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## **“If You Burn It, They Will Come: The Housing Authority in Huntsville, 1941-1960**

**By John O’Brien**

Between 1950 and 1960 Huntsville did not merely grow, it transformed. On April 1, 1950, two war-time manufacturing sites, the Huntsville Arsenal and Redstone Arsenal, merged and became the primary research center for the Army's guided missile command. The Thiokol Chemical Corporation relocated their headquarters from Maryland to Redstone Arsenal and the Army's rocket research division transferred to the new Huntsville site from Fort Bliss, Texas.<sup>1</sup> The resultant tide of in-migrants overwhelmed the city's infrastructure as Huntsville's population soared 340.3 percent during the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Rents doubled, and then quadrupled. Traffic stretched the length and breadth of the city. Cars crowded Memorial Parkway and it soon became the city's main thoroughfare instead of a convenient overpass. Huntsville's historic heart, the courthouse square, withered from lack of investment and low property values. Slums caught the public attention and substandard housing proliferated while the city boomed.<sup>3</sup> The Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville received the unenviable task of handling the disparate issues presented by the city's rapid growth.

The Huntsville Housing Authority negotiated between the city's needs and federal concerns from its inception in 1941. Throughout the 1950s, the city council found it difficult to

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- 1 Mary T. Cagle, “History of Redstone Arsenal,” *MSFC History Office*, [http://history.msfc.nasa.gov/huntsville/history\\_redstone\\_arsenal.pdf](http://history.msfc.nasa.gov/huntsville/history_redstone_arsenal.pdf), 1-10.
  - 2 “Booming Cities Decade-to-Decade, 1830-2010,” *United States Census Bureau*, October 4, 2012, <http://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/017/508.php>
  - 3 *The Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville: A History, August, 1941 – March, 1973*. (Huntsville, AL: The Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville, 1973) 4-7.

manage the issues of infrastructure, population growth, poverty, and housing alone. The council leaned on the Local Authority to represent the city's interests on a federal level through formal and informal channels. The city required federal funds; both to address the pressures of a large population living in a small town, and to expand a collection of cotton mills and watercress farms into the largest city in north Alabama. In return, the Housing Authority not only promoted the various schemes of local officials but also played a direct role in shaping the geography and demography of this new rocket city.

The limited literature produced on Huntsville in this period focuses on the imposition of the federal government's will without the concerns of local interest. Bruce Schulman's *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt* proclaimed that throughout the South, "in-migrants captured a large percentage of the new jobs in space and defense centers,"<sup>4</sup> and the concerns of native whites went unheeded as to the distribution of federal funds. However, in Huntsville, attracting the in-migrants served the purposes of the city's elite. Businessmen and city officials welcomed the influx. Schulman identified Huntsville as one of the Southern boom cities where federal funds and the cooperation of local business leaders made the transition between the Cotton South and the desegregated modern South smoother.<sup>5</sup> Although the boom cities desegregated and urbanized without the violence and drama of Birmingham, they still offer insight into the processes by which federal monies transformed a region. Huntsville experienced unprecedented growth and investment during a turbulent period

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4 Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 159.

5 Schulman, *Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 208. Schulman mentions Huntsville a total of three times in his book. One of the pages cited state that federal money made desegregation easier in Huntsville without much exposition as to how. Birmingham received substantial federal aid and violence still erupted there.

of Southern history. Yet, besides scholarship on Redstone Arsenal or the Marshall Space Flight Center, Schulman and other historians of the industrialized South have done little to understand the relationship between federal institutions and local government in Huntsville, Alabama.

During the Great Depression, Congress recognized the shortage of decent housing nationwide and produced a variety of laws that empowered local housing authorities and provided them with funds. The Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932 authorized the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to make loans to local corporations dedicated to slum clearance and the eradication of urban blight. Title II of the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) allowed direct federal aid for public housing. These early efforts at housing reform culminated in the United States Housing Act of 1937, aimed at providing local housing authorities with resources to relocate their most unfortunate denizens. Four years later, the American entrance into World War II shifted the focus from slum clearance and urban renewal programs, to housing defense workers.<sup>6</sup> The Lanham Public War Housing Act of 1940 addressed this concern and authorized the distribution of aid to, “those areas ... in which the President shall find an acute shortage of housing exists ... [that] would not be provided by private capital.”<sup>7</sup> Huntsville received its first housing loans under this program.

In 1946 Charles F. Palmer deemed substandard half the homes, apartments, and other dwellings in the southern United States. He understood the issue better than most; Palmer organized Techwood Homes, Atlanta's first housing project and one of America's first federally funded public housing sites. He served as the Coordinator of Defense Housing from 1940 until

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6 John J. Gunther, *Federal City Relations in the United States: The Role of Mayors in Federal Aid to Cities*. (Newark: The University of Delaware Press, 1990), 124-128.

