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# The Legacy of Levittown: What the Post-WWII Suburbanization of Long Island Reveals about the Racial Wealth Gap Today

Molly Simons

Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut

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Molly Simons

Post-World War II America was a nation scrambling to fix its most severe problems. Two of those problems were a housing crisis and growing racial inequalities. Unfortunately for the Black community on Long Island, racial issues took a back seat to solving the housing shortage. These racist policies implemented by planned developments like Levittown led to decades of disenfranchisement and widened the racial wealth gap.

Levittown, New York was built between 1947 and 1951 for returning World War II veterans. At least, all the white ones. Levitt & Sons, the company responsible for building this suburban development, pioneered a method of an assembly line for working crews. The company, built 36 houses a day, each them on a 60-foot-by-100-foot plot.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of four years, Levitt and his company built 17,447 Cape Cod houses, each with a fully furnished kitchen, a 12-inch Admiral television, two bedrooms, and an unfinished attic.<sup>2</sup> For an ordinary American, a Levitt house sold for \$7,000 upfront,<sup>3</sup> but for veterans covered by the G.I Bill, the federal government and housing subsidies helped lower the cost to about \$400 upfront.<sup>4</sup> As the first mass produced suburb, Levittown became the prototype for what post-war suburbanization was going to look like in America. Unfortunately, that prototype did not include any minority families. Laid out in Clause 25 of the contract to buy a house in Levittown, the discrimination was explicit, “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 servant shall be permitted.”<sup>5</sup> This display of segregation “seems especially jarring” because the development was built as the very practice of segregation was fading away around it.<sup>6</sup> As the first Levitt houses were going up, less than thirty miles away, Jackie Robinson was breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball.<sup>7</sup> Segregation continued to crumble as a year later, President Truman integrated the military.<sup>8</sup> On Long Island however, segregation still existed in suburban developments. Eugene Burnett, a Black World War II veteran who was among thousands that “lined up for their green patch of the American Dream,” experienced this discrimination firsthand and was turned away from Levittown.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting on that segregation nearly 50 years later, he said, “It’s symbolic of segregation in America. That’s the legacy of Levittown.” That legacy of Long Island suburban towns, the legacy of discrimination and segregation, was what created a lasting difference between the wealth of white towns like Levittown and Black towns like Roosevelt.

Roosevelt, New York started as a small trading post between the larger town in the center of Long Island, Hempstead, and a trading harbor on the south shore of Long Island, Freeport.<sup>10</sup> Roosevelt continued to be a small village until about 1900 when the first summer homes started to spring up around the area.<sup>11</sup> Similar to many other Long Island towns, much of Roosevelt’s development was contingent on the railroad system and the use of the electric trolley car. Roosevelt continued to develop into a small community until the late 1950s and early 1960s when the racial dynamic of many Long Island towns started to shift.<sup>12</sup> Once discriminatory practices like those of Levittown were implemented, white families started to move to white-only communities and Roosevelt became increasingly Black. Over the next twenty years, Roosevelt’s white population shrunk from over 80% to almost 10%.<sup>13</sup> Because so many Black families were moving into Long Island suburbs, the government stopped investing in Black communities like

Roosevelt. One Roosevelt resident, Bernice “Bunny” Frisby recounted the time when her family moved from Queens to Roosevelt, mostly white at the time, saying “I was looking for everything in the storybooks.”<sup>14</sup> Ms. Frisby added that she “thought the