

AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF THE ALBINA
DISTRICT (1940-1975): THE PRIORITIZATION OF GREEN
OVER BLACK

by

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This thesis situates decisions and projects carried out by Governor Tom McCall and Portland city officials within the broader context of the cities environmentally considerate ethos. I argue that environmental racism has been the most persistent and relentless form of racism that has affected the African American community in Portland. The allocation of pollution in Portland, following years of urban renewal and implications of the Willamette Greenway Plan, which sought to concentrate pollution so that the majority of the city could be beautified, was fundamentally guided by racialized stereotypes of the African American community in Portland. Racially restrictive housing measures throughout the 1940s, 1950s, which concentrated Portland's entire African American community into one small area, Albina, allowed McCall to associate blight with race rather than infrastructural issues. In doing so, Albina was viewed as a necessary sacrifice for polluting industries, if the remainder of the city were to remain clean. The Columbia River Slough, bordering Albina, would ultimately become a toxic dumping ground for polluting industries. Citizens of Albina, as a result of decisions carried out by Portland's city officials, were forced to live within a highly toxic environment. In this way, the environmental changes brought about by the Willamette Greenway Plan had a widely more negative effect on Portland's African American community than the rest of the city's residents. However, an important narrative, one that is often downplayed, is that African Americans living in Albina were active in their opposition to the urban renewal projects and the dumping of untreated waste, the combination of which resulted in an environment of toxicity. African Americans in Albina who were active within neighborhood environmental politics, although rarely considered environmentalists, were actually urban environmental pioneers in Portland. This thesis considers the differences between modes of environmentalism and culminates in questioning the cyclical nature of environmental racism.

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Introduction

African Americans, throughout the history of the United States, have experienced enduring racism structurally, institutionally, and socially. In Portland, Oregon, despite a recently acquired stereotype of liberalism, environmentalism, and equality, the narrative is no different. African American Portlanders have been, and continue to be, disproportionately affected by housing policies, arrest rates, job discrimination, and countless other forms of racialized ideologies. However, this paper aims to prove that one specific form of racism plagued Portland's African American community in a persistent and relentless manner. Environmental racism, injustice perpetuated by means of environmental decisions made through racialized discourse, has created a lasting impact on the Albina neighborhood of Northeast Portland, a predominantly African American section of the city. Rather than a single instance of racialized discrimination, the environmental racism experienced by African American Portlanders exists through a multitude of decisions compounded on one another. In this way, environmental racism in Portland is the result of a string of decisions that resulted in African Americans being unjustifiably exposed to toxicity.

In order to understand the ways by which Albina became the center of environmental toxicity in Portland, it is necessary to contextualize the broader historical scope of African Americans' existence in Portland. Thus, the story does not begin in Albina itself, but rather in Vanport, in the early 1940s, when WWII and the Great Migration coincided, and thousands of African Americans settled in the greater Portland area. The increasing African American population, incompatible with racially restrictive housing policies, needed lodging if they were to help the wartime labor efforts. Without

a viable plan for the construction of living quarters, Henry Kaiser, the man in charge of wartime shipbuilding manufacturing plants, created the city of Vanport in 1942 in order to house African American workers who could not live elsewhere in Portland. Vanport was built in a haste on weakly supported land and was not meant for permanent housing.¹ Thus, following the end of WWII in 1945, many residents of Vanport left the area to settle in other parts of Portland. However, for African Americans, housing was severely limited, and an already crowded Albina offered few options for those looking for permanent housing. As a result, Vanport was kept open as thousands of citizens had few, if any other options for shelter. Due to racially restrictive covenants in housing deeds, thousands of African Americans were metaphorically and literally trapped in Vanport in May of 1948, when the Vanport flood demolished the city in a matter of minutes. Forced to continue living in Vanport, then suddenly displaced, thousands of African Americans were forced to seek refuge in the nearest place they were allowed to live, the already cramped and underfunded Albina district of Northeast Portland.²

As many displaced Vanport residents settled in Albina, a lack of infrastructural preparation resulted in further overcrowding, thereby exacerbating issues of cleanliness and crime. Rather than viewing these concerns as stemming from racialized housing policies, the issues were determinants of blight, the term utilized to justify urban renewal.³ Racial stereotypes correlated uncleanliness with blackness, which allowed city officials to view the results of overcrowding as a community problem, rather than a

¹ Dale Skovgaard, "Oregon Voices: Memories of the 1948 Vanport Flood," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol 108, No. 1, pp. 88-106.

² Laartz, Paul. "Flood Creates Need for Hundreds of New Home Here; Opinions Vary on Best Methods of Providing Housing." *Oregonian*, 18 July 1948.

³ Gibson, Karen J. "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000." *Transforming Anthropology*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2007, pp. 3-25., doi:10.1525/tran.2007.15.1.03.

lack of governmental aid and commitment. This racialized discourse would be looked to in order to guide the decision-making process of how industry should be allocated within Portland.

By utilizing the term blighted to describe Albina, city officials not only qualified the area as a place to put industry, but also as an area where urban renewal projects should be funded. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, thousands of Albina residents, particularly those who lived in lower Albina, were pushed North as renewal projects such as the Memorial Coliseum, I-5 South, and the Emanuel Hospital cleared space that consisted primarily of African American residencies and businesses. These projects, which continued to industrialize African American spaces, also further segregated and concentrated the black community in the Northern neighborhoods of Albina. The combination of an increasingly industrialized and segregated Albina would be a guiding force for environmental decisions made by Governor Tom McCall and city officials in the late 1960s and into the 1970s.

The gubernatorial election of 1966 had a decisive focus on environmental politics. McCall, who ultimately won the election, committed himself to Portlanders as a governor who would push for environmental reform. To prioritize long term environmental preservation and secure the beauty of Portland for generations to come, McCall initiated the Willamette River Greenway Plan. At the core of this project was the need to concentrate pollution in a tight knit area, essentially sacrificing a small section of Portland to allow the vast majority of the city to remain clean and aesthetically appealing. For McCall to satisfy the generally white, middle class visions of a beautified Portland, one that offered plentiful opportunities for outdoor recreation,

another group would need to bear the resulting consequences. Albina, after decades of industry development and urban redevelopment that further concentrated the African American population, was seen by McCall as blighted, and therefore fit for the concentration of pollution.

McCall settled Portland's main polluting industries along the Columbia River Slough, a waterway that bordered the Northern neighborhoods of Albina, the very place African Americans were pushed towards following displacement during urban renewal projects of decades previous. Without a waste disposal method in place, toxic, untreated waste was continually dumped directly into the slough. The untreated waste piled up in the slough for years, creating a sludge composed, in part, of chemicals such as arsenic, mercury, hydrochloric acid, cyanide, and countless other extremely dangerous compounds. The residents of the Albina neighborhoods, pushed continually closer to the slough and without the ability to purchase other housing in Portland, had no option but to be permanently and continuously exposed to the rampant toxicity of the nearby slough. Not only did Albina residents live amongst the toxicity of the slough for decades, many families supplemented their diets with fish caught directly from the waterway. The proximity of the slough to permanent housing created a situation in which Portland residents, largely African Americans, were exposed to toxicity for decades.

However, an important part of the story, one that highlights the oppressive and continuous nature by which environmental racism persisted in Portland, is the degree of activism African Americans exhibited against the policies that resulted in the slough's toxicity. Their voices, often heard through the form of community organized groups,

were present against every substantial decision that turned Albina into a site of industrial toxicity. Decades worth of evidence shows that rather than being objects of governmental decisions, African Americans in Albina were presently active in pushing for rehabilitation within the community, rather than renewal which perpetuated displacement. Despite years of urban environmental activism, African Americans were largely ignored in their push against harmful governmental decisions. Nonetheless, African Americans were urban environmentalists, before the environmental movement ever occurred.

Yet, today, many sections of the slough are sites of open recreation, as they have been thoroughly cleaned of the toxicity that persisted for decades. Rather than Portland city officials understanding the plights of Albina's African American citizens, it was white, middle class recreationalist' interest in the cleanup of the slough that ultimately caused the project to begin. Those who actively worked to clean up the slough are hailed as environmentalists, yet the African Americans who pushed for many of the same measures for years, were never seen as courageous environmentalists. This dichotomy evidences the difference in ideology between African American urban environmentalists and white, recreation-based environmentalists. The prioritization of white, middle class leisure over African American wellbeing and livelihood is a common theme throughout Portland's environmental history.

Finally, it is important to consider history when looking to the future. If the slough becomes fully clean, and middle-class recreation seekers continue to buy housing, the cost of living in Albina will be driven up. For some long-term residents who cannot keep up with rapid increases in rent, displacement is again a possibility. The

cyclical nature of environmental racism needs to be considered when making decisions that can affect communities disproportionately and unjustly. African Americans were forced into the housing conditions that ultimately exposed them to the slough's toxicity, will they one day be forced out, this time to a new environmental threat?

Historiography

Although literature regarding environmental racism is relatively recent⁴, specifically in the Northwest and Portland, the history has hardly been ignored. Matthew Klinge, author of *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle*, questions the way notions of civic improvement and land use affect different members of Seattle's population. He argues that changes under the guise of civic renewal reinforced and concentrated inequality through modes of classism and nativism. Development and civic projects, he argues, inherently alienated some groups while simultaneously uplifting others. Essentially, this thesis attempts to argue a similar narrative, but adapted to the geographic space and particulars of Portland, rather than Seattle.

Troubled Waters in Ecotopia, written by Ellen Stroud, is the most important piece of literature which addresses the topic of environmental racism in Portland, and specifically Albina. Stroud takes a similar stance, arguing that decisions carried out by Tom McCall and city officials created an environment of toxicity within the Columbia River Slough. Stroud articulates her argument well and focuses primarily on the rhetoric and stereotypes utilized by officials in order to view the slough as a "natural" waste site. However, in reading her work, I was continually interested in two topics. First, how exactly did the African American community fit within all the decisions being made regarding Albina? Second, how was it that African Americans pushing for the slough's cleanup were not viewed as environmentalists, yet members of the white middle class,

⁴ The Environmental Justice Movement's timeline coincided with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. However, the first book published on the harsh realities of environmental racism was *Dumping in the Dixie*, published in 1990.

who gained grants to begin cleanup years later, are viewed as environmentalists? These questions, which I felt went unanswered through Stroud's work, are focus points of my third chapter.

Carl Abbott, author of *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*, questions how efforts to shape Portland have contributed to its image as an attractive and livable environment. Through using examples of planning, politics, and geography, Abbott argues that the planners who saw their works and ideas implemented directly benefited the specific interests of community leaders and local politicians. Although Abbott's discourse and argument do not center around environmental racism, his descriptions of Portland planners, their projects, and their agendas helped shape the narrative of my thesis.

Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana by Andrew Hurley focuses on a city sacrificed to industry. He argues that in order to secure future industrial expansion, capitalism prioritized economic growth over social justice. Through this prioritization, affluent whites exploited disconnections between race and class, ultimately resulting in poor and minority groups exposure to environmental pollution.

Lastly, it is worth noting that this specific topic, environmental racism in Albina, lacks a wide range of published literature. Unlike New York, San Francisco, and even Seattle, Portland does not have a plethora of published narratives of environmental racism. Thus, this thesis attempts to fill some of the gaps left, in part, by a lack of literature on the subject.