7 “Lanham Public War Housing Act.” (PL 76-849, October 14, 1940.) United States Statutes at Large 54, (1940), 1125-1126.

President Roosevelt abolished the office via Executive Order 9070 in 1942.<sup>8</sup> Palmer published *Adventures of a Slum Fighter* in 1955 about his study of housing projects across three continents. Thus, his condemnations of housing conditions in the southern United States carried an authority and understanding earned through obsessive research.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the latter 1940s, housing reformers, such as Palmer, pushed for new legislation that would continue the construction boom and provide jobs nationwide. Palmer argued that the continued use of federal funds to subsidize Southern housing could stem the flow of migrants northwards and stimulate the growth of new metropolises in the “nation's number one economic problem.”<sup>10</sup> Unknown to him, Palmer prophesied the future of Huntsville.

By 1950 a bevy of federal housing laws sat ready for use. Like other cities in Alabama and across the nation, Huntsville manipulated these laws to suit its local needs with little real oversight from either Washington D.C or the Public Housing Authority regional office in Atlanta. Though the money came from outside the city, the Local Authority made the decisions. In this way, Huntsville followed national and state wide trends in its local housing policies.<sup>11</sup> Unlike other housing programs in Alabama, Huntsville experienced federal investment during its economic and demographic ascent and the programs focused on expanding housing opportunities within or near the city. The first programs in Alabama reflected President Roosevelt's focus on rural housing initiatives. Mark Gelfand described the 1933 amendment to the NIRA as an “officially sponsored exodus from

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8 *Housing Yearbook, 1942*. ed. Coleman Woodbury and Edmond H. Hoben (Chicago: National Association of Housing Officials, 1942) 47.

9 Charles F. Palmer, *Adventures of a Slum Fighter* (Atlanta: Tupper and Love Inc., 1955), ix.

10 Charles F. Palmer, “Housing, The South's Number One Economic Opportunity,” *Social Forces* 25, no. 2 (1946): 189-191.

11 Arnold Hirsch, *Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 269.

the cities.”<sup>12</sup>

Of the \$25 million appropriated for housing and homesteads under the 1933 amendment to the NIRA, the federal government spent a quarter of the money in Alabama. Five communities in Jefferson and Walker counties; Palmerdale, Gardendale, Trussville, Bessemer, and Jasper suffered either from the lack of demand for workers in Birmingham's steel industry or a collapse in agricultural prices. Federal funds provided these communities with rural housing, construction work, and local industries, often a textile mill.<sup>13</sup> Birmingham's leaders used housing grants from Washington D.C to restructure the city and preserve valued cultural areas following its economic collapse and the migration of the steel industry to other states and nations. The Magic City's use of federal grants morphed it from a steel town to the home of a leading medical research center.<sup>14</sup> Previous federal programs in Alabama focused on renewing a community, not redesigning it. The experience of federal funds in Huntsville differed from the rest of the state and by 1958, Huntsville possessed more housing and urban renewal projects than any other city in Alabama.<sup>15</sup>

Huntsville's history lacked a previous example of explosive growth and prosperity. Much of the city's identity and cultural expression emerged from its extensive contact with the federal government during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also, unlike Birmingham, Huntsville served as home to John Sparkman, an influential Senator committed to the growth of the city. Sparkman worked closely with the Huntsville Housing

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12 Mark I. Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) 24-25.

13 Wayne Flynt, *Poor but Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 306.

14 Christopher Scribner, *Renewing Birmingham: Federal Funding and the Promise of Change, 1929-1979*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 140-147.

15 “Housing Board Has New Aide,” *The Huntsville Times*, October 08, 1958.

Authority to ensure its needs were met. His later appointment as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs solidified this relationship. This combination of factors; the early contact with federal agencies like the United States Housing Authority and Department of the Army, the efforts of Senator Sparkman, and the rapid growth of Huntsville allowed the local Housing Authority to exercise an inordinate degree of influence in shaping the development of the city.

