

Shaping the City from Below: Urban Planning and Citizens' Battle for Control
in Roanoke, Virginia, 1907-1928

Emily B. Harmon

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Dennis P. Halpin, Co-Chair
Melanie A. Kiechle, Co-Chair
LaDale C. Winling

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ABSTRACT

In 2017, urban planners in Roanoke, Virginia, created a plan to construct a new public space that will honor the city's first professional city planner, John Nolen. Nolen is now considered a founder of the urban planning profession in the United States. Roanoke officials hope to celebrate the city's connection with Nolen and emphasize his influence over Roanoke's development. Similarly, historical narratives about urban planning focus on male city planners while ignoring citizens' contributions. Urban histories, on the other hand, concentrate on large metropolitan areas in the urban North. By combining urban history, women's history, and southern history, this thesis seeks to understand how diverse citizens in a small city of Southwest Virginia shaped the city.

Beneath the surface of John Nolen and professional city planning, upper-class white women, African Americans, and male city leaders and businessmen, engaged in a dynamic power play over Roanoke's built environment. As they engaged in this battle for control, citizens shaped Roanoke from below. Wealthy Roanokers partnered with John Nolen to assert power over other citizens and to shape the city in their own interests. By uncovering the story of a southern city's development in the early twentieth century, this thesis exposes the ways in which southern citizens shaped urban spaces to exert power over other citizens and engage in a battle for control over the urban environment.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

At the turn of the twentieth century, Roanoke, Virginia, was a city strained by rapid industrial and population growth. From 1882 to 1900, Roanoke exploded from a population of 669 to 21,000. Over the next thirty years, Roanoke citizens battled for control over the urban environment. In 1906, a group of women joined together to address urban problems that plagued Roanoke's citizens. They named themselves the Woman's Civic Betterment Club (WCBC) and raised money to hire city planner John Nolen to help them make Roanoke a more livable and reputable city. The women used Nolen to legitimize their concerns with the urban environment and to increase their power in society, although their plan was ultimately rejected. White citizens later used the concepts of city planning to implement Jim Crow residential segregation ordinances within Roanoke, but African Americans resisted these ordinances through real estate purchases. Eventually, in 1928, male city leaders asked Nolen to return to Roanoke to plan it a second time. This time, instead of women leading the movement, men usurped control of city planning from women. This thesis examines the citizens that used city planning to gain control of the city and assert power over other citizens. Though John Nolen planned Roanoke, citizens shaped Roanoke from below as they engaged in a dynamic power play over the urban environment.

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My first trip to the archives in Roanoke proved to be the one that began my journey down this path. I would like to extend thanks to the archival staff at the Virginia Room in the Roanoke City Public Library, who located sources that ignited my interest in Roanoke women like Sarah Cocke and Willie Walker Caldwell. I also would like to thank the John Nolen Research Fund and the Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Collections. Looking through John Nolen's papers on Roanoke gave me the valuable resources I needed to write an entire thesis on a topic that had previously been a footnote in Roanoke's history.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends who supported me all along the way. Thanks to my mom and dad, who have sacrificed so much over the years to allow me to pursue a quality education, and to my sister, the constant encourager of my work. I could not have made it this far without my cohort, Ellen Boggs, Grace Hemmingson, and Katie Brown, who shaped my work from the very beginning in Dr. Monique Dufour's Writing Skills class. Seeing the hard work you poured into your projects pushed me to work as hard on my own. Lastly, and probably most deservedly, thanks to my husband, Michael Harmon, who encouraged me to return to school regardless of the financial sacrifice. You committed countless hours of reading my papers and listening to my presentations. Somehow, though you have next to no background in history, you ask the best questions about my work. I honestly could not have done this without you.

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Introduction

In the next few years, city officials will be constructing a new public space in Roanoke, Virginia. They plan to renovate a grassy, vacant space in the heart of Roanoke's downtown district, which is next to Roanoke's tallest building, a block from the new Amtrak station, behind the art museum, and across the street from Roanoke's iconic Market Building. Many Roanokers consider this area the historical and cultural center of Roanoke. This public space, called Nolen Plaza, will honor the city's first professional city planner, John Nolen.

The recognition of Nolen's work in Roanoke is appropriate. Nolen planned Roanoke at the very start of his career, and he would later be considered one of the "Fathers of City Planning." Scholars and urban planners attribute the prevalence of comprehensive city plans throughout the country to his work. The plan that he created in Roanoke in 1907 was a groundbreaking work.¹ It was Nolen's first ever comprehensive city plan, and the fifth ever created in the entire United States. Later in life, Nolen credited the Roanoke plan with catalyzing his career and legacy as a city planner. Certainly urban planners today, aware of Nolen's prominence, want to highlight his connection with Roanoke.

However, the construction of a public space dedicated to Nolen ignores the work of Roanoke citizens who shaped the city in subtle but significant ways. First, in 1907, a group of women called the Woman's Civic Betterment Club (WCBC) catalyzed the city planning movement in Roanoke. They dreamed of making Roanoke a more beautiful city, raised money to hire Nolen, and exerted their social power, the ability to influence or control a course of events,

¹ John Nolen, *Remodeling Roanoke; Report to the Committee on Civic Improvement* (Roanoke: Stone Printing & Manufacturing Co., 1907).

on Roanoke's built environment through the creation of city health ordinances, school reform, and park development. Second, in the 1910s, city leaders used the concepts of city planning to institute a racial hierarchy, which they believed would make Roanoke a more beautiful and sanitary city. African Americans resisted these changes through real estate purchases, exerting economic power to obstruct city leaders' plans. Finally, by the late 1920s, city leaders revived efforts for professional city planning and invited Nolen to plan Roanoke a second time. Though women now had a political voice through women's suffrage, men usurped control of city planning from women. Women continued to exert their influence in different ways. They maintained their alliance with Nolen, used their connections throughout the city to encourage the adoption of his second city plan, convinced city leaders to appoint a woman to the City Planning Commission, and claimed ownership of city planning throughout the nation.

By looking beneath the surface of John Nolen and professional urban planning, this thesis argues that diverse citizens, upper-class white women, African Americans, and male city leaders and businessmen, engaged in a dynamic power play over Roanoke's built environment. Wealthy Roanokers partnered with John Nolen to legitimize their concerns about Roanoke, and ultimately, to assert power over other citizens. While Nolen's plans acted as a guide for Roanoke's development for decades, citizens pursued only the aspects of his plans that agreed with their own vision of Roanoke. As citizens engaged in this battle for control, they shaped Roanoke from below.

On the surface, both women and African Americans during this time appear powerless. At the turn of the twentieth century, discriminatory laws kept both African Americans and women from having political authority. Many people in Virginia still held to the "cult of true

womanhood,” which prescribed that women remain in the home while men represented the family in public matters. Both women and men believed that women were especially virtuous and religious, and any involvement in politics would tarnish their purity. Though the concept was used by men to limit women’s political involvement, many women also ascribed to this concept. For African Americans, on the other hand, Jim Crow laws had successfully disfranchised ninety percent of voting African American men when Virginia rewrote its state constitution to create poll taxes and property requirements in 1902.² These laws intentionally discriminated against African Americans and pushed many out of the ballot box.

Despite their lack of political power, women and African Americans used the means available to them to exert their power on public space and the built environment in Roanoke. Women had long been considered especially adept at cleaning and housekeeping, and they used their domestic abilities to claim authority, or the ability to influence others because of one’s recognized knowledge about a subject, over cleaning the city. This concept was known as municipal housekeeping. Having been shut out of political participation, women employed ideas from municipal housekeeping to challenge male city leaders, both politicians and businessmen, for authority over public space. In Roanoke, women used their positions as municipal housekeepers to advocate the benefits of public health reform and city planning. Despite not having the right to vote, women used their cultural authority as mothers and house managers to

² Brent Tarter, “African Americans and Politics in Virginia (1865-1902),” *Encyclopedia Virginia*. Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, October 21, 2015.

influence public opinion and shape public space in their own interests, advocating the creation of health codes, playgrounds, and libraries.³

African Americans lacked the public influence that white women held in society in the Jim Crow south. In addition to disfranchisement, African Americans were sensationally misrepresented in newspapers, unable to testify in court, and silenced by male city leaders when trying to make their concerns known. Realizing that their voices would not be heard, African Americans shaped public space through more clandestine methods. Taking advantage of a loophole in city segregation ordinances, Roanoke's African American community banded together to purchase real estate on a street that was considered by city leaders to be white. Through physically refusing to yield space to white citizens, African Americans engaged in a power play with white segregationists in Roanoke and claimed space for themselves.

Roanoke's social groups engaged in a dynamic power play over Roanoke's urban environment, which in turn shaped the city. This concept, borrowed from *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City* by Catherine McNair, attributes urban development to citizens rather than government officials or city planners. Through this framework, it becomes easy to see Roanoke's development as a series of power plays amongst Roanoke's social classes. Hiring a professional city planner, the women of the Woman's Civic Betterment Club claimed authority over public space, not only against upper-class men but also Roanoke's lower class citizens, especially African Americans. White citizens used residential

³ Susan Wirke, "The City Social Movement: Progressive Women Reformers and Early Social Planning," *Planning the Twentieth Century American City*. (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 55-75; Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

segregation to push African Americans out of the downtown district and white neighborhoods. African Americans engaged in hidden tactics to resist white city leaders' plans. Eventually, white men claimed authority over the city by professionalizing city planning, appointing male-led and dominated planning committees, and pushing women to more philanthropic or private matters. Pushed to the sidelines, women employed other methods for influence and control over the urban environment. All of these strategies employed by Roanoke's social classes show the battle for power and control over space.⁴

Studying these power plays in Roanoke brings together urban history, women's history, and southern history to uncover the role of Southern citizens, white, black, male, and female, in shaping the urban environment from below. City planning historians have traditionally praised professional planners while overlooking citizens who funded their profession and made their work possible. This narrative impacts the work of current urban planners, like those in Roanoke, who emphasize the legacy of professional urban planners over the work of citizens. In response to the male-dominated narratives of planning historians, women's historians supported new interpretative frameworks to think outside of the standard narratives of city planning to unearth

⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Pr, 1990); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press : Distributed by Simon & Schuster, 1996); and Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

women's accomplishments.⁵ Research about women's underlying roles in urban planning inform this study's understanding of how women sparked the city planning movement from below.

Women in Roanoke partnered with John Nolen, a Founding Father of urban planning, to achieve their own goals of making Roanoke a safer and more pleasant place to live. Though they were not professionally trained planners, women legitimized urban planners' professions, and urban planners validated women's concerns for public health and order in their cities. African Americans in the Jim Crow south bore the brunt of urban reforms as white citizens used city planning to push African Americans out of white spaces. Though African Americans had little to no political power, they used economic power to shape the city's segregation districts and asserted their own autonomy by building a community for black residents in the undesirable section of the city. Through these methods, citizens shaped Roanoke.

By uncovering the story of a southern city's development in the early twentieth century, this thesis seeks to understand how and why southern citizens shaped urban spaces. Urban historians have recently sought to understand the impact of diverse actors in shaping urban environments.⁶ However, urban histories have tended to focus on large metropolitan areas like New York City and Chicago. Instead, this thesis focuses on a small city in Southwest Virginia

⁵ Maureen Flanagan, ed, "Women in the city, women of the city: where do women fit in urban history?," *Journal of Urban History* 23, no. 3 (1997): 251+.; Maureen Flanagan, "The City Profitable, the City Livable: Environmental Policy, Gender, and Power in Chicago in the 1910s," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (1996): 163-190; Eugenie L. Birch, "From Civic Worker to City Planner, Women and Planning, 1890 to 1980," in *The American Planner: Biographies and Recollections*, ed. Donald Krueckeberg, Center for Urban Policy Research, 1994.

⁶ Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City*; Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004); Catherine McNeur, *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

that was at one time one of the largest and most important urban centers of the South. With Nolen's 1907 plan for Roanoke being the fifth comprehensive city plan in the United States, Roanoke also stands at the forefront of city planning throughout the nation. Due to economic stagnancy in the latter half of the twentieth century, Roanoke is now rarely discussed as an important player in the urban South. In addition, cities in Appalachia have been mostly ignored by urban historians.⁷ By understanding why Roanoke's citizens wanted a city plan and the changes they implemented in the city over the course of two decades, this thesis unearths the impact of southern citizens who are often overlooked in urban narratives.

Historians of the New South have recently illuminated the anxiety that accompanied the sweeping transformations in southern society after the Civil War.⁸ This thesis builds on that analysis by showing the tension at the heart of Roanoke's development. Roanoke considered itself a city of the New South, a term used by southerners after the Civil War and Reconstruction to engender confidence in the South's future. Boosters claimed that the New South would overcome the problems of the Old South through a booming economy, population growth, and racial peace.⁹ Roanoke boasted some of the fastest growth in the entire region and, along with Birmingham and

⁷ Kevan Delany Frazier, "Big Dreams, Small Cities: John Nolen, the New South, and the City Planning Movement in Asheville, Roanoke, and Johnson City, 1907–1937," (Ph.D. Dissertation, West Virginia University, 2000), <http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/304633740?accountid=14826>.

⁸ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*, 15 anniversary edition (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007).

⁹ On New South and the argument for racial peace, see Edward Ayers, *Promise*, 323.

Chattanooga, served as a model city of the New South.¹⁰ The elite of Roanoke, with financial stakes in the city's reputation, worried that Roanoke's true character as a rowdy boomtown with violent race relations would be found out. Hoping to prove Roanoke was a "Magic City," upper-class citizens and city leaders shaped the city to align with their vision of New South ideals.

Historians of racial segregation have unearthed how white city leaders used urban planners and zoning laws to exclude African Americans from certain areas of cities during Jim Crow.¹¹ Roanoke was at the forefront of the effort to institute residential segregation. This thesis uncovers the story of Roanoke's own residential segregation laws. Through overt and covert methods, white elites successfully segregated Roanoke, pushing African Americans into a less-desirable, underserved section of the city. By using city planning methods to legitimize racial segregation, Roanoke was one of the first cities in the country to codify residential segregation based on race. However, as scholars have shown, African Americans resisted discriminatory laws through numerous methods.¹² In

¹⁰ Edward Ayers, *Promise*, 55 and 61.

¹¹ David M Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); N. D. B Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Kevin Michael Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2007); Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017).

¹² Freund, *Colored Property*; David Delaney, *Race, Place, and the Law, 1836-1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing And White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997).

Roanoke, African Americans engaged in grassroots activism by purchasing real estate in contested territories. Through these concealed methods, African Americans claimed certain areas of the city as their own and shaped city space. However, with limited access to municipal services like decent roads, electricity, or sewers, African American's inferior status was replicated over the long term onto the built environment. Roanoke remains one of the most segregated cities in the country today.¹³

Local histories of Roanoke have celebrated Roanoke's progress and industry while avoiding its conflict and tension. This thesis builds on and challenges one of the only scholarly monographs written on Roanoke, *Roanoke, Virginia, 1882-1912: Magic City of the New South* by Rand Dotson.¹⁴ By ending in 1912, Dotson's study misses the full impact that city planning had on Roanoke. This thesis, rather, reperiodizes the narrative, with the Nolen plans in 1907 and 1928 serving as bookends. Reframing the story of Roanoke's development during these crucial decades focuses on the impact of professional city planning and elucidates the battle between Roanokers for control over the urban environment.

This thesis is organized thematically and chronologically. Each chapter focuses on a certain groups of citizens and advances the narrative chronologically, though there is some overlap in certain areas. The first chapter of this thesis examines the creation of the Woman's Civic Betterment Club and their early attempts to shape Roanoke. The women argued that they were especially adept at cleaning the city as they cleaned their homes.

¹³ Matt Chittum and Sarah Gregory, "Decades of inequality and lack of opportunity have generational cost in Roanoke," *The Roanoke Times*, May 7, 2017.

¹⁴ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia, 1882-1912: Magic City of the New South*. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007).

But beneath this surface of municipal housekeeping, the Roanoke women pursued city planning to increase women's power within their society. No longer content to be involved in only domestic matters, upper-class women adopted and promoted ideas of municipal housekeeping to push their own interests forward. By devising and orchestrating a Fall Festival which raised more than enough money to hire a city planner, the women contributed through typically "feminine" activities - selling cookbooks, decorating booths, selling homemade foods and coffee, and entertaining guests. Though the WCBC's activities appeared domestic and feminine, their efforts were ultimately political. They intended to transform public space in their own interest and increase their power within Roanoke society.

The second chapter focuses on the city's attempts to impose residential segregation in Roanoke following Nolen's first city plan. From 1911 to 1917 (when the Supreme Court ruled that residential segregation based on race was unconstitutional), Roanoke city leaders pushed African Americans out of the city. Though the women of the WCBC never publicly advocated residential segregation, they were deeply embedded in white supremacy. The WCBC focused on making Roanoke a "City Beautiful" for people like themselves: the white, upper-middle class. Roanoke city leaders took their cue from city planning to order their city according to a racial hierarchy that they believed was irrefutable and inherent. However, Roanoke's African American community did not passively endure these discriminatory practices. They used the power available to them to resist residential segregation and to carve out a place for themselves in Roanoke's built environment.

The final chapter focuses on John Nolen's return to replan Roanoke in 1928. When Roanokers failed to implement most of Nolen's suggestions in 1907, male city leaders asked him to replan the city. Nolen was forced to confront a city transformed during the past twenty years by women's civic reforms, white society's pursuit of racial segregation, and political and economic decisions by male city leaders. These changes to Roanoke's cityscape shaped Nolen's second city plan. This time, however, women would be subjected to the authority of a male-led City Planning Commission. The WCBC began as a way for women to improve their city and change their place in society, but when city planning became more popular with the public and across the nation during the 1910s and 1920s, male leaders usurped control over the city plan. Undeterred, women employed more subtle methods to influence city planning initiatives in Roanoke.

