

SOUL CITY, NORTH CAROLINA: BLACK POWER, UTOPIA, AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN DREAM

by Christopher Strain *

Imagine,
A city without prejudice.
A city without poverty.
A city without slums.
A city tailor-made for industry.
A city with a booming economy.
A brand new shining city.
With open spaces. Trees and grass. Rolling hills. Soft winds.
Fresh air. Clear skies. Where stars and moon are visible. Clean
water. Lakes. Creeks. Ponds. Springtime weather. Hardly any
snow. Yet distant mountains. Ample schools, hospitals, parking,
recreation. Well built, stylish housing. A master plan. But not
sterile and cold. For a city conceived with just an eye for bricks
and mortar is a city without a soul. Call the bold alternative
SOUL CITY.

—Excerpt from an undated promotional brochure,
Soul City: The Bold Alternative,
published by The Soul City Company

On 13 January 1969, in the office of the Secretary of Agriculture in Washington, DC, Floyd McKissick announced his intention to build a city in Warren County, North Carolina. Soul City was to be a multiracial, multicultural development for underprivileged and disadvantaged persons which newspapermen quickly referred to as a "black-built" town. As McKissick, former national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) explained, "White men have built other cities. We want this city to reflect the many cultures, the many nations that exist in American society. . . . Soul City will be an attempt to move into the future, a future where black people welcome white people as equals."¹ Area newspapers told the tale, reflecting the rise and fall of McKissick's idea. Early headlines during the period 1969–1973 used words such as "hopeful," "dream," and "praiseworthy" to describe the project, but headlines after 1975 used adjectives, such as "tangled" and

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"insurmountable," to convey the town's problems. The headiness of Soul City's early years gave way to critics, circling like buzzards in the air of optimism that enveloped the experimental town. When Soul City's pioneers stumbled and fell, political heavies, such as North Carolina Representative L. H. Fountain and Senator Jesse Helms, were ready to swoop in and pick them apart, claiming that the project was doomed from the start. McKissick was a man of relentless vision, but forces would conspire to prevent that vision from becoming the harmonious community he imagined.

He sought to create a model community. McKissick's version of the American dream incorporated a communitarian vision, far different from the traditional American pursuit of individual success and material gain. "Soul City is going to be. . . a city, [a] place of truth which ought to have a high tower with a beacon of light to let the world know it's there and a place where man can develop himself to what he wants to be."² This echo of John Winthrop's "City upon a Hill" was set not in 17th century Massachusetts, but in the piedmont region of 20th century North Carolina. It was utopian in the sense that it was visionary: as the city took shape, rising from the Carolina mud, it carried with it all of the tensions and fears of the nation's torrid racial past—even as it set the stage for a brighter future. Born out of the tumult and hope of the 1960s, Soul City prefigured the "New Urbanist" trend of the 1980s and 1990s; furthermore, it represented the first sustainable black community built from the ground up in the 20th century with assistance from the federal government. It was unique among 20th century alternative communities with regard to its idealistic initiative, its detailed planning, its massive funding, and its ultimate failure. The scope of Soul City as a 1970s-era utopia is without parallel, and the story of how McKissick's dream city materialized—and failed to materialize—represents a dramatic combination of Black Power and utopian design, set against the backdrop of African Americans' quest for their version of the American dream.

THE IDEA: "ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE"

Floyd B. McKissick led a life of activism. Born on 9 March 1922 in Asheville, North Carolina, McKissick was attending Morehouse College in 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and he promptly quit school and enlisted in the U.S. Army. Upon returning from Europe, he completed his studies at North Carolina Central University, and in 1951 became the first black man to attend the University of North Carolina Law School. An accomplished attorney, McKissick led the fight to eliminate the trespass statutes used to thwart nonviolent direct-action campaigns by civil rights activists. In 1963 he was elected National Chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and in 1966 he succeeded James Farmer as National Director, serving two years. His book *Three-Fifths of a Man*, published in 1969, was one of the most powerful works to come out of the civil rights era. The book angrily captured the disillusionment following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, and in it McKissick boldly called for socialistic reform and biracial unity in the United States at the same time as he called for black empowerment.³

Soul City was as much a city-sized projection of McKissick's persona and his beliefs as it was a new business proposition. Developed by Floyd B. McKissick Enterprises, Incorporated, Soul City would be located on a 5,180-acre site, fifty miles north of the Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill area, in a rural, economically depressed part of the

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piedmont. Ads claimed that it would be "the only freestanding [not associated with an existing city] new town in the making," as well as "the largest and most innovative project ever undertaken by a minority-owned developer."⁴ The city was intended not only to stem the migration of rural blacks to the city, but also to entice urban residents back to the countryside from the slums of U.S. cities. It offered an alternative to urban social miseries.