Chapter 1:

Vanport, Oregon, a wartime city built in the early 1940s, was accustomed to large amounts of rainfall every year, as was to be expected living in the greater Portland area. The end of May in 1948, was no different, a wet spring which was perceived as merely a late start to summer. Unbeknownst to most Vanport residents however, the increased rainfall had the effect of melting mountain runoff following an uncharacteristically snowy winter. The combination of heavy rainfall with increased snowmelt runoff caused the Columbia River to rise at unprecedented levels. By May 29th, the rise in the Columbia River posed a significant threat to the city of Vanport.

Vanport, located just North of Portland, was situated on the bank of the Columbia River. The city was built on marshland, in a lowland area that already was susceptible to floods. Nonetheless, Vanport citizens believed the dams and dikes along the Columbia River were sufficient to withhold flooding. Despite this belief, the dikes were unable to hold the rising Columbia River, and the engineers controlling the dams were forced to open the floodgates in order to preserve remaining city dams. Within a matter of minutes, the city's buildings and homes were collapsed and under water, forcing thousands of citizens to depart immediately.

Of the people living in Vanport at the time of the flood, thousands were African Americans who had settled in Oregon during the Great Migration in the years during WWII. African American Portlanders, despite laws existing against racial housing segregation⁵, could only find lodging in select neighborhoods. Vanport was one of the

⁵ In 1917 the Supreme Court, in *Buchanan V. Warley*, ruled that racially discriminatory zoning laws were unconstitutional on the basis that owner's property rights were unjustifiably broken. In 1948 in *Shelley V. Kraemer*, judicial enforcement of racially restrictive housing covenants was ruled to be in violation of the

few places African Americans could find housing, outside the historically African American hub of Albina in Northeast Portland. Consequently, Albina was the only local option for African Americans who, displaced by the flood, were in search of immediate housing.⁶

The abrupt inflow of African Americans to Albina following displacement from the Vanport Flood exacerbated pre-existing racial and housing issues in Portland. Through associating race rather than infrastructure with the problems in Albina, the neighborhoods were considered blighted. The characterization of Albina as blighted set the stage for future environmental policies and projects initiated by Governor Tom McCall in the late 1960s. McCall, through the discourse of blight, would come to see Albina as a place already fit for potentially toxic industrial development. Ultimately, Portland's segregated housing patterns and the stereotypes associated with them would be looked to in order to guide decisions about the concentration of pollution within the city.

Portland During WWII

In 1941, England needed ships for the war with Germany. With Eastern shipbuilders already busy with the "Liberty Ships"⁷ project, the US Maritime Commission contracted the Oregon Shipbuilding Company to begin production, and Henry Kaiser's construction company to allocate space for the job. Henry Kaiser was an American industrialist who created jobs in the shipbuilding, metal, healthcare, and

Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause.

⁶ Maben, Manly. *Vanport*. Oregon Historical Society Press, 1987.

⁷ A class of cargo ships constructed in America during WWII. This ship was efficient in material and labor and represented the industrial wartime prowess of the United States.

construction industries. He actively worked against Hitler and Germany during WWII, using innovative construction techniques to build ships in record times at the Kaiser Shipyard. When he was given the task of creating a new shipyard in Portland, he knew that such a large project required equally large numbers of laborers, something Portland did not have an adequate population for at the time.

White and black workers were recruited from the East and South by the Oregon Shipbuilding Company and Kaiser. The recruiters issued advertisements in over 11 states' papers, describing the need for workers out West in Portland. These workers were often brought to Oregon via the Kaiser Karavan, car trains that would import laborers to Portland. This sparked a boom in Portland's population, an increase of 160,000 citizens, or roughly an extra one third of the previous population.⁸ The rapid increase in population was due to the better working conditions, including hours and wages, that were accessible in the Oregon shipyards. Many African Americans who had a difficult time finding good work in the South and even the East, were compelled to move to Portland. In an oral interview with Edward Merchant, a resident of the time, he stated that, "Many black Southerners, who had worked for extremely low wages, came to Portland in hopes of doubling and tripling their wages while working less hours."⁹ Ultimately, there was a tenfold increase in the number of African Americans living in Portland. Previously, African American net migration to Oregon had never succeeded one percent, yet between 1940 and 1950, this number reached 6.9 percent.¹⁰ Portland

⁸ Taylor, Quintard. "The Great Migration: The Afro-American Communities of Seattle and Portland during the 1940s." *Arizona and the West*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1981, pp. 109–126.

⁹ *History of Portland's African American Community (1805-to the Present)*. Portland Bureau of Planning, 1993. 59.

¹⁰ Taylor, Quintard. "The Great Migration: The Afro-American Communities of Seattle and Portland during the 1940s." *Arizona and the West*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1981, pp. 109–126.

offered better working conditions for laborers, and sufficient numbers for the construction of wartime ships. However, the city was simply not prepared for the rapid increase in population.

African Americans who migrated to Portland were often met with hostility, “white trade only” posters, and overt racial backlash. Migrating workers remembered the open nature of racial oppression, despite having been actively encouraged to settle in Portland. One worker, who settled in Portland to work on the shipyards, remembered the public forms of discrimination saying, “I came to Portland in 1943 and was surprised to see the signs. All along Union Avenue (now called Martin Luther King Blvd) there were ‘white trade only’ signs.”¹¹ Furthermore, the vast majority of restaurants, hotels, clubs, bowling alleys, and amusement parks refused black business. African American migrants to Portland did not fully escape the racial and oppressive mindset of the South.

Besides social hostility, a key issue for both newcomers and established Portlanders, was how the housing market could adjust to such a population influx. Without adequate housing, enough schools, big streets, or substantial transit, Portlanders, both black and white, were at best hesitant to support the influx, and at worst overtly hostile towards the increase. Carl Abbott, in his book *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*, wrote that Portlanders were willing to see emergency housing constructed, but, “in somebody else’s neighborhood.”¹² The housing shortage proved difficult for both white and black migrants, although the latter

¹¹ *Ibid*, Oral Interview Edward Merchant.

¹² Abbott, Carl. *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*. University of Nebraska Press, 1983, 158.

was significantly more confined than the former. Black workers were routinely excluded from the housing market and were forced to either live along Williams Avenue in North Portland, or find empty space in attics, spare rooms, and even tavern floors.

Williams Avenue was located at the heart of the Albina area. Williams Avenue, and Albina more generally, were some of the very few spaces in the Portland area that African Americans could find housing. Without discriminatory policies barring African American residents, Albina housed the majority of Portland's African American population. Williams Avenue was Albina's center for African American businesses and was referred to as the "black Broadway" of Portland at the time. Not only were there African American owned restaurants, clothing stores, and bars, but also nightclubs and music halls that hosted world renowned artists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington.¹³ Although Williams Avenue was a lively, successful center of Portland's African American population, there simply was not much room for an increasing population. This caused a housing crisis for incoming workers, given that African Americans were still barred from accessing much of the housing in the city. Increasing numbers of African Americans meant a necessary increase in housing, yet there were no foreseeable and immediate changes to housing to accommodate the growing population. Consequently, the Housing Authority of Portland was created by the Portland City Council as a wartime emergency measure to provide the necessary infrastructure to support the recruited workers.

¹³ Gioia, Ted. *West Coast Jazz: Modern Jazz in California, 1945-1960*. University of California Press, 1998, 111.

The first project the Housing Authority of Portland conducted was to decide where the new population would live, many of whom were African American. Although Portland did not have directly segregationist laws, segregation persisted through racially restrictive housing covenants, redlining, exclusive property deeds, and other means with exploited loopholes in the laws.¹⁴ For example, the “Code of Ethics of Portland Realtors”, under Article 34, disallowed local realtors from selling property to races that they believed would devalue the property as a whole. Further, Article 34 stipulated that minorities should be streamlined to the geographic location consisting of, “Oregon Street and Russell, and between Union and the River”¹⁵ which separated Albina’s undesirable properties to be sold to minorities, while keeping desirable properties open for purchase by white families. Due to these racially restrictive measures, there was not adequate housing to support an increasing African American population. Resultantly, African American migrants to Portland were severely limited in where they could find access to housing. The Housing Authority of Portland’s (HAP) decision to provide African Americans a means of housing in one particular area of the city spurred white Portlanders to protest. When the HAP presented a plan to create a dormitory for black workers in Albina, but outside the normal redlined boundaries, civic leaders and white members of Albina pushed against the plan, stipulating that crime would increase and property values would decrease. A group of over 500 concerned Albina residents posed a solution to housing the African American workers, saying,

¹⁴ Abbott, Carl. *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*. University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

If it is necessary to bring in large numbers of Negro workers, locate them on the edge of the city' urged the President of the Central East Portland Community club. 'It would be much better for all concerned. If they are allowed to fan out throughout the city it will soon be necessary to station a policeman on every corner.¹⁶

Although Albina reaches out as far Northbound as N.E. Columbia Blvd, and as Southbound as where I-84 is today, the vast majority of African American residents lived between the boundary of Killingsworth Street in the North and Fremont Avenue in the South. Both Killingsworth and Fremont are located in the Northeastern section of Portland, across the Willamette from Downtown. The Northern section of Portland, on the same side of the Willamette as Albina, has a history of industrial production. Across the river downtown, more office buildings and bureaucratic institutions were located. Within Albina, N.E. 15th Avenue and Mississippi Avenue were the primary Eastern and Western borders, respectively for African American tenants, although the technical boundaries persisted further East and West. The geographic area being described is shown in 1A using streets and 2A using neighborhoods. Photo 1B shows Albina's location in the greater Portland area. Wealth was concentrated Downtown (West side of the Willamette River), in suburbs to the South, as well as in the Southeast. African Americans in Portland routinely and historically lived amongst industrialization, both literally and metaphorically across the river from wealth.

¹⁶ Abbott, Carl. *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*. University of Nebraska Press, 1983, 43.

