

# DISCONNECTED



Image courtesy of Google Earth

How highways intentionally displaced and segregated Atlanta

## Disconnected

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SAM BASKIN, creative director

The Interstate System was meant to connect the country, and in many ways it did. It was constructed to improve the economy, strengthen defense, and reduce traffic. However, in many urban areas it was designed to purposefully displace or segregate Black communities. According to The Partnership for Southern Equity, “the construction of the interstates in Atlanta, combined with the application of federal urban renewal dollars, decimated Black and low-income white communities that fell in their paths. Some estimates calculated the displacement at approximately 70,000 people, approximately 95% of whom were Black.”

Planners decided to route interstates and highways through downtown districts for several reasons. One reason was to connect the growing suburbs to downtown jobs, allowing people to easily access work. However, highways were also routed through downtown to demolish low-income and Black neighborhoods. According to a Georgia Department of Transportation report on Georgia’s 1947 highway plan, “To the greatest extent possible, the routes were intended to go through ‘marginal neighborhoods’.”

However, “marginal neighborhoods” were often defined poorly, and the label was often used to target Black neighborhoods. Planners at the time used the term “Urban Renewal” to describe using interstates to demolish areas defined as slums.

One area in particular that was unjustly targeted was the Sweet Auburn neighborhood, a wealthy and thriving predominantly Black neighborhood in downtown Atlanta. John Wesley Dobbs, a leader in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood, gave a speech before the Metropolitan Planning Committee, in which he stated that Auburn Avenue is home to many Black-owned businesses with millions of dollars in assets as well as important cultural institutions. At the end of his statement, Dobbs said “Your proposed plan

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would destroy this development of ours, which represents two generations of sweat and toil. This attempt, ladies and gentlemen, is fundamentally wrong and unsound.”

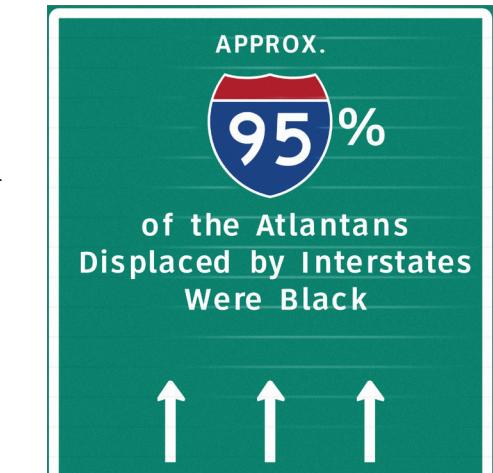
The initial route of the Downtown Connector would have gone through the headquarters of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company on Auburn Avenue, one of the most important institutions in the city’s Black business community during the 20th century.

According to Dr. Calinda Lee, the Vice President of Historical Interpretation and Community Partnerships at the Atlanta History Center, “Not only did the business thrive generally, but it also provided a lot of jobs in the Atlanta area for African-Americans. It provided mid-level and clerical jobs for people who, largely because of discrimination, only had access to blue collar employment.”

After strong political action, the interstate’s route was moved three blocks to the East, instead taking out businesses with less significance. However, the interstate still had a devastating effect on the neighborhood, dividing Auburn Avenue and contributing to its decline.

Many other predominantly Black neighborhoods across Atlanta were targeted with devastating results. Dr. Ronald Bayor, a historian and the author of *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, stated “Highways not only had the intended effect of regulating and confining black residential mobility in the western areas; they also displaced blacks in the downtown section.” The displacement caused by the interstate was often much more harmful than residents simply having to move houses, especially when displacement occurred in poorer neighborhoods.

One key factor is that remuneration for eminent domain only applies to homeowners. In other words, renters have to move out and find a new home without financial assistance. Another factor is the physical separation from the social networks that many people in poor communities rely on. Dr. Lee gave an example. “For people who are more poor, there’s more reliance on social networks. Where maybe the woman who lives two doors down is the person who provides child care for the community because I don’t have the resources to fully participate in a formal



Data from Partnership for Southern Equity

sector for that kind of support. The people at the end of my block might sometimes float me a little bit of food or money when my money runs out for the month. So you have these social networks that are mutually supported in a really fundamental way and when people get displaced, they can’t take those networks with them,” she stated.

