

**Discrimination, Urban Renewal  
and  
New London's Lost Neighborhood**



Presented by New London Landmarks  
and Connecticut Fair Housing Center  
with Lonnie Braxton II  
September 15, 2018

*Made possible by a grant from Connecticut Humanities*



### **Discrimination, Urban Renewal and New London's Lost Neighborhood**

To commemorate 2018's 50th anniversary of the passage of the Fair Housing Act, New London Landmarks partnered with Connecticut Fair Housing Center and Lonnie Braxton, II to explore how discriminatory policies shaped New London's built environment.

We decided to focus on an area on and around Shapley Street—a street which had existed since 1746 and which was destroyed in the 1960s by the Winthrop Cove Urban Renewal Project. Shapley Street, Hill Street, Richards Street, and Stony Hill all ran from Huntington Street towards Main Street, through what is now public housing. Schoolhouse Lane and Mather Court were side streets.

This was one of New London's earliest integrated neighborhoods. By the 1960s, it was one of New London's most densely Black neighborhoods. People who lived here could walk to downtown and to Riverside Park. It was also a closely-knit community. In an oral history interview, Alene Pye described it as a place where everyone knew everyone.



*Huntington Street pre-urban renewal*

*Unless otherwise noted, all photos courtesy New London County Historical Society.*



*Shapley Street*



*Schoolhouse Lane*



*Mather Court*

**“Beautiful yard. We had chickens in the backyard, and we had a grape arbor, and we**

**had apple trees ... A lot of friends. We used to play marbles in the summertime.”**

**- Rev. Herman Pollard, about growing up on Shapley Street in the 1940s.**

### **Federal Street**

Federal Street was originally built with whaling era money and had grander homes in comparison to the Shapley Street, Hill Street and other streets in the redevelopment area. Nonetheless, these buildings were demolished in order to further the goals of the Winthrop Cove Urban Renewal Project:

- Public clearance for private enterprise
- Make downtown more attractive to non-residents
- Improve traffic flow
- Increase parking



*Corner of Federal and Huntington Streets*



*Demolition of a Federal Street house.*



*The site of the Saint James Episcopal Church rectory is now a parking lot.*

**Residents Had Mixed Feelings about Redevelopment**

The residents of the Shapley Street area had mixed feelings when they learned their neighborhood would be demolished. Alene Pye, who was raising her children in a cold water flat on Hill Street, loved the neighborhood's safety and close-knit community. Nonetheless, she was happy to hear that she'd get assistance moving to better housing.

Beebe Norman, however, whose grandparents lived on Shapley Street, remembers seeing her grandfather holding his head in his hands, wondering where they would go.

**"... you were being up-rooted from ... neighborhoods that you've been in for a long time and suddenly you have to do something completely different. My grandparents, they moved completely across town where they knew no one."**

-Beebe Norman



*Hill Street, with the house where Alene Pye lived in the foreground.*

### **The Acors Barns House**

A few property owners in the redevelopment area between Shapley Street and downtown fought to prevent the demolition of their buildings. Francis McGuire, whose law office was located in the Acors Barns House at 68 Federal Street, managed to save his building from the wrecking ball.

Acors Barns was one of New London's most successful whaling agents. He later opened a bank on State Street and was also a founder of the New London Northern Railroad.

Another property owner, Dr. Carl Weiss, spearheaded a successful effort to save the block of Whale Oil Row houses on Huntington Street.

Both property owners were supported by the New London County Historical Society, which floated the idea of preserving a larger number of properties between Federal Street and downtown.

There was no comparable effort to preserve the historic homes in the predominantly black neighborhood just a block or two away, such as the Adam Shapley House built in 1739 which survived Benedict Arnold's fire of 1781.



*The Acors Barns House at the corner of Federal and Meridian Streets*



*The view from Federal Street down Meridian Street*

### **Boulevards and Barriers**

Prior to the Winthrop Cover Urban Renewal Project, there was no clear demarcation between the African American neighborhood around Shapley Street and downtown New London.

But as streets widened to welcome suburban employees and customers, they became less welcoming to pedestrians. Was this an unfortunate side effect, or were wide boulevards such as Governor Winthrop Boulevard a deliberately constructed barrier between new public housing and the downtown which city planners hoped to revive?

There was certainly an open precedent for the use of highways and wide arterials as a way to isolate African Americans and low income residents from white and higher income areas. According to its 1936 *Underwriting Manual*, the Federal Housing Authority preferred to insure mortgages where “natural or artificially established barriers will prove effective in protecting a neighborhood and the locations within it from adverse influences, ... includ[ing] prevention of the infiltration of ... lower class occupancy, and inharmonious racial groups.”



