

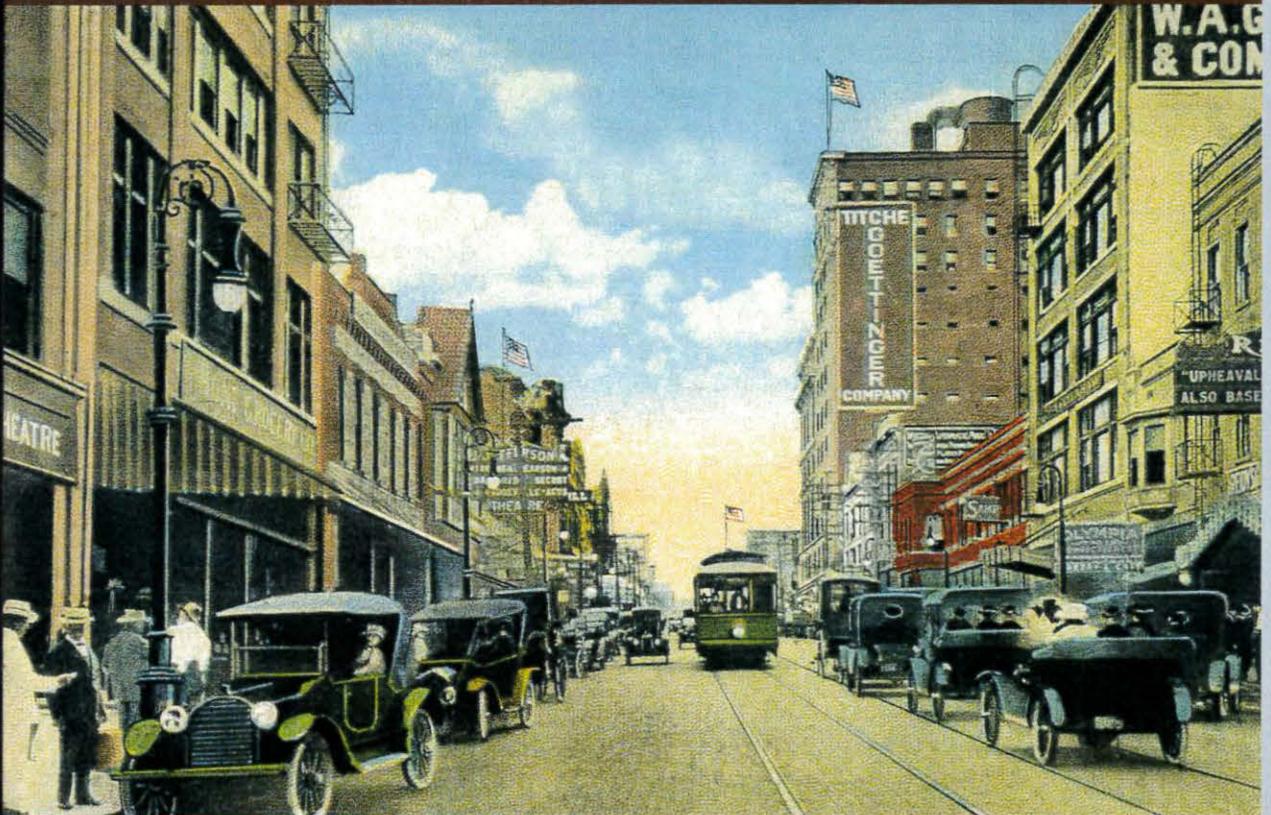
Spring  
2018

# LEGACIES

Dallas  
on the Move

*A History Journal for Dallas & North Central Texas*

Deadly Dallas Streets  
Out of Many, One  
The Impact of Transportation on Historic Ethnic Neighborhoods  
Braniff Airways Took Dallas to New Heights  
George Schrader: Conversation with a History Maker



