

The Language of “Blight” and Easton’s “Lebanese Town”: Understanding a Neighborhood’s Loss to Urban Renewal

WHEN ONE APPROACHES EASTON, PENNSYLVANIA, from the south on Route 611, the first views of the city are a McDonald’s restaurant and a small convenience store plaza to the north and the worn parking lot of a Quality Inn motel directly ahead. Adjacent to the motel are a now closed Perkins Restaurant and a movie theater with a large sign still announcing the films it was showing when it ceased operations in January 2006. Behind the Quality Inn are paved empty lots and two tall apartment buildings erected in the late 1960s that house senior citizens. There is no evidence that this was once the site of a thriving, close-knit multiethnic and multiracial neighborhood populated by Lebanese and Italian immigrants, their descendants, and African Americans. Aside from the nearby Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church, built in 1986 after its predecessor was demolished in 1969, and a dead-end street named after a prominent Lebanese American resident, nothing remains of Easton’s “Lebanese Town,” which was razed in the early 1960s. And yet it lives on in the memories of its former residents. This article explores the loss of this neighborhood, whose demolition was the result of an urban renewal project that commenced in 1963.

Easton was following a national trend. Since the first half of the twentieth century, Americans who were worried about a perceived rampant

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urban decline identified “blight” as the main enemy of the city.¹ By the 1930s, local leaders concerned with the economic health of their city centers cited the “same litany of ills—declining population, dilapidated neighborhoods, declining property values and declining revenues from commercial and industrial sites, snarled traffic.”² Across the country, urban planners, officials, and citizens determined that physical rejuvenation of the urban core would address these problems. Conflict emerged over how to proceed. Social workers and some urban leaders pushed for public housing, while real estate industry representatives promoted private enterprise. The federal government became a central actor in this process with the Housing Act of 1949, which historian Alexander von Hoffman has described as a failed compromise, the product of “seven years of bitter legislative stalemate and a shotgun wedding between enemy lobbying goals,” or even as a victory for real estate industry interests.³ Title 1 of the act provided one billion dollars in loans to eliminate slums and “blighted” areas through rebuilding. Localities received federal funds and the power of eminent domain to help them purchase and clear lands that would be earmarked for sale at a reduced cost to private developers, who, it was hoped, would be enticed to rebuild.

Over the next decade, cities of all sizes took advantage of this and its successor programs, altering urban America to a staggering degree. Yet projects often fell short of expectations. Local redevelopment organizations did not always comply with federal requirements to replace demolished housing with additional housing units, exacerbating existing housing shortages for lower-income families.⁴ Especially in the early years, cities practiced “bulldozer” renewal, eradicating whole neighborhoods. Programs sometimes eliminated not “slums,” but “low-rent” neighborhoods, as Herbert Gans has shown in his classic work on Boston’s West

¹ Mark Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933–1965* (New York, 1975), 11.

² Kevin Fox Gotham, “A City without Slums: Urban Renewal, Public Housing, and Downtown Revitalization in Kansas City, Missouri,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 60 (2001): 292. See also Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940–1985* (Baltimore, 1990).

³ Alexander von Hoffman, “A Study in Contradictions: The Origins and Legacy of the Housing Act of 1949,” *Housing Policy Debate* 2 (2000): 299; Gotham, “City without Slums,” esp. 294. Gotham highlights the role played by the real estate industry spokespersons affiliated with the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) and its research arm, the Urban Land Institute, which recommended that cities condemn the blighted areas near the Central Business District (CBD) and sell or lease the lands to private developers for rebuilding.

⁴ Von Hoffman, “Study in Contradictions,” 318; Gelfand, *Nation of Cities*, 208.

End. Again and again, racial minorities were disproportionately affected. Projects often proceeded despite civic outcry, and in city after city, cleared lands remained vacant. Mark Gelfand observed, "Throughout the country, wrecking crews leveled the homes and businesses of urban Americans, who then watched their former properties sprout weeds and remain fallow for years."⁵

Much of the scholarship on the politics and legacy of postwar urban renewal has highlighted the nation's larger cities, such as Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Kansas City, New York, and Newark.⁶ Certainly these cities featured the most extensive and costly projects. It is sometimes forgotten that officials in smaller towns, such as Easton, Pennsylvania, with a population of approximately thirty-five thousand in the 1950s, also sought and secured the same federal funds. In fact, by 1961, almost 28 percent of cities of twenty-five thousand to fifty thousand inhabitants were participating in federally funded renewal projects.⁷ We have more to learn about how experiences in smaller towns compare and how their residents understand today the causes and consequences of the programs that, in many cases, permanently altered life in their cities. As David Schuyler writes, "how small and medium-sized communities . . . attempted to halt urban decline and attract downtown the new commercial developments that were spiraling outward from the center is an important though largely unexamined component of our recent history."⁸ This study, based on interviews with former residents and current and former city officials, newspaper coverage, and city planning department archives, shows how local elites exploited ambiguities in the federal legislation to benefit the few at the expense of the many.⁹ It also explores an

⁵ Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (New York, 1962); Gelfand, *Nation of Cities*, 212, 156.

⁶ Gans, *Urban Villagers*; Gelfand, *Nation of Cities*; Dennis R. Judd, *The Politics of Urban Planning: The East St. Louis Experience* (Urbana, IL, 1973); Harold Kaplan, *Urban Renewal Politics: Slum Clearance in Newark* (New York, 1963); Kirk R. Petshek, *The Challenge of Urban Reform: Policies and Programs in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1973); Teaford, *Rough Road to Renaissance*; Peter H. Rossi, *The Politics of Urban Renewal: The Chicago Findings* (New York, 1961); Clarence N. Stone, *Economic Growth and Neighborhood Discontent: System Bias in the Urban Renewal Program of Atlanta* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1976).

⁷ Basil Zimmer, *Rebuilding Cities: The Effects of Displacement and Relocation on Small Businesses* (Chicago, 1964), 13.

⁸ David Schuyler, *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1940–1980* (University Park, PA, 2002), 7.

⁹ This project involved ethnographic research involving interviews, discussions, and participant observation complemented by archival research. Our study began in January 2006 and continued

understudied dimension of renewal—namely its lasting human legacy—by examining the attitudes of those who were impacted by renewal towards both the recent past and their city government.

Finally, the Easton example is notable because the neighborhood in question was unusually mixed, both racially and ethnically. The creation of the black ghetto in most northern cities dates to the early twentieth century.¹⁰ This was not the case in this part of Easton. This integrated neighborhood was home to upwardly mobile blacks, and it had several African American homeowners, some of whom purchased houses as early as 1930.¹¹ An exploration of Easton's "Lebanese Town," composed of almost equal proportions of "Americans," "Lebanese," Italian Americans, and African Americans, allows us to better understand the dynamics of renewal for one of the country's rare integrated northern neighborhoods.¹²

Easton's "Lebanese Town"

It's a muggy summer evening in the neighborhood that many call Lebanese Town. A group of men sits drinking Turkish coffee and talking "old country" politics in the smoke-filled Karam's Café at Lehigh and Bank streets. Outdoors on South Fourth and Lehigh streets, a few white-haired women in black dresses and black stockings sit on sagging front

through summer 2008. We conducted interviews and conversations with roughly forty-five people of Lebanese, Italian, and African American ancestry. We located former residents of Lebanese descent through their parish, which is housed in a new building in downtown Easton. We met many of the neighborhood's former black residents at a reunion held at St. John Lutheran Church. Most interviews were taped and transcribed.

¹⁰ Following a period of relatively tranquil late nineteenth-century residential integration, industrialization, the use of blacks as strikebreakers, and increased social segregation all conspired to start most northern cities on a path toward accelerating residential segregation in the early twentieth century. See Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 19–31. See also Arnold R. Hirsch, "'Containment' on the Home Front: Race and Federal Housing Policy from the New Deal to the Cold War," *Journal of Urban History* 26 (2000): 158–89; Kaplan, *Urban Renewal Politics*; John H. Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton, NJ, 1983); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), 48–50.

¹¹ Black homeowners in 1930 included Walter Hall at 341 Lehigh Street and Aaron Good at 339 Lehigh Street.

¹² Only a few studies explore the impact of renewal on integrated neighborhoods. See Guian McKee, "Liberal Ends through Illiberal Means: Race, Urban Renewal, and Community in the Eastwick Section of Philadelphia, 1949–1990," *Journal of Urban History* 27 (2001): 547–83; and Wendell Pritchett, "Race and Community in Postwar Brooklyn: The Brownsville Neighborhood Council and the Politics of Urban Renewal," *Journal of Urban History* 27 (2001): 445–70.

stoops, gazing at the shouting children who dart among the dusky shadows on the street. . . . Nearby, adults and kids savor refreshing, homemade lemon ice from Thomas’ corner grocery store at the bottom of the Lehigh Street hill. On most warm days like this one, South Fourth and roughly a three block radius surrounding it pulsate with the sounds of voices speaking English and Arabic—often a lively combination of the two—while aromas of garlic and baking bread lace the air.¹³

Journalist Eileen Kenna described the Lebanese neighborhood in this way in 1983 as part of a series of articles marking the twentieth anniversary of the neighborhood’s demolition. “Lebanese Town” was in downtown Easton near the railroad station, west of the city center. It was bordered by the Lehigh River and Lehigh and Washington streets to the south, South Fifth Street to the west, South Fourth Street to the east, and Ferry Street on the north. A ninety-year-old, life-long Easton resident and local historian, Mrs. Godfrey, described it as a lively and racially mixed section at the city center with densely packed, two- and three-story houses inhabited by shopkeepers, factory workers, laborers, and their families.¹⁴ While to local Eastonians it was known as “Syrian Town,” and as “Lebanese Town” after World War II, and despite the marked Lebanese character of Kenna’s depiction, it was not exclusively Lebanese. In our calculations, based on the 1963 city directory for the streets concerned in the immediate renewal area, 20 percent of the households were “Lebanese,” 25 percent Italian and Italian American, 30 percent African American, with the remaining 25 percent Irish, Greek, Pennsylvania Dutch, or Anglo and other extractions described by our interviewees as “American.”¹⁵

The neighborhood underwent considerable ethnic succession. In the 1880s, its residents included “native”-born residents of German stock intermixed with immigrants from Wales, Ireland, England, and several Germanic states.¹⁶ They were succeeded by eastern European and

¹³ Eileen Kenna, “Lebanese Town’ Now a State of Mind,” *Easton Express*, Jan. 2, 1983, A1.

