

There Goes the Neighborhood? “Residential Pruning” and the Good Life in Downey

G. Aron Ramirez

A 2015 Los Angeles Times article highlighted Latino achievements in Downey, a suburb southeast of Downtown Los Angeles. The article dubbed Downey the “Mexican Beverly Hills,” which aroused surprisingly-mixed emotions among residents, like myself. The Mexican Beverly Hills, though, has only recently become Mexican; until the late 1980s, most Downey residents were Anglo middle-class suburbanites living in the last white space in increasingly-Latino Southeast Los Angeles.¹ In the span of less than a decade, Downey matched the ethnic profile of neighboring suburbs, but its population retained an important characteristic: through the racial transformation, Downey residents were still overwhelmingly middle-class.

This change did not occur by chance. The Downey residents, city council, and especially City Manager Gerald Caton, enacted economically discriminatory policies to ensure that incoming ethnic Mexican homeowners conformed to a high middle-class standard, a practice that I term “residential pruning.” I employ this label for a number of reasons. City government policies were strict but not inflexible; families of lower-class means did move in, and apartment complexes replaced single-family homes in parts of the city, much to residents’ and government’s chagrin. But residential pruning was how the city government shaped the incoming populace into the ideal middle-class suburb - including the Anglo one the Mexicans replaced. Thus, the city government used residential pruning with similar goals to, say, garden pruning, which enhances the image of a neighborhood. I do wish to note, however, that residential pruning was no less a form of discrimination; families were nonetheless excluded from settling or staying in Downey.

Surprisingly, economic discrimination existed separately from racial

¹Note: Throughout this essay, I use the terms “Mexican,” “Mexican American”, and “ethnically Mexican” interchangeably. In this context, I use the terms to refer to the Downey homeowners of Mexican ancestry who constituted the Downey social structure. I also use “white” and “Anglo” interchangeably to mean an American of English or other white European descent.

discrimination. Standard American historiography intertwines race and class to constitute different levels of societal exclusion. The case of Downey, however, challenges this assumption. Residential pruning by Caton and the city council, for the most part, holds ethnic composition constant – in this case, mostly Mexican. That economic discrimination nonetheless existed at the active and passive behest of the city government suggests an independence and separation of class and race.

Caton and the city council maintained Downey's middle-class status because of residential pruning through ordinances that could only be met by affluent homeowners. The municipal code screened out residents who couldn't participate in the single-family-detached-home standards required of American suburbanites. Residential pruning worked, too: in the context of concurrent economic decline in surrounding suburbs with similar demographic changes, Gerald Caton and the city council found a means, as the city motto would imply, of keeping Downey's "future unlimited."

Downey developed like nearly every other settlement in early Los Angeles. Until European contact, fertile land nestled between the San Gabriel mountains sustained a modest population of the Gabrielino tribe. Europeans first settled in the Los Angeles basin with the establishment of the San Gabriel mission in 1771, and began to proselytize and convert the indigenous people. The Spanish mission system was transferred to the Mexican Republic following its independence, and in 1833, the Mexican Secularization Act seized mission properties and privatized the lands. To encourage settlement in Alta California, the Mexican government continued the Spanish practice of granting permanent land titles to prominent men who promised to populate the state. Manuel Nieto, a former soldier stationed in Alta California, received a land grant from the Spanish in 1784 for land near the San Gabriel River, and profited from raising cattle and farming small crops; upon his death, Nieto was one of the richest Mexicans in Alta California, and he passed his valuable property down to his family.²

Settlers began exploring the San Gabriel Valley after the Mexican-American War and subsequent cession of California to the United States. John Gately Downey, an Irish immigrant who served as governor of California and operated a successful (if exploitative) railroad partner-

²Charles Quinn Russell, *History of Downey: The Life Story of a Pioneer Community, and of the Man Who Founded It – California Governor John Gately Downey – From Covered Wagon to the Space Shuttle*, (Downey, California: Downey City Printing Office, 1973), 17. Cf. with Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979) for a similar history focused on Santa Barbara, the focal point of contemporary Mexican society.

ship, purchased land formerly of the Nieto grant.³ The Central Pacific Railroad established a railroad depot and the settlement became known as Downey. Agricultural-minded Americans farmed the fertile land in Downey, planting small crops like alfalfa before striking orange gold with citrus groves that were profitable enough to create a stable economic backbone for the nascent community. By the time of the Depression, farms made up most of Downey's landscape, dotted by the occasional self-built home.⁴

Downey took on a distinctly suburban flavor following World War II, in part because of realtors. Residents, nearly all of whom were white, purchased properties from realtors selling tract homes built rapidly over the orange groves.⁵ By 1956, nearly 85,000 residents lived in Downey neighborhoods protected by racially-restrictive covenants that prohibited resale of properties to undesirable neighbors – anyone who wasn't white and middle class. Not unlike in other American suburbs of the 1950s, realtors in Downey were on the defensive following the 1948 United States Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which ruled race-restrictive covenants in deeds legally unenforceable. Not unlike in other American suburbs, either, Downey realtors adapted: in place of the explicitly racial discrimination, deeds prohibited resale that would threaten the integrity and property values of the neighborhood. This discrimination was made possible by the Federal Housing Authority's real-estate appraisal system which distinguished property values and loan risks based on a four-color system: green for the best, purple for good, yellow for fair, red for risky (which was almost always reserved for areas where minorities lived).⁶ For that reason, the small population of Japanese and Mexican field workers who lived in Downey were, as federal loan survey documents showed, "a detrimental influence."⁷

James Stamps spearheaded the move for incorporation in the 1950s. A former beet farmer whose family at one point owned over one hundred

³Russell, *History of Downey*, 23.

⁴For a similar discussion regarding early settlers and self-built homes in Southeast Los Angeles, see Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), chapter 1, which details the early history of South Gate, a suburb on Downey's eastern border.

