

**A  
HISTORY  
OF  
RACIAL  
DIVISION**

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# INTRODUCTION

This book is a curation of maps, photos, and articles surrounding the racial divide of Austin, Texas, with the focus on discriminatory housing policies that has kept the city segregated for over a century and continues to have an impact today. The main text is pulled from an Austin American-Statesman article written by Dan Zehr that chronicles the history of housing policies throughout the decades. Other selected text from separate articles are interspersed to provide more insight on race relations in Austin with discrete events in each time period.

**1910s — 1930s**

# WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE HISTORY OF EAST AUSTIN

BY MICHAEL BARNES

Lisa Byrd has paid heed to East Austin history. She also has seen how the story can go astray.

"There were freedmen, for instance, in Austin prior to Emancipation," Byrd says. "Austin was a mecca in part because there already was a free black population. At one time, African-Americans made up 30-35 percent of the population."

The outgoing director of Six Square, formerly known as the African American Cultural Heritage District, grew up in Philadelphia. Being from somewhere else helped her bridge the gaps in the city's shared memory about East Austin.

She has observed the narratives ever more carefully since she was appointed in 2005 to the African American Quality of Life Initiative, a response to police mistreatment of the city's black community, as well as to studies about local health, education and employment disparities.

Soon, Byrd, who came to Austin in the 1980s to work in arts and entertainment, will join her family in New York City. Other advocates will continue to stand up for those cultures that evolved roughly between East Seventh Street and Manor Road, and East Avenue (now Interstate 35) and Airport Boulevard.

"We need to preserve the stories that are the legacy of this community," Byrd says. "We must also support continued cultural production. It's not a question of just the past, but how do we continue our presence here?"

One of her group's crucial projects has been the revival of Downs Field on East 12th Street, home to a Negro League team, the Austin Black Senators and the Huston-Tillotson University Rams. Baseball legends Satchel Paige, Smokey Joe Williams, Willie Mays and Buck O'Neil, as well as Willie Wells, Austin's homegrown Baseball Hall of Fame hero, played there.

"We must reanimate these spaces," Byrd says.

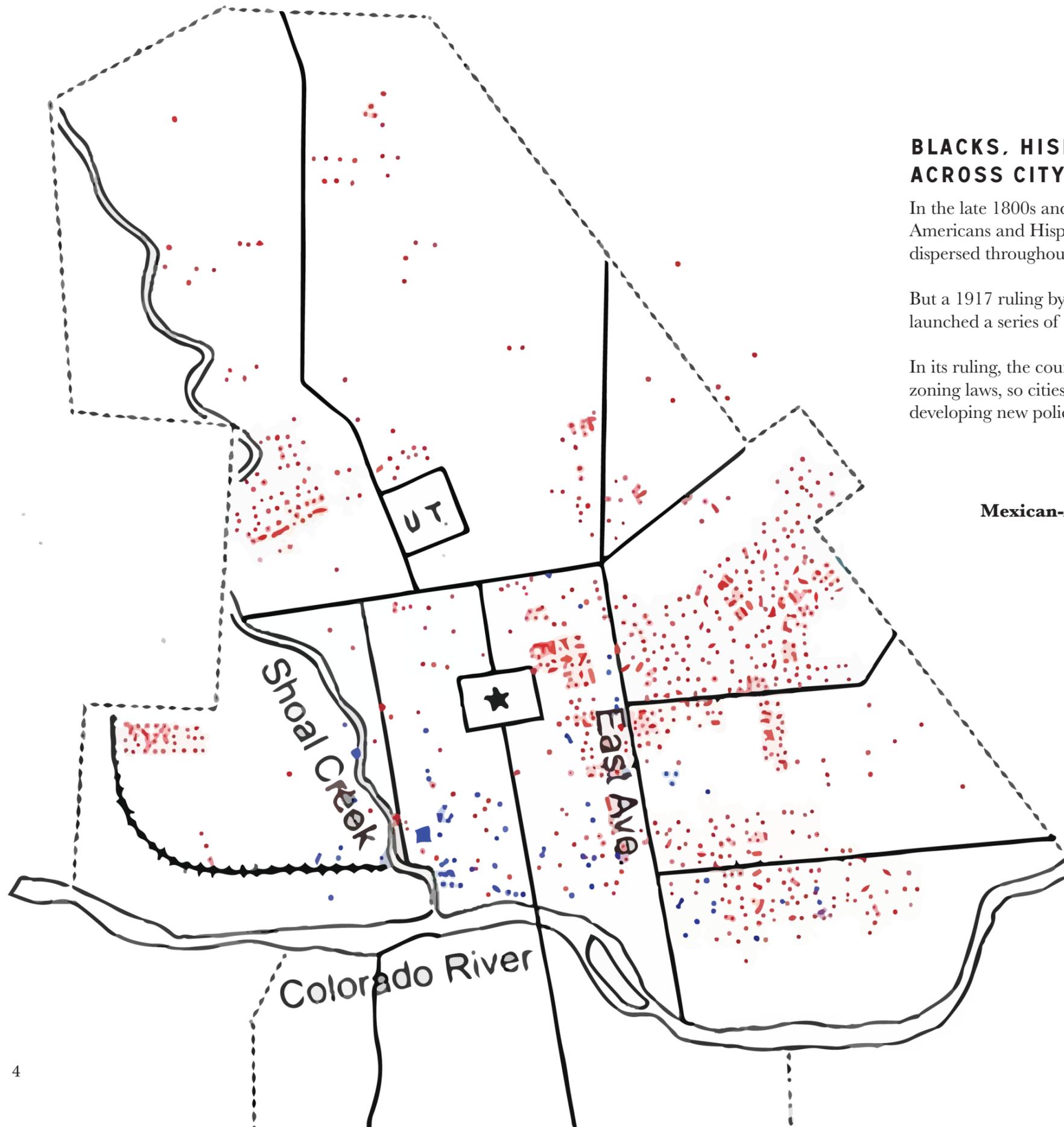
## BLACKS, HISPANICS SPREAD ACROSS CITY

In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, African-Americans and Hispanics lived in pockets dispersed throughout the city.

But a 1917 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court launched a series of policies that changed that.

In its ruling, the court struck down segregationist zoning laws, so cities across the South started developing new policies to isolate minorities.

**Black households** ■  
**Mexican-American households** ■



“And be a catalyst so that they become important spaces again within this community.”