¹⁴ Mrs. Godfrey, interview by Rachel Scarpato and Andrea Smith, June 13, 2007, Easton, PA. The names of interviewees are pseudonyms used to protect individuals’ identities, as is the standard practice in cultural anthropology.

¹⁵ Neighborhood data are compiled from *Polk’s Easton (Northampton County, Pa.) City Directory . . . 1963* (Boston, MA, 1963), from which we developed a house-by-house database of neighborhood residents prior to demolition. Once the businesses (14) and vacant apartments (14) were eliminated, 141 residences remained. Former residents themselves attributed ethnicities in focus-group settings; these ethnic labels were in turn checked against the individual census records.

¹⁶ These Germanic states included Wurtemberg, Bavaria, and Hesse. See U.S. Census, 1880, for Easton, Northampton County, PA.

Russian Jews and immigrants from southern Italy, who arrived in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷ Easton's Lebanese began to arrive by the turn of the century.¹⁸ They were Maronites, virtually all from the village of Kfarsab in the Al Koura province of contemporary Lebanon. Their history parallels wider Lebanese migration patterns. Most worked as peddlers, apparently settling in Easton at the request of a New York supplier.¹⁹ New York City had become the center of this enterprise by the 1880s, and from there networks of suppliers and peddling circuits spread out into other regions of the country.²⁰ Easton's peddlers traveled by foot as far as ten miles away, selling such items as thread, needles, buttons, combs, or shoes to farmers in the rural areas. The ideal peddler career trajectory involved slow but steady savings, leading to the purchase of a wagon and, ultimately, an independent dry goods store. By the 1920s, this transition was already underway in Easton. Of the 112 people in the city identified in the 1920 census as "Assyrian" or from the "Syrian Arab Republic," 40 percent worked as peddlers, 28 percent were merchants selling dry goods or fruits, and a remaining 26 percent were laborers at local iron, steel, or hosiery mills.²¹ Households by this time often contained extended families and included second-generation Pennsylvania-born children along with additional relatives, such as the household heads' parents, siblings, or

¹⁷ The majority of Easton's late nineteenth-century Italian immigrants came from the provinces of Calabria and Sicily. There were 341 Italians in Northampton County in 1900, 1,582 in 1910, and 3,723 in 1920. They were attracted by opportunities in local quarries, construction, the Bethlehem Steel plant, or local silk mills. Richard Grifo and Anthony F. Noto, *A History of Italian Immigration to the Easton Area* (Easton, PA, 1964), 14, 10, 12.

¹⁸ "Syrian" immigration to the United States commenced sometime after 1860, peaked in the late nineteenth century, and continued until World War I. Immigration came to a virtual halt with the U.S. Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, but it began anew at the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict and again during the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s. This immigration was dominated by Maronite, Orthodox, and Melkite Christians of the eastern-rite sects and by residents of the autonomous Mount Lebanon district. By 1910, "Syrians" were found in all states, with populations concentrated in such cities as New York, Detroit, Boston, and Worcester, Massachusetts. When the U.S. Census Bureau first used a separate "Syrian" category in 1920, there were 51,900 people so identified. See Sarah Gualtieri, "Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis: Women and Syrian Transatlantic Migration, 1878–1924," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24 (2004): 67–78; Kemal Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860–1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17 (1985): 175–209; Philip K. Hitti, *The Syrians in America* (1924; repr. Piscataway, NJ, 2005).

¹⁹ Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church (Easton, PA), "History of the Easton Lebanese," <http://www.mountlebanon.org/histeast.html> (accessed Apr. 3, 2006).

²⁰ Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale, IL, 1985), 139.

²¹ Of the Easton residents listed as being of Syrian descent in the 1920 U.S. Census, 33 percent (35 individuals) were born in Pennsylvania, and all of these had birth dates after 1907.

cousins. The increasing concentration of outsiders from “Syria” raised some local alarm. An intracommunity conflict in 1916 led journalists to write of the “rioting” of “warring Assyrians” on Lehigh and South Bank streets and suggests that even the police were nervous.²² By the 1930s, however, most Lebanese immigrant families had transitioned from being tenants to homeowners.²³ This process accelerated after World War II, by which time most families of Russian Jewish, Italian, and Pennsylvania German descent had left for the surrounding suburbs and the city’s more exclusive neighborhoods, such as College Hill, leaving behind a neighborhood composed of remaining Italian- and Lebanese-origin immigrants, their descendants, and African Americans.

Easton’s black population was bimodal. A large contingent was recently transplanted from the South, participants in the Great Migration, as was typical for industrial regions of Pennsylvania.²⁴ The other source was a large extended family descended from free blacks who traced their ancestry to Aaron Hoff, who arrived in Easton in 1834.²⁵ Many members of this family joined the First Colored Lutheran Church, affiliated with the current St. John Lutheran Church and located to this day at Ferry and Fourth streets.²⁶ Both “southern” and longtime “local” blacks lived in the neighborhood known as “Lebanese Town.”

“We never used to lock our doors”

Easton’s “Lebanese Town” lives on in the memories of the former residents we interviewed for this study. When we met an interviewee for the first time, he or she often exclaimed, “We never used to lock our doors!” One woman told us that her aunt did not even own a key until renewal forced her out of her home. This frequent refrain indicated a sense of

²² Acting Street Sergeant Keller took ten other police officers with him to make arrests of a few individuals, suggesting that the authorities were preparing for the worst. *Easton Argus*, Nov. 29, 1916.

²³ Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church, “History of Easton Lebanese”; U.S. Census, 1930, for Easton, Northampton County, PA.

²⁴ Alferdteen Harrison, *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson, MS, 1991).

²⁵ Aaron O. Hoff and his wife, Diana, were born in New Jersey around 1815 and 1820, respectively. See U.S. Census, 1850 and 1860, for Northampton County, PA. They had eight children. Their descendants lived in the neighborhood, and many of them are still members of the St. John Lutheran Church.

²⁶ This information came from interviewees. The church was built in 1843 as Christ’s Evangelical Church. See *History of Northampton County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1877), 188–89.

safety and familiarity with one's neighbors and implicitly contrasted practices found in his or her new neighborhood today. In the old neighborhood, the interviewees told us, people used to look after each other. We heard this from interviewees of all backgrounds. A woman descended from Easton's early free black population described it as a "real" neighborhood where "you were everybody's child." Because people worked different hours in the same locale and/or quite close by, someone was always on the street getting ready for work or coming home. "The streets were always alive," another woman explained. She said that she would return home from work at a nearby Lebanese tavern at two o'clock in the morning to find older men still on the stoops talking. Lights would soon shine from the home of the local baker.²⁷

Another common theme was the rich texture of urban life, a texture determined in large part by the close interpenetration of residences and industry. People worked and lived in the downtown area. They discussed at length the nearby factories and businesses that employed them or their family members; their neighbors ran a great variety of independent shops. Before we arrived to his home, Joseph had prepared a list, from memory, of forty businesses and religious institutions that were destroyed, and in our interview with him, he focused on these businesses and how they provided a vibrant social life for the youth growing up there.²⁸

But it was the emphasis our interviewees placed on the neighborhood's ethnic and racial diversity that most surprised us and led to the present study. Without prompting, all of our interviewees noted the neighborhood's unusual racial and ethnic diversity. Eighty-year-old Lebanese American Anne, when talking about her favorite dress shop, Grollman's, said, "When I was in Easton and I would see something that I really wanted, Grollman's would order it for me. They were one of the best—they were a wonderful family. See, I'm Lebanese—they were Jewish. In those days, the Lebanese, the Jews, the Italians, the Afro-Americans . . . all lived mixed, one right after the other." Anne regularly identified people as members of one of several distinct ethnic groups: "Afro-American,"

²⁷ Susan, interview by Rachel Scarpato and Andrea Smith, June 27, 2007, Easton, PA; Sandra, interview by Andrea Smith, July 15, 2008, Easton, PA; Francine, focus group discussion led by Rachel Scarpato and Andrea Smith, June 21, 2007, Sammy's Place, Easton, PA.

²⁸ Joseph, interview by Rachel Scarpato and Andrea Smith, June 27, 2007, Easton, PA. Joseph's list includes eight general stores, one bakery, one grade school, three churches, two gas stations, four restaurants, two cleaners, two butcher shops, two tailors, a shoemaker, a print shop, a flower shop, six barrooms, a club, an appliance store, a men's clothing store, a pharmacy, an ice cream parlor, and a state liquor store.

“Lebanese,” “Italian,” or “Jewish.” She explained, “They lived right next door, right across the street from us, around the corner on Fourth Street, DiMaggio. I don’t know whether he remembers anything or not—he was a small boy . . . but the Italians, the Afro-Americans, the Jewish—Sift, they had a bakery and they got to be famous—and the Goods! The Goods was Afro-American, and they had a home which was gorgeous.” In Anne’s view, diversity was a positive feature of the neighborhood, and she often likened the neighbors’ interactions to those of a large family. “Now, we went to each other’s funerals, we went to each other’s weddings, we were there for each other . . . and that is something that I will never

While neighborhood residents of all ethnicities cited the locale’s unusual racial and ethnic mix, we did identify some degree of microlevel segregation. Black former residents pointed out that blacks were concentrated along Maple, Shawde Court, Washington, and West streets. However, a glimpse at the families living on South Fourth Street at the time of renewal (1963) reveals a block-by-block mixture of peoples of all of these backgrounds (see table 1).

Interviewees also underscored the integrated nature of the neighborhood’s businesses. This was the first feature Mrs. Godfrey remembered when she suggested that we research this past. At length she described “taverns” run by Lebanese women that catered to the local African Americans as well as the Lebanese. Thus, while businesses were known to be “Lebanese,” “Italian,” or “Afro-American,” they attracted a pluralistic clientele. Anne noted, “There was an African American poolroom on Bank Street, South Bank Street—there was a poolroom there. And it was a hanging place for the Lebanese, Italians, the Afro-Americans and the Jewish—they all used to get together.”³⁰

“Redevelopment ruined Easton”

Many people we met seemed stunned by the dramatic change to the cityscape and still had difficulty comprehending what had happened over forty years later. The urban renewal that they experienced was so complete that many former residents continue to talk about it with a mixture of confusion and disbelief. Susan, an Italian American woman in her late sixties, met us in her home and brought us photocopied images of some of the vanished streets. While showing us a picture of the “Free” Bridge

²⁹ Anne, interview by Rachel Scarpato and Andrea Smith, June 22, 2007, Easton, PA.