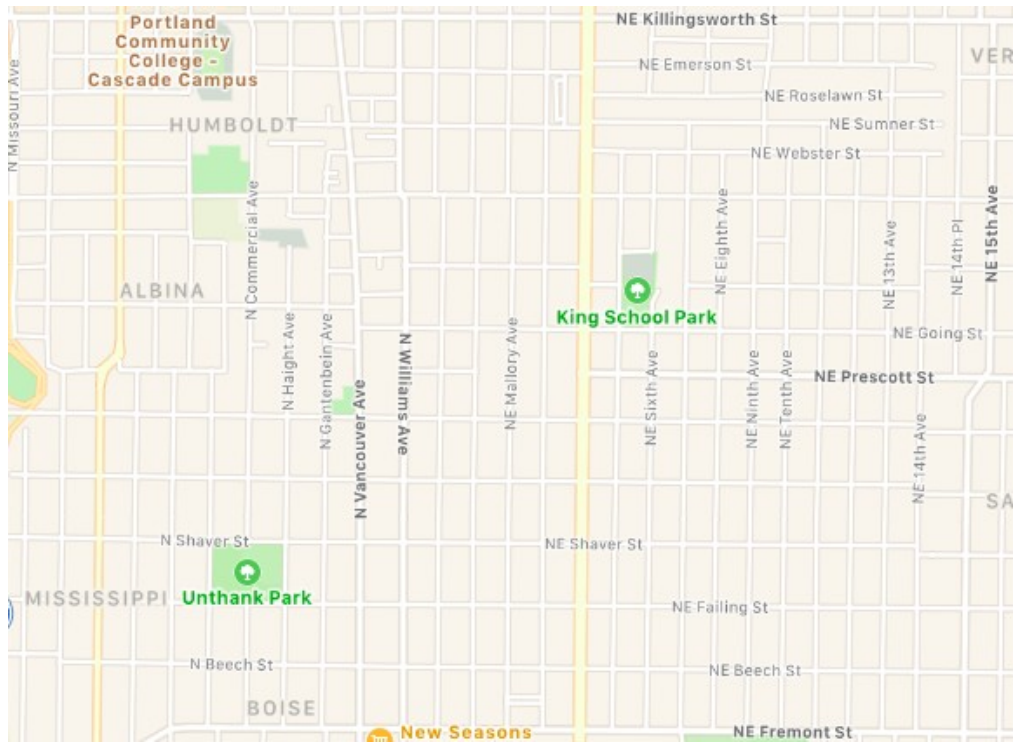


Figure 1A Pictured: North and South Boundaries (N.E. Killingsworth St, N.E. Fremont St)

East and West Boundaries (NE 15th Ave, Mississippi Avenue)

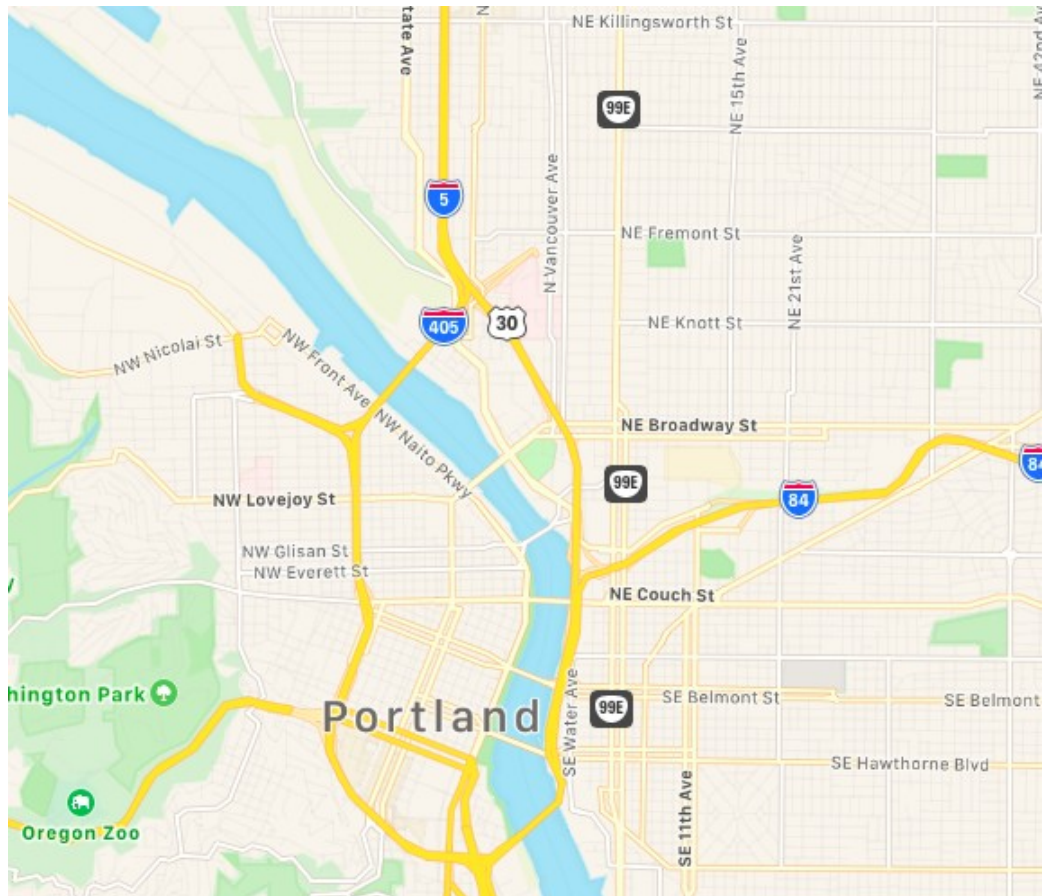


Figure 1B Pictured: Killingsworth St and Fremont St placed in the context of the greater Portland area.



Figure 2A: The Albina neighborhoods relative to the Columbia River Slough

An increasing African American population demanded the creation of a plan to house new workers. There simply would not be adequate places to live for incoming African American workers. In an article on the consequences of the Vanport Flood, reporter Natasha Geiling argued that, due to the rapid expansion in Portland’s African American population and the redlined nature of most neighborhoods, there simply was not the space for Albina to adequately house the influx.¹⁷ The United States Maritime Commission, along with the Oregon Shipbuilding Company and Kaiser Yards, felt the Housing Authority was developing too slowly for the population numbers. The Housing Authority deliberately moved slowly, fearing that developing large tracts of permanent housing would encourage African American workers to remain in Oregon after the war,

¹⁷ Geiling, Natasha. “How Oregon’s Second Largest City Vanished in a Day.” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 18 Feb. 2015.

a situation they actively worked against.¹⁸ The Housing Authority of Portland wrote that, on account of blight in Albina, it would be fit for comprehensive industrial development, arguing that a community asset could be created from an undesirable city.”¹⁹ With white Albina residents protesting against settlement, the HAP developing housing too slowly, and without an obvious place to put mass dormitories, Kaiser went above the Planning Commission as well as City Council, committing to a deal with the Maritime Commission to create a project for 10,000 living quarters. Kaiser purchased a plot of land spanning 650 acres, just above the city of Portland. The plot of land was situated between Portland’s Northern boundary and the Columbia River, directly north of the Albina area. Initially termed Kaiserville, the city was built in a haste, and consisted of 700 identical apartments. Formally named Vanport for its location between Vancouver, Washington, and Portland, it quickly became not only the biggest wartime housing construction in America, but also the second largest city in Oregon.

¹⁸ “Housing Authority of Portland [HAP] History (AD/177).” *Efiles*, efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/2776620/.

¹⁹ Sanders, Richard. *Glimpses from the Past: the Housing Authority of Portland: Fifty Years of Building a Better Community*. Housing Authority of Portland, 1991.



Figure 3: City of Vanport Map

Outlined in Blue, the city of Vanport rests just North of Portland’s city boundary, and between the Columbia River and the Columbia River Slough.

Throughout the war, Vanport was both progressive and conservative in its racial practices. Over 40,000 residents lived in Vanport, and although a maximum of 25% at any time were African Americans, many Portlanders dubbed the city the “Negro Project.”²⁰ Vanport was built 1942, the year following Executive Order 8802, which prohibited the defense industry from discriminating against employees. Nevertheless, de facto segregation was enforced on housing employees within the city. Three sections, or fifty buildings, were allotted to the African American population, while the rest housed

²⁰ Pearson, Rudy. “Vanport, Oregon (1942-1948).” *Welcome to Blackpast* •, 8 Feb. 2020, www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/vanport-1942-1948/.

white workers and families.²¹ In Vanport, the housing market was fully segregated, in spite of legal statutes which prohibited that very form of segregation. Although housing policies in the city divided racial groups, Vanport also functioned in a very progressive way. Churches, schools, parks, and other public places were shared between racial groups, forms of desegregation not yet popularized in Portland. Children learned and played together, were taught by the same teachers, and were given access to the same learning materials. Thus, while housing segregation persisted, inclusive attitudes of local institutions promoted progressive ideologies.

However, as the war came to a close, black families were disproportionately and uniquely disadvantaged as segregation once again manifested. Following the war, many people, most of whom were white, left Vanport, increasing the percentage of blacks in the city from 18 percent to 35 percent.²² While the white workers were often able to easily leave Vanport, African American families had a noticeably more difficult time. A general housing shortage in Portland, along with layoffs of black workers from the shipyard, created housing transitions that were much easier for whites to adapt to than African Americans. Further, in 1945, the only housing open to African Americans in Portland was still a small, confined space in Northeast Portland. Realtors could be dismissed by the Realty Board if they sold property to African Americans outside of the established confines.²³ By the end of the war, white families had largely dispersed

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Maben, Manly. *Vanport*. Oregon Historical Society Press, 1987.

²³ Smith, Greta. “‘Congenial Neighbors’: Restrictive Covenants and Residential Segregation in Portland, Oregon.” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. 119, no. 3, 2018, p. 358., doi:10.5403/oregonhistq.119.3.0358.

elsewhere, leaving African American families, who could not find housing elsewhere, behind in Vanport.

By 1948, the only occupants left in Vanport were generally those who had been laid off after the war, but had been unable to find adequate housing elsewhere, “With half the population of Portland employed in industry during the war, the end of the war meant large layoffs with following unemployment. Black workers were the first laid off and often could not afford to move from Vanport or find work elsewhere in the city.”²⁴ Although Vanport was meant to be a city for wartime residents, without other housing available, Vanport was kept open, and over 5,000 African Americans still resided there.

Vanport Flood - 1948

Vanport’s infrastructure reflected the haste and effort by which it was constructed. With the entire city completed in just over 100 days, it was described as, “mostly a slipshod combination of wooden blocks and fiberboard walls, built on marshland between the Columbia Slough and the Columbia River.”²⁵ Furthermore, Vanport was entirely physically separate from Portland, and the only way it remained dry was through a system of dikes that held off the Columbia River’s flow. The entirety of Vanport’s safety was bestowed in the trust of the dike system in place. The apartments themselves were built on wooden foundations, which proved exceptionally

²⁴ McCord, Lindsay E., "Parting the Green Curtain: Tracing Environmental Inequality in Portland, Oregon" (2016). Pitzer Senior Theses. Paper 72. http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pitzer_theses/72.

²⁵ Geiling, Natasha. “How Oregon's Second Largest City Vanished in a Day.” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 18 Feb. 2015,

difficult to construct in the swampy and marshy terrain. The city's design was highly susceptible for disaster.

While Oregon, and the Pacific Northwest as a whole, are accustomed to large amounts of rainfall and precipitation each year, 1948 proved particularly wet. A snowy winter left the mountains packed with snow, which turned to heavy runoff after a warm yet rainy May. By May 25th, 1948, following weeks of heavy rainfall, the Willamette and Columbia Rivers had reached a level of 23 feet, 8 full feet above the normal flood plain. Over the next few days, Vanport city officials routinely checked the dikes, and the United States Army Corps of Engineers told the HAP that they would in fact hold, and therefore they decided not to issue an evacuation warning.

