

“Making and Preserving the Nation’s Public Housing”

By Patrick R. Potyondy

March 2015

Author’s Note: This is an extended version of the paper I presented at the 2015 Hayes Graduate Research Forum, humanities division. Thus, it reads much like an oral presentation, rather than a written piece of scholarship. It draws upon some of my dissertation research, including time spent with local preservationist activists. Footnotes were not originally included in the paper as it was written for oral presentation, and these were only inserted for this submission. A final note on the oral-history citations: though at the time of this writing, they are all within the possession of the author, he plans to donate them to the archive at Ohio History Connection (formerly Ohio Historical Society), and the citations reflect this. Please contact the author if there are any concerns about citations.

Season three of David Simon’s *The Wire* opens with a telling conversation between Bodie and Poot, two established characters. Because of time limits and, to be honest, the amount of swearing in even the opening 45 seconds, I won’t show the clip. Both characters grew up in Baltimore’s public housing and for them, public housing represents different if not necessarily competing themes. Bodie, pictured to your left, claims the structures, about to be demolished by the city, are mere, quote, “steel and concrete,” while Poot contradicts him, quote: “No man, I’m talking about *people*. *Memories* and shit.” Their back-and-forth cuts to the heart of the tension surrounding the *history* of public housing across the United States, between residents and urban planners, and between the public and academics.¹

¹ David Simon, *The Wire* (HBO Video, 2002), Season 3, Episode 1.

So poignant are these sentiments for current former residents across the U.S. that communities are challenging the redevelopment plans of municipal interests—some public and some private. Cheryl Corley, on NPR’s *Morning Edition*, just recently reported on how residents of the Lathrop Homes in Chicago are resisting the redevelopment of that public housing project which they call home. Memory and history, once again, sit at the apex of this conflict. But these are just two examples that successfully challenge ahistorical stereotypes about public housing and the people who live there.²

With this presentation, in addition to surveying the preservation of public housing places across the United States, I will zero in on oral histories I have collected from former residents of Poindexter Village, Columbus, Ohio’s first and all-black public housing community. Just within the last couple years, the city and the local housing authority chose to demolish Poindexter, an act that many in the community protested. Like Lathrop in Chicago and over 700 other public housing projects built across the U.S. from 1933 to 1949, Poindexter Village was a garden-style modernist development, quite distinct from the substandard housing before it and from the ill-designed and ill-managed towers that might come to mind when we talk about “the projects.”

Literature Review: Telling the Story of Public Housing

My paper specifically engages with and builds upon several layers of scholarship including policy histories, the new public housing history, historical geography, and the digital humanities. A majority of public housing histories from the 1980s through the 2000s have primarily presented case studies of exceptional individual cities that reinforce a narrative of abject failure, an indictment of white liberal urban planners who exacerbated the stark urban racial divide. A majority of the histories focus on top-down processes of professionals and

² Cheryl Corley, “A Chicago Community Puts Mixed-Income Housing To The Test,” *Morning Edition, National Public Radio*, February 5, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/02/05/381886102/a-chicago-community-puts-mixed-income-housing-to-the-test>.

institutions.³ Some recent work from roughly the last decade, however, has incorporated the voices of the people who called the projects home. These have not fundamentally altered the dominant national narrative of failure. Still, something akin to a “new public housing history” has emerged that challenges many of the myths about public housing in the United States.⁴ A primary group of historians has illustrated how residents themselves, far from powerless, in fact shaped public housing policies at the grassroots level while also making strong communities. Some historians have also stressed the strong design of the earliest public housing.⁵ A new edited volume, representing many of the field’s major figures, is about to be published challenging eleven *Public Housing Myths*, and thus heavily revising the historiography of America’s public housing.⁶ Even these historians, however, have not examined how the national black press and academics have portrayed and analyzed public housing. Nor have they analyzed the collective memories that have solidified around these places, places which communities and professionals have worked to preserve.