The Huntsville Housing Authority emerged from a city council resolution on August 14, 1941. Local Authority officials dealt with federal concerns within the first nine months of operation. This early exposure primed the Board of Commissioners for the booming population and new demands that emerged in the 1950s. Between 1941 and 1943 the men behind the Housing Authority learned how to cope with the competing interests of city, county, state, and federal agencies. In July 1941, twenty-five prominent citizens signed a petition demanding the creation of a housing authority. Mayor A.W. McAllister appointed the five original members of the Housing Authority in August 1941, they organized in a month. The City Council awarded the new Authority with an operating budget of \$2,500. On September 2, 1941 Chairman Herbert Johnson and Commissioners Hunter, Ashford Todd, Oscar Mason, and H.E. Monroe met to discuss the possibility of declaring Huntsville a defense area under the Public War Housing Act of 1940. They contacted R.C. Ditto, the commander of the Huntsville Arsenal and dispatched letters to the United States Housing Authority and 8<sup>th</sup> Congressional District Representative John Sparkman.<sup>16</sup> The existence of the Authority hinged on whether or not housing officials in Washington D.C. classified the Chemical Warfare Plant at Huntsville Arsenal as an industry, “connected with and

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16 “Minutes of the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville, Alabama No. 1,” The Vault at 200 Washington Street, Huntsville, Alabama, September 2, 1941 to November 3, 1941, 1-15.

essential to the national defense.”<sup>17</sup>

Washington said no. The recent American entry into World War II meant high demand for defense housing projects and exhausted funds with which to build them. The \$150 million appropriated in 1940 was gone by January 1942. A second appropriations bill meant another chance at federal aid and on February 2, 1942 Chairman Herbert Johnson announced that the Huntsville Housing Authority received a grant. Representatives from the United States Housing Authority arrived later that month. Earl Gauger, E.T. Pairo, and Henry Taylor met with the Board of Commissioners in a special session on February 16, to outline the relationship between the Authority and the federal government.<sup>18</sup>

E.T. Pairo explained that “a 300 unit Defense Housing Project had been set up for Huntsville and ... the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville [were] to acts as agents of the United States of America in the development and construction of this Project.”<sup>19</sup> The Authority recognized their precarious position and the responsibility laid before them. W.B. Mills Jr. received the nomination to become the Authority's first Executive Director and they passed Housing Authority Resolution No. 3 as a guiding set of principles.

Housing Authority Resolution No. 3 outlined the goals of the Housing Authority as a corporate body caught between federal money and local concerns. The Commissioners believed it was their duty to ensure “adequate housing ... to properly care for the workers in the industries of Huntsville engaged in ... the war efforts.” The resolution also mandated the use local labor and construction materials in the building and maintenance of the project and included the assurance that Authority policies would not “devalue the investments of the citizens of the city of Huntsville.” This pledge reinforced their position as federal

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17 “Lanham Public War Housing Act.” (1940), 1126.

18 Minutes, No. 1, November 3, 1941 to February 16, 1942, 17-23.

19 Minutes, No. 1, February 16, 1942, 24.



entity acting in Huntsville's interests.<sup>20</sup> In early May the Housing Authority passed Resolution No. 12, a contract between itself and the United States government. The Local Authority received \$10,000 from the Federal Public Housing Authority and the Commissioners decided to return the original \$2,500 disbursement granted by the city council.<sup>21</sup> Between August 1941 and May 1942 the Housing Authority shifted from an institution created by the city of Huntsville to corporate agents of the American government that operated off and depended upon federal funds.

Connections with federal agencies brought limited attention to the previous actions of the Housing Authority. In order to receive funds for the construction and operation of the project, the Authority needed to meet the standards imposed by the Atlanta Region Office. Prior to the grant of federal aid the Commissioners hired Charles H. McCauley of Birmingham as the principal architect and Paul M. Speake of Huntsville as the assistant architect for the Defense Housing Project. The Federal Public Housing Authority notified the Commissioners that all personnel hired had to be approved by the government prior to employment. The local Authority complied with the federal regulations and rescinded McCauley and Speake's employment.<sup>22</sup>

Despite occasional interference from the Federal Public Housing Authority Office in Atlanta, oversight remained minimal. Construction of Redstone Park and its role in the war effort dominated all other business between the Local Authority and the Atlanta office. Though representatives from the Atlanta office directed the Commissioners to cancel his contract, in November 1942 Paul M. Speake became the Local Authority's second Executive Director. Speake's employment stemmed from W.B. Mills Jr., the previous Executive Director, receiving a

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20 Minutes, No. 1, February 16, 1942, 26.

21 Minutes, No. 1, May 4, 1942, 61-62.

22 Minutes, No. 1, March 12, 1942, 45-48.

commission as First Lieutenant in the Marine Corps.<sup>23</sup>

The arrival of federal aid heralded the start of development. However, several agencies needed to decide upon a site for Project Ala-1094, later known as Redstone Park. Throughout 1942 Housing Authority officials continued in their role as mediators between the city and Washington D.C. No work could begin without consent from the Redstone Arsenal, the recently organized Federal Public Housing Authority, and the Local Authority. On February 19, the Huntsville Housing Authority proposed that Defense Housing Project Ala-1094 should border Fifth Street and Madison Street and be carved from 50 acres of the Rhett property.<sup>24</sup> The commanding officer of the Chemical Warfare Arsenal immediately protested the site and scheduled a meeting in early March between representatives of the Department of the Army, the USHA, and Executive Director Mills and Commissioner Mason in Atlanta. Mason and Mills returned to Huntsville with no consensus beyond an agreement with the Army to let housing officials in Washington D.C. decide upon the proper location for a defense housing project.<sup>25</sup>