The United States Army Corps of Engineers were incorrect, and a dike broke, forcing the engineers to open the floodgates, causing a catastrophic flood that prematurely devastated the city in the afternoon hours of May 30th, 1948. The morning of May 30th, the HAP put out a flyer that simply read, “REMEMBER. DIKES ARE SAFE AT THE PRESENT. YOU WILL BE WARNED IN NECESSARY. YOU WILL HAVE TIME TO LEAVE.”²⁶ Yet by 4:17 p.m. that day, a railroad dike that isolated Vanport from Smith Lake turned from a small hole to a 500-foot-long gap streaming lake water directly into the city. The meager walls built around the city were no match for the power behind the water, and within 10 minutes the city was heavily flooded. The flood collapsed the city's infrastructure, including housing and community buildings, which were not built to withstand natural disaster, rendering the city unusable and unlivable, “The city of Vanport that was built within a few months was virtually wiped

²⁶ Huang, Winnie, et al. “Resurfacing History.” *Around the O*, 15 Nov. 2017, around.uoregon.edu/vanport.

out within a few minutes.”²⁷ Ongoing debates regarding the amount of casualties caused by the flood highlighted community distrust of the HAP and government. While official records tally 15 casualties, long standing local rumors and firsthand accounts estimate the number to be much larger. Undoubtedly, the Vanport flood was a tragedy, and those who did not lose their lives were immediately without shelter. Over 18,000 people, roughly 6,300 being African Americans, were displaced from their homes, and city.

The inability for African Americans fleeing Vanport to purchase housing outside an already overcrowded Albina following the war gridlocked them in place. While the white workers of Vanport simply purchased or rented housing within Portland and surrounding suburbs, the African American community could not relocate with such ease. Thus, although the Vanport flood was a natural disaster, due to the racist housing policies of Portland, African Americans were unduly affected. This exemplifies the core of environmental racism, by which discriminatory policies result in a minority community unfairly shouldering the risk and devastation of an environmental catastrophe. The Vanport flood is often written off as an unfortunate, but unavoidable accident. However, the implications of racialized housing policies fundamentally caused African Americans living in Vanport to be unfairly affected by the flood.

The displacement of citizens from Vanport intensely exacerbated the already present housing issues in Portland. Prior to the flood, one in five Portlanders living in an urban environment lived in substandard housing.²⁸ The Interim Report of Committee on Standard Housing, in a 1948 report, argued that public funds should be allocated

²⁷ *History of Portland's African American Community (1805-to the Present)*. Portland Bureau of Planning, 1993.

²⁸ McCord, Lindsay E., "Parting the Green Curtain: Tracing Environmental Inequality in Portland, Oregon" (2016). Pitzer Senior Theses. Paper 72. http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pitzer_theses/72

towards fixing the unsanitary and problematic living conditions for the lowest income workers. The flood delayed the possibility for repair, and made finding shelter an utmost priority for the recently displaced flood victims. The city formed estimates regarding the need for shelter and came to the conclusion that there was, “An emergency need for housing that ranges from 3,000 to 4,5000 dwelling units.”²⁹ As previous residents of Vanport sought refuge in Portland, the need for housing was obvious, yet opinions on how they should be housed varied greatly. Segregationist housing patterns once again manifested. The same problems that were temporarily alleviated by the creation of Vanport returned with a new intensity.

Measures such as redlining and restrictive property deeds were still in place to perpetuate segregation in housing despite lack of legal validity.³⁰ Further, the HAP vehemently opposed the construction of public housing to replace those shelters lost by the flood. Voters in Portland also voted against emergency public housing measures in their neighborhood. Thus, African Americans displaced from Vanport had few options for housing, and more than half lived in a dense urban section of Northeast Portland, an

²⁹ Laartz, Paul. “Flood Creates Need for Hundreds of New Home Here; Opinions Vary on Best Methods of Providing Housing.” *Oregonian*, 18 July 1948.

³⁰ Portland has a long history of racialized housing policy. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Portland City Council changed many North Portland multi-family housing zones into single-family zones. Rezoning allowed single-family homes to retain their real estate values, and also gave homeowners easier access to the Federal Housing Administration's loans in single family zones. This practice was reinforced by redlining, which was utilized to enforce racial segregation through private and federal lending. The Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC) displayed neighborhood desirability through colorization on a map of the city. Portlanders looking for housing in red lined areas could be refused loans on account of the financial risk that lending in these areas posed. Red lined areas were determined largely by the racial makeup of the region, and the average income of the population. In the 1950s, the federal urban renewal program used blight and eminent domain in order to construct projects, many of which resulted in widespread displacement of African Americans.

Mills, Alison. “The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America.” *Berkeley Planning Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2018, doi:10.5070/bp329138440.

area which already had a prominent African American community, and which was confined by MLK Boulevard, Fremont Street, Oregon Street, and Interstate Avenue.³¹

This created a situation in which white refugees were free to seek housing throughout the city, but black refugees were nearly forced into one, small area. Portlanders realized the issue of housing African Americans in a market that did not allow for their growing presence. Some Portlanders argued for the need to incorporate influxes of minority populations into housing considerations, the League of Women's Voters, for example, argued for, "A revamping of our Housing Authority so that it will consist of a balanced representation of the entire community."³² Nonetheless, African Americans were forced to continue to overcrowd the only areas that would accept them. Consequently, the areas with the highest concentration of African American residents to white residents was the Albina district, the same district where over 500 residents protested allowing increased African American housing. The neighborhood experienced an episode of white flight, a phenomenon social science researcher Samuel Kye articulates, "The presence and growth of minorities continues to independently motivate white flight in America's suburban areas."³³ Whites often left the area under the mistaken belief that an increase in an African American population in the neighborhood would correlate with declining values of property and an increase in crime. The tracts of census data covering Albina (22 and 23) found that in this area there had seen a net increase of roughly 3,500 nonwhites (the vast majority being African Americans) and a

³¹ *History of Portland's African American Community (1805-to the Present)*. Portland Bureau of Planning, 1993.

³² Wentworth, Cynthia. "League of Women Voters Committee Outlines Need for Slum Clearance And Building of Low-Cost Dwellings." *Oregonian*, 10 Apr. 1949.

³³ Kye, Samuel H. "The Persistence of White Flight in Middle-Class Suburbia." *Social Science Research*, vol. 72, 2018, pp. 38–52., doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2018.02.005.

net decrease in the white population of over 2,700 white homeowners.³⁴ Following the Vanport flood, Albina was primarily black, and vastly overcrowded.

Albina and Urban Renewal

By the 1950s, after the war and flood had taken their toll, there was still the pressing issue of creating a more widely understood city plan. In 1954, the Federal Housing Act sponsored an urban renewal project that had three core guidelines. Originally authorized under the 1949 housing act, Title I sought to quell the spread of blight into areas deemed well maintained. Second, that those areas which were already blighted but possessed the possibility for redemption should be rehabilitated. Lastly, those areas deemed blighted beyond repair and rehabilitation should be redeveloped. The placement of industries and factories was of key importance to addressing the problem of blight within Portland. A pivotal consideration the planning commission had to address was how and where industry should be allowed to grow in Portland.

Broader racial beliefs of white Portlanders about blackness and cleanliness guided the ways by which city planners reacted to the floods displacement, and the relocation of industry. To city planners, the Columbia River Slough, situated between Albina, one of the few neighborhoods in Portland that allowed for a growing African American presence, and Vanport, a city destroyed by the flood, appeared to be a logical place to allow for industry. Due to the wartime nature of Vanport, particularly following WWII, the city became associated with public housing and African American workers.

³⁴ Urban League of Portland, interracial progress: Bi-monthly report Vol 1, no. 1, p 2.

The city's high population density, combined with a lack of infrastructural maintenance and a general poor exterior appearance made it a place, to city officials, where industrial development would benefit rather than harm the area.³⁵ Further, likely an extension of the hysteria white North Portlanders exercised when they attempted to quell the construction of African American friendly housing, the North peninsula (including Albina and Vanport) was thought to be a hotspot for crime, and developed a general reputation as being a crime ridden and impoverished area.³⁶ Those that lived in Vanport but were forced to find refuge in Portland carried a stigma and stereotype of crime and uncleanliness with them when they settled into Albina. By the standards of the 1954 Federal Housing Act's stipulations, this was an area the city could deem blighted, making it eligible for redevelopment. In reality, the floods displacement of thousands of African Americans, many of whose only option was to settle in the already overcrowded and underfunded Albina district, allowed city officials, in part, to see the issues as stemming from race rather than infrastructural issues.

Viewing the North Portland area as blighted allowed for the continued industrialization of the region throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. Although Albina in the 1940s was a space that thrived as Portland's African American center, Albina was physically changed over the next two decades by the practice of urban renewal, leaving a lasting impact on the community. For example, the construction of the Memorial Coliseum, the I-5 Highway, and the Emanuel Hospital³⁷ were projects that

³⁵ McCord, Lindsay E., "Parting the Green Curtain: Tracing Environmental Inequality in Portland, Oregon" (2016). Pitzer Senior Theses. Paper 72. http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pitzer_theses/72

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ The Emanuel Hospital was built through the Model Cities Plan funding. Although the Model Cities Program, created by President Lyndon B. Johnson, was a project against the war on poverty, projects such as the Emanuel Hospital perpetuated displacement amongst lower income neighborhoods in Portland.

removed Albina residents from their homes, pushing them North, closer to the Columbia River Slough, to find affordable housing. Although Portland's black population had been thriving in Albina, different pools of funding allocated for housing and transportation renewal posed a threat to the community. Portland and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) subsequently took over, and razed, areas of Albina to build the I-5 highway. The construction of the I-5 highway through Albina resulted in the, "clearing of the southern end of Portland's black neighborhood."³⁸ In fact, the continued construction on the I-5 rerouted traffic in such a way that much less traffic passed through Williams Avenue, a hot spot for African American businesses located in North Portland. Although nightclubs, restaurants, and bars once flourished throughout the 1950s, the diverted traffic from the I-5 construction forced many of these businesses to shut down. This marked the last time Albina's black population was increasing, as it has since steadily decreased.³⁹ In an interview with the *Portland Mercury*, Winta Yohannes, the managing director of Albina Vision Trust, an organization that works to restore Albina's thriving culture, argues that it is unthinkable that the I-5 would have been constructed there had it not been a hub for the African American community.⁴⁰

After Interstate 5 was built directly through Albina, it became even easier to deem parts of the neighborhood as blighted. The highways disrupted main streets and neighborhoods, further pushing the agenda that the area was fit for renewal. By doing

³⁸ Abbott, Carl. *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*. University of Nebraska Press, 1983, 164.

³⁹ Stenvick, Blair, and Alex Zielinski. "Can An Unlikely Partnership Help Restore Portland's Historic Black Neighborhood?" *Portland Mercury*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

so, the city of Portland received the authority and funding to tear down parts of these neighborhoods in order to redevelop. The Memorial Coliseum project was framed as a project that would benefit more people than it harmed, a commonly used narrative when prioritizing white Portlander's leisure over African American livelihood.

Unsurprisingly, in 1956 Portlanders passed the vote to locate the Memorial Coliseum in the Eliot neighborhood. Over 470 homes were destroyed, along with businesses and community centers.⁴¹ Over half of the people displaced from their homes were African American. With Portland's black to white population ratio dwarfing 50%, it is clear the placement of the Coliseum was concentrated in an African American hub of Portland. As residents lost their homes, they generally relocated Northeasterly, oftentimes being forced to settle in older Albina neighborhoods such as Boise and Humboldt, furthering the geographic separation of racial groups in Portland.⁴²

The final major blow to lower Albina residents was the Emanuel Hospital project in the early 1970s. The Portland Development Commission sighted high concentrations of low income families, substandard housing, African Americans, and crime as the reasons for requesting urban renewal funds.⁴³ Albina residents, through the Albina Neighborhood Improvement Program, argued for renewal through rehabilitation rather than demolition. Nonetheless, 10 blocks were cleared, including Williams Avenue, the heart of black business' in Portland. The redevelopment demolished more than 1,100 homes, and countless businesses, many of which had already been

⁴¹ Killen, John. "Throwback Thursday: 60 Years Ago, Portland Began Urban Renewal Plan for South Auditorium District." *The Oregonian*, 9 Jan. 2019.

