Where Did West Elmwood Go?

By [Amelia Grabowski](http://rhodetour.org/items/browse?search=&advanced%5B0%5D%5Belement_id%5D=39&advanced%5B0%5D%5Btype%5D=is+exactly&advanced%5B0%5D%5Bterms%5D=Amelia%20Grabowski)

Staring at the endless concrete in the Huntington Expressway Industrial Park, it seems impossible that this was once a vibrant neighborhood. Laughing children ran across neighbors’ yards, caught up in games of hide and seek. The smell of coffee, oranges, and kerosene filled the air. Fruit trees grew everywhere. On a warm day you could hear cicadas sing, and, at night, the frogs chirped. Everybody knew each other.

A close-knit neighborhood, old West Elmwood referred to the community bounded to the east by Mashapaug Pond, to the north by the railroad tracks at Huntington Avenue, and to the west by Niantic Avenue.

Dennis Maynard grew up in West Elmwood in the 1950s: "As a child living in that area it was like Disneyland.[It was just a playground.](http://www.rhodetour.org/items/show/22#.U2PWOMdX7Oc) To this day we always talk about West Elmwood as probably the best place you could grow up. It was a combination of residential, country, a lot of gardens. Not farms, but gardens. Lots of fruit trees. You had the access to the water. Everybody knew each other. Regardless of your race, everybody knew each other. As kids you were in everybody's house."

Today, old West Elmwood is gone.

Providence was one of many American cities drastically altered by so-called “urban renewal” projects in the mid-twentieth century. Supposedly “blighted” and deteriorated neighborhoods were demolished to make way for highways, industrial parks, and other modern urban structures. These changes were supposed to improve cities, but in many cases, they destroyed vibrant communities and negatively altered people’s lives. This is what happened in West Elmwood.

The Providence Redevelopment Agency bulldozed West Elmwood to construct the[Huntington Expressway Industrial Park](http://www.rhodetour.org/items/show/20#.U2PWWMdX7Oc). Studies describing unhealthy and unsafe living conditions in this portion of West Elmwood were used to justify the city’s action.

Knocking down this portion of old West Elmwood forced families to leave both their homes and their community. As a result of implicitly racist practices of banks and lenders, people of color often could not get mortgages to purchase new homes in new suburban developments. “Many neighborhoods, [the government] classified as white,” explained Cliff Montiero, a longtime activist and opponent of urban renewal. “People of color could not get mortgages [to live] in those areas.” For the former residents of West Elmwood, who could not afford to buy a home in desirable neighborhoods outright, that meant they were forced to live in sub-prime housing. ”Many people [in West Elmwood] used to be homeowners. After losing their home ownership in the Mashapaug Pond area, [they] became renters,” Montiero said.

Some West Elmwood homeowners fought to save their homes with the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League. Two hundred people signed a petition. People attended city government meetings, speaking out about the injustice of the urban renewal project and the Providence Redevelopment Agency’s misrepresentation of West Elmwood. Arguing that “urban renewal is Negro removal,” they highlighted the implicit racial discrimination in urban renewal projects, which disproportionately negatively affected colored people.

For five years, the people of West Elmwood fought for their neighborhood, but in the end their struggle failed. Most of the houses in old West Elmwood were knocked down. Over five hundred families were forced to leave. "They came in and tore down the houses, bulldozed the hill," recalled neighborhood resident Ed Hooks. Now, West Elmwood survives only in the memories of the people who once lived there.

**Discussion Questions**Even though the people of old West Elmwood fought to save their neighborhood, most of old West Elmwood was demolished. Why do you think the people of old West Elmwood lost their fight?

If your home or neighborhood were going to be knocked down, what would you want people to remember about it?

Why did many activists and residents feel urban renewal projects were racially discriminatory?

Why do you think projects like the construction of the Huntington Expressway Industrial Park were called “urban renewal”? What does “renewal” mean in this context? Who do you think decided to call projects like the industrial park “renewal” projects?