

University of North Carolina at Asheville

The Negro Has Been Served Skunk on a Platter for So Long Half Dressed,
It Is Time Now, For Him to be Served Steak:
The Rent Strikes in Asheville's Public Housing Communities—December 1967 to March 1968

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the Department of History
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts in History

by
Rachel Ann Allred—4792

Asheville, North Carolina
20 November 2007

The Negro has been served Skunk on a platter for so long half dressed, it is time now, for him to be served Steak.

We're coming but our head ain't bending low, we're walking proud and talking loud, because we're the new BLACK JOES.¹

This statement, issued by the Hillcrest Tenants' Association, reflected the spirit of the black community in Asheville from December 1967 to March 1968. Faced with indignities and a social milieu that was designed to keep them down at every turn, a group of dedicated public housing tenants sought to reconfigure the world in which they lived. These tenants withheld their rents for three months with great success—their demands were met at both the local and federal level. In the process, their actions spurred counter protests and brought much of Asheville's racial tensions to a head, but without violence. They were rooted in grassroots ideas which are best described as aligning with black power—an ideology that stressed African Americans having a say in determining their futures.

Charles Tilly, a sociologist, in his essay “From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements” defined a social movement as “a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of repeated public displays of that population's worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment.”² He sets up an equation to measure a movement's strength as “strength = worthiness X unity X numbers X commitment. If any of these values falls to zero, strength likewise falls to zero.”³ Their success depended upon the fact that their movement was worthy, unified, had a strong following and was committed. Their claims were specific and legitimate and in the chaos of life in Asheville during those four months of the strike the idea of black determinism was worthy enough to draw

1 “The 34,” Hillcrest Community Organization, manuscript folder 30, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

2 Charles Tilly, “From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements,” in *How Social Movements Matter*, ed. Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam and Charles Tilly (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 257.

3 *Ibid.*, 260.

commitment from a strong minority of public housing tenants. The striking tenants displayed strength in each of these four areas and saw their aims met.

Scholars in any field have not yet studied the rent strikes in Asheville's public housing. A public housing rent strike was undertaken in Chicago a few months before the Asheville strike, as explained below, but even this strike has not been exhaustively studied. Because of this, corroborating secondary research must be obtained by piecing together the treatment of different topics in various fields of social science—particularly history, economics and sociology. The additional topics researched include the racial histories of North Carolina and Asheville, the spread of urban renewal through Great Society projects and the black power movement in the context of the greater civil rights movement.

Harry Brill explored the Chicago rent strike in *Why Organizers Fail: The Story of a Rent Strike*. This work explored the strike organized by the Neighborhood Action Committee, a local, grassroots, radical, black power organization, in 1967. Brill accounted for the failure of this strike with the fact that with the departure from community-driven values, the strike was no longer seen as worthy by the tenants themselves and unity in the movement was lost. Asheville's strike touched on black power ideas, but such radical practices were never adopted in Asheville like they were by strike leaders in Chicago.

The lack of extreme and radical black power ideology in Asheville can be attributed to a certain extent to North Carolina's racial history. As described in Crow, Escott and Hatley's *A History of African Americans in North Carolina* and Ready's *Asheville: Land of the Sky* and *The Tar Heel State: A History of North Carolina*, North Carolinians did not experience the worst of Jim Crow as seen in Mississippi or Alabama, nor did North Carolina have large urban centers teeming with restless, disenfranchised ghetto populations. That is not to say that things were not bad in the Tar Heel State as far as race relations go—indeed, many famous events of the civil

rights movement such as the Greensboro sit-ins took place in North Carolina to protest the existing conditions. Still, without a large urban center, and in it a ghetto created by white institutions, the radicalism of the black power movement did not catch on as quickly.

Black power in its essence as a separatist, grassroots movement was present in the state and in Asheville, however. Jeffrey Ogbar, in *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, defined black power as “group consciousness among black people and the belief that they, independent of whites, can achieve liberation by the creation and maintenance of black institutions to serve the best interests of black people.”⁴ This basic definition was supplemented by Peniel Joseph in *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*, with the remark “in a premulticultural age where race shaped hope, opportunity and identity, Black Power provided new words, images and politics.”⁵ In “NAACP, Black Power and the African American Freedom Struggle: 1966-1969,” Simon Hall agreed with Clayborne Carson when he stated that “much of the NAACP's hostility toward "Black Power" during 1966-1967 stemmed from concerns over image rather than disputes over ideology.”⁶ These historians agree that many so-called “mainstream” organizations believed in black self-determination, but did not wish to ally themselves with radical or violent imagery that the media often associated with more “radical” black power-inspired groups such as the Black Panther Party.

This ideological shift to black power in the late 1960s flowed out of the struggles, successes and failings of the civil rights movement. Robert Weisbrot in *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* attributed the shift to “the persistence of prejudice,

4 Jeffrey Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 3.

5 Peniel, Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 14.

6 Simon Hall, “NAACP, Black Power and the African American Freedom Struggle: 1966-1969,” *The Historian* 69, no. 1 (2007): 49.

poverty, and ghetto slums, [that] exposed deeper barriers to equality that impelled many blacks to question not only the courage and consistency of white liberals but also the core values of liberal belief.”⁷ Kim Lacy Rogers in “Oral History and the History of the Civil Rights Movement,” urge[d] the use of oral histories from movement participants to avoid a “great man” telling of history and to show the “movement’s real consequences—a transformed black political consciousness, the increased political efficacy of...movement participants and expanded opportunities and possibilities for all black Americans.”⁸ These ideas of self-determination and black power were used by the strikers to rally unity and to prove the worthiness of their undertaking.

