

“STATE OF EMERGENCY”: EDGEHILL, NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE AND THE
FIGHT AGAINST DISPLACEMENT FROM URBAN RENEWAL TO
GENTRIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

“STATE OF EMERGENCY”: EDGEHILL, NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE AND THE FIGHT AGAINST DISPLACEMENT FROM URBAN RENEWAL TO GENTRIFICATION

Gentrification and displacement have become increasingly important terms within the fields of historic preservation, urban planning, geography, and social justice in late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. Urban neighborhoods have changed rapidly as developers purchase properties at low cost in order to renovate, demolish, or rebuild and sell at higher prices. Historic preservation offers organizations, both professional and grassroots, the tools to share the history of neighborhoods at risk of gentrification and the stories of the people at risk of displacement. Utilizing the Edgehill neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee, this dissertation explores the impact of residential segregation, through both federal urban renewal and the Model Cities program, to understand how gentrification is the next step of this long legacy. ALSO, the dissertation analyzes how grassroots organizations within Edgehill utilized public history methodology in the form of historic preservation and material culture to celebrate the neighborhood's significance and make the case against gentrification in the wake of the 21st century corporate development of Nashville as a whole.

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CHAPTER I: SYNTHESIZING HOUSING DISCRIMINATION'S ROLE IN URBAN STUDIES AND IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

On November 19, 2016 *The Tennessean* published a video titled “Nashville’s Edgehill neighborhood in ‘state of emergency.’” In the video, Edgehill residents discussed the issues their community faced: gentrification, displacement, an increase short-term rentals, and a lack of affordable housing.¹ Between 2010 and 2017, one year after residents of Edgehill declared the state of emergency, Nashville’s population increased over 10 percent.² Residents of Edgehill are not alone in feeling the pressures of Music City’s boom as the new self-proclaimed “it-city.” What makes them unique is the fight they led to protect their neighborhood. Rather than viewing historic preservation as a tool for gentrification, residents saw an opportunity to utilize historic preservation methods to protect their neighborhood. As the construction of more multi-storied tall-skinies, or the unconnected duplexes on a single parcel that typically tower over primarily single-family, one- to one-and-a-half story homes, began to tear the historic fabric of Edgehill apart, residents and organizations came together to take control of change.

The Edgehill neighborhood is located south of downtown Nashville. The neighborhood is approximately one mile from Fort Negley, the Civil War fortification

¹ Andy Humbles. *Nashville’s Edgehill in ‘state of emergency’*, 1 min., 39 sec.; from *The Tennessean*, online video, <https://www.tennessean.com/videos/news/2016/11/19/nashville-s-edgehill-neighborhood-%22state-emergency%22/94141358/> (accessed December 10, 2018).

² “Quick Facts: Nashville-Davidson (balance), Tennessee; Davidson County, Tennessee,” Census.gov, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/nashvilledavidsonbalancetennessee,davidsoncountytennessee/PST120217>.

built during Union occupation, and Fort Casino, built off 8th Avenue where the city reservoir is now located. To the south, is Belmont University while to the West is Vanderbilt University. In the northwest corner of the neighborhood boundaries stands Music Row. Interstates 65 and 40 make up the northern boundaries of Edgehill (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of the Edgehill neighborhood with the Edgehill Neighborhood Conservation Overlay in red. Points of interest are also highlighted. Map created by author via ESRI online.

To understand the importance of the residents' fight for protection of their neighborhood, one must understand the importance of Edgehill within Nashville. The first white newspaper to mention Edgehill was *The Nashville Daily American*, which on

December 11, 1890 published “Changing Names Important Alterations to Prominent West End Streets.” Edgehill Avenue, the heart of the neighborhood today, received its name after the council voted to change the name of West Jackson and Kentucky Streets.³ Local newspapers do not mention Edgehill much more throughout the 1890s, possibly because it had developed as an African American enclave. One article, which sheds light on the demographic makeup of Edgehill, appeared in 1895. On October 13, 1895, four cabins burned down in Edgehill. All of the men who owned the houses, William Erwin, Frank Arnold, Ashbury Derham, and William Hopkins, were all listed as “colored” in the article.⁴

Local historians position Edgehill as an early free-African American community, formed on the heels of the contraband camps located at Fort Negley and Fort Casino. Contraband camps, found near Union-occupied cities and strongholds, became spaces for enslaved people to find protection within the Confederacy. In 1862, as more enslaved people left the sites of bondage to seek freedom in Union-occupied territories, U.S. General Ulysses S. Grant appointed John Eaton, Jr. as the general superintendent of contrabands. The post effectively established contraband camps for newly freed men, women, and children where they could find food, clothes, and shelter. Furthermore, it later allowed the U.S. Army to conscript African American men into the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT).⁵ Fort Negley became one of the most vital U.S. forts. Built largely by African American men staying around the fort for protection and other free African

³ “Changing Names Important Alterations to Prominent West End Streets,” *The Daily American*, Nashville, 11 December 1890, p. 3.

⁴ “Four Cabins Burned,” *The Nashville American*, 14 October 1895, p. 5.

⁵ Stephen Joseph Ross, “Freed Soil, Freed Labor, Freed Men: John Eaton and the Davis Bend Experiment,” *The Journal of Southern History* 44 (1978): 215.

Americans living in Nashville at the time, the fort sat atop St. Cloud Hill.⁶ Other Union forts included nearby Fort Confiscation, later renamed Fort Morton, Fort Houston, and Fort Casino.⁷ Also constructed by conscripted African Americans, Fort Casino stood half a mile from Fort Negley. Today, Casino Hill is the location of the 8th Avenue Reservoir and Reservoir Park, both important spaces in the Edgehill neighborhood.⁸



Figure 2. View from Fort Negley, looking towards Edgehill Avenue.

⁶ Bobby L. Lovett, "Nashville's Fort Negley: A Symbol of Blacks' Involvement with the Union Army," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 41 (1982): 11.

⁷ Lovett, "Nashville's Fort Negley," 17.

⁸ "Eighth Avenue South Reservoir," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1976), Section 1.

After the war, many African Americans would stay in the sites of the former contraband camps and form their own freed communities. At least three contraband camps existed in Nashville. One contraband camp was found near the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad depot. Another was located in East Nashville near present-day Edgefield. The third, and the one most pertinent to Edgehill, was in the vicinity of Fort Negley, one mile away from modern day Edgehill.⁹ With the connection to the Civil War and the U.S. Army's occupation of Nashville, the community that shaped what became Edgehill has roots back to the 1860s and emancipation, a nationally significant event in American history. The connection and significance of the neighborhood, while lost to history in the minds of some of Metro Nashville's officials, was not lost among the residents.

By 1890, the year Edgehill Avenue received its name, the population of the Tenth Ward equated to 55 percent African American. The Tenth Ward encompassed a large section of what is now the southern part of Edgehill.¹⁰ Newspaper articles support the demographic makeup of Edgehill at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition to the previously mentioned 1895 *Tennessean* article, several death records from the 1890s and 1900 list the deaths of Edgehill residents. More often than not, the names are listed under the "Colored" section of the death record.¹¹ Such important historic African American churches as Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (1866), Kayne Avenue Baptist

⁹ Bobby L. Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 55.

¹⁰ Benjamin Walter, "Ethnicity and Residential Succession" in *Growing Metropolis: Aspects of Development in Nashville*, ed. James F. Blumstein and Benjamin Walter (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1975), 22.

¹¹ "The Death Record," *The Nashville American*, 07 April 1900, p. 8.

Church (1882), Bass Street Baptist Church (1887), Lea Avenue Christian Church (1892), and Mt. Sinai Primitive Baptist Church (c. 1890) defined the institutional foundation for the Edgehill neighborhood. Add to that the presence of two African American public elementary schools: Carter School, located on 12th Avenue S. near Edgehill Street, and Lawrence School on South Street near Kayne Avenue. These two schools were combined c. 1950 into the present-day Carter-Lawrence School. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the churches and schools became public landmarks for Black neighborhoods in a “Jim Crow” city, replacing the earlier primacy of the U.S. fronts.



Figure 3. Kayne Avenue Missionary Baptist Church.



Figure 4. Greater Bethel A.M.E. Church.

With the establishment of the street car system in 1889, Edgehill slowly became a neighborhood of more mixed racial demographics. The street car first came to South Nashville, of which Edgehill is situated. The system connected North, South, East, and West Nashville to the downtown business district.¹² With the increase in connection brought on by the street car system, more and more white people began to move into Edgehill and other neighborhoods outside of the urban core. Consequentially, this move pushed the established African American residences and institutions to the inner streets of the neighborhood. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the churches and schools became the public landmarks for Black neighborhoods in an “Jim Crow” city, replacing the earlier primacy of the U.S. army forts.

¹² “A New Electric Line,” *The Daily American*, Nashville, 26 March 1889, p. 7.

However, Edgehill remained an important middle-class African American neighborhood throughout much of the first quarter of the twentieth century. In 1905, the Board of Public Works introduced a bill to extend the West End sewer across Belmont Avenue and into Edgehill Avenue.¹³ Improvements to the neighborhood's infrastructure meant developers could seize the opportunity to subdivide and sell off lots. Yet, because of Jim Crow segregation, developers and real estate agents had to specify whether or not the homes they advertised could be purchased by African Americans. Often the top or the very end of the "for sale" advertisement would read "For colored people."¹⁴

Prominent residents of Edgehill include artists and professional architects. William Edmondson was the child of two formerly enslaved people. Orange and Jane Edmondson lived in Nashville and raised their children in the city. Jane moved to 13th Avenue South in 1907 where she became a laundress. Two of her sons, Orange, Jr. and William, purchased homes in Edgehill as well, on 14th Avenue South. William Edmondson first started his journey into art through helping a local stonemason with funerary art. He later started a sculpture garden, which gained him more prominence. Edmondson would make history by being the first African American to exhibit a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art.¹⁵

Additionally, the first African American owned architecture firm, established by Moses III and Calvin McKissack, has ties to Edgehill. The McKissack brothers came

¹³ "New Bills," *The Nashville American*, 28 April 1905, p. 10.

¹⁴ "For Sale – Hawkins street lots at \$16 per foot," *The Nashville American*, 4 April 1909, p. 20; "For Sale to Colored People," *Nashville Tennessean*, 17 January 1909, p. 7.

¹⁵ Bobby L. Lovett, "From Plantation to the City: William Edmondson and the African American Community," in *The Art of William Edmondson* ed. William Edmondson et al. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 19-20; Linda T. Wynn, "McKissack and McKissack Architects," Carroll Van West, et. al, eds., *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, online edition.

from a line of master builders, starting with their grandfather, Moses, who lived his life enslaved. Their father, Gabriel Moses, continued the trade and passed it down to his sons. In 1905, Moses III opened a construction company in Nashville. After building the Dean of Architecture and Engineering residence at Vanderbilt University, McKissack continued to receive commissions for prominent, white residences.¹⁶ In 1920, Moses is listed in the Census as living at 1501 Edgehill Avenue. Calvin is listed only a few blocks away at 1205 Edgehill Avenue.¹⁷ The two brothers would go on to complete several prominent commissions, including the Carnegie Library at Fisk University as well as many other Works Progress Administration Projects throughout Nashville and other parts of the state.¹⁸

A closer examination of Census data from 1900 to 1940 illustrate the impact of the street car system and the movement of whites into the outer, historically African American neighborhoods. Take for example the 1920 Census and Moses McKissack's home on Edgehill Avenue. Along Edgehill Avenue and Thirteenth Avenue South, a cross-section within the neighborhood, all of the enumerated families are listed as "B," or African American. Along Villa Place, one of the streets along the outer, western boundary, the families are predominately white.¹⁹ By 1930, the distinct patterns of segregation in Edgehill start to fade. On 15th Avenue South, only two blocks away from a

¹⁶Linda T. Wynn, "McKissack and McKissack Architects," Carroll Van West, et. al, eds., *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, online edition.

¹⁷ Ancestry.com. *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920. (NARA microfilm publication T625, 2076 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸ Wynn, "McKissack and McKissack Architects."

¹⁹ Ancestry.com. *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line].

predominantly African American street, a white family is listed on the 1930 Census.²⁰ However, by 1940, the demographics began to shift again. Wealthier white families had the ability to utilize New Deal programs, like the G.I. Bill, to build home in suburban neighborhoods. Edgehill gradually became a predominantly African American neighborhood again, perhaps to the detriment of the community in the face of white political power and urban renewal.²¹

The late 1950s saw Owen Bradley open his recording studio on 16th Avenue South, along the western boarder of Edgehill. The first recording studio in the area, the success of Bradley lured other recording companies to the neighborhood. Instead of tearing down the single-family residences, companies reused the buildings, converting them into studios. The success of the music industry led local government to allow for zoning changes along the western edge of Edgehill, effectively displacing the families that once called the area home.²² Journalist Paul Hemphill's important and influential book, *The Nashville Sound*, characterized the neighborhood of the 1960s: "Music Row (or, sometimes, Record Row) is the local name for an eight-square-block area about two miles from downtown, in the urban renewal area around Sixteenth and Seventeenth Avenues South, near Vanderbilt University and a vast Negro section, where almost all of Nashville's music-related businesses operate out of a smorgasbord of renovated old

²⁰ Ancestry.com. *1930 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2002. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1930. T626, 2,667 rolls.

²¹ Ancestry.com. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1940. T627, 4,643 rolls.

²² Nashville Civic Design Center, *Edgehill Neighborhood: Findings and Recommendations, 2003* (Nashville: Nashville Civic Design Center, 2003), 9.

single- and two-story houses and sleek new office buildings."²³ Cultural historian John Grissin agreed, commenting that the neighborhood from his white perspective had "weed-filled lots, run-down buildings, and private homes for senior citizens." He added: "Between the chrome and glass of modern one- and two-story office buildings, the place continues to look pretty dumpy."²⁴ With Music Row an official staple of Nashville by this time, residents of Edgehill began to worry about what else might encroach upon their neighborhood.

The Federal Urban Renewal Program, which lasted between the 1950s and 1960s, wreaked havoc amongst Nashville's African American neighborhoods. The aim of urban renewal was to clear out "blighted" sections of cities' urban cores and expand public parks, schools, infrastructure, and remodel public housing.²⁵ In Edgehill, however, urban renewal projects brought Federal interstates right through the neighborhood, cutting off the historically African American neighborhood from Fort Negley, where the newly emancipated African Americans began community building, as well as other parts of Music City. Tearing down many of the single-family residences, Interstates 40 and 65 now form the northeastern boundary of Edgehill.²⁶

This chapter has three purposes. The first is to illustrate previous scholarly contributions to the subfields of urban history and housing discrimination. The rich historiography within urban studies spans disciplines and approaches which lend well to understanding change and growth of cities overtime. The articles and books discussed

²³ Paul Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 36.

²⁴ John Grissin, *Country Music: White Man's Blues* (New York: Coronet, 1970), 24.

²⁵ Nashville Civic Design Center, *Edgehill Neighborhood*, 9-10.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

here also cover a wide range of issues within the field of urban history, including restrictive covenants, redlining, and federal government intervention in housing. Second, this chapter seeks to position Nashville in the field of urban history. As a New South city, Nashville slowly climbed after Reconstruction, which paved the way for economic growth during the twentieth century, ultimately leading to the “It-City” seen today. This research adds to the earlier work of Don H. Doyle and Louis Kyriakouides to situate Nashville within the historiography of New South urban history studies, but my research also looks at the long legacy of housing discrimination. Finally, this chapter seeks to position urban spaces within the greater context of dialogues with historic preservation and public history. Preservationists work to preserve spaces and places of local, state, and national significance. Given the rapid pace of change seen in cities during the twenty first century, perhaps the field needs to find different methods for ensuring stories are not erased from the landscape.

One of the earliest works on the study of urban growth and change came with the 1925 publication of Robert E. Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick MacKenzie’s *The City*, which established the Chicago School of urban sociology. Particularly, Burgess’ essay “Growth of the City” created a model of understanding cities in zone with a central core with Chicago as a case study. According to Burgess, directly outside of the urban core laid a zone of transition, typically occupied by immigrants and non-white renters, as well as early industries. Beyond the zone of transition was the zone of worker’s homes. Single-family homes and apartment homes occupied the final zone, the residential zone.

Outside of the city, Burgess explained, laid the commuters' zone.²⁷ Although other models have since been established to understand urban growth, Burgess' approach remains an important model.

Furthermore, some similarities between the Chicago School model of urban growth and today's models of gentrification are noteworthy. For example, Burgess discussed zones of concentrated poverty."²⁸ A 2019 study conducted by William Stancil found that residents who are displaced by forces of gentrification and revitalization within urban cores are often displaced to worse-off areas from city centers, or into more concentrated pockets of poverty outside of the boundaries of the city center.²⁹ In a sense, as more white people return to urban cores, outlying suburban neighborhoods become starved of capital and investment in public services, the same plight experienced by urban cores in the period of massive white flight.

Any study of urbanity would not be complete without reference to Jane Jacobs and the influence of historic preservationist to the debates from the 1960s forward. In 1961, Jacobs published her first work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. She proposed four pillars of urbanism: safe and interesting streets, a fabric to connect those streets on a district or neighborhood level, public spaces like parks and a public square to help promote safe and interesting streets, and a functional identity that does not segregate spaces or uses on the district or neighborhood level. Essentially, Jacobs promoted a

²⁷ Robert Ezra Park, Ernest Watson Burgess, and Roderick Duncan MacKenzie, *The City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1925).

²⁸ Ernest Burgess, "The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project," in *The City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1925), 47-62.

²⁹ Myron Orfield and William Stancil, "American Neighborhood Change in the 21st Century," *Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, University of Minnesota Law School*, April 2019.

mixed-use, diverse neighborhood.³⁰ Writing at the time as a critique of Robert Moses' plan to run an interstate through Greenwich Village, Jacobs saw the streets as places for the public to create and cultivate community. Within three years, the National Trust for Historic Preservation promoted the study from the U.S. Council of Mayors, *With Heritage So Rich*, that also underscored the losses to historic and architectural fabric caused by urban renewal.³¹ The book played a huge role in convincing Congress to approve the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966. In 1969, Jacobs published *The Economy of Cities*. In this work, Jacobs pushed her theory of urban diversity past the street level to analyze industries. She argued cities needed multiple industries in order to remain innovative and keep people employed. She further argued innovation and diverse industries could help prevent the decline of cities over time, as people would continue to work towards solutions.³² Richard Florida would later expand upon that theme with his work, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002).³³

David Harvey published *Social Justice and the City* in 1973. He took an interdisciplinary approach to understanding cities using principles of Marxism, geography, and philosophy. Harvey argued the structure and form of a city reflects the relationship between labor and capital. He also argued that social policies are framed as attempts to maintain a specific income distribution within a city or to redistribute income amongst the diverse social groups that make up a society. In either case, when the spatial

³⁰ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

³¹ United States Conference of Mayors. 1966. *With heritage so rich: a report of a Special Committee on Historic Preservation under the auspices of the United States Conference of Mayors with a grant from the Ford Foundation*. New York: Random House.

³² Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Random House, 1969).