Apparently Washington moved too slowly. Less than a month later, on April 6, Herbert Johnson and W.B. Mills met with the commander of the Redstone Arsenal and representatives of the Federal Public Housing Authority. Defense Housing Project Ala-1094 moved from the proposed location in Huntsville to a new site in Farley. Federal officials asked for the blessing of the Local Authority and the Board of Commissioners offered their unanimous consent.<sup>26</sup> The Army agreed to collect garbage, maintain sewerage and water lines, and provided military police and fire services to the new project if the City of Huntsville connected Redstone Park to its electrical grid.

However, no construction began. Though the Authority

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23 Minutes, No. 1, October 5, 1942, 75.

24 Minutes, No. 1, February 19, 1942, 34.

25 Minutes, No. 1, March 2 – 12, 1942, 39-43.

26 Minutes, No. 1, April 6 – May 4, 1942, 49-51.

negotiated a site selection that fit the needs of the Department of the Army and the Huntsville city council, Redstone Park stayed a potential development. The Authority had a site development plan, agreements from the city and the Army for extension of services, and no authorization to continue work on the Project. Without a Notice to Proceed, the contractors remained idle. W.B. Mills Jr. bypassed the Atlanta Region Office of the FPHA and traveled to Washington D.C. at his own expense. He met with housing officials in the capital, returned with a Notice to Proceed, and in August 1942 construction began on Redstone Park.<sup>27</sup> This episode proved that the Local Authority could not only operate off of federal funds but could also maneuver between agencies.

Although the Housing Authority depended upon the federal government for its funding and local ties for its influence, it sometimes found itself forced to exert autonomy. The successful construction of Redstone Park and the critical nature of the war time manufacturing sites in Huntsville meant expansion of the Housing Authority's activities. On January 14, 1943, E.T. Pairo returned to Huntsville with an announcement from the Atlanta Field Office of the FPHA. John P. Broome, the head of the Atlanta Field Office, decided to allocate funds to Huntsville for the construction of a "new war housing project ... Ala-1098 [Binford Court], to contain 220 family dwelling units for the housing of Negro workers at the Huntsville Arsenal and the Redstone Ordnance Plant."<sup>28</sup> Once again, site selection caused controversy. This time the Local Authority exercised its powers as the city's representative and did not locate the new project at the Redstone Ordnance Plant's proposed site. Pairo and the Board of Commissioners identified three possible sites: one between Seminole Drive and the city limits, one north of Fifth Avenue and east of the N.C. & St. L. railroad, and one in "the

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27 Minutes, No. 1, August 2, 1942, 69.

28 Minutes, No. 1, January 14, 1943, 109.

North part of town lying in the area of the Winston Street Negro School.”<sup>29</sup> Commanders at the Redstone Ordnance Plant protested the Seminole Drive site and wanted the new housing project in Farley, near Redstone Park.

The Board of Commissioners did not budge. Herbert Johnson, Oscar Mason, Commissioner Hunter, Ashford Todd, and Paul M. Speake conferred with the men from Atlanta and sited Binford Court, “West of the City Limits and East of Seminole Drive and North of Fifth Avenue,” in a unanimous vote. This choice combined the first two site options and allowed Huntsville to receive further federal investment while removing a portion of the black population to a project outside of the city limits.<sup>30</sup>

Few people wanted to move. Administering Binford Court presented the Local Authority with a new challenge, race relations in Huntsville. The Local Authority learned how to deal with minority populations. This proved invaluable practice, the 1950 census identified 1,545 nonwhite homes in the city. Of that number, 47% of the homes qualified as slums due to their inadequate sanitation facilities alone.<sup>31</sup> The Board of Commissioners utilized federal and local resources to not only construct Binford Court but to people it. The previous project, Redstone Park, suffered no problems in reaching full occupancy. However, the prospective tenants of Binford Court viewed the motives of the Local Authority with suspicion.

Housing Manager Claude D. Phillips addressed this issue in a letter to John P. Broome, Director of the Atlanta Field Office of the FPHA. Binford Court's first tenants moved in on July 26,

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29 Minutes, No. 1, January 14, 1943, 108.

30 Minutes, No. 1, January 14, 1943, 109.

31 *U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1950: Summary Population and Housing Characteristics: Alabama*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1951, 28.; “Minutes of the Huntsville Housing Authority, No. 2,” The Vault at 200 Washington Street, Huntsville, Alabama. April 3, 1950, 66.