The study of social movements, such as the black power movement or the neighborhood organizations that carried out the rent strikes, was undertaken by a group of sociologists in *How Social Movements Matter*. They were attempting to define whether disruptive or moderate movements had a greater effect on implementing changes in society. Their conclusion, drawing on many comparative models, was that “violent strikes were less successful than peaceful ones.”⁹ Charles Tilly, in his essay “From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements” concluded that “the distinguishing feature of social movements lie in sustained challenges to authorities and responses by those authorities, during which at least one challenger publicly displays WUNC: worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment.”¹⁰

Peter Kivisto, in his article “A Historical Review of Changes in the Public Housing Policies and Their Effects on Minorities” sought to place the events of this time period into their appropriate historical context during the Great Society period. Kivisto was trained as a political scientist, but in this essay he placed the creation of public housing in its historical context.

7 Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Norton, 1991), 1.

8 Kim Lacy Rogers, “Oral History and the History of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 2 (1988): 567.

9 Giugni, et al., *How Social Movements Matter*, 17.

10 Ibid., 260.

Kivisto argued that the Great Society policies were the logical end of New Deal policies and that it was inevitable that public housing would be the focus of the country in the late 1960s. *In American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton argued that American blacks were put into ghettos through these New Deal policies. They tracked the residential patterns of blacks over two centuries and conclude that African Americans have been systematically separated from other racial groups. The climate of the 1960s as described by these authors was another tool in establishing the worthiness of the strikers' claims—it was as if the entire country had an eye toward their problems.

Housing Segregation in Suburban America since 1960: Presidential and Judicial Politics was written by Charles M. Lamb, a political scientist, but focused on the legal history of public housing. He also discussed the urban renewal projects going on across the country and how they connected to public housing projects. One work that delved into the economic forces driving urban renewal is *Segregation in Federally Subsidized Low-Income Housing in the United States*. This book, written by economists, explained the effects of urban renewal on minority populations and the effects shared many similarities to what happened in Asheville in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The authors maintained that, “early federal housing programs facilitated the relocation of low-income families and individuals from areas in or near business districts and thus contributed to the redevelopment of the central city.”¹¹ This was exactly what happened in Asheville under the East Riverside Urban Renewal Project.

Bickford and Massey in “Segregation in the Second Ghetto: Racial and Ethnic Segregation in American Public Housing, 1977” examined, over the course of decades, the connections between dwelling-styles and race. They found that subsidized homes or homes for

11 Modibo Coulibaly, Rodney Green and David James, *Segregation in Federally Subsidized Low Income Housing in the United States* (Westport: Praeger, 1998), 33.

the elderly were normally occupied by white tenants, whereas single-family or authority-owned homes were most occupied by minorities. In Asheville, all new construction in the years leading up to the strike in the field of public housing was apartments for the white elderly.

Peter Dreier in his article “The Status of Tenants in the United States” explored the idea that the disenfranchisement of tenants has as much to do with tenancy as it does with race and class. He attempted to tease out the underlying assumptions of home-owners in regards to tenants of all class levels and argued that simply being a tenant, regardless of your race or class, removed you somewhat from the political process and lessened your power in the community.

These issues and concerns built the environment of the Asheville rent strike. As local and national attention turned to the evolution of the civil rights movement and policies concerning public housing and urban renewal, the stage was set for the strike undertaken by a small group of Asheville tenants to be seen as worthy by the city of Asheville and the strikers themselves.

The summer of 1967 was, in many parts of the country, violent and uncertain. Non-violent strategies in the civil rights movement were continually becoming less attractive in an environment of continued strong anger and hatred. The anger that was felt among many African Americans across the nation was also bubbling up in the city of Asheville. In August 1967, Ora Spaid, Executive Director of the Opportunity Corporation of Madison-Buncombe Counties, wrote to Reverend Allen Gardner of the First Presbyterian Church in Asheville. In this letter he spoke of the tension that had beset Asheville in the previous weeks:

As you know, our community has been torn with tension in recent days. This is clearly an overlay of national attention given to the race riots in some 27 major cities...A wall of distrust has gone up between Negro and white. Whites seem to look apprehensively at our Negro neighborhood as if they are about to explode. Negroes, who earlier had no cause to do so, now regard whites with suspicion...It seems to me that it is time for the expression of some gesture of trust and reconciliation between the races. I believe this should come from the white community, because it was the white community which withdrew from trust into fear of Negroes in our city...I can't help but feel that the white members of our city ought to appreciate the fact that the Negro members of the community did not

join the national tendency to violence.¹²

This letter was written the week after Asheville police officers had shot a young African American man who was being agitated by white teenagers from neighboring Haywood County. The black community did not riot in the streets as so many had feared, but tensions in the city were thick and palpable.