⁵ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 125-126.

⁶ "Home Owners Loan Corporation appraisal of central-north Downey 1939," Los Angeles City Survey Files, Area Descriptions, Home Owners Loan Corporation, Record Group 317 (National Archives: Washington, D.C., 1939), doc. C-136. My thanks to Eric Avila of UCLA for pointing me to this website, an interactive tool that overlays HOLC appraisals over modern maps.

⁷ Many works have studied racially-restrictive covenants in suburban housing, but Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier* is perhaps the most convincing in its thorough treatment of the subject.



Figure 1: Proposed boundaries for the City of Downey, used for incorporation campaigns in 1956 (Image courtesy of the Downey Historical Society)

acres of Downey land, Stamps' roots in the community ran deep.⁸ Stamps, though, was born in Arkansas and moved to Downey at an early age along with other California-bound southern farmers. With him, like with most of the earlier travelers, came a transplanted Southern conservative political culture that grew well in the farming communities of Southeast Los Angeles.⁹ His efforts for incorporation were motivated by keeping Downey an "All-American City" – indeed, Anglo American – as incorporation campaign posters showed.¹⁰ Stamps drafted most of the city charter and ordinances required for incorporation by the State of California. Downey residents voted to incorporate in 1956 (after a failed campaign two years earlier) and created the City of Downey. The city council adopted Stamps' charter and nominated close friend Oren L. King to serve as the first city manager to execute Stamps' vision.¹¹

Stamps obsessed over maintaining neighborhood property values in the original ordinances. For example, Article V of the municipal code, concerned with sanitation, states its intent and purpose as:

⁸ Russell, *History of Downey*, 194.

⁹ For an example of transplanted southern conservative politics, see Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, chaps. 5-6.

¹⁰ Larry Latimer, *Downey* (Mount Pleasant, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2010), 29.

¹¹ "Downey Wins! New City OK'd," *Downey Champion*, December 18, 1956.

“[t]o define as public nuisances and violations those conditions and uses of land that are offensive or annoying to the senses, detrimental to property values and community appearance...[t]o develop regulations that will promote the sound maintenance of property and ...[t]o establish administrative procedures for the City's use, upon its election, to correct or abate violations of this Chapter on real property throughout the City.”¹²

Stamps wrote the code to purportedly protect property values, which seems to be a reasonable, if oddly placed, intent for the section concerning sanitation. But “property values” appeared throughout the entire municipal code. The stated purpose for “landscaping, lighting, and walls” was to “[c]reate an atmosphere of orderly development and uniformly pleasant and attractive surroundings in the City to enhance, conserve, and stabilize property values.”¹³ And as one historian has argued, few forces rival the effectiveness of unified and politically-motivated Los Angeles suburban homeowners.¹⁴ The capital required to purchase a Downey home was steep enough to incite fierce protection of those property values, and the municipal code provisions, in more sections than one, uphold and enhance those investments.

These provisions were racially motivated. Per Federal Housing Authority policy, areas inhabited by minorities were riskier loans. As private loan companies read the federal maps and based their loan decisions off the FHA's four-tiered system, companies began avoiding mixed-race neighborhoods, regardless of whether or not they used the FHA's loan protection policies.¹⁵ Anglo suburbanites, predicated on maintaining racial homogeneity, then found a numerically-proven excuse for racist motivations: protecting neighborhood property values.¹⁶ Such covert language was generally unnecessary before 1948; before the decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, racially-restrictive covenants legally excluded unwanted ethnic groups, since homes were private property and manageable solely by deed owners. Following the 1948 ruling, though, Anglo homeowners sought a different, enforceable method to control who populated the suburbs. It was not uncommon for real estate deeds to include provisions preventing the resale of houses to homeowners who, because of institutionalized penalties for mixed-race neighborhoods, jeopardized property values – in

¹² Downey, California, Municipal Code, Article V, Chapter 9, Part I.

¹³ Downey Municipal Code, Article IX, Chapter 5, Part II.

¹⁴ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990), chapter 3.

¹⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 190-218.

¹⁶ For more on suburban preference for racial homogeneity, see Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, passim.

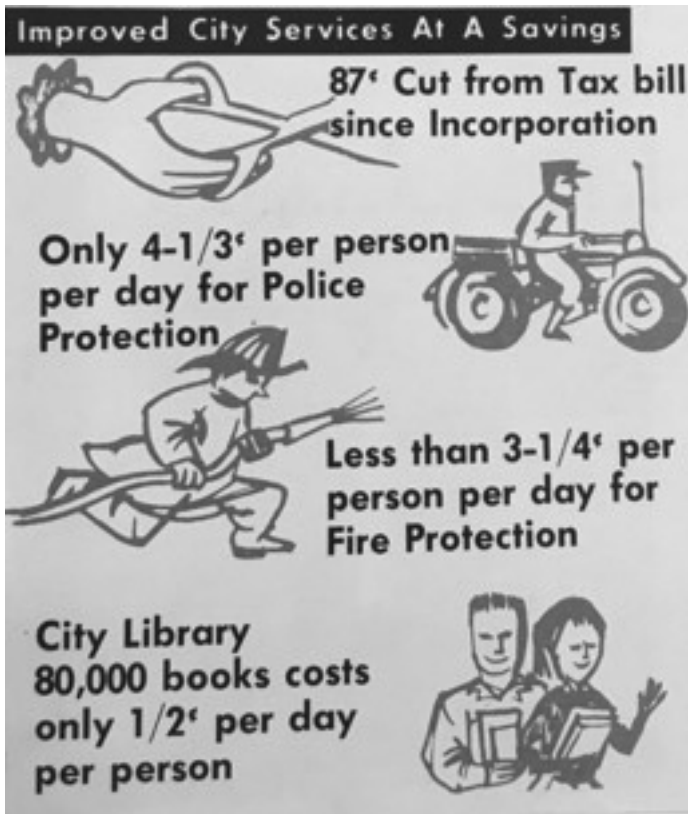


Figure 2: Pro-incorporation groups mailed pamphlets like these to advocate for local control of services. This culture of local control allowed residential pruning to flourish. (Image courtesy of the Downey Historical Society).

practice, an ethnically undesirable homeowner.¹⁷ Given how Downey remained a racially homogeneous suburb past 1948, one can presume Stamps' intent in protecting property values.

