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DREAMS DEFERRED: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF KINLOCH, MISSOURI

Billie Mandelbaum

Mentor: Iver Bernstein

Kinloch, Missouri is an all-black suburb located 12 miles northwest of downtown St. Louis. In 1948, Kinloch incorporated, becoming Missouri's first all-black city and the oldest politically independent African-American community west of the Mississippi River. Despite once being home to over 6,000 African Americans, today Kinloch is largely abandoned; its estimated population is 215 people. Kinloch's derelict appearance may seem like another eyesore on Metropolitan St. Louis' blighted landscape. However, as this thesis demonstrates, the story of Kinloch is not one of inevitable urban decay. Instead, I argue that racist politics and government policies spurred the development and destruction of one of America's few African-American suburbs. I trace Kinloch's history from its development as an all-white streetcar suburb in the late 1800s to its eventual demise in the 1980s as a result of a failed redevelopment plan associated with the expansion of Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. By analyzing primary source documents including early twentieth century real estate advertisements, archival newspaper articles, and government records, I illuminate how recurrent racism and discrimination came to create, maintain, and destroy Missouri's first all-black suburb. Following Kinloch's history from its development to its decline demonstrates how vulnerable black communities are to destruction, and how that destruction becomes naturalized.

Through this study, I seek to alter scholarly conceptions about American suburbs and the relationship between suburbanization and urban decline. Rather than accept conceptions about suburbs as being white, prosperous outgrowths of black, decaying urban cities, I demonstrate how the presumably "urban" issues of race, poverty, and even violence transformed the suburban landscape, thus subverting the urban-suburban dichotomy. While scholars have deemed the "suburbanization of poverty" and emergence of "suburban ghettos" to be relatively new demographic trends, the story of Kinloch suggests that this is not a new phenomenon. Although Kinloch is a disappearing city—its history largely erased from the public and academic record—valuable lessons for understanding contemporary metropolitan areas lie beneath the community's ruins.