

A Historical Overview of Blacks in the Fruit Belt

The Continuing Struggle to Build a Vibrant Community

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Introduction

The story of blacks in the Fruit Belt is a classic tale of how urban policies have destabilized the African American community and robbed low to moderate-income blacks of the wealth producing power of homeownership. Blacks have lived in the Fruit Belt for many years. As early as 1930, a small group clustered in the neighborhood, mainly on the western side of Michigan Avenue. Then, during the 1950s, the population composition of the Fruit Belt started to change dramatically, as large numbers of blacks moved into the community and an even larger number of whites moved out. Those African Americans entering the neighborhood thought they were integrating the Fruit Belt, but in reality they were entering an unstable neighborhood that was *transitioning* from a predominantly white to black community.

Two interactive factors triggered black migration to the Fruit Belt and the neighborhood's transition to a predominantly African American community. First, the building of the Kensington Expressway in 1960 split the Fruit Belt and separated most of it from the lower East Side and devalued property. Moreover, as soon as the mostly German population discovered that an expressway was going to be built through the community, they started to leave the Fruit Belt in droves. Second, during the 1950s, a massive urban renewal project on the lower East Side destroyed about 30 city blocks and decimated the historic center of Black Buffalo. Many of those displaced African Americans, along with black newcomers to the City, settled in the Fruit Belt. Between 1940 and 1970 more than 70,000 African Americans poured into Buffalo, as the number of blacks living in the City soared from about 18,000 to 94,000, an increase of 422%.

The combination of black migration to Buffalo and black displacement from the lower East Side led to a dramatic increase in the number of African Americans living in the Fruit Belt. During the fifties, the number of African Americans living in the Fruit Belt rocketed from less than 400 to 4,284. In less than a decade, African Americans jumped from an insignificant minority to 35% of the total population. This dramatic population growth continued during the sixties, as the number of blacks living in the Fruit Belt rose to and peaked at 9,125 in 1970. In that year, blacks comprised 81% of the population.

The succession process was completed. The Fruit Belt was now a predominately African American community. The rising tide of black population growth in the Fruit Belt, thus, reached its zenith in 1970. Thereafter, especially during the seventies, the number of blacks residing in the Fruit Belt rapidly declined. During the seventies, the population lost was remarkable. Between 1970 and 1980, the number of blacks living in the Fruit Belt plunged by almost 5,000 residents, a staggering population lost of 54% in just one decade.

This is a stunning statistic. The population declined continued over the next two decades, albeit at a lower rate. By 2000, less than 3000 (2,949) blacks lived in the Fruit Belt. Moreover, the Fruit Belt population not only became smaller, it also became poorer. Between 1970 and 2000, the proportion of Fruit Belt residents living in poverty increased from 28% to 45%, an increment of 61 percent.

The Forces of Decline

To gain insight into the forces that spawned the spectacular loss of population in the Fruit Belt, it is necessary to examine the City's approach to neighborhood development. During the sixties, the Fruit Belt neighborhood was severely impacted by the City's aggressive demolition campaign and the Medical Corridor's institution expansion strategy. The *triggering device* was the Fruit Belt's inclusion in the City's *Model Neighborhood Area* (MNA), a component of the Urban Renewal Program. In retrospect, the Fruit Belt *MNA* was the opening chapter of a story called, *Two Tales of the Same Neighborhood –The Fruit Belt Residential Community and the Fruit Belt Medical Corridor*. The Model Neighborhood Area divided the Fruit Belt into two components: Oak Street (the Medical Corridor) and the Fruit Belt Residential Community. The western boundary of the *Oak Street section* extended from Main and Best Street on the north to Goodell Street on the south. The southern boundary extended from Main and Goodell to Michigan Avenue, while Michigan Avenue to Best Street formed the eastern boundary. Best Street formed the northern boundary of the *Oak Street section* (blue boundaries on the map). The boundaries of the *Fruit Belt Residential Community* are outlined in light blue on the map below.

The *MNA* argued that improved housing was the most critical component of the regeneration of the Fruit Belt. The main barrier to good housing was the omnipresent dilapidated housing units, which needed to be replaced before new housing units could be constructed. Back then, the conventional wisdom was that housing rehabilitation in distressed neighborhoods was too costly. Therefore, new builds were the only feasible way to produce good housing in the Fruit Belt. Using this rationale, the city embarked on an aggressive housing demolition campaign. The problem is that the City tore down considerably more housing units than they constructed.

The Two Sections of the Fruit Belt MNA



From a black community building perspective, the results were disastrous. The City's bulldozer moved relentlessly through *Oak Street area* (the Medical Corridor), destroying almost every house in the locale, especially in the margin between North and Best streets. Most of the remaining housing units in the Medical Corridor were converted into non-residential uses. Residential development in the Medical Corridor came to a screeching halt. Of course, St. John Baptist Church constructed the McCarley Gardens and the black developer, Wilbur Trammel, built Pilgrim's Village, but these were multistory, apartment style complexes that housed only a fraction of the displaced population. Also, these apartment complexes were "communities within communities" and made no pretense of being integrated into the broader neighborhood structure. This was not residential development. This was simply the placement of a few housing units within the Medical Corridor. Not only this, but the handful of housing units contained in these two complexes did not come close to replacing the total number of housing units lost in the demolition process.

