

# "He Bragged About it All the Time:" The Public Housing Legacy of Lyndon Baines Johnson

By Fred McGhee



One of the more unknown and underappreciated aspects of President Johnson's legacy is his commitment to public housing. A strong supporter of the 1937 U.S. Housing Act, which created the United States Housing Authority (USHA) and local public housing authorities, LBJ is responsible for the construction of the nation's oldest public housing project built under that law: Santa Rita Courts located at 2341 Corta St. in East Austin.

The historical significance of Santa Rita Courts, as well as its two sister projects Rosewood Courts and Chalmers Courts, first came to my attention in 1996 while I was working for the Austin Housing Authority. To my surprise, Santa Rita's role in American history—much less Austin's history—was largely unrecognized. In 2004, I set myself the task of researching and writing a National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) nomination for the housing development. I did so pro bono, not only because of the intrinsic value and character of the project, but because Austin was beginning to experience serious affordability challenges and the re-emergence of housing shortages. Among other things, I saw the nomination of Santa Rita Courts to

the NRHP as a vehicle to educate decision makers and the public at large about the political debates surrounding the 1937 Housing Act. The present-day solutions put forth by affordable housing specialists, including the role of non-profit housing and cooperatives, were also discussed extensively during the Great Depression. Laws such as the 1937 Housing Act imperfectly addressed fundamental political challenges that continue to vex us today.

Congressman Johnson had been elected in a direct federal election that by-passed the existing Jim Crow primary system in Texas. He actively sought and received significant African-American and Mexican-American support, populations hit particularly hard by the Great Depression. In his famous "Tarnish on the Violet Crown" radio address (Austin had been dubbed "the City of the Violet Crown" since the 1890's by O. Henry) delivered on Austin radio station KNOW on January 23, 1938, Congressman Johnson spoke about scenes he had observed while on a walking tour of Austin the previous Christmas: "Within the shadow of the Capitol I found people living in such squalor that Christmas Day was to them just one more day of filth and misery." He saw a family of eight

or ten people living in a room 20 by 25 or 30 feet, a fire hydrant from which 110 people took their drinking water, and an outdoor toilet which they all used. Johnson continued, "But why do I tell you this? Why, some may ask, should one who is elected to represent this district take note of such unattractive spots when our city has so much to be proud of? No one is more proud of the beauty and attainments of the City of Austin than I. But for that very reason I am unwilling to close my eyes to needless suffering and deprivation, which is not only a curse to the people immediately concerned, but is also a cancerous blight on the whole community." Prior to delivering this speech, Johnson had spoken before the Austin City Council just before Christmas 1937. He observed, "We have some slums in Austin. We ought to be progressive enough to remove certain eyesores."

The United States Housing Act of 1937 marked the first permanent federal commitment to slum clearance and the production of low-cost public housing for poor people. Johnson did not just vote for the act, he called together Tom Miller and other local persons of influence, and said "Now look, I want us to be

