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Figure 1. Survey map of East Arlington.

# How Eminent Domain Destroyed an Arlington Community

BY NANCY PERRY

For 50 years, from 1892 until 1942, a bustling African American neighborhood was located in Arlington County, Virginia, on a wedge of land now occupied by a portion of the road system west of the Pentagon building. Arlington County referred to the community as East Arlington, as seen on the 1935 Franklin Survey map in Figure 1.<sup>1</sup> The first residents of East Arlington were descendants of fugitive slaves living in the government maintained community of Freedmen's Village.<sup>2</sup> In August, 1882, some of those descendants, parishioners of Mount Olive Baptist Church, purchased and platted two acres of land east of Freedmen's Village. They named their subdivision Queen City.<sup>3</sup> In October, 1904, land for a neighboring subdivision, East Arlington, was also platted and over the years the lots were purchased by other African American families.<sup>4</sup> Many of the former residents still refer to the combined subdivisions as Queen City. While the 1930 census lists 691 residents in East Arlington and the 1940 census lists 903 residents, the 1950 census does not mention East Arlington at all nor does it appear on current maps of Arlington County.<sup>5</sup> What happened to it? This paper discusses the loss of East Arlington to eminent domain and construction of the Pentagon building.

## Eminent domain and compensation

Eminent domain is the power granted to the government to take privately owned property for the good of the public. It is a necessary power when building essential infrastructure such as forts, lighthouses, or the Interstate Highway System. Without it a government cannot function, cannot protect its citizens.

Most often eminent domain takes one or just a few properties. However, there are instances where an entire community is taken. In the 1950s much of Southwest Washington D.C. was taken in the name of 'urban renewal.'<sup>6</sup> In 1995 the town of Valmeyer, Illinois, was taken from its original location and moved to higher ground after being destroyed by Mississippi River flooding.<sup>7</sup> In 2002 Cheshire, Ohio, was taken after suffering dangerous levels of air pollution from a nearby power plant.<sup>8</sup> In 1942, at the height of American involvement in World War II, East Arlington was taken to make room for the road system serving the new Pentagon building.<sup>9</sup>

Eminent domain's only mention in the Constitution is in the Fifth Amendment's 'Takings Clause,' where it is specified that when property is taken, the aggrieved property owner must be compensated. Specifically, the Takings Clause says "...nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation."<sup>10</sup> The Constitution contains no definition of 'just compensation.' Tangible losses such as land and improvements (houses, businesses) can be compensated monetarily. Most often the seller is given fair market value, with the buyer (the government) setting the price. In 1942 additional tangible losses such as moving expenses, the loss of possessions, or the loss of sales (if the property is a business) were seldom compensated. Intangible losses resulting from eminent domain, sometimes referred to as demoralization costs, are difficult to quantify and seldom compensated (Durham, 1985).<sup>\*</sup> One such demoralization cost is the loss of a sense of community by individuals forced to leave that community.

Not all communities are the same. Most of us live in what sociologists call a *gesellschaft* community. We are bound together by formal guidelines (such as those governing a homeowner's association), rules, and regulations. We may also be united by affection and/or dependence on our neighbors, but not necessarily. Occasionally, however, a rare and ephemeral community forms, a *gemeinschaft* community. This is a small group of people tightly bound by social ties to, and dependency on each other and the community as a whole. When a *gemeinschaft* community is broken up, the loss of community cannot be compensated.<sup>11</sup> East Arlington was a *gemeinschaft* community. In 1942 Arlington was racially segregated. African Americans were unwelcome in Arlington's white schools, churches, stores, restaurants, banks, and playgrounds. But they were welcome in Arlington's small African American communities such as East Arlington.

## East Arlington

The residents of East Arlington listed on the 1940 census lived in 218 households. Data suggest that it was not a particularly prosperous neighborhood. The average home value of the 90 households owning their homes was \$1765 (\$29,768 in 2015 dollars). The average monthly rent of the 128 households renting their homes was \$15 (\$153 in 2015 dollars). One hundred thirty of

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<sup>\*</sup>James G. Dunham, "Efficient Just Compensation as a Limit on Eminent Domain" *Minnesota Law Review*, 69 (1985), p. 1277.



