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Expressways (also known as interstate highways or freeways) are now so ubiquitous on the American landscape that many people, even scholars, have rarely questioned how they came to be. One common assumption is that expressways were born in 1956 when President Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highways Act, while another assumption holds that they faced nothing but immediate widespread acceptance. Both assumptions, as this thesis highlights, are incorrect. Utilizing newspaper accounts, correspondence, city plans, and engineering schematics focused on one particular highway, the Mark Twain Expressway located in the aging city of St. Louis, the research contained in this thesis asserts that expressways were planned and constructed years earlier than widely understood and many of them met opposition when proposed. It also suggests that the dominant political climate of the era, with the assistance of deft political skill, largely influenced the direction and results of the expressway debate.

To present a well-rounded picture of the motivations and actions of expressway proponentsâ€”usually downtown businessmen, mayors, city planners, and highway engineersâ€”this thesis presents a wide array of contextual information. By 1950, the city of St. Louis had stopped growing as quickly as it had in the decades before, while suburban tracts in the political separate St. Louis County boomed. Businesses in downtown suffered and room for new industries was non-existent. To accomplish objectives of civic revitalization, downtown leaders pushed for expressways and urban renewal measures, and as a result many neighborhoods were increasingly defined as slums or blighted areas.

Many citizens of North St. Louis disagreed with those designations. Their neighborhoods were aging, but still well-kept and beloved by residents. They did not fit into new definitions of neighborhood desirability expressed by planners and politicians. Furthermore, the common rhetoric often contained an implicit racism, as many of those blighted areas bordered areas populated by African Americans, and areas containing African Americans were deemed slums ready for clearance and rebuilding. This thesis examines how residents in white neighborhoods on the North Side were keenly aware of those designations and fought to keep their communities from being downgraded by decision-makers.

The publication of the Elliott Plan by the Missouri State Highway Commission in 1951 heralded the acceleration of expressway planning in St. Louis. It also confirmed the growing nationwide consensus that emphasized the American system of economic growth, increased automobile ownership, and widespread homeownership. To those who sought to benefit from themâ€”mainly downtown businessmenâ€”expressways represented progress, a buzzword of the consensus. Accordingly, they used that term to secure the terms of debate.

This thesis also highlights how residents, influenced by decades of political and social fragmentation turned to neighborhood improvement associations and locally elected aldermen to vigorously oppose the Elliott Plan and defend their neighborhoods against change.