

David Harris



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

David Harris provided a historical introduction to New Brunswick beginning in the 1960s when, he said, the “Hub City” was “the center of African American culture” in the region. “It was a place where we could get our hair cut in a real barber shop and not in someone’s kitchen. The women found beauty salons, and there were great black

churches.” [1] Harris lived in nearby South River—a borough southeast of New Brunswick—in the early 1960s and was a part-time student at Rutgers, studying political science. [2] He worked for DuPont in Parlin for five years and then came to New Brunswick in 1965 to work for the Middlesex County Economic Opportunities Corporation as the director of Citizenship Education. [2] This took place amid “great levels of activism” and the Civil Rights movement. Harris was involved with citizenship education and voter registration. [2]

One issue with which Harris became involved concerned the New Brunswick Housing Authority and the Memorial Homes. He described the public housing projects as “about a thousand people living on approximately an acre of land in four buildings, poorly maintained—designed for failure.” [3] Harris contended that building the towers on “a very important piece of real estate was just an interim step” to clear the area, which at one point had been mostly minority homeowners. [3] He noted that this occurred while “the urban renewal process was in full swing” and that the public housing was “sold as better housing, a better situation, slum clearance.” [3-4] Harris thought that this was part of the City’s future plan to “take back that very potentially valuable land along Route 18.” [4]

Harris explained how many of the design features of the buildings “failed” the residents; for example, there was only one elevator in each building and no laundry facilities. [5] The lack of essential amenities indicated to Harris that “this was a temporary—a transitional—stroke.” [5] Despite critics’ negative comments about the complex, Harris insisted that the residents were “some of the finest people, they were middle-class African Americans, upwardly striving, and many of them had very good social work, teacher-type jobs.” [5] However, he said that as the middle class left, the Memorial Homes developed a stigma. [5]

The Memorial Homes were eventually razed—Harris claims that the political “establishment” had a party on top of the Hyatt Hotel that day—and later replaced by

HOPE VI housing. [6] The new housing, “simple walk-ups,” proved to Harris that “the structure dictated the terms of the living conditions to the tenants.” [7]

Harris spoke about positive and negative aspects of Johnson & Johnson (J&J), mentioning that because J&J has been in New Brunswick since 1888, “it has had a tremendous positive impact, just that name, because it’s one of the most respected brands in American business history.” [8] Conversely, Harris thought that “the leadership at that time had insufficient grounding, insufficient awareness, insufficient commitment to democratic principles when they turned their face to the community in a democratic society.” [8] He dismissed the company as having a campaign to “assault” the Memorial Homes residents and of taking an autocratic approach to the community: “Here’s what we’re going to do now,” he imagined J&J thinking. [8-9] Harris agreed that the J&J business model worked and that the company was generous in its giving, but that the giving was “subtle in nuance.” He said that, “I couldn’t count my money in a place like this and look down the street at Eric B. Chandler and see the women and children in line, waiting for an appointment for well-baby services, having waited two or three months.” [9]

He noted that he served on the board of the New Brunswick Development Corporation (Devco), but as part of its physical-development mission, Devco wanted to “diminish the African American presence and the presence of poor people in the central business district.” [10] As part of this, Harris said, the welfare office was moved to How Lane, and the YMCA and the YWCA were removed from downtown. The loss of the YMCA meant the loss of a pool for local children, while the community lost the YWCA—“a core of women’s activism” that advocated for poor youth. “You don’t do that and argue that we had community people at the table,” he added. Harris acknowledged that “those were good decisions but there was no *quid pro quo*.” [10] He expressed the conflict between the needs of the community and redeveloping the central business district: “Grudgingly, I yield that point because it made places that are the arts, the business, more of a comprehensive area. It made sense not to put a swimming pool for poor kids right in the middle of that.” [10]

Part of his objection to the removal of the YMCA was that it was not replaced elsewhere. Harris said that “You cannot do that and continue to argue that New Brunswick Tomorrow (NBT) is taking care of the community.” [11] He was also annoyed that the new high school lacked certain amenities, such as an in-school healthcare center or a swimming pool: “Why is there no swimming pool at the most expensive high school in the history of the state? Why don’t these children have a swimming pool?” he asked.