Six Square is now based on San Bernard Street in a bungalow owned by the Wesley United Methodist Church. This high ground was once a silk-stocking slice of the “Negro District,” the East Austin area set aside as a segregated zone in the city’s 1928 urban plan.

Byrd thinks there are many reasons that historical moment is portrayed incompletely, perhaps because casual observers look only at the broad strokes of history. In a far-ranging discussion with this reporter, she shared some of the most common misperceptions about the era and the area.

### Not everybody moved there

Byrd says that free African-Americans lived pretty much where they chose — or where they could afford — for decades before 1928. After 1928, many stayed where they grew up; in other words, they did not move to the Negro District, as is often assumed.

Several of Austin’s 19th-century once-thriving freedmen’s communities — north, west and south — survive today, if just barely. In Bouldin, for instance, locals who attend the Good Will Baptist Church recall that the surrounding area was almost entirely African-American well into the 1940s. One 103-year-old church member, whose youth predates the 1928 plan, didn’t leave her house near the church — and this reporter’s residence — until she recently entered a nursing home.

“Look for the churches,” Byrd says. “You can tell where people lived by the churches. And you know that as people moved out of a community, those churches lost their connections to their surroundings.”

### Seeking a better — or at least safer — life

Movement to the Negro District did not come just from Austin’s 15 freedmen’s communities, nor just because of a city plan. People poured in from outside the area.

Take Erma Miller Williams, a retired teacher now in her 90s, who moved to East Austin from the country because it was a better place to live and work. Or 100-year-old Laura Anne Davis Silver, who escaped a harsh life in rural Caldwell and Bastrop counties to live in East Austin.

For all the racism inherent in the establishment of a segregated Negro District, it meant, to many, greater security, increased amenities and richer cultural opportunities. Safety in numbers was certainly needed in a time when no black person could look a white person in the eye without the fear of violence or even death.

“Clearly, some horrible, traumatic things happened,” Byrd says. “Moving to East Austin was

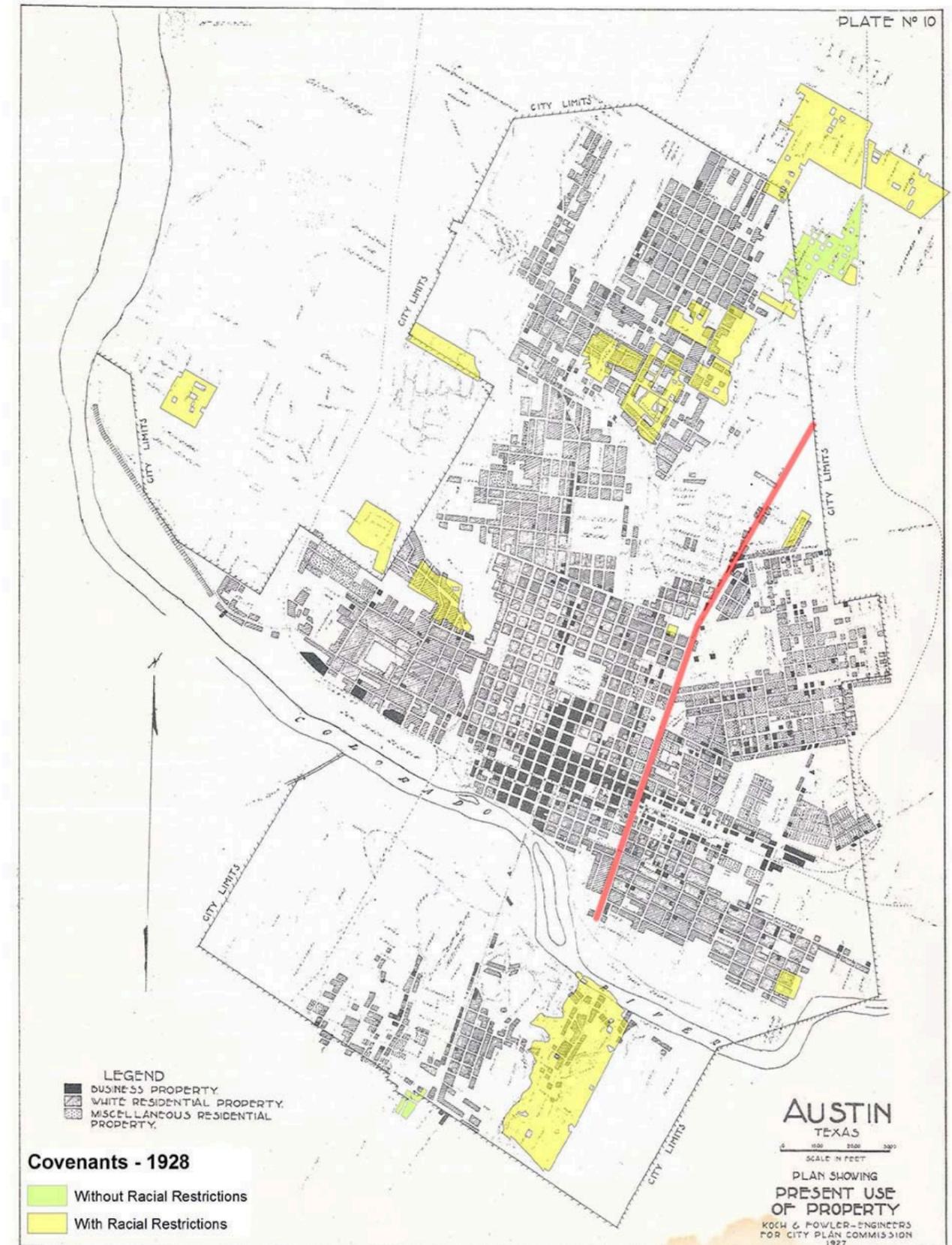
## EVOLUTION OF A ‘NEGRO DISTRICT’

In Austin, the strategy to isolate minorities took the form of the Koch and Fowler city plan, which in 1928 proposed the creation of a “Negro District” -- making it the only part of the city where African-Americans could access schools and other public services.

Koch and Fowler also proposed that the district have the city’s weakest zoning restrictions, allowing the development of “a number of slightly objectionable industrial uses” -- essentially, any use that wasn’t specifically outlawed.

Residential areas with race covenants overlaid on the property use map drafted by urban consultants Koch and Fowler in 1927.