My work illustrates that without the people, public housing remained simply empty, lifeless structures. I trace how urban planners from the top-down and residents from the bottom-

³ Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); John F. Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Raymond A Mohl, “Making the Second Ghetto in Metropolitan Miami, 1940-1960,” *Journal of Urban History* 21, no. 3 (1995): 395–427; Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Nicholas Dagen Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

⁴ D. Bradford Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁵ Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women’s Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Baranski, “Something to Help Themselves: Tenant Organizing in San Francisco’s Public Housing, 1965–1975,” *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 3 (2007): 418–42; Kelly Anne Quinn, “Making Modern Homes: A History of Langston Terrace Dwellings, a New Deal Housing Program in Washington, D.C.” (Dissertation, University of Maryland, 2007), <http://hdl.handle.net/1903/7177>; Amy Lynne Howard, *More than Shelter: Activism and Community in San Francisco Public Housing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁶ Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Fritz Umbach, and Lawrence J. Vale, eds., *Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

up transformed mere space into a meaningful and lasting place. Thus, engage in an extensive scholarship on urban planning and design and the public history of placemaking.⁷ Along with public housing historiography, my project engages with a vast literature on memory, erasure, and forgetting as well as an equally complex literature on the historic preservation of public places. At least since Carl Becker's *Everyman His Own Historian*, American historians have grappled with public history, or to put it another way, how the public engages with "the past."⁸ It is now common for historians to grapple with conceptions of collective memory, most prominently in studies of national upheaval, trauma, and warfare. In the United States context, David Blight has applied memory studies to the American Civil War, and Monica Perales, to an industrial southwestern border-town.⁹ My concern, however, is with how urban communities attach and formulate connections and memories around distinct urban spaces and institutions in the past and present. Thus, not only am I applying theories of collective memory to public housing, I am also engaging with scholars who have written on how urban public spaces are racialized, remembered, commemorated, forgotten, and even erased.¹⁰

⁷ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961); Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); Monica, William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies., Perales, *Smelertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Border Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Project for Public Spaces, "Project for Public Spaces: What Is Placemaking?," accessed March 16, 2015, http://www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/.

⁸ Carl L. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., 1935); "The past" is drawn from the phrasing of Roy Rosenzweig and David P. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁹ David W. BLIGHT and David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Perales, *Smelertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Border Community*; See also, Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7–24.

¹⁰ Lynch, *The Image of the City*; Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Nora, "Between Memory and History"; Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London ; New York: Verso, 1994); John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1994); Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes As Public History* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995); David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Wiley, 1997); Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Indiana University Press, 2000); David W. Blight, "Historians and 'Memory,'" *Common-Place* 2, no. 3 (April 2002), <http://www.common-place.org/vol-02/no->

While my project bridges this gap between the historiography of public housing and the issues of collective memory, commemoration, and historic preservation, it also places big-data collection and digital visualization on a national scale into conversation. I engage with digital visualizations as a way to communicate not only data but analysis. This line of inquiry is undertaken in the spirit of digital historian David Staley who, in *Computers, Visualization, and History*, convincingly argues that digital visualization can be a “main carrier of the meaningful information.”¹¹ In this paper, as I engage with an eclectic secondary source material in the digital humanities, I present three sequential maps of New Deal public housing development of previously un-visualized data.¹²

Drawing on only one part of my dissertation, I focus in this paper on residents and preservationists as active agents, agents who had some say over what type of a community they built and remembered.¹³ In large part because the housing authority has not preserved the majority of its historical records—thus erasing much of its and its residents’ history—I have sought out the oral histories of former residents to capture the type of story that is too often forgotten or ignored. Working extensively with a community group now called the Poindexter Legacy Foundation, I have located interviewees. These efforts, for instance, led me to additional oral histories that the community performed at a local history festival. As I have examined these oral histories and other historical documents, I have asked what type of community did public

03/author/; Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester University Press, 2007).

¹¹ David J. Staley, *Computers, Visualization, and History: How New Technology Will Transform Our Understanding of the Past* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2013), xii.

¹² Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994); David J Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M Harris, *The Spatial Humanities: GIS and the Future of Humanities Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=642395>; Manuel Lima, *Visual Complexity: Mapping Patterns of Information* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011); Bill Ferster and Ben Shneiderman, *Interactive Visualization: Insight Through Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10617473>.

¹³ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).

housing residents make? What aspects of the architecture and urban planning did residents make use of and engage with? Why, in sum, were so many people so passionately dedicated to preserving Poindexter Village and its history?

