

**BLACK
ENCLAVES
ALONG THE
NORTH
CANADIAN
RIVER**

REDLINING

Redlining was nominally a practice of dividing a city (by drawing red lines on maps) to indicate the areas that posed the most and least risk to mortgage lenders per federal guidelines. In reality, the “riskiest” areas were almost always Black communities. Compounding this housing practice were covenant restrictions in new housing developments, excluding non-white residents from owning or renting property in a neighborhood.

The map to the left is from the 1940 Oklahoma City Plan and shows the concentration of non-white residents in the city.

As Oklahoma City grew after World War II, the white population moved to new suburban developments. Black residents had far fewer options and moved into areas deserted by white residents.

Walnut Grove was by far a majority-white area in 1920.

By 1950, it was almost entirely Black.

3. Property to be owned and used for residence purposes for white people only on blocks restricted to residence purposes. Except that the usual servants quarters may be used for colored servants.

Restriction from Thompson's Woodland Addition, 1929

This is a reversion clause in this dedication and upon the violation of said condition last above set out, the lot or lots and the improvements thereon shall immediately revert to the Company or its assigns and it shall be entitled to immediately re-enter and take possession of said lot or lots and the improvements thereon, provided however, this reverter shall not affect the lien of any mortgage or deed of trust placed on any lot in said addition prior to the violation of the restriction in this clause if the same is placed thereon in good faith and so long as such lien is not held or owned by and for a person of African descent, commonly known as a negro.

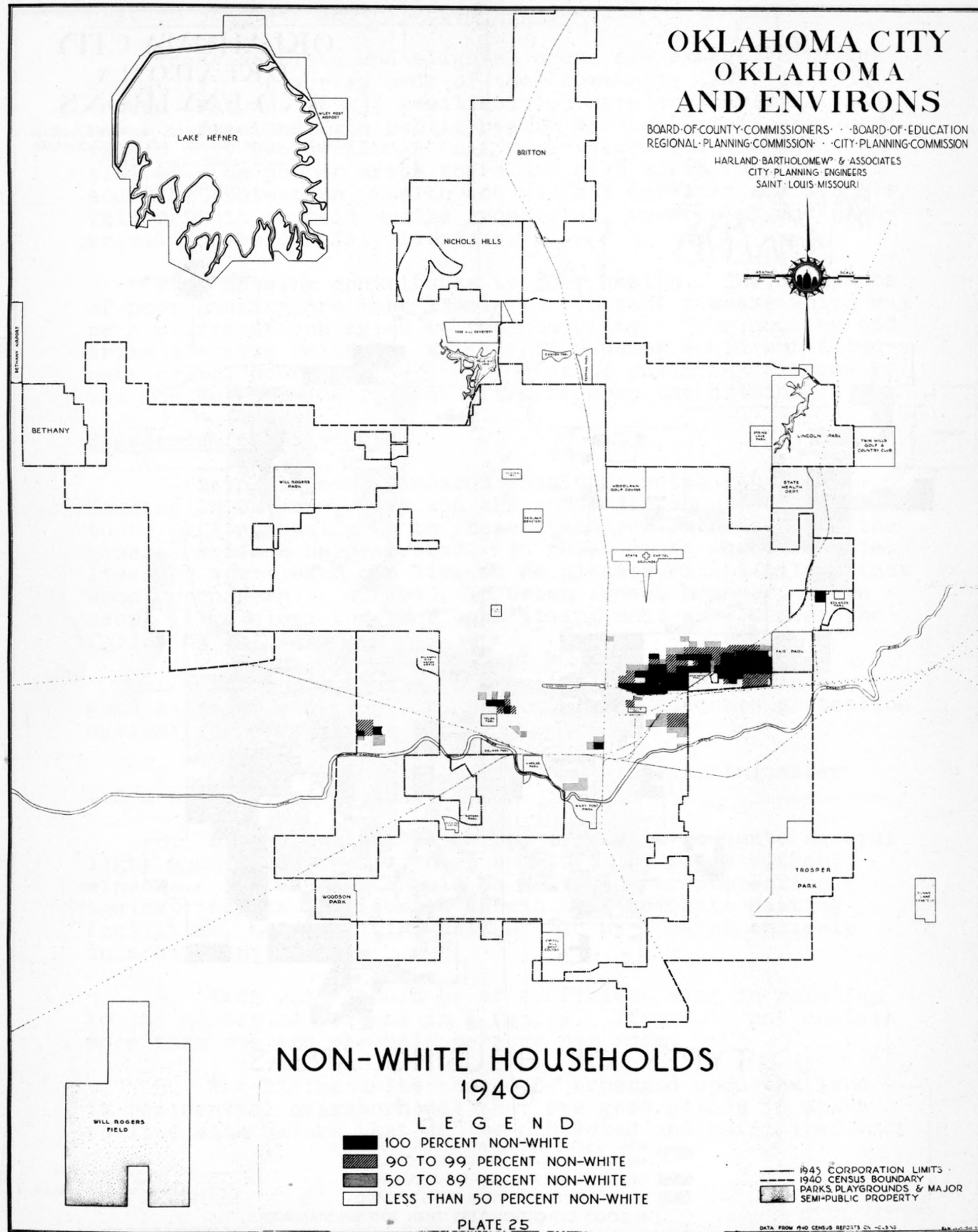
Provided, further any person not a Negro, who shall obtain a valid Sheriff's Deed to any lot in said addition under the foreclosure of the lien of mortgage described above and shall obtain rightful and lawful possession of said property under said Sheriff's Deed shall take the same free from any violation of this condition occurring prior to the sale under which said Sheriff's Deed is issued but shall, in all other, take same subject to this condition and right of reverter.