1943, yet by November 1, only 58 of the 220 units were occupied. The Local Authority already toured Binford Court, in August 1943, with prominent black ministers, “to familiarize them with the convenience and cleanliness of the housing units ... so as to get the project before a great number of colored people.”<sup>32</sup> Despite the tour, occupancy remained low. This lack of tenants damaged the position of the Local Authority. In February 1943, H.E. Monroe wrote to John Broome about construction bids for Binford Court. He suggested that the more expensive masonry construction be used instead of wooden frames. Monroe and the Local Authority assumed that due to the poor housing conditions for black residents in Huntsville the project would operate after the end of the war.<sup>33</sup> However, if the Local Authority could not fill Binford Court then future grants for other projects might have seemed uncertain.

With the need for more tenants in mind, Housing Manager Phillips requested that school teachers and mill workers from Huntsville's black community be allowed to move into Binford Court. He argued that textiles formed an essential part of the materiel produced in Huntsville because the local mills were “doing 80% or more work toward the war effort.” Atlanta granted his request but went a step further in modifying renter eligibility. I.C. Brewer, assistant director of the Atlanta Region Office, responded to Phillips's request with a proclamation of local discretion for placing tenants in Binford Court, “This is your authority, therefore, to accept applications from ... other workers from the Huntsville area.” Binford Court no longer existed solely to house defense workers. Now, any black citizen with substandard housing qualified to rent from the local authority.<sup>34</sup> In an effort to match the needs of the new tenants with the needs of the local authority, Herbert Johnson suggested that “an advisory committee for [Binford Court] be organized

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32 Minutes, No. 1, August 2, 1943, 160.

33 Minutes, No. 1, February 5, 1943, 132.

34 Minutes, No. 1, November 1, 1943, 173.

and presented the authority with a list of prominent negroes,” from the Huntsville area. Oscar Mason selected seven names and addressed letters to: Dr. Joseph Fanning Drake, Mabel Powell Cooke, Rev. O. Tucker, Myrtle Turner, Earl McDonald, and Rev. A.L. Lamar, requesting they help ease the process of relocation.<sup>35</sup> Extension of renter eligibility provided the Local Authority with a ready source for new tenants and the cooperation of the local black elite assuaged the fears of those prospective tenants. Binford Court neared full occupancy by December 1944.<sup>36</sup>

Although the final site of Binford Court momentarily irritated the commanding officers of the Redstone Ordnance Plant, it proved a popular decision with the white citizens of Huntsville; so popular in fact that Binford Court appeared on booster material designed to promote Huntsville to the outside world. A brochure attached to a tourist map of the city proclaimed Huntsville the “Heart of the Powerful Tennessee Valley,” and implored the traveler to settle in this idyllic southern town of “Agriculture – Industry – Recreation.” It praised Madison County's status as the top agricultural producer in Alabama, highlighted the local mills and mill villages, and made sure to mention the easy fishing found in the Tennessee River. A section entitled 'Homes' elaborated on the cheap price of houses in the area without failing to mention that “Negro workers and their families have homes provided in the new 220-unit Binford Court housing development.”<sup>37</sup> Such ready mention of Binford

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35 Minutes, No. 1, January 3, 1944, 186.

36 Minutes, No. 1, January 1, 1945, 228.

37 “Historical Maps of Madison County,” Alabama Maps, last modified February 25, 2013,

<http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/counties/madison/madison.html>  
; I assume the map is from the early 1950s because it lists the city's population at 38,153. This number is twice as high as the 1950 population of 16,437 yet only half as large as the 1960 population of 72,365. The largest amount of growth took place in 1955, so this is probably before that.

Court on the brochure indicates that by the early 1950s, the business community of Huntsville perceived the Local Authority and its urban renewal and housing efforts as a selling point designed to attract people to the city.

Huntsville despised its slums, yet the city owed the urban renewal efforts of the 1950s to their presence. The Local Authority assumed control over eradicating the city's slums in July 1950.<sup>38</sup> Huntsville's most famous slums received monikers that echoed the citizenry's distaste for their shacks, outhouses, and inhabitants: "Brogtown," "Honey Hole," and Dixie Village also known as "Boogertown." Prior efforts to impose garbage and sanitation regulations on these areas proved useless. As early as 1947, the Madison County health department brought trucks into "Boogertown" to haul away the mounds of garbage. This sanitation program stemmed not from charitable urges but from a desire to prevent the spread of disease inside the city limits. "Boogertown" lay outside of the city proper but Dr. A.M. Shelamer, county health officer, reminded the people of Huntsville that, "Diseases and the fly observe no city limits lines." Shelamer voiced a theme that became common in Huntsville among advocates of slum removal; slums contained disease and were a threat to the city.<sup>39</sup> In 1951, "Brogtown" became the first slum evacuated. The smallest of the three slums, it stretched for 26 acres along the intersection of West Clinton and Spring Street. The *Huntsville Times* made little mention of the conditions of "Brogtown" beyond describing the slum as, "down-at-the-heels."<sup>40</sup> The Housing Act of 1949, required completion of a project to house the displaced before slum-clearance began. Construction of the all white Butler Terrace project, the Local Authority's longest operating site, began in

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38 "Minutes, No. 2," July 3, 1950, 88.