Chapter One

A City Beautiful

At the turn of the twentieth century, Roanoke, Virginia, was a city strained by rapid industrialization. When the Norfolk & Western Railroad decided to locate its headquarters in the Roanoke Valley in 1882, the population and economy of Big Lick (as Roanoke was known at the time) exploded. That decade, Roanoke was the fastest growing city in the South.¹⁵ Due to this explosive growth, contemporaries called it the “Magic City of the South” and celebrated it as an exemplar of New South industry and progress.¹⁶ Rapid development, however, had caused many problems in the city's design and function. Urban planner John Nolen would later quip that the city had simply gone “from Big Lick to Bigger Lick.”¹⁷ The prevalence of saloons, which outnumbered any other business in Roanoke’s downtown district, and dirty streets made one visitor remark that Roanoke was like “a mining camp or a mushroom city of Colorado.”¹⁸ The outdated sewer system, rotten wooden sidewalks, and dismal sanitation record had become an embarrassment to Roanokers. The city’s negative reputation soon stifled economic development as potential investors and residents decided that Roanoke’s magic had worn off.

By 1907, Roanoke was bursting at the seams with a population of thirty-five thousand. That year, a group of women banded together to address problems caused by rapid urbanization. Organized under the Woman’s Civic Betterment Club (WCBC), the women sought to influence

¹⁵ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, xv.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁷ John Nolen, *Remodeling Roanoke*, 11.

¹⁸ Baltimore Sun, quoted in Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 21.

the public space of Roanoke in their own interests. Frustrated by the lack of public sanitation in the city and their husbands' apathy about their concerns, the women took up the cause of making Roanoke a better place to live. By organizing a wildly successful Fall Festival, raising thousands of dollars, and hiring the nation's first professional city planner, the women of the WCBC challenged the authority of male city leaders over Roanoke's development. By appealing to their feminine abilities as municipal housekeepers, the women engaged in a power play with male city leaders over Roanoke's built environment. Ultimately, the women employed professional city planning to exert their influence in public matters from which they had been previously isolated.

Sarah Cocke and the Formation of the WCBC

In 1906 Sarah Johnson Cocke, a genteel Southern woman with high hopes for her new city, formed the WCBC. Cocke was born in Atlanta and raised by a prominent Southern family. In fact, her father was a Confederate Army doctor, her mother was a close friend of Varina Davis, Jefferson Davis' wife, and her uncle Howell Cobb was a presiding officer in the Confederate Congress. In her adult life, Cocke enjoyed the luxuries of high society. She attended Waverly Seminary in Washington, D.C. and later married New York physician Hugh Hagan. With Hagan, Sarah traveled extensively, even living in Austria for a year while Hagan studied medicine at the University of Vienna.¹⁹ After Hagan died unexpectedly, she married Lucian Cocke, general counsel for Norfolk & Western Railroad in Roanoke, Virginia. Lucian had been Roanoke's first mayor from 1882-1884. In addition, Lucian was the youngest son of Charles Lewis Cocke, the

¹⁹ Sarah Johnson Cocke and J. Hayden Hollingsworth, *A Woman of Distinction: From Hoopskirts to Airplanes, a Remembrance* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Xlibris Corporation, 2002), 202.

founder of Hollins Institute, the first women's college in Virginia. Charles had served as the Institute's president from 1846 until his death in 1901, after which Lucian's next oldest sibling, Martha, became president; she was the first female president of any college in Virginia. Clearly, Sarah had married into a family that had long valued female education and advancement.

By 1907, Cocke was forty-two years old. She had been living in Roanoke for four years at "Cockspur," the Cocke family's Queen Anne mansion in Orchard Hill. She enjoyed sitting on the porch in the cool summer evening breeze, with views of Mill Mountain and the Roanoke Valley. At her home, Cocke entertained guests such as the U.S. Senator John Daniels, former U.S. House of Delegates Representative Henry St. George Tucker, and presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan.²⁰ Initially, Cocke said she was "surprised to find such a progressive city, and one so cosmopolitan tucked away in the Valley of Virginia," and compared Roanoke to



Figure 1. A photograph of "Cockspur," the Cocke's Queen Anne mansion in Roanoke. This photograph was taken in May 1914 when the Cockes received one of their most important guests, Vice President and Mrs. Thomas R. Marshall, at their home. Image from the Historical Society of Western Virginia Digital Archives.

²⁰ Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 223-224.

a “younger sister of Atlanta, or an infant of New York posterity, save that neither Atlanta or New York could boast its setting in the Shenandoah Valley.”²¹

Yet, not all was ideal in the Magic City. Cocke’s home was located near downtown, and she remembered “the sound of raucous evening activities [that] drifted up the hill and if the wind was right, it was uncomfortably common to hear gunfire from the saloons and houses of the evening ladies along Lick Run.”²² A natural spring in the middle of downtown, Lick Run posed a other problems. Although Hotel Roanoke was a modern structure with plumbing, all of the sewage from Hotel Roanoke ran into Lick Run, and other less-sophisticated establishments would cart their sewage to the spring and dump it in.²³ Most threatening to her own family was the city fountain, which supplied unsanitary water for patrons of the city market as well as their livestock. Cocke “was astounded to see water taken from the fountain in large pails and carted off to schools for the children to drink.”²⁴ At school, children drank water from the pail with a shared dipper. Though Roanoke residents thought this was a normal practice, Cocke understood that germs spread through unclean water. Cocke told her children to only drink from sources that she had approved in advance.

Most of all, Cocke was surprised when no one else seemed concerned about these issues.²⁵ Although her late husband had taught her the value of sanitation, Cocke claimed, “you certainly didn’t need an education to understand the place was an epidemic waiting to happen.”

²¹ Ibid., 223.

²² Cocke and Hollingsworth, *A Woman of Distinction*, 266.

²³ Ibid., 268.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ For this paragraph, see Ibid., 268, unless otherwise noted.

And in 1905, “Big Lick Fever” struck. Typhoid killed thirty-five people that summer, fifteen of them children. Cocke remained concerned about the availability of clean drinking water for her children at school: “I stood it as long as I could then mentioned it to Lucian. I had, in fact, been mentioning it to him ever since I moved to Roanoke, but, he, like everyone else, seemed uninterested . . . He listened patiently but nothing happened.”²⁶

Cocke fought against the popular perception that the sanitary conditions in Roanoke were acceptable. While most people believed that the number of deaths from “Big Lick Fever” was normal for a city the size of Roanoke, Cocke explained to friends and acquaintances that it was a large number even for a city as populous as Atlanta. Frustrated and determined, Cocke decided, “if something were to be done, it appeared that someone other than the city fathers would have to initiate the action.”²⁷ One evening, she decided to take a tour of Roanoke to confirm what she had always suspected. After seeing a drunk man urinate in Lick Run, fall into the sewage, crawl out, and then pass out on an empty whisky barrel, she had seen enough. She remarked, “We would get something done about it, of that I was determined. If the men didn’t think it was important, I knew I wasn’t the only woman who was concerned.”²⁸

Cocke found a golden opportunity to unite other women to her cause after citizens attended a popular lecture on the “Physical, Mental, and Moral Hygiene of the School” by physician Leigh Buckner in 1906. Through the lecture, many women became concerned about the school conditions that could cause their children to have, as the physician said, “a lowered

²⁶ Ibid., 269.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 270.

vitality, a weakened constitution, a system ready to furnish an excellent culture medium for the myriads of noxious germs that swarm in these unsanitary conditions.” The women banded together to form the Educational League. With Cocke as their president, the women inspected schools and demanded that the City Council double its appropriations for public schools and to fix the unsanitary conditions in the school. Sarah’s husband Lucian presented the demands to the city council, and the women insinuated that the City Council members’ jobs were at risk if they did not comply.²⁹

In another initiative, Cocke spearheaded a crusade for a pure food and milk ordinance. As Cocke recounted in her memoir, one evening in the fall of 1906, the Cockes were entertaining a few friends when the women began discussing what was being served for dinner.³⁰ When Cocke said they were having turkey that she purchased from Gilly Bush at the market, a friend named Molly Coxe asked her if the feathers had been pulled from the turkey when she purchased it; she said that Bush had been selling buzzards as turkeys and groundhogs as rabbits. After discussing these frustrations, Cocke realized that muckrakers like Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, and Jane Addams were addressing these issues in larger towns up north, and “there was no reason we couldn’t accomplish the same thing on a smaller scale.”³¹ The next day, Cocke and each of the women at the dinner wrote to friends to express their concerns and ask them to come to a

²⁹ Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia, 1882-1912*, 219-220.

³⁰ Cocke and Hollingsworth, *A Woman of Distinction*, 271-272.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 272.

meeting in two weeks. While Cocke expected about fifty women to attend, she was pleasantly surprised when more than one hundred women showed up to the meeting.³²

Willie Walker Caldwell, a close friend of Cocke's who attended dinner that night, jumped at the chance to make Roanoke a better place. Caldwell had been born and raised in Wytheville, Virginia, and moved with her husband to Roanoke for his new law practice. Like Cocke, Caldwell's family had been important in the Civil War; Willie's father was Confederate General James A. Walker, last commander of the "Stonewall Brigade" in Virginia. Inspired by Cocke's leadership, Caldwell used her local connections as a Virginian to work toward public health initiatives in Roanoke.³³

Other women who attended the meeting were upper-class, white, and many of them wives of prominent businessmen in Roanoke. Most of them lived in the southwest quadrant of the city, predominately the upper and middle-class section. While many of the women were Roanoke natives, others had emigrated from cities like Atlanta, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York with their husbands to pursue careers in the railroad and other growing industries. Many were well-educated, having graduated from female seminaries in Virginia and along the East Coast.

Under Cocke and Caldwell's leadership, the attendees of the meeting decided to use their consumer power as grocery purchasers to boycott market vendors whose sanitary standards were unsatisfactory.³⁴ The women's boycott was soon successful. Unhappy with the condition of the

³² Ibid., 273.

³³ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia, 1882-1912*, 224.

³⁴ Ibid., 218.

city's market from which many of them purchased food for their families, the lack of sanitary environments for their children in school, and the apathetic response by city fathers, the women took up the cause of cleaning Roanoke. They named their club the Woman's Civic Betterment Club and used their power as women to shape the city in their own interests.³⁵

As women in the South in 1907, their rights were substantially limited. The women could not vote, and society's understanding of women's place in society limited their activities to domestic matters. In spite of these constraints, the WCBC strived to improve their city and to carve out a place for themselves in public matters. The WCBC employed ideas of municipal housekeeping to lay claim to the civic domain, and ultimately, to exert power over Roanoke's built environment.

Municipal Housekeeping

The Woman's Civic Betterment Club appealed to the concept of municipal housekeeping to legitimize their movement to the public. They claimed that, as women, they were responsible for cleaning up the city and even considered themselves mothers of Roanoke. The concept of municipal housekeeping originated as early as the 1900s. Reformer and settlement house worker Jane Addams promoted women's involvement in civic affairs through what she called "city housekeeping."³⁶ Historian Mary Ritter Beard published an influential book in 1915 titled *Woman's Work in Municipalities* explaining the natural ability of women to clean up the city as

³⁵ Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³⁶ Jane Addams, "Municipal Housekeeping," *Indianapolis Home Magazine*, July 22, 1906 in Jane Addams Papers, Digital Collection, <https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/5827>.

they cleaned up their homes.³⁷ As Beard explains, women were especially virtuous, having “natural instincts” which enabled them to be “housekeepers of the world.”³⁸

Municipal housekeeping was the path through which many women throughout the United States became involved in urban reform efforts. Women claimed that they were experts in domestic affairs and argued that their impartiality in politics and commerce enabled them to remain untainted by selfish motives.³⁹ At the center of their efforts was not simply beauty, but a desire to deal with problems that urban life had begun to present including slums, air and water pollution, as well as overcrowded public schools.⁴⁰ As public health concerns threatened the livability of urban environments, women took up the cause to make cities cleaner, healthier, and more beautiful.

The WCBC employed the concept of municipal housekeeping to explain the club’s objectives to the public. The women of the WCBC were aware of what society perceived as their natural abilities and embraced city cleanup and beautification as part of their responsibility. In one of the first public announcements of the WCBC in the *Roanoke Times*, Cocke pointed to these types of issues to justify Roanoke’s need for a Woman’s Civic Betterment Club: “Owing to certain anti-health conditions existing in our city, negligence of some doctors in posting houses containing contagious diseases,” Cocke remarked, “the practice of expectoration about the market, the need of a regular bacteriologist, it behooved the women of Roanoke to band together

³⁷ Mary Ritter Beard, *Woman’s Work in Municipalities* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1915).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, x.

³⁹ Eugenie Birch. “From Civic Worker to City Planner,” 475.

⁴⁰ Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 144.

into a permanent organization having as its object the betterment of these and all other conditions pertaining to the public health and the advancement of the prosperity of the city.”⁴¹

The women also promoted themselves as mothers of the young city of Roanoke. In one of their early publications, the women presented Roanoke “as a lusty infant, extended in peaceful repose on an elevated spot overlooking the city.”⁴² Below the illustration was an inscription, “A lusty infant, lying amid almost inexhaustible resources. What should be done for it?” To reinforce the female domain of cleaning Roanoke, they presented Roanoke as an infant that needed to be nurtured by women. They claimed that in order to raise the infant city of Roanoke into a healthy adolescence and adulthood and for it to reach its fullest potential, the women



Figure 2. The “lusty infant” illustration that the WCBC commonly used in their publications. Not only did this image put municipal issues under the umbrella of the women’s control, but the WCBC also used it to present Roanoke as baby that needed to be nurtured in order to reach its fullest potential. Image from Festival Facts and Fancies, November 12, 1907, Virginia Room, Roanoke City Public Library.

⁴¹ *The Roanoke Times*, December 9, 1906.

⁴² *Festival Facts and Fancies*, November 12, 1907 in the Virginia Room, Roanoke City Public Library.

needed to nurture it in similar ways as they nurtured children: keeping it clean, safe, happy, and healthy. The WCBC placed the image prominently in several issues of the publication, and through the “lusty infant” image, the women claimed female duties and maternal instincts as their primary motivation.

The Vision of Roanoke as a “City Beautiful”

Once Cocke and the WCBC realized the public was supportive of their work, the women turned to solutions on a grander scale. As Cocke would later say, the women wanted not only for their children to have sanitary and appropriate school facilities, but also for their children to grow up in a beautiful environment. As she would later say, “A City Beautiful was in [our] minds something worth working for.”⁴³ During the City Beautiful movement, people believed that a city’s organization and beauty could increase the morality and civic virtue of its citizens. Inspired by the White City in the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, City Beautiful designs featured grassy open spaces, organized streets, and buildings with large columns and white edifices. Women like the WCBC members latched onto the City Beautiful movement because it spoke to their desire to make their cities a better place for their families and children. The women could also use a professional male city planner to legitimize their concerns about the urban environment.

Roanoke women were not the first to turn to urban planning to solve public health issues. As historians have argued, sanitary reform in the nineteenth century laid the groundwork for

⁴³ Mrs. Lucian H. Cocke, “The Woman’s Civic Betterment Club of Roanoke,” *The Virginia Realtor*, September 1926, in WCBC File, Virginia Room, Roanoke City Public Library.

urban planning.⁴⁴ Citizens addressing public health issues not only created large-scale solutions for these problems but also inspired their communities toward municipal improvement.⁴⁵ The WCBC built upon this tradition when they publicized the city's problems and worked toward its betterment at the turn of the twentieth century. They eventually found the solution to their problems in the comprehensive city plan, a new urban planning concept that ordered multiple aspects of a city's layout to guide the city's growth "comprehensively." Comprehensive planning gained popularity in 1903 when architect and urban designer Daniel Burnham helped implement L'Enfant's eighteenth-century design for Washington, D.C. Planning historians consider it the first comprehensively planned city in the nation. Only four years later, Roanoke women decided they wanted the same thing for their city.

In order to implement their vision of a City Beautiful in Roanoke, the WCBC would need to hire a city planner. John Nolen came recommended by George Baldwin, a civic leader in Savannah, Georgia, who had hired Nolen to complete a landscape plan for Daffin Park in 1906.⁴⁶ As a well-connected native Georgian, Cocke likely knew Baldwin or others within Savannah's park commission.⁴⁷ A recent graduate from Harvard's School of Landscape Architecture, Nolen had only been commissioned for park plans and landscape architecture projects. The concept of city planning was still in its infancy, but Nolen believed his version of a comprehensive city plan

⁴⁴ Jon A. Peterson, *The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840-1917*, Creating the North American Landscape (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁶ R. Bruce Stephenson, *John Nolen, Landscape Architect and City Planner* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 62-67, 69.

⁴⁷ Kevan Frazier, "Big Plans, Small Cities," 51.

was a revolutionary tool for ordering cities in the twentieth century. By combining plans for parks, transportation, and a civic center, Nolen marketed comprehensive city planning to small but growing cities whose development could still be shaped by a city plan.⁴⁸

Hoping that the City Council would support Nolen's work, the WCBC requested that funding be appropriated in the city budget for Nolen's plan. The city fathers, refusing to devote municipal funds towards a city plan, denied the women's request. In order to pay for the plan, the club members would have to fundraise, themselves.⁴⁹ Undeterred, the WCBC hired Nolen. In April 1907, Nolen arrived in Roanoke to gather data and information for his first comprehensive city plan. He wrote notes and took photographs of the problems plaguing Roanoke: industrial waste piling up in vacant lots downtown, trash littering the banks of the Roanoke River, and poor road conditions that impeded travel. As Nolen wrote to his wife, Barbara, "It is a big job to remodel a city, especially where so much has been done exactly wrong."⁵⁰ After about one week, Nolen returned to his office in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to complete the plan. By August 1907, Nolen mailed Cocke the completed version of the city plan, titled *Remodeling Roanoke*.

In order to pay for Nolen's work, the women conceived the idea of a Great Fall Festival of Southwest Virginia to be held in November 1907. Through a public event like a festival, the WCBC would not only be able to raise funds but also educate Roanoke citizens on the need for a city plan. Cocke began promoting Nolen as the best city planner in the United States, and the WCBC marketed the value of comprehensive city planning.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18; R. Bruce Stephenson, *John Nolen*, 69.

⁴⁹ Cocke, "The Woman's Civic Betterment Club," 36.

⁵⁰ R. Bruce Stephenson, *John Nolen*, 70.

