

A Summary of Soul City, North Carolina: A Bold Initiative. Its History and Legacy.

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Soul City was founded and planned by an African American, Floyed McKissick. McKissick had a vision. Soul City differed from many of the traditional all-Black towns and communities: it was founded after the mid-20th century, in 1969, more than a hundred years after enslavement, near the end of the great migration from south to north, nearly a century after the Exoduster movement of the 1870s and after many of the traditional all-Black towns and communities were in decline. Soul City was different in one other significant way: Soul City was not founded as a refuge from murder, rape and oppression committed against African Americans. Floyd McKissick's vision of Soul City included a multiracial city (Strain 2). In fact, McKissick's use of the word 'Soul' in some marketing brochures was meant to convey a different meaning than it

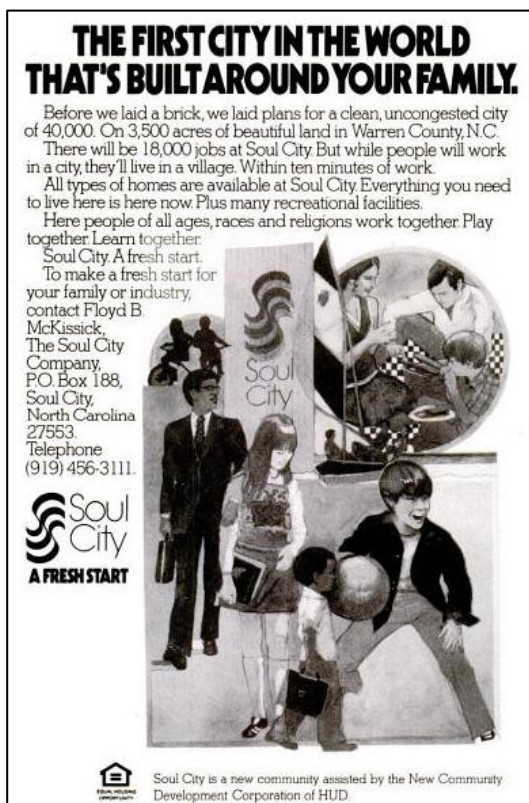


Figure 1 A Soul City marketing brochure. Photo Credit: Public Domain

did during the 60s and 70s in America: McKissick's city would be a city that is "well built, [and has] 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" (Strain 57). So, the word 'Soul' in Soul City had more of an aesthetic meaning, maybe even a spiritual connotation, which is reasonable; after all, Mr. McKissick later became pastor of the First Baptist Church of Soul City.¹

Mr. McKissick, was a native of Ashville, North Carolina and his patriotism led him to leave Morehouse College, and enlist in the Army after the bombing of

Pearl Harbor (Strain 58). After his stateside deployment, he was eventually deployed to Europe

toward the end of the war. McKissick's eye-witness experience in seeing the efforts to rebuild a war-torn Europe gradually evolved into the idea of building a new city, with Black folks in control. Although he advertised Soul City as an integrated city, McKissick believed in Black-led economic development. He believed in Black power (Berra et al. :36 – 1:13), as did the founders of traditional all-Black enclaves; some of these all-Black enclaves were initiated nearly a century earlier. Before Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) popularized the phrase, founders of all-Black



Figure 2 Floyd McKissick with Kwame Ture.
Photo Credit:1983, The Ann Arbor News

communities were putting Black power into action, well-before Mr. Ture, and Mr. McKissick, were born. McKissick writes in his book *Three-Fifths of a Man* “Black people. . . instinctively knew that Black Power was not racist but necessary...” (Strain 59).

Careful reading of Strain's article reveals a driven and fearless young Floyd McKissick.

Returning from the war, McKissick graduated from North Carolina Central College of Law. He eventually was admitted to University of North Carolina Law School, after being denied because of his race; a law suit by Thurgood Marshall provided him entry into UNC Law School (Goodloe).

Mr. McKissick changed is party affiliation and his politics—from an anti-Nixon activist to an activist who embraced president Nixon and supported his re-election campaign; McKissick's shrewd political strategy resulted in a \$14 million federal bond guarantee, by Nixon's Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)—leveraging the New Communities Act of the Johnson administration. McKissick was criticized by some Black civil rights activists for switching parties and supporting Richard Nixon. Mr. McKissick's mind was locked on a vision. A vision that evidently ordinary Black citizens could see, but some Black

politicians and activists could not accept and at least one racist Republican politician was hell-bent on destroying.

Floyd McKissick Sr. and his son, Floyd McKissick Jr.—Soul City Director of Planning—articulated that vision with crystal clarity. Their vision *was* actually that of providing a refuge. A refuge, not from the relentless onslaught of violence and oppression, but as Floyd McKissick Jr. stated, a refuge from the “devastating poverty” that so many Blacks found when searching for work in the inner cities, after leaving the south (Berra 2:50 – 3:02). In contrast to the ghettos and crime that they found in the inner cities, the Soul City refuge would provide respectable work for Black men and women in a clean, wholesome environment. It would provide them with the ability to actually own a home and accumulate equity by returning to the region where they migrated from (Berra 2:50 – 3:02 and 3:15 – 4:05). The Nixon administration evidently saw the viability of this vision: It was Nixon’s HUD bond guarantee that brought the Soul City dream closer to reality (Strain 66).