³³ Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

form of a city is changed, accessibility and the cost of living within a given space goes up for any household.³⁴

Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, published in 1985, highlighted the importance of technology and transportation innovations to forming some of the earliest suburbs. Jackson argued societal changes led to a flip in the valuation of land. As cities built up, people did not want to live in the areas surrounding the core. Yet, as industrialization and advances in technology spread, real estate speculators and developers marketed suburban living as the so-called American dream. Of significance, Jackson's research into twentieth century practices of residential segregation gave future scholars the term "white flight," or the exodus of white people out of city centers as more Black people moved in, or were relegated to only certain sections of the city due to segregation patterns. Jackson's study provided a clear connection between urban segregation and the creation of the suburbs for white families to escape the city.³⁵

Specific studies on the history of residential segregation in Nashville also add to the contextualization of this research project. Don H. Doyle published several books and articles on Nashville. His first books to include Nashville as a primary case study included, *Nashville in the New South, 1880-1930* and *Nashville Since the 1920s*, which were published in 1985. *Nashville in the New South* credited the railroad for Nashville's economic boom in the late nineteenth century. However, Doyle does not shy away from critiquing the vast difference between the wealth of white elites and the impoverished

³⁴ David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

³⁵ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

lives of African Americans living right below the major downtown thoroughfare, known as Black Bottom. Yet, as the financial collapse and Great Depression occurred, Nashville lost some of its prominence as a New South City.³⁶ Picking up where *Nashville in the New South* left off, *Nashville Since the 1920s* analyzed the city's progression into a modern, urban center complete with the Nashville-Davidson County Metropolitan government system. He tracked the migration of younger men from the rural counties surrounding Nashville and the tensions between the new urbanites and those holding political power. Politics played a large role in Doyle's second book, as he closely traced the federal government's interventions in the city during the New Deal Era. He gave great attention to the New South city's role in integration and the Civil Rights Movement.³⁷

In 1987, Sam Bass Warner published *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth*. Warner viewed the issues plaguing cities as a conflict between private gain and public need. He posited that privatism, or the need of a few capitalists to have control over the majority of businesses and politics in an area, ultimately fail cities as it does not guarantee the vast majority of citizens a satisfactory standard of living. Warner analyzed the city of Philadelphia from the colonial period through early industrialization and into the modern metropolitan area seen today. Through his analysis, he illustrated how the growth of industry in Philadelphia led to a decline in the sense of

³⁶ Don H. Doyle, *Nashville in the New South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

³⁷ Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

community within the city, and ultimately led to further segregation between classes and races.³⁸

Doyle published *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, and Mobile, 1860-1890* three years later in 1990. With other southern cities as case studies, Doyle positioned Nashville as one of the more successful examples of a New South city. With a heavy emphasis on railroads as not only transportation networks but also economic hubs, Doyle argued cities like Atlanta and Nashville were better set to remain urban centers than port cities like Charleston and Mobile at the end of the Civil War. Complete with statistics and data analysis, Doyle once again provided a source for understanding how Nashville grew out of Reconstruction to become a major economic center for Middle Tennessee.³⁹

One of the most important studies in urban history and understanding the racial issues cities faced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is Thomas J. Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (1996). Sugrue's work added to the growing subsection of urban history focusing on the interplay between racial segregation and economic decline. His case study focused on Detroit, particularly in the post-World War II collapse. Sugrue analyzed the patterns of migration of Black families into Detroit and how their migration coincided with white migration out of the city and into new suburban neighborhoods. With assistance from the federal government via the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and Veterans Administration (VA), whites

³⁸ Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

³⁹ Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

found ways to keep their new neighborhoods homogenous. As the automobile industry in Detroit collapsed and whites moved further out from the urban core, city leadership blamed African Americans for the demise of the city, which ultimately led to the Detroit riot of 1967, a pivotal moment Sugrue highlighted.⁴⁰

Thomas W. Hanchett's 1998 work in Charlotte, North Carolina provided an intensive research project on a New South city. Hanchett analyzed Charlotte across an approximately one hundred year span, from the late nineteenth century through the 1970s. He found that early Charlotte included a "salt and pepper" distribution, with both Black and white families living in the same neighborhood, as well as a mix of uses along the streetscape. However, by the 1900s the city began to segregate, with entire blocks occupied by African Americans and others by whites. Over time, elite whites found ways to separate themselves not only from African Americans, but also from working-class whites. Suburbanization, backed by the federal government via the FHA and Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC), allowed wealthy whites to close off neighborhoods via development of white-owned businesses, restrictive covenants, and maintaining political control. Although Charlotte urbanized late in comparison to other cities, especially in the northeast, Hanchett's work provided an excellent parallel to study other New South cities' patterns of residential segregation.⁴¹

Arnold R. Hirsh's book, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (1998), analyzed the ways in which whites controlled city policies to

⁴⁰ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁴¹ Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

enact residential segregation. Hirsh argued that the influx of African Americans into Chicago led to several white reactions: mob violence, government manipulation on the part of white business leaders and universities, closing off neighborhoods to prevent more public housing developments, and community organizing. Whites used violence to prevent or scare away African American renters or potential homebuyers. Additionally, prominent business owners and university leadership in the city used their power to sway policy decisions, especially related to the construction of more public housing projects. Whites sought to ensure new public housing only went into neighborhoods already occupied by housing project or occupied predominantly by African Americans. Hirsh also called out the hypocrisy of the Hyde Park neighborhood for seemingly being open to an integrated neighborhood while only allowing African Americans to live on specific lots. Hirsh's approach to his study of Chicago's residential segregation focused more on whites' reactions and misuses of power to control where African Americans could and could not live, thus reinforcing the ghettoization of Black neighborhoods.⁴²

Louis Kyriakouides' *Social Origins of the Urban South: Race, Gender, and Migration in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930* (2003) analyzed the migration patterns in the Middle Tennessee region that led to Nashville's growth as a New South city. Kyriakouides highlighted the links between Nashville as an economic center for the surrounding, rural counties, which aided in the city's growth as a major hub for the region. As agriculture declined and younger men sought work, the city became a place for laborers to journey to. He traced the migration patterns and illustrated how the city

⁴² Arnold R. Hirsh, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

reformed in the post-Civil War era. This analysis is beneficial to understanding the city's second boom, as an urban destination for both corporation and tourists, nearly a century later.⁴³

White flight became the major topic of study for Kevin Kruse. In 2005, Kruse published *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. He argued that white flight was not explicitly a Northern phenomenon. Instead, it occurred throughout the South as well. However, Kruse argued that white flight in the South occurred as a reaction to forced integration in the wake of *Brown v. Board* and that whites wanted uphold separation whereas in the North, whites reacted to the black families migrating out of the South. This difference also led to more violent reactions in the North, where often whites outnumbered African Americans. Whatever the argument for white flight may be, the FHA aided whites seeking separation through the HOLC and the G.I. Bill as suburbs became the popular choice for white families and city governments disinvested in their urban cores, once again establishing a racialized geography within the city and in the rings around the core.⁴⁴

Looking more specifically at the judicial cases against restrictive covenants, Jeffrey D. Gonda published *Unjust Deeds: The Restrictive Covenant Cases and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* in 2015. In his book, Gonda argued the fight for residential integration and the end of legal segregation changed activism within African American communities. At the end of World War II, developers and real estate agents

⁴³ Louis Kyriakoudes, *Social Origins of the Urban South: Race, Gender, and Migration in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁴⁴ Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

marketed new planned suburban communities to white families, who with the help of the federal government experienced unprecedented access to homeownership. In order to keep these new communities white only, restrictive covenants were often utilized. Gonda's work highlights the activism led by Black lawyers and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Even after the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Shelley v. Kramer* (1948), discriminatory residential practices continued, as did the fight to end them. Gonda argued the legal fight against restrictive covenants ultimately helped Black activists turn to the court system to end segregation.⁴⁵

Louis L. Woods' work on residential segregation, especially segregation backed by the federal government via the Veterans Administration, sheds great light on the interplay between federal policy and the legacies of urban segregation. "Almost 'No Negro Veteran Could Get a Loan'," analyzed the relationship between the Federal Housing Authority and the G.I. Bill, which could have provided Black veterans a way to buy a house and begin building equity and wealth for future generations. Instead, many were unable to use the housing portion of the bill, despite their military service during World War II. While white men were able to buy a home using the G.I. Bill with nearly zero money down and a mortgage backed by the federal government, Black veterans did not have such opportunities. The FHA still supported racialized segregation in residential areas despite the ruling against restrictive covenants in *Shelley v. Kramer*, and would not assist Black families in the same way as whites.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Jeffrey D. Gonda, *Unjust Deeds: The Restrictive Covenant Cases and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

⁴⁶ Louis L. Woods, "Almost 'No Negro Veteran Could Get a Loan:' African Americans, the G.I. Bill, and the NAACP Campaign Against Racial Segregation, 1917-1960," *The Journal of African American History* 98 (2013): 392-417.

In 2018, Woods published another article on racial segregation. In this article, he analyzed racial zoning, racially restrictive covenants, government-backed redlining, federal mortgage lending, discrimination within the G.I. Bill, and racial bias in the real estate market to understand the longstanding effects of racial segregation on Black intergenerational wealth. Beginning in 1910 with Baltimore's citywide ordinance banning African Americans from living on the same streets as whites, zoning laws and government tools have been used to restrict African Americans' access to homeownership. Despite Supreme Court cases, like *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917) and *Shelley v. Kramer* (1948), whites in power found ways to maintain segregation. More importantly, however, as Woods argued, is the fact that this systemic restriction has left a long legacy seen today in the increasing racial wealth gap.⁴⁷

While several published works focus on Nashville's history in general, Bobby L. Lovett's work centers around the African American experience in Nashville and Tennessee. In *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee*, Lovett covered a large span of time, from 1780 to 1930. He started his work before the nineteenth century in order to analyze how elite Black men and women navigated life in a southern slave-holding state. Following through the Civil War and Reconstruction, this particular work ended in 1930 on the onset of the Great Depression. Lovett's work clearly showed how a Black elite class always existed in Nashville, no matter how small. Yet, whether due to enslavement or Jim Crow, this class still had to carefully navigate within a white-dominated and controlled city. His careful research provided a closer look at where

⁴⁷ Louis L. Woods, "'The Inevitable Products of Racial Segregation': Multigenerational Consequences of Exclusionary Housing Policies on African Americans, 1910-1960," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 77 (2018): 967-1012.

African Americans in Nashville settled, established schools and churches, and built up their own communities.⁴⁸

Lovett's work built upon earlier studies of Nashville. James Summerville's 1981 article "The City and the Slum: 'Black Bottom' in the Development of South Nashville," explored the area once known as Black Bottom, which existed beyond the Capitol, banded by Fourth, High, Vine, and Spruce Avenues as well as Lower Broad. Summerville combined both geography and political history to tell the story of how Black Bottom went from a major African American neighborhood outside of downtown Nashville to a white business district, then later an urban renewal project. Once an immigrant neighborhood, as ethnic whites became more accepted in southern communities, African Americans created their own communities along the low lying land next to the Cumberland River. Yet, as the land became more valuable as Nashville's downtown core grew, whites wanted Black Bottom for themselves. Utilizing the City Beautiful Movement, the call for prohibition, and a failed attempt at selling bonds to create a park, eventually white Nashvillians succeeded in clearing out the former African American neighborhood. Interestingly, Summerville's research included tracing where these people moved to, including North Nashville with Meharry Medical College as well as 12th Avenue South near Ft. Negley and the city reservoir, which later became Edgehill.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Bobby L. Lovett, *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930: Elites and Dilemmas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999).

⁴⁹ James Summerville, "The City and the Slum: 'Black Bottom' in the Development of South Nashville," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40 (1981): 182-192.

In the twenty-first century, historians explored how Nashville's urban past reflected its national significance in the Civil Rights Movement. Bobby L. Lovett's book *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee* (2005) documented the role Tennessee played in the fight for racial justice. While housing is not one of his specific topics of inquiry, desegregation of public schools and higher education had direct ties to residential segregation. His special attention to Movement figures like Diane Nash, James Lawson, and Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, as well as universities like Fisk and Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial placed Nashville at the center of Black activism for the state of Tennessee.⁵⁰

Following the research lead of Lovett, seven years later Benjamin Houston published *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (2012). Perhaps more so than previous works, Houston's research helped to geographically situate the neighborhoods and businesses within Nashville through the lens of racial boundaries. The "Nashville Way," as he explained, was actually two Nashville ways, separated by race. While whites in the city saw themselves as relatively progressive within the state, African Americans remained limited by Jim Crow laws and a hostile local and state government. Houston found the 1950s and 1960s as a changing point in Nashville's built environment, as racial customs and white political power allowed for the destruction of Black neighborhoods during the eras of urban renewal and highway construction. Effectively, as legal school and residential segregation came to an end, the Metropolitan government had already changed the boundaries of the city,

⁵⁰ Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005).

reshaping Black neighborhoods and predominantly white neighborhoods for decades to come.⁵¹

Torren L. Gatson pushed Houston's analysis further by investigating the NAACP's role to end residential segregation in Nashville and Atlanta. Using the papers of the NAACP as well as other manuscripts, Gatson argued the organization's legal campaign against residential segregation became a jumping point for further Black activism. In regards to Nashville, he highlighted the role of the federal government in the creation and funding of the Nashville Housing Authority (NHA) in the early 1930s. Throughout the 1940s, the Nashville chapter of the NAACP became a stronger force within local, political activism, ultimately lending a hand in the Civil Rights Movement. Of note, Gatson's dissertation does not simply provide a narrative of the NAACP's role in the fighting against residential segregation in two New South cities. Instead, he weaved public history methodology into his research, arguing historic preservationists need to harness the tools available to better celebrate and preserve Black, urban spaces, especially after urban renewal projects in the 1960s damaged communities, sometimes beyond recognition.⁵²

Gatson's work tied together urban history and historic preservation. Within the field of historic preservation, many scholars and practitioners have conducted projects and written articles or monographs on the importance of preserving urban spaces, picking up from the scholarship and activism of the 1960s. Dolores Hayden's *The Power of*

⁵¹ Benjamin Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

⁵² Torren L. Gatson, "The Combative Tactics of the NAACP Against Unfair Housing Laws and Practices: A Comparative Study of the Dynamic Changes in Urban and Rural Landscapes 1920-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Middle Tennessee State University, 2018).

Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History (1995) documented her own work in Los Angeles. She argued historic preservationists have the methods at hand, like survey and documentation of historic structures, to create a more inclusive landscape history. Through a more inclusive landscape history, people can learn and understand the social history of a place important to them. Hayden also included a narrative timeline of how preservationists and historians have viewed and treated urban landscapes, and ended with a hopeful idea that urban spaces would be memorialized rather than torn down.⁵³

In a similar, reflective tone is Andrew Hurley's *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (2010). Hurley analyzed the issues historic preservationists encounter when working in urban settings. The book is a detailed account of his own work on the Old North St. Louis project. The project brought together faculty and students at the University of Missouri St. Louis and they worked in conjunction with a local community-based non-profit, Old North St. Louis Restoration Group. The book served as a reflection project for Hurley after the end of the initial work, which fused public history methods with public archaeology and historic preservation. Through careful consideration of the shortcomings and successes of the project as well as a critique of past historic preservation methods, he explained how a public history methodology can be applied to preservation projects in an urban context in order to mitigate the displacement of lower income residents.⁵⁴

⁵³ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

⁵⁴ Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

Both Hayden and Hurley noted certain issues preservationists face in the urban context, including professional assumptions about architectural integrity as well as historical significance. In 2014, John Sprinkle, Jr.'s *Crafting Preservation Criteria: The National Register of Historic Places and American Historic Preservation* contended with the issues of significance and integrity. Sprinkle's background as the bureau historian for the National Park Service (NPS) lent itself well to his analysis of the American preservation movement. As a government historian, Sprinkle understood that legislative acts and decisions made by NPS top authorities shaped the nature of preservation criteria. These decisions ultimately became the way to identify and determine eligibility for historic properties across the country. Yet, that does not mean that criteria are objective. Sprinkle illustrated how political and economic factors influenced both the federal government and NPS historians as they tried to reach a consensus on national preservation criteria. Furthermore, he showed how local and state stakeholders tried to influence federal criteria in order to have more historic sites included in the Landmarks program and the National Register. With various opinions and players, establishing a set of standards for determining significance, integrity, and authenticity for eligibility in federal programs was difficult. According to Sprinkle, objectivity became an almost impossible goal to achieve.⁵⁵

This brief summary of scholarship reflects the historiography that informs this study. Historians, sociologists, and planners alike have written extensively on urban history and how cities grow. State and local historians in Tennessee have studied the

⁵⁵ John Sprinkle, Jr. *Crafting Preservation Criteria: The National Register of Historic Places and American Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

many aspects of Nashville's history, from early settlement to the Civil War and into the Civil Rights Movement. They have also investigated the impact of Urban Renewal. My study adds to the dialogue by exploring how historic preservation and public history approaches can bring out and give emphasis to African American agency in the evolving cityscape of Nashville. Edgehill represents a noteworthy case study due to its close proximity to Ft. Negley and Ft. Casino, areas believed to have ties to the contraband camp during Union occupation. The outgrowth from around the forts helped establish Edgehill as an important African American neighborhood south of downtown. Previous works, including Lovett's and Summerville's, briefly mention Edgehill as such. Yet, as urban renewal projects took over the city, the margins of historic Edgehill were erased. Now, with increasing pressure on Nashville's land and resources due to an influx of major corporations and tourists, the core Edgehill neighborhood is once again under threat. Residents of the neighborhood and activists have come together using grassroots public history methods to tell the story of the neighborhood and make their case for significance at the local and state levels.

CHAPTER II: URBAN RENEWAL, PUBLIC HOUSING, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE EDGEHILL NEIGHBORHOOD, 1933-1967

Shortly after the establishment of the Metropolitan government of Nashville-Davidson County in 1963, several urban renewal projects targeted at African American neighborhoods began. Typical of mid-century America, Nashville's urban renewal projects took aim at so-called distressed neighborhoods such as Edgehill in South Nashville. The African American neighborhood, which began during the era of Reconstruction, became the home of working- and middle-class residents by the end of the nineteenth century. Within the neighborhood boundaries stood several landmark churches, such as Kanye Avenue Baptist Church, Bethel AME Church, and Bass Street Baptist Church. Two schools were located in the neighborhood, Carter School and Lawrence School. The famous stone mason and artist, William Edmondson, called Edgehill home and displayed some of his early work in his front yard.

The establishment of the Metropolitan government occurred with little input from Nashville's African American communities. The vote came in 1963; the Voting Rights Act of 1964 was still a year to come. While African Americans voiced their opinions and concerns, their voices fell deaf to white government officials who gave them little consideration. Urban renewal projects, under the guise of slum clearance, ripped through African American neighborhoods, all at the hands of the Metropolitan government. The mid-1960s brought forth the Great Society Programs, which heightened the issues occurring in Nashville and the Edgehill neighborhood. A series of memorandums from

the Tennessee State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights clarify the matter.

“Mr. Weaver was told that HUD approved urban renewal projects adjacent to existing low cost public housing or urban renewal sites and that this tends to perpetuate segregation.”¹ In a memorandum to Samuel J. Simmons from John Spence, dated January 31, 1968 detailed a meeting of the Tennessee State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. During that same meeting, Mrs. Tom Ragland, Chairman of the State Advisory Committee, told Secretary Weaver Nashville had become more segregated in 1968 than it had been in 1938.² The State Advisory Committee and Secretary Weaver discussed the issue of concentrated poverty and the persistence of segregation due to urban renewal projects and new public housing projects at their meeting. In the meeting, committee members from Nashville pressed the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary on issues arising in Edgehill. Mahlon Griffith advocated for the South Street Community Center, the only remaining private social agency in the neighborhood which stood at risk of erasure from its location in the upcoming Edgehill Urban Renewal area. Secretary Weaver assured Griffith and the committee that Edgehill had been brought to his attention. He then explained HUD had

¹ Memorandum to Samuel J. Simmons from John Spence, January 31, 1968, Tennessee State Advisory Committee activities focusing on Nashville housing discrimination and urban renewal, 1966-1968, Civil Rights Movement and the Federal Government: Records of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Special Projects, 1960-1970, Record Group 453, Records of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, National Archives, College Park, Maryland; hereafter referred to as Memorandum to Samuel J. Simmons from John Spence, January 31, 1968.

² Memorandum to Samuel J. Simmons from John Spence, January 31, 1968.

“a policy on sites for public housing, and a local public housing program should not be concentrated in one area or exclusively in ghetto areas.”³

However, urban renewal projects suffocated the Edgehill neighborhood. Within the community, the Edgehill Urban Renewal project created a new public housing complex. To the west, the University Urban Renewal project expanded Vanderbilt University. To the north, the construction of Interstate-65 saw the northern boundary of the neighborhood decimated. Urban renewal threatened Edgehill from within and on two borders. While Metro might have decided to implement the latest Model Cities program in Edgehill, they continued with the longstanding tradition of urban renewal under the guise of progress, which led to the destruction and elimination of opportunity for historic African American neighborhoods.

The Edgehill Urban Renewal project and the new public housing complex did not represent the first public housing projects in Nashville. Beginning in the 1930s, with New Deal programs, the federal government expanded their intervention in housing. Historian Robert D. Leighninger explained how Title 2 of the National Industrial Recovery Act established the Public Works Administration (PWA) and made provisions for construction, repair, and alterations of low-rent housing and slum removal.⁴ Housing legislation of the 1930s brought about changes to urban policies and reshaped the urban landscape. In 1933, the Housing Division of the PWA set precedent for later New Deal era housing legislation. Two of the key institutions created during the New Deal were the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert D. Leighninger, *Long-range Public Investment: The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 120.

