

Georgia Historical Society (GHS) Marker Program Application
Historical Research Paper for
Techwood Homes, Atlanta, Georgia

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Atlanta was the epicenter for the initial development of federal public housing policy in the United States, although this chapter in the city's history has not received ample recognition. In 1934, the city was the site of the first federally-funded slum clearance project in the country, in the Tech Flats neighborhood. Two years later, on August 15, 1936, the first tenants moved into Techwood Homes, the first federally-funded public housing project to be completed in the U.S., built on the cleared land.¹ Conforming to the pattern of residential segregation that characterized 1930s Atlanta, Techwood Homes was designated for white families only. University Homes, a companion low-rent housing project on Atlanta's West Side completed just after Techwood Homes, was intended to house Black families.²

Techwood Homes provided housing for more than 600 white families in housing units arranged in blocks of two-story townhouses or three-story apartment buildings.³ Within each building, the units were arranged to maximize residents' access to fresh air and natural light and were furnished with a range of modern appliances and amenities, including electric stoves, ovens, and refrigerators, "glistening white" bathrooms, screened-in windows, and tiled floors.⁴ With its amenities including playgrounds, a wading pool for children, laundries, a library, an auditorium, garages and storage areas, and an administration building with retail shops and a medical office, Techwood Homes was nearly a "complete neighborhood," offering almost every service its residents might need.⁵ Over the next several decades, Techwood's combination of modern, well-sited housing units and community amenities became a model for housing projects constructed in Atlanta and throughout the United States.⁶ Despite its clear historical significance for the city of Atlanta and the state of Georgia as a symbol of Atlanta's central place in the early history of American public housing policy, Techwood Homes has not received ample recognition as a historic site at the state level. As such, this important site deserves to be recognized by a Georgia Historical Marker.

The driving force behind the initial development of Techwood Homes was Charles F. Palmer, a wealthy Atlanta real-estate developer who became interested in slum clearance and the construction of low-rent housing for financially self-serving reasons, believing that clearing the city's slums would raise the value of his real estate assets in downtown Atlanta.⁷ Palmer was particularly interested in redeveloping the Tech Flats neighborhood, located in the heart of Atlanta between the Georgia

¹ Christina E. Crawford, "Expanding the Interwar Housing Map," Atlanta Housing Interplay, published 2020, <https://www.atlhousing.org/introduction>; Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)" (Atlanta, Georgia: National Park Service, 1995); Robert M. Craig, *Atlanta Architecture: Art Deco to Modern Classic, 1929-1959* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1995), 117.

² Lawrence J. Vale, *Purging the Poorest: Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 54.

³ Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 4.

⁴ Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 5.

⁵ Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 75-76.

⁶ Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 20; Craig, *Atlanta Architecture*, 119.

⁷ Crawford, "Expanding the Interwar Housing Map"; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 48.

Institute of Technology and the central business district, because of its proximity to his properties.⁸ In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Tech Flats neighborhood suffered from high rates of crime, disease, infant mortality, truancy, and juvenile delinquency.⁹ Intrigued by successful examples of government-led slum clearance and so-called social housing projects in Europe, Palmer began to study housing policy and developed a plan to replace the Tech Flats neighborhood with low-rent housing for low-income families.¹⁰

By the spring of 1933, Palmer had recruited the support of a number of leading Atlanta businessmen and politicians for his plan to redevelop the Tech Flats neighborhood, including Clark Howell, Sr., the publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*; James L. Key, the mayor of Atlanta; Dr. Marion Luther Brittain, the president of Georgia Tech; and other prominent white Atlantans.¹¹ Palmer, Howell, and the other proponents of the Techwood project, as it came to be known, benefited from good timing. Around the same time that they began the process to organize financing for their project, the new Roosevelt administration announced the initial New Deal programs. One program in particular drew the attention of Palmer, Howell, and the other Techwood backers: the Public Works Administration (PWA), which offered funding for slum clearance and low-rent housing projects.¹²