McKissick found the answer to the problems of urban America in black economic empowerment—specifically, in the assumptions and concepts in Black Power ideology. Essential in helping African Americans to overcome their depressed political and economic situation in white-dominated society, Black Power advocates called for the empowerment of African Americans. For many, it was a somewhat confusing concept; expressions of Black Power ranged from nascent ideologies of cultural nationalism to violent commitment to revolution. The concept confused and frightened many white Americans, wary of the aggressive undertones in the rhetoric of Black Power, but for most African Americans, the appeal of Black Power lay in its excitement and energy. Stokely Carmichael, who wrote one of the definitive explanations of Black Power in the late 1960s, advised that the average African American "wanted to build something of his own, something that he builds with his own hands. And that is *not* anti-white. When you build your own house, it doesn't mean you tear down the house across the street."⁵ McKissick historicized this argument when he described CORE's shift in 1966. "Emphasis was shifted from the more glamorous tactic of nonviolent, direct-action demonstrations to the more tedious, solid tactic of community organizing," he explained in *Three-Fifths of a Man*. "Black people . . . instinctively knew that Black Power was not racist but necessary, not anti-white but pro-Black."⁶ A key tenet of Black Power, as McKissick understood it, was black economic development. "Economic power is the first prerequisite for political power," he wrote. "Unless the Black man attains economic independence, any 'political independence' will be an illusion. White intimidation and control, especially in the ghettos and the rural South, will continue as long as the Blacks are economically dependent."⁷

The idea for Soul City grew slowly. As a soldier overseas, McKissick had seen Europeans rebuilding their war-torn cities. Seeing the architects and engineers and city planners working in conjunction with the U. S. Army and "thinking in terms of people," it dawned on him "how few Black people were actually involved in new construction trades or new city planning or regional planning and construction [in the United States]."⁸ The massive effort to rebuild Europe also impressed upon McKissick the importance of proper planning coupled with governmental aid. Upon returning from Europe, he discussed the idea of an alternative city with one of his law professors, Dan Pollit. McKissick deferred his dream of creating a city until resigning from the directorship of CORE, but on 23 August 1968, he incorporated McKissick Enterprises to "develop business ideas and to form additional enterprises by corporate or other forms of business structures in the building of a Black economy."⁹

According to press releases, organizations contributing to the project also included the Soul City Company, general partners in the development; the Soul City Foundation, Inc., responsible for "social planning" for the new community; HealthCo, Inc., a "health care delivery system" designed to serve both the inhabitants of the existing residents of Warren County and the new residents of Soul City; the Warren Regional Planning Corporation, developing minority business opportunities in the area; and the Soul City Investment

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Corporation, designed to carry out investment ventures in the development, and consisting of both existing residents of Warren County and staff members. The Soul City Sanitary District, "the first unit of local government at Soul City," was empowered to build and operate water and public health facilities, while levying taxes and issuing bonds to support these utilities; and the Soul City Utilities Company, a public corporation, was set up to construct the sewage facilities.¹⁰

Funding for Soul City was to come from private sources and banking interests for land acquisition and preliminary staffing, and contracts from the federal government for specific projects. In addition, bonds, issued under a \$14 million Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guarantee, were made possible under Title VII of the Urban Growth and New Communities Act of 1968 (as amended in 1970); and certified the "inherent economic feasibility of the project." Soul City, according to its planners, was "not a begging proposition." It could, and would, "pay for itself."¹¹

At the end of its development period, estimated to be between twenty and thirty years (McKissick told one investor that Soul City would be completed "by the end of this century"), the city would have a population of 50,000 people, supported by 24,200 "basic and dependent" jobs. It would have eight "residential clusters (villages)," each with its own "Activity Center," providing social services and community facilities, and each with its own elementary school. Additionally, Soul City would have an educational park, which would offer "academic, skill development, and adult educational programs" for all individuals "above elementary level." The city would boast a man-made lake, parks, and recreational facilities which would comprise one-third of the total development acreage. It would have a plaza, serving the whole community with shopping services, "municipal structures," and recreational and cultural facilities, as well as a tourist complex with hotel/motel facilities, office space, meeting rooms, and—anticipating the flood of people who would want to come and visit—souvenir and gift shops. The centerpiece of this plan was to be an "Afro-American trade center," which would serve "as a link to African culture and industry." Finally, Soul City would have an industrial park, separate from the residential areas.¹²

There were some precedents, and those few offered hope. Floyd McKissick was heir to a long tradition of black town development. In the 19th century many free blacks organized communities where they could receive vocational and liberal-arts training, serve apprenticeships, support themselves, and become self-reliant. Before the Civil War there was Brooklyn, Illinois, founded by Free Frank; communities such as Nashoba, Tennessee, and the Port Royal Experiment on South Carolina's Sea Islands initially flourished, but ultimately proved unsustainable.¹³ After Reconstruction, black "exodusters" migrated to Kansas, where they settled. Towns such as Nicodemus, Kansas; Mound Bayou, Mississippi; Boley, Oklahoma; and Promiseland, South Carolina followed.¹⁴ In the mid-20th century black separatists dreamed of repatriated lands within the United States in which African Americans could stake their claim. Leaders of the Detroit-based Republic of New Africa (RNA) hoped to "liberate" territory in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana to create a separate black state.¹⁵ However, such plans were grounded more in theory than in reality: government-subsidized start-up payments of land and \$400 billion in reparations were not forthcoming. More instructive from McKissick's point of view was the incredibly successful Columbia, Maryland, begun in 1963. It quickly became a model in city planning. Built from the ground up, Columbia aimed to avoid urban

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sprawl through "mixed-use zoning" in which residential and recreational areas balance the commercial and industrial development in what planners hoped would be a successful alternative to hodgepodge growth. The first residents moved into Columbia in 1967, and over the course of the next decade, the new city grew and thrived.¹⁶ Blending the nationalist consciousness of 19th century black communal experiments with the thoughtful planning of Columbia, the planners of Soul City aimed to work within the system to achieve what the RNA could not achieve outside the system: a sustainable black community, executed within a traditional capitalist framework. McKissick chose Warren County as the site for his own experiment in city building.