To add to the increasing tension in the city, the East Riverside Urban Renewal project had failed to pass during the April 1967 vote. This project was modeled after other urban renewal projects in the country and Mr. James Greer, executive director of the Redevelopment Commission for the city of Asheville stated that the urban renewal program would work by “abolishing slums and replacing them with a clean well-planned community. Clean housing breeds good health—children and adults. The people in this area would have an opportunity to grow mentally, spiritually, educationally and physically.”¹³ This project was also tied into the construction of the new city civic center to increase tourist money being spent in Asheville from across western North Carolina. It was heartily supported by the business leaders in Asheville—the group who would benefit most from an expanded business district and tourist revenues.

A small group of voters were convinced that urban renewal was what Asheville desperately needed at the time and the East Riverside Urban Renewal bond issue was brought up for another vote on December 5, 1967. The proposed urban renewal area covered 407 acres of land in an African American neighborhood and would come at a cost of \$2.9 million to the city of Asheville (\$1.4 million to come from the bonds being voted on in the referendum, while the remaining cost would be paid by the federal government). According to the pamphlet, *Facts about Urban Renewal for the People of East Riverside*, the land would be developed in the

12 Ora Spaid to A. Allen Gardner, August 10, 1967, manuscript folder 1, “A. Allen Gardner papers” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

13 Minutes of the Task Force on Urban Renewal—April 17, 1967, manuscript folder 25, “League of Women Voters Papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

following ways: “51 acres for public housing, 24 acres for parks, 14 acres for new and widened streets, 4 acres for non-profit institutions, 19 acres for private commercial use, 36 acres for private residences and 259 acres to be rehabilitated, not cleared.”¹⁴ The project was designed to benefit the business district of the city and was readily supported by many prominent business leaders as well as those citizens who simply wanted to see the area “cleaned up.” An editorial that ran in *The Asheville Citizen* after the bond failed to pass the first time urged citizens to “Consider the advantages. Then vote on the worth of the project—which is considerable—to the Asheville community...The important question before you will be...Do the citizens of Asheville want to clean up a slum?”¹⁵

The residents of the East Riverside area did not generally share this enthusiasm for the project however. Rev. Otis Dunn who lived in East Riverside commented on the situation by saying “We’d like to see houses built, rather than doing away with the church, with the neighborhood, with morality...we don’t want to be pushed out like dogs by Imperialism, Communism; where are the houses?”¹⁶ His response was typical of many African Americans in the area who felt that white voters were taking their neighborhood away. Mrs. Alleen Johnson, a resident of the area, said “some home owners in the area are so hostile regarding the recently-approved Urban Renewal project that they are ready to shoot the next white man who knocks on their door.”¹⁷ The community organizers who worked with the residents of the area described the feelings of many as:

14 Facts about Urban Renewal for the People of East Riverside—November 10, 1967, manuscript folder 22, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

15 The Negative Air is Unhealthy, unsigned editorial in *The Asheville Citizen*, undated, clippings file folder 1, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

16 Action Tabled on Housing Proposal, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, undated, manuscript folder 1, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

17 Anti-poverty Workers Ousted from Meeting, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, January 31, 1968, clippings file folder 3, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

Many people in the East Riverside area are currently upset by Urban Renewal. They know that housing is tight, and they wonder where the 705 families to be relocated will live. Many old people who own their own homes have no possibility of moving into a debt-free home. With incomes of \$40-50 a month, the only option appears to be public housing, where they will be tenants. To many people this is a distinct loss of freedom. Many cannot even afford public housing.¹⁸

Residents who were forced to leave the East Riverside area were encouraged to consider coming back by moving into the public housing to be constructed in the area. Carl Johnson, leader of the rent strike, charged that this program was not urban renewal, but rather slum relocation.¹⁹

Although many were angry about the way the urban renewal issue was being addressed, it did not mean that there were not definite and specific problems in the East Riverside area. The Model Cities application for the East Riverside area described the bleak living conditions.

Most often, life centers around the small gambling places and the homes where liquor is sold...Most of these decaying homes were built 60 years ago and were not well built then as evidenced by the failing structural members, crumbling foundations, high, uncertain porches and uneven siding...A small stream, usually called "Nasty Branch," winds through East Riverside and is currently a garbage dump, disposal area for raw sewage, breeding place for rats, mosquitoes, and the source of a terrible stench...There can be no doubt that the Model Neighborhood is a depressing place in which to live.²⁰

Also included in the East Riverside area were the two black housing projects which started the strike: Hillcrest and Lee Walker Heights. The context of the projects within the community was described as "Lee Walker Heights, built 20 years ago, is situated on a hill with only one access road. This hill is surrounded by businesses and residents are virtually cut off from any neighborhood contacts outside the project. Similarly, Hillcrest is situated on a hill and is an isolated ghetto within a ghetto."²¹ Both physically and psychologically removed public life, the tenants of these neighborhoods had to employ unconventional means to have their voices

18 Asheville Model Cities Program Application, "*Voices of Asheville: Robert Brunk Oral History*," D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

19 Robert Brunk, interview by author, September 24, 2007.

20 Asheville Model Cities Application.

21 Ibid.

heard by the governing authorities. This separation helped to fuel the unity of the movement.

According to Robert Brunk, Community Organizer with the Opportunity Corporation of Madison-Buncombe Counties, the conditions within the housing projects before the strike were steadily becoming worse in the months leading up to the strike. As tensions heated within the city concerning the urban renewal project, charges of corruption were being lobbied against the Housing Authority of the city of Asheville. Maintenance men were accused of stealing building materials and selling them to local contractors, thus leaving no materials with which to make desperately needed repairs to project units.²² The executive director of the Asheville Housing Authority, Philip Vaughn, repeatedly referred to residents of Hillcrest and Lee Walker Heights as “niggers” in public meetings.²³ In the face of such humiliation and corruption, the residents of Hillcrest Apartments voted on December 3, 1967 to start a rent strike to demand adequate maintenance procedures.

