

1619 Project Day 5

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Students will be able to:

Analyze the legacy of slavery and racism seen in the creation of Chicago's highways.

## PDN: Image Analysis

**Directions: Analyze the images below. Then answer the questions that follow.**



Image Descriptions: These pictures are taken in the same place on the West Side of Chicago.

Left image: West Side neighborhood in 1939

Right Image: What that area looks like today.

1. What changes do you notice between the before and after pictures?

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2. THINK: How did this highway impact the neighborhood it was built in?

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## The Creation of Highways and Their Impact on Chicago

Today we are continuing our look about the legacy of slavery in Chicago by analyzing articles from the New York Times' 1619 Project. You may be thinking, "What does a road have to do with slavery?" Today we're going to look at how racism heavily influenced the creation of Chicago's highways

**Prompt: How is the legacy of slavery and racism seen in the creation of Chicago's highways?**

Rewrite prompt in your own words

Historical Thinking Skill



## Review: 1956 Interstate Highway Act Overview

**Directions:** Watch [Interstate Highway Act of 1956](#), and then answer the questions that follow.

**Notes:**

1. What was the purpose of the Interstate Highway Act?

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2. RECALL: What was the IMPACT of the Interstate Highway Act?

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**1619 Project Excerpt – “Traffic” by Kevin M. Kruse**

**Directions:** Read and annotate the following text from *The 1619 Project*. Then answer the questions.

**“Atlanta has some** of the worst traffic in the United States. Drivers there average two hours each week mired in gridlock, hung up at countless spots, from the constantly clogged Georgia 400 to a complicated cluster of overpasses at Tom Moreland Interchange, better known as “Spaghetti Junction.” The Downtown Connector — a 12-to-14-lane mega highway that in theory connects the city’s north to its south — regularly has three-mile-long traffic jams that last four hours or more. Commuters might assume they’re stuck there because some city planner made a mistake, but the heavy congestion actually stems from a great success. In Atlanta, as in dozens of cities across America, daily congestion is a direct consequence of a century-long effort to segregate the races.

For much of the nation’s history, the campaign to keep African-Americans “in their place” socially and politically manifested itself in an effort to keep them quite literally in one place or another. Before the Civil War, white masters kept enslaved African-Americans close at hand to coerce their labor and guard against revolts. But with the abolition of slavery, the spatial relationship was reversed. Once they had no need to keep constant watch over African-Americans, whites wanted them out of sight. Civic planners pushed them into ghettos, and the segregation we know today became the rule.

**This intertwined history** of infrastructure and racial inequality extended into the 1950s and 1960s with the creation of the Interstate highway system. The federal government shouldered nine-tenths of the cost of the new Interstate highways, but local officials often had a say in selecting the path. As in most American cities in the decades after the Second World War, the new highways in Atlanta — local expressways at first, then Interstates — were steered along routes that bulldozed “blighted” neighborhoods that housed its poorest residents, almost always racial minorities. This was a common practice not just in Southern cities like Jacksonville, Miami, Nashville, New Orleans, Richmond and Tampa, but in countless metropolises across the country, including Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Syracuse and Washington.

While Interstates were regularly used to destroy black neighborhoods, they were also used to keep black and white neighborhoods apart. Today, major roads and highways serve as stark dividing lines between black and white sections in cities like Buffalo, Hartford, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh and St. Louis. In Atlanta, the intent to segregate was crystal clear. Interstate 20, the east-west corridor that connects with I-75 and I-85 in Atlanta’s center, was deliberately plotted along a winding route in the late 1950s to serve, in the words of Mayor Bill Hartsfield, as “the boundary between the white and Negro communities” on the west side of town. Black neighborhoods, he hoped, would be hemmed in on one side of the new expressway, while white neighborhoods on the other side of it would be protected. Racial residential patterns have long since changed, of course, but the awkward path of I-20 remains in place.

By razing impoverished areas downtown and segregating the races in the western section, Atlanta’s leaders hoped to keep downtown and its surroundings a desirable locale for middle-class whites. Articulating a civic vision of racial peace and economic progress, Hartsfield bragged that Atlanta was the “City Too Busy to Hate.” But the so-called urban renewal and the new Interstates only helped speed white flight from Atlanta. Over the 1960s, roughly 60,000 whites left the city, with many of them relocating in the suburbs along the northern rim. When another 100,000 whites left the city in the 1970s, it became a local joke that Atlanta had become “The City Too Busy Moving to Hate.”

1. Which communities did many cities displace to create highways?

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2. Highways were initially created to help alleviate traffic within cities and connect the country. According to the author of the text, what other purpose do highways serve?