On the eastern side of the Michigan, the City bulldozer was not as aggressive, but it still destroyed numerous housing units, especially below North Street. The Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority did construct the Woodson Homes in the 1980s, but these were also apartment complexes and only replaced a fraction of the lost housing units. While the Woodson Homes, along with the McCarley Gardens and Pilgrim's Village, provided residents with high quality affordable housing, they did not recreate the type of neighborhood setting needed to build "community" and to sustain the Fruit Belt over time.

Equally important, this approach to residential development robbed Fruit Belt residents of the wealth producing power of homeownership. Back in 1970, both the Fruit Belt and Allen Town were in trouble, but the City used one approach to development in Allen Town and another in the Fruit Belt. In Allen Town, they did not use massive demolition. Instead, they provided developers and upwardly mobile residents with low-rate loans to encourage the rehabilitation of the existing structures; while in the Fruit Belt, the city bulldozer destroyed homes and made no effort to maintain the neighborhood's historic character. The opposing development strategies sparked differential rates of housing appreciation. For example, in 1970, the median value of housing in the Fruit Belt (census tract 31) was \$7,500 and \$36,600 in Allen Town (census tract 67), a difference of \$29,100. By 1990 the median value of housing was \$18,000 in the Fruit Belt and \$186,300 in Allen Town, a differential of \$168,300 in housing values between the two neighborhoods. Put another way, between 1970 and 1990, the value of housing in the Fruit Belt increased by 140%, while in Allen Town it increased by 409%.

The Road Not Taken

A new era in the quest to regenerate the Fruit Belt neighborhood was born in the 1990s. At the onset of the decade, the City invested over \$2 million in the rehabilitation and construction of new housing units in the neighborhood. Although not a lot of money, the plan still called for the rehabbing of existing structures and the building of new homes within a neighborhood context. Even though the new builds were modeled after suburban homes and ignored the community's neighborhood design, this was still a step forward.

Then in 1994, the Buffalo General Hospital announced its *Buffalo 2020* initiative, which included a bold plan to transform the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the hospital. The hospital's consultants, Blatner Associates, argued that environmental factors, such as education, housing, safety, and other neighborhood conditions affected the health of people. Therefore, as part of its mission, the hospital had a responsibility to transform the neighborhoods around them into animated and healthy places. The emergence of economic hard times combined with the formulation of a new strategy for developing the Medical Corridor led to the demise of General Hospital's *Buffalo 2020 Initiative*. Although never implemented, the *Buffalo 2020 Initiative* nevertheless established the principle that institutions in the Medical Corridor had a responsibility to assist in the regeneration of the Fruit Belt residential community.

Several years later, in 1997, the City established the Fruit Belt Task Force to lead the regeneration of the Fruit Belt community. The City allocated \$1,237 mil for the demolition, rehabilitation and construction of new housing units in the Fruit Belt. However, by 1999, the

redevelopment strategy had stalled, and the Task Force asked the UB Center for Urban Studies (CENTER) to formulate a plan to re-ignite the development effort. Concurrently, under the leadership of Richard Rinehart, an urban planner, the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus initiative was launched. *Thus, the development of the Fruit Belt community began to evolve along two tracks—the Fruit Belt residential community and the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Campus.*

The UB Center for Urban Studies called for the implementation of a bold plan to transform the Fruit Belt into a multicultural and cross class neighborhood, which retained its existing population, while bringing in hundreds of new residents. The goal was to redevelop the community within a ten year period and to repopulate it by constructing about 340 new units of housing. To reimagine the Fruit Belt, the neighborhood would be the site of extensive landscaping and streetscaping. The housing was to be marketed to moderate income blacks, workers at the Medical Campus, recent college graduates, upwardly mobile blacks, and suburbanites desirous of an urban lifestyle. The goal was to retain the existing population, while encourage new population groups to move into the neighborhood. A central feature of the CENTER's plan was an anti-gentrification strategy, which would not only keep lower income groups from being displaced, but also to ensure that 30 to 40% of the housing units would be allotted to low to moderate income households.

A tax increment financing (TIF) scheme would be used to fund the project. Although this approach had not been used in New York State, it had been used successfully to fund the revitalization of distressed communities in other cities, including Chicago. The plan was supported by Common Council president, James Pitts, but City Hall (the Masiello Administration) and the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Campus (BNMC) opposed and ultimately killed it. The Masiello Administration probably felt the Fruit Belt housing strategy competed with its downtown housing strategy, which was being planned at the same time. Masiello planned to build about 300 new housing units, which would be marketed to the same group being targeted by the Center for Urban Studies.