(FHA). The Home Owners' Loan Act of 1933 enabled the federal government to “provide emergency relief with respect to home mortgage indebtedness, to refinance home mortgages, to extend relief to owners occupied by them and who are unable to amortize their debt elsewhere.”⁵ A year later, the federal government passed the National Housing Act of 1934 which established the FHA and encouraged the “improvement in housing standards and conditions.”⁶ Not even five years later, more federal-level housing legislation passed. The U.S. Housing Act of 1937 enabled the federal government to provide financial assistance to state and local municipalities in order to run localized housing agencies. In order to qualify for financial assistance, local governing bodies had to eliminate slums and provide sanitary living accommodations for low income families. Through the Housing Act of 1937, the federal government sought to achieve a greater elimination of slums, reduce both unemployment and unsanitary housing, and increase the number of standard dwellings.⁷

Federal housing legislation in the 1930s, as contributors analyzed in the book *Public Housing Myths* (2015), came from an underlying belief in utopian ideals. Additionally, the government saw standards for housing as a way to use oversight to prevent the spread of disease and enact social control over low-income families living in the government assisted projects.⁸ With each New Deal era housing policy, the government sought to rid cities of slums through government approved housing. The removal of so-called blight meant and construction of government apartments meant

⁵ *Homeowners Loan Act of 1933*, Public Law 43, 73rd Cong., 1st sess., (June 13, 1933), 128.

⁶ *National Housing Act of 1934*, Public Law 479, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess. (June 27, 1934), 1246.

⁷ *U.S. Housing Act of 1937*, Public Law 412, 75th Cong., 1st sess. (September 1, 1937), 88.

⁸ Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Fritz Umbach, and Lawrence J. Vale, eds., *Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 1.

stricter regulations for tenants and, supposedly, continued investment in both the people and the dwellings they occupied.

In Nashville, the construction of two housing projects began following the Housing Act of 1934 and the creation of the Housing Division within the PWA. The Tennessee General Assembly passed the Tennessee Housing Authorities Law in 1935 in order to disperse the one hundred million dollars the state received to begin demonstration housing projects.⁹ The state divided the funds between two cities: Memphis and Nashville. Cheatham Place and Andrew Jackson Courts would be Nashville's first public housing projects.¹⁰

Reports of the construction of Andrew Jackson Courts and Cheatham Place began in 1935. In the era of Jim Crow, the two projects were racially segregated. The PWA led the project. News of the public housing projects remained positive despite some setbacks in the construction process. *The Tennessean* ran a two page story in September 1936 on the building boom occurring in Nashville. Reporter Fred J. Topping praised the work on Andrew Jackson Courts and Cheatham Place for clearing the slums and making the city appear "more livable and more attractive."¹¹

The locations of the Andrew Jackson Courts and Cheatham Place illustrate the South's entrenchment in Jim Crow segregation, a legacy that would outlive the New Deal era housing reforms. Andrew Jackson Courts were constructed in North Nashville, near Fisk University. Notably, the project stood adjacent to a middle-class African American

⁹ Carroll Van West, *Tennessee's New Deal Landscape: A Guidebook* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 129.

¹⁰ West, *Tennessee's New Deal Landscape*, 130.

¹¹ Fred J. Topping, "Nashville Leader in Building Boom Sweeping Over South," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 11 September 1936, 14-15.

neighborhood.¹² Although initially praised by African American leaders as an opportunity to enhance the surroundings in North Nashville, they later spoke out against Andrew Jackson Courts. Black realtors and local ministers criticized the plan. Rather than needing a public housing project, they argued the areas surrounding Fisk needed the PWA to fund sewers, street pavement, and streetlights.¹³ Cheatham Place, also in North Nashville, did not stand near either of the African American universities. Instead, the project was constructed in Kalb Hollow surrounded by trees and well-landscaped grounds.¹⁴ The segregation common to all aspects of life in the South persisted into housing projects and divided Nashville into African American enclaves and white sections of town.

Andrew Jackson Courts and Cheatham Place did not open until 1938, a year after the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 passed.¹⁵ With the 1937 act, city governments could establish their own, local housing authorities then apply for funding from the federal government. Nashville quickly led the state, alongside Memphis, to create a city-wide housing authority. In October 1938, then Mayor Thomas L. Cumming announced Nashville citizens had filed a petition to establish a local housing authority.¹⁶ The Nashville Housing Authority (NHA) was established in 1938 when the vote of approval occurred in late October.¹⁷ The passage of the NHA did not occur without controversy. Councilman Elkin Garfinkle argued the lower rents at Cheatham Place pulled tenants

¹² Don H. Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 96-97.

¹³ West, *Tennessee's New Deal Landscape*, 136.

¹⁴ Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 96.

¹⁵ "Official to Study Cheatham Place," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 19 March 1938, 16.

¹⁶ "Tepco Survey Cost Queried," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 17 October 1938, 3.

¹⁷ "History," Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency, accessed February 9, 2019, <http://www.nashville-mdha.org/history/>, para. 2.

away from market rate apartments in West End, a neighborhood within his district.¹⁸ Controversy surrounding subsidized rents and proximity to market rate apartments was common during the New Deal Era. Edward G. Goetz described how the private real estate sector claimed public housing took on a form of socialism and destroyed neighborhoods.¹⁹ However, for Councilman Garfinkle and the West End realtors, the controversy only pertained to white tenants, not to African American tenants in public housing.

The NHA went to work on the construction of two new public housing projects in 1939. J.C. Napier Homes, for African Americans, and Boscobel Heights (later remained J.A. Cayce Homes), for white families, were the first two project undertaken by the independent housing authority. Napier Homes cleared the site of over one hundred houses NHA deemed “sub-standard” in the area bounded by Lafayette, Cannon, Claiborne, and Lewis Street in South Nashville.²⁰ Construction officially began on Napier in March 1940. The project consisted of over three hundred apartment units, an administrative building, and a NHA agency office.²¹ The white-counterpart to Napier, Cayce Homes, was constructed on Shelby Avenue in East Nashville, on the former site of Boscobel College.²² The project consisted of 380 apartment units in the style of two-story rowhouses with connecting sidewalks. NHA renamed the project after James A. Cayce,

¹⁸ “USHA Manager Here Defends Rentals Made,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 3 November 1938, 1.

¹⁹ Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, and Public Housing Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 2-3.

²⁰ “N.H.A. Will Ask for Housing Bids,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 21 December 1939; “Another Dent,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 18 February 1940, 18.

²¹ “Advertisement for Bids,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 2 January 1940, 15; “Another Dent,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 18 February 1940, 18.

²² “Housing Bids Planned for Jan. 1,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 4 October 1939, 2.

chairman of the housing authority when construction began. Cayce passed away before the project was completed.²³

New Deal era public housing projects in Nashville reinforced the color line in the city. Housing projects were segregated, and public housing projects for African Americans went up in neighborhoods primarily servicing the city's Black communities as seen in Andrew Jackson Courts. The federal government and city leaders used the clauses in 1930s housing reforms to clear out what they deemed to be blighted areas of the city, often razing African American homes.

Two key pieces of legislation passed in the 1940s that had longstanding effects on housing. The 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, provided FHA- and Veteran Affairs (VA)-backed loans to white veterans.²⁴ Five years later, in 1949, the federal government passed the U.S. Housing Act of 1949. Part of President Harry Truman's Fair Deal program, the 1949 Housing Act included more federal funding for urban renewal slum removal projects and more public housing units. Unlike New Deal era housing legislation, the 1949 act encouraged the private sector to invest in housing and the redevelopment of communities deemed blighted.²⁵ This clause within the act would prove important to NHA and their disregard of displacement caused by the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project in the 1960s.

In 1954, the federal government passed the U.S. Housing Act of 1954. The legislation provided a more coordinated attempt to prevent the spread of blight with a

²³ "Housing Project Will Be Named for J.A. Cayce," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 13 June 1941, 17.

²⁴ Louis Woods, "Almost 'no negro veteran could get a loan': African Americans, the G.I. Bill, and the NAACP Campaign against residential segregation," *The Journal of African American History* 98 (2013): 392-393.

²⁵ *Housing Act of 1949*, Public Law 171, 81st Cong., 1st sess., (July 15, 1949), 413.

goal of eliminating slums in American cities, further stigmatizing low-income and African American neighborhoods. The 1954 Housing Act provided funding for programs that eliminated slums and provided public housing, but only if the local governing body proved they had secured both public and private resources.²⁶ The act also made changes to FHA-backed loans and mortgages, helping middle-class families purchase homes. It was under the Housing Act of 1954, as well as the two acts in the 1940s and the New Deal era housing legislation, that NHA began the planning of the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project.

On November 27, 1963 an article in *The Tennessean* had the title “Early Renewal Plans Ready: U.S. Loans to be sought to Push Downtown Loop, Edgehill Projects.” NHA Director, Gerald Gimre, announced that preliminary plans for the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project had reached completion. Council and Mayor Beverly Briley would still need to vote to authorize funding from the Urban Renewal Administration to finalize the plans and begin work on the project. In his article, reporter Frank Ritter detailed a debate within Council. According to his report, multiple councilmembers held concern over the nearly three hundred acres of houses in Edgehill set for razing within the project boundaries. While Gimre explained the houses were substandard and therefore blight within the neighborhood, some councilmembers called for a replacement of housing for those families who would ultimately lose their homes. Most of those families in the project boundaries were African Americans.²⁷ While the sentiment might have come across as progressive within the New South city still rife with segregation,

²⁶ “The Housing Act of 1954,” *Monthly Labor Review* 77 (1954): 990.

²⁷ Frank Ritter, “Early Renewal Plans Ready: U.S. Loans to be sought to Push Downtown Loop, Edgehill Projects,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 27 November 1963, 10.

councilmembers worried more about the shortage of homes for African Americans and worried about having to provide more housing for them, especially if that housing came into predominantly white neighborhoods.

The Edgehill Urban Renewal Project was bounded in a way that cut part of the neighborhood off from the greater Nashville area. The project's northern boundary fell along Division Street. Lawrence, Bradford, and Cathey Avenues defined the southern end. Chestnut Avenue and the L&N Railroad line made up the eastern boundary. Villa Place was the project's western boundary.²⁸ The Edgehill Urban Renewal Project was not the only NHA-backed project to wreak havoc on the neighborhood. The project's northern boundary abutted the Central Loop Urban Renewal Project, which prioritized the rebuilding of the downtown business district over established residential neighborhoods. To the west, the University Urban Renewal Project allowed Vanderbilt University to expand further into the Edgehill neighborhood. Therefore, during the period of urban renewal, roughly 1950-1970, the first wave of significant changes occurred to the built environment of the neighborhood.

²⁸ "Urban Renewal Care Urged," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 2 December 1963, 3

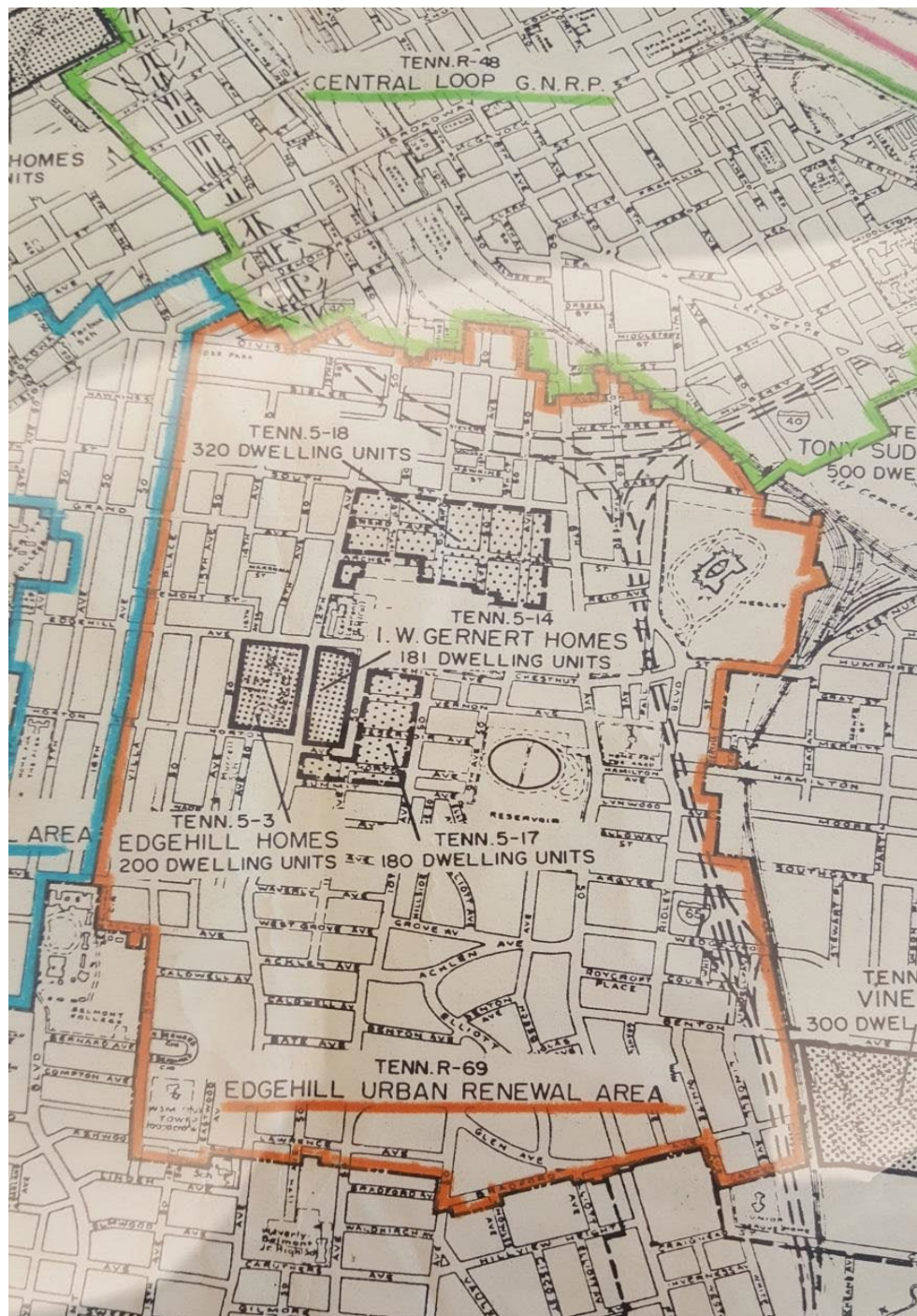


Figure 5. Map of the Urban Renewal Projects with the Edgehill Urban Renewal Area in orange. Metropolitan Development and Housing Authority.

At a Council meeting in December, the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project stirred controversy once again. Councilmember Glenn Ferguson once again raised the question regarding the state of housing within the Edgehill neighborhood. He claimed many of the houses set for razing could in fact be repaired at a low cost. Ferguson further argued for the preservation of some of the houses due to their architectural beauty and historic value. He was quoted as saying, “Once these communities are gone, they’re gone forever and we will lose a vital part of our history and a type of architecture we aren’t likely to see again.”²⁹ The councilmember went on to ask if private investments could not be made to preserve the older, 19th century homes in Edgehill. The NHA continued with their argument that the homes were of substandard quality, and therefore needed to be razed by 1966 and replaced with either single-family dwelling or housing projects, which became part of their plan for the neighborhood.³⁰

As progress continued on the planning phase of the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project, NHA held public information meetings. The three meetings were scheduled for early October 1965 and located within the neighborhood at Rose Park School, Easley Community Center, and a project site office on Eighth Avenue.³¹ Not even a day after the last public information meeting was held, *The Tennessean* ran a front page article on the project with the title “Dwellings Sought for 700 Families.” The first phase of the project would displace at least seven hundred families from their homes in Edgehill. Even worse, the report stated NHA estimated 2,100 of the 3,850, or approximately 54 percent of, families living within the project boundaries would be displaced during the estimated

²⁹ “Urban Renewal Care Urged,” 3.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Information Talks on Edgehill Slated,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 3 October 1965, 50.

seven years of work.³² The first of the seven hundred displaced families lived along the northern boundary of the project area. NHA scheduled the acquisition of their properties for early 1966 to make way for the construction of Interstate 65.³³

NHA systematically prioritized the construction of the interstate over the established residential neighborhood in Edgehill. With over 50 percent of residents in the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project boundaries slated for displacement, NHA had to find adequate housing for the many displaced African American families. Charles Hawkins, the Urban Renewal Director for NHA, told reporter Jim Squires the housing authority would construct two public housing projects in Edgehill.³⁴ However, the public housing projects would only include five hundred units, at least two hundred short to replace housing lost by the seven hundred families. NHA would leave some land in the neighborhood available for private housing development, with no promise to do a one-to-one replacement for the thousands of people displaced.

³² Jim Squires, "Dwellings Sought for 700 Families," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 6 October 1965, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

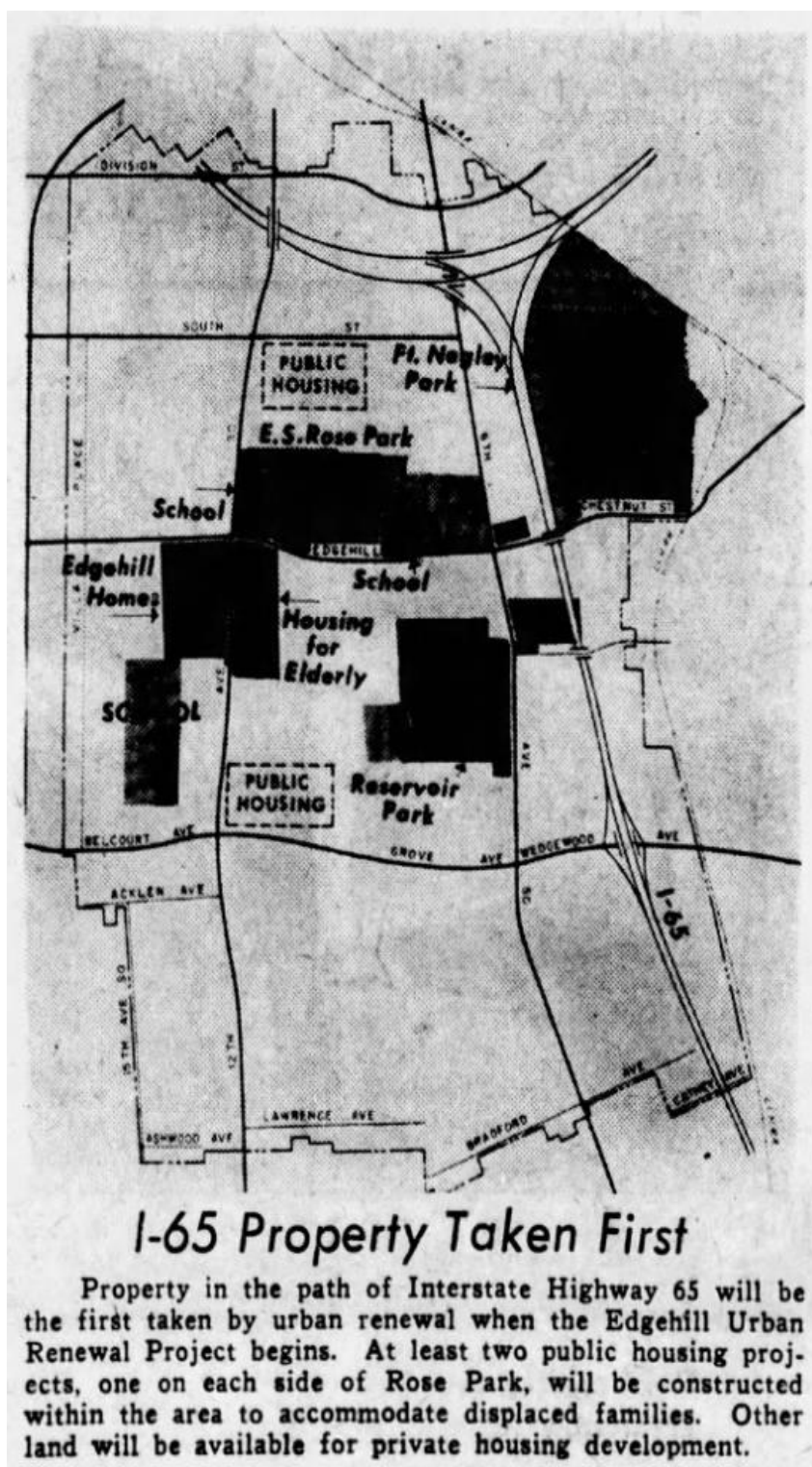


Figure 6. Map depicting the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project Area. *Tennessean*, October 6, 1965, 1.

