

A VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY PRESENTATION
ON REPORTING FROM:

UPROOTED

A ProPublica and Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism at WHRO Investigation

Tuesday, August 20, 2024

Presentation by: Brandi Kellam

“Uprooted” Lead Investigative Reporter and Film Director

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- The presentation will focus on the inspiration for the investigation, central themes, research, challenges, and takeaways.

03 BACKGROUND

05 DISCOVERY

08 VIRGINIA COLLEGES

09 CENTRAL THEMES

10 EXPANSION PLAYBOOK

11 RESEARCH

15 TAKEAWAYS

18 THANK YOU!

BRANDI KELLAM

ABOUT ME ➤

Brandi Kellam is a two-time Emmy Award-winning investigative journalist and documentary film director whose work has been featured on national news platforms, including CBS News, NBC News, and BET. Her reporting has brought critical issues to light, including her 2023 series and documentary, *Uprooted*, which examined the history of higher education's role in displacing Black communities through federally funded urban renewal projects that largely targeted these communities for the expansion of college campuses.

The series, in collaboration with ProPublica and the Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism at WHRO, ignited local and national debates about racism and housing injustice. It has also received several accolades, including a Gracie Award, Columbia University's Tobenkin Prize, the Education Writers Association's Hechinger Grand Prize, and Brandi's first regional Emmy as a documentary film director.



A Tidewater Virginia native, Brandi grew up in the Hampton Roads region of Virginia before attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she earned a bachelor's degree in sociology. She also holds a master's degree in broadcast and digital journalism from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University.

Why the Destruction of a Black Neighborhood Matters to Me—and Should Matter to Everyone

As a teenager, I competed in track meets at Christopher Newport University. As a reporter, I unearthed the painful history behind the campus's location.

Virginia Law Allows the Papers of University Presidents to Stay Secret, Limiting Public Oversight

A provision in state law exempts college presidents' "working papers and correspondence" from disclosure even after they step down — as we found out when we asked about one ex-president's role in campus expansions that uprooted a Black neighborhood.

Virginia's Public Universities Have a Long History of Displacing Black Residents

PROPUBLICA

Racial Justice

Erasing the "Black Spot": How a Virginia College Expanded by Uprooting a Black Neighborhood

by Brandi Kellam and Louis Hansen, Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism at WHRO

Sept. 5, 2023, 5 a.m. EDT



In the second half of the 20th century, the establishment and expansion of public universities across Virginia uprooted Black families, hindering their efforts to accumulate wealth in the most American way — homeownership.

The University Uprooted a Black Neighborhood. Then Its Policies Reduced the Black Presence on Campus.

<https://www.propublica.org/series/uprooted>



DISCOVERY

"Looking for a reporting project near my hometown...[a] source told me about the demolition of the Shoe Lane area."

"When I spoke with Hamilton [CNU Professor], I asked if he felt there was anything missing from his research. He said he wished that he could have talked with the families exiled by eminent domain, but that they were long gone. I wasn't so sure...I decided to look for them."

"When I sat down at the Johnsons' dining room table...[James] and Barbara told me about growing up on a farm there, and about how the seizure of the neighborhood's core by eminent domain had thwarted their family's plan to build a subdivision for Black families. He showed me albums and notebooks filled with his photos of the demolished houses and with newspaper clippings he had collected...[James] had organized and collected over 60 years' worth of records out of a deep attachment to the only place he knew as home."



Original photograph courtesy of James Johnson

"All too often, educational institutions also control the narrative about their role in society, including their expansion into diverse communities, and it's the journalist's responsibility to find victims and make their voices heard."

DISCOVERY: “ERASING THE BLACK SPOT”



“I had heard that the goal was to wipe it out completely, you know, no houses or anything,” he said. “I was told that that was the plan: It was to erase the Black spot - they called it a “Black spot.”