39 "Booger Town' Clean-Up Starts Sanitation Drive," *The Huntsville Times*, May 15, 1947.

40 "Brogtown Buzzes With Development," *The Huntsville Times*, May 13, 1951.

February 1951, and the project reached half occupancy by July 1952.<sup>41</sup> The acquisition of "Brogtown" occurred without much drama and the inhabitants relocated to Butler Terrace.

In order to tackle the "Honey Hole" the Local Authority needed to confer with city and county officials. The slum loomed larger than "Brogtown" due to its size and location. "Honey Hole" lay inside the city limits and its forty acres stretched for eight blocks. A young mother who lived in the "Honey Hole" off O'Shaughnessy Avenue, contracted typhus and Dr. Otis Gay, county health officer, declared the whole area to be in a state of emergency due to his concerns about a possible outbreak of dysentery or tuberculosis.<sup>42</sup> On September 4, 1958, Nathan Porter, executive director of the Huntsville Housing Authority, joined other city officials at the Madison County Health Department.<sup>43</sup> Through the combined efforts of the Local Authority, city officials, and the County Health Department; a four-point plan emerged to dismantle the slum. The plan consisted of the Local Authority purchasing the worst tracts, spraying the whole area with DDT to eliminate fleas, poisoning the hundreds of rats that roamed the streets, and eventual demolition of the entire site to make way for urban renewal efforts.<sup>44</sup> In December 1958, the demolition began as novice firefighters burned down the first shacks in the "Honey Hole." Destroying the slum served as practice for the Huntsville Fire Department.<sup>45</sup>

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41 "Butler Terrace Groundwork Set," *The Huntsville Times*, February 27, 1951.; "84 Families Move Into Butler Units," *The Huntsville Times*, July 20, 1952.

42 "Rats, Disease Said Threat to North Huntsville Area," *The Huntsville Times*, August 29, 1958.

43 "Solution Sought in Winston Area," *The Huntsville Times*, September 4, 1958.

44 "Huntsville Plans Anti-Disease War," *The Huntsville Times*, September 5, 1958.

45 "Torch is Put to Honey Hole Blight Area," *The Huntsville Times*, December 16, 1958.



To the people of Huntsville, the Dixie Village or “Boogertown” slum seemed worse than the others. The largest slum rested on 10<sup>th</sup> Street, between Madison Pike and Ninth Avenue. Originally slated for demolition in 1956, the start of the project delayed until 1958 and construction finished in 1966.<sup>46</sup> However, “Boogertown” represented more than slow progress on the part of the Local Authority. More than any other slum, it represented the poverty that Huntsville hoped to leave behind. In July 1959, Huntsville Hospital admitted two starving children. Seven year old James Strickland weighed about 22 pounds and his eight month old brother, eight pounds. Both lived in “Boogertown.”<sup>47</sup> Outrage swept through the city. People accosted the boys' mother, Geneva Hovis Strickland, for failing to feed them. Strangers visited the eight month old in the hospital. A local church donated a wood-burning stove to the family. In an interview with the Mrs. Strickland the *Huntsville Times* asked, “How could this happen here?”<sup>48</sup> The Local Authority required the presence of slums to operate. Public outcries over the miserable living conditions of Huntsville's slums forced the Local Authority to develop closer ties with city and county officials. Also, these slums provided the reason for the Authority's continued existence. Under Title I of the 1949 Housing Act, the Housing Authority of Huntsville received no funds unless there existed some form of, “a slum or blighted area or deteriorating area,” to tear down the buildings of and relocate the people within.<sup>49</sup> Without these disadvantaged areas, federal investment in housing and urban renewal in Huntsville would have ceased after World War II.

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46 *The Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville*, 6.

47 “2 Starving Children Hospitalized in City,” *The Huntsville Times*, July 21, 1959.

48 “Root of Stricken Tots' Story Found in Boogertown Mire,” *The Huntsville Times*, July 26, 1959.

49 “Housing Act of 1949.” (PL 81-171, July 14, 1949.) Senate Document No. 99 (1949), 3638-3639.