**Areas with race restrictions** ■  
**Non-white residential areas** ■  
**East Avenue** —



one cultural response to that. African-Americans did not — and still don't always — have a big public presence. I think that's by arrangement. People figure out how to survive. My theory: When you keep things quiet and below the radar, nobody messes with you, and that has served this community to the point where it no longer serves it."

### First wave of the Great Migration

Between 1910 and 1930, more than 1.6 million African-Americans left the rural South for cities in the North, Midwest, West and Southwest. Austin was one of those cities. All told, by 1970 more than 6 million blacks had vacated traditional rural areas of the former Confederacy.

Many of those African-Americans were recruited for booming manufacturing concerns, including ones along the railroad tracks in East Austin and along the southern rim of downtown.

"They knew they could get work," Byrd says of those who migrated to the city. "It was an exciting time for all Austin. That's why the 1928 master plan is so significant. Leaders wanted to continue that growth. So they allowed significant intermingling in commercial corridors: East Avenue, Red River, East Sixth."

In a classic personal illustration of the Great Migration, sometime after freed slave Ransom Williams died in 1901, his family pulled up stakes from their hardscrabble farmstead in southwestern Travis County to move to East Austin. Archaeologists recently dug up more than 25,000 objects from that farmstead, some that showcased the isolation and hardships suffered by those in remote rural areas.

### The Jazz Age

The end of the Civil War brought freedom from slavery, but not from white supremacy. The exploitative sharecropper system, Jim Crow segregation laws and the return of the Ku Klux Klan froze the social and economic systems that were in place before Emancipation.

One of the key goals of the powerful was to keep the races from mixing, not just socially but, in particular, sexually. This was called, in analyses published across the country, the "Negro Problem."

"They wanted to figure out how to revert back to slavery," Byrd says. "They found one thing that continued to dehumanize: We don't want whites and blacks to mingle. Codifying segregation was the answer to (preventing) black men, especially, and white women (from) being in close proximity."

By instituting separate public schools, parks, hospitals, libraries, cemeteries, swimming pools and recreation centers in a place like the Negro District, whites hoped to keep young people from doing what

## FEDERAL POLICY FORMALIZES BOUNDARIES

Less than a decade later, in 1935, the federal government launched a New Deal program that would reinforce segregationist boundaries in Austin and throughout the country. The program, designed to restore household wealth during the Great Depression, used redlining -- the practice of denying goods or services to racially determined neighborhoods -- to specifically exclude minority populations.



Historic East Sixth Street during the 1920s. (Austin History Center, Austin Public Library)



they have always done: Find each other attractive.

Tensions in the 1920s were heightened because white youths — not for the last time — adopted and adapted a buzzy African-American cultural form — in this case, jazz. As Richard Zelade details in his romp, “Austin in the Jazz Age,” this version of “race music” was accompanied among young white adults by relaxed mores related to drinking, drugs and sexuality.

White supremacists couldn’t keep university students or famous folklorists from visiting black clubs in East Austin, but they could ensure that for the most part, it wasn’t a two-way street.

### City Beautiful Movement

It is rarely remembered that during the 1890s and the early 20th century, intellectuals and urban leaders who were part of the Progressive movement came to believe that beautiful and monumental planning led to greater civic and moral virtues.

Inspired by the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, cities across the country — Austin included — aspired to grand buildings, clean parks, sparkling waterways, paved streets and bright streetlights. Mayor A.P. Wooldridge was a leading local proponent of this reform movement.

High-minded reforms inevitably contributed to the 1928 plan — never, by the way, adopted into law — which zoned districts for different uses. Although a relatively open city, Austin was nonetheless part of the Jim Crow South, so any grand plan would have to set aside, for the first time, a separate district — and usually unequal amenities — for African-Americans. East Austin, for instance, was among the last parts of town where streets were left unpaved.

“We were going through efforts to modernize the city,” Byrd says. “How do we do that? The city’s central core was first to get the good things, because of commerce. Then East Austin doesn’t become a priority. Keep it out of sight, out of mind; we can build the other parts of the city.”

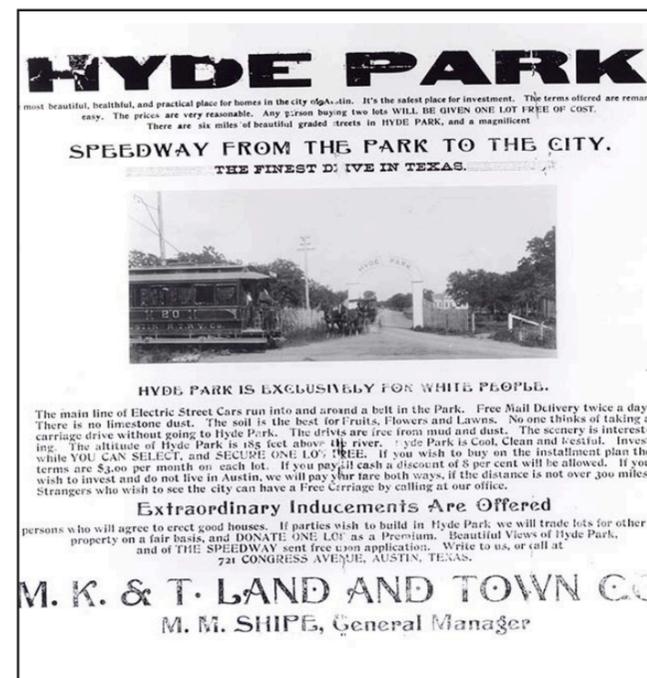
But then as now, people didn’t like to leave behind the social comforts of their existing communities. So city leaders used carrots — improved attractions in East Austin, including soaring new churches — and sticks, such as the refusal to hook up the other black communities to public utilities. Restrictive property covenants and redlining did the rest until the late 1960s.

### Departure came early

People tend to believe that disruptions to East Austin’s communities of color are a recent phenomenon. They think of gentrification as primarily one group of people doing something to another group.

Government-backed mortgages wouldn’t be offered in redlined districts, which were overwhelmingly populated by African-American and, to a lesser extent Hispanic, residents. In Austin, the largest redlined section encompassed Koch and Fowler’s black district.