Anthony Santoro, Former CNU President



Newport News college
seeks approval to expand

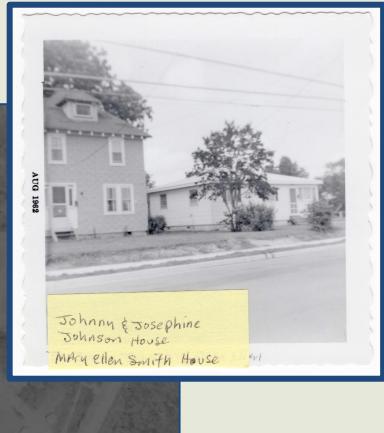
**Old fears of displacement
still arouse homeowners**

By Leonard E. Colvin

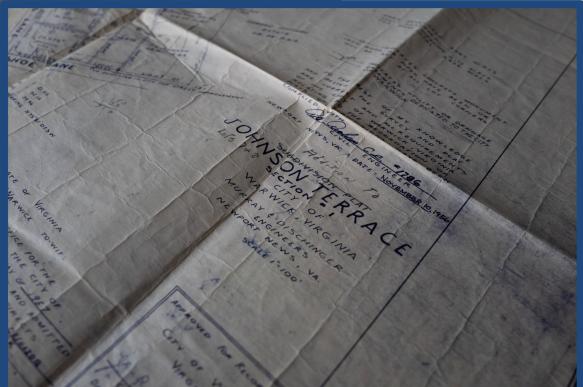
owned by African American families living in on the condemned area

the Shoe Lane later the entire

The Office of the Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Virginia has appointed the undersigned to act as its counsel on behalf of Christopher Newport University in the acquisition by condemnation of the property commonly known as



**Council Votes 5-2 For Shoe Lane Location
For Christopher Newport Junior College**



DISCOVERY: “ERASING THE BLACK SPOT”

Newport News, Virginia: A Timeline

- 1960s: A Black community looking to grow into a larger middle-class neighborhood is targeted by white city officials. Despite having cheaper options, officials forcibly acquired approx. 60 acres to locate now Christopher Newport University (CNU).
- 1970s and 80s: CNU evolved from a commuter to a residential campus. University officials quietly began discussing a second, larger expansion.
- 1980s: CNU attained state approval to extend the campus boundary, which includes the remainder of the homes in the Black neighborhood. In 1989, some remaining Black homeowners filed a federal lawsuit to block the expansion. The case is dismissed.
- Following the dismissal, university officials claimed they would only negotiate when owners approached them to sell. Later, Paul Trible, CNU’s president from 1996 to 2022, claimed he would not invoke eminent domain.
- However, documents show university officials approached residents to broach sales and explored using eminent domain to acquire some properties during Trible’s presidency.
- 2024: Only five homes from the Black neighborhood remain.



Original photograph courtesy of James Johnson

VIRGINIA COLLEGES

Other Virginia public universities have also expanded in the same era by taking Black neighborhoods.



Christopher Newport University
Photo Credit: Christopher Tyree

►► CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT UNIVERSITY

In the late 1960s, residents living in a community off Shoe Lane in Newport News wanted to sell some of their farmland to Black people who aspired to the American dream of homeownership. The community was growing into a middle-class neighborhood. Aware that more Black families would be moving to the area, the Newport News City Council used eminent domain to seize the core of their community, approx. 60 acres, for a new public two-year college—a branch of the Colleges of William and Mary system, now Christopher Newport University.

►► OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

By the 1950s, Lambert's Point was a thriving middle-class Black community. It was leveled in the 1960s and '70s to make room for a branch college of William and Mary, now the main campus of Old Dominion University (ODU). The city and the college displaced more than 150 families and demolished 140 buildings covering 40 acres.

►► UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

While the University of Virginia (UVA) was doubling its student population in the 1960s, the city of Charlottesville used eminent domain to wipe out Vinegar Hill, a thriving Black generational community and business district located near downtown.

CENTRAL THEMES

Thriving communities, resident pushback, and undervalued offerings.

Before it was leveled for ODU's main campus, Lambert's Point was almost entirely a middle-class Black community with single-family homes, apartment buildings, shops, schools, grocery stores, and churches. The formerly vibrant African American neighborhood of Vinegar Hill (UVA) featured Black-owned businesses that generated approximately \$1.6 million annually from goods and services, according to records. It also included churches, schools, and charitable organizations. Before the 60-acre seizure for Christopher Newport, the Black community off Shoe Lane and three other streets consisted of a church and about 20 Black families, including teachers, dentists, a high school principal, and a NASA engineer. They owned ranch-style houses, and some were planning to sell their excess land to other Black families seeking opportunities for homeownership.