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**Figure 2. Street in East Arlington.**

the residents lived and boarded in homes with non-relatives. The age of the average resident partially explains the apparent poverty. The mean age was only 29 years; 105 residents were children five years or younger.<sup>12</sup>

East Arlington enjoyed few of the amenities afforded to white neighborhoods in the county. Two of the streets that bordered East Arlington – Columbia Pike and Arlington Ridge Road – were paved. Streets within the neighborhood (Figure 2) were packed dirt. Only 9<sup>th</sup> Street had a layer of gravel on top of the dirt, which the county periodically sprayed with oil to keep down the dust. The streets lacked curbs, gutters, sidewalks, and street lights. No water, gas, or sewer pipes ran beneath the streets; no power lines conducted electricity to the houses.

The homes themselves were generally one- or two-story frame houses sitting on a concrete pad or on the bare dirt. A few homes were brick. They typically had a living room, a kitchen, and two bedrooms. Many also had front and/or back porches. The kitchens had wood stoves and iceboxes. The ice man, a resident of the neighborhood, came through on a regular basis with ice blocks to power the iceboxes. Lacking flush toilets and sewers, most families had an outhouse. County crews periodically emptied the outhouses. Lacking running

water, families carried fresh water from a spring on the grounds of nearby National Cemetery. Some families had wells in their back yards, but no one trusted the well water for drinking.

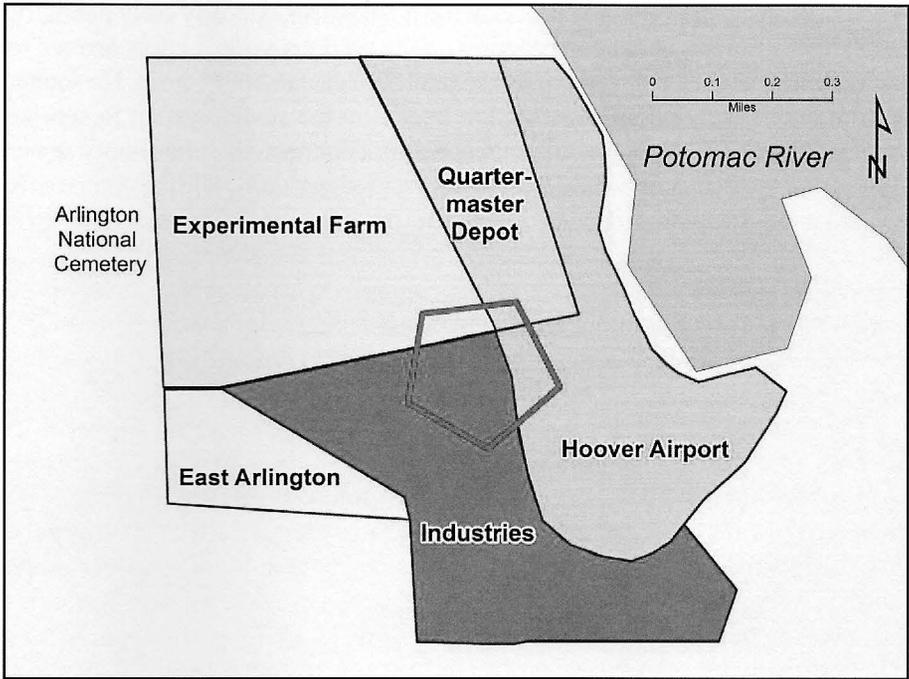
Several resident-owned businesses including small groceries, barber shops, a shoe repair shop, beer-garden/restaurant, a garage, and a pool hall served the neighborhood. A few residents found employment in these businesses. At the base of Columbia Pike, where it meets the Potomac River, were located several larger industries that employed 101 men from East Arlington including the West Bros. Brickyard (82), a concrete plant (6), an oil refinery (2), and a coal yard (11). These industries generated ancillary income for owners of boarding houses for out-of-town workers and women who cooked and carried daily meals to industry workers.<sup>13</sup>

Two established churches served the neighborhood. Both Mount Zion Baptist Church and Mount Olive Baptist Church originated in Freedmen's Village and both built large brick churches on Arlington Ridge Road. A branch of the charismatic Pentecostal sect, the 'Daddy Grace' church, was also found in the neighborhood for a time.

