

THE LEVITTOWN LEGACY: SEGREGATION IN SUBURBIA



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. . ."

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."





A family in front of their new Levittown home.



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

Task:

- 1) **Do some research online. Visit the following website:**
<http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html>
- 2) Click on “American FactFinder”
- 3) In the next window, type in “Levittown” where it says “town” and choose “New York.” You will repeat this step for the following communities:
 - a) Town: Levittown State: Pennsylvania
 - b) Town: Smithtown CDP State: New York (*make sure you type CDP!*)
 - c) Wyandanch State: New York
- 4) Fill in the chart on the next page.

U.S. Census Bureau

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Levittown, New York		
Characteristics	Number	% of Town's Population
<i>White</i>		
<i>Black or African-American</i>		
<i>Median Household Income in 1999</i>		
Levittown, Pennsylvania		
<i>White</i>		
<i>Black or African-American</i>		
<i>Median Household Income in 1999</i>		
Smithtown, New York		
<i>White</i>		
<i>Black or African-American</i>		
<i>Median Household Income in 1999</i>		
Wyandanch, New York		
<i>White</i>		
<i>Black or African-American</i>		
<i>Median Household Income in 1999</i>		

1) Rank the towns from the most wealthy (1) to the least wealthy (4)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

2) What is the difference in median income between the richest community and the poorest community (in dollars)?

3) Based on this information, has Levittown changed much since the 1950s?

4) Overall, has Long Island changed? Is segregation still a problem on Long Island? Explain your answer thoroughly.