*Church Street prior to urban renewal.*



*Church Street became Governor Winthrop Boulevard. The street was widened to funnel traffic in and out of the city . This site sat vacant for decades before the Radisson Hotel was built.*



*Union Street resembled Starr Street with its Greek Revival homes.*



*During urban renewal, Union Street lost housing in order to make way for a parking lot on one side and a parking garage on the other.*



*Federal Street was a narrow, walkable street.*



*Federal St. widened to accommodate suburban commuters, making downtown less accessible for pedestrians living in new public housing.*

### Main Street

Main Street ran from State Street towards Hodges Square. Families who lived there could walk to Riverside Park, the Old Town Mill and to the small shops and restaurants along its path.



*Main Street*



**“It was a good, fun neighborhood. We had lots of friends on the street . . . There was a place right across the street called Al’s Dug-out . . . We’d go there for soda and hot dogs and all the other things that they sold.”**

**-Beebe Norman,  
who lived at 633  
Main Street.**

### Thames River Apartments on Crystal Avenue

Some of the residents who were displaced from the Shapley Street neighborhood were among the first residents of the Thames River Apartments on Crystal Avenue, where a Polish neighborhood was demolished.



**“I felt I was rich then! That was a nice place to live ... the place was so nice and so clean, and everybody was friendly, like a big family of people.”**

- Alene Pye on moving into the new Thames River Apartments.



*Crystal Avenue prior to redevelopment.*

### Main Street

Main Street lost many historic buildings when it widened and became Eugene O'Neill Drive, part of a system of one-way arterials.



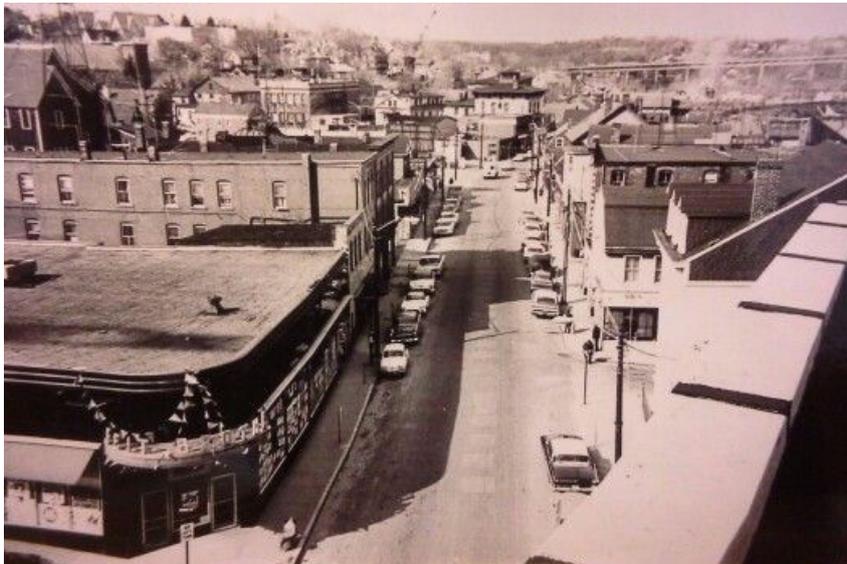
### **Beit Brothers supermarket**

The Beit Brothers supermarket was on the corner of Main Street and Masonic Street. In 1960, only 80% of Americans owned cars. Beit Brothers was within walking distance for residents of the Shapley Street neighborhood.

According to George Oldershaw, who took most of the photos in this booklet, at least 45 small business locations were razed as part of the Winthrop Cove Urban Renewal Project. Most never reopened, as they had depended on local customers from the demolished neighborhoods.

**“We lived on Shapley Street, and on Main Street there was a store called Beit Brothers. And we didn’t have a car ... So every grocery time, we would walk down to Beit Brothers with this wagon and load the wagon up, and that’s how we’d put the groceries in the wagon and get back home with it.”**

— Rev. Herman Pollard



### The relocation process

Some residents in the Shapley Street neighborhood were happy with the help they received from the redevelopment agency relocating after their homes were slated for demolition.

For example, Alene Pye was pleased with the assistance she received from the Redevelopment Agency in finding a new place to live. But other renters received no assistance, and some black homeowners such as L'Overture Harris of 30 Shapley Street received so little money that they were unable to ever buy a house again.

Mr. Harris's house was devalued in the Redevelopment Agency's appraisal report because it was located in a primarily non-white neighborhood.

