POLITICS AND PLANNING IN A SMALL AMERICAN CITY:

The Public Housing Program in Mount Vernon, NY, 1934-50

A SENIOR THESIS
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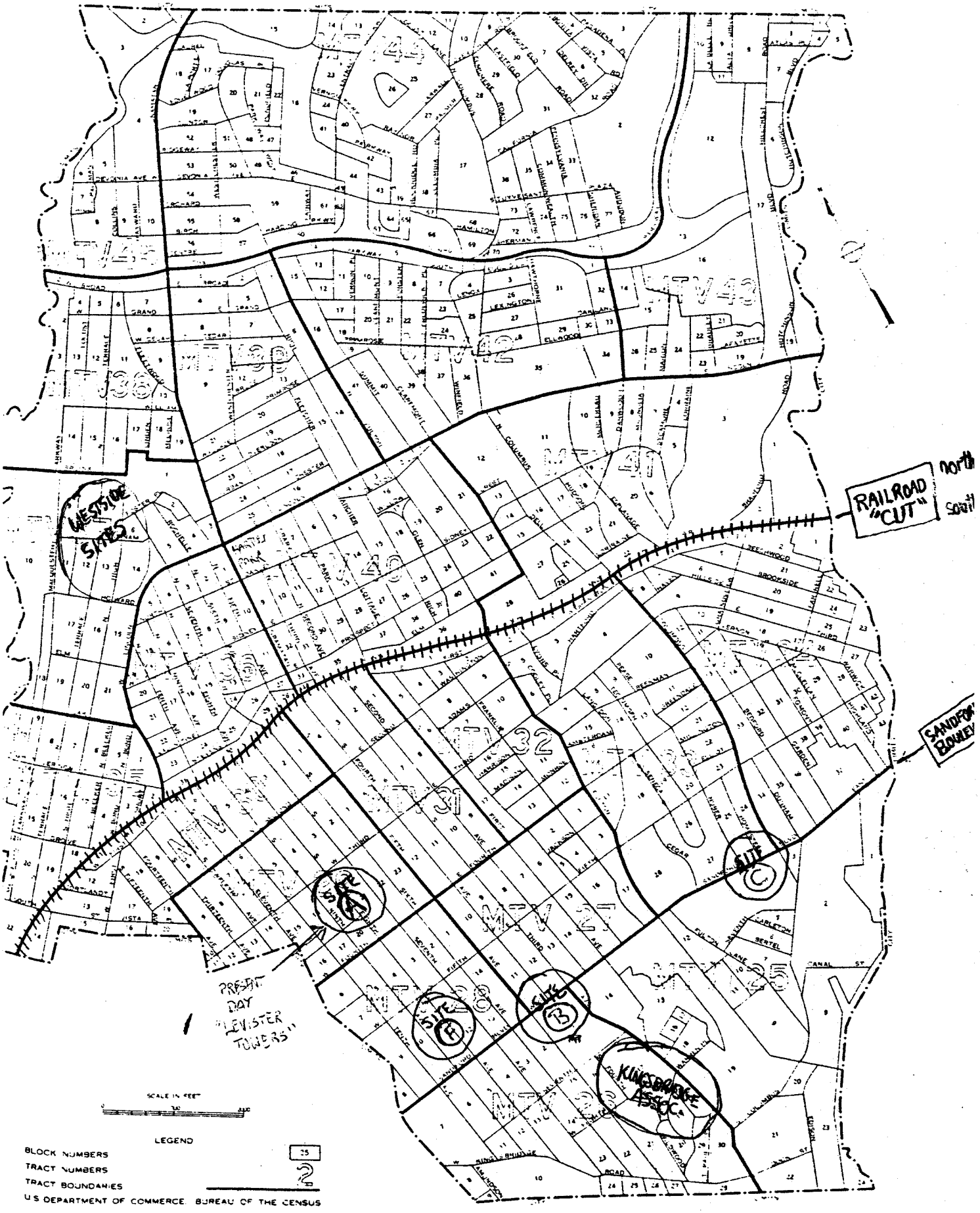
MOUNT VERNON, NEW YORK. BY CENSUS TRACTS AND BLOCKS: 1950



Not far north of New York City, the land grew corn until a few men bought it from its farmers in 1851. The men combined all the fields and divided the entire area into 1000 approximately equal lots. They had an ambition: to establish a community of homes for industrial workers close to the factories of the City yet sunk in the midst of rural quiet and beauty. Believing that workers form a special class--the "industrial classes are the creation of all wealth," declared their charter--they created the Industrial Home Association No. 1 to house those workers judged to be of "good moral character and industrious habits." It was to be a model community for the downtrodden working clases. It would be called Mount Vernon. And its motto. . . . the "City of Happy Homes."[1]

Almost a century later, with the same cooperative spirit and lofty goals of housing the lower classes, Mount Vernon built a public housing project in 1950. The project stands today, Levister Towers by name, low-income in purpose and low in spirit as well, a decaying cluster of five ten-story structures towering above a community of mostly two- and three-story homes. The stairways smell of urine. The elevators rarely work. The lobby doors no longer lock. And the doorbells, that used to tinkle with the turn of a handle, now grate metal-on-metal if even they work at all. In each and every one of nearly 500 "units" lives a black family. Whites no longer live there, and hardly any, except for salesman and politicians, venture near. The first cooperative housing plan in 1851 eventually gave birth to Mount Vernon. The second plan in 1950 deformed it.

One look at Levister Towers makes it hard to imagine how the people of a primarily well-to-do residential community ever decided to build such a project monstrosity in their own backyard. It is hard to believe that this dying leviathan was born of philanthropic intentions, that it represented Mount Vernon's idea of

quality housing for low-income people. And Mount Vernon was no different from countless cities, and even towns, across the nation. How many major cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, as well as small cities such as Mount Vernon's neighbors, New Rochelle, Yonkers, and White Plains, built ill-fated housing projects? Some critics have blamed the decline of public housing on careless and inefficient management of the buildings. Others claim, however, that many public housing projects, for a variety of reasons, were doomed to become ghettos before the first brick was ever laid. In Mount Vernon, a tangle of politics, prejudice, and property values, from when public housing was first proposed in 1934 to when it was finally built in 1950, smothered any chances that the newborn housing program might live up to the ideals of those who had supported it.

* I *

To stave off New York City's attempts at annexation, Mount Vernon declared itself a city in 1892.[2] Between Scarsdale to the north and the Bronx to the south, Mount Vernon lay tucked in the lower pocket of Westchester County, straddling the "town" and the "city" in location and in spirit. It called itself a city yet was never quite sure that, in truth, it was not a town. And the more it became like a city, the more it wanted to remain a town.

If being a "city" meant smoking factories or towering office buildings, Mount Vernon around the turn of the century was definitely not, and gladly so. As one writer wrote of Mount Vernon around the turn of the century, "Mount Vernon was a model community and it impressed the visitor when he first crossed the line from the Bronx."[3] When the people of Mount Vernon thought of the "city," it was that seething commercial behemoth to the south, New York City, that came to mind.

With slightly more than four square miles, Mount Vernon was dwarfed by New York City and even its neighboring cities to the west and east, Yonkers and New Rochelle. Mount Vernon stood apart from New York City geographically, yet the City always overshadowed Mount Vernon's development. With New York City so close, Mount Vernon never had to become culturally and commercially self-sufficient. It thrived on being dependent from New York. To Mount Vernon came the wealthy who worked in New York City's tall buildings but had no wish to live in them. In Mount Vernon were "homes," not buildings. If New York was the "city"; Mount Vernon was just a "neighborhood."

With the economic good times of the 1920s, the neighborhood grew. As New York City expanded, many of the wealthy moved to Westchester County. Few places at the time were more exclusive or convenient to New York than Mount Vernon. In just ten years, the number of people in Mount Vernon increased by half from 42,726 to 61,499, suddenly making Mount Vernon one of the most densely-populated cities in the United States.[4] Each year the city added nearly one thousand new homes, nearly two a year for every block in the city.[5] The land grew homes so fast that almost none was set aside to grow grass. On the north side was Hartley Park, a two square block area. The only large park, Brush Park on the south side, gave part of itself over to the city's need for a garbage dump.[6] Businessmen, lawyers, and doctors moved into new mansions in neat rows on peaceful, shaded streets. No one owned very much property; the houses fit closely together. A man took pride not in his property but in his house, its grand spaciousness, its distinctive outside moldings, and its steeple-like gables in front. A man liked to walk home from the train station after work at night and see his house--his "home"-- from the street. And he liked to know that others, who he did not know or would ever meet, liked his house, too. For that, in turn, meant his

home had a high property value and it meant financial security.[7]

Not all of Mount Vernon lived in grand mansions on peaceful streets. To Mount Vernon had come those who, piece by piece, had built it up. For the Old Stock Americans, the newly arriving Italians constructed the homes in which they lived and the railroads and highways they used to get to work in the city. The Italians had come to the city in large numbers in the early years of the century to work on the new railroad from New Haven to New York.[8] The railroad was only one of five major thoroughfares tying Mount Vernon to New York, but it was the one for which the Italians had dug a "cut" about twenty feet deep, east to west across the middle of the city. The "cut" forever affected people's perceptions of the city's geography. "It seems almost inevitable," wrote the local newspaper, the Daily Argus, in 1937, "that a city shall have a locale known as 'the other side of the tracks.' In the case of Mount Vernon, the wrong side of the tracks has been that southwest sector known as the south side."[9] For years people talked of covering the "cut" as the city grew up around it. Editorials in the newspaper and reports to the Mayor were never acted on. The "cut" became a scar that never healed.

* II *

Just north of the tracks, the Westchester Woman's Club met on the first and third Wednesday of every month at their private clubhouse on Crary Avenue. News of its meetings, banquets, and dress occasions made the society pages of the Daily Argus every week. The Westchester Woman's Club typified Mount Vernon's leisure class, those who did not have to cope with making a living and found time on their hands to devote to social and civic purposes. Although members were from Mount

Vernon only, the Club's use of Westchester in its title gave it an air of suburban exclusiveness. Its members purported to be of high society and its goals were equally high: "To form a recognized centre for civic activities and mental culture; to further the education of women for the responsibilities of life; to encourage all movements for the betterment of society; and to foster a generous public spirit in the community."[10] The Club counted nearly 500 members. Anyone who was "someone" in Mount Vernon usually joined, although the Club enlisted very few Italians and Jews and no blacks. Members could join any one of 46 committees sponsoring programs throughout the year on American Home-Making, Art, Choral Groups, Civics-Education, Drama, History-Travel, Instrumental Music, Literature, and Patriotism. In the membership directory, women were listed by their husband's first and last name. The list read like a Who's Who of influential businessmen and elected officials in Mount Vernon.[11]

In late 1933, when the Club's Civics Committee set out to find and promote some worthy cause, the federal government had one waiting. The Depression had spawned a political demand for government-sponsored employment programs which, in turn, dug the foundations for a novel federal housing program. The New Deal's Civil Works Administration was offering cities across the country grants and low-interest loans to finance clearance of substandard housing and construction of housing developments for low-income families. The host city would receive new homes for its poor as well as construction work for its unemployed; the federal government, meanwhile, would be constructing its own urban political base. In Mount Vernon, the Civil Works Administration circumvented the local politics and control of a Republican City Hall and made its appeal directly to the Westchester Woman's Club. In November 1933, the CWA funded and directed a survey of sub-standard housing under the name and prestige of the Westchester Woman's

Club.[12]

The Woman's Club and its mostly Republican membership readily cooperated with the New Deal housing agency. The Club's president, Edythe Law Bowman, was "unusually liberal from a social point of view although conservative in other ways," recalled a friend of hers.[13] Better housing and desperately-needed employment programs were issues of necessity and not of politics. They may have had no taste for cooperating with New Deal schemes, but bad housing in the City of Happy Homes violated their aesthetic sense of the neighborhood and community to which they were pledged and devoted. Was it true, members of the Civics Committee wondered, what they had heard about the homes south of the tracks? Weren't these slums the very breeding grounds of filth, crime, disease, and licentiousness? If so, weren't they a stain upon the city's upstanding reputation and integrity? Didn't they threaten to contaminate the rest of the city while draining its taxes away in increased costs of health, clean-up, fire and police protection? Finally, how could the slums <u>not</u> drag down the very dignity of the many fine but unfortunate citizens who lived there? Didn't the peeling paint and dilapidated front porches of once fine houses symbolize a wanton decay of the human spirit?