⁴² Hughes, Jena. "Historical Context of Racist Planning: A History of How Planning Segregated Portland." *Bureau of Planning and Sustainability*, Sept. 2019.

⁴³ Gibson, Karen J. "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000." *Transforming Anthropology*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2007, pp. 3-25., doi:10.1525/tran.2007.15.1.03.

geographically relocated during the Memorial Coliseum's construction and were staples within the lower Albina community. Remaining residents were again pushed Northward toward Humboldt, Boise, and King neighborhoods. At the turn of the following decade, the African American community was centered around Killingsworth and Fremont in the North and South, and Mississippi and N.E. 15th on the East and West. This area was not only more racially concentrated than lower Albina, but also covered much less land, only a two-and-a-half-mile stretch. Furthermore, of the 76 acres plotted by the Portland Development Commission, many acres sat vacant for years after the project as the plan for a federally funded Veterans hospital, whose creation was used to justify the amount of land demolished, ultimately fell through. The jobs promised in the construction and maintenance of these renewal projects were never presented to the greater African American community of lower Albina.

One local resident, writing under the name Molly to the Portland Bureau of Transportation, discussed the lasting and real impacts of projects such as the memorial coliseum, the I-5 Highway, and Emanuel Hospital. She argues that it was not a coincidence that the placement of these construction sites destroyed hundreds of black homes, businesses, and churches. She situates these projects and their consequences in her grander argument, which is that bike lane expansion and the creation of new pathways could have very similar effects on the African American community if not approached correctly. She goes on to say that the consequences of industrial ventures are often posed as, "for the greatest good."⁴⁴ She argues, however, that that framework renders those communities affected by these decisions essentially invisible. In making

⁴⁴ "Development & Permitting." *Development Permitting RSS*, www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/79225.

her case against increased bike lanes, she looks to the history of industrial effects on the African American community in Portland, ultimately referencing the consequences of I-5, Emanuel, and the Memorial Coliseum.

The urban renewal projects of lower Albina did more than simply displace African American citizens from their homes. The culmination of the projects further concentrated and segregated the black community, a fundamental aspect of how city officials determined “blight” in decisions regarding pollution allocation. Through systemic displacement in lower Albina, African American Portlanders would soon be put at significantly greater risk as a result of the environmental decisions carried out by Portland’s governor and city officials.

Governor Tom McCall’s Environmental Intervention

Following a decade of urban renewal, it was clear that commercialization and development were prioritized over housing considerations and resident welfare. The Portland City Planning Commission (PCPC) noted that overcrowding, low housing values, and a high turnover on renters were the reasons for the “blighted” classification, and thereby the justification for increased industrial development. Acknowledging a potential counterargument, the PCPC stipulated in a 1965 report that, “The Negro did not cause blighted conditions. He merely entered Portland where housing and environmental conditions were already declining.”⁴⁵ While this statement attempted to mitigate the planning commission of potential accusations of racism, it failed to acknowledge the historical context by which the African Americans were forced into

⁴⁵ Portland City Planning Commission, 1965, p. 60.

those conditions. Nonetheless, the PCPC justified the intensely increasing expansion of industry through blight.

Urban blight and renewal were at the fore of the gubernatorial election in 1967 in Portland. Both Robert Straub, a democrat, and Tom McCall, a republican, would use environmental renewal based rhetoric in their campaigns for governor. Both were environmentalists who wished to clean up pollution and keep Portland as a clean, presentable city. However, McCall pushed even further in his advocacy for environmental reforms as Straub discussed broad environmental ideas such as the Willamette Greenway concept.⁴⁶ Straub, who was seen as a potentially more dependable candidate, led in the polls in the months leading up to the election. However, campaigns such as the rock concert he sponsored at McIver Park, and the success it had with anti-war supporters, pushed him into victory. At the time when Tom McCall was elected to governorship in Portland in 1967, environmental longevity was prioritized, and urban sprawl was seen as encroaching on the beauty of the city.

McCall, born in 1913 in Massachusetts, moved to Oregon when he attended the University of Oregon and received a degree in journalism in 1936. After graduation, McCall worked for the Oregonian before enlisting in the navy as a World War II correspondent in 1944. Following WWII, McCall became a well-known journalist around Portland, even hosting a radio show on a local radio station. His career as a journalist coincided with his political motives, and in 1949 he served as the executive secretary for two years under Oregon Governor Douglas McKay. In 1966, McCall ran a campaign for governor as a representative of the Republican party, prioritizing

⁴⁶ "Robert Straub (1920-2002)." *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, 2019.

environmental conservationism as a key policy. His victory would position him to become the “environmental governor.”⁴⁷ McCall would ultimately leave a legacy in Portland of environmental prioritization. Although this paper highlights a negative consequence of his environmental planning, it would be unjust not to describe the many positives that shaped McCall’s legacy.

Nearing the end of the 1950s, McCall made the transition from print journalism at KPTV radio, to television broadcasting at the KGW station in Portland. Here, McCall met Tom Dargan, the station manager at KGW, whose belief in innovative programming influenced McCall to use his nightly television time to discuss narratives of social issues in Oregon.⁴⁸ These developed into featured documentaries, in which McCall would use his investigative journalism skills to highlight specific issues of Oregonian environmentalism. One of the first of his early environmental works was titled *Crisis in Klamath Basin* (1958), which, somewhat ironically given his future policies, highlighted the unjust consequences faced by the Klamath Native American tribe as the local government utilized their timber in the open market. For this documentary, McCall was given his first environmental award, the golden beaver. After the documentary, as well as his nightly commentaries gained popularity throughout Portland, Dargan authorized McCall to produce another documentary focused on environmental aspects of Portland and Oregon. McCall released *Pollution in Paradise* in 1962, a documentary that argued job production and environmental wellbeing need not be juxtaposed in Oregon. Rather, McCall stipulated that a flourishing economy and

⁴⁷ Larson, Derek R. *Keeping Oregon Green Livability, Stewardship, and the Challenges of Growth, 1960-1980*. Oregon State University Press, 2016.

⁴⁸ Robbins, William G. “Pollution in Paradise (Documentary Film).” *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, 17 Mar. 2018, oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/pollution_in_paradise_documentary/#.XrJMxy2ZP-Y.

environment could exist simultaneously. McCall's cohesion narrative of environment and production produced a new local spirit of politics, one that placed the tangible environment at the fore of state policies. Coinciding with McCall's local revitalization of environmental politics was Rachel Carson's *Silent Springs*, also published in 1962, which carried the same message, but reached a national audience. McCall's localized focus, and Carson's national call to environmental protection pushed Portlanders to prioritize the local environment.

McCall reflected his environmental philosophies in his policies as governor. One landmark environmental decision carried out by McCall as governor was the Oregon Beach Bill, passed in 1967. The Oregon Beach Bill revoked privatization of beach wetlands along the Oregon coast. Following the completion of railroads, the Oregon State Land Board sold public land to private owners. By the turn of the 20th century, over 23 miles of tideland had been sold. McCall, who wished to establish public ownership of coastal beach land, held a media day in May of 1967, to gain public support for the bill. Ultimately, the coverage the event received was enough to push the public to demand the passage of the Beach Bill. Passed in July of 1967, the Oregon Beach Bill made all wet sand (described as 16 feet vertical from low tide) property of the State of Oregon, and therefore for public use.⁴⁹

While the Oregon Beach Bill is often an under-appreciated policy of McCall's, his Willamette River Greenway Project gets much more attention and appreciation. The Willamette River Greenway Project, established in 1967 and passed in 1973, sought to use state and local funding to renew and embellish the land surrounding the Willamette

⁴⁹ "A Symbol of Home": The Environmental and Political Legacy of Tom McCall in Oregon." *Oregon Historical Society*, ohs.org/museum/exhibits/a-symbol-of-home-the-legacy-of-tom-mccall-in-oregon.cfm.

River which flowed through, and divided Portland. It was a beautification project, and one that attempted to highlight the inherent nature that existed despite the blossoming urban metropolis of Portland. It was a culmination of McCall's ideals, a seemingly perfected balance between nature and industry. For many years, and even today, McCall is remembered by Portlanders for not only maintaining, but improving the beauty of Portland through this project. In fact, a National Geographic cover story in 1972, titled, "A River Reborn" praised McCall's endeavors to environmentally bedeck Portland's waterfront. Although McCall is in many ways deserving of admiration for his environmental endeavors, the following chapters expose the often harsh realities that must endure for an urban environment to remain environmentally scenic.

Chapter 2:

The Willamette River Basin is Oregon's largest watershed that is located in the northwest of the state. The Willamette River is responsible for between 12-15% of the Columbia River's flow. Seventeen miles of the Willamette pass through the city of Portland, which is the most urbanized center along the river. The river and its subsequent tributaries form the general "Willamette Valley", where more than two thirds of Oregon's population live today. It has been a critical aspect of Portland's growth, providing food, jobs, and leisure.

The Willamette River Basin has been a geographic and historical focal point for the relationship between cultural and environmental systems to develop in Western Oregon. Historian William Honey argues that the Willamette River has gone through three cultural revolutions throughout history. Hunting and foraging categorize the first development, followed by an agricultural movement, and ending in the industrial urban revolution of the 1950s onwards. During each of these periods, human interaction has environmental implications, "The basin has been shown to have limitations in its capacity to sustain human activities, especially those which fail to acknowledge its delicate ecological nature."⁵⁰ However, while less developed cultures were more directly tied to the land, technological innovations, and an increasingly mobile population, all worked to weaken ties between the environment and humans. This divergence resulted in increased leisure time for the middle class, who often sought recreation through outdoor activities. Water based and water related activities were of

⁵⁰ Honey, William D., and Thomas C. Hogg. *The Willamette River Greenway: Cultural and Environmental Interplay*. Water Resources Research Institute, Oregon State University, 1975.

paramount interest for those looking to spend some of their leisure time outside. In the face of increasing industrial urbanization, Oregonians wanted to make sure places of leisure were going to be available to not only them, but future generations of Oregonians as well. Yet, while beautification projects, such as the Willamette River Greenway Project created new and better opportunities for middle-class Portlanders to experience the outdoors, they simultaneously created a toxic environment for African Americans living within Albina.

The Willamette River Greenway Plan

The concept of a greenway plan is primarily a beautification project for the natural environment, specifically those areas adjacent to the waterfront. Included in this beautification effort is the creation of parks, trails, campgrounds, and other recreational developments along the riverside. Out of the desire to create and preserve ideals of middle-class leisure, Karl Onthank, a conservationist and professor at the University of Oregon, was the first to develop a concept of a greenway plan relating to the Willamette River. Robert Straub applied Onthank's idea of a greenway project during his gubernatorial campaign of 1966. Although Straub ultimately lost to Tom McCall, McCall promptly endorsed implementing a greenway project himself, "McCall, along with conservation and recreation personnel, was prompt in formulating an avenue of approach."⁵¹ McCall would ultimately be an instrumental figure in the configuration of the public image of Portland as an environmentally progressive state.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 54.

