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Luther Adams

By 1960 African Americans created a strong and vibrant, and thoroughly segregated community in Louisville. At the center of that community stood the “Old Walnut Street” business district spanning from Sixth Street to Thirteenth Street, overflowing on to the side streets along Walnut. Spanning more than 100 years, for many Blacks it was “the heart and soul of the black community.” In the poem “Footing It Down The Block,” George Ann Berry and Estella Conwill Alexander memorialized Walnut Street as a place “where energy rich and dark pulsated real through the block/ and life forces transfuses and folk fused together...”¹

In 1984, James Syndor, a Black photographer, described Walnut Street as “a street of great smells. The aroma of home-cooked food poured out of the Wilson Restaurant, Buckhart’s, Givens Goodies, Teeken’s Bakery, out of Betty’s and the Little Palace Café.” Within the seven blocks of Walnut Street there was the only Black-owned filling station in the city located at 8th Street; department stores such as Byck’s and Waterman’s; businesses like the Lucky Morris Pawn Shop, rumored to be “run by Negroes but not owned by Negroes” and the Mammoth Life Insurance Company. At theaters like the Lyric and Grand African American actors always received the top billing, in an *Imitation of Life*, Miss Louise Beavers was the headliner. Although created by the realities of residential and social segregation, it was a street of ‘laughter and

music,” and of stylish nightspots such as the Top Hat, the Joe Louis Club, the Little Doggie and Charlie Moore’s Café, where on any given night Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Dinah Washington or Sarah Vaughan might perform. For others with more limited resources there was the Fifth Avenue Pool Hall, the Moonglow Café or the Orchid Bar. As Syndor observed, Walnut Street was “a stage on which all social classes performed.”²

While Blacks were not allowed to enter the Orange Bar, Fountain Ferry amusement park or the consistent opportunity to try on clothes in downtown department store within the Walnut Street corridor there existed what the historians Christopher Silver and John Moeser have termed a “separate city.” In cities such as Memphis, Atlanta, and Louisville the Black community existed as a “city within a city,” served almost entirely by black business and professionals. In spite of a narrow economic base Blacks “served their own community in matters such as financing, insurance, jobs, personal services and patronage, as well as offering a social life that rivaled that the white world in its depth and diversity.”³ Indeed, for many Blacks in Louisville the culture and community centered on Walnut Street was unrivalled in the River City.

As Syndor recalled, “you could find *everything*, you wanted on that street. You could make some fast money and you could go broke. You could get entertained, get embalmed and get fed.”⁴ During it’s heyday, Blacks could walk along the street and get their hair done at any one of a number of shops including: Ella’s Beauty Salon, John Miller Barber Shop, and the Red Star Barber Shop which advertised itself as the place to go “for a good haircut and shave.” Just outside of the Walnut Street business district they might choose to see Mrs. Fannie Jordan “wonderful hair grower,” which claimed to be

the place to go “if you want your scalp cleaned and your hair to grow.” Back on Walnut Blacks might stop at Your Shop or F. L. Stith to have their clothes pressed, altered or cleaned. If you were hungry for chili on a cold day, there were restaurants like Helen’s Chili Parlor or John’s Mexican Chili Parlor which reminded its customers “Do not forget to see us when you are hungry.” If chili was not appealing then there were any number of Black owned businesses to choose from such as Davis Eat Shop, operated by Willa Davis Cross “proprietress.” The majority of Black businesses, or those catering to Blacks, were located along Walnut Street including a number of flower shops, grocery stores, doctors, lawyers, real estate agents, and at least one private detective, Lewis C. Olive. The Domestic Life Building, located at 601 Walnut Street, alone housed the offices of the dentist P. O. Sweeny; T. Lomax Nichols, MD; the realtors Ray and Hawes Agency; and Service Drug Company.⁵

In Harlem there was 125th Street; in Memphis there was Beale Street; in Louisville Walnut Street was no less vital in the lives of African Americans. According to a migrant George Wilson, there was a saying in Louisville, “that if one would just stand ‘by the corner’ long enough, any person he or she wished to see would pass by.”⁶ Although whites would often come downtown to “see the sights,” as Goldie Beckett, a migrant from Hopkins County Kentucky, recalled, Walnut Street was a “haven,” a safe place, where Blacks could “go and be free after work.” After their arrival in Louisville, the Becketts purchased A. B. Ridley Funeral Home located in the heart of the Black Community at 11th and Walnut. Although clearly, tinged by nostalgia Goldie Beckett spoke for many Blacks in Louisville when she claimed, that the era of the “Old Walnut Street district” “were the happiest days of my life.”⁷ Yet, in less than ten years, Our

Merciful Saviour and Mammoth Life Insurance Company would be the only buildings left standing within the Walnut Street district. By 1968, there were 150 fewer Black-owned businesses in Louisville, than in 1942 although the Black population had nearly doubled.⁸