There was no school in East Arlington. Most of the children walked up Columbia Pike to another African American neighborhood, Johnson's Hill, to attend the Hoffman Boston School of Negroes.

## The Taking

World War II had been raging in the Pacific since Japan invaded China in 1937 and in Europe since Germany invaded Poland in 1939. American citizens, including the residents of East Arlington, looked on with unease, wondering if and when the United States would become involved. By 1941, the American government was mobilizing in preparation for that eventuality. The War Department expanded, quickly outgrowing their quarters in the old Munitions Building. Even with rented spaces in office buildings throughout Washington, D.C., they were cramped for space. A new War Department building was needed, one that could contain the entire department under one roof.<sup>15</sup> Such a building (eventually known as the Pentagon) required a large plot of land, larger than any plot of land available in the District. The government looked beyond the borders of the District to neighboring Arlington County for a suitable location for the new building. Several contiguous government-owned plots of land could be used, including portions of the National Cemetery, the Department of Agriculture's Arlington Experimental Farm, and an Army site earmarked for a new quartermaster's depot. Privately owned land would also be required.



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**Figure 3. Parcels of land used in construction of the Pentagon, parking, and road network.**

Using eminent domain, the government condemned and took the obsolete Hoover Airport, land occupied by the industries mentioned above, and the community of East Arlington.<sup>16</sup> Figure 3 shows that when combined, these plots of land could accommodate the new building, 67 acres of parking lot, and a 30 mile road network to carry War Department employees to and from work. Part of that road network occupies the land vacated by East Arlington.

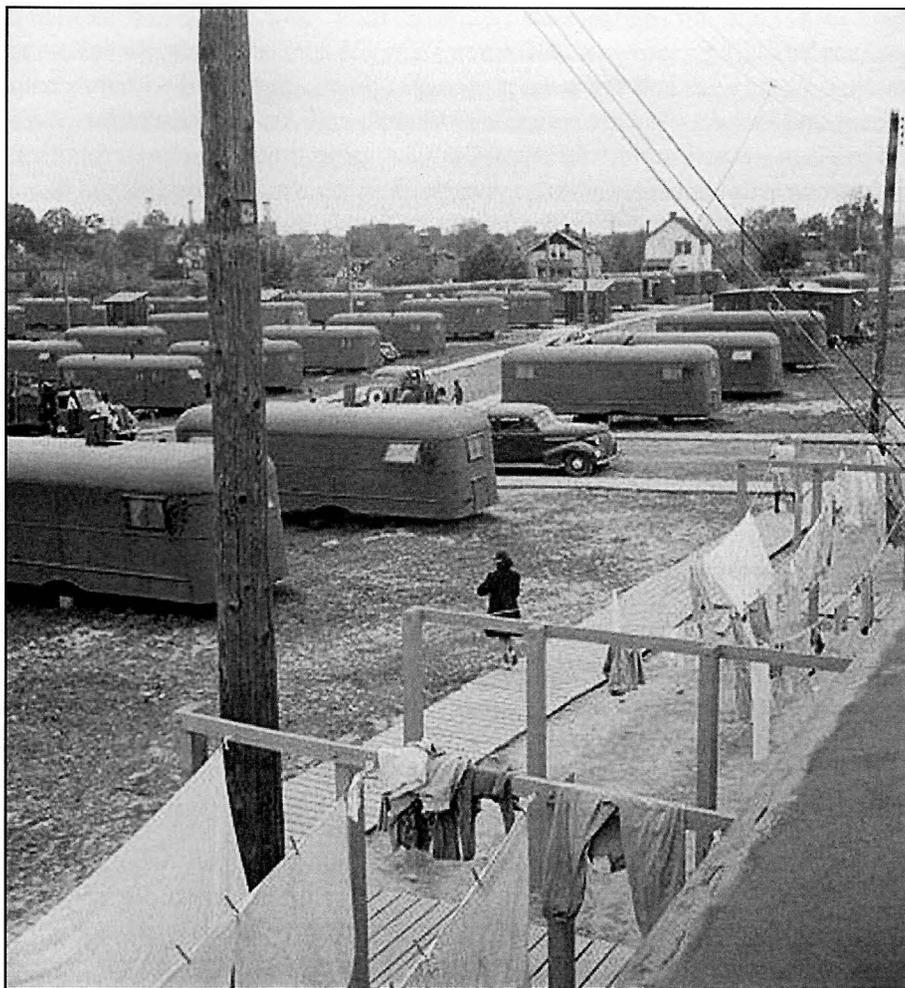
Construction on the new Pentagon began the day the construction contract was approved, on 11 September, 1941. Situated on the muddy banks of the Potomac River, the enormous building would eventually rest on 41,492 piles. The din from pile drivers began immediately and rang ceaselessly 24 hours a day for the next year.<sup>17</sup> Because the footprint of the building did not touch East Arlington, the residents were unaware that they would be required to move. They watched early construction of the building in fascination. “We just thought they were going to build a building over in the field, but we had no idea it was going to be as big as it was. Then they came to building the roads, and that’s when they took all the houses.”<sup>18</sup>

