

#5: Importance of the digitization of archives and digital curation (See: June 24, 2021 [EVENT](#))

Speaker: Robert PARKER

Title: “Urban Renewal in Asheville’s Southside Community: A New Digital Interface, A New Perspective on a City’s History”

Video: <https://youtu.be/jEAAKING1s4> — (6’32”)



We are in a Historic moment. It’s about the value of archives. It is about the value of History. And it’s about the value of Community. Archival records are essential keys to understanding history and events.

Priscilla Robinson, Portia Evans, Dr. Richard Marciano, and Dr. Myeong Lee: What they have done in creating a new digital interface and launching it today is to give back the narrative and the voice to a community---to the Southside neighborhood of Asheville, NC, a community that was slated to be silenced. Erased from the map.

On June 4, 1964, the city council of Asheville voted to revise its housing code. This decision would have compounding and lasting ramifications that continue to affect many of its residents today. The plan was urban renewal.

The following year, 1965, homes and businesses owned by the community’s black residents of Asheville were systemically marked for future destruction. Soon thereafter, city-appointed appraisers descended upon the streets of Southside to implement the city’s well-coordinated mission to evict residents and condemn properties. Archival

photographs depict property agents posed in front of neighborhood buildings and residences holding signs. In the background of some these same photographs, children are playing; adults are gathered on their porches, seemingly unaware of the impact of the recorded moment. Few knew what was to come: these hand-held signs identified a property’s location and would later be used to target black-owned parcels to be acquired by the city. The signs, too, foretold the ominous saga of this community’s families and businesses---soon destined to be moved or removed. This was urban renewal.

Records show the city’s actions were swift. (*Because of the new digital interface, we can count the numbers. We now know*): More than 200 Southside homes were appraised in the first year. By 1968, only three years later, 660 homes would be appraised for future acquisition by the city, and 62 deeds would be transferred from the name of individual property owners into the name of HACA, the Housing Authority of the City of Asheville. By 1980, the number of city-acquired parcels from the Southside community alone would total 873. 873 parcels of homes, families, lives---gone.

Using public records and archives, Dr. Marciano and Dr. Lee (in conjunction with a team of dedicated students and other individuals) have worked diligently to link the names of the community’s local residents with the thousands of related transactions, associated with the city’s acquisition of these properties in Southside. It is a detailed and laborious task representing years of work. Painstakingly reading and reviewing pages and pages of documents, this team has employed some of the latest technology available---to expand the use and relevance of these paper archives. In its new digital form, the compiled information satisfies our modern needs to know more, and allows the quantity of knowledge stored in these archives to be communicated at levels, unimaginable only a few years ago. Today a much larger audience can share and contribute to the story of urban renewal in Southside, thanks to the dedication and efforts of these experts. Without these contemporary digital tools and software, it likely would have taken skilled archivists and historians many more decades to successfully process and study these vital records related to Asheville’s history. Digitally speaking, we are at the cutting edge of technology.

[This paragraph was omitted in the 24 July 2021 on-line presentation due to time constraints.]

Together, this team of individuals has pioneered a digital interface entitled “Remapping Southside Community, 1965-1980.” The interface combines multiple sources of detailed historical information from city maps, business directories, archival papers---appraisals, court decisions, land offers, transfer of deeds---and period photographs related to Asheville’s acquisition of the properties of Southside. Literally, thousands of documents have been digitally read, linked, and layered for us to study. The creation of this interface is a huge achievement. It’s interactive and allows one to search using the names of former owners or tenants, or streets of the neighborhood. For the first time, key information and statistics regarding the transfer of properties are available to the public. The launching of this complex and challenging digital interface is no small feat (even for experts) and should be applauded; it should serve the community, historians, scholars, and students for years to come.

Archives are essential to History. The processing and digitization of the varied and related documents of this collaborative project provide a broad new perspective on the city’s history as it relates to urban renewal and a deeper understanding and insight into the significant negative impact that this process inflicted upon the lives of Southside’s former and current residents.

In “**Remapping Southside Community, 1965-1980,**” black property owners and tenants are now identified, and the recorded transfers of deeds are now counted. One can trace the history of the city’s land acquisitions in Southside, including parcels of city-owned properties acquired during the urban renewal process, which remain vacant today, more than a half-century later. What has been taken away is well documented.

Archives, too, can tell a story---a human story: Priscilla’s story, Portia’s story, perhaps your story. Here on the screen, we see these how these stories unfold: The data documents (from 1965 to 1980) the displacement of the individual owners and tenants from this neighborhood and the demise of a community---parcel by parcel, property by property.

The information-rich interface should encourage and foster new observations and new discussions. Most importantly, the interface provides a new narrative to Southside’s story and gives voice to a community, once silenced. This is the historic moment.

-Robert McD. Parker, Independent Researcher

Bio:

Robert Parker is a researcher and advisor to collectors, museums, and foundations regarding acquisitions, collections management, and provenance issues. He has been in charge of research for numerous important international exhibitions.

Recently, as director of the project entitled “Colonists, Citizens, Constitutions,” he coordinated the realization of this multiple-venue exhibition and the accompanying catalogue for the first public viewing of these privately-owned historical documents. The catalogue to which he was also a contributor was written by Dr. James F. Hrdlicka with a foreword by the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The exhibition opened at the New-York Historical Society in 2020 and is now on view at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia until September 2021.

Having conducted research with primary resources for years, he has now become interested in the importance of digital curation and the digitization of archival records.