The largest urban renewal project of the 1950s epitomized the Local Authority's role as an intermediary between local and federal institutions. Hannes Luehrsen designed Memorial Parkway and in January 1957, the formerly German city planner presented an idea to the Huntsville city council. Luehrsen's recent endeavors in Huntsville, and his role as the head planner for Redstone Arsenal, made the architect's vision for a new city center little more than a delayed reality. Luehrsen asserted that previous city planners had failed to address the growth that accompanied Redstone Arsenal. He advocated a new downtown area between the Big Spring Park and Memorial Parkway. Luehrsen believed the proposed city center would concentrate businesses, house municipal offices, and alleviate the parking situation; an essential service since he claimed that the people of Huntsville had "lost the knowledge of walking and are used to doing everything by drive-in."<sup>50</sup> The day after his meeting with the city council, Huntsville's Planning Commission called a special session to hear Luehrsen's proposal. The Board of County Commissioners offered its approval the same day.

Now, the plan needed funding. Huntsville's leaders turned to the Local Authority. They hoped to receive federal funds by including Luehrsen's proposal in the West Clinton Street Redevelopment Project.<sup>51</sup> By February 20, the Local Authority's executive director, Nathan Porter, arranged for a meeting in Atlanta between members of the Planning Commission, the city council, the the Board of County Commissioners, Luehrsen, representatives from the Local Authority, and public housing officials from the region office of the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA). The men hoped to secure federal funds for a survey of the proposed development area.<sup>52</sup> However,

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50 "Luehrsen Gives City Center Plan," *The Huntsville Times*, January 13, 1957.

51 "Plan's Reception Said Enthusiastic," *The Huntsville Times*, January 13, 1957.

52 "Luehrsen Plan Moves Toward Formal Study," *The Huntsville Times*,

several months passed before a reply came from Atlanta and Mayor R.B. Searcy requested that Porter attempt to arrange another meeting. This time the housing officials agreed to travel to Huntsville and inspect the proposed site.<sup>53</sup> A complete study of the area emerged in February 1958, after the city council hired the Sydney Carter planning firm. They deemed Luehrsen's original city center idea the Heart of Huntsville. Mayor Searcy requested that the Local Authority forward the plan to Atlanta for further study.<sup>54</sup> Another year passed before Atlanta granted permission to compile a development plan on the Heart of Huntsville project. The Local Authority made the final decision in selecting the firm that would present said plan.<sup>55</sup> HHFA officials approved the plan in September 1960, and instructed the Local Authority to obtain approval from the city council. The council passed a unanimous vote and the Local Authority resubmitted the original plans with an application for federal funds.<sup>56</sup> At every point in the planning and development of the Heart of Huntsville project, the city of Huntsville found itself dependent on its Local Authority. Mayor Searcy asked the executive director to arrange multiple meetings with federal agencies and from Luehrsen's first proposal to the city council until the approval of the final plans, Huntsville's leaders knew this project depended on the Local Authority and its ability to secure funds from the HHFA.

Senator John Sparkman's relationship with the Local Authority personified its roles as both a federal and local

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February 20, 1957.

53 "Porter To Slate City Center Meet," *The Huntsville Times*, April 22, 1957;

"Luehrsen's Plan Meeting Slated," *The Huntsville Times*, April 28, 1957.

54 "City Center Plan Study Is Sought," *The Huntsville Times*, February 25, 1958.

55 "Planner Picked For Civic Center," *The Huntsville Times*, December 11, 1959.

56 "U.S. Agency Approves Heart of City Plan," *The Huntsville Times*, September 1, 1960.; "City Backs Downtown Area Plan," *The Huntsville Times*, September 9, 1960.

institution. Throughout his tenure in the Senate, the Local Authority turned to Sparkman to represent their specific interests in Washington D.C. In 1973, the Local Authority published its first official history and dedicated it to the legislative work of Senator Sparkman, who they deemed, “Mr. Housing and Urban Renewal.”<sup>57</sup> Sparkman helped author the Housing Act of 1954, which allowed housing authorities to shift from slum clearance to urban renewal projects.<sup>58</sup> His role as a member of the Senate Committee on Banking and Currency, and appointment as the first Chairman of the Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs, put Sparkman in a position to influence federal housing officials on behalf of the Local Authority. Gail Carter, the longest serving employee of the housing authority, current manager of the Northwoods site, and the first female maintenance superintendent in the state of Alabama; recalled Sparkman's influence on housing projects and urban renewal in the city, “He was very instrumental in getting a lot of public housing in Huntsville... and Sparkman Homes is named after him.”<sup>59</sup>

The first interactions between the Local Authority and John Sparkman occurred before his election to the United States Senate. In December 1942, the War Production Board cut the refrigerator appropriations for the Redstone Park defense housing project and informed the Local Authority that it needed to requisition enough ice boxes to supply the project. However, the Local Authority failed to secure a contract for the delivery of ice because none of the local ice plants wanted to deliver to Farley. Instead, the Local Authority found a manufacturing company in Indiana that agreed to sell 301 kerosene refrigerators to the Redstone Park project. The Local Authority contacted Senator Lister Hill and Congressman Sparkman in relation to the

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57 *The Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville*, ii.