Table 1. Ethnicity of South Fourth Street Residents

Address	Name	Ethnicity	
111	South Fourth	Barkat Jos	Lebanese
111	South Fourth	Isaac Wakeem P	Lebanese
111	South Fourth	Manento Domenick	Italian
111	South Fourth	Sabo Rose Mrs	Lebanese
111	South Fourth	Symia Leonard J	Lebanese
113	South Fourth	Miner Robt H	Lebanese wife
113	South Fourth	Samia Nazah Mrs	Lebanese
113	South Fourth	Tine Bessie Mrs	
117	South Fourth	Hagerty Margt T Mrs	
119.5	South Fourth	Arner Emily S	
119.5	South Fourth	Kutz Margt A 2	
121	South Fourth	Fadero Jas	Italian
121	South Fourth	Lane Lillian	
121	South Fourth	Shumar Elias B	Lebanese
123	South Fourth	Avianantos John	Greek
129	South Fourth	Isaac Barry P	Lebanese
132	South Fourth	Loprete Wm D	Italian
134	South Fourth	Canone Wallace J	Lebanese
138	South Fourth	John Namie R	Lebanese
138	South Fourth	McClary Viola Mrs	African American
140	South Fourth	Good Russell	African American
140	South Fourth	Unger Frank	
144	South Fourth	Boulous Jos E	Lebanese
144	South Fourth	Canone Elliot J	Lebanese
144	South Fourth	D'Angelo Liboria C	Italian
148	South Fourth	Schooley Geo A	Italian
148	South Fourth	Transue Richd E	
149	South Fourth	Jabour Geo	Lebanese
149	South Fourth	Mansour Farhat	Lebanese
150	South Fourth	Burkot Mary Mrs	Lebanese
152	South Fourth	Jabbour Geo J	Lebanese
153	South Fourth	Badway Jas	Lebanese
154	South Fourth	Scalzo Rose M Mrs	Italian
154	South Fourth	Speer Lillian H Mrs	
155	South Fourth	Melhem Izzat	Lebanese
156	South Fourth	Isaac Jos P	Lebanese
157	South Fourth	Saad Harry A	Lebanese

158	South Fourth	Daniels Bessie A	Lebanese
159	South Fourth	Smith Fred J	
202	South Fourth	Staszewski Edw	Lebanese wife
202	South Fourth	Torres Getulio	Italian
204	South Fourth	Rose Esther G	African American
204	South Fourth	Rose Ruth M	African American
204	South Fourth	Winkey Eleanore H Mrs	African American
205	South Fourth	Melhem Jahjah	Lebanese
206	South Fourth	Shumar Rose Mrs	Lebanese
208	South Fourth	Hanni Anthony J	Lebanese
209	South Fourth	Hanni Jos	Lebanese
209	South Fourth	Merritt Edw F jr	
209	South Fourth	Rose Robt G	
211	South Fourth	Salin Sarkin	Lebanese
212	South Fourth	Karam Geo	Lebanese
212	South Fourth	Rizzo John	Italian
213	South Fourth	Hubei Elmer P	
214	South Fourth	Gioieni Chas J	Italian
215	South Fourth	Haddad Lewis	Lebanese
216	South Fourth	Joseph Jacob A	Lebanese
217	South Fourth	Jebeir Tannas	Lebanese
218	South Fourth	Lauer Mahlon H	Lebanese wife
219	South Fourth	Bentz Chas E	Lebanese wife/PA Dutch
220	South Fourth	Johnston Carl F	African American
221.5	South Fourth	McCullough Eva Mrs	African American
221.5	South Fourth	Stull Jean Mrs	
222	South Fourth	Joseph Jabour J	Lebanese
224	South Fourth	Essid Ferod	Lebanese
227	South Fourth	Oliver Geo E	Lebanese
231	South Fourth	Badway Jos	Lebanese
300	South Fourth	Thomas Helen Mrs	Lebanese
304	South Fourth	Koury Frank	Lebanese
308	South Fourth	Bachman Florence E	

Source: *Polk's Easton (Northampton County, Pa.) City Directory . . . 1963* (Boston, MA, 1963). Ethnicities were determined by former residents and census data. Blank ethnicity denotes "American" or unknown. Note that the Lehigh-Washington street demolition targeted the west side of the street (odd numbers). The east side was demolished in the Riverside Drive project.

with homes in the background, she added, “You can see here the amount of homes they tore down. I don’t know why they did that.” Mrs. Godfrey’s assessment that project backers were “radicals” was shared by Susan’s husband, Joseph, a retired high school teacher, who described the process as fevered. “They waved their hands and it was gone.” He felt that the area had not been in bad shape at all. “Some houses in the back alleys may not have been perfect, but even those were nice. But they just mowed them down.” The philosophy of the time contrasted with today’s “spot redevelopment,” he explained. “In those days, if you had one bad house, you took out the whole block.” He added, “Once you start leveling, where do you draw the line?”³¹

People often discuss the project in terms that suggest a murky notion of the process at work. When asked how the decision was made to demolish his store, one eighty-eight-year-old grocer said simply, “Redevelopment came and they didn’t care about you.” “Redevelopment” simply arrived in Easton. When asked who was in charge of urban renewal, another man replied, “I don’t know who it was—I’m sure it had to come out of Washington, then it trickled down into the locals. They used to call it Easton Redevelopment Authority, they had to do what they had to do because, you know, it was probably their job. It just happened, that’s all.” Sometimes people talked about “the City” as the principle actor. A “Lebanese” woman in her late seventies explained, “The City—the City had the say-so.”³²

For many, “redevelopment” was a villain. One woman told us, “Once the redevelopment came, it broke up the community.” Her friend concurred. She discussed life in the former neighborhood in rosy terms, concluding, “until the redevelopment came to improve Easton.” In most cases, people used “redevelopment” to refer to a general process, but sometimes it was unclear if they were also referring to the responsible local agency, the Easton Redevelopment Authority (ERA). Anne stated

³⁰ Mrs. Godfrey, interview by Rachel Scarpato and Andrea Smith, February 7, 2007, Easton, PA; Anne, interview, June 22, 2007.

³¹ Susan and Joseph, interview by Rachel Scarpato and Andrea Smith, June 27, 2007, Easton, PA; Mrs. Godfrey, interview, June 13, 2007.

³² Oliver, focus group discussion led by Rachel Scarpato and Andrea Smith, June 28, 2007, Sammy’s Place, Easton, PA; John, interview by Rachel Scarpato, July 12, 2007, Easton, PA; Ellen, interview by Rachel Scarpato, July 5, 2007, Easton, PA. People we spoke with used simplified ethnic labels (“Lebanese” rather than “Lebanese American”) as a shorthand to identify themselves and others. We employ their labels here, but since the people they discussed were usually U.S. citizens, we place these labels in quotation marks.

outright in the first minutes of our conversation, "Now, who ruined Easton? You could put it in [your] paper: redevelopment ruined Easton!" These statements reflect real alienation from local government and the political process. In their narratives, "redevelopment" appears akin to a force of nature that arrived and then left, a process into which residents had little input or influence and one seemingly void of human actors.³³

Other interviewees saw redevelopment in Easton as only a microcosm of larger urban renewal efforts around the country. The realization that "redevelopment" was happening nationwide allowed our interviewees to feel that they were not suffering alone. When discussing redevelopment in Easton, a bartender in her late fifties asked her friends, "Didn't the same thing happen in Scranton?" That similar renewal processes occurred just seventy miles northeast of Easton illustrated the prevalence and extensiveness of "redevelopment." A "Lebanese" grocer in his eighties told us that "redevelopment was happening all over . . . the same thing happened to my mother's two sisters in Providence, Rhode Island."³⁴

Today, others blame specific individuals. When we met a group of former residents for the first time at a local tavern, one woman in her fifties was quite clear about who destroyed her neighborhood. "Mayor George Smith!" Francine shouted out to us between bites of hamburger. "They gave my parents \$5,300 for their house," she added. "They were the first to go." Joseph also mentioned Mayor Smith and added, laughing, "They named a bridge after the man who destroyed our city." Yet Smith, mayor when the project was conceived and carried out, was not the only person impugned. Other interviewees blamed former members of the Easton Redevelopment Authority, who they felt must have made money on the side. And yet no clear consensus emerged regarding who was behind the project and stood to gain from it. Thus, like people who discussed the process in vague terms, those who identified specific villains also were puzzled by the whole process. When we asked Joseph who had benefited from redevelopment, he replied "Who knows?! I wish I could tell you." He suggested that perhaps the owner of a small gas station benefited, adding, "Someone benefited, you know someone did. Money went into someone's pocket, I'm sure."³⁵

While they apparently did not know exactly who was running the

³³ Francine, focus group discussion, June 21, 2007; Anne, interview, June 22, 2007.

³⁴ Sally, focus group discussion, June 21, 2007, Sammy's Place, Easton, PA; Oliver, focus group discussion, June 28, 2007.

³⁵ Francine, focus group discussion, June 21, 2007; Joseph, interview, June 27, 2007.

renewal project, former residents did have a clear sense of the rationale city officials had given for it. These authorities, many said, thought their neighborhood was a great source of “blight,” an assessment they passionately contested. As Francine told us, “They said that the area was ‘blighted,’ but it really wasn’t. In the eyes of the mayor, the area was ‘blighted.’” Susan also stated emphatically, “Most of the homes they tore down were brick. Politicians at the time would tell you that they were crap, but they really weren’t.” Ellen explained, “They said that our houses were slums. Our houses were not slums. Hardwood floors? Every house had hardwood floors, oak, mahogany.” Former homeowners consistently defended the quality of their properties, often giving elaborate descriptions of their homes that had been razed. Anne, for instance, told us, “I had a finished-off cellar, I had a beautiful cellar, I had it all done over like an apartment. And my first floor, I had all hardwood floors. . . . I had paneling in every room. . . . I had a beautiful picture window. My home was . . . brought past up to date. It was beautiful.”³⁶

Another man contrasted the homes they were encouraged to move into with the quality of homes the city wanted to tear down:

They wanted us to move, they said “how about if we move you to Wilson Borough?” . . . Between Fifteenth and Sixteenth streets there were townhouses, very small, one, two, three bedrooms—they wanted us to move there. The homes we used to live in, 149 South Fourth Street, where the windows were, they had marble . . . we had solid oak steps going up, three stories plus a full basement. They were built with double brick, they were fantastic buildings, large buildings, large rooms.