About Anton Nelessen and his alternative proposal to the Hyatt Hotel plan, Harris recounted:

Dick Sellars—a big, handsome guy—was in charge of J&J. He knew the business. He was tough and he knew what had to be done for that great company. When he stepped across the street to be involved in the community, he was a fish out of water. Here’s Nelessen getting up to propose the alternative after Dick Sellars and his crew made their

presentation. And obviously the crowd was for Nelessen, and Dick Sellars said something—I could actually see him saying this right now, it hurt so bad. Dick Sellars said, “That’s a great plan,” to Nelessen, “but the only plan I have money for is this one.” [13]

Harris described the moment as very painful, adding sarcastically, “There was your community involvement.” [14]

He said that he did not stay on the board of Devco for long because he realized that “the meetings were really essentially designed to put the community input on what they had already essentially planned.” [14]

Harris was critical of plans for the current New Brunswick high school, built on the southern outskirts of the city. He said that the decision to build the school there, at some level, “had nothing to do with education”: The site needed environmental cleanup, and if it was approved for a high school the state would pay for the remediation. [15] Harris also had problems with the size of the school; he would prefer to have schools on a “smaller-scale density so that teachers and principals know every kid.” [15] He added that after touring the school, “I wanted to cry when I got back to my car, to see that expenditure and to be in a place that was so cold.” [15]

He spoke positively of the redeveloped Hiram Market, saying it reminded him of areas in the East Village and West Village of New York City. Still, he said, “We needed to pay probably a little more attention to how important [the history of the area] was in terms of the city’s economic development.” [16]

Harris also spoke of his respect for former mayor John A. Lynch, Jr., a political rival at times. He described Lynch as “a hell of a battler” and “a tough Irish kid. He would fight you to the end; he was a tremendous leader.” [17] He mentioned that they retained a correspondence while Lynch was incarcerated. “We might have fought like cats and dogs,” Harris said, “but we’re not going to forget you or kick you while you are down.” [17]

“I don’t think Rutgers was ever recognized or treated the way it should have been, because Rutgers is our central asset,” Harris said of the state university. [19] He said that Rutgers, like the hospitals, employs many local residents and added that the school “is the reason anybody really talks about New Brunswick.” [19] Harris suspected that the culture of Rutgers was at odds with the “old leaders, anti-intellectual folks.” [19] He conceded that Rutgers had a “kind of public ivy attitude” and was not that involved with New Brunswick either, although he thinks that a relationship has begun to develop more recently. [20] He used the downtown Rockoff dorms as a way to illustrate that adding a physical presence to the city can add an accompanying emotional presence. [21] Harris briefly touched on the hospitals, mostly about how they provide many jobs to local residents. [21]

When asked, in hindsight, what should have been done differently, he expressed his feelings that not enough attention was paid to the children and that there should have been greater dialogue between the education system and the healthcare system. [23-24] He thought that J&J—with its connection to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—should be able to push some of his proposals forward.

Harris said that John Heldrich is “a sweet guy who will really help you on any personal issue, but ideologically he’s always going to be a rock-solid conservative” and that he was not sufficiently sympathetic to community issues. [26]

Regarding the arts in New Brunswick, Harris thought that the State Theatre and other arts venues—while great economic assets to the city—should be used to educate children culturally and not just teach them to be “another type of consumer, now a consumer of the arts.” [27]

Harris ended his interview envisioning a visitor traveling on Route 18 and gazing at the New Brunswick skyline. “An observer, an untrained eye, is doing cartwheels looking at that—an enormous accomplishment, even if we restrict it just to the brick-and-mortar, an enormous accomplishment. And peeling back that layer, you see the unfinished business, maybe that’s left for us or the next generation. But the price was tremendous—a tremendous price.” [29]

KEY QUOTATIONS

[Quotations have been edited for grammar and alphabetized by topic]

Changes to the Central Business District

It diminished the African American presence and the presence of poor people in the central business district. You don’t move the welfare office out to How Lane, you don’t get rid of the YMCA, the YWCA; okay, you put in a bank and a theater. You don’t do that and argue that we had community people at the table—as if to say that they agreed with that. You could do those things, and at some level, it turns out that those were good decisions—but there was no quid pro quo. We’ll take that swimming pool from the Y, both pools, the YMCA (which is the George Street Playhouse now), and the YWCA, which was a core of women’s activism. That board, those women, were strong in their support on behalf of poor children. So you don’t take down two pools in the name of “it makes more sense” (and it did make more sense, in the end). Grudgingly, I yield that point because it made places that are the arts, the business, more of a comprehensive area. It made sense not to put a swimming pool for poor kids right in the middle of that. [10]

