

Trouble in the Water:

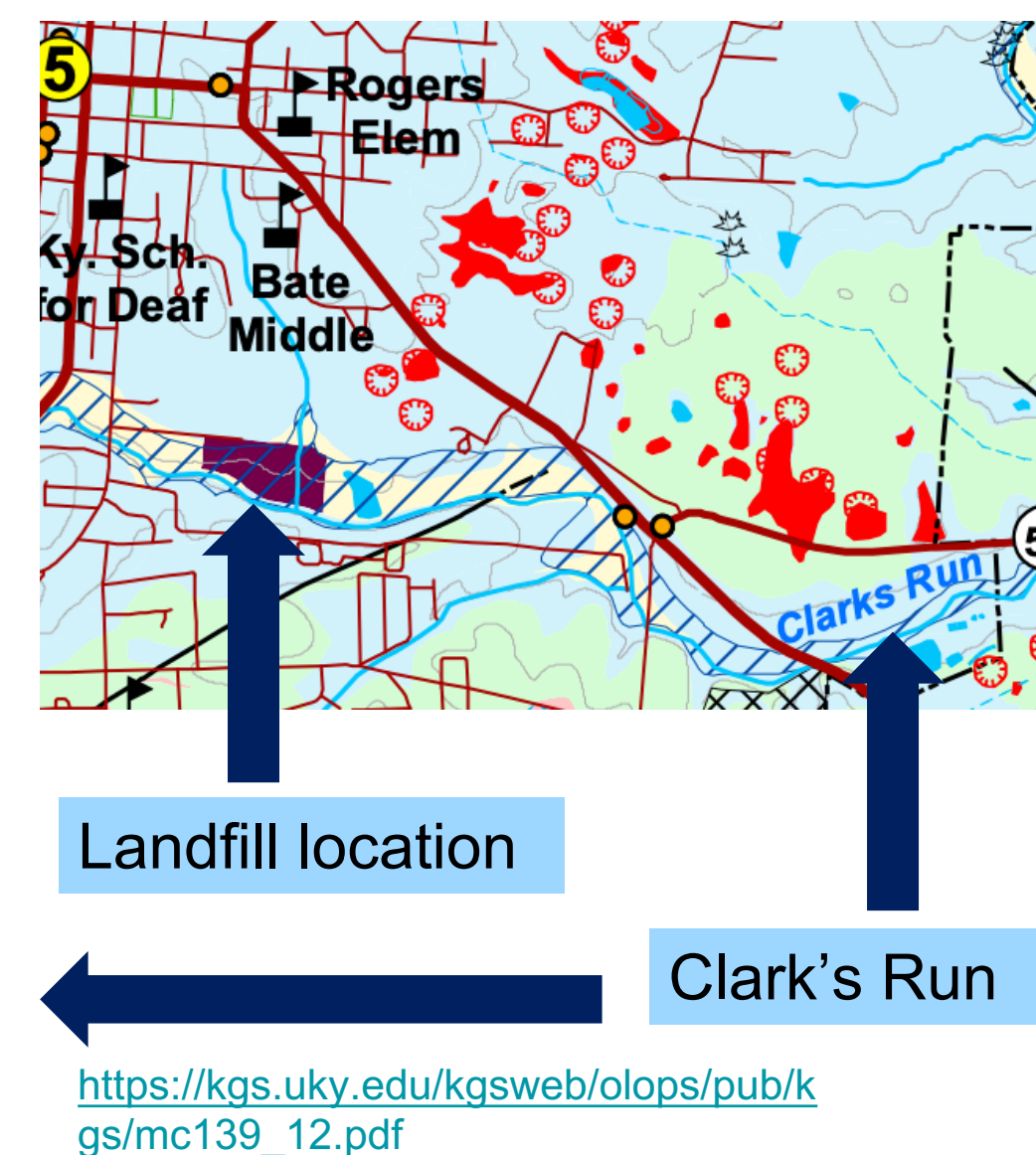
Environmental History and Racism in Danville, KY

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Abstract

Intrigued by the incidents of water and land contamination surrounding Danville's past landfill locations, I explored the environmental history of Clark's Run and the surrounding neighborhoods, engaging with themes of environmental racism and memory-building.