Lambert's Point residents fought against property takings, sometimes contending that the adjacent affluent white neighborhoods would be better sites for new development. Similarly, residents in Newport News and Charlottesville fought in city council chambers or courtrooms, arguing against seizures and seeking better compensation for their property.

Newport News officials paid 20% less for the properties than the value set by an independent appraiser, council records show. While Norfolk officials stated in public meetings that property owners were paid market rate, some former residents dispute this, claiming their families did not receive a fair price.



Original photograph courtesy of James Johnson

EXPANSION PLAYBOOK

Even after prior property seizures and displacement, Virginia universities continued their expansion efforts into Black communities.

- In the 1970s, Old Dominion University used eminent domain to acquire more properties, after a first phase taking in the 1960s that displaced more than 150 families.
- In the 1970s and '80s, Christopher Newport University sought to expand its campus boundaries, including the remaining homes of a 100-acre Black community, which had 60 acres seized in the 1960s.
- During the 1970s, UVA acquired properties from Black owners in the Gospel Hill neighborhood to build medical facilities, buildings, and a library. The acquisition of these properties continued through the 1980s for additional medical facilities and parking lots.
- In recent years, CNU's BOV authorized using eminent domain to take three properties for a parking lot. University officials told us that these properties were ultimately sold to the college.

THE BOARD OF VISITORS OF CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT UNIVERSITY

WHEREAS, there are several properties located next to or near the University that are important to the future of the University, and

WHEREAS, each of the owners of these properties has expressed an interest in selling their home or business property to the University, and

WHEREAS, the University has negotiated in good faith, and

WHEREAS, the University has failed to reach a fair settlement in order for it to acquire these properties, and

WHEREAS, Virginia Code §25.1-101 empowers the University to acquire property by eminent domain, now, therefore, let it be

RESOLVED, THAT the President is hereby directed to take whatever actions are necessary to acquire the following properties by eminent domain for the following

RESEARCH

- ▶ Extensive research and interviews were conducted to gather documents, records, first-person accounts, and historical analysis.



RESEARCH BARRIERS



Lambert's Point during the initial expansion of Old Dominion College
ODU Special Collections & University Archives

►► HISTORICAL PROPERTY DATA OVERWRITES

Historical data on real estate assessor site and mapping tools overwrites when parcel data changes.

►► FOIA EXEMPTION FOR PRESIDENTIAL PAPERS

As a public institution, Christopher Newport is subject to state public records law. However, university officials would not allow us to see the vast majority of documents from recently retired President Paul Trible.

►► LIBRARY ARCHIVE REQUIRES PERMISSION

CNU's library, named in part after its longest-serving president, requires librarian permission to access resources, including its archives.

RESEARCH BARRIERS

newport news GIS Map Viewer GeoHub Tutorial Video

The map displays a portion of Christopher Newport University, with streets labeled STANTON RD, PRINCE DREW RD, MODES LN N, and Great Lawn. A specific parcel is highlighted with a cyan border. A callout box provides detailed information about this parcel:

Parcel

Parcel Id	229000308
Site Address	236 PRINCE DREW RD
Internal Link (More Details)	More info
Public Link (More Details)	More info
Legal Start Date	
Property Description	16.255A PT CORBINS & PRINCE DREW
Use Code	19
Use Description	UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE/BUSIN SCHOOL
Class Code	C
Class	Commercial

[Zoom to](#) [...](#)

Layers

- Basemap
 - Aerial (2024)
 - Newport News Basemap**
 - Tax Map
 - Dark Gray Canvas
 - Light Gray Canvas
- Aerial Photography
 - Aerial (2024)
 - Aerial (2023)
 - Aerial (2022)
 - Aerial (2021)
 - Aerial (2019)
 - Aerial (2016)
 - Aerial (2013)
 - Aerial (2010)
 - Aerial (2009 VBMP)
 - Aerial (2007)
 - Aerial (2007 VBMP)
 - Aerial (2001)
 - Aerial (1995)
 - Aerial (1959)
 - Aerial (1937)
- Education
- Emergency Management
- Engineering & Projects
- Environmental
- Operations & Maintenance

Area Map of Christopher Newport University

RESEARCH BARRIERS

§ 2.2-3705.7. Exclusions to application of chapter; records of specific public bodies and certain other limited exclusions.

