

Marlowe Born Cohn

Dr. [Bob Bednar](#)– Roadside America

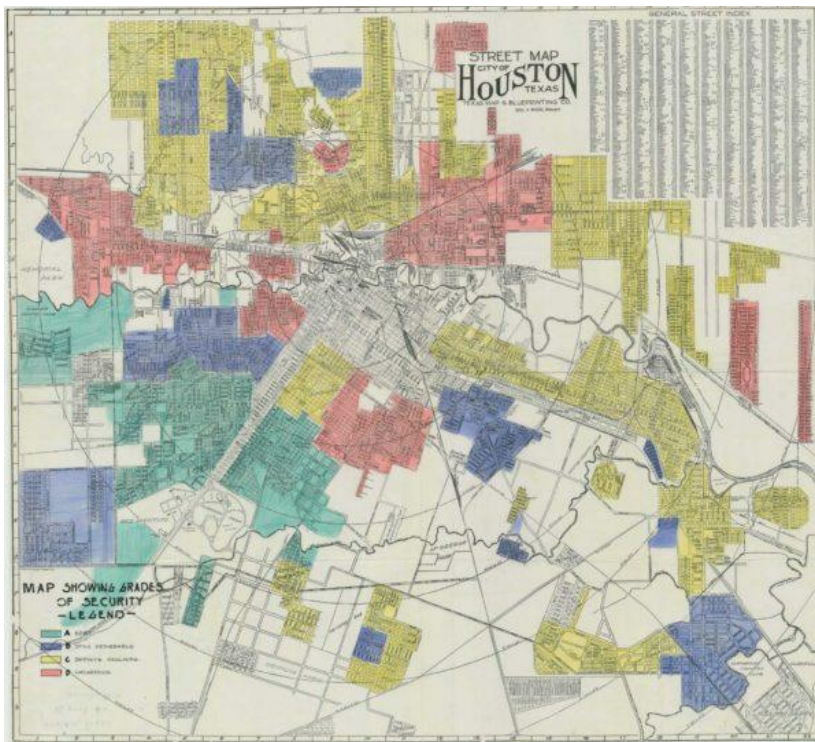
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Highway Redlining in Houston

In the 1920's and 30's, the city of Houston had a thriving, vibrant black communities, centered in the historic Third, Fourth, and Fifth wards, where black Americans owned businesses, and for a few decades, prospered, nestled in the relative of safety of the city in within the far less friendly swaths of rural Texas. Yet, in the present, there are only shadows of these once proud communities, many buried and paved over by the veritable tangle of highways and loops that make up modern day Houston. This was a targeted attempt to smother black prosperity, and combined with racist zoning laws, locked Houston's African American communities into cycles of poverty and disadvantage. These efforts had great and terrible effects on the existing neighborhoods and people and continues to affect people that live in this area to this day. How was this done, and how has it affected the former residents of these communities to this day?

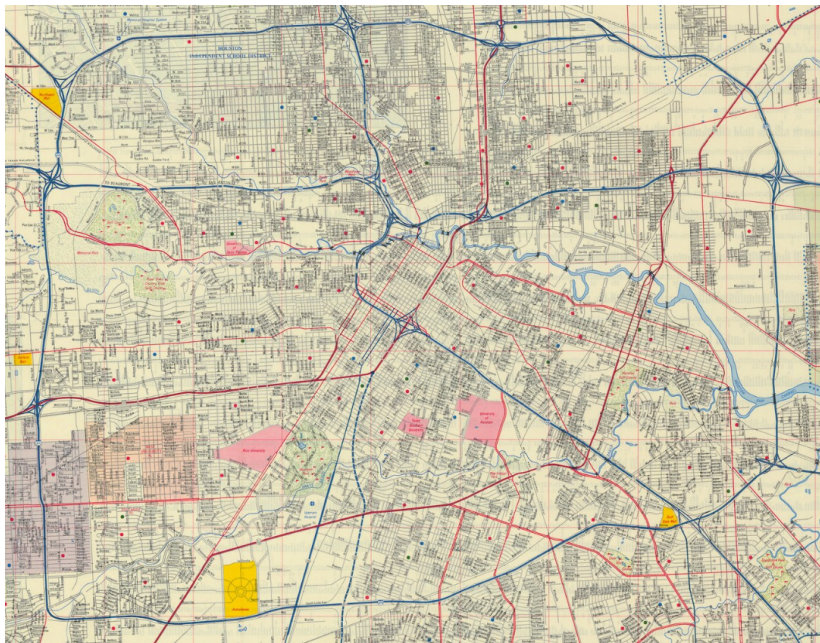
In the early twentieth century, Houston's African American community flourished, as it was an oasis of safety in the dangerous desert of racism and hostility in Texas. However, by the modern day, few businesses are owned by black owners. The ABC found data on the ownership of black businesses in Houston: "3,586 Black-owned businesses out of 108,772 total businesses in Houston. That's only 3.3% when Black Americans make up 17.2% of Houston's population (Nguyen)". Yet, a century ago, Houston was considered "the Harlem of the South for its...

