

# **Diversity when rebuilding Appalachian housing:**

Lessons from historical subsistence homesteads

Appalachian Studies Association

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# ASA2022 – The Historic Grant Street Bridge

*Newspaper article regarding its closing /  
Protest documented by drone*



# Purpose:

Design a blueprint for the renewal of neighborhoods in an Appalachian town.

Use diverse histories as a way to frame the discussion.

Oral histories as a way to record stories and provide themes for further exploration

[https://www.bdtonline.com/news/bluefields-east-end-focus-of-national-infrastructure-pilot-program/article\\_4c77e71c-ba16-11ed-ab0f-8f52a7c2d75a.html](https://www.bdtonline.com/news/bluefields-east-end-focus-of-national-infrastructure-pilot-program/article_4c77e71c-ba16-11ed-ab0f-8f52a7c2d75a.html)



Map of Bluefield, West Virginia

## Significance / Theoretical

## Framework

- New Urbanism
- Reaction to post-war suburbia
- Design led
- Focus on traditional and walkable neighborhoods



New Urbanist Neighborhood  
Austin, TX





Bluefield, West Virginia's historic Eastside neighborhood, once housed vibrant African American neighborhoods.

## Relevance:

Appalachian towns and cities offer existing infrastructure and affordable homes and land.

Neighborhood highlights the rich history of African American neighborhoods and promotes them as tourism sites.

The region is near major East Coast and Midwest metro markets.



# Context: New Deal subsistence homesteads



Dailey, WV  
Appalachian New Deal  
subsistence homesteads were  
designed to give rural  
households a chance to build  
community.



# Arthurdale, WV





Appalachian New Deal subsistence homesteads provided modern kitchens, food storage facilities, and enough land to produce gardens and raise chickens.





# Dailey, WV / Cumberland, TN





# Norvelt, PA



# Research Question:

How can local history inform regional redevelopment?





Former African American elementary school in the Northside neighborhood of Bluefield





Former Park Central High School – West Virginia's last segregated high school (1969).

# Methods:

## Arthurdale focus group findings

- *Fierce loyalty to the town*
- *Unique educational model*
- *Most homes have been adapted in some way*
- *Original houses are valued if adapted.*
- *Character of original homes important in renovation*
- *Garden and root cellars are still used by many residents*
- *Sense of unique character felt by all*

# Methods:

Virginia Tech

University Libraries Collaborative Research Grant

On-site interviews –February 2023

12 – 15 audio and video interviews with residents

60 minutes

Open-ended questions

Former Park Central High School



## *Questions for Bluefield residents*

When and where were you born?

What were your parent's occupations?

Where is your family from? When did they arrive in Bluefield?

What did your grandparents tell you about your family?

What neighborhood did you live in? What are your earliest memories of that neighborhood?

What did you grow up hearing about the other neighborhoods?

How did railroads/coal mining and transportation shape the town as you were growing up?

What was your family home like?

What did you wear for special occasions? What about your parents and grandparents?

What church(es) did your family attend? What do you remember about events they held (church), (school), (and community center)?

When you left home to go to church or school, what businesses and homes did you pass?

What was going on in the street?

## *Questions for Bluefield residents*

What are your earliest memories of school? What teachers stand out to you?

What businesses did your family frequent? Do you remember: nightclubs, major concert events, music venues, record stores, jewelry stores, drugstores

**Who were some outstanding citizens in your community or some that you remember hearing stories about?**

What are your memories of resistance to segregation?

What are your memories of integration? How did integration change your neighborhood? How did it change the rest of Bluefield?

How do you want the neighborhood to change and to stay the same? What do you hope for Bluefield's future?

*Preliminary themes from interviews*

Neighbors are connected and protecting each other.

Larger and extended families.

Community organizations strong, e.g. church, school, athletics, etc.

Bluefield State College as a strength





Former Traveler's Hotel





Former Hotel Thelma

## Discussion:

Former residents of subsistence homesteads spoke of items that produced bonds of community.

Residents of Bluefield spoke of activities and organizations that connected families within black neighborhoods.

The model of co-housing can inform the redevelopment of Appalachia.





Gary Bowling's House of Art  
Bluefield, WV



## Next Steps:

*A broader survey of residents*

*Town Hall meeting*

*Form an advisory board*

*Design charrette*

## Conclusion:

The goal is to create a template to redevelop other Appalachian towns.

What makes redevelopment unique in Appalachia?

What are the unique obstacles to sustainability in Appalachia?

How can issues of diversity serve as an economic impetus for these towns?

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