

"LASTING OFFENSE & PAIN"

LONGWOOD COLLEGE'S GROWTH AT A COMMUNITY'S EXPENSE

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Bordering the southern end of Longwood's campus are over a dozen houses representing a once-vibrant community that lived where parking lots, academic buildings, and residence halls stand today. As evidenced by historical records, media reports, and eventually recognized by university administration, then-Longwood College frequently used eminent domain to roll over a predominantly black community in the name of campus expansion.

Matt McWilliams, university spokesman and deputy to the president, said, "Longwood sought and got permission to use eminent domain throughout the decades in the middle part of the century." He continued, "The threat of that being used would often prompt

them to sell their homes to Longwood."

Longwood's use of the practice formally ended 21 years ago, after a public promise from then-university President Patricia Cormier. President W. Taylor Reveley IV and the Board of Visitors formally apologized in a resolution passed in 2014, referencing the "real and lasting offense and pain in our community."

Eminent domain is the legal practice which allows the government to force owners to sell their private property for "just compensation," if the property will be used for "public use." Longwood, as a public university, was able to use eminent domain to rapidly expand the campus into its current triangular shape.

According to college master plans

covering 1962-1968, provided through Longwood's archive for the purpose of this reporting, then-Longwood College was expecting an increase in enrollment of 800 students to total 1,900 undergraduates by 1970. The plan published in October 1960 stated, "A survey was made to determine what areas are lacking and what facilities would have to be added or changed to efficiently accommodate the proposed increase in enrollment."

An updated master plan was approved by Longwood's board in 1966, covering the years 1966-1972, in which then-Longwood College reported improvements made in the general appearance of the campus during the past six years, especially in the fields of landscaping and sidewalks.

The plan directly references dozens of acquisitions, mostly homes listed as “dwellings,” and the Race Street Baptist Church, a predominantly black church founded in 1890. Records show costs of demolition fees, purchases, and construction on streets that were previously occupied. The church and its neighbors were forcefully relocated through eminent domain in 1967, and later demolished.

None of the college’s master plans from that time include specific references to the use of eminent domain. Official confirmation would come nearly four decades later.

A July 1, 1967 article in the Richmond Times-Dispatch references frustration from state government officials with then-Longwood College President Dr. James H. Newman for delays in campus construction and usage of state-allocated monies. Newman attributed the delays to families still in their homes after the college had purchased them.

The article stated Dr. Newman “had been reported as saying the college’s expansion plans were being hindered by local controversies over displacing and relocating Negro families.” The article then references Newman being given an “unrequested leave of absence” as college president. Later that year, Dr. Henry I. Willett, Jr. took office.

The next available campus master plan, dated July 1985 under then-President Janet D. Greenwood, again focused on potential campus expansion for student housing and the need to meet related demands.

Two years later, as reported in the Sept. 15, 1987 edition of The Rotunda, then-Longwood College continued to use and/or threaten eminent domain. In a front-page article, news editor Matt Peterman summarized a recent Board meeting, writing, “The Longwood College Board of Visitors unanimously approved a motion proposed by rector, Thomas D. Rust, that would implement eminent domain, the power of government to take land for public use, as a last resort concerning the master plan and more specifically, the construction of new parking lots.”

In the article, Peterman wrote, “The decision is against the cry of residents represented by the committee to save our neighborhood, who believed a compromise on the situation could be reached, concerning the expansion of Longwood College. Eventually the college may expand to where approximately sixty homes now stand. Currently seven homes are affected in the area of Hooper, S. Main, Franklin, and Pine Streets, located south of the College.”

The article continues, “James E. Ghee, a member of the Citizens Committee, listened to the proposal with concern. He stated earlier in the year that it was ‘A slap in our face



Longwood’s Campus from Above, 1960’s
Courtesy of Longwood University

for Longwood to develop a master plan that drastically impacts on the black community... (and for it)... not have any input into it...’ On Saturday he said, ‘In essence, they are saying ‘We are going to do what we want to and we don’t want to deal with the community.’”

The article was The Rotunda’s last reference to the college’s use of eminent domain.

The next campus master plan, dated October 1991, references a slowing of property purchases. “Land acquisition by the College has historically been in a southern direction. These older minority neighborhoods have been mostly razed with only homes fronting Griffin Boulevard and a single block between Race Street and Pine Street south of Franklin remaining.” It adds, “While it is anticipated that the College will remain a willing buyer of properties within the High/ Main/ Griffin triangle, very little property acquisition is mandated by the proposed Master Plan.”

Cormier took over as president in 1996, leading the transition from college to university, while simultaneously focusing on the development of the campus’ physical space. Eight years into her term, Cormier and the Board of Visitors made it Longwood policy to refrain from using eminent domain in the future.

Under Reveley’s administration, as part of the Board of Visitors 2014 resolution, university leadership expressed regret for the usage of eminent domain.

The resolution in part read, “WHEREAS, in subsequent years, after passing from direct state governance to governance by an appointed Board of Visitors in 1964,

Longwood caused real and lasting offense and pain to our community with its use of eminent domain to facilitate campus expansion, and acted with particular insensitivity with regard to the relocation of a house of worship.”

McWilliams said Longwood is no longer actively approaching homeowners about selling their property. “We wouldn’t have those conversations until the property went up for sale, or until a property owner reached out to the university and expressed an interest in selling their property. We don’t initiate that conversation,” he said.

Reflecting on the university’s history of eminent domain use, McWilliams said, “I don’t think it was necessary or unavoidable in the way that [campus expanded]. I think it could have been done and should have been done in a much different way than it was, and I think the way that it was done caused deep pain and deep anguish. If we were in the position now where we were, growing at the rate that they were growing back then... we would certainly go about figuring out how to expand in a much different way, and we would certainly not acquire property through those means, which was really, really regrettable.”

This is the first of an anticipated series of articles by The Rotunda chronicling the college’s use of eminent domain, and its impact on the local community. The Rotunda’s Editorial Board encourages people willing to share their stories or provide information to contact the staff at therotunda@live.longwood.edu.



Longwood's Campus from Above, 1970's
Courtesy of Longwood University



Artists rendering of 2025 Campus Master Plan, created in 2015
Courtesy of Longwood University