Work on the Pentagon proceeded at a breakneck pace. By early February, 1942, it was time to begin construction on the road network. Letters arrived to each property owner giving them until March 1 to vacate their homes. No sooner did the letters arrive than construction began on the sewer system to service the Pentagon. East Arlington, of course, was not connected to the county sewer system, but the Pentagon would have to be. Workers arrived while the community was still occupied, digging deep trenches through the neighborhood to hold the sewer pipes. "They started work before we moved ... They started by putting the sewers in. They came right up 8<sup>th</sup> Street and they dug a trench there. They started it before we got out of there ... They weren't kidding around because it was right out our front door."<sup>19</sup> Finally the residents grasped the reality of their predicament. They had to move, now!

Under the best of circumstances, relocating 900 people in less than a month is a challenge. These were not the best of circumstances. In 1942 a serious housing crunch existed in the Washington, D.C. area as workers from other parts of the country arrived to take part in the war effort. At the same time, residential segregation was still the custom in Arlington. East Arlington's families were African American; they would only be able to move into another African American neighborhood. The 218 families had less than a month to vacate their homes and there was no place for them to go, but go they must. Religious leaders in the community did their best to keep the residents informed of the situation. "[Mount Olive's] Reverend Mackley stayed at the courthouse and gave news and helped us know exactly what it was that we should do. He gave us any news and advice that he could get ... And a lot of the ministers ... would go to the courthouse to get as much news as they possibly could."<sup>20</sup> The county was aware of the residents' problem, but did little to help other than to wring their hands. "Board Chairman Edmund D. Campbell made the motion to authorize Mr. Hanrahan to do what he could for those forced to move, *compatible with the best interests of the county*, and to prevent unnecessary hardships wherever possible."<sup>21</sup> The War Department was also aware of the community's situation, but they had a deadline to meet. By now Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor and the country was at war. "Construction of these roads must be completed by the time the new War Department Building opens next November. Any delay would be very serious."<sup>22</sup>

### **Mrs. Roosevelt**

Help arrived from a surprising quarter. On behalf of the residents, an attorney wrote to the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, appealing for help. Mrs. Roosevelt forwarded the letter to the House Military Affairs committee, using



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**Figure 4. Arlington, Virginia, farm security administration trailer camp project for Negroes. General view of the project from the roof of the community building.**

her position to elevate the community's predicament to a level where people could help.<sup>23</sup> As a result, while she could not prevent the evacuation of the community, Mrs. Roosevelt both won the residents an additional month to move and also secured temporary shelter for the homeless families until they could make permanent arrangements.

