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Exodus

April 17, 2010 · [Leave a Comment](#)

A Quick-and-Dirty History of Buffalo's Broadway-Fillmore Community

By [Charlotte Hsu](#) | [Share on Facebook](#)



Henry Louis Taylor, Jr.

I recently sat down to talk about Buffalo's East Side with Henry Louis Taylor Jr., director of the University at Buffalo's Center for Urban Studies and a man with an

impressive collection of maps, books and Census records documenting the city's history. I asked him, specifically, how Broadway-Fillmore, a once-bustling neighborhood deep in East Buffalo, came to be one of the nation's poorest areas.

Here's a synopsis, based on what he said and information cobbled together from other sources:

Older residents recall Broadway-Fillmore as Buffalo's old Polonia — a thriving, working-class community centered around factories and the railroad. The district was home to the [Central Terminal](#), the city's main train station and an architectural wonder with an office tower 17 stories tall. Broadway Street was a destination for shoppers looking to buy everything from pastries to jewelry, clothing and shoes.

Taylor says the community began to change in the post-World War II era with the development of the Interstate Highway System and the commodification of housing, which increased people's mobility and catalyzed the development of suburbs across the nation. In Buffalo, families who owned homes in Broadway-Fillmore began to move to Cheektowaga and similar communities, drawn by the promise of an idealized, suburban lifestyle.

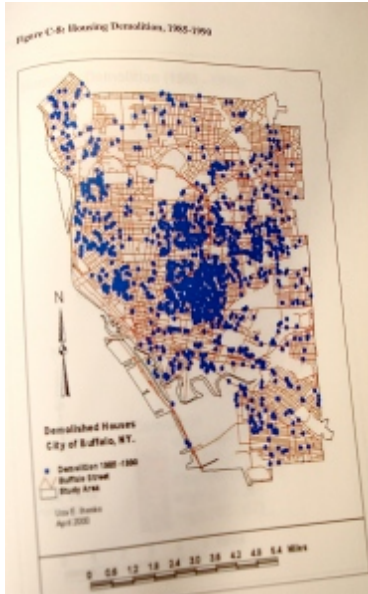


What they left behind.

The exodus coincided with several important historical events, one being an explosion in Buffalo's African American population. Between 1940 and 1970, Taylor says, the number of black residents in the city rocketed from 17,000 to more than 100,000. Much of that increase resulted from the Second Great Migration — the mass migration of African Americans from the country's South to urban areas in the industrialized North, Midwest and West. Many blacks who settled in Buffalo were former agricultural workers who had lost their jobs as the mechanical cotton picker reduced the need for

farmhands in such states as Mississippi and Tennessee.

These economic migrants arrived in Buffalo at a time when urban renewal projects were pushing African Americans out of their traditional neighborhoods — which had been ethnically integrated — and into sectors of the city that whites were vacating. Thousands of these displaced people, many very poor, made their way into Broadway-Fillmore starting in the late 1960s, drawn by low rents, Taylor says.



A map of demolitions between 1985 and 1990.

Despite this influx, many abandoned homes remained vacant. Factories that once employed East Side laborers were closing. The [last train](#) departed from the Central Terminal on Oct. 28, 1979. The neighborhood’s population dwindled, and its new residents did not have the spending power to support all of the area’s businesses, so many closed. In an effort to reduce blight, the city began demolishing empty homes. Arson took others, leaving behind a patchwork of trash-ridden urban prairie.

Despite this depressing picture, community groups including [Broadway-Fillmore Alive](#) and the Central Terminal Restoration Corporation are promoting historical preservation and the neighborhood’s rebirth. [Planned events for 2010](#) at the old railroad station include a train show and autumn picnic. Thousands of partygoers packed the concourse for an April Dyngus Day celebration featuring live music, sausage, pierogi and beer.

Taylor says that in the past, Buffalo has not had the “innovative and creative thinkers” to revive its historical landmarks the way many other cities have: “Buffalo never figured that out, and they’re not close,” he says. Nevertheless, he believes the East Side has “not seen its last fine days.” The best plans for revitalization, he says, will focus on improving the fabric of a neighborhood — the housing, the commerce and the schools — and not just on developing a single resource. In his opinion, the East Side’s decline

happened because of “a series of choices and decisions” that politicians and citizens made.

“We did this,” Taylor says. “We chose this,. And as a consequence, we have a chance to make a better decision, to make better choices...We’ve got a chance to fix it and a chance to make it better, so that’s our destiny. And that’s why I like it.”



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