**“They came door to door and someone would come and explain it. Usually from City Hall or somewhere, and they would let us know what was happening. We didn't have to worry about paying or anything because they paid for the move ... And they would find you-- where we was going was better homes, a better place to live.”**

—Alene Pye



NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION  
Zoning Business 1  
Boundaries North by Stony Hill Street, East by Main St., South by Shapley Street, and West by Huntington Street.  
Character and Trend Neighborhood is built up with houses mostly over 70 years old. It is primarily non-white. Residentially it is declining rapidly as structures deteriorate thru misuse and lack of maintenance.  
LAND DESCRIPTION  
Size 27.83' x 72' / 68' x 41' rear Frontage 37.83' Area 2759 sq.ft. Approx.  
Description Land is fairly level and at approximate street grade.

Detail from the Redevelopment Agency appraisal form for 30 Shapley St.



**Winthrop Cove Redevelopment Project: the numbers**

**Cost :** \$12,642,713

**Homes Lost:** 690

**Families Displaced:** 667

**Disparate Impact**

24% of people displaced were people of color.

People of color were only 7.8% of New London's population.

**Replacement Units**

Winthrop Square - 295

Huntington Towers

(Elderly Deed Restricted) - 120

Gordon Court

(Elderly Deed Restricted) - 52

Thames River Apartments -120

Only 420 replacement units were available to families.



*Construction of Winthrop Square apartments*

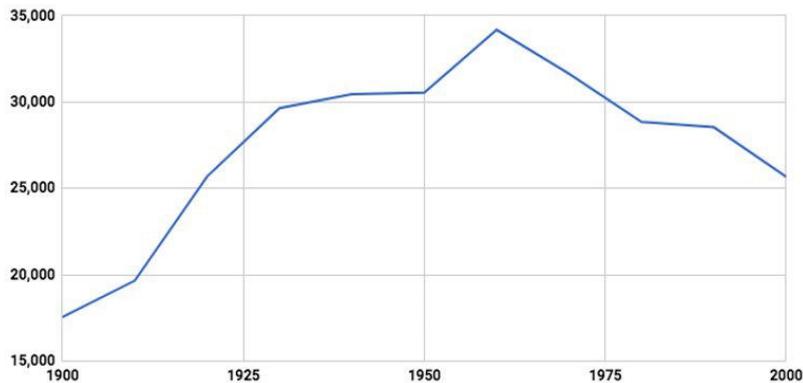
## National Context

The Winthrop Cove Urban Renewal Project was part of a nationwide push to rejuvenate urban centers through highway construction and slum clearance. Between 1937 and 1974, the federal government spent over \$12 billion on urban renewal projects.

### How does a neighborhood get designated a slum?

In New London as in other cities, population growth, zoning, real estate steering and redlining all played a role.

New London, CT Population 1900 -2000



## How Slum Clearance and Redevelopment Program May Apply in New London

(This article, the first of a series of three, gives background information never before brought to public attention on the proposed program of slum clearance and urban redevelopment in New London, and was written by the president of the New London planning board. The material has been reviewed for accuracy and completeness of presentation by the research and planning division of the Connecticut redevelopment commission and the division of slum clearance and urban redevelopment of the housing and home finance agency in Washington.)

By ALMA F. ESHENFELDER

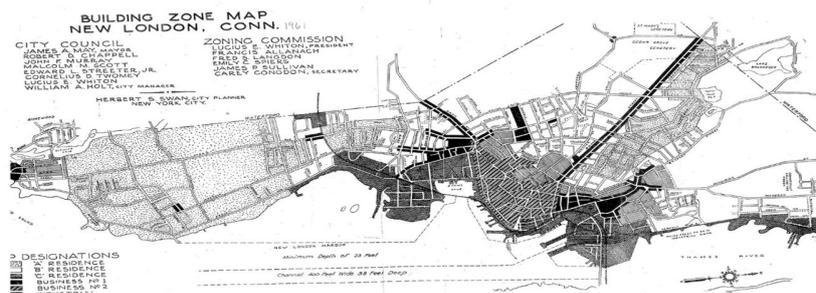
The city of New London, along with 17 or more other communities in Connecticut, is embarking on a program of slum clearance and urban redevelopment with the aid of the federal government under the provisions of the housing act of 1949, the national legislation which authorizes federal assistance to localities undertaking slum clearance projects.