Downey's tax base sustained its impressive growth in the 1950s and 1960s. Originally based on agriculture, Downey, like other Los Angeles suburbs, attracted real estate and oil investors. Speculators poured into Downey as the oil reserves flowed out, but Downey became a recognizable place for further investment. E.M. Smith, an oil speculator looking to venture into the 1920s aviation fad, purchased a lot in central Downey and converted it into an airstrip. Emsco Aircraft, cleverly substituted for the E.M. Smith Company, struggled financially through the Depression and interwar years, but found fortune when it secured federally-guaranteed postwar aerospace construction contracts. The contracts were hardly indefinite, but Downey's aerospace plant constantly won new projects. With the onset of the Cold War and the Space Age in the 1950s and

¹⁷See Camarillo, "A New Frontier in America's Cities of Color," and Sides, *LA City Limits*, 102.

1960s, Downey had at least one major, stable source of tax revenue to ensure development of roads, facilities, and general upkeep of the suburban lifestyle.¹⁸ Small white-collar companies moved into Downey, which by then had earned a reputation as a safe place to live and do business – for the white middle-class residents who could move in.

But small populations of immigrant Japanese, Greek, Cuban, and Mexicans did live in primarily-Anglo Downey.¹⁹ These groups lived in residentially-segregated less-desirable parts of Downey, and their presence in turn harmed property values.²⁰ In general, though, immigrant populations in the 1950s and 1960s were limited in number and were legally prevented from the social mobility available to their Anglo counterparts throughout the city.

By the 1980s, the white population in Downey was mostly at odds with the demographic profile of contemporary Southeast Los Angeles. Beginning in 1965 following the Watts Riots, Anglo Americans moved out of the formerly-restricted suburbs like Compton and Bell Gardens at a pace so rapid, one historian has called it the “White Exodus.”²¹ Unscrupulous realtors, of minority and Anglo backgrounds, aided the demographic transition through blockbusting practices, where they warned white homeowners that the value of their property would decrease with the influx of non-white residents; the Anglo homeowners usually sold quickly, padding the realtors’ pockets.²² By 1980, suburbs that were previously “lily-white” and mostly upper-working-class were populated by black and Mexican homeowners of increasingly lower-working-class backgrounds.²³ With time, the former prestige of the Southeast LA suburbs was replaced

¹⁸Gerald A. Blackburn, *Downey's Aerospace History, 1947-1999* (Mount Pleasant, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), passim.

¹⁹For a Cuban perspective on minority communities in Downey, see Mario A. Guerra, *Embracing Change: An Immigrant Saga* (Bloomington, Indiana: Archway Publishing, 2017), 22-24. His story, though, is atypical: as a light-skinned Cuban immigrant, earning citizenship was easier and quicker than for a Mexican immigrant because of the Cuban Adjustment Act (1966), which gives Cubans permanent residency after one year of physically residing in the United States. That, and his light skin complexion, inform his discussions about living and working in the United States, and make his case different from the typical experiences Mexicans faced.

²⁰See note 8

²¹ Albert Camarillo, “Cities of Color: The Making of California’s Minority-Majority Cities,” *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no.1 (February 2007), 10.

²² Albert Camarillo, “A New Racial Frontier in America’s Cities of Color: Reflections on Minority-Majority Cities – the Case of Compton, California,” in Hazel Markus and Paula M. L. Moya, *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

²³ Jerry Gonzalez, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 7-8.

by notoriety, and the cities' reputations worsened, giving rise to Compton as the "Murder Capital of the World" in the 1980s. Downey, then, was the Anglo middle-class holdover of a different style of suburbia.²⁴

Downey stayed white longer than nearby cities because homeowners felt no such pressure to escape until the late 1980s. With their own police force, fire department, school district, and city council, residents maintained remarkable control over city functions. Facing little pressure to integrate the schools, Anglo parents prided themselves on maintaining their standard of living – at least until the next best option became available. As one historian demonstrated, by 1980, white homeowners looking to resist school integration moved en masse to Orange County, whose population boomed in the 1960s and the 1980s, developing "the county's identity as a haven for whites concerned about states-rights, property-rights, and 'traditional' values."²⁵ Indeed, cities like Yorba Linda, Newport Beach, and Irvine offered Downey homeowners similar middle-class autonomous suburban lives without Downey's geographic proximity to minority-majority cities.

For this reason, Anglo homeowners began moving away from Downey in the 1980s.²⁶ By this point, realtors realized the inevitable demographic changes and began selling to Mexican Americans who could afford to move in. In place of the Anglo residents moved mostly Mexican-origin homeowners, as was mostly the case with Norwalk, Pico Rivera, Paramount, and South Gate, the four suburbs to every direction of Downey. Unlike the surrounding suburbs, though, Downey's prestige didn't decline.

Perhaps a consideration of the 1990s tax base would help explain Downey's divergence. As previously mentioned, federally-contracted aerospace companies almost continuously occupied the Downey plant. Throughout the 1960s, Downey-based firms constructed parts of the Apollo 11, and worked on similar projects through the Reagan-era increase in defense spending. By the 1990s, the contracts were sparse and the labor force at Rockwell, then the occupier of the Emsco plant, was only a quarter of what it was during its earlier heyday.²⁷ Starting in the 1960s, amidst Southeast Los Angeles's demographic transition, Anglo

²⁴ The following two paragraphs are speculation that I have based on my initial working with the subject matter, primary sources, and knowledge of contemporary forces. I see understanding this as crucial to understanding Downey's Mexican development.