In his view, city officials labeled the homes as blighted so that they could tear them down. “That’s how they labeled them to rip them down, you know, by eminent domain.”³⁷

The Specter of the Suburbs and Urban Decline

Easton’s “Lebanese Town” was eradicated in stages by a series of renewal projects. The first, the “Lehigh-Washington Street” project, targeted the very heart of the Lebanese community and is our focus here.

³⁶ Francine, focus group discussion, June 21, 2007; Susan, interview, June 27, 2007; Ellen, interview, July 5, 2007; Anne, interview, June 22, 2007.

³⁷ John, interview, July 12, 2007.

Described as "one of the most drawn out and difficult urban renewal projects in the Lehigh Valley," this was the fourth redevelopment project undertaken by city officials, who were facing postwar deindustrialization and the development of the rural areas ringing the city.³⁸ Easton had been the region's premiere shopping center, but by the 1950s it was losing its allure to suburban malls, and its population was declining. A report on the Central Business District (CBD) noted, "The population of Easton declined by over 3,000 people between 1950 and 1960," representing a nearly 10 percent population loss.³⁹ The report went on to argue that population decline was not the entire story. Instead, Easton's share of consumer spending was "declining absolutely and relatively." Even though retail sales in the CBD continued to increase between 1954 and 1958, city leaders were worried because this increase was marginal and dwarfed by growth in the surrounding areas. Analysts argued that downtown businesses could not present an "atmosphere conducive to attracting shoppers"; they described building conditions as "generally poor" and parking as inadequate, and they lamented that the "mixed utilization of land fail[ed] to create an aesthetic appearance." The report noted the real risk of further erosion of the CBD, the city's most important sector of the tax base.⁴⁰ Reports such as this one convinced city officials that they needed to revitalize the commercial portion of downtown Easton to draw suburbanites back to the city's shopping district.

The timing of a natural disaster proved fortuitous for development interests. In the wake of flooding caused by Hurricane Diane in 1955, the City Planning Commission "seized the opportunity" to qualify 197 city acres along the Lehigh and Delaware rivers for redevelopment under the Federal Urban Renewal Program.⁴¹ Despite the fact that there was "no discernible loss of the historic structures that lined the waterfront," as Timothy Hare has written, the city's renewal efforts after the flood left an "unprecedented wake of architectural destruction."⁴² The Easton Redevelopment Authority commenced its first project, the Canal Street

³⁸ "Difficult' Renewal Job Coming to End in Easton," *Allentown Morning Call*, July 18, 1973.

³⁹ Joint Planning Commission Lehigh-Northampton Counties, "Easton Central Business District" (research report, typescript, n.d.), 1, Planning and Redevelopment Archives, City Hall, Easton, PA.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Annual Report of the City of Easton . . . 1958* (Easton, PA, 1959), 34.

⁴² Timothy Hare, "Governmental Role in the Decentralization of the Historic Area of Easton, PA from 1945 to 1960" (independent study project, Department of History, East Stroudsburg

project, one year after the hurricane (see figure 1). This project involved the demolition of 48 homes on the south side of the Lehigh River and preparation of the land for industrial use. Luring developers proved more difficult than planners had anticipated, however. The land was still vacant in 1963, and two years later the project was referred to as “the Canal Street fiasco.”⁴³ Two smaller projects, the Union Street and Jefferson Street renewal projects, followed. City officials later considered these projects more successful because the cleared lands were rebuilt with homes for low-rent and low-income public housing, nearly replacing the demolished housing units (112 new public-housing units replaced 133 demolished units). But they too had their critics.⁴⁴

Formal consideration of the Lehigh-Washington Street area began in the last three months of 1960. Officials intended the initial venture to involve thirty-eight acres and to be a “joint redevelopment and rehabilitation project” with the city’s housing authority, which would purchase some of the land to build high-rise housing for the elderly. The plan was pursued energetically. By the end of 1960, an inspection team was half finished with a “comprehensive substandard survey of every dwelling unit” in the “area bounded by 4th Street, 5th Street, Ferry Street, and the New Jersey Central Railroad,” the area that was eventually razed.⁴⁵ In January 1961, the City Planning Commission gave preliminary certification for a “Lehigh-Washington Street Urban Renewal area.”⁴⁶

Plans continued at a rapid pace; the federal government approved a planning grant on November 30, 1962, and by year’s end (a mere month later), the Easton Redevelopment Authority reported that it had completed “forty-five percent of the planning activities.” A few weeks later, the authority requested federal permission to initiate execution, or “acquisition, relocation and demolition.”⁴⁷ It was on January 24 that the Easton City Council and City Planning Commission first received a copy of the

University, Dec. 22, 1993, unpublished manuscript at Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA), sec. 1, 55.

⁴³ *Annual Report of the City of Easton . . . 1963* (Easton, PA, 1964), 67; Community Planning Subcommittee of the Citizens Advisory Committee, “Report on the Advisability of Including the Moose Property in the L-W Street Project” (typescript, Mar. 23, 1965), Planning and Redevelopment Archives.

⁴⁴ *Annual Report of the City of Easton . . . 1964* (Easton, PA, 1965), 76.

⁴⁵ *Annual Report of the City of Easton . . . 1960* (Easton, PA, 1961), 45, 46.

⁴⁶ *Annual Report of the City of Easton . . . 1961* (Easton, PA, 1962), 67.

⁴⁷ *Annual Report of the City of Easton . . . 1962* (Easton, PA, 1963), 63. A reason given for the speed in clearing the land was the need for housing for the elderly.

plan, which had been prepared by Murray-Walker Associates, Inc., a Philadelphia-based firm hired by the Easton Redevelopment Authority. It is no wonder that some city officials expressed surprise, as the plan involved the demolition of the area’s 155 structures, including all of its residential ones. At that meeting, John Beiswanger, chair of the City

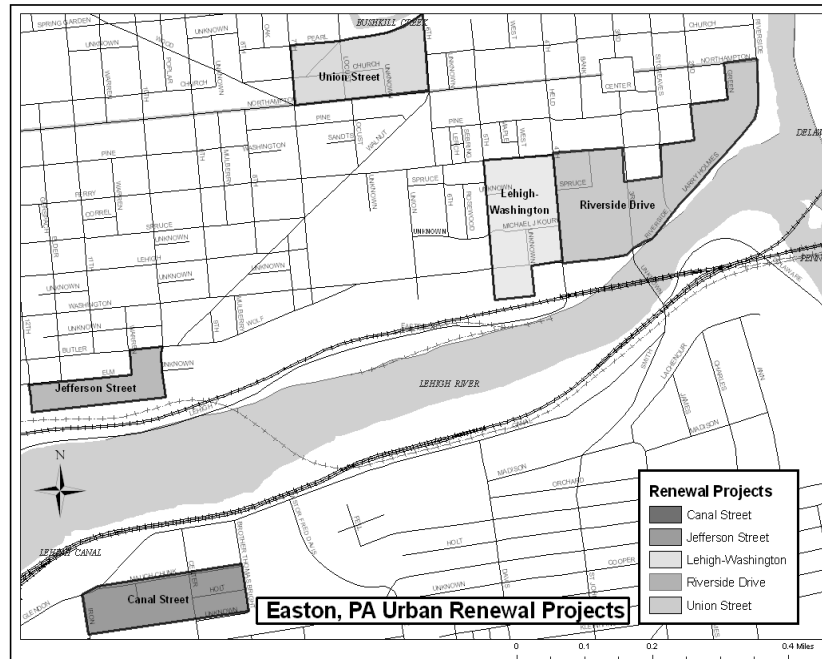


Fig. 1. Location of Easton Urban Renewal Projects. Courtesy of Pat Facciponti, Lafayette College.

Planning Commission, and commission member John Oldt questioned such an extensive clearing of properties. Joseph Dowell, coordinator of ERA, responded with the city planning philosophy then in vogue: complete clearance was necessary to promote “a sensible re-use pattern” and increase the site’s attractiveness to potential developers. It appears that the planners hoped to minimize public response to the project. Murray-Walker representative Michael Lonergan announced that just one public hearing would be held for the entire tract and that in the “consent area,” “acquisition of properties” would be speeded up roughly a year.⁴⁸

The outcry was immediate when these plans were made public. Protesters first targeted the proposed demolition of one building in particular: the headquarters of the Northampton County Historical and Genealogical Society located at the intersection of Fourth and Ferry streets.⁴⁹ A thirteen-person delegation met with the Easton City Council a few days after the plans became public. Edward Schaible, president of the historical society, argued that the 1833 building provided a good example of the “late federal period style.”⁵⁰ A letter-writing campaign followed, with writers focusing on the soundness of the structure and the difficulty the historical society would face if forced to find a new location for its museum. After what the *Easton Express* described as a “veritable flood of letters to the editor” from “young and old,” “architects and engineers, political scientists, historians, business people and plain lay citizens” against the demolition of a “priceless community asset,” the redevelopment authority altered the plan in order to spare the building.⁵¹ As an editorial explained, there was a tension between “redevelopment as an imperative to economic regeneration” and “a proper desire to preserve the rich historical assets that are found only in the older communities.”⁵²

Somewhat lost in the fray, however, were protests regarding the other 150 structures slated for the wrecking ball. Mrs. Margaret Hagerty, a resident of South Fourth Street and a member of the Citizens Advisory Committee on the Workable Program, met with the city council along with the historical society protesters and argued that “all houses in the project area along Fourth Street between Ferry and Spruce should be retained, as all but one “are of brick construction, and, although old, are in good condition.” She added that they shouldn’t be demolished “just because we have someone who wants to do some fancy planning in Easton.”⁵³

Hagerty was not alone. The local Lebanese community opposed the project, and pastor Father Norman Peters of Our Lady of Lebanon Church took the lead. His protest group, The Lehigh-Washington

⁴⁸ “Council, Planners Due to Act by Wednesday on Redevelopment Job,” *Easton Express*, Jan. 25, 1963.

⁴⁹ “Letter Protests Plans to Tear Down Building,” *Easton Express*, Jan. 29, 1963.

⁵⁰ “Council Gets Protest on Plan to Demolish Historical Headquarters,” *Easton Express*, Jan. 30, 1963.

⁵¹ “Museum Question Solution?” *Easton Express*, Feb. 11, 1963; “Museum to Be Spared under Private Housing Plan Offered to City,” *Easton Express*, Feb. 11, 1963.

⁵² “Must Easton Lose Museum?” *Easton Express*, Jan. 31, 1963.

⁵³ “Council Gets Protest on Plan to Demolish Historical Headquarters.”

