far we have come in terms of race relations, as well as how far we still need to go.

The key to understanding and valuing local African American cultural history is through the education system. There is a need to improve the way we educate young African American children and young adults about not only the mainstream history but also the importance of their local cultural history in conjunction with this. We often excuse ourselves from addressing culture in historical events over fears of offending others and this is a big mistake. To have something misrepresented may actually serve better than to not have representation at all. This misrepresentation would at least generate interest in students wanting to know more about the topic versus ignoring contributions of entire groups of ethnic and racial peoples. You cannot expect an individual, or a community, to respect something that they know nothing about. More specifically, you cannot expect to see individuals show pride or respect towards a community when its own city fails to even do so. Omaha still remains very segregated, and the North Omaha Freeway will be not be going anywhere, anytime soon. But while the freeway is permanent, the instances of racism do not have to be. Racism has deep roots into the history of our city, even in a so-called post-racial era, we are continuously allowing this problem to grow. As African Americans we must be more involved in efforts to better our communities instead of passively watching decisions be made for us. Though there is much dissonance and animosity among Omaha’s Black community, we all share the experience of being dehumanized, rejected, and made to feel invisible because of the color of our skin (Klein, 1978). Because of this we all share a moral investment, independent of income, education, or lifestyle, to the betterment of the racial
situation in our city. To be complacent with our current racial identity and condition is to give up. We are not violent indignant, needy, individuals as the media likes to portray us, but in order to correct this perception, we need to prove them wrong. It has been 51 years since the Supreme Court outlawed segregation, and yet it has been allowed to continue on as a normal part of life in the city of Omaha. For 51 years, we as African Americans have assumed that equality would be handed to us, and that racial respect and cultural unity would just fall into place. This is where we have failed. We must stop filling the role of the oppressed if we ever expect to be equals in this city. If the lack of progress in the last five decades has not shown us that we have to make do for ourselves, then our complacency will ultimately further compound our current racial unrest. We have been waiting 51 years for our White counterparts to respect us as equals, but I ask, why are we waiting on them? The world teaches Black children that they are dependent. We are slaves, we are erratic, we are uneducated, we are poor, even those who become successful athletes, are portrayed as dominated by a system of white coaches. To be respected as equals we need to teach our children, and understand ourselves, that we are not simply a White man’s shadow. We need to assert ourselves as equals if we want to be looked at as such, and we need to do so by our own hand, not wait for others who have no intention of changing the current racial situation.

“When White people say justice, they mean, just us” - Black American folk aphorism
Figure 1. East, Central, and West alignments shown together on a map of Omaha. (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1975)
Figure 2. Hamilton to Lake Street section between 27th and 28th Streets. (United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration and Nebraska Department of Roads, 1973)
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Game of Roads


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