The CWA survey confirmed much of what the Club members had heard and thought about the city's slums. The public must know, declared members of the Civics Committee. The <u>Daily Argus</u> ran a front page story headlined, "Survey Here Bares Squalid Slums Menacing City Health, Safety" as if the slums had been covered up from the City's notice until that time. "Mount Vernon, proudly titled 'City of Homes,'" the <u>Argus</u> continued, "harbors in its midst veritable hovels in which children and adults live in incredible filth and privation."[14]

* * *

In the area south of the tracks, Mount Vernon had grown up earliest and grown old fastest. East of South Fourth Avenue people lived in what were still some of the finest homes and attractive neighborhoods in the entire city. In the southwest, however, particularly the area bounded by South Fourth Avenue to the east, Tenth Avenue to the west, Second Street to the north, and Sandford Boulevard to the south, the houses and neighborhoods had begun to rot away. Many of these homes were some of the city's oldest that had fallen into a state of disrepair. Others were makeshift wooden structures, "cold water flats," put up to house Italian laborers at the turn of the century.[15] This was the area that had escaped the builder's shovel in the 1920s. Only 17 percent of this area's homes had been built during the building boom as compared to an average of 40 percent for the city on the whole.[16] But as a consequence, it was the first area of the city where some blocks had turned into four-story apartment buildings with storefronts below at street level. One-third of 475 families surveyed in the southwest area lived in homes deemed "unfit for habitation," needing major repairs and clean-up of rotting stairways, crumbling floors, peeling paint, falling plaster, and garbage strewn cellars. More than a hundred families lived in cold water flats, relying on their stoves not only for cooking but for heat and hot water as well. Some families still used oil lamps for light. One in six families had no tub or shower for bathing. In one block, the number of families outnumbered toilets by 99 to 83. And in this same block were only eight private bathrooms; a trip to the toilet meant a trip to the hallway or the shared outhouse in back.[17]

To most Mount Vernon people, the south side "slums" were the scourge of the city; for most blacks --Negroes or colored people, as they were called-- the

"slums" were home. In the city's southwest, blacks and Italians formed most of the neighborhood. Next to their Italian neighbors, however, blacks lived as second-class citizens, enduring far worse living conditions and, ironically, paying far more. They lived in slum "homes" that they could not call their own. Out of more than 4000 blacks, only 70 owned any property in 1934.[18] The Italian homeowner, meanwhile, had become the Italian landlord as he and his family had moved into better housing elsewhere in the city, mostly on the west side. Out of 84 families on the southwest side who lacked bathing facilities, 68 were black. Out of 57 families with no hot water, 52 were black. Out of 117 families relying on their stove for heating, 100 were black. And, out of 34 families sharing a common toilet, 25 were black.[19] Knowing that the black family could not find housing elsewhere, the landlord could charge a black family more rent than its Italian neighbors. In one block, for example, where blacks made up half of the population, black tenants paid an average of $7.20 per room while whites paid only $6.36 per room.[20] Out of 37 families paying more than $60 rent in the entire southwest side, 25 were black.[21]

During the boom years before the Great Depression, blacks had arrived in Mount Vernon as they were increasingly displaced by farming technology in the South and lured by the prospects of manufacturing jobs in the North.[22] In 1934 blacks had increased to six percent of the city's total population; there were three blacks in 1934 for every one there had been in 1920.[23] Many Mount Vernon residents, however, never noticed the increase unless they happened to travel through the city's southwest area. The overwhelming majority of blacks, 70 percent, lived in a 26 block area in the southwest part of the city. The white residents, principally Italians, were moving rapidly north into the west side and Chester Hill area and south below Sandford Boulevard and even into the Bronx.[24]

In some blocks, blacks made up more than half of the population by 1940.[25] Most blacks coming to the city could afford nothing but the cheapest housing available, usually located on the southwest side. Yet economics alone did not explain why even wealthier blacks had difficulty moving to other areas of the city. If any white homeowner on an all-white street sold his house to a black family it was often at the expense of his neighbors' friendships and perhaps his own professional reputation. Sometimes he did not even have a choice. A "restrictive covenant" in the small print of his property deed prohibited sale to anyone but whites. The black family, on the other hand, might inquire with a real estate company about a house advertised for sale in a white area only to find that it had just been sold.[26] "One of the most damning indictments against the whole sordid situation [of the slums]," the Daily Argus declared as late as 1937, "is that it places a premium upon decency and drags down the living standards of those who must live in the slums, whether they like it or not. It has been said, for example, that a clean, decent Negro family--and their number is legion--would have a hard time to find a home in any other than a slum district."[27]

Among blacks, no one had formal power to fight for social change. As one contemporary black writer put it, "Politically the Negro is a non-entity."[28] In 1934, not a single black was serving or had ever served in any elected office. When a black clergyman ran for school board in 1932, only 440 out of 1177 eligible blacks voted. Two years later, he ran again, and only 268 blacks came to the polls.[29] A total of five blacks worked as day laborers among the 188 employees in the Department of Public Works. Among other city agencies, only two blacks were employed part-time with the Recreation Department and one as a day laborer with the Department of Public Health. In the City Court, Police and Fire Departments, no blacks were employed. In the federal post office, meanwhile, 19 out of 81

employees were black.[30]

And among blacks, no one was angry to fight for change. Powerlessness and hard times brought with them a certain resignation. Many blacks were too busy trying to make a living and had neither the time nor spirit to rally for better conditions. Even though black unemployment rates ran about twice as high as white's, a larger percentage of the population was employed because of the number of black women in the workforce. More than 60 percent of all blacks in Mount Vernon worked as compared to only 42 percent of whites. Most blacks worked as porters, domestics, and servants. Of more than 4,000 black citizens in Mount Vernon only three were doctors, one a lawyer, and a handful, ministers.[31] Blacks lacked an educated class to rally for better conditions. Because many of the blacks were new to Mount Vernon, they neither knew the city or their neighbors well enough to organize effectively. Finally, the legacy of southern life may have figured in this quiescence. Many of the new blacks felt no great injustice with their conditions. "Often southern standards, which are at best inferior, are mistaken for adequate housing conditions," wrote one Mount Vernon black writer.[32] The blacks were not yet ready to speak for themselves, to better their conditions.

Not surprisingly, whites were not ready to speak for the blacks either. Although most whites in Mount Vernon were not hostile to blacks, neither were they very concerned for blacks' welfare. Only three white churches, wrote one black writer, had shown anything but a passing interest in the problems of the blacks. "Race relations in Mount Vernon are not bad in the sense of being vicious"; the same writer wrote in 1934, "the worst complaint is indifference."[33] In Mount Vernon, it was easy for the rich and the powerful, for the businessman and the politician, to disregard the blacks, to forget about the city's southwest. They

could. And they had. For not until the Westchester Woman's Club survey in 1934 was any protest heard.

* * *

Within a week after the Woman's Club survey, a chorus of groups united in calling for the Mayor and the Common Council, the city's elected five-member legislative board, to devise a new housing plan. Ministers passed around petitions on Sundays. Labor unions wrote to the Mayor urging a housing program to provide employment. Women's groups such as the Women's Democratic Club and the Business and Professional Women's Club supported the plan. Several other self-proclaimed "civic" groups and individuals wrote letters to the Common Council.[34] And more than 350 people attended a Common Council meeting to urge better housing conditions.[35] The Daily Argus led the charge, sustaining the public outcry with numerous photographic layouts of the slum conditions. One picture showed a battered wooden door with litter-strewn grass in front: "No Garden Spot Is This Backyard."[36] The Argus would continue to be the public forum and unifying voice of the eclectic coalition forming behind a new housing program.[37]

The reformers called for immediate and drastic action. Tougher laws would not work, they argued, for the slum owners would not obey. How was the city to outlaw an unpainted shutter, a moldy floorboard, a dirty sink, or a smoke-stained kitchen ceiling? How could it afford to enforce such laws? The city could do all in its legal regulatory power to clean up substandard housing, but too much would remain. The houses would still be ugly. They would continue to degrade and reduce their inhabitants to despair and hopelessness. The slums could not be legislated away, declared illegal, and expected to vanish. They had to be wiped

out of existence. "It should be obvious by now," one women wrote to the Daily Argus, "that Mount Vernon can solve its slum problem only through its obliteration, . . . and use of federal or state funds to provide decent quarters for the slum dwellers."[38] The slums must be razed to the ground, and with them every rotten board torn down, every germ in every cellar cesspool stamped out, and every scrap of garbage whisked away. And in their place had to rise sturdy, sanitary new homes. And so too would rise the spirit of the fortunate citizens who would live in them. It was not a dream. For the first time, federal funding offered the city the opportunity to erase its slums and build anew.

Money was a strong incentive. The city by itself could not finance a multi-million dollar public works program. For ideological reasons, no Republican city government could increase taxes for some perceived New Deal boondoggle and hope to remain in office on the next election day. In Mount Vernon lived three or four Republicans for every one Democrat; Mount Vernon had not joined Roosevelt's New Deal urban coalition nor given itself over to the New Deal spending policies.[39] Taxpayer associations, recalled a former alderman, were the city's most common and vocal interest groups. [40] Since the onset of the Depression, City Hall had initiated over 15 million dollars worth of employment-oriented public works projects but buffered them from the taxpayer by creating more than thirty bond issues.[41] The city in 1934 was just short of its own constitutional debt limit; "backdoor" funding through debt for a multimillion dollar housing program was not fiscally possible.

