



## Whites Riot in Response to Arrival of First African American Family in Levittown, PA

Upon driving up to their new home at 43 Deepgreen Lane, Daisy Myers was filled with doubt, recalling that she repeatedly asked herself, "what would be the extent of our ostracism? Would we be able to sleep comfortably?" as she studied the four law officers standing on the lawn of her address in the Dogwood Hollow Section of Levittown. These questions regarding the neighborhood reaction to the arrival of a black family in what had been an intentionally all-white enclave, were unfortunately answered over the next two weeks. At dusk each evening, crowds of people gathered outside the Myer's home, angrily shouting and jeering, singing the national Anthem, and throwing stones toward the Myer's home, as apparently these "spacious skies," they sang of were not meant to be enjoyed in an integrated setting. Levittown police failed to enforce the court ordered protection for the Myers, prohibiting more than three people from assembling near the residence at once. Mobs consequently gathered in this fashion each night, only finally subsiding due to interference from the state police. After an agonizing fourteen days, the riots ended, but the Myers continued to suffer the anxiety of the consequences triggered by the introduction of integration to Levittown. Harassment of the family persisted for almost three months, as Daisy Myers received threatening phone calls of those who "told [her] they threatened to shoot William down on sight," the family's deliveries of oil, bread, and milk stopped arriving, and the more than occasional unfriendly white stroller-by forced the Myers to have constant protection, or at the very least, sympathizing company. Anti-segregationist even obtained property immediately neighboring the Myers' home, using the location to intimidate the family further, evident by their conspicuous display of the confederate flag.

The resistance seen in the August riots against the integration of Levittown, PA was not uncommon throughout suburban neighborhoods. Quite the contrary in fact, racial discrimination and the subsequent segregated communities were the norm in 1950s suburbia. Yet despite this plaguing harassment, the Myers refused to leave their Levittown home, justifiably feeling entitled "to live where [they] chose," as William put it. Remarking on the family's incredible determination to outlast their opponents, Dianne Harris, historian and author of *Second Suburb: Levittown, PA*, stated, "the Myers endured an ordeal that few could have weathered with such dignity, courage, grace, and fortitude."

This endurance allowed the family to break "the lily-white pattern of Levittown," as Daisy Myers stated, a pattern that William Levitt had attempted to keep in existence in his planned suburban community. While he did not consider himself to hold racist ideals, Levitt had long refused to sell his homes to African Americans. Applications for home ownership in Levittown had to be made in person at the Levittown Exhibit Center Sales Office, allowing discrimination in the housing industry of the community to readily continue daily. Yet through the assistance received from the American Friends Service Committee, the Myers were able to circumvent these discriminatory practices, making headway in the racial trends of the neighborhood. Yet due to the

overpowering ideals of many white residents, in combination with the ideals of Levitt and his employed real estate agents, the effects of the inequality are still seen in Levittown today, as the 2000 census identified ninety-eight percent of the town's population as Caucasian.

## **At 50, Levittown Contends With Its Legacy of Bias**

By BRUCE LAMBERT

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The year-long 50th-birthday party for this pioneering suburb on Long Island is winding down. The parade drew 5,000 marchers. Crowds came for candlelight church services, an antique-car show, exhibits, seminars and tours of the fabled Levitt houses that started it all.

. . . But not everyone touched by the Levittown experience has been celebrating.

"The anniversary leaves me cold," said Eugene Burnett, who was among thousands of military veterans who lined up for their green patch of the American dream here after World War II. But he was turned away because he is black. "It's symbolic of segregation in America," he said. "That's the legacy of Levittown.

"When I hear 'Levittown,' what rings in my mind is when the salesman said: 'It's not me, you see, but the owners of this development have not as yet decided whether they're going to sell these homes to Negroes,'" Mr. Burnett, now a retired Suffolk County police sergeant, recalled. He said he still stings from "the feeling of rejection on that long ride back to Harlem."

The salesman was not honest with Mr. Burnett. Blacks and other minorities had no chance of getting in, because Levitt had decided from the start to admit only whites. . . .