²⁵ Jack Schneider, "Escape from Los Angeles: White Flight from Los Angeles and its Schools, 1960-1980," *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 6 (September 2008): 995-1012, 1005.

²⁶ United States Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Volume 1, Chapter A, Part 6* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002). Cf. with Census of 1970 and 1980.

²⁷ Blackburn, *Downey's Aerospace History*, 78.

business owners took stores with them as they moved out of cities like Compton and South Gate, leaving emptied stores that were infrequently replaced. In turn, this weakened the cities' tax bases.²⁸ This phenomenon also affected Downey businesses in the 1980s, though not to the same extent.²⁹ Unlike in other cities, the outgoing Anglo-owned stores were almost equally replaced by incoming ethnic businesses: for every "Covey Auto Parts" that left, a "Luis *Carniceria*" moved in.³⁰ This must have happened differently from other cities because of the perception of Downey as a safe place to do business; as a city with low crime rates, its own police force, favorable business policies, and especially a target demographic for ethnic businesses, it was safer for business owners to move to Downey than other cities like Compton. Prospective homeowners saw middle-class Mexicans moving into Downey, and cultural familiarity attracted other Mexican-origin residents. Downey's federal-aerospace-supported tax base helped the city through the 1980s as Anglo-owned businesses left and ethnic ones established their roots. As these businesses set up in Downey, further strengthening the tax base, the city not only avoided economic decline, but strengthened its prestige and reputation as a middle-class suburb for Mexicans.

The city council hired Gerald Caton in 1989 as the contours of Mexican middle-class Downey began taking shape. By then, Caton and the city council focused their efforts on excluding an economic - not racial - demographic. Caton's government utilized political and legal means to exclude and maintain Downey's middle-class status during rapid demographic transition. When Gerald Caton became city manager in 1989, he had a reputation for effective city governance. Caton took the job as a thirty-eight-year-old with a stellar reputation after "injecting new life" as city manager into Cudahy, a nearby Latino working-class suburb. Caton's success stemmed primarily from his penchant for recruiting redevelopment projects that converted unused or underused properties into

²⁸ Camarillo, "A New Racial Frontier in America's Cities of Color"; Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven*, especially chapter 6 and conclusion; Josh Sides, *LA City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 210-216. Not all Los Angeles suburbs experienced businesses leaving with their owners, though. George Sanchez discusses in "'What's Good for Boyle Heights is Good for the Jews': Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (September 2004): 633-661, for an example of Jewish business owners in Boyle Heights who kept their businesses in the city despite moving their houses to other cities. That was atypical, and likely not the case in Downey, but it shouldn't be ruled out because certain law firms did retain their services despite owners moving out.

²⁹ My analysis here is based on business listings in *Downey City Directory* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Directory Company) from 1950 and 1992.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

successful commercial centers. Caton, in his new Downey job, worked with an operating budget ten times larger than in Cudahy.³¹ Caton quickly got to work, putting forth revisions to the city ordinances twelve times in his first three years, from rules as politically pertinent as “powers and duties of the board” to areas as obscure as “equipment funds.”³² Gerald Caton knew of the language in Downey’s municipal code and showed interest in revising it. That he left certain parts untouched suggests he was comfortable with the way they contributed to his vision for Downey as an emerging Mexican Beverly Hills.

This requires a brief discussion of the city’s political structure: the council-manager system. Five councilmembers elect from amongst themselves a representative of the council, the mayor, who serves as the ceremonial head of the city. The mayor, unlike in a council-mayor format, has no executive function; the charter vaguely assigns the mayor “responsibility for interpreting the policies, programs, and needs of the City government to the people.” Those policies, though, are determined by the city manager. The city manager is chosen by city councilmembers and serves for as long as the council chooses. Gerald Caton essentially was chosen, with minor help from the mayor and city councilmembers, to maintain Downey’s prestige. Caton and the Downey government certainly benefited from working with a framework of city ordinances created to exclude minorities.

The municipal code indicates which rules have been revised, added, or amended. Some ordinances are entirely removed, and will be noted as such in subsequent editions. Appended text (such as “Added by Ordinance X, adopted MM/DD/YY”) indicates which codes have and haven’t been revised since the original 1956 municipal code. Just because their text has not changed, though, does not mean their interpretation has not.

In fact, framework that protected property values by excluding minorities before 1980 was kept afterward to restrict non-middle-class homeowners from moving to Downey. Of the hundreds of mentions throughout the entire city ordinances, less than twenty had been removed or substantially revised.³³ It would be difficult to assume, though, later politicians’ knowledge of these racial motivations for such language, since Downey’s first Latino councilmember took office in 1985, by when city government would not have used “property value” language to restrict

³¹ Kondo and Harris, “Downey Picks Cudahy Chief as City Manager.”

³² My claim is also based on an analysis of the municipal code, which contains each revision made to the ordinances. To determine the twelve ordinances in Caton’s first three years, I scanned the edited ordinances, looking for edits that took place in late 1989 until 1992. This period was especially productive, averaging four major revisions a year; later years averaged about a major revision a year, which is evidence of Caton’s enthusiasm for changing the municipal code to maintain Downey’s middle-class status.

³³ This claim is based on my analysis of the municipal code.



Figure 3: Gerald Caton, Downey's city manager from 1989-2011, at the aerospace facility that, once closed, became the Downey Landing shopping center. (Image courtesy of the Downey Historical Society).

