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### Interstate 40 and the Decimation of Jefferson Street

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

## Interstate 40 and the Decimation of Jefferson Street



Once a bustling thoroughfare in North Nashville's African-American community, the construction of Interstate 40 decimated Jefferson Street. The destruction of this African-American community had its genesis with the passage of the 1956 Interstate Highway Act, also known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act. Passed during the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower and enacted on June 29, 1956, the Act provided for approximately 41,000 miles of an interstate highway. Highway planning for the purpose of clearing deteriorated or poverty-stricken areas began in 1938, when the United States government first deliberated giving assistance to states for interstate highways. Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture under President Franklin Roosevelt, proposed that highways routed through cities could accomplish "the elimination of unsightly and unsanitary districts." In the early 1940s, the American Concrete Institute urged the building of expressways through urban areas for "the elimination of slums and blighted areas." According to Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, over the next twenty years, the connection between highway construction and removal of African Americans was a common leitmotif of those who stood to profit from a federal road-building program. The American Road Builders Association informed President Harry S. Truman, near the end of the 1940s that if interstates were properly channeled through municipal areas, they could "contribute in a substantial manner to the elimination of slum and deteriorated areas."

In planning for the interstate system in the Tennessee, one of the consultations that the city of Nashville planners received recommended a route that went "eastward from Memphis along Route 70 S, then hugged the Louisville & Nashville Railroad tracks for several miles before continuing directly downtown between Broadway and Charlotte Avenues." However, this path came near Belle

Meade, Vanderbilt University, Baptist Hospital, and Centennial Park. Ignoring the consultants' recommendations, the State offered Nashville an alternative proposal. The substitute plan called for the expressway to parallel Charlotte, bend to the north to cross 28th Avenue North, and curve again toward Jefferson Street. While functionaries discussed the various plans, they never informed those who would be impacted how the area would be disrupted. This design effectively eviscerated North Nashville. Interstate 40 demolished a hundred square blocks, including sixteen blocks of stores along Jefferson Street. In addition to the hundreds of homes and business adversely impacted by Interstate 40, its route swerved between the nearly contiguous campuses of Tennessee A&I State University and the area around Fisk University and Meharry Medical College.

Jefferson Street's business and recreational corridor took on even more importance for African-American commerce after the Capitol Hill urban renewal program annihilated much of its African-American commercial district. Planners Clarke and Rapuano knew that the construction of the interstate expressway would form a "Chinese Wall" dividing and destroying the neighborhood. For much of the planning process, people in the African American community were uninformed. While officials filed the plan with Tennessee's Department of Highways and Public Works on September 15, 1958, the department "consistently refused" to admit that a path had been selected. Some nine years later—after reports revealed that 18th Avenue North was going to be widened to accommodate interstate traffic—the African American community finally became aware of its imminent threat. In response to the threat posed by the construction of the interstate, professors from Fisk and Tennessee A&I State Universities formed the Interstate 40 Steering Committee. As noted by Ben Houston in *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City*, after a search of

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the archives, it was revealed that that the original interstate route had been “somewhere near Vanderbilt.” This caused an eruption of anger and adding insult to injury, they discovered that a public hearing had taken place as required by law on May 15, 1957. However, notice of the hearing was not distributed to the press; rather, notices were displayed in post offices in all white neighborhoods, and each notice had the wrong date for the public hearing.

Members of the I-40 Steering Committee included Flournoy A. Coles, Iman Otey, Curlie McGruder, Dr. Edwin Mitchell, and Attorney Avon Williams, Jr. In October of 1967, Dr. Mitchell appeared before the Chamber of Commerce where he gave a scathing rebuke to the city’s white elite. He indicted the City as being a place where “super highways form concrete moats between Negro and white communities” and “huge jungles of compact housing” marked the homes of African Americans, whom he called “consumers of the slum rather than producers thereof.” In describing recent public policies that helped shape the realities facing African Americans in the way of Interstate 40, Mitchell stated, “Gentlemen, you of the chamber, the city, and state administrations endorsed this program, You Did Not Speak for US!” Dr. Mitchell ended his razor-sharp discourse by stating: “What brave and unthinking men you are!” Nashville’s role in the Civil Rights Movement possibly played a part in the racial tone of highway plans and opposition there; racial violence followed the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Nashville, which was already a hot-bed for demonstrations and civil rights organizing. Scholars assert that in Nashville, “many public policies had racial implications and racial intentions,” and the steering committee argued that the proposed highway route through the latter city was no exception.

Ultimately, the I-40 Steering Committee filed a legal suit to stop the construction of the interstate through the North Nashville community. Attorney Avon Williams, Sr. filed the suit in the U. S. District Court in Middle Tennessee claiming that the interstate planning discriminated against Nashvillians who lived in the path of the Interstate. On November 2, 1967, Judge Frank Gray determined that the public hearing was inadequate and filled with “irregularities, agreeing with the plaintiffs that I-40 would adversely impact North Nashville. However, after agreeing with the I-40 Steering Committee, Judge Gray ruled in favor of the defendants stating, “most of the evidence presented by the plaintiffs goes to the wisdom and not the legality of the highway department’s decision.” The Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Judge Gray’s decision and the U.S. Supreme

Court denied a review, effectively ending the Steering Committee’s legal battle. This was one of the first legal battles to stall the construction of an interstate on the grounds of racial discrimination. However, one result was a new federal directive “that no highway or other public works shall be implemented on the basis of hearings more than five years old.”

The outcomes of the Nashville stretch of Interstate 40 are difficult to challenge. Within a year of the I-40’s completion, most businesses in the neighborhoods surrounding the expressway experienced financial difficulty and some ceased operations. Additionally, property rates declined by nearly a third. More than 620 black homes, twenty-seven apartment houses, and six black churches were demolished and fifty local streets were dead-ended. As the Reverend Dr. Kelly Miller Smith noted, the interstate was “a bitter thing which tore the community apart.” Once a thriving residential, business, entertainment and recreational center within the African-American community, I-40 dissected and decimated Jefferson Street.

Linda T. Wynn

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