The Council deferred voting on a bill which appropriated funding for the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project until a series of public hearings were completed in October 1965.³⁵ The City Council had to get through the final approval of the plans for the project because they stood to lose \$1.5 million in local funding as required by the federal government for federal urban renewal funds. Before the final vote, *The Tennessean* published an editorial in favor of urban renewal projects. The article praised NHA for “an honest effort to make up for lost time by holding public meetings in the Edgehill area to explain logically what will happen when the project is approved.”³⁶ The news story also included praise for the neighborhood’s councilmember, Mansfield Douglas. Douglas was one of Nashville’s first African American councilmembers, having been appointed in 1963.³⁷ The editorial insisted that urban renewal would be good for Edgehill and plans for the relocation of families were well underway.³⁸ The editorial made assertions, but did not include information on the relocation plans and did not detail how urban renewal would help the community in any way.

The Edgehill Urban Renewal Project did not just displace family homes. Business owners in the neighborhood also found themselves at risk of displacement. NHA partnered with the Small Business Administration to mitigate issues arising from the displacement of Edgehill’s small businesses. The housing authority held a series of meetings with affected business owners at the Rose Park Community Center. The meetings, according to a news report, provided information on how NHA and the Small

³⁵ Wayne Whitt, “Council Passes Curfew Bill 2nd Reading,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 20 October 1965, 2.

³⁶ “New Urban Renewal Step,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 25 October 1965, 8.

³⁷ *A Resolution honoring former Councilman Mansfield Douglas III*. Resolution No. RS2009-734, May 7, 2009.

³⁸ “New Urban Renewal Step,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 25 October 1965, 8.

Business Administration could help business owners and provided information on relocation.³⁹ The difference in how NHA treated Edgehill businesses compared to its residents is striking. While public hearings were held with residents, ultimately NHA pushed Council to pass measures to keep the project moving and made no promise to replace lost housing. However, NHA made efforts to partner with business-oriented organizations to provide ample information and relocation advice, advice not similarly extended to displaced residents.

Groups in Edgehill organized their own meetings and public hearings, rather than waiting for NHA. In January 1966, the Carter-Lawrence Community Council hosted John Van Ness, the planning supervisor for NHA, at an African American institution to talk about the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project. The Nashville Education Improvement Project, an organization funded by the Ford Foundation, co-sponsored the talk with the Carter-Lawrence Community Council. Van Ness spoke about the acquisition of property for the project. According to Mrs. Robert Jemison, member of the Nashville Education Improvement Project, Van Ness would answer all questions regarding property and displacement.⁴⁰

At a March 1966 Council meeting, Councilmember Douglas expressed his frustration with land speculators. Douglas informed Council of real estate agents and other speculators attempting to get property owners in Edgehill to sell out below market rate. He went on to explain he had to urge residents to report any suspicious activity and reminded them that they could not be “force to move until they have first been offered an

³⁹ “Meet to Help Firms at Edgehill Project,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 9 January 1966, pg. 11.

⁴⁰ “Van Ness to Talk on Urban Renewal,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 13 January 1966, pg. 48.

opportunity to move into a standard dwelling suitable for their needs at a price or rent within their means.”⁴¹ Douglas’s frustration echoed the frustration felt across the Edgehill neighborhood. Between the construction of Interstate 65 and real estate speculators, more and more families felt the threat of displacement in the name of blight removal and urban renewal.

In the midst of the debate surrounding the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project in Nashville, government officials in the country’s capital were working on more housing legislation as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society Program. The Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965 established the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which replaced the FHA. The act was created in order to “assist in the provision of housing for low- and moderate-income families, to promote orderly urban development, to improve living environment in urban areas, and to extend and amend laws relating to housing, urban renewal, and community facilities.”⁴² The hope was that HUD and Johnson’s Great Society housing programs would decrease the amount of racial segregation in urban cores caused by white flight and suburbanization backed by FHA- and VA-backed mortgages.⁴³ The lack of investment in cities driven by suburbanization led to intense segregation and a cycle of poverty. With the creation of HUD and other Great Society programs, the federal government hoped to decrease residential segregation and reinvest in urban cores.

⁴¹ Wayne Whitt, “Councilman Raps Land Speculators,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 2 March 1966, pg. 10.

⁴² *Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965*, Public Law 117, 89th Cong., 1st sess., (Aug. 10, 1965), 451.

⁴³ Eunice and George Grier, “Equality and Beyond: Housing Segregation in the Great Society,” *Daedalus* 95 (1966): 77.

In September 1966, Tennessee Commission on Human Relations, along with four other organizations, protested against the relocation of displaced families in the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project boundaries. The four other groups included the Edgehill Citizens Organization, the Nashville Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Tennessee Council on Human Relations, and the Nashville Christian Leadership Council. The signed resolution demanded NHA stop the acquisition of property within the project boundaries until it could provide adequate relocation homes at prices reasonable to those displaced. The joint resolution also went on to complain that the relocation housing available to displaced families represented more middle- and upper-class means whereas the homeowners in Edgehill, while they owned their homes, did not have that kind of income. Instead, many qualified for public housing after losing their homes.⁴⁴

It took a week for NHA to agree to meet with the groups who filed the joint resolution. In a *Tennessean* article, Councilmember Douglas stated he did not know the value in trying to meet with members of NHA. He is quoted as saying, “So far, we have received little cooperation from those people [NHA]. The authority is moving people out of their homes without first providing a place for them to move. The authority isn’t supposed to do this until they demonstrate adequate housing accommodations have been made for those people who are uprooted.”⁴⁵ Douglas further explained how homeowners in his district did in fact own their homes, but could not afford to buy in other neighborhoods in Nashville. They were confined to the Edgehill neighborhood and did

⁴⁴ “5 Units Protest Relocation of Displaced,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 1 September 1966, pg. 30.

⁴⁵ “NHA to Hear Urban Renewal Complaints,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 8 September 1966, pg. 56.

not have the means to purchase houses in more affluent communities. At the time of the initial complaint, NHA had not yet built either of the two public housing projects they had touted in their preliminary plans.

As 1966 came to a close, tensions between Edgehill neighborhood groups and NHA heightened. A group known as the Edgehill Committee started filing complaints with federal authorities in HUD stating that the location of public housing units in the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project boundaries intensified segregated housing in the city. Their complaint utilized Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in that the locations of the public housing projects contradicted the Act's attempt to abate racially segregated housing.⁴⁶

The Edgehill Committee was made up of prominent Nashville figures. Members were state and city figures, like Mark S. Israel who served as executive director of the Tennessee Commission on Human Relations and was a prominent leader in Nashville's Jewish community as well as Councilmember Douglas who represented both the Metro Council and the NAACP. The committee also included Reverend Andrew White who served as president of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council and as president of Nashville's chapter of the NAACP. Prominent Edgehill neighborhood figures included Reverend Bill Barnes who founded Edgehill Methodist Church, known as one of the first intentionally integrated churches in Nashville. Others included Kelly Miller Smith, president of the Edgehill Citizens Organization and pastor of Nashville First Baptist Church Capitol Hill. Smith served as president of the Nashville NAACP during the

⁴⁶ "Edgehill Unit Raps Housings," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 16 November 1966, 26.

Supreme Court ruling against school segregation. Along with 12 other Black parents, Smith filed a suit with the U.S. District Court against the city's schools in order to spur integration in Nashville's schools.⁴⁷ Mrs. Henry Tomes, who represented the South Street Community Center, the last private social services center in the neighborhood, also served on the committee.⁴⁸ The make-up of the Edgehill Committee included both African American and white leaders. The committee also illustrated the strong grassroots organizations within the neighborhood.

By December 1966, as the first official year of work on the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project came to a close, the Edgehill Citizens Organization found victory in a delay on plans for the location of new public housing units in the neighborhood. At a meeting with the Metro Human Relations Commission and NHA, Councilmember Douglas argued the plan for a concentrated area of public housing in the largely African American portion of Edgehill would lead to the persistence of a ghetto and completely disregarded community interest.⁴⁹ Before NHA would continue on with the planning of new public housing in the project boundaries, officials would first hear the recommendations drawn by the Metro Human Relations Commission.

At the same time city leaders and the NHA were contemplating how to handle the controversy in Edgehill, state Civil Rights leaders were meeting with federal officials to make complaints on behalf of the neighborhood as well. The collective action on the part of local leaders in Edgehill and regional Civil Rights groups is best illustrated by the

⁴⁷ David E. Sumner, "Kelly Miller Smith Sr.," Carroll Van West et.als, eds., *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, online edition.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Edgehill Housing Delayed by Complaints on Location," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 6 December 1966, pg. 4.

Tennessee State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights meeting with HUD Secretary Weaver in December 1966. The State Advisory Committee met with Weaver again in November 1967. *The Tennessean* reported on the meeting. During the meeting, Secretary Weaver touted the Model Cities program, HUD's latest program for eliminating slums as one option for clearing out blighted portions of city centers. He also stated the federal government had an obligation to ensure families who had been confined to the slums due to low-cost public housing had an opportunity to move elsewhere in cities. Secretary Weaver was the first African American to serve in a cabinet-level position in HUD. His statements at the meeting with the State Advisory Committee ride the line between his commitment to the federal agency and his understanding of the effects of racial segregation. The newspaper article best illustrated this by calling Secretary Weaver's comment "But you can get too much concentration of public housing" a balance for previous comments promoting the Model Cities program.⁵⁰ With the Model Cities program, Metro officials wanted to use the new federal tool for urban renewal programs.

⁵⁰ Rob Elder, "Weaver Cites Slum Cleanup Plan, *The Nashville Tennessean*, 17 November 1967, pg. 1.

CHAPTER III: MODEL CITIES, DISPLACEMENT, AND THE NEGLECT OF NASHVILLE'S AFRICAN AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOODS

The Model Cities program, part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's ambitious Great Society and War on Poverty programs, attempted to bring people of color and the urban working class to the decision-making table regarding how federal funds would be spent in disinvested neighborhoods. The HUD Handbook for the Model Cities Administration stated that the purpose of the program was "to achieve, through the carrying out of plans developed by local governments and their citizens, substantial improvement in the quality of life of people living in blighted city neighborhoods."¹ The president took that purpose even further. Johnson stated in a special message to Congress, "1966 can be the year of rebirth for American cities...I recommend that both the public and private sectors of our economy join to build in our cities and towns an environment for man equal to the dignity of his aspirations."² President Johnson admitted that past federal urban renewal programs had strengths, but also weaknesses. Yet, he believed his Model Cities program would be different. It would allow more citizen participation in the process of renewing urban neighborhoods, words that gave hope to the residents of Edgehill. The Edgehill Committee went before the Tennessee State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights hoping to meet Johnson's vision.

¹ Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Model Cities Administration, DIR. 3100.1," Washington: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1967, 1.

² Lyndon B. Johnson, Special Message to the Congress Recommending a Program for Cities and Metropolitan Areas, Online by The American Presidency Project, University of California Santa Barbara.

Therefore, the citizens who went before the Advisory Committee questioned Secretary Weaver closely about the Model Cities program and demanded fairness. Recommendation 12, as published after the open meeting, asked “that communities receiving Model Cities funds stipulate that there will be implementation of all laws and regulations prohibiting racial discrimination.”³ Already worried about the inherent racial discrimination at play in the placement of public housing in predominantly African American neighborhoods during the era of urban renewal, concerned citizens anticipated the same in Model Cities. Mayor Briley even acknowledged the failures of previous attempts at urban equity. In a statement the mayor said, “We have waited too long already; the failures of the past are staggering, contributing in very large measure to problems of the present.”⁴ Nevertheless, he still focused his attention on the already torn apart North Nashville for federal Model Cities funding, which would have a ripple effect for Nashville’s other African American neighborhoods.

Mayor Briley and his team within Metro offices saw the Model Cities Program as a way to alleviate the city’s housing crisis. A detailed *Tennessean* expose on a portion of North Nashville housing, bounded by 10th Avenue North and Herman Street, documented the problems. The news story focused on the house of Annie Williams, a two week old child living in a dwelling well against codes. Together with her mother and eleven siblings, the family lived in a three room house without running water.⁵ Despite building multiple public housing projects in middle-class African American neighborhoods just a

³ John Spence to Samuel J. Simmons, “Meeting of Tennessee State Advisory Committee with HUD Secretary Robert Weaver at Nashville, November 16, 1967,” January 31, 1968.

⁴ Rob Elder, “The Festering Sore at 10th and Herman is Still There,” *The Tennessean*, November 5, 1967, 23.

⁵ Ibid.

few years prior with urban renewal funding, Metro had not done enough to provide safe housing for the urban working-class. Throughout the 1960s, 4,000 units of public housing were recommended for Nashville. By 1967, the year the federal government announced the Model Cities program, less than 1,000 of the units had been constructed.⁶ In regards to the substandard housing at 10th and Herman, NHA Director Gimre simply stated code enforcement “could move a lot faster if we could reasonably expect to relocate these people in better housing.” The City would bet on Model Cities funding to relocate those displaced as they sought to clean up areas they deemed slums.⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.



Figure 7. Map depicting the Model City Area. Planning Commission, "Model City Survey Research Evaluation and Preliminary Data System Design," 1970.

On November 17, 1967, Nashville officials announced the city received funding from the Model Cities Program. Although the federal government had not announced the exact amount of funds for each city, Nashville government requested \$270,537 for an initial plan to develop a new program for North Nashville. Reports added that the city would match any grant with \$67,634.⁸ The mayor put his faith in the program to recreate North Nashville. In a speech Mayor Briley stated, “This is an opportunity to demonstrate what we can do with our own facilities and know-how, plus the tremendous advantage of federal funds and coordination of available federal programs, operating with local initiative.”⁹

Yet, those in the Model Cities Area as well as those burdened by urban renewal programs had reason to distrust the plans. The area included 5,600 acres and would directly effect a population of 47,000.¹⁰ Mayor Briley had a long list of issues he wanted to tackle using the Model Cities funding the city received. The issues included “inadequate housing, transportation, employment and lack of economic opportunity.”¹¹ As many Black Nashvillians already knew, however, the city had systematically disinvested from these areas, which had for decades been known as slums. The lack of adequate housing and transportation were issues created by Nashville’s leadership, which in turn created the so-called slums they now sought to clean up. Additionally, middle- and professional class Black Nashvillians knew the City would continue to push those displaced by urban clean up into their neighborhoods while simultaneously attempting to

⁸ Ed Willingham, “Nashville, Smithville Got Model City Tag,” *The Tennessean*, November 17, 1967, 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 16.

¹¹ Ibid, 1.

place more industrial uses into their residential enclaves. However, Secretary Weaver continued to promise not to limit the urban working class into “ghettos.”¹²

On the same day that Secretary Weaver was set to announce whether or not Nashville had received funding from the federal government for the Model Cities Program, *The Tennessean* reported on the halt of funding towards more public housing in Edgehill. The NHA had planned to center approximately 900 public housing units in Edgehill. 500 new units were slated to be constructed beside another 400 that had been constructed with urban renewal funding.¹³

Perhaps one of the most vocal critics of urban renewal and then Model Cities was Councilman Mansfield Douglas. In a major op-ed for *The Tennessean*, Douglas detailed the issue of housing across Nashville. In his piece he stated, “As long as such renewal developments are planned, or programs such as “model cities” are planned, or major highways or boulevards which divide people from services are planned, without any consultation with people in neighborhoods which are affected, greatness will elude Nashville.”¹⁴ At the time of his op-ed, Douglas was serving as President Pro Tem in the Council. As Edgehill’s councilmember, he used his voice to express disdain over the way his constituents had been treated during the era of urban renewal as well as his fear of what Model Cities would eventually do. Douglas explained that he used Edgehill as a case study not just because he represented the neighborhood, but because “it stands as a symbol of how a local government, by indifference and callous disregard of just ordinary

¹² Rob Elder, “Weaver Ends Visit With Note of Model Cities Hope for Poor,” *The Tennessean*, November 18, 1967, 11.

¹³ Rob Elder, “Weaver to Hear Housing Charge,” *The Tennessean*, November 16, 1967, 15.

¹⁴ Mansfield Douglas, “Slum Housing Big Metro Problem,” *The Tennessean*, January 7, 1968, 1.

interests of people being displaced, can completely alienate those people.”¹⁵ He summed up the issue with using federal funding to recreate North Nashville and displace those living in the area to other parts of the city. As Douglas succinctly stated, “people don’t want to be displaced just because government wants them moved.”¹⁶

Douglas detailed his worries surrounding the Model Cities Program and the fears of his constituents in Edgehill. However, others felt the program represented a much needed call for change. The Deputy Director of the Model Cities Administration, John A. Buggs, spoke about his hope when he appeared before the Race Relations Institute at Fisk University in July 1968. Buggs explained that the Model Cities Program, as well as the many urban uprising that occurred across the country the same year, made Black life “the main issue in American life.”¹⁷ He went on to explain how change was a vital part of the Model Cities Program and how rapid change was necessary for progress. He further pleaded with city leaders who received funding through the program to be integrationists and include the urban working class into the decision making process on how the funding would be spent.¹⁸

While many did not trust the goals of the Model Cities Program in Nashville, there were some promised benefits. As part of the Concentrated Employment Program (CEP) promised to place approximately 1,800 unemployed and underemployed people in the city with jobs. The Secretary of Labor, Willard Wirtz, along with local Representative Richard Fulton made the announcement in June 1968. The jobs would be within the

¹⁵ Ibid, 9.

¹⁶ Ibid, 9.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Cooper, “Negro Called Nation’s No. 1 Issue,” *The Tennessean*, July 5, 1968, 12.

¹⁸ Ibid.

North Nashville project area.¹⁹ Of note, *The Tennessean* reported that in an analysis of the Model City area for the CEP job proposal, the researchers found the job market in North Nashville was rife with racial discrimination. In fact, African Americans with a higher education background than their white counterparts were still less likely to be hired. The goal of the CEP in the Model Cities area would be to find the many unemployed African American jobs with the state or in programs with the Opportunities Industrialization Center.²⁰

Integration was an underlying goal of the Model Cities Program. Scholar Alice O'Connor explained how the introduction of Model Cities as part of the Great Society saw a turn away from solely brick and mortar urban renewal and the clearing of neighborhoods defined as slums to a more human approach to solving urban issues. The more local, neighborhood approach was meant to bring those affected to the table. O'Connor explained how Model Cities attempted to make up for the previous failures and displacement that occurred under urban renewal by giving neighborhood groups and historically marginalized voices more of a say in which projects would receive funding.²¹ Yet, in Nashville, the relocation of those displaced from the Model Cities area of North Nashville into other predominantly African American neighborhoods such as Edgehill and Haynes Heights illustrates how that goal ultimately failed in cities like Nashville. O'Connor argued policymakers could not overcome "a basic ambivalence over whether

¹⁹ "Wirtz Approves Job Program," *The Tennessean*, June 24, 1968, 1.

²⁰ Ibid, 2.

²¹ Alice O'Connor, "Swimming Against the Tide: A Brief History of Federal Policy in Poor Communities," in *The Community Development Reader*, ed. James DeFilippis and Susan Saegert (Routledge: New York, 2008): 18-19.

their aim was the build up communities or help people leave them.”²² The situation in Nashville shows how city leaders wanted to clean up North Nashville and move residents into neighborhoods already distressed by construction of large public housing project, which further segregated the city and undermined the integrationist aim of Model Cities.