Restriction from Crown Heights Addition, 1938

OKLAHOMA CITY OKLAHOMA AND ENVIRONS

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS · BOARD OF EDUCATION
REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION · CITY PLANNING COMMISSION

HARLAND BARTHOLOMEW & ASSOCIATES
CITY PLANNING ENGINEERS
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI



from
*"The Comprehensive
 City Plan,"*
 Oklahoma Room
 Collection

SANDTOWN

WEST TOWN

SOUTH TOWN

WALNUT GROVE

Downtown looking W

“Aerial photo of the highway construction”

1964, Oklahoma Historical Society,

Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection

2012.201.OVZ001.9599



Carver (né Sandtown) Elementary c1960 (1)

May Ave.

Oklahoma has had Black towns and Black communities long before statehood. Perhaps the earliest one near Oklahoma City was Sandtown near May Ave and the river. These communities grew with the rest of the state after 1907. By 1915, Oklahoma City operated an elementary school in Sandtown, though the area wasn't annexed until 1930.

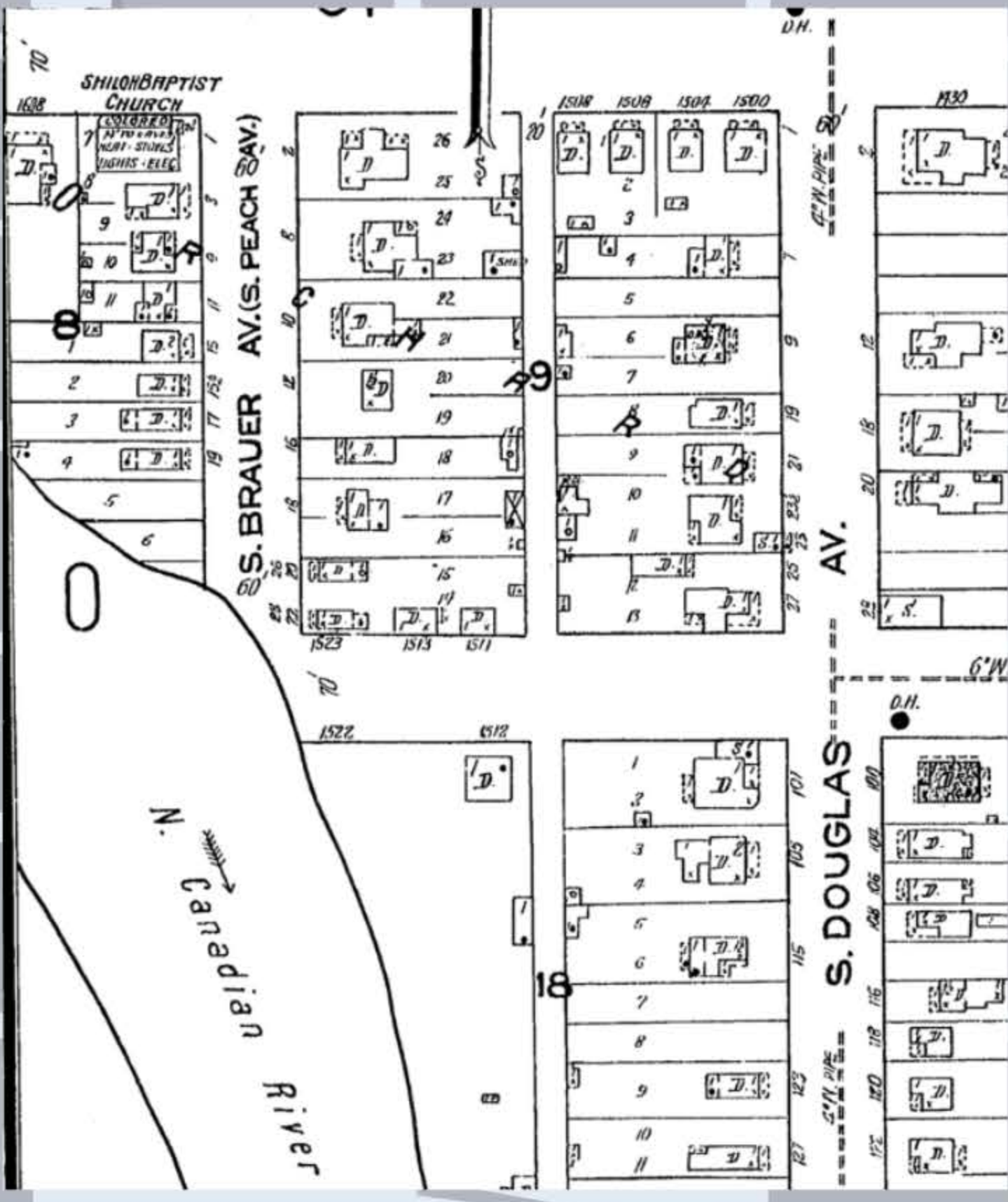
SANDTOWN

Reno Ave.



Crosstown grading looking East through Sandtown, 1965 (2)