Clark's Run is a creek that flows through Boyle County, eventually emptying into Herrington Lake. The creek served as a major water source for Danville's early founders and residents. Today, Clark's Run remains a central point in the community: it is where children cool off in the summer, school groups conduct basic research, and local organizations host clean-up days to rid the space of trash. However, Clark's Run and its surrounding environment have a history of pollution from two illegally-run landfills and nearby factories. Because of the creek's proximity to a predominantly African American neighborhood, the environmental hazards became human health hazards that disproportionately affected this group of Danville residents. Using archived newspaper articles, personal interviews, and local educational organizations, I discovered instances of injustice situated within a long history of systemic racial oppression that challenge usual narratives of environmental justice.



Urban Renewal Strikes Danville

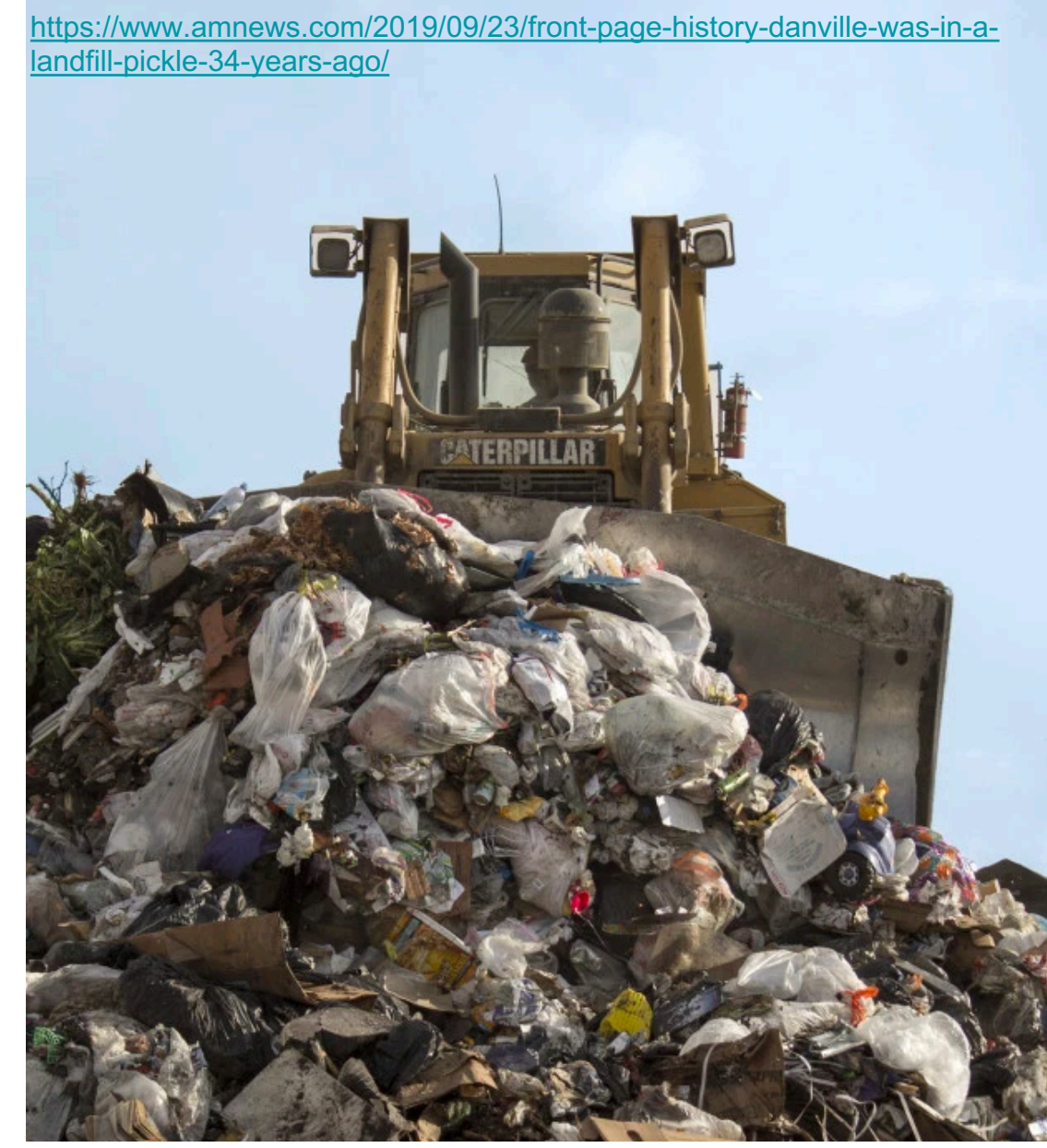
Nation-wide urban renewal began in the early 1950s. The Federal Housing Act of 1954 encouraged removing "blighted" areas or designating them as industrial areas. This contributed to environmental burdens felt by low-income, often minority, communities.