The continuation of racial discrimination from urban renewal to Model Cities caused rife throughout Nashville. On May 6, 1969, a meeting between Mayor Briley and the Model Cities Citizens Coordinating Committee took a turn for the worse when citizens began to scream at the mayor. A week prior to the meeting, the committee had suspended any further planning for the Model Cities Program until the mayor clearly laid out the authority of the committee. The committee worried that Model Cities Director William Reinhart did not consult with them on project planning, but simply asked them for their approval after plans had already been made. During the tense meeting, Mrs. C. E. McGruder, a member of the coordinating committee, screamed that she would “step all over” Mayor Briley if he returned to North Nashville.²³ Dr. Edwin Mitchell explained why the committee felt such high frustration. He explained that the guidelines for the Model Cities Program state that Citizens Coordinating Committees must participate in the decision making process, a key aim of the program as a whole. Yet, in Nashville, the committee did not have any power to provide guidance so that “dislocation and racial tensions in programs like I-40 and the Edgehill Urban Renewal Project,” would not occur again in North Nashville.²⁴ While the citizens committee attempted to best represent the communities affected by any urban clean up, Briley took offense at their motion to block

²² O'Connor, “Swimming Against the Tide,” in *The Community Development Reader*, 21.

²³ Charles Thompson, “Model Cities control Issue Brings Screams,” *The Tennessean*, May 7, 1969, 40.

²⁴ Ibid.

any future planning. He called McGruder a radical and argued no committee should have the ability to block a project being funded by the federal government.²⁵

The Model Cities Program did not fully achieve its initial goals. As seen in Nashville, citizens, especially Black Nashvillians, did not feel the goal of citizen participation was fully realized in determining how funds would be spent in the project area. Additionally, displacement, a downfall of many of the urban renewal projects in the city, still remained a central issue as Council attempted to clean up urban areas. While North Nashville became the target area for Model Cities funding, neighborhoods like Edgehill and Haynes Heights felt the ripple effects of displacement. The residents of Edgehill continued their pushback against NHA's urban renewal plans for more public housing while facing an influx of residents displaced by Model Cities. The screaming showdown between the Model Cities Citizens Coordinating Committee and Mayor Briley highlights the ultimate failure of the program in the eyes of Nashville's Black citizens. In 1970, Councilman Douglas continued to push back against the Model Cities Program. The night Council voted to submit their plans for the redevelopment of North Nashville he argued that the Model Cities Program "looks like it has the potential of becoming an even greater disaster" than the Edgehill Urban Renewal project.²⁶

The election of Richard Nixon as president brought with it changes to HUD in the late 1960s. Nixon's New Federalism sought to consolidate HUD's programs. This new policy stood in direct opposition to Johnson's ideas of citizen participation in the Great Society. New Federalism, instead, touted the idea that local officials knew the needs of

²⁵ Ibid.77

²⁶ Tom Ingram, "Model Cities Likened to Edgehill 'Disaster'," *The Tennessean*, March 31, 1970, 11.

local neighborhoods better than others, including the residents who would be affected by policy.²⁷ In the place of citizen participation in determining how federal funding was spent, the Nixon administration sought to undermine the Model Cities Program with Community Development Block Grants (CDBG). Through the creation of CDBG, seven programs were consolidated: urban renewal, Model Cities, water and sewer facilities, open space, neighborhood facilities, rehabilitation loans, and public facilities loans – all of which targeted urban areas.²⁸ With Nixon’s “Silent Majority” in power, the federal government saw a renewal in the disinvestment in urban areas predominantly occupied by non-white people, setting the stage for lower property costs that would eventually lead to gentrification within thirty years.

A 1970 report authored by the Race Relations Information Center included a quote from the Model Cities Director. Buford Drake admitted that the projects planned under the new Model Cities Program could eventually become an urban renewal program for North Nashville.²⁹ Already skeptical of any new neighborhood plans, the residents of North Nashville still felt the effects of the construction of Interstate 40, which tore the predominantly African American portion of the city apart. The report went on to state, “The residents – the vast majority of whom are black – were skeptical about the intentions of a local government – dominated by whites – that has done little to prove that when it says improvement it does not mean destruction.”³⁰ It seemed, to the reporter, that

²⁷ Raymond A. Rosenfeld, “Local Implementation Decisions for Community Development Block Grants,” *Public Administration Review* 39 (1979): 448.

²⁸ Raymond A. Rosenfeld, “Local Implementation Decisions for Community Development Block Grants,” *Public Administration Review* 39 (1979): 449.

²⁹ Tom Ingram, “N. Nashville Revamp Near?” *The Tennessean*, January 31, 1971, 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

the Model Cities Program would end in failure in Nashville, much like it did in other cities across the country.

A land use study, cited in a 1974 report, had already concluded that dwelling units in the Model Cities Area would decline in the latter half of the decade and anticipated that more multi-family units, rather than single-family homes would become common in North Nashville.³¹ In a story detailing the debate over development in North Nashville, *The Tennessean* in 1971 reported, “Alternative housing already is being prepared for migrants from North Nashville in Edgehill...”.³² Already reshaped by the Edgehill and University Urban Renewal projects, the neighborhood would soon change even more as displaced residents found a new place to live in the neighborhood. Haynes Heights, a newer African American neighborhood in Nashville located near American Baptist College, also became one of the city’s suggestions for people divided by Interstate 40 and other urban renewal projects in North Nashville to move to.³³ However, Haynes Heights would soon become a target for Model Cities funding as highway rerouting became a goal for Metro officials.

Situated north of the Cumberland River and east of the Bordeaux neighborhood, the Haynes Heights neighborhood developed in the middle twentieth century as an African American middle- and professional class neighborhood. The Davidson County Planning Commission approved the 14 acres subdivision in 1954. The site would include 102 lots for home sites. The developer, K. Gardner, estimated that each house would, on

³¹ Metropolitan Planning Commission, “Model City Survey Research Evaluation and Preliminary Data System Design,” Nashville: Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, 1974, 93-94.

³² Tom Ingram, “N. Nashville Revamp Near?” *The Tennessean*, January 31, 1971, 24.

³³ *Ibid.*

average, cost approximately \$10,000.³⁴ The main thoroughfare bordering the neighborhood was Whites Creek Pike, along with Manila Street (later renamed West Nocturne Drive), Francis Street (later renamed Pierpoint Drive), Malta Drive, Shreeve Lane, Ledford Drive, and Gardner Lane. The neighborhood offered a lake, known as Haynes Heights Community Lake, along Ledford Drive and Shreeve Lane.

³⁴ Etha Green, "Planning Commission, at Peak Activity, Starts 16th Year of Community Service," *The Nashville Banner*, October 7, 1954, 13.



Figure 8. Map of the Haynes Heights Subdivision and surrounding areas. Nashville Planning Commission.

The neighborhood is named after Reverend William Haynes. Born into enslavement, his father was the white owner of a plantation and an enslaver. His mother, an enslaved woman, labored on his father's plantation. Reverend Haynes later became a well-known Baptist minister, educator, and land developer in Nashville. Through his ministry, Haynes became involved in relocating Roger Williams University, later known

also as the American Baptist Theological Seminary, away from its historic location next to Vanderbilt University to Whites Creek Pike, a move that occurred after several buildings on campus burned in 1905.³⁵ The act of terrorism left the university without a home for several years. However, George Peabody College for Teachers and other local developers purchased the land by 1911, erasing the history of one of Nashville's four freedmen's colleges.³⁶ The move put the college on a virtual island within Nashville, but it provided a safe haven where African American neighborhoods could prosper in the northern part of Nashville. Haynes, a leader of the Tennessee Negro Baptist Association and a pastor at Sylvan Street Baptist Church, worked to reestablish the African American institution in north Nashville.³⁷

Roger Williams was not the only institution that would anchor the Haynes Heights neighborhood. Reverend Haynes' father gifted him land near Whites Creek.³⁸ In 1931, approximately twenty years before developers broke ground on the new neighborhood, Haynes donated a parcel of land for Haynes School, a school for local African American students.³⁹ The school went through many iterations, and by 1938 community members petitioned the county school board for twelfth grade to be added. The community also petitioned for a new building, one that would house the only African American high school in Davidson County. At the time, Haynes School housed students

³⁵ Bobby L. Lovett, "Roger Williams University," Carroll Van West, et. al, eds., *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, online edition.

³⁶ Lovett, "Roger Williams University."

³⁷ Bobby L. Lovett, *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 152.

³⁸ Quinester Knox Calloway, "Reverend William Haynes, 1850-1933," for the Haynes School Alumni Newsletter, <http://www.haynesalumni.yolasite.com/resources/Rev%20William%20Haynes.pdf>.

³⁹ Nashville Next Volume III: Community Plans, Bordeaux-Whites Creek-Haynes Trinity, June 22, 2015, 40.

in both elementary and high school.⁴⁰ Two years after the community gained the senior grade level, they once again petitioned Davidson County School Board. This time, they asked for a new building, which opened in 1940 on Whites Creek Pike.⁴¹ A decade later, Davidson County allotted more funding for a new Haynes Elementary School, a move often used by white-dominated school boards as part of equalization. Both schools were located on Whites Creek Pike, which further solidified the portion of the county as an African American community anchored by civic and educational institutions.⁴²

Haynes Heights developed as the surrounding community grew, providing African American Nashvillians a sense of place in the era of Jim Crow. Although the neighborhood was outside of the city limits while the HOLC utilized redlining, North Nashville became one of the few spaces for African Americans to live and establish businesses. From Whites Creek Pike to Youngs Lane the map of Nashville was colored red.⁴³ The areas around Fisk University, Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial (now Tennessee State University), and Roger Williams, all Historically Black Colleges and Universities, had the label of hazardous due to the red shading on the HOLC maps. Because of their D-grade, the Federal Housing Authority, as well as private lenders, refused to provide loans in these areas. Despite this, many African Americans formed their own communities in these spaces, including residential neighborhoods, churches, and schools. Almost ten years after the HOLC retired the redlining maps, Haynes Heights

⁴⁰ "Ask New School," *The Tennessean*, February 25, 1938, 17.

⁴¹ "Hundreds will Attend New Vocational Classes," *The Tennessean*, September 1, 1940, 4.

⁴² "Providence School Nearing Completion," *The Tennessean*, August 29, 1950, 3.

⁴³ Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., "Mapping Inequality," *American Panorama*, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=13/36.173/-86.813&city=nashville-tn>.

developed in the middle of what was once considered a hazardous area, simply because African Americans lived, worshipped, and learned there.

As the new neighborhood for African Americans, leaders of Nashville's African American communities saw the development as a sign of progress. They called the area of Nashville the "clean outskirts of the city" and believed the private financial backing of the development proved that African Americans had "an appreciation for finer living conditions the same as other racial groups."⁴⁴ The neighborhood would have 102 homes and would be the largest private development for Black Nashvillians.⁴⁵

Haynes Heights continued to grow throughout the 1960s as more lots were sold for new homeowners. Residents of the neighborhood found a sense of community through social activities at Haynes High School, various neighborhood groups, and skating leagues.⁴⁶ The large front yards that adorn the lots of Haynes Heights were used for play time for neighborhood children. Each year a Christmas party was held by a different family for neighbors to attend.⁴⁷

Like many other African American neighborhoods in Nashville, growth supported by the Metro Council meant Haynes Heights became at risk for industrial uses moving into the residential neighborhood. In 1964, the Haynes Heights Community Civic League, a new organization formed in the neighborhood, testified before Council. They urged Nashville's leaders to deny a rezoning request that would place industries in their

⁴⁴ Robert Churchwell, "Progress Reported in Negro Community," *The Nashville Banner*, December 28, 1955, 6.

⁴⁵ Etha Green, "County's Building to Top \$29 Million," *The Tennessean*, December 2, 1954, 1 & 6.

⁴⁶ "Skating Party," *The Tennessean*, June 22, 1966, 24.

⁴⁷ Gayle Barbee, Jeanette Bean, Joyce Jenkins, Beverly Jenkins, Ida Martin, and Quinta Martin, interview by Robin Zeigler and Victoria Hensley, July 17, 2020.

neighborhood. The director of Riverside Hospital, a hospital for African Americans located on Youngs Lane, N.G. Simmons, explained the detrimental effects industrial uses would cause both Haynes Heights and the hospital. He asked, “Does every Negro community have to have an industrial complex?”⁴⁸ The activism of the neighbors paid off. Metro Council ultimately decided against the rezoning.⁴⁹

During the late 1960s, Haynes Heights residents began to feel the side effects of the Model Cities program and urban renewal projects. Similar to other African American neighborhoods in Nashville, they began to feel the pressure of displacement and highway development. *The Tennessean* ran an article detailing the construction of Interstate 40. The reporters explained how the Scovel Street neighborhood was ruined as a result of interstate construction. He posited that wealthier residents of Scovel Street may have moved to Haynes Heights after they were displaced. However, things remained grim in North Nashville.⁵⁰ Haynes Heights became a refuge for African American families forced from their North Nashville neighborhoods as the Model Cities program was implemented.⁵¹

Yet, even homeowners in Haynes Heights began to feel the direct effects of highway construction in their neighborhood. Under the guise of improvement, the Nashville Model Cities Agency decided to reroute U.S. Highway 41A. They stated the reroute would only have minimum adverse effects to Buena Vista Park, the Cumberland Golf Course, and Haynes Heights.⁵² Haynes Heights homeowners, along with nearby

⁴⁸ “Haynes Heights Battles Industry,” *The Tennessean*, January 21, 1964, 3.

⁴⁹ Frank Ritter, “Data Unit Gets Police Surplus,” *The Tennessean*, January 22, 1964, 1.

⁵⁰ Tom Gillem, “Scovel Street Life Scarred by Interstate,” *The Tennessean*, March 1, 1970, 1 and 10.

⁵¹ Tom Ingram, “N. Nashville Revamp Near?” *The Tennessean*, January 31, 1971, 24.

⁵² Tom Ingram, “Proposed Road Spurs Clash,” *The Tennessean*, June 22, 1971, 3.

Haynes Manor residents, came together to voice their opposition to the new plan. They argued rerouting the major roadway through residential areas would create more noise and traffic problems for residents.⁵³ Once again the residents won the fight against their city. The reroute of Highway 41A went through Bordeaux instead as the Tennessee Department of Highways chose Alt. ABB, further eroding the continuity of North Nashville.⁵⁴

⁵³ "Meeting to Discuss Route 41A Called," *The Tennessean*, February 13, 1972, 2; Hugh LaFollette, "Plan to Shift 41A Opposed," *The Tennessean*, May 11, 1972, 59.

⁵⁴ See map attached to "Notice of Corridor Public Hearing," *The Tennessean*, May 3, 1972, 36.



Figure 9. Map included in a “Notice of Corridor Public Hearing” advertisement. *Tennessean*, May 3, 1972, 36.

The risk of displacement and movements into other neighborhoods was perhaps anticipated by officials charged with implementing the Model Cities Program. In a letter written as an addendum to the Model Cities Guidebook, HUD explained that some facilities necessary for housing, education, and health may need to be located outside of the Model Neighborhood.⁵⁵ Members of the Edgehill community, already exacerbated by a lack of housing and community services due to urban renewal projects, worried about the amount of available dwelling units for those displaced from the North Nashville Model Cities Area. The Project Area Committee (PAC), a group made up of twenty five organizations within Edgehill who served as a citizens advisory group to NHA, sought to halt new NHA projects in the neighborhood in 1970. *The Tennessean* reported that the PAC petitioned NHA for more housing and free bus services to shopping centers.⁵⁶ The Edgehill Urban Renewal project had already brought about the destruction of single-family homes to make way for public housing projects. Additionally, the neighborhood lost its local shopping centers and were forced to travel further just to get necessities. With the influx of more residents forced to the neighborhood because of displacement as well as racial discrimination within the housing market, Edgehill residents and their organizations continued to press against the City.

⁵⁵ Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Model Cities Administration, DIR. 3100.1," Washington: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1967, 2.

⁵⁶ Tom Gillen, "NHA Program Halt Sought," *The Tennessean*, January 6, 1970, 24.

CHAPTER IV: ASSESSING SIGNIFICANCE OF HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOODS: EDGEHILL AND THE FIGHT FOR ZONING PROTECTIONS

The era of urban renewal tore down African American working- and middle-class family homes. The houses ranged from minimal traditional to Craftsman bungalow to even later ranch styles. Modest in scope and size, the homes were often affordable to an average working family in Music City, and because of redlining, were in an area African Americans could actually rent or buy.¹ The smaller homes in Edgehill stood in contrast to the larger, more grand architectural styles of neighborhoods like Belle Meade and Forrest Hills, with three-story classical revival mansions and larger lots.

¹ Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., "Mapping Inequality," *American Panorama*, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=13/36.1099/-86.8691&opacity=0.8&city=nashville-tn>.



Figure 10. 1030 Villa Place, an example of a Craftsman bungalow. MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.



Figure 11. 907 15th Avenue S., an example of a minimal traditional. MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

The more modest houses within Edgehill reflect a wider trend of building smaller homes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Progressive Era brought with it a movement towards simplicity and a celebration of craftsmanship.² Additionally, smaller homes reflected the closeness of families. During this time period, the home was thought to be the center of morality and happiness. Instead of large, sprawling houses, people began to build smaller, more functional homes. Furthermore, it is important to remember Nashville was not the sprawling metropolitan area seen today. Neighborhoods like Edgehill reflected a more suburban plan for residential-zoned neighborhoods. The

² Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 156.

small houses of Edgehill possibly reflected a long popular faith in “republican homes,” or homes that were small in size so as to not lead to comparison by neighborhoods nor to allow children to feel greater than another child in the neighborhood.³ Common styles included the Craftsman bungalow, minimal tradition cottages, and a fair number of ranch style dwellings.⁴



Figure 12. 1411 Villa Place, an example of a stone bungalow. MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

³ Wright, *Building the Dream*, 84.

⁴ Common houses in Edgehill include Craftsman, minimal traditional cottages, and ranches. These types of houses largely align with McAlester’s “Modern Houses” section of her book. See: Virginia McAlester, *Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America’s Domestic Architecture* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2013), 551-613.



Figure 13. 1501 Edgehill Avenue, a McKissack and McKissack designed home and former residence of Moses McKissack. MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

In more recent years, the new wave of development brought about by the tourist boom has led to a second wave of urban renewal throughout Nashville. Many of the modest, single-family residential areas along the outskirts of the urban core have seen an influx of younger renters and wealthier urbanites. In the case of Edgehill, Vanderbilt University to the west and Belmont University to the south brought in more college-aged renters. As with other university towns, Vanderbilt University began to encroach upon neighboring Edgehill. The University Urban Renewal Project ran in tandem with the

Edgehill Urban Renewal Project.⁵ The Edgehill Urban Renewal Project, along with the University Center project, were approved in 1962. Nashville city government celebrated the projects as a way to modernize and progress the city's "medical and educational complex."⁶ With Vanderbilt University encroaching upon the residential neighborhood, the Urban Renewal Administration set the stage for young, predominantly white renters to soon fill the neighborhood.

Furthermore, the infamous "one hundred people a day" to move to Nashville put pressure on extant housing stock.⁷ Conversions of single-family homes into multi-family rentals, the increase in short-term rentals to accommodate tourists, and development pressures to tear down and rebuild larger, more expensive apartments and condominiums led many neighborhoods to completely shift in demographics as well as rental and mortgage prices. The 2016 "state of emergency" Edgehill residents put forth culminated from decades worth of forced change. From the street car and white movement into the neighborhood, to white flight and "blight" brought on by the city's disinvestment in the neighborhood, to urban renewal, and the most recent wave of gentrification, residents of Edgehill became tired of watching the decimation of their homes and businesses.

During the 2000s Manuel Zeitlin Architects purchased the White Way Cleaners buildings, an important industrial and commercial building in Edgehill. White Way Cleaners was constructed in 1931 by Foster and Creighton Company.⁸ The modern

⁵ Lindsey Hager, "University Center Urban Renewal" (Historic Preservation Term Paper, Middle Tennessee State University, 2015), 3-4.

⁶ Dick Battle, "University Area Grant OK'd," *The Nashville Banner*, 9 April 1962.

⁷ Joey Garrison, "New data: Nashville Region Still Growing by 100 People a Day," *The Tennessean*, March 28, 2017.