If the federal government was going to contribute funding, it was not about to hand it over to a municipal government to spend as it pleased. Until such practice was declared illegal by the Supreme Court in 1934, the federal government

had previously bought up land in some cities and started low-income housing projects without the advice or consent of the local municipality.[42] For a city to receive federal funds, public housing legislation required only that a municipality appoint a committee of private citizens, called a "housing authority," to administer a program. The authority would direct clearance of sub-standard slum areas, oversee construction of a low-income housing development, and henceforth preside over the management of the new housing development.[43]

The idea of a housing authority had a strong appeal to the groups uniting behind a low-income housing program. On it would serve the most capable, civic-minded citizens of Mount Vernon, free from the interests of politics and free to come to an honest and humanitarian solution to the housing problem. The "politicians" had had long enough to cure the slums. They had failed. There was no more trusting a city government that was ineffective and prone to the temptations of corruption. "Let's begin right now," declared the Daily Argus, "by agreeing to forget any and all politics connected with this proposal. It is entirely true that the housing authority will be supreme in its power; it should be equally free from political contact."[44] A housing program that cost almost nothing and enjoyed the support of leading civic organizations would be a tough proposal for the city administration to resist.

But in Mount Vernon, City Hall would fight it off for eight years.

* * *

The Common Council feared loss of control. In a straight party vote, the housing authority proposal lost by a vote of four Republicans to one Democrat a

month after the release of the Woman's Club survey. The Democratic Mayor, Leslie Bateman, elected in 1931, had supported the proposal, but the Common Council refused to play along with a New Deal scheme.[45] The slum conditions were intolerable, agreed the Republican Council, but they could be bettered through stricter enforcement of existing health and building laws. The City already had its own Department of Health, Department of Public Works, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Board of Estimate and Contract to regulate all forms of housing. What need was there for yet another housing agency? And how long would it be before the so-called housing authority moved from slum clearance and low-income housing to middle-income housing and eventually all sorts of building activities? "The powers of the housing authority, once created, are unlimited," declared the Common Council President, George Percy. "They become a body corporate and practically no power can be exerted to restrain or control their activities."[46] The Common Council believed the price of cooperation with outside governments was potentially high. Because the State already financed most of the school budget, with annual appropriations of half a million dollars, there was a separately elected committee, the School Board, controlling education. The School Board's loyalties, the Council knew, were to its voters first, to the State second, and to the city administration a distant third. The housing authority, moreover, would not be accountable to anyone but the federal government. Its members were appointed by the Mayor to five-year terms. City officials were not eligible for appointment. Neither the Mayor nor the Council would have any power to remove an authority member. The only power the City had was a negative one: to veto, not to formulate, any project proposal contracted between the authority and the federal government. And what if the housing authority proposed a plan which City Hall did not want? With the pressure for employment programs, it might not be easy to turn a project down.

Why should anyone but the City's duly elected officials decide where and what kind of housing would be built (and who would receive the building contracts)? Wouldn't the creation of a housing authority mean relinquishing control over the city's most essential purpose---as a residential community? For Mount Vernon was not a city of industry or a city of office buildings; it was a city of homes.[47]

Not for another three years, until 1937, did the housing authority issue come up again. This time the stakes had been raised, for by that time, New York State had passed a new law, mirroring that of new federal legislation, creating a State Division of Housing with authority to finance 90 percent of any slum clearance and low-income housing plan carried out by a housing authority. While only a handful of cities had already created their own housing authorities, the increasing amount of funding offered would convince 622 more cities across the nation to do so in the next four years.[48] Next door, Yonkers had already created a housing authority in 1935 and was well under way to cleaning up one of its slum areas. New York City had built a number of projects since 1934.[49] The concept of a housing authority in 1937 seemed neither so impractical nor unprecedented as it had three years before.

Once again, a series of Daily Argus pictures of dilapidated tenements rekindled the drive for a housing authority in early 1937. "I am thoroughly convinced that you cannot legislate slums out of existence. You can end such a condition only by providing decent quarters for those who now live in our slums," the lone Democratic Alderman, John Cortright, argued in re-introducing a new housing authority proposal.[50] The proposal met a quick death. As if to stave off criticism, the Common Council announced it was forming a committee of investigation, the Committee on Health and Sanitation. The "committee", however,

had only two members, I. Leonard Heuslein and A.H. Karl, neither of whom had any special qualifications to make a report on health and both of whom happened to be known public housing opponents. Their report recommended against establishing a housing authority and in favor of tightening existing laws. The Council responded by passing an ordinance requiring every dwelling unit to have at least one toilet.[51] The new provision would go largely unenforced, but it did serve to placate the advocates of better housing. As the Argus caustically observed, "The Aldermen have once more displayed their adroitness in evading an unpleasant controversy. In the beginning they proclaimed sympathy for the program. They held meetings, they made speeches--and they avoided action until the first public fervor over the plan should subside."[52] As before, the issue passed out of the public eye.

To the editors of the Daily Argus, the failure of the housing authority plan was due to a lack of public knowledge and to a short-sighted city government trying to avoid controversy. "The real obstacle is public indifference. Until more Mount Vernon people believe that slums exist and are an economic and moral evil, the slums will stay."[53] To the Daily Argus, and the reform groups, the solution to the slums was as simple as placing the unfortunate slum-dweller in an attractive, clean, and safe home. And building the necessary public support would be as simple as educating and informing the public about the harmfulness of the slums. Underlying this rationale was a progressive faith in the inherent goodness and responsibility of human nature: slum dwellers were disposed towards being good citizens, they only lacked a better environment in which to change; likewise, the citizens of Mount Vernon were disposed towards bettering conditions in the slums, only they lacked an awareness of the problem.

* * *

Opposition to public housing, however, ran deep and for far more concrete reasons than a lack of awareness.

Freedom of enterprise --- build a public housing project, declared the city's real estate interests, and the people of Mount Vernon could never be sure of that freedom again. A project would siphon off hundreds of families, attracted by the prospect of paying low rents, who would otherwise demand new houses and apartments built by private enterprise. The private builder could not possibly offer as low rents as those of a government-subsidized project. "The project, if erected," Heuslein argued, "would put the City permanently in the real estate renting business. . . . it will be competitive with commercially-owned, tax-paying properties which will be required to help support it."[54] Another critic warned, "Competition with housing project rents will be impossible for private capital to meet."[55] The government was not only an opponent to compete against in mobilizing resources for construction; it was also the referee, free to change the rules of play whenever it deemed it the public interest to do so. "Is our city going into competition with its own citizens? asked one opponent, "If so, we are marking ourselves for at least one branch of State Socialism."[56] A public housing project, declared Republican Alderman John K. Miller, "puts the private owner of property out of business."[57] Public housing, many believed, meant that private enterprise would be in a competition it could not possibly win.

Freedom from excessive taxes --- build a public housing project and the people of Mount Vernon could never be sure of this freedom again. Public housing was nearly tax-exempt. Under State law, a project would owe taxes only on the

value of the land prior to construction, as if there would be no taxable multi-million dollar housing on it, as if the hundreds of families in the project would not benefit from city services that they would not pay for in property taxes. Who would be left paying the taxes? One woman wrote to the Common Council, "Tax exemption would work a hardship on every other taxpayer in the city, because he [the taxpayer] would have to pay not only his share of taxes for all city services but also taxes for every tax exempt building put up."[58]

And the opposition ran even deeper than ideas about economic freedoms; it touched the nerve of social values.

What, afterall, were the slums? "Slums are people."[59] The idea of rehabilitating slum people and their slum habits with new housing seemed an expensive and unrealistic social experiment, nothing other than "poorly-disguised vote-getting build ups and publicity for grandiose lady-bountifuls."[60]

"What am I to do about my property?" one slum landlord complained, "If I put even $300 into that home, those tenants would have it looking just the way it does now in another few months."[61]

People make slums.

"Most of these people [slum-dwellers] and their mode of living are not new to present day conditions," stated I. Leonard Heuslein, "They have always been in most communities and always will be."[62]

People made slums.

"It will be useless," declared the City Health Commissioner, "to do any extensive building [of housing projects] for the cheaper class of tenants and leave

standing old buildings that are now objected to, for as long as they stand there will be tenants of the poorest class to occupy them."[63]

People will make slums.

And everyone knew that people who made slums were black people. People who would live in a low-income public housing development would be black people. Public housing was for black people.[64]

* III *

Benjamin F. Levister was a black man. A migrant from North Carolina, he was one of the few black residents outraged at living conditions in Mount Vernon. "It's awfully hard to feed a man when he's already eaten," recalled one Mount Vernon black man in discussing the tendency among blacks to be satisfied with their conditions as improvements over the rural living standards they had grown up with in the South.[65] Levister, however, was "a man ahead of his time."[66] Though not a lawyer, he often represented black people in court. Though he knew that blacks were not allowed in Mount Vernon's high-class restaurant, the Beehive, one day he invited a few black laborers in their overalls off the street --"C'mon boys, I'm going to buy you some dinner!"-- to the Beehive.[67] When a police officer tried to eject them, he threatened him with a lawsuit and set a precedent for the desegregation of Mount Vernon's restaurants and theaters. Later, he would lead the fight to allow blacks to enjoy Westchester County's beaches. Levister was, according to one contemporary, "very smart, very shrewd, very dynamic and very persuasive."[68] "He had the nerve of a lion," recalled another, and "he feared

nobody."[69] In the summer of 1939, Levister took on City Hall.

This time the newspaper had not printed any new photographs or editorials. Instead, the Common Council started getting a new stream of letters endorsing a housing authority for Mount Vernon. The letters arrived from various black organizations --Morris Link Post #1117, the Westchester Committee Against Racial Discrimination, and finally the very official sounding Mount Vernon Housing Advisory Committee --- and all signed with the same name, Benjamin F. Levister.[70] Although Levister created the Mount Vernon Housing Advisory Committee entirely on his own, the name he chose made it sound somehow official, a mild deception that the Daily Argus perpetuated in its coverage.[71] Organizing a group to appear before the Council, Levister testified that "for certain groups of this city [blacks] the conditions are deplorable." In the previous ten years, declared Levister, only one house had been built in the slum areas.[72] He reported that the managing agents of some vacant houses and apartments owned by the federal government would not rent to blacks if the federal Homeowners' Loan Corporation head a mortgage anywhere on the block.[73] The lack of vacancies for Negro families, he predicted, would force blacks to penetrate into traditionally white areas unless "additional improved housing in Mount Vernon would make it unnecessary for those so-called objectionable persons to find living quarters in these would-be restricted areas."[74] Two weeks later he submitted a new survey of slum conditions showing that 90 to 100 families investigated had neither heating nor bathing facilities.[75] As it had in 1934, the federal government once again intervened, supplying Levister with technical information about establishing a housing authority. Levister urged creation of a housing authority, giving details about other successful projects in Atlanta, New Jersey, and New York City, and offered to supply the Council with any further information it might need about how

to secure funding.[76]

Then Levister took the battle outside the Common Council's chambers to enlist a broader base of support. If the movement for a housing authority previously had stopped and stalled, the relentless efforts of Levister's Mount Vernon Housing Advisory Committee beginning in 1939 ignited once and for all the engines of political change. The Committee sponsored monthly mass meetings with speakers from the United States Housing Authority, a State Senator from Brooklyn, as well as speeches by leading white citizens from all over Mount Vernon. The women's groups, churches and labor unions that had previously supported a housing authority jumped back on the bandwagon. "A number of civic organizations and churches outside the colored group have joined in support of the better housing movement," reported the Daily Argus.[77] By early 1940, Levister claimed that a total of 84 organizations supported creating a housing authority and he submitted a petition with 1500 signatures in favor a a housing authority to the Common Council.[78] The Mount Vernon Housing Advisory Council wrote to Mount Vernon's State Senator, Pliny Williamson, urging him to introduce enabling legislation for an authority. Williamson wrote back indignantly that "you did not state how your Advisory Council was created. Nor do you give its powers, authority, and responsibility." He informed Levister that the Mayor and Common Council must approve such a plan before legislation is drafted.[79] In 1939 and again in 1940, the Common Council took no action. Not until the next year, after an accidental electrocution of a 19-year-old black youth, did the City act. The Mount Vernon Housing Advisory Committee and other black groups attributed the death to faulty wiring in substandard housing and accused the Common Council of outright hostility towards efforts for better housing.[80] The city, it seemed, had to do something. And it did. But it might still have done nothing, had it not been for the election

of a new mayor.

