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Author(s): Anna D. Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann

Source: *Connecticut History Review*, Spring 2021, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring 2021), pp. 82-119

Published by: University of Illinois Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/connhistrevi.60.1.0082>

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Urban Renewal in a New England Mill Town: Willimantic's Puerto Rican Community and Redevelopment

ANNA D. JAROSZYŃSKA-KIRCHMANN

In December 1971, Betty Lou Williams, executive director of the Willimantic Redevelopment Agency (WRA), publicly stated that “there will be no Puerto Rican ghetto in Willimantic.”¹ Her harsh remark referred to the issue of housing for those Willimantic residents who lived in an area slated for demolition, among them many Puerto Rican workers employed in the town's industries, who were renters in Willimantic's downtown. The Weicker Amendment—section 210 of the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Act of 1969, required that towns procure adequate housing for the resettlement of affected residents before initiating any demolition programs, and Williams emphasized the goal of de-concentrating minority groups into housing dispersed throughout the town. Her utterance, however, became a succinct commentary on the central problem that Willimantic's plans for downtown redevelopment faced: an issue of housing for the Puerto Rican community.

Urban revitalization plans had been discussed in Willimantic since the early 1950s and concerned aging infrastructure of downtown as well as the need to facilitate economic development in that old textile mill town. The Willimantic Redevelopment Agency was officially created in 1966. Three years later the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) confirmed a grant reservation to redevelop a major portion of Willimantic's downtown, defined as the Central Business District (CBD). In 1971 public referendum the town's residents formally approved the redevelopment plan, subsequently amended by WRA in 1973 with quite disastrous consequences. That late adjustment enlarged the cleared area, eliminated an additional street,

¹ Mark Melady, “Housing is Critical for Renewal: Fourth of Five Parts,” *Hartford Courant*, Dec. 29, 1971, p. 34B.

and did away with plans for residential housing in the downtown. It created instead the so-called “Major Parcel,” about a ten-acre piece of land earmarked for a large shopping mall. For three years, between the fall of 1973 and the fall of 1976, WRA carried out demolition, which displaced 154 families and 104 individuals, representing 675 people, as well as 129 businesses, several churches and other historic structures. Over the next two years the town introduced internal improvements such as updated sewage lines, new street lighting, sidewalks, and landscaping, and added a new courthouse, library, police station, and, eventually, housing for the elderly.² The shopping mall, however, never materialized, leaving a vast empty area in the middle of the town.

Throughout the renewal planning process, the presence of the Puerto Rican renters in the downtown became a significant source of racial and economic tensions. Despite growing activism of local Puerto Rican organizations and their supporters, and attempts at social reforms through the Model City initiative, the Puerto Rican community bore the disproportional brunt of the renewal. Not unlike in other places in the nation, the urban renewal in Willimantic and the issue of housing became intrinsically and irrevocably linked.

PROMISES OF URBAN RENEWAL

In the post–World War II decades numerous large cities and small towns in the state of Connecticut embraced the hopes of redevelopment through the federal funds and initiated urban renewal projects. Inadequate housing, outdated infrastructure, dilapidated buildings, congestion and pollution in urban areas troubled local politicians and businessmen. As both city residents and businesses were increasingly choosing to move to the suburbs, the tax base of cities was collapsing and the poverty of its core growing. The situation was perceived as a crisis, which required immediate and forceful intervention. The Federal Housing Act (FHA) of 1949 provided the legal foundations; the so-called blighted areas or slums were to be demolished and replaced with new and modern housing, services, and commercial structures. The Housing Act passed in 1954, put more emphasis on providing public spaces for services and commercial development; the 1956 Highway Act laid foundations for

² Richard Baber, “Vacant Lots and Broken Dreams: Urban Renewal in Willimantic, Connecticut,” *Connecticut History* (1993): 73–90. Barber recounts political events surrounding the redevelopment but pays little attention to its impact on interethnic relations in town; the centrality of the Puerto Rican experience is largely absent from his otherwise thorough account. For the reflection on the legacy of the redevelopment, see also Mark Svetz, “Redevelopment: A Mixed Blessing,” *The Windham Phoenix* 1, no. 4 (March 1986): 9–10.

the new transportation network; and the HUD, established in 1965 as part of President Johnson's Great Society legislation, was to lead and coordinate further efforts to revitalize American cities.³

In 1966, President Johnson also initiated the Model Cities Program, which assigned federal funds to target some selected neighborhoods, in order to demonstrate how economic and social issues can be improved as a result of close cooperation between the local government and groups of residents. The program, administered by the HUD, required broad participation of residents, who should be consulted over the directions of local initiatives. Most Model Cities projects didn't even begin their implementation before 1968, after which they came under the scrutiny of the new Nixon administration. In 1974, the program was discontinued.⁴ The Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 provided "Community Development Block Grants," which consolidated some previous urban programs under HUD. Municipalities could now compete for the block grants to fund smaller improvement projects, rarely involving slum clearance.⁵ Although the story of urban renewal in larger cities has by now been widely studied, we generally know much less about both the renewal process and its consequences in smaller locations.⁶

³ For the history of urban renewal see for example Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940–1985* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); Mark H. Rose and Raymond A. Mohl, *Interstate: Highway Politics and Policy since 1939*, 3rd ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2012); Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴ Bret A. Weber and Amanda Wallace, "Revealing the Empowerment Revolution: A Literature Review of the Model Cities Program," *Journal of Urban History* 38, no. 1 (2012): 173–92; John Sasso and Priscilla Foley, *A Little Noticed Revolution: An Oral History of the Model Cities Program and Its Transition to the Community Development Block Grant Program* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005).

⁵ Teaford, *The Rough Road*, 203–31.

⁶ Notable exceptions include David Schuyler, *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1940–1980* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 2002); Andrea Smith and Rachel Scarpato, "The Language of 'Blight' and Easton's 'Lebanese Town': Understanding a Neighborhood's Loss to Urban Renewal," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 134, no. 2 (April 2010): 127–64; Andrea L. Smith and Anna Eisenstein, *Rebuilding Shattered Worlds: Creating Community by Voicing the Past* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); Llana Barber, *Latino City: Immigration and Urban Crisis in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1945–2000* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

Connecticut's larger cities eagerly responded to the promise of rejuvenation of its infrastructure and prospects of economic prosperity. Richard C. Lee, mayor of New Haven, managed to secure large federal funds for three major urban projects, beginning in mid-1950s.⁷ Hartford, Bridgeport, and Stamford were not far behind.⁸ Smaller towns in Connecticut, especially in its central region, also rushed to get federal money for various projects. The Connecticut Development Commission's (CDC) annual reports gauged the progress of redevelopment in the state. In 1960, the CDC identified more than 18,300 acres of blight in 68 of the state's 169 municipalities, with very high incidence of blight in the so-called Northeast Planning Region. That region included old mill towns such as Thompson, Putnam, Killingly, and Plainfield. In 1950–1954, eight redevelopment projects were pursued in the state, and in 1955–1962, 56 projects were underway, encompassing an area larger than three thousand acres. By 1963, out of the fifteen planning regions only three had no projects initiated: Connecticut River Estuary with the old colonial shore towns like Old Lyme, Old Saybrook and Clinton; Northwest, with rural colonial towns of Cornwall, Kent, and Canaan; and Windham, with its largest town of Willimantic. Total blight in acres was reported as 18,368, with 2,915 acres under various projects, that is about sixteen percent of the total need.⁹ When in February 1973, the Connecticut Urban Renewal Association (CURA) organized a conference in New Haven to discuss the consequences of the Nixon administration's ending all federal housing subsidies and replacing the urban renewal program with the revenue sharing program by 1975, Connecticut still had 43 renewal projects, with forty of them five to ten years

⁷ On Lee's career, see Douglas W. Rae, *City Urbanism and Its End* (New Haven: Yale, 2003); Allan R. Talbot, *The Mayor's Game: Richard Lee of New Haven and the Politics of Change* (New York: Praeger, 1970). On aspects of the renewal projects in New Haven, see Anthony V. Riccio, *The Italian Experience in New Haven* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006); Mandi Isaacs Jackson, *Model City Blues: Urban Space and Organized Resistance in New Haven* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

⁸ Although any comprehensive study of urban renewal in Connecticut is missing, see brief discussions in Bruce Fraser, *The Land of Steady Habits: A Brief History of Connecticut* (Hartford: Connecticut Historic Commission, 1988); David M. Roth, *Connecticut: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton: 1979); Neal R. Peirce, *The New England States: People, Politics, and Power in the Six New England States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972); Albert E. Van Dusen, *Connecticut* (New York: Random House, 1961).

⁹ Connecticut Development Commission, "Blight and Urban Renewal, Technical Report 123" (Hartford: 1963).

old.¹⁰ In 1975, statistics showed that since 1949, over 800 million dollars were spent on projects in 38 municipalities in the state.¹¹

Compared with other cities and towns in the nation and in the state, Willimantic was quite late coming into the urban renewal game, and the sense of urgency was rising. Willimantic's post World War II economic woes were closely related to the general state of industry, and particularly the textile industry in New England. Willimantic developed in the early nineteenth century as a textile mill town. The first local mills processed silk and cotton and relied on the power of the Willimantic and Shetucket rivers. By the mid-nineteenth century, Willimantic became connected to other regions by railroads, and the town grew by leaps and bounds, attracting new capital investments from Hartford and Rhode Island to become a leading textile manufacturing center in Connecticut by the end of the century, with the American Thread Company (ATCO) becoming the largest employer in town.¹²

Since their inception, Willimantic mills employed large numbers of immigrants. Ethnic groups present in town included the Irish, who dominated throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, French Canadians, who became the largest group after the turn of the century, as well as groups of Swedes, Germans, the English, Scots, Poles, Syrian Lebanese, Italians, Jews and Russians. Following World War II, Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, and some African Americans also sought employment in town.¹³ Since by mid-century Syrian Lebanese

¹⁰ "Urban Renewal Officials Oppose Nixon Fund Freeze," *Hartford Courant*, Feb. 24, 1973, p. 32.

¹¹ "New Britain Renewal Leaves Some Hopeful, Some Hopeless," *Hartford Courant*, Jan. 5, 1975, p. 1A; "Redevelopment Nears \$1-Billion Mark," *Hartford Courant*, Jan. 5, 1975, p. 20A.

¹² For the history of Willimantic through the 1930s, which focuses mostly on the town's economic development, see Thomas R. Beardsley, *Willimantic: Industry and Community, the Rise and Decline of a Connecticut Textile City* (Willimantic, Conn.: Windham Textile and History Museum, 1993). Beardsley based his study on the coverage of events in the local newspaper, *The Chronicle*. The second half of the book includes several oral history interviews with Willimantic's residents. See also idem, *Willimantic Women: Their Lives and Labors* (Willimantic: Windham Textile and History Museum, 1990); Barbara M. Tucker, *Remembering Willimantic: Community and College, 1920–1970* (Willimantic: David M. Roth Center for Connecticut Studies, ECSU, 1999). A Fall 2003 issue of *Connecticut History* (vol. 42, no. 2) included several articles on various aspects of Willimantic's early history.

