

Public Housing in Richmond

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RRHA's public housing communities provide housing for more than 10,000 people in 11 family public housing developments and eight elderly housing buildings throughout the city.

The move for development of public housing in Richmond began in the early 1930s as a push by the Public Works Administration (PWA) for a project to be built just north of Virginia Union. This development derailed when residents pushed back against the location. Then in 1935 PWA proposed slum clearance, the demolition of blocks of substandard housing in Jackson Ward, coupled with the construction of hundreds of units of low income housing.

Proponents of the plan said that residents would be glad of the opportunity move out of their "dilapidated, unsanitary shacks", though some area homeowners fought back against having to give up their homes. The cry of dilapidation was not without foundation. For instance, Silver and Moeser's *The Separate City* cites a 1938 evaluation by Harland Bartholomew which found that, "approximately one-third of the city's 43,000 housing units lacked indoor toilets. Nearly one-half had only cold water, and 2,635 units had no water at all." It takes no stretch to imagine that these conditions were more prevalent in the low-income neighborhoods.

The Richmond Housing Authority was founded in 1940, and the next year work began on Gilpin Court. A 1985 article in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* by Bonnie Winston says that: Attention focused on an eight-block area north of Broad Street in which 319 of 321 structures were judged as substandard beyond any doubt. In 1941, clearance and construction began on what by the end of 1942 was to become Gilpin Court, named for Charles Sydney Gilpin, a famed black actor who was born in 1872 at 200 Charity St., in the heart of the area.

The court was to be the first of three "high-standard, low-rent housing projects," according to accounts. It was to house blacks, 228 of whose families were displaced by the clearance on the site, which had a "record as a breeding spot of disease and delinquency," newspapers said.

The construction of Creighton Court and Hillside Court followed Gilpin in 1952. Fairfield Court was built in 1958, Whitcomb Court at this same time period, Mosby Court in 1962, and Blackwell in 1970. This marked the end of the construction of the large communities, as no single development since then has contained more than 60 units.

Between 1999 to late 2001, RRHA demolished 440 public housing units in Blackwell using HOPE VI funds provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. In an echo of the initial call for slum clearance in the 1930s, the RRHA described the need for action on Blackwell by stating that: Over time the units became obsolete and deteriorated. The area was also plagued with crime such as burglaries, robberies and larcenies.

The deterioration had led to a high concentration of low-income residents, little retail and a lack of community pride and private investments had all but stopped as private investors remained overwhelmed by the concentration of poverty and public housing that had begun to erode to other areas.

The redevelopment plan also called for the relocation of the Blackwell residents and approximately 540 replacement housing units, of which aspects of both critics of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA) say were not handled very well.

In 2002 the RRHA applied for a \$20 million federal grant to demolish the 106 units at Mosby South. The plan was to build “170 units of single-family homes and apartments that would include public housing and units available to the general public” with 105 more units to be built elsewhere in the city. The Richmond Tenant Organization and families from Mosby Court South hired legal counsel to fight against the grant application. The request for funding was denied by HUD in March 2003.

In 2008 RRHA tore down the Dove Court apartment complex in Northside and has plans to redevelop the area with mixed-income single-family and two-family housing.

The RRHA is moving forward with plans to redevelop the Gilpin Court as a mixed-income neighborhood. The area is seen as having a lot of potential due to its proximity to the VCU Biotech Park and Philip Morris, but the plan is not without controversy. A few years in the making already, the RRHA’s Valena Dixon said in early 2008 that,

“We know Gilpin Court revitalization will take five to 10 years, and demolition will not start for at least three years.”

Except for the almost \$11 million in renovation announced in March 2009, no specific plans have been put forth for Hillside Court or the housing communities in the East End.