\$7.50



# The Impact of Transportation on

## The Stories of Old North Dallas and La Bajada

BY PATRICIA HICKS, JUANITA H. NAÑEZ, AND RICK LOESSBERG



# Historic Ethnic Neighborhoods

*N*eighborhoods are typically created and influenced by a number of factors like geography, economics, and the availability of transportation. However, for people of color who lived in Dallas prior to the latter part of the twentieth century, the law of segregation and the dominant social attitudes of the much larger Anglo community heavily influenced the origination and existence of minority neighborhoods. These rules and customs not only determined where and why these communities existed, but what happened to them over time.<sup>1</sup>

Two historic ethnic Dallas neighborhoods—Old North Dallas and La Bajada—demonstrate how these various factors came together and how decisions pertaining to transportation made by the Anglo population both assisted and later threatened these neighborhoods. Old North Dallas, which was located just north of downtown, was established in the 1860s as a freedmen’s community, and it was, until about 1970, the home of much of Dallas’s black middle class. La Bajada (which continues to exist immediately west of downtown) came into existence during

the 1920s to 1940s and has generally always been a community for working class Hispanics. Located at the end of the Continental Bridge which arches over the Trinity River, the community is appropriately named “la bajada,” which means “the descent” or “a drop at the bottom of the bridge.”

While the two neighborhoods differ from one another in location, populations, and history, there are still significant similarities between the two. In addition, one of these communities—

Old North Dallas—for all practical purposes, no longer exists, and the number of people who can recall what it once was is rapidly diminishing. The other neighborhood—La Bajada—is now ironically being threatened by the same access across the Trinity River that initially led to its creation. Discussing these neighborhoods now and how they each came to be will help ensure that future populations will know their importance and the influences and stories behind them.

## Old North Dallas

---

Of the two neighborhoods, Old North Dallas is not only the oldest, but it was also one of the first African-American neighborhoods in Dallas.<sup>2</sup> It subsequently became noted as being the center “of black life and culture . . . and the birthplace of progressive ideas, the nucleus of black leadership, and a place that cultivated the hopes and dreams of Dallas’s African-American population.”<sup>3</sup>

Initially located near a black cemetery at what is now Lemmon and Central Expressway, the community quickly grew to more than 300 residents.<sup>4</sup> Over time, the community continued to grow, and at its peak, its boundaries generally approximated present-day Ross Avenue on the south, Pearl Street on the west, McKinney Avenue-Woodside-Weldon on the north, and Haskell on the east. Several of the streets within the community (Routh, Mason, Fuqua, Campbell, and Winn, for example) were named after some of its first residents.

A major contributor to the neighborhood’s growth was the arrival of the Houston & Texas Central railroad in 1872. Although this railroad bisected the neighborhood, black laborers first came to the area to help build the railroad, and then once construction was completed, the railroad continued to offer African Americans employment opportunities as cooks, roundhouse

workers, and boxcar loaders. Perhaps the most prestigious of these railroad jobs was that of being a Pullman porter. Pullman sleeping cars were regarded as being “a hotel on wheels,” and the porters were the people who made things happen on a train and attended to its passengers (Pullman porters also became the first African-American labor union to be recognized by the AFL-CIO).

Harry Boswell, who was a freed slave, built one of the first homes in the area.<sup>5</sup> Many of the original homeowners had no alternative but to build their own homes. Some hired friends to help with construction. Shotgun-style frame homes populated the area, but as the community geographically expanded in the 1920s, many of the larger Victorian-era homes that had originally been built on State and Thomas Streets for Anglos began being purchased by black doctors, educators, and businessmen, and others were converted into multi-family housing to accommodate the community’s growing population.<sup>6</sup>

Because racial segregation was so entrenched in Dallas, the community began to develop its own businesses and institutions. In 1925 Dr. W. R. McMillan opened a medical facility (the McMillan Sanitarium) at Hall and State Street for residents. Papa-Dad’s Old-Fashioned Barbecue, the State Theater, Smith Brothers Drug Store, and



