

RACISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF JOHN FITCH WAY: THE CITY GOVERNMENT'S ROLE AND THE VICTIMS, 1960-1975

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the history of the construction of John Fitch Way, or Route 29 in Trenton, New Jersey. John Fitch Way is a highway that was built in the 1960s and '70s. The construction of the highway was met with much criticism by citizens of Trenton, but in the end was completed. This paper attempts to illuminate the victims of the highway's construction and who is to blame for these peoples' suffering. Research was conducted primarily in the Trentoniana archive and many documents were uncovered that help bring clarity to this situation. This research will help show the victims of a local urban renewal project and hopefully show the injustice that was imposed on hundreds of residents of Trenton.

INTRODUCTION

Within this paragraph are two pictures of Decatur Street. One picture is circa 1961, showing several homes and businesses. The other is circa 1965, after the street was decimated to make room for the construction of John Fitch Way. Today, there is no longer a Decatur street in Trenton, New Jersey. These images show the stark reality of Urban Renewal projects that have taken place in Trenton and throughout the United States. Not only this, but Decatur street was entirely populated by African Americans, highlighting the racism associated with urban renewal.¹ This paper will examine an urban renewal project, the construction of John Fitch Way, also known as Rt.29, in Trenton, New Jersey. I will argue that the state and city governments specifically targeted African Americans for the construction of John Fitch Way. Moreover, I will argue that some city officials under then Mayor Holland played a decisive role in this, contrary to previous research. Unfortunately, little can be done for the hundreds of people mistreated as part of urban renewal in Trenton and all across America, but I hope this paper can illuminate the injustices citizens of Trenton faced as a result of the construction of John Fitch Way.



Figure 1: Decatur Street circa 1961.



Figure 2: Decatur Street circa 1965. Homes and businesses pictured previously were removed for construction of John Finch Way.

¹ 1940 United States Federal Census, Ancestry.com Accessed May 1, 2019, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1940usfedcen/>.

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VICTIMS OF THE HIGHWAY

Plans for the construction of the highway were first conceived in the early 1950s, not long after federal money for such projects became easily accessible to local governments. The first tangible plans were drawn up in 1955. The proposal received considerable backlash from both citizens of Trenton and Mayor Arthur Holland himself. Through the 1960s the state and city governments went back and forth on proposals for the project, with little progress made by either side. In the end, much of the states' proposed highway was built by 1971, with more to come in the following years. Detailed maps obtained from the Trentoniana archives help to visualize the change that took place in what was formerly known as the south ward in Trenton.²

In the following pages of this paper are several pages from maps created by the Sanborn map company for the Trenton fire department first in 1957 and last updated in 1971. The maps were created for insurance purposes and have significant detail. The color of the buildings reflects the material they are made with, and each building's purpose, whether dwelling, commercial, etc. are noted. The startling differences between the two versions are best shown by the two maps following this paragraph. The roads primarily affected by John Fitch Way's construction were Lamberton, Bloomsbury, South Warren, and Market. There are several more streets affected by the highway, some of which will be discussed later; these roads were the largest ones affected. Also of note are the different ethnic groups affected by the highway's construction, public censuses from 1940 will help draw conclusions about who was most affected. As later censuses are made public in the coming years, historians will be able to make stronger and more narrow conclusions on this topic, however, the earliest data, 1940, is certainly still applicable.³⁴

² Alexander Kamm, "Route 29 and Stacy Park, a Story of Government Oversight", unpublished paper, 9 May 2014.

³ Sanborn Map Company, Map of Trenton New Jersey Volume 1, 1957, Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 15 April 2019.

⁴ Sanborn Map Company, Map of Trenton New Jersey Volume 1, 1971, Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 15 April 2019.