* * *

Mayor William Hart Hussey had worked as a truck driver for the Pruser Oil company until he married the boss's daughter. Soon, he was running the company, one of Mount Vernon's biggest. He was well liked and had become a fireman and eventually Chief of Police before running for Mayor in 1939. A Republican Mayor faced with an obvious New Deal program, Mayor Hussey would have surprised no one by rejecting the housing authority proposal. "He was an arch conservative," recalled Hussey's Corporation Counsel, Arthur Ellis, "He wanted nothing to do with the Roosevelt Administration." Hussey, for example, had already turned down a WPA proposal to cover the railroad cut before taking up the housing proposal.[81] He had worked hard to reduce the city's spending and reduce the debt burden of previous administrations.[82] The political pressure for a low-income housing plan, however, was enormous. Not just Democrats, but many progressive-minded Republicans supported it. Groups like the Westchester Woman's Club, and its former president, Edythe Law Bowman, whom the Mayor knew and respected very much, insisted that better housing was not a political issue.[83] The forces calling for a housing authority were no longer to be quieted by yesterday's empty promises of tougher laws and enforcement. Any more accidents due to substandard housing could be politically catastrophic. The City had to take some definite action.[84] In early 1941, the Mayor appointed a committee to conduct a formal investigation into the slums. To the eight-member committee he named some strong housing authority advocates including Levister and two of the more vocal women supporters.

In February, 1942, the committee released a 101-page technical slum survey revealing conditions "contrary to present day conceptions of human endurance." It accused the Health and Building Departments of malfeasance for their failure to cope with the slum conditions. Avoiding any direct reference to blacks, the report highlighted the general shortage of housing for low-income people, pointing out that low-income people not only needed better housing , but because vacancy rates were very low, they needed more housing. "Mount Vernon should keep pace with progressive ideas for the welfare of its citizens," the committee concluded, and establish a housing authority to carry out a new low-income housing program.[85]

With the publication of the Committee's report, the political floodgates had been opened. The Daily Argus launched a series of articles and editorials on the results of the Citizen's Committee survey. One editorial, calling the Committee's report "an important social document," declared that "strong talk is needed in a city that for 20 years has watched a serious housing problem threaten the health, morals, and economic security of the whole community without taking a single constructive step toward effecting a cure."[86] Front page news stories documented the growing constellation of major groups supporting a housing authority: the League of Women Voters, the League of Women Shoppers, the National Council of Jewish Women, the YWCA, the Contemporary Circle of Sinai Temple, Macedonia Baptist Church (black), Centennial A.M.E. Zion Church (black), the American Labor Party, the Building and Construction Trades Council. There were no public signs of opposition. When Hussey came out publicly in favor of the committee's report and the need for a housing authority, the Common Council was the only obstacle remaining.

On the Common Council, four of the five members --William Allman, John

K. Miller, George Percy, and David Cohn-- had voted against the plan before. Yet Hussey was considered a "strong" mayor; the Common Council generally went along with his wishes.[87] "The Common Council was puppets to the Mayor," remembered one Mount Vernon resident. [88] Under a Democratic Mayor, a Republican Council might never have supported a New Deal-type housing plan. Under a conservative Republican mayor, however, its support was just a matter of toeing the party line. After a month's delay, the Council unanimously approved the housing authority plan and the State enacted enabling legislation.[89] When the political winds shifted, the Council leaned the right way.

To fill five places on the newly created Mount Vernon Housing Authority, Mayor Hussey chose local residents of diverse backgrounds and occupations, a true citizen's committee representing a cross-section of the city. Appointed chairman was I. Leonard Heuslein, a fox to guard the chicken coop. The fox, Heuslein, would stay on the Authority for only a few months until deciding that he did not have enough time to devote to his task.[90] As a replacement the Mayor chose Arthur H. Goetz, a New York City businessman, who was well known for his involvement in community charity but who, at first, had little enthusiasm for a housing plan. Goetz, however, was not the vehement opponent of public housing that Heuslein had been; his selection was intended more as a "counterweight" to the remaining four selections, all of whom were committed to developing a low-income housing plan for Mount Vernon.[91] The other members included Edythe Law Bowman, former chairman of the Westchester Woman's Club; Melvin Levi, a wealthy owner of a furniture factory; George Grimm, head of a plumber's union; and Dr. William S. Randolph, the only black appointee and one of a very few black professionals in Mount Vernon. A former leader of the Crispus Attucks Republican Club, Randolph was considered a safer choice than Levister who, despite his public

leadership of the housing movement, threatened to prove politically unwieldy.[92] Far more a gradualist than Levister, Randolph believed that "compromise is the secret to achievement." When he had first come to Mount Vernon, the city hospital had barred him patient privileges, so he had entered the political arena to fight racial discrimination and advance his own career as well.[93] While Levister had stirred up many emotions, he had alienated many people too; Randolph increasingly eclipsed Levister's leadership among blacks in the fight for better housing.[94] If the new members of the Housing Authority had any thing in common, it was their general lack of experience or expertise in housing policy. In the months to come they would learn much about housing from the State's technical advisers and then propose a plan that from all technical aspects seemed to be sound housing policy.

* IV *

With the creation and appointment of a housing authority, many people in Mount Vernon probably believed the housing problem well on its way to being solved. Different people, however, had different ideas about exactly what was the "solution" to the city's housing problems. Some people were most concerned with the physical aspects of clearing away the slums. For them, it was a matter of erasing the city's eyesores and reducing the slums' perennial drain on city services. Others thought more in terms of providing affordable quality housing for the city's low-income people. They were not against clearing away the slums; rather, they emphasized the need for improved and increased housing for people crowded in the slums. By public housing law, any city that undertook a low-income project had to clear either the area, slum or vacant, it was building on or a substandard area elsewhere in the city.[95] Except that public housing law required it, the two

solutions--slum clearance and new housing--in theory did not have to be linked.

Would the Housing Authority concern itself most with clearing away the slums or with creating new low-income housing? This question arose because much of the support for creating a housing authority sprang from this ambiguity of purpose. The rationales for public housing were sufficiently broad to unite the conservatives who simply wanted to eliminate the slums with the liberals who wanted more and better housing for low-income people. If anyone in Mount Vernon had taken time to read the State's legislation, they would have found that it favored neither slum-clearance or low-income housing development over the other. Rather, it stated that "the clearance, replanning, reconstruction, and rehabilitation of substandard and insanitary areas or the providing of adequate, safe and sanitary low rent housing accommodations in these areas and elsewhere for persons and families of low income, or both of these, are public uses and purposes for which public money may be spent and private property acquired."[96] The State housing law left the priorities of slum-clearance or new low-income housing development open to Mount Vernon's interpretation.

In the fall of 1943, the Housing Authority announced that it intended to build on a total of three unnamed sites on which it had agreed upon with the State. "For obvious reasons, the three sites selected for the housing project cannot be divulged at this time," wrote the Daily Argus, excusing the Authority's secrecy.[97] The people of Mount Vernon did not seem to be worried. They may have assumed that the Authority would clear away the bad houses and put in good ones. New construction would not start until after the war was over, and who knew how many more years the war would last? Most importantly, the housing plan would provide employment in the post-war period, when the economy was

expected to lapse back into a depression. In an editorial headlined "A MAGNIFICENT JOB", the Daily Argus declared that "Indeed, Mount Vernon's housing plan should give the city a strong start in meeting the problems of readjustment that are bound to follow the war. And that's why it is important for each and every one of us to take an active interest in the vast task that lies ahead for members of our Housing Authority -- and to lend them every assistance we can in carrying through successfully a project that may well serve as a model for the entire state."[1] For the moment, the question of where public housing would be built did not seem to concern anyone.

While some people believed the Authority was on the verge of solving the housing problem, the members of the Authority had come to realize that their task was logistically more complex than merely clearing out slums and rebuilding in its place. It was easy enough to clear out ramshackle buildings, but what about the tenants inside? Where would they go? Vacancies were scarce. War workers were coming into town and almost no new homes were being built during the war. In fact, there had been very little new construction in Mount Vernon since the end of the 1920s, because the Depression had contracted housing demand and even forced many families to double up.[2] Would the Authority simply evict these slum people, leaving them little chance of finding new housing? The worst slum area in the city, the block running from Seventh and Eighth Avenues between Third and Fourth Streets, was also the single most-populated block in the city with more than 600 inhabitants.[3] A project in that block would mean two hundred families would go homeless for at least as long, at least one or two years, as it took to clear the area and build anew. For the Authority to confine its construction to the cleared areas themselves would defeat its very purpose of providing additional housing for low-income people. When the Authority announced plans to build on three sit

however, the public did not know that the Authority did not mean three slum sites.