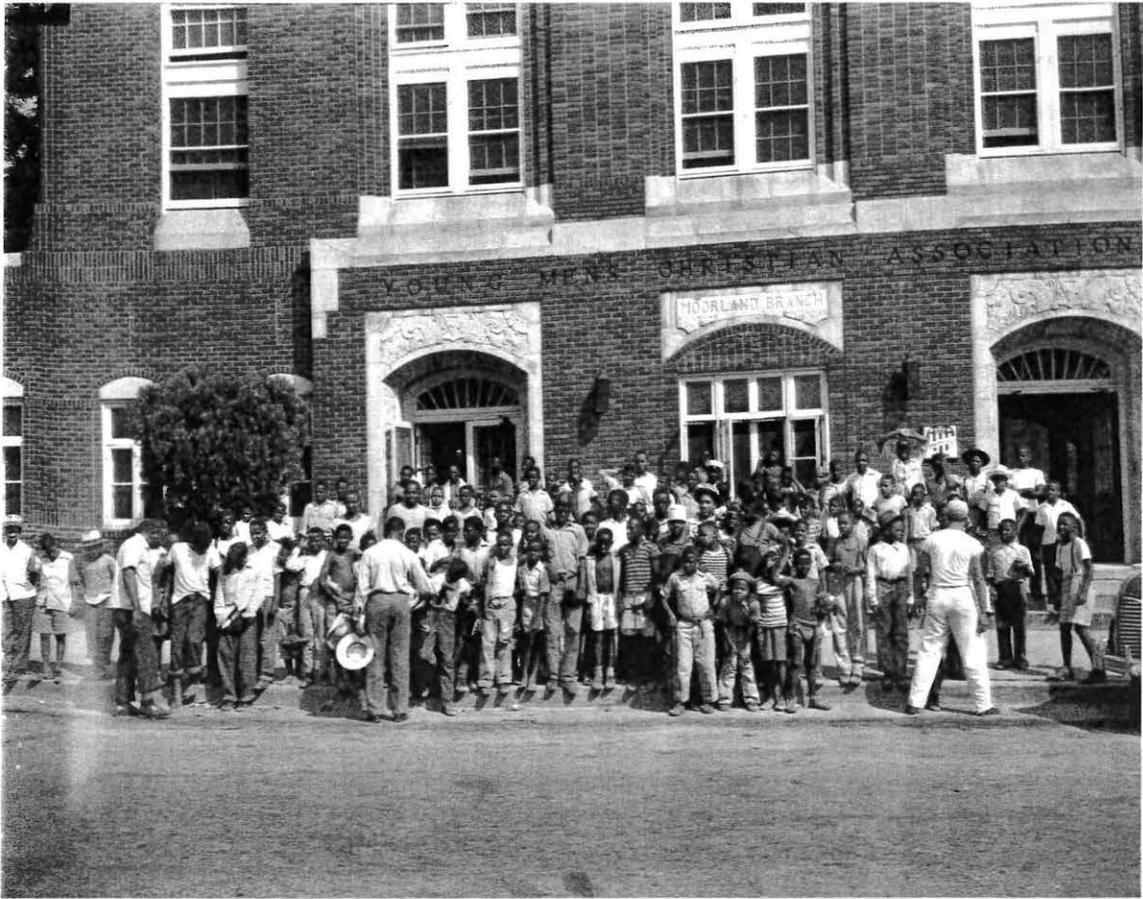
**The McMillan Sanitarium at Hall and State streets was one of the few medical facilities available to African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. But it was also one of many black-owned and operated businesses and institutions that flourished in Old North Dallas.**

Rain's Grocery Store served the area. The Lone Star Hotel (2602 State Street) and the Powell Hotel and Court (3115 State Street) provided accommodations for out-of-town visitors.<sup>7</sup>