As a newly elected governor, McCall commissioned the Oregon State Highway Department to consider the possibility of a Willamette River Greenway Plan. By March of 1967, the plan was deemed feasible, and by June of the same year it was enacted into law. The name Willamette River Greenway Project was coined, and the cost was split between the federal government, who would assume half of the fiscal responsibility, and state and local governments, who each would contribute 25% of the necessary funds. The Willamette River Greenway Project was a concept that stemmed from changing values, increased leisure, and a new middle-class identity, “The Willamette Greenway is more than simply a program to employ technology to renew a relevant resource. The program is itself a configuration of values and priorities for behavior that in turn impact upon all citizens and visitors to the Willamette River Basin.”⁵² Ultimately, this notion would be reflected throughout the project's duration.

For the most part, support for the Willamette River Greenway Project was widespread, particularly for middle class communities. The *Eugene Register Guard* in the late 1960s, for example, titled a publication about the Willamette River Greenway Project as, “A Dream Too Thrilling for Politics.” The publication focused on the need to act quickly, as urban industrialism posed a threat to the desired middle-class way of life, “Life in such super-cities could be a super-nightmare...twice as many people forced to drive farther to find scenery and recreation.”⁵³ Coupled with the idea of development, was the loss of the environment. To supporters of the project, industrialism would soon cover every part of their beautiful state, unless they acted fast and preserved the

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ The Willamette River Greenway Association. *The Willamette River Greenway, Eugene Register Guard*, 1970.

environment against the rapid growth of booming cities. Many Oregonians felt that the environment was inextricably linked to their state's identity, and consequently themselves, "Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed. The wilderness erodes and as it does, perhaps we do too."⁵⁴ Clearly, Oregon's environment was seen, in the eyes of the greater middle class, as a feature of the state that must be preserved. The Willamette River Greenway Project seemed to many like the perfect way to keep the environment, and thereby leisure activities, safe from widely expanding industrial growth.

In order to maximize the amount of land that could be beautified under the Willamette River Greenway Project, McCall and city planners deemed it necessary to clean up the areas where the polluting industries had their factories. McCall determined that the best way to keep these areas free from pollution would be to concentrate the city's major polluting industries in one space. This would allow for the vast majority of the city to be pollution free, with only a small section of the city receiving the majority of pollutants. While this would have a negative impact on one small part of the city, it would maximize areas fit for beautification projects, and fulfill the interests of a greater number of citizens.

Pollution Along the Columbia River Slough

However, for McCall's vision of a beautified city to be realized by the majority of Portlanders, a group that was primarily white and middle class, another group would have to shoulder the downsides. McCall and city officials, upon discussing the best

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

place to concentrate the polluting industries, harkened pre-existing racial stereotypes of dirtiness and cleanliness. Albina had long been crowded, primarily African American, and already industrial. In this way, Albina in North Portland, adjacent to the Columbia River Slough, seemed “blighted beyond repair”, a place where pollution could seemingly be put justifiably, “The reputation of a degraded, lesser neighborhood that public housing gave North Portland neighborhoods allowed for the subsequent siting of further industrial facilities in these locations.”⁵⁵ The slough was not seen as a local resource, but rather as the place most suitable for Portland’s continued industrial expansion. To McCall, concentrating rather than dispersing industrial pollution minimized damage to wildlife, open land, and natural habitat that was deemed “more important” than the North Portland neighborhoods. Albina and the Columbia Slough were essentially sacrificed at the hands of city planners in order to preserve the areas of land they desired. African Americans experienced a very different perspective of McCall’s visions than did white, middle class Portlanders.

McCall, following the city's decision, urged industrial factories to settle along the Slough. As they did, increasing amounts of toxic, and untreated waste was being dumped directly into the Slough itself. This is especially problematic because the slough had ceased operation in the 1940s as a response to flood control. The untreated waste then, was building up without measures taken to clean the slough. This became increasingly evident, and by March of 1968, the Oregon State Sanitary Authority, a division of the State Board of Health, conducted the “Columbia Slough Pollution Study”.

⁵⁵ McCord, Lindsay E., "Parting the Green Curtain: Tracing Environmental Inequality in Portland, Oregon" (2016). Pitzer Senior Theses. Paper 72. 37. http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pitzer_theses/72,

The pollution study categorized the pollution into the slough through three categories. The first group was titled major organic dischargers which were defined as, “Those firms which discharge all of their wastes with little or no treatment to the slough.”⁵⁶ Among this group were: H.B. Fuller Company, Portland Rendering Company, Pacific Meat Company, and Simpson Timber company. The pollution study found that,

From this investigation, it would appear that only four firms, those in the category of major organic dischargers, are responsible for the majority of the wastes that are being discharged to the Columbia Slough. In the case of Portland Rendering Company and Pacific Meat Company, the Sanitary Authority has won judgements against the two firms in the past. The staff has repeatedly tried to encourage the two firms to connect to the Portland city sewer system without success.

The Pacific Meat Company alone did grave environmental damage, dumping over 150,000 gallons of animal parts and blood into the slough every day, even as late as 1970.⁵⁷ However, while those industries that entirely disregarded recommended waste disposal methods did the most significant damage to the slough, they were far from the only source of pollutants. The second category companies could fall into was defined as minor organic dischargers, companies that discharge the majority of their waste to the Portland interceptor sewer system, but occasionally (accidentally or intentionally) would discharge some part of their organic waste into the slough. Among this category were Silver Falls Packing Company, Armour and Company, and others.

⁵⁶ Oregon State Sanitary Authority. *Columbia Slough Pollution Study March 1968*. Columbia Slough Pollution Study March 1968, Oregon State Board of Health, 1968.

⁵⁷ Stroud, E. “Troubled Waters in Ecotopia: Environmental Racism in Portland, Oregon.” *Radical History Review*, vol. 1999, no. 74, 1999, pp. 65–95., doi:10.1215/01636545-1999-74-65, 77.

Third, were the complying firms, those companies that discharge all organic waste through the Portland interceptor sewer system. This group consisted of just the Portland Provision Packing Company and the Brander Meat Company, the only of the three categories with fewer than 4 companies. Moreover, there were instances of companies who were not geographically located in a position to dump along the slough, but did so anyway through transfer of waste, “Vann Barrel Company is located inside the city, however, they discharge their barrel rinse water to Leatherman Oil sump, which in turn discharges to Columbia Slough. This arrangement results in oily wastes being discharged to the slough.”⁵⁸ With many companies dumping their untreated and toxic waste into the slough, the toxicity was overwhelming by the time of the study.

Following the analysis of how the Columbia River Slough was being polluted, and by whom, the study tested the toxicity of the pollution. Leachate⁵⁹ in the slough was measured and it was found that, “Approximately 175,000 gpd of leachate having a BOD⁶⁰ ranging from 300 to 700ppm or having a population equivalent of about 3,650 was being discharged to the slough.”⁶¹ A perfectly clean river has a BOD of below 1ppm, and a body of water considered polluted between 2-8ppm, beyond 8ppm a river is considered severely polluted. With the BOD in the slough measuring between 37 to 87 times the BOD of a river considered highly polluted, it is clear that the slough's toxicity was out of control.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

⁵⁹ Leachate is defined as any liquid that, in passing through matter, extracts soluble solids. In an environmental context, it refers to a liquid that has entrained an environmentally harmful substance that could enter the environment. It often refers to industrial waste.

⁶⁰ Biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) refers to the amount of dissolved oxygen required to break down organic material.

⁶¹ Oregon State Sanitary Authority. *Columbia Slough Pollution Study March 1968*. Columbia Slough Pollution Study March 1968, Oregon State Board of Health, 1968.

Further, this pollution had legitimate effects on the fish that lived within the slough, a problematic issue for those fishermen that used the slough's fish as food for themselves and their families. For many citizens, whose grocery budget did not quite meet their family's needs, supplemented their diets with fish caught in the slough.⁶² The fish tested by Columbia Riverkeepers contained chemicals fundamentally unsafe for human consumption, "The tests found levels of arsenic, mercury and PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) that exceed what the Environmental Protection Agency recommends for safe, unrestricted fish consumption."⁶³ PCBs (Polychlorinated biphenyl) were banned by American federal law in 1978 when the chemical's environmental toxicity was realized, and it was classified as a persistent organic pollutant. Generally used as industrial compounds, exposure can result in nervous, reproductive and immune system problems as well as cancer. One fish tested showed to have 27,000 percent more PCBs than were deemed safe for human consumption by the EPA.

The studies were followed by the Oregon State Sanitary Authority reaching out to those companies polluting along the slough, to see if they would be open to remedying the problem. While the Oregon State Sanitary Authority suggested forming a service district to fix the waste disposal issue, the majority of firms claimed they would simply rather continue to dump in the slough as normal.⁶⁴ The report stipulated that those industries who fell under the major organic dischargers category did not show

⁶² Jim Kadera, "Polluted Columbia Slough Faces Clean-up Problems," *Portland Oregonian*, 1 August 1971, 11.

⁶³ Profita, Cassandra. "Tests Reveal High Levels Of Toxic Pollutants In Columbia River Fish." *Oregon Public Broadcasting*, Ecotrope, 30 May 2018, www.opb.org/news/blog/ecotrope/tests-reveal-high-levels-of-toxic-pollutants-in-local-fish/.

⁶⁴ Oregon State Sanitary Authority. *Columbia Slough Pollution Study March 1968*. Columbia Slough Pollution Study March 1968, Oregon State Board of Health, 1968. 9.

interest in attempting to reorganize their waste distribution to allow for less toxicity in the slough, and thereby the environment. The survey outlined the misuses of the slough, and argued that desired future uses would be halted if the pollution continued at the same rate. Ultimately, the survey argued that measures had to be taken to fix the environmental toxicity of the slough, “It is concluded that positive action must be implemented and participated in by all public entities and industries to correct this area wide pollution problem.”⁶⁵

The rhetoric surrounding the slough is often concerned with ideologies rather than realities. Inherently, the polluting industries and the Oregon State Sanitary Authority possessed their own agendas, each aiming to do their respective job in the best and easiest way possible. Yet, framing the narrative this way ignores the very tangible effects the toxic pollution had on the local neighborhoods of Albina. African Americans, through racialized housing policies, lack of political clout, and the priorities of city officials, were the group who carried the greatest risks of the environmentally toxic decisions of Portland and McCall. Simply through long exposure, fishing, and geographic proximity, thousands of African Americans were forced to expose themselves to harmful toxins. PCBs, Pentachlorophenol (PCP), lead, hydrochloric acid, cyanide, and countless other harmful toxins were in abundance within the toxic sludge of the slough.⁶⁶ Without a means of finding other housing in Portland, the residents were trapped in Albina alongside the toxicity that was trapped in the slough.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Stroud, E. “Troubled Waters in Ecotopia: Environmental Racism in Portland, Oregon.” *Radical History Review*, vol. 1999, no. 74, 1999, pp. 65–95., doi:10.1215/01636545-1999-74-65, 79.