THE PLACE: WARREN COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

Named after a Massachusetts doctor who died fighting for American independence at Bunker Hill, Warren County is contiguous with the North Carolina-Virginia border, atop the crazy-quilt pattern of North Carolina's northeastern counties. In 1969, when McKissick conceptualized Soul City, the county was about two-thirds African American and one-third white, with a few resilient individuals of Native American descent.¹⁷ The mixed ethnic and demographic makeup of the county favored an endeavor like Soul City. Now, as then, the county has an air of past grandeur. Many small farms dot the area where tobacco once ruled. Second-growth oaks and pines flourish where ancient hardwoods once stood. Jack-in-the-pulpit, dogtooth violets, and Turk's cap lilies bloom early in the spring season of wildflowers; St. John's wort, once a charm against evil spirits, also grows there. Place names, such as Old Bethlehem, Dewberry, Greenback, and Licksillet, celebrate the county's rustic heritage. The grand Jones Spring Hotel, where politicians, planters, and gamblers thronged in the mid-19th century, stands deserted and dilapidated. Robert E. Lee's daughter lies buried in a cemetery there, and local whites seemed to take pride in the county's Confederate heritage: a billboard at the county line welcomed visitors to "Klan Country."¹⁸

McKissick's choice of Warren County was strategic: it was predominantly black, rural, and poor. In 1969, the per capita income in Warren County was \$1,638, with 6,500 people out of a total population of 15,810 living "below low income level." At \$3,465, the median *family* income for black families was less than the national *per capita* income of \$3,705.¹⁹ Farming was less viable than it once was. As Bernard Thompson, the white administrator of the nonprofit Soul City Foundation, put it, "the tractor has done away with the mule, and the cotton pickers [machines] have done away with the cotton pickers [laborers]."²⁰ Children who grew up in Warren County were leaving it in search of opportunity in Richmond, Norfolk, Washington, DC, New York City, Atlanta, Nashville, and Louisville; and they left behind a demographic group that was older and poorer. It was an area ripe for expanding industries. Pulpwood manufacturing, which traditionally required little labor while draining an area's natural resources, employed the largest number of industrial workers. People in Warren County needed work, and with a dropout rate of 44.7 percent, the region ranked behind the state average in all areas of educational attainment.²¹

There were other reasons the area was attractive for industrial development. There was plenty of water from the Kerr Reservoir only a few miles to the north, with

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groundwater to support a sizable city. Interstate Highway 85 was one mile to the west of the proposed site, Interstate-95 was fifteen miles to the east, and a major railroad, the Seaboard Coastline Railroad, cut through the property. It was near the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area, and the local airport. Close to the Research Triangle Park, Soul City would enjoy technical support from the research and development facilities associated with that area.

Local officials were surprised at the announcement of Soul City's coming to their area. W. A. Miles, mayor of Warrenton, said the news came as a "complete surprise"; Frank W. Reams, executive director of the County Industrial Development Commission, heard of the plan "on the radio."²² While Soul City exemplified Black Power in many ways, McKissick stressed in January 1970 that the community would be neither segregated nor separatist. "How do we know integration won't work?" he asked. "No one has really tried it yet. Soul City will enable blacks and whites to come together as equals."²³ Whether McKissick described Soul City as a black venture or a multiracial one often depended on his audience.

Local whites initially balked at the idea. The seller of the land received so many threatening phone calls in the days after the sale that he had to leave town for a brief "cooling-off" period.²⁴ The notion of Soul City threatened many local whites, troubled by two primary aspects of the would-be community. First, it was a "utopian experiment" in a land characteristically hostile to such ideals. In the early and mid-1970s, conservative white southerners were not particularly receptive to the kind of "new-fangled thinking" reflected in Soul City's planning; the South had never been a region receptive to progressive reforms or new social ideas. Slow, orderly change, appreciative of tradition and conservative social values, had always ruled the day in North Carolina and other southern states. Even though white North Carolinians were more progressive than many of their southern neighbors, anything outside the norm was still often met with suspicion if not open hostility, and Soul City—a multiracial, planned community in the heart of "Klan Country"—was certainly outside the norm. Second, it was a black enterprise, conceptualized and engineered by African Americans. Not unlike other white southerners, North Carolinians living in the piedmont region sometimes interpreted such initiative by their black brethren not as healthfully ambitious, but as dangerously "uppity." However, this intransigence seemed to soften over time, and settled into a kind of watch-and-wait attitude. "This could either be the worst thing that has happened, or the best, a real shot in the arm," said Amos L. Capps, chairman of the Warren County Commission.²⁵