In the summer of 1933, Palmer and his supporters applied to the PWA's Housing Division for a loan to fund their Techwood project through the Housing Division's "limited-dividend" housing program.¹³ At the same time, Palmer also campaigned for funding for a second slum clearance and public housing project in Atlanta, this one initiated by John Hope, the president of Atlanta University.¹⁴ Hope sought to redevelop the Beaver Slide neighborhood near the newly-formed Atlanta University Center into low-rent housing for Black families, to be called University Homes.¹⁵ Having applied to the limited-dividend housing program, Palmer, Hope, and their supporters met with a slight setback in the fall of 1933 when the program was canceled. However, it was quickly replaced with a direct-development program that established the PWA as the direct builder and funder of public housing projects.¹⁶ Since the Housing Division had already received the applications for funding for Techwood and University Homes, these projects would become the first to be funded under the direct-development program.¹⁷

On October 13, 1933, the PWA's Housing Division approved funding for both Atlanta housing projects – Techwood Homes, for white families, and University Homes, for Black families – under the new direct-development program. Techwood and University Homes would thus be the first

⁸ Crawford, "Expanding the Interwar Housing Map"; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 48.

⁹ H. Lee Dunagan, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form: Techwood Homes Historic District" (National Park Service, 1976); Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 23.

¹⁰ Carol A. Flores, "US Public Housing in the 1930s: The First Projects in Atlanta, Georgia," *Planning Perspectives* 9 (1994): 411.

¹¹ Dunagan, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form: Techwood Homes Historic District"; Flores, "US Public Housing in the 1930s," 411; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 54.

¹² Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 2.

¹³ Flores, "US Public Housing in the 1930s," 411; Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 92-93.

¹⁴ Flores, "US Public Housing in the 1930s," 411; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 54.

¹⁵ Flores, "US Public Housing in the 1930s," 411; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 54.

¹⁶ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 93, 98-99.

¹⁷ Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 98-100.

slum clearance and public housing projects directly funded and constructed by the federal government.¹⁸ Nearly one year after the Techwood project had been approved, the clearance of the Tech Flats neighborhood and construction of Techwood Homes began on September 29, 1934, with the ceremonial demolition of a house in Tech Flats, initiated by Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.¹⁹ In a nationally-broadcast speech, Ickes presented the clearance of the Tech Flats neighborhood as the beginning of “something new and better” for Atlanta and for the nation, arguing that “slums will have no place in the newer and finer social order” being created by Roosevelt and the New Deal.²⁰ In November 1935, at the formal dedication of Techwood Homes, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt reiterated Ickes’ message in a speech in front of a crowd of 50,000 people at Georgia Tech’s Grant Field.²¹ Roosevelt hailed the construction of Techwood Homes as a milestone in American housing policy, noting that “within sight of us today stands a tribute to useful work under government supervision – the first slum-clearance and low-rent housing project” in the country.²² The “hopeless old houses” of the Tech Flats neighborhood had been replaced by “the bright, cheerful buildings of the Techwood Housing Project.”²³

Nearly two years after the redevelopment of the Tech Flats neighborhood began, the first residents moved into Techwood Homes on August 15, 1936.²⁴ Techwood’s first tenants took up residence in the project’s carefully-designed housing units, furnished, as previously mentioned, with a full range of modern conveniences.²⁵ For the first years of Techwood’s existence, management of the project continued to rest with the PWA’s Housing Division, which used Techwood Homes as a model for housing projects being constructed throughout the United States.²⁶

Drawing on the PWA’s “social and health standards” for housing projects, the managers of Techwood Homes sought to create an “uplifting and wholesome environment” for the project’s residents.²⁷ Techwood’s managers intended that the project would provide its residents with a strong “sense of community” and an improved quality of life.²⁸ In order to achieve these goals, a Tenants’ Association was formed soon after Techwood Homes opened. Among its responsibilities was the organization of social, educational, and recreational programs for the residents of Techwood Homes.²⁹ The Tenants’ Association also published *The Techwood News*, a community newspaper detailing programs on offer and other aspects of life in Techwood Homes.³⁰ For example, a

¹⁸ Flores, “US Public Housing in the 1930s,” 411; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 54, 58.

¹⁹ Historic American Buildings Survey, “Techwood Homes (Public Housing),” 3; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 63.

²⁰ Harold L. Ickes, quoted in Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 63; “Ickes Pleads for ‘Liberty League’ for Underprivileged of America As He Launches First PWA Project Here for Clearance of Slums,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 September 1934, p. 1A.

²¹ Mark B. Lapping, “The Emergence of Federal Public Housing: Atlanta’s Techwood Project,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 32, no. 4 (1973): 381-382; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 66-67.

²² Franklin D. Roosevelt, Techwood Homes dedication speech, quoted in Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 66.