Not Nostalgia—Poor Neighborhoods

The vast majority of Blacks in the city lived in four distinct clusters: Downtown, California, Parkland, also known as “Little Africa,” and “Smoketown.” Parkland, an area South of Broadway and west of Twenty-Eighth Street, held a reputation as being settled predominantly by “Deep South Negroes.”⁹ Smoketown, bounded by Broadway and Kentucky, and Shelby to First Street and Smoketown, was one of the few large Black enclaves located east of the central business district, outside of the West End. Although the majority of African Americans were clustered in these four regions, Blacks could also be found in fewer numbers throughout the city. Black neighborhoods were not only overcrowded, but more often than not they were also old or run-down. According to the Real Property Survey published in the *Louisville Defender*, more than seventy-five percent of African Americans lived in substandard housing.¹⁰ Black neighborhoods were characterized by a lack of proper sanitation, deteriorated property, cheap rents, and dense population.¹¹ They were also the areas in which migrants were most likely to live due the constraints of Louisville’s racialized housing market.

The majority of African Americans lived in housing stock built in 1899 or earlier. Their houses were old and often needed major repair. African Americans were confronted with living in the “oldest and most dilapidated” houses in the city.¹² The Urban League described many of the houses in Parkland as little more than “shacks.”¹³

No matter where Blacks were compelled to live, within Louisville's segregated housing pattern, their homes were often of poor quality. African Americans commonly came home to rat-infested houses with broken steps or whole porches missing or plumbing so poor that drinking water was located in an outside toilet. When a toilet existed it was often not "fit for use," in some instances the only available restroom was shared by as many as eight families. Blacks paid to live in houses where broken plaster hung above their heads and from the walls. Blacks paid to live houses in which there was no heat or leaking gas pipes.¹⁴ In 1948, more than 18,000 Black families were sharing housing accommodations. In one case:

A mother and six children (ages ten, eight, five, four and one)[sic] occupy one room on Magazine Street. There is no direct ventilation in the room. Gas leaks from the hot water heater and stove but there are so many holes in the room it does not seem to have affected their family. A toilet in the back yard is used in common by thirty-five other persons and others who may drift in from the street. . . . twenty people were reported living in two rooms, and in another case fourteen people occupied four rooms. When the cases were investigated some of the occupants were found to be sleeping in shifts.¹⁵

An earlier WPA study on Property and Sanitation in the city pointed out that conditions such as these had a direct influence on the health of Louisville's Black community.¹⁶ The second-rate housing conditions African Americans faced were reflected by the morbidity and mortality rates of Louisville's Black population. Between 1942 and 1946 the death rates among African Americans was "far out of proportion to their total in the population" far exceeding that of whites during the period.¹⁷ Pneumonia and tuberculosis were among the leading causes of death in the Black community. Although African Americans comprised 14.8% of Louisville's population in 1946, they accounted for forty percent of tuberculosis deaths.

In Louisville, the struggle for open housing was intimately linked to urban renewal, the demise of Walnut Street and the creation of a “ghetto.” This was not the “making of the second ghetto,” but the creation of one where it had not existed before. While Blacks in Louisville clearly confronted residential segregation before, they had not confronted the degree of spatial isolation, lack of community and social resources or the grinding poverty ushered in by urban renewal and white flight. Walnut Street’s importance to Blacks in Louisville should not be viewed as a nostalgic look backward toward a “golden age” of the ghetto, instead it was simply a recognition that urban renewal created conditions that were fundamentally different in kind and scale than Blacks faced in Louisville before.

Although urban renewal began in 1959, it was preceded by the National Housing Acts of 1933 and 1934, and the Housing Act of 1937 which created the Federal Housing Administration and the low-rent public housing program directed by the Public Housing Administration. As a result of the 1937 Act the Louisville Housing Commission was created. Nationally, urban renewal began in 1949, with the passage of the Federal Housing Act, which authorized federal assistance for slum clearance. In 1950 Kentucky passed the state law, which enabled its cities to undertake urban renewal projects. A series of amendments in 1954, 1956, 1957, 1959 and 1961 authorized slum clearance and relocation payments, sought to prevent the spread of slums through rehabilitation and conservation as well as increased federal funding while permitting local government to pool its resources for urban renewal projects.¹⁸

In the pamphlet, “Urban Renewal?” the Urban Renewal and Community Agency argued its mission was to “IMPROVE LOUISVILLE” and to “STOP” blight and decay.

