

NEWS: [Compounding History](#): COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN CHERRY HILL, CURTIS BAY, FAIRFIELD, AND BROOKLYN, ALONGSIDE OTHER SOUTH BALTIMORE COMMUNITIES, HAVE BEEN THEIR OWN STEADFAST ADVOCATES 2023.

Understanding Brooklyn Homes means taking time to learn the neighborhood's history and the impact history has on the community members who are still grieving. We must acknowledge that the tragedy on July 2 is one recent event in a long history of disregard.

Both South Baltimore and grief are familiar to me. My own family history is interwoven in the communal history of South Baltimore and suffers for it. My great-grandfather was murdered outside a tavern following his shift at Bethlehem Steel in 1949, and my aunt, his granddaughter, died under mysterious circumstances nearly 60 years later. She was found dead in her apartment at Cherry Hill Homes in 2008. These personal losses in my own family are connected to the abusive relationship Baltimore's leadership has with neighborhoods in the southern region of the city.

Little is known about my great-grandfather's murder, and even less is known about my aunt's death. The tragedy of neglect means no resources to intervene in these deaths, little information officially recorded, and almost nothing but family histories to keep these memories — these people — alive. Each loss impacted generations of children and adults in my family, who, like those recently impacted, live in the shadow of grief, violence, and mourning, with Baltimore's most powerful groups paying very little attention to their pain.

The July 2, 2023, shootings at Brooklyn Homes, a public housing project in Baltimore's Brooklyn neighborhood, exemplify the relationship between structural neglect and the idea that Baltimore, and its community members, are criminal and not worthy of care or concern.

Two young people, Aaliyah Gonzalez and Kylis Fagbemi, were murdered that night, and 28 other people (largely young people and children under the age of 18) were injured in the shooting. A community block party in one of Baltimore's southernmost neighborhoods will, in the wake of the shooting, forever be remembered tragically by community members who are now trying their best to heal.

Baltimore City leadership, along with their statewide and national colleagues, have failed to serve communities in South Baltimore for decades. The mass shooting exemplifies that reality. As the gathering grew and things took a chaotic turn, residents called the police for help, but the police didn't respond until it was too late.

The current neglect is part of longstanding patterns of emotional, physical, and structural violence. Gun violence, interpersonal conflict, and lack of community connection are a few of the consequences of what leaders have committed to: ignoring Black communities in favor of white development in other regions of the city. While electeds are eager to serve the needs and

concerns of white, property-owning citizens, they are equally as eager to ignore the needs of communities that lack those characteristics.

“This is not a new phenomenon. This issue is not new for Baltimore city, and this is definitely not new for South Baltimore,” Bishop-elect John Watts, senior pastor of Kingdom Life Church Apostolic, said at a city council hearing in July held to discuss the incident. “I feel like we are the forgotten part of Baltimore City.”

At that hearing, police had few answers for why they hadn’t shown up to keep residents safe.

Today, just as stipulations dictated that non-white, non-men without land were prevented from full citizenship in 1776, Baltimoreans who lack the power of whiteness, property ownership, and voting age are routinely forsaken by elected officials who swear to serve their needs. In this way, Baltimore is following a political hierarchy that has ruled over relations in the United States since the nation’s colonial inception. The dynamics governing who is protected by the rule of law and cared for by officials have not changed in centuries.

“Throughout the day, there are multiple points at which the public was requesting assistance at which we should have had a broader understanding of what was happening on the ground, and we should have requested more resources for the Brooklyn homes,” acting Police Commissioner Richard Worley told people gathered in the hearing.

When City Councilperson Nick Mosby pressed him about why some parts of the city can get prompt responses from BPD and others can’t, Worley said, “I think that we police where there are calls for service.”