It seems therefore that it would be well to outline at this time the necessary procedures which

of 1949 with which we, in New London, are particularly concerned, are Titles I and III. Title

The Day, June 1951

## Zoning and Real Estate Steering



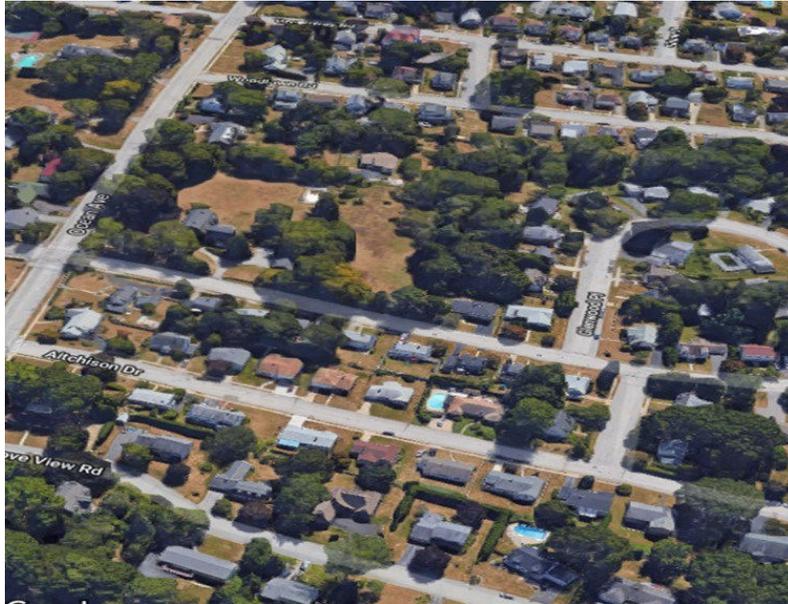
**“No blacks lived south of Willetts Avenue [laughter] in New London. No. No blacks ... There wasn’t a lot of rental properties. They were all homes for sale ... Single family homes. To buy a home down there was out of the reach of some of their pocketbooks. I know real estate agents wouldn’t show you a home down there.**

—Spencer Lancaster

**“There was forced discrimination even when we bought this house. Because what I noticed, thirty-six years ago, if we went to an area like Ocean Avenue or Montauk Avenue, they would steer us away from that area, the realtor. “**

—Alene Pye

## Housing Segregation by Type



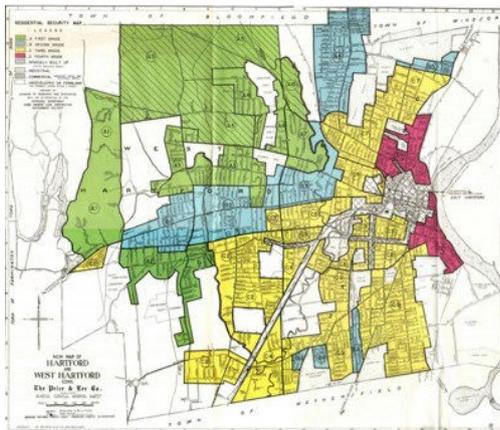
*Ocean Avenue south of Willetts Avenue zoned for low density.*



*Douglas Street was zoned for high density.*

### Redlining, Race-Restricted Covenants and the GI Bill

The Federal Housing Administration insured or denied mortgage insurance to homes in neighborhoods according to risk. A neighborhood would be rated red—the worst rating—if it contained any minority residents. Their *Underwriting Manual* said, “Incompatible racial groups should not be permitted to live in the same communities.”



*Home Owners' Loan Corporation map showing redlining in West Hartford*

In the same time period—the '40's, '50's and '60's,—the FHA was subsidizing affordable mortgages to white homebuyers in the suburbs, making it possible for white families to accrue wealth as their homes appreciated.

Racially restrictive covenants also prevented black homebuyers from purchasing suburban homes. Suburban developers and homeowners feared that mortgages would be denied and property values would go down if any black families moved into their neighborhoods.



*Race restricted covenants made many suburban neighborhoods unavailable to black homebuyers.*

Discriminatory banking practices meant that the vast majority of black servicemen returning from WWII were unable to use the G.I. bill to receive low-cost mortgages.

## Conclusion

The former residents of the Shapley Street neighborhood we interviewed all described the neighborhood as friendly, safe and close-knit. Some of them described homes which were in good shape, others described homes which were run down but not blighted, and others described homes which were so substandard that they were eager to leave.

The neighborhood became vulnerable to demolition because of national and local policies which led to overcrowding, segregation and disinvestment. Perhaps rather than asking whether the Winthrop Cove Urban Renewal Project was good for New London, we should instead focus on how we reached a point where it was even a possibility.

## Thank you to:

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- *Dime Bank and Fiddleheads Natural Foods Cooperative for sponsoring all our 2018 programs*
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**CT**humanities