For the Urban Renewal Commission, as neighborhoods deteriorated to the “point of no return” renewal became a necessity fueled by “the natural increase in population,” the migration of a “formerly rural population,” and the growth of urbanization.¹⁹ During the ten years between 1950 and 1960, Louisville’s Black population grew three times as fast as the white population.²⁰ Between 1957 –1962, the city approved four different urban renewal projects. The first began in 1957 when Louisville voters accepted a five million dollar bond issue that paved the way for the start of the various urban renewal projects. Two years later the Urban Renewal Commission described this project as an “effort to revitalize our city areas which are decaying, and prevent good areas from starting to decay.... The objectives of urban renewal are simple: to clear or rehabilitate slum and blighted areas; to rehouse those displaced into standard accommodations; and to rebuild the cleared areas for productive and desirable uses.”²¹

The first renewal project was characterized by wholesale demolition and extended periods where newly cleared sites remained vacant for extended periods of time. Its effort to redevelop blighted areas led to the construction of streets, sewers and running water in some of Louisville’s Black communities. But more importantly to create “buffer zones on the east and west sides of the downtown business core.”²² the construction of the University of Louisville medical campus, hospitals, motels and office buildings. Meanwhile the West project, commonly known as the Civic Center Project, became the site for city, state, county and federal office buildings including the courthouse and county jail. The site extended from Second Street to Fifteenth Street and from Broadway to Market, encompassing the Walnut Street business district. For the Urban Renewal

Commission these projects represented an attempt to save downtown “by breaking the strangling nose of blight and slum that has surrounded the core of the city.”²³

Joseph Hammond, a Black business owner, spoke for Black Louisville as a whole when he said, “The clearing of Walnut vandalized the social fabric of the Black community.”²⁴ The city’s efforts to “quarantine blight” amounted to little more than a systematic process by which Blacks were pushed out from downtown. Black business suffered the brunt of urban renewal, few Blacks could afford to relocate and those who did confronted the difficulties of finding a new location in segregated housing market.

Urban renewal intensified the housing shortage in Louisville. Although the Urban Renewal Commission recognized limited housing was a “severe problem for negroes,” the small number of public housing units it created were little more than a stop-gap measure. Nor did African Americans have a legitimate voice in the process of urban renewal, when public hearings were held they were most often to inform Blacks of what would happen to their homes and businesses, rather than a forum in which they could shape the process of renewal to suit their own interests. Because Blacks overwhelmingly lived in Louisville’s poorest neighborhoods, displacement mainly impacted those with the least social and economic resources to fight urban renewal. For instance, in the Southwick Redevelopment area the project displaced 333 African American families, but only one white family.²⁵ Blacks represented more than eighty-five percent of the persons dislocated by “slum” clearance; however the city relocated less than thirty percent of the families displaced by slum clearance.²⁶

In what, the sociologists Scott Cummings and Michael Price, have called “classic patterns of ‘invasion’ and ‘succession’” African Americans turned toward the adjacent,

and less densely populated, white neighborhoods in the West End to meet their housing needed.

In a speech delivered to the Louisville section of the National Council of Jewish Women, Murray Walls on behalf of the Human Relations Committee described the nature of housing for Blacks in Louisville. According to Walls racial discrimination created a separate housing market for African Americans. For those with the desire and resources to buy a new home there were only two alternatives: either stay in an already crowded area or try to expand into the areas open to them. It became apparent that “no money was available to Negroes wanting to build houses east of 18th Street.”²⁷ Instead, the greatest expansion of African American home ownership was in the neighborhoods directly south and west of Broadway. However, as Murray Walls discovered, “When the Negro began to expand, if one family entered a block [occupied by whites], FOR SALE signs would go up all along the street. There was panic selling at its worst.”²⁸ In a similar speech given by a member of the Human Relations Committee, Fredrick William Woolsey argued that African Americans “Found that the only freedom of choice that existed for them was between one home in the West End and another in the West End.”²⁹ Whites often responded to their new Black neighbors by “fleeing” to the suburbs of Jefferson County outside the city.

For African Americans in Louisville as elsewhere in the nation, urban renewal became synonymous with “Negro Removal.” Historians have demonstrated that through a complex interplay between African American migration, federally financed programs of urban renewal and interstate highway construction, the Home Owners Loan Corporation [HOLC] and Federal Housing Administration [FHA], real estate practices

and white flight to suburbia Blacks were entrapped in increasingly deteriorating inner cities. In cities such as Atlanta, Richmond, Miami, Cincinnati and Chicago suburbanization and urban renewal combined to create what many historians have termed the “second ghetto.”³⁰ Increasingly, poor whites and people of color found themselves spatially isolated in inner cities surrounded by a suburban ring existing as a residential haven for a more affluent and mostly white population. What the cultural critic George Clinton has termed, chocolate cities, and vanilla suburbs.

While in other cities urban renewal and white flight combined to make the “second ghetto,” this was not the case in Louisville. Instead for many Blacks in Louisville it created a ghetto where one had not existed before. Residential segregation in Louisville was enforced through custom rather than law. Where cities such as Atlanta used a number of zoning laws to contain its Black population, no such laws were enacted in Louisville.³¹ Although African Americans were clearly segregated, forced to live in the city’s worst housing stock, until the 1960’s African Americans lived in a number of enclaves throughout downtown. In Louisville residential discrimination has been depicted as more of a “checker board” or “layer cake,” than as the continuous ghetto that existed for Blacks in cities such as Chicago or Cincinnati. Since middle class Blacks were no more immune to the realities of residential segregation, many Black neighborhoods were more economically diverse than they would become over time. Historically, Blacks in Louisville commonly lived in close proximity to whites within the city, albeit on racial homogenous blocks or streets.