¹³ Anna D. Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann, "Feeling the Unrest of the Times: The 1912 Labor Struggles in Willimantic, Connecticut," *Connecticut History Review* 55, no. 2 (Fall

who arrived in Willimantic at the turn of the century have been already well-integrated in town and African Americans had always a very limited presence, Puerto Rican migrants became the first large racialized group to settle in Willimantic.¹⁴

The increased migration of Puerto Ricans to New England was a consequence of rising emigration from the island to the mainland in the aftermath of World War II. "Operation Bootstrap," which increased investments into the development of industry in Puerto Rico simultaneously encouraged agricultural contracts facilitating migration of Puerto Ricans, mostly men, for employment in labor-hungry American agriculture. Puerto Rican farm-workers travelled to Connecticut to work on tobacco and mushroom farms, in nurseries, and as laborers for vegetable and fruit growers in the region.¹⁵ Dissatisfied with harsh working conditions on the farms, some Puerto Ricans quit agricultural jobs and moved to the cities and towns, where jobs were available in various industries. Others were recruited directly from the island or other cities, like New York by factory agents, who were looking for both men and women workers to fill industrial labor needs. The largest Puerto Rican communities were formed in Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, Norwalk,

2016): 111–39. For more on Connecticut's ethnic groups, see Samuel Köenig, *Immigrant Settlements in Connecticut: Their Growth and Characteristics* (Hartford: Connecticut State Department of Education, 1938); Bruce M. Stave, "Coming to Connecticut: Immigrants in the Land of Unsteady Habits," *Connecticut History* 49, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 201–11; Bruce M. Stave, and John F. Sutherland with Aldo Salerno, *From the Old Country: An Oral History of European Migration to America* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994).

¹⁴ In 1980 US Census, 44% of Willimantic's Puerto Ricans classified themselves as white, 1% as black, and 55% "other" (neither black nor white), Norma Boujouen and James R. Newton, *The Puerto Rican Experience in Willimantic* (Willimantic, CT: Windham Regional Community Council, 1984), 43. On the complications of racial awareness and self-identification of Puerto Ricans versus more rigid racial categories developed in the United States see for example Clara E. Rodriguez, "Racial Hegemony: Puerto Ricans in the United States," in *Race*, ed. by Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 131–45.

¹⁵ The demand for labor was large enough that in 1955, the Puerto Rican Department of Labor established its office in Hartford, and the Shade Tobacco Growers Association operated fourteen camps for migrant workers in Connecticut and southern Massachusetts. Ruth Glasser, "From 'Rich Port' to Bridgeport: Puerto Ricans in Connecticut," in *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, ed. by Carmen Teresa Whalen and Víctor Vázquez-Hernández (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 178–79.

and several other smaller towns.¹⁶ By mid-1970s, Connecticut's Puerto Rican population numbered about 150,000, or close to 6.5 percent of the state's total population.¹⁷

The Puerto Rican influx to smaller mill towns in Connecticut such as Willimantic also intensified in mid-1950s and was tied to the availability of jobs in several local plants. Although in the interwar decades the textile industry in New England gave signs of weakening, World War II brought boom to the textile industry, which continued into the early 1950s.¹⁸ ATCO, which produced cotton and synthetic thread had the workforce of about 1,600 in 1961. Employment was also available at Roselin, manufacturing braided fabric and ribbons; Kendall Company, which produced diaper cloth; and smaller National Silk and Tioga Yarn, producing specialty yarns. Metal and electrical mills included Akim Engineering (hooks and machinery); Brand Rex (wire and metal); Rogers Corporation (rubber products); Jones and Laughlin (metal and steel products); and the largest of them, Electro Motive Manufacturing Company, which produced radio and other electric parts, and employed 2,100 in 1960.¹⁹ Total non-agricultural employment in 1960 in the town of Windham was estimated at 7,880.²⁰

It was, however, a meat processing plant, Hartford Poultry, which in the 1950s sent out a recruiter directly to Puerto Rico in search of workers. The recruiter loaned prospective workers and their families money for travel and after their arrival, provided them with housing; other Puerto Rican workers

¹⁶ Ruth Glasser, "From 'Rich Port,'" 179–90. For more on the general history of Puerto Ricans in Connecticut see also Ruth Glasser, *Aquí Me Quedo: Puerto Ricans in Connecticut* (Middletown, CT: Connecticut Humanities Council, 1997); Barbara Burdette, *The Puerto Ricans: On the Island, On the Mainland, In Connecticut*, The Peoples of Connecticut Multicultural Ethnic Heritage Series Number Four (Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut, 1976).

¹⁷ Burdette, *The Puerto Ricans*, 38. By comparison, in 1970, the US Census indicated that close to 1,400,000 Puerto Ricans lived stateside. According to US Census, in 1940, 69,967 Puerto Ricans lived on the mainland; in 1950, 301,375; in 1960, 887,661; in 1970, 1,391,463, and in 1980, 2,013,945. Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism American History and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 606.

¹⁸ William F. Hartford, *Where Is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870–1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 151–54. See also David Koistinen, *Confronting Decline: The Political Economy of Deindustrialization in Twentieth-Century New England* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 15.

¹⁹ Robert Davenport Associates, Inc., "Land Utilization and Marketability Study, Central Business District Renewal Project, Willimantic, Connecticut, April, 1970," Table 8, p. 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Table 3, p. 12.

followed in chain migration from the island, nearby states, and from the Hartford area. The work in the “chicken factory,” or “El Chicken,” as it was often called for short, was hard and dangerous. One Puerto Rican worker remembered that a day after he and his companions arrival in search of a job from Florida, they were taken by Don Cheo, a supervisor, to the factory floor, where he was told to “kill chickens:” “I was covered with blood from head to toe, and it was cold. The other boys all quit. I got paid \$1.35 an hour. The better we got the more they yelled at us to kill. We killed 35,000 or 40,000 chickens a day. We began work at seven a.m. At nine a.m. they gave us a fifteen-minute break and at twelve we got half an hour for lunch. We stopped at three or four or later, depending on how much work there was. I worked there two months. If I hadn’t left, I would have died there.”²¹ Although some Puerto Ricans worked at Hartford Poultry for as long as a decade, gradually many workers moved on to ATCO, where conditions were considered superior to those at the poultry plant.²²

By the end of the 1960s, the economic opportunities in the area began to shrink, as the economic differences deepened between the eastern and western parts of the state. Connecticut’s military and arms industry flourished during the Korean war, but it was mostly located in the western region and on the shore. Metal and precision firms and insurance companies also chose western areas to be closer to New York City. In the 1970s, population shifts affected Connecticut’s largest cities, such as Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport, which all lost population by 9, 7.5, and 1.2 percent respectively, while their suburbs expanded by triple percentage points. The majority of the suburban residents were middle class whites. At the same time, the non-white population of the state had doubled, entering mainly congested urban areas.²³

Willimantic was particularly adversely impacted when the plans to run Interstate 384 through the town and connect it directly to Hartford in the West and Providence in the East were abandoned. The town that once was a major railroad junction now found itself with neither a viable railroad connection nor a highway. Some manufacturers continued to reduce employment and others closed down their operations or relocated. Hartford Poultry closed

²¹ Boujouen and Newton, 12.

²² Ibid., 3–16.

²³ Herbert F. Janick, Jr., *A Diverse People: Connecticut 1914 to the Present* (Chester, CT: The Pequot Press, 1975), 73–74. See also David M. Roth, *Connecticut*, 208–9; Peirce, *The New England States*, 182.

in 1972, and Electro Motive left for South Carolina in 1975.²⁴ Moreover, Willimantic began to lose population. While in the decade of 1940–1950, the population of Willimantic increased by over twelve percent, in the next decades the increase was only 2.2 percent.²⁵ Unlike in larger cities, which experienced intense suburbanization, Willimantic, as many smaller mill towns, did not develop suburbs, but rather lost population to other towns in the area, for example to Mansfield and Coventry, which in 1950–1960, gained 32 and 37 percent respectively.²⁶ By 1968, Willimantic reported the lowest wage levels in all of Connecticut, with the rate of unemployment being among the highest in the state.²⁷

Fear for the future set in. As one long-time resident recalled, in the 1960s “Willimantic was a city at low ebb, a mill town on the decline. . . . The American Thread controlled the city’s economy. Wages were low and the constant threat of the plant’s closing hung like a dark cloud over the future. The city lacked virtually every means of controlling its destiny,” and gave in to “the peculiar mixture of fear, anger, hope and despair.”²⁸

DOWNTOWN WILLIMANTIC

The area of downtown Willimantic was defined by its geographical features: the Willimantic River and tracks for the New Haven-Hartford Railway constituted its southern and partially eastern boundary (Main and Union Streets). The incline of the Prospect Hill, which included several residential blocks of Victorian houses served as its northern boundary (Valley Street). To the east, the downtown area was marked by Jackson Street, a thru fare leading north towards Mansfield, and the western boundary was the landmark 1895 Town Hall on High Street. In the pre-redevelopment times, connecting Main and Union Streets in the south and Valley Street in the north were several short north-south streets which divided the area into roughly ten blocks: from west to east Walnut, Bank, North, Church, Temple, Center, and Broad streets, with short Meadow street linking Walnut and North. Lincoln Square, a triangular shaped area wedged between Union Street and the New

²⁴ “Hartford Poultry Closes; 240 Jobless,” *The Hartford Courant*, March 7, 1972, p. 23B; “Electro-Motive Co. Moves Equipment,” *The Hartford Courant*, July 15, 1975, p. 21B.

²⁵ Davenport, Table 1, p. 6.

²⁶ Stanley R. Kokoska, Mayor of the City of Willimantic, “Model Cities Application, Willimantic, Conn., April 1968,” Part 3-A, page 3.

²⁷ “Model Cities”, Part 3-A, page 1–2.

²⁸ Svetz, 9–10.

Haven—Hartford railroad tracks, completed what was commonly considered Willimantic's downtown.