⁸ Carroll Van West, *Nashville Architecture: A Guide to the City* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2015), 133.

laundry building became a success for the Edgehill neighborhood with many local Black women finding employment. Over the years, White Way proved so successful that a series of additions were added. The firm rehabilitated the original laundry and subsequent additions to create Edgehill Village. According to the center's website, the architectural firm used an approach that "was careful and sensitive which is transforming Edgehill Village into the heart of an emerging neighborhood bridging Music Row with the surrounding historic Edgehill neighborhood."⁹ The primary owner of Edgehill Village, Asana Partners, state that they seek to connect the new, upscale village to the surrounding, historic neighborhood. However, there are no community spaces available. Instead, the village boasts more high-end stores, like Free People, Warby Parker, and Billy Reid. A quick glance at restaurant prices reveal \$4.50 to \$12 tapas at Barcelona Wine Bar, \$10.00 specialty burgers at Jack Brown's, and a \$9.95 starter Caesar salad at Bella Napoli Pizzeria.¹⁰ The creation of a tourist destination, filled with restaurants, bars, and shops, in Edgehill led to an increase in traffic congestion along Villa Place and Edgehill Avenue, two of the main arteries through the neighborhood, as well as an increase in parking along the streets of residential sections of the neighborhood. Edgehill Village as a residential amenity to the neighborhood did not take into consideration the long-term tenants and homeowners. Instead, the village is geared towards younger, perhaps Vanderbilt University and Belmont University students along with more affluent renters in Edgehill and the Music Row area. Edgehill Village's website further erases the

⁹ "History of Edgehill Village," Edgehill Village Nashville, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.edgehillvillage.com/about/>.

¹⁰ See menus for the following restaurants: Taco Mamacita Nashville, Edgehill Café, and Bella Napoli Pizzeria. The author analyzed the stores and prices at Edgehill Village during a site visit. See EdgehillVillage.com for more info, or the individual websites for Aesop, Warby Parker, and J. Crew.

history of the neighborhood as one of the earliest African American neighborhoods in Nashville by focusing on the connection to adjacent Music Row, not the historic Black community. Yet, rehabilitating the White Way Laundry buildings into Edgehill Village was viewed as a revitalization effort in Edgehill. For some residents, the revitalization effort led to further gentrification and displacement.

In 2017, staff at the Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission approached Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation for help to conduct an architectural survey of Edgehill. The survey work served as the first step in Councilmen Colby Sledge's District 17 and Councilman Freddie O'Connell's District 19 Neighborhood Conservation Overlay for Edgehill. Metro Historic Zoning Commission (MHZC), is part of the Metropolitan Historical Commission, Nashville's historical agency working to "preserve, protect, and document the history, historic places, buildings and neighborhoods of Davidson County through education, technical assistance, and advocacy."¹¹ Councilmen Sledge and O'Connell represent the Edgehill neighborhood and had heard residents' fears of further displacement due to new development, short-term rentals, and aggressive speculators. With the help of MHZC, they determined a Neighborhood Conservation Overlay would be the best solution.

MHZC offers four types of zoning and designation, each with a different level of protection and guidelines. A historic landmark overlay is an individual or "campus" overlay for buildings of historic significance. The Landmark Overlay is the most restrictive of the four, and Metro Nashville or the state often own the properties. Historic

¹¹ "How can we help you?" Metropolitan Historical Commission, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nashville.gov/Historical-Commission/Services.aspx>.

Bed and Breakfast Overlays allows for the use of a historic building as a bed and breakfast. Historic Preservation Zoning Overlay is an overlay that provides protection for a neighborhood through the regulation of exterior alterations. Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay, similar to the Historic Preservation Overlay, provides zoning protections for a neighborhood. However, the overlay is less restrictive and only reviews new construction, additions, demolitions, and the moving of structures.¹² For the Edgehill neighborhood, where urban renewal and revitalization projects already stripped the residential community of some of its historic fabric and new residential infill threatened what was left of the single-family feel of the community, the Neighborhood Conservation Overlay made the most sense.

When Center staff began the architectural survey of Edgehill in October 2017, residents of Edgehill had already begun a series of community meetings to discuss the Neighborhood Conservation Overlay and potential design guidelines. With a letter from MHZC in tow, staff took photographs of each house along sections of South Street, Grand Avenue, Tremont Street, Edgehill Avenue, Horton Avenue, Wedgewood Avenue, 14th Avenue South, 15th Avenue South, and Villa Place. While only a section of the Edgehill neighborhood, MHZC staff determined the section had the most intact historical and architectural integrity, a sign of how urban renewal and gentrification had changed the neighborhood.

¹² Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission, *Metro Historic Zoning Handbook* (Nashville: Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, 2018), 5.

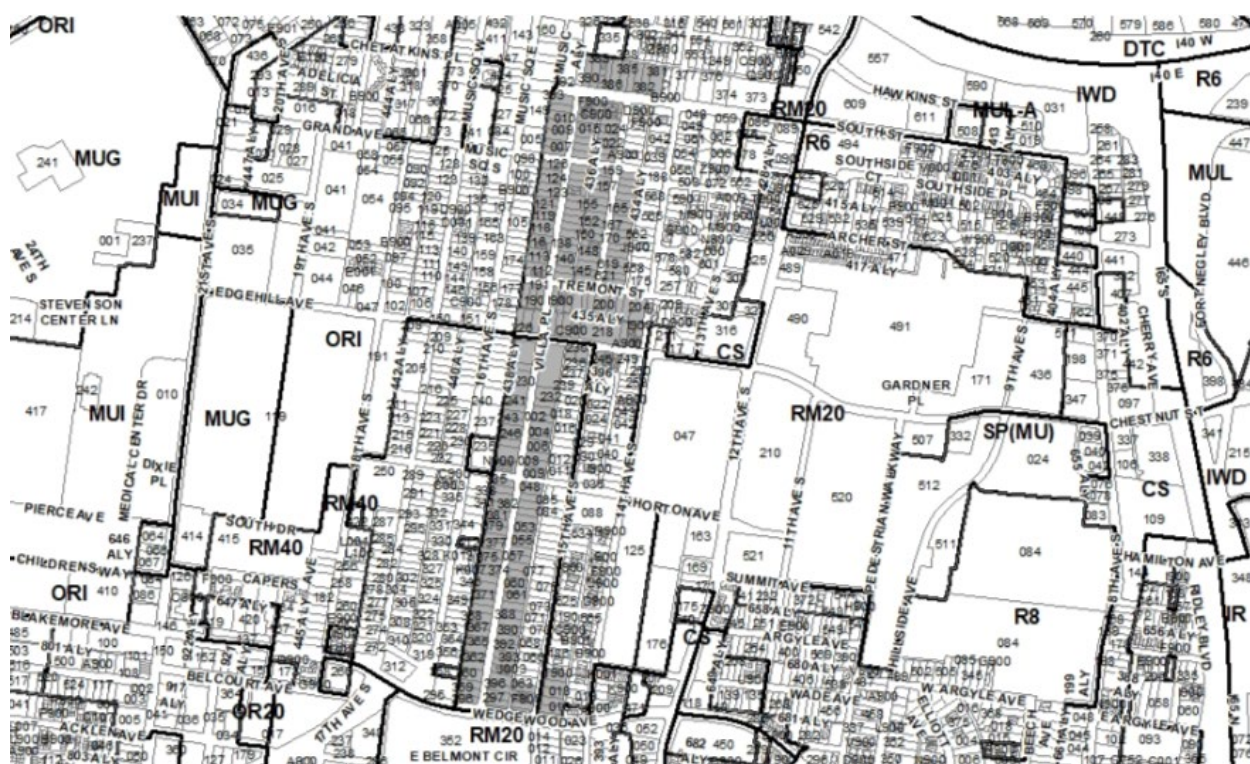


Figure 14. Map of the Edgehill Neighborhood Conservation Overlay. Shaded parcels are within the NCZO. Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission.

Stopping at each house to take photographs meant Center staff often encountered residents of the neighborhood. More often than not, residents seemed skeptical at first, not knowing why strangers armed with cameras would stop outside of their homes. Upon showing the letter from MHZC, which explained why Center staff were out in the neighborhood, residents would share their own stories. One woman explained how her elderly mother had lived in Edgehill for decades and how she now lived there too to take care of her. She further explained how she came out to the front porch to ask Center staff what they were doing because they often receive mailers, or even direct knocks on the door, from speculators and developers wanting to buy the house. Other residents often

shared similar stories and explained their distrust of outsiders coming into the neighborhood. When they found out Center staff worked to help preserve Edgehill and create the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay, they talked about how much they needed some form of protection before the history was completely wiped away.¹³

While the initial interaction with Edgehill residents led Center staff to believe the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay would garner plenty of support, the process of BL2018-1245 through Metro government illustrated how the neighborhood became divided. MHZC staff held four community meetings in Edgehill beginning in September 2017. As the bill for the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay went through MHZC, the Planning Commission, and Metro Council, staff continued to have community meetings, on February 22, April 26, and May 2, 2018. All of the meetings occurred before the bill went up for public hearing at the Planning Commission meeting in the summer of 2018.¹⁴

Despite the numerous community meetings held by both MHZC and neighborhood groups, like the Edgehill Neighborhood Coalition, the public hearing period of several Planning Commission and Metro Council meetings became heated. Members of the opposition group claimed proponents of the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay had not been transparent in their quest to get Metro Council approval. Furthermore, opposition leaders claimed, during public hearings, that proponents had

¹³ The author of this paper was one of the Center's graduate research assistants to work on the Edgehill project. While taking photographs for the survey, several residents expressed their distrust in seeing new people walking around. However, upon hearing about the Neighborhood Conservation Overlay, they would tell of their approval of the measure and how they worried the neighborhood would be lost if Metro government did not do something to help. No names were recorded during these discussions.

¹⁴ Staff Recommendation: Edgehill Neighborhood, June 20, 2018, Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission Agendas and Minutes Archive, Nashville, Sonny Side Park.

forged signatures while canvassing to make it seem as though more residents of Edgehill supported the measure.¹⁵ It appeared that these allegations proved to have no merit.

At the August 1, 2018 Planning Commission meeting, Councilman Sledge appeared before the Commission to explain how they would hear two sides fiercely defend their viewpoints on the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay. The bill had already passed through MHZC and the August 1 meeting was the first time the Planning Commission would have the bill on public hearing. Councilman Sledge urged the commission to remember the community wanted to prevent demolition of historic homes and buildings in their neighborhood and that the overlay represented the only tool available to them.¹⁶

Ronald Miller, a resident of Villa Place, spoke first on behalf of the Edgehill Neighborhood Coalition. Miller discussed how the Edgehill Neighborhood Coalition believed in the Planning Commission's mission to guide growth and development while simultaneously protecting historic resources. He went on to explain how Edgehill was full of historic resources, including many that represented the marks African Americans had left on Nashville. Speaking on behalf of the Coalition, Miller listed the work the organization already completed to save historic resources, including the polar bear statutes, the Murrell School, and the White Way Laundry buildings. The Coalition even worked beyond just preserving historic resources, but also provided first-time home

¹⁵ "08/01/2018 Planning Commission Meeting," Youtube video, 5:35:55, posted by MetroNashville, August 2, 2018, <https://youtu.be/WCCUfiUKKqY>.

¹⁶ "08/01/2018 Planning Commission Meeting."

buyer loans for potential buyers to move into Edgehill as well as a scholarship fund for high school students in the neighborhood.¹⁷

The opposition, led by Jill Bader, also a resident on Villa Place, spoke for five minutes as the leader of the opposing group. Bader explained how she bought her first home in Edgehill with the hopes of raising a family one day. However, she believed the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay would prevent her hopes from becoming reality. Bader explained how the restrictive design guidelines would prevent her from making additions to her home, thus making it impossible to raise a large family. She also brought with her a hand drawn map on poster board, color coded to present the neighbors for and against the overlay. According to her map, more residents were against than for.

While the leader of the opposition claimed to want to make additions to her home in order to raise a family, it is worth noting that she rents her home out regularly on the vacation rental website Airbnb. Her listings, named “Jolene” and “Lil Jo,” do not mention Edgehill as the neighborhood in which they are located. Instead, Music Row is frequently cited in the listings as promotional material. At the time of this dissertation, “Lil Jo,” the studio apartment attached to the main house, is listed at \$63/night.¹⁸ “Jolene,” the full house listed as “Walkable! Music Row 1930s bungalow” goes for \$311/night.¹⁹ Interestingly, the listing includes bunk beds in order to sleep up to ten guests. While the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay does not regulate the use of historic buildings, proponents of the overlay often cited short-term rentals, like Airbnb listings, as

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Walkable! Mins 2 Downtown. Music Row’s, ‘Lil Jo,’” Airbnb.com, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/19860036>.

¹⁹ “Walkable! Music Row 1930s bungalow- meet ‘JOLENE!’” Airbnb.com, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/19359365>.

a main reason for seeking the overlay. Proponents saw the overlay as a way to lessen the number of short-term tourists in the neighborhood and increase the number of long-term residents again.

One member of the opposition, Brian Siewert, a resident of Tremont Street, discussed the “tasteful and graceful” new development in Edgehill. Siewert, a Nashville developer living in Edgehill, spoke of the new construction going up in the neighborhood. He described them as architecturally tasteful, fitting in with the aesthetics of Edgehill’s historic fabric. He also went on to explain how over forty tall-skinnies went up on the Eastside of Nashville, where he owns another historic property. Siewert accused proponents of the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay of exaggerating the speed at which houses were demolished and replaced with multiple tall-skinnies.²⁰ However, proponents of the overlay hoped to use the zoning tool as a protectionary measure such that more homes would not be demolished and replaced, a point seemingly missed by several opponents.

²⁰ “08/01/2018 Planning Commission Meeting.”



Figure 15. 904 A/B Villa Place, an example of a modern duplex. Google Maps.

The August 7, 2018 Metro Council meeting included BL2018-1245 on the public hearing docket. Walter T. Searcy, of Villa Place, spoke first. His powerful testimony included a call for “neighborliness.” As Searcy explained, visitors to the neighborhood replaced neighbors, but those visitors did not invest in Edgehill the way long term residents once had. He further explained how the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay would help preserve the African American history of the neighborhood, or as he called it, the “African Gold Coast of Nashville.”²¹

A representative for 1713 Villa Place, who had previously represented 1204 Villa Place at the Planning Commission meeting, asked the Council to oppose the overlay. In his representative testimony, he claimed the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay

²¹ “08/07/2018 Metro Council Meeting August 07, 2018,” YouTube video, 7:32:46, posted by MetroNashville, August 8, 2018, <https://youtu.be/Y2fQxaJtSAA>.

had divided Edgehill, not united. He also gave three reasons why the overlay should not be passed. First, he explained that the fight to preserve a community had nothing to do with the size or shape of the homes. He also talked about reaching out to the proponents of the overlay, but getting denied the opportunity to speak with them. His third reason included the benefits of revitalization. The representative described how the increase in investment in Edgehill made the community more vibrant and a better place to live.²² What the representative for the owner of 1204 and 1713 Villa Place did not understand, however, was how the architecture of the neighborhood, the streets lined with primarily modest, single-family homes, shaped the community. The influx of tall-skinnyes and short-term rentals meant the single-family residential feeling and community of long term neighbors in Edgehill was at risk.

Ultimately, BL2018-1245 passed through Metro Council in September 2018. Currently, MHZC is awaiting an update to the Edgehill Neighborhood Design Guidelines, pending future community meetings. Councilmen Sledge and O'Connell, at the bill's third and final reading, moved for passage, but explained that further meetings with residents would solidify the design guidelines to meet the needs of both the proponents and opponents. As the design guidelines stand today, MHZC only reviews residential infill and alteration to the exterior of buildings, like additions. The loose guidelines provide greater leeway for homeowners wanting to make changes to their homes, such as back additions and creating more living space in half-stories.

²² "08/07/2018 Metro Council Meeting August 07, 2018."

The Edgehill Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay provides a case study into the use of zoning regulations for historic preservation protections. Proponents of the overlay remained vocal in their goal of preventing tear-down fever and the construction of tall-skinny duplexes and triplexes in their historically single-family neighborhood. Further, they felt losing the architectural integrity of their neighborhood would lead to a loss in the historic integrity. Edgehill, with roots dating back to the Civil War and the contraband camp near Forts Negley and Casino has historical significance. As one of the earliest African American neighborhoods in Nashville, the neighborhood has went through the effects of the street car and influx of white families, disinvestment by Nashville city government during white flight, urban renewal, and now gentrification. Yet, the modest homes that remain on the built environment reflect Progressive Era ideals of home life and the simplicity of domestic architecture. While not the grand and ornate homes of nearby Belle Meade, Edgehill still represents an important era of domestic architecture. Additionally, the modest homes reflect the era of Jim Crow, when African American homebuyers and renters were shut off from various parts of Music City, able to attain houses in D-rated redlined districts.

The historical and architectural significance of Edgehill stands in direct contrast to the arguments used by opponents of the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay. While style is arbitrary in some neighborhoods, the various architectural styles present in Edgehill are not. They represent an era in architectural history and a period of significance as well. Tall-skinnies, which change the feel and zoning of the neighborhood, do not have a place. New construction in Edgehill is not strictly prohibited

by the overlay. Instead, MHZC has the right to review and regulate new residential infill to better fit into the style and rhythm of the significant neighborhood.

Portions of the Edgehill neighborhood probably meet the criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a district associated with African American history. However, the history of the neighborhood is still there. The houses that remain on the neighborhood landscape help to tell the stories of the working- and middle-class African American families who built a community. The neighborhood also retains key institutional anchors such as the historic churches.



Figure 16. Mt. Sinai Primitive Baptist Church. Google Maps.

CHAPTER V: EDGEHILL, WILLIAM EDMONDSON, AND A NEIGHBORHOOD'S ANTI-GENTRIFICATION EFFORTS THROUGH MATERIAL CULTURE

In cities experiencing explosive growth like Nashville, neighborhood change seems inevitable. However, some neighborhoods, more often historically non-white and lower income, are often more at risk than others. Such is the case for the Edgehill neighborhood, one of Nashville's oldest African American neighborhoods. It was also the home of renowned stonemason William Edmondson.¹ Outside his home at 1434 14th Avenue South, Edmondson created tombstones and sculptures out of limestone. His sculptures caught the attention of art critics and he became the first African American, and Tennessean, to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.²

Despite the success of Edmondson, the city of Nashville razed his homesite to make way for the Murrell School for African American students in 1956, one of the many urban renewal projects in the neighborhood.³ In the face of Metro's disregard for Edgehill and Edmondson's significance, residents of the neighborhood sought ways to preserve his legacy and their neighborhood in the face of erasure and development. In 2018, Mayor David Briley announced that Metro's budget was at risk of losing \$23 million. To abate such a large budgetary loss, he proposed the sale of several Metro

¹ Ancestry.com. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Census Place: *Nashville, Davidson, Tennessee*; Roll: *m-t0627-03975*; Page: *8B*; Enumeration District: *99-146*. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

² Museum of Modern Art, "Press Release for Immediate Release," October 18, 1937.

³ Eugene Dietz, "Board Approves Negro School," *The Tennessean*, June 15, 1956, 1.

properties, including the Murrell School site, the site of William Edmondson's former home.⁴ A community garden, a public park, and the Murrell School were all at risk at being sold, potentially to a private developer, to help Metro's budget deficit.

Concerned with what the sale of the properties would do to their neighborhood, residents of Edgehill, and others invested in the preservation of Edmondson's legacy, formed the Save the William Edmondson Homesite Coalition. The coalition and other concerned residents voiced their dismay and held a vigil for Edmondson and the park after hearing the news.⁵ Eventually, the mayor backed down from the proposal of selling off the land. However, Edgehill residents did not stop at such a victory. Instead, the coalition worked to put together their own proposal. In March 2019, they unveiled their Higher Vision Master Plan, which called for a cultural arts center and museum to honor Edmondson as well as a park that would include sculptures reminiscent of Edmondson's folk art. Not only did they hope to honor the late artist, but also Edgehill's greater significance within Nashville.⁶

The example of Edgehill residents crafting their own proposal for public art and public space is part of wider effort of using public art as anti-gentrification measures in the face of rapidly changing urban settings. Urban planners, historic preservationists, and activists are producing studies and literature on the use of place making, public art, and public space in regards to gentrification and redevelopment. This chapter seeks to explore the use of public art and public space in anti-gentrification measures. Edgehill residents'

⁴ Joey Garrison, "Metro budget could lose \$23 million," *The Tennessean*, June 18, 2018, 1A and A11.

⁵ Sandy Mazza, "Nashville community fights for Edgehill park, gardens proposed for development," *The Tennessean*, June 13, 2018.