African American expansion into the West End was fueled by demands for better housing and the practices of a number of Louisville realtors. As Walls explained in her

speech to the National Council of Jewish Women, realtors took advantage of the segregated housing market to “make hay while the sun shines.” Despite their “Code of Ethics,” which prohibited realtors from changing the racial character of a neighborhood through “block busting.” African Americans increasingly found the only housing available to them west of Eighteenth Street. As urban renewal kicked into high gear, African Americans were forced from the central city, as businesses, apartments, and housing, including the prestigious Teacher’s Row, were deemed blighted and removed. In a brief history of segregation in Louisville, Vernon Robertson argued that Blacks “were carefully contained by what seems to be an overall plan to limit Negro housing to an extension of the central areas going toward the west end.”³² The process of ghettoization ensnared all African Americans, including many with the resources to buy quality housing. Ruth Bryant recalled, when she arrived in Louisville from Tulsa, Oklahoma the only available housing was in the Du Valle section of Southwick, an area where pigs ran freely and outdoor toilets were the norm. However, there was “nowhere to move” until they were able to purchase a two-story home on 27th Street and West Jefferson from two white women in a neighborhood tipping from white to Black.³³ For African Americans searching for a better home there was “no chance of buying a single house outside the established pattern.” As residential segregation increased, open housing became a pressing civil rights concern.

African Americans’ fight against residential segregation in Louisville was about more than the ability to buy a nice home in any neighborhood they chose. Black open housing activists were not motivated by some simple desire to live next door to white people. Their goal was not to get closer to white people, but to get closer to equality.

While well aware of the realities of racism and residential segregation, Blacks in Louisville saw this as a moment to transform the urban landscape by challenging the boundaries of margin and inclusion. Here Blacks demonstrated a “collective imagination” that produced a vision of what the city could be that was radically different than their present or past. Blacks had the hope, the dream of equality that necessitated the struggle for open housing and against ghettoization. Blacks in Louisville, as throughout the nation, acted on the belief that they could “make their world anew.”³⁴

Open housing served as a means to gain access to better schools and employment opportunities. It also represented African Americans’ attempt to envision a radically different urban landscape, than either municipal government or many local whites envisioned. In seeking equal access to housing, Blacks also sought to fundamentally alter the boundaries of race and class throughout the city. As Maurice Rabb, an NAACP member who fought restrictive covenants in Shelbyville, Kentucky prior to his arrival in Louisville explained, many Blacks believed open housing was the solution to “all our problems.”³⁵ His vision of a different future was echoed by Murray Walls, who argued, “So long as people live in isolation as we do ... our schools will remain segregated, our churches will remain segregated, our young people will grow up the one with a belief in his superiority, the other with a badge of inferiority.”³⁶

African Americans in Louisville fought against residential segregation and for the hope of transforming the urban landscape to suit their interests throughout the twentieth century. However, in the context of urban renewal it took on an even greater importance. Indeed, the open housing campaign of the later 1960’s were a direct descendant of earlier struggles initiated by Blacks in the city. The Louisville branch of the NAACP was

organized in 1914, to oppose a residential segregation ordinance prohibiting Blacks and whites from buying homes on blocks in which their race was not already the majority and culminated in the Supreme Court case *Warley v. Buchanan*. During the late 1930's African Americans such as E. E. Pruitt, manager of Beecher Terrace housing project, and Murray Walls, as Tenant Selection Supervisor simultaneously fought along side the NAACP and the Urban League to insure Blacks gained equal housing consideration during the construction of Louisville's first projects.³⁷ Andrew Wade and P. O. Sweeny were among a handful of Blacks who risked their lives in an attempt to buy a home outside the "established pattern."

In 1957, the NAACP sued the Municipal Housing on behalf of twelve defendants to challenge the doctrine of "separate but equal." Even though Blacks received a fair share of public housing, Louisville's projects were segregated. The NAACP forced the Commission to adopt a plan of gradual integration, but four years later less than one percent of public housing was integrated. Placing its emphasis on gradual rather than on integration, Municipal Housing Commission refused to "compel a White applicant against his wishes to occupy a unit in a project which is occupied predominantly by Negro tenants."³⁸ Blacks found relying on whites Louisvillians' willingness to "voluntarily" desegregate proved no remedy at all. As members of Mayor Hoblitzell's public accommodations emergency committee and the NAACP, Murray Walls and Maurice Rabb, urged the mayor to confront the African American housing crisis in Louisville stating, "we must not condone discrimination...and confine Negroes to a ghetto."³⁹