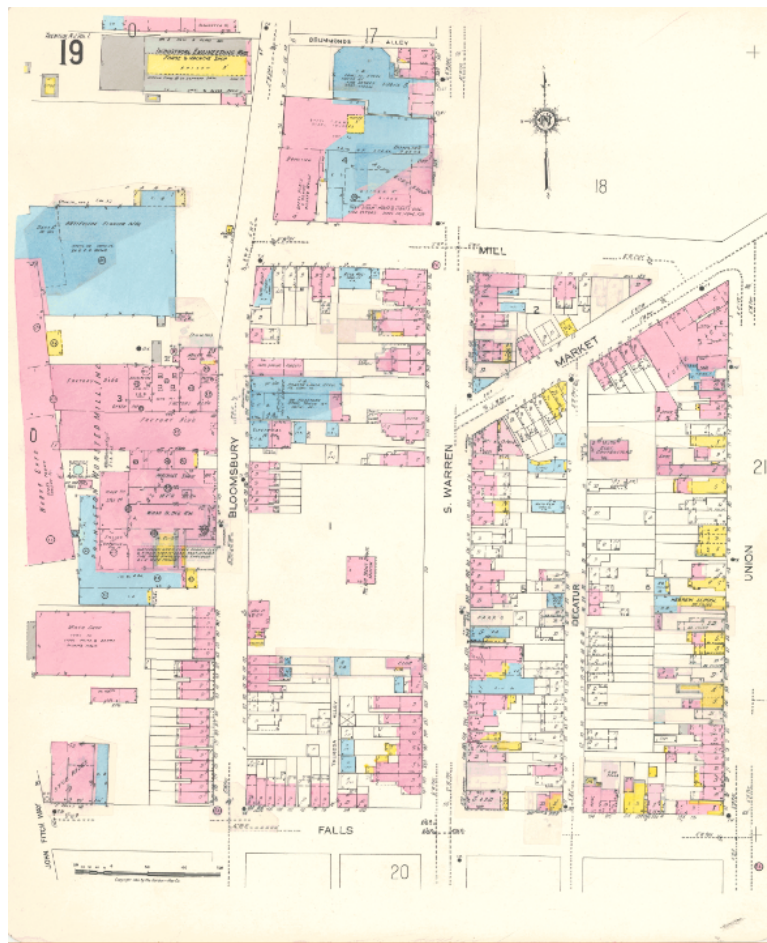


Figure 3: Sanbourn maps 1957 version.