²³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Techwood Homes dedication speech, quoted in Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 66.

²⁴ Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 65.

²⁵ Craig, *Atlanta Architecture*, 117-118.

²⁶ Historic American Buildings Survey, “Techwood Homes (Public Housing),” 20-21.

²⁷ Historic American Buildings Survey, “Techwood Homes (Public Housing),” 20-21.

²⁸ Lapping, “The Emergence of Federal Public Housing,” 382.

²⁹ Lapping, “The Emergence of Federal Public Housing,” 382; Historic American Buildings Survey, “Techwood Homes (Public Housing),” 22.

³⁰ Lapping, “The Emergence of Federal Public Housing,” 382.

November 1942 issue of *The Techwood News* announced that Mayor William B. Hartsfield would give a speech at the next Tenants' Association meeting; provided a schedule of upcoming social events, including a winter dance; advised women how to prepare nutritional meals for their families during wartime rationing; and noted other war-related news.³¹

Barely more than two years after Techwood Homes opened, supporters of the Techwood project, such as Palmer, were already celebrating the success of the housing project in transforming the Techwood neighborhood, which, according to the *Atlanta Constitution*, had undergone "a complete transition."³² The *Constitution* noted that there had been no reports of juvenile delinquency, infant deaths, or tuberculosis in the project and that crime rates had been reduced "to virtual zero" at Techwood.³³ Palmer and other proponents of Techwood Homes argued that the rapid transformation of the Techwood community was due entirely to the "uplifting and wholesome" environment created by the housing project.³⁴ However, another contributing factor to Techwood's early success was the fact that, for the first decade of Techwood's existence, prospective tenants were carefully screened by Techwood's managers. As a result, few residents of the Tech Flats neighborhood were accepted as tenants, despite pre-construction promises that they would be rehoused on site.³⁵ Opponents of public housing in the 1930s and 1940s often criticized the fact that the community at Techwood Homes was not composed of "rehabilitated slum dwellers," but rather upwardly mobile, lower-middle class white families.³⁶

In the late 1960s, three decades after its construction, Techwood Homes was still considered to be a successful example of public housing in the U.S., in terms of both design and the strength of the community.³⁷ However, in the early 1990s, after over a decade of steep decline, Techwood Homes had become for many in Atlanta and across the country a crime-ridden symbol of the failure of public housing.³⁸ In a repetition of developments in the early 1930s, the city of Atlanta and the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) began looking for solutions to the "problem" of the Techwood area, eventually settling on a plan to redevelop the project as a mixed-income housing development. In 1995, the redevelopment project (Centennial Place) was approved by the AHA, Techwood's remaining tenants, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).³⁹ Soon afterwards, Techwood Homes, with the exception of one building, was demolished.⁴⁰

The demolition of the majority of Techwood Homes in the 1990s does not diminish the historical significance of this area. The Techwood Homes site, especially the one surviving original building, is a physical reminder of Atlanta's central place in the history of American public housing. As such, it links people in the twenty-first century to the many people who were, in some way, connected to

³¹ *The Techwood News*, Vol. 3, No. 8 (4 November 1942). Archival material in researcher's possession; copy attached to application.

³² "Uncle Sam Uses Atlanta As His Housing Laboratory," *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 August 1938, p. SM1.

³³ "Uncle Sam Uses Atlanta As His Housing Laboratory," *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 August 1938, p. SM1.

³⁴ Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 20-21.

³⁵ Flores, "US Public Housing in the 1930s," 422; Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 23-24; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 69-70.

³⁶ Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 23-24.

³⁷ Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 89.

³⁸ Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 89.

³⁹ Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 118-120.

⁴⁰ Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 127-128.

Techwood Homes: from Charles Palmer, to the original residents of Tech Flats who were displaced by the slum clearance project, to the white Atlantans chosen as Techwood's first residents, and to the generations of residents who lived at Techwood throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, as an exclusively white housing project until its integration in 1968⁴¹, Techwood Homes is also a reminder that public housing policy and segregationist politics went hand-in-hand in early twentieth-century Atlanta. Ultimately, as a place of major historic significance for the city of Atlanta and the state of Georgia, Techwood Homes deserves recognition through a Georgia Historical Marker.

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⁴¹ Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 25-26.

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The Techwood News

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Georgia Historical Marker Program Application
Documentation Worksheet for
Techwood Homes, Atlanta, Georgia

Fact One
On August 15, 1936, the first tenants moved into Techwood Homes, the first federally-funded public housing project to be completed in the United States.