58 “Torch is Put to Honey Hole Blight Area,” *The Huntsville Times*, December 16, 1958.

59 Gail Carter, interview by John O'Brien, 1402 Yukon Street NW, February 22, 2013.

purchase for their help in, “getting the approval of the War Production Board.” Neither, however, responded in time and the National Housing Agency ordered the Local Authority to find a way to deliver ice.<sup>60</sup> Later efforts by Senator Sparkman proved fruitful. During the attempts to populate Binford Court; Sparkman met with Senator Hill, Wilbur Nolen the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) director for Alabama, and Earle S. Draper the National Deputy Commissioner of the FHA to reduce the rents at Binford Court. Sparkman and Hill succeeded in convincing the federal men to lower the rents in Huntsville by nine dollars.<sup>61</sup>

These were not isolated incidents; Sparkman developed a relationship with the Local Authority that lasted for decades. In August 1949, Herbert Johnson penned a letter to Sparkman on behalf of Mayor McAllister. It began, “Dear John ... we are having some housing trouble again.” Due to the end of World War II and the lack of need for defense housing, Huntsville faced the loss of Redstone Park. They appealed to Sparkman to help find a way to keep both defense projects, Redstone Park because the city suffered from a housing shortage and Binford Court because it was, “much better than 90% of the present colored housing.” Johnson concluded the letter by congratulating Sparkman on his “swell job” in helping pass the Housing Act of 1949.<sup>62</sup> Sparkman's intercession delayed the transfer of Redstone Park until December 31, 1955, when the Department of the Army assumed control of the property.<sup>63</sup> Sparkman's role with the Local Authority sometimes included an active participation in slum clearance. Around 2:00 pm on December 15, 1958, the Senator held the torch that burned the first shack in the “Honey Hole”

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60 Minutes, No. 1, December 7, 1942, 97.

61 Minutes, No. 1, June 4, 1944, 198.

62 “Minutes of the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville, No. 2.” The Vault at 200 Washington Street, Huntsville, Alabama, August 1, 1949, 15.

63 “Redstone Park Change Is Slated,” *The Huntsville Times*, November 3, 1955.

slum. As the flames flickered behind him, he spoke of the Local Authority's programs and deemed them, "the finest demonstration of [urban renewal] of any small city in the whole country."<sup>64</sup>

The Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville left a complex legacy and its later actions were built upon the experience gained between 1941 and 1960. Created under the Lanham Public War Housing Act of 1940 and envisioned as agents of the federal government in Huntsville, the Local Authority fast became agents of Huntsville operating within the federal government. However, more study of their role in the city's development is needed. The history of the Local Authority spans seven decades and leaves a significant impact in each. Turn-over among its Commissioners remained low throughout the 1950s; in 1959, four of the original five board members still presided over housing and urban renewal efforts in the city.<sup>65</sup> The Housing Authority's first chairman, Herbert Johnson, served on the Board of Commissioners until his death in 1967.<sup>66</sup> However, these men remained a part of the Local Authority for a reason. They delivered the results that Huntsville's leaders wanted.

The Local Authority petitioned Alabama's congressmen to help secure Huntsville as a defense area, worked with John Sparkman to ensure the continuance of federal housing projects in the city after World War II, reshaped ethnic boundaries by removing a portion of the city's black population outside of Huntsville's limits, played a direct role in eradicating the large slums that plagued the city, and provided a link to federal funds

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64 "Torch is Put to Honey Hole Blight Area," *The Huntsville Times*, December 16, 1958.

65 "Huntsville, Alabama: Space Capitol of the Universe," 1959, Huntsville-Madison County Archives, 2010-10 Box #2, Folder HHA 60's - 70's, 25.

66 "Mr. Johnson Dies at Home; Services Set," *The Huntsville Times*, December 22, 1967. It is interesting to note that Johnson died the same day as former Mayor R.B. Searcy, who presided over Huntsville from 1952 - 1964.

that made local schemes like the Heart of Huntsville a possibility. As the first generation of Commissioners the experience they gained from navigating city politics, housing laws, and federal directives during the boom period of the 1950s proved priceless in the coming decades. The Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville used the influence granted them as an arbiter of federal funds to reshape the city of Huntsville, Alabama.