

#GORDONPLAZA  
#FULLYFUNDEDRELOCATIONFORGORDONPLAZA  
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PHOTO BY FERNANDO LOPEZ

# THE AGRICULTURE STREET LANDFILL

BY JESSE G. PERKINS, RESIDENT OF GORDON PLAZA

The Agriculture Street Landfill was a dump in the upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans, LA. It was opened as a dump in 1909 for industrial and residential waste and closed in 1958. It reopened in 1965 after Hurricane Betsy for the use and collection of storm debris. However, without proper regulation, an alarming array of toxic waste was disposed there.

Sometime in 1966, it was closed, but there were reports of continued dumping. In 1969, the development of the Press Park town homes began. Subsequently, the Gordon Plaza senior apartments were erected. In 1978, the development of the Gordon Plaza subdivision commenced and was completed in 1981. It was developed for low-income African Americans. In 1987, the Robert R. Moton Elementary School was built but closed in 1994.

I moved into the Gordon Plaza subdivision in May of 1988, after purchasing a home for my mother and I in March of the same year. We had no knowledge whatsoever that this land was previously a toxic waste landfill. Having played on this site as a kid, I only related to it as the “dump.” After being informed that this was a toxic waste landfill, my American dream quickly became a nightmare. This was when our fight for justice and liberation began. The community organized, and we took our fight to the streets against the City of New Orleans, Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO), and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) became involved in 1993 and conducted testing on the site,

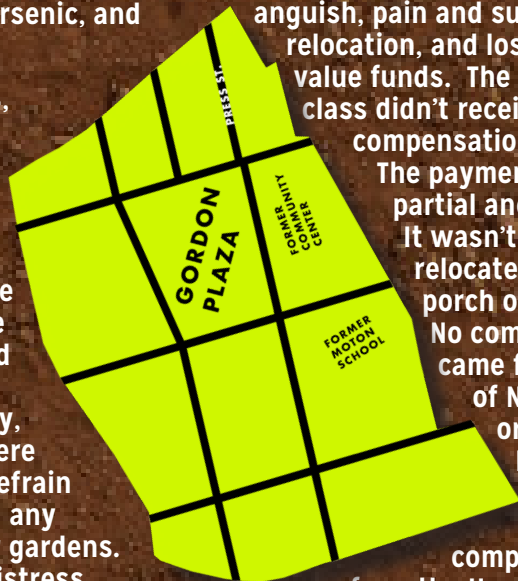


Print collage by Tina Orlandini | Photos of Jesse Perkins and Sheena Dedmond with her daughters, Braylein and Baylei by William Widmer



which resulted in the discovery of 150 contaminants, of which 49 are carcinogens including polychlorinated biphenyls, polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, arsenic, and lead.

In February 1994, the residents and former residents filed a lawsuit in Civil District Court. In 1994 the EPA declared the area a Superfund site. Because of the soil's toxicity, the residents were encouraged to refrain from consuming any foods from their gardens. The emotional distress from this shocking news was overwhelming. The community's stress level was catapulted through the roof. In 1997, in agreement with the City of New Orleans, the EPA proposed and began the clean-up of the site for those who granted them access to their property. We deemed it a cover-up rather than a clean-up. They excavated two feet of soil and laid a geotextile mat to alert those involved in performing future excavations that the toxic soil was right beneath it. I was one of ten who denied the EPA access to my property. In 2001, the clean-up ended. The total cost of the clean-up was estimated to be in the millions and could have easily relocated all of the residents residing on the Superfund site.



In 2006, Judge Nadine Ramsey ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. In 2008, the nine class representatives on the case were awarded full compensation, including mental anguish, pain and suffering, relocation, and loss of property value funds. The rest of the class didn't receive any compensation until 2015.

The payments were partial and disgraceful. It wasn't enough to relocate the front porch on my house. No compensation came from the City of New Orleans or the Orleans Parish School Board.

Instead, the compensation came from the Housing Authority of New Orleans' insurance carriers. Almost three decades later in 2018, after not receiving any payment from the City of New Orleans for a fully funded relocation, the Tulane University Law Clinic filed a lawsuit on behalf of the Gordon Plaza residents in Federal Court.



BANNER BY CALEB WASSELL

We've lost a number of people to various types of cancers, including breast cancer. Many suffer from respiratory issues and skin irritations. On one block, five people developed cancer, and three of them died as a result of it. According to the Tumor Registry, my neighborhood is the second-highest cancer-causing neighborhood in the state of Louisiana.

It is imperative that we keep this fight for justice alive. After being failed by five mayors, including Mitch Landrieu, who allocated and spent 40 million dollars on crime cameras, it is apparent that we are not a priority and have been put on the back burner. The consensus amongst the residents is, if there were one white person living in the

neighborhood, we would have been relocated. Currently, we have taken up the cause with the first Black woman mayor, Latoya Cantrell. During her campaign, she gave her word that she was in full support of relocating all residents involved.

We met with her, and she stated that she would get back with us in September of that year to address the issues presented to her. Well, September of 2018 has come and gone, and with numerous attempts to get in touch with her, she has avoided us. She conveyed messages through representatives that she will get back to us. Two years later, she still hasn't had any discussions with

us. The People's Assembly of New Orleans has been actively involved in helping us get this matter resolved. The continued agony and death inflicted on the people of this community must stop. We will continue our fight for a fully funded relocation and will not stop until justice is served.



Artwork by LaVonna Varnado-Brown for *The American Dream Denied: The New Orleans Residents of Gordon Plaza Seek Relocation* at Newcomb Art Museum