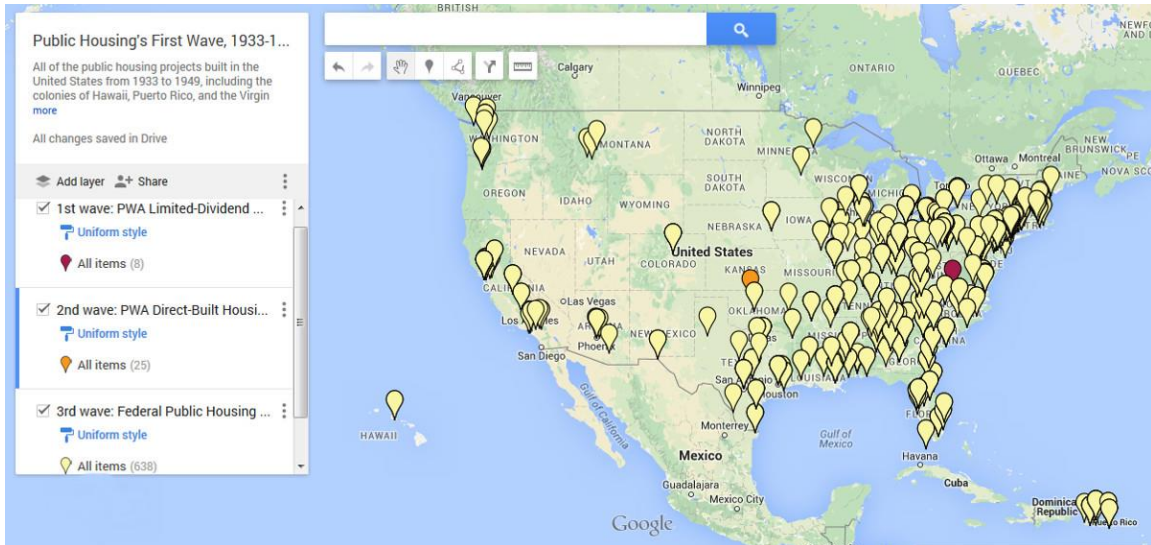
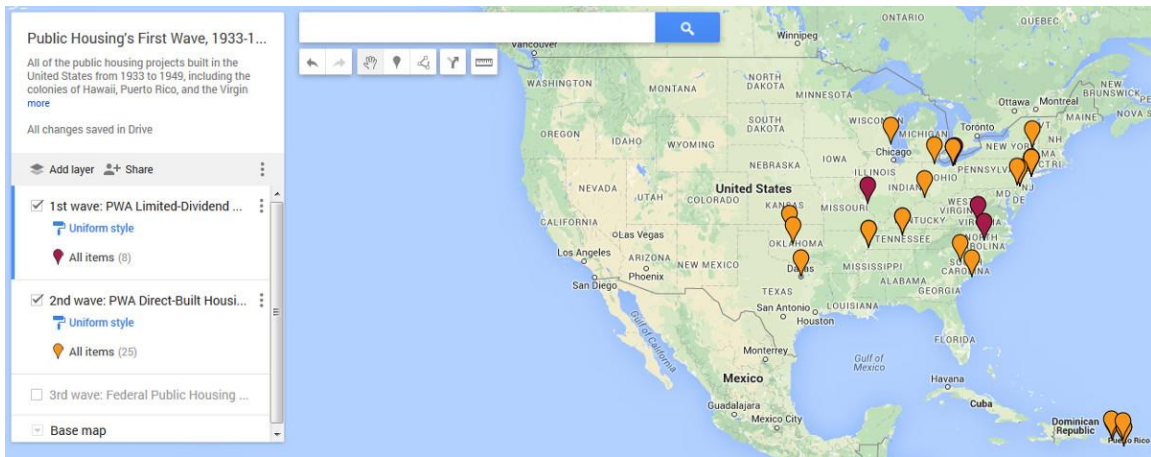
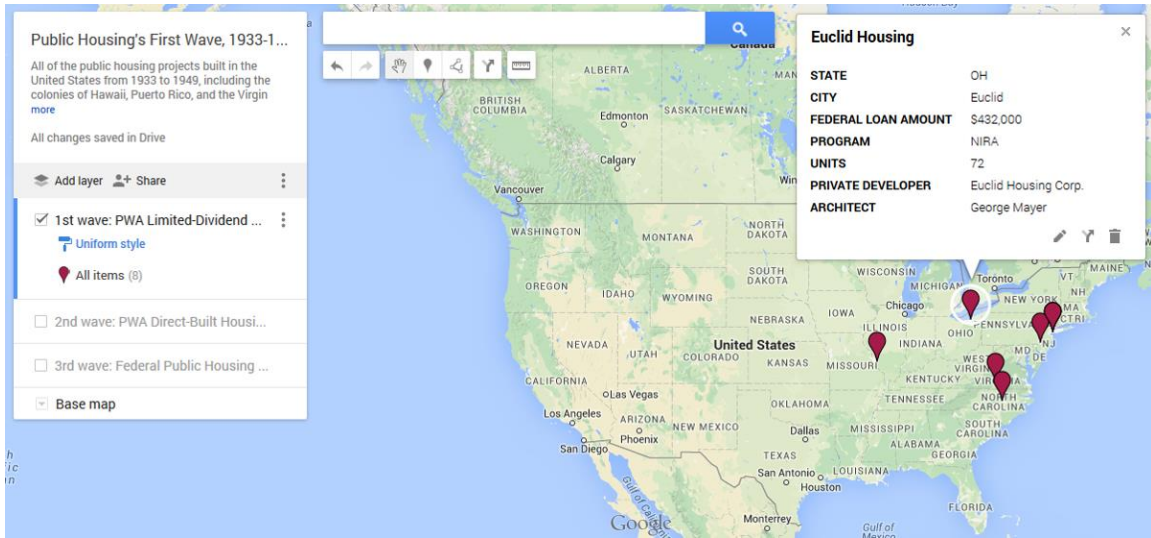
Visualizing the Experimental Policy of the New Deal via Public Housing's First Phase

