



Culture

## JCSU virtual-reality project to showcase Black neighborhoods torn apart by urban renewal

Using grants totaling \$307,000, researchers at the school will use computer technology to reconstruct the former Brooklyn and Greenville neighborhoods.



*With aid from computers and historic documents, JCSU researchers will use historic photos such as this to stitch together two Charlotte communities long vanished. (Photo: Courtesy of JCSU)*

By **Jonathan Limehouse**

April 5, 2021



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Seventy-three-year-old Arthur Griffin Jr. remembers growing up in the Brooklyn community long before urban renewal razed the historic Black area in uptown Charlotte.

"We felt safe," Griffin said. "We felt like we belonged."

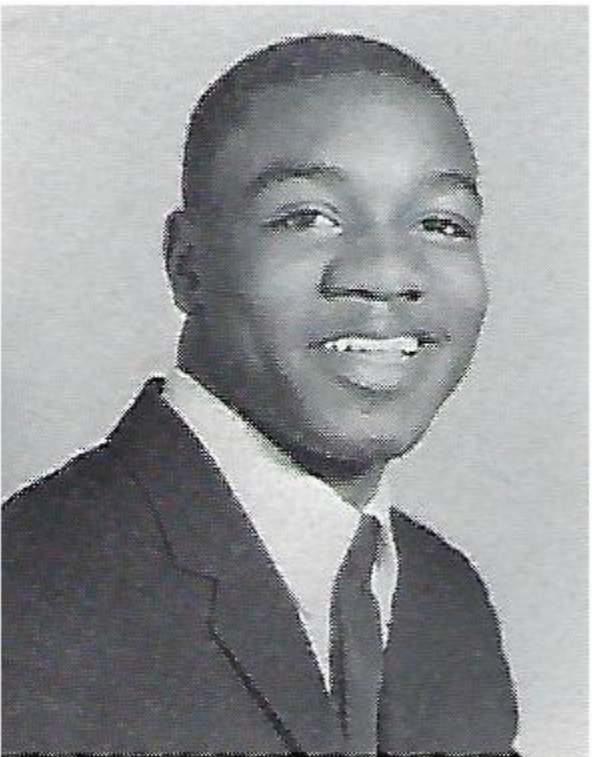


\$307,000 to virtually reconstruct neighborhoods destroyed with Greenville, a another Black neighborhood destroyed by urban renewal.

With the aid of computer technology, JCSU researchers will produce the virtual reconstructions based on historic photos, city documents and interviews with former residents.

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Griffin, a former Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools chairman, said he hopes the project will provide a historical context for Black youth and others with no knowledge of Charlotte before urban renewal, which saw entire Black communities, and their economic underpinnings, obliterated.



Arthur Griffin Jr., who grew up in Charlotte's Brooklyn neighborhood, at let in a 1966 class photo at Second Ward High School in Charlotte. (Photos: Courtesy of Arthur Griffin Jr.)



don't think we've recovered from

## 'It was interruptive'

Tekla Ali Johnson, a JCSU librarian who is piloting the project, said she was "stunned" when reading city documents relating to Charlotte's urban renewal.

"They were very open," she said, "and they said things like, 'This will impact over 3,000 negro families, but only three families are white families, so we're going to take care of them.' Stuff like that."

From 1950-1966, an estimated 1,009 families were displaced from Brooklyn alone, the [University of Richmond's Digital Scholarship Lab](#) estimates. And Charlotte was far from the only city where urban renewal was used.

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"This happened in Texas, Omaha, Cleveland, Detroit, California and New York," said Brandon Lunsford, a JCSU archivist and digital manager who is co-piloting the project. "Whenever black people would build their own community like this, they would come through and destroy it."

In Charlotte, Brooklyn was leveled to make way for a section of uptown that now houses the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Government Center, county Courthouse, Marshall Park and other government buildings.

"It was interruptive toward the community," Griffin said. "Communities are not just houses and streets; they're like a culture and lifestyle."

Griffin recalled walking along McDowell Street and seeing famous Black figures





Griffin also recalled bring his own “Negro-only” Lincoln Theater.

## A ‘human cost’

Johnson and Lunsford see parallels between urban renewal and today’s gentrification of historic Black neighborhoods.

“Some of these moves need to be evaluated for their human cost, not just for economic benefit,” Johnson said. “I’m not saying someone’s sitting around saying, ‘Hey, let’s move the black population specifically,’ but if that’s the end result, then we call that institutional racism.”

Lunsford, noting how the construction of Interstate 277 in 1981 destroyed Black homes and split Black neighborhoods, called it “structural racism.”

Johnson, who grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, in the 1960s, said a road was built through her segregated community. She recalled a Nebraska politician giving her and other children petitions to distribute in support of urban renewal projects.

In August, Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles acknowledged the city’s historic role in perpetuating racism and issued an apology.

## The technology

For the virtual reconstruction of Brooklyn and Greenville, JCSU researchers will use technology similar to the tools used by researchers in Italy who created a [virtual map of ancient Rome](#).

“When we started this, we thought it was an original idea,” Johnson said. “But



UNC Charlotte, Levine Museum of the New South and the Duke Digital Humanities Lab are partners in the project. Johnson will work with JCSU on research and 3D modeling.

Johnson said she hopes that maybe 18 months down the line that the project can be accessible to visitors at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture.

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### **Jonathan Limehouse**

Jonathan Limehouse is QCity Metro's reporter covering Charlotte neighborhoods north of uptown. He also reports on education, public safety and health. He is a sports fan, so he'll weave in a sports story from time to time. Email him your news tips at [jlimehouse@qcitymetro.com](mailto:jlimehouse@qcitymetro.com) or connect with him on Twitter, [@jon\\_limehouse](https://twitter.com/jon_limehouse).

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