Citizens Home Preservation Committee, hired a local law firm for assistance, and it spent much of the next year protesting the project. It too built its argument around challenging the "blight" claims, and it pressed city leaders to explain how they came up with the data used to justify demolition.⁵⁴

There was only one public meeting to answer questions on the project. Held May 28, it attracted hundreds of people, and the sentiment at the meeting was largely in opposition to development. Hagerty presented a petition against the project that was signed by 386 people from across the city. Individuals spoke up to defend the quality of their homes. For instance, Mrs. Gloria Robinson (an African American woman living at 114 South Fifth Street) urged council members to retain houses on her street. She added that she had invested a great deal into her home, "and at 64 I don't think I could start all over again." Rose Salvero, also of South Fifth Street, made a similar plea, and a representative of Easton's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) said that a statement on discrimination in Easton's public housing was forthcoming.⁵⁵

Peters's Citizens' Home Preservation Committee represented the largest opposition bloc, and he submitted a petition with over five hundred signatures. He also presented an alternative proposal that allowed preservation of "the standard solid structures" along Fourth Street, the south side of Ferry Street, on Lehigh Street, and on Washington Street from Fourth to West streets. He argued that these houses were "clean, safe, and sanitary, mostly owner-occupied." He added that all that was needed to preserve them was to "move your program back 100 feet." When asked what the project would do to the Lebanese parish he served, he responded, "It would destroy it." Attorney Coffin, hired by Peters's committee, pressed the city council and Murray-Walker employee Michael Lonergan for the data they were using to justify such widespread demolition. Lonergan replied that "he did not have data on the study with him," but he did concede that some of the buildings were "in good condition."⁵⁶

The local press assisted prodevelopment interests. Although it had ini-

⁵⁴ "Council Okays Lehigh-Washington Redevelopment. Vote Is Unanimous Despite Objections by Area Residents," *Easton Express*, June 27, 1963; "Owners Protest Prices Offered on Properties in L-W Project Area," *Easton Express*, Sept. 11, 1963.

⁵⁵ "Redevelopment Decision by Council May Not Be Reached for Month," *Easton Express*, May 29, 1963.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

tially expressed some trepidation, particularly regarding the demolition of the county historical society headquarters, and in February had published an editorial regarding the potential displacement of the city's black population, the *Easton Express* subsequently began publishing a series of prodevelopment editorials, especially in the days leading to the important city council meetings held in May and June.⁵⁷ It granted guest editorial spots to Joseph Dowell, ERA coordinator, and these were reinforced by articles penned by members of the paper's own editorial board ("Decline of Cities—Heavy Price of Progress," "Third of Easton's Housing Units Unfit," "D-Day for Easton's Renewal," "Can Council Face Renewal Challenge?" "Why City Renewal in L-W Sector?" "Attacks on Renewal Neglect the Truths," and "In Renewal, Piecemeal Approach Can't Work").⁵⁸ Editorials emphasized the widespread blight in the area, and the consultants predicted a dramatic increase in the tax base and the marketing of the entire project area within two years of acquisition.⁵⁹

Citizens had one last moment to address their concerns at the city council meeting on June 27. Peters's group submitted a ten-and-a-half-page letter that described the plan as being "in reckless disregard of the human rights of your citizens affected" and one that would pose risks in the loss of "present substantial tax revenues." While his letter outlined additional critiques, including the fact that contracts had yet to be issued for the use of the land, his committee emphasized concerns with the "standards employed in the study of blight." He pressed the city council for another hearing "at which evidence would be given on the actual condition of buildings in the area." Yet, when the city council voted unanimously to approve the project, it did so without holding additional public meetings or, as far as we can tell, ever providing the requested data to local citizens.⁶⁰ Despite Peters's continued efforts to block the project, negotiations with owners commenced on September 1, with the Easton

⁵⁷ "Major Challenge in Renewal," *Easton Express*, Feb. 12, 1963.

⁵⁸ Joseph C. Dowell, "Decline of Cities—Heavy Price of Progress," *Easton Express*, May 25, 1963; Dowell, "Third of Easton's Housing Units Unfit," *Easton Express*, May 27, 1963; "L-W Program's Value to the City," *Easton Express*, May 28, 1963; "D-Day for Easton's Renewal," *Easton Express*, May 31, 1963; Edward P. Kennedy, "Can Council Face Renewal Challenge?" *Easton Express*, June 1, 1963; Kennedy, "Why City Renewal in L-W Sector," *Easton Express*, June 8, 1963; Kennedy, "Attacks on Renewal Neglect the Truths," *Easton Express*, June 19, 1963; "A Display of Political Courage," *Easton Express*, June 23, 1963; Dowell, "In Renewal, Piecemeal Approach Can't Work," *Easton Express*, August 7, 1963.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, "Why City Renewal in L-W Sector."

⁶⁰ "Council Okays Lehigh-Washington Redevelopment."

Redevelopment Authority obtaining the "right to possession" by December 9, 1963.⁶¹ Demolition began the next year, and the area was cleared by the end of 1967.⁶²

The project was controversial even after its completion. The ERA encountered "seemingly endless difficulties finding buyers" for the land, which remained empty for years. In the end, the city redeveloped most of the area as a series of public-housing projects for the elderly, resulting in a decided loss of tax revenue (rather than the ten-fold increase that had been promised).⁶³

Justifying Demolition, Measuring "Blight": Official and Unofficial Languages of Blight

Our interviewees were certainly correct in their belief that the city used the language of "blight" to describe the former Lebanese neighborhood and justify its demolition. In city reports and in our discussions with former officials, concerns about the spread of "blight" were prominent. The Easton Redevelopment Authority's "Questions and Answers on Urban Renewal," a brochure distributed through the Citizens Advisory Committee in 1963, referred to "blight" as a "sickness that plagues," a condition where "a single dilapidated building . . . spread[s] the infection to the surrounding area." Conveying the need to "beautify" and "revitalize" Easton, city reports and brochures attempted to show the tremendous possibilities of urban renewal programs. These publications communicated a great sense of optimism, replete with images of a new, airy, utopian version of downtown Easton with modern, high-rise buildings. Artists' renditions of the "renewed" Easton were contrasted with illustrations of "dilapidated dwellings," "junk and weed infested yards," "bleak depressing environments," and the "absence of adequate sanitation," conditions that all contributed to Easton's "blighted" state.⁶⁴

It is not surprising that these reports emphasized "blight." Since a primary goal of Title 1 of the Housing Act of 1949 was to eliminate slums

⁶¹ "Owners Protest Prices Offered on Properties in L-W Project Area"; "Easton Groups Air Availability of Mortgage Funds for Residents Dislocated by Renewal Projects," *Easton Express*, Oct. 31, 1963.

⁶² *Annual Report . . . 1963*, 68.

⁶³ "Difficult' Renewal Job Coming to End in Easton," *Morning Call*, July 18, 1973.

⁶⁴ Easton Redevelopment Authority, "Questions and Answers on Urban Renewal" (typescript, Mar. 31, 1963), 6, Planning and Redevelopment Archives.

and “blighted” areas through rebuilding, localities could obtain the federal funds only after demonstrating the existence of “blight.” However, the federal acts never clearly defined the terms “slum” and “blighted areas.” Even an official charged with formulating housing standards and measures stated in the 1950s that blight “refers to not one characteristic or condition. . . . Instead, it covers a fairly wide range of conditions and characteristics.” To qualify, a “blighted” area needed to have both building and environmental deficiencies: “At least 20 percent of the buildings in the area must contain one or more building deficiencies, and the area must contain at least two environmental deficiencies.” The list of qualifying “environmental deficiencies” was especially vague and subjective, and it included such characteristics as overcrowding; improper location of structures; excessive dwelling unit density; conversions to incompatible types of uses, such as rooming houses among family dwellings; obsolete building types; detrimental land uses or conditions, such as incompatible uses, structures in mixed use, or adverse influences from noise, smoke, or fumes; and unsafe, congested, poorly designed, or otherwise deficient streets.⁶⁵

As we have seen, most of the citizens who opposed the project underscored the neighborhood’s *physical structures* and interpreted “blight” to be a measure of building quality. Official reports, on the other hand, were highly variable. Private consulting firms invariably attempted to quantify the amounts of “blight” found across the city. The use of numbers and percentages, and phrases such as “intensity of blight,” added an air of scientific rationality to the city’s redevelopment efforts. And yet these very measures were extremely inconsistent across the different reports produced for city government, in part because “blight” was defined in different ways. The 1956 “Land Use Plan” stated that “Blight in the City is not widespread. In most cases it is confined to pockets throughout the City, except in Wards 5 [the location of the Lehigh-Washington project], 11 and 12 where the intensity of blight is over 35%.”⁶⁶

When the ERA first narrowed its sights on the Lehigh-Washington Street section of Ward 5, it contracted Morris Knowles, Inc., to conduct a “Substandard Dwelling Survey” in 1960. This survey revealed quite different figures. It recommended only 16 percent of the 149 dwellings surveyed (or 24 buildings) for “repair or demolition,” not the “over 35%”

⁶⁵ Carl Lindbloom and Morton Farrah, *The Citizen’s Guide to Urban Renewal*, rev. ed. (West Trenton, NJ, 1968), 26.

⁶⁶ 1956 plan quoted in Morris Knowles, Inc., “Easton. Report on Review and Updating of Land Use Plan” (typescript, 1962), 26–27, Planning and Redevelopment Archives.

suggested in the 1956 plan.⁶⁷ This hardly seemed to justify the wholesale demolition of the entire neighborhood, and it is perhaps no surprise that the redevelopment proponents could not find the original survey during the single public hearing on the proposal. It never resurfaced publicly despite the fact that Pastor Peters's working group in particular continued to question the grounds on which the "blight" label had been based.

A mere two years later, neighborhood blight was apparently spreading. The 1962 *Annual Report* noted that "110 of the 152 buildings" (72.4 percent) in the Lehigh-Washington Street area contained "one or more deficiencies" warranting clearance.⁶⁸ But that same year, city consultants Morris Knowles, Inc. had argued in a report that blight in the area had reached 99.9 percent. In their 1962 "Land Use Plan," they suggested that this dramatic shift in the degree of blight was partly due to changing categories in the census between 1950 and 1960. According to Morris Knowles, Inc., the 1950 census "did not list a category to show where 'deterioration' was taking place." "Deterioration," the report noted, "is an important criterion under the new concepts of current Federal programs. As a result, only major areas of dilapidation could be pinpointed" in 1950.⁶⁹ The addition of the new category "deteriorating" or "housing in need of more repair than would be provided in the course of regular maintenance" to the already existing categories "sound" and "dilapidated" had the effect of increasing the quantity of blighted structures.⁷⁰ According to these new criteria, Ward 5 had 239 deteriorating and 305 dilapidated homes, or 544 (or 99.9 percent) of the 547 total units.⁷¹ Looking more closely at the 1962 *Annual Report*, we find yet another explanation for the shifting measurements. While 72.4 percent of the buildings had "one or more deficiencies," the report noted that "the entire area contains envi-

⁶⁷ Morris Knowles, Inc., "Findings: Lehigh-Washington St. Substandard Survey" (typescript, [1960?]), Planning and Redevelopment Archives.