A manifesto was subsequently published by the Hillcrest Community Organization that outlined their stance:

Favorite pastimes of those in our community who would divide us, is to determine who the leaders are and decide who among us is responsible or irresponsible (by their standards).

Sometime before it gets hot, those know-it-alls better learn that a city like Asheville has leaders all over the place.

1. Each of us is a leader in some area—church, club, civic group, etc.
2. Each one of us can influence and therefore lead, guide or direct someone else, be he old, ignorant, young or uneducated.

We all want freedom, and now, for ourselves and our neighbors. We are sick and tired of our so-called friends, keeping their feet on our necks. Asking us to quit when we’re in great pain, suffering great indignities.

It is a pity that our so-called beat friends cannot understand that all of us do not think alike, talk alike, etc., but we do have one thing in common:

²² Robert Brunk, interview by author, September 24, 2007.

²³ Ibid.

“We are HUMAN and we want freedom.” Many of our so-called friends and X Negroes haven’t heard of the famous Whitney Young’s truism. That’s one where he advised the other people about this leadership deal and suggests they all, “should be careful in deciding for us who our leaders are.”

His classic remark that many of these leaders may not be college-trained, will likely say, “I is rich and I is poor;” but they’re leaders too, and you’d better believe it.

The Negro has been served Skunk on a platter for so long half dressed, it is time now, for him to be served Steak.

We’re coming but our head ain’t bending low, we’re walking proud and talking loud, because we’re the new BLACK JOES.

We’re coming but our head ain’t bending low, we’re walking proud and talking loud, because we’re the new BLACK JOES.²⁴

This manifesto was used as a touchstone among the citizens to prove their worthiness and to recruit greater numbers of strikers. The goals they shared with the community centered around maintenance and lease concerns, but among the tenants themselves the reasons for the strike were centered on racial concerns.

Robert Brunk described the mood in Asheville as one of racial unrest and that the cultural climate of the time was angry.²⁵ Citizens of Asheville, both black and white, were aware that changes were happening across the country and this mood aroused fear among black and white citizens. Unrest about housing authorities practices and criticism of the Housing Authority Board had been growing for weeks. In fact, two days after the rent strike began, threats were made against Dr. Joseph Schandler, chairman of the Asheville Housing Authority. It was reported in *The Asheville Citizen*: “Schandler, an optometrist, revealed that while he and his wife were away from home Thursday night, a high school girl acting as babysitter for the couple’s two children received a telephone call from a voice she believed to be a man’s. The caller threatened the life of himself and his wife.”²⁶ There were no formal leads or suspects and unrest around the

24 “The 34,” Hillcrest Tenants’ Organization.

25 Robert Brunk, interview by author, September 24, 2007.

26 AHA Chairman Quits; Rent Strike Growing, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, December 9, 1967, clippings

housing situation continued to grow.

Dr. Schandler submitted his resignation from the Board and charged the Opportunity Corporation with beginning the strike and contributing to the unrest in the community. “[The Opportunity Corporation] organized the tenants to complain without giving them sufficient guidance as to the proper channels to make their complaints known...Prior to the organization of the Opportunity Corporation we had a good relationship between the tenants and the authority.”²⁷ Vaughn, the executive director of the Authority, went as far as to say “Johnson [leader of the rent strike] has an expense account provided by the Opportunity Corporation and is paid to run here and there to find out how to create this type of difficulty.”²⁸

In reality, however, the Opportunity Corporation, a government-funded group to help facilitate community action and growth, had nothing to do with the start of the rent strike; in fact, Brunk, who worked with the strikers, was kicked out of the meeting where the strike was voted upon because he was white.²⁹ The tenants, and only the tenants, had decided to resort to extreme measures to have their demands heard. Because they carried no power in the city outside of their own communities, they had to create power for themselves using whatever means they had. The Housing Authority had very little money beyond rent money and so by withholding their rent they changed the power dynamic to ensure that they would be listened to. However, the strikers could have been easily evicted. To ensure support for their cause, the strikers had to define their demands as legitimate and specific and prove to the community and to other potential strikers that the movement was worthy.

The strikers’ first demands of better maintenance were given some, though not adequate, attention a few days after the strike began. Eleven additional maintenance men were hired and

file folder 2, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Robert Brunk, interviewed by Rachel Ann Allred, September 24, 2007.

ditching equipment was rented to help with the drainage problems at Hillcrest Apartments. This superficial show by the Housing Authority did not impress Carl Johnson, leader of the strike, however. “These men have been hired for three to six weeks. If this is merely a way of satisfying people as far as complaints are concerned, then we don’t regard this as any step toward getting what we are asking for.”³⁰

To ensure the success of the strike, they also had to convince other community leaders who held power of the worthiness of the movement. They found their legitimacy in the third-party analysis of their demands conducted by the Asheville Area Human Relations Council, a community organization that sought to end discrimination in housing. The Council toured Hillcrest Apartments on December 9th and met with Mr. Johnson and Mr. Brunk. On that date, Johnson and Brunk listed the complaints of the tenants as:

1. Poor maintenance throughout project
2. Drainage problem
3. Excessive utility bills
4. Garbage disposal bad—breeding ground for rats
5. Trouble with lease—can be terminated without notice.
6. Mr. Vaughn’s inattention to Grievance Committee
7. No advance notice of spraying—food therefore cannot be protected.
8. Maintenance men steal—help themselves to food. Have taken piggy bank.
9. Difference in rent between welfare recipients and workers. Workers have lower floor on rent scale.³¹

Both Mr. Johnson and Mr. Brunk stressed at this meeting that what tenants wanted, more than anything, was for the maintenance problems to be fixed.³² Consensus on some maintenance concerns was reached on December 15th. Their maintenance demands were seen as worthy and were taken seriously by the Housing Authority and the community. Spurred on by the success of

30 AHA to Employ 11 New People for Maintenance, article from The Asheville Citizen, December 7, 1967, clippings file folder 2, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

31 League of Women Voters Observer’s Report at Meeting of Housing Committee of Human Relations Council, January 1968, manuscript folder 18, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

32 Ibid.

their initial demands, the strikers began to expand what was worthy of being fixed beyond maintenance issues.

At a public meeting on December 19, the strikers testified to the fact that they could no longer stand the insults thrown at them by Mr. Vaughn and demanded his dismissal before the strike would end. The Human Relations Council heard the complaints of many tenants in regards to the disrespect of Vaughn. “One woman stated that she had been called a prostitute to her face... The tenants told of his objecting to the children sitting on their stoops playing cards in the evening. The parents would prefer their children to stay closer to home in the evening and they see nothing wrong with playing cards. They resent this restriction as infringement of their personal rights.”³³

Vaughn responded to the threat of the strikers’ demands by demanding that the Housing Authority guarantee a renewal of his contract with a pay raise. However, all of the members of the Housing Authority board thought that it was unwise to agree to such a demand during such a heated time in the city, although they were all quick to point out that they thought Vaughn was doing an excellent job.³⁴

The strikers also expanded their demands to end the strike to include a more constitutional lease. The dwelling lease for the Authority was the same one used throughout the south at the time and denied tenants’ the right to legal proceedings. Section V of the lease stated

If the tenant fails to comply with any of the provisions of this lease, it shall be automatically terminated and the Management shall have the right immediately to reenter the premises and remove all persons therefrom, and the Tenant hereby expressly waives all notice required therein or by law to terminate this lease and waives any and all legal proceedings to recover possession of said premises, and agrees that upon any such failure the Management may immediately reenter said premises and dispossess the Tenant without legal notice or the institution of any legal proceedings whatsoever.³⁵

33 Ibid.

34 AHA Lauds Vaughn's Work, Delays Pay Hike Approval, article from The Asheville Citizen, December 22, 1967, clippings file folder 2, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

35 Housing Authority of the City of Asheville Dwelling Lease, manuscript folder 28, “League of Women Voters

The strikers urged anyone who questioned what they were doing to read the Bill of Rights and then to read the Housing Authority lease.³⁶ Their demands for a new lease fell on deaf ears for a while, however, because the lease had to be fought on a national level because it was the standard lease for the Department of Housing and Urban Development at the time.

The strikers simply took this an opportunity to create national attention, however, and to demonstrate their commitment to the cause. They drafted letters to be sent to every Chamber of Commerce in the United States discussing the public housing situation in Asheville. The letters urged the Chambers to encourage the citizens of their town to not spend tourist dollars in Asheville until the situation improved. The strikers presented the letters to the Housing Authority board and threatened to mail them if demands were not met in a timely manner.³⁷ Still, the federal agents from Housing and Urban Development did not visit Asheville for another six weeks.

The worthiness of the movement was challenged as charges were lobbied at the Opportunity Corporation that they were instigating unrest in the area. W.L. Crisp, leader of the tenants' organization at the all-white public housing project, Pisgah View, claimed that "representatives of the Opportunity Corporation of Madison-Buncombe Counties had been agitating in the Pisgah View area...and Ora Spaid [executive director of Opportunity Corporation] told him personally that he better 'get on the bandwagon' with other groups protesting against the housing authority."³⁸ Crisp, however, had long-standing grievances with Ora Spaid and the Opportunity Corporation and sought to fight them at every turn. The Hillcrest Community Organization manifesto told the city who the real leaders were in the rent strike. "Favorite pastimes of those in our community who would divide us, is to determine who the

papers," D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

36 Robert Brunk, interview by author, September 24, 2007.

37 Robert Brunk, interview by author, September 24, 2007.

38 AHA Lauds Vaughn's Work, Delays Pay Hike Approval.

leaders are and decide who among us is responsible or irresponsible (by their standards).

Sometime before it gets hot, those know-it-alls better learn that a city like Asheville has leaders all over the place.”³⁹ Even as Crisp and others tried to say that the Opportunity Corporation was behind the strike and thus undermine the work of the strikers, the tenants chose to publicly announce their unity in the movement.