Griggs Park, built in 1915, was a popular social and recreational destination with a swimming pool, bathhouse, ball field, and a playground. The park's playground was particularly important for children; as resident Dr. Robert Prince noted, he got his "first taste of segregation" when he was told he couldn't use the swings at an east Dallas park, and Griggs was "one of the few places where you could swing. And we had seesaws."<sup>8</sup> Baseball Hall of Fame member Ernie Banks played baseball

at the park growing up, and many carnivals, plays, and concerts were held there. The park itself was named after the Rev. Allen R. Griggs, who had been a former slave and then later led the New Hope Baptist Church on Hall Street, helped build Dallas's first high school for blacks, and published the state's first African-American newspaper.<sup>9</sup>

Children went to school at B. F. Darrell Elementary and Booker T. Washington High School. Since Darrell Elementary did not have much of a playground, Griggs Park was often used for recess. High school students walked to Cobb Stadium on Harry Hines to watch football games.



**The Moorland YMCA on Flora Street served as a social center for the Old North Dallas community, as well as the site where young men could engage in athletics.**

The Moorland YMCA was another important social center for the community. When constructed in 1930 on Flora Street, it was the only YMCA for African Americans in the southwest, and it was called “a beacon for the North Dallas community.” It was especially important since, “in a city that offered few places outside of church for African Americans to congregate, the building became the location where professionals could meet, clubs and organizations could come together, and young men could play and engage in extracurricular activities.” It served as the gymnasium for black schools that lacked athletic facilities, and it was a place where schools even held their proms.<sup>10</sup>

By 1940, about 16,000 people—one-third

of the city’s black population—lived in the neighborhood.<sup>11</sup> Again, because of segregation, there was more economic diversity in the neighborhood than might be seen in a neighborhood today, with business owners and other professionals living in close proximity to unskilled workers. Dr. Lee Gresham Pinkston, for instance, lived in the neighborhood; he became the first black doctor on the staff at St. Paul’s Hospital in 1954.<sup>12</sup>

Many families could not afford to own a car. However, because it was possible to walk to so many places and because of the city’s street car and bus system, that was not as important as one might think today. Street car fares were three cents. Bus Route 4 (for Highland Park) and



**This aerial photograph shows the future route of North Central Expressway, with the old railroad tracks removed. Roseland Homes, a housing project near Hall and Washington streets, is visible at the right, with B. F. Darrell Elementary School, at Munger Avenue, just below it.**

Route 5 (for State Street) were frequently utilized, especially by women working as domestics in the Park Cities. Black passengers, however, still had to sit in the back.

Since 1911, officials had discussed converting the Houston & Texas Central railroad corridor,

which ran through the community, into some type of high-capacity roadway. In 1941 the city acquired the property from the railroad, and in 1947, construction on what became Central Expressway began.<sup>13</sup> Although this project contributed significantly to the phenomenal

growth that the city soon experienced, it also started a process that would lead to the end of Old North Dallas. Having a railroad cut through the neighborhood was already a problematic feature for Old North Dallas, but it was something the community lived with. However, replacing a set of railroad tracks with a six-lane, divided high-speed freeway was another matter entirely, requiring the demolition of a large number of homes, and effectively cutting off the eastern half of the neighborhood from its western half.

Over the next thirty years, the neighborhood began to disappear because of the intrusion of Central Expressway, increased housing opportunities for African Americans, real estate speculation, and the construction of yet another freeway (Woodall Rodgers) that further separated and reduced the western half of the community by about one-fourth. By 1990, the community almost completely ceased to physically exist. Where, in 1940, about 9,700 people once lived in the neighborhood west of Central Expressway, only about 400 remained in 1990. And about eighty acres of bull-dozed, vacant land sat where numerous small businesses, stores, and homes once stood.

Today, after several decades of substantial

private and public investment, the area has changed dramatically. The western portion is now home to about 4,500 people living in high-end housing, and it has become a popular restaurant destination. However, people do not know it as Old North Dallas; instead, it is now referred to as "Uptown." Nor is it a predominantly African-American community; less than four percent of its population is black.