WEST TOWN



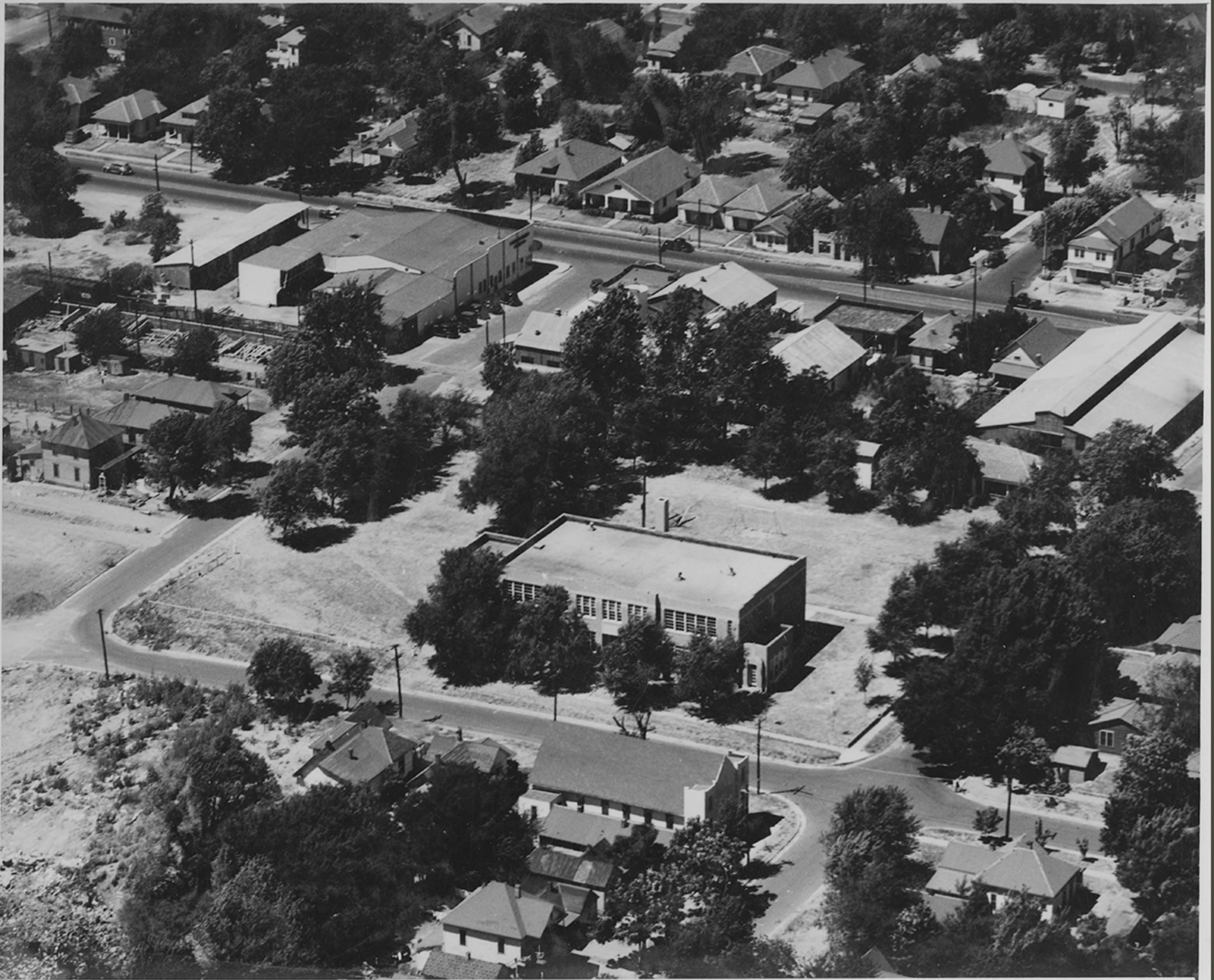
1922 Sanborn Insurance Map showing the proximity of the river to homes in West Town.



c 1923 (3)



Expressway construction crossing Western Avenue, 1963 (4)



Orchard Park School in West Town

c1940, Metropolitan Library System,

Oklahoma City Public Schools Board Collection

OKC.PS.095.01



Near West Main Street,
c1923, Metropolitan Library System,
John Dunning III Collection
DUN.2017.07.09.217

"I drove out West Main and saw all this, the water being right up to the pavement."

I drove out West
Main & saw all
this the water
being right up
to the pavement.

PLACE STAMP HERE
ADDRESS

D



Both c 1923 (5,6)



SOUTH TOWN

S. Shields Blvd.

Current River Path

The Robinson Rapids

c1923, Metropolitan Library System,
John Dunning III Collection DUN.2017.07.07.363

"I walked along here the other day and peeped in this house, still perched upon the pavement of S. Robinson. The water is now only about three feet lower."

I walked along here the other day & peeped in this house, still perched upon the pavement of S. Robinson. The water is now only about three feet lower.



N. Lincoln Blvd.



Walnut Grove After the Flood



Piles of Wreckage
Left by Flood on East Washington St.

Both c 1923 (7,8)

WALNUT GROVE



Elevated highway construction through Walnut Grove, 1963 (9)





For many reasons, including proximity to rail lines and oil fields, and because area residents had less economic power, storage of oil and industrial chemicals were held near Black enclaves. When flooded, these storage tanks could leak and contaminate the area.