In particular, the WCBC hoped to educate the public on how city planning was not simply a beautification project. Many citizens did not see the need to make Roanoke beautiful. In an article in the *Roanoke Times* that solicited ideas for “What Will Make Greater Roanoke?,” male business leaders focused on economic development as a cure to the city’s problems. Other citizens wrote into the newspaper to “question [the club’s] motives and goals.” Many upper-class men, who had the greatest political and financial influence, did not understand the need to improve urban aesthetics and sanitation.⁵¹



Figure 3. The advertisement poster created by WCBC member Mrs. C.A. (Nettie C.) Howard to advertise the Southwest Virginia Fall Festival. The female figure in the poster was described by a Roanoke Times article as “The Champion of Health and Beauty.” John Nolen kept a glass slide of the poster and probably used it in his promotion of city planning. Image from the John Nolen Papers, Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Collections.

⁵¹ Dotson, *Roanoke*, 227.

To combat these commonly-held beliefs, the WCBC argued that city planning could solve real public health and sanitation problems.⁵² A poster created to advertise the Fall Festival presented women as the protectors of both health and beauty. The poster was created by a member of the Club, Nettie C. Howard, the chairman of the committee on advertising. It was described by the reporter in the *Roanoke Times*:

It represents a female as the Champion of Health and Beauty standing erect with her right arm extended, and bearing in her hand a crown which is held over the city of Roanoke lying before her. It breathes the spirit of wishing to our own beloved Roanoke - "The Magic City" - health and beauty, things so greatly desired for the advantage and advancement of every municipality. The woman's right foot rests upon "Pandora's Box of Diseases" showing that the new movement for civic betterment hopes to crush disease, especially those of an infectious or contagious character, under foot forever.⁵³

Not only would a comprehensive city plan beautify Roanoke, but it would also rid the city of disease. Health and beauty, in fact, were inseparable. Roanoke's typhoid outbreak had occurred only two years prior. Realizing that the threat of disease likely worried Roanoke citizens, the WCBC capitalized on this fear by presenting their work and the city plan as a solution to contagious diseases. More importantly, by linking the goal of health with beauty, the women claimed authority over city planning and public health reform. As the poster illustrated, only women could bestow health and beauty upon Roanoke.

This connection between health and beauty was also echoed in a song written for the WCBC. Sung as the club's anthem, the women used the song to express "What the Civic Betterment Club Desires." As the first stanza says,

"We would have our city cleaner
We would have it healthier;

⁵² Kevan Frazier, "Big Plans, Small Cities," 51.

⁵³ *The Roanoke Times*, November 10, 1907.

We would make of it a better place to live;
We would make it more attractive
To the stranger at our gates;
For we know that it had something it can give.”⁵⁴

Through the song, the club communicated to the public what a comprehensive city plan could accomplish. In fact, the first stanza sums up the WCBC’s objective: to make the city cleaner, healthier, more attractive, and a better place to live.

While men were convinced that the economy could solve Roanoke’s problems, the women pinpointed specific solutions that a comprehensive city plan could provide. If endearing in its early years, Roanoke’s reputation as an unattractive, disease-ridden city was beginning to embarrass city leaders and upper-class residents. It was also beginning to cost them money. Increasingly, potential investors had decided that Roanoke would not be a suitable place to establish a business.⁵⁵ By making Roanoke more beautiful, the women argued, city planning could contribute to the prosperity of the city as a whole. Through the city plan, the WCBC could shape Roanoke into “an object of just pride.” With paved streets, playgrounds for their children, and “bright attractive park(s),” children would grow up strong and healthy, and workers would be happy to call Roanoke home. Rather than trusting solely in economics as men did, the women appealed to upper-class concerns of economic prosperity while also promising tangible improvements in the cityscape for workers and their families.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ “What the Civic Betterment Club Desires” in WCBC file, Virginia Room - Roanoke City Public Library. Full text in Appendix.

⁵⁵ Dotson, *Roanoke*, 218.

⁵⁶ “What the Civic Betterment Club Desires”; For male vs. female perspectives in early urban reform, see Maureen Flanagan, “The City Profitable, the City Livable: Environmental Policy, Gender, and Power in Chicago in the 1910s,” *Journal of Urban History* 22, no. 2 (January 1996): 163-90.

Having communicated the values of city planning and claimed authority over urban reform, the women were nearly ready to make Roanoke a City Beautiful. One more thing remained, however. The WCBC members knew that they would not be successful without the support of men. As historian Alison Isenberg explains, female club members consistently emphasized the “cooperative, reciprocal relationships” between men and women in civic housekeeping and understood the advantages to having men on their side.⁵⁷ The WCBC cemented this reciprocal relationship by establishing a male advisory board, made up of five local businessmen and leaders: Edward Stone, a publisher and prominent businessman; Louis Scholz, an executive in the Virginia Brewing Co.; J. Taylor Gleaves, vice-president of a local brick factory; Robert H. Angell, owner of a manufacturing company and former Republican state delegate; and Lucius Johnson, the president of the Norfolk & Western Railroad. Both Stone and Gleaves’ wives were members of the WCBC. Willie Walker Caldwell invited Stone to serve as a member on a board of businessmen to “consult and assist us in our work.”⁵⁸ The men met once a month and used their connections as businessmen to help the WCBC. For example, Johnson used his authority as president of the Norfolk & Western railroad to provide free transportation for any goods donated for the Fall Festival. Rather than needing advice, the WCBC used male advisors to legitimize their Club to the public and took advantage of the help they could offer them. By partnering with men along the way, they were able to ensure a fuller adoption of their goals and ideals.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America*, 20.

⁵⁸ Letter from Willie Walker Caldwell to Edward Stone, 1907-1908 City Planning Folder, *Edward Stone Papers*, UVA.

⁵⁹ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 227-228.

The Fall Festival

By the fall of 1907, the posters, songs, newspaper coverage and the appointment of a male advisory board had convinced Roanoke citizens that the WCBC was a positive force in the city, even if they still were unsure about the need for a city plan. Perhaps most of all, Roanokers were excited for the Fall Festival, and the newspapers praised the hard work of the WCBC in executing such a grand event for the city.⁶⁰ From November 12 through 23, 1907, the women ran a “carnival of nations” with dozens of booths built and decorated in styles of countries across the world including Turkey, East India, Switzerland, and China. The visitors to the festival meandered through the international booths that were occupied by the “handsome matrons and lovely maidens” of the WCBC, competed in various contests, and attended shows performed by local singers and performers.⁶¹

The women were proud of their heritage as southerners and included a “Dixie” booth among the locales represented at the carnival. Reportedly hundreds of people lined up to see the Dixie booth each night of the festival. The WCBC hoped that the Dixie stall would be a major attraction at the festival and equipped it especially with a modern electric kitchen. Club members in charge of the Dixie booth dressed in hoop skirts and baked southern biscuits for the attendees to enjoy.⁶² The Dixie stall, decorated in dozens of Confederate flags, showcased how important Confederate and southern identity were to the women of the WCBC. Not only did the Dixie booth appeal to festival-goers nostalgia for the Old South, but by equipping it with modern

⁶⁰ For positive newspaper coverage, see *The Roanoke Times*, November 13-24, 1907.

⁶¹ *The Roanoke Times*, November 13, 1907.

⁶² Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 229.

technology, the women pointed to the South's progressive future. Though the WCBC did not post a segregation policy, African Americans were most certainly barred from entry to the festival. Costing twenty-five cents, the event was likely intended only for well-to-do white citizens in Roanoke society.⁶³



Figure 4. The WCBC's carriage in the Floral Parade, which was a major attraction during the Fall Festival in November 1907. Sarah Cocke, Willie Walker Caldwell, and two unidentified members ride in the carriage as two African American men serve as coachmen. Citizens in a Victorian home nearby peek out of an upstairs window to get a better view of the parade. Though Cocke did not want to accept the prize, judges awarded the WCBC's carriage with the "most effective" prize in the carriage category. Image from Historical Society of Western Virginia.

One of the highlights of the festival was a Floral Parade, in which club members decorated carriages and automobiles with paper flowers and paraded through the streets of

⁶³ "No Postponement of Fall Festival," *Evening News*, November 12 1907; 25 cents is equivalent to approximately seven dollars in 2018.

Roanoke. A photo taken at the parade is one of the only existing photos of the festival or the members of the WCBC during a club activity. In the photograph, Sarah Cocke, Willie Walker Caldwell, and two unidentified members ride in a carriage elaborately adorned with paper flowers. Two African American men dressed in formal attire and top hats drive the carriage. Though African Americans were unwelcome to attend the festival, the WCBC permitted them to serve as coachmen, reenacting the racial hierarchy and roles that were in place during slavery. The photograph reveals the racial inequalities cemented into Roanoke society during Jim Crow. African American citizens were allowed to participate in the festivities but only in positions that exemplified their subservience to white society.

The Battle over the Urban Environment

By the festival's end, the women had gained a positive reputation among Roanoke's citizens and raised \$2,000, the equivalent of \$125,000 in 2018. It was more than enough money to pay for John Nolen's work. In fact, the WCBC was able to pay for an additional report by two bacteriologists on Roanoke's sanitation problems.⁶⁴ The WCBC was happy with Nolen's work as they believed it would cement their ideas into Roanoke's future development; as Nolen suggested, Roanoke ought to order its streets, rid public spaces of litter and industrial waste, create parks and a civic center, clean the Roanoke River, and preserve natural areas in the city along the river and on top of Mill Mountain as public land.

⁶⁴ C.E. Emerson and Ezra Whitman, *Sanitary Roanoke: Report to the Committee on civic improvement* (Roanoke, VA: The Stone Printing & Manufacturing Co., 1907).



Figure 5. Industrial waste piled in a vacant lot in downtown Roanoke. Nolen photographed scenes like these during his research trip to Roanoke in 1907. These photographs, which were not included in Nolen's plan, show the problems that the WCBC hoped to address through a city plan. Courtesy of John Nolen Papers, Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Collections.

The time came to present Nolen's plan to City Council. As Cocke said, "With becoming modesty and some ceremony these plans were presented to City Council."⁶⁵ In a final push for male support, they made their appeal to the men's leadership clear: "With joy and pride in our plans, yet as suppliant on bended knee, the Woman's Civic Club presents them to the city . . . we confidently leave our plans for the present in the hands of the Roanoke citizens, sure that among them are men enough, strong men, disinterested men, wise men, who, when the time comes, will

⁶⁵ Cocke, "Woman's Civic Betterment Club," 36.

be ready to line up before us and lead us on to victory.”⁶⁶ Through these exaggerated, public appeals to male expertise and leadership, the WCBC presented themselves as proper ladies worthy of public support.

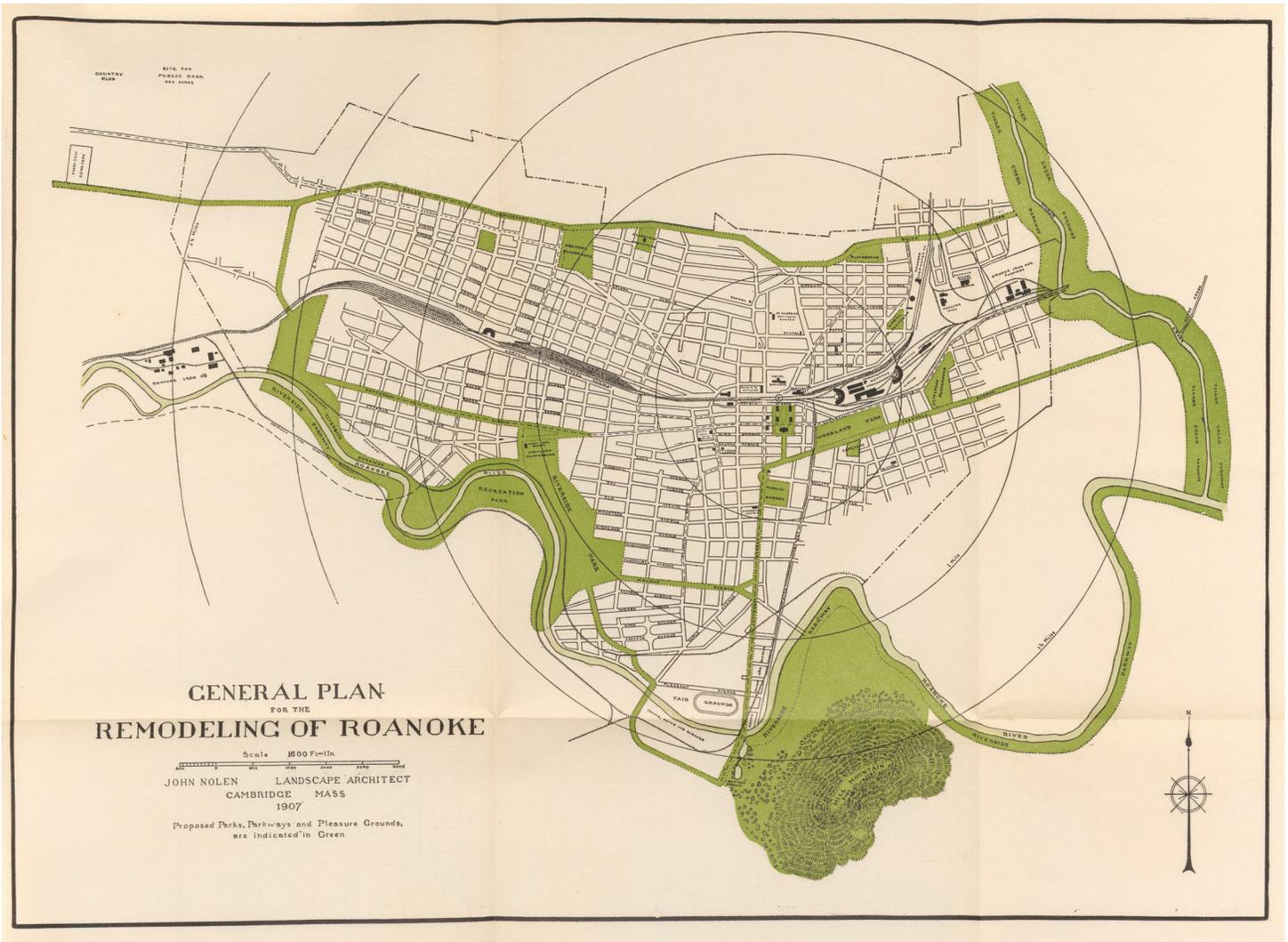


Figure 6. The “General Plan” map created by Nolen for Remodeling Roanoke, 1907. Although the plan included specific written suggestions for Roanoke’s development, this map demonstrates Nolen’s sweeping reform of roads, civic center, and a park system along the Roanoke River and Mill Mountain. Though Nolen had already planned parks and neighborhoods in his career, this was his first attempt at planning all of these aspects in an entire city. Nolen would later say that his work in Roanoke was invaluable to his career as he used this plan to market city planning across the country. Courtesy of John Nolen Papers, Cornell Rare and Manuscript Collections.

⁶⁶ *The Evening News*, Volume 17, Number 11, January 13 1908.

Through the Fall Festival and city plan, the women exerted their influence on the city as women. Though they could not vote and societal expectations required that they remain outside of politics, the women used the means available to them to gain control of the city's development. As men in City Council likely understood, the women's fundraising, publicity, and partnership with a professional planner like Nolen was a power play to control Roanoke's physical and social landscape.

Perhaps in answer to the women's play for power, these men responded with apathy. Nolen's plan, which called for a complete remaking of Roanoke, was never considered. City Council agreed to put \$530,000 worth of bonds, earmarked for basic sewer and road improvements, up for a vote by property owners. However, over the course of years, nothing happened.⁶⁷ *Remodeling Roanoke* was accepted with thanks, filed away, and gradually forgotten. City Council left the women to advocate for Nolen's plans on their own. Not only that, but the club members' husbands decided that their work had gone a little too far. In a speech given a year after the festival, Sarah Cocke said that the women had been forced to rest by their husbands.⁶⁸

Though outwardly respectful and submissive to male city leaders, the women used city planning to exert their influence on matters that they previously had been excluded from. Cocke's private ideas, as revealed in her memoir, illustrate her more independent attitudes about women's power. When her friends asked whether their plans to change the city would make their husbands angry, Cocke expressed confidence and self-reliance in her answer. She said, "They don't even have to know. After we get ourselves organized, then we will recruit them to be on

⁶⁷ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 232-233.

⁶⁸ Text of "Speech given in 1908 (or later) by Sarah Johnson Cocke, née Sarah Johnson Cobb," in WCBC file, Virginia Room - Roanoke City Public Library.

our side. I suspect we all know how to do that.”⁶⁹ Cocke also recounted how the women made their first public appearance before City Council. As she said,

Six of us piled into Minnie Stone’s car and off we went, leading a parade of carriages with more than one hundred fifty women. . . . Mayor Cutchin and the honorable gentlemen were flustered at all the hullabaloo and let us know that the place for women was in the home, attending the children, and that our public appearances should be limited to church. I gave them to understand that we would appear where and when we liked when we had something to say and suggested that we would be in frequent attendance at their meetings until our demands were treated with respect.⁷⁰

Though the women employed ideas of femininity, purity, and deference to justify their movement to the public, Cocke’s writings published after her death show her more honest ideas about the power that women held. As a descendant of club member Mrs. Frank E. Brown later remembered, “My father said they ran the town. He said when they wanted those men to do something, those men being City Council and the city fathers, those women put on their hats, got themselves down there, and went in and just told them what to do. Just like that.”⁷¹

Denied their ability to implement their city-wide vision, the club members used their power as women to influence public opinion and implement their vision for Roanoke piecemeal. In a few years, the women had convinced the city to purchase land for Roanoke’s first park, Elmwood Park.⁷² Acknowledging the club’s work, city leaders allowed the WCBC to meet in the Elmwood mansion, a space that would serve as the club’s headquarters for years to come.

⁶⁹ Cocke and Hollingsworth, *A Woman of Distinction*, 272.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 274-275.