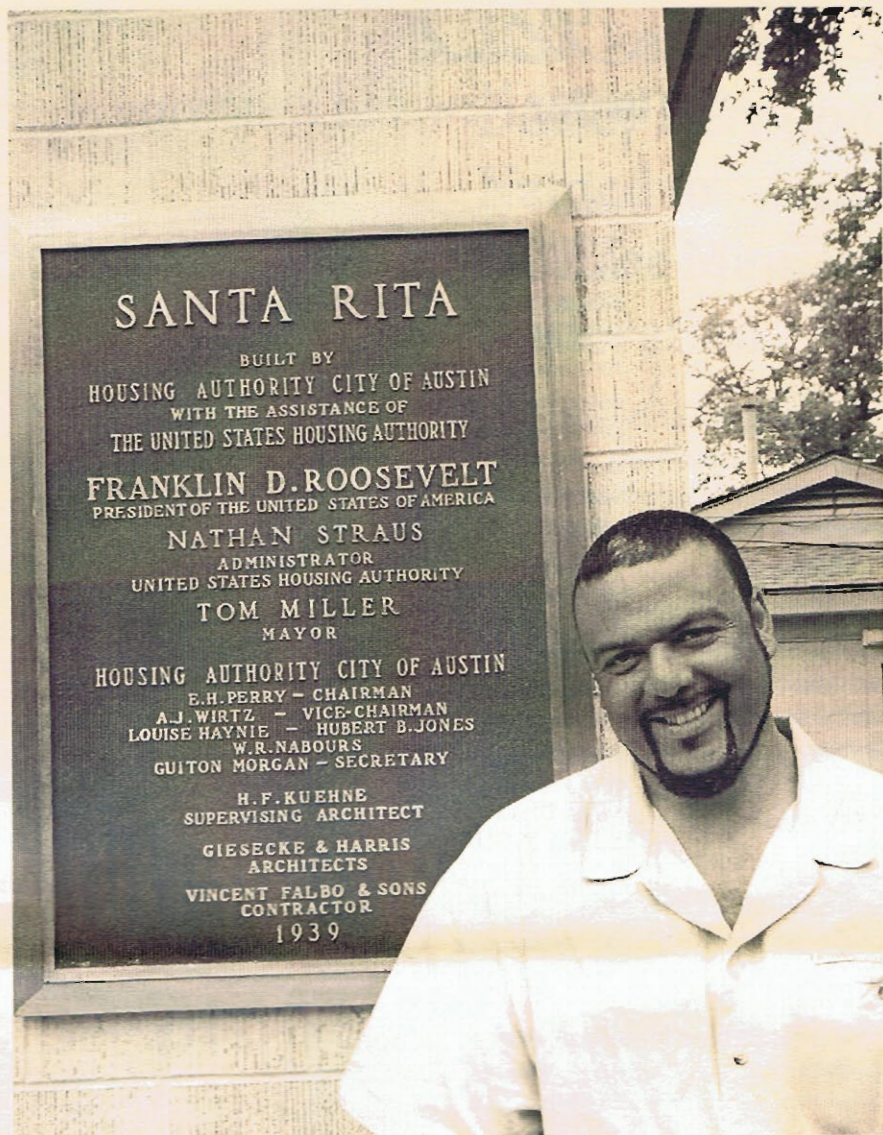
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first in the United States if you're willing to do this, and you've got to be willing to stand up for the Negroes and Mexicans." Austin, Texas was selected as the site of the first USHA housing project because of Johnson's single-minded, persistent and remarkable talent for political persuasion, a skill which would become a Johnson trademark.

After passage of the 1937 Housing Act, five housing authorities were initially approved and three loans announced by President Roosevelt: Austin, New Orleans and New York. Congressman Johnson—so the local story goes—had the grants announced in alphabetical order, knowing that recognition of Austin would precede New Orleans and New York. Why Austin? "Because," said Leon Keyserling, then deputy administrator of the USHA, "there was this first term congressman who was so on his toes and so active and so overwhelming that he was up and down our corridors all the time...." Johnson called on Keyserling and said, "Lady Bird and I want you to have cocktails with us"—"How's that?"—"Well, we want Austin to be announced first"—"Well, why first?"—"Mayor La Guardia [of New York] might not like that."—"Well, it's the first in the alphabet, isn't it?" Keyserling noted: "...It was his go-getterness that got the first project for Austin".

The three were announced simultaneously.

According to D.B. Hardeman, longtime assistant to former Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn and



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Johnson biographer, Johnson "was proud of that project and bragged about it all the time and in places where it couldn't have done him the slightest good, only the opposite."

Although the housing development has undergone cosmetic changes over the years, Santa Rita Courts retains an excellent degree of integrity. The site plan is intact including the setting, building orientation and the relationship

between built and open spaces. The housing development's integrity of workmanship, feeling, and association all remain unaffected, and it continues to serve its much-needed function of providing low-cost housing to a limited income population. Visit <http://www.flma.org/santarita.html> for some historic photographs of the development and to download a copy of the National Register nomination. ☺