Source	How and Where was the Source Accessed?
Christina E. Crawford, "Expanding the Interwar Housing Map," Atlanta Housing Interplay, published 2020, https://www.atlhousing.org/introduction ; Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)" (Atlanta, Georgia: National Park Service, 1995); Robert M. Craig, Atlanta Architecture: Art Deco to Modern Classic, 1929-1959 (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1995), 117.	Online; material in researcher's possession.

Fact Two
Techwood Homes provided housing for more than 600 white families in housing units arranged in blocks of two-story townhouses or three-story apartment buildings, arranged to let in fresh light and air and furnished with a range of modern appliances and amenities.

Source	How and Where was the Source Accessed?
Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 4-5.	Material in researcher's possession.

Fact Three
The driving force behind the initial development of Techwood Homes was Charles F. Palmer, who was interested in redeveloping the Tech Flats slum, located in the heart of Atlanta, because of its proximity to his properties. He proposed to redevelop the Tech Flats slum into low-rent housing for low-income families.

Source	How and Where was the Source Accessed?

<p>Crawford, "Expanding the Interwar Housing Map"; Lawrence J. Vale, <i>Purging the Poorest: Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities</i> (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 48.</p>	<p>Online; physical book through library.</p>
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<p>Fact Four</p>	
<p>On October 13, 1933, the Public Works Administration (PWA) approved funding for two Atlanta housing projects: Techwood Homes (for white families) and University Homes (for Black families). Both projects would be funded and constructed directly by the federal government.</p>	

<p>Source</p>	<p>How and Where was the Source Accessed?</p>
<p>Carol A. Flores, "US Public Housing in the 1930s: The First Projects in Atlanta, Georgia," <i>Planning Perspectives</i> 9 (1994): 411.</p>	<p>Online; via Google Scholar.</p>

<p>Fact Five</p>	
<p>Construction of Techwood Homes began on September 29, 1934, with the ceremonial demolition of a house in the Tech Flats slum, initiated by Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.</p>	

<p>Source</p>	<p>How and Where was the Source Accessed?</p>
<p>Vale, <i>Purging the Poorest</i>, 63.</p>	<p>Physical book in library.</p>

<p>Fact Six</p>	
<p>President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the Techwood Homes project on November 29, 1935, in front of a crowd of 50,000 people at Georgia Tech's Grant Field.</p>	

<p>Source</p>	<p>How and Where was the Source Accessed?</p>
<p>Vale, <i>Purging the Poorest</i>, 65-67.</p>	<p>Physical book in library.</p>

<p>Fact Seven</p>	
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For the first years of Techwood's existence after its completion in August 1936, management of the project continued to rest with the PWA's Housing Division, which used Techwood Homes as a model for housing projects being constructed throughout the United States.

Source	How and Where was the Source Accessed?
Historic American Buildings Survey, "Techwood Homes (Public Housing)," 20-21.	Material in researcher's possession.

Fact Eight

The managers of Techwood Homes sought to provide the project's residents with a strong "sense of community" and an improved quality of life. A Tenants' Association was formed shortly after Techwood Homes opened; it organized social, educational, and recreation programs for residents.

Source	How and Where was the Source Accessed?
Mark B. Lapping, "The Emergence of Federal Public Housing: Atlanta's Techwood Project," The American Journal of Economics and Sociology 32, no. 4 (1973): 382.	Online; via Google Scholar.