Ultimately the struggle to end residential segregation became a two pronged effort led by the HRC and the Committee on Open Housing (and to a lesser degree West End Community Council), an African American organization created in 1966 to attain an open housing ordinance. Created in June 1962, the HRC was a moderate civil rights agency composed of a majority of liberal whites including: Chairman, Monsignor Alfred, president of Bellarmine College; Rose Tarbis, a member of the Urban League and the Council of Jewish Women; Ray Bixler, head of the Psychology Department at the University of Louisville; Dorcas Ruthenburg, a playwright and writer for the *Courier-Journal* and Mansir Tydings, as Executive Director. Frank Stanley, Sr. editor of the *Louisville Defender*, Lois Morris, Murray Walls and Maurice Rabb were among the African Americans appointed to the HRC. As its long-term goal the HRC sought to improve inter-race relations, which would lead to the end of discrimination in Louisville. Its members viewed its mission as to promote and secure mutual understanding and respect among the various religious, racial and ethnic groups in the city. Unlike the COH, as a government agency the HRC neither had the option nor the desire to resort to protest demonstrations to achieve its goal; rather it acted as a negotiator in interracial controversies.⁴⁰

Although the HRC had already begun to discuss the open housing issue, in 1964 the West End Community Council (WECC) urged the HRC to actively endorse an open housing ordinance. The WECC was organized in May of 1963 by Anne Braden as a group of white and blacks citizens working to “keep the West End a balanced community, neither all Negro nor all white.” In an effort to stabilize desegregating communities the WECC sponsored art, theater and music programs to unite the West End

community. It directly challenged white flight through an “I’m Not Moving” campaign in which members such as Ruth Bryant, went door-to-door educating West End residents on integrated housing. They also distributed placards reading, “House Not for Sale” and “Well, I’m Not Moving.”⁴¹ Although organized by Braden, she acknowledged her communist reputation could potentially harm the organization and assumed a background role in the WECC. Instead, African Americans such as Hulbert James, Gladdis Carter, head of the West End YWCA, and Ruth Bryant, became the primary spokespersons for the group.

On June 25, 1964 the HRC endorsed a fair housing plan. First, the proposed ordinance outlawed refusing to sell, rent or lease housing on the basis on race, religion or national origin; the false representation of homes or apartments as unavailable when they in fact were; and racial discrimination in the terms, conditions and privileges of any property deal. The proposed ordinance also provided fines of up to one hundred dollars for noncompliance. However, the HRC soon discovered that such an ordinance would receive little support from city hall. Not only was the drafted ordinance unpopular among many white Louisvillians, Mayor Cowger refused to comment on the proposal, the Louisville Area Board of Realtors openly condemned it, and Board of Aldermen indicated they would vote against the ordinance.

Second, the HRC conducted a number of surveys on housing including “What Happens to Property Values in Integrated Urban Housing” and “Facts for Action.” Collectively these studies examined the population trends in the West End and contradicted the popular discourse suggesting that property values fell as Blacks moved into formerly white neighborhoods. Their findings only further inflamed a white

community already incensed over the issue of open housing. According to one historian, that the Commission actually thought the studies would sway public opinion only “illustrates the Commission’s naïve belief that education and discussion of the issue would gain acceptance of an ordinance among the [white] population.”⁴²

Third, the HRC drafted the “Declaration of the Principles of the Freedom of Residence.” Under the Declaration the Board of Realtors, financial institutions and other real-estate institutions agreed to sell, lease or rent property without regard to race, creed, color or national origin. The HRC combined the Declaration with a proposed ordinance creating a seven-member panel to process racial discrimination complaints through negotiation and arbitration. Maurice Rabb cast the only vote against the proposal, calling the plan “toothless.”

the HRC expressed its “deep frustration” with the ordinance saying:

The commission can handle complaints about racial discrimination in housing through negotiations only. If the accused person refuses to negotiate, there is nothing the commission can do about it. The commission had no subpoena powers and there are no enforcement provisions in the ordinance. It contains a declaration of principles aimed at freedom of housing, which has been endorsed by real-estate, home-loan, and other organizations in the housing industry.⁴³

Mrs. William Flarshiem, chairman of a commission panel empowered to hear complaints, lamented, “It’s a lost sound of fury signifying nothing.”⁴⁴

When Mayor Schmied refused to seek a stronger open housing ordinance African Americans founded the Committee on Open Housing in March 1966 to organize a protest movement for an open housing ordinance. Although a few whites such as Ray Bixler served on the committee, the COH was primarily composed of and led by African Americans. Its leaders were Reverend A. D. King, a recent arrival in the River City,

pastor of the Zion Baptist Church and brother of Martin Luther King, Jr., ; Reverend W. J. Hodge of the NAACP; Hulbert James, executive director of the WECC and Reverend Leo Lesser, president of the Greater Louisville Area AME Ministerial Alliance. The COH served as lobbyists group for fair housing as the HRC began to draft a new, enforceable, open housing ordinance.