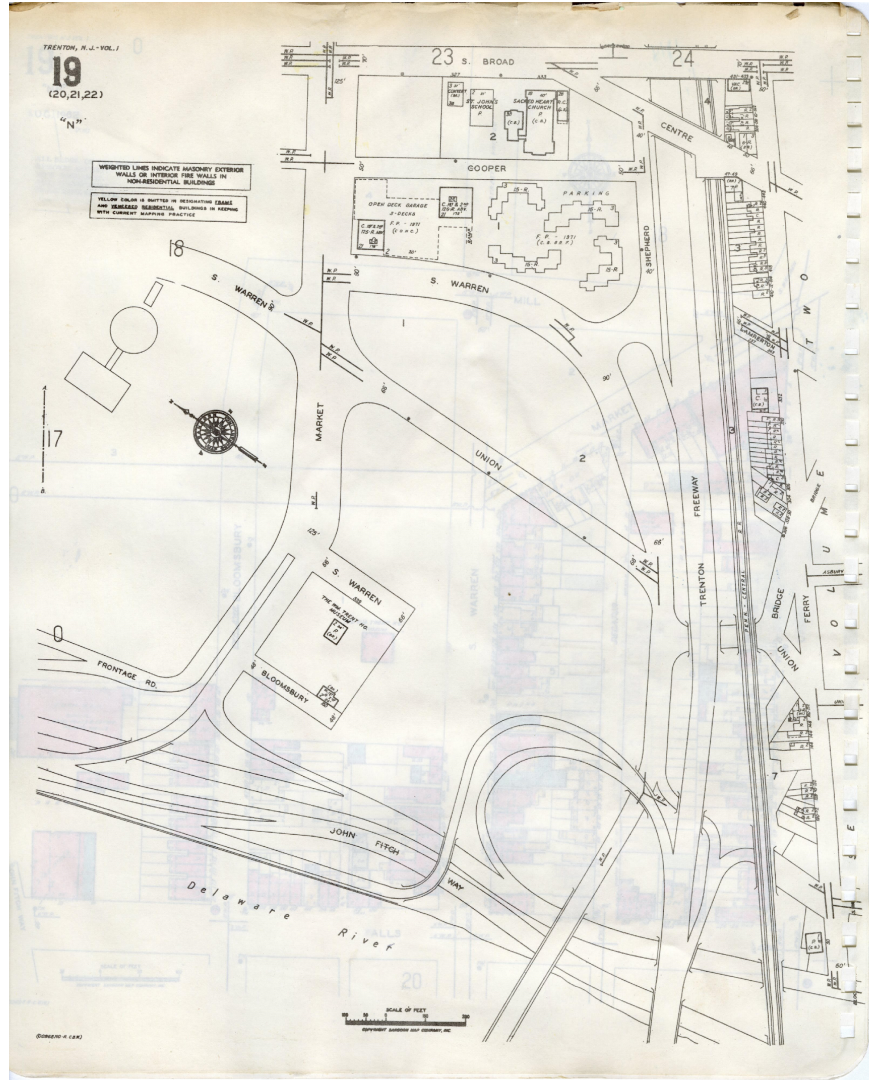


Figure 4: Sanborn maps 1911 version

The primary victims of urban renewal in Trenton was the growing African American population. Up until the 20th century, Trenton a mostly white city, filled with immigrants from all over Europe. However, African Americans began to come to the city first during and after World War One, and later following World War Two. Those African Americans who came to Trenton were forced by banks to buy or rent houses in the worst areas of the city, or 'red' areas, as they were known. This is the phenomenon known as 'redlining', and it is the reason African American families disproportionately lived in the 'slums' that governments sought to clear for urban renewal. Indeed, redlining maps found on the University of Richmond's "Mapping Inequality" website show the area cleared for John Fitch Way was a red zone.⁵

Census data shows that the primary residents of the area cleared for John Fitch Way were African Americans. The two sections labeled 21, figures 7 and 8, show the further attempts at urban renewal the city was undertaking. Figures 9 and 10 also follow the same pattern. On figures 6, 8, and 10, a note can be seen saying, "territory covered by this region no longer corrected, see page 19." This means that the map

⁵ Digital Scholarship Lab, "Mapping Inequality." University of Richmond, Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=13/40.2167/-74.7693&opacity=0.8&city=trenton-nj&area=D4>.

company no longer bothered correcting those two sections because they were removed and turned into the freeway depicted on figure 4. There is a note on page 22 saying that a few buildings remained, but those are non-domestic buildings. Every building depicted on pages 19-22, apart from those few on page 22, were cleared in order to build this highway. Lamberton Street, depicted on page 21, was one of several streets affected by John Fitch Way. According to census data, more than 65% of the houses affected on Lamberton street by urban renewal were owned by black families. It is also possible this number grew over the next 20-25 years. The section of Bloomsbury that remains on page 20 also consists chiefly of black families. Census data shows that the aforementioned Decatur Street was entirely black in 1940. Even censuses from 1940 show that families displaced were disproportionately black. This a combination of plain racism and an effect of redlining from decades prior.



Figure 5: Sanborn maps 1957 version.

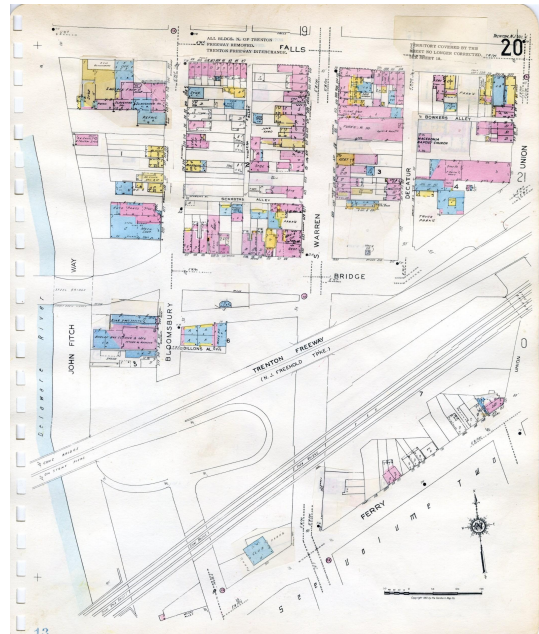


Figure 6: Sanborn maps 1971 version

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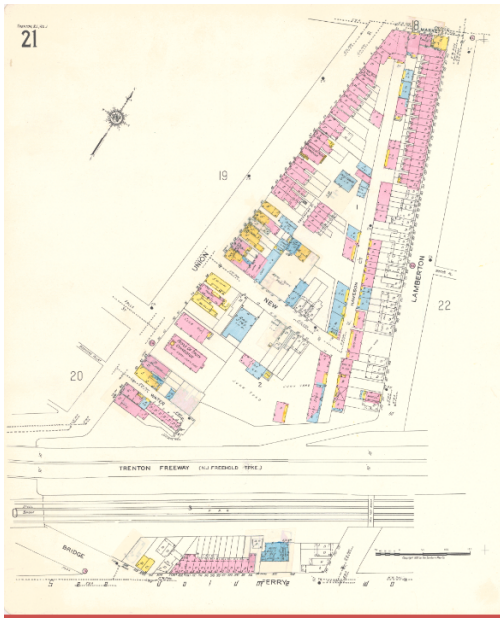


Figure 7: Sanborn maps 1957 version.

