

https://www.journalnow.com/opinion/columnists/elizabeth-a-herbin-triant-winston-salem-s-residential-segregation-history/article_9d4b4aa1-0b02-571f-afbc-3e5921b1ea43.html

Elizabeth A. Herbin-Triant: Winston-Salem's residential segregation history

By Elizabeth A. Herbin-Triant Guest columnist 12 hrs ago

U.S. 52 bisects Winston-Salem, separating an increasingly vibrant downtown from an impoverished majority-black part of the city. Attractive sites like the gleaming Central Library, the Wake Forest Innovation Quarter and trendy breweries lie west of the highway, as does economic opportunity. As was made clear at a conference hosted by the Spatial Justice Studio at the Center for Design Innovation last month, the section of the city that lies east of U.S. 52 faces a number of challenges, including health disparities, insufficient access to grocery stores and transportation and dismal prospects for upward mobility.

How did this situation come to be? Winston-Salem has a long history of intentional residential segregation. In June 1912, Winston-Salem's Board of Aldermen enacted an ordinance to prevent African Americans from owning or living on property on certain parts of East Fourth Street, and white people from living on property on sections of Third and Depot streets. The ordinance was soon amended to cover the entire city, stating that white and black people could not move into homes on blocks where the majority of occupants were of a different race. The ordinance responded to what the press described as an "invasion" of black folks into white neighborhoods in East Winston. Home to tobacco factories that employed black workers, Winston-Salem was already a segregated place. As a few black tobacco workers moved to middle-class white neighborhoods near the factories, residents looked to city government to "protect" them.

African Americans moving into middle-class white neighborhoods were part of a state-wide trend of black economic success. Indeed, the city's black population was acquiring property at a higher rate than whites in the years prior to the ordinance. These successes, however, were not celebrated; opportunity was considered a zero-sum game.

The segregation ordinance was challenged in 1913 when a black tobacco worker named William Darnell moved into a house he had purchased on Highland Avenue. Tried and found guilty of violating the ordinance in municipal court and in the Forsyth County Superior Court, Darnell appealed to the North Carolina Supreme Court. Ruling in favor of Darnell in April 1914, the court declared the segregation ordinance in Winston-Salem unauthorized (thus invalidating similar ordinances in Mooresville and Greensboro, and notifying cities like Charlotte that were considering segregation ordinances that their efforts would be in vain). In his opinion, Chief Justice Walter Clark pointed to various problems with the ordinance, including the fact that it would have undermined the efforts of industrialists to retain workers. Clark was not concerned about the anxieties of middle-class whites, but about the interests of elites like R.J. Reynolds.

Even after the decision in *State v. Darnell*, which was followed by a 1917 U.S. Supreme Court decision declaring residential segregation laws unconstitutional, white residents of Winston-Salem tried to use municipal power to keep the city segregated. In 1930, a new ordinance divided the city into different residential and industrial zones, and it specified where white and black residents could live within these zones. Challenged in court, this ordinance was invalidated in 1940 by the state supreme court.

The federal government aided efforts to segregate Winston-Salem through the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), a program that assessed the credit-worthiness of neighborhoods. Assessing neighborhoods with any black residents as “declining” or “hazardous” (no matter what the economic circumstances of the residents), HOLC made it extremely difficult for African Americans to access housing loans; it also discouraged white communities from accepting blacks into their neighborhoods.

After World War II, Winston-Salem’s leaders redeveloped the downtown, razing black neighborhoods to make room for municipal buildings and highways, including not just U.S. 52, but the East-West Expressway (today’s Business 40). As this took place, homes, churches and small businesses were lost — and with them, part of the city’s rich history.

Surely the intractability of poverty among black residents of East Winston today has much to do with the city’s various efforts to create and reinforce segregation. Kept out of white neighborhoods through ordinances and other methods, African Americans in

Winston-Salem found their own neighborhoods to be ineligible for housing loans, subject to the wrecking ball and isolated from the city's jobs and attractions.

The good news — evident at the Spatial Justice conference — is that well-meaning people are eager to rectify this situation. Surely, if those involved can unify around empowering the residents of East Winston (who have long felt ignored by city leaders) to bring justice and opportunity into their neighborhoods, this next chapter of the city's history will make the generations to come proud.

Elizabeth A. Herbin-Triant is an assistant professor in the Department of History at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. She is the author of *Threatening Property: Race, Class, and Campaigns to Legislate Jim Crow Neighborhoods*.