At the same time the COH took the initiative and drafted an open housing ordinance. On September 13, 1966 representatives of the Kentucky Christian Leadership Conference, the WECC and the NAACP presented the Board of Aldermen with a proposal for an enforceable housing ordinance including fines up to five hundred dollars and jail sentences. The aldermen promised to give the proposal “due consideration.”

Negotiation v. Direct Action

As a moderate civil rights agency the HRC found itself wedged between the opponents of open housing and an increasingly militant group of open housing supporters arguing that its governmental mandate did not extend beyond the conference room. The HRC seemed unable or unwilling to acknowledge that an appeal to the conscious of white Louisvillians would not result in equal treatment much less an open housing law.⁴⁵

From this point on there was a decided split between the HRC and the COH. The rift between the two organizations was not simply a matter of strategy, though it was that. The difference in approach stemmed from a fundamental difference in their reading of race and racism in the River City. The HRC was unable or unwilling to acknowledge the depth of commitment to white supremacy by white Louisvillians. Here, both the state in the form of municipal government and white “hecklers” through their “defensive localism” were wedded in their resistance to open housing.

The COH warned that if the open housing ordinance was not passed they would initiate a campaign of non-violent direct action to pressure city officials to act. Which prompted the HRC to speak out against the plans to demonstrate as well as against the SCLC associates and the COH itself.

Yet, for some open housing advocates the distinction between negotiation and direct action was less stark than either COH or its African American opponents would suggest. Although he had been an active participant in the public accommodations marches, E. Deedom Alston viewed himself as more of a negotiator during the open housing fight. He chose not to demonstrate saying, “I am a quick reactor: If you hit me, I’m going to hit you back, so I did not want to expose myself to this type of activism.” However for Alston, they were simply two sides of the same coin; activism was a tool used to facilitate negotiation. With an apt analogy he explained, “were it not for activism negotiation could never have been accomplished. If you see me point the gun [at you] and though I leave it back at the car, though you know it’s pointed at you, I don’t have to say anything about the gun, you see it pointed at you.”⁴⁶ African Americans like Alston believed that the Black protest demonstrations were the “gun” that would make the task of negotiating with the Board of Aldermen and the Mayor that much easier.

Direct Action - Examples

1. In April the NAACP initiated a “Don’t Buy Downtown” campaign in support of open housing.
2. COH moved the focus of its demonstrations from downtown to the all-white neighborhoods of the South End. On April 1, the COH conducted the first of more than twenty demonstrations in the South End. More than 160 demonstrators marched through

the South End, followed by growing numbers of white hecklers waving Confederate flags and hurtling rocks, eggs and obscenities at the open housing advocates. The actions of these white hecklers is reminiscent of the “defensive localism,” whites in Detroit used to “protect” their property from perceived threats from Blacks and liberals which protected their “rights” at the expense of Blacks’ rights.⁴⁷ The marches became almost nightly affairs involving several hundred demonstrators and attracting hostile crowds of white “hecklers” numbering between 900-2,000 on any given night. Though few white “hecklers” were ever arrested, by the end of April more than 600 demonstrators were arrested.⁴⁸

On April 11, 1967, the Board of Aldermen met to consider the open housing proposal. The bill was defeated by a 9-3 vote, with Louise Reynolds, Eugene Ford, Sr. and Attorney Oscar G. Stoll voting in favor of the ordinance. For one historian of the open housing movement, April 11th was, “Black Tuesday—the day on which racism’s burning fires of hate and fury were brought out in full-dress revue before an awed and vacillating citizenry; it had professed to see the housing dilemma settled in favor of equal justice and freedom for all but now did not lift a finger in a favor of an open housing bill...”⁴⁹

Despite the injunction, and subsequent arrests, the protest marches continued. Jessie Irvin was one of the many African Americans who turned out in favor of open housing; she marched down Chestnut and Jefferson Streets downtown and along the marchers on Central Avenue in the South End led by Reverend A. D. King and Reverend Leo Lesser. Irvin recalled:

The thing that stood out in my mind was when we marched on Central they threw rocks and bottles [they] threatened us and physically abused us, they had knives

and guns. I was scared but not scared enough not to march. I was pregnant at the time. I marched not because it was something I thought I'd see the fruit of but because my children would. I marched for that and because I was tired of staying in substandard housing.⁵⁰

Open housing advocates like Jessie Irvin marched almost daily after the ordinance's defeat and the impasse between the HRC and city hall. Throughout late April the level of nightly violence increased, as open housing advocates continued to march despite the court injunction. By April 18th and 19th the police used tear gas for the first time to quell the hundreds of rock-throwing whites. On the 20th, thirty protesters were arrested as soon as they stepped out two trucks to march. According to the *New York Times*, "white hecklers, unable to reach the marchers, battled the police with bottles and chunks of concrete and bricks. An unoccupied police cruiser was overturned in the melee." In at least one instance the Louisville police found a car-load of Molotov Cocktails whites intended to use against the protesters.⁵¹ Yet, according to protesters such as Eric Tachau, few white "hecklers" were ever arrested.⁵² The next night, one hundred twenty-five protesters were arrested attempting to march in South End, and in parking lot of Churchill Downs.

