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October 28, 2008

The Road Not Taken

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Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/lewyn/55/>

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

40 years ago this month, Jacksonville merged with its Duval County suburbs. As a result, a small city that once encompassed less than 40 square miles became an 757-square-mile powerhouse.

Before consolidation, residents of Jacksonville's poorer areas lived in Third World conditions. Times-Union columnist Tonyaa Weathersbee recently pointed out that before consolidation, "there was always the risk of contracting sand sores from playing in the dusty, unpaved streets." By contrast, consolidation brought sidewalks and paved streets to the city's low-income areas.

Nevertheless, Weathersbee questions the wisdom of consolidation due to continued white dominance of city government and the continued decline of Northwest Jacksonville's poorer areas. Weathersbee suggests that if consolidation had failed, continued white flight would have led to a black-majority city, and a black-dominated city government would have paid more attention to Jacksonville's low-income black neighborhoods.

Admittedly, a Jacksonville shorn of its middle-class, majority-white Southside would have had a smaller tax base than today's Jacksonville. But Weathersbee suggests that even a minuscule, all-black city could have avoided stagnation, based on the example of Atlanta, another city trapped within its 1950s boundaries. She argues that Atlanta "became an economic powerhouse" because visionary leadership "helped to build a strong black middle class." In other words, Weathersbee believes that the core city could have comfortably survived a division of Jacksonville into a black core city and a noose of white suburbs surrounding them.

I doubt, however, that the Atlanta example supports her argument, because Atlanta's transition to a black-majority city was not at all smooth. Between 1970 and 1990, Atlanta's population nosedived from 497,000 to 394,000 - over a 20 percent loss. By contrast, the population of Atlanta's suburbs virtually doubled. In 1990, 27 percent of Atlanta's residents lived in poverty. (The percentage decreased slightly to 24 percent in 2000). By contrast, according to Weathersbee, 29 percent of Northwest Jacksonville's residents live in poverty today. This means that the poverty rate for Atlanta as a whole (including the city's middle-and upper-class neighborhoods) was almost as high as the poverty rate for Jacksonville's toughest areas. In 1989, Atlanta had 246 killings, or 62 per 100,000 - about four times Jacksonville's murder rate today. And in Atlanta, as in Detroit and other more troubled cities, the black middle class moved to the suburbs: Clayton and DeKalb Counties, two of Atlanta's largest suburban counties, are majority black.

Admittedly, the city of Atlanta has become whiter, wealthier and more populous over the last decade and a half. However, some of the factors leading to Atlanta urban rebound are not present in Jacksonville. In particular, Atlanta's vehicle traffic is far more congested than Jacksonville's. According to the Texas Transportation Institute (a research organization funded by the Texas state government) the average Atlanta traveler lost 60 hours per year in traffic congestion; by contrast, the average Jacksonville driver lost 39. Where traffic congestion is high, people are more likely to move closer to work in order to reduce their exposure to such congestion - and so as congestion has grown, downtown commuters have gentrified many of Atlanta's older intown neighborhoods.

Furthermore, Atlanta is larger and faster growing than Jacksonville: metro Atlanta has 5.1 million residents as opposed to metro Jacksonville's 1.2 million. Because Atlanta is so big, it attracts a critical mass of twentysomething, highly educated, single people from all over the nation- people who are generally more likely to be attracted to city life, and who tend to have the kind of white-collar jobs that are most likely to be downtown. By contrast, Jacksonville is simply not large enough to attract enough young singles to fill up all of the city's intown neighborhoods. Moreover, Jacksonville's more industrial economy tends to attract more family-oriented, middle-class people: people who are somewhat more likely to prefer the space that suburbia offers over the convenience of intown life.

So what would a Jacksonville trapped in its 1967 boundaries have looked like? Two Southern cities have metropolitan area populations comparable to ours (just over 1 million) but have failed to annex significant amounts of suburban territory: Birmingham, Alabama and Richmond, Virginia.

Because Birmingham failed to merge with its suburbs, the city of Birmingham now has only 229,000 residents, 73 percent of whom are black. Birmingham's "black city/white suburbs" strategy does not seem to have worked out very well for residents of the core city. In 2007, Birmingham had 37 murders per 100,000 people, more than twice that of Jacksonville. In addition, 29% of Birmingham's black residents have incomes below the poverty level, well above Jacksonville's 21% black poverty level. At least some public services are worse in Birmingham: by my count, the city bus system has 32 bus routes, as opposed to Jacksonville's 52 (plus trolley and Skyway). Not surprisingly, Birmingham (unlike Jacksonville) has lost population: since 1960, the city of Birmingham has lost almost a third of its population. In 1960, Birmingham had 140,000 more people than Jacksonville (341,000 as opposed to 201,000). Today, Jacksonville has more than half a million more people.

To be fair, Birmingham and Jacksonville are not quite identical: Birmingham's metro area population has grown more slowly (from 747,000 in 1960 to 1.1 million today; by contrast, Jacksonville's regional population has doubled and then some). On the other hand, Birmingham has an advantage that pre-consolidation Jacksonville lacked: even without massive annexation, the city of Birmingham encompasses 130 square miles, more than three times as many as pre-1967 Jacksonville. Thus, a 40-square-mile Jacksonville might actually be more of a basket case than Birmingham is today.

Richmond is also more troubled than Jacksonville in some respects. Like Birmingham, Richmond has bled people to its suburbs: Richmond had 230,000 people in 1950, and has only 200,000 today (57% of whom are black). In 2007, Richmond had 26 murders per 100,000 people, about twice as many as Jacksonville. In addition, a stunning 30% of Richmond's blacks had incomes below the poverty level- more than in Jacksonville or even Birmingham. The city bus system has just over 40 bus routes- again, fewer than Jacksonville. And the city's schools are disastrous even by the low standards of American cities: for the last year in which I could find statistics, the mean verbal SAT score was 357. (By contrast, the national average is typically just over 500, and Duval County students are far closer to that average than to Richmond's average).

Consolidation has not solved all of Jacksonville's ills: our city still suffers from some "middle-class flight" to St. Johns and Clay Counties, and Jacksonville still has too many high-poverty neighborhoods. But if Jacksonville was stuck in its pre-1967 boundaries, it would have purchased a one-way ticket to Palookaville: a weak tax base, leading to white and black middle-class flight, leading to a city even poorer and more dangerous than the Jacksonville we live in today.