⁷¹ Dot Brown Piedmont, “Excerpts from Interviews for The Hand That Rocked the Cradle Pulled the Strings,” in WCBC File, Virginia Room, Roanoke City Public Library.

⁷² Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 223.

Without funding and approval from the city fathers, Roanoke would never solidify the systemic improvements that were possible under Nolen's plan. Though city planning had been ineffective, the WCBC was eventually able to influence many other areas in Roanoke's development. According to an article by Willie Walker Caldwell published in 1912, the WCBC had achieved numerous accomplishments for the Roanoke community including "new school buildings and additions to old ones; drinking fountains and better sanitary arrangements in all . . . better care and handling of food stuffs; an annual municipal cleaning week; more regular city cleaning; [and] a yard contest," among other achievements. However, the WCBC's crowning accomplishment "won after a three years' fight" was a health board with a chief health officer and health department.⁷³ The same Department of Health reported that the typhoid fever death rate had dropped from 1.2 per 1,000 in 1905 to 0.3 per 1,000 in 1912.⁷⁴ Though the WCBC's efforts in hiring a professional city planner were seemingly fruitless, and the women were politically powerless, the women used their influence across the city to effect real change in Roanoke. Men had shut them out from political participation and had ignored their efforts to implement a city plan. However, with persistence, the WCBC shaped public space in their own interests for Roanoke's benefit.

Conclusion

With society's expectations confining them to private matters, women employed concepts of municipal housekeeping to step into public initiatives. Not only did the WCBC want to

⁷³ "Virginia," Mrs. M. M. (Willie) Caldwell, *The American City* 11, no. 6 (June 1912), 841-842.

⁷⁴ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 237.

improve the city for their children, but they also sought authority over the city's development. Disguised as municipal housekeeping, the Roanoke women pursued city planning to increase women's power within their society. By employing a professional city planner, women engaged in a power play with male city leaders over Roanoke's urban environment. Although their plans to enact a comprehensive city plan in Roanoke were unsuccessful, through persistent efforts and continued public influence, the WCBC transformed the market, schools, streets, and parks of Roanoke in their own interests.

Chapter Two

A City Segregated

John Nolen left Roanoke in 1907 and would return again in 1928 to plan the city a second time. During his absence, Roanoke's white and black communities engaged in an overt and covert war over where African Americans should live. White Roanokers, who disliked Nolen's plan because it advocated improvements for African Americans, saw no need to spend municipal funding on black neighborhoods. Instead, the Roanoke community used the spirit of Nolen's plan and the concept of city planning to implement sweeping reforms in "racial order."

Through Jim Crow and residential segregation laws, Roanoke's city leaders pushed African Americans out of spaces that white residents claimed for themselves. As a city of the New South, civic boosters wanted their city to be known as a progressive and modern municipality. While Northern progressives like Jane Addams and Upton Sinclair sparked urban reforms in large cities like New York and Boston, Southern progressives saw an opportunity for instituting a certain order of their own.⁷⁵ As their Dixie booth at the Fall Festival had shown, the WCBC linked progressive and modern ideas with their southern and Confederate identities. Empowered by the concepts of city planning that the WCBC had brought to Roanoke, city leaders embraced codified residential segregation, designating streets throughout the city as white, black, or mixed. Still active and influential, the WCBC supported the city council's endeavors. In fact, segregation fit well

⁷⁵ William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

with the WCBC's goals. Through making Roanoke a more segregated city, they hoped Roanoke would reach its potential in its appearance, public health, and racial homogeneity. By promoting social and racial order in Roanoke's landscape, the WCBC shaped Roanoke into a different version of a City Beautiful: a City Segregated.

The story of codified segregation in Roanoke is not one of absolute control by white men and women. African Americans in Roanoke claimed real estate along contested territories to protest unequal racial treatment and access to urban resources. Although white men and women certainly had a louder voice, African Americans fought back to secure spaces and establish services for their community. Between Nolen's first and second city plans, white and black Roanokers engaged in a dynamic power play over space in Roanoke that would permanently shape the contours of Roanoke's cityscape.

Racial Context in Roanoke

Prior to the Norfolk & Western railroad's arrival in the Roanoke Valley in 1882, both African Americans and whites lived in two small villages named Big Lick and Gainsborough, separated by a simple set of railroad tracks. Most white families lived on the south side of the railroad tracks in Big Lick. The 1880 census shows that 379 whites and 290 blacks lived in Big Lick, totaling 669 residents. Only a few hundred yards away, African-American families settled on the rolling hills and valleys north of the railroad tracks in Gainsborough. Gainsborough had 67 white residents and 272 black residents, totaling 339 people. Although historical narratives have emphasized the white population

in Roanoke’s early communities, blacks actually outnumbered whites when combining residents from both Big Lick and Gainsborough.⁷⁶

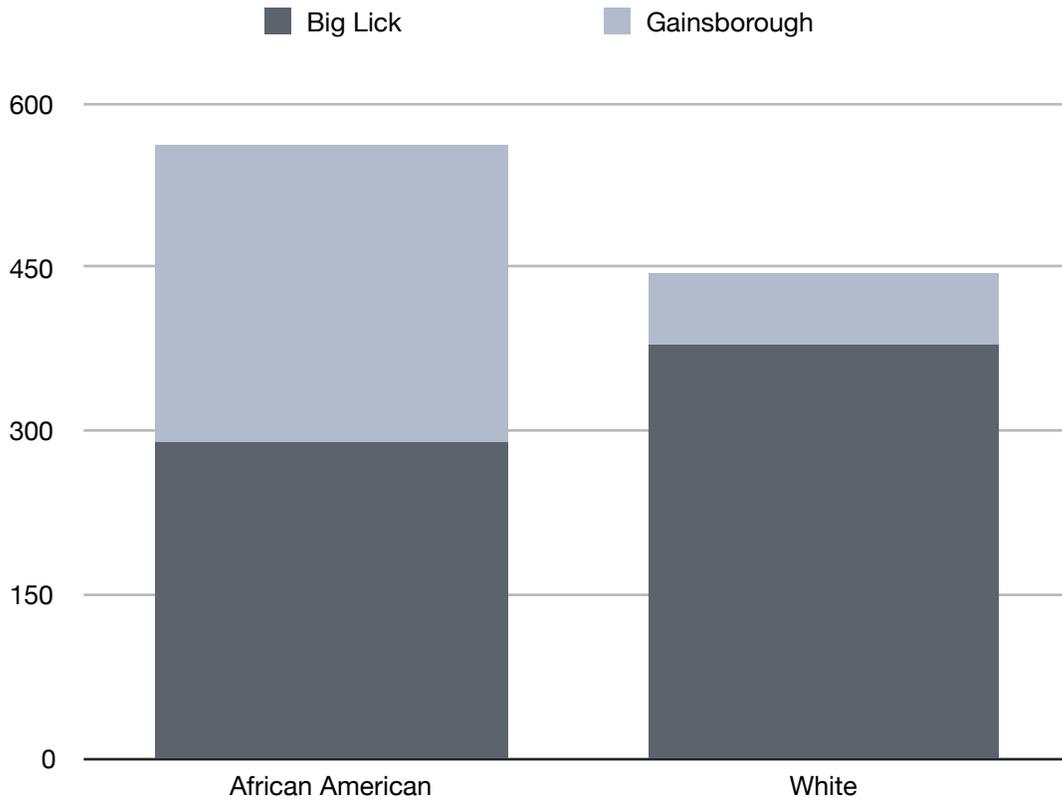


Figure 7. The combined racial breakdown of Big Lick and Gainsborough in 1880. Prior to the arrival of the Norfolk & Western Railroad in 1882, more African Americans lived in the Big Lick and Gainsborough communities than whites.

When the Norfolk & Western Railroad located its headquarters in Big Lick, industrial and population growth catapulted these two communities into a new urban and industrial identity. Young white men from the North arrived to the Roanoke Valley in droves to work in factories and machine shops. Along with these Northern newcomers

⁷⁶ Ann Field Alexander, “Behind the Veil: The Early History of Black Roanoke,” talk at Booker T. Washington Black History Symposium, February 6, 1993, 4.

came African-Americans and poor whites from the countryside of Southwest Virginia.⁷⁷ As Big Lick's population swelled, city leaders applied for a city charter that incorporated Big Lick and Gainsborough into Roanoke's city limits. By incorporating Gainsborough's black community into Roanoke's citizenry, white city leaders and urban boosters exerted political and financial power over black villagers who had enjoyed relative autonomy in a majority black community after the Civil War.

By 1890, Roanoke's population was approximately seventy percent white and thirty percent black. African American men worked as porters, day laborers, and construction workers. Black women also worked, serving in white homes as domestics or as laundresses. Though African Americans throughout the South often lived in the alleys behind their white employers' homes, Roanoke's African American community remained concentrated in the northwest section of Roanoke near Gainsborough (since then shortened to the spelling "Gainsboro").⁷⁸ There in Gainsboro, African Americans attended black churches such as High Street Baptist Church or Fifth Street Presbyterian Church. Some residents opened up businesses to support Roanoke's black community, such as black physician Isaac Burrell. Burrell was one of a few doctors who served black residents and established Southwest Virginia's only black-owned drugstore in Gainsboro.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke*, 18 and 32.

⁷⁸ Ann Field Alexander, "Behind the Veil," 5-9.

⁷⁹ Ann Field Alexander, "Isaac David Burrell," 1, in RCPL-VR, Box 4, Folder 30.

Rapid population growth in Roanoke's community caused tensions to grow between white and black residents. Political parties vied for the votes of Roanoke's newest residents, and white and black men competed for jobs that white men believed they deserved.⁸⁰ Buoyed by newspaper accounts, middle-class white business owners and railroad executives pinned the city's immorality, in particular, gambling, violent crime, and prostitution, on the African-American community. Newspapers and white society agreed that debauchery and crime characterized African-American neighborhoods and businesses.⁸¹ As Edward Ayers notes in *Promise of the New South*, newspapers exaggerated black crime and blamed African-American men for rising crime rates.⁸²

Also contributing to the unfair treatment of African-Americans was a newly-installed police force in Roanoke; as was common practice in southern cities at the time, police frequently charged African-Americans with petty crimes and but turned a blind eye to white citizens practicing the same behavior.⁸³ Unfortunately for black men, the city benefited from a steady stream of able-bodied men in jail; Roanoke used a chain gang,

⁸⁰ Alexander, "Behind the Veil," 9-10.

⁸¹ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke*, 105; Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁸² Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 153.

⁸³ Pippa Holloway, "'A Chicken-Stealer Shall Lose His Vote': Disfranchisement for Larceny in the South, 1874-1890," *The Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 4 (2009): 931-962.

made up of men over sixteen years old who were being held in jail, to work on the city's streets.⁸⁴

By the time that Sarah Cocke arrived in Roanoke in 1903, she entered a city that had experienced a tense history between white and African American citizens. In fact, she might have even heard of "the Roanoke Riot" while living in her home state of Georgia in 1893. The lynching and mob violence, which flung Roanoke into the national spotlight, would alter the way white people reacted to African American crime in Roanoke and across Virginia.⁸⁵

On September 20, 1893, a white woman named Sallie Bishop from the neighboring town of Cloverdale accused an African American man of robbing and physically assaulting her at Roanoke's city market. A black man named Thomas Smith was captured and taken to the city jail for holding, though there was scant evidence that they had caught the correct man. As the morning turned to afternoon, a mob of one to two thousand people "almost entirely composed of lower- and working-class white men" gathered outside of the jail. Rather than sending Smith out of the city to prevent a lynching, the mayor called in a local militia force to contain the crowd. By eight o'clock

⁸⁴ Cephas B. Moomaw and Charles A. McHugh, *Code of the City of Roanoke, Virginia: Containing Constitutional Provisions Relative to Cities and Towns, Charters of the Town of Big Lick, the Town of Roanoke, and the Charters of the City of Roanoke, Various Amendments Thereto, and a Compilation of All Statutory Provisions Relating to Cities and Towns of the Commonwealth, and the General Ordinances of the City* (Union Printing and Manufacturing Company, 1909).

⁸⁵ Ann Field Alexander, "'Like an Evil Wind': The Roanoke Riot of 1893 and the Lynching of Thomas Smith," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 100, no. 2 (1992): 173-206. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/4249275>; in her article, Alexander argues that the Roanoke Riot impacted the way that Virginian cities dealt with lynchings.

that evening, the mob made “a wild rush” for the west side of the building, and in the midst of the attack, the militia fired on the mob. A newspaper reporter estimated probably 150 shots were fired in all, killing eight and wounding thirty-four. During the frenzy, police took Smith out the back of the building. They waited for tensions to calm in a patch of woods by the Roanoke River.⁸⁶

At around three o’clock in the morning, for reasons that remain unclear, police walked Smith back to the jail. As they neared the city, “twelve or fifteen men sprang suddenly from the weeds in a vacant lot, and, with cocked guns and revolvers, demanded the surrender of the prisoner.”⁸⁷ The police surrendered Smith to the mob of men (some suspect that the police colluded with the mob), and they “hurried Smith up Franklin Road and into the Mountain Ave” where they lynched him on a hickory tree at the corner “beneath the electric light.”⁸⁸ By daytime, a crowd had gathered to see the “ghastly fruit.”⁸⁹ A picture was taken that morning that would later be sold as a souvenir, and others snagged bits of Smith’s clothing for the same purpose. The mob eventually burned Smith’s body along the banks of the Roanoke River.

News of the lynching spread across the nation and even across the Atlantic.⁹⁰ Many Northern newspapers praised Mayor Trout for his valiant stand for justice. But most newspapers, as Rand Dotson says, “cited damage done to the city’s reputation as a progressive and booming

⁸⁶ For this paragraph, see *Roanoke Daily Record*, September 21, 1893.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Roanoke Daily Record*, September 21, 1893.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Alexander, “An Evil Wind,” 196.

business center as the most lamentable outcome of the violence.”⁹¹ Even Virginia newspapers, many of which were traditionally supporters of lynchings, found nothing admirable about the Roanoke Riot.⁹² Local newspapers had previously embraced and encouraged mob justice, but the Roanoke Riot of 1893 had been such an embarrassment to the city that reporters began to demand punishment for the perpetrators.⁹³

African Americans reacted to the lynching as well. Ida B. Wells, a black reformer and journalist from Tennessee who had become famous for her outspoken stand against lynching, wrote about the Roanoke Riot. As she argued, “for an offense which would not in any civilized community have brought upon him a punishment greater than a fine of a few dollars, this unfortunate Negro was hung, shot, and burned.”⁹⁴ Though Roanoke did not have a black newspaper at the time, Roanokers published a short piece in the NAACP’s *Crisis* in 1916 arguing that the mob had in fact lynched the wrong man.⁹⁵ The jailer many years later revealed that the “real criminal was arrested” a short time after Smith’s lynching and “was allowed to leave on promising never to return.”⁹⁶ Though some people from the black community praised the mayor’s attempt to protect Smith, others saw the riot as an affront to their existence in Roanoke.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Dotson, *Roanoke*, 140.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 197.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁹⁴ Ida B. Wells as quoted in Dotson, *Roanoke*, 151.

⁹⁵ Roanoke’s black newspaper, *The Roanoke Tribune*, was not published until 1939.

⁹⁶ “The Horizon,” *The Crisis* 12 (October 1916): 300.

⁹⁷ *Savannah Tribune*, September 23, 1893, 2.

Embarrassed, city leaders worked to fight against future lynchings. They were relatively successful; for eleven years, no extralegal hangings occurred in Roanoke.⁹⁸ Though outright violence subsided for a few years, it became clear in 1904 that tensions were merely simmering beneath the surface. When a white woman named Alice Shields accused a black man of entering her home, assaulting her infant daughter, and slitting Shields' throat from ear to ear, white Roanoke citizens turned to violence again. While city leaders argued that Roanokers had moved on from the mob justice of the Roanoke Riot, their actions proved otherwise. Some white Roanokers immediately lashed out at the entire African American community. Black men were beaten on the streets by white citizens, mobs hunted down black residents who spoke out against white supremacy, and a seventy-five men mob in the nearby town of Salem used wire cables to flog a man named Taylor Fields because he had allegedly made “an absurd and dastardly statement in regard to the horrible Shields tragedy.”⁹⁹

Well-to-do Roanokers refrained from brutal physical abuse and instead advocated what they felt was a more sensible solution: segregation. With racial segregation, white residents claimed that they were protecting white women from black men and, in doing so, were decreasing the likelihood for mob violence against African Americans. Upper-class Roanokers argued that segregation abided by progressive ideals of urban order and racial peace. However, beneath the surface of these progressivist claims, white Roanokers could use segregation to exert power over African Americans by delineating exactly

⁹⁸ Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 145 and 152.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

where they could live. By pushing them out of white areas of the city, white residents could instill their supposed racial superiority onto the landscape of Roanoke.

White men and women wrote into the newspapers to argue that blacks ought to be kept completely separate from whites.¹⁰⁰ White women held negative views of African Americans. Though some maintained the facade of progress and friendliness between the races, one woman's suggestions revealed her true beliefs when she stated that "No Negroes Allowed" signs be put up and offenders be shot immediately.¹⁰¹ Though her identity remained anonymous, this woman probably spoke for many others who felt threatened by black crime. Rather than waiting for a black man to commit a crime against a white person and then lynch them after the crime was committed, this woman advocated what she might have felt was a more orderly, but no less violent, approach. Segregation would allow white citizens to identify a black person "encroaching" on white territory and kill them before they hurt anyone. To her, this approach would save white lives. To African Americans, her suggestions would have given white citizens authority to kill a black person for simply walking down a street claimed by white people. By controlling space with violent methods, white citizens hoped to push African Americans completely out of the city.

Roanoke's African American community had suffered for decades under a system of racial inequality and discrimination, and by the turn of the twentieth century, city leaders began to pursue a different way of preventing violence and exerting control over

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 154.

