

REVISITING THE ROCHESTER NARRATIVE

Inner Loop's story has changed

Looking back at the D&C's original coverage of the freeway, and how a lack of diversity in the newsroom left out voices of people displaced and affected

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It is easier for us to see when policies or legislation were racist or unjust when we have the perspective of time. As the Revisiting Rochester Narrative fellows for summer 2023 at the Democrat and Chronicle, we were curious about what stories the D&C told during the construction of the Inner Loop and how it has evolved over the years. We explored how the D&C covered the city's decision to build a highway through diverse, mostly Black communities in the 1950s and how that reporting shaped our understanding of the highway's impact on Rochester.

- In our previous article, we gave a brief of the Inner Loop's history and explored why it's an important piece of infrastructure to understand locally and in connection with national urban renewal trends.

- This time, we reviewed newspaper archives from the mid-1940s to today and pieced together some of the conversations that have taken place over time in Rochester about the Inner Loop.

It is said that journalism is the first draft of history. Through our research, we found that:

- The Democrat and Chronicle covered the city planning and construction of the Inner Loop and a companion Outer Loop. We found that the D&C stories lacked voices of people who lived in the neighborhoods that were razed. When reading the D&C's coverage from 1942-1965, we often found ourselves wondering, "What was happening in communities like the 3rd and 7th wards? How were the people there and other communities responding to the Inner Loop?"

- The Fredrick Douglass Voice — published by Howard Coles, a Black Rochesterian who is credited with elevating Black perspectives and experiences — regularly covered communities affected by the Inner Loop. There were various accounts in The Voice that showed how impacted people felt about construction of the Inner Loop.

- As the D&C has moved toward more inclusive reporting, it has published retrospective pieces on the construction of the Inner Loop, the demolition of homes and redlining. The newspaper created the Revisiting the Rochester Narrative fellowship to help provide nuanced coverage of the affected neighborhoods.

We reviewed archives available online, at museums and in libraries. We spoke with local historians and interviewed an expert on how highway design and construction was influenced by racism and segregation. We also compared the D&C's coverage to what appeared in The Fredrick Douglass Voice. So, let's take a look.

How did the D&C initially cover the Inner Loop?

Construction of the Inner Loop began in 1952. The Democrat and Chronicle started sharing stories about the Inner Loop highway when it was just a proposal, one of the earliest mentions that we found of the Inner Loop was in a column published Jan. 21, 1946.

To solve traffic issues, two highways were planned: an Inner and Outer Loop.

The proposed loops were referenced in the column, which was about new bus routes and traffic downtown. The article, which has no byline, concludes with a sentiment about Inner and Outer arterial looped streets to make commuting more efficient.

"Of course, the Main Street bottleneck is a disgrace to a city of Rochester's progressiveness," states the column from the D&C.

The Main Street congestion was referencing an influx of cars and pedestrian traffic in downtown Rochester. It stemmed from a change a couple years after the end of World War II, when Rochester's population jumped to 332,488 people, a 12.4% increase from 1920. An article from April 16, 1948, talked about the differences between the state and city's proposed plans. It uses some derogatory language to describe the city's neighborhoods.

The article mentions how the highway could "enable the eventual rehabilitation of the blighted Baden-Ormond area, sweeping away the slum section and making possible industrial development there," the article states.

The Inner Loop and Outer Loop were often written about in tandem during their beginning stages. The Inner Loop was to be built through the center of the city and the Outer loop was to circle around the greater Rochester area.

At this time, the Democrat and



In this September 1958 photo, a building on Cumberland Street in Rochester is demolished in preparation for construction of Interstate 490, known as the Inner Loop. COURTESY OF THE ROCHESTER PUBLIC LIBRARY LOCAL HISTORY & GENEALOGY DIVISION.

Chronicle's newsroom was mostly white and male, this shared identity and experience impacted the stories they saw as important enough to run in the paper. They lacked a lot of stories from the city neighborhoods affected by the Inner Loop. However, the D&C did write about the suburban neighborhoods slated to be impacted by the Outer Loop.

We found many mentions of the Brighton community when looking back at the D&C's archive. About a year after the first mention of the Outer Loop, the D&C covered protests from Brighton residents about plans to construct the highway through parts of their town.

While at that time the blueprint of the highway had yet to be approved, the article states that "Brightonites filed petitions of protest against putting the Outer Loop through their best residential districts..."

- Additionally, other articles from the D&C stated that cutting out these homes in the Brighton area would be detrimental to the community, writing subheads such as "Would Doom Homes."