The whites-only policy was not some unspoken gentlemen's agreement. It was cast in bold capital letters in clause 25 of the standard lease for the first Levitt houses, which included an option to buy.

It stated that the home could not "be used or occupied by any person other than members of the Caucasian race."

That clause was dropped in 1948 after the United States Supreme Court, ruling on another case, declared such restrictions to be "unenforceable as law and contrary to public policy."

Ignoring the law of the land, however, Levitt continued adhering to its racial bar. Levittown quickly filled up with young white families. Minority residents trickled in during the 1950's, but the pattern was set.

. . . Most blacks intent on moving to Long Island ended up in the few "open housing" communities, which became predominantly minority pockets. "We didn't have many other choices," said Mr. Burnett, who lives in Wyandanch, in Suffolk County.

As a result, "Nassau County is the most segregated suburban county in the United States," said Dr. Andrew A. Beveridge, a sociology professor at Queens College. He based that view on a computer study of national census data, in which he calculated what portion of the population of each county would have to move to achieve racial integration.

. . . .At the outset, some whites here fought racism, forming the Committee to End Discrimination in Levittown. There were protests and a leaflet against "Jim Crowism," Mrs. Cassano said. "Some people moved in very unaware of the Caucasian clause and were disturbed when they found out," she said.

In the second Levittown, near Philadelphia, angry white mobs threw rocks in 1957 to protest the prospect of blacks moving in. In the response back here, the Levittown Democratic Club, Jewish War Veterans and a Protestant minister all spoke up for open housing.

But this Levittown has had its share of bigots. The Levittown Historical Society's president, Polly Dwyer, recalled one incident: "An Asian family moved in, and some people moved out because of them. It's so silly. They were good, quiet, decent people."

A Hofstra University political science professor, Dr. Herbert D. Rosenbaum, who lived here from 1953 to 1965, said: "In those years, even liberal people like ourselves tended to take residential segregation for granted, without approving it. None of us went out into the street to change it."

Levittown's history seems especially jarring, experts say, because the community was founded as segregation was beginning to crumble. While the first Levitt houses were being built, Jackie Robinson was breaking the color barrier in baseball. A year later, President Harry S. Truman integrated the military.

Another paradox was that although Levittown was built for World War II veterans, who had fought tyranny and racism, its doors were opened to at least one former German U-boat sailor, while black American soldiers were turned away.

"Because Levittown promised affordable housing, with no down payment, it offered hope to the African-American working class when no other community did -- but that hope was quashed," said Dr. Barbara M. Kelly, Hofstra University's director of Long Island Studies. "After the war, blacks thought things had changed, but they hadn't, and Levittown became a microcosm of that frustration."

The role of the developer, the late William J. Levitt, is debated. He defended his actions as following the social customs of the era.

"The Negroes in America are trying to do in 400 years what the Jews in the world have not wholly accomplished in 600 years," he once wrote. "As a Jew, I have no room in my mind or heart for racial prejudice. But I have come to know that if we sell one house to a Negro family, then 90 or 95 percent of our white customers will not buy into the community. This is their attitude, not ours. As a company, our position is simply this: We can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem, but we cannot combine the two."

Indeed, the official Federal Housing Administration policy back then called for "suitable restrictive covenants" to avoid "inharmonious racial or nationality groups" in housing.

"To paint Levitt as a villain would be unfair: the whole system was villainous," said Dr. Herbert Gans, a Columbia University sociology professor who lived in Levittown, N.J., and wrote "The Levittowners." "Levitt strictly reflected the times," he said.

Dr. Kelly said, "To single Levittown out on racial covenants, as if it weren't going on everywhere else, is unfair."

But critics say Mr. Levitt was no passive bystander. His company branded integrationists as Communist rabble-rousers and barred them from meeting on Levittown property. It also evicted two residents who had invited black children from a neighboring community to their homes.

### **Questions –**

1. Who was Daisy Meyers? How was Meyers treated when she and her family moved to Levittown, Pennsylvania?
2. Explain William Levitt's policies toward selling homes to African-Americans. How did he try to defend these policies?
3. What evidence is there that racial segregation is still widespread on Long Island? What are the causes of this segregation?