⁶ Erica Ciccarone, "Edgehill Residents Hope to Honor William Edmondson with Renovated Park and Museum," *The Nashville Scene*, April 25, 2019.

proposal for a public park complete with a memorial to William Edmondson as a craftsperson speaks to the preservation of community, public space, and honoring a renowned resident. The community's development of the proposed William Edmondson Cultural Arts Center and Museum and the William Edmondson Homesite Park, all part of the Higher Vision Master Plan, intersect with public history literature on place making and community engagement specifically because Edgehill residents view the proposed park as a memorial borrowing from the material culture of Edmondson, not just a public space.

It is important to understand the life and work of William Edmondson in order to understand how the proposed William Edmondson Cultural Arts Center and Museum and William Edmondson Homesite Park both borrows from the aesthetics of his work and memorializes the famed Edgehill resident. He began and ended his life in Davidson County. His parents, Orange and Jane Edmondson, were enslaved in Tennessee.⁷ Edmondson had several jobs before he discovered his craft of sculpting. Previous jobs included working as a farm laborer, a racehorse swipe, and as a laborer for the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railway. In 1907, an accident occurred and Edmondson left his job with the railway. Upon recovering, he then went to work as a janitor in a local hospital until it closed down in 1931.⁸ In 1932, Edmondson began to work as a stonemason. Two years later, around 1934, Edmondson devoted his life to religion.

⁷ "William Edmondson," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/william-edmondson-1408>; Tennessee, Death Records, 1908-1965, Tennessee State Library and Archives; Nashville, Tennessee; *Tennessee Death Records, 1908-1958*; Roll Number: 1, Ancestry.com. *Tennessee, Death Records, 1908-1965* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

⁸ Stacy C. Hollander, "William Edmondson," Carroll Van West, et. al, eds., *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, online edition.

Through this religious conversion, he believed he was called by God to not only preach, but also carve tombstones. Also around the time of Edmondson's religious conversion, he found that someone had left a pile of limestone on his property.⁹ In fact, in an interview for *Time Magazine*, Edmondson explained the stone came from God and that "Jesus planted the seed of carvin' in me."¹⁰

The Project for Public Spaces, a non-profit organization working towards the creation and sustainability of public spaces, defines place making as "a collaborative process by which we can reshape the public realm in order to maximize shared value."¹¹ In order for place making to be successful, a community must have a dedicated public space and a shared vision for that space. Material culture can aid in the identity and culture of a community. Jules David Prown defined material culture as two-fold: "the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time" and "the artifacts themselves."¹² Using Prown's definition, community members can then utilize material culture for place vision. Project for Public Spaces defines place vision as the third set in their five step process. At this step community members and stakeholders begin to describe and develop a concept plan for a public space.¹³ Because material culture studies aids in the understanding of the values and ideas of a community, weaving material culture into the

⁹ "William Edmondson," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed April 17, 2020.

¹⁰ "Mirkels," *Time Magazine* 30 (1937), 68.

¹¹ "Our Mission, Project for Public Spaces," accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.pps.org/category/placemaking>; "What is Placemaking?" Project for Public Spaces," accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.pps.org/category/placemaking>.

¹² Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1982): 1.

¹³ "The Placemaking Process," Project for Public Spaces, accessed April 26, 2020, <https://www.pps.org/article/5-steps-to-making-places>.

planning process can help in establishing and creating shared community values. As historian Dolores Hayden argued, “ethnic vernacular arts traditions have often operated in a similar way to instill community pride and signal the presence of a particular community in the city.”¹⁴ In Edgehill, the material culture of William Edmondson’s folk art drove the development of the Higher Vision Master Plan proposal. While his homesite is no longer extant, residents of Edgehill sought to use the aesthetics and materials of Edmondson’s art as a way to celebrate his legacy, thus making Edmondson part of the cultural history of the neighborhood. In a sense, despite the erasure of the buildings and work yard, Edgehill residents are using place-memory to tell a wider social history neighborhood.¹⁵

¹⁴ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 38.

¹⁵ For more on place-memory see: Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, 46.



Figure 17. William Edmondson, "Lady with Cape," c. 1935-1940. On loan from Collection of KAWS, New York at Cheekwood Museum and Gardens. Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 18. William Edmondson, "Squirrel," 1940. Cheekwood Museum and Gardens, 1999.11.3. Photograph taken by the author.

In order to understand how the coalition in Edgehill and their proposed plan fit into the larger history of using public art and public space as an anti-gentrification or anti-displacement tool, a look at what other cities and organizations have done is necessary. Case studies of communities using such tools can be found in cities across the country. During the era of urban renewal, a community in Los Angeles worked to secure

public space by creating their own park to prevent a highway from running through the neighborhood.¹⁶ Community engagement became a key to the success of Chicago Mural Group in the 1970s.¹⁷ Early gentrification of New York, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, saw artists and activists working together to create public exhibitions which forced newcomers to see how neighborhoods changed.¹⁸ More recently, cities experiencing unintended consequences have seen activist utilize art and public space to fight against a changing built environment. Examples can be found in places like Seattle, Austin, and even within Nashville.¹⁹

The Logan Heights neighborhood presents a similar case as Edgehill. Residents of Logan Heights, in San Diego, California, utilized both public art and public space to prevent destructive development. Interstate 5 cut through the neighborhood in 1963. Talk of a bridge opening in the neighborhood caused residents to band together to demand change. The Coronado Bay Bridge opened in Logan Heights in 1969. However, the residents were proactive in their demands and asked city officials to establish a public park underneath the bridge. The city agreed, but residents did not receive their park right away. Instead, in 1970, the city began to raze the parcels slated for the public park for a new California Highway Patrol Station.²⁰ Residents took matters into their own hands and established Chicano Park without city permission. They occupied the site for twelve

¹⁶ "Chicano Park," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2013), Section 1.

¹⁷ Mary Lackritz Gray, *A Guide to Chicago's Murals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), xxvii.

¹⁸ Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 60-61.

¹⁹ Katherine Long, "In Seattle's Central District, Residents, Artists Imagine a 'Parallel Universe'," *The Seattle Times*, July 23, 2018; "Norf Wall Fest," Norf Collective, accessed April 16, 2020, <http://norfstudios.com/projects#/norf-wall-fest/>.

²⁰ "The Takeover of Chicano Park," Chicano Park San Diego, accessed April 24, 2020, <http://www.chicanoparksandiego.com/history/page1.html>.

days before the city finally agreed to their original demands. During those twelve days, residents cleared the land, planted gardens, and created a community space. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, muralists utilized the space for their artwork. The murals specifically drew upon the aesthetics of Mexican and Mexican-American culture.²¹ For residents of Logan Heights, the construction of the interstate and bridge fragmented their neighborhood. In order to promote and protect the neighborhood's identity, they established a park and painted over the bridge pillars with murals celebrating their culture.

The Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG) formed in 1970 when city artists, led by William Walker, came together out of concern for the level of crime. Originally named Chicago Mural Group, the collective started their work with murals.²² One such mural, "Together We Overcome," was painted by collective member John Weber in 1971. The mural shows two arms clasping together surrounded by community members and a the depiction of people breaking up a fight. Located in West Town, Weber designed the mural to show the ability of a neighborhood to overcome crime.²³ In 1998, CPAG's executive director, Jon Pounds, worked with other muralists to create "I Welcome Myself to a New Place." The mural, painted adjacent to railroad tracks, stood at the division of two neighborhoods, Roseland and Pullman. The neighborhoods were racially segregated and the tracks represented the dividing line. Not only did Pounds collaborate with other muralists, but he invited residents of both neighborhoods to work on the project. The

²¹ Daniel Hernandez, "Chicano Park 50 years later: Coronavirus delays celebration but historic moment still matters," *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 2020.

²² Gray, *A Guide to Chicago's Murals*, xxvii.

²³ Aaron Wang, "Moving Pictures: Chicago's Mural Culture Challenged in the Face of Gentrification," *The Daily Northwestern*, April 21, 2020.

mural, done in patchwork style, drew upon the history and culture of both neighborhoods to depict racial harmony.²⁴ Today, CPAG's works include murals, sculptures, mosaics, and landscape design.²⁵ The work of CPAG not only sparked the community mural wave that other cities began to adopt, but also illustrates how artists and community members can work together to create public art in public spaces. However, with gentrification continuing to change Chicago's neighborhoods, the group has raised concern about how property speculators are erasing the historical murals from the built environment.²⁶

In the 1980s a group of artists in New York City formed a new collective called Political Art Documentation and Distribution, better known as PAD/D. Started by artist Lucy R. Lippard, the collective was inherently political. Their flyers read "PAD/D is a progressive artists' resource and networking organization seeking to provide artists with an organized relationship to society and demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making."²⁷ The artists infused their work with overtly political themes, one of which was gentrification. PAD/D produced several exhibitions attacking gentrification. *Out of Place* – *Art for the Evicted* was an outdoor, public exhibition along the streets of the Lower East Side of Manhattan.²⁸ Their largest anti-gentrification exhibition was *Not for Sale*, which PAD/D produced multiple times. While some of the works were inside of galleries, other works were on the streets of the Lower East Side, much like *Out of Place*. One mural depicted the concept of predatory real estate as a cockroach encroaching upon a

²⁴ Wang, "Moving Pictures," *The Daily Northwestern*, April 21, 2020.

²⁵ "History," Chicago Public Art Group, accessed April 21, 2020, <http://www.chicagopublicartgroup.org/history-of-cpag>.

²⁶ Wang, "Moving Pictures," *The Daily Northwestern*, April 21, 2020.

²⁷ Ault, *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985*, 60-61.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 61.

neighborhood.²⁹ PAD/D not only had exhibitions and street art, but also asked artists to create posters of their work as well. The collective saw the posters as a tangible way to promote the anti-gentrification themes of the art and receive a wider audience.³⁰ While PAD/D's work does not necessarily represent a neighborhood's use of public art and public space to define or preserve neighborhood identity, they do present a case study of neighborhood artists coming together to produce works in public spaces. Rather than only having exhibitions in gallery spaces, PAD/D artists wanted their work to be seen by all and force viewers to confront gentrification and its consequences on the community.

In the Central District neighborhood in Seattle, a group of activists came together to form Africatown. Central District once housed a large portion of Seattle's African American population. However, as more people and large tech firms moved to the city, gentrification meant more and more Black families living in the area were displaced. The organization envisioned a Central District redevelopment led by African Americans who had lived there for generations.³¹ Artists designed signs emblazoned with the words "coming soon" to parallel the coming soon signs around new apartment buildings and commercial blocks. However, their signs depicts African-influenced architecture, Black bodies in public spaces, and drum lines parading a new park. The works were placed in public spaces and streets within the Central District.³² While not the traditional public murals seen in previous decades, the signs represent a different form of using public art to

²⁹ Ibid, 340-341.

³⁰ Ibid, 342-345.

³¹ Long, "In Seattle's Central District, Residents, Artists Imagine a 'Parallel Universe'," *The Seattle Times*, July 23, 2018.

³² Simone Alicea, "Public Art Project Reimagines Development in Seattle's Central District," *KNKX*, July 26, 2018.

interrupt the narrative of revitalization and redevelopment. Artists working within the Africatown organization hope the works do not just stand as an alternate reality. Instead, they hope to see some of the imagined developments come to life. Not only does Africatown operate as a public art collective, but they also run a community land trust, which could one day make the imagined spaces depicted on their art a reality for the Central District.³³



Figure 19. Erika Schultz/*The Seattle Times*, “Coming Soon Project in Pratt Park,” July 2018.

A local example that follows the literature of public art as a tool for anti-gentrification measures can be found in North Nashville. The Norf Collective formed

³³ Simone Alicea, “Public Art Project Reimagines Development in Seattle’s Central District,” *KNKX*, July 26, 2018; “About Us,” AfricaTown Land Trust, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.africatownlandtrust.org/about-us/>.

when a group of North Nashville residents and activists came together to start Norf Wall Fest. The festival consisted of a series of murals painted on buildings across North Nashville. The collective sought to “celebrate culture, history and life by collaborating with our community in creating public art for our eyes.”³⁴ The festival attracted the attention of local media outlets and the Frist Art Museum. Norf Collective exhibited a series of murals at the Frist between August 10, 2019 through January 5, 2020.

According to the museum’s description of the exhibition, the public art crafted by Norf Collective stood out amongst the many murals found in other sections of Nashville, such as the Gulch and the Nations, two redeveloped sections of the city. The curators hoped to “shine a light on a culturally and historically important, yet often underserved, Nashville community” while also exploring “the role the arts play in urban redevelopment and in the expression of neighborhood and individual identities.”³⁵ In a sense, the murals act as artists’ memorials of North Nashville. The project, Murals on Jefferson Street, celebrated the culture of the historically Black business district. One such mural painted on the Elks Lodge depicts blues musicians.³⁶ Jefferson Street once housed music clubs where African Americans could play and listen without the worry of segregation. Unlike the proposed Edgehill park, however, the murals do not represent tangible public art memorializing a prominent figure from the neighborhood. Additionally, the murals are on existing

³⁴ “Norf Wall Fest,” Norf Collective, accessed April 16, 2020, <http://norfstudios.com/projects#/norf-wall-fest/>.

³⁵ “Murals of North Nashville Now,” Frist Art Museum,” accessed April 16, 2020, <https://fristartmuseum.org/calendar/detail/north-nashville-now>.

³⁶ “Murals on Jefferson Street,” Norf Collective, accessed April 16, 2020, <http://norfstudios.com/projects#/united-healthcare/>.

buildings and are visual art, therefore they do not preserve public space within the neighborhood.



Figure 20. Omari Booker, “The Writing’s on the Walls,” 2019. As seen on exhibit at the Frist Art Museum’s “Murals of North Nashville Now” exhibition, 2019.

In Edgehill, residents sought to bring public art and public space together for the betterment of their neighborhood in a way that went beyond the common form of public-facing murals. In 2018, Dr. Jennifer Marshall, a professor of art history, wrote to *The Tennessean* expressing her worry over the proposal to sell off the parcels that made up the Edgehill Community Garden and Murrell School. To Marshall, the sale not only comprised of displacement, but also acted as “a desecration of Edmondson’s memory.”³⁷

³⁷ Jennifer Jane Marshall, “Selling William Edmondson Homesite ‘a Catastrophe for Nashville,’” *The Tennessean*, June 18, 2018.

She went on to argue that galleries that had exhibited Edmondson's work and the Edmondson Park on Charlotte Avenue were far away from the actual community the artist lived and worked in. Marshall argued that Edgehill was where Edmondson gained fame and the home of his first fans—his neighbors. To once again raze the site of his home and work yard would mean to raze “a place of growth and community.”³⁸ Marshall's opinion article appeared in local media outlets nearly a year before Edgehill residents debuted their proposal. However, her comparison of the Edgehill Memorial Gardens and Edmondson's work yard as productive places of community can be found within the proposed park plan. On June 18, the Metro Budget and Finance Committee voted to take the Edgehill properties off the slate to be sold. Councilmember Colby Sledge, who represents Edgehill, asked that instead of selling it off, for the area to be redeveloped with better amenities for the neighborhood.³⁹ Rather than waiting for Metro Parks and Recreation to design a plan, residents took the matter into their own hands.

Edmondson's home and stone yard were located at 1434 14th Avenue South, in the Edgehill neighborhood. He owned his home and lived with his older sister, Sarah Edmondson. His occupation on the 1940 Federal Census is stonemason, which shows how prolific his carvings became.⁴⁰ Edmondson's neighbor Sidney Hirsch helped Edmondson's carvings gain attention. Hirsch introduced Alfred and Elizabeth Starr to Edmondson. The Starrs then had photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe photograph and

³⁸ Marshall, “Selling William Edmondson Homesite ‘a Catastrophe for Nashville’,” *The Tennessean*, June 18, 2018.

³⁹ Michael W. Aldrich, “Nashville Council Committee takes Edgehill Park Sale off Budget After Community Outcry,” *The Tennessean*, June 19, 2018.

⁴⁰ 1940 Federal Census, Census Place: *Nashville, Davidson, Tennessee*; Roll: *m-t0627-03975*; Page: *8B*; Enumeration District: *99-146*, Ancestry.com. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

document his stone carvings. Dahl-Wolfe showed her photographs to Alfred Barr, Jr., director of the Museum of Modern Art in 1937.⁴¹ That same year, the Museum of Modern Art exhibited Edmondson's sculptures. Of note, *Time Magazine* argued Edmondson's work was not revered by "by Nashville Negro colony," but instead by "Manhattan's art colony."⁴² However, in time, that would change. Historian Bobby L. Lovett has argued that other African Americans in Edgehill did appreciate Edmondson's art and "were amazed at the cultural benightedness of the whites who flocked from Belle Meade to buy Edmondson's art."⁴³

The sculptures and tombstones Edmondson carved were considered folk art. In the words of Barr, Edmondson's work fell in the category of "modern primitive."⁴⁴ Barr went on to say that the work was representative of "the achievements of naïve or self-taught artists...usually the naïve artist works in the easier medium of painting. Edmondson, however, has chosen to work in limestone, which he attacks with extraordinary courage and directness to carve out simple, emphatic forms."⁴⁵ Many of Edmondson's sculptures are representative of biblical stories, including *The Lion*, *Preacher*, *The Ark*, and *Crucifixion*, all of which were included in the Museum of Modern Art exhibit.⁴⁶ His work was simple. *The Arc* included four blocks of limestone stacked upon each other. The bottom two blocks were unadorned. The top two blocs were

⁴¹ Hollander, "William Edmondson," Carroll Van West, et. al, eds., *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, online edition.

⁴² "Mirkels," *Time Magazine* 30 (1937), 68.

⁴³ Bobby L. Lovett, "From Plantation to the City: William Edmondson and the African-American Community," in *The Art of William Edmondson*, ed. Rusty Freeman (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 27.

⁴⁴ Museum of Modern Art, "Press Release for Immediate Release," October 18, 1937.

⁴⁵ Museum of Modern Art, "Press Release for Immediate Release," October 18, 1937.

⁴⁶ Museum of Modern Art, "Sculpture by William Edmondson Master Checklist," 1937.

sculpted to depict the ark in box form with windows, almost reminiscent of a house. Edmondson sculpted many angels. His angels had a frontward glare. Their hair looks reminiscent of textured hair. The bodies were simple, conical shaped. Robert Farris Thompson argued in *The Art of William Edmondson* that the rough wings and textures of the angels represented imperfection in what are otherwise thought to be “icons of perfection.”⁴⁷

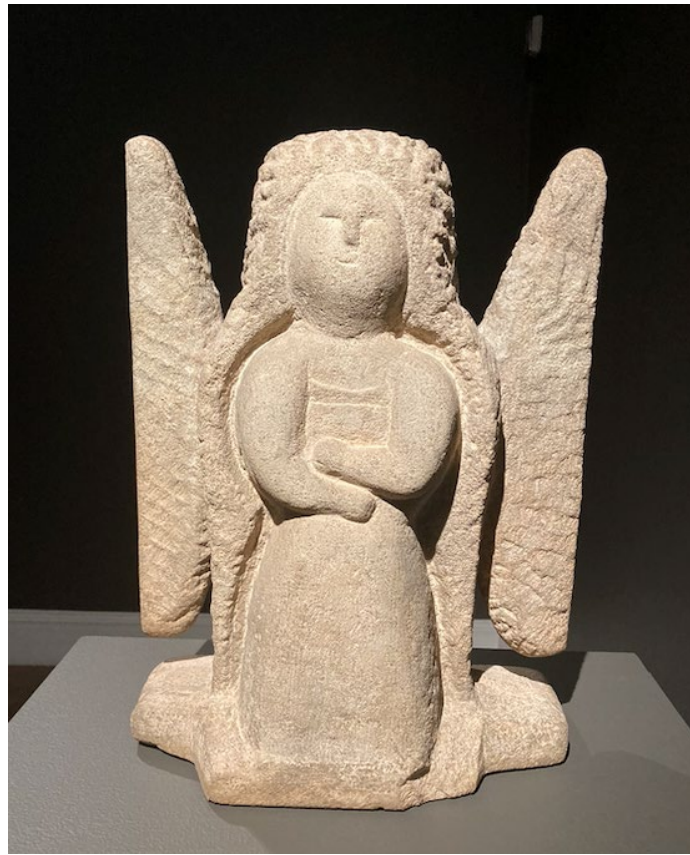


Figure 21. William Edmondson, “Angel,” 1937-1939. On loan from Collection of Robert A. Roth at Cheekwood Museum and Gardens. Photograph taken by the author.