The following information contained in a public record is excluded from the mandatory disclosure provisions of this chapter but may be disclosed by the custodian in his discretion, except where such disclosure is prohibited by law. Redaction of information excluded under this section from a public record shall be conducted in accordance with § [2.2-3704.01](#).

1. State income, business, and estate tax returns, personal property tax returns, and confidential records held pursuant to § [58.1-3](#).

2. Working papers and correspondence of the Office of the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, or the Attorney General; the members of the General Assembly, the Division of Legislative Services, or the Clerks of the House of Delegates or the Senate of Virginia; the mayor or chief executive officer of any political subdivision of the Commonwealth; or the president or other chief executive officer of any public institution of higher education in the Commonwealth. However, no information that is otherwise open to inspection under this chapter shall be deemed excluded by virtue of the fact that it has been attached to or incorporated within any working paper or correspondence. Further, information publicly available or not otherwise subject to an exclusion under this chapter or other provision of law that has been aggregated, combined, or changed in format without substantive analysis or revision shall not be deemed working papers. Nothing in this subdivision shall be construed to authorize the withholding of any resumes or applications submitted by persons who are appointed by the Governor pursuant to § [2.2-106](#) or [2.2-107](#).

As used in this subdivision:

"Members of the General Assembly" means each member of the Senate of Virginia and the House of Delegates and their legislative aides when working on behalf of such member.

"Office of the Governor" means the Governor; the Governor's chief of staff, counsel, director of policy, and Cabinet Secretaries; the Assistant to the Governor for Intergovernmental Affairs; and those individuals to whom the Governor has delegated his authority pursuant to § [2.2-104](#).

"Working papers" means those records prepared by or for a public official identified in this subdivision for his personal or deliberative use.

SUBJECT: Documents Withheld

DATE: June 1, 2023

The following documents were withheld from release pursuant to the Virginia Freedom of Information Act. The list below includes the subject area, volume, and sub section of the code that exempts the documents from mandatory disclosure.

Presidential Correspondence - Meeting Materials - 3 pages
Documents withheld pursuant to Section 2.2-3705.7

Presidential Correspondence - Notice of Campus Events - 17 pages
Documents withheld pursuant to Section 2.2-3705.7

Presidential Correspondence - Work with Hampton City Council - 17 pages
Documents withheld pursuant to Section 2.2-3705.7

Presidential Correspondence - University Updates to the Board of Visitors - 75 pages
Documents withheld pursuant to Section 2.2-3705.7

TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Final notes include takeaways from research, as well as subjects and experts featured in “Uprooted.”



TAKEAWAYS

REMAINING RESIDENTS:

The Johnsons say they aren't bitter toward Christopher Newport...but they say they feel like strangers on land where they should belong. They don't know how much longer they will stay in their home, or if the decision will be up to them—or their children, who would inherit under their will. The university's updated site plan calls for acquiring the last houses in the neighborhood by 2030.

HISTORY AND NARRATIVE:

The plaque on the site of "Walker's Green" honors their late neighbor William Walker...[he]served on Christopher Newport's board while the school was expanding and the homeowners sued. The plaque notes that Walker "initially opposed" locating the college...what it omits is that during his time on the board, other homeowners were upset that Walker didn't update them about the school's intentions, and encouraged them to compromise.

Like Christopher Newport, William & Mary hasn't fully grappled with its role in Shoe Lane's demise. Its official history states that the city donated the land, without mentioning how, and from whom, it was obtained.

REPAIR:

"These universities ... are doing great things for our communities, for our country," said Davarian Baldwin, American studies professor at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut and author of "In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities" (2021). "They are the center of the political economy today. We need to understand that. "But that prosperity and greatness has come with a profound cost for the host communities where they sit. And we must account for that. We must repair that."



A VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY PRESENTATION ON REPORTING FROM “UPROOTED”



THANK YOU!

A VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY PRESENTATION ON REPORTING FROM “UPROOTED”

Tuesday, August 20, 2024

Presentation by: Brandi Kellam

“Uprooted” Lead Investigative Reporter and Film Director

Email: brandi@brandikellam.com