# Letter: No 'White Flight' for Levittown

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No urban myth seems more pervasive and troublesome than the myth of "white flight" to the suburbs in the post-WWII years. Unlike other urban myths - UFOs, ghost sightings, JFK conspiracy theories, Bigfoot, creationism, a Republican-orchestrated 9/11, and President Obama as a foreign-born national - the myth of "white flight" has been perpetuated by journalists, academicians, and civil rights activists who know it's a myth.

Too, over the years, Levittown has become to "white flight" what Roswell, New Mexico is to UFO buffs. Consider the facts:

Between the crash of '29 and V-J Day, the American housing industry nearly became extinct. Consequently, the 1945-50 era occasioned the greatest housing shortage in history. It was not unusual in the two or three years after the war for a "to let" newspaper advertisement to be answered by scores - in a few cases, hundreds - of prospective tenants. People didn't move to the suburbs to get away from "them." They moved to find a place to live.

The housing boom of the 1950s was necessarily a suburban boom because outside of the big city, land and labor and building materials were relatively inexpensive and the country's new interstate highway system (augmented by highways built in the '30s by men like Robert Moses) made these areas more accessible to the motoring public.

Most of the white people who settled in Levittown and the surrounding towns came from predominantly white neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx - from a New York City that was predominantly white in 1950. Their socioeconomic motivations for joining the exodus to suburbia have been well documented by historians like Barbara Kelly, Kenneth Jackson, and Marjorie Freeman Harrison.

Although black people in the 1950s were moving into northern cities like New York and Detroit from the rural South, there were many blacks who moved into the suburbs - a migration well documented in 1993 in Andrew Wiese's *Places of Our Own: Suburban Black Towns Before 1960* (*Journal of Urban History*). Like their white counterparts, they were motivated by economics, not race.

Suburban growth in the decades following WWII was a larger socioeconomic phenomenon taking place around all the major cities of the industrialized world. While the trend was pioneered in America in general, and Levittown in particular, it's foolish to think that the United States' racial issues had anything to do with suburban growth in France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands.

The people who moved to Levittown after 1968, such as my family, left the city because of rising crime, taxes, unemployment, labor disputes, overcrowded public schools, and a general decline in the quality of municipal services. Indeed, the urban blight and societal decay were the results of the public policies championed by the very journalists, academicians, and civil rights activists who speak of "white flight."

"White flight" was popularized by the "whites only" clauses that appeared in housing contracts between 1934 and 1949 per the guidelines of the Federal Housing Authority. These clauses represented the opinion of the FHA and not necessarily the wishes of Levitt & Sons and other developers - a fact glossed-over or omitted in

many reports of racial discrimination in housing. Was there ever housing discrimination experienced by Levittown and/or by Levittowners? Of course. I know somebody who came to New York City in 1962 and was told that the housing project she and her husband were looking at was “reserved for blacks” - so they moved to Levittown. Another family had difficulty obtaining a mortgage because a few of the realtors they encountered wanted a large down payment - preferably in cash “the way the Indians and Pakistanis do.” These, however, were isolated incidents and don’t represent the way Levittowners or the realtors in Levittown do business.

Levittown in 2010 continues to be a less racially diverse town than some other Nassau County communities because its houses fall into a narrower price range as a result of having been built in the same styles (Ranch and Cape), on the same sized plots of land (mostly 60x100), and around the same time period (1947-51). A house in Hicksville, for example, might be twice as expensive as a house across the street - something one wouldn’t expect in Levittown. Somebody from a lower income group who could not afford a particular house in Levittown probably could not afford any of the other houses in Levittown.

The notion that Levittown is “homogenous” is kicked around a lot. I’ve lived in the Hicksville/Levittown area since 1968. In those four decades, I’ve known Levittowners who were gay, straight, liberal Democrats, conservative Republicans, Jews, evangelical Christians, atheists, creationists, Darwinists, foreign-born, descendants of the Pilgrims, sports fans, anti-war protestors, decorated war heroes, musicians, writers, dancers, refrigerator magnet collectors, African violet growers, alcoholics, and tea drinkers. Certainly not the type to pull up stakes because they don’t like people who are different.

Paul Manton