

Displacement in North and Northeast Portland – An Historical Overview

*“One of the realities is, there’s emotional damage and grief that takes place when a community is moved. It’s a real thing. [It’s like] when a person passes away, there’s a grieving process you have to go through. Well, our congregations—they face that. We’ve really had to work through that. We’re still working through it.”*

–Dr. Mark Strong  
Lead Pastor, Life Change Church

Throughout Portland’s history, housing opportunity and race relations have been inextricably linked. Beginning in 1919, changes to the Portland Realty Board’s Code of Ethics banned members from selling to African Americans, believing that a black presence within four blocks of a neighborhood would lower property values. For the next three decades, red lines drawn on a city map would dictate where people of color could live, buy property, or secure a bank loan, relegating them to a tiny, economically depressed eastside district called Albina.

By the Second World War, when 150,000 laborers from across the country made their way to the Columbia River to work in Henry Kaiser’s shipyards, Portland had already earned a reputation as a place where opportunity for African Americans was limited to work on the railroads or as domestics. As a result, fewer than 3,000 black residents called Portland home before wartime industry and the promise of high wages tripled their numbers—seemingly overnight.

A public housing shortage, however, left Portland unable to accommodate the sudden influx and Albina was too small to support the boom in the African American population. So arriving workers, black and white, made their home in Vanport, living side-by-side in a 650-acre complex erected on a flood plain by Kaiser himself, characterized by thin-walled buildings, mud, and the constant clamor of industry.

On Memorial Day in 1948, the Columbia rose 15 feet, turning Vanport into a lake and leaving 18,000 people homeless. One-quarter of them were African Americans, left to find their way in a city where they had never been welcome.

Ten years after Vanport, the redlining policy had been removed from the real estate code, but the practice itself persisted unofficially. Seventy-three percent of Portland’s black population, now in the tens of thousands, was concentrated in Albina. Limited employment opportunities for blacks meant that Albina was home to some of the city’s lowest income households. As blacks were routinely denied mortgages and financing to improve their properties, the aging Albina housing stock deteriorated into dilapidation.

But something else had also taken shape in Albina. Black businesses, community centers, and houses of worship had begun to spring up, as did local chapters of the Urban League and the NAACP. A vibrant cultural center not unlike a “Harlem on the Willamette” was emerging in the heart of North and Northeast Portland. At the Williams Avenue YWCA, the Oregon Federation of Colored Women hosted scholarship teas, while Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was often used to host formal dinners. Blessed Martin’s Day Nursery on North Williams cared for children while their mothers searched for employment in the wartime economy. To the residents of North and Northeast Portland, these were more than buildings: they provided the foundations of community; they were cornerstones of a cultural identity.

In the ensuing decades, a series of city plans would alter the face of the community that had been built there. Federal legislation in the mid-twentieth century encouraged cities to redevelop blighted areas. In Central Albina, hundreds of homes were razed to make way for the Memorial Coliseum, then Interstate 5.

In 1967, Emanuel Hospital announced plans for a new medical campus to be located in Central Albina. To make space for development, Emanuel cleared land of more than 200 properties. Strong community opposition led to a Replacement Housing Agreement in 1971, signed by Emanuel Hospital, the Housing Authority, the Portland Development Commission, the Model Cities Citizens’ Planning Board, and the City Demonstration Agency. The agreement promised 180-300 housing units would be developed as replacements for demolished homes, but those homes were never built. All told, Albina’s Eliot neighborhood alone lost half of its residents—3,000 people—to involuntary displacement between 1960 and 1970.

*“My sister lives in the house we grew up in. Our neighborhood was devastated by the expansion and take-over of our neighborhood by Emanuel Hospital, the freeway, and the city of Portland, which built a lot across the street from our house. These expansions destroyed the homes and neighborhoods we grew up in. Those who remained behind saw their neighborhood blighted and were unable to sell their homes. Only three original homes remain there today. New condo units were built and increased property taxes for the original homeowners.” –Mary, North Portland*

Over the next decade, swaths of North and Northeast Portland experienced significant decline and sharp increases in crime. The city began efforts to revitalize the area in 1989 with the Albina Community Plan (adopted in 1993). The plan established conservation districts to preserve Eliot’s remaining historic structures. While it brought about some significant improvements, rising property costs continued to force residents out of the area to resettle on the edges of the city and beyond.

*"I grew up near Jefferson High School. My family tended a garden on the south side of Jefferson, across the street. Today, those lots are additional field space for the school. In the African American community, family members stay in the neighborhood to remain close to each other. As housing costs rise, families are forced to move away from each other, breaking up the community. Many families that grew up in North and Northeast Portland are now forced to move away from the neighborhoods where they have lived their entire lives. When the Vanport floods occurred, the African American community was displaced. When Emanuel Hospital was built, my community was displaced. When the Coliseum was built, my community was displaced. When the Rose Garden was built, my community was displaced. Now, with the new high-end housing and businesses getting built, my community and I are getting displaced." – Marion, Portland*

From 1990 to 2000, the number of African Americans living in the area declined by 3,800. In 2000, city planners identified 4,000 acres along North Interstate Avenue for urban renewal, establishing the city's largest urban renewal area. Although twenty urban renewal areas have existed within the city since the late 1950s, few others have included substantial residential areas. The Interstate Corridor Urban Renewal Area (ICURA), however, contains sections of 10 neighborhoods, many of them historically African American neighborhoods. In the next ten years, the population of African Americans declined by another 7,650.

When the Portland Development Commission announced in November 2013 that it had secured Trader Joe's as the anchor tenant for a commercial development planned for NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd and NE Alberta St., the proposed development in the heart of a historically African American neighborhood felt to some in the community like an all-too-familiar echo from the past. In response to a call from African American community leaders for investments to prevent further displacement, Mayor Hales and housing Commissioner Dan Saltzman proposed that an additional \$20 million in urban renewal funds be set aside to support affordable housing in the Interstate Corridor. The Portland Development Commission and the City Council readily agreed and voted in favor of the proposal.

But the weight of this history demanded a new approach. The City recognized it couldn't develop this plan with ready-made answers—it needed to listen to the community first. Through a series of forums and other outreach efforts, the Portland Housing Bureau gathered input from hundreds of community members impacted by or at risk of displacement. The N/NE Neighborhood Housing Strategy recommendations that followed represent a strong step as a City toward acknowledging and addressing this history, and moving forward.