McCall and city planners were forced to balance differing environmental agendas between socioeconomic classes. The environment affected different people in different ways. A poor African American family living in a crowded and polluted section of Albina would likely want urban environmental renewal. A white middle class family who lives in the suburbs would likely want recreation areas, parks, and beautification projects. Ultimately, McCall's policies prioritized the latter, with his proposals and programs disproportionately benefiting and protecting middle and upper-class neighborhoods.⁶⁷ The Columbia River Slough and the toxicity local residents faced demonstrate the means by which environmental city planning can have significant impacts on citizens. However, the string of proposals and decisions that created the toxicity around the slough were subject to active opposition by many Albina citizens. Activism within Albina spanned decades worth of renewal and redevelopment projects, the combination of which creating a toxic environment.

⁶⁷ Abbott, Carl. *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*. University of Nebraska Press, 1983, 271.

Chapter 3

Throughout the history of Albina, particularly following the Vanport flood, planning agencies repeatedly disregarded the opinions and desires of Northeast Portland citizens, particularly in the heart of Albina South of Fremont.⁶⁸ However, this does not mean that Albina citizens were merely bystanders to the surrounding changes. Rather, there are clear examples of the community organization aimed at working against the industrialization, and subsequent pollution of their neighborhoods. Between 1966 and the mid 1970s, local neighborhood organizations transformed much of the Albina population into active, and even angered residents pushing for action. This transition made the Albina citizens agents of, rather than objects of, neighborhood decisions.⁶⁹ Neighborhoods such as Albina argued for urban cleanup and revitalization, rather than beautification projects focused on recreation and leisure. In this way, Albina looked beyond the oppressive changes that were in the past and out of their control and pushed forward for future changes that would benefit their urban environment. Albina residents were present and active in their opposition to the string of projects that left the slough toxic.

Activism from Albina's community leaders was emboldened by the mistreatment of the 1950s and 1960s urban renewal projects. More than ever, activists focused on reform that advocated for rehabilitation rather than renewal, evidenced by their focus on community uplift rather than total restoration. The Central Albina Plan of 1960, which sought to conduct a renewal project between MLK Boulevard and Fremont

⁶⁸ Abbott, Carl. *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*. University of Nebraska Press, 1983, 189.

⁶⁹ *Ibid* 190.

Street, was actively opposed by Portland NAACP president, Mayfield Webb⁷⁰ and local Albina activists. Although they successfully disbanded the Central Albina Plan, local residents knew they needed to organize to stop future plans of renewal.⁷¹

During 1960, in the wake of community uncertainty, The Urban League held a “Community Conference on the Problems, Needs and Resources of The Albina District”. Following this conference, the Albina Neighborhood Improvement Committee (ANIC) began to work on a neighborhood improvement program in conjunction with the Portland Development Commission. Following deliberations, the development committee agreed to provide resources and assistance to a local Albina organization in the way of seeking federal government funding for neighborhood rehabilitation programs.⁷² From this, the Albina Neighborhood Improvement Committee was formed, with Reverend Cortlandt Cambric, a respected community leader, as the head chairmen. After holding meetings to determine the most important issues that the community faced, officials from the Housing and Home Finance Agency from both San Francisco and Washington D.C. visited Albina and the community leaders.⁷³ The Finance Agency supported the idea that a successful rehabilitation program could be implemented, and ANIC specified the improvement area as the space between Fremont, Skidmore, Vancouver, and Mississippi. By 1961, ANIC got members of the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) to inspect local buildings in order to determine if they would

⁷⁰ Along with his work at the NAACP, Webb served as the executive direction of the Albina Corporation in 1968. Entirely operated by local residents, the corporation connected unemployed Albina residents to employers. That same year, Webb received the Albina citizens award.

⁷¹ Pearson, Rudy. “Vanport, Oregon (1942-1948).” *Welcome to Blackpast* •, 8 Feb. 2020, www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/vanport-1942-1948/.

⁷² *Albina Neighborhood Improvement Project, Portland, Oregon*. Portland Development Commission, 1962.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

back improvement loans. ANIC members formulated an application which was sent to and approved by the Portland Development Commission as well as the City Planning Commission. Resultantly, the Portland City Council approved the application for the “Albina Neighborhood Improvement Project” in August 1961. Following the application's approval, the Albina Neighborhood Improvement Information Center (ANIIC) was created as a bridge between local residents and planning personnel.

The Albina Neighborhood Improvement Project/Program (ANIP) was community driven and sought to remedy many of the issues that plagued their neighborhoods. Key to their platform was investment in home improvements, park creations, and neighborhood connectedness. The organization operated in a 35-block area, and ultimately rehabilitated over 300 homes. ANIP successfully organized in the early 1960s against the proposed placement of a Nordstrom distribution center, a project that would have cleared residential blocks for industry. When Nordstrom declined to commit to the project, they cited neighborhood opposition. Furthering ANIP’s commitment to rehabilitation rather than renewal, they had a very successful Neighborhood Tree Team, a beautification project that did not require demolition. They also provided the infrastructural maintenance that the city neglected to take care of such as: streetlights, sidewalks, and alleyways.⁷⁴ The need for improved street lighting in Albina had largely been ignored until ANIP met with the commissioner of the City Street Light Bureau. The City Street Light Bureau commissioned the Portland General Electric Company, who installed 35 new lighting fixtures. At a time when the city

⁷⁴ “The History of Trees and the Albina Neighborhood Improvement Project.” *Urban Forestry Blog RSS*, 21 Feb. 2020, www.portlandoregon.gov/parks/article/633785.

offered the Albina neighborhoods little funding and sponsored few green spaces, the work of ANIP supplemented the lack of government aid.

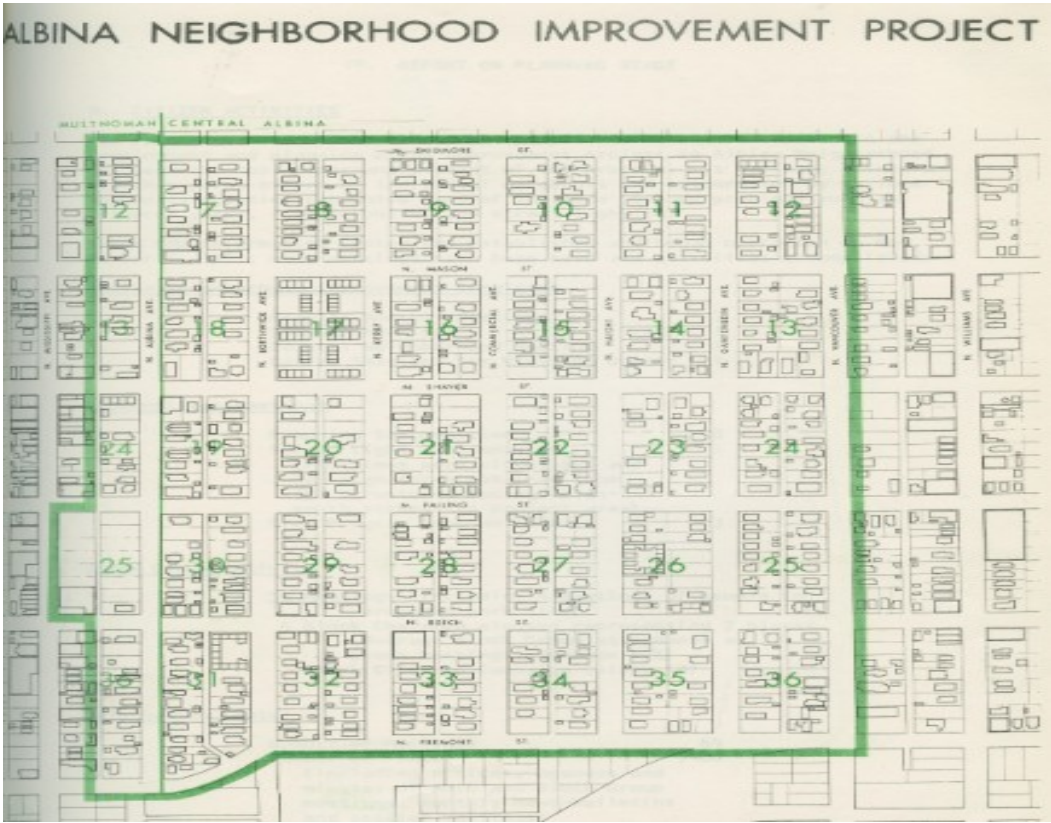


Figure 4: Albina Neighborhood Improvement Project Plan

Local block groups were another form of grass-root organization that sought to keep neighborhoods sanitary and safe. Mrs. Joseph Crane, the creator of the block groups, and a local Albina resident herself, utilized the Albina Neighborhood Improvement Committee to gain recognition. Through ANIC, The Portland Bureau of Health sanitary inspector, Jack Anderson, was contracted. Mr. Anderson and the block group organized a clean-up campaign that revolved around garbage and rodent control, two factors often cited as determinants of blight in renewal projects. The block groups success was highlighted in the Albina Neighborhood Improvement Project Report of 1962, “It has

been illustrated that joint effort by individual neighbors and cooperation by various community agencies can solve many of the more obvious problems such as littered yards, rodent control, and street lighting.”⁷⁵ The group met 33 times a year, conducted surveys, and was composed of committees and subcommittees dedicated to the betterment of local neighborhoods. Block groups, the ANIC, and the ANIP all demonstrated the strength of local organization while simultaneously highlighting the lack of infrastructural funding from the city government.

Although local residents found some success in their activism against renewal projects, when it came to issues directly regarding the Columbia Slough, they were largely ignored. Years of renewal projects and industrial relocation which tightened the proximity between neighborhoods and toxicity led Albina residents to become upset at their lack of agency in planning within their town. In 1973, in an attempt to feign giving more agency to Albina residents, the US Army Corps of Engineers held a citizens advisory meeting. At this meeting, representatives from government agencies largely outnumbered citizens. Local Albina resident Maya Runyon, directly following the meeting, said that after a long history of oppression by various governmental agencies, Albina residents felt overpowered by the agencies having so many representatives.⁷⁶ Clifford Nelson, another local resident, agreed, asking why the people who were doing all the talking were none of the people that actually lived within Albina. At the meeting, there was a clear difference in agenda and focuses. While the government agency focused on concerns of flood control, recreation, and water quality, local residents were

⁷⁵ *Albina Neighborhood Improvement Project, Portland, Oregon*. Portland Development Commission, 1962.

⁷⁶ MILLER, CHAR. *NATURE OF HOPE: Grassroots Organizing, Environmental Justice, and Political Change*. UNIV PR OF COLORADO, 2019.

instead concerned with public health, proximity of pollution to housing, industrial zoning rights, and homeowner property rights.⁷⁷ Following the meeting, a questionnaire confirmed that Albina residents were far outnumbered in the meeting. Furthermore, their requests were by and large ignored. Albina would continue on a city plan of heavy industrial zoning, using the slough as a dumping ground for the pollution.

In 1974, local citizens again attempted to influence local agencies to put a halt to the growing toxicity in Albina. The North Portland Citizens Committee held a conference titled “North Peninsula Environment ‘74: Lakes, Lands, and Livability.” This conference, concerned primarily with water pollution within the Columbia Slough, was designed to be a predominantly citizens meeting, with certain local agencies getting invitations. They invited representatives from the Department of Environmental Equality (DEQ) in order to argue for a thorough cleanup of the slough, followed by an enforcement of a no pollution policy. Although there were members of the DEQ present, virtually all of the citizens' requests were denied, and the DEQ continued to issue the same number of permits allowing industries along the slough to dump waste directly into the waterway.