¹⁰¹ *The Roanoke Times*, February 4, 1904.

black residents. They found their answers in Jim Crow, a system that subjugated African Americans beneath white society in nearly every facet of life, from schools and hospitals to street cars and water fountains.¹⁰² By 1906, the Virginia House of Delegates passed a bill that allowed cities across Virginia to implement Jim Crow laws on street cars, as had been in effect in Richmond.¹⁰³ White Roanokers pursued these discriminatory laws, believing that Jim Crow was the progressive and modern solution to their race problems. Further validated by the Supreme Court's ruling of "separate but equal" in Plessy v. Ferguson, Roanokers began to implement segregation with full-force throughout the city.

The WCBC, Sarah Cocke, and the Argument for Segregation

It was into this city that John Nolen stepped in 1907 to create a city plan. Though the WCBC rarely addressed the African American community directly, Jim Crow and systemic racism were deeply ingrained in Roanoke society. For these women, creating a more sanitary and beautiful city meant creating greater divisions between white and African American citizens in Roanoke. Surprisingly, the women of the WCBC steered clear of promoting codified segregation, despite segregation's close ties to city planning and establishing order in the city. Perhaps they believed it was a political matter best left to male city leaders. Although there is not specific evidence as to the women's beliefs

¹⁰² For more on white supremacy's transition from violence to control of land and segregation, see N. D. B Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and John W. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁰³ Evening News, Volume 13, Number 36, 10 February 1906

about racially-defined segregation, the women's views of African Americans can be understood through other sources.

As a "local color" writer, Sarah Cocke left behind more evidence of her views of African Americans than any other club member. Publishing *Bypaths in Dixie* in 1912, Cocke became relatively famous for her stories of "Aunt Phyllis," the black woman who had raised Cocke at her family's home in Georgia.¹⁰⁴ Like many southern children raised during Reconstruction, Cocke recounted fond memories and lessons learned from her "mammy," while at the same time relegating Aunt Phyllis to an inferior status as a black woman. In an era in which Southerners valued "the good old days" before the Civil War, the *Atlanta Constitution* praised Cocke's work in memoriam of the "antebellum darky," since "only those who have come in close contact with [them] can write fully of his complex character."¹⁰⁵

Bypaths in Dixie was a statement about the place of black women in white society before and after the Civil War. Lucian Lamar Knight, reviewing the book, praised the book for its "true to life" depictions of happy slaves who enjoyed a comfortable status in white homes. As he said, *Bypaths in Dixie* "portrays the old Black Mammy as she really was - a privileged character in the Southern home."¹⁰⁶ In fact, Cocke's depiction of Aunt Phyllis was a trope that reinforced the Lost Cause mythos. The "Lost Cause" was a myth created by the Confederacy near the end of the Civil War, in which they argued that the

¹⁰⁴ Sarah Johnson Cocke, *Bypaths in Dixie: Folk Tales of the South* (New York: E.P Dutton, 1912).

¹⁰⁵ *Evening News*, Volume 19, Number 87, 12 April 1909

¹⁰⁶ *Evening News*, Volume 24, Number 139, 11 December 1911

southerners fought the Civil War for states' rights rather than slavery. By depicting the south as a majestic and beautiful place full of happy slaves, Cocke idealized the South and argued that Northerners simply misunderstood the special relationship between slaves and their masters.

Bypaths in Dixie is made up of “negro lore” told through Mammy Phyllis’ voice written in a “negro dialect.” Intended for children, Cocke wrote down the stories told by Mammy Phyllis to entertain them. However, these stories also taught young white children about the “proper” ways to relate to African American women. Aunt Phyllis was not an authority figure, but rather a “strong ally” to the children under their care.¹⁰⁷ As the introduction to the book states, physical punishment was “unnecessary with the wise-old Mammy... there were the birds, beasts and fowls to be invoked in song and story. Thus were the children restrained, guided and taught.”¹⁰⁸ White children were to be under the care of black women but not under their authority.¹⁰⁹ In fact, Cocke’s stories in *Bypaths in Dixie* shows that white children were not respectful of black women, but only through storytelling, were entertained and persuaded to follow a black woman’s instructions.

Throughout Cocke’s writings, Cocke presents Aunt Phyllis as an important person in her life. In a poem printed in the Evening News’ “Civic Betterment” column, Cocke describes her love for each of her mother figures: her mother and Aunt Phyllis.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Cocke, *Bypaths in Dixie*, 21.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰⁹ Jennifer Lynn Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006).

¹¹⁰ *Evening News*, Volume 19, Number 62, 15 March 1909

Interestingly, Cocke ascribes more nurturing qualities to Aunt Phyllis than her mother and goes so far to say that “Rest” is embodied in her mammy. In Cocke's memoir, her fond memories nearly always involve Aunt Phyllis. In some ways, the memoir was a tribute to her childhood when her parents and Aunt Phyllis shaped her into the woman she would become. When Aunt Phyllis passed away, Cocke admitted that she mourned her loss like a family member.

However, this close relationship, referred to by many New South boosters as a sign of their friendly relations between the races, belies Cocke's political beliefs. Despite looking to her mammy as a beloved mother figure, she did not embrace equality between white and black people. Married to a well-known Democratic activist, she favored an educational and property qualification to vote.¹¹¹ Southern states implemented these and various other restrictions on voting during Jim Crow. Some states enacted an expensive poll tax that only wealthy whites could afford. Others required voters to offer a reasonable explanation of part of a state's constitution (the definition of “reasonable” was left to the discretion of white registrars). In any case, the more restrictions that a state was able to pass, the fewer people were able to vote. With only a third of the eligible male population voting in elections in the early twentieth century South, wealthy whites held almost complete control of politics in southern states and pushed African Americans out of almost all political participation.¹¹² Like many white southerners in Jim Crow, Cocke

¹¹¹ *Woman's Who's Who of America: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporary Women of the United States and Canada, 1914-1915*, ed. John William Leonard (New York: American Commonwealth Company, 1914), 189.

¹¹² Edward Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 309; for more on disfranchisement in Virginia's 1902 constitution, see 305-309.

believed that African Americans were inferior to white people and supported their disfranchisement.

Though Sarah Cocke's personal views on segregation are difficult to see, the Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs (VFWC), of which Cocke was vice president, published an explicit position on the matter. The General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), a national organization, had encouraged a friendlier and closer relationship between whites and blacks. At their annual meeting in 1908, the Virginia women resolved that their membership to the national organization be withheld until this resolution was amended by the GFWC. The Virginia Federation staunchly defended the values of segregation on the basis of white supremacy and womanhood. As they stated, the Virginia women were grateful for all of the assistance that the General Federation offered to them, but they "feel very deeply that one thing American womanhood should stand for is the purity of our race - something that is only possible when there is an absolute social separation of the white and negro races."¹¹³ The Virginia women continued:

Therefore, be it resolved that in the light of present conditions in some parts of our country, we feel called upon to use our influence in emphasizing more strongly our belief that the line of social separation between the races must be kept absolutely without a break. And be it resolved, further, that when the by-laws of the General Federation are changed upon this point that the Virginia Federation will be glad to join hands with her sister workers of other states and become part of the national organization. Until such time, the Virginia Federation must stand alone - in weakness perhaps, but firm in the conviction of right and duty.¹¹⁴

The Virginia Federation risked support from their national organization to publicize their stance on segregation. By publishing this statement in Virginia newspapers, the women sought

¹¹³ *Evening News*, Volume 17, Number 115, 15 May 1908

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

support from the white Virginia community at large. In their view, segregation was absolutely necessary to maintaining white supremacy. Appealing to the concepts of Social Darwinism, in which white people believed they were genetically superior to African Americans and all other races, the women argued that eliminating social separation between the races would taint their genetic purity as white people.¹¹⁵ Similar to their efforts to purify and clean the city, these women argued that integration and miscegenation was a matter of genetic pollution that they had to take a stand against.

This resolution, passed by a group of women from across Virginia, does not necessarily implicate Cocke and women in Roanoke. However, Roanoke women were a powerful force within the Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs during this time. In fact, it took place only six months after the Southwest Virginia Fall Festival and the publishing of *Remodeling Roanoke*, in which Roanoke women had been recognized across the state, and even across the country, as progressive workers for public health and urban reform. To acknowledge their accomplishments, the VFWC allowed WCBC Vice President Willie Walker Caldwell to speak at the meeting on "The Elimination of the Public Nuisance," and the entire group sang the Roanoke rally song entitled "What the Civic Betterment Club Desires."¹¹⁶ In addition, the Virginia women elected Sarah Cocke as the Virginia Federation's vice president. The *Evening News* likely published the many details of the meeting because of its close connection with Roanoke women; interestingly, the *Times-Dispatch* in Richmond only said, "the Virginia Federation deemed it best not to unite

¹¹⁵ On genetic pollution and need to maintain "purity" of white race, see Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 300-302, 310-311.

¹¹⁶ "Hear Reports and Elect Officers," *The Times Dispatch*, May 15, 1908.

with the General Federation of Clubs for the present at least,” neglecting to explain that the issue was regarding racial segregation.¹¹⁷ No doubt, when Roanokers read the statement on segregation published in the local newspaper, they would connect it to the WCBC and Sarah Cocks.

While southern women appealed to white supremacy for segregation, others began to use a public health argument to segregate black servants out of white homes. As historian N.D.B. Connolly notes, “Colored maids, nannies, and laundresses, by white people’s general estimation, were especially insidious carriers of tuberculosis and other contagion.”¹¹⁸ Newspapers in Roanoke urged that white citizens consider the health risks of employing black house servants. Arguing that black people were more disease-ridden than white people, they posited that the health of their children was at risk by allowing black people to enter their homes. The article quotes statistics from Maryland that show an increased death rate among African Americans from tuberculosis. As the article states, the death rate of whites from tuberculosis “was 106.5 annually to each 100,000 of population.”¹¹⁹ Among the African Americans in the same area, the article states, “this ratio is more than doubled being 230.2 to every 100,000 of population, and this mortality ratio is believed to be understated rather than overstated.” White citizens used these statistics to naturalize disease amongst African American residents while ignoring the true cause of their disease: the appalling living conditions that African Americans had been enduring for decades.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 32.

¹¹⁹ *Evening News*, Volume 18, Number 78, 1 October 1908.

White residents, believing disease was natural in African Americans due to their genetic inferiority, were unconcerned with improving their living conditions or access to healthcare facilities. While Roanoke had five hospitals, all of them were exclusively for white residents. Black people seeking medical attention at one of these facilities would be turned away. Even much later in 1920, African American leaders would protest the lack of public services available to African Americans.¹²⁰ With insufficient electricity, water, and sewage disposal, abysmal road conditions, and poor transportation, many African Americans still coped with deplorable conditions in their neighborhoods while the city offered these services to the rest of the city. However, based on the accepted belief in white supremacy, the prevalence of black disease, and their desire to prove that Roanoke was not “disease-ridden,” white leaders in Roanoke argued that segregation was necessary. At a meeting of the WCBC in 1909, club members lamented that they could no longer employ “mammies” in white homes because of the health risk that black women posed to their children.¹²¹

As staunch segregationists, Virginia women argued that times were changing. No longer could white and black people have a close relationship as they had experienced in slavery.¹²² Rather, the best solution for the purity of the white race and the health of their children was to separate the races. Through appealing to scientific city planning and sanitary reform, the women of Roanoke could impose both a physical and social order on their city. The concepts of zoning and urban planning gave white citizens new ways to assert their perceived social and racial

¹²⁰ “Colored Citizens of Roanoke, Va. Effectively Protest Against a Movement to Start Segregation,” *New York Age*, May 21, 1921.

¹²¹ *Evening News*, Volume 19, Number 62, 15 March 1909

¹²² *Evening News*, Volume 26, Number 88, 11 October 1912

supremacy.¹²³ In fact, segregation, through professional city planning, accomplished exactly what white society in Roanoke wanted: it “impos[ed] a sense of order on potentially chaotic urban milieus. It assisted in chaperoning and at times exploiting women’s sexual power, apportioning the scarce resources available to city governments, preventing and justifying interracial violence, and turning at times unforgiving land into profitable real estate.”¹²⁴ By employing John Nolen, the WCBC appealed to progressive reform efforts to transform Roanoke’s landscape. Pinpointing the African American section as an especially unattractive place, the women likely hoped that Nolen would help them fix the “negro problem” that they believed was plaguing Roanoke’s cityscape.

City Planning and Segregation

The Woman’s Civic Betterment Club (WCBC) invited John Nolen to Roanoke to gather information for his state-of-the-art comprehensive city plan. Perhaps Cocke and the WCBC chose Nolen because they thought he was especially practiced at dealing with problems in New South cities like industrialization and Jim Crow. In fact, his professional portfolio up to that point had been planning parks and neighborhoods in cities of the New South like Greenville, South Carolina, and Charlotte, North Carolina. He also had worked in Savannah, Georgia, a city of the Old South steeped in southern tradition and culture.

¹²³ N.B.D. Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 43.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Nolen suggested many ways to improve Roanoke. Yet perhaps the most careful criticism Nolen made in his 1907 plan was a call for vast improvements in the African American section of the city. Nolen was shocked to see the appalling living conditions for African Americans.¹²⁵ As unsanitary and ugly as the rest of Roanoke was, the African American neighborhood of “Old Lick” was more so. As he argued, “Beyond the railroad ... I urge the most serious consideration of the present almost intolerable situation.”¹²⁶ The natural topography of that section had originally featured rolling hills, but as Nolen said, “today it is lined and gashed by a system of straight streets, cut out regardless of grades.”¹²⁷ He included many photographs of the roads in Old Lick that show the steep



Figure 8. Photo from Nolen's Remodeling Roanoke, 1907, to illustrate the problems in the African American section of town. In particular, Nolen was especially concerned with the grades of the roads that were not only ineffective but unattractive. Nolen wanted to rework the layout of the streets in that section to incorporate the natural landscape of rolling hills.

¹²⁵ R. Bruce Stephenson, *John Nolen*, 72.

¹²⁶ John Nolen, *Remodeling Roanoke*, 14.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

grades that were prominent in that area of the city - impossible grades for horses and difficult terrain for early automobiles. As Nolen also noted, the homes of African Americans were so derelict that they “hang insecurely on the side hills or rest in the valleys.”¹²⁸

Realizing that white city leaders in Roanoke were unconcerned with issues in the African American section of town, Nolen argued that improving Old Lick would be beneficial for Roanoke as a whole. Nolen committed an entire page to the problem of Old Lick and reserved his most impassioned speech to call for improvements there. “It would scarcely be possible to make a worse disposition of that section than the existing one,” Nolen wrote, “either from the point of view of the public or the present unfortunate occupants. For every reason - economic, sanitary, aesthetic, and humanitarian - active steps should be taken to radically change the character of the city in the Old Lick section.”¹²⁹ However, Nolen’s proposed reforms stood in opposition to Jim Crow sentiment. For southern cities like Roanoke, segregation was a valid and progressive reform, endorsed by the Supreme Court through the judicial doctrine of “separate but equal.”¹³⁰

Despite good intentions, Nolen’s plans to beautify Old Lick and improve African Americans’ living conditions would have likely hurt more than helped. As scholars have shown, twentieth century urban planners’ pursuit of efficiency and reform have often

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ R. Bruce Stephenson, *John Nolen*, 72-73.

been destructive to minority communities.¹³¹ In fact, Harland Bartholomew, a city planner a generation after Nolen, is well known for his support of slum clearance and racial segregation. As planning historian Jeffrey Brown argues, planners like Bartholomew used the creation of freeways as a tool for shaping the city.¹³² Urban planners intentionally used freeways to encourage and discourage development in certain areas of the city. Whether intentionally or not, developers of freeways typically ignored the negative impacts that their plans would have on minority communities. As Brown says, “In some cities, especially in the South, highways were explicitly designed and deployed as physical barriers to separate white neighborhoods from African American neighborhoods.”¹³³ The implementation of these freeways throughout the twentieth century uprooted many African American communities. Though urban planners sought to create better cities, they often did so at the expense of marginalized or poor communities.

Interestingly, Nolen suggested a similar solution for Roanoke’s problems. As he argued, it should be possible to “revise and improve the location of many of the streets, open up at least one broad avenue to the north, connecting agreeably the heart of the city with the beautiful rural country beyond the Salem Turnpike, and set aside for public parks or other suitable use certain areas that are clearly ill-adapted for ordinary building purposes.”¹³⁴ Like Bartholomew, Nolen hoped to create a modern road that allowed

¹³¹ N. D. B Connolly, *A World More Concrete*.

¹³² Jeffrey Brown, “A Tale of Two Visions: Harland Bartholomew, Robert Moses, and the Development of the American Freeway,” *Journal of Planning History*, 4, no. 1 (2005): 3-32.

¹³³ 8-9

¹³⁴ John Nolen, *Remodeling Roanoke*, 14.

people to more easily access certain areas of town. However, Nolen's top-down redevelopment, influenced and funded by white city leaders who wanted to push African Americans away from the city, likely would have used the improvements to uproot African Americans from their homes to an even more distant and less accessible section of town. As Catherine McNeur argues in *Taming Manhattan*, upper class citizens used spatial and environmental control to exert power over and "tame" lower class residents.¹³⁵ Similarly, the renovation of black neighborhoods in Jim Crow Roanoke would not have been used to benefit African Americans, as perhaps John Nolen hoped. Rather, white city leaders and citizens would have used the opportunity to exert their supposed racial superiority onto the urban landscape, further suppressing black citizens.

White Roanokers fought for access to public spaces and main thoroughfares into and out of the city. By hiring a professional city planner like John Nolen, the WCBC and other upper-class white citizens made a move towards controlling more and more of the urban landscape in Roanoke. The fact that one of the main streets in Gainsboro, now called Fifth Street NW, is still impossibly hilly and lacks sidewalks in some places shows why African Americans were allowed to remain there. While white city leaders and the elite sought improvement for the more affluent neighborhoods, primarily in the southwest quadrant, their continued neglect of black spaces made the African American neighborhoods undesirable to white residents. The legacy of these decisions remains implanted on the built environment of Roanoke.

¹³⁵ Catherine McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*.

Codifying Residential Segregation

Nolen's appeals for improvements in the African American neighborhoods ran counter to common beliefs of white Roanokers in the Jim Crow era. Rather than improving the living conditions for African Americans, white Roanokers felt that segregation was a more sensible and affordable solution. However, the reforms that Nolen suggested - ordering Roanoke, making it more beautiful and sanitary - eventually became embodied in residential segregation ordinances.