McKissick recognized industry as the essential ingredient in Soul City's success. "We need more industry in new towns," he declared. "Soul City's economic base must be oriented entirely to manufacturing." Soul City would raise the standard of living for the residents of Warren County, who would stay at home rather than migrating in search of work, "that is, if industry really gets involved to the benefit of the people, the new community and, of course, industry itself."²⁶ Soultech I, the city's first industrial complex, would be one of the first four physical constructions at Soul City.²⁷

PLANNING AND BUILDING

Early in 1973, McKissick moved from his comfortable home in New York into a trailer on the edge of a cornfield, on the site of what would become Soul City, within view of an

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antebellum mansion, a barn, and several ramshackle outhouses.²⁸ McKissick was behind his anticipated timetable. "Everything requires negotiation," he admitted that summer. "Even industry that's interested in a site has to send in a team and you have to go back and prepare a report. But we're very, very close now . . ."²⁹ Undeniably, progress was being made. Officials from the Economic Development Administration within the U. S. Department of Commerce, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the nearby towns of Henderson and Oxford all worked together with Soul City's planners to develop a \$9 million regional water system that would pipe water through twenty miles of lines to all three towns. Planners were exploring innovative ideas, including recreational facilities such as the 160-acre "Afro Park" and they also considered—three years *before* the establishment of Habitat for Humanity—"sweat equity" home financing, in which the future owner would provide his or her own labor to help limit construction costs.³⁰ Further development depended on the successful sale of a \$14 million bond issue by the Soul City developers, but in the interim, the community grew slowly: the inaugural issue of the *Soul City News* in late summer of 1973 included a photo of puppies playing, with the caption, "Population Increases to 33."³¹

A number of people genuinely wanted Soul City to succeed. Governor James E. Holhouser consistently supported the venture. He indicated his strong support for the new community in a letter to Floyd Hyde, Undersecretary of the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), dated 16 April 1973. "We are moving to get this project underway," he wrote, "as we deem [it] innovative, creative, and important to the economic development of our region." Holhouser was giving more than lip service to Soul City, since North Carolina state officials had committed \$1.7 million to the venture. To Holhouser, Soul City represented "one of the few positive projects in the nation today seeking to bring all of our people together" in an organized effort to "solve the problems which they face as well as those problems which face the nation as a whole."³² In endorsing the new town, he vaguely referred to the problems of racism, poverty, and urban violence that plagued the nation, and that Soul City might help to ameliorate.

Speaking at the city's official groundbreaking ceremony on 9 November 1973, Gov. Holhouser declared it "a moment of historic proportions" during which "the eyes of the nation" were on Soul City and its "pioneers." He and the others present "had come to this pleasant site to break ground for the first building of a brand new city," but he cautioned, Soul City was "far more than just another city." It was nothing short of "a tribute to man's ability to dream new dreams and to put those dreams to work."

This land we stand on today was once the site of a plantation that depended on the labor of slaves. It is significant of how far we have come that Soul City is being built here as a "freestanding" community with its own industrial base to be developed by black-controlled corporations, but to be open to people of all races.

Perhaps some of the men and women who will make their homes, who will build their lives in Soul City will be descendants of some of the very men and women who toiled on the old Satterwhite plantation. Many of Soul City's citizens are certain to feel a spiritual kinship with those slaves.

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Holhouser concluded his speech by saying, "Let Soul City be a lesson for all of us that man can go as far as his dreams take him, so long as he is willing to work to make those dreams come true."³³

A few months later, in January 1974, Soul City consisted of a skein of muddy roads, a health service, and a jumble of white mobile homes that housed forty of the fifty full-time staff, including architects, planners, health and social workers, financial experts, and educational and job-training personnel. It also included a Head Start and daycare center, converted from the "Big House," as the old Satterwhite plantation house was called. Evidence of progress was abundant. The old billboard welcoming visitors to "Klan Country" still remained, but new state highway signs announced Soul City's presence. Bulldozers and trucks were cutting and paving roads, workers were laying water and sewer lines, and construction had begun on Soultech I, a huge concrete, steel, and gray-glass structure encompassing 40,000 square feet of manufacturing space and 12,000 square feet of office space. Most of Soul City's tangible progress was in its exhaustive planning with shelves of statistical projections, volumes of fund-raising materials, mountains of drafts and architectural renderings. The ratio of backlogged job applicants was about 60/40, black to white, reflecting a truly biracial mix.³⁴ Announcing the Soul City Company's completed sale of \$5 million of bonds on Wall Street, McKissick declared on 19 March 1974, that Soul City "is on its way."³⁵ And it was.

People started arriving in 1974. Janice Crump, her husband, and their three children left a comfortable life in Atlanta to move into a trailer at Soul City that year. She was a Delta Airlines reservationist; her husband, a homebuilder. "We were real pioneers," she recalled five years later. They had come because they saw "more than the fields and the dirt roads and the mud." They saw "a promise of what it could be." Other early arrivals came from Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, and New York City, and many worked on the Soul City Company staff.³⁶ The promise of a better life, promoted through brochures and pamphlets, drew them.