Fact Nine

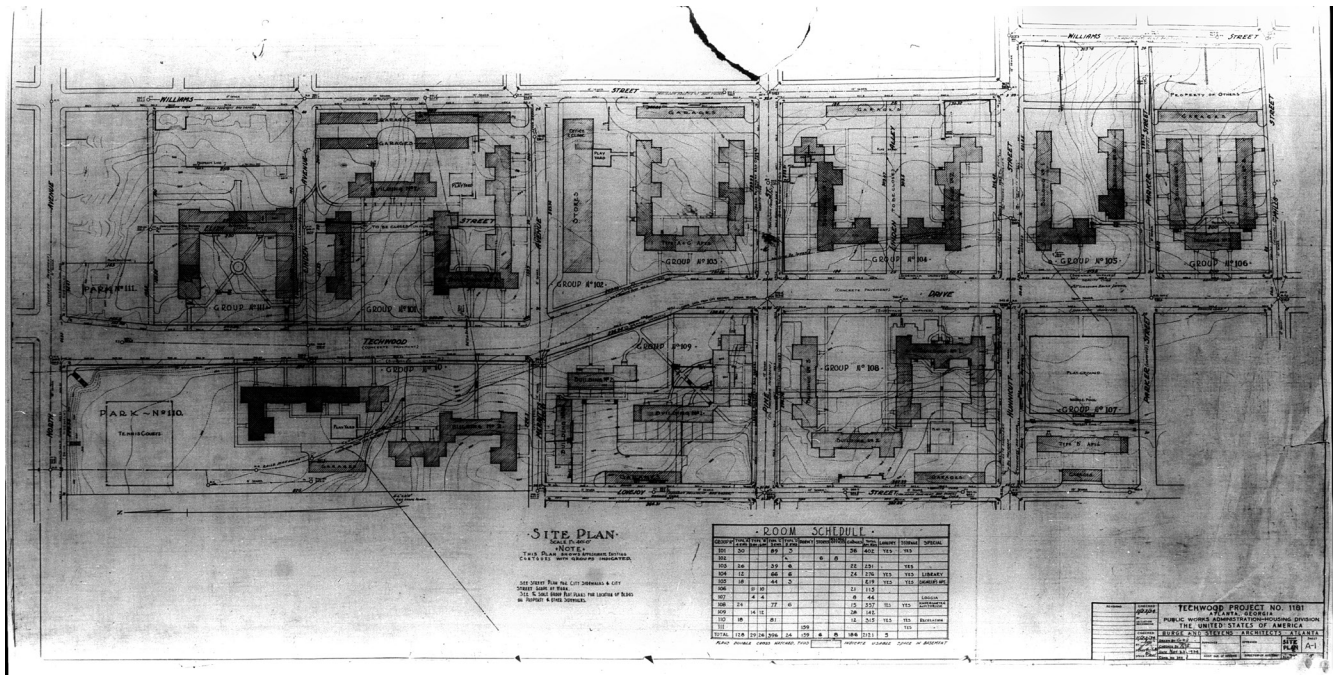
In the late 1960s, Techwood Homes was still considered to be a successful example of public housing in the United States. By the early 1990s, however, after over a decade of steep decline, Techwood Homes had become for many in Atlanta and around the country a crime-ridden symbol of public housing's failures.

Source	How and Where was the Source Accessed?
Vale, Purging the Poorest, 89.	Physical book in library.