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“As the new suburbs ballooned in size, traffic along the poorly placed highways became worse and worse. The obvious solution was mass transit — buses, light rail and trains that would more efficiently link the suburbs and the city — but that, too, faced opposition, largely for racial reasons. The white suburbanites had purposefully left the problems of the central city behind and worried that mass transit would bring them back.

Accordingly, suburbanites waged a sustained campaign against the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) from its inception. Residents of the nearly all-white Cobb County resoundingly rejected the system in a 1965 vote. In 1971, Gwinnett and Clayton Counties, which were then also overwhelmingly white, followed suit, voting down a proposal to join MARTA by nearly 4-1 margins, and keeping MARTA out became the default position of many local politicians. . . David Chesnut, the white chairman of MARTA, insisted in 1987 that sub-urban opposition to mass transit had been “90 percent a racial issue.” Because of that resistance, MARTA became a city-only service that did little to relieve commuter traffic. By the mid-1980s, white racists were joking that MARTA, with its heavily black ridership, stood for “Moving Africans Rap- idly Through Atlanta.”

Even as the suburbs became more racially diverse, they remained opposed to MARTA. After Gwinnett voted the system down again in 1990, a former Republican legislator later marveled at the arguments given by opponents. “They will come up with 12 different ways of saying they are not racist in public,” he told a reporter. “But you get them alone, behind a closed door, and you see this old blatant racism that we have had here for quite some time.”

3. Why did some white people in Atlanta’s suburbs resist the creation of a public transit system?

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4. Based on the reading, how did racism shape the creation of highways? Cite one piece of evidence to support your answer.

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## “Displaced: When the Eisenhower Expressway Moved in, Who Was Forced Out?” by Robert Loerzel

“If you live in Chicago and you drive a car, you’ve probably been stuck in traffic on the Eisenhower Expressway. Oak Park resident Jillian Zarlenga sure has. ‘I spent a great deal of time on the Eisenhower inching towards the Harlem Avenue exit’ she says.

Sitting in traffic jams gave Jillian time to think — especially when she was working as a United Church of Christ chaplain at Elmhurst Hospital. ‘I had a lot of time sitting on the Eisenhower examining this huge area of land, thinking there must have been a lot of people that lived here before, and I was just curious where they all went,’ she says. She also wondered about all of the buildings that were torn down. What was lost? These musings prompted her to pose this question to Curious City: ***‘What happened to the people displaced by the Eisenhower Expressway?’***

It’s a good question, and it gets even better when you add up some of the basic details surrounding the Eisenhower (or the Ike, or I-290, if you’re so inclined), which runs almost due west from Chicago’s Loop out to Oak Park and beyond.

For example, the Eisenhower — built between 1949 and 1961 at a cost of \$183 million — displaced an estimated 13,000 people and forced out more than 400 businesses in Chicago alone. Who were these people, indeed?

And, another reason to look at the Ike: It was the first superhighway in the heart of Chicago. However, by the 1960s — after more expressways were built, more neighborhoods were torn up, and traffic stayed as terrible as it was before — grassroots groups began fighting against these projects and even managed to kill one off.

But first, why was the Eisenhower built at all?

The traffic in Chicago was so bad that people were desperate for a solution. In the 1920s and ’30s, more and more cars were filling the streets. ‘Cars really overwhelm the city — not just Chicago, but everywhere,’ says David Spatz, a scholar in residence at the Newberry Library who’s writing a book on the history of Chicago’s expressways. ‘Many community groups are demanding expressways because traffic is really dangerous and unmanageable.’

The interstate highway system didn’t exist yet, but planners across the country envisioned superhighways without any stop signs or traffic lights to slow down cars. In 1940, the Chicago City Council approved plans for a local system of superhighways. Traffic was worst on the West Side, Spatz says, so that’s where the highway builders started first.”

1. Why was the Eisenhower built?

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“All of this was happening at a time when city officials were trying to get rid of dilapidated and unsightly buildings. ‘Expressways were seen as a way to kill two birds with one stone — to modernize the city by retrofitting it for cars and for traffic,’ Spatz says. ‘And at the same time, clear out neighborhoods that were blighted.’ Of course, it was questionable which buildings and neighborhoods qualified as ‘blighted.’

‘It’s something that’s used sometimes for nefarious purposes,’ Spatz says. ‘It makes eminent domain easier. And certainly the people living there contested the idea.’

In the late 1940s, the Oak Leaves newspaper in Oak Park predicted that the new superhighway would replace the West Side’s ‘appalling slums’ with ‘orderly dwellings where orderly people are living in health and comfort.’