⁶⁸ *Annual Report . . . 1962*, 63.

⁶⁹ Morris Knowles, Inc., "Report on Review and Updating of Land Use Plan," 28.

⁷⁰ The 1960 *U.S. Census of Housing* provided examples of slight defects: "lack of paint; slight damage to porch or steps; small cracks in walls . . . cracked windows." Housing that is "deteriorating" needs "more repair than would be provided in the course of regular maintenance" and is exemplified by "intermediate defects," such as "holes, open cracks, rotted, loose, or missing material over a small area of the foundation, walls, roof, floors or ceilings." Housing deemed "dilapidated" does not offer "safe and adequate shelter" and thus "endangers the health, safety, or well-being of the occupants." Such housing has at least one "critical" defect, or it has numerous "intermediate" defects that require the structure to be "extensively repaired, rebuilt, or torn down." 1960 *U.S. Census of Housing*, vol. 1, *States and Small Areas* (Washington, DC, 1963), xxxii-xxxiii.

⁷¹ Morris Knowles, Inc., "Report on Review and Updating of Land Use Plan," 28.

ronmental deficiencies, such as improper conversions, to a degree and extent that almost total clearance is necessary.”⁷²

City reports offered different measures of blight and thus different rationales for demolition from one year to the next. At times, demolition was justified by a quantification of the degree of deterioration and dilapidation of the neighborhood’s *structures*, while other reports argued that the *environmental* deficiencies were extensive enough to warrant complete clearance. Sometimes the same data could be spun in different directions according to official whims. An image of a portion of Lehigh Street appears in the Easton City Planning Commission’s 1957 “A Report on the Comprehensive General Plan of the City of Easton, PA,” as an example of “satisfactory” housing to contrast with the “blighted” housing on Jefferson Street slated for demolition (figure 2).⁷³ That same city street would be razed a few years later.

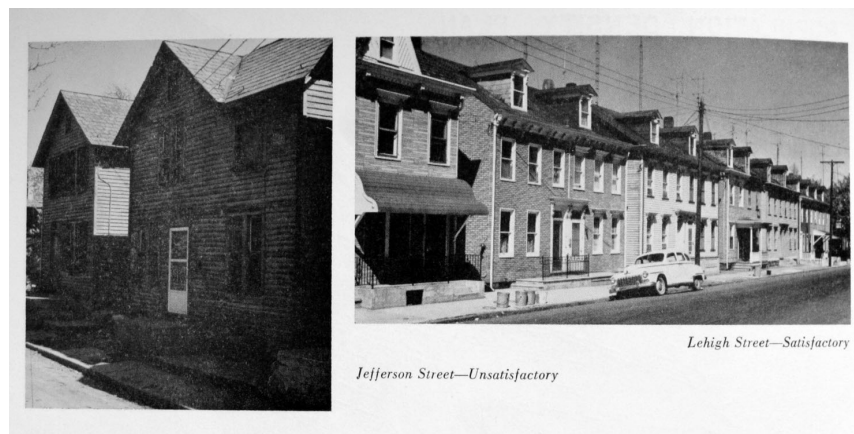


Fig. 2. Comparison of housing from “A Report on the Comprehensive General Plan of the City of Easton, PA—1957” (unpublished bound report, 1957), 20, Planning and Redevelopment Archives, City Hall, Easton, PA. Courtesy of the City of Easton, PA.

By the end of June 1963, city council members were unanimous in their condemnation of the neighborhood, and in the bill they signed, they cited deficiencies in “over 75 percent” of the structures:

⁷² *Annual Report . . . 1962*, 62–63.

⁷³ “A Report on the Comprehensive General Plan of the City of Easton, PA—1957” (unpublished bound report, 1957), 20, Planning and Redevelopment Archives.

The Local Public Agency has made detailed studies of the location, physical condition of structures, land use environmental influence, and social, cultural, economic conditions of the Project areas and has determined that the area is a blighted area and that it is detrimental and a menace to the safety, health, and welfare of the inhabitants and users thereof and of the Locality at large.⁷⁴

And yet, as we have seen, the building-by-building survey conducted in 1960 had recommended demolishing only a fraction of the structures. The question remains: if the buildings were in fact in reasonable shape, what else about this section of the city attracted city leaders?

"An area like that": Race, Ethnicity, and Other "Deficiencies"

Rachel Scarpato (RS): . . . I am curious as to why specific areas of the city were chosen and not others . . .

Former Mayor (FM): They were slums! Abject slums! . . .

RS: What was wrong with them?

FM: What do you mean, what was wrong with them? They had a lot of crime, a lot of fires, they had a lot of problems, a lot of delinquency . . . of all kinds.

RS: Really. And the building structures were in bad physical condition as well?

FM: Absolutely. In effect, what you're doing is condemning the property.⁷⁵

Through our close reading of city reports and interviews with former residents, it became apparent that aspects of the neighborhood aside from its deteriorating physical structures may have drawn the attention of city leaders. Its very foreignness, its unusual integration of different races, sometimes in the same building, the mixing of generations in the Lebanese homes, and perhaps the custom of creating separate apartments for extended family members or lodgers all defied city norms. Some interviewees felt that city officials thought that it was the people themselves, not the properties, who were "blighted." A Lebanese woman in her fifties told us ardently, "They made us out to be dirt, but we're not!"⁷⁶ Although the Lebanese-origin interviewees did not remark on an anti-Lebanese prejudice, some African Americans felt that it had been fairly widespread.

⁷⁴ "Minutes of the Council of the City of Easton, Pa." (bound printed volume, 1963), June 27, 1963, 729, City Clerk's Office, City Hall, Easton, PA.

⁷⁵ Former Mayor, interview by Rachel Scarpato, July 11, 2007, Easton, PA.

⁷⁶ Francine, focus group discussion, June 21, 2007.

Some Lebanese Americans did indicate a nativist flavor to local politics, however. An elderly man explained it this way:

Urban renewal was a disaster, very much a disaster and it devastated our people, tore us apart. We were forced to move out. . . . What they wanted was to get rid of us, to integrate us into American society, but we were Americans anyway. . . . We went to school, you know, most of our people who graduated there became magistrates, lawyers, doctors. . . . All of the sudden you're supposed to lose your culture and your heritage because it's somebody's idea to knock this out?⁷⁷

A man in his eighties who still works for the city concurred:

At that time, they're foreigners and didn't belong in this country. A lot of people looked down on them because they're foreigners. In fact, they didn't call us Lebanese, they called us Syrians. . . . [laughs] If you see the relationship we have with Syrians, I mean, we're Christians. We're the only Christian country in the Middle East. We've always been picked on, we're a peace-loving people, always were . . .

Later on in the interview, he continued in the same vein:

They had no regard. . . . I'm not saying everybody . . . but the powers that be that were in power . . . they'd destroy any foreign neighborhood . . . they looked down on nationalities. . . . Now, believe me, they know who you are, what nationality you are . . . inside, a lot of them haven't gotten over that, you know what I'm talking about? They'll be nice to you and all that, but "he's a Syrian," and that happens to all nationalities. They think the Lebanese are all moonshine peddlers, some of them never get it out of their heads.⁷⁸

Did Easton officials target the Lehigh-Washington Street area due to its unusual ethnic (Lebanese) character? Despite the area's common designation as the "Lebanese" neighborhood (or "Syrian Town"), the documentary record is noticeably silent on its "Lebaneseness." Newspaper articles and official city reports on the project invariably referred to the area by its official designation, "the Lehigh-Washington Street" project (even though whole files in city archives are labeled with the shorthand

⁷⁷ John, interview, July 12, 2007.

⁷⁸ Anthony, interview by Rachel Scarpato, July 17, 2007, Easton, PA.

"Lebanese," and one African American woman in her seventies explained to us that "Lehigh-Washington" was a "code word" for Lebanese).⁷⁹ City consultants, however, had scrutinized the town's social make-up more generally. A "Population Characteristics" report advocated "[taking] physical, economic, social, and political aspects of society into consideration" when deciding to implement "community renewal objectives." This report would help systematically determine the existence of undesirable social elements in the city of Easton. Encouraging the city to assess qualities of citizens in making urban renewal decisions, the report introduced a "Ward Rating System." This rating system ranked Easton's twelve wards using first through fourth quartiles on ten different population features, including income, family size, education, and employment. The report deemed populations of more affluent wards more desirable than those in low-income wards. Ward 5, the ward of the former Lebanese neighborhood, ranked in the bottom quartiles of all but one population feature.⁸⁰

But nowhere were the ward's unique cultural features discussed. It sometimes appeared that report writers had actively silenced any discussion of ethnicity. For instance, the "Minorities Group" report asserted that the city's only visible minority group was "nonwhite." "While the population is 11 percent Italian origin, they are largely 2nd and 3rd generation, dispersed in the city, with concentrations in Wards 6 and 8," the report noted, although no ward's population exceeded 25 percent Italian origin. Because there were "no significant nationality groups in Easton for minority consideration," the report highlighted the city's "Negro" population, the "only significant minority group."⁸¹ And yet the city's "Housing Conditions" report, published that same year, noted a high concentration of *foreigners* in Ward 5. This emerged only indirectly in an explanation of the ward's unusual age composition, with a quarter of the population under age twelve and people over age forty-five comprising approximately 40 percent of the total. This unusual composition, the report stated, likely stemmed from the fact that "part of the population [could] be categorized as new arrivals. Families thus tend[ed] to be large and include both young

⁷⁹ Sandra, interview, July 15, 2008.

⁸⁰ "Population Characteristics" (typescript, Easton Community Renewal Program report no. 5, Dec. 1964), 1, Planning and Redevelopment Archives.