Mexicans from moving in.³⁴ In general, though, I have noticed a serious disconnect between the rosy history the city portrays, and the reality of older generations of Downey.³⁵ Therefore it would be hard to conclude whether or not the city council knew of racial implications of “property

³⁴ The first Latino mayor was Ernesto Davila, mayor in 1985-1986. See City of Downey website, http://downey-v1002.civica.granicusops.com/_blobcache/0000/0007/6571.pdf, accessed on 22 November 2017.

³⁵ For example, in 2016, the City celebrated its 60th anniversary of incorporation and decorated the streets with signs showing old pictures of Downey, setting up “historical exhibits,” and publishing brief vignettes of life in Old Downey. Nearly every discussion of Downey history involved bragging about the aerospace industry and Downey's role as the “cradle of the space age,” but there was a surprising absence of discussion – or even acknowledgement of – Downey's discriminatory past. This amnesia trickles down to the Downey Historical Society, whose holdings represent the history of Downey as white residents have experienced it. What's more, the city library has two books of the history of Downey, one published in 1932 that glamorizes John Downey's exploitation and the fierce removal of Gabrielino “Indians,” and a 1973 history that, being published before Mexican Americans moved to Downey in significant numbers, ignores the role of early Hispanic residents, and resorts mostly to advertising-friendly tropes to give a mythological telling of Downey's history. This gap between what Downey thinks it knows about its history and what Downey really knows about its history motivates my research.

value” language. It is not, however, difficult to understand the meaning of “property value” language in 1990s Downey.

Caton used the property value language framework for residential pruning. The landscaping requirements in Downey’s municipal code provide one such example. The city code forbade reasonably offensive appearances like broken windows or vegetation that promotes fire hazards, which protected homeowners from damage or harm caused by inflamed lawns or scattered glass.³⁶ Some requirements, however, made less sense. Technical charts fill the “Landscaping Requirements” section that mandate:

“Except in the R-1 and R-2 zones, the total number of trees required shall be as follows:

One (1) tree for every five (5) parking spaces; and One (1) tree for every twenty (20) linear feet of street (including street side) frontage... Except in the R-1 and R-2 zones, the size of trees, at time of planting, shall be as required in Table 9.5.4.”³⁷

Or, that homeowners must provide:

“[a] colorful landscape edge [that] should be established at the base of buildings. Avoid asphalt edges at the base of structures as much as possible. Plant materials located in containers are appropriate... Planting masses on-site should assume a simple, non-uniform arrangement. The diversity of massing types should be great enough to provide interest, but kept to a level that evokes a relaxed natural feeling.”³⁸

One historian has written about suburban sounds and styles evocative of nature, from names like Chicago’s Forest Park or New York’s Garden City, to the commonly tree-laden streets.³⁹ In this case, Downey politicians, including Caton, maintained Stamps’ original aesthetic to ensure the continuation of classic-looking homes. Conformity, not flexibility, was required. But these requirements were also prohibitive on two levels: initial cost and cost of maintenance. For new developers, compliance with ordinances, especially fanciful tree and slightly vegetation requirements, could add significant costs. By design, then, the owners who invested in Downey needed to be of secure-enough means to afford such auxiliary requirements. The cost of maintenance similarly prohibited certain property owners. For front lawns, prohibitions included:

³⁶ Downey Municipal Code, Article V, Chapter 9, Subsection 2.

³⁷ Downey Municipal Code Article IX, Chapter 5, Part II.

³⁸ Downey Municipal Code, Article IX, Chapter 5, Part II, Subsection 4.

³⁹ For more on the politics of nomenclature, see Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, especially chap. 4 and chap. 8.

“Vegetation causing detriment to neighboring properties, or that is out of conformity with neighboring community standards to such an extent as to result in, or contribute to, a diminution of property values, including, but not limited to: Lawns with grass in excess of six inches (6”) in height; Hedges, trees, lawns, plants, or other vegetation that are not maintained in a neat, orderly, and healthy manner as a result of lack of adequate mowing, grooming, trimming, pruning, fertilizing, watering, and/or replacement.”⁴⁰

Maintenance needed to be taken almost weekly, lest a lawn grow more than a disorderly six inches. Thus, a family moving into Downey needed to allocate, on a weekly basis, either hours of their day or monetary pay to service and maintain their vegetation. Such costs added up to a significant yearly investment, and restricted homeowners to those of particular means. White racial homogeneity was implied in Downey's earlier years, but in the 1990s Caton left these codes unedited to shape and prune incoming residents by economic, rather than racial, terms.

These codes were not without teeth: penalties meted out by the city swiftly and reliably enforced the codes in 1990s Downey. An edit by Caton increased penalties: \$100 for a first offense, \$200 for a second offense within 12 months, and \$500 for a third offense. Failure to pay on-time resulted in a late fee that doubled the cost; failure to pay the compounded citation within sixty days results in added administrative fees and variable interest rates.⁴¹ One could very well end up paying over \$1,000 for having a lawn that grows over six inches, according to these regulations. And the city enforced them: a letter in the local newspaper, the *Downey Eagle*, complained about the zeal with which Downey officers wrote tickets for municipal code violations. Erroneously charging the mayor for the stricter penalties, one citizen wrote:

“Under the new plan you are fined first and then are required to correct the violation. With the change in the Charter, the code enforcement officers will be like ‘Big Brother’...Is the purpose of Amendment #6 to increase the revenue for the City of Downey by issuing more citations, resulting in collecting more money? Or is the purpose to control and micro-manage the daily lives of the citizens? Or both?”⁴²

⁴⁰ Downey Municipal Code, Article V, Chapter 9, Subsection 2.

⁴¹ Downey Municipal Code, Article I, Chapter 4, Part VI.

⁴² Guy Sterner, “Citation Threat,” *Downey Eagle*, October 1, 1993. The city has also been notorious for very strict enforcement of parking violations due to street sweeping, with similar fee schedules for those violations, even to cars not registered to Downey homeowners.