During an open housing meeting, Hulbert James declared, that inaction on open housing would guarantee "open hell" for the upcoming Kentucky Derby. James words signaled an acceleration of the COH initiative to disrupt the 93rd running of the Kentucky Derby. Under the slogan, "No Housing Bill, No Derby," the COH marched demanding the mayor and Board of Aldermen act on open housing.⁵³

National attention (mint julieps and big hats), and led the Kentucky Derby Festival Committee decided to cancel the 12th annual Pegasus Parade as well as the Free Country and Western Music Show. In years prior to 1967, the parade attracted the largest

crowds of any event associated with the Kentucky Derby; its cancellation cost the city an estimated 550,000 dollars.

On May 5th, Dr. King, returned to the city to address an evening rally of several hundred open housing advocates at a West End church. According to the *New York Times*, King stated, “We are aiming at bringing the issues out into the open and exposing injustice.” In terms of the derby he warned, “we are not playing about it.”⁵⁴ Following the rally, over two hundred demonstrators marched in the downtown business district in support of the NAACP “Don’t Buy Downtown” boycott. However, after meeting with local leaders of the open housing movement, King announced that the plan to protest at the Derby was terminated. As King explained, he advised the COH not to demonstrate as a “gesture of good faith to refute the claim that we are interested only in disruption for disruption’s sake.”⁵⁵

The decision brokered by King to call off the demonstration at the Kentucky Derby, turned out to be a mistake. In decided not to demonstrate or at least retain the threat of such a demonstration, local Blacks allowed King to give away one of their most important points of leverage without gaining anything in return. Moreover, without the threat of disruption COH also lost its spotlight in the national media, which had made the mayor at least more willing to consider negotiation. Though the COH called off its protest at the Kentucky Derby, the demonstrations escalated in the weeks following the event. By May 10th, Dr. King returned once again to Louisville, leading seventy demonstrators during a march in the South End. During an attempt to reason with a group of young white hecklers, a rock was thrown out of the crowd, ricocheted off King’s car and through the window. King later recalled that the rock “shaved my neck and the

bottom part of my face, and it caused me to start thinking about the purpose of that rock.”

At the car sped away, white teenagers swarmed the car screaming “vicious epithets.”

During an address to several hundred people at the Greater St. James A. M. E. Church in the West End, King approached the pulpit carrying a large rock symbolic of his earlier confrontation.

‘We shall tell the young men and young ladies in the South End that upon this rock...Upon this rock, we are going to build an open city, and the gates of injustice will not prevail again.’⁵⁶

As the November elections approached the Black protest movement shifted strategies. Perhaps with the earlier struggle to obtain public accommodations in mind, African Americans turned to voter registration as a means to secure an open housing ordinance. Although none of the Democratic nominees openly advocated an open housing ordinance, according to Bernier, “many marchers believed that a secret deal was made between civil rights leaders and the candidates.”⁵⁷ The *Courier-Journal* reported that, “some leaders in the Negro community said that they privately received campaign commitments that the Democrats would do something about a strong housing law.”⁵⁸ As Lyman Johnson put it, “we helped kick the Republicans out and put the Democrats back in. We told the Democrats: ‘Remember two terms ago you wouldn’t pass a public accommodations ordinance, and you paid for it. In a sixty-five percent Democratic community, you had to put up with two terms of Republicans.’ The message got across.”⁵⁹

On November 7, 1967 Democrats replaced eleven of the twelve Republican Aldermen. Louise Reynolds, who supported open housing, was the only Alderman

reelected. On December 13, the new Aldermen passed an enforceable housing ordinance by a 9-3 vote. This victory was followed in March by the passage of a state law banning housing discrimination, led by the efforts of three African Americans: State Senator and migrant, Georgia Davis Powers and Representatives May Street Kidd and Hughes McGill. This was one of the first open housing laws enacted in the South. By April 1968 Congress passed the 1968 Civil Rights Act which contained housing provisions, however, this bill was too watered down to be an effective measure against housing discrimination.

For Blacks in Louisville their open housing victory was not seen as the penultimate answer to housing discrimination, but rather it was viewed as a necessary tool in the fight against residential segregation. It is difficult to measure the success of the struggle for open housing, since the passage of the open housing ordinance did little to halt white flight. While the ordinance was important, it was foremost a tool to build their dreams of equality. Blacks envisioned a very different future than the one created by urban renewal, where the “haven” that existed on Walnut Street could be wed to the freedom to live in quality housing. Hope, a radical imagination, and the will to act upon their dreams fueled the open housing struggle. Yet, in the end the hope of securing a nice home -- for themselves and their children -- where they did not have to pay more for housing of lesser quality or live in the shadow of segregation eluded many Blacks. In “A Dream that Failed: An Analysis of the Life and Death of the West End Community Council,” Anne Braden wrote that the WECC was “built on a dream with no more validity in the minds of people—integration.”⁶⁰ Although the WECC slowed white flight, ultimately it was unable to stop it.