Cultural Hub

Coming out of the activism of the 1960s, I was living in South River, and like all of the towns around the Hub City, the center of African American culture was New Brunswick. It was a place where we could get our hair cut in a real barber shop and not someone's kitchen. The women found beauty salons, and there were great black churches. [1]

Devco Service (as Board Member)

I didn't stay there long. It was clear that the meetings were really designed to get community input on what they had already essentially planned. [14]

Hiram Market (Redeveloped)

Because it's so quiet, it reminds you of some of the areas in the East Village and West Village and other very quiet places in New York. I kind of love what they did with Hiram Market. Now, because it's just so soft, it's so comforting, it has such a good feel to it. You know, we're not developing something that says, "Hey, look at me." And I get a feeling that the people who live there kind of enjoy it. They know each other, and the several times I have been there and was invited for various things—they know their neighbors. So as to the history of Hiram Market, we needed to probably pay a little more attention to how important that was in terms of the city's economic development. But I would say that we got a pretty good result, given the forces that were against something more historic. [16]

Hospitals

The hospitals mean jobs to us, and we talk about healthcare and all of that. Their focus is kind of somewhere else in terms of that issue, but there are jobs there. I think they are the number one employer of local people, but not far from Rutgers. Rutgers is up there also. Rutgers essentially is ten-month jobs; the hospital is three shifts a day. [21]

John Heldrich

We've had a long relationship, a rocky relationship, since the 1960s. A sweet guy who will really help you on any personal issue, but ideologically he's always going to be a rock-solid conservative, which is okay if that meant fiscal policy and international relations. Okay, I could accept that. But you can't be rock solid in favor of continuing slavery, as a conservative.

I feel he was just such the critical person, and J&J always respects its leaders. And it tells you something about having resources, when you can give a guy a town to play with: "John, your thing is New Brunswick." What? That's what I would have said—"What?!" But he [would have] said, "Gee, just New Brunswick?" I'm sure that's what he said. So his lack of enlightenment on a lot of these issues, and his fear of the community-building process, led to a lot of problems. You're not going to find a stronger, more committed family man or anything like that. [26]

John A. Lynch, Jr.

A hell of a battler—I remember him playing either shortstop or second base, a tough Irish kid. He would fight you to the end and, you know, he was a tremendous leader. [17]

Johnson & Johnson (J&J)

The only long-term memory in this town is Johnson & Johnson, from 1888 forward, the only long-term memory. And I think it's had a tremendous positive impact, just that name, because it's one of the most respected brands in American business history. [8]

Memorial Homes

It was a very important piece of real estate, and some of us argued that that was just an interim step; the urban renewal process was in full swing, so they cleared that area, which was mostly homeowners, African Americans, whites, and some Puerto Ricans, because the other groups had not begun to come. [3]

Don't forget the party that I can just roughly call "The Establishment" had on top of the Hyatt Hotel on the day that Memorial Homes was imploded. [6]

Redeveloped Landscape

The physical development—again, let's go back and let's end as we began, coming north on Route 18 and looking at the skyline of New Brunswick. An observer, an untrained eye, is doing cartwheels looking at that, an enormous accomplishment, even if we just restrict it to the brick-and-mortar—an enormous accomplishment. And peeling back that layer, you see the unfinished business; maybe that's left for us or the next generation. But the price was tremendous—a tremendous price. [29]

Rutgers University

I don't think Rutgers was ever recognized or treated the way it should have been, because Rutgers is our central asset. The economic downturn hit us, but when you have a university on the level of Rutgers in your midst, jobs will continue for the local folks. It's like the way of the hospital. There are jobs for the indigenous population. Rutgers is the reason anybody really talks about New Brunswick. [19]

Transformation of Downtown New Brunswick

So the long road from Memorial Homes to what we have now—one of the most spectacular sites driving south on George Street, or coming up New Street—you come face to face with the Heldrich Hotel. It will knock you down. It will knock you over when you lack the information as to what it cost us in a moral sense to get to that place. [12]