Over time, citizens rejected Nolen's city plan and instead pursued segregation laws to make Roanoke a City Beautiful. In fact, Roanoke's mayor, Joel H. Cutchin, had been a long-standing supporter of the City Beautiful movement.¹³⁶ When *Remodeling Roanoke* was published, Cutchin called for the city leaders to adopt the plan immediately and establish a way to pay for the improvements. After City Council thwarted efforts to implement Nolen's plan, he and the WCBC searched for other methods to improve Roanoke. Perhaps by adopting an initiative like segregation that seemed vastly more practical and valuable to male city leaders, Roanoke's landscape could become more ordered, sanitary, and beautiful. Not only did segregation seem more practical, but the WCBC had already done the groundwork of educating citizens on the need for urban order and reform. City Beautiful initiatives had failed, but segregation was an idea white citizens could get behind.

Only three years after Nolen published *Remodeling Roanoke*, Cutchin wrote to Baltimore's Mayor J. Barry Mahool to learn more about their proposed segregation

¹³⁶ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 232.

ordinance.¹³⁷ Cutchin had seen an editorial in the *Richmond Dispatch* titled “Can’t Get Over Being Black” that mentioned Baltimore legislation restricting where African Americans could purchase real estate. As Cutchin explained to Mahool, Roanoke leaders wanted to implement segregation policies because “the negroes show a disposition to encroach upon white sections continually.” Cutchin’s expressed goal was to prevent violence in Roanoke over contested territory between white and black citizens. As he argued, “while the better class of whites are powerless, as they seem to think, there is another class which take the law into their own hands and run undesirable people out of their section.”

A week before Christmas in 1910, Baltimore’s “segregation ordinance” became law; it was the first city in the United States to attempt to separate the residential spaces of blacks and whites.¹³⁸ Five months later, on May 13, 1911, the Roanoke Common Council passed its own segregation ordinance.¹³⁹ It read, “It shall be unlawful for any colored person to occupy as a residence or to establish and maintain a place of public assembly, in any house, upon any street or alley between two adjacent streets, on which a greater number of houses are occupied as residences by white people than are occupied as residences by colored people.”¹⁴⁰ The author of the newspaper article publicizing the segregation law then stated, “Another section reverses the order of things as applied to

¹³⁷ Joel H. Cutchin to Barry Mahool, November 5, 1910, Baltimore City Archives

¹³⁸ Gretchen Boger, “The Meaning of Neighborhood in the Modern City: Baltimore’s Residential Segregation Ordinances, 1910—1913,” *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 2 (2009): 246.

¹³⁹ *Evening News*, Volume 24, Number 57, 5 September 1911

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

white people living in territory occupied by colored people.”¹⁴¹ In other words, a street’s “racial identity” would be based on the race of the majority of people who lived on that street. If a street was occupied by only white people, it remained only white; if it was occupied by only black people, it remained black; and if a street had a mixture of white and black residents, it remained mixed.¹⁴²

The ordinance had a provision that exempted house servants or employees from the law so that they could live on the block on which they worked, even if they did not match the racial majority on that block. However, research from a slightly earlier period shows that most African Americans in Roanoke lived in the northwest section of the city instead of alleys or streets located near their workplaces. Perhaps African Americans, uncomfortable with living amongst white residents, preferred to have autonomy outside of their occupations to live in their own community across the railroad tracks.¹⁴³

The segregation ordinance remained a municipal law until 1912, when Virginia State Senator John M. Hart from Roanoke presented a segregation bill before the Virginia Senate.¹⁴⁴ The law would provide the “designation by cities of the commonwealth of segregation sections for the residence of white and colored persons, and providing penalties for violations of the law.” The bill passed only a few weeks later on March 12,

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Naomi Mattos, “Segregation by Custom vs. Segregation by Law,” 4. Virginia Room, Box 4, Folder 18.

¹⁴³ Ann Field Alexander, “Behind the Veil,” 9.

¹⁴⁴ *Evening News*, Volume 25, Number 24, 27 January 1912

1912. That September, Roanoke city leaders adopted an additional segregation ordinance that put into effect the segregation act of the Virginia General Assembly.¹⁴⁵

The state law gave Roanoke the ability to create formal segregation districts, determining exactly which streets black residents could live on. However, the ordinance from 1911 also remained in effect, which held that a street's "racial identity" was based on the race of the majority of people who lived on that street. Through this loophole, African Americans who were shut out from political participation used the mechanisms available to them to assert their agency and claim contested territory as their own.

The Segregation Map and Contested Territory

In March of 1913, the city's Special Committee of Segregation began discussing a segregation map that would designate specific districts for white and black residents.¹⁴⁶ The eight members of the committee were white men from the all quadrants of the city: C.I. Lunsford, insurance agent; John Trout, real estate and insurance broker; Albert D. Lane, engineer; William McDermott, blacksmith; James M. McNelis, saloon owner; George T. Miller, painter; Blair J. Fishburne, businessman; and C.R. Williams, lawyer.¹⁴⁷

At one meeting of the Common Council in which they discussed the Virginia segregation act and the potential map, two unnamed African American men attended the

¹⁴⁵ *Evening News*, Volume 26, Number 71, 21 September 1912

¹⁴⁶ *Evening News*, Volume 27, Number 59, 8 March 1913

¹⁴⁷ Naomi Mattos, Segregation, 6.

meeting to voice their opposition to the ordinance.¹⁴⁸ “Not having time to consider the objections,” the Common Council record explains, “and the hour being late, Mr. Williams moved to adjourn to meet in the council chamber Wednesday, March 12, 1913, at 8 o’clock P.M. to complete the calendar, which motion was adopted by unanimous vote.”¹⁴⁹ The Common Council used the strategy of delay to silence the voices of these African American citizens. Though these men’s names have been left out of the historical record, their presence at the meeting speaks to the African American community’s resistance to Jim Crow legislation and awareness of white city leaders tactics. Perhaps realizing how easily city leaders could quash their political resistance, African Americans sought alternative, nonpolitical methods for fighting against the segregation law.

Eventually, all legal barriers to the creation of the segregation map had been removed, and the Roanoke Common Council approved a segregation map that designated five segregation districts: sections one through four would be for African American residents, and section five, and all areas of the city not included in sections one through four, would be for white residents.¹⁵⁰ After the approval of the segregation map by the Common Council, the *Roanoke Times* published the reactions to the map by citizens. Most white people were pleased with the map. Gilmer Avenue, however, in the Northwest section of Roanoke remained the only “bone of contention.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 10.

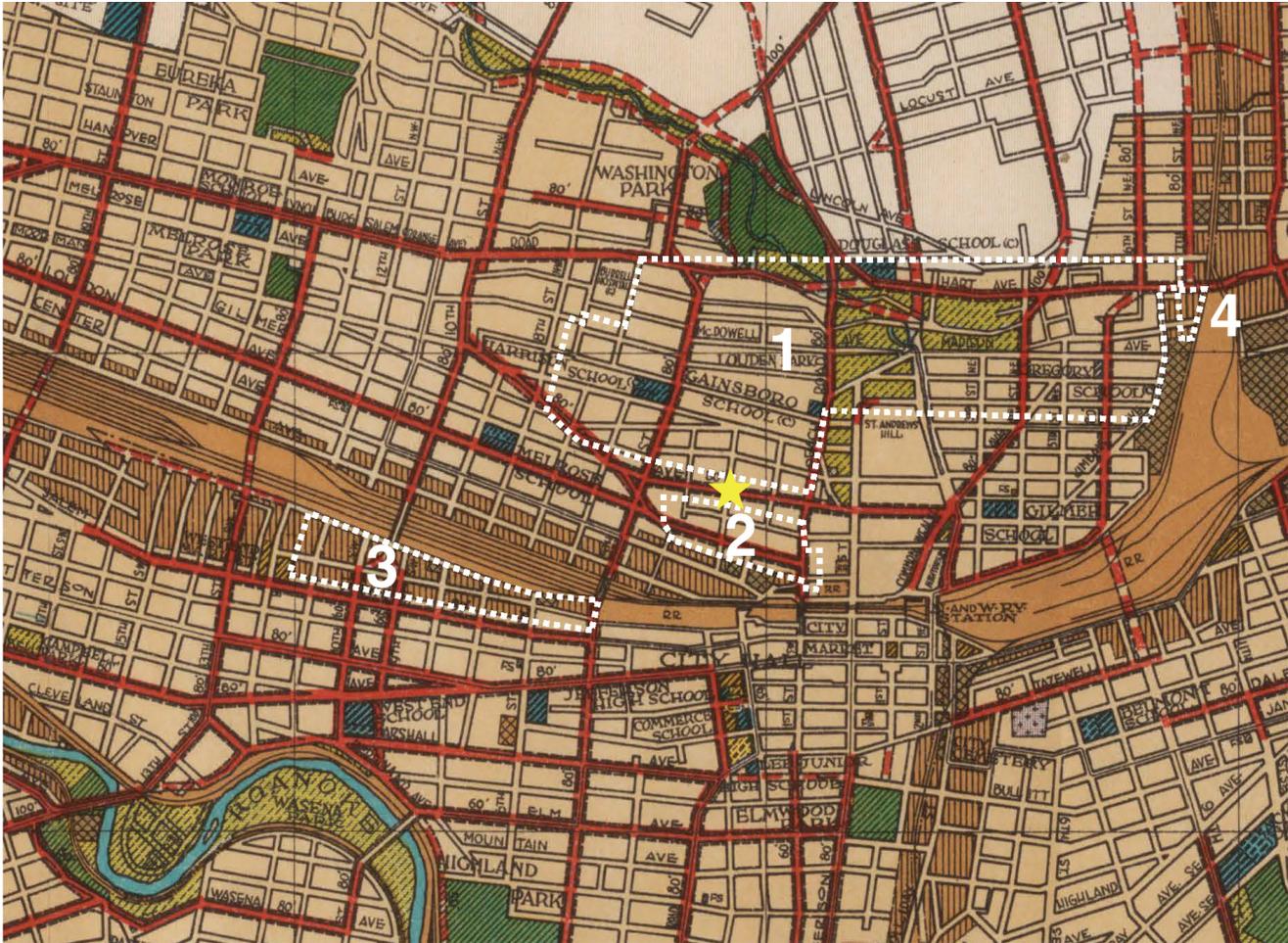


Figure 9. The segregation districts outlined by the Special Committee of Segregation. The four segregation districts are outlined in a white dotted line. The yellow star marks the contested territory between districts 1 and 2 along Gilmer Avenue. Lines superimposed by the author onto an “Existing Conditions” Map from John Nolen’s 1928 plan, John Nolen Papers, Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Collections.

White residents argued that they should maintain control of the main thoroughfares into and out of the city because of the danger that African Americans posed to their wives and children who used those roads to get to school, work, and church.¹⁵² Furthermore, the Northwest citizens argued that they “should take pride in improving, beautifying, and making as desirable as possible, those main thoroughfares into and through the city as it is possible to do,” which they implied would be impossible if

¹⁵² *Evening News*, Volume 26, Number 84, 7 October 1912

African Americans had control of those streets. Through this argument, the white citizens in the northwest quadrant argued that it was in the best interest of the city as a whole to keep Gilmer Avenue white. As they claimed, Roanoke's reputation depended on it.

The battle over Gilmer Avenue was highlighted in a local court case, in which a white resident named C.E. Zeller brought a charge against two African American men for living on a white street. The two men were Columbus Fuqua, an employee of the Norfolk & Western Railway, and J.W. Fowlkes, a manager of the Richmond Beneficial Insurance Company, living at 30 and 34 Gilmer Ave NW, respectively.¹⁵³ Both men were married and had just moved to Gilmer Ave, where they rented homes. Fuqua and Fowlkes were summoned to court to answer these charges and were the first people prosecuted under Roanoke's segregation law. Zeller and Sergeant Alexander Griffin, a police officer, testified against the men that their rental homes were located on a block made up of white residences.¹⁵⁴ For unknown reasons, the court dismissed Fuqua's case but fined Fowlkes \$100. Fowlkes' case was "taken to the higher courts that the legality of the ordinance may be tested."¹⁵⁵ Unfortunately, the eventual outcome of the case remains unknown.

By 1915, white residents had successfully convinced the Segregation Committee to not include Gilmer Avenue in any of the black segregation districts (see Segregation Map above). It looked as if the white residents had won control over Gilmer Avenue through publicity and legal action, neither of which African Americans had access to.

¹⁵³ Mattos, "Segregation," 12.

¹⁵⁴ *Evening News*, Volume 24, Number 58, 6 September 1911

¹⁵⁵ *Evening News*, Volume 24, Number 59, 7 September 1911

However, because the 1911 ordinance was still in effect, African Americans were able to gradually claim Gilmer Avenue as their own. Between 1910 and 1915, Gilmer Avenue transitioned from a white street to having an overwhelming majority of black residents when the segregation map was passed.¹⁵⁶

By examining local directories, tax maps, and GIS data, in-depth research on Gilmer Avenue shows how and when the transition from white to black occurred. In resistance to the segregation districts, African Americans gradually acquired properties along Gilmer Ave NW, starting in the first block in 1910 and stretching to the 400 block by 1915. In fact, Fuqua and Fowlkes, mentioned earlier in the segregation court case, were two households that had contributed to the first block's transition from white to black in 1911. Along with Fuqua and Fowlkes, African American doctors, dentists, railroad workers, pastors, and their families moved onto Gilmer Avenue.

While this movement of black families onto Gilmer Avenue could be interpreted as coincidental or simply necessary because of a shortage of homes for black residents, the story of the 400 block of Gilmer Avenue reveals an intentional plan to claim this contested territory.¹⁵⁷ Many of the people who eventually occupied the 400 block of Gilmer Avenue NW were leaders and activists in the African American community in Roanoke. Dr. Edward R. Dudley, who had lived at 29 Gilmer Avenue in 1911 (across the

¹⁵⁶ Naomi Mattos, "Segregation," 11.

¹⁵⁷ Mattos, a graduate from William and Mary University, completed this project during an internship with John Kern, the Roanoke Regional Director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. Mattos performed exacting research that is incredibly helpful to my study, but her paper largely focuses on the findings of her research rather than interpreting it. She refers to but does not fully engage with discussions of African American agency or contested territory, as I hope to.

street from Fuqua), moved to 405 Gilmer Avenue in the fall of 1914. He was the first black dentist in Roanoke, and for years, practiced alongside only one other black dentist to serve the entire African American community. By 1915, Dudley began the Magic City Building and Loan Association, which was the first savings institution for African Americans in Roanoke. He served on the staff of the Burrell Memorial Hospital, the first and only black hospital in Roanoke for years. He also helped establish a community center for African American girls, among other things. Perhaps most importantly, Dudley was a founding officer for Roanoke's NAACP chapter in 1916. In the 1910s, the NAACP targeted residential segregation as one of its first objectives. By understanding his involvement in community activism, especially with the NAACP, Dudley's move to the 400 block of Gilmer Ave can be understood as an act of resistance to segregation by white city leaders.

That same year, Bradford and Lelia Pentecost moved to 400 Gilmer Avenue from 39 Gilmer Avenue. Bradford was a chef for the Norfolk & Western Railway, and Lelia worked in the home. Though the Pentecosts' activism is less obvious than Dr. Dudley's, they were involved in more subtle work and were closely connected with famous civil rights activists. In fact, the Pentecosts practically raised Oliver W. Hill, Sr., who would later become famous for his arguments in the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Hill considered Roanoke his childhood home and lived with the Pentecosts in Roanoke from 1917 to 1923, and later when he returned to Roanoke to begin his law practice in 1934.

Hill's memories reveal the Pentecosts' daily resistance to racial prejudice.

According to Hill, Mrs. Pentecost was a clever and proud woman. As Hill stated in his autobiography, she "used to take pride in the fact that she had never worked in any white folks' kitchen. In fact she never worked outside her home."¹⁵⁸ She accepted boarders but required that any white boarders were required to treat her with the same respect afforded to white women, namely taking off their hats and referring to her properly as Mrs. Pentecost.¹⁵⁹ Hill said that if a white man refused to do so, "she'd throw him out and slam the door behind him."¹⁶⁰ The Pentecosts also worked with Oscar Micheaux, an early African American filmmaker who used film to challenge racial stereotypes and segregation. Micheaux lived in Roanoke from 1922 to 1924, and while there filmed *House Behind the Cedars* in the Pentecosts' home. Though the film is now considered lost, the film was said to address interracial marriage and the general mistreatment of African Americans in Jim Crow society.¹⁶¹ Unsurprisingly, the Virginia Board of Censorship found the film to be "so objectionable, in fact, as to necessitate its total rejection."¹⁶²

The Dudleys and the Pentecosts were only two of more than a dozen households that moved to the 400 block of Gilmer Avenue in 1915. By that year, African Americans

¹⁵⁸ Oliver W. Hill, as quoted in Mattos, "Segregation," 15.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ "Civil right veteran: Today's battles 'more complicated'," Mike Hudson, *The Roanoke Times and World-News*, January 31, 1993.

¹⁶¹ J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 101.

¹⁶² Ibid.

had claimed Gilmer Avenue, stretching over five blocks. Prior to 1915, the 400 block of Gilmer Avenue was completely occupied by whites. After 1915, when the segregation map was passed that placed Gilmer Avenue between two segregation districts, nineteen African American families moved onto Gilmer Avenue; whites only occupied three of the twenty-two houses. Leaders and activists in the African American community used the 1911 ordinance to claim the 400 block of Gilmer Avenue for black residents. Although white residents were convinced city leaders to give Gilmer Avenue to white residents, African Americans fought back with subtle but effective methods that ultimately drew their community together.

The segregation map and districts remained in effect from 1915 until 1917, when the Supreme Court ruled that residential segregation was unconstitutional in *Buchanan v. Warley*. It seemed like a success for African Americans, and it would give them confidence when addressing another attempt by city leaders to implement segregation a few years later. In 1921, City Commissioner Robert H. Angell, who had served on the Advisory Committee for the WCBC in 1907, submitted a resolution for “white citizens to refrain from selling to colored citizens for residential purposes, and . . . colored citizens to refrain from buying property in such sections even through it be offered them.”¹⁶³ This resolution, also known as a restrictive covenant, was city leaders’ method of working around residential segregation laws that had been ruled unconstitutional.

