

“The Air We Breathe”

By Angus Gracey

A young girl steps outside her family home in North Charleston, and crosses into a midday summer heat common to the Lowcountry. And yet her mind does not turn to the heat, but rather to the air. For each breath she takes, it feels as if she is inhaling something tangible and thick. The air is heavy, smelling of car emissions and rotten eggs. She is familiar with these particular scents, and knows where they come from: the combination of the Kapstone Paper Mill and traffic on Interstate 26.

This scene unfolds regularly in the 21st century, yet it is not unique to this age. Those I spoke with, many of whom were born before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier in 1947, stated that the paper mill predated them. Noxious air from the paper mill has been ubiquitous in North Charleston well before the city was incorporated in 1972. The construction of I-26, however, happened recently enough for many residents to recall how construction crews decided on what parts of their neighborhood would be condemned. Since I-26 split the predominantly African American Rosemont neighborhood in two on September 7th, 1960, the air in North Charleston has been degraded by the ever-growing number of automobiles, which now average two per household.¹ Not coincidentally, the number of African American children receiving treatment for asthma at MUSC from 1956 to 1997 also increased 20-fold.²

As a longtime resident remembered, the quaint North Charleston of her youth was unlike the bustling city we find today. Decades ago, before the influx of industry and infrastructure, North Charleston featured several tight-knit and self-sustaining communities. Rosemont, Liberty

¹ "South Carolina." Data USA. Accessed June 27, 2019. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/south-carolina>.

² Waters, Dustin. "Is Pollution Poisoning Charleston's African-American and Low-income Communities?" *Charleston City Paper*. June 26, 2019. Accessed June 27, 2019. <https://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/is-pollution-poisoning-charlestons-african-american-and-low-income-communities/Content?oid=5790876>.

Hill, Dewey Hill were neighborhoods where it was not uncommon for a family to feed itself from its garden, and the bodies of water surrounding the Lowcountry. Grandmothers spent their waking hours on their porches, simultaneously enjoying the ocean breeze and casting watchful gazes. Despite abhorrent segregation, these communities raised young men and women with a strong commitment to place. Indeed, a 2009 letter sent by the Rosemont Neighborhood Association to the Department of Justice stated that, "African-American citizens... have lived in the community for generations... inheriting their homes from parents and... grandparents."³ The development projects of the last several decades have, however, splintered these tightly knit communities. For as the letter also notes, "This neighborhood... has dealt with an abundance of toxic neighbors, including polluting industry and the placement of I-26."⁴

The capacity of communities like Liberty Hill and Union Heights to be self-sufficient has been limited by polluting industries and ill-conceived infrastructure projects. The families who once caught dinner from the Cooper River can hardly do so now without endangering their family's health. As a *Post & Courier* reported, "Industries dumped more than 45,000 pounds of cancer-causing chemicals into the Cooper River in 2010, making it the sixth-worst waterway in the country for those pollutants."⁵ Multiple generations have toiled on polluted lands, and been forced to breathe contaminated air. Toxic air particles from car and factory emissions lodge in the lungs of residents, while micro-plastics and other pollutants contaminate the Lowcountry's famed waterways.

³ Waters, Dustin. "Is Pollution Poisoning Charleston's African-American and Low-income Communities?" Charleston City Paper. June 26, 2019. Accessed June 27, 2019. <https://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/is-pollution-poisoning-charlestons-african-american-and-low-income-communities/Content?oid=5790876>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Petersen, Bo, "Cooper Cancer Threat Charleston River Ranks 6th-worst in U.S. for Carcinogens." Post and Courier. November 02, 2016. Accessed June 27, 2019. https://www.postandcourier.com/archives/cooper-cancer-threat-charleston-river-ranks-th-worst-in-u/article_aa34f6ac-e735-5c10-8859-f3a86b6e8bfa.html.

The myriad socio-economic and environmental problems facing North Charleston can ironically be traced to developments meant to lift residents out of poverty. City officials, developers, and urban planners in the middle of the 20th century, believing socio-economic prosperity to be contingent upon sprawling highways and massive industries, disregarded the unique and self-sustaining cultures of individual communities. Dirt roads, which created serpentine patterns through long-lived neighborhoods, were replaced by an interstate system that literally divided communities. Everything seemed to get bigger and less personalized. Rather than embrace the unique nodes of individual communities, urban planners and developers embraced a monolithic vision of North Charleston. Somewhere along the way developers forgot that, in the words of the seminal writer Jane Jacobs, “strips of chaos... have a weird wisdom of their own.”⁶ The recent history of North Charleston, and many other urban spaces in this country, tells us that economic development does not inevitably lead to prosperity. For when development is prioritized over the actual needs of local residents, communities often suffer.

⁶ Rich, Nathaniel. "Did Jane Jacobs Predict the End of the U.S.?" *The Atlantic*. October 18, 2016. Accessed June 27, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/the-prophecies-of-jane-jacobs/501104/>.