Living in Downey in the 1990s was prohibitively expensive for residents without the means to afford the middle-class suburban lifestyle, and that ensured Caton's use of the municipal code would keep Downey a middle-class suburb.

However, there were few other arrangements if home-owning proved to be too expensive. The next-best option would be renting a home, which offered access to Downey's reputable neighborhoods, police services, and school district.⁴³ Middle-class suburbanites, though, have historically seen rental housing as anathema to the suburban ideal, since semi-permanent or temporary housing begets transience and loose attachments to suburban neighborhoods.⁴⁴ Of course, Stamps' municipal code restricted this type of housing and Caton left that framework intact through his revisions. Property owners looking to subdivide their lots into apartments were responsible for fees related to the conversion, calculated by a multifaceted equation that charged developers based on the proposed number of units, as well as a yearly fee based on the age and size of the complex.⁴⁵ In sum, the municipal code as effected by Stamps made it difficult to convert single-family properties into multi-family complexes. However, a 1987 revision to the municipal code by Caton's predecessor rewarded such developers, likely in response to contemporary housing shortages in California, where:

“an applicant shall be eligible for either a density bonus or other incentives or concessions of equivalent financial value in accordance with State law if the applicant for a conversion of existing rental apartments to condominiums agrees to provide thirty-three percent of the total units of the proposed condominium project as target units affordable to households with moderate incomes or less, or to provide fifteen percent of the total units in the condominium conversion project as target units affordable to lower-income households.”⁴⁶

This epitomized residential pruning in Downey: flexible enough for working-class residents to move in, but strict enough to enhance the middle-class reputation. By removing semi-permanent rentals in favor of mortgaged condominiums, the revision signified a middle ground be-

⁴³ I base my analysis here off the U.S. Census from 1980, 1990, and 2000, where rental housing had the second-highest number of Downey families.

⁴⁴ For more on this, see Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*. See also Jerry Andrews, “Forced Public Housing is a Swelling Cancer,” *Downey Eagle*, January 21, 1994.

⁴⁵ Downey Municipal Code Article IX, Chapter 5, Part X.

⁴⁶ Downey Municipal Code Article IX, Chapter 5, Part XII, Subsection 14. This did, of course, incite backlash. See Downey *Eagle* op-ed below in note 47.

tween strict economic discrimination and flexible suburbanization. This should not be overplayed, though. Stamps, Caton, and other Downey politicians enacted steep hurdles for non-single-family homes to prevent Downey from losing its middle-class reputation.

Through the 1990s, Caton enacted other policies to keep Downey middle-class. During the early 1990s economic recession, Caton followed strict no-lending policies for businesses and homeowners. Despite losing two automobile dealerships, significant sources of city revenue, "Caton said the city's Redevelopment agency considered helping [a car dealership owner and Downey resident], but decided that 'the risks were greater than the (potential) benefit to the city'."⁴⁷ Caton maintained that his policies were the most fiscally responsible, but doing so removed an added safety net for businesses or homeowners to rely on. Caton's publically-known policies ensured the homeowners and business owners in Downey were wealthy enough to support their middle-class lifestyle, even throughout the recession.

Residential pruning existed beyond the city manager's actions, though, and negotiations for a new freeway, the Century Freeway (I-105), exemplify greater currents of economic discrimination. Recent historians have identified freeway construction and other infrastructural improvements as "suburban renewal," methods by which suburbs clear areas of low-income housing (or in most cases, the people living in it).⁴⁸ Throughout Southern California, cities like Flood Plains and Santa Fe Springs used freeway construction plans like the San Gabriel Freeway (I-605) for these exact purposes, mostly displacing Mexican or African American families living in homes labeled by authorities as health hazards.⁴⁹ The opportunity to evict working-class residents informed Randall Barb, the Downey mayor who nominated Caton, in his advocacy for construction of the I-105 freeway. Discussions regarding the freeway's design began in earnest over a decade prior, with the proposed line running from Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) to the larger Santa Ana Freeway (I-5). A major thoroughfare, Imperial Highway, made nearly this same connection, running from LAX to Yorba Linda in Orange County – where the I-5 runs through – but freeway construction involved razing houses through northern Compton, southern South Gate, and southern Downey. The proposed plan incited opposition in these predominantly-minority

⁴⁷ Lorna Fernandes, "Auto Dealer Koosa Faces a 'Friendly' Foreclosure: Financing: Religious order hopes to acquire title of Nissan of Downey, then lease it back to the beleaguered owner," *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1991.

⁴⁸ See Andrew Wiese, *Places of their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 104-109; and Jerry Gonzalez, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills*, chap. 4.

⁴⁹ See Gonzalez, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills*, 116-129; and Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).



Figure 4: Downey politicians in 1965 unveiling the first proposed route of the I-105 freeway through southern Downey. (Image courtesy of the Downey Historical Society).

neighborhoods.⁵⁰

A congressional committee met in 1984 to discuss the progress and planning of the freeway’s construction. Planners placed the freeway near Downey’s border with Paramount, which by then was a low-working-class minority-majority suburb. Construction, therefore, could improve Downey’s physical image by removing houses and families that more closely resembled working-class Paramount than the Mexican Beverly Hills. Indeed, constructing the I-105 freeway physically demarcated the built and living environment between the two suburbs – a distinction that’s still visible today. The City of Downey Planning Commission sent mayor Barb and city councilwoman Diane Boggs – a former mayor herself who also approved of Caton – to testify on behalf of the city. Their urgency was apparent, as Mayor Barb pleaded:

“And so again, as we hear testimony and we see your interest, we’re encouraged that the freeway will be built and that it will *intersect our city as it’s been designed*, and that we will move forward in that area. I again just would like to welcome you...And if

⁵⁰ United States Congress House Committee on Public Works and Transportation - Subcommittee on Surface Transportation, *Progress of California Century Freeway (I-105)* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1985), 226-245 (especially testimony by Violet Rabaya).