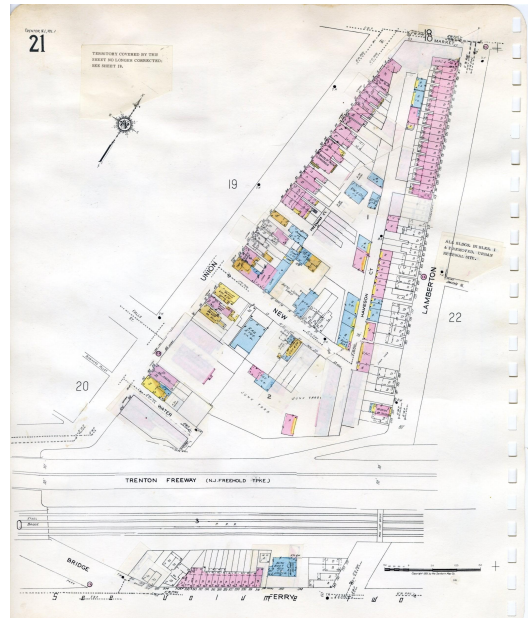


Figure 8: Sanborn maps 1971 version.



Figure 9: Sanborn maps 1957 version.

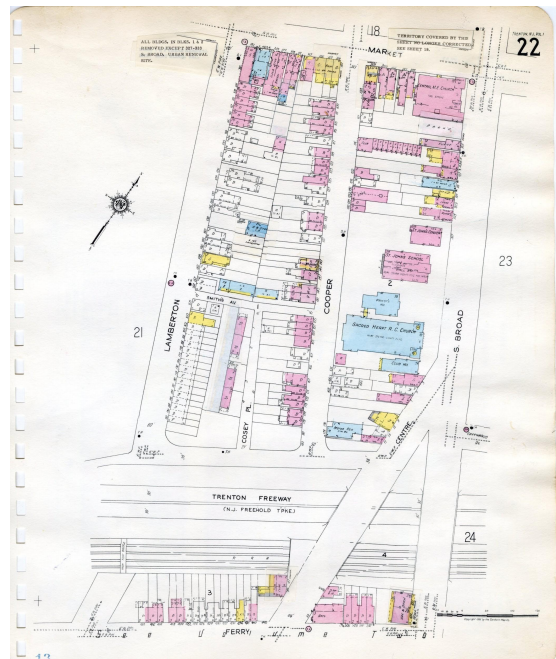


Figure 10: Sanborn maps 1971 version.

Numerous organizations in Trenton, including the South Ward Civic Association, the Garden Club of Trenton, and the Congress of Racial Equality opposed the highway. Depicted are entire neighborhoods destroyed and dozens of homes, all for a highway that almost no resident of Trenton wanted. In his 2014 paper, *Route 29 and Stacy Park, a Story of Government Oversight*, Alexander Kamm

writes, “By and large the people of Trenton agreed that the highway or at the very minimum the State’s plan for the route were not in Trenton’s best interest at all.”⁶ It can safely be said that the majority of Trenton’s residents felt the highway was unnecessary and opposed its construction. The residents of Trenton knew they were losing entire neighborhoods, a farmer’s market, Stacey Park, and much more. The map company ended up condensing pieces of Trenton that were important to so many of its residents previously on pages 19, 20, and 21 into what is depicted on page 19 in 1971.⁷⁸

Figure 15: Rodent Baiting document. Note the specific notes on the right hand side of the page.

Figure 16: Rodent Baiting document. Note the specific notes on the right hand side of the page.