When local and national news outlets, elected officials, and community members responded to the mass shooting at Brooklyn Homes, few people in power connected the fatal shooting to Baltimore’s history. Instead, it fell to community members like Keisha Allen and other South Baltimore-based community members and activists to use their social media platforms to remind people about the longstanding neglect faced by neighborhoods

“Down here, we’re a political staging area for candidates from other counties, states, or Washington, D.C.,” Allen [wrote on X](#) (formerly known as Twitter). “They come here, we support them, they run for office and win, earn numerous promotions or higher office. Our district is WORSE now than before”.

Community members in Cherry Hill, Curtis Bay, Fairfield, and Brooklyn, alongside other South Baltimore communities, in response to this ongoing failure of elected officials, have been their own steadfast advocates. They have used collective power to stay alive and live well. They build gardens and farms with Filbert Street Garden, plan grocery co-ops and farm collectives with Black Yield Institute, fight scurvy with orange trees and blackberry bushes, and care for each

other as they remain neglected by elected officials who run on campaigns about championing public health and combating gun violence.

Police officials, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, and the Housing Authority of Baltimore City did not lead with a philosophy of repair or restoration. Officials chose a different route when giving comments on the tragedy at Brooklyn Homes. The general tone and policy implementation since the tragic shooting ignored the community's longstanding needs and immediate concerns. In a press release published immediately after the shooting, Scott said:

This investigation is ongoing, and we will not rest until the people responsible are held accountable. This tragedy again shows why we must continue to focus on the amount of illegal guns on our streets that make it into the hands of individuals who should not have them and continuously carry out violent acts in our city. [...] I'm asking that anyone who has information on who committed this cowardly, violent act to come forward and help us secure justice for the Brooklyn community.

This statement, meant to offer comfort and a call to action for accountability, fails to mention the role of police officers, bureaucracy, and other important factors when outlining the “violent acts” that make mass shootings in Baltimore possible. Since this statement was released and other meetings with local officials have been held, Brooklyn Homes is still grieving. This grief is marked by elected officials' dismissal and the looming threat of houselessness as HABC President and CEO Janet Abrahams is “considering evictions.” Ultimately, Scott and BPD officials opted to focus their attention on catching suspects, punishment, and a tough-on-crime script instead of directing time, money, and resources to the continued care of Brooklyn Homes and people throughout South Baltimore.

The reality is that the first thoroughly recorded piece of history about Brooklyn, according to The Baltimore Sun and the Maryland State Archives, is the [lynching](#) of King Johnson. After shooting Frederick Schwab, a white man, in self-defense, 28-year-old King Johnson was dragged from a jail cell by eight white men and [lynched](#) by a white mob on Christmas Day in 1911. No one was on guard outside the cell, no one intervened to save Johnson's life, and no one was charged for Johnson's murder. To this day, there is no public memorial to honor Johnson's life.

The 1911 lynching preceded the annexation of Brooklyn by the City of Baltimore in 1918.

Following annexation, Brooklyn and surrounding communities like Curtis Bay, Fairfield, and Cherry Hill remained poor, and working-class communities were largely exploited for industrial labor. Bethlehem Steel was the largest employer — and [polluter](#) — in the region. Environmentalists, legal scholars, and historians have studied the impact of the steel mill on residents and the area's climate for decades. These findings largely conclude that the Curtis Bay area has been economically and environmentally devastated in addition to the ongoing public health threats caused by the region's exploitation. The neglect facing Baltimore's southernmost communities is historical and parallels how the Southern states in the U.S. are largely ignored by national leaders.

Structural history and personal family histories are connected. Rule of law, elected officials, and policing shape our lives — and inaction, especially in a crisis, is fatal. Communities and people in South Baltimore deserve more than lifetimes of constant crisis.

When discussing contemporary news, we must remember 20th-century history and acknowledge the truth that events happen to real people and real communities. Forsaking South Baltimore means abandoning families and communities where the impact of those events spans lifetimes. The disregard compounds as individuals try to remedy conditions that only a systemic approach from people in power can alter. Until resources and support match the needs of community members, there will be no improvement in the lives of Baltimore's most mistreated residents.