What, then, was the alternative? Although Mount Vernon had been built up more than any other area in Westchester, it was not impossible to find unused land. In the 1920s, land had been costly; since the Depression, however, prices had dropped, and on the south side few people were building new homes at all. For many of these vacant or no longer used tracts, it was not hard to find the owner. The city alone, through tax foreclosures, had been steadily accumulating more and more property, nearly 300 parcels of land with an assessed valuation of over $1 million, property which it yearned to sell off for some revenue.[101]

From a practical standpoint, building a project on vacant land made sense. First, vacant land cost less than land with buildings already on it, from which landlords and storeowners would demand high prices. Second, once a project was already built on a vacant tract, there would automatically be a place to relocate families dispossessed by subsequent clearing of slum areas. Third, construction on vacant land could take place almost right away because there would be no delays to relocate tenants and demolish existing buildings. In New York State, furthermore, it was the usual practice for a housing authority to build on vacant sites. If a vacant site was used for construction, the State provided funds for slum clearance of another area of the city even if the slum area itself did not receive any project. "Thus two purposes are served," reported the State Division of Housing, "housing can be built without undue delay, and slums which have a deteriorating effect on the community, but which are not necessarily good sites for residential use, can be cleared and restored to active life."[102]

Aside from matters of finance and tenant relocation, the State advanced its

larger goals of community planning through careful project selection. It hoped to assimilate the new public housing tenants, who had lived in nothing but slums all their lives, into the surrounding community. It discouraged confinement of public housing to any one site, particularly to a site within a slum area. "The basic element in a balanced neighborhood," declared the 1951 State's annual housing report, "is balanced housing--housing for families of all income levels--if democracy is to be achieved. . . . It is highly desireable that housing for a single income level should not be concentrated in particular areas or segregated for housing for other income groups. Ghettoes, economic or otherwise, are not in the American tradition."[103] Housing Authority member, Dr. William Randolph remembered that Governor Thomas Dewey insisted on the integration of races in any Mount Vernon project.[104] Indeed, the State's goals extended beyond providing for the base material needs of slum-dwellers; it believed that by changing low-income people's everyday surroundings, it would socialize them into the mainstream of American middle-class community values. Its progressive vision emphasized the social developmental processes of children growing up in a housing project. "If children are brought up in economic isolation through no fault of their parents, common understanding is impeded during the critical formative years and class feeling is fostered and intensified at maturity."[105] The State stressed the need to provide the spatial luxuries people of slums had never known such as playgrounds, recreation rooms, and meeting halls. On the cover of one of the State's housing reports was a picture of a mother and child on the lawn in front of their new low-income home with a caption: "Within this frame.....Life and Spirit Grow."[106]

If the Housing Authority should not confine a project to slum-cleared areas, neither should it pile low-income people into a single, sprawling, highrise project as physically distinct from the rest of the community as were the slums. Instead of

one large project, with an "institutional look" that "sticks out like a sore thumb", one public housing architect argued before the Housing Authority, Mount Vernon should construct two or three smaller projects that fit in with the homes and buildings nearby.[107] As long as the lower-class people, mostly blacks, lived in housing radically different from the surrounding community--whether it was dilapidated cold water flats or modern project monstrosities--they too would feel different and never be able to assimilate with the rest of Mount Vernon.

In the early days of 1944, the Housing Authority met with the Common Council to discuss the plan it had agreed on with the State. There were to be projects on three sites for a total of 650 dwelling units, costing $4.5 million. The State would pay 90 percent or $135,000 per year and the City would pay around 10 percent or $10,671 per year plus the costs of tax exemption. Site A contained the city's most densely populated and semi-commerical area, a four square block area from Seventh and Ninth Avenues between Third and Fourth Streets. It swallowed up "the heart of the Negro community" including the five leading black churches.[108] Site B encompassed a vacant tract just south of Sandford Boulevard and bounded by Third and Fifth Avenues down to Seventh Street. And Site C was a vacant tract just south of Sandford Boulevard, bounded by East Seventh Street, Fulton Lane, and an imaginary line south of Homestead Avenue. All three sites were located on the south side. The north side never received a moment's consideration because property acquisition costs were prohibitively high, and the political costs of introducing low-income groups into what was considered the city's prime residential area were probably even higher.[109] Two of the south side sites, on the other hand, had gone vacant and undeveloped for years. From 1930 to 1940, nearly six times as many buildings had been built on the north side than on the south side.[110] "When private enterprise is willing to step in and do this job, the Housing Authority will

be only to glad to let it. So far it has not done so," Housing Authority member, Edythe Bowman insisted.[111] One letter to the Common Council claimed, "No lending institution will give a first mortgage loan to a prospective builder in the South Side. Not even the F.H.A. will insure loans there."[112] Vacant sites on the south side seemed perfect locations for new low-income housing development.

Essential to its decision on site locations was the Housing Authority's realization that in Mount Vernon there was no single block or street of entirely substandard housing. As the Mayor's Citizen's Committee on Housing in 1942 had acknowledged, "We cannot say that we found any definite so-called slum areas in Mount Vernon, but we did find many clearly sub-standard living quarters."[113] Good houses were usually mixed in with the bad. Isolated patches of slum tenements had sprouted all over the southwest side as well as in a few places on the west side and one in the far south. The Authority could not clear away the entire southwest side. Nor did it have powers of spot-clearance.[114] It chose Sites B and C not simply because vacant land cost less and because the State encouraged site diversification, but also because it hoped vacant-site projects would siphon off the families living in some of Mount Vernon's worst and geographically scattered slum structures.[115] A vacant-site plan promised to house those who most desperately needed it and to free up the previous substandard patches so they could be condemned by the city or redeveloped privately.

Of all three sites, the Authority had most reluctantly proposed Site A because it entailed relocating displaced tenants as well as higher land costs. The Mayor and the Common Council, however, had insisted on one project being located in the slum area itself.[116] The Authority consented but warned that all three sites must be approved together as a single package: "It is necessary to set up the

project in the manner propounded in order to eliminate a substandard part of the slums and provide adequate, proper, sanitary, safe, low-rent housing accommodations. This cannot be accomplished by any dissection of the project; nor can it be done by confining a project solely to the slum area itself."[117] In January of 1944, the Common Council approved the plan amidst a flood of letters in support. Mayor Hussey gave his approval the following day. The Authority could proceed with its plan as soon as the war ended.

Still the people of Mount Vernon still did not know where the projects were to be located. Some voices began protesting that the Authority was going too fast without the public's knowledge. The Daily Argus asked all five members whether it should wait for more public approval of its plans before spending any State funds. All but Bowman answered no; the public had already approved creation of the Authority, declared the other members, and it was time for action.[118] At a forum attended by 300 residents, in April, 1944, the Authority showed it still enjoyed broad support when members won the loudest applause over its real estate critics.[119] The Authority soon hired an architect and conducted test borings of the three sites.

Then the secret got out. In September 1944 the Authority, seeking to generate public support, put on display at the public library the architect's model of the projects. The Authority planned to build two- and three-story homes on each tract, designed to fit in with the architectural character of the surrounding community. "In planning the project," reported the Authority, "the aspects of suburban living will be taken into consideration. Buildings will be designed to fit into community patterns. Facilities which promote closer community living for project tenants, such as a meeting hall, nursery school, craft and recreation rooms

will be provided. Tenant activities will also be planned to fit in with a City-wide program for community recreation."[120] Thousands of people viewed the library exhibit showing various site layouts. The Daily Argus praised the attractive layout of colonial-type homes. Street markings on the model, however, gave away the sites' location.[121] The revelation of the sites may have been accidental or timed in order to quell potential opposition with the plan's visual attractiveness. Nevertheless, it had been nine months from the time the Authority and City came to agreement before the public finally discovered the site locations.

* V *

Property value. Mount Vernon was the "City of Happy Homes" and the City of High Property Values. Beneath the veil of politics and surpassing all humanitarian sentiment, there remained the figure of a man and his property---his biggest investment, his biggest security. "When people put their money into residential property in a restricted zone in any community, they acquire 'vested rights'"; Authority member Arthur Goetz had written in 1936, "and they have a right to expect that their 'vested rights' shall be respected by the elected and appointed officials of the community."[122] The purpose of city government, according to Goetz, was to protect and enhance property values by enforcing zoning regulations and maintaining public services such as roads, police and fire protection, and water supply, so as to maximize enjoyment of one's private property. In Mount Vernon, a city government could differ with the people on issues of politics, policies, and principles; but a city government treasonous enough to undermine property values would never survive the next election. When the public found out the news about site locations on vacant land--outside of the slum

areas--homeowners thought about property values, and the backlash was impossible for City Hall to ignore.

One November evening in 1944, two months after the library exhibition, a member of the Kingsbridge Gardens Civic Association read the following petition aloud before the Authority and Common Council: "We the undersigned, being the owners in fee of the real property set opposite our respective signature do hereby protest and object to the erection of any public housing project, (postwar or otherwise) south of Sandford Boulevard in the City of Mount Vernon."[123] If the Common Council was not overly impressed by the petition's 208 signatures, it could not overlook the fact that every one of the signers had crammed into the Common Council's chambers to join in protest. The Kingsbridge Association was a group of property owners from a narrow geographical area in the far south of the city, from Third and Fifth Avenues between Seventh Street and Kingsbridge Road. The Association argued that it was unfair for the south side to receive the burden of all three projects and that the north and west sides should each bear one too. The protesters objected not to the building themselves, but to the people who would live in them. Randolph assured them that "in some of the worst homes in Mount Vernon [are] some of the finest housekeepers. . . . if you could see the proposed sketches, you would be proud and if you could be assured the people living there would know how to keep their homes, I think you would feel different." The property owners did not believe in the socializing vision of a public housing project. "I'm the oldest resident of Kingsbridge Gardens," one homeowner told the Council and the Authority, "If we bring this type of people in, what's going to happen?"[124]

The issue of race would never surface as such in newspaper reports, but it

was clear that the Kingsbridge Association feared the penetration of blacks beyond their confined area in the city's southwest, north of Sandford Boulevard. "In the background all the time," recalled Dr. Randolph years later, "there was a growing and intensifying objection based on race."[125] In their own narrow area the Kingsbridge property owners had restrictive covenants blocking black encroachment into the neighborhood.[126] And for years they and other south side property owners had resisted any spread of blacks south of Sandford Boulevard. The color line had been drawn down the middle of Sandford Boulevard. In 1940, for example, 196 black families lived in the blocks immediately north of Sandford Boulevard between Fourth Avenue and Tenth Avenue, while only 12 black families lived in the corresponding blocks across the street south of Sandford Boulevard.[127] People knew that blacks committed around one-third of the city's reported crimes.[128] And they had heard stories that black people did not even know how to use bathrooms and toilets.[129] Protestors did not believe that a clean home and efficient government administration could make blacks turn into good citizens and neighbors; at the very least, they did not believe it enough to risk their schools, their neighborhood, and their property values.

The opposition grew stronger as two other organizations, the Nuvern Terrace Association and the Asbury Brotherhood, joined in with the Kingsbridge Association against any project south of Sandford Boulevard.[130] The Common Council had already asked the Authority to consider other sites besides B and C. [131] Two years later, ironically, the Council would approve the erection of army barracks on vacant Site B for 100 homeless war veterans. The barracks were ramshackle wooden constructs that were supposed to be temporary but nobody knew how long it would take for the thousands of returning veterans to find homes. The veterans who were to live there, however, were all white. No protests from property

owners were heard.[132]

The Authority now found itself in the position of having to find two more sites. The Daily Argus reported that "Housing Authority members discussed informally for more than an hour the problem of being "stymied" on vertually every site they consider."[133] It still intended to fulfill the contract with the State calling for 650 units of housing, its estimate of "the minimum anticipated needs of Mount Vernon."[134] And if there were to be 650 units, it would take three sites to accommodate a dispersed low-rise development that fit in with the surrounding community of houses. The Authority still intended to diversify the site locations in order not to isolate a single pocket of low-income families, which meant that all the sites could not be located on the southwest side. Concentrating the project in the southwest area, furthermore, would cost far more than the $4.5 million budgeted because of the cost of buying highly developed property.