To some degree, this change was inevitable— all neighborhoods go through various life cycles. Providing greater housing opportunities and not limiting where non-whites can live is certainly important, and locating needed infrastructure and redeveloping under-utilized areas is critical to any city's economic future. However, when making these redevelopment and infrastructure location decisions, it is important to always maintain the appropriate balance and to remember and learn from the past. Old North Dallas was not just where African Americans once lived, a location on a map from 1945, or a photograph. It was where people were born, grew up, married, had children, and died. It was where they ate and shopped and visited and worshiped. It was a community.

## La Bajada

---

La Bajada now finds itself in a situation somewhat similar to what Old North Dallas experienced: it is likewise being endangered by the presence of a new transportation improvement, real estate speculation, and redevelopment. The community was one of five Hispanic neighborhoods on the west side of Dallas (and the Trinity River) that began to emerge after "Little Mexico," the first and largest of the Hispanic neighborhoods in Dallas, was created beginning in about 1910. While in the 1920s some people began to move to what became La Bajada, it was the building of levees along the Trinity River (which were

completed in 1931) and the Continental Bridge (which was completed in 1933) over the river that provided the major impetus for the community.<sup>14</sup>

Many of the levee workers had been Mexican settlers from Little Mexico and the other West Dallas barrios who had originally left Mexico to escape the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution and who had been drawn to the area by opportunities to work the land on such ranches and farms as Trinity Farms and Rancho Grande off present-day Inwood Road and Hampton Road or to clear roads and build tracks for the Texas and Pacific railroad. Building

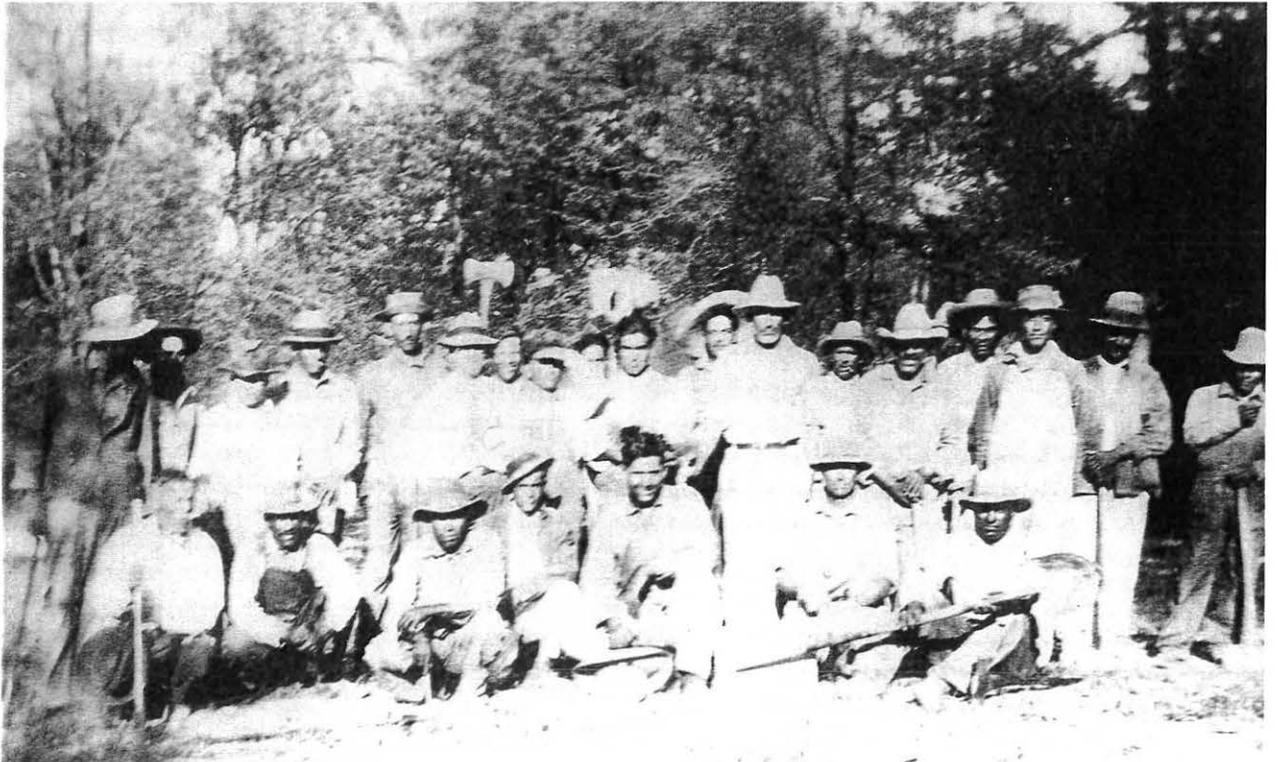
these levees thus not only provided employment opportunities for many Hispanics, but with the area west of the river now being protected from flooding, new areas for housing suddenly became possible. With one of these being at the foot of the new Continental Bridge that connected western Dallas with the rest of the city, La Bajada was born.