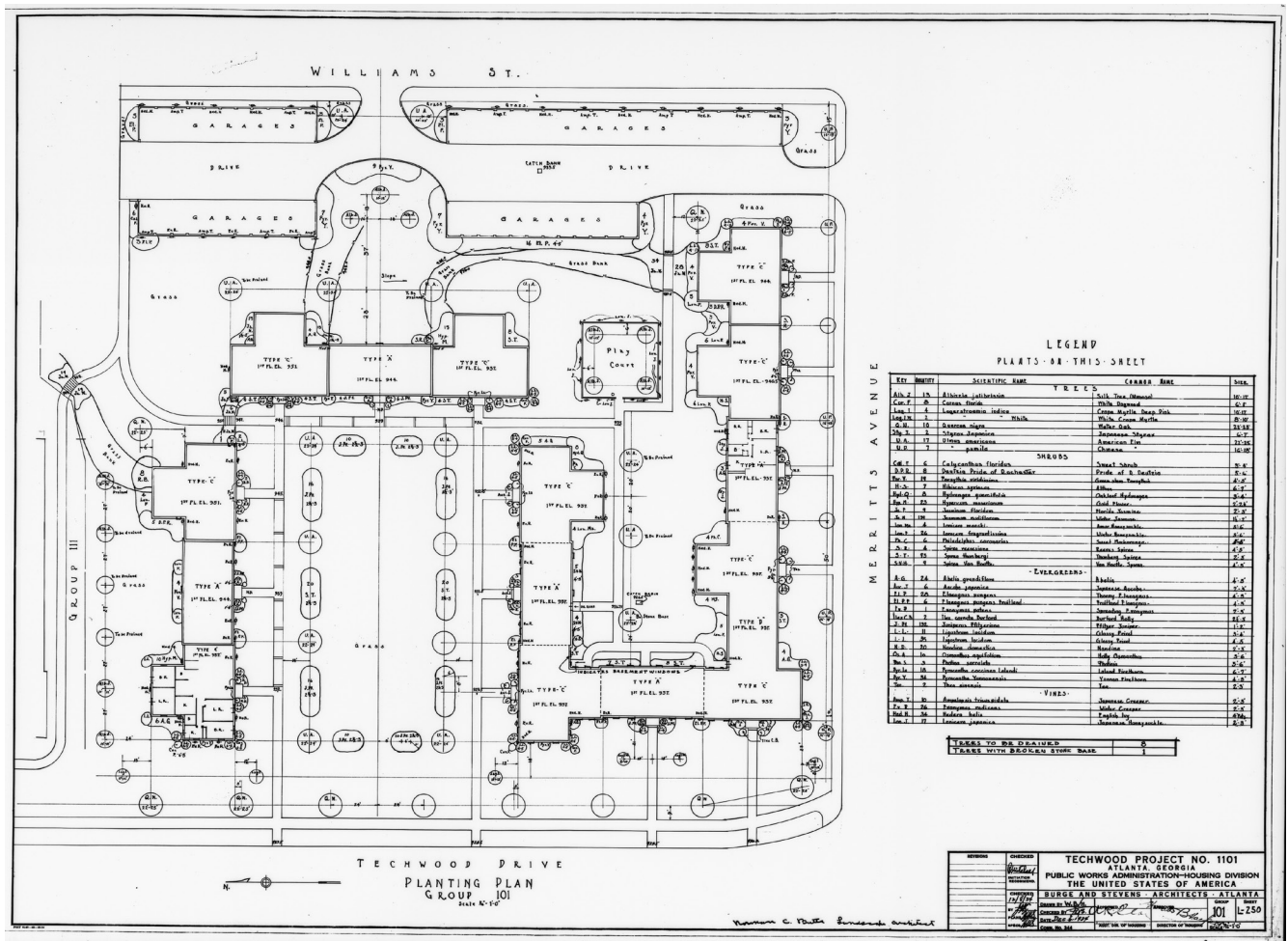
Fact Ten

In the early 1990s, plans were drawn up for Techwood's redevelopment as a mixed-income housing development. In 1995, the redevelopment project (Centennial Place) was approved by the Atlanta Housing Authority. The majority of Techwood Homes (with the exception of one building) was demolished in 1995.

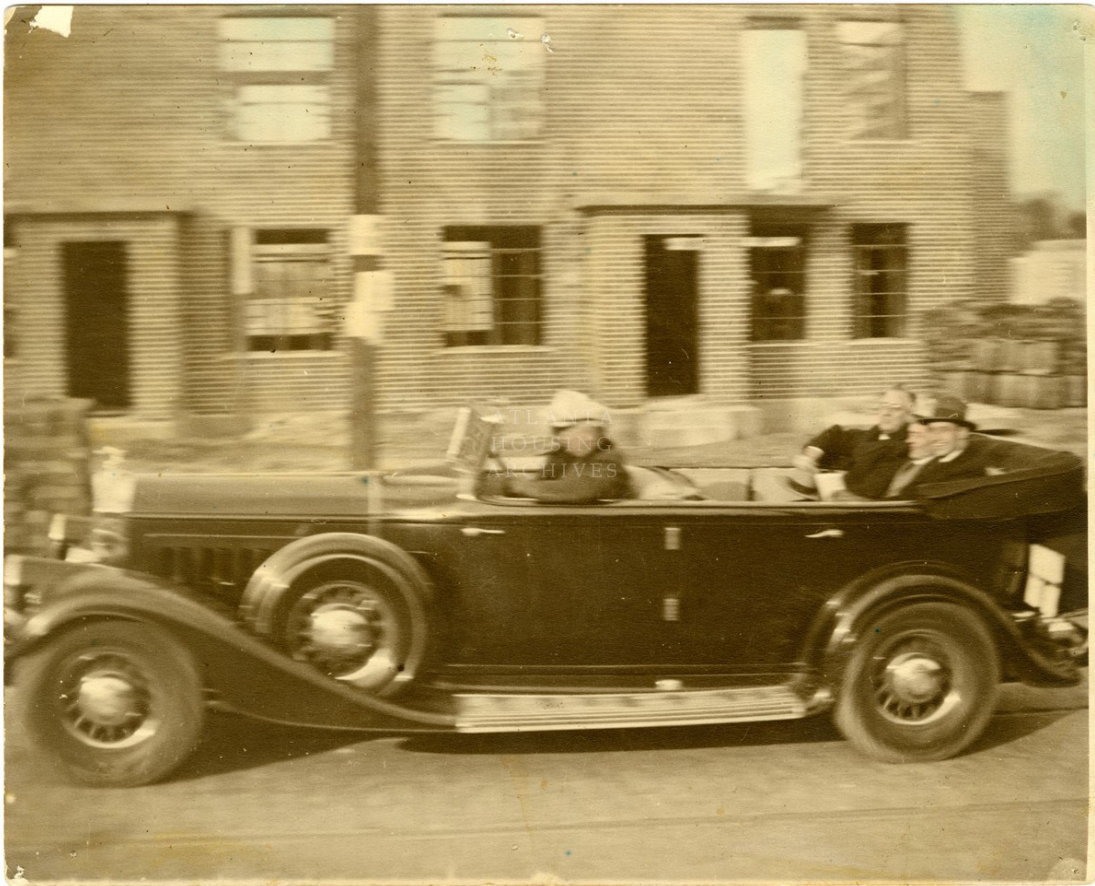
Source	How and Where was the Source Accessed?
Vale, Purgin the Poorest, 118-120, 127-128.	Physical book in library.