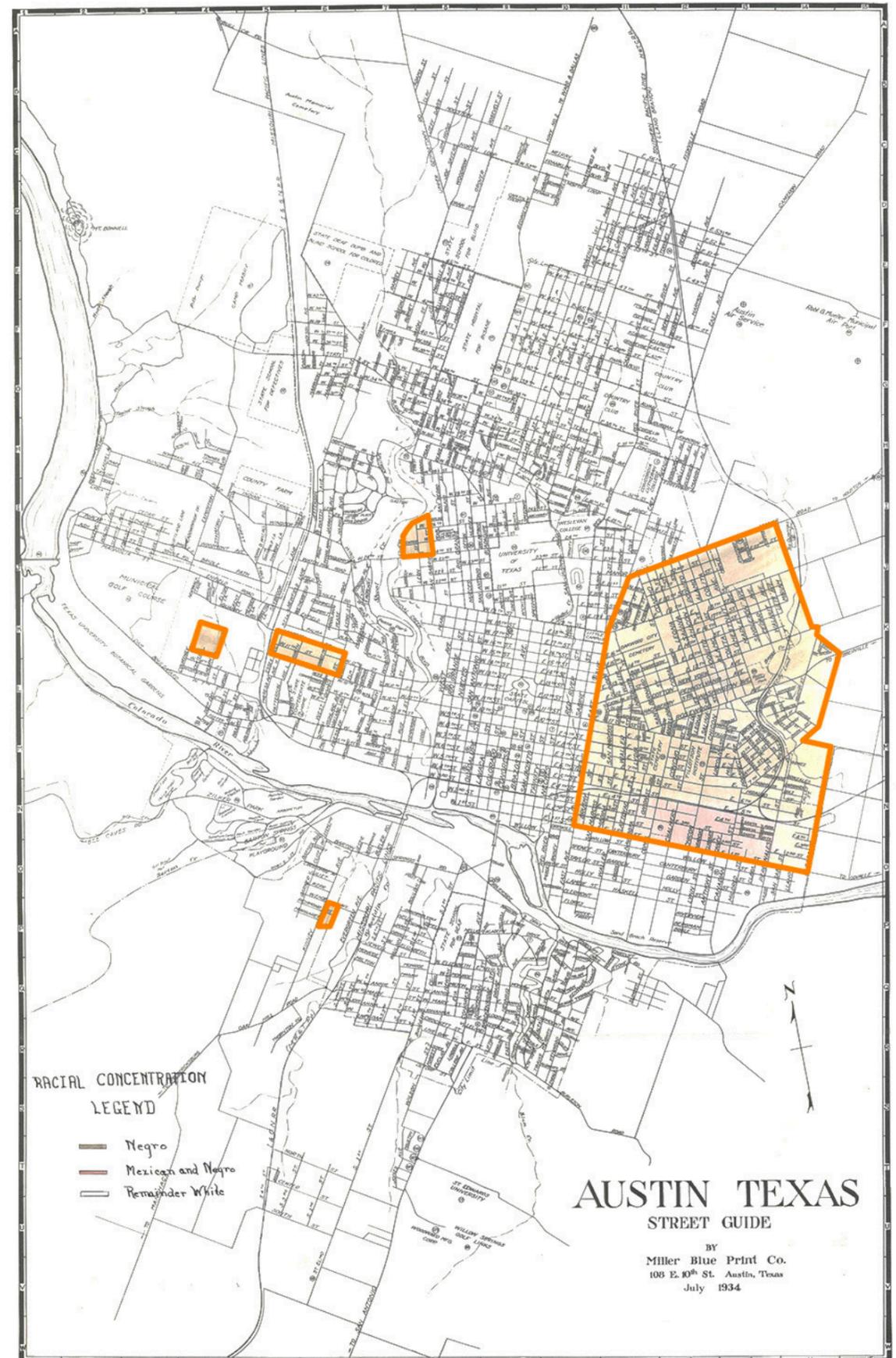
The Home Owners Loan Corporation would not provide mortgages for those districts, barring minorities from one of the country’s most significant efforts to build household wealth.



Hyde Park real estate ad, circa 1915, declaring it a community exclusively for whites only. (Austin Daily Statesman)

Map of Austin, July 1934.  
(Home Owners Loan Corporation)

### Concentrations of blacks, Hispanics



But the passing of the old Negro District had already begun by the late 1960s.

“The turning point came in 1968,” Byrd says, referring to fair housing enforcement. “People might not have realized that when the upper class left, that began the destabilization. In the 1980s, when the middle class left, was when it really happened.”

Many African-American families also left East Austin in the 1970s when their children were assigned to faraway schools as part of a decades-long desegregation process.

And yet Byrd and others seek ways to keep old community ties alive to prevent the erasure of a cultural heritage that goes back to well before the 1928 plan and that included eastside freedmen’s communities such as Gregorytown, Masonville, Robertson Hill and Pleasant Hill.

“You look at all the things that sustain a community,” she says. “Then they are taken away, and what happens after that? People look at gentrification as a single event. But you have to look at how a community stabilizes itself.”

#### Time to respect what came before

Byrd’s experience in Philadelphia informed her wish to preserve what is left of East Austin’s traditional black culture. There, people still use and live in buildings that date back to the 1600s.

“It becomes more and more significant as each generation uses it,” she says. “The continuity of human experience that is set in the built environment.”

Locally, she was delighted to hear that an angel buyer had purchased the Willie Wells home in South Austin to save it from the bulldozer. She hopes, too, that developers of the Plaza Saltillo project will acknowledge that the land was once home to Masonville, a thriving freedmen’s community, and not just with a historical marker.

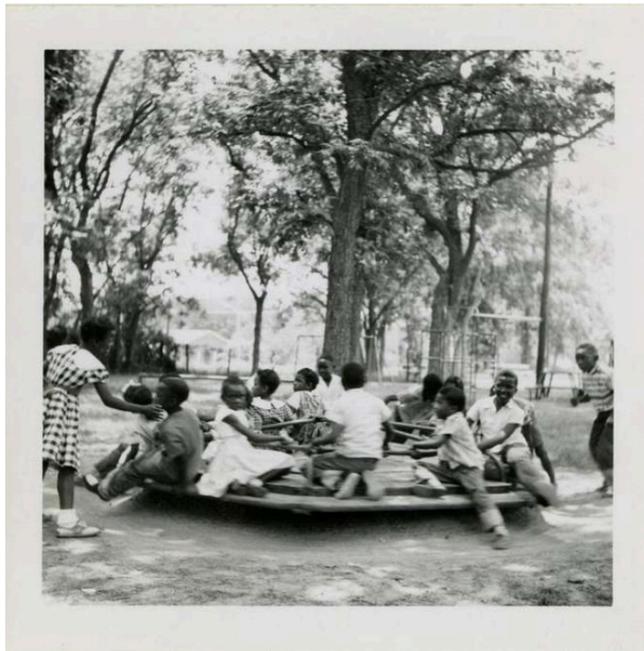
“There are a lot of ways to acknowledge that a space was a space,” Byrd says. “On a smaller scale, we’ve talked to builders and developers, tying something to place that gives it more credibility and more longevity. It’s a great challenge to go beyond the sign, but instead how the history influences what it looks like and who uses it.”