In late January 1968, the unified work of the strikers had achieved its first major success when strikers saw their first major demand met—Vaughn announced his resignation as executive director of the Housing Authority. At this same time, strikers also added to their demands that Dr. Schandler resign from the Board of Directors of the Housing Authority for not responding adequately to their demands. The Authority accepted Dr. Schandler’s resignation on January 31st and Vaughn’s on February 2nd. Having two demands met, the strikers dropped their previous demand for the resignation of Mrs. Magnolia Whiteside. Johnson explained, “She explained her position and said that in many of the things she did, she was just following orders. We felt after hearing her side that we could work with her and voted to drop this demand.”⁴⁰ Dr. Schandler denied that his or Vaughn’s resignation had anything to do with the demands of the strikers and he said it was unfortunate that the resignations came at a time when they “appeared to be the result of pressure from another group.”⁴¹ His statement, however, could not detract from the fact that anyone who tracked local news could see the connection between the strikers’ demands and the resignations.

Another challenge to the strikers appeared when the all-white public housing community, Pisgah View, announced a counter strike to protest Vaughn's resignation. W.L. Crisp, leader of

39 The 34.

40 AHA Accepts Director's Resignation, article from The Asheville Citizen, February 2, 1968, clippings file folder 3, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

41 Schandler Resigns; Don Moore is Named AHA Chairman, article from The Asheville Citizen, clippings file folder 3, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

the Pisgah View tenants' association, announced that 172 persons were participating in the strike, but Authority records indicate that only 27 tenants actually participated in the strike.^{42,43} Mrs. F.M. Elrod, a white home owner who lived near Pisgah View, announced at the Pisgah View meeting where the rent strike was voted upon that white property owners in the area had formed their own strike against paying their property taxes.⁴⁴

By this point, the city was awash with strikes and counter-strikes. The Pisgah View Tenants' Association strike sought to end the community's acknowledgment of the worthiness of the black strikers' demands. Crisp stated repeatedly that the problems found in Hillcrest and Lee Walker Heights did not happen in Pisgah View—a fact that, given the housing situation in Asheville at that time, was very unlikely.⁴⁵ The white tenants chose not to unite as under-served tenants with the black strikers, but rather reacted to the idea of the black strikers' determining outcomes in public policy. At this same time Crisp also announced his candidacy for Buncombe County commissioner and that he was running on a segregationist platform.⁴⁶

The worthiness of the strikes was challenged by black tenants within the public housing communities as well. When Vaughn resigned, two women who lived in the Hillcrest Apartments formed a petition with over 80 signatures of Hillcrest residents who wanted no part in the strike.⁴⁷ At Pisgah View, tenants were kicked out of tenants' association meetings simply because they were employees of the Opportunity Corporation. The tenants, all women, claimed they were simply interested in community matters at the meeting, but they were forced to stop

42 Anti-Poverty Workers Ousted from Meeting.

43 Negro Strikers Hold Firm, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, February 21, 1968, clippings file folder 3, "League of Women Voters papers," D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

44 Anti-Poverty Workers Ousted from Meeting.

45 Thoughts on a Tenants Council for Public Housing, C.H. Lindsley, February 26, 1968, manuscript folder 27, "League of Women Voters papers," D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

46 Rev. Crisp to Seek County Board Post, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, February 11, 1968, clippings file folder 3, "League of Women Voters papers," D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

47 AHA Accepts Director's Resignation.

taking notes and were not allowed to speak during the meeting.⁴⁸ An atmosphere of a witch hunt descended on Pisgah View to attempt to keep Opportunity Corporation leaders out, while in Lee Walker Heights and Hillcrest black tenants who did not support the strike came to be viewed at Uncle Toms.⁴⁹

At this same time, the strikers' commitment was tested when the Housing Authority warned all striking tenants to pay up or be evicted. In the chaos and confusion of January, no eviction papers had been signed against striking tenants. However, with some of the striking tenants' demands being met and the growing number of non-payments with the addition of the Pisgah View strike, the Authority warned strikers to "end their rent strikes so the board can get on with the job of dealing with their complaints."⁵⁰ Crisp commented that the statement "has been taken as a threat but this does not scare us at all. We are aware of our rights and have talked to an attorney."⁵¹ However, over half of the striking tenants at Pisgah View paid by the deadline.⁵²

The residents of Lee Walker Heights and Hillcrest, however, stayed committed to the strike and were not quick to pay. In a group statement they declared "the threat of legal proceedings does not invoke fear in any of us. We intend to stand firm until we are assured on paper that it will be profitable for us to end the strike."⁵³ They also restated that all unpaid rents were being deposited in a bank account so that accounts could be settled when the strike ended and that information concerning the strike had been forwarded to "Floyd McKissick, director of CORE and former resident of Asheville; Senator Robert Kennedy; Robert S. Weaver, Secretary

48 Anti-Poverty Workers Ousted from Meeting.

49 Robert Brunk, interview by author, September 24, 2007.

50 HUD Promises Aid in Improving Housing Projects Here, article from The Asheville Citizen, January 26, 1968, clippings file folder 3, "League of Women Voters papers," D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

51 Ibid.

52 Negro Strikers Hold Firm.

53 Ibid.

of HUD; Attorney General Ramsey Clark; President Johnson; and Vice President Humphrey.”⁵⁴

The strikers continued to publicize the worthiness of their demands, while still remaining unified and committed. Although their numbers were not large, they stuck together to enact change.

