

# Levittown Primary Source Documents

**Background:** Levittown refers to a series of large suburban developments designed by Levitt and Sons in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland. Built from 1947 into the 1950s, it was especially popular for returning veterans of World War 2. The Levittown was an iconic example of the 1950s shift to suburban living. The homes came with white picket fences, green lawns and new kitchen appliances.

- 1) In your own words, what is the historical significance of the Levittown? \_\_\_\_\_
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## **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 perspective 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.

## **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."

- 1) Describe some examples of race controversy surrounding Levittown: \_\_\_\_\_
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## **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.

- 2) What is Levitt's reason for not selling/renting to negroes? \_\_\_\_\_
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