In 1952, the newly created local Redevelopment Agency sponsored a preliminary study on the potential of urban renewal in the city.²⁹ The report described the survey area as “very densely built-up, with over 25 families per acre of residential or mixed land use. The Main Street frontage was exclusively business at the center, with some mixed business and residential use at the east and west end of the survey area, as well as along some of the side streets. Industrial, business and residential uses were mixed in the interiors of the blocks and along the Valley Street.” The authors of the report further commented on the conditions of buildings in the downtown:

There is no apparent pattern to the development of land uses, except the steady conversion of old dwelling structures to commercial use. . . . There are a fair number of recently built commercial structures, particularly along Main Street which are in good condition, but for the most part the buildings are old 2 and 3 story frame dwellings. The predominate number of lots with mixed uses are where these old houses have been converted on the first floor to small stores. . . . The whole area suffers from mixed land uses, overcrowding and many obsolete and old structures, which, from preliminary examination, do not appear to be in good condition and, from assessor's information appear to lack sufficient plumbing and heating facilities for the number of families housed.³⁰

The report also pointed out that the use of land was “extravagant” and several blocks were very small and unable to move traffic or offer space for parking. The proposal called for elimination of “Walnut Street and Meadow Street from Walnut to Church. Also proposed was eventual elimination of Temple and Center Streets and part of Broad Street. The extension of Broad Street to the corner of Union and Jackson is proposed. Much, if not all, of the thru traffic from the east can be routed thru to Valley Street.” The attached maps showed that the area suggested for redevelopment was about seven acres in size and located mostly between High and Bank Streets.

In 1965, the town hired the Firm of Bryan and Panico, which prepared another study, significantly different from its predecessor. According to Bryan and Panico, the “blighted areas” and “grey areas” in the City of Willimantic

²⁹ “Preliminary Report” by Technical Planning Associates of New Haven; the report had two parts: “A Preliminary Survey of the Redevelopment Area”; and “A Screening of All Potential Project Areas Previously Considered.” The same Redevelopment Agency of the City of Willimantic issued another report in August 1953.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

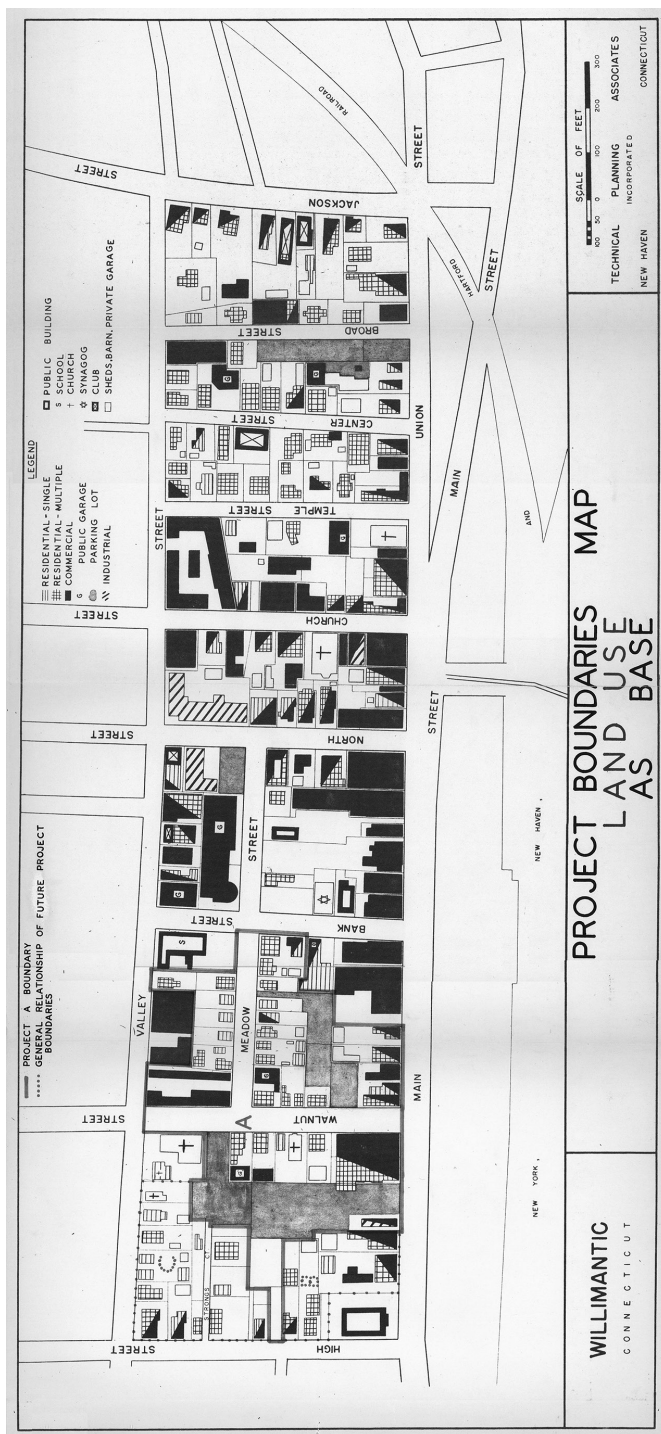


Fig. 1. "Project Boundaries Map, Land Use as Base." The Redevelopment Agency of the City of Willimantic, Connecticut.
Preliminary Report, 1953. Windham Townhall.

encompassed practically the entire town, but for the Prospect Hill and some areas on the southern bank on the Willimantic river. They included Bridge Street to the West, blocks between Valley and Prospect streets to the North, the southern part of Main Street and Lincoln Square, and the neighborhood north of the ATCO mills almost all the way to the Natchaug River. An old Oaks neighborhood on the southern bank of the river was also added. Bryan & Panico located the “tentative urban renewal project boundary” within the “blighted area” between railroad tracks and Valley Street, and North Street and the neighborhood to the east of Jackson Street, enlarging the area suggested in 1952 by including additional urban blocks in all directions.³¹ The report commented:

The Central Business District is the retail core of the region and probably the single most important asset of the community. Yet Main Street area was not built for use in an automobile era and suffers from problems of congestion, limited parking, mixed and competing land occupancies and many obsolete buildings. The result has been the spread of more modern shopping facilities outside the core, but scattered shopping centers can never provide the community service of a successful and attractive downtown. . . .

If Windham-Willimantic is to retain its regional position and repolish [sic] the appearance and image of the community, a substantial, long term rebuilding and improvement program will be needed in the downtown area. Adjacent to the downtown are additional areas, primarily residential in nature, built under standards of the past and now in need of improvement and rehabilitation.³²

The report recommended re-establishment of the by then defunct town redevelopment agency which could apply for funds to not only redevelop the so-called Central Business District (CBD), but also a new Government Center, inclusive of a new Town Hall, post office, library, fire house, and police station.³³ The report’s authors optimistically forecasted that Willimantic’s population would keep increasing from about 17,000 in 1960, to more than 24,000 in 1985.³⁴ When in June 1966, the Common Council voted to create the Willimantic Redevelopment Agency tasked with applying for federal funds for renewal, the Bryan and Panico study became a basis for this application.³⁵

³¹ Bryan & Panico, “Comprehensive Planning Program”; “Comprehensive Plan of Development,” September 1965.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁵ Baber, 77–8.

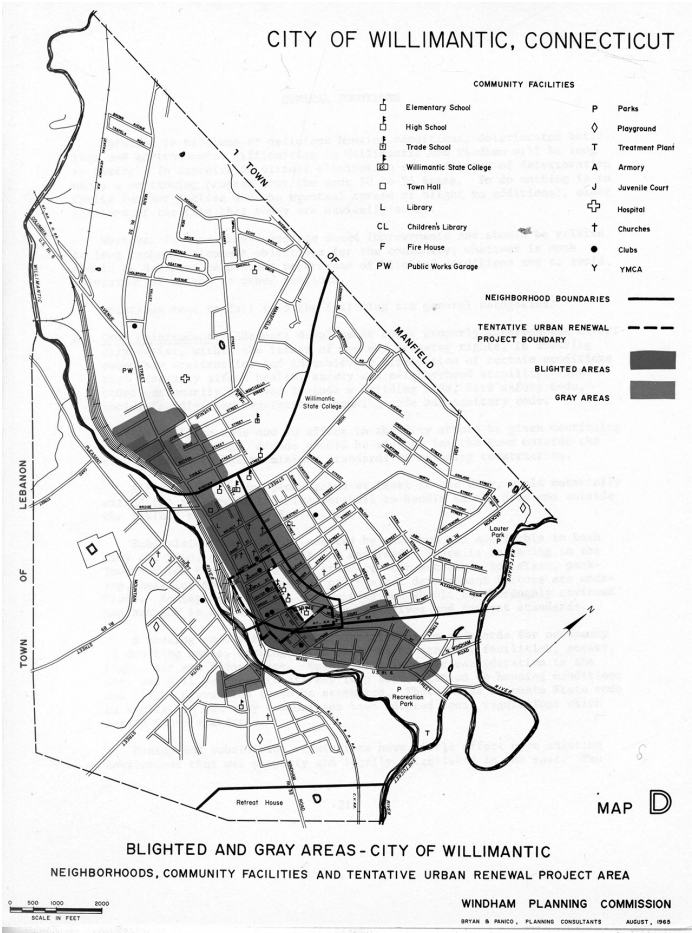


Fig. 2. Bryan & Panico, “Comprehensive Planning Program,” September 1965. Center for Connecticut Studies, Eastern Connecticut State University.

The Model Cities Program application, which the town prepared in 1968, provided some more useful descriptions of the downtown. Because the application aimed to secure federal funds, it strongly emphasized the need for revitalization and to fit the program’s requirements, defined the entire city of 14,000 as one neighborhood. It stated: “Its [Willimantic’s] compact area of 4.8 square miles brings the City’s people and activities into close and constant proximity. There is hardly any place within the city limits which is more than a mile from its central business district. . . . Every major activity

in Willimantic directly affects the entire City. It is a total neighborhood from which no portion can be logically omitted.” With the population density within the city as high as 2,950 persons per square mile, Willimantic stood in sharp contrast with the density of 164 in the rural areas that surrounded it, and the distance to other larger urban centers, such as Hartford and New London, and lack of convenient intercity transportation added to the uniqueness of Willimantic as a self-contained urban center.³⁶ The authors of the Model Cities application further described the town’s environment:

Physically, the chief characteristic of the City of Willimantic is that it is old. According to the 1960 census, almost 80% of its 4620 housing units were built before 1940, and almost 21% of all its housing units were considered deteriorated or dilapidated, or lacked some plumbing facilities. It is estimated (based on building permits issued) that only 97 dwelling units were constructed in the City between 1960 and 1964. Although some new construction has occurred in residential housing in the subsequent years, the major influx of population has been in an income group unable to afford this new housing. . . . In the downtown area there are many multi-story brick buildings which were originally constructed as office buildings before the turn of the century, but which have been converted into rooming houses and small apartment dwelling units.³⁷

The town recognized the need for low- and moderate-income housing as one of the main problems facing Willimantic. Surviving photos, which were taken in April 1968, probably to illustrate the conditions for the Model Cities application, indeed show the most extreme examples of dilapidated, run-down buildings, some clearly condemned, some in a dangerous state of disrepair.³⁸

The town directories from the period between 1966 and 1975, also attest to the density of population and mixed-use character of downtown, with residential units intermingled with shops, restaurants, small businesses, services, and religious institutions.³⁹ A few rental apartment buildings, like those on 32

³⁶ “Model Cities,” Part 2-A, p.1.

³⁷ “Model Cities,” Part 3-A, pp. 3–4.