bustling Black-owned businesses (Walker)”. What caused this decline of business? In the 1930’s, in the midst of the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt declared a New Deal, a plan to bring Americans out of the economic crisis. A critical portion of the New Deal was the construction of the interstate highways. While they were later connected and continued by President Eisenhower after the second World War, this plan began the groundwork for the highways that carved up many American cities, including Houston. But, at the time, there was no room in the cities for these new freeways. So there was the question of where the government should place these freeways? Around this time, many cities across the country were being zoned according to the percentage of non-white residents in various neighborhoods, rating these neighborhoods.



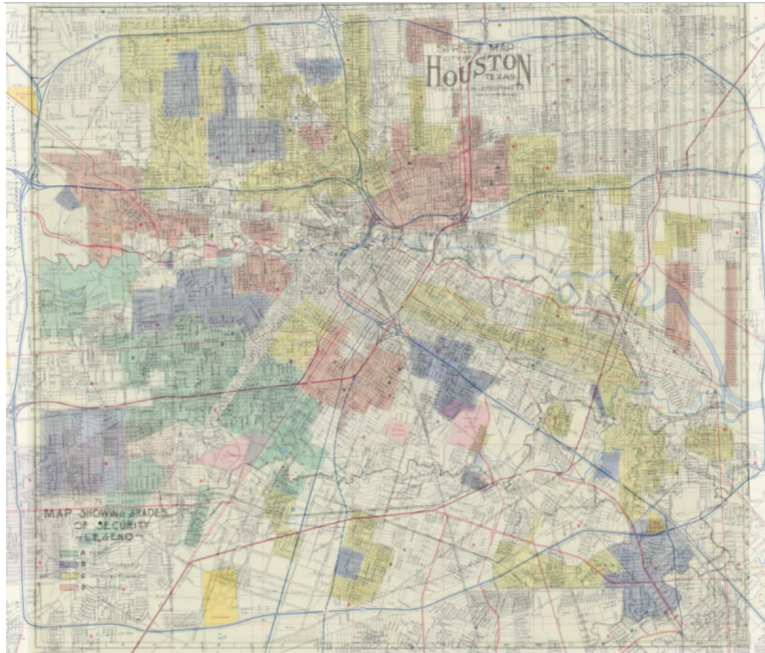
This period map was created to categorize the neighborhoods of Houston, based on the number of non-white residents. The green section is the highest ranked, followed by the blue, yellow, and red.

The 'A' neighborhoods were those with high proportions of white residents, while the 'D' neighborhoods were considered the worst by this metric and this metric alone. While for the people that lived there, these so-called hazardous neighborhoods were centers of culture and community, the people in power decided that there was nothing worth preserving- and they knew that the people there would not be able to fight their land being bulldozed and turned into the highways. (*find citation*). So, the leadership in Texas decided to place the highways in these redlined neighborhoods. While, for white residents, these highways brought connectivity to the greater world and ease of travel, they split black neighborhoods down the center, breaking apart cultural centers and destroying paving over black businesses. Ironically, the roads, the ultimate symbol of American freedom, crushed the dreams and social mobility of black Americans in Houston.



This road map, circa 1979, shows where the highways were constructed. State Highways are in blue and include the 610 loop and I-45, which cuts through the center of the loop. When these images are imposed on each other, an alarming trend appears: these roads, much of the time, go

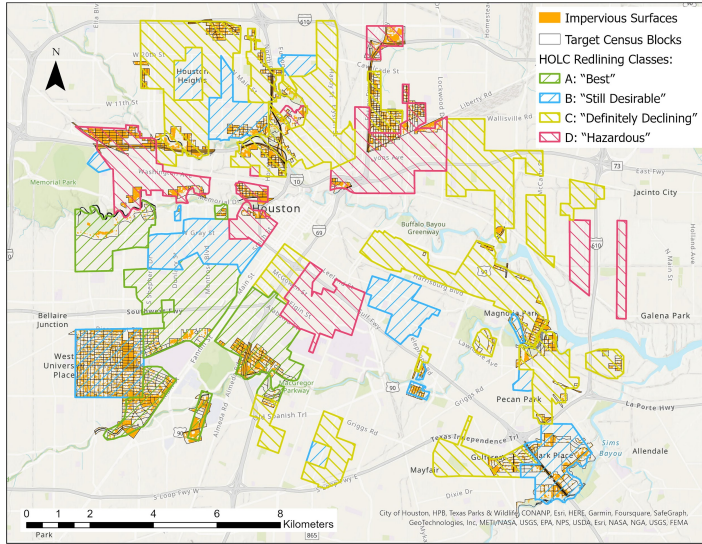
straight through red and yellow zones that are marked as less desirable due to their residents. The placement of these highways shows how black communities were often split by the highways.