⁸¹ "Minorities Group. A Research Report" (typescript report, Easton Community Renewal Program report no. 8, Aug. 1965), 2, Planning and Redevelopment Archives.

children and grandparents.”⁸² These “new arrivals” were clearly recent immigrants from Lebanon and relatives of the existing community members. According to our research and that of others, the extended family household composition was typical in the homes of neighborhood Lebanese residents.⁸³ Thus, the Lebanese character of Ward 5 only appears in official reports in this masked fashion.

The neighborhood’s racial characteristics are another story altogether. Ample studies have shown that federal policies were not race neutral; the very development of Easton’s suburbs was facilitated by policies and practices of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which encouraged the Homeowners Loan Corporation’s (HOLC) notorious neighborhood rating system to determine the creditworthiness of its housing. This rating system was overtly racist, and it fostered white flight, disinvestment in urban centers, and residential segregation. FHA guidelines even instructed realtors and land developers that “if a neighborhood is to retain stability it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes.”⁸⁴

The new Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 only exacerbated existing housing discrimination, as several studies have documented.⁸⁵ Slum clearance became known as “Negro clearance,” for people of color were disproportionately displaced by highway and renewal efforts. Overall, two-thirds of the people uprooted by such projects were nonwhites.⁸⁶ Urban renewal presented a “triple threat” to people of color: it displaced them from desirable neighborhoods, reduced the supply of housing open to them, and forced the break-up of integrated neighborhoods.⁸⁷ Already by 1959, the Commission on Civil Rights reported that urban renewal was “accentuating patterns of clear-cut racial separation.”⁸⁸

⁸² “Housing Conditions” (typescript, Easton Community Renewal Program report no. 10, Aug. 1965), 18, Planning and Redevelopment Archives.

⁸³ Gainne Mannion, “Lebanese Town: Biography of a Neighborhood” (unpublished paper by Lafayette College student, Dec. 20, 1980), Planning and Redevelopment Archives.

⁸⁴ The most highly rated neighborhood was new, racially homogenous, and all white. Older neighborhoods that included Jews and working-class whites were next, and neighborhoods adjacent to African American neighborhoods were rated third. The fourth- and bottom-ranked neighborhoods were all African American ones. See FHA 1936:233 in Gotham, “City without Slums,” 307.

⁸⁵ For a succinct historical overview, see Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 19–31. See also Hirsch, “Containment’ on the Home Front,” 158–89; Kaplan, *Urban Renewal Politics*; Mollenkopf, *Contested City*; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 48–50.

⁸⁶ Gelfand, *Nation of Cities*, 213.

⁸⁷ Robert C. Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto* (New York, 1948), 324.

⁸⁸ Gelfand, *Nation of Cities*, 213.

Was the Lehigh-Washington Street area targeted for its *racial* heterogeneity? We noted that the neighborhood's racial integration was a feature that stands out quite positively in popular accounts today. What public statements on the Lehigh-Washington Street project never mention, and what internal city reports note often, is the fact that the neighborhood had the city's highest concentration of people of color. The 1960 census showed an overall decline in the city's population by roughly 10 percent, from 35,632 to 31,955, and this decline was greatest in the central city wards. But consultants' reports also indicated that the city's population of "Negroes" was increasing, from 1.5 percent in 1950 to 4.0 percent in 1960.⁸⁹ These same reports also demonstrated that this was higher than the percentage of nonwhites in the nearby cities of Allentown or Bethlehem (which were .77 and 1.7 percent "Negro" in 1960). It should also be pointed out that the numbers of "nonwhites" in Easton were far greater than in adjacent suburban towns, such as Forks, Nazareth, or Palmer, which had grand totals of one, one, and zero nonwhite individuals in 1960, respectively.⁹⁰ What is more, the city's "Negro" population was not evenly distributed; rather, it was concentrated on the Lehigh River's south side in a few downtown wards, notably Ward 1, with 10.4 percent, Ward 6, with 4.0 percent, and Ward 5, the locus of the Lehigh-Washington Street project, with 27.1 percent of the residents being nonwhite (see table 2).⁹¹ Was this entirely coincidental?

Easton's branch of the NAACP did not think so, and it protested the project on these grounds. These protests were part of a much wider effort to oppose discrimination in the city's public housing. The NAACP targeted the membership of the Easton Redevelopment Authority. In early 1963, for instance, it opposed its appointment of Hugh Moore Jr.⁹² Moore was the founder and former chairman of the board of the Dixie Cup company, one of the area's most successful businesses. He was also an architect and local philanthropist who, on the day of his appointment to the ERA, had presented his final gift to the city of Easton in the form of land to create a recreational area along the Lehigh River (now known as "Hugh Moore Park").⁹³ Perhaps not unrelated is the fact that Moore was

⁸⁹ Morris Knowles, Inc., "Report on Review and Updating of Land Use Plan", 4, 7.

⁹⁰ *United States Census of Population: 1960, General Social and Economic Characteristics* (Washington, DC, 1962), tables 21 and 25.

⁹¹ "Minorities Group," 3.

⁹² "NAACP Opposes Naming Moore to Authority Job," *Easton Express*, Jan. 8, 1963.

⁹³ "Moore Presents Final Part of Gift to Easton," *Easton Express*, Jan. 7, 1963.

Table 2. Racial Characteristics by Ward

WARD	WHITES	BLACKS	PERCENT BLACK
1	883	102	10.4
2	1100	0	0.0
3	5289	36	0.7
4	2788	39	1.4
5	1114	415	27.1
6	2977	124	4.0
7	2143	1	0.0
8	4484	5	0.1
9	3110	73	2.3
10	3451	186	5.1
11	1835	175	8.7
12	1512	76	4.9
TOTAL	30686	1232	3.9

Adapted from “Minorities Group. A Research Report” (typewritten report, Easton Community Renewal Program report no. 8, Aug. 1965), table 1, p. 3, Planning and Redevelopment Archives, City Hall, Easton, PA. Courtesy of the City of Easton, PA.

also the designer of the award-winning Union Streets project, one highly lauded in city reports and one that NAACP president Thomas Bright later blamed for the eviction of a large concentration of black families.⁹⁴ The NAACP argued that it was time to have an African American on the authority board, and it raised the issue of the repeated relocations of the city’s black population:

All over the Nation, and here in Easton, Negro families have been pushed and shoved about to make room for redevelopment projects. We are not opposed to progress, but such progress too often has come about at very high cost and with great suffering to Negro families. . . . There is no reason why a Negro should not have been appointed to this board. Negro citizens have a greater stake in redevelopment plans than any other group in Easton, and they deserve an adequate voice in the decisions which are made.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ According to observer Turney T. Gratz, Easton Housing Authority’s executive director, Thomas Bright also complained that 80 percent of the residences in the North Union Street redevelopment housing site had been occupied by African Americans before the buildings were razed and that the subsequent Jefferson Street project also affected more blacks than whites. Incensed by these allegations, and especially an *Easton Express* editorial that repeated the figures, Gratz reported that the black presence in the Union Street area had been 21 percent, and that no blacks had lived on Jefferson Street. “High Rise Units to Be Known as ‘Walter House,’” *Easton Express*, Feb. 9, 1963.

⁹⁵ “NAACP Opposes Naming Moore to Authority Board.”



Fig. 3. Ward map from the “Easton Community Renewal Program Summary Report” (typescript bound report, Easton City Planning Commission, 1965), 22, Planning and Redevelopment Archives, City Hall, Easton, PA. Courtesy of the City of Easton, PA.

Moore made public his response to the NAACP. He noted that the Citizen Advisory Committee had been expanded to twenty members, including Bright. He added that “too often these advisory committees are ‘paper committees’ created to fulfill requirements of laws related to urban renewal. So long as I am on the authority, this will not be the case.”⁹⁶ It is unclear what power members of that committee held, if any.

Further concerns about the impact of the Lehigh-Washington renewal plan on the local black community were raised at an NAACP meeting the following month. An *Easton Express* editorial laid bare some of these concerns. In the renewal area, it reported, “80 white and 32 Negro families will have to be resettled.” With the community redevelopment program moving into “high gear,” the editorial continued, and with its “chief emphasis on supplanting ‘blight’ with income-generating and tax-producing land uses, the housing squeeze on the bottom-income groups . . . is bound to increase.” The editorial noted that the city’s black resident, “in displacement from private housing by renewal programs, does not have the freedom of movement available to dispossessed whites. He carries the burden of racial prejudice as well as the economic disadvantage.”⁹⁷

Thomas Bright continued to press city officials. He invited Joseph C. Dowell, executive director of the ERA, to an NAACP branch meeting to answer questions about the proposed project. Many African Americans, he pointed out, “give up homes under the authority redevelopment program and are unable to obtain homes in the better areas of Easton.” In response to a suggestion that “in many cases Negroes are unable to buy homes in the better sections because they often work at low paying jobs, and can’t obtain bank loans as a result,” Bright stated, “We are going to stop sugar-coating these issues and start presenting [them] as they actually are.”⁹⁸

The NAACP organized several rallies over the course of the summer to protest “poor housing opportunities” and alleged job discrimination in private business and city and county government.⁹⁹ They also picketed city hall. One of the signs displayed at the city hall rally stated, “Why Can’t I Live on College Hill?”¹⁰⁰ Housing was on the minds of local par-

⁹⁶ “Moore Replies to Objections by NAACP Here,” *Easton Express*, Jan. 12, 1963.

⁹⁷ “Major Challenge in Renewal,” *Easton Express*, Feb. 12, 1963.

⁹⁸ “NAACP Branch Views Film on Urban Renewal,” *Easton Express*, May 7, 1963.

⁹⁹ “Demonstration Here Planned by NAACP Unit,” *Easton Express*, June 11, 1963.