Frisco Switch Near Walnut Grove

c1923, Metropolitan Library System,

John Dunning III Collection

DUN.2017.07.09.229



Bannaker School in Walnut Grove

**c1950, Metropolitan Library System,
Oklahoma City Public Schools Board Collection
OKC.PS.095.01**



Opening of Walnut Grove Booketeria

1949, Metropolitan Library System,
Public Library Collection

MLSPL0017

FAIRGROUNDS

NE 4th St

“What set the Fairground apart was there was a sense of community.” -JW Sanford

By the 1930s, 92% of Oklahoma City’s Black population lived in 112 contiguous blocks between Lincoln Boulevard and Eastern Avenue and NE 1st to 8th streets. An area called Fairgrounds (because it was near the site of the original State Fair) was the most eastern neighborhood. When the State Fairgrounds moved to the west side of the city, the historically Black high school Douglass moved to this location. It remains at this location today.



The path of the unchannelled North Canadian is clearly seen at the top of this photo from 1960. (10)

S. Eastern Ave.



WHY DON'T WE HAVE MORE PICTURES?

Most historical collections at institutions like museums and libraries come from organizations and companies and community history is often overlooked. MLS' Special Collections Department is actively working with Black-led organizations to document, record, and share stories from these enclaves.

Do you have a story to tell from your life?

We want to hear from you!

Sign up at bit.ly/MLS-BlackHistoryInterview

Email us at special.collections@metrolibrary.org

Or follow this QR code:



DO THESE ENCLAVES EXIST NOW?

Only the Fairgrounds area remains as a majority Black community. Walnut Grove does not exist at all, and the land has been reused for the Boathouse District. South Town is the location of Scissortail Park, and West Town and Sandtown have become industrial areas. While there are existing homes in many of these areas, the vibrant African-American communities are not intact. What led to these changes?

Changes in urban use and design took place across the country in the second half of the twentieth-century, and Oklahoma City was no exception. Urban Renewal efforts across Downtown OKC caused great disruption to commerce, traffic, and recreation in the city's core. Neighborhoods on the periphery of the projects became noisier, more congested, and lived with constant change from closed roads and demolition.

The US Interstate system had been under construction for decades across rural parts of the country. The portion of I-40 connecting roads east and west through Downtown began construction in the early 1960s. Land was acquired and cleared, then a multi-lane expressway rose from the red dirt. In January of 1966, the Stanley Draper Expressway, commonly called the Crosstown, opened. These photos show the Crosstown's path right through the river communities.

PHOTO CREDITS

1. "Carver Elementary", Metropolitan Library System, Oklahoma City Public Schools Board Collection, OKC.PS.017.01
2. "Aerial photo of construction path", Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection 2012.201.OVZ001.9603
3. "At Cleghorn & California St", Metropolitan Library System, John Dunning III Collection, DUN.2017.07.07.381
4. "Aerial photo of the expressway coming from the top right ", Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, 2012.201.OVZ001.9633
5. "In The Flooded District", Metropolitan Library System, John Dunning III Collection, DUN.2017.07.07.388
6. "Robinson St. 3 ft below High Water", Metropolitan Library System, John Dunning III Collection, DUN.2017.07.07.362
7. "Walnut Grove After the Flood", Metropolitan Library System, John Dunning III Collection, DUN.2017.07.07.371
8. "Piles of Wreckage Left by Flood on East Washington St.", Metropolitan Library System, John Dunning III Collection, DUN.2017.07.07.379
9. "Aerial photo of a highway's bridge's skelton over the railroad tracks", Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, 2012.201.OVZ001.9607
10. "Photo of an aerial view of Cato Oil Plant on NE 9th Street", Oklahoma Historical Society, Ray Jacoby Collection, 2055.19638

Oklahoma City was built around the North Canadian River from its earliest days. The river in 1900 looked very different from the channeled path it takes today. The river twisted around, taking the path of least resistance across the terrain. It was dense with vegetation and wildlife, routinely stunk, and often flooded. These posters show the original path of the river overlaid on today's street grid.

Let's learn more about how these Black enclaves grew in these areas and what happened to them over time.

West Town, South Town, and Walnut Grove share a similar story. The most centrally located enclaves, they originally were mixed-race residential neighborhoods for the working class. South Town in particular was large, and had vibrant Black, Czech and Hispanic communities. All these enclaves had housing, churches, stores, restaurants, and even factories. The areas also had multiple elementary schools to accommodate white and Black students during segregation.

The North Canadian River encroached on them at several points, and channeling the river changes the grid and feel of these neighborhoods dramatically.