The process affected the thriving African-American business and residential district in downtown Danville. The city claimed eminent domain for gentrification purposes, gutting African American folks' communities and leaving them with few options for recovery. Many moved to the Terrell Road and Duncan Hill neighborhoods or Bate-Wood Homes, resulting in a concentration of African Americans in an area full of environmental hazards.



Research Process and Findings

My research centers on the South end of Danville, Kentucky, including South 2nd St., Duncan Hill St., and Terrell Drive. I focus primarily on the early 1960s to late 1980s, with contextual evidence about urban renewal and community displacement originating in the 1950s.



Key Findings:

- Early 1950s: City of Danville constructed two segregated low-income housing projects; the African-America project (Bate-Wood Homes) was located off South 2nd between Duncan Hill and Terrell Drive
- Bate-Wood was built on the site of a previous dump; the city did not fulfill promises to clean up this site; instead, it transformed the dump into a landfill and moved it immediately behind Bate-Wood homes
- 1970: The City declared the landfill full and opened a new one off South 4th, right beside Clark's Run
- 1979: State auditors told the city to cap both landfills, but people dumped illegally in both areas until they were capped (1991)
- Nearby factories dumped industrial waste into the unregulated landfills, where it could seep into Clark's Run, endangering neighborhoods
- Throughout this process, few African Americans were represented on the councils making these decisions
- Oral history interviews challenge dominant narratives that environmental hazards usually reify racial inequalities and produce protests or action against them. In this case, since Bate-Wood was an improvement over previous housing conditions, many residents did not complain about the pollution. These black residents reported that they did not speak up because the city had a long history of ignoring them and because the laws did not favor them. White residents do not face the levels of contamination that black residents do, and city officials for years have shown little empathy or interest in the wellbeing of the African American community.