Within four years, 1960-1964, nearly 15,600 whites left the West End in favor of the East End, South End or the suburbs of Jefferson County.⁶¹ During the 1960's alone, the white population in the West End decreased by roughly fifty percent. As the city of Louisville's population declined, that of Jefferson County increased by nearly eighty percent by 1986. At the same time Blacks were left isolated in Louisville's West End, African Americans comprised twenty-eight percent of the population in Louisville, but only seven percent of the population in Jefferson County. The few whites that remained in the West End primarily lived in Portland, a working class neighborhood of Irish Catholic heritage. Despite the success of the open housing campaign in achieving an ordinance barring discrimination, Blacks entered the 1970's more segregated than ever before. In 1940 Louisville's segregation index stood at 70.0 by 1970 it had rose to 89.2.⁶²

Not only did housing conditions worsen, but so too did economic opportunities for Blacks in the River City. Throughout the period, Blacks made only slight economic gains. American Americans remained at the bottom of Louisville's socio-economic ladder. But due to the destruction of many Black businesses and the onset of deindustrialization, that ladder now had a few more rungs in it. During the 1970's the number of Black families below the poverty line rose by twenty-two percent and American Americans continued to work the same menial jobs, at the same menial pay as before. The majority of American Americans, sixty-seven percent, were employed as domestics or increasingly in service industries as unskilled labor.⁶³ For entrepreneurs, integration and urban renewal emaciated Black business in the River City.

The results of the open housing campaign were somewhat paradoxical. On one hand the struggle itself represented a significant challenge to white supremacy and the

progressive veneer of equality in Louisville. Sparked by worsening housing conditions, urban renewal and the on going struggle for equality the open housing campaign drew much needed attention to the way residential segregation brutally truncated Black lives. Not only did Blacks in Louisville gain national attention, but they also served noticed that they would take action to attain equality. While their militance clearly surprised many whites in the city, it was an important step toward freedom and self-determination. Moreover, their campaign to attain legal recognition to equal housing was successful. However, legal success was undermined by white flight, and the bleak economic realities Blacks faced in the city. Yet, ultimately the dream Blacks had of the urban landscape was of not of integration, but of equality. Here we can hear the echoes of Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddamn," where she sang, "you don't have to live next me, just give me my equality." Thus, it seems more accurate to view the "Dream that Failed" as equality itself.

At the moment of Blacks' greatest Civil Rights triumph, African Americans were increasingly marooned ghettos such as the one created in the West End of Louisville. The construction of a ghetto combined with limited economic opportunity and increased residential segregation and unending police brutality to create conditions that led many African Americans to question whether freedom could in fact be legislated. In Black Louisville much of the economic and communal infrastructure was razed along with buildings deemed as blighted. Increasingly, African Americans questioned our nations' commitment to equality, and found the nation lacking. Meanwhile raised questions about the United States' commitment to equality. In Louisville, like many cities across America

during the Sixties Blacks began to answer Langston Hughes' decades old query "what happens to a dream deferred?"

¹ George Ann Berry and Estella Conwill Alexander, "Footing It Down The Block,"

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³⁰For more recent treatments of these issues see, Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) & Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post-War Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003). Also see, Charles F. Casey-Leininger, "Making the Second Ghetto in Cincinnati: Avondale, 1925 - 70" in Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. *Race and the City, 1820 - 1970*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Carolyn T. Adams et al., *Philadelphia: Neighborhoods, Divisions, and Conflict in a Postindustrial City*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Raymond Mohl, "Making the Second Ghetto in Metropolitan Miami, 1940 - 1960" in *The New African American Urban History*. Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, Eds. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Arnold Hirsh, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940 - 1960*. (U. S. A.: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Arnold Hirsch, "With or Without Jim Crow: Black Residential Segregation in the United States" in Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl, Eds. *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993) and Ronald

Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). On real estate practices see W. Edward Oser, *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story*, (Lexington, Ky. : University Press of Kentucky, 1994). On regional distinctions see Robin Flowerdew, "Spatial Patterns of Residential Segregation in a Southern City," in *Journal of American Studies*, Number 13, 1979. On the role of African American women in housing movements See Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon, 2005); A. Naples, *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Felicia Kornbluh, "To Fulfill Their Rightly Needs': Consumerism and the National Welfare Rights Movement," *Radical History Review* 69 (fall 1997), 76-113; Lisa Marie Levenstein, "The Gendered Roots of Modern Urban Poverty: Poor Women and Public Institutions in Post-World War II Philadelphia" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002); & Premilla Nadasen, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights," *Feminist Studies* 28 (Summer 2002), 271-301.

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

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New York Times, May 5, 1967.

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