The temporary shelter offered to the community consisted of two trailer villages erected by the Army.<sup>24</sup> Vacant land was identified in other African

American communities in the county, Green Valley (now known as Nauck) and Johnson's Hill (now known as Arlington View). Where necessary, the land was leveled. Water lines and sewer lines were put down, men's and women's bath houses and laundry facilities were constructed, and Army issue trailers were put in place – small trailers for small families, large trailers for large families. Everything was connected with a network of wooden sidewalks (Figure 4).

Families registered for the trailers; as a trailer was emplaced and hooked up to utilities, a family moved in. Because the trailers were not installed as quickly as families vacated their homes, some families had to make interim arrangements. Some moved in with friends and relatives in other neighborhoods. One family of nine, four of them children, lived for four months in a shed with a dirt floor. Everything the family owned but the mother's four-poster bed was lost.<sup>25</sup> The Pentagon building schedule was relentless. The last families moved out of their homes in early April and the following day East Arlington was burned to the ground.<sup>26</sup>

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### **Just compensation**

The Constitution promises just compensation for the losses occasioned by a taking resulting from eminent domain. In the case of East Arlington, that meant that the owners of properties (residences or businesses) were compensated based on the value the government assigned them. Temporarily housing the refugees in trailer camps should not be mistaken for compensation but instead seen as the actions of a government taking care of its citizens in a disaster.

The War Department was not in the business of dealing with individual families. The deed filed by the War Department with the Arlington County land records office at the time of the taking specified a flat amount of money for total compensation, \$369,427 (\$5,351,456 in 2015 dollars).<sup>27</sup> The money was given to Arlington County to portion out to the individual property owners, who were in fact residents of the county. The money was intended to compensate individuals who lost land and improvements on it; no compensation was given for moving expenses or business losses.

Whether moving directly into a cramped trailer, or first making one or more interim moves, most residents lost almost everything they owned. There

was no room in the trailers for anything more than clothing, dishes, and pots and pans, so most families simply walked away from their possessions. No money was given for loss of personal possessions, meaning that the 128 households that rented their homes were entitled to no compensation whatsoever. None of the 101 individuals who worked in the industries nor the individuals working for small businesses in East Arlington were compensated for loss of employment. None of the lost businesses were rebuilt elsewhere.

As painful as the material losses were, however, the loss of community was most wrenching. “[I]t was never the same, we never had a community, because people went here, they went there, they went everywhere.”<sup>28</sup> “Some of those people you never did see them again ... They never came back to this area. When East Arlington got leveled, that really broke that community up.”<sup>29</sup> “We lost our community; we lost our homes; we lost our work. What was lost will never be replaced.”<sup>30</sup> The community these participants mourned was a loss that could not be compensated.

## Conclusions

Eminent domain typically inflicts pain on those being forced to move. The purpose of eminent domain is to allow the government to build something **FOR** the citizens, something to make their lives better. To the citizens being forced to move it more often feels like something being done **TO** them. For residents of East Arlington, the taking of their community was no exception, but perhaps even more so. While they were Americans first and African Americans second, outside their community they were treated as second or third or fourth class citizens, seldom on the receiving end of something good, frequently on the receiving end of something bad. Within their community, they enjoyed acceptance, concern, and love from their neighbors. They cared for each other’s children, cut each other’s hair, sold each other groceries, ice, and milk. Their *gemeinschaft* community represented security and acceptance that residents of other communities can never understand.

The timing of the taking exacerbated the loss, coming 25 to 30 years too early. The Civil Rights Era of the 1960s would have changed the dynamics of this story completely. Residential segregation was made illegal by the Fair Housing Act of 1968. After the Civil Rights legislation, African Americans had a choice of where to live. The residents of East Arlington who were adults in 1942 might have chosen to remain in their homes, but their children might have chosen to move out, possibly moving to more desirable parts of the county. The *gemeinschaft* community would be allowed to die naturally. The older adults would be wistful to see their children leave, but it would be seen as a natural

process, a choice. The taking was not a choice. The residents were ripped out of their community and spread to all corners of the region. The War Department compensated the property owners monetarily for their land and improvements, but the residents of East Arlington could never be compensated for their greatest loss, their community. They mourn it still.