McKissick’s detailed plan included the nuts and bolts of city development, such as the infrastructure required to support Soul City’s human sanitation needs; these included the Soul City Sanitary District to provide (among other amenities) running water from the tap, the Soul City Utilities Company to build the infrastructure to support flushed toilets, electricity to plug home appliances into and a telephone infrastructure to make local and long-distance calls. McKissick’s director of planning (his son) also laid out the financial infrastructure, recreational areas, roads, neighborhood subdivisions (such as Green Duke Village) and other infrastructure plans (Strain 60).

In addition, the project team planned and implemented the Soultech I industrial complex, which did eventually employ 200 people. McKissick and his planners also reached out to the



Figure 3: Soul City Tract Map
Source: McKissick Papers (University of North Carolina).

planners and developers of another city-building initiative—the Columbia, Maryland project team—that also leveraged the Johnson administration’s New Communities program.

Some of the problems that the Soul City project faced were: Fierce opposition from influential (and racist) politicians, such as Jesse Helms;² Mr. McKissick took this opposition in stride: “Let your adversaries be a Godsend to make you work a little bit harder” (Berra et al. 11:55 – 12:02). Other problems included what some southerners saw as federally-mandated imposition (HUD) on state’s rights. Negative media coverage—especially major newspapers in Raleigh, such as the *Raleigh News and Observer*, which launched a series of articles critical of Soul City—among other factors, was another impediment to the success of the Soul City project (Strain 67). In addition, Senator Jesse Helms initiated a federal investigation into the finances of the project, claiming fraudulent activities. Housing and Urban Development concluded that there was no such fraudulent activity—but the damage had been done; the Soul City project image and the reputation of the project team were tainted by this investigation. Other factors that led to Soul City’s decline were the project’s lack of viable industry companies willing to take a chance and provide a service or product and at the same time provide jobs in Soul City (Strain 68); Strain claims that Soul City’s location in rural Warren County and the apparent lack of visibility into the project progress that the Carter administration was expecting were additional factors that led to the project’s decline (Strain 69). Floyd McKissick Jr, in a 2021 interview, also noted that some federal workers associated with the project did not have sufficient understanding of basic project management—especially the three interrelated critical project components—Time, Cost and Scope—and this lack of basic project management knowledge negatively affected the project. Professor Strain contends that it is also possible that Mr. McKissick did not develop a good rapport with local politicians in Warren County, and this also might have contributed to the project’s decline. The Carter administration’s Housing and Urban Development department ultimately voted to “discontinue the new town as a Title VII development” (Strain 67); it was this action by Carter’s HUD which brought construction to a halt—permanently.

Today, sadly, the industrial-manufacturing complex in Soul City—SoulTech—is now part of the state correctional system. On the other hand, much of the infrastructure that the Soul City project developed (such as running water and sewage treatment) is used regionally by multiple cities and counties(Jordan Brown 2:19- 3:07), new housing is being built and sold by other developers in the Soul City area.³ Also, lots formerly owned by the Soul City Corporation was a “small retirement community” (Berra et al. 21:29



Figure 4 HealthCo Medical and Dental clinic

In addition, the Soul City health clinic HealthCo operated for several decades after HUD terminated funding to the project.

Floyd McKissick Sr. lived in Soul City until he passed away in 1991; McKissick’s daughter, Charmaine McKissick-Melton still lives in Soul City. A former Soul City administrative assistant, Jane Ball-Groom, and a few others, still lives in Soul City.

"We might not be primarily a utopia, but we do have a concept at Soul City that can be a prime means to revitalize blighted rural areas and stem migration to the large urban areas." ⁴

This 1976 poem by Kristina Wilken will give you a sense of the pride that residents felt for their 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

Soul City can be placed firmly among the long list of African-American, self-determined, town-building initiatives.⁵

Notes

¹ See Goodloe in works cited.

² After Jesse Helms won an election, Mr. McKissick sent him a letter congratulating him; Helms responded by promising to shut down Soul City; See Berra et al, 11:30 – 11:50.

³ See the short video by Akilah Davis here: <https://abc11.com/post/norlina-soul-city-north-carolina-legacy-floyd-mckissick-jr/14480253/>

⁴ From the Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Cp971.93 S72sl) <https://ia801706.us.archive.org/29/items/soulcitynorthcar00soul/soulcitynorthcar00soul.pdf>

⁵ Strain’s article contains many references that can be researched, to learn about other Black-founded towns; Strain has listed over 50 unique references. Although Dr. Strain has mistakenly attributed the founding of Brooklyn, Illinois to Free Frank—Free Frank actually founded New Philadelphia, Illinois; Brooklyn, Illinois was founded by “Mother” Priscilla Baltimore, an African American woman—his fourteen-page article is useful to any researcher of Black-founded towns, especially those researching Soul City, North Carolina.

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