The Authority turned to the west in search of more sites. A few landlords of rundown tenement buildings on the city's west side had requested that the Authority build a project there.[135] Perhaps because of a combination of the requests for a housing project, the cheaper cost of land on the west side, and the justification that the west side had some patches of slums, the Authority publicly suggested some west side sites in the Daily Argus in February of 1945. When two months later no one had protested, the Authority formally proposed a new housing plan to the Common Council. It gave the Council a choice of two plans. The first was to put 250 units on the original Site A; 150 units in the western area bounded by Putnam Street, Bronx Street, North High and Locust Avenues; and 250 units in an area just south of Site A, bounded by Seventh and Eighth Avenues between Fourth and Fifth Streets. This last site was a crowded city block and the

acquisition costs would add an additional $500,000 to the cost of the project. The Negro Civic League submitted a petition of 104 signatures endorsing this extension of Site A as no less than a "masterly answer to the opponents of Housing in Mt. Vernon."[136] The second choice was to build 250 units on Site A and 400 units in the less costly western land bounded by Putnam and William Streets and Locust and North Terrace Avenues.[137] Mayor Hussey then came out publicly in favor of any choice of the proposed west side sites, and the Common Council appeared on the verge of accepting one of the Authority's proposals when 200 west side residents, mostly Italians, flooded the Council's chambers in protest. They argued against the project because it meant for many of them losing their homes. "We invite you to come and visit our homes and tell us who are the slums," said one letter to the Authority with 104 signatures attached.[138] The west side site were not vacant areas nor were they slum areas, residents insisted. One resident, Anthony Arcuri, recalled that a few landlords of rundown apartment building in the area had persuaded the Authority to propose the area as a project in hopes of being bought out. Meanwhile, in the same neighborhood stood many single family homes in good condition. Arcuri himself had just put in $15,000 of renovation work and the owner across the street had just put in a new foundation for his house.[139] The Common Council quickly ruled out the west side sites. Blocked in the south and in the west, the Authority, it seemed, had nowhere to go.

A chorus of groups now rose in early 1945 against the Housing Authority. One property owner's group demanded that any project proposed by the Authority be subject to a public referendum. [140] In a letter to the Common Council, the Italian Civic Association declared that the Authority had betrayed the trust of the citizens who had created it. "People commonly associate low-rent housing with slum clearance. Based on this assumption, the authority's creation received public

sanction." The Association warned that "it now develops that the housing authority is more interested in building low-rent housing and less interested in clearing slums. In this respect it has lost orientation."[141]

The opposition groups claimed that the Authority had lost orientation because, as it now developed, these groups had defined their own self-proclaimed "fundamental principles of public housing." In a letter to the Common Council, the Killieburn Taxpayers Protective Association argued against a "project undertaken in the guise of slum clearance that has not as its primary objective and specific aim the elimination of sub-standard dwellings and replacement by modern, low-cost units." The Association warned that "cheap vacant land, away from slum sections and on the fringes of better neighborhoods that give promise of future expansion is no invitation to promiscuous building of low-cost housing." It concluded, "Housing intended to alleviate objectionable conditions in slum areas should be confined to areas where substandard dwellings already exist in comparatively large numbers."[142] The Housing Authority, these groups had decided, had no other function than to tear down slum structures and build there anew.

Once again, a citizen's committee--a new committee to replace the old citizen's committee on housing, the Housing Authority--was put forward to solve the housing problem. "The problem has developed to be more complex than most people contemplated," wrote the Italian Civic Association, "It requires a broader approach than the Housing Authority alone can take." The Association called for a committee "representing a true cross-section of the City" to reassess the need for any low-rent housing at all. [143] Mayor Hussey asked the Authority to take no further action until a new committee of citizens he appointed made its report. Effectively stripped of its power, in September the Authority struck back. The

chairman, Arthur H. Goetz, resigned in anger.[144] And Dr. Randolph complained, "It is a bit late for a group of citizens without any special knowlegde on the subject to step forward and request that the work of our city government involving almost $5,000,000 be 'halted.'"[145] Years later, Randolph would remember that the city's "vested interests" had come to certain conclusions about the housing program, that "eventually there was a meeting of minds upstairs," well beyond his or the Housing Authority's privy.[146] Avoiding any more public controversy, the Mayor did not wait for his new committee's report and, in a private meeting, reached an agreement with the Authority to continue its efforts. . . . on Site A only.

Realizing that Site A alone could not accommodate the goal of 650 units, the Authority two months later proposed an additional site, Site F, only one block south of Site A, between Seventh and Ninth Avenues from Fifth Street to Sandford Boulevard. Only a few property owners protested and the Common Council approved the plan anyway.[147] With one less site to work with, the project architect had to redraw the plans for two- and three-story buildings spread out on three sites to five- and six-story building on two sites.[148] As a result, the buildings no longer fit in so well with the surrounding community of houses. The Authority then submitted the proposal for Sites A and F to the State for approval. Accompanying the documents was a map titled "Present Land Uses" of Mount Vernon. The map showed areas of commercial uses, normal residential housing, and substandard housing. A curious entry in the legend was a classification for "Negro" area. Around this area, perhaps to accent its importance, a red line was drawn. And within this area, Sites A and F neatly fit inside. The project would, after all, "fit in" with its surrounding community.[149]

* VI *

As the war ended, many hoped that construction on Sites A and F would begin as soon as possible to help stimulate employment. Coming back to the city were many veterans in search of work and in search of homes. In 1947, the city erected temporary barracks and converted two old schools to house returning veterans and their families. A total of 158 units were provided. Nearly 2600 veterans applied.[150] Private construction efforts, meanwhile, provided only two new apartment buildings for a total of 38 families in the first two years after the war. City Hall reported that Mount Vernon's population had increased by an estimated 8000 people since 1940. [151] Mount Vernon faced its most serious housing shortage ever, one that affected all income groups.

The Housing Authority, according to City Hall, would solve the problems of housing for low-income people. The Authority, on the other hand,--rebuffed in the past--had re-defined its purposes to be for slum-clearance and not to add to the stock of low-income housing. "It is most difficult," declared the Authority's annual report of 1948 ,"for many to comprehend that our Authority is doing a slum-clearance job and not trying to solve the general housing shortage."[152] Yet the Authority could not begin construction until all tenants on Site A and Site F had found new accommodations.[153] This meant removing 550 families from their homes. Despite the Authority's attempts to find new housing, relocation was a time-consuming and legally expensive process that would eventually delay the project for years. Meanwhile, the Housing Authority was not solving the general housing shortage; it was helping create it.

In late 1948, the delays of tenant relocation took their greatest toll when building costs sharply rose by nearly 50 percent and the Authority's architect

demanded a higher price.[154] When neither the City nor the State would subsidize the added expenses, the Authority had to abandon plans for Site F. On Site A it proposed a new project of 500 units in five ten-story towers. Zoning laws, however, prohibited building more than seven stories high. "We who left New York," wrote one opponent of a zoning change, "came to the City of Homes to escape towering brick gargantuans and have no intention of being meek about our objections."[155] Others suggested that the Common Council should carefully weigh the increase in population and the increased demand for city services that taller apartment buildings would create.[156] Notwithstanding these objections, the Common Council changed the zoning regulations after only one public hearing, because of the pressure to provide as many units as possible even though the project would be restricted to a single site. Before it could build a single unit, the Authority had to relocate 234 families as well as to demolish all the structures on Site A including 45 businesses and five churches.[157] Confined to a single site, the Authority discovered that the only direction it could build a project was, in fact, to project it up.

Mount Vernon hailed its new low-income housing program. The Daily Argus dedicated an entire issue to its opening in September, 1950.[158] The Mayor and Common Council could point to their success in alleviating the post-war housing shortage. The Negro Civic League praised the new opportunity for blacks to live in better housing. The civic-minded reform groups applauded the wiping away of a substandard area and its replacement by spanking new apartments. The unions congratulated themselves on the jobs they had created. The real estate interests had protected the prime residential neighborhoods elsewhere in the city from government encroachment. Property owners on the west side had saved their houses, and property owners south of Sandford Boulevard had "saved" their

neighborhoods.

When the Authority and City Hall agreed to place the entire housing plan on a single slum site, they not only resigned themselves to the delays of relocation, but they also assured that the "homes" thereby created would become, in the long run, a "project" rather than a "community." At first the "project" tenants were an even mixture of white veterans, who were given preference in the tenant-selection process, and black families mostly displaced from Site A.[159] The two races lived entirely integrated floor by floor. One black tenant remembered white families living across the hall and the children of both races playing happily together.[160] Yet the project was doomed to become the fulfillment of its enemies worst "projections," no less than the image and institutionalization of the ghetto. Strangely, the project went by no other name, until 1955, than Site A.[161] For the project, in a sense, remained the unwanted offspring in the City of Happy Homes.

* VII *

This, then, was the story of public housing in Mount Vernon, New York. It began in 1934 with the high standards and heartfelt hopes of the Westchester Woman's Club and ended in 1950 with high rise buildings in the heart of Mount Vernon's slums. From 1934 until 1942, as women's groups, religious organizations, leftist political parties, unions, and, finally, black groups joined in a crescendo of protest over the city's substandard housing, the city administration could no longer put off the calls for a low-income housing plan. In the background all this time were the federal and State governments, both offering the necessary program funds under the condition that local administration of the housing plan be decentralized under the control of a five-member housing authority. Beyond 1942, the newly

established Mount Vernon Housing Authority, whose members were of diverse backgrounds but with little expertise in the field of housing, tried to carry out a State-recommended plan of project diversification on both slum and vacant land. At this point, the staunch protests of property owners blocked development of any proposed sites elsewhere than the southwest area of the city. In the end, it was the city government--compelled to provide at least some form of public housing--that exercised final veto power and dictated the placement, and perhaps the future decay, of the new housing plan.

The story of public housing in Mount Vernon was no different than that of many other cities across the nation.[162] In New York City, a number of projects were concentrated in a small, predominantly slum and black area on the city's east side, despite the State's open opposition.[163] In Chicago, the Board of Alderman turned down almost every one of the Chicago Housing Authority's vacant site recommendations, unless such projects were agreed to be kept 90 percent white, in favor of sites in the heart of the Black Belt.[164] In New Rochelle, the original proposal for two low-rise garden apartment projects, Winyah Gardens and Huguenot Gardens, was reduced to a single project on one site, the buildings squeezed upward, and the project renamed to Hartley Houses.[165] In Yonkers, the local housing authority complained of a "grave misunderstanding" of the purposes of public housing, that "many believe it is a slum-clearance program and do not understand that it actually is the means of providing safe, decent and sanitary low-rent housing for persons of low-income."[166] In White Plains, in 1947, the original proposal for a vacant site project was turned down due to "certain insurmountable difficulties" in favor of clearing and building in a substandard area.[167] In cities across the nation, the supporters of public housing had just enough political leverage to get a project built, yet not enough to have a choice of

sites.