¹⁶³ “Colored Citizens of Roanoke, Va, Effectively Protest Against a Movement to Start Segregation,” *New York Age*, May 21, 1921.

Realizing how restrictive covenants threatened their community, African American citizens attended the meeting held in the city's Municipal Building. Led by Rev. L. L. Downing, an important leader in the African American community, they appealed to the Supreme Court's ruling in *Buchanan v. Warley* and said that they felt compelled to defend their rights for both themselves and their posterity. "So strongly did the delegation present their objections to the Commission," the newspaper article said, "that the resolution embodying the proposed action was not even presented." Through these outspoken methods, African Americans staved off restrictive covenants, at least for a time. Unfortunately, new subdivisions in the southern part of the city included restrictions on who could purchase them, including not only African Americans but also Lebanese, Greeks, Italians, and Jews. Despite its unlawfulness, white city leaders continued to search for ways to push African Americans out of white neighborhoods.¹⁶⁴

Conclusion

When John Nolen returned to Roanoke in 1928, Roanoke's segregation had become firmly cemented onto Roanoke's landscape. Edward Stone, a civic booster who led the initiative for a second Nolen city plan, pointed to Roanoke's progressiveness for its race relations. While praising Roanoke's cosmopolitan citizenship, he qualified that "the eighteen percent of the population which are colored citizens are well segregated and a friendly feeling exists between the races."¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Matt Chittum, "When segregation ruled the streets," *The Roanoke Times*, August 13, 2005.

¹⁶⁵ Edward Stone Papers, Box 107, City Planning Folder

Nolen probably noticed that very few of his suggestions from 1907 had been implemented. Instead, he was likely stunned to see the lasting effects of Jim Crow and racial residential segregation that had occurred in his absence. Today, Roanoke remains one of the most segregated cities in the country, not only by race but also by class.¹⁶⁶ Though Roanoke's city limits have expanded, with wealthy whites moving south of the city into Southwest Roanoke County, and African Americans branching further out into the Northwest section, the bones of the original segregation map are still imprinted onto the Roanoke landscape in 2018. Current residents are often surprised to hear that Roanoke was one of the first comprehensively planned cities in the country, but many would be less surprised to hear it was also one of the first residentially segregated cities in the country. Rather than being left with beautifully landscaped avenues and pristine public spaces as City Beautiful proponents hoped for, Roanoke citizens have instead inherited a legacy of racial segregation and inequality.

¹⁶⁶ Matt Chittum and Sarah Gregory, "Decades of inequality and lack of opportunity have generational cost in Roanoke," *The Roanoke Times*, May 7, 2017.

Chapter Three

A City Planned

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, thousands of cities across the country commissioned comprehensive plans from a new generation of urban planning professionals. Roanoke, which had the distinction of obtaining one of earliest comprehensive city plans, had more than doubled in population since 1900 and had grown almost as significantly in land area.¹⁶⁷ By the mid-1920s, *Remodeling Roanoke* had become nearly obsolete.

With the rising tide of city planning across the United States, Roanoke's city leaders eventually realized that they did need a city plan, after all. Edward Stone, a longtime civic booster and prominent businessman, began reviving efforts to plan Roanoke. By 1926, Roanoke's mayor appointed a City Planning Commission to oversee the creation and adoption of a new city plan. After some debate and much delay, the commission hired John Nolen to plan the city a second time.

Nolen's second plan for Roanoke was titled *Comprehensive City Plan: Roanoke, Virginia, 1928*. The negotiation between men and women during the 1928 plan shows how power dynamics in Roanoke had and had not changed since the first Nolen plan. As men sought to place city planning under male control, women exerted their influence in subtle ways. In addition to shifting power dynamics, a close examination of the 1928 plan reveals the ways in which Roanoke's citizens, white and black, male and female, battled for control over Roanoke's

¹⁶⁷ "Population of Virginia - 1900," and "Population of Virginia -1920," [VirginiaPlaces.org](http://www.virginiaplaces.org), from Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, *Historical, Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: The United States, 1790-1970* (Ann Arbor, MI: ICPSR, 2005), accessed April 22, 2018, <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1900numbers.html> and <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/pop1920numbers.html>.

cityscape during Nolen's absence. Comparing Nolen's 1907 and 1928 plan elucidates citizens' victories and defeats as they shaped Roanoke from below.

Men Claim City Planning

Though women had traditionally led civic improvement initiatives in Roanoke, by the mid-1920s, men began claiming city planning as a male-driven effort. A man named Edward Stone used his power and influence as a man to push for municipal improvements. Stone was one of Roanoke's most admired businessmen and a prominent member of Roanoke's upper-class. Though Stone only had an elementary school education, he was the owner of Stone Printing and Manufacturing Company, which had become the largest and most modern printing establishment in the South. In addition to Stone's business enterprises, he was also an avid civic booster. He served on the WCBC's male advisory board in 1907 and printed *Remodeling Roanoke*. Stone's wife, Minnie, compiled recipes from WCBC members into *Roanoke Cook Book*, which Stone printed and the women sold as part of their fundraiser during the Fall Festival.¹⁶⁸ By 1926, Stone was the president of the Chamber of Commerce and highly influential in municipal politics.¹⁶⁹

As a man, Stone held the power required to catalyze a second city plan. Being well-acquainted with the WCBC's failed efforts in implementing *Remodeling Roanoke*, Stone determined that things would be different this time. With his connections to men in both business and politics, Stone could work closely with city officials to ensure the adoption of the city plan.

¹⁶⁸ The Woman's Civic Betterment Club, *The Roanoke Cook Book: Favorite Recipes by Some of Roanoke's Good Housekeepers*, compiled by Mrs. Albert A. Stone (Roanoke: Stone Printing & Mfg. Co, 1907).

¹⁶⁹ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 178.

In December 1925, Stone contacted Nolen and asked him to return to Roanoke to plan it a second time.¹⁷⁰ Anticipating Nolen's hesitancy because so little had been done with his first plan, Stone explained that he was hoping to obtain official support from the city government.

Excited with the chance to replan Roanoke, Nolen hoped to cement his legacy as an urban planner. In fact, Nolen was nearing the end of his active planning career and hoped to see a plan implemented in Roanoke, the city that he credited with catalyzing his urban planning career.¹⁷¹ In the midst of this, however, Nolen's practice was struggling. He had completed dozens of commissions in Florida, but widespread land speculation and a hurricane devastated the real estate market. In St. Petersburg, Florida from 1923 to 1927, the city's bonded debt skyrocketed from \$3.8 million to \$23.7 million, with six percent interest.¹⁷² With municipal debt piling up, many of Nolen's invoices remained unpaid.¹⁷³

After several months, Stone did as he had promised and successfully convinced city leaders to consider a city plan. Perhaps more importantly, Stone also asked them to create a government-sanctioned body that would ensure the development and implementation of the plan. As both Stone and Nolen knew, this was one of the first steps necessary for securing a city plan that could be implemented with the authority and sanction of the city government. As a man, Stone was able to achieve in less than a year what the WCBC had been working towards for decades: a partnership with the male-led city government. In August 1926, Mayor Blair Fishburn

¹⁷⁰ Edward Stone to John Nolen, December 7, 1925, in John Nolen Papers, Box 33, Folder 11 (Roanoke, VA Dec 1925-Dec 1926).

¹⁷¹ R. Bruce Stephenson, *John Nolen*, 79.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 205.

appointed five members to the City Planning Commission: Edward Stone, Dr. George B. Lawson, B.N. Eubank, Shelburne C. Spindle, and Mrs. Sarah Cocke.

Women Contest Male Authority over City Planning

Sarah Cocke's appointment to the City Planning Commission was appropriate. As citizens likely knew, Cocke and other women had laid the groundwork for city planning in Roanoke. Since 1907, women had remained active in Roanoke's public affairs and development. After World War I, the Woman's Civic Betterment Club shortened its name to simply "The Woman's Club of Roanoke." According to Dotson, the Woman's Club was a "vastly less public organization, devoted primarily to 'civic art,' domestic education, current events classes, gardening, and philanthropy."¹⁷⁴ Though it appears on the surface that the Woman's Club was more private and further removed from civic improvement work, the story of Nolen's 1928 city plan reveals the women's subtle yet influential work in shaping Roanoke.

No longer the sole advocates of city planning, Roanoke women continued to exert their influence, both publicly and privately, on Roanoke's development. As the sole female member of the commission, Cocke, now a grandmother and sixty-two years of age, used her past leadership in city planning to influence the future plans for Roanoke. A month after her appointment to the City Planning Commission, Cocke published an article in the *Virginia Realtor* on the history of the Woman's Civic Betterment Club.¹⁷⁵ Through the article, Cocke laid claim to the city planning movement in Roanoke and even throughout the country. Timed as it was with the creation of a

¹⁷⁴ Rand Dotson, *Roanoke*, 237.

¹⁷⁵ Mrs. Lucian H. Cocke, "The Woman's Civic Betterment Club of Roanoke," *The Virginia Realtor*, September 1926.

City Planning Commission, Cocke used the opportunity to remind people of the work women had done in Roanoke. Although men were now in charge, Cocke argued that women had laid the groundwork.

Though her language remained polite and controlled, Cocke did not refrain from expressing her disappointment about the first plan's lack of municipal support. As she argued, the implementation of a city plan was long overdue. Cocke said, "It has been the source of sincere regret that more active work has not been done looking forward to carrying out the plans thus presented."¹⁷⁶ She placed the blame for this delay squarely on the shoulders of the male-led City Council. Rather than simply lamenting the past, Cocke used this disappointment to fuel her insistence for a second city plan to guide the development of Roanoke. As Cocke argued,

"Today city planning is becoming a part and parcel of the development of all progressive communities in this country, and the women of Roanoke feel with some degree of pride that they were able to make a contribution towards the development of ideas which have now been accepted as a necessary element in civic work, and have made their contribution to the growth of the tiny acorn which has grown into the spreading oak - a city of health, prosperity and good cheer. It, however, needs the finishing touch of the Nolen plans to carry it further forward in its civic development, and this we believe is the judgment of our public spirited and progressive citizenship. I sometimes wonder if the women will be too big or too timid to say, 'I told you so.'"¹⁷⁷

By showing the WCBC's integral role in city planning and the lost potential of the 1907 plans, Cocke concluded her piece with the strongest statement: that the women of the WCBC were ahead of the rest of the city and the rest of the nation in recognizing the value of city planning. Given a mouthpiece as a current member of the City Planning Commission, Cocke used her authority as a woman to claim ownership over space in Roanoke.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

Though Cocke was given official authority as a member on the City Planning Commission, other women exerted their more private influence and persuasion. One woman, Ida S. Bane, credited herself in a private letter to John Nolen with playing a role in getting a woman on the City Planning Commission. As she said, “it was I who prompted this Woman’s Club to claim a place on the Commission and myself [recommended] Mrs. Cocke, and went to the Mayor.”¹⁷⁸ While Bane was never in as powerful a position as Sarah Cocke, she did have relationships with male city leaders that she used to her advantage. As the sister of Edward Stone and sister-in-law and friend to Mayor Fishburn, Bane “claimed a place” on the Commission for the Woman’s Club, nominating their esteemed matriarch to the position.

Cocke, herself, understood the powers of female persuasion like Ida Bane’s. Written on the front cover for her memoir’s manuscript, Cocke wrote a poem about this feminine influence.

A Lady hen, in plumage white.
She croweth not, though, soothly can she talk.
Yea, merrily talk, and that, her sex despite,
Proclaims her, Hail, Cocke of the walk!¹⁷⁹

As the poem states, Cocke believed that her power lay, not in “crowing” but in her ability to persuade as a woman. By “soothly” and “merrily” talking, Cocke wielded power that she believed was suitable for a woman. By using a common colloquial phrase like “cock of the walk,” and personalizing it with her own last name, she identified her persuasive abilities as ones that allow her to be powerful and dominant, “her sex despite.” In fact, by understanding women’s power through quiet persuasion and subtle influence, the impact of women in Roanoke becomes

¹⁷⁸ Mrs. James A. Bane to John Nolen, December 20, 1926, in John Nolen Papers, Box 33, Folder 11 (Roanoke, VA Dec 1925-Dec 1926).

¹⁷⁹ Sarah Johnson Cocke, Manuscript of *From Hoopskirts to Airplanes*, reverse of front cover, in WCBC File, Virginia Room, Roanoke City Public Library.



Figure 10. The primary map for the Comprehensive City Plan: Roanoke, Virginia, 1928, shows the impact of citizens who had shaped Roanoke during Nolen's absence. Courtesy of John Nolen Papers, Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Collections.

more visible. As men professionalized and masculinized city planning, women used the means available to them, both overt and covert, to exert their own power in Roanoke's built environment.

Though perhaps not intentional, Stone's efforts to achieve municipal support usurped control from women over city planning. By taking control of city planning, Stone made city planning more amenable to city officials, but in the process, sidelined women. When men like Edward Stone, John Nolen, and City Council members included women like Cocke in 1928, they

believed themselves to be progressive and inclusive by allowing women to be involved in an issue under the control of the city government. However, women arguably had less control in 1928 than in 1907, no longer leading the efforts for city planning on their own terms. Rather, their concerns about the urban environment and goals for city planning were subjected to the professional, male-dominated sphere of city government and city planning.

The 1928 Plan and Citizens' Impacts in the Urban Environment

Officially published in 1928, Nolen's second city plan for Roanoke embraced a more thorough understanding of the issues that city planning could address. In a seventy-six page report, complete with aerial photographs and colored maps, Nolen included four separate plans within the Comprehensive Plan: a Major Streets and Highways plan, a Parks and Recreation Areas plan, a Regional plan, and a Zone plan.¹⁸⁰ Compared with only forty pages of written material in *Remodeling Roanoke*, Nolen's later plan used greater specificity in his suggestions for Roanoke's improvements. The 1928 plan addressed not only Roanoke's thoroughfares, parks, schools, and public buildings, but also business districts, industry, and zoning. While his earlier plan appeared impractical and focused on aesthetics, Nolen's new plan focused on practical matters. Through emphasizing utilitarian solutions, Nolen appealed to Progressives' desire for scientific expertise accompanied by a white male desire for commercial and industrial development. This specific, scientific, and practical study showed male city leaders that urban planning could make Roanoke a more efficient and profitable city.

¹⁸⁰ John Nolen, *Comprehensive City Plan: Roanoke, Virginia, 1928* (Roanoke, Virginia: Stone Printing and Manufacturing Company, 1928).

Nolen's 1928 plan showed clear improvement from his first comprehensive city plan in 1907. While *Remodeling Roanoke* seemed idealistic and impractical, the second plan outlined more reasonable goals for Roanoke's development. For example, in 1907, Nolen advocated a complete renovation of Roanoke's main streets downtown into broad tree-lined boulevards with wide sidewalks. The 1928 plan instead suggested a general blueprint for future streets and only addressed specific streets and intersections that had significant traffic congestion issues. Rather than overhauling much of Roanoke's cityscape, the 1928 plan allowed for a more flexible and gradual implementation.

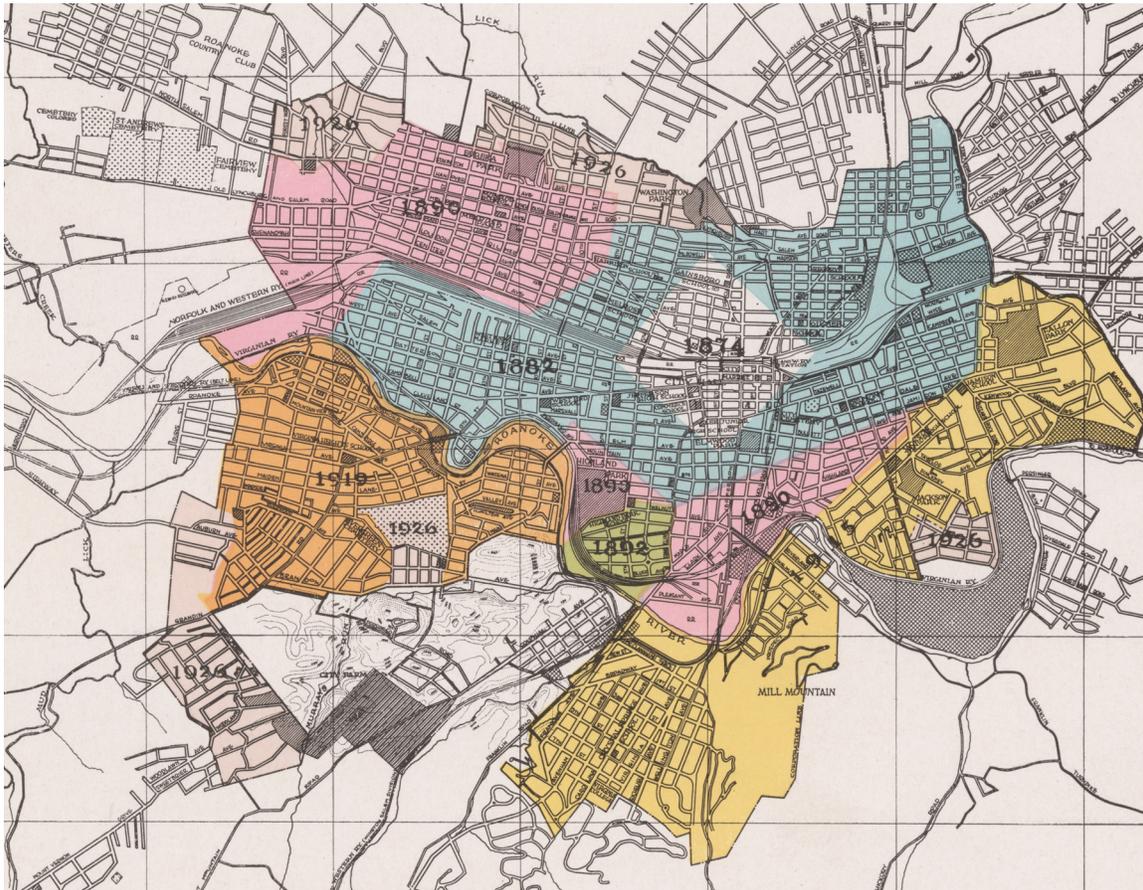


Figure 11. The Annexation Map included in Nolen's 1928 plan, showing the stages in which Roanoke had grown and annexed areas into its city limits over the previous fifty years. Since 1907, the South Roanoke Hills and Morningside (1915, yellow), Wasena and Raleigh Court (1919, orange), and Grandin Road and Melrose (1926, beige) neighborhoods had been annexed into the city limits. The South Roanoke and Grandin Court neighborhoods remain the most affluent in Roanoke today. Courtesy John Nolen Papers, Rare and Manuscript Collections.