Previous studies of the construction of John Fitch Way have primarily blamed the state for driving the urban renewal project. However, my research points to some within the city government as playing a large role in this. Documents on the next two pages show one of the city's attempts to investigate and find code violations in the houses it desired to destroy for John Fitch Way. Figure 11 is a simple list compiled by the city of property they currently owned in the area where John Fitch Way was proposed to be built. Most of the property was vacant or otherwise prepared to be destroyed for the highway. However, the document shows two properties, 52 and 54 Decatur Street, that had not been seized yet that are specifically starred. This document provides us with a picture of the city's mindset going into this project. They knew what homes and buildings they would destroy to build this highway, it was only a matter of moving the residents living in those places out of the way.⁹

Rat infestations were a significant issue for residents in "slums" during the 20th century. An article from the Trenton Times issue of 13 August 1964 says that eighty residents from the soon to be demolished John Fitch Way area complained of rat infestation. According to the article, the city responded saying they will investigate and exterminate in the next few weeks.¹⁰ However, Dorothy Cronheim, director of inspections, added on 4 December 1964 "it would be "pointless" to order every building renovated or all housing violations corrected since the city expects to start acquiring property there early next year and demolition will start soon after."¹¹ This comment from a prominent city official expresses a disregard for the wellbeing of the residents that the city assumed they would be able to displace in the coming months. This point is even furthered by the fact that the report is dated almost exactly a year after the August 1964 article was published.¹²

A close analysis of the documents suggests that these inspections were not simple rat inspections. The title of figures 11 and 12 mention John Fitch Way, suggesting that the motive of these inspections was not a routine rat inspection but motivated by the highway project. Many of the houses that were inspected were also searched for other possible violations. There are comments such as "no cellar steps" or "water on." These kinds of comments suggest an attempt to find any reason that the city could legally seize these houses and destroy them for the highway. Responses such as the one given by a city official in

⁹ "City Owned Property in John Fitch Way Area." Box 4, Folder South Trenton Neighborhood Council. Arthur Holland Collection. Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 2 April 2014.

¹⁰ "80 Fitch Way Residents Complain of Rats, Housing." Trenton Times. 13 August 1964.

¹¹ "80 Fitch Way Residents Complain of Rats, Housing." Trenton Times. 13 August 1964.

¹² "Report of Rat Baiting." 24 August 1965. Box 4, Folder South Trenton Neighborhood Council. Arthur Holland Collection. Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 2 April 2014.

the aforementioned Trenton Times article coupled with suspicious actions such as the ones in this report display a pattern of unjust treatment from the city.¹³

The speed at which this inspection was done was also alarming. Roughly 50 buildings, mostly houses, were baited and inspected in three days. August 20th, 23rd and 24th were a Friday, Monday and Tuesday, respectively. It is highly unlikely anything was done over a weekend, so this was all done on those days and likely while the building's residents were at work or school. These documents do not show exactly who did the inspections or how many people did them, but the desire to do it quickly is evident. This report was even sent on the same day, the 24th, as a large number of the inspections were done. This suggests that there was considerable motivation to complete this inspection; an inspection that was likely motivated by the John Fitch Way project.¹⁴

These documents specify how the city officials involved in the John Fitch Way project showed little regard about the residents in the houses in the way of the highway's planned location and were only concerned with the project's completion. The inspections were done in order to find violations in these homes, not to help with a rodent problem in the neighborhood. Dorothy Cronheim's comment to the *Trenton Times* is an example of how the city did not want to improve the conditions of the south ward, they only wanted to destroy it. The fact that it took the John Fitch Way proposal in order for the city to do an inspection of rat infestation in these homes just shows how little regard city officials had for these residents.¹⁵

A prevailing theme among those who have previously studied the construction of John Fitch Way is that Mayor Holland and the city are not primarily responsible for the harm it caused to Trenton's residents. Alex Kamm, who studied Rt.29 and specifically how it affected Stacey Park, wrote at length about how the city, particularly Mayor Holland, fought the state all the way as they tried to build the highway. Mayor Arthur Holland is an interesting figure, he was first elected mayor in 1959 and served off and on until his death in 1989. He was mayor during the majority of John Fitch Way's planning and subsequent construction. Mayor Holland himself moved into a majority black neighborhood in 1964 and was a known proponent of black integration.¹⁶ There is little doubt that Mayor Holland was not in favor of John Fitch Way; he fought its construction seemingly from the beginning. Mayor Holland sent a letter to W.J. Schonwald, Director of Planning, in December of 1965 raising questions about the proposed highway and calling for changes in the plan.¹⁷ Mayor Holland continued to fight the highway well into the 1970s.¹⁸

However, that does not mean that every city official agreed with Mayor Holland. The rat baiting report outlined above was created by and for the city, and the comments from Dorothy Cronheim came from a city official. Furthermore, the relocation of residents from homes in the urban renewal zone was a city run project and was highly controversial. A letter sent from CORE to the Mayor's office deemed that, "the relocation provisions for residents of the John Fitch Way III area are inadequate to date."¹⁹ They made seven demands of the city in this letter: that the relocated residents receive first preference for all vacancies in public housing, particularly the predominantly white housing, that the two year residency

¹³ "Report of Rat Baiting." 24 August 1965. Box 4, Folder South Trenton Neighborhood Council. Arthur Holland Collection. Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 2 April 2014.