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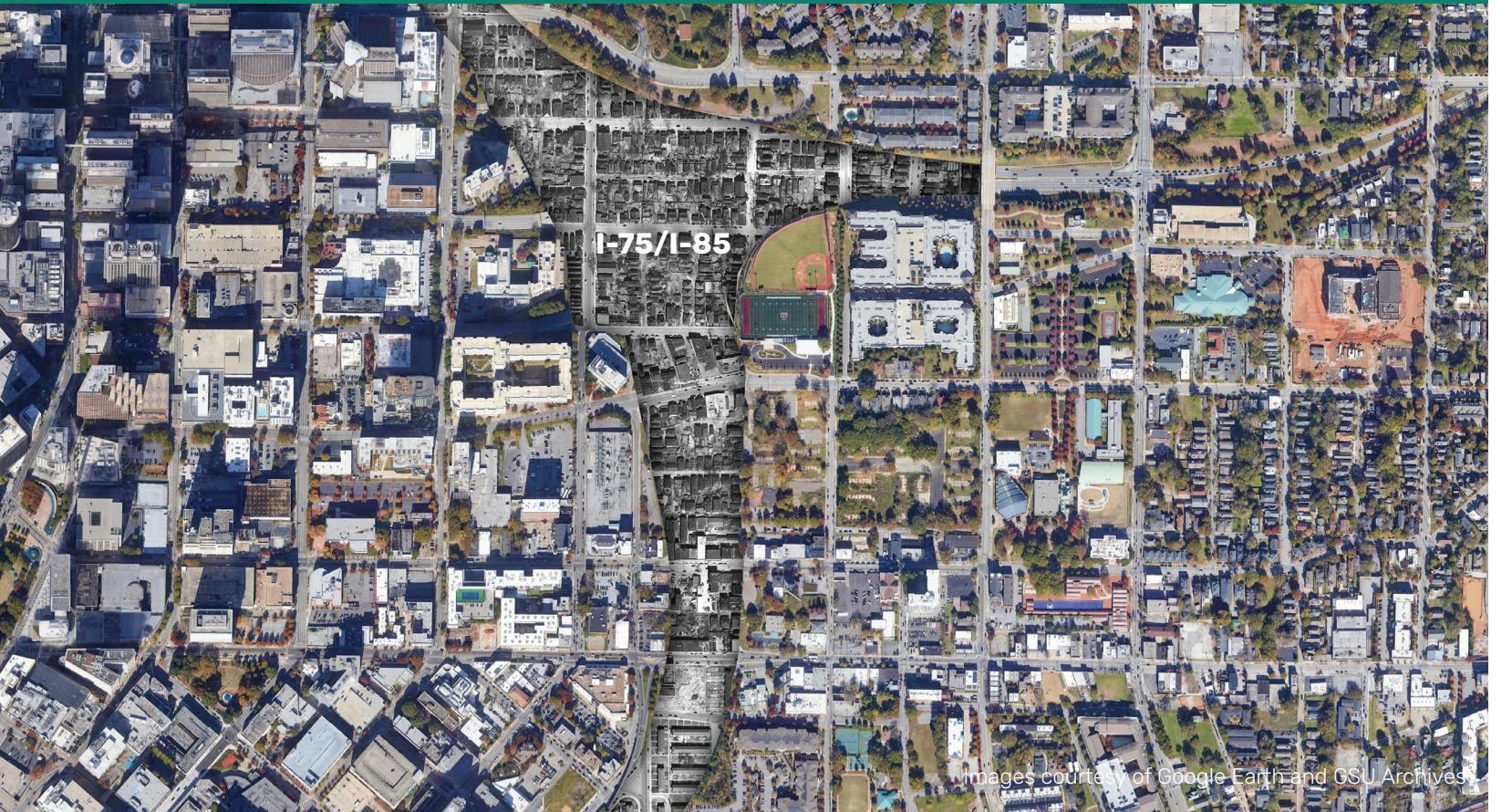
It is important to note that segregation was a very intentional aspect of interstate design. In *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, Bayor wrote “In a 1960 report on the transitional westside neighborhood of Adamsville, the Atlanta Bureau of Planning noted that ‘approximately two to three years ago, there was an ‘understanding’ that the proposed route of the West Expressway [I-20 West] would be the boundary between the White and Negro communities.’” The construction of the highway system was not the first time that roads were used to displace and segregate in Atlanta.

In a less physical sense, names of roads in Atlanta were changed to show the demarcation between white and Black neighborhoods. One notable example is Monroe Avenue and Boulevard,



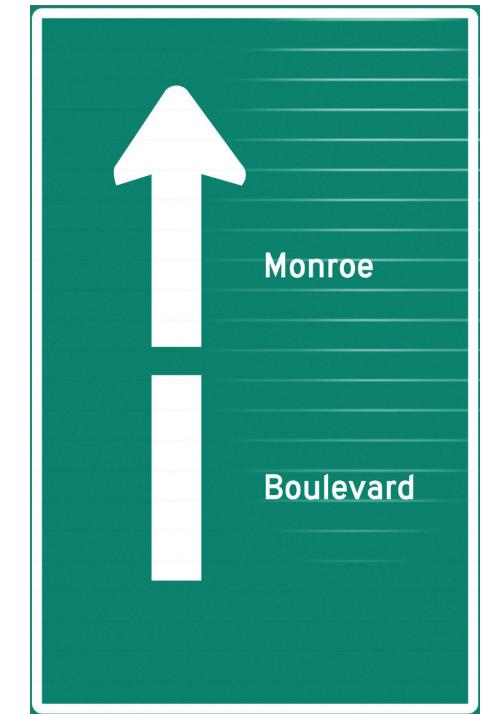


## Downtown and Summerhill Neighborhood Sweet Auburn neighborhood



which changes names after crossing Ponce. This was so that white homeowners could feel like they did not technically live on the same street as Black people.