³⁸ Stanley R. Kokoska Collection, Center for Connecticut Studies, Eastern Connecticut State University. Vol. 1, no. 1 (1971) of *The Lantern*, a mimeograph newsletter, which appears to be a product of the Republican party’s supporters in town, also featured on its first page a number of photos of dilapidated properties with a caption: “Housing Code Enforcement, Fire Inspection, Recreation, Health Inspection Neglected.” Kokoska Collection, ECSU.

³⁹ See also recollections by Claire Mickle on <http://windhamweek.blogspot.com/2012/11/links-to-claires-main-street-before.html>, accessed March 25, 2019.



Fig. 3. Stanley R. Kokoska Collection, Center for Connecticut Studies, Eastern Connecticut State University.

Bank Street, 38 Jackson Street, or 26 Union Street feature solid lists of Latino names, with more dispersed throughout other streets, most likely as renters in multi-family residential units.⁴⁰ In the early years of the Puerto Rican community's formation, Don Cheo and his wife Eloisa rented a house on Bank Street, where they provided workers recruited by them from the island with primitive accommodations. As one female worker recalled, "The men slept on the third floor and the girls on the second floor. We were fourteen young girls who were brought here to work at the chicken factory. I remember that the beds looked like those of soldiers. The beds were in a line and two of us would sleep on each bed. Eloa [sic] used to lock us up to prevent us from

⁴⁰ A *Hartford Courant* article from December 1971, contains a full listing of names of private owners, businesses, churches and properties in downtown slated for purchase by the Willimantic Redevelopment Commission. The list includes just one Latino name, that of Ramon V. Torres, a Vietnam veteran, who bought rental property from Max Heller on Temple Street, an event duly noted in local press. "A City Waits: Who's Who in Redevelopment Property," *Hartford Courant*, December 28, 1971, p. 26B; Willimantic Town Hall, WRA Records, 1972–1981. According to the *Hartford Courant* article, Ramon Torres paid \$65,000 for eleven tenements "in the downtown ghetto" from Max Heller. Torres served for 23 years in the Army and retired in 1966. Both he and his wife worked at Brand Rex, a local metal works company. "Tenements Purchased. Puerto Rican Power Initiated," *Hartford Courant*, August 16, 1968, p. 16D.

leaving the house late at night. . . . All of us fourteen girls came from the south coast.”⁴¹ In the 1960s, the Puerto Rican life centered around Union Street. In a later interview one local Puerto Rican resident recalled the community there: “Union Street was another world. It was the local ghetto. The [movie] theater is there now. Union, Broad, Center, and part of Jackson Street was all Puerto Rican. You could hear music in the summer; we sang in Spanish. Everyone was outside. I was accustomed to it. I would say, ‘This is mine. Here I don’t have to speak English. I feel good. I don’t have to face those racist people. I belong here.’”⁴² By mid-1960s, a Spanish grocery, a Latino record store, and People’s Barrio Place, or a community center, all sprang up in the same area. Puerto Rican Catholics attended St. Joseph’s church, located on Jackson Street within walking distance from downtown.⁴³

The multi-ethnic and working-class character of the downtown area was also retained by the presence of other working-class ethnic communities there. For example, the French Canadians operated the Franco American Club located on Center Street in Willimantic’s first Armory, built in the 1890s. Since 1933, Poles gathered in the Polish Home, owned and operated by the Pulaski Polish American Citizenship Club. The Jewish Congregation worshipped in Willimantic on Main Street, Temple Street, and since 1923, on Bank Street, where the synagogue provided both a place of worship and a community gathering place. In 1956, the Ukrainian National Home was founded on 50 Broad Street. The Lebanese Club met in the back room of Lindy’s, located at 70 Union Street, a popular restaurant, opened in 1930 by George Haddad, an immigrant from Lebanon.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Boujuen and Newton, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

⁴⁴ Although the synagogue was moved out of downtown in 1965 to a new building on the intersection of Jackson and Ash, and in 1962 the Ukrainian community followed suit and relocated their home to Club Road in North Windham, both the Franco American Club, with its revolving dance floor, and Pulaski Club, which hosted numerous entertainments and had a handsome rental hall, served a mixed clientele of town residents. In the 1970s, Pulaski Club was also a place of entertainment for Puerto Ricans, who by then became the main tenants in multifamily housing in its direct neighborhood. Both Lundy’s and the Franco American Club’s buildings were raised in the renewal; the Club reopened in a new facility on Club Road, but Lindy’s never re-opened. The Polish Club located right on the edge of the area of destruction, survived until 2003, when the building was sold. The 1976 list of organizations which sponsored the Memorial Day Bicentennial Parade in Willimantic attests to the active ethnic club life, and includes the Polish Club, Knights of Columbus, Lebanese Club, Temple B’nai Israel, Puerto Rican Club, Ukrainian Club, Franco American Club, and Ukrainian Dancers of Willimantic. *The Chronicle*, June 19, 1976.



Fig. 4. Aerial Photo of the Major Parcel Area, 1965. Windham Townhall.

A MINI-GHETTO OR A MODEL CITY?

Almost exactly at the same time when WRA was established in 1966, stories about the housing crisis in Willimantic began to appear in the *Hartford Courant* highlighting the appalling conditions and calling for the enforcement of the housing code. One article reported on the existence of “apartments without bathrooms and in which a single kerosene stove serves both for cooking and heat,” and with “falling plaster and cockroaches.” Complaints about discrimination in renting and rent gouging were brought up by the Spanish-American Civic Club.⁴⁵ The Windham Area Community Action Program (WACAP, an agency which administered federal anti-poverty programs in the region, established in Willimantic in 1965) urged adoption of a “strong and adequate housing code” and its stringent enforcement. “By establishing landlord-occupant responsibilities, through a code, we believe that the

⁴⁵ “Labor Shortage Seen Factor in Puerto Rican Exploitation,” *Hartford Courant*, June 21, 1966.

relationship between tenants and owners will improve,” WACAP leaders suggested in their letter to the mayor of Willimantic.⁴⁶ Max Heller, the local owner of several downtown rental units admitted that slum conditions existed in housing occupied by Puerto Rican tenants, but his lawyer shifted the responsibility to the town, stating: “It’s not Mr. Heller’s problem. He’s doing what he can. It really is a community problem. . . . Where there’s overcrowding, there’s got to be a slum area.”⁴⁷ Responding to a rush of bad publicity in the press, on June 29, 1966, a week after the city officials toured the Union and Meadow streets area, a new housing code was indeed enacted.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Willimantic’s downtown label as a “mini-ghetto” of “roughly five city blocks housing some 1,000 Puerto Ricans and 300 Negroes” persisted in the *Hartford Courant*.⁴⁹

The Puerto Rican community in Willimantic did not remain inactive. In addition to the Spanish American Civic Club and WACAP, its interests were also represented by the Coalition (La Coalición), an organization led by a Spanish-speaking activist clergyman Rev. Charles Pickett from the St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, and a young local Puerto Rican organizer Isnoel Rios. Additionally, the Community Relations and Community School Programs at Eastern Connecticut State College offered their support and organized cultural and educational outreach.⁵⁰ Finally, in the mid-1960s, an organization called People’s Barrio Place was established on Union Street as a youth center to deal with educational and social problems of the Puerto Rican youth.⁵¹

The Puerto Rican community gained also an unexpected ally in December 1967, when the traditionally Democratic town elected the new mayor

⁴⁶ “Community Action Program Urges Strong Housing Code,” *Hartford Courant*, June 29, 1966, p. 50D. “Model Cities” Part 3-A, page 8: “Willimantic is the headquarters of the Windham Area Community Action Program, an OEO agency which serves 20 towns, covering 700 square miles, with a total population of 100,000, 71% rural.” See also *Hartford Courant*, June 21, 1966; June 26, 1966; June 29, 1966.

⁴⁷ “Attorney Blames Overcrowding for Acknowledged Slum Area,” *Hartford Courant*, June 26, 1966, p. 7B2.

⁴⁸ *Hartford Courant*, April 19, 1968. In 1966 Town Directory Max Heller was listed as insurance and real estate agent, also advertising rental of furnished rooms.

⁴⁹ “Small City Faces Problem Too,” *Hartford Courant*, Oct. 17, 1967, p. 31B.

⁵⁰ “Model Cities,” Part 1-A, page 7. Eastern’s sociology students conducted a survey of Willimantic residents through interviews with nearly 400 individuals.

⁵¹ Boujouen and Newton, 39. Eastern Connecticut State College, now Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU), established the Community Relations Project, led by James H. Tipton and Samuel Tirado, to improve relations between the college and the town and to focus on the plight of Puerto Rican residents. Among many programs developed, the CRP sponsored multi-cultural festivals, exhibitions, book collections, and speaker series. Community Relations Collection, Connecticut Studies Center, ECSU.

Stanley R. Kokoska, a Republican. Only thirty-six years old, a man with vision and energy, Kokoska was determined to introduce immediate reforms and improvements in town. Kokoska's background made him particularly suitable for this task, since although he came from a large Polish American family, he grew up in foster homes, because his father was unable to take care of all the children. Kokoska became sensitive to the plight of the poor and discriminated as he himself claimed to have suffered from prejudice because of his Polish American background. Kokoska served in the Korean War, put himself through college, and looked for a career in education. A self-described "accidental Republican," he resented class distinctions. "We are all people, the only thing that makes us different is economics," he said in one press interview.⁵² The beginning of Kokoska's tenure in office proved, however, inauspicious. On Valentine's Day, February 14, 1968, a large fire broke out at the Sherwin-Williams paint store on Main Street between Church and Temple Streets, and flames fed by the chemicals stored in the basement quickly consumed several other businesses, leaving twenty three families homeless.⁵³ One of the structures affected by the fire was People's Barrio, located nearby on Union Street.⁵⁴ The fire left a huge gash in the center of downtown further convincing the town about the urgent need for redevelopment.⁵⁵

While the bureaucratic wheels of urban renewal funding were very slowly turning, Mayor Kokoska decided to file an application for the Model Cities Program, seeking federal funds to address a variety of social issues in town, which went beyond its physical transformation. Within a few weeks, Kokoska managed to mobilize the community in an unprecedented way. Numerous meetings were held with a variety of organizations, businesses, churches, and other constituency groups. The local newspaper and radio station provided

⁵² "Once A State Ward Here, Mayor Raring to Remake Willimantic," *The New Haven Register*, December 24, 1967; Robert MacGregor, "A Mayor' Christmas Has Deepest Meaning," *Hartford Times*, December 23, 1967. Stanley R. Kokoska, interview with the author, November 30, 2010.

⁵³ Baber, 78; Svetz, 11–12; *Hartford Courant*, Feb. 15, 1968; "Model Cities," Part 3-A, page 4; "Fire Damage May Exceed \$500,000," *The Chronicle*, February 15, 1968, p. 1, 7; "Furnace Explosion Blamed for Blaze," *idem*, Feb. 16, 1968, p. 1, 5, and photos on pp. 6–7.