¹⁰⁰ “Negroes Demonstrate, Claim Job Bias Here,” *Easton Express*, June 15, 1963.

ticipants in the August 1963 march on Washington, DC, as well. The *Easton Express* quoted Bright as saying, "Easton needs to wake up. Jobs and housing for our Negroes are bad problems." Another participant in the march, Mrs. Robert Miller, a registered nurse, stated, "Does Easton have discrimination? Oh yes, right where it hurts the most—in housing, particularly."¹⁰¹

We have no clear evidence that the Easton Redevelopment Authority targeted the Lehigh-Washington Street area specifically to reduce the number of nonwhites living in the downtown business district. Nevertheless, this was the ultimate result. By 1965, before the Lehigh-Washington Street demolitions had been completed, that project and the preceding Union and Jefferson street projects had "accelerated the movement of the Negro to the South Side" (i.e. to the other side of the Lehigh River; see figure 1). A study found that due to the removals of populations induced by demolitions associated with the previous three redevelopment projects (Canal Street, Union Street, and Jefferson Street projects), "over half of the Negro population of Easton is now in the 4 wards south of the Lehigh River." Yet it is unclear from this report if this was viewed as a success or a failure. The report suggests that its authors found the presence of minority residents to be a detriment to an area. It concludes that there has been "a dispersal from a center city concentration" of nonwhites, a trend that continued "as a result of urban renewal." At the time of the report (1965), the authors found that the only areas of "severe concentration" of African Americans were in Ward 11.¹⁰²

City leaders rarely openly revealed their concerns about the ethnic and racial composition of the neighborhood they planned to obliterate. However, they often described the area as a "slum," as we see in the interview with a former city mayor, quoted above. Even the *Easton Express*, which consistently held pro-redevelopment positions, at one point noted that "blight" is just another euphemism for "slum" and a way to index indirectly the "Negro" parts of town.¹⁰³ Such a position seems to be confirmed by a statement a former redevelopment-era mayor made to us about the project. "The Lehigh-Washington Street project," he explained, "was quite controversial because that happened to be the area where most

¹⁰¹ "Easton Area Delegation Reaches Capital after Six-Hour Ride on Bus," *Easton Express*, Aug. 28, 1963.

¹⁰² "Minorities Group," 2, 9.

¹⁰³ The editorial states, "... slums—or 'blighted' areas, a fancy euphemism coined by planners and politicians to avoid ruffling feathers . . ." *Easton Express*, Feb. 12, 1963.

of the Lebanese immigrants lived. And many of them were well-to-do, and they did not have to live in the . . . you know, an area like that.”¹⁰⁴

Was it the neighborhood’s black population, or the mixture of peoples that city officials disliked? We may never know. In a letter to the paper following the three-hour-long public hearing on the project at the end of May 1963, though, Hugh Moore Jr., the member of the Easton Redevelopment Authority who had been condemned by the president of the NAACP, raised questions about the neighborhood’s integrated nature. He referred to the people to be displaced as “national, religious, racial or culturally motivated groups.” He continued, “although I feel that diversity of national origins, beliefs and cultures is an enrichment of American life, it hardly seems a healthy influence as it exists in the Lehigh-Washington Street section.” He added that he wanted to achieve “an attractive urban environment.”¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

In 1960s Easton, “blight” was a multivocal label that held different meanings to parties debating the Lehigh-Washington Street renewal project. In the popular understanding, “blight” indicated the physical decay of neighborhood structures. Neighborhood residents consistently based their protests on the grounds that the buildings were solid and well-maintained. This meaning was sometimes the intent in official usage as well, although reports using this more mainstream definition still found highly variable measurements of “blight” from one year to the next. Ultimately, however, city officials defended the demolition of the neighborhood on wholly different grounds—the existence of “environmental deficiencies,” such as “improper conversions” and “crowded conditions,” features that allowed them to claim that the targeted area was 99.9 percent “blighted.” But even this usage masked another key concern, namely the neighborhood’s social characteristics and, in particular, its ethnic and racial composition. Close scrutiny of city documents reveals that officials had tremendous interest in the racial composition of the neighborhood. This “elephant in the room” emerges in plain detail in internal reports, but it is never associated with the Lehigh-Washington Street project in forums or literature meant for the wider public.

¹⁰⁴ Former Mayor, interview, July 11, 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Hugh Moore Jr., “Letter to the Editor,” *Easton Express*, June 12, 1963.

It is ultimately in this gap between the popular (physical structure) and official (environmental deficiencies) languages of blight that real miscommunication occurred, creating the sense of betrayal that many of the town’s citizens still feel today. The fact that the city leaders never made public their 1960 building survey and did not hold additional public hearings suggests that officials had something to hide. They certainly could have clarified the grounds on which the neighborhood “blight” label was based or educated the public as to which environmental deficiencies were so alarming.

Easton officials were certainly not alone in their quest to search out and destroy “blight.” To obtain federal funds under Title 1 of the Housing Act of 1949, “Local Housing Authorities” (or LHAs) in towns of all sizes had to locate and demonstrate the presence of “blight.” As subsequent housing acts increased the proportion of costs borne by the federal government, these programs became very attractive to officials in smaller cities such as Easton. As *The Citizen’s Guide to Urban Renewal* reports, the Housing Act of 1961’s reduction of the local financial burden to just 25 percent of costs “made the program almost irresistible for any city that wishe[d] to face up to the problems of blight.”¹⁰⁶

Yet this “blight” was not the easily measured and quantifiable physical attribute that city reports suggest. Localities hired teams of engineers, social scientists, and other “experts” to help them identify how to best garner federal funds. But federal guidelines were so vague that the conclusions of ostensibly scientific studies—even those prepared in the same year—varied widely. As Mark Gelfand writes, “severe distortions were created in the slum clearance process. . . . Areas that could not objectively be called blighted were nonetheless demolished because their desirable locations made them ripe for ‘higher uses’ such as office buildings and civic centers.”¹⁰⁷ This was the case in Easton, as well as in Boston’s West and South Ends and San Francisco’s Western Addition, where city planners justified renewal by painting pictures of social decay. In doing so, they attacked well-working communities, much like the neighborhoods Gans and Mollenkopf describe as “urban villages” that were characterized by “intense ethnic community life” centered around churches, shops, and taverns.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Lindbloom and Farrah, *Citizen’s Guide*, 181.

¹⁰⁷ Gelfand, *Nation of Cities*, 208.

¹⁰⁸ Gans, *Urban Villagers*; Mollenkopf, *Contested City*, 173–74.

It is no wonder that the former residents we interviewed were confused and continue to defend the quality of their neighborhood's housing stock with passion forty years after the fact. Whether or not this was a "blighted" neighborhood was a pivotal and loaded question of vital import when the project was under consideration, and it remains one to many today. For among the lasting legacies of urban renewal projects are their social consequences, seen here in terms of our interviewees' frustration, disillusionment with city government, and sense of general disconnect from the political process. We also find it especially interesting that along with dense "social ties," what former residents seem to miss the most about their neighborhood was their ability to interact on a daily basis with people from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, something lacking in their lives today. Not unlike the progressive, future-minded "radicals" who dismantled the stable integrated community of Eastwick outside of Philadelphia, Easton's "radicals" attacked integration and accelerated processes of segregation.¹⁰⁹

Epilogue

By 1966, 146 buildings were destroyed on thirteen and a half acres in the Lehigh-Washington Street project, displacing eighty-three families and fourteen businesses.¹¹⁰ Most of the land was ultimately sold to the Easton Housing Authority and not to the builders of high-rise luxury apartments as planners had promised. Construction of two senior citizens' homes, a nursing home, offices for the Easton Chamber of Commerce, and privately owned subsidized senior citizen apartments followed.

Although this project attacked the center of the Lebanese neighborhood, it did not destroy it completely. Blocks of high ethnic Lebanese concentration remained, particularly on the other side of Lehigh, South Fifth, and South Fourth streets. These blocks were soon eradicated with the city's next large project, the Riverside Drive project (see figure 1). Undertaken between mid-1966 and 1971, this project involved the destruction of 173 buildings on twenty-two acres, including the spiritual

¹⁰⁹ See McKee, "Liberal Ends through Illiberal Means."

¹¹⁰ Steve Armstrong, "The Appearance of Easton Is Irreversibly Changed," *Express*, May 11, 1977.

centerpiece of the Lebanese community, its church.¹¹¹ In the process, seventy-nine businesses and 128 families were uprooted, some of whom had been dislocated just a few years earlier by the Lehigh-Washington Street project.¹¹² By 1977, the Easton Redevelopment Authority had paid over \$11.6 million for the acquisition of property in its five urban renewal projects, leveling over 870 homes in the process and leaving the city's appearance "irreversibly changed."¹¹³

While it is now scattered across the city and its satellite suburban townships, Easton's Lebanese community still survives, largely due to the parishioners' commitment to their church. Many interviewees of Lebanese origin noted that they may be better off financially now that they have settled in new homes (predominantly in surrounding suburbs). Looking back on the Lehigh-Washington Street project, however, they are still perplexed. One man laughed at how officials promised the city great financial benefits: "They got rid of hundreds of homes, and built what? A Quality Inn? I know you need to make reservations years in advance to stay there!" he sarcastically quipped. Other people were most upset that the cleared land stayed empty for so long. For a while, they told us, the area was used productively only when the circus came to town and its crew camped out there each year. Several people felt that the project itself caused Easton's decline, while another man had his own novel theory. He told us that former residents were so angry about their community's destruction that they decided to boycott downtown shops. This act in and of itself, he argued, caused the city's decline.¹¹⁴

Only a few years after the completion of the Lehigh-Washington Street project, city planners seem to have had second thoughts. Their annual report of 1969 commenced with a poem lamenting the ease and destructiveness of "bulldozer" renewal:

¹¹¹ The parishioners finally managed to secure some compensation from the Easton Redevelopment Authority and were granted a new building just opposite the boundary of the old Lehigh-Washington Street project, diagonally across from St. John Lutheran Church, which had been spared in the redevelopment.

¹¹² Armstrong, "Appearance of Easton."

¹¹³ See Armstrong, "Appearance of Easton." Hare, "Governmental Role in the Decentralization of the Historic Area of Easton," offers a thorough history of the city, including a detailed discussion of the city's early highway and redevelopment efforts.

¹¹⁴ Roger, focus group discussion led by Rachel Scarpato and Andrea Smith, June 21, 2007, Sammy's Place, Easton, PA. While the economic impacts of these projects on the city are beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting that other studies have found that the businesses least likely to survive displacement in such renewal projects were those that served local ethnic neighborhood markets. See Zimmer, *Rebuilding Cities*, 326.

I watched them tearing a building down,
A gang of men in a busy town.
With a ho heave ho and a lusty yell,
A steel ball swung and a side wall fell.
I said to the foreman, "Are these men skilled,
The kind you'd hire if you were going to build?"
With a great big laugh he said, "No indeed!
Common labor is all I need.
I can wreck in a day or two,
What builders have taken years to do."
I said to myself as I turned away,
"Which of these games have we tried to play?
Are we builders who work with loving care,
Measuring life with rule and square,
Or are we wreckers who roam the town,
Content with the work of tearing down."¹¹⁵

Lafayette College

ANDREA SMITH
RACHEL SCARPATO

¹¹⁵ Easton City Planning Commission's Annual Report for 1969 (typescript, Mar. 24, 1970), 1, Planning and Redevelopment Archives.