As the city began clearing the path for the Congress Street Expressway, the first neighborhood hit with demolition was the Near West Side. Here’s how the *Chicago Tribune* described the area in 1949, the year construction started:

*‘Today it harbors a haphazard mixture of industries and residences. ... Nearly half its families have lived there more than a generation and in homes built for the most part before 1900. ... Today the community population of 50,000 includes chiefly persons of Italian, Mexican, Greek, Jewish, and Negro ancestry.’*

- Chicago Tribune, 1949

Of all the neighborhoods that the expressway sliced through, the Near West Side had the largest population of blacks in 1950. Nearly 40 percent of its people were African-American.”

2. THINK: What is the author suggesting when they said: “Of course, it was questionable which buildings and neighborhoods qualified as “blighted.”?

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Near West Side, Chicago, 1947. (Courtesy University of Chicago Photographic Archive. Mildred Mead Photographs, apf2-09597)

“Jim O’Neil, who lived at 1623 W. Van Buren St. when he was a boy in the 1940s, fondly recalls a Mexican-American pal and some African-American girls who played with his sister. The Near West Side was one of those places officials called ‘blighted.’ But O’Neil didn’t think of it that way. ‘I don’t think our building was run-down,’ he says. And after looking recently at old photos of the neighborhood, he says, ‘It certainly does not look run-down to me.’

In February 1949, city housing coordinator D.E. Mackleemann said some people in the neighborhood simply didn't believe that the highway would actually get built. 'One man forced us to get an eviction order from the court because he said he had been reading about superhighways for years and thought the whole thing was a dream,' Mackleemann told the *Tribune*. 'In several instances residents paid no attention until the buildings next door were being torn down.'

Jim O'Neil's family moved to Chicago's South Side and he lost touch with everyone he'd known in the old neighborhood.



The city ran relocation offices to help people move, but that wasn't always an easy task. The country was in the midst of a housing shortage in the years after World War II. Some people whose homes were demolished on the Near West Side 'were glad to find newer and better surroundings, but the housing shortage has made it a tough job,' the *Tribune* reported.

Some property owners fought in court to get more money for their buildings and land. 'Most settled for a negotiated price,' says Spatz, who has examined about 1,000 of these court cases. 'You really can't fight eminent domain.'

Some people followed their ethnic groups to different enclaves around the city and suburbs. For example, Mexican-Americans on the Near West Side ended up in Pilsen and Little Village.

The people displaced by the expressway included residents of the Near West Side's Greektown and Little Italy sections.

'There was a tight-knit Greek community,' says Harry Lalagos, who was born in 1944 and lived at 642 S. Blue Island Ave.

'Everybody knew everybody, and everybody had cousins and relatives that all lived in the same area. ... My dad had a store down there, a grocery store and a restaurant.'

'Our doors were always open,' says Harry's younger sister, Demetra Lalagos. 'People were just popping in and out. ... Everybody got along.'

3. What impact did the Eisenhower Expressway have on the communities that it displaced?

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“But then came the expressway. ‘I remember the construction equipment digging down and putting in the overpasses,’ Harry says. ‘If you were standing on the Halsted Street overpass and looking west, you would see the overpasses at Morgan Street and Racine, but it was just all dirt. And every one of the underpasses would flood from the rain. ... We’d build a raft and just float around in there.’

The expressway project continued to the west, disrupting the East Garfield Park, West Garfield Park and Austin neighborhoods. It ran through a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in West Garfield Park. ‘Its construction was a physical manifestation of Jewish Chicagoans’ political powerlessness,’ historian Beryl Satter writes in her 2009 book *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America*. Satter’s father was a civil-rights attorney who crusaded for black families victimized by real-estate speculators.

‘It sliced the neighborhood in two and essentially destroyed it,’ she writes. ‘Routines that had marked daily life were now impossible. The walk to the newsstand for the Sunday morning paper? Forget it; what used to be a peaceful stroll now entailed crossing eight lanes of traffic. The corner tailor? Gone. The baker? Out of business.’



The intersection of Central and Lake Streets in Chicago's Austin neighborhood, 1929. (Courtesy Chicago History Museum, DN-0088475)

‘I do remember people saying that this was destroying the neighborhood — that it was tearing the heart out of the neighborhood,’ Satter says. ‘It demoralized people to have it built there that way. ... It disfigured the neighborhood.’

The Satters moved out in 1956, heading to the South Side. Many of their neighbors moved north to other Jewish enclaves — including West Rogers Park along Devon Avenue.”

4. What impact did the Eisenhower Expressway have on the black communities on the West Side of Chicago?

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1619 Project Day 4  
Date:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Students will be able to:  
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**Exit Ticket**

**In 3-5 sentences, answer the prompt for today. Be sure to include evidence from the texts you read today.**

**Prompt: How is the legacy of slavery and racism seen in the creation of Chicago’s highways?**

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