Her last message is a gentle but firm admonition to those pouring into an altered East Austin, migrants motivated by changing markets and attitudes, as well as by a revived downtown.

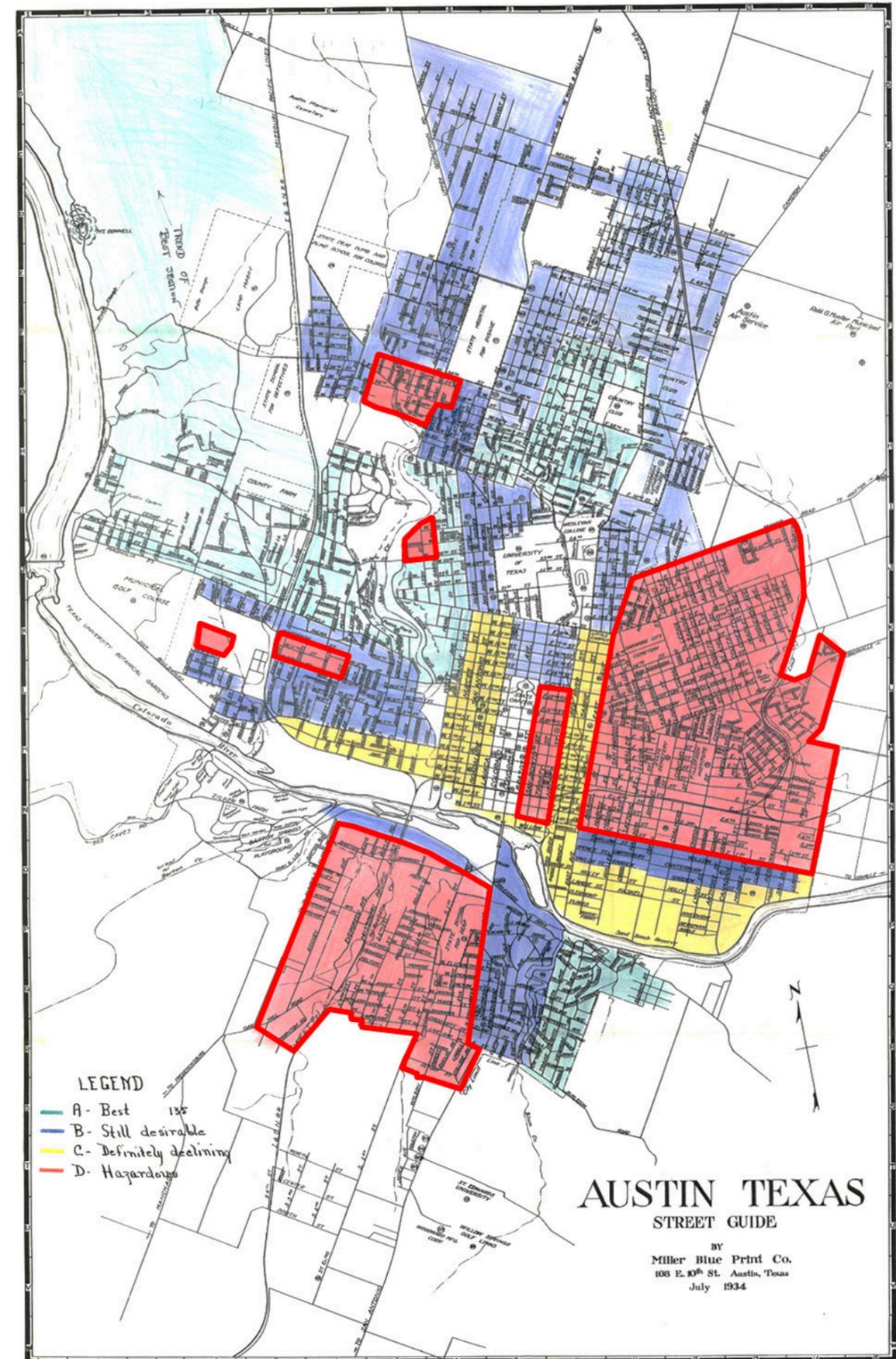
“You can’t continually replay the role of Christopher Columbus,” Byrd says. “There were people here, there was a society, a culture here that you are adding to, not taking away from.”



