**Africville – The Lost Town**Linda Ward, CBC News Online | July 8, 2002

In the north end of Halifax was a town called Africville ... until 1970, when bulldozers knocked down what was left of the community. The city had taken the land to make way for industrial development.

To some, Africville was a slum, populated by former American slaves who escaped during the War of 1812. To about 400 black settlers, it was a place where they could live in privacy, free from racism and discrimination.

**The history of Africville**

Following the War of 1812, as many as 3,000 black people streamed into the province and settled within a short distance of Halifax. The British had promised they would be given basic necessities to help them settle into a life of freedom. But the British did not follow through on their promise, and left these people to fend for themselves, without food, clothing or shelter.

The first land purchase in Africville is believed to have been in 1848. According to Parks Canada, the population of Africville never exceeded 400 people, who came from up to 80 different families. It was a tight-knit community of law-abiding, tax paying, Baptist citizens who did their best to survive in the conditions they faced. By 1849, the newly formed community had established a Baptist church.

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In the 1850s, some Africville residents were relocated due to railway construction. The city began building industrial sites all around and through Africville after Halifax residents rejected the unappealing structures. Africville became the home to Rockhead Prison (1853), the city's night soil disposal pits (1858), an infectious disease hospital (during the 1870s), a trachoma hospital (1905), an open city dump and incinerator (in the early 1950s) and a slaughterhouse.

The Halifax city council, regarded the "area around Africville as a location for city facilities not tolerated in other neighbourhoods." In addition to the smelly, dirty industries that were relocated to Africville, the city failed to install water service, sewage, lights or paved roads. Africville also lacked recreational facilities although the Halifax Recreation and Playgrounds Commission did provide facilities to other areas of the city. The residents had no fire or police protection and no garbage removal program. By the mid-1940s, Africville was seen as a real problem for the city of Halifax.

**Relocation**

In 1947, Halifax city council designated Africville as industrial land. However, the residents of Africville expressed a desire to stay and develop the area residentially. City council authorized the borrowing of funds to provide water and sewerage services, but the services were never installed. In the 1950s, discussions in the Halifax city council concerning the industrial potential of the Africville site increased. The city of Halifax owned sizable property to the south, east and west; railway tracks surrounded and intersected the community and the shoreline was valuable for harbour development.

In mid-1954, it was recommended that the residents of Africville should be moved to city-owned property southwest of the existing community. The report stated: "The area is not suited for residences, but, properly developed, is ideal for industrial purposes. There is water frontage for piers, the railway for sidings, a road to be developed leading directly downtown and in the other direction to the provincial highway."

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The city of Halifax claimed that the relocation was for humanitarian reasons as a part of a large urban renewal plan the city had proposed, including the improvement of living conditions, and the racial integration of Africville residents. They proposed welfare planning, co-ordinating employment, educational and rehabilitative programs with the re-housing of residents. Africville residents were not consulted in the formation of initial relocation terms, and no attention was given to recommendations from the community.

In the end, many citizens were shipped off to slum housing, their personal belongings transported in city garbage trucks. Bulldozers were sent in during the night to level the community; not only the houses, but the stores, businesses and even the church. One resident recalls, "Those who refused or were slow to leave often found themselves scrambling out of the back door with their belongings as the bulldozers were coming in the front."

The families of Africville were given less than $500 compensation. Most of the residents were relocated to public housing in Mulgrave Park in Halifax. In 1968, the Africville relocation was proclaimed a success, and the last building was bulldozed in 1970.

**The after-effects**

Some saw the abolition of Africville as a positive government action to bring employment, education and desegregation to a black slum community, while others saw it as another instance of white people taking land that they wanted to develop while disregarding the current residents. The people of Africville had lost their homes, their businesses and their livelihood. But to most of the residents, the biggest loss was their sense of community, their circle of support and the place where they had a sense of belonging.

The incident has become known as one of the most severe episodes of racial discrimination in Canadian history. But what is surprising is that few Canadians have ever even heard of Africville. Many former Africville residents spoke out about their loss and it has become the rallying point for Nova Scotia's black community to fight racism and to educate others on diversity.