Additionally, some roads were closed off to prevent movement between white and Black neighborhoods. Baylor wrote “One example of this segregation technique was the dead-ending of Willis Mill Road. In the late 1950s the city and county agreed to cut Willis Mill Road five blocks south of Martin Luther King Jr. Drive (formerly Gordon Road) so that it would be impossible to drive from that street to Cascade Road. Willis Mill begins again north of Cascade.”



A highway had even been proposed for the purpose of segregation prior to the Lochner plan and Interstate System.

“In 1941 and again in 1947, another highway (the West View Parkway) was suggested as a way of stemming black mobility,” Baylor stated. The techniques used to displace and segregate with the interstate system were not new ideas in Atlanta.

Many long term effects of the racially-motivated infrastructure decisions still exist today. In Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta, Baylor wrote “With its downtown deserted at night; its concentrated public housing; its uneven economic development; the distance between jobs and housing for the low income, segregated city neighborhoods . . . Atlanta stands today as the product of decisions substantially based on long-term racial considerations.”

Today, Atlanta is still a very segregated city. According to “Atlanta: Scarcity and Abundance”, “The City of Atlanta is divided by income: high-income households, mostly Whites, live on the north and east sides; low-income households,

primarily Black, live on the south and west sides. It has the highest income inequality of any city in the USA, with a Gini coefficient of 0.57 [19].”

However, there are several projects trying to undo some damage done by the interstate on the city. Two notable examples are the Stitch project and the Midtown Connector Transportation Improvement Project (MCTIP). Both projects plan to cap the interstate, placing a platform over the interstate and reconnecting the two separated sides of the city.

Audrey Leous, the Senior Project Manager at Central Atlanta Progress explains, “[The Stitch project] really is aimed at rebuilding a part of the neighborhood that was ripped apart when the interstate was constructed, so that’s not only restitching together the street network that allows for better connectivity, but really the main goal was creating a neighborhood that can revitalize that particular part of downtown. - Currently you’ve got the area that’s north of the interstate and the south of the interstate and it’s not always seen as a unified area and so this is really meant to catalyze development in that particular part of downtown as well as stitch together the neighborhoods on either side of the interstate.”

The Stitch would cap the Downtown Connector between West Peachtree and Courtland Street. The MCTIP is in earlier stages, but has a similar goal. It plans to cover the Downtown Connector between North Avenue and 10th Street. The tops of each cap would be open for development of green space, parks, or even several buildings. While there are many benefits to these projects, reconnecting the two sides of the city would obviously not undo the full damage of displacement and segregation that has already occurred. Additionally, the projects could end up causing some other buildings to be demolished to make way for the project. Dr. Lee emphasized, “This story of road construction and displacement is not over. The final chapters have not been written. The cap project is really interesting and would help to enliven the midtown area again by connecting the east and west, but even as it seeks to unite those spaces again there are properties that have been targeted for eminent domain.”

However, displacement is still occurring today in modern day Atlanta in many ways other than road construction. One major cause of displacement is the removal of public housing in Atlanta. The

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Atlanta Ranks



in The Nation in Income Inequality

HOPE VI public housing program aimed to reduce concentrations of poverty by providing mixed-income housing, but often ended up demolishing public housing without connecting existing residents to new housing. This action resulted in similar displacement patterns to that of interstate construction.

Gentrification, which goes hand-in-hand with a lack of affordable housing, is another cause

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of displacement. Property values have shot up throughout the city, causing an increase in rent and property taxes which forces out many poorer residents. Today, many people struggle to find affordable housing in Atlanta and are often pushed to the suburbs, particularly to the south of the city. Rental prices tend to be cheaper in those neighborhoods, but there is also less access to jobs and transportation. “If you get displaced south where the rental costs are cheaper, then you also are farther removed from work, and you’re also farther removed from public transportation to get to a job. - Those areas are drawing families, impoverished families in particular. You also end up with areas with school systems that are not as good, and it can lead to a kind of replication of the cycle,” Dr. Lee stated. Displacement is an ongoing problem in Atlanta that did not end when the interstates were completed.

The negative, and often intentional, effects of interstate construction are not unique to Atlanta. Similar scenarios have played out all across the country, and the same is true today for displacement as a result of lack of affordable housing and gentrification. It is important to remember that many injustices of the past still exist in some form today. In 1957, Mayor Ivan Allen coined the phrase “A City Too Busy to Hate,” to describe Atlanta. During the next 10 years, white flight was reaching its peak and planners tried to use I-20 to intentionally segregate Black and white neighborhoods. Even if progress has been made, there is often still work to be done.