These research questions have led me to examine the preservation of public housing at the national level, with Poindexter and Columbus serving as an on-the-ground case study. I have begun to make original use of the official registration forms for the National Register of Historic Places as both primary and secondary sources as part of this research. This first section, however, maps all of the public housing projects that the New Deal federal government built between 1933 and 1949. I call this the first phase of America's public housing.¹⁴

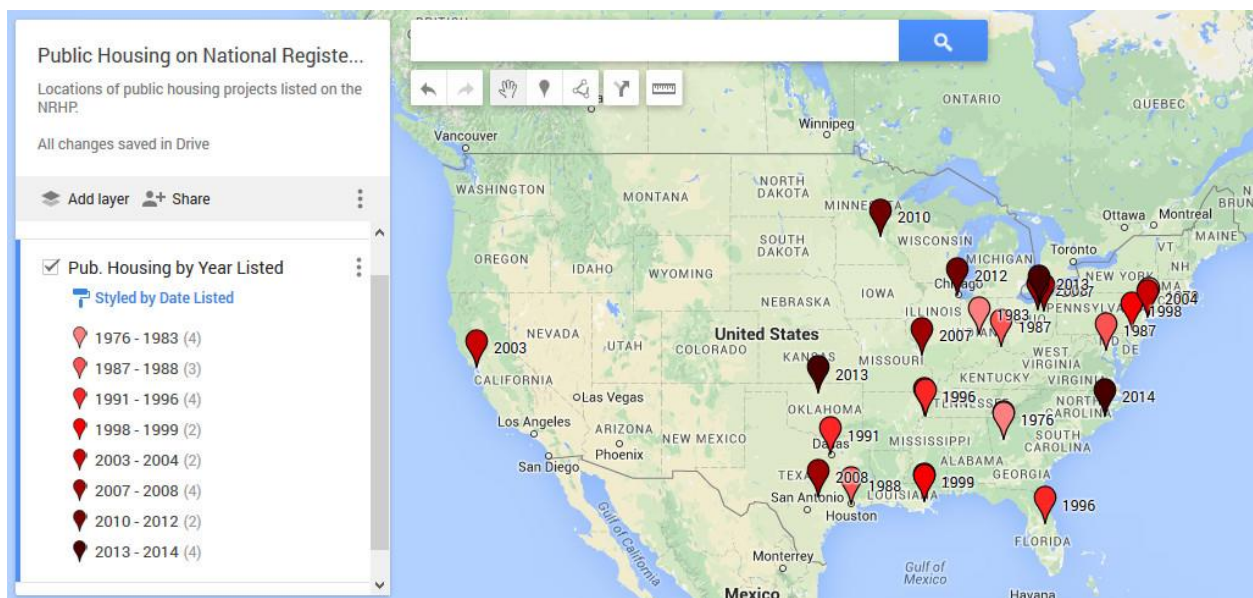
These first three visualizations map out all of the public housing projects that the federal government built between 1933 and 1949. They came in three phases. The earliest is illustrated here. The second map shows an increase in production as the first projects proved popular and successful. And the third map completes the picture when the program exploded, with over 700 projects being built by federal and local housing authorities across the nation, including the possessions of Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Hawaii. Below, the maps are presented sequentially which creates a narrative of three waves of public housing experimentation and success.¹⁵

¹⁴ I am, however, aware that the US government did build some pre-1933 public housing, particularly during World War I. That was on a much smaller scale and was completely undone after the war effort. Public housing after 1933 was permanent and much more extensive.