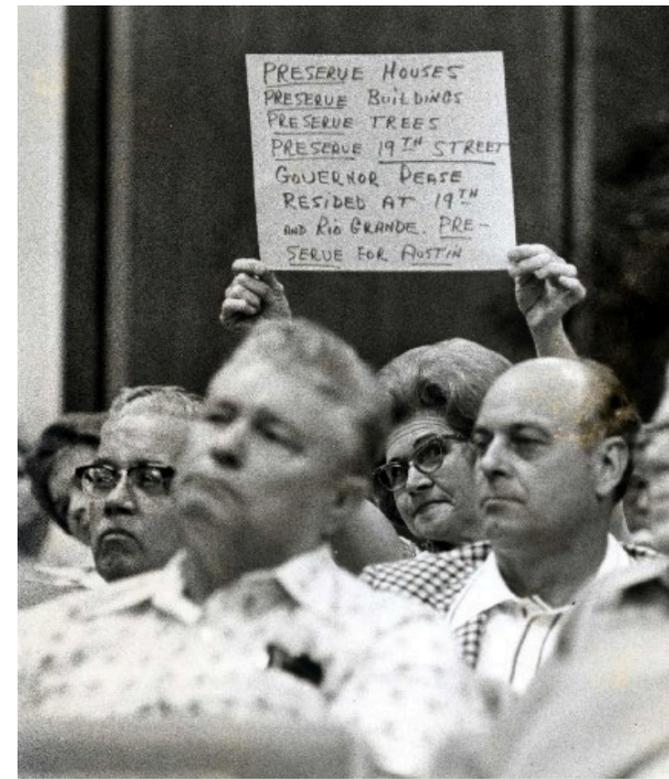
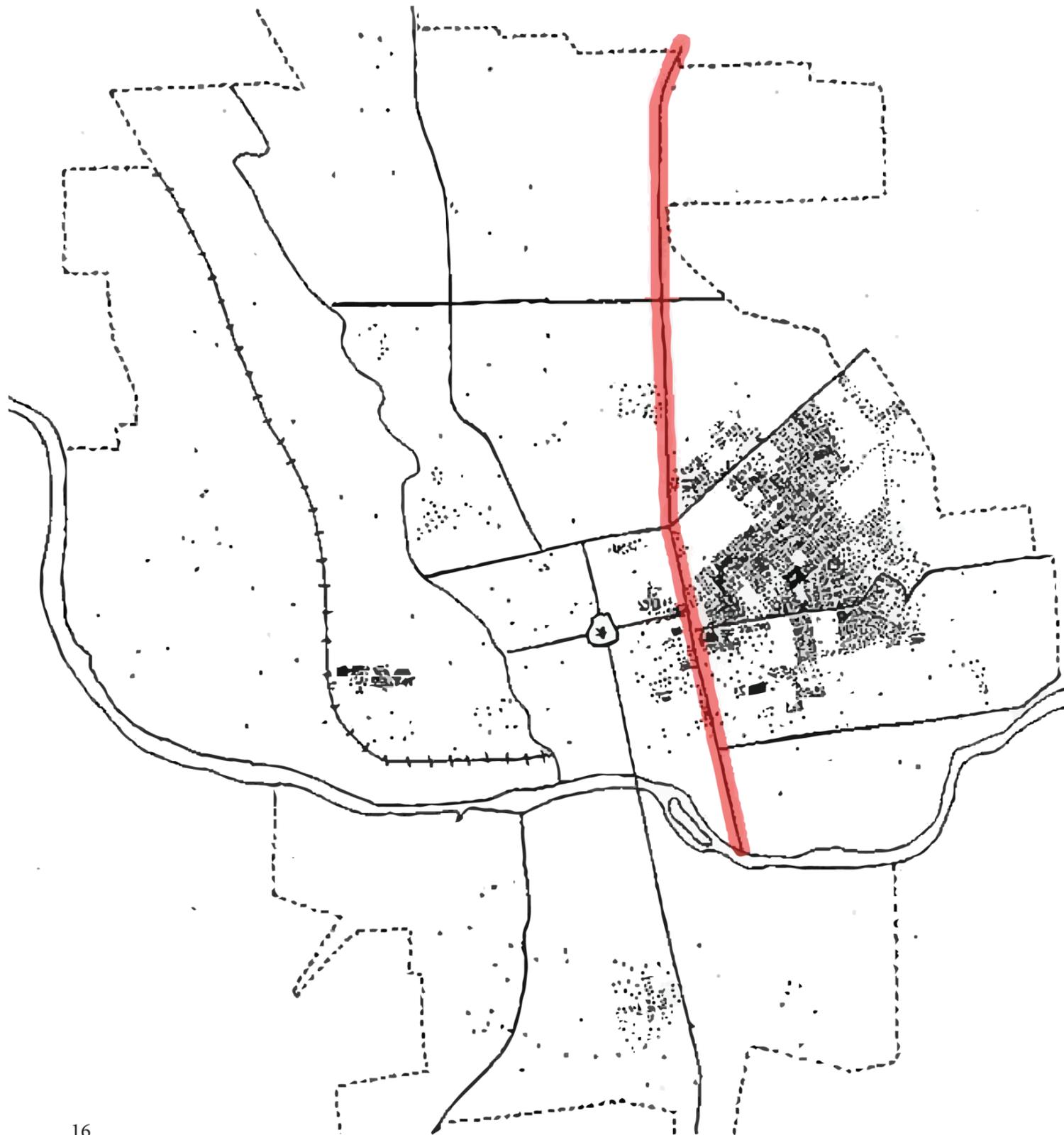
*The Negro District was, in part, designed to keep black and white youths from mingling socially and otherwise. This was taken April 18, 1958. (Austin History Center)*



*Taken at a local playground some time during the 50s and 60s. (Austin History Center)*



**1940s — 1970s**



A protester at the May 1, 1975 City Council Meeting regarding MLK Jr. Boulevard (*Austin American-Statesman*)

### CHANGING COVENANT LANGUAGE

The Texas Legislature and court rulings occasionally afforded Hispanics the same status as white residents, but historical evidence suggests that policies and private attitudes maintained distinct lines between the Hispanic and Caucasian populations.

For example, the language used in private covenants shifted in the first half of the 20th century, changing from “no people of African descent” to “Caucasian only” -- a switch that allowed for a more flexible form of segregation.

# THE FIGHT OVER AUSTIN'S MLK JR. BOULEVARD

BY MICHAEL BARNES

Seven years after civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was gunned down in Memphis on April 4, 1968, there was no public monument to his legacy in Austin.

No statue. No park. No school. No street. No community center.

Although it was relatively painless and inexpensive in April 1975 to change much of East 19th Street — the part that runs through East Austin from Interstate 35 to Ed Bluestein Boulevard — into Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, the battle for public recognition was far from over.

For more than a year, a group called the West 19th Street Association fought the extension of the name change past the Capitol Complex and University of Texas campus to North Lamar Boulevard. Leaders of the group said that it would cost businesses to change their signs, letterhead and advertising. It would also impinge on property rights and promote an alternative historical legacy.

Charging racism, critics begged to differ. Multiple petitions, lawsuits and harsh words followed.

Until the late 1880s — in keeping with the original plan to name Austin's east-west thoroughfares after trees — it was called Magnolia Street. The road long supported businesses on both sides of East Avenue, the predecessor to Interstate 35. Although East 19th was not as active as East 11th or 12th streets, it boldly intersected the six square miles of the city's Negro District as laid out in 1928.