Living conditions were sometimes harsh in the triangularly-shaped neighborhood bounded by Sylvan Avenue, Canada Drive, and Singleton Boulevard. Streets were unpaved, and since West Dallas was an unincorporated area, outside the Dallas city limits, there were no “city” services like trash pick-up or street lights. The Bataan Community Center was created in 1932 to help assist the neighborhood’s residents. Originally called the West Dallas Social Center, it provided medical supplies, food, clothing, and recreational opportunities and became a critical piece of the

community and its central meeting place.

Small frame homes were built in the neighborhood by several developers (Claude Brantley, Tom Wheeler Realty Company, and Tipton Real Estate), with most of this construction occurring in the 1940s and with most of this housing remaining today. Some residents built their own homes, and other houses were built elsewhere and then relocated to the neighborhood. Although the community was heavily working class, many residents owned their own homes.

Unlike Old North Dallas, which had its own hotels, stores, shops, funeral homes, and places to eat, only a few businesses operated in La Bajada, such as the Huerta Garage. This lack of local employment opportunities required most La Bajada residents to work elsewhere, with many excavating and processing chalk and limestone for nearby cement companies or working for



Many Mexican immigrants who worked on the Trinity River levees in the late 1920s and early 1930s settled in the West Dallas barrios, including La Bajada.



**The Bataan Community Center opened in 1932 to assist residents of La Bajada with medical supplies, food, clothing, and recreational opportunities.**

the Oriental Oil Company or the Hercules Oil Refining Company. Residents also shopped at nearby businesses outside of the neighborhood, like the West Dallas Pharmacy and La Estrella Bakery.

Children went to school at what was then Benito Juarez School (now Lorenzo de Zavalla Elementary School) and Crozier Technical High School. While there were a couple of nearby movie theaters on Singleton Boulevard (the Avon Theater and the Rosales Theater, which showed Spanish-speaking movies), most residents rode the bus downtown to see the movies at the many Elm Street theaters. The geographical separation of the community from much of Dallas, as well as the racial segregation that existed, boosted a strong community bonding and created a community where everyone knew everyone and where news spread quickly throughout the neighborhood.

The community has always been strongly

patriotic. Its residents readily and willingly served during World War II, and a number of its streets were subsequently renamed to commemorate U. S. gallantry at Guam, Wake, and Bataan in the South Pacific. Upon the end of the war, the GI Bill allowed many returning veterans to purchase homes in the area.

In 1952 the neighborhood was annexed by Dallas and officially became a part of the city. However, it was not until the 1970s that it finally began fully receiving typical city services when its streets became paved, street lights were installed, and a health clinic (Los Barrios Unidos Community Clinic) opened, and this was through the dedicated efforts of people like Councilperson Anita Nañez Martinez and neighborhood residents Pete Martinez (no relation), Consuelo Salinas, Josephine Torres, and Felix Lozada.<sup>15</sup>

By the 1980s, the area economy near the neighborhood had transitioned from extraction



**Small frame houses, many of which remain today, filled La Bajada.**

and processing to distribution and transportation with the opening of the Lone Star Park and Turnpike Distribution Center just a few miles away. Under pressure from barrio members, a smelter plant responsible for significant lead contamination was closed. Luis Sepulveda (who subsequently became one of Dallas County's first Hispanic justices of the peace), along with other residents, then worked to ensure that the much-needed environmental clean-up associated with this smelter actually occurred.