¹⁵ Judith Robinson et al., *Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949: A Historic Context, Volume I* (The National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, October 12, 1991).



So far, I have identified 25 public housing projects that are officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places, which is administered by the National Park Service. The following map is one visualization of the locations of these places. It shows the places in chronological order by date listed on the Register. The first was listed in Atlanta in 1976. The most recent listings are from 2014 in North Carolina. The majority of locations correlate with the highest numbers of projects built during the New Deal, as seen in the above maps. It is important to note that most regions of the United States are represented in these listings, implying lingering positive memories of this federal government policy.



Using data from the registration forms including photographs, oral history testimony, and more, I am analyzing when, where, and why communities and individuals have worked to list these places. They stand as physical embodiments of the New Deal and the people who lived there. Even in locations where a place has been demolished, its listing on the Register marks it as a location of value for the nation. Like former residents of Poindexter Village once hoped for,

communities across the nation have made sure that public housing communities have gained the recognition of the National Register.

The architects of the New Deal desired to create jobs for a nation out of work while at the same time providing for those who had too little as FDR testified to in 1937, saying in his famous second inaugural address, “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” He made it a point to visit the projects that his New Deal was creating, and so he visited Poindexter to commemorate its opening in October of 1940.¹⁶

Some architects shared his vision. Howard Dwight Smith was the general architect for Columbus’ housing authority, a professor at Ohio State, and the university architect for the university. In the spirit of the New Deal, he called for his professional colleagues to provide “public service” in what he termed “socialized architecture” to aid those who did not have access to modern housing.¹⁷ Poindexter itself, that Smith and a team of architects helped design, was composed of 33 original housing buildings with a total of just over 400 units, making it slightly larger than most. All of the buildings were two-story, Garden-style structures, not the towers that arrived in the late 1950s and 1960s.¹⁸ But in my last section, I present a few pieces of testimony from former residents of Poindexter Village.

Residents Making a Community

Without residents, public housing would have simply remained empty and meaningless physical structures—an empty space. But residents took up the opportunity to make it a meaningful place; they transformed Poindexter from mere housing into home. Designers of the

¹⁶ Untitled photograph, *Columbus Dispatch*, October 12, 1940.

¹⁷ Howard Dwight Smith, “Architecture in the Public Service” (National Association of Housing Officials, March 1939).

¹⁸ Champion Avenue Project No Ohio 1-1, Site Plan, Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority and the United States Housing Authority, Columbus, Ohio, 1939, Ohio History Connection Archives.

New Deal decided that they could not challenge racial segregation with their already-under-attack housing program, and so Poindexter was an all-black housing project until after the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision. Segregation, then, was a fact of life for the first generations of residents. Paradoxically, however, it offered black residents a safe and supportive local space to develop a strong social anchor institution at Poindexter Village. This was an era when racial housing covenants restricting the sale to non-whites were still wide-spread, when you couldn't pray to get even a sniff of a loan if you were black, let alone be *welcome* in a white school or neighborhood.

Civil rights activism was one avenue where residents coalesced. They successfully challenged a rent increase in 1942 with the help of the nationally-known Vanguard League. Newspaper articles blared headlines reading “Vanguards Say ‘Peaceful Means’ of Gaining Gov’t Housing About Exhausted” and “Poindexter Village Tenants Plan March on City Hall in Columbus Rent Battle.”¹⁹ Tenants pushed for their right to affordable housing as well as access to the other public housing the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority was planning in the city.²⁰ Meetings were held at Poindexter about larger civil rights issues like combating discrimination in employment, education, and, fittingly, housing. She recalled Julie Whitney Scott, who grew up in and around Poindexter in the late 1960s, recalls what sort of culture the community fostered:

The term “Village” wasn’t just a noun, it was an action word. It meant there were elders in the immediate area that took care of you while your parents went to

¹⁹ “Vanguards Say ‘Peaceful Means’ of Gaining Gov’t Housing About Exhausted,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, June 13, 1942, pp. 17; “Poindexter Village Tenants Plan March on City Hall in Columbus Rent Battle,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, August 29, 1942, pp. 17.