⁵⁴ Boujouen and Newton, 39.

⁵⁵ An additional building, a house on Union Street, a "gingerbread" Victorian structure with a barber shop on the first floor was also demolished despite questions about its condition and historical value in order to, as some argued, show the federal government that Willimantic was ready to seriously take on opportunities of urban renewal. The owner was ordered to pay the expenses for the demolition, which took place on April 9. Svetz, 12. "Old Firetrap Is Doomed," *The Chronicle*, April 9, 1968, p. 1.

daily coverage and encouraged participation; a special phone service allowed residents to call in and record their opinions. The Letter of Intent was filed on January 30, 1968, and the full application followed. It sought \$170,000 in federal funds for the next twelve months for improvements in the areas of social services, education, health, reduction of unemployment and crime and delinquency, and improvement in transportation. The application pinpointed the moment when the idea to request federal funds was conceived as the Three Kings Day Festival on January 6, 1968, sponsored by the Community Relations Program from Eastern Connecticut State College. It was the first time, the application's authors noted, that the Puerto Rican community's presence in town was acknowledged and celebrated, and about 800 residents "Negro and white, English- and Spanish-speaking, rich and poor" attended. Despite a relatively short period of time spent on its compilation, by mid-April 1968, the hefty Model Cities application was finally ready.⁵⁶

The Model City application constitutes an excellent window into the state of affairs in Willimantic in 1968, and demonstrates a serious effort to include Puerto Rican voices in the process. Proceedings of meetings with the city officials were available to the Spanish-speaking residents in translation, often prepared by Rev. Pickett. In addition to meetings with labor unions, churches, and social service organizations such as WACAP, special meetings were organized with La Coalición, which strongly endorsed the Model Cities project. The Coalition's letter, written on its behalf by Hector Gonzales and Isnoel Rios (coordinators), and Rev. Pickett (advisor), defined the main problems from the point of view of the Puerto Rican community:

It is no secret that the Puerto Ricans of Willimantic have many problems, the major of which is housing. Many of our people pay very high rents for indecent housing. The apartments which are available to most people are either too high for Puerto Ricans and Negroes or the landlord discriminates against us. We feel that if there were more housing, rents would be lower and the poor of all races would have better homes. We feel the anxiety of

⁵⁶ *The Chronicle*, February 7, 1968; "Model Cities," Part 1-A, page 1. The Three Kings Day event was sponsored by the following local organizations: Eastern Connecticut State College, Windham Area Community Action Program, St. Joseph's Church, St. Paul's Church, Greater Willimantic Chamber of Commerce, the City of Willimantic, Willimantic Daily Chronicle, WILI Radio Station, Willimantic YMCA, Club Damas Latinas, Greater Willimantic Area Human Rights Council, Textile Workers of America, Senior Citizens Center—Willimantic, the American Thread Company, and the Food Handlers Union. The festival took place at Eastern. James H. Tipton, Director, Community Relations Project, "Announcement," [December 1967], in Community Relations Collection, Connecticut Studies Center, ECSU.

the oppressed and get more and more tired by promises of help which never come true. When we are turned down because of our origin we know the real meaning of discrimination. To think that we can be treated like that is a mistake because we come to Connecticut as fellow Americans with full Constitutional rights and we are beginning to wake up to our rights as they are as they have always been. We fight the wars in Korea and Viet Nam, and yet you tell us to go home to Puerto Rico, while industry invites us to come to Willimantic with promises of decent housing and good wages.⁵⁷

In addition to housing, the letter also identified other issues that the Puerto Rican community recognized as in need of improvement and argued for space for recreation, such as a plaza, where the Puerto Rican youth could congregate and socialize without fear of being harassed by police; Spanish-speaking policemen and personnel at the hospital and the emergency room; English language classes for adults; need to address education issues for children and youth; job training for better jobs and opportunities for economic mobility; and public transportation and driving classes. The Coalition letter concluded: "Our people are enthusiastic, really enthusiastic, about this Model Cities Program and we support it. Please don't let us down again." Some of the same issues were also brought up in letters and phone calls from the residents, as well as in statements prepared by various organizations.⁵⁸

The Model Cities application addressed all the issues brought up in the Coalition's letter. The self-study emphasized and praised the multiethnic character of the city, and stated:

... Most Puerto Ricans feel that they are discriminated against in housing, employment, education, health and social services, and police-community relationships. It would appear that this feeling is unfortunately justified. This problem is also complicated by the severe language problem, and perhaps by a fairly widespread belief in Willimantic that this ethnic wave, like the previous ones, will either be absorbed or go away. In these days of rising tensions in the field of civil rights, however, it is apparent that Willimantic should seek assistance from some of the many sources of help available through State and Federal agencies to meet the needs of these two groups of disadvantaged citizens immediately and decisively.⁵⁹

However, even before the ink dried on the Model Cities application, Willimantic again found itself in the news. In the end of April 1968, the *Hartford Courant* printed a three-part series on the "Willimantic Ghetto," focusing

⁵⁷ "Model Cities," Part 1-B, letter from The Coalition—La Coalición, April 3, 1968.

⁵⁸ "Model Cities," Part 3-B, pages 2–26.

⁵⁹ "Model Cities," Part 3-A, pages 2–3.

on the substandard conditions in downtown housing.⁶⁰ Part one of the series described the deplorable conditions: led paint peeling off the walls, holes in the walls, poor plumbing and inadequate heating. Limited progress was also acknowledged: some units were freshly painted, and one of the landlords was pursuing renovations which included space for a store front planned for a Puerto Rican record store. In the second installment entitled “Landlords Blame Puerto Ricans,” Paul Heller, son of Max, who managed the family rental business, presented his view of the situation. In highly discriminatory and racialized language, he denounced the tenants: “I realize it’s a problem of education. . . . They spit on the floors, throw garbage out the windows, pile papers and garbage in the halls, punch out walls and knock out windows. They destroy everything.” He continued, “The problem, of course, is that they come from the hinterlands of Puerto Rico where they never had plumbing or public garbage removal. It’s very hard for this generation to learn cleanliness.” Heller claimed that letters in both English and Spanish were distributed to tenants about the proper garbage removal, but with no result, which created fire hazard. When another landlord was confronted by the tenants about code violations, he allegedly responded: “I don’t pay attention to the housing code. I never have and I don’t ever intend to.” Rev. Charles Pickett, who was also interviewed for the story defended the tenants and confirmed that terrible living conditions existed in many places, including The Elms, a local rooming house. But even he admitted that the garbage removal problems and incidents of vandalism did take place in some rental housing.

In the final article of the series, “Mayor Hits Slumlords,” Mayor Kokoska agreed that the two main challenges in Willimantic were better job opportunities and better housing, and pledged continuous effort to enforce the housing code. Kokoska also stressed the need and willingness to hire at least two Spanish-speaking policemen and in general to share the governance of the city with the representatives of the Puerto Rican community.⁶¹ Although Kokoska called for a team approach to finding a solution to Willimantic’s social problems, the *Hartford Courant* series, written in a sensational and

⁶⁰ Part I: “Housing Code Silent,” *Hartford Courant*, April 19, 1968, p. 1, 5; Part II: “Landlords Blame Puerto Ricans,” *Hartford Courant*, April 20, 1968, p. 5; Part III: “Mayor Hits Slumlords,” *Hartford Courant*, April 21, 1968, p. 43A. The author of the series was William Perez.

⁶¹ In a later piece Kokoska was again quoted as saying: “Some blighted areas are nothing but living cancer,” pointing to the dilapidated buildings, and promising vigorous code enforcement. “Mayor Proposes Hit Blighted Areas First,” *Hartford Courant*, June 26, 1968, p. 26D.

divisive tone, clearly undermined the spirit of cooperation reflected in the Model Cities application.⁶²

The summer of 1968 was going to bring more conflict. Although Willimantic remained on the margins of the historical community power struggles that Puerto Ricans, and especially the Young Lords led in other places in the nation, there should be little doubt that the town's residents must have been aware of it. In New York, Chicago, and other locations, Puerto Ricans rioted, burned garbage, protested inadequate housing, police brutality, and economic and political discrimination, while the Civil Rights movement opened up new avenues and gave new language to the Latino demands.⁶³ In Hartford, a twenty thousand strong and growing Puerto Rican community suffered both from economic privation and lack of political representation. In August and September, 1969, following a series of street riots and confrontations with police, Hartford's Puerto Ricans forced a political change, achieving what José E. Cruz calls "brokered representation," which laid foundations for the future political action in the city.⁶⁴ In May 1968, Poor People's marches were organized in New London and Willimantic, each drawing out 250 participants. It was estimated that in Willimantic about 80 percent of the marchers were white and mostly connected to the University of Connecticut and Eastern Connecticut State College, as well as the local churches.⁶⁵ The next month, a forty member representation of the Willimantic community, which *Hartford Courant* described as "ethnic and economic melting pot" headed for

⁶² Kokoska after his term as mayor (1967–69) went on to head state's first skill center for minority groups in Hartford, which offered training programs for minority groups. "State's 1st Skill Center Helps Minority Groups Find Work," *Hartford Courant*, Feb. 7, 1971, p. 5B.

⁶³ According to José Ramón Sánchez, "Between 1964 and 1971, there were twenty-eight violent riots by Puerto Ricans in different U.S. cities," *Boricua Power: A Political History of Puerto Ricans in the United States* (New York University Press, 2007), 130. For more on the Puerto Rican Civil Rights and experiences in the 1960s, see for example Sonia Song-Ha Lee, *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement: Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Justice in New York City* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014). On urban segregation, see Douglass S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶⁴ Jose E. Cruz, "A Decade of Change: Puerto Rican Politics in Hartford, Connecticut, 1969–1979," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 16, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 45–80; idem, *Identity and Power: Puerto Rican Politics and the Challenge of Ethnicity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

⁶⁵ "'Poor People' March in two Communities," *Hartford Courant*, May 12, 1968, 6A.

the Poor Peoples' March in Washington DC, led by Rev. Pickett. Among the many issues that the trip should dramatize, Rev. Pickett stressed, "the most critical problem is housing."⁶⁶

The tensions in Willimantic boiled over when on a hot summer night of July 1, 1968, an incident took place in the parking lot of Burger Chef between a group of young Puerto Rican males and a group of local white males. According to a sociological report prepared a year later, the confrontation first involved verbal challenges and then, after someone fired a shotgun in the air, disintegrated into pelting cars with crow bars and bottles. In the aftermath of the incident, the Willimantic police arrested seven Puerto Ricans, but no whites, causing an outcry in the Puerto Rican community. The next day, a public meeting was organized to air complaints, attended by police chief, the Spanish American Coalition, local leaders and clergymen, WACAP, and local residents. On July 16, the circuit court dismissed all charges on the seven arrested.⁶⁷

The episode, however, further strained race relations in town. Just three weeks after the incident the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut transferred Rev. Pickett, a supportive voice for Willimantic's Puerto Rican community to Hartford.⁶⁸ The other leader of La Coalición, Isnoel Rios, continued his studies in sociology at the University of Connecticut, but remained active in the Willimantic's Human Rights Council. The pressure to alleviate tensions between Puerto Rican population and whites in Willimantic continued throughout 1969, as the community demanded appointments of Puerto Ricans to the Housing Authority, and the NAACP initiated an investigation into the discrimination allegations in town.⁶⁹

By the end of 1968, it was announced that in the eastern part of the state, New London, instead of Willimantic would be the recipient of the Model

⁶⁶ "Area Group Arrives in Capital to Back Poor Peoples' March," *Hartford Courant*, June 20, 1968, p. 36D.