These instances of community activism against the slough’s pollution evidence the nature by which the voices of Albina residents were routinely ignored and overpowered. Previous to, and throughout the settlement of industry along the slough, Albina residents attempted to legitimize their opinions as local residents. Nevertheless, McCall and local city officials continued to degrade the slough, leaving the toxicity behind for nearby neighborhoods.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Modes of Environmentalism

There has been a well-documented, long history of community activism and intervention in Albina. Community leaders repeatedly pushed for policies that stressed rehabilitation rather than renewal. Despite a long history of activism in Albina, published examples of community opposition to the environmental impacts of toxicity on the slough appear to be very infrequent. The apparent lack of evidence however, results from an analysis of activism that is far too broad. The toxicity that resulted in the Albina neighborhoods was not a single event, but rather a culmination of decades worth of decisions and redevelopment. Perceiving community activism through evidence of opposition to the slough's toxicity is misleading, as this was merely the culmination of many projects, each of which local residents fought against. Local activism against projects such as the Memorial Coliseum, I-5, Nordstrom centers, and the Emanuel Hospital, by organizations such as ANIP, ANIC and block groups represent evidence of activism against the toxicity of the slough. Albina community organizers worked against the very projects and policies that created the conditions of their geographic proximity to the slough's toxicity. Opposition to the steps taken to create the slough's toxicity is fundamentally evidence against the end result.

Although there was clear evidence of Albina residents pushing for environmental reform in their neighborhoods, they were not seen by McCall and planners as environmentalists. Portland has prioritized environmentalism throughout its statehood, particularly in the 1960s onward, yet African Americans have been systematically excluded from being considered environmentalists.

It was not until white Portlanders started to focus on the renewal of the Slough that any progress began to be made on its cleanup. In the 1970s, in part thanks to McCall, Oregon developed a stereotype as an ecotopia, a state which prioritized environmental harmony with its citizens. McCall's push for the removal of billboards, implementation of bicycle paths and public beaches, return deposits on cans, and the development of the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) were a few of the many ways in which Portland gained this reputation. Portlanders have embraced this reputation as environmentally conscious, emphasized by voting patterns, bumper stickers, and companies' mission statements. By the early 1990s, with decades worth of environmental consciousness at the fore of many Portlander's agendas, the Columbia Slough began to take on a new narrative. White, generally middle-class Portlanders saw the slough as a waste of a precious resource, one that could be used for an afternoon kayak, a waterside picnic, or a quick swim. What once was seen as a blighted place to settle industry began to be seen as a calm waterway that flowed directly through the city. The Columbia Slough had potential in the minds of many Portlanders, and it simply required the "right" group to pursue those goals for them to be met.

In the early 1990s, the "right" group to clean up the Columbia Slough was formed, the Columbia Slough Watershed Council. They lobbied the DEQ, Portland Parks and Recreation, and the Portland Bureau of Environmental Services in order to push for a cleanup of the slough. They argued that cleaning up the waterway would not only allow humans to recreate closer to the city but would also be ecologically impactful for nearby species of birds and waterfowl. The Columbia Slough Watershed

Council received grants from the DEQ as well as the Metro Nature in Neighborhoods grant for habitat restoration.⁷⁸ As a result, the Columbia Slough Watershed Council, a group composed primarily of white middle class Portlanders and concerned with recreation and animal habitat, influenced local government to provide funding for the area.

Beginning in 1993, Environmental Services began working with the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality to identify and reduce pollutants existing in the Columbia River Slough. This takes on many forms, including installing filters in storm sewers, stopping unauthorized discharges of pollutants into the storm sewers, halting soil erosion, creating wetlands, and eliminating sanitary waste overflows. These measures, along with others, became utilized in order to restore the slough enough to permit recreational use. It is clear that these practices were not innovative in nature and could have been applied when the issue was even more prevalent.

The Columbia Slough Watershed Council has held an annual cleanup of the Slough, which continues today. The event is geared towards people wishing to use the slough for recreational purposes, and the watershed council even provides boats, kayaks, tools, and gloves for participants. On their website background, which functions similarly to a mission statement, they write, “Impacts from 150 years of development have left a legacy of environmental problems in the Slough: contaminated fish and sediment, diminished wildlife habitat, and water pollution from both point and nonpoint sources. The Columbia Slough Watershed Council was formed to address these

⁷⁸ “Record of Decision for Metro Metals Northwest, Inc. Portland, Oregon ECSI#5455.” *Oregon Department of Environmental Quality*, 2016.

issues.”⁷⁹ There is no mention of the negative effects shouldered by local residents, or of the potential health threats toxicity long posed to Albina residents. They go on to discuss how the slough’s cleanup could allow for more habitat and open space to be, “explored by foot, bicycle or canoe and kayak.”⁸⁰ Their focus is clear, the renewal and preservation of nature space in the Columbia Slough will not only offer wildlife a chance to use the slough, but allow increasing access for human recreation.

This reflects the beliefs and priorities of environmentalists, specifically during the time period in which the Slough suffered the worst pollution. It was not until groups and organizations that held the interests of the white middle class began to argue for the Columbia River Slough's environmental cleanup that it was taken seriously. Groups such as Cascadia Kayaks saw the Slough as a waste of recreational space, one that could be used by families and individuals looking to experience the great nature that the Portland area has to offer. Today, we would consider those groups and individuals working for the betterment of natural resources to be environmentalists. However, the Albina neighborhoods pushing for the same cleanup for years were often tagged as angry citizens and protestors by city officials and big businesses. There is no evidence that the city ever viewed Albina’s pushback through an environmentalist lens.

In assessing the differences between the African American environmentalists living in Albina and the white, middle class environmentalists, it becomes clear that middle class leisure and recreation was prioritized over legitimate health concerns from a primarily minority-based community. What was seen as a necessary evil of Portland’s

⁷⁹ “About the Watershed.” *CSWC Interim Website*, www.columbiaslough.org/about-the-watershed

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

overarching environmental renewal became the focus of a cleanup project when the “right” people wished to develop it.

Why then, were the, primarily African American, residents of Albina not seen as virtuous environmentalists despite pushing for the same renewal as people who today are considered environmentalists? The key difference in the histories and discourses of environmentalism rely on class distinction. In chapter one, I discussed the effects of increased leisure time for a blooming middle-class population. An increase in time off work for the middle class meant an increase in time spent in the great outdoors, especially for a town settled in the Northwest, just a few hours from beaches, mountains, and rivers. Discussion of environmentalism became correlated with recreation seeking middle class values of nature’s purity, and the untouched expanse of Oregon’s land. Further, if discussions of environmentalism did not revolve around the untouched wilderness that middle class families enjoyed, than it was focused on the preservation of parks and landscapes that were conducive to the “beauty” of Portland, “They are eager to preserve both physical and visual access to the natural environment, whether the wild scenery of the Pacific Coast, Cascades, and Columbia Gorge or the city’s own trees and parks.”⁸¹ The type of cleanup and renewal Albina residents were fighting for when they protested toxic developments along the Columbia Slough did not fit the lens of current politics and cultural beliefs.

Albina residents were pushing for a different type of environmentalism, urban environmentalism. This type of environmentalism exists within the confines of city streets, local neighborhoods, housing sections, and urban centers. However, middle

⁸¹ Abbott, Carl. *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*. University of Nebraska Press, 1983, 31.

class beliefs, stemming from a suburban environment, aligned more with preserving the natural environment for continued recreation, than cleaning up aspects of cities already considered dirty or blighted. This arises from the historical context in which urbanism was associated with environmental destruction,

Willamette Valley residents from Portland to Eugene viewed sprawl much more broadly as an environmental disaster that wasted irreplaceable resources of scenery, farmland, timber, and energy. Metropolitan growth was explicitly associated with the painful example of Southern California - the disease of 'Californism' and the sin of 'Californiacation.'⁸²

Subsequently, the work of Albina citizens to push for the cleanup of the Slough was not seen as environmentalism because urbanism was viewed as antithetical to environmentalism. Urban renewal would not create more recreation space, better views, or preserve untouched lands for generations to come. Thus, it was relatively easy for city officials and more broadly the middle class to see the issues raised regarding the environment by a group of citizens living in a dense urban space as not associated with environmentalist movements or narratives.

Final Thoughts

The clean-up of the Columbia River Slough would offer this story a happy ending. While it would by no means justify or rectify the plethora of health issues that arose from the environmental toxicity surrounding the slough and Albina, it would paint a picture of environmental progress on the side of minorities, an ode to the voices for change who were overlooked by McCall and officials thinking that they were acting in

⁸² *Ibid*, 250.

the best interest of the environment. Yet, a large takeaway is that there are often deeply entrenched unintended consequences attached to decisions.

Cleanup of the Columbia River Slough slowly began to increase the appeal of the surrounding neighborhoods, thereby driving housing prices to unprecedented heights, beginning a process of displacement. In order to understand the potential negative impacts of the slough's cleanup, it is important to briefly discuss the mechanisms by which long term residents become displaced. Firstly, prior to dislocation, neighborhoods uniformly go through a period of disinvestment, in which the area is seen as not worth further investment. During this time, buildings deteriorate, and median income levels decline as low-income families take advantage of the affordable housing, an extension of disinvestment. This is clearly evident in the case of Albina, a neighborhood city McCall and city officials concluded was unworthy of the investment necessary to fix lacking infrastructure. Eventually, after a marked period of disinvestment, "urban pioneers", a group that generally consists of educated, adventurous, and predominantly young white people, begin settling in the area. This group often possesses cultural habits and beliefs that are different from the pre-existing, more long-term residents of the neighborhood. As the new group begins to settle, often revamping and reworking apartments and houses seen prior as run down or dilapidated, the neighborhood slowly begins to gain a new reputation. This change of mindset is particularly evident "for real-estate developers and upper middle-class folks who used to consider the area unsafe or unwelcoming." Taking advantage of low market prices, developers often purchase large tracts of properties for considerably low prices in order to make large scale renovations. What used to be a run-down apartment building, may

be turned into luxury townhouses or condos. What forms is a contention between the old and the new, a mixing of lifestyles and cultures that had not previously coexisted in a geographic space.

The process is not one that is immediately negative to the long-term residents of the area. Often, long term residents notice and appreciate the positive side effects of decreased crime, safer parks, more options for dining and shopping, and the wage advantages of those industries. However, more long-term considerations expose the undesired side effects of these short-term advantages. After leases end, many landlords may require rent prices that are astronomically higher than the rent paid on the property for years previous. While many of the residents seeking housing may be able to pay that price, many long-term residents, with jobs accustomed to their living conditions, cannot compete with a high increase in fiscal requirements. In turn, long term residents are often priced out of their homes, resulting in both economic and social marginalization of a community who considered a specific area their home for years, or even generations before redevelopment.

While there is still a lively African American community in Albina, and while cleaning up the Columbia Slough can undoubtedly be seen as a positive for nearby residents, if one thing is clear, it is that it is necessary to consider the longer term ramifications of decisions deemed to have positive short term effects. At what cost does development, redevelopment, and investment come? If the clean-up of the slough continues to displace long term citizens, will it simply push the residents towards affordable housing in a different toxic environment?

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