²⁰ “Negroes Demand Access To Three Columbus Projects,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, May 30, 1942, pp. 1.

work. They watched over you while you played in the courtyard. . . . They taught us respect for our elders and respect for ourselves and each other.²¹

Having lived in Poindexter at a time when Black Power's influence within the civil rights movement was rising, Scott made note of the strong social networks that acted within Poindexter.

And as I've hinted at already with my examples, women played a crucial role in making Poindexter a safe and vibrant community. When I interviewed Aretha Edward and her daughter in June of 2014, she said, "Oh yes what happened is we had a chain out there of women, and we would tell each one what was going on in the neighborhood."²² Cindy Mastin, in her oral history, recalled, "The bottom line was that if somebody was in trouble that lived out there, then they had support if they just reached out and said something."²³

Unlike the mainstream scholarship by sociologists which argues that public housing was isolated from the surrounding urban area, residents recalled that Poindexter Village's design made sure it could be meshed surrounding locations and culture. Paco Grier, who was born and grew up in Poindexter said:

Everything was centered around Poindexter Village. Everything we needed was right here in this community: fish markets, the drug store, so we had no need of anything outside of that. . . . And as far as the music, that's one reason why I was influenced in my early years, was the music. Because there was a club on every

²¹ Julie Whitney Scott, "The Destruction of a Neighborhood and Thus Its History," *The Free Press*, February 13, 2014, <http://columbusfreepress.com/article/destruction-neighborhood-and-thus-its-history>.

²² Oretha Edwards and Leslie Bridges interview by Patrick R. Potyondy, Transcript, June 16, 2014, Poindexter Oral History Project (Ohio History Connection).

²³ Cindy Mastin interview by Cristina Benedetti, Transcript, October 23, 2014, Poindexter Oral History Project (Ohio History Connection).

corner. It was like 52nd street in New York. So I was never without a place to showcase my skills.²⁴

As he illustrates, the Village was not isolated from the surrounding community, especially in the first three decades of its existence.

Concluding Remarks

Quote: “When I drive down Long Street anymore, I don’t even turn to the right – it’s just an emotional thing for me. Like I said, I grew up there, my parents raised me there.” Paco Grier, former resident.²⁵

Quote: “I put it in the same category as this Sphinx or Taj Mahal or the Vatican or whatever. I mean if you don’t get the physical thing there, they don’t mean [anything] then. I mean we can *talk* about these places, but if we got nothing left from it . . . that we can see and touch, it don’t really mean nothing.” Baba Shongo, former resident.²⁶

Quote: “History is important. That what you do in your life is important. That when you do something or you see something, it can last. It’s significant. If you tear away and take everything away from people that they have and if they have pride in, you leave them with nothing.” Julie Whitney Scott, former resident.²⁷

Quote: “I’d love to be able to go to there and say, ‘*Well, see that over there, I had a place I grew up. It looks just like that. They tore it down, but that’s what’s left of it. And Roosevelt*

²⁴ Steven Paco Grier interview by Cristina Benedetti, Transcript, December 5, 2014, Poindexter Oral History Project (Ohio History Connection).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Chief Shongo Obadina interview by Patrick R. Potyondy, Transcript, April 25, 2014, Poindexter Oral History Project (Ohio History Connection).

²⁷ Julie Marie Whitney Scott interview by Patrick R. Potyondy, Transcript, January 24, 2015, Poindexter Oral History Project (Ohio History Connection).

came here and dedicated this.’ Yeah, I wanted a piece of it to be there.” Daniel Sturkey, former resident.²⁸

These are just a few of the answers from former residents when I asked them why they wanted Poindexter Village to be preserved rather than very nearly totally destroyed. Arguably, more than anything else, what a nation chooses to commemorate, memorialize, and preserve represents the core being of what it strives to be and not just *what* but *who* it values. Although only two of Poindexter’s buildings still stand, my research seeks to question exactly what type of a nation the United States seeks to be. Is it one that only values places like George Washington’s Mount Vernon or Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, or is it a nation that has room for preserving the homes of the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses, too?

²⁸ Daniel Sturkey interview by Patrick R. Potyondy, Transcript, December 12, 2014, Poindexter Oral History Project (Ohio History Connection).