From 1970 to 2010, the population of the community declined from 1,287 to 958. However, much of this had to do with the size of the average household becoming smaller (4.52 in 1970 and 3.56 in 2010), a trend that was also occurring nationally, rather than to a general outmigration away from the area. Homeownership continues to be very high with 66.5 percent of the homes being owned by their occupants (in comparison, the rate for the city is only 43.4 percent), and with a median household income of \$36,250 (which is three-fourths of the Dallas County figure), most of its residents continue to be working class.<sup>16</sup>

What has changed noticeably, however, are the prospects for its future. In 2012, the construction of the new Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge, which is parallel to the Continental Bridge and which was designed not only to improve access into

western Dallas, but also to serve as a "signature" feature, was completed. In addition, in 2014, the Continental Bridge itself was substantially renovated and converted into an elevated park/pedestrian-only bridge; in 2016, the bridge was renamed in honor of former Dallas mayor Ron Kirk and its plaza gateway was renamed in honor of La Bajada resident Felix Lozada.

Collectively, these two bridge projects, just as the levees and the original Continental Bridge did in 1931-33, have once again re-opened western Dallas to the rest of the city. In so doing, the La Bajada area has become the subject of intense interest by real estate developers. The lively Trinity Groves restaurant development opened in 2012 and is now regularly frequented by patrons from throughout the Dallas area. The construction of a 355-unit, four-story, high-end residential development is nearing completion on Singleton, and other similar residential and commercial projects are being contemplated nearby.

Such interest, in turn, is causing property values in the neighborhood to escalate suddenly and sharply. In the past year, the assessed value of land in La Bajada has increased on many residential properties from \$9,000 per lot to \$50,000.<sup>17</sup> There is now a concern that two things will happen: residents will no longer be able to afford to live there, and the community itself will begin to disappear as property-owners (especially the absentee landlords), having received a financial offer that is difficult to refuse, will sell their properties to developers with plans for larger, new projects.

Responding to the development pressure that confronts the area, the La Bajada Neighborhood Association successfully obtained a zoning ordinance in 2012 that restricts the height of new structures in the community. Building upon the legacy of those like Martinez, Lozada, and Torres, this group, under its chairperson Eva Elvove, continues to work to preserve, promote, and improve the community. The West Dallas 1 Coalition was also created about four years ago, in part, to similarly

help the community navigate the environment in which it now finds itself.

As has been experienced in Old North Dallas, maintaining the proper balance between preserving existing historic neighborhoods and encouraging new investment is difficult. While an example of what could locally happen to a minority community that became the site of both developer interest and substantial transportation improvements did not readily exist for Old North Dallas in the 1940s nor did this African-American community, given the parameters of the times, realistically have the opportunity to meaningfully influence the discussions about its future, the situation for La Bajada is different. However, whether the outcome for La Bajada will actually be any different or whether it, too, vanishes is still to be determined. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Texas was, of course, a member of the Confederacy, and following Reconstruction, it adopted many of the South's Jim Crow laws. Also, in Texas and in the rest of the U.S., racial segregation was frequently imposed through the use of racial covenants that prevented property owners from selling or leasing property to non-whites. In 1948, the Supreme Court ruled that such covenants could not be legally enforced. In 1968, discrimination in housing through other means was finally prohibited with the passage of the Fair Housing Act.

<sup>2</sup>BDR Editorial Board and Community Contributors, *African American Families and Settlements* (Dallas: Black Dallas Remembered, Inc., May 1990).

