

The Levittown Legacy: Segregation in Suburbia?

by Kyle Sabo

As a lifelong resident of Levittown, New York, alumni of its schools and social studies teacher at Division Avenue High School, I was invited to speak at an annual business gathering to share my views about what it was like to grow up in Levittown and return to teach there. My comments reflected my feelings about coming-of-age in, what I see as, an idyllic suburban community. However, as a social scientist and student of history I could not ignore the other side of Levittown's past: the racial segregation that dogged the community in its early days and continues to linger in its shadows.

The concept of the planned suburban community was pioneered by William Levitt, who viewed the potato fields of Hempstead Plains as a solution to the housing shortage facing the young men returning from World War II and their families. Levitt's approach was to apply the lessons of the assembly line, division of labor and mass production, to the construction of new housing. In doing this, he brought the housing industry into the Industrial Age and transformed the way people lived in the United States.

According to Tyson Freeman (National Real Estate Investor, September 30, 1999), "following World War II, the inner cities were busting at the seams. After many years, urban growth spilled over into the suburbs. Widespread car ownership and the increased development of the freeway system, intensified by the Federal Highway Act of 1956, catalyzed the move." The growth of Levittown was part of this trend.

In Levittown, a returning GI could purchase a Cape-style home complete with appliances, landscaping, a fireplace, vertical blinds and free use of the community swimming pools for \$7990 without making a down payment. In one day, GIs from Brooklyn could drive out to the site on Long Island, select a plot and sign a deed for an unbuilt home, sometimes without any input from their wives.

The men who came to Levittown were generally blue collar workers. In many cases their jobs were either directly or peripherally related to the booming Cold War military-industrial complex. Long Island was the home of Grumman, Hazelton, and Sperry, all leading military contractors. Many twenty-something Levittowners remember watching air trials of F-14 Tomcats. Their older brothers and sisters saw the sleek F-111 of the 1960s. The men that made these aircraft had premium jobs: unionized with full medical benefits, a retirement system, and high wages.

In Levittown and other towns like it on Long Island, former city-dwellers and renters became homeowners and empowered citizens. They wrote and voted on school budgets, decided on capital projects, and built new and powerful political clubs and local and county governments. Townships like Hempstead (today the largest in the nation) and Oyster Bay provided services, such as sanitation and water services, and created a whole new class of blue collar municipal employees and local residents who valued their high paying jobs.

Levittown was an embodiment of the American dream, with one important catch. The promise Levittown offered for the future was a racially exclusive one. African Americans were denied access to this suburban dream. Every deed signed by new homeowners contained a clause that bound them "not to permit the premises to be used or occupied by any other person than members of the Caucasian race. . ."

The impact of this segregated past continues to shape the present. The 2000 census identifies 94.1% of Levittown's population as "Caucasian." In a town of 53,000, only 3,601 people are Latino and only 266 are African American. In fact, Long Island as a whole today is a checkerboard of racially, ethnically and economically segregated communities.

Should the Levittown experiment in planned suburban development be viewed as a triumph of post-World War II American society, or was it so tarnished by racial segregation that it more accurately symbolizes the continuing tragedy of injustice? Students can use photographs and excerpts from newspaper articles included in the document-based package that follows and web-based research to reach their own conclusions.

Levittown, NY : Triumph of post-World War II American society or symbol of racial injustice?

Directions:

1. Examine the pictures below, read the excerpts from newspaper articles and gather more information from the internet before reaching your conclusions. To learn more about the history of Levittown, New York and similar Levitt housing developments in New Jersey and Pennsylvania visit: [people/b&t/william.htm](http://people.b&t/william.htm); www.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/MassConsumerism/Suburb/Race.htm; www.infoclub.com.np/lifestyle/; www.time.com/time/time100/builder/profile/levitt3.html; tigger.uic.edu/~pbhales/Levittown.html; www.lihistory.com/specsec/levmain.htm; and www.nreionline.com/ar/real_estate_postwar_america_hitches.
2. After examining all of the sources, use the documents and information from the internet to answer the question: Levittown, New York : Triumph of post-World War II American society or symbol of racial injustice? Your essay should have a clear introduction that states your opinion, at least three paragraphs that present supporting evidence, and a summary concluding paragraph that summarizes your ideas. It should be approximately 500 words long.



A family in front of their new Levittown, Long Island home.



A Life magazine photo of Levittown, New York, circa 1958.