And the story of public housing in Mount Vernon was the story of the "town" that did not want to become a "city." For years it had prospered by virtue of its location---just far enough from New York City to constitute a suburb. Yet as New York grew, it drew Mount Vernon closer to the brink of the "city." While more lower-income groups moved in, more efficient commuter transport allowed middle class professionals to settle in a new belt of suburbs even farther from New York. Mount Vernon's response to the encroaching "city" was reflexive and haphazard. It lacked a cohesive plan to adjust to changing economic and demographic realities. "It is perhaps inaccurate to say we have no interest in planning for the future," the Italian Civic Association wrote to the Common Council in 1945, "But we have no group giving it the intensive study that is required."[168] As evidenced by its sudden reversals in the face of property owner opposition to the south side and west side sites, the Mayor and the Common Council brokered the interests of various groups for and against public housing. Catering to the least common denominator of political influence, City Hall merely compromised competing interests in a piecemeal fashion. It never developed its own separate vision of how the city might develop and change in the future. What started out as a carefully planned community of 1000 homes in the 1850s was becoming, by the 1950s, a chaotic hodgepodge of income groups and housing types. And, in response, the City seemed to have no plan. The Housing Authority, in the end, was no authority at all. A miscarried public housing program would signal for Mount Vernon more stillbirth development efforts in the future.

ENDNOTES

1. Otto Hufeland, Early Mount Vernon, (Mount Vernon, NY: Mount Vernon Public Library, 1940), pp. 13-16.

2. Daily Argus, 4/7/42.

3. Hufeland, Early Mount Vernon, p. 36.

4. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Abstract. AND U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Metropolitan Districts, Population and Area, p. 142.

5. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. Statistical Abstract: 1926, p. 808. AND U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. Statistical Abstract: 1930, p. 852.

6. Mount Vernon Common Council. Documents Submitted to the Common Council [untitled], 6/14/44 and 10/13/48. [Henceforth, cited as Common Council.]

7. Note: 3/4 of the housing production nationwide in the 1920s was marketed to the top 1/3 of the household income spectrum. [Nathaniel Keith, Politics and the Housing Crisis since 1930, (New York: Universe Books, 1973), p. 20.]

8. Daily Argus, 5/24/82.

9. Daily Argus, 2/19/37.

10. Westchester Woman's Club, Yearbook, 1936-1937, Mount Vernon, New York, p.34.

11. Ibid. Note: Member lists from 1936-7 revealed two easily identifiable Italian surnames and one Jewish surname. AND Interview with Virginia Moscowitz, Mount Vernon, New York, 2/28/85.

12. Daily Argus 9/25/50. Details are unclear about exactly who, the CWA or the Westchester Woman's Club, initiated the survey; the most details of the connection between the Club and the CWA appears in a newspaper article in September, 1950.

13. Interview with Dr. William S. Randolph, by telephone, Mount Vernon, New York, 3/14/85.

14. Daily Argus 2/23/34.

Note: The Women's Club was indeed the first organization to give public attention to the slums."it was because of a survey that this organization instituted 16 years ago that the spotlight was put on the city's slums." Daily Argus, 9/25/50.

15. Daily Argus, 2/19/37.

16. Author's calculations from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Housing, Supplement to the First Series Housing Bulletin for New York, Mount Vernon, Block Statistics.

17. Daily Argus, 2/9/42-/2/13/42. Note: The results of the Willmark Report, commissioned in 1941 by the Mayor's Committee on Housing, as published by the Daily Argus is the only quantitative material, besides the Census, on substandard housing in Mount Vernon. Although this report was not made until nearly a decade after the Woman's Club survey, a CWA commissioned report, "A Study of the Negro Population of Mount Vernon," by a black writer, Wilfred S. Lewin, in 1935 confirms the miserable state of housing in the city's southwest.

18. Wilfred S. Lewin, "A Study of the Negro Population of Mount Vernon", (Typewritten and unnumbered pages), (Mount Vernon Public Library: Civil Works Administration Study, 1935.), Section titled "Housing."

19. Daily Argus, 2/10/42.

20. Lewin, "Negro Population", Section titled "Housing."

21. Daily Argus, 2/12/42.

22. Note: Many blacks went to New York City for a brief time before moving out to Mount Vernon. Most came from Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. [Lewin, Section titled "The Present Negro Population."]

23. Lewin, Section titled "The Present Negro Population" as from federal census of 1920 and City Census of Mount Vernon, 1934.

24. Ibid.

25. Author's calculations from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Housing, Supplement to the First Series Housing Bulletin for New York, Mount Vernon, Block Statistics.

26. Interview with James Tarter, Mount Vernon, New York, 2/8/85. Note: Restrictive covenants were not declared unenforceable by the Supreme Court until 1948. [Robert E. Forman, Black Ghettos, White Ghettos, and Slums, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1971), p. 55.] Until 1950, the National Association of Real Estate Boards "Code of Ethics" directly recommended against renting or selling

to "members of any race or nationality . . . whose presence will be clearly detrimental to property values in that neighborhood." [Forman, Black Ghettos, p. 59.] In Mount Vernon there were notable exceptions to the residential segregation rule including James Tarter on Adam St.; Felix Kessel on No. Terrace Ave.; Raymond Pryor on Devonia Avenue.

27. Daily Argus, 2/20/37.

28. Lewin, Section titled "Negro Organizations."

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., Section titled "The Economic Status."

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., Section titled "Housing."

33. Ibid., Section titled "Inter-racial Cooperation."

34. Common Council, 4/12/34.

35. Daily Argus, 9/25/50.

36. Daily Argus, 4/4/34.

37. Note: Years later, Westchester Woman's Club president and Housing Authority member, Edythe Law Bowman, credited the editor, Arthur C. Saunders, and a reporter, Philip E. Anderson, of the Argus for keeping her concerned about the slums. [Daily Argus, 1/22/55.] One other woman, Mrs. Florence Tenney charged the Argus with distorting stories about the slums and trying to make the advocates of public housing seem more numerous than they actually were. [Common Council, 5/15/39.]

38. Daily Argus, 3/30/40.

39. Note: According to the voter records at the Westchester County Board of Elections, in the 1936 Presidential election, Franklin D. Roosevelt won just 37% of the vote in Mount Vernon while winning by a landslide nationwide. (The Board of Elections did not have voter enrollment records, only canvass tallies of individual elections.) Many of Mount Vernon's "old-timers" have estimated that Mount Vernon's Republican enrollment bested Democrats by three or four to one until the Second World War. A Democratic mayor, Leslie Batemen, was successfully elected in 1931 probably because of the backlash against Hoover.

40. Interview with P. Raymond Sirignano, by telephone, Florida, 2/14/85.

41. City of Mount Vernon, Annual Report of the Comptroller, For the years 1934-42. AND, Joseph Beaumont, "A Master Plan in the Making", Citizen's Outlook, July-August, 1936, p.3. "It will evidently be necessary for Mount Vernon to change its fundamental fiscal philosophy and live within its reasonble [sic] income rather [than] to go further into debt year by year."

42. Robert Moore Fisher, 20 Years of Public Housing, (New York: Harper Bors., 1959), pp. 85-9. Note: The PWA undertook construction of some 51 projects in 36 cities beginning in February 1934. In 1935, in the "United States vs. Certain Lands in the City of Louisville," it was ruled that the federal government could not use the power of eminent domain for slum clearance and public housing. Almost a year later, in "New York City Housing Authority vs. Muller, it was ruled that local housing authorities could, in fact, exercise that power.

43. Note: the legislation would change often on both the federal and state levels from 1934 onwards, mostly in regards to the extent of funding. See: "New York State Public Housing Law and Companion Acts. Housing Amendment to the State Constitution (Article XVIII)", New York State Division of Housing, June 15, 1940.

44. Daily Argus, 4/5/34.

45. Daily Argus, 5/10/34.

46. Ibid.

47. Note: The Common Council might not only have feared loss of political control, but economic control. One source reported that one of the Council members owned some of the slum properties, but in a different name, and made a handsome profit off tenants. In the Argus, Richard Stinson, Commissioner of Public Works, charged "prominent institutions and mortgagees" with running many of the slum tenements. "If you want to know something, you can look up the names of some of the owners of those houses. You'll get a pleasant surprise." [Daily Argus, 4/6/34.] From lists the author obtained of property owners in two substandard areas between Seventh and Ninth Avenues (Sites A and F), no names were recognizable.

48. Daily Argus, 1/16/42. Note: Until 1937, there had been only 46 housing authorities created in the U.S. See Keith, Politics and the Housing Crisis, p.28-9.

49. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing to the Governor and Legislature of the State of New York, 1942, Legislative Document No. 29.

50. Daily Argus, 2/21/37.

51. Common Council, 2/24/37.
Note: Heuslein and Karl were members of the Eastside Improvement Association; Heuslein and the Association had spoken out vociferously against the a housing authority in 1934. [Daily Argus, 5/4/34.]

52. Daily Argus, 4/22/37.

53. Ibid.

54. Daily Argus, 5/4/34.

55. Common Council, 5/9/45. (Manlio Severino).

56. Daily Argus, 5/26/44. (George Bliss, President of the Railroad Federal Savings and Loan Association).

57. Daily Argus, 3/28/40.

58. Common Council, 5/15/39. (Mrs. Florence Tenney), [see note 37].

59. Daily Argus, 2/19/37. (Heuslein).

60. Common Council, 2/24/37. (Report of the Committee on Health and Sanitation).

61. Daily Argus, 2/19/37.

62. Daily Argus, 5/4/34.

63. Common Council, 3/24/37. (Franklin W. Shipman.)

64. Interview with James Tarter, 2/8/85.
Interview with William S. Randolph, Mount Vernon, NY, 11/30/84 and 3/14/85.
Note: Though never stated in the newspapers, the common expectation was that public housing would take many black families.

65. Interview with Ben Anderson, Mount Vernon, New York, 2/8/85.

66. Note: Three men put it exactly in those words.
Interview with William S. Randolph, 11/30/84.
Interview with Ben Anderson, 2/8/85.
Interview with Irving Kendall, by telephone, Florida, 2/21/85.

67. Interview with Henry G. Wiggs, Mount Vernon, New York, 2/1/85.
Interview with Ben Anderson, 2/8/85.

68. Interview with William S. Randolph, 11/30/84.

69. Interview with Henry G. Wiggs, 2/1/85.

70. Common Council, 6/14/39 and 8/9/39.

71. Daily Argus, 8/16/39, for example.

72. Common Council, 8/9/39.

73. Common Council 6/16/39.
Note: Until 1949, the FHA declared that the racial composition of a neighborhood was to be a factor in deciding on its mortgage loans. [Leonard Freedman, Public Housing: The Politics of Poverty, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969), p. 136.]

74. Common Council, 8/9/39.

75. Common Council, 8/9/39.

76. Note: Again, there is no way to tell whether the federal government approached Levister first or whether Levister sought out cooperation with the federal government. Nonetheless, the two were certainly working together.

77. Daily Argus, 8/18/39.

78. Daily Argus, 3/12/40.

79. Daily Argus, 3/23/40.

80. Daily Argus, 3/10/41.

81. Interview with Arthur Ellis, by telephone, Florida, 3/4/85.

82. Note: The city's debt had been reduced to approximately $12 million by the end of 1941. See Annual Report of the Comptroller, 1941.

83. Note: Two sources, as well as the daughter of the Mayor, independently confirmed that Hussey and his family knew Bowman well.
Interview with Louise Hussey, Bronxville, New York, 2/8/85.
Interview with Jack Bornstein, by telephone, Mount Vernon, NY, 3/3/85.
Interview with Manlio Severino, Brewster, New York, 2/17/85.