This unity and commitment paid off when in mid-February, groundwork was laid for ending the strikes when two federal officials, E.J. Moyle and John B. Sams, came up from the regional offices of the Housing Assistance Administration in Atlanta. Moyle “conceded that his office was derelict in not coming to Asheville sooner and talking with the Housing Authority about problems her. He promised to ‘lean over backwards’ to bring about a revision of the budget if needed to finance some of the more urgent projects.”⁵⁵ At the meeting, Sams brought with him a copy of the newly revised lease for the southeast that was much more constitutional than the one that the strikers were protesting against.

The federal agents were also made aware of the irregularities in bookkeeping at Hillcrest that resulted in fraudulent charges for tenants. This problem was seen by the Human Relations Council in December, but nothing had been done to fix it yet. “Dr. Lindsley and Mr. Dave were examining the financial records of Hillcrest and found what appears to be great laxness in crediting payments for utilities.”⁵⁶ Although no action was taken at the time, in June 1968 a federal auditor was sent to Asheville to straighten out the Authority's bookkeeping problems.

Johnson commented positively about the meeting and said that he thought the Hillcrest Tenants’ Association would now “give him authority to sit down and negotiate with the Housing Authority and I feel that after that meeting we will be able to end the rent strike.”⁵⁷ Robert Barbour, a member of the Housing Authority board, stated “I feel that the rent strike was not

54 Ibid.

55 Quick Action Pledged on Housing Problems, article from The Asheville Citizen, February 8, 1968, clippings file folder 3, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

56 League of Women Voters Observer's Report at Meeting of Housing Committee of Human Relations Council.

57 Quick Action Pledged on Housing Problems.

necessary for the tenants to get their complaints across to us. It was a device they used and it was effective. But we are all aware of the problems now and it is time to end it.”⁵⁸

The new Executive Director, W. Jennings Groome, “pledged to do all he could to correct tenant complaints.” At the public meeting where his appointment was announced this statement “drew applause from residents of Pisgah View Apartments, all white, but silence from Negroes, who live in Hillcrest Apartments and Lee Walker Heights.”⁵⁹ At the meeting, a member of the Housing Authority board, P.F. DeSaix, compared the tactics of the strikers to Hitler. Francis Coyle, head of the Interfaith Committee on Housing, protested the remark. “To liken the small upsurge of leadership in the housing projects with Hitler is invidious. If this is the kind of talk they’ve been getting, I’m surprised that there hasn’t been more than a rent strike.”⁶⁰ A Hillcrest tenant retorted to demands of the Authority that the strike was not necessary by saying “Our money got rid of Carl Vaughn. You need our money. We will not go off the rent strike until we have had our meeting and negotiation. Don’t try to make us look small because the newspaper is here tonight. They’re only going to print so much because there’s a big white hand up there telling them what to print and what not to print.”⁶¹ DeSaix’s remark only bolstered the legitimacy and worthiness of the strikers’ claims and, thus, the strength of the movement.

In the end, the worthiness and commitment shown by the strikers worked. On March 1 the Authority and leaders of the tenants’ associations met in a closed-door meeting to attempt to resolve the strike.⁶² By March 7, the Housing Authority had issued a “six-page typewritten

58 Housing Authority Warns Rent Strikers to Pay Up, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, February 15, 1968, clippings file folder 3, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

59 Housing Authority Hires New Director, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, February 27, 1968, clippings file folder 3, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

62 AHA, Tenants Silent After Meeting Here, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, March 3, 1968, clippings file folder 3, “League of Women Voters papers,” D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

report... of what it expects to do to improve conditions in each of the city's three housing projects."⁶³ It was also stated that tenants' council would be formed with the help of the Asheville Area Human Relations Council that would represent tenants from all three communities before the Authority board.

With the assurances of improvements on paper and the creation of a tenants' council the strikers paid their rents from their bank account. The months that followed brought many changes to Asheville. A federal auditor confirmed that the Housing Authority was guilty of bad management and bookkeeping in June when he turned up "imbalances in the books, inadequate record keeping, failure to take annual inventories, lack of control over funds, questionable architectural and legal fees and numerous violations of federal and local housing policies."⁶⁴ In August, *The Asheville Citizen* interviewed tenant leaders in each of the communities to see if conditions had improved. The consensus of community leaders was that conditions were steadily improving. Johnson commented "As far as I am concerned, the executive director is doing everything in his power to satisfy complaints that were raised during the rent strike. There are things the tenants wish could be done, but they realize the reason they haven't been done is lack of funds and that the Housing Authority is trying to obtain the needed funds."⁶⁵ The tenants had their demands met, but more importantly they reconfigured to some extent the power structure of public housing. The formation of a tenants' council gave a voice to the tenants so that they would not have to resort to extreme tactics to pull some power in their favor.

The rent strike led by African Americans in Asheville's public housing was successful

63 AHA Lists Improvements Planned at 3 Projects, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, March 7, 1968, clippings file folder 3, "League of Women Voters papers," D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

64 U.S. Auditor Says AHA Guilty of Bad Management, Bookkeeping, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, June 4, 1968, clippings file folder 3, "League of Women Voters papers," D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

65 Tenant Leaders Indicate Public Housing Conditions are Improving, article from *The Asheville Citizen*, August 4, 1968, clippings file folder 3, "League of Women Voters papers," D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina Asheville.

because of their display of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment. Their claims were worthy and legitimate. The leases were unconstitutional, Vaughn had repeatedly denounced them in public meetings and the conditions they complained about were confirmed by an independent inquiry by the Asheville Area Human Relations Council. Their unity was shown in their failure to back down as a group. They also grounded their movement in ideas of self-determination and excluded non-blacks from pivotal meetings and the strike itself. They had strong numbers and, although not a majority of the community participated in the strike, those who did showed strong commitment and did not back down until their demands were taken seriously at a local and federal level. Success in these four areas paved the way for a successful end to the strike that reconfigured leases on a federal level, ensured tenant participation in public decisions through the tenants' council, but most importantly, shifted some power in favor of the residents of "an isolated ghetto within a ghetto."⁶⁶

66 Asheville Model Cities Program Application.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

A. Allen Gardner Papers, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville 28804.

This collection focuses on the work of the Asheville Area Human Relations Council from 1962-1967. Most items focus on desegregation in and around the city of Asheville.