The second plan also covered a larger geographic area than the 1907 plan. When Nolen first planned Roanoke, the city limits reached only to the northern banks of the Roanoke River. By 1928, the city had built four main bridges that spanned the river: Memorial Bridge, Wasena Bridge, Franklin Road Bridge, and the Walnut Street Bridge. All of these bridges provided access to new suburbs created on the opposite side of the Roanoke River. Nolen also included a Regional Plan to incorporate neighboring communities into the 1928 plan. In anticipation of continued growth in population and land area, Nolen included a network of small towns that twenty years earlier had been considered distinct communities.

A close examination of the 1928 plan reveals the ways in which women shaped the city between Nolen's first and second plans. Though Nolen's 1907 plan was never adopted, women in the WCBC advocated principles of his plan and worked toward its adoption through smaller initiatives. For example, women like Willie Walker Caldwell constantly advocated the creation of parks in her weekly "Civic Betterment" column in the *Roanoke Times*.¹⁸¹ After years of public advocacy, the city purchased the Terry and Gish properties, which formed Elmwood and Highland Parks, respectively.¹⁸² As Nolen said in his 1928 plan, "too much cannot be said in praise of the efforts of those who have made these [parks] possible."¹⁸³ In addition, Caldwell called for the construction of playgrounds so that Roanoke's children could play and grow into strong adolescents. The city had at least five playgrounds by 1928, all pictured in Nolen's

¹⁸¹ See the WCBC's running column in *The Roanoke Times*, beginning January 13, 1907, and appearing at least weekly through 1912.

¹⁸² Rand Dotson, *Roanoke, Virginia*, 233.

¹⁸³ John Nolen, *Comprehensive City Plan: Roanoke, Virginia, 1928*, 35.

plan.¹⁸⁴ Because the WCBC had been successful implementing parks on their own, Nolen used their work as a spring board for future park development in 1928.



Figure 12. "Municipal Building, Roanoke, Virginia," drawn Louis Ruyl of New York City. Nolen included this drawing in the opening pages of the 1928 city plan. Though the City Beautiful movement had gone out of style by 1928, Nolen and the City Planning Commission likely pointed to the Municipal Building's classical aesthetics as a testimony to Roanoke's progressive and cosmopolitan citizenry. Image from John Nolen, Comprehensive City Plan: Roanoke, Virginia, 1928, page 6.

Not only did the women catalyze the creation of natural areas in the city, their work also sparked municipal development. The city constructed a Municipal Building in 1915, which Nolen's 1907 plan inspired. The building with large columns, a white edifice, and grassy open spaces on each side spoke to City Beautiful designs, which the WCBC had valued so highly. Though the women hardly funded or constructed the Municipal Building, they hired Nolen and

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 41-42.

advocated City Beautiful aesthetics for municipal adoption. Willie Walker Caldwell's daughter, Sarah Caldwell Butler, also established the first free public library in Roanoke in Elmwood Park's mansion.¹⁸⁵

In 1907, Nolen advocated a central civic center in Roanoke's downtown that included these types of municipal buildings. As he argued, Roanoke needed a central civic area of five centrally located buildings like a city hall, library, assembly hall, post office, and courthouse. By 1928, Nolen amended his 1907 "Civic Center" plan to incorporate the new Municipal Building. Although the Municipal Building was located a half mile from the site he had originally proposed, Nolen reframed his suggestions for a civic center to include the existing layout. He suggested an addition onto the Municipal Building and the construction of a post office across the street with a small parking lot between them. Next to these two buildings, Nolen suggested a space for Roanoke city officials to erect a monument. Nolen developed a new conception of a civic center in light of the changes that citizens made in Roanoke during his absence.¹⁸⁶ Though women had been relatively unsuccessful in making Roanoke a City Beautiful, their work eventually shaped the city, dotted with parks, a river greenway, and a City Beautiful-inspired civic center.

African Americans also continued their battle with white citizens over space. As much as Roanokers claimed that African-Americans were separate but equal, segregation subordinated African-Americans beneath the white elite and working class. By 1928, African Americans were

¹⁸⁵ "One Year in Roanoke: 1921," Historical Society of Western Virginia, *The Roanoker*, July 1, 2012, <https://theroanoker.com/interests/history/one-year-in-roanoke-1921/>.

¹⁸⁶ This version of Nolen's plan was implemented and currently functions as the city's municipal offices and courthouses, with a War Memorial featured in precisely the space that Nolen had proposed in 1928.

officially segregated into the Gainsboro neighborhood. There were four general schools for “colored” children in Roanoke: Gainsboro, Gregory, Harrison and Northeast Junior School. On average, the amount of available space on the school grounds, including the building, was 32.3 square feet per child. In comparison, white children could attend both high schools and elementary schools. There were nineteen white schools in total throughout the city, and the average space available per child was 75.2 square feet per child. In addition, Roanoke had dozens of parks available for white children, but only one park for African American children. The Burrell Memorial Hospital, marked with a “C” for “colored” on Nolen’s 1928 map, shows the African American hospital that the black community constructed in 1915. The hospital was named in memory of Dr. Isaac Burrell, an African American doctor in Roanoke who died en route to Washington, D.C. for a routine gall bladder surgery, because medical care was denied to him at Roanoke’s white hospital.¹⁸⁷

Despite their unjust living situation, African-Americans ran for election for city government, protested unequal access to public space, and created a cultural hub for themselves in the Gainsboro district along Henry Street. Local histories from African American residents talk about the lively and bustling activity surrounding the black hotels and restaurants, hospitals, and jazz clubs that served the African-American community in Roanoke for decades.¹⁸⁸ The Dumas Hotel, which now functions as a community center, was a jazz hall where prominent jazz

¹⁸⁷ Ray Cox, “Phone call opens a window on a century of medical service to Roanoke Valley,” *The Roanoke Times*, April 11, 2016, http://www.roanoke.com/news/woym-phone-call-opens-window-on-a-century-of-medical/article_4d497b4c-2b99-5324-a30f-e8943a10ddc1.html

¹⁸⁸ John Davis, “Black Roanoke: Our Story,” The City of Roanoke, <https://www.roanokeva.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1537>.

musicians from across the country performed. Denied lodging at Roanoke's white hotels, the musicians stayed in rooms at the Dumas Hotel for the night.

Although African Americans had unequal access to most of Roanoke's public space, they created their own livelihoods that allowed them to live separate lives across the tracks. Though their lives were fundamentally unequal to white citizens', Roanoke's African American citizens worked through difficult circumstances to give their community doctors, dentists, hospitals, banks, and recreational activities. Clearly African Americans had improved their living situation from 1907, when John Nolen called them the "unfortunate occupants" of the "almost intolerable situation" north of the railroad tracks.¹⁸⁹ Nolen had documented the African American homes with photographs, describing the structures as "ramshackle negro cabins that hang insecurely on the side [of] hills or rest in the valleys."¹⁹⁰

Though Nolen spent significant time calling for improvements for African Americans in 1907, his 1928 reflections seem to recognize the long way that African Americans had come over the past twenty years. He addressed the black community in a brief section titled "Areas for the Colored Population," in which he explained how city planning would be as much of a benefit to black residents as white residents.¹⁹¹ While Nolen pitied African American Roanokers in 1907, he validated their agency by addressing them directly in his 1928 plan. In addition, Nolen strategically interspersed improvements for African Americans throughout the 1928 plan. By focusing mostly on white spaces and including the occasional improvement in the African

¹⁸⁹ John Nolen, *Remodeling Roanoke*, 14.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ John Nolen, *Comprehensive City Plan*, 65.

American neighborhood, Nolen made his recommendations for the black community appear more reasonable to white city leaders. Now more aware of the reality and inequality of race relations in the Jim Crow south, Nolen avoided the combative tone that he had expressed in the 1907 plan and played to city leaders' paternalism toward black residents.

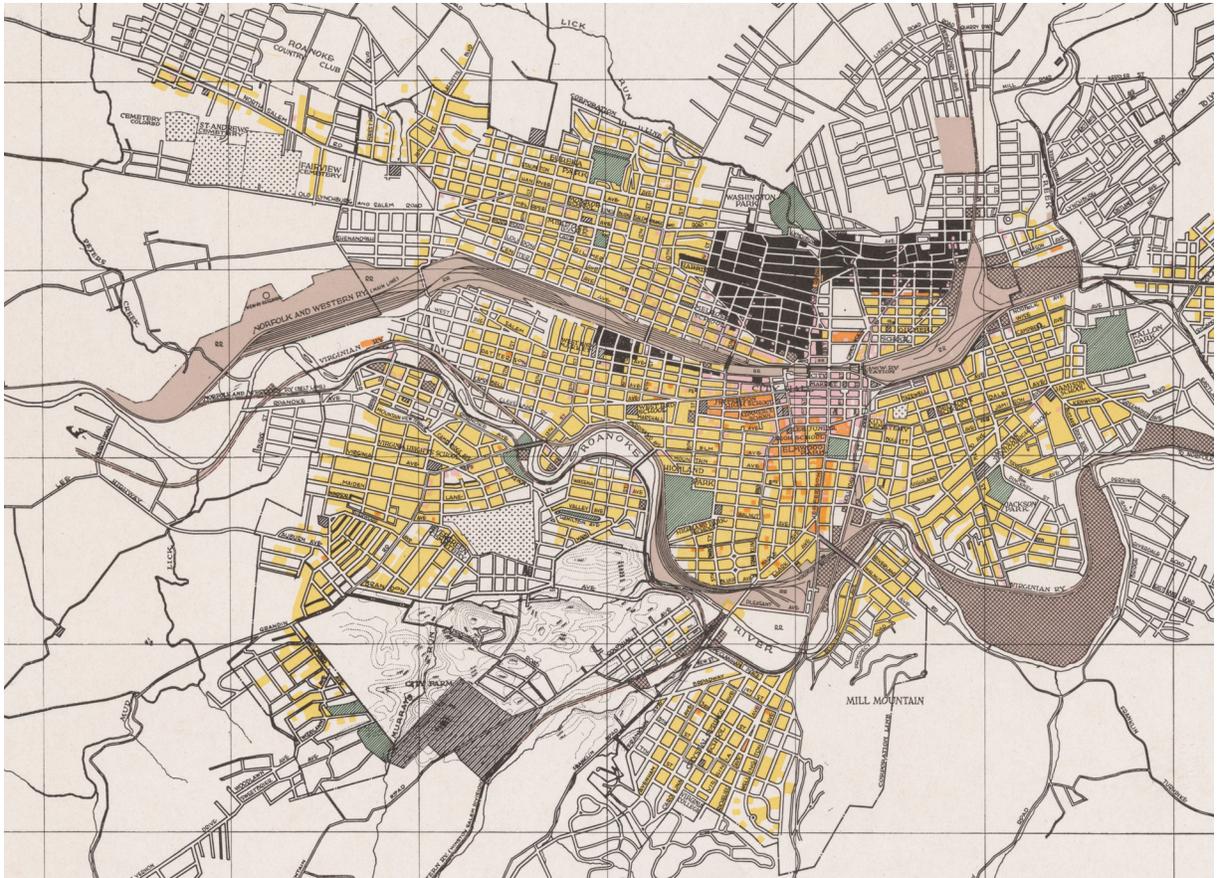


Figure 13. In 1928, John Nolen returned to Roanoke to plan it a second time. This map, which designates areas by land use districts, shows the “Negro Residence” section colored in black. Multiple-family residence is colored in orange, single-family residence in yellow, and business districts in pink. Although residential segregation had been ruled unconstitutional more than a decade earlier, the city was still clearly divided by race. The “Negro Residence” section follows the exact areas as the segregation map from 1915, with the exception of Gilmer Avenue which was gradually claimed by African Americans. Courtesy of John Nolen Papers, Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Collections.

Nolen’s 1928 plan ultimately reflects the effectiveness with which Roanoke’s city leaders had implemented residential segregation during Nolen’s absence. The concept of a racially-defined neighborhood was absent from Nolen’s 1907 plan. However, by 1928, Nolen

included a map with a large swath of streets north of the railroad tracks marked in black, designating the African American residential district. Through zoning residential areas according to race, Nolen's map reflects city leaders' success in imprinting white supremacy onto Roanoke's urban landscape.

Conclusion

Throughout the process of obtaining a second city plan, Roanoke's men and women engaged in a power play over who got to control city planning and urban space. Though women had achieved great strides in civic improvement throughout the previous two decades, they were never able to implement Nolen's 1907 plan. To ensure government adoption of the plan, men usurped control from women and sidelined their concerns. Although men claimed authority over city planning, women remained influential and exerted their own power through subtle methods.

By the time Nolen returned to Roanoke to plan the city a second time, he arrived in a city that had been transformed by citizens. Women had sparked the creation of parks, playgrounds, a civic center, and libraries, and white men and women saw to the segregation of African Americans in the least desirable section of town. Though African Americans were officially segregated by 1928, they shaped their own space and provided needed services for their community. Nolen's 1928 plan bears the marks of citizens shaping their city from below.

Epilogue



Figure 14. Joint meeting of City Council and City Planning Commission to accept the Comprehensive City Plan by John Nolen on May 20, 1929. The City Council members sit at the table in the center and the City Planning Commission sits along the right wall. Mr. Edward Stone is sitting on the right in front of the right map, and Mrs. Sarah Johnson Cocke is third from the right wall. John Nolen's maps, many of which are reprinted in this thesis, line the back wall. Courtesy of the History Museum of Western Virginia.

On May 20, 1929, the City Planning Commission presented Nolen's 1928 Comprehensive Plan to City Council. Photographer George Davis took a photograph to document the occasion. In the photograph, City Council members sit at a long conference table in the center of the room, with large maps created by Nolen's offices displayed in the

background. Sarah Cocke sits on the right side of the room along with Edward Stone and other members of the City Planning Commission. Other women, some secretaries employed in the municipal offices, others female leaders in Roanoke, line the left side of the room.

This was the second time Sarah Cocke had attended such a ceremony. Much had changed since the first ceremony in November 1907. Women's presence had become more accepted, not only in public matters like Cocke's position on the City Planning Commission, but also employed as secretaries and stenographers such as several women in the room. Women had also been given the right to vote. City planning had become widely accepted across the country. Women started the movement for city planning in Roanoke and catalyzed similar movements throughout the country. The Woman's Civic Betterment Club in Roanoke used city planning to claim authority over Roanoke's built environment and increase their power in society. However, over the course of several years, men pushed women out of city planning and usurped control from them. In 1929, just as in 1907, Cocke and women like her literally and figuratively did not have a seat at the table.

African Americans, on the other hand, were not even welcome in the room. They were disfranchised, physically threatened, and blamed for nearly every problem in the city. White society subjugated African Americans beneath them and used city planning to push African Americans out of the city. Determined not to be so easily conquered, African Americans fought back through clandestine methods. Although African Americans in Roanoke were not able to achieve racial equality, they used the power they had available to them to shape their urban space in their own interests. By creating a thriving center of black culture along Henry Street in Roanoke, African Americans fought back against white society to make a city unto themselves.

White men, who at first did not recognize the benefits of city planning, blocked Nolen's 1907 plan and made much of the WCBC's work ineffective. Realizing that city planning initiatives could be used to achieve racial segregation, Roanoke's city government adopted aspects of city planning to confine African Americans to a small, undesirable space in Roanoke. By the 1920s, men realized they could use city planning to control the city. Through professionalizing and masculinizing city planning, men seized control from women. By 1929, white men had solidified their control over the urban environment and claimed all of the seats at the table for themselves.

The story of John Nolen's 1907 and 1928 city plans reveals the dynamic power play between Roanoke citizens that shaped the urban environment. Over the course of two decades, citizens vied for control in shaping Roanoke. Women appealed to their feminine abilities to clean up the city, African Americans quietly purchased properties along contested territories, and eventually men claimed authority over the city with their long-standing political and social clout. Though Nolen planned Roanoke, it was citizens, engaging in this power play, who imprinted Nolen's plans and their urban vision onto Roanoke's landscape.

Historical narratives of cities, especially small cities that have been not been studied extensively by historians, continue to feature a white, masculine, top-down understanding of urban development. For example, one local history book of Roanoke features historic photographs of Roanoke's downtown. It emphasizes buildings like local businesses, industrial factories, early skyscrapers, streets, and landmarks — all the work of white men. The caption beneath a photograph of Elmwood Park passively states that Elmwood was sold to the city in 1911 and housed the city's first library. Though the author had the opportunity to discuss the

WCBC, their persistent efforts to convince the city to purchase the land for park development, and their work of establishing the city's first public library in the Elmwood Mansion, the caption removes people like the WCBC from Roanoke's narrative. By extracting the actors from Elmwood's story, the WCBC and citizens like them disappear from view.

Citizens interested in local history purchase these types of books to teach children about their city's history or to sit on their coffee tables at home for casual reading. After glancing through the photos and captions, readers are left with the impression that cities are built by city leaders, architects, businessmen, and urban planners. Residents of cities across the country see problems within their urban environments but do not realize their power in changing it to meet their own needs. By understanding citizens' agency and influence in a small Appalachian city one hundred years ago, people can be empowered to partake in a grassroots movement that shapes today's cities from below.

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