In March 1975, representatives of the Austin Black Assembly, which met weekly in Texas Rep. Wilhelmina Delco's offices on East 12th Street, petitioned the Austin City Council to honor King



## BOXED IN BY RESTRICTIONS

White flight to suburban neighborhoods, restrictions put on deeds and a range of other private land-use requirements further concentrated the city's African-American population over the next several decades.



In April 1975, city employee Roger Schürmacher moves the new Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard street sign in place as Eddie Owens looks on at Airport Boulevard and old E. 19th Street. (Austin American-Statesman)

by renaming 19th Street after him. According to the Rev. Freddie B. Dixon, then senior pastor at Wesley United Methodist Church, some opposition arose from both the white and the black communities. Documented in a 2010 letter, Dixon recalled feeling misled by the City Council, and he shared his misgivings with J.J. Seabrook, president emeritus of Huston-Tillotson University.

On April 10, 1975, the day when new Council Member Emma Lou Linn — only the second woman elected to the position in Austin history — was sworn in, MLK sign opponents clashed.

According to an American-Statesman story by reporter Mike Kelley, protester Howard A. King said he would instead file a suit to have a street named for a Native American. And he wouldn't stop there. King: "It is accepted that Austin has more minority groups than major, crosstown arterials."

There was some concern over the cost — \$40,000 to \$200,000 for renaming the exits off Interstate 35. "Dr. King's full name is so long, the highway department reported, that a much larger sign and support will be necessary."

There was even mention of naming the new MoPac after King.

Still, the Council voted 4-2 in favor of the 19th Street name change. Mayor Roy Butler and Mayor Pro Tem Bud Dryden voted no.

Almost immediately, signs east of Interstate 35 were switched out.

Why not west? Some supporters of the name change felt the abrupt stop at the freeway was patronizing.

On May 1, 1975, Seabrook rose to make his plea to complete the deal. One white citizen held up a sign calling on the council to "Preserve 19th Street!"

After Seabrook suddenly crumpled in pain, Linn administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. At age 76, Seabrook died later that day of a heart attack.

On May 6, 1975, the Austin Citizen newspaper announced that the "West 19th Street Association" had been formed. Marion B. Findlay and Harris Johnson led this group.

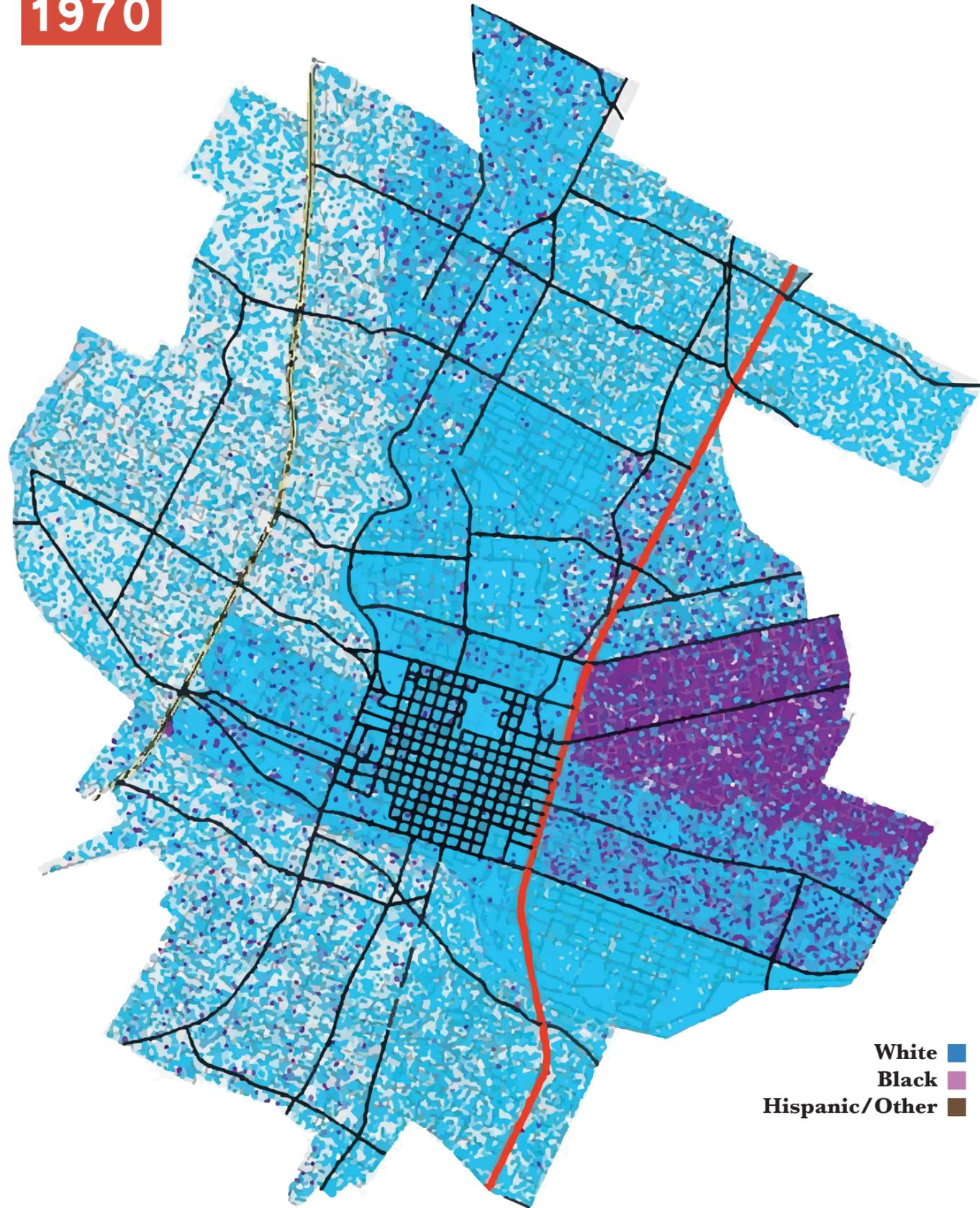
"The sole purpose of our association is to oppose changing the name of any existing street in Austin without of the consent of the property owners concerned," Findlay said. "Those who allege other motives are themselves furthering the prejudices they profess to condemn."