¹⁴ "Report of Rat Baiting." 24 August 1965. Box 4, Folder South Trenton Neighborhood Council. Arthur Holland Collection. Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 2 April 2014.

¹⁵ "Report of Rat Baiting." 24 August 1965. Box 4, Folder South Trenton Neighborhood Council. Arthur Holland Collection. Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 2 April 2014.

¹⁶ Alexander Kamm, "Route 29 and Stacy Park, a Story of Government Oversight", unpublished paper, 9 May 2014.

¹⁷ W.J. Schonwald to Arthur Holland. December 10, 1965. Box 51, Folder: Route 29 1965. Arthur Holland Collection. Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 7 May 2019.

¹⁸ Alexander Kamm, "Trenton's Mayor Arthur Holland, Coalition Leader for Change", unpublished thesis, 14 May 2015.

¹⁹ Congress of Racial Equality, "Demands for Change in the Urban Renewal and Housing Plans of Trenton", Box 1, Folder Congress of Racial Equality, 1964. Arthur Holland Collection. Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 1 May 2019.

requirement for public housing be waived, that the locations of low-rent housing available to non-whites be specifically stated, that the availability of 221 mortgages to low income families had to be indicated, that the 54 low income private houses be specifically located for residents, that the relocation office make every effort to reach people in the community, and that scattered site public housing be used for Fitch Way residents.²⁰ The fact that at least some of these demands were not inherently met by the city relocation office show how they were not concerned with the well-being of the people being relocated. Despite the unfairness of urban renewal relocation, these residents were still only receiving priority in public housing that was predominantly black. The city attempted to continue the trend of housing segregation that caused mostly black families to be the targets of urban renewal.

While the city may deserve this criticism, Mayor Holland should be exempt from this criticism on account of his numerous public denouncements of the project and his positive image in the black community.²¹ In an interview I conducted with W.A. Flowers, a longtime resident of Trenton, he stated that Mayor Holland, "would visit churches, you call and he would come", and responded with "Oh, yeah" when asked if Mayor Holland was well liked by the community.²² Mayor Holland's public statements coupled with his direct outreach with the black community caused him to be separate from the actions taken by others in the city. There were many city officials who were either subtly or outright in favor of John Fitch Way, and those involved in the relocation of Fitch Way residents did not show enough care or general fairness to the residents. This all culminates in an image of the state being the main proponents of the project, joined by many inside the city who still held deep rooted racist beliefs and sought to treat the city's black residents with very little regard.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with the example of Decatur Street. Decatur Street no longer exists in Trenton, and its status as an entirely black street underlines the racism associated with the construction of John Fitch Way. The scourge of urban renewal not only destroys places where people lived, it destroys the history many of them hoped to leave and the chance for others to experience it. No longer can somebody walk along Decatur Street or visit Stacey Park as those in the past did. This urban renewal project, and many others like it across America, were rooted in racism. Census records from over 20 years prior show how the streets targeted primarily housed minorities. I coincide my feelings on John Fitch Way to the feelings many get when walking in a graveyard. When I drive on the road, I cannot help myself from thinking about all of the memories, legacies, relationships built on the homes and businesses that used to be located here. I doubt that there are many commuters on the road who think the same things, but someday I hope that changes and maybe then there can be justice for those who were mistreated. I also realize that the Victims of the John Fitch Way aren't just the residents who were displaced; anyone hoping to learn and experience Trenton's former beauty are victims, myself included.

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²⁰ Congress of Racial Equality, "Demands for Change in the Urban Renewal and Housing Plans of Trenton", Box 1, Folder Congress of Racial Equality, 1964. Arthur Holland Collection. Trentoniana Archive, Trenton Public Library, Trenton, NJ. 1 May 2019.

²¹ Alexander Kamm, "Route 29 and Stacy Park, a Story of Government Oversight", unpublished paper, 9 May 2014.

²² W.A. Flowers "Interview on Trenton at the East Trenton Collaborative", Interviewed by Zachary Kozak, April 6, 2019.

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