Techwood Project site plan, Atlanta, GA, 1935. Architects: Burge and Stevens; oversight by PWA Housing Division. "Techwood Project No. 1101, Site Plan," 22 November 1934, Microfilm drawer 2.7 (Atlanta, Georgia: Atlanta History Center, Kenan Research Center).



Techwood Homes Planting Plan, Group 101, November 1934. Landscape Architect: Norman C. Butts. Architects: Burge and Stevens; oversight by PWA Housing Division. Historic American Buildings Survey (Library of Congress), <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/hhh.ga0665.photos.042998p/>.



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt touring newly dedicated Techwood Homes, 1935. Techwood Clark Howell Homes Records, TECH 2014.0002.5.2.1 (Atlanta, Georgia: Atlanta Housing Archives, The Housing Authority of the City of Atlanta).



Techwood Homes under construction with PWA Housing Division sign in foreground, c. 1935. Charles F. Palmer papers, Box 167, Folder 8 (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library).



“Official opening of Techwood Homes, Sept. 1, 1936, showing speaker’s stand located on top terrace of Building 1, Group 109.” Charles F. Palmer papers, Box 167, Folder 9 (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library).



Techwood Homes, 1936. Charles F. Palmer papers, Box 167, Folder 8 (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library).



Techwood Homes aerial, 1936. Charles F. Palmer papers, Box 167, Folder 8 (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library).



Techwood Homes aerial, 1936. Charles F. Palmer papers, Box 167, Folder 8 (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library).



Building 1, Group 109, Techwood Project, Atlanta GA, May 21, 1936. Charles F. Palmer papers, Box 167, Folder 9 (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library).



Typical entrance, two-story row houses, Building 2, Group 109, Techwood Project, Atlanta GA, May 21, 1936. Charles F. Palmer papers, Box 167, Folder 9 (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library).



Families moving into row houses on Merritts Avenue, Building 3, Group 109, official opening Techwood Homes, Sept. 1, 1936. Charles F. Palmer papers, Box 167, Folder 9 (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library).



Playground behind Building X, Techwood Project, Atlanta GA, 1936. Charles F. Palmer papers, Box 167, Folder 8 (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library).



Techwood Homes street views, including Group 102 commercial strip (bottom), c. 1940. Techwood Clark Howell Homes Records, TECH 2014.0002.5.2.18 (Atlanta, Georgia: Atlanta Housing Archives, The Housing Authority of the City of Atlanta).



Techwood/Clark Howell Homes playground, c. 1940. Techwood Clark Howell Homes Records, TECH 2014.0002.5.3.3 (Atlanta, Georgia: Atlanta Housing Archives, The Housing Authority of the City of Atlanta).



Techwood Homes family, apartment interior, c. 1940. Techwood Clark Howell Homes Records, TECH 2014.0002.5.3.2 (Atlanta, Georgia: Atlanta Housing Archives, The Housing Authority of the City of Atlanta).



**Techwood Homes
1936-1996**