84. Note: Almost every source interviewed--Purdy, Bornstein, Severino, Kendall, LaSorsa, Guaranta--declared that the Mayor was feeling great political pressure. Bornstein claimed that the Hussey had three lawyer advisers who recommended that he take positive action. No other reasons were ever mentioned.

85. Daily Argus, 2/5/42.

86. Daily Argus, 2/6/42. Note: Articles ran from 2/5/42 to 2/13/42.

87. Interview with P. Raymond Sirignano, 2/14/85.

88. Interview with Jack Bornstein, 3/3/85.

89. Note: It was never clear why the State and not the federal government was chosen as a source of funds since both had nearly identical legislation.

90. Interview with Mrs. I. Leonard Heuslein, by telephone, Yonkers, New York, 2/2/85. AND Daily Argus, 2/11/43--Heuslein objects to taking time to see the slums personally.

91. Interview with William S. Randolph, 3/14/85.

92. Interview with Ben Anderson, 2/8/85.

93. Interview with William S. Randolph, 11/30/84.

94. Note: Anderson claimed that Levister had become too divisive. Although he still maintained some visibility on issues of discrimination, such as equal rights at the hospital, he largely dropped into the background.

95. "New York State Public Housing Law and Companion Acts. Housing Amendment to the State Constitution (Article XVIII)", New York State Division of Housing, June 15, 1940.

96. Ibid. Article I, Sect. 2.

97. Daily Argus, 9/18/43.

98. Ibid.

99 Note: Even many of Mount Vernon's grand mansions on the east side of town (Chester Hill) now housed three and four families. [Common Council, 4/22/42, letter from G.Ludlow.]

100. Daily Argus, 3/30/40.

101. Common Council, 1/26/44. (Mayor's Annual Report to the Common Council).

102. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1948, p.29.

103. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1951, p. 2.

104. Interview with William S. Randolph, 11/30/84.

105. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1951, p. 2.

106. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1951.

107. Daily Argus, 4/29/43. (Henry Churchill.)

108. Lewin, Section on "The Present Negro Population."

109. Note: the Mayor's annual report for 1944 talked of "jealously" guarding the city's prime residential districts of the north. [Common Council, 1/24/45.]

110. Author's calculations from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Housing, Supplement to the First Series Housing Bulletin for New York, Mount Vernon, Block Statistics. 1221 on northside compared to 219 on the south side.

111. Daily Argus, 11/27/43.

112. Common Council, 5/9/45. (Manlio Severino.)

113. Daily Argus, 2/5/42.

114. Daily Argus, 11/11/44.

115. Interview with William S. Randolph, 3/14/85.

116. Ibid.

117. Common Council, 1/12/44.

118. Daily Argus, 5/9/44.

119. Daily Argus, 5/26/44.

120. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1944, p. 34-5.

121. Daily Argus, 9/13/44. "Housing Exhibit Shows Two Tentative Sites."

122. Arthur H. Goetz, "The Protection of Vested Property Rights in the Vicinity of Memorial Field", Citizen's Outlook, June 1936, p. 2.

123. Daily Argus, 11/11/44.

124. Ibid.

125. Interview with William S. Randolph, 11/30/84.

126. Interview with James Tarter, 2/8/85.
Interview with Ben Anderson, 2/8/85.

127. Author's calculations from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Housing, Supplement to the First Series Housing Bulletin for New York, Mount Vernon, Block Statistics.

128. Lewin, Section titled "Crime and Delinquency."

129. Interview with James Tarter, 2/8/85.

130. Daily Argus, 2/21/45.

131. Common Council, 12/8/44. (Letter from Cohn to Bowman.)

132. Interview with Jack Bornstein, 3/3/85. Bornstein was one of these veterans in the temporary barracks. Asked why he did not favor a sturdy low-income housing project on Site B rather than barracks, he replied that he would never want to live in a project and he knew it was only a matter of time before he and the other veterans would be earning enough money to buy a place of their own.

133. Daily Argus, 3/24/45.

134. Common Council, 1/12/44 ["minimum estimated needs"] and Common Council, 4/11/45 [intent to stick to contract].

135. Interview with Anthony Arcuri, Mount Vernon, New York, 1/25/85. AND Common Council, 12/13/44 (letter from property owners).

136. Common Council, 4/25/45.

137. Note: Also suggested was a different western site on Mount Vernon and Grove Avenues, [Common Council, 3/28/45.]

138. Common Council, 3/28/45.

139. Interview with Anthony Arcuri, 1/25/85.

140. Common Council, 4/11/45.

141. Common Council, 6/13/45.

142. Common Council, 4/25/45, (underlinings not mine).

143. Common Council, 6/13/45.

144. Daily Argus, 9/1/45.

145. Daily Argus, 9/4/45.

146. Interview with William S. Randolph, 3/14/85.

147. Daily Argus, 12/8/45.

148. Mount Vernon Housing Authority, Minute Book, 1/14/48.

149. Mount Vernon Housing Authority, Application for Financial Assistance for a Public Housing Project, October 15, 1946.

50. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1947, p. 123.

51. Daily Argus, 3/24/48.

52. Mount Vernon Housing Authority, Minute Book, 1/14/48.

53. "New York State Public Housing Law and Companion Acts. Housing Amendment to the State Constitution (Article XVIII)", Article 8, Section 153.

54. Mount Vernon Housing Authority, Minute Book, 9/24/48.

55. Common Council, 11/10/48.

56. Common Council, 11/10/48.
Interview with Manlio Severino, 2/17/85, who testified before Common Council.

57. Mount Vernon Housing Authority, Minute Book, 1/10/49.

58. Daily Argus, 9/25/50.

59. Note: Although dispossessed tenants were supposed to get first choice, in fact they did not. This is because the tenants were only eligible if they had incomes less than 5X the established rent levels (6X if more than three dependents). Veterans, meanwhile, could earn as much as 7X the rent level (8X if more than three dependents) in order to live in the project. [Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1949, p. 27.]

60. Interview with Alice Miller, Mount Vernon, NY, 1/8/85.

61. Daily Argus, 12/16/55.

62. The big public housing defeats happened in Los Angeles, Houston, and Seattle where, unlike other cities in the post-war period, population was increasing and the wealthier were not moving in large numbers to the suburbs. [Freedman, Public Housing: The Politics of Poverty, p.79.]

63. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1951, p. 5.

64. Arnold Hirsch, Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-60., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.), p. 224-5.

65. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1948, p. 66.
Interview with Oscar Parnell, by telephone, New Rochelle, New York, 4/10/85.

66. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1951, p. 90.

67. Report of the State Commissioner of Housing, 1948, p. 8.

68. Common Council, 5/8/45.

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The Yale History Department has awarded this work the John Addison Porter ze for the best essay among 100 or so entrants in American History.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

This essay relies on three types of sources: 1-secondary readings; 2-primary documents; 3-personal interviews. Each of these types of sources added to my understanding and analysis in critical ways:

Secondary readings provoked my thinking and raised the questions my essay tried to answer. In the bibliography, some of my more important readings are annotated. My most important secondary source was Banfield and Meyerson's Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest, an in-depth look at the controversy over site selection in Chicago. The rest of my secondary sources were a crash course in topics I knew nothing about before starting this essay: residential segregation patterns, public housing legislation, the politics of site selection. When I started this essay I had no idea that the politics of public housing were, to a great extent, the politics of race. Had not my secondary readings illuminated this aspect, I could well have interpreted my primary source material far too ingenuously. [In fact, for a while I was entertaining the notion that Mount Vernon was not affected very much by racial considerations like all the cities I had been readings about, ("I don't think anybody was thinking about race" some of the whites I interviewed said), until I came across the Authority's 1943 Application for Financial Assistance with the attached map so meticulously red lining the black neighborhood.]

Primary documents were the basic substrate of my research. My most important source was the Daily Argus, as microfilmed as well as clipped and collected in file folders at the Mount Vernon Public Library. No less than half of my total time spent on research was spent reading old articles from the Daily Argus. According to Dr. Randolph, the Argus presented extremely accurate reports about the Housing Authority's actions. I never found any reason to doubt its accuracy, yet, as noted in the text (p.34), it tended to gloss over issues of race. I know this for sure because the substance of documents submitted to the Common Council often reflected far more attention to racial differences than was ever reported in the Argus. My second most important set of primary documents were these same "Documents Submitted to the Common Council," which are typewritten copies of all documents submitted to the Council at each meeting and stored in the vault in the City Clerk's office. I spent days in the City Clerk's office leafing page by page through each volume looking for any trace of discussion about slums and low-income housing. My reason for scanning these volumes so intensively was in case I had missed any events in my readings of the Daily Argus. The combination of these two sources makes me sure that I covered the major happenings over the 16 years of the development of Mount Vernon's public housing program. My third most important document was the United States Census of Housing for 1940, (the very first year for which such a report was compiled), which supplied me with "hard" information block-by-block about housing conditions, rents, and color of occupancy. My fourth most important primary document was Wilfred Lewin's CWA report "A Study of the Negro Population of Mount Vernon" which I came across in the Mount Vernon library. All I was able to find out about Lewin was that he was a black musician and resident of Mount Vernon. My fifth most important source was the annual reports of the New York State Division of Housing that I found by accident in the stacks of the Seeley Mudd library. These supplied important information about the status of the public housing program State-wide, especially in Yonkers, White Plains, and New Rochelle. Most importantly, these

reports revealed the idealistic and socializing goals the State held for public housing. Although many of my references and quotes come from the 1951 report--more than five years after the time when Mount Vernon was proposing its first project--this is because it was only beginning in 1950 when the State really started to "jazz up" their reports with commentary. Finally, one primary source that was not important were the minutes of the Housing Authority's meetings because they had been lost before 1948 and were not very substantive.

Oral sources were the spice of my paper. To the best of my knowledge, I contacted virtually every living person concerned in an official capacity with the Housing Authority in the 1940s. The list includes the executive director (George Russel); two housing authority members (Randolph and Grimm); one councilmen (Sirignano); the housing authority's counsel and city corporation counsel (Ellis); the Mayor's secretary (Purdy); the Mayor's daughter (Louise Hussey), and business manager (LaSorsa); Levister's surviving family (Ruth Levister and Althea Haywood); leaders of the public housing opposition (Severino, Heuslein's wife); black leaders (Anderson, Wiggs); and an almost dispossessed homeowner (Arcuri). Two of my biggest disappointments were interviews with the former executive director, George J. Russel, who refused to talk at all after I spent over a month tracking him down to Fort Lauderdale, and George Grimm, who remembered very little and replied, "No comment" to any questions about race.

For some of my questions, general and specific, I could never have found the answers in written documents. In this sense, then, interviews complemented my research; they certainly were not relied upon for factual information because people were asked to think back forty to fifty years back in their pasts. In general, I did not include in my text any information that I got from only one source, (except for Randolph's recollection about the Authority's initial emphasis on Sites B and C in 1943-44, which could not possibly be corroborated and seemed plausible). Otherwise, I tried to corroborate bits of information from interview to interview. My most frequent question, for example, was why Hussey supported the housing program---everyone concurred that he was under tremendous political pressure.

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