<sup>3</sup>Terry Anne Schulte-Scott and Marsha Prior, *From Freedmantown to Roseland Homes: A Pioneering Community in Dallas, Texas* (draft report), Geo-Marine, Inc., 2002.

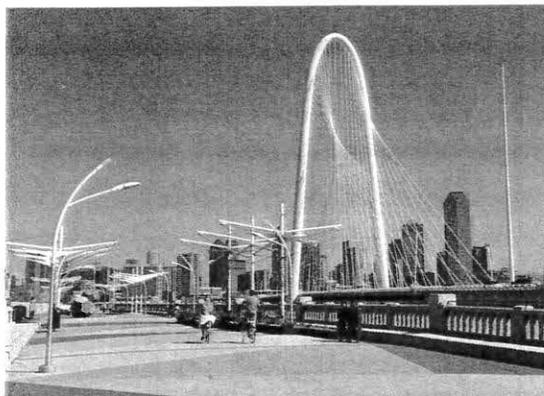
<sup>4</sup>BDR Editorial Board, *African American Families and Settlements*.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>QuimbyMcCoy Preservation Architecture, LLP, "History of Moorland YMCA," February 18, 2008.

<sup>7</sup>For the McMillan Sanitarium, see Dr. Manie L. McKnight, *First African American Families of Dallas: Creative Survival* (Black Dallas Remembered Steering Committee, 1987), 80-1; for the Powell Hotel, see "Sam Childers, "Historic Hotels of Dallas," *Legacies* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 58, and Sam Childers, *Historic Dallas Hotels* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2010), 79.

<sup>8</sup>Roy Appleton, "Major Makeover Coming for Griggs Park North of Downtown Dallas," *The Dallas Morning News*, December 29, 2012.



**Construction of the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge and conversion of the old Continental Bridge into a pedestrian overpass have attracted new development to the areas west of the Trinity, including La Bajada.**

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.; see also John H. Slate and Willis C. Winters, "A Means to a Peaceful Transition: L. B. Houston and the Desegregation of Dallas Parks," *Legacies* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 34.

<sup>10</sup>QuimbyMcCoy, "History of Moorland YMCA."

<sup>11</sup>At its height, the boundaries of Old North Dallas roughly approximated two census tracts (Tracts 16 and 17). Census Tract 17 was then subsequently divided and renumbered over time. All population figures cited in this article for the neighborhood are from the Census Bureau and are for the corresponding/renumbered/reconfigured census tracts.

<sup>12</sup>Lisa C. Maxwell, "Lee Gresham Pinkston," *The New Handbook of Texas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), 5:214.

<sup>13</sup>Tom Killebrew, "The Story of North Central Expressway," *Legacies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 39-51; Oscar Slotboom, *Dallas-Fort Worth Freeways* (Dallas: Lightning Press, 2014).

<sup>14</sup>For Little Mexico, see Gwendolyn Rice, "Little Mexico and the Barrios of Dallas," in *Dallas Reconsidered*, ed. by Michael V. Hazel (Dallas: Three Forks Press, 1995), 158-168; for construction of the levees, see Jackie McElhaney, "Navigating the Trinity," in *Dallas Reconsidered*, pp. 45-59, and Robert B. Fairbanks, "The Great Divide: The Politics of Space and the First Trinity River Valley Controversy," *Legacies* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 48-60.

<sup>15</sup>"Anita N. Martinez: History Maker," transcribed and edited by Stephen Fagin, *Legacies* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 46-54.

<sup>16</sup>The boundaries of La Bajada coincided with a portion of Census Tract 101 (blocks 102-104, 107-112, 114-116, 119-121, 201, 212-213) in 1970. The portion of the census tract that contained this neighborhood then subsequently became block group 1 of Census Tract 101.02. All statistical information presented within this paragraph comes from the Census Bureau.

<sup>17</sup>Assessed valuation figures are for scattered properties along Coronet, Bataan, and Brantley for the period of 2016-2017 per the Dallas Central Appraisal District.