⁶⁷ The best account comes from Andy Palladino, who investigated the incident and assembled a sociological report a year after it took place; a typed manuscript by Andy Palladino, "From Puerto-Rico to Willimantic: A Problem," June 24, 1969, Center for Connecticut Studies, ECSU.

⁶⁸ "Reverend Pickett Moves to Hartford as Spanish-Speaking Missioner," *Hartford Courant*, July 20, 1968, p. 17.

⁶⁹ "NAACP's Smith Told to Move into Willimantic," *Hartford Courant*, July 11, 1969, p. 35; "Appointment of Puerto Ricans to Housing Authority Urged," *Hartford Courant*, July 13, 1969, p. 13C2; "Smith to Continue Study of Alleged Discrimination," *Hartford Courant*, Dec. 8, 1969, p. 34D.

Cities funds.⁷⁰ With the hopes for the Model Cities Program funding gone, the town began to tie all the hopes for federal aid to the urban renewal application.

THE HOUSING PROBLEM

In June 1969, the HUD finally approved the renewal grant for Willimantic, and shortly after Betty Lou Williams was selected to assume position of executive director to administer the program. Williams previously served for five years as assistant executive director of the Redevelopment Agency in Rockville, another Connecticut mill town, where she directed an urban renewal program, in which big parts of the historic downtown were demolished, and for which she earned the nickname “Bulldozer Betty.”⁷¹

The main issue Williams faced was housing. In the summer of 1969, a Vista Volunteer and WACAP employee filed a report, in which he stated:

The city’s major problem is acute shortage of housing units. This is especially true of rental housing because of great pressure on the market by those groups which favor renting as opposed to purchasing. Three groups which greatly affect the supply and demand of rental housing are students, elderly, and low wage earners. All of these people seek low cost housing and Willimantic has a relatively high proportion of its population in these three groups. Consequently, the pressure on the rental market is intense.⁷²

The WACAP report also emphasized systematic discrimination which Puerto Rican and a smaller group of African American tenants experienced in town, and which the short-lived Spanish-American Tenants’ Association in Willimantic tried to address. The author of the report concluded:

⁷⁰ *Hartford Courant*, Dec. 31, 1968. In Connecticut, Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, New London, and Waterbury received the Model Cities funding. Sasso and Foley, *A Little Noticed Revolution*, 239. Strangely, the local newspaper did not comment on or even speculated about the reasons for the rejection.

⁷¹ Williams would prove to be one of the central figures in the Willimantic renewal story and her legacy is considered controversial by many in town. On one hand she is remembered as an unflinching and unhesitating boss of the destruction. But on the other, she garnered respect for her leadership. As one resident commented, Williams “was a lady ahead of her times and the local boys could not keep up with her. She worked hard, played hard, and was a true leader.” Another one agreed: “Many of the deals were brokered over martinis & scotch & sodas in the Clark House restaurant, on extended lunch hours. She made the agency click, she was a true leader.” TheCronicle.com, thread The Redevelopment of the 70’s, December 2006–January 2007.

⁷² Richard Mandell, “Report on Housing Problems in Willimantic, prepared for WACAP,” July 1969. Connecticut Studies Center, ECSU.

Willimantic's housing difficulties can only be solved with a substantial increase in the number of units, particularly rental units designed with the needs of low-income families in mind. Any temporary maneuvers to alleviate present conditions will at best be only palliatives and increase the frustration of those now living in substandard housing. . . . The recently announced urban renewal funds should be looked to as an exciting impetus to begin solving the problem of deteriorated units. But a caveat is necessary as the city begins to plan for renewing that area of the city which holds many of the most dilapidated houses: we must replace old units with new ones.⁷³

The Weicker Amendment placed the plight of Puerto Rican tenants again at the center of the town's attention, as the search for new housing for low-income families commenced, not without controversy. In June 1970, during a public meeting the city assistant housing inspector told the Willimantic Housing Authority that he was afraid of creating a ghetto in the new housing project and suggested erecting a six-foot fence around the proposed 92-unit housing for low-income families, most of them Puerto Rican. Despite calls for the inspector's dismissal by organizations including the Coordinating Council for Spanish Activities, Willimantic's Human Rights Council led by Isnoel Rios, and Eastern Connecticut State College's Community Relations Office, the town council decided to accept the inspector's apology and retain him in his position. Outraged, the Puerto Rican community responded with a rally in front of the town council office demanding inspector's resignation; it was estimated that as many as 150 people participated.⁷⁴

In April, 1970, Robert Davenport Associates from Davenport, Maryland, a firm with experience in the assessment for many urban renewal projects, provided the town of Windham with an economic study on land utilization and marketability of the Central Business District. The study focused on the 36.5 acres under consideration, out of which twenty acres were to be cleared. This thorough study examined economic factors at play in Willimantic in 1970, including slow growth in the industrial sector and decline in the textile industry. Ultimately, the study recommended that no land should be

⁷³ Ibid, 41–43.

⁷⁴ "Assistant Housing Inspector Seeks Fencing Around Low-Income Project," *Hartford Courant*, June 1970, p. 32D; "Council Will Discuss Dubina Controversy," *Hartford Courant*, June 10, 1970s, p. 30D; "Puerto Ricans Gain Permission to Conduct March of Protest," *Hartford Courant*, June 12, 1970, p. 24D; "Puerto Ricans to demand Resignation of Official," *Hartford Courant*, June 13, 1970, p. 26; "Puerto Ricans Picket Willimantic City Hall," *Hartford Courant*, June 14, 1970, p. 32A; "Demands for Firing Dubina Renewed; Legal Aid Unit Would Freeze Funds," *Hartford Courant*, June 26, 1970, p. 20D.

earmarked for industrial use, and instead proposed that some twenty acres in CBD should be allocated as follows: 7.1 acres for residential use (town-houses, duplexes with garden space); 5.3 acres for commercial use (retail service and office space); and 7.6 acres for public and semi-public uses such as street re-alignment, parks, school, site for public housing and housing for the elderly, etc.⁷⁵

The town was preparing to present the renewal plan for a referendum. The public was offered a brochure entitled “The Challenge of the 70s: Renewal in Downtown Willimantic” with an attractive design for downtown, which included a modern shopping center, ample parking, a plaza for entertainment, and a vast residential section between Broad and Jackson Streets as well as on the east side of Jackson. The brochure featured renderings of fashionably dressed people strolling among appealing shopping facilities and taking a break with a cup of soda on a lively plaza. Perhaps most importantly, the brochure pointed out that “the City of Willimantic is in the position of realizing nearly ten million dollars’ worth of major improvements in the heart of the City for a total cash outlay of less [sic] than one million dollars.”⁷⁶ The attached map showed that Center and Temple Streets as well as Lincoln Square would be eliminated to make space for commercial use, but that the block between Broad and Jackson Streets and an area to the east of Jackson would remain residential. In May 1971, a public referendum for the final approval of the renewal project passed overwhelmingly. Out of 6,600 voters, 1,557 cast their votes, with 1,231 supporting the redevelopment plan, and 326 rejecting it.⁷⁷ In February 1971, a loan and grant application was formally filed.⁷⁸

In most urban areas in the nation, once it became obvious that an area was going to be redeveloped, it would enter a downright spiral of neglect and deterioration, because any further investment in improvements would be deemed financially unwise. In Willimantic, problems with housing code enforcement in the buildings slated for demolition also continued. In the fall of 1971, hearings were held to report on housing problems in Willimantic, including on “lack of rent control; no control over landlords; discrimination of blacks and Puerto Ricans by landlords; need for more housing in central

⁷⁵ Davenport, 50. I have not found any evidence that the conclusions of the study were presented for any public discussion.

⁷⁶ “The Challenge of the 70s: Renewal in Downtown Willimantic.” A brochure prepared by Raymond, Parish & Pine, Planning Consultants. Willimantic Collection—Publications, Box 2. Center for Connecticut Studies, ECSU.

⁷⁷ “Redevelopment Funds Passed,” *Hartford Courant*, May 25, 1971, p. 17B.

⁷⁸ Baber, 80.

The Central Business District Renewal Plan is being prepared by professional planning and urban renewal consultants under the direction of the Willimantic Agency Board of Commissioners.

The Renewal Plan proposes many significant changes to be made in the downtown area of the City of Willimantic. A major commercial area of approximately six acres will be redeveloped into a new business district. Several areas

are planned for smaller commercial or office development and housing sites will be used for relocation of existing businesses. Two public places will be built to create an open, relaxing atmosphere that will attract people to the downtown area. A new municipal parking lot will be provided and several street improvements will be made. Jackson Street will be widened in places. Temple Street and Center Street will be closed along with the portion of Union Street. Approximately 160 housing units for the elderly and moderate income families will be developed. The plan also includes the rehabilitation of many commercial buildings that will form the nucleus of the Downtown area. The Jillion Building, a historic structure, will be restored and used as a public museum.

Should the City attempt entirely alone, the major renewal project would be nearly 10 million dollars. Under the Urban Renewal Program the Federal government will pay 75% of the total project cost. The State will pay 10% and the City will pay an additional 15% of the project costs. Therefore, the total cost to the City of Willimantic will be about 15% of the entire cost of the project.

A portion of the City's share will be provided in Non-Cash Grants. The City will provide municipal parking area and the housing for the elderly complex.

Total Project Costs: Approx. \$70,000,000
Federal Government Share: 3/4

Total City Share: 1/8
Total State Share: 1/8

The City of Willimantic is in the position of making major improvements in the heart of the City. The cost of these improvements is less than one million dollars.

What does this mean in tax revenue for the City? Estimates of the cost of the project, tax revenue would increase by at least 100%.