The BNMC probably opposed the project for a different set of reasons. Tax increment financing is based on the idea of selling bonds to pay for the redevelopment of distressed area. The idea is that *increased tax dollars*, which are spawned by new development, will pay off the bonds. The medical campus may have been fearful that such an approach would inhibit their tax write offs or increase their payments lieu of taxes. Whatever the reasons, the combined opposition of City Hall and the BNMC kept the Fruit Belt comprehensive redevelopment strategy from being implemented.

Defeat of the tax increment financing strategy considerably slowed regeneration of the Fruit Belt. The reason is the TIF would have provided the Fruit Belt with the necessary "upfront" capital needed to rebuild the community. Without such an influx of revenue, the

community would have to be regenerated in an incremental, piecemeal fashion. Undaunted, the residents formed a collaborative called the *Leadership Group* and moved forward with the redevelopment strategy. However, without funding the redevelopment effort stalled. St. John Baptist Church stepped into the void, and launched a \$54 million redevelopment project to implement the plan developed by the UB Center for Urban Studies. However, without the necessary upfront capital, the St. John project has moved slowly. Today, they have built a Hospice and 28 townhouses.

Concurrently, during the 2000s, with millions of public and private funds being invested in its development, the medical campus prospered. In 2001, the leading health care, life sciences, research, and medical education institutions in Western New York, which had co-habited the area for years, came together in partnership with the City of Buffalo, the County of Erie, and the surrounding neighborhoods to form the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Campus. Because it is viewed as an essential component of the region's economic development strategy, policymakers have poured significant human and fiscal resources into its development.

The Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus



The Black Community Building Process

African Americans, within the context of turbulent community change, fought to build and develop the Fruit Belt. Initially, the community's institutional framework centered on churches and the Homeowners and Tenants Association, a community based organization. Later the framework expanded to include the Friendly Fruit Belt Block Club, the Fruit Belt Task Force, the Langston Hughes Center, Locust Street ArtClasses and, most recently, the CAO-UB Center for Wellness and Neighborhood Development.

Over time, Fruit Belt residents not only fought to improve housing conditions in the neighborhood, but also to increase their political power, improve the quality of public education, and strengthen the social fabric of the community. For example, in 1969, Rev. Herbert V. Reid, pastor of Gethsemane Grape Street Baptist Church, led a movement to improve neighborhood conditions by increasing the community's political power. Back then, the Fruit Belt neighborhood was divided among the Delaware, Niagara and Masten council districts. In this environment, Reverend Reid felt the political fragmentation made it difficult for the community to get the services it needed to grow and prosper. So, he persuaded the Fruit Belt Homeowners & Tenant Association to initiate a lawsuit that claimed special problems in the neighborhood required a separate City Council member. Although the lawsuit failed, the City Council nevertheless redrew the neighborhood's councilmanic boundaries so that most of the community was placed in the Masten District with a small section in the Ellicott District. In 1990, the entire community was placed within the boundaries of the Ellicott District.

The residents also fought to improve the quality of education for neighborhood children. By 1976, School 37, which was located on Carlton Street in the Fruit Belt, had become all-black. The school was plagued with many problems and the Board of Education had scheduled it for closing. The parents fought to keep the school open. In 1977, the Board told the parents that to keep the school open; they would have to develop a strategy for integrating it. The Board and parents worked collaboratively to come up with a plan for developing a new curriculum that would be attractive to blacks and whites. During this period, with the closing of many local industrial plants, it was becoming increasingly clear that the age of heavy industry was over in Buffalo, and young people would have to find new career choices. Against this backdrop, the parents and school board developed a futuristic curriculum designed to teach students basic skills within a framework that prepared them for "meaningful careers and pursuits in the future." The new school was dubbed *Futures Academy*.

Located in the southwestern corner of the Fruit Belt, along Goodell Street, St. John Baptist Church emerged as a powerful community building force. In that section of the community, the church built the McCarley Gardens for low to moderate income families, and the St. John Towers for seniors. In 2002, it established the Reverend Dr. Bennett W. Smith, Sr.

Family Life Center to provide child care, education and after-school programs, and health and wellness programs to community members. In 2008, St. John opened the Aloma D. Johnson Fruit Belt Community Charter School to improve the quality of education in the neighborhood.

The Locust Street ArtClasses became nationally known for its art program for neighborhood children and other Buffalo residents. Concurrently, the community produced nine block clubs, and most recently established the CAO-UB Wellness and Neighborhood Development Center to spearhead the social organization of the community and grapple neighborhood development issues. Thus, despite a declining population base, the leadership base of the Fruit Belt remains strong, and so too does its commitment to winning the fight to transform the community into a great place to live, work and raise a family. In this new epoch, the secret to the Fruit Belt's sustained growth and development will be its ability to forge a collaborative relationship with the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Campus. The fate of the two places is intertwined, therefore, for the Fruit Belt to grow and prosper, it has to benefit from the growing downtown presence of the University of Buffalo and the continued development of the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Campus.