- The D&C went out and interviewed homeowners that were included in the initial plan that was drawn to get their perspective on the situation and how they felt — and even included photos of the houses in this white neighborhood.

- The residents of Brighton recommended other possible routes for the Outer Loop. One was Elmwood Avenue located north of East Avenue and the other was the New York Central Railroad.

- The Outer Loop's original plan had proposed to remove about six homes. The plan was revised, and no homes were removed from the Outer Loop construction.

How does D&C coverage compare to other Rochester papers?

Alongside the Democrat and Chronicle, papers like The Times-Union and The Fredrick Douglass Voice also wrote about the city of Rochester.

We went to the Rochester Museum and Science Center where we were given access to editions of The Voice. We also referenced the Rochester Voices website where some of the articles are digitized and public. Special thanks to Stephanie Ball for giving us access and being so welcoming.

We wanted to see how at the time The Voice, run by Howard Coles, told stories that other publications did not.

The Voice was first published Oct. 6, 1933. The purpose of the paper was to further push the ideals and aspirations of the African American community in Rochester. Coles was an advocate of the

Black community, encouraging voter participation and uplifting other black people into important occupations.

As the paper gained traction, one of its most notable reports early on was a housing survey by The Voice that unveiled the unsafe living conditions of Black tenants in 1938.

When it came to The Inner Loop, The Voice paper reported important elections, requests for access to City Council meetings, and Howard Coles personally revealed documents of houses that were targets for razing.

Coles also made multiple outreach attempts to other publications, including the D&C, and asked them to include columns in their paper, according to the Howard W. Coles Collection, which is available for review at RMSC.

Coles' attempt at outreach were met with resistance in a letter from a D&C editor, which is part of the Coles papers at RMSC.

What was happening nationally as the Inner Loop was built?

The so-called "urban renewal" approach to community planning was used in most major cities across America. We compared what the D&C was writing with other publications from cities that were building highways in a comparable manner.

We talked to Adam Paul Susaneck, creator of the project Segregation by Design, which compares redlining maps to the location of urban renewal projects to show how major cities in America often built highways over or through lower-income neighborhoods. He often adds additional research to further explore other kinds of infrastructure projects that have been built through redlined neighborhoods. He has a whole list of cities that he has explored, and similarly has a list of ones he intends to research.

While Susaneck has not dived into Rochester yet, he is knowledgeable enough to speak to these widespread urban renewal projects more broadly.

"What's interesting is Rochester, and a bunch of other cities, really loved those loops," Susaneck said.

In exploring the construction of highways in other cities their choice of placement was specific, he said.

Susaneck found that the Loop served to conserve a historic downtown or business area while giving people from the suburbs a quick way into the city.

"The loop really comes in as like a wall that provides easy access to everyone driving in from the suburbs, but then creates like a physical barrier for these neighborhoods," he said.

Through his research he has been able to recognize a distinct pattern of

building highways right through redlined, "hazardous" neighborhoods.

Susaneck noted that southern cities were more explicit in their reasons for wanting to build the highways.

These municipal governments, often led by people who were racist, creating infrastructure plans that sought to destroy Black and brown communities, he said. Articles from the Miami Herald made many references to the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act as being synonymous with "slum removal."

"Federal money for urban renewal projects may be needed," states a Miami Herald article from March 11, 1957. "The goal should be not merely to free Miami of slums but lay the foundations for the city of tomorrow starting at the center."

Southern newspapers weren't the only ones using this language. As referenced earlier, we did find D&C articles that refer to the neighborhoods where the Inner Loop was planned to be constructed as "blighted," "substandard Rochester" and "slum section."

Nationally, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had not yet been established when plans for these highway infrastructure projects were made. The legislation and infrastructure that was created by the government specifically made life more difficult for people of color in America.

The Inner Loop was finished a year after the violent unrest, referred to as "riots" or "uprisings," that took place in predominantly Black neighborhoods in Rochester.

What does the Democrat and Chronicle coverage look like now?

There has been a push to have more holistic coverage of the Inner Loop in recent years. Looking over archives of D&C articles, specifically from 1940-1965, we noticed the coverage missed opportunities to connect with the people who lived or worked in the buildings that were going to be demolished for the highway to be built.

Now at the D&C we are publishing more stories that hope to grapple with a more nuanced history by getting the voices of people who were affected by racist policies and infrastructure. There have been stories done that talk more deeply about redlining and other policies that made life more difficult if you were Black or impoverished.

Currently, decisions are being made about the deconstruction of the Inner Loop North.

As we create this first draft history about highway deconstruction, we plan to tell more stories from the communities that are on the receiving end of urban renewal projects.