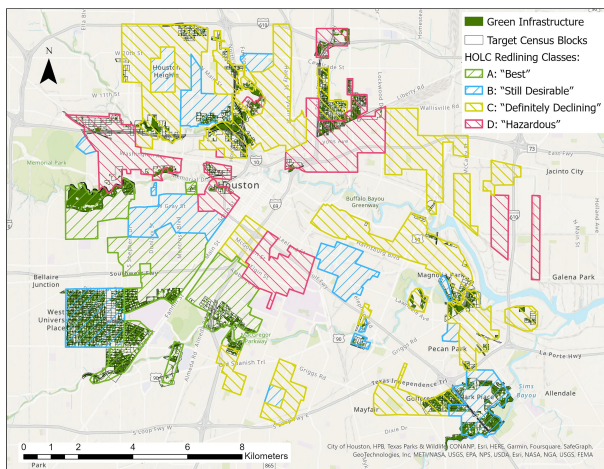
These trends demonstrate that black neighborhoods were systematically targeted by the state government to break up their communities.

To this day, the Redlining and distribution of neighborhoods haunts the residents of Houston, limiting their ability to accumulate wealth and harming their health. One distinct way that this happens is through flooding. Houston, as a city, is very flood prone, due to a mixture of geography and a failure of infrastructure. This is particularly felt by African American communities that were carved up by the highways, as they are far more prone to flooding. Within Houston, two important factors for flooding are green spaces, which aid the drainage of water and reduce risk of flooding, and impervious areas, such as parking lots or other large concrete structures, which greatly increase the risk of flooding in those areas. As seen in the study conducted by Behrang Bidadian, Redlined communities are highly correlated with the presence and lack of these spaces. As seen in the map below, the Redlined communities, marked in red

and yellow, are highly correlated with the impervious structures in orange.



Bidadin also gives exact figures for the percentage of Median impervious surfaces in each zone. They go as follows: 37.5% in 'A' zones, 38.2% in 'B' zones, 61.7% in 'C' zones, and 64.4% in 'D' zones. This clearly and definitively shows that Redlined neighborhoods have greater proportions of structures and buildings that increase flooding risks in Houston. Add this to additional research that Bidadin does on green spaces and their correlation with redlined communities.



The green spaces, which aid greatly in flood prevention, are highly correlated with the 'superior' 'A' and 'B' sections of the map. Of the median percentages of green spaces, 'A' zones have

60.5%, 'B' zones have 61.5%, 'C' zones have 35.2%, and 'D' Zones have 33.8%. These percentages show that green spaces are correlated with the sections of the city that were considered more desirable than others.

In addition to the impact of Redlining on flooding, there have also been significant correlations between pollution and redlining. One of the main factors of Houston's economy is the power industry, namely, gas and oil refineries. These refineries have a long and storied history of releasing hazardous chemicals into the atmosphere and water around them, despite legislation that attempts to limit this. Most of these refineries are located in areas that were marked as 'Definitely Declining' or 'Hazardous' on the maps. As Burns says "Manchester and neighboring Harrisburg, situated on the east side of Houston, are made up of 98% People of Color... there are seven facilities in Manchester... just four of these seven facilities released almost 500,000 pounds of pollutants into the air. Ninety percent of Manchester and Harrisburg residents live within one mile of one of these facilities (Burns)", showing that in just one neighborhood, the vast, vast majority of people living there were significantly exposed to high levels of pollutants, composed of extremely toxic elements, known to affect the health of people. Across Houston, this pattern holds true, with black communities having more of these refineries and more exposure to pollutants for the residents, which can only lead to negative health consequences. According to Burns, "Butadiene, benzene, ethylbenzene, toluene, and xylene are all toxic byproducts of the drilling and refining of oil. All of them can cause severe health problems with exposure (Burns)". These are released from refineries, and affect the communities around them significantly. How can a community thrive and grow and make a better future for their children when they are being poisoned? The pollutants let off by these refineries and

facilities have stunted the progress of African-American and other minority communities in Houston for generations, causing or increasing significant health problems in the residents.

In conclusion, the use of highways to segregate Houston and cut up rising and thriving black communities has had deleterious effects on minority neighborhoods in Houston, by reducing business opportunities, increasing flood risks for inhabitants, and exposing everyone in these communities to toxic levels of pollutants.

Citations:

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[2017.2%25%20of%20Houston%27s%20population](https://abc13.com/national-black-business-month-black-owned-businesses-entrepreneurs-power-networking-conference/13595544/#:~:text=Data%20from%20LendingTree%20shows%20there,up%2017.2%25%20of%20Houston%27s%20population)

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I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.