# 2- Housing Discrimination on Long Island

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Racial bias was a major problem in the United States during the 1950's and 1960's. Examples of racial discrimination on Long Island were less dramatic than they were in many parts of the south and some urban centers. However, as events unfolded during the 1960's, it became apparent that they were deep seated and widespread. Among the more significant problems on Long Island was housing discrimination.

Many post-World War II suburban housing developments on Long Island were exclusively white. The best known of these developments was Levittown. Between 1946 and 1951, Levitt and Sons constructed 17,447 low-cost two and three bedroom homes in the region. Ninety percent of the units were purchased by the families of World War II veterans. Initially, Levitt and Sons included a clause in mortgage and rental agreements that restricted occupancy to "Caucasians," except for "domestic servants." Even after the clause was removed, the company still refused to sell or rent to African Americans. Of the 65,276 residents of Levittown in 1960, only 57 were Black, less than .1% of the population.[17]

Other Nassau communities that were virtually all white in 1960 included Massapequa Park (28 Black residents out of a total population of 19,904 people), Bellmore (8 Black residents out of a total population of 12,784 people), Massapequa (50 Black residents out of a total population of 32,900 people), and Plainedge (28 Black residents out of a total population of 21,933 people). A large percentage of the Black residents of these communities were women and probably served as domestic workers.[18]

The various federal and state civil rights acts of this period, including the Civil Rights Act of 1968 which banned discrimination in the sale, lease or rental of property, made racial discrimination less open, but did not successfully end it. According to the 1970 federal census, African Americans continued to be less than .1% of the population in Bethpage, Levittown, Massapequa Park, Franklin Square, Massapequa, and Wantagh. In other predominately white towns, including East Meadow, Oceanside, Hicksville, Merrick, Plainview, and Rockville Centre, the number of African American residents actually declined during the decade.[19] As a result of the pervasiveness of racial discrimination and segregation, African Americans remained deeply suspicious of Long Island governmental and legal institutions.

During the 1960's, the red-lining of certain communities by banks and mortgage agencies and blockbusting by real estate brokers contributed to housing segregation. In order to insure the continued profitability of their investments, lenders would refuse to issue mortgages to Black families who wanted to purchase homes in traditionally white communities. As a result or red-lining, Black buyers were only shown houses in specific neighborhoods.[20]

Blockbusting was an effort by real estate interests to play on racial prejudice to frighten white families into selling their homes at below market value. Agencies would purchase their homes and resell them to Black clients at inflated prices. According to a March, 1963 article in Newsday, when the housing market was slow, real estate brokers "would put a scare into white neighborhoods that a Black family was moving in" and would try to convince a white home owner "to sell out of fear that the house would drop in value." Blockbusting contributed to the rapid transformation of communities like Roosevelt and parts of Hempstead from predominately white in 1960 to predominately African American in 1970.[21]

The fight against blockbusting was a major part of the civil rights struggle to build stable interracial communities on Long Island. According to articles in the Roosevelt Press and the Hempstead Beacon, clergy and citizen groups in both communities actively challenged blockbusting.[22] As a result of their activities, New York State agreed to investigate charges against real estate interests and to suspend or revoke the license of any firm using scare tactics.[23]

Racial discrimination also affected the ability of Black families to rent housing on Long Island. In January, 1963, Newsday reported that a landlord refused to rent a three room apartment to a Black woman who wanted to move from Queens to Roosevelt The landlord claimed he rejected her application because he feared that she would ruin his house.[24] In March, 1965 the New York State Human Rights Commission ruled that owners of a Freeport apartment house had discriminated against a Black woman when she attempted to rent an apartment on Merrick Road.[25]

Even when African American families were able to purchase homes in predominately white areas of Long Island, their problems were not resolved. In a 1969 article titled "Black Family Fights L.I. Housing Bias," The New York Times described the experience of a family that moved into a virtually all-white south shore community. Neighbors protested their arrival and "Nigger Go Home" was painted on the wall of their house.[26]

Racial prejudice was so intense in some parts of Long Island that a white family whose members looked "too dark" was the subject of harassment. In Copaigue, a dark-skinned Caucasian man and his family were "hounded from their new home by numerous threatening phone calls because somebody mistook them for Negroes. The man said nothing like that ever happened to him in the many years he lived in the South; and even if I were colored wouldn't I have the right to live?"[27]

Not only were attempts made to keep new Black families from moving into communities, but Long Island's Black leadership suspected that many towns were using urban renewal projects designed to clean up substandard housing as an excuse to drive out Black families who were long time residents. In January, 1963, Newsday reported that Rockville Centre's urban renewal office had contributed to an exodus of over sixty African American families who had lived and owned property in the village's urban renewal area. Between the 1960 and 1970 censuses, the African American populations of Rockville Centre and East Meadow declined by approximately 21% and Oceanside by nearly 50%. Black organizations including the NAACP and CORE found themselves battling the discriminatory effects of urban renewal policies throughout the decade.[28]