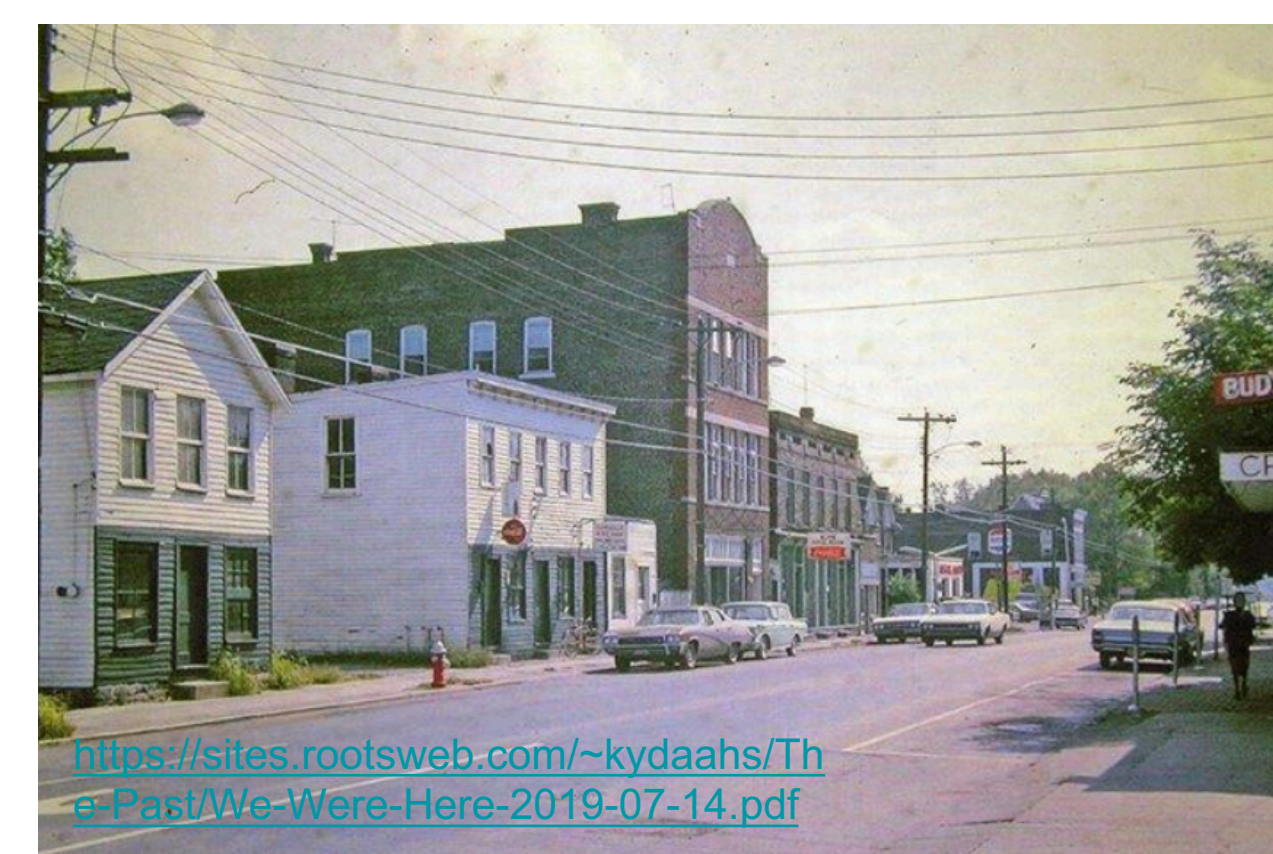


Image of downtown Danville prior to urban renewal

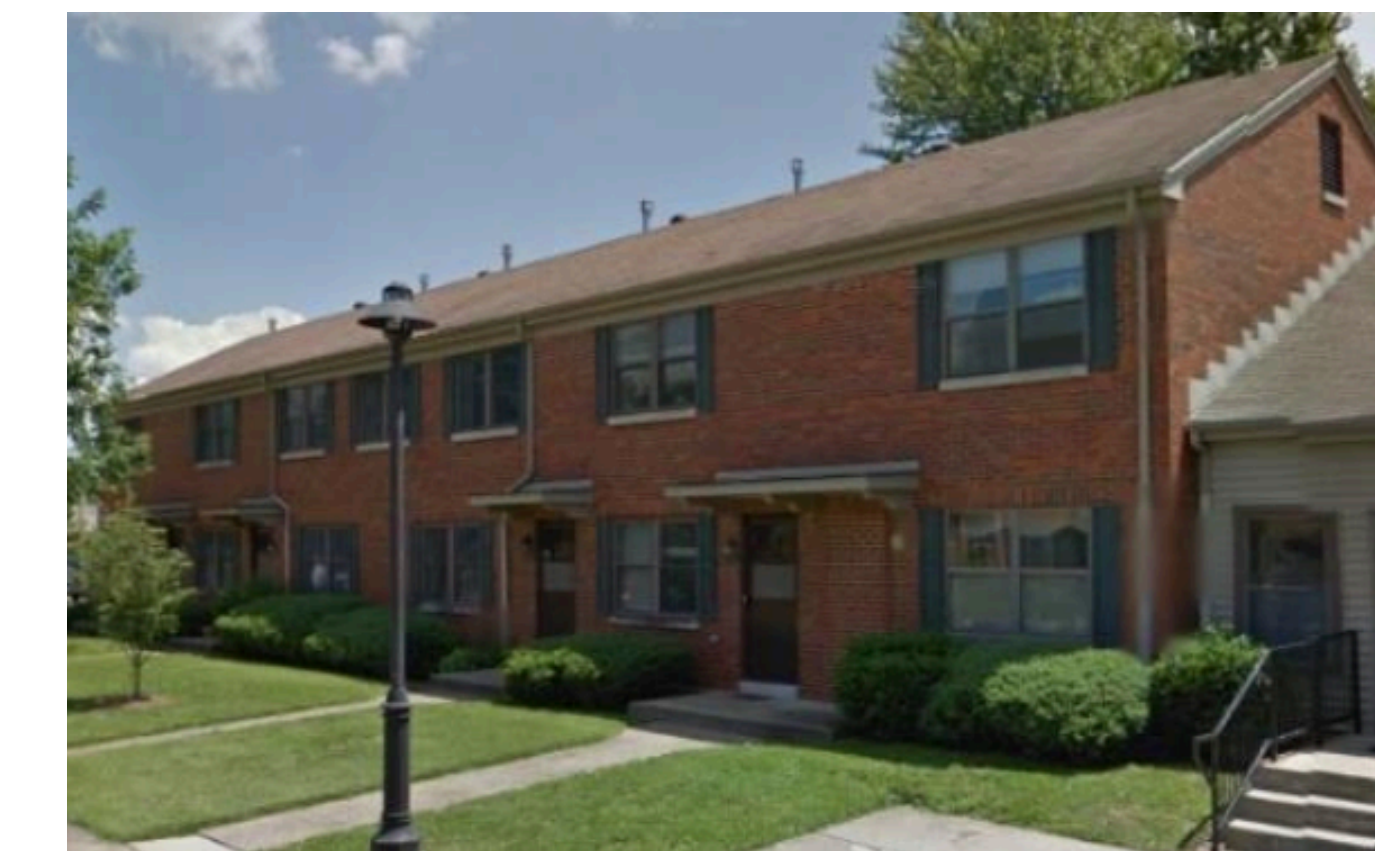


Modern-day downtown Danville

Conclusions

While white city leaders in Danville have demonstrated significant apathy and indifference toward the African American community for years, the environmentally racist policies they pursued were not due to calculated actions of villainous antagonists but to the collective failures of privileged groups to act with consideration, forethought, and care regarding the African American community.

The actions of the city of Danville sent a resounding message: when it came to the siting of environmental hazards, those with the power and privilege that whiteness affords would ensure their own safety at the expense of the African American residents. This was a message that emerged clearly in oral history interviews and newspaper reports, one that continues to resonate with the African American community. It has built distrust and resignation among black residents and perpetuated racist dynamics that continue to plague race relations in Danville.



Environmental Injustice

Environmental injustice refers to the unequal distribution of environmental burdens across social groups and geographical areas, such that some communities or people – low-income communities, African-Americans, women -- are disproportionately affected. Environmental injustice also has to do with people's ability to advocate for themselves and be heard in issues of environmental burdens and benefits. In Danville, the burden of hazardous landfills and polluted creek water fell mainly on African-Americans who also lacked bargaining power.



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