Street names reflected the racial pride and optimism of the new venture. The main street of Soul City was named Opportunity Boulevard. Some street names recalled local trees and birds, but many byways, most of which were never cut or paved, indicated a preference for heroes of African American history: Nat Turner Street, Charles Howard Road, John Brown Drive, Harpers Ferry Lane, Christopher Attucks Trail, Thomas Payne Pathway, Toussaint L'Overture Avenue, Henry Highland Garnet Boulevard, Frederick Douglass Street, David Walker Road, Dred Scott Drive, Harriet Tubman Lane, George White Avenue, and Sojourner Truth Trail.³⁷

Various celebrities contributed to the cause. McKissick sent a letter to Muhammad Ali, heavyweight boxing champion of the world, to solicit Ali's participation as an investor in Soul City.³⁸ In a letter signed "Country Preacher," the Reverend Jesse Jackson of Operation PUSH pledged his support to Soul City, which, he was certain, would "become a reality."³⁹ A promotional brochure assured potential residents that Soul City was "the first city in the world that's built around your family"; it was a city designed "to fit into people's plans," not a city in which people's plans must be fit. The close proximity of industry and residential areas ensured that "you'll spend time enjoying yourself instead of commuting"; living and working in Soul City would "add an hour to your life." Home prices reasonably ranged from \$25,000 to \$70,000, with townhouses starting at \$20,000. Veterans

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Administration, Federal Housing Administration, and conventional financing would ease home ownership. Water, sewer, power, and telephone lines were in place, underground, "where they won't be an eyesore." Schools, parks, medical and dental care—all were at hand. "You'll find almost everything you could ask for in Soul City," the brochure promised. "And anything you won't find right here, isn't far away."⁴⁰

Another brochure proclaimed Soul City "The Bold Alternative." It would "provide economic opportunities for thousands of people who have been denied them in the past." The new town, "truly representative of the innovative spirit which built America," would anchor "an open society in which all people regardless of race, color, or economic status will not only be welcome but also find opportunities for self-development and freedom." The brochure went on to detail the concept, the industrial opportunity, the strategic location, the economic resources, and the quality of life at Soul City, "the responsive community." Those who would participate "stand now at the threshold of a bold new venture in community development—of mission high," the brochure announced, inviting brave men and women to come. Together, the citizens of Soul City "will meet the challenge of America."⁴¹ It sounded almost too good to be true.

McKissick yoked savvy public-relations work with effective fund-raising, which stemmed from his unlikely political affiliations. His political about-face in the early 1970s had puzzled his friends and old civil rights allies. In 1970 he had called President Richard M. Nixon "one of the nation's leading proponents of law and order—fascist style"; two years later he contributed to the Nixon campaign, raised funds for his reelection, headed a national committee to persuade African Americans to vote for Nixon, and served on the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP's) Black Executives Advisory Committee.⁴² McKissick's actions seemed almost schizophrenic to those who demonized Nixon for his unsympathetic view of civil rights activism, but evidently McKissick had his reasons. "I don't want anyone to feel he has my vote in his hip pocket," he explained. "I believe if I go to one party and can't establish what I want, then I have the freedom to go to the other party."⁴³ There was no Republican party organized in Warren County, so it provided a convenient vehicle to challenge white Democrats at local township and county commission meetings, and the party in control in Washington also had the power to appoint census takers and poll watchers, key positions in a new, developing community.

His behavior seemed more understandable when the rewards of his new political alliance began to pay off. McKissick's support of Nixon in turn gained McKissick the support of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which provided Soul City with a \$14 million federal bond to back the project's initial development phases in the summer of 1972.⁴⁴ Backing Nixon also fit with McKissick's philosophical notion that economics is the basis of the American political system. Black critics charged him with allying himself too closely with the white political structure, but he defended his actions by claiming "if blacks are ever to be liberated, they must adopt a philosophy of sophistication, competence, and strategy."⁴⁵ Whether McKissick "sold out" or not was debatable, but if he did, he certainly held out for the highest bidder. "He has learned where the money is and he's going out and getting it," one reporter noted in June 1973. "Skeptics there unquestionably are," he added, "but with the kind of money McKissick has corralled so far, they are keeping their skepticism to themselves at the moment."⁴⁶ The HUD bond breathed

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life into the project, and propelled the town from the drawing boards and architectural renderings into reality.

PROBLEMS: "A FANTASTIC DREAM?"

McKissick's swing to the political right, however, could not win him certain alliances. The animosity between him and Senator Jesse Helms was profound, despite the former's attempts at reconciliation. McKissick congratulated Helms on his reelection in a telegram sent 10 November 1972. "In spite of the fact, no two men think alike, there are many common things that we should work together on, and many common things we should work together for," he wrote.⁴⁷ Helms responded,

In fairness to you, I feel I should make clear that I do not favor the expenditure of taxpayers' funds on the project known as "Soul City." Moreover, at the appropriate time, I intend to request a careful independent examination of expenditures to date, in order that all citizens may have complete facts on which to base their judgment of this type of federal spending of their tax money.⁴⁸