The Association employed all sorts of delaying tactics, including a referendum petition and judicial action. Meanwhile, the Austin Black Assembly pointed out that the City Council had, since

(continued on page 23)

**1970s — 2010s**

1970



White ■  
 Black ■  
 Hispanic/Other ■



*This is a view of East Avenue, looking north from the top of Brackenridge Hospital in the 1960s. For decades, the road that became Interstate 35 in 1962, became a de facto boundary that isolated Austin's African-American residents to the east. (Texas Department of Transportation)*

### DIVIDED BY I-35

While the influx of Hispanics into Texas and Austin during the second half of the 20th century led to a much greater dispersal of their population throughout the area, the largest concentrations remain in East Austin.

We can still see the effects of those segregationist policies today, both in the city and around the metro area. The vast majority of Austin's African-American and Hispanic populations remain east of I-35.

But Austin's divisions run deeper than where its residents live. The policies that spawned a geographic divide set the stage for a sharp economic divide as well.

1965, adopted at least 58 resolutions calling for name changes.

"That tactic worked in yesteryears, but today they cannot change the minds and will of black people, because we will fight for what we think is right, fair and just, until death," the Assembly proclaimed in a stinging Nov. 7, 1975, press release. "J.J. Seabrook was a black man who weathered many storms caused by such people. He died fighting for recognition of a black man's contribution in this bicentennial year."

In June 1976, the Association tried to use a 1929 law to assert that the city had no right to control the destiny of West 19th Street.

Findlay: "We, the property owners, own 19th Street, not the city."

But Assistant City Attorney Don Wolf disagreed: the law gave the city "rights, privileges and easements on those streets that all cities have over their streets."

The city won. Decades later, in 2010, peacemakers from East and West Austin joined to honor Seabrook by renaming the MLK Street bridge over Interstate 35 after him.

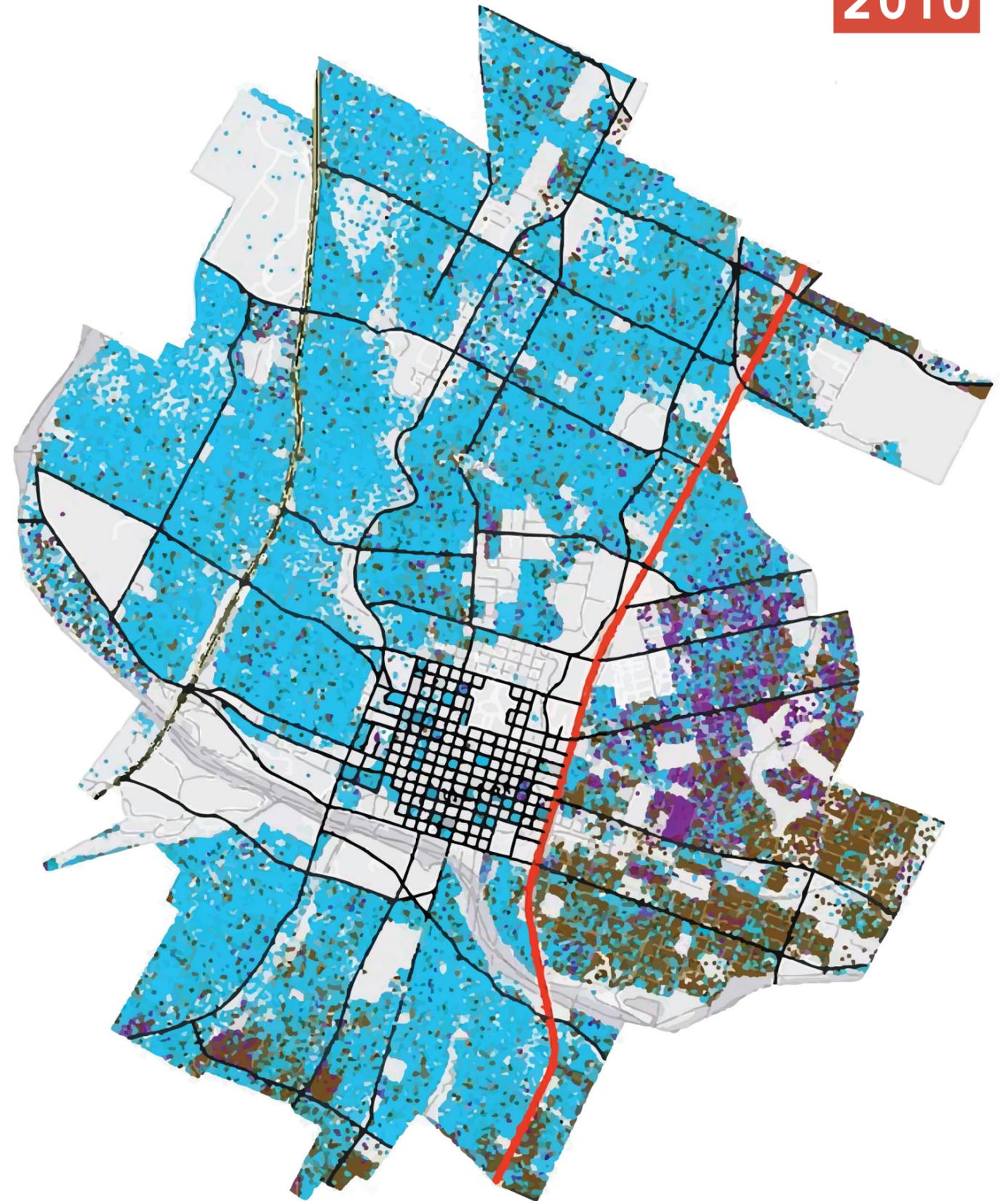
"I've worked on racial reconciliation in the city for years," said Joseph Parker, Jr., senior pastor of David Chapel Missionary Baptist Church. "So I think this is just a first step in the process, but it's not an end. You can symbolize bridging East and West Austin, but there needs to be more than a symbol."



Redlining not only barred minorities from the country's single-largest accumulation of household wealth, it also denied them the compound interest that future generations could derive from such affluence.

Their exclusion from that wealth has calcified through an increasingly complex mix of social dynamics — subtle and unintentional forms of discrimination, disadvantaged schools, higher crime rates and passive public policies that maintain the status quo.

Together, these forces divided Austin in the past and keep it divided today. The metro area has one of the highest rates of income segregation in the country, a factor that could ultimately limit the ability of many Austin youth to climb the income ladder and bolster the region's future prosperity.



# CREDITS

**“History of Austin’s racial divide in maps”**

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