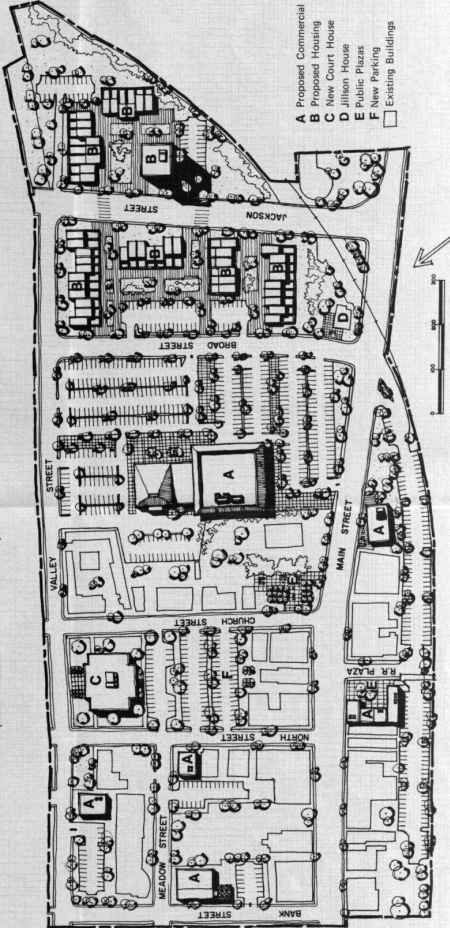
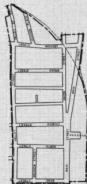


Fig. 5. "The Challenge of the 70s: Renewal in Downtown Willimantic," Center for Connecticut Studies, Eastern Connecticut State University.

business district and need for housing for larger families.”⁷⁹ Similar issues were, however, regularly dismissed by the WRA and Betty Lou Williams, who openly admitted that “in order to avoid the spread of blight, the Willimantic housing code compliance program has been concentrated on the area *outside* [my emphasis] an already designated blight area.”⁸⁰ Fears of creating a ghetto in the newly proposed Valley Street location for the one-hundred-unit project for low-income families had surfaced yet again.⁸¹ Low-income housing was also planned on Ash Street and in Windham Heights. In an updated application for federal funds WRA stated: “The proposed project will not create any concentration of minority groups within the community at large. The housing to be available is not all located in any one neighborhood. The project will allow even further reduction in a present concentration of minority group families and individuals and will provide new possibilities for homogeneous ethnic and economic grouping, while the concentration and largeness will be avoided.”⁸²

The *Hartford Courant* featured a new series of articles on the Puerto Rican housing crisis in Willimantic in January 1972. According to that coverage, Betty Lou Williams criticized the Spanish-speaking residents of Willimantic for their alleged apathy and absence from participation in the council meetings, while the town tried to turn the attention to planned internal improvements.⁸³ The Puerto Rican community, however, continued to speak up regarding the urban renewal plans and the need for more and better housing. One *Hartford Courant* article stated:

About 60 Puerto Rican family units will be displaced by the redevelopment. The families, amounting of more than 200 persons, comprise more than 30 percent of those to be displaced by redevelopment. A third of the Puerto Ricans earn less than \$3,000 a year. About 10 per cent of the families in the project area include five or more people, and these large families are mostly Puerto Rican. . . . Puerto Ricans view redevelopment with mixed emotions. Diaz [Sam Diaz, a WACAP member] who seems to be one of few Puerto

⁷⁹ “Residents Air Views on Housing Problems,” *Hartford Courant*, Oct 22, 1971, p. 23B.

⁸⁰ Mark Melady, “Housing Enforcement Lags Under Nonexistent ‘Policy’” *Hartford Courant*, November 13, 1971, p. 19B. See also “Residents Air Views on Housing Problems,” *Hartford Courant*, October 22, 1971, p. 23B.

⁸¹ *Hartford Courant*, Nov 25, 1971. “New Housing Site May Be Sought,” *Hartford Courant*, Nov. 25, 1971, p. 86B. The north of Valley street location was eventually rejected as not compliant with the HUD rules, which called for prevention of a “ghetto.”

⁸² Mark Melady, “Housing is Critical for Renewal,” *Hartford Courant*, Dec 29, 1971, p. 34B. Part I of series “The City Waits.”

⁸³ “Urban Experiment, Overhaul Projected in New Year,” *Hartford Courant*, Jan. 3, 1972, p. 21B.

Ricans in favor of the plan, said a larger and improved central business district will attract business to the area. Diaz said the Puerto Rican community will be lost because families will be spread throughout the city. This, he added, could be a benefit because Puerto Ricans will become independent and will learn to function “in the system.” . . . Isreal Amill, an Eastern Connecticut State College student and WACAP worker, said the redevelopment program is essentially a political move to aid businessmen. “It will in a way give us better housing,” he said, “but it will split us up and we will lose any chance for political power. Whites don’t want a large concentration of Puerto Ricans anywhere.”⁸⁴

During 1970–71, Windham Heights, a privately built complex of subsidized housing for low-income families was finally completed, which relieved the pressure for low-income housing. It was, however, located far from downtown and offered no public transportation options.⁸⁵

THE MAJOR PARCEL

The turning point in the redevelopment came in a surprising twist in January 1973, when WRA suddenly proposed modifications to the renewal plan, which were quickly approved by the Windham Planning Commission. According to this new plan, Broad Street, previously designated for residential units, was going to be eliminated, and the designation of the area changed from “residential” to “commercial.” Williams explained: “Federal economists have recommended more businesses and less subsidized housing in the city’s center,” and “Every major developer [she talked to] wanted more commercial space,” but she gave no further details or evidence. The public hearing WRA held on the issue was attended by only fifteen residents.⁸⁶ The Willimantic Housing Authority was expected to come up with alternate sites for housing,

⁸⁴ “Residents, Agency at Odds on Renewal,” *Hartford Courant*, Jan. 11, 1972, p. 17B. The new president of Chamber of Commerce in Willimantic protested the *Hartford Courant* coverage of the “crisis in Willimantic,” attempting to create an image of “a big, terrible Spanish, Puerto Rican type ghetto in Willimantic.” He added: “Our small ghetto is no way like the North End in Hartford.” “CofC Head Hits News Coverage,” *Hartford Courant*, Jan. 24, 1972, p. 17B; “CofC President Criticized,” *Hartford Courant*, Jan. 26, 1972, p. 13B; “CofC Leaders Clash on ‘Role’” *Hartford Courant*, Feb. 2 1972, p. 45B.

⁸⁵ Baber, 79.

⁸⁶ “Residents Hear Renewal Plan Changes,” *Hartford Courant*, February 21, 1973, p. 59B. The change in the renewal plans was quickly overshadowed by the controversy over the conflict of interest regarding one of the WRA members, who could potentially benefit from the sale of his property in the area, see Baber, 80–81.

initially planned for the Broad Street neighborhood.⁸⁷ Thus a so-called “Major Parcel” was created.

After some delays, on October 9, 1973, seven years after the establishment of WRA, the first building was demolished in Willimantic in what one commentator later called “an orgy of destruction.”⁸⁸ Also in October 1973, an investment collaborative made an announcement about their plans to build a large shopping mall in neighboring Mansfield (the Eastbrook Mall), about two miles away from the Major Parcel. Strangely, this development was no cause for re-consideration, adjustment of plans, or any type of reflection on the part of WRA or Willimantic residents.⁸⁹ In the “Comment” section of *The Chronicle*, right by the ominous information that “the impetus of regional growth continues to find expression in Mansfield, where the plans are advanced for 23 acre, multi-million dollar enclosed shopping mall, already informally reviewed by the town Planning and Zoning Commission,” a cheerleader of the Willimantic renewal proclaimed: “We are a city and community on the move, casting off the old shackles of decline, and starting a new voyage.”⁹⁰

By late 1974, most of the 101 buildings slated for demolition were acquired and most of them were demolished. For the next two years, WRA focused on implementation of internal improvements, such as a new courthouse, fire and police complex, new sewers and sidewalks, lighting and some landscaping, etc. However, there was still no viable investor, who could fill the Major Parcel, as the deadlines for proposals came and went.⁹¹

And the destruction was not over. By May 1976, the Hurley-Grant Building on Main Street and the so-called Union Block were the only two buildings slated for demolition that were still standing. Both were historic structures and some residents began to mobilize in their defense. *The Chronicle* received letters from readers calling for saving Hurley and the Union Block from destruction, and a private group attempted—and failed—to buy and rehabilitate the structures. Some residents organized a few rallies, while someone, referring to the bicentennial year, painted on the front of one of the buildings: “In the spirit

⁸⁷ Baber, 81–82.

⁸⁸ Svetz, 15. For the coverage in *The Chronicle*, see “Demolition Begins,” *The Chronicle*, October 10, 1973, p. 18

⁸⁹ “Group Considers Industrial Park,” *The Chronicle*, October 11, 1973, p. 1; “Major Shopping Center Proposal to Be Discussed ‘Informally,’” *The Chronicle*, October 15, 1973.

⁹⁰ “Comment,” *The Chronicle*, October 18, 1973, p. 6.

⁹¹ Baber, 83.



Fig. 6. Demolition of the Bank Street Synagogue and the Old Fire Station. Photo courtesy of Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz, Temple Bnai Israel, Willimantic, CT.



Fig. 7. “Linoleum Bloc Print of Hurley Grant and Union Block Buildings” by Editha Spencer. *The Chronicle*, September 29, 1976, 5.

of '76, don't tear me down." Despite those last-minute efforts, in October 1976, demolition on Hurley-Grant and Union Block proceeded as planned.⁹²

The lone historic structure which survived on the Major Parcel was the 1820s Jillson House, a house museum of one of the early industrialists in Windham.⁹³ During the next two years (1976–78) the town built Father Honan Village, a low-income housing for the elderly on Jackson Street, across the street from the Major Parcel. The Major Parcel itself remained an open grassy knoll, but for a small cinema building added in 1978. Finally, in January 1979, amidst controversy which accompanied her ten-year tenure in Willimantic, Betty Lou Williams resigned from her office. The era of urban renewal in Willimantic was over.

LEGACIES

A sociological study of the Puerto Rican community conducted in 1984, found that about 1,850 persons born in Puerto Rico lived at that point in Willimantic, with 92 percent of them tenants in a few apartment complexes, including Windham Heights, Village Heights, and Ivy Gardens. About two hundred families were tenants in older multi-family houses on Union, Milk, Chapman, Ash and Main Streets, an area to the east of the Major Parcel, and directly north of the American Thread.⁹⁴ Only eight percent of Willimantic Puerto Ricans were homeowners. In 1980, 21 percent of Hispanic families, compared to about nine percent of all families in Willimantic, lived below the poverty level. Writing on the eve of American Thread's closing of its Willimantic's mills, the authors of the study also indicated that almost 28 percent of Willimantic Puerto Ricans in the labor force were unemployed—a ratio which drastically increased once ATCO left town in 1985. Additionally, the Puerto Rican community was affected by limited transportation options, inadequate social services, insufficient opportunities for rest and relaxation, and the general marginalization in city life. The residents also reported increased levels of drug addiction, seeing a correlation between unemployment and the growing drug problem.⁹⁵

⁹² See for example letters to the editor and coverage in *The Chronicle* on May 8, June 5, September 29, 30, October 1, 2, 11, 20, 1976. "WRA Demolition Begins on Hurley-Grant Building," *The Chronicle*, October 21, 1976, p. 18.

