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History

Tentative Title of Dissertation:

Asphalt politics in the Deep South, 1953 - 1980

Dissertation Abstract:

From 1953 to 1980, the creation of the Interstate Highway System allowed Southern communities to reimagine and reorient racial, spatial, and hierarchical arrangements. My dissertation focuses on how race influenced interstate route selections, as well as urban renewal targets. This study investigates how congressional, state, and local politicians, as well as transportation planners and bureaucrats, such as Alabama Highway Director and White Citizens Council chapter president Sam Engelhardt, Jr., were influenced by Jim Crow ideology in their route selections. In Huntsville, Alabama, the local NAACP allied with a conservation group protesting the same route through a wildlife refuge. By 1971, they were pleading for a reexamination of the interstate route approval process, since no one of color or from the impacted communities could participate in the 1950s route selection process. According to U.S. Census records and maps, African-Americans made up 14% of the total population of Huntsville, but more than 50% of the interstate route runs through the African-American westside neighborhoods. The two groups waged a decade-long grassroots campaign against the Alabama Highway Department, in response to tactics employed by the Highway Department to suppress minority participation in the approval process. "Asphalt Politics in the Deep South," reveals the complex and inconclusive nature of racial change during these transitional decades. While the Civil Rights Movement and legislation changed the South's racial landscape in fundamental ways, a close study of the Interstate Highway System reveals how racialized social engineering and urban planning would continue to shape urban communities across the South.