League of Women Voters of Asheville/Buncombe County Papers, D.H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville 28804.

This collection focuses on the League's work with many issues in western North Carolina including the rent strike, the Equal Rights Amendment and the clean-up of the French Broad River. Manuscript box 7 contains materials about the rent strike.

Voices of Asheville: Robert Brunk Oral History, D.H. Ramsey

Library, Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 28804.

Robert Brunk discusses the strike, his work with the Opportunity Corporation and the Model Cities program. Also included is Asheville's Model Cities applications (written by Brunk).

Robert Brunk, interview by author, September 24, 2007.

Robert Brunk discusses his role in the rent strike and the events surrounding the strike.

Secondary Sources:

Bickford, Adam and Douglas Massey, "Segregation in the Second Ghetto: Racial and Ethnic Segregation in American Public Housing, 1977," *Social Forces* 69, no. 4 (1991): 1011-1036.

This article looks at urban renewal policies and analyzes their effectiveness at slum relocation and the creation of a ghetto.

Brill, Harry. *Why Organizers Fail: The Story of a Rent Strike*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971.

Although this work is more than 30 years old, it is the only work that analyzes the Chicago rent strike. In it, the author discusses the failings of the strike and attributes them to the extreme radicalism of the strike organizers.

Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

This is a monograph that traces the narrative history of SNCC, but the last third of the book does a great job of recreating the history of the black power movement in the late 1960s across America.

Coulibaly, Modibo, Rodney Green and David James. *Segregation in Federally Subsidized Low Income Housing in the United States*. Westport: Praeger, 1998.

This work traces the historical underpinnings of segregation in public housing. It specifically focuses

on the problems of urban renewal as facilitating segregation and the creation of ghettos in America's cities.

Crow, Jeffrey, Paul Escott and Flora Hatley. *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*.

Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1992.

This work traces the long history of African Americans in North Carolina from colonial slavery through the modern civil rights movement.

Dreier, Peter, "The Status of Tenants in the United States," *Social Problems* 30, no. 2 (1982):179-198.

Dreier looks at the status of tenants, regardless of their race or class, and breaks down prejudices that are specific to tenants for being tenants.

Giugni, Marco, Doug McAdam and Charles Tilly, ed. *How Social Movements Matter*. Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

This collection of essays focuses on how and why social movements work. Movements are studied from across the world to reach broad generalizations about the success or failure of movements.

Hall, Simon, "NAACP, Black Power and the African American Freedom Struggle: 1966-1969," *The Historian* 69, no. 1 (2007): 49-82.

This essay traces the idea of black power within the NAACP and analyzes why the NAACP was reluctant to label their ideas as black power.

Joseph, Peniel. *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*. New

York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006.

This work is a narrative retelling of all of the black power movements in the 1960s and how they came together and split apart over the years.

Lamb, Charles. *Housing Segregation in Suburban America since 1960: Presidential and Judicial Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

This is a great work to capture the legal setting of the Great Society. Included are presidential memos, court decisions and analyses of legal battles and the White House's stance on them.

Massey, Douglas and Nancy Denton. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

This book is about the history of the Great Society period, but written with an eye toward the current housing situation. It also tells the story through the lens of economics, instead of sociology or history.

Momeni, Jamshid, ed. *Race, Ethnicity and Minority Housing in the United States*. Westport:

Greenwood Press, 1986.

The most helpful part of this collection for me is an essay by Peter Kivisto entitled "A Historical Review of the Changes in Public Housing Policies and Their Impacts on Minorities." This essay, historical in nature, outlines the major decisions affecting minority housing projects from the New Deal to the late 1970s.

Ogbar, Jeffrey. *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

This book traces the lasting effects of the black power movement on African American popular consciousness today.

Ready, Milton. *Asheville: Land of the Sky*. Northridge: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1986.

This is a basic history of Asheville from the arrival of Native Americans following the Ice Age to the present with one section on civil rights in Asheville (the rent strike is not mentioned).

Ready, Milton. *The Tar Heel State: A History of North Carolina*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005.

This book traces North Carolina's history from the arrival of Native Americans to the present. Asheville is mentioned briefly in the chapter on civil rights, but nothing is noted about the rent strike.

Rogers, Kim Lacy, "Oral History and the History of the Civil Rights Movement," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 2 (1988): 567-576.

This article analyzes the unique role of oral histories in re-telling events that are so close to our time that we get a limited, Great Man view of them.

Weisbrot, Robert. *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Norton, 1991.

This work chronicles the complex race relations of blacks and white working side by side throughout the civil rights movement. It covers the 1950s to the 1970s.