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### **About the Author**

Dr. Nancy Perry is a graduate of the Department of Geography and Geoinformation Science at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Her dissertation focused on the geographical aspects of segregation for the African American community in Arlington, Virginia. Currently she teaches geography at Helena College in Helena, Montana.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Franklin Survey Company, *Property Atlas of Arlington County Virginia: Showing the Entire County Complete in One Volume*. (Philadelphia, PA, 1935), Plate 14.

<sup>2</sup> Comelia B. Rose, *Arlington County, Virginia: A History*. (Baltimore, MD: Port City Press, 1976), pp. 122-125.

<sup>3</sup> Deed Book N4, Alexandria County, n.d., p. 265 Arlington County Land Records Office, Arlington, VA.

<sup>4</sup> Deed Book 110, Alexandria County, n.d., p. 546. Arlington County Land Records Office, Arlington, VA.

<sup>5</sup> Ancestry.com. (www.ancestry.com). Census Records for 1930, 1940 and 1950.

<sup>6</sup> Wendell E. Pritchett, "The 'Public Menace' of Blight: Urban Renewal and the Private Users of Eminent Domain," in *Faculty Scholarship Paper 1199*, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, "350 Feet Above Flood Ruins, A River Town Plots Rebirth," (*New York Times*, October 31, 1993. P. A1.

- <sup>8</sup> Gideon Parchomovsky and Peter Siegelman, "Selling Mayberry: Communities and Individuals in Law and Economics." *California Law Review*, 92, 2004. Pp. 92, 75-146 ff.
- <sup>9</sup> Steve Vogel, *The Pentagon: A History*. (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 204-207.
- <sup>10</sup> Constitution of the United States, "Fifty Amendment. For this paper, author used [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifth\\_Amendment\\_to\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_Constitution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifth_Amendment_to_the_United_States_Constitution). Retrieved May 23, 2013.
- <sup>11</sup> Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. Trans. by Charles P. Loomis. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1957).
- <sup>12</sup> Ancestry.com. (www.ancestry.com). Census Records for 1940.
- <sup>13</sup> Ancestry.com. (www.ancestry.com). Census Records for 1940.
- <sup>14</sup> Brochure entitled *Celebrating 135 Years of Excellence*. (Arlington, VA: Mount Zion Baptist Church, 2001).
- <sup>15</sup> Vogel, *The Pentagon*, pp. 35-37.
- <sup>16</sup> Vogel, *The Pentagon*, pp. 105-113.
- <sup>17</sup> Vogel, *The Pentagon*, See especially pp. 121-139.
- <sup>18</sup> S. Katz, "Not Everyone Thought it was so Dreamy: *Washington Star*, September 1, 1975, p. B1.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Vincion, July 16, 2013.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Eunice, August 9, 2012.
- <sup>21</sup> "Arlington Plans Aid for Residents Ousted by War Building," *Washington Star*, March 8, 1942. P A13.
- <sup>22</sup> "U.S. Begins to Get Road Sites," *Washington Post*, February 14, 1942. P. A1.
- <sup>23</sup> "House Unit to Hear Plea of Families Facing Ouster," *Washington Star*, February 12, 1942. P. A1.
- <sup>24</sup> Arlington Plans Aid for Residents Ousted by War Building," *Washington Star*, March 8, 1942. P A13.
- <sup>25</sup> Interview with Eunice, October 3, 2012.
- <sup>26</sup> "Army 'Blitz' Levels Arlington Area," *Washington Star*, April 18, 1942. P. A6.
- <sup>27</sup> Deed Book 575, Arlington County, n.d. p. 370. Arlington County Land Records Office, Arlington, VA.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Rachael, July 23, 2013.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview with Florence, June 21, 2012.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with David, July 25, 2013.