

THE VEERING PATH OF PROGRESS:
POLITICS, RACE, AND CONSENSUS IN THE NORTH ST. LOUIS
MARK TWAIN EXPRESSWAY FIGHT, 1950-1956

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how a complicated mix of factors converged to influence the planning, proposal, protest, and final route of the Mark Twain Expressway through St. Louis's North Side in the 1950s. To proponents, the expressway symbolized the economic stabilization of the central business district, expansion of industry, and a brighter future for St. Louis at a time when white middle-class Americans were increasingly leaving the somewhat declining city for the suburbs. For opponents, the expressway represented yet another example of downtown leaders working to the detriment of their neighborhoods, and they fought to change its route vigorously.

Of the many factors that influenced the debate, three played prominent roles. First, the historical fragmentation of the city put downtown and outlying areas at odds on nearly every political issue, especially civic projects. Second, implicit racism, often hidden by euphemisms such as "blight," was used to justify the need for expressway, while at the same time it intensified anti-expressway rhetoric expressed by people who feared the racial turnover of their particular North Side neighborhood. Third, a growing nationwide consensus that held economic growth, automobile usage, and homeownership in the high regard fueled the approval of the Mark Twain Expressway under the banner of progress. Expressway proponents, such as Mayor Raymond Tucker, shrewdly used that term to control the debate and neutralize the opposition coming from the North Side.