there's anything we can do to help, please let us know."⁵¹

Because Mayor Barb understood the implications of removing southern Downey families, he wished for the project to be promptly completed. Residents shared the politicians' enthusiasm for suburban renewal, too. City councilwoman Dianne Boggs's family sold their home in South Gate a decade earlier to expedite construction. As a Downey councilwoman, her interests laid in maintaining a middle-class milieu that the residents of south Downey spoiled. In her testimony, she anxiously informed the project planners of "7 dwellings to be removed, 3 industrial complexes to be removed, 14 apartment buildings to be removed" – all anathema to a suburban middle-class ideal. But she also informed the committee of the residents' interests in the project:

"I had occasion recently for my election to walk my district door to door and talk with all of the residents who are living in the corridor [near where the construction was supposed to take place]. Their concern is the immediate completion of the freeway... because it leaves a little less place for crime and they're anxious to get the freeway completed so they can get their cul-de-sacs in."⁵²

Government and residents alike had vested interests in the freeway: the city council wanted demarcation between Paramount and Downey, and the residents wanted to "get their cul-de-sacs in" for new middle-class suburbanites. Gerald Caton, of course, became a staunch proponent of the new freeway, and welcomed its completion. By 1993, suburban Downey residents could commute in their cars to their white-collar jobs over property where, just a decade prior, lived families who didn't fit the middle-class image Caton and the city council tried to maintain.

By 2000, Caton's efforts succeeded in achieving Downey's character and flavor as a middle-class minority-majority suburb, which it maintains to this day. Brief incidents of gangs moving into Downey temporarily threatened the city's status in the early 2000s, but effective city-wide programs like "Gangs Out of Downey" (GOOD) quelled the threat.

Caton, ever the residential pruner, continued his middle-class-magnet policies. In 2003 when the Downey aerospace plant closed for good, Caton quickly devised a plan to redevelop empty space into a robust commercial center to raise property values in the neighborhood. With a

⁵¹ United States Congress House Committee on Public Works and Transportation - Subcommittee on Surface Transportation, *Progress of California Century Freeway (I-105)*, 5-6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6-7.

quip that “[t]he community’s ego was really hurt with the closure,” Caton went right back to work to keep Downey the Mexican Beverly Hills.⁵³ In its place went the Downey Landing, a shopping center with the Gerald M. Caton Fountain, and Downey Studios, a production studio where Iron Man and some other blockbusters were filmed.

The main difference between the Downey of the 1990s and the Downey of 2010s is a facelift throughout the city; the people come, if not from the same families, from the same backgrounds. Downey’s municipal codes, first written by Stamps but kept by subsequent City Governments, effectively fashioned its population – “residential pruning” as I have called it – to discriminate who could from couldn’t move in. Middle-class families have stayed in Downey and middle-class families have flocked to Downey. This is all the more astonishing in comparison to similar suburbs in the area: Compton, a city where middle-class blacks upgraded to *en masse* in 1960s, did not survive as a middle-class suburb when it went from majority-white to majority-black. The makeup of the two cities was largely the same in 1956, when Downey was incorporated: mostly Anglo middle-class white-collar workers living in a racially-segregated sleeper suburb.

The 2010 Census reported that major cities in the United States like New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and Phoenix, had become minority-majority.⁵⁴ As immigration continues, especially from Latin American countries like Mexico and El Salvador, so will the trend. As metropolitan cities become minority-majority, populations will look to suburbanize, not different from early nineteenth century suburbanization.⁵⁵ Populations of ethnic minorities will move into suburbs that were previously all-white, and it is of interest to understand what projects a city to become the next Compton and what projects a city to become the next Downey.

I hope to take greater understandings about race and class from my conclusions. In standard historiography, race and class have seemed to work inextricably in conjunction with one another. Social historians in American historiography have been quick to understand class as a function or aspect of race and racial forces, as opposed to its own definite category. When one is subjugated to a different racial categorization, class opportunities are similarly limited. As one historian has shown about late-nineteenth-century Santa Barbara, the conjunctive inter-workings of race and class relegated Mexicans to low-skilled and semi-skilled occu-

⁵³ Akilah Johnson, “Shuttle’s Loss Hits at Heart of Downey,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 2003, accessed on 10 December 2017, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/feb/05/local/me-downey5>.

⁵⁴ Noor Wazwaz, “It’s Official: The U.S. is Becoming a Minority-Majority Nation,” *U.S. News and World Report*, July 6, 2015, accessed December 10, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/07/06/its-official-the-us-is-becoming-a-minority-majority-nation>.

⁵⁵ See Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, chaps. 1-4.

pational labor, since the Mexicans fit into the lowest rung in a racial-socioeconomic-Anglo-capitalist ladder.⁵⁶ While this may have held true for situations in which a white/non-white binary exists, the case of 1990s Downey suggests otherwise. In Downey, race was a controlled variable, to borrow social-scientific terminology, since the majority of the population was Mexican American – a minority by the yardstick of standard racial categorizations in which race and class typically function. Nonetheless, economic discrimination (in the form of residential pruning) existed, and arguably exists past the twenty-first century. Following the logic of standard historiography, race and class should work simultaneously as levels of discrimination. However, actions by Gerald Caton and other Downey politicians, as I have suggested, economically discriminated despite the absence of racial discrimination against Mexicans.⁵⁷ Perhaps this can provide a framework for understanding the resource-competitive inter-minority conflicts, such as the black-brown tensions plaguing current-day Compton.⁵⁸

But, in the case of Downey, politicians like Gerald Caton and Randall Barb used – or stayed – legal means to ensure that the Mexicans moving into Downey were of a sufficient economic background to conform to the economic ideals of a middle-class suburb. Through edits and intentional non-edits to the municipal code, many of them remnants from an era of Downey's history predicated on racial discrimination, Caton and the city council enacted standards of living that only a middle-class family could afford. The ordinances – some with bizarre and specific regulations – were enforced dutifully and with sufficient severity to prevent lower-class families from moving to Downey in numbers great enough to threaten the suburban ideal. And for those lower-class families, if they couldn't afford to live in a single-family detached home, there were few other alternatives. It was no less a form of discrimination, but residential pruning was crucial in Downey's protection of its legal means to cultivate a certain milieu, one that was able to maintain its luster as the Mexican Beverly Hills.