⁹³ The Jillson House was placed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 1971, due to efforts of the Windham Historical Society, and restored with the funds from the WRA.

⁹⁴ Boujouen and Newton, 19.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81–83.

Following the closing of American Thread, and after some other businesses left town, Willimantic faced a serious economic recession, and the drug economy expanded in town. The problem loomed so large that in 2002, the *Hartford Courant* ran a multi-part series on Willimantic, entitled “Heroin Town,” for which its authors received a Pulitzer Prize nomination. The exposé even prompted a *60 Minutes* segment on the same topic in 2003, featuring Dan Rather himself narrating the story while standing in front of the police station located in the back of the notorious Hotel Hooker, a run-down rental rooms establishment used by drug addicts.⁹⁶ At the time nobody could dispute that Willimantic indeed suffered disproportionately to its size from the drug problem, but the interpretation as to the reasons for this situation differed. The town residents reacted strongly to the “Heroin Town” authors’ suggestion that heroin “most likely” arrived in town “with some of the workers recruited from Puerto Rico by the American Thread Co.,” a blame that left many in town embittered.⁹⁷

By the year 2000, close to 200,000 Puerto Ricans lived in Connecticut, constituting 5.7 percent of the state’s population.⁹⁸ Over one third of Hartford’s residents were also Puerto Ricans. In 2001, Eddie Pérez, a Puerto Rican politician and activist had been elected the first Latino Mayor of Hartford and served in his office until 2009. Both the visibility and political influence of Puerto Ricans increased. At the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century Willimantic was 40–50 percent Latino, a population which in addition to the Puerto Rican majority also includes Guatemalans, Mexicans and Dominicans. In recent years Willimantic undertook serious efforts at cultural revitalization, sponsoring, among others, a successful Third Thursday street festival, which draws crowds from the surrounding areas in the summer, and other cultural and artistic events. In 2013, the local Windham Textile and History Museum and Eastern Connecticut State University organized an exhibit of Latino history and culture titled “Latino Migration.”⁹⁹ One of the results of the exhibition became a four-part documentary series

⁹⁶ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/heroin-town/>, accessed September 23, 2019.

⁹⁷ Tracy Gordon Fox and Bill Leukhardt, “Heroin Town,” October 20, 2002. See also Karen Hunter, “Reporting a Hurtful Myth,” *Hartford Courant*, December 1, 2002. The newspaper coverage prompted a wave of letters to the editor.

⁹⁸ Figures according to US Census, Ruth Glasser, “From ‘Rich Port’”, 175. See also Edna Acosta-Belén, Carlos E. Santiago, *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 98–101.

⁹⁹ The idea of the exhibit came from Anna D. Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann (ECSU, History); the curator of the exhibit was Ricardo Perez (ECSU, Anthropology), and the financial and organizational support was provided by Eastern’s President and herself a Puerto Rican, Dr. Elsa Nuñez.

on the history of Latinos in Willimantic produced by Eastern, which featured interviews with community leaders and town residents.¹⁰⁰ The interviewees remembered how starting in the 1980s a first Puerto Rican was elected to the Education Board, and in the late 1990s more were elected to the Windham Board of Selectmen. In 1991, the Spanish-speaking community established their own Catholic parish, Sagrado Corazon, and built a church. Spanish-speaking Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists also formed their churches in town. Since 1987, Puerto Rican festival and awareness week promoted Puerto Rican culture, and in the 2000s *Collectivo Mestizal*, an organization for the propagation of Latin American and Caribbean cultures organized numerous events, including the Three Kings Day parades, Day of the Dead, and Cinco de Mayo. In 2001, a Julia De Burgos Park was established on Jackson Street, commemorating a Puerto Rican poet and activist. Poetry in the Park series, sponsored by the Curbstone Foundation, were organized there as community events.¹⁰¹ Despite the increase in Latino political participation and strengthening of the cultural presence in town, Willimantic residents still face limited economic prospects: the two biggest employers, Windham Hospital and ECSU, are both facing budget cuts and the town is still struggling to attract any new business.

The Willimantic urban renewal experience must be considered within the broader national context of politics, government regulations, economy, and the civil right movement of the 1960s. In the nation, as in New England, urban communities of African Americans and Latinos were the most often targeted for slum and blight clearance and for highway projects. In 1963, writer and activist James Baldwin famously expressed his disapproval by saying that “urban renewal” meant really “Negro removal.” His metaphor proved well-founded; according to statistics, by 1963 two thirds of those displaced by the renewal schemes were non-white, and the housing assistance to the dislocated populations was woefully insufficient. As historian Steven Conn concluded, “In American cities in the 1950s and ‘60s, the color of blight was

¹⁰⁰ Videos are available on Eastern’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4l7y4LKSCGQ> (Labor Migration); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqKDt3hFp5w&t=2s> (Politics); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGkkCNkQ47c> (Religion); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El1cArDSfPw> (Culture).

¹⁰¹ Alexander “Sandy” Taylor and Judith Ayer Doyle founded Curbstone press in 1975, and ran it from the basement of their house on Jackson Street. Curbstone press published hundreds of books and poetry books on Latin American themes. After the passing of its founder, Curbstone Press transformed into a foundation. For more on the idea of the park, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/16/nyregion/a-park-just-made-for-a-poet.html>

black.”¹⁰² The housing issue remained the central problem; for example in Camden, NJ, between 1963 and 1967 about 3,000 low-income housing units were destroyed, but only 100 built, and minorities made up 85 percent of those affected.¹⁰³ The redevelopment schemes affected Puerto Rican communities in many urban areas. In New York, a Puerto Rican neighborhood was destroyed to make space for the Lincoln Center. In Manhattan’s Upper West Side and in Brooklyn, Puerto Rican activists had to mobilize to protest the destruction and demand better housing. In Chicago, Puerto Ricans experienced multiple displacements as they were forced out by the construction of highways, high rise projects, and the expansion of the University of Illinois campus. In some smaller towns, Latino residents also felt consequences of urban renewal, both in economic and political realms.¹⁰⁴

The story of urban renewal in Willimantic is the story of an isolated New England mill town, dependent on declining textile industry and looking anxiously towards the future of deindustrialization and economic depression. Tying its hopes to the influx of federal money and brick-and-mortar improvements in its deteriorating downtown, Willimantic joined scores of other Connecticut towns counting on economic redevelopment delivered by the federal

¹⁰² Steven Conn, *Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 157–58. In case of highway construction, although the federal government provided most funds, the decisions on the location of highways were made by the state highway departments and local authorities. Rose and Mohl, *Interstate*, 97–111; Teaford, *The Rough Road*, 163–64.

¹⁰³ The Civil Rights Division of the New Jersey State Attorney General’s Office concluded in a report: “It is obvious from a glance at the renewal and transit plans that an attempt is being made to eliminate the Negro and Puerto Rican ghetto areas by two different methods. The first is building highways that benefit the white suburbanites, facilitating their movement from the suburbs to work and back; the second is by means of urban renewal projects which produce middle and upper income housing and civic centers without providing adequate, decent, safe, and sanitary housing, as the law provides, at prices which the relocated can afford.” As quoted in Rose and Mohl, *Interstate*, 108. The opposition and protest to the highway-caused displacement grew, as residents protested highways cutting through not only neighborhoods, but also urban parks and other open spaces, and filled the air with traffic pollution. Conn, 178–83. More on the freeway revolt, Klemek, 134–39; Teaford, 93–105; 163–64. See also Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 47–55.

¹⁰⁴ Rose Muzio, “The Struggle Against ‘Urban Renewal’ in Manhattan’s Upper West Side and the Emergence of El Comité,” *CENTRO Journal* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 109–41; Samuel Zipp, “The Battle of Lincoln Square: Neighborhood Culture and the Rise of Resistance to Urban Renewal,” *Planning Perspectives*, 24, no. 4 (2009): 409–33; Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 5th edition (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004); Schuyler, *A City Transformed*; Barber, *Latino City*.

dollar. Seduced by the vision of a shopping mall as a cornerstone to a plan of bringing business to downtown, the city residents prioritized economic benefits over any other considerations. Caught between the forces of the town's economic needs and racial discrimination was the community of Puerto Rican tenants, the last working-class ethnic group to find residence in the downtown. The issue of low-income housing, lack of housing code enforcement, and racial tensions became irrevocably linked to the urban renewal plans. The Puerto Rican groups in Willimantic organized and put pressure on the landlords and town officials, finding allies among the local clergy, social workers, and college faculty and students. The decision to apply for the Model Cities funds briefly mobilized all town residents, including the Puerto Rican organizations, hopeful for finding solutions to the most urgent social issues. However, once the chances for obtaining funding for social programs collapsed, urban renewal seemed to be the last hope, and the issue of low-income housing the last obstacle to overcome on the road to what was perceived as a possibility of economic revival.

There should be little doubt that downtown Willimantic needed redevelopment and modernization of the old and badly deteriorated housing stock, as well as new options for business and parking. But the promise of urban renewal failed its residents. It did not bring the expected economic benefits, and the internal improvements of the late 1970s were limited. The historical part of downtown, which could have been at least partially preserved and renovated, was instead entirely demolished—an approach which was characteristic for the 1950s and early 1960s “bulldozer” policies, but which had already been discredited by the mid-1970s. More importantly, the urban renewal damaged a sense of community among the Puerto Rican as well as other working-class ethnics in town, increased racial tensions, and resulted in growing segregation, after the downtown tenants had been dispersed into low-income housing complexes located away from the downtown.

Since the 1970s, the empty area of the Major Parcel had been used as extra parking, as location for travelling carnival or for public events like street races or country fairs. Only in recent years, after four decades since the clearance of the parcel, the landscape there had begun to change. In 2018, most of the grassy area north of the Jillson House Museum was fenced off and a large Shaboo Stage was built in the hope of using it for outdoor concerts in the summer months. In 2020, the town began construction of the Windham Community and Senior Center in the corner of the Major Parcel, where a long-abandoned cinema had been demolished. It is expected that this addition to the former Major Parcel might bring traffic to this part of town and

re-integrate it into Willimantic. So far, no historical marker or any other sign preserves the history of this part of Willimantic's downtown.

*Anna D. Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann is Distinguished Professor of History and the CSU Professor in the Department of History at Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic, CT. She published *The Exile Mission: Polish Political Diaspora and Polish Americans, 1939–1956* (Ohio University Press, 2004); *Letters from Readers in the Polish American Press, 1902–1969: A Corner for Everybody* (Lexington Books, 2014); *The Polish Hearst: Ameryka-Echo and the Public Role of the Immigrant Press* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), as well as numerous articles on various aspects of the Polish American experience. Kirchmann is past president of the Polish American Historical Association, and currently serves as Editor-in-Chief of the journal Polish American Studies.*