Levittown Racial Exclusion Clause: "The tenant agrees not to permit the premises to be used or occupied by any person other than members of the caucasian race. But the employment and maintenance of other than caucasian domestic servants shall be permitted."

FHA Asked to Curb Negro Housing Ban, *New York Times*, March 12, 1949

The Federal Housing Administration was asked yesterday to forbid exclusion of Negroes from any housing insured by that agency. Specific target of a delegation that called at the FHA offices was William J. Levitt, whose organization has built thousands of small homes for veterans on Long Island.

Besides members of the American Labor party, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Civil Rights Congress, and Nassau-Suffolk Consumers Council, the group of eleven persons included James Mayweathers. Mr. Mayweathers said that although he is a veteran, he has been excluded, as a Negro, from a group of prospective purchasers of homes Mr. Levitt's organization is building under FHA commitments.

Mr. Mayweather conducts a floor-polishing service from his home in East Williston. He said he had applied for one of 350 houses, the first of 4,000 to be built in Roslyn, L.I. To do this he had stood in line outside the model home there from 7 A.M. Saturday until 7:30 o'clock the following morning. On Sunday morning, he said, Mr.

Levitt told him that a Negro could not buy one of the houses. This statement was confirmed by John S. Fells, a real estate broker of Great Neck.

Housing Bias Ended, *New York Times*, May 29, 1949

Levittown -- The clause in the lease of the houses built by William Levitt, Nassau County mass-production builder, barring Negroes from the use of the premises, has been deleted, Commissioner Franklin D. Richards of the Federal Housing Administration has informed the Committee to End Discrimination in Levittown.

4 Say Levittown Refuses Leases After Children Play With Negroes

New York Times, December 5, 1950

Mineola-- Two Levittown couples made the charge in Supreme Court here today that their civil liberties had been violated by the refusal of Levitt & Sons to allow them to renew their leases. They said they were requested to vacate their houses at the expiration of their current leases because of objections to their having Negro children play with their own children on lawns adjoining their rented homes.

The Levittown Decade, *Newsday*, September 2, 1957

William J. Levitt doesn't like to discuss discrimination. . . In a statement he made in June, 1954, . . . said Levitt on discrimination: "The plain fact is that most whites prefer not to live in mixed communities. This attitude may be wrong morally, and some day it may change. I hope it will. But as matters now stand, it is unfair to charge an individual with the blame for creating this attitude or saddle him with the sole responsibility for correcting it. The responsibility is society's. So far society has not been willing to cope with it. Until it does, it is not reasonable to expect that any builder should or could undertake to absorb the entire risk and burden of conducting such a vast experiment."

Levitt made no bones about the fact he would not rent or sell directly to Negroes. In 1948 and 1949 a Committee to end Discrimination fought Levitt's policies regarding non-Caucasians, who were not allowed tenancy in Levittown. It should also be stated that some of the volleys against Levitt appeared to have been deliberate agitation stirred up by left-wing groups. The committee was successful in deleting a "Caucasian only" clause from Levitt's leases, but unsuccessful in changing his rental and purchase policies.

Actually, a Negro family bought a Levitt house from a private owner in 1950 and moved in without fanfare or demonstration. And two years later another Negro family purchased a home and one sublet a Levitt house. In neither case was Levitt involved. But in 1953, when William Cotter was refused a new lease on the house he had sublet, the racial issue in Levittown was out in the open. Cotter was evicted, and the courts upheld the landlord's right to rent to whom he pleased.

At 45, Levittown's Legacy Is Unclear, *New York Times*, June 28, 1992

Eugene Burnett, a retired sergeant in the Suffolk County Police Department who is black, enlisted in the Army two days before his 17th birthday. After his discharge in 1949 he read advertisements in *The Daily News* and *The New York Mirror* for Levittown, and he and his fiancée borrowed a friend's car and drove to Long Island. "We were taken to a model house, never thinking there was any kind of problem," Mr. Burnett recounted. When he asked the agent at the rental office for an application, the agent seemed to go into shock, Mr. Burnett recalled, adding: "'It's not me,' the agent said. 'The builders have not at this time decided to sell to Negroes.' I was devastated. I'll never forget the ride back to East Harlem."

A Successful Experiment (Source: Levittown Public Schools and L.I. Newsday)

| | Levittown Schools' Academic Diploma Rate | Median Property Value |
|-----------|--|-----------------------|
| 1947-1948 | N/A | \$8,000 |
| 1988-1989 | 32% | \$149,000 |
| 2001-2002 | 75% | \$290,000 |