⁵⁶ See Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society*, passim; Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

⁵⁷ Whether discrimination existed against other groups of color is a question I will address with further research.

⁵⁸ See Camarillo, especially his recent works like "Cities of Color" and "A New Frontier in America's Cities of Color." I also wish to denote a difference between race and class as two separate functions of the structure of discrimination, and two separate functions of discrimination as part of one's identity. I do not find the two to be mutually exclusive, meaning that a working-class Mexican can be discriminated in, say, Downey for his or her class position, but discriminated in, say Palo Alto for his or her class position and ethnic background.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Andrews, Jerry. "Forced Public Housing is a Swelling Cancer." *Downey Eagle*. 21 January 1994.
City of Downey Municipal Code. Downey: City of Downey. <http://qcode.us/codes/downey>.
- Dominguez, Alex. "Rock & Brews Holds Ribbon Cutting, Will Open Labor Day." *Downey Patriot*. 30 August 2017. Accessed November 12, 2017. <http://www.thedowneypatriot.com/articles/rock-and-brews-holds-ribbon-cutting-will-open-labor-day>
- Downey City Directory: 1950*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles Directory Company.
- . 1994. Los Angeles: Los Angeles Directory Company.
- "Downey Wins! New City OK'd." *Downey Champion*. 18 December 1956.
- Fernandes, Lorna. "Auto Dealer Koosa Faces a 'Friendly' Foreclosure: Financing: Religious order hopes to acquire title of Nissan of Downey, then lease it back to the beleaguered owner." *Los Angeles Times*. 24 October 1991. Accessed December 10, 2017. http://articles.latimes.com/1991-10-24/news/hd-204_1_auto-dealership.
- Guerra, Mario A. 2017. *Embracing Change: An Immigrant Saga*. Bloomington, Indiana: Archway Publishing.
- Harris, Lee and Annette Kondo. "Downey Picks Cudahy Chief as City Manager: Gerald Caton Says He Will Focus on Shopping Center Expansion, Search for New Police Chief." *Los Angeles Times*. 17 August 1989. Accessed December 8, 2017. http://articles.latimes.com/1989-08-17/news/hd-692_1_assistant-city-manager.
- Home Owners Loan Corporation. "Appraisal of central-north Downey." 1939. Los Angeles City Survey Files, Area Descriptions, Home Owners Loan Corporation, Record Group 317, National Archives, Washington, D.C., 1939. Document number C-136. Accessed on 19 November 2017. salt.umd.edu/T-RACES/demo/demo.html.
- Johnson, Akilah. "Shuttle's Loss Hits at Heart of Downey." *Los Angeles Times*. 5 February 2003. Accessed on 10 December 2017. <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/feb/05/local/meh-downey5>.
- Sonksen, Mike. "Downey in the Past, Present, and Future." *KCET*. 26 June 2015. Accessed on 12 November 2017. <https://www.kcet.org/history-society/downey-in-the-past-present-and-future>.
- Sterner, Guy. "Citation Threat." *Downey Eagle*. 1 October 1993.
- United States. *1970 Census of population. Volume 1, Volume 1*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census,

1972.

- United States. *1980 census of population. Volume 1. Chapter A. Part 6. Volume 1. Chapter A. Part 6.* Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1982.
- United States. *1990 census of population.* Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, 2002.
- United States. *Progress of California Century Freeway (I-105: hearing before the Subcommittee on Surface Transportation of the Committee on Public Works and Transportation, House of Representatives, Ninety-eighth Congress, second session, August 16, 1984, at Downey, CA.* Washington: U.S. G.P.O. 1985.
- United States Census Bureau. *California, 2000. 2000 census of population and housing.* Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau, 2002.

Secondary Sources

- Avila, Eric. *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.
- Blackburn, Gerald. *Downey's Aerospace History, 1947-1999.* Mount Pleasant, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2009.
- Camarillo, Albert.. "A New Racial Frontier in America's Cities of Color: Reflections on Minority-Majority Cities – the Case of Compton, California." In Hazel Markus and Paula M. L. Moya, *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- . *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- , "Cities of Color: The Making of California's Minority-Majority Cities," *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no.1 (February 2007): 1-28.
- Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles.* London: Verso, 1990.
- Gonzalez, Jerry. *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018.
- Jackson, Kenneth. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Latimer, Larry. *Downey.* Mount Pleasant, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2010.
- Molina, Natalia. *Fit to be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.
- Nicolaides, Becky. *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class*

Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Russell, Charles Quinn. *History of Downey: The Life Story of a Pioneer Community, and of the Man Who Founded It – California Governor John Gately Downey – From Covered Wagon to the Space Shuttle*. Downey, California: Downey City Printing Office, 1973.

Sanchez, George J. “‘What’s Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews’: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s.” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (September 2004): 633-661.

Schneider, Jack. “Escape from Los Angeles: White Flight from Los Angeles and its Schools, 1960-1980.” *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 6 (September 2008): 995-1012.

Sides, Josh. *LA City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.

Wazwaz, Noor. “It’s Official: The U.S. is Becoming a Minority-Majority Nation.” *U.S. News and World Report*. 6 July, 2015. Accessed December 10, 2017. <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/07/06/its-official-the-us-is-becoming-a-minority-majority-nation>.