⁴⁷ Robert Farris Thompson, “Edmondson’s Art,” in *The Art of William Edmondson*, ed. Rusty Freeman (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 9.

Because Edmondson lived and worked in Edgehill, it is important to understand what that cultural landscape would have looked like. Scholar Grey Gundaker attempted to reimagine what Edmondson's work yard would have looked like throughout his life in the neighborhood. Gundaker drew upon William Wiggins analysis of Edmondson's biblical themes. Wiggins, according to Gundaker, saw the sculptures as characters in a story Edmondson was directing.⁴⁸ As such, Edmondson's yard, with the limestone slabs and sculptures depicting biblical stories, were representative of Edmondson the man. Photographs of Edmondson's yard provide insight. For example, a photograph of Edmondson's workshop taken by Edward Weston shows a sign over his workspace as well as several sculptures. The sign reads "Tomb-stones for sale. Garden Ornaments. Stone work. Wm. Edmondson." The sign would have directed visitors in Edgehill to his yard in order to purchase his sculptures as well as provided context for the sculptures being on his property. The same photograph shows a sculpture of an eagle atop a limestone block. Gundaker argued the eagle depicts variations in white and Black America. Edmondson's eagle is by the opening to his workshop, not by a door. The eagle also had religious significance to it, as it watched over Edmondson's property.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the placement of the sculptures within the yard show how Edmondson viewed his work. An example found in one of Dahl-Wolfe's photographs depicts *Preacher* and *Lawyer* facing each other, almost in conversation. Gundaker argued this

⁴⁸ Grey Gundaker, "William Edmondson's Yard," in *The Art of William Edmondson*, ed. Rusty Freeman (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 61; William Wiggins, "Jesus," in *William Edmondson: A Retrospective*, ed. Georganne Fletcher (Nashville: Tennessee Arts Commission, 1981).

⁴⁹ Gundaker, "William Edmondson's Yard," 63.

placement could be representative of two laws or two books, as *Preacher* has a bible in his hand, which is above *Lawyer*.⁵⁰ Edmondson's yard, scattered with religious figures carved in stone, represented his religious conversion and the call of God he felt in his life.



Figure 22. William Edmondson, "Crucifix," n.d. On loan from Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center / The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation at Cheekwood Museum and Gardens. Photograph taken by the author.

⁵⁰ Gundaker, 67, 70.

In March 2019, *The Tennessee Tribune* published an article written by the Save the William Edmondson Homesite Park and Gardens Coalition. The grassroots group was founded by documentary filmmaker Mark Schlicher, who at the time was working on producing a documentary on Edmondson, and Gloria McKissack. They were later joined by neighborhood leaders Brenda Morrow and Tyson Heller. The coalition is now made up of residents, concerned citizens, and a documentary filmmaker, with the mission “to save, protect, preserve, and enhance the beloved neighborhood park, community gardens, and historic site located at 1450 14th Avenue South in Edgehill.”⁵¹

The proposed plan went beyond simply redeveloping the existing park with better amenities as Councilman Sledge had proposed a year earlier. The coalition proposed a brand new William Edmondson Cultural Arts Center and Museum within the greater park vicinity. They proposed that the building house an expanded Edgehill Branch Library as well as panels detailing the history of Edgehill. They also proposed that the Cultural Arts Center and Museum house studio and class spaces as well as gallery spaces, making it an arts center for the entire neighborhood. For the Edmondson Homesite parcel, the coalition proposed that the parcel be developed into a pedestrian plaza with interpretive signs to illustrate where Edmondson once worked. From the Edmondson Homesite, the park would include a sculpture garden, reminiscent of Edmondson’s work yard. The sculpture garden would also include a sculpture-themed playground (see Image 3). Additionally,

⁵¹ Save the William Edmondson Homes Park and Gardens Coalition, “William Edmondson Homesite Park Higher Vision Master Plan,” *The Tennessee Tribune*, March 21, 2019.

the coalition wrote in their article that they hoped to “bring some of William Edmondson’s sculptures ‘home’ to be displayed inside the Center.”⁵²



Figure 23. Schematic of the William Edmondson Cultural Arts Center at the William Edmondson Homesite. Save the William Edmondson Homesite Park and Gardens Coalition and Nashville Civic Design Center.

What makes the Save the William Edmondson Homesite Park and Gardens Coalition and their proposed William Edmondson Homesite Higher Vision Master Plan unique within the literature and examples of using public art and public space as a tool for anti-gentrification is that it represents a community using material culture in

⁵² Save the William Edmondson Homes Park and Gardens Coalition, “William Edmondson Homesite Park Higher Vision Master Plan.”

placemaking. Furthermore, unlike the public murals seen in cities like San Diego, Chicago, and New York, or even the idealized development schemes in Seattle, the use of public art in Edgehill also seeks to celebrate and memorialize Edmondson as a lifelong resident of the neighborhood and as a renowned artist. The entire site is modeled in a way that reflects Edmondson's sculptures and his work yard.

Drawing on Gunbaker's and Wiggins's analyses of Edmondson's yard, the significance of the placement of Edmondson's sculptures and his work shop has already been established. The proposed park plan pays tribute to the no longer extant cultural landscape. The placement of the William Edmondson Cultural Arts Center and Museum is at the center of the overall plan. The orientation is northward, in order to have visitors look towards the Edmondson Homesite. The homesite itself is proposed to include interpretive panels indicating where Edmondson's work yard was placed as well as information on the sculptures that would have been seen in his yard. Finally, the homesite is set to be the entrance to the sculpture garden, where contemporary local artists can exhibit their own sculpted works.⁵³ The placement of these features symbolizes pieces of Edmondson's life which are no longer extant within Edgehill's built environment. Thus the placement both honors Edmondson while also recreating a cultural landscape lost to urban renewal and gentrification. The coalition further argued that the physical environment of Edmondson was a critical factor in his work. His studio, or work yard, was outdoors within a historically African American neighborhood, where his neighbors

⁵³ Save the William Edmondson Homes Park and Gardens Coalition, "William Edmondson Homesite Park Higher Vision Master Plan."

could view his work and sometimes become subjects of his sculptures.⁵⁴ The displays created by Edmondson illustrate the intention of the sculptures to be displayed outdoors. The proposed outdoor sculpture garden is an expanded version of Edmondson's personal work yard as it will feature works throughout the site, reminiscent of his former yard.

All of the public art set to be included in the Higher Vision Master Plan are sculptures. Returning to Hayden's work, she argued "urban landscapes stimulate visual culture."⁵⁵ This is especially true when analyzing the coalition's proposal. The fact that the proposed public art will be sculptures is significant. First, it separates the plan in Edgehill from other examples of public art. The most common form of public art used in the preservation or celebration of neighborhoods are murals. Examples are found in other major cities and in North Nashville. While the murals are public art and often include a political and anti-gentrification message, they do not necessarily borrow from the works of historic artists from the neighborhood. The coalition specifically proposed a sculpture garden and sculpture playground because it was Edmondson's medium to share his craft. In a sense, through the public meetings and vision planning, the coalition used the material culture of Edmondson's sculptures to define Edgehill. Drawing upon Dell Upton's work on how urban residents craft their identity through the material and structure of the city, one can argue Edgehill residents hope to shape their identity and the neighborhood's identity around the art of William Edmondson.⁵⁶ The folk art of an African American sculptor will reinforce the reality of Edgehill began as an African

⁵⁴ Save the William Edmondson Homes Park and Gardens Coalition, "William Edmondson Homesite Park Higher Vision Master Plan."

⁵⁵ Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History*, 47.

⁵⁶ Dell Upton, *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1.

American neighborhood for visitors. The sculpture-specific public art also works to memorialize Edmondson as one of Edgehill's famous residents. It was the tombstones and limestone carvings he created in the neighborhood that garnered the attention of the Museum of Modern Art and launched him to fame as the first African American to have a solo exhibition at the esteemed museum. For the coalition, sculpture has meaning and significance because it was how Edmondson shared his craft.

One might argue that even the title of the coalition's plan has significance. The Higher Vision Master Plan is reminiscent of Edmondson's religious themes seen throughout his art and his consistent claim that God called him to sculpt. While in private collections and on view at museums today, Edmondson's art was originally public art. He did not hide his creations, but instead left them on display in his work yard for both Edgehill residents and potential buyers to view. The coalition's proposal draws upon Edmondson's life and work in many symbolic ways. From the placement of the proposed William Edmondson Cultural Arts Center and Museum at the center of the neighborhood park to the entrance of the sculpture garden on the former site of Edmondson's work yard, the artist is at the center of the plan. Furthermore, the members of the coalition, residents of Edgehill, and concerned citizens found meaning and identity in Edmondson's art. The fact that all of the proposed public art are sculptures harkens back to Edmondson's medium. Drawing upon Hayden's work, the coalition answers her call for "finding new, community-based ways of working with the physical traces of the past."⁵⁷ Taken altogether, the Higher Vision Master Plan combines material culture, public art,

⁵⁷ Hayden, 61.

and public space to fight back against gentrification. Yet, it also does more. It celebrates the life of an artist who created a cultural landscape within Edgehill through his work yard and his art, making it a unique tool to preserve the neighborhood.

In 2021, William Edmondson's name and art became the center of controversy within Edgehill. A Chicago-based development firm together with Nashville-based architecture firm Tuck-Hinton sought to rezone an approximately seven acre portion of the neighborhood, along 920 and 1000 Hawkins Street, commonly known as Beaman Automotive, from Industrial Warehouse/Distribution to Specific Plan-Mixed Use. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, several of the early community meetings took place online. As more residents of the neighborhood heard about the proposed project as the date for the Metro Planning Commission's hearing loomed closer, the controversy ensued and the development team added more public meetings for the community to express their concerns.

The original plan, called North Edge, included four buildings. Building A was a twelve-story mixed use building. Buildings B, C, and D were proposed as eight-story mixed-use buildings. Within the four buildings would be 540 dwelling units, 500 hotel rooms, and 160,000 square feet of office spaces. The plan also included screened parking structures as well as a greenway. According to Nashville Now Next, the plan focused on the height relationships between the Gulch and Edgehill in an attempt to add transitional density.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Robert Looper, III, "An Overview of the New 'North Edge' Development Plan in Edgehill, Nashville Now Next," March 15, 2021.

Two months after the initial plan was reported, North Edge became the proposed North Edgehill Commons. Taking into consideration input from community meetings, the developers and architects wanted to “re-establish a strong sense of place and identity by providing a density transition from the high-rise Gulch district to the mid / low-rise Edgehill neighborhood.”⁵⁹ Heights for all four proposed buildings decreased, with A standing at ten stories, B with eight stories, C with five stories, and D with seven stories. The controversial part of the plan was the “urban green” space, which was proposed to stand in the center of the development in order to invite newcomers and established Edgehill residents alike. The main feature of the green space would be the W.E. “Quarry,” which was meant to honor William Edmondson.⁶⁰

In a flyer passed around to Edgehill residents urging them to support the development, North Edgehill Commons was described as a “live/work/play space on the edge of Historic Edgehill, and will serve the community as a place to celebrate the heritage and identity of the surrounding area.” The flyer also offered an explanation of the greenspace as an “intricate” and communal” space honoring Edmondson.⁶¹ From rendering of the development, one could find large limestone sculptures reminiscent of Edmondson’s sculptures of animals, such as a lion. Additionally, the playground portion of the greenspace was proposed to include slabs of limestone, to represent the pieces of limestone Edmondson utilized to craft his sculptures in his front yard in Edgehill.

⁵⁹ Robert Looper, III, “Conceptual Renderings Offer A Glimpse into The Future of North Edgewood Commons Nashville,” Nashville Now and Next, June 2, 2021.

⁶⁰ Looper, “Conceptual Renderings Offer A Glimpse into The Future of North Edgewood Commons Nashville.”

⁶¹ **FIND CITATION**



Figure 24. A flyer for North Edgehill Commons. Betsy Phillips, Nashville Scene.

As Betsy Phillips stated in her *Nashville Scene* article, “it kind of doesn’t matter what the actual cost is. If it costs \$10,000 per statue or \$50,000 per statue, or even \$1,000 per statue, that will be more than William Edmondson made from selling the statues that he actually carved in his lifetime — the ones that these sculptures would be based on.”⁶² Her point is best proven by the auction sale of Edmondson’s *The Preacher*. Case

⁶² Betsy Phillips, “William Edmondson's Legacy and a Potential Edgehill Development,” *The Nashville Scene*, June 14, 2021.

Antiques, based in Knoxville, Tennessee, hosted a two-day Winter Auction in January 2020. *The Preacher* was part of the sale and had a high estimate of \$75,000.⁶³ The sculpture far exceeded Case's high estimate. Edmondson's sculpture sold for more than seven times higher. Depicting a minister with his arm raised and a bible in hand, the sculpture sold for \$540,000.⁶⁴

Not only did Phillips' point regarding the how much each proposed sculpture would have cost in North Edgehill Commons cause controversy, but the fact that the developers did not consult with activists in Edgehill and throughout Nashville about their own proposed park space raised an eyebrow. Ultimately, the developers did back down from the original proposal. The developers met with neighborhood advocates, including representatives from the Save the William Edmondson Homesite, the day of a public meeting. On June 15, 2021, the developers announced that they would back down from the proposed greenspace and park because they did not know the neighborhood already had their own plan. The developer continued to apologize to the community and the organizations who had laid the groundwork for a potential memorial park. Ultimately, Marquette Companies agreed to completely drop William Edmondson's name from their development project as they had no real connection to the stonemason.

In a timely manner, the Higher Vision Master Plan was updated and released in June 2021, at the same time the North Edgehill Commons was going through Metro's procedures for approval. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 tornado that ripped through parts of Nashville, and other budget changes, the Save the William Edmondson

⁶³ Case Antiques, "Lot 126: William Edmondson Sculpture, The Preachee," CaseAntiques.com.

⁶⁴ "Preach It: Edmondson Sculpture Leads Case's Auction At \$540,000," *Antiques and the Arts*, January 28, 2020.

Homesite Coalition worked internally to revamp the proposed Master Plan. Their stated goals include making the homesite and adjacent property a priority for preservation, receiving a commitment from leaders in the Mayor’s Office and Metro Council to work on the implementing the Master Plan, and a commitment from Metro Departments to complete the Master Plan by 2025.⁶⁵ The Master Plan has since been updated to meaningful building and cultural landscapes that honor not just Edmondson, but also other prominent Edgehill individuals such as the McKissack brothers and DeFord Bailey. The key building, the William Edmondson Library and Cultural Arts Center is proposed to face North so that the entrance will face the site of Edmondson’s home and outdoor studio. In addition to studio and classroom spaces, the proposed center is also set to house a new and expanded Edgehill Branch of the Nashville Public Library. Sculpture gardens and exhibit spaces as well as a playground are still proposed to utilize the aesthetics of Edmondson’s sculptures. A community garden, which is already present in Edgehill near the site of the former Murrell School, will remain and become protected by the park.⁶⁶ While the work of the Coalition is ongoing, their dedication to the plan and their willingness to advocate in the face of developers stands as a reminder of Edmondson’s legacy and continued influence in Edgehill.

⁶⁵ Save the William Edmondson Homesite Coalition, “William Edmondson Homesite Park & Gardens Higher Vision Master Plan,” Nashville: 2021, 4.

⁶⁶ Save the William Edmondson Homesite Coalition, “William Edmondson Homesite Park & Gardens Higher Vision Master Plan,” Nashville: 2021, 1-2.

CONCLUSION

The Edgehill neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee represents a unique micro-study of the long legacy of residential segregation. As a New South city, Nashville was home to multiple U.S. forts during the Civil War, rebuilt during the era of Reconstruction, and remained segregated well into the latter half of the twentieth century. With its proximity to Fort Negley and Fort Casino, both constructed by Black craftspeople, Edgehill has deep roots in Nashville's African American history. Yet, several waves of growth and change pushed Black Nashvillians out of the neighborhood or into segregated public housing projects. Residents of Edgehill, both past and present, have continued to push back against drastic neighborhood change. Grassroots organizations, churches, and non-profits have worked together to voice residents' concerns to Metro Council, state organizations, and even the federal government. The continuous fight serves as a reminder of Edgehill's history and legacy as one of Nashville's early African American neighborhoods.



Figure 25. A yard sign outside of the Murrell School.

Since the Neighborhood Conservation Overlay passed in Metro Council in 2018, the portion of Edgell with zoning protections has kept the historical and architectural context intact. Although reactive to the growth and change of the late 2010s, the overlay does regulate residential infill within the boundaries. However, the portions of Edgell left out of the NCZO continue to change. Demolition of more modest housing paves the way for larger, more modern housing that does not fit in with the historic character. Portions of Edgell, especially those areas closer to the Gulch, are being renamed and

rebranded without paying homage to the neighborhood's African American history. The practice is common amongst Nashville's gentrifying neighborhoods.¹



Figure 26. A residential development sign for Gulch South, located on the northern edge of Edgehill.

The cultural and physical landscape of Edgehill has continued to change since the Center for Historic Preservation conducted the initial architectural survey for Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission. As recently as November 2021, the Metro Council approved a rezoning along 12th Avenue S and Hawkins Street.² The request came

¹ Mike Reicher, "There Goes the Neighborhood: New Community Names Crop Up in Gentrifying Nashville," *The Tennessean*, October 26, 2017.

² Erica Francis, "Metro Council Approves Request to Rezone Edgehill Community," *WKRN*, November 16, 2021.

about so that North Edgehill Commons could be constructed. The building will stand as a stark transition from the Gulch to the smaller-scaled Edgehill neighborhood. However, the rezoning did not come without pushback from the neighborhood, as seen in their fight to ensure that William Edmondson's likeness and legacy would not be included in the new development. As Nashville continues to grow, residents of Edgehill and other concerned citizens will continue to fight against rapid development and displacement.

Beyond organizing against gentrification and displacement, the residents of Edgehill show how grassroots organizations can utilize public history, historic preservation, and material culture methodology as tools. As early as 1965, Councilmember Ferguson recognized the destruction brought on by urban renewal would erase the historic fabric of the Edgehill neighborhood.³ These fears were realized as Metro Council allowed for funding to be spent wiping out houses to make room for large scale public housing projects in the heart of the neighborhood.

President Johnson's attempt at a Great Society did not fare much better for residents of Edgehill. Through Model Cities funding and programming, displaced residents in North Nashville were presented with limited places to live in the city they had called home. Edgehill, with several public housing projects already constructed, became Metro officials' first choice neighborhood for those displaced. However, this only added to the segregated nature of the neighborhood.

When the neighborhood declared a state of emergency in 2016, the passage of the Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay was still two years away. However,

³ "Urban Renewal Care Urged," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 2 December 1963, 3

preservation was still at the heart of the neighborhood's demands. The eight demands were:

- 1: Real estate companies to stop pressuring our neighbors to sell their homes.
- 2: Development that places people before profit.
- 3: New construction that fits into our neighborhood, and does not crowd us out.
- 4: A halt to the creation of short-term rentals. We need homes not hotel rooms.
- 5: To preserve black-owned land, housing and business.
- 6: Development that happens with us, not to us.
- 7: The right to remain in our neighborhood if we choose.
- 8: Better protections of tenants against problem landlords and unjust convictions.⁴

The list of demands represents a neighborhood tired of the long legacy of residential segregation in Edgehill, and much of Nashville. In the wake of rapid development, long term residents are at risk of being displaced from the neighborhoods they called home throughout the eras of urban renewal and the Model Cities program. The most recent grassroots organization, Friends of the William Edmondson Homesite, continues the legacy of residents organizing and utilizing public history methodology to keep their neighborhood intact. By presenting a masterplan to the public and to Metro representatives, they are voicing the concerns of residents while also providing a solution. Keeping public space in the hands of the public, expanding the Edgehill library branch, and creating a new space that honors the legacy of William Edmondson are all examples of combining activism and public history. What residents of Edgehill have done, from urban renewal to gentrification, is provide a model for grassroots organizations fighting back against displacement.

⁴ Andy Humbles, "Neighborhood Study Declares Edgehill in State of Emergency," *The Tennessean*, November 16, 2016.

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