McKissick, hoping for a "fruitful exchange," persistently responded by sending Helms data and brochures pertaining to Soul City, but correspondence between the two men became coldly professional after this first frank exchange.⁴⁹ Through 1975 McKissick continued to try to convert Helms to the cause, and Helms continued to refuse to visit, having decided long before that the scheme was too expensive. McKissick even visited Helms's office in Washington, DC, on 19 December 1974, but congressional aides told him the Senator was unavailable.⁵⁰

By spring of 1975, more than \$5 million in federal funds had been spent on Soul City, but there were still few visible signs of success: no shops, no homes, and no industry. Premature rumors of Soul City's demise circulated, particularly in Raleigh's *News and Observer*; Senator Helms and Representative Fountain, smelling blood, closed in for the kill. The two politicians called for investigations, and the federally-funded health clinic at Soul City, HealthCo, became a lightning rod for controversy.⁵¹ Critics charged that the clinic was "a two-house trailer enterprise in a non-populated city," staffed by workers drawing "unrealistic (i.e., exorbitant)" salaries. Taxpayers' dollars "were going down the clinic drain" in Soul City.⁵² The clinic offered a focal point for Helms's and others' faultfinding.

At least four audits, including one by the General Accounting Office that halted all operations at Soul City for eighteen months, were ordered by congressional critics and doubters, however, all gave the project a clean financial bill of health.⁵³ But the audits signaled trouble to the media and the public, and over the next few years, the press chronicled a slow downward spiral as Soul City failed to materialize. McKissick resented the criticism when it became personal. One particularly damning article in the *Wall Street Journal* accused him of leading an extravagant lifestyle, symbolized by his large home.⁵⁴ "Why should anyone care how I spend my own money?" he angrily retorted. "That big house is partly to create land values . . . partly to put up our important visitors. We don't have no hotel here." Criticized for naming the Magnolia-Ernest Recreational Complex pool after his parents, he replied, "Who the hell else should I name it after?"⁵⁵ Suggestions of nepotism and

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financial mismanagement took their toll. No one at Soul City spoke ill of McKissick, and even the report of a HUD task force, appointed in February 1979, which led to federal withdrawal from the project, contained no criticism of him. The report stated that Soul City's apparent failure "in no way reflects adversely on the capabilities of the developer."⁵⁶ After the audits, however, news reports on Soul City began to highlight the enterprise's problems more than its achievements.

Soul City's lengthy demise paralleled its lengthy planning. Two factors marked the beginning of the end for Soul City and ironically, both came at the height of the town's success. When it became apparent that Soul City was more than just a pipe dream, and that it was in fact in the process of becoming a reality, and when it became apparent that big money was involved, critics and political enemies became much more serious about challenging the enterprise. Fountain and Helms represented elements within a network of state politicians hostile to the project and interested in pleasing their constituents by undercutting the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement as it branched into new arenas. Furthermore, the tension between state politicians, such as Fountain and Helms, and HUD, a federal agency, reflected the ongoing conflict over states' rights in the South. In addition, the HUD financing, while guaranteeing the amount of the bond issue in case of default on the part of the issuee, unintentionally served as a kind of license to fail. By providing a built-in financial bailout for investors, HUD may have dulled the hunger and raw ambition that had made Soul City successful up to that point. McKissick had to counter the perception that he benefited from governmental handouts. "Nobody is giving Soul City any 5 million," stressed McKissick. "All HUD is saying is that if we go broke, they'll guarantee our bond obligations to the investors, and I can guarantee to you that we're not going to go broke." He added, "I'm under such a tight contract with HUD that they won't even let me die for [another] thirty years."⁵⁷

Figuratively speaking, however, HUD officials did let McKissick die when it announced in 1979 that there would be no more money for Soul City by opting to discontinue the new town as a Title VII development. The board of the New Community Development Corporation, an arm of HUD, voted on 28 June 1979, to phase out Soul City by acquiring the project's assets from the Soul City Corporation.⁵⁸ "It's like cutting off a man's hand and then condemning him because he can't pick up anything," McKissick complained.⁵⁹ "People have invested their lives in this place, much more than their money," McKissick said. "That's what just kills me . . . we just can't let it die."⁶⁰ *Newsweek* declared in 1979 that the project was "far short of its goal" and "may be in danger of collapse."⁶¹ An editorial in a local newspaper called the venture "little more than a fantastic dream" and "an outstanding example of government waste of public funds."⁶²

The North Carolina Black Leadership Caucus, declaring "it would be a travesty of justice and a waste of human talent, ingenuity, and public resources to abort the project at this stage in its development," coordinated a "Save Soul City" campaign that petitioned President Jimmy Carter with over 1,500 signatures of support, but negative press continued to keep potential investors away.⁶³ Perdue, Inc., one of the nation's largest poultry companies, announced in 1979 that it would build a 500-acre poultry operation in Warren County; over twenty years later, that business was still in operation, but it was too little too late for Soul City.⁶⁴ By the 1980s, Soul City was dead to all but those living there. Residents at Soul City never conceded defeat. One woman challenged a newspaper article

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that declared Soul City had "all but faded away" by the late 1980s. "Your reporter should have investigated more thoroughly before conveying her conclusions about Soul City in the article of June 26," Elvira J. Kirkland wrote in the *Raleigh News and Observer* on 16 July 1988. "Can a community that has acquired so many assets be fading away?" she asked, going on to cite the community's health center, volunteer fire station, preschool, recreational facilities, senior citizens' development, and other achievements.⁶⁵

SOUL CITY: AN ASSESSMENT

In the early 1970s an environmental impact statement prepared by HUD estimated that about 18,000 jobs and 14,750 households would be created in Soul City over the last three decades of the 20th century. HUD predicted a city of 44,000 by the year 2005.⁶⁶ It was not to pass: unofficial census data showed 80 black residents and 15 white residents in 1977, 105 black and 15 white in 1979, and in the 1980s and 1990s, even these numbers dwindled.⁶⁷ There are countless reasons why Soul City did not succeed in the way that Floyd McKissick envisioned. Soul City never landed a major industry. Its major benefactor, the federal government, wavered in its financial support, and the economic recessions of the 1970s did not help the venture.

Ultimately, Soul City may have failed because it was a one-man show. As one researcher theorized, perhaps too few people shared McKissick's vision of making Soul City succeed.⁶⁸ It was, as one reporter called it, a "magnificent obsession."⁶⁹ But this theory is undermined when one considers that there were *many* people who shared McKissick's dream: their faces beam back from the pages of the newsletter *The Soul City Sounder*, which documented their own hard work in making the community prosper.

Likewise, it would be overly simplistic to argue that Soul City, like countless other black ventures, fell prey to the calculated efforts of official and unofficial forces hostile to its success, though these efforts did occur. Senator Jesse Helms, in particular, hindered McKissick's efforts, and supporters of Soul City recognized this fierce opposition. Emsar Bradford, Jr., a CPA in New York, wrote a letter of encouragement to McKissick in 1975, and he aptly noted, "I am quite certain a black [man] in control and command of such a large endeavor (millions of dollars) is too *much power* [for white officials]." Bradford added, "Fight them all the way."⁷⁰ An anonymous "white friend" sent McKissick a note scrawled on a scrap of newspaper that lambasted "Helms and the rich bastards [who] are trying to make it hard for you."⁷¹ In 1979, McKissick himself mused, "I wonder what we really could have accomplished had I the ongoing assistance of Senator [Robert] Morgan, Senator Helms, and Representative Fountain."⁷²

Certainly, racial prejudice may have been part of the calculus that made Soul City fail, but it was not the main factor. Helms cannot shoulder the burden (or bask in the accomplishment) of single-handedly foiling Soul City. It cannot be overlooked that the inability to attract industry severely hurt the venture. Whether this ineffectualness stemmed from McKissick's powerful enemies, from his own poor business judgment, or from premature termination of the project by the federal government is unclear; most likely, it was a combination of these factors.

Clearly, it seems a fatal flaw in McKissick's plan to have assumed the success of a city built in a rural setting without first finding an industry to support jobs for the residents. In

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this sense, the location of Soul City affected its outcome. It was located in an impoverished county in a southern state long controlled by rural elites. The proximity to Research Triangle Park, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, may have looked good in the brochures, but there were few connections between these two worlds, geographic proximity notwithstanding. For the vast majority of residents in Warren County, the centers of research, development, and higher learning offered little, and they simply needed non-agricultural jobs to replace what their parents and grandparents had done, which was sharecropping. In other words, Warren County may have been a poor choice, and locating Soul City there made its development as an industrially based city of 50,000 people an uphill struggle under the best of circumstance, especially since the developers had no commitments from any large manufacturing interests. Furthermore, Warren County held little allure for the young black professionals who might have been attracted to the promise of Soul City. Had Soul City been placed closer to Durham and Raleigh, it might have attracted more interest not only from these individuals, but also from manufacturers, but putting Soul City closer to major cities would have made land acquisition much more difficult and expensive.

If all parties involved agreed that it would take two to three decades to develop this project, then why did the federal government withdraw funding after only seven years? In the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter's national urban policy sought economic development through grants, loan guarantees, and interest subsidies available to private firms. At the time of the withdrawal, the Carter administration was moving toward the establishment of an urban policy based on self-help, rather than extensive federal financial support. This policy would have been carried out by the National Development Bank, had Congress approved its creation as proposed in 1978. The development of Soul City seems to have fit the Carter administration's urban policy, however, the washout of the National Development Bank may have affected Soul City's sustainability.⁷³ In addition, the Carter administration was looking for tangible results, and concrete measures of progress that were lacking in Soul City in 1979.

Did hubris play a role? That is, did McKissick lay the *national* groundwork for this project while neglecting the *local* base, by forgetting to develop the necessary connections with government officials in Oxford, Henderson, and Warren County? In short, was Soul City a viable plan, blocked by political forces aligned against it, or is it the story of a dreamer who lacked the business and political skills to make his vision real? The questions related to Soul City's demise merit further investigation. As reported by the media, the shortcomings of Soul City often eclipsed its successes largely because those successes fell short of the very high expectations that everyone—believers, skeptics, and especially Floyd McKissick himself—had for the plan. McKissick viewed Soul City as a venture in racial advancement shaped by Black Power and the new drive for black economic self-determination. "This is the civil rights movement of the 1970s," declared McKissick.⁷⁴ He simultaneously, and perhaps contradictorily, viewed Soul City as a necessary experiment in biracial community. He was fond of quoting bluesman Huddie Ledbetter, better known as "Leadbelly," who sang:

We're in the same boat brother,
We're in the same boat brother,

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And if you shake one end, you gonna rock the other
It's the same boat brother.⁷⁵

An idealist, McKissick knew it took cooperation across racial lines to build a city. He wore the moniker of "dreamer" proudly, knowing that it took big dreams to make a place such as Soul City work.

The story of the Civil Rights Movement often lies in small victories that had huge meaning: ordering a sandwich at a lunch counter, checking out a book from the local library, taking a swim at the municipal pool. In the early 1960s, the drama of this social movement lay in the conflict and confrontation inherent in achieving these small victories. But as activists accomplished their goals, and as the movement grew beyond the realm of desegregation and voting rights, it became apparent that American democracy and society required even deeper reform to address its racial inequalities. To realize fully the promise of the Civil Rights Movement and achieve Black Power objectives, black economic empowerment needed to accompany social and political equality; without the former, the latter carried little meaning. To McKissick and others, new black communities could serve as the vehicle for this empowerment by enhancing group identity and serving black political and economic objectives. Indeed, community-building and housing were key links in this process; as one city planner noted in 1970, "because of the worn and deteriorated conditions of the central urban environment and a resulting proliferation of physical rebuilding schemes, a 'strategy on housing' may well govern all other strategies among and affecting black people as they move to accomplish other more definable objectives." Accordingly, Soul City represented a new civil rights and Civil Rights-Black Power Movement for the 1970s; and this was the case in the sense that black citizens were collectively and aggressively creating a space to realize their own version of the American Dream, as McKissick claimed. The legacy of Soul City lies in its unique blend of Black Power, utopian idealism, and real-world initiative. As a model of city planning, it foreshadowed the trend in planning and design to create unified, mixed-use, urban spaces that include multicultural neighborhoods, and that cater to families of differing economic backgrounds. The New Urbanism continues to define the cutting edge of city planning in the 21st century as architects and developers find new ways to unify industry and residential living while combating suburban sprawl.⁷⁶

To call Soul City a novel concept would be to undervalue the role African Americans historically played in building America's towns and cities. McKissick freely admitted that his vision had precedent. "Soul City is not a new idea," he explained. "We've been running cities for years. On the plantations the work was done by blacks—the black engineers, black cooks, the black blacksmith, the black carpenter, and the black roofer—they all controlled the destiny of the white man."⁷⁷ But if Soul City represented a continuation of African American industriousness, rather than a novel expression of it, then that industriousness found an unprecedented expression in this "black-built" town. Soul City was unique insofar as it sought to avoid the poverty, crime, and other contemporary problems of urban America through careful planning; and these creative solutions came from African Americans themselves. The key was Black Power, which provided the revolutionary impetus for economic development. "Power expresses wealth; in America, money doesn't talk—it screams," he noted in *Three-Fifths of a Man*. "In their attempts to

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achieve Black ownership of business, Black participation in economic decisions, they [African Americans] are striving for nothing less than a Black 'nationalization' of American wealth and the means for producing it."⁷⁸

It is important to note that it was not the actuality of Soul City's development, but the perception of the project's progress that Helms and his allies used to mount a public attack. It never became the pulsing city that McKissick envisioned, but the tidy houses, the newly renovated HealthCo facility, and the Floyd B. McKissick, Sr. Assisted Living Center all testify that Soul City never "failed," as one article claimed.⁷⁹ In 2003 Soultech I stood empty, with foreboding "State Property--No Trespassing" signs staked around its perimeter, but the Soul City Baptist Church, whitewashed and sturdy, stands as a testament of the faith of those who continue to raise their voices in praise. The juxtaposition of unused factory space and trim, tidy houses in Soul City's single neighborhood, Green Duke Village, capture the tension between what Soul City promised to become and what it became: a quiet, pleasant, predominately African American neighborhood on the edge of Norlina and Manson, North Carolina. And yet the mighty promise of McKissick's dream still lingers, haunting the rolling hills and woodlands. It was a powerful vision, and perhaps the strongest element of Soul City's legacy remains its power as a symbol, as a hopeful expression of community. In 1976, a young girl named Kristina Wilken wrote a poem, published in *The Soul City Sounder*, that summed up the promise and unrealized potential of Soul City:

"Good Place to Live"

I've lived in Soul City since I was seven
Floyd McKissick, I'm sure, will go to heaven.
He founded Soul City and gave it a name
The President could not have done the same.
Soul City's for everyone, dark or light hue
You've heard it, I know it, you'll have your chance too
The future Soul City is going to be bright,
For folks who have not yet seen the light.⁸⁰

NOTES

The author would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions to this article: Dr. H. G. Jones and the staff of the North Carolina Collection at Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Laura Clark Brown and the staff of the Manuscripts Department at Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Mike Sistrof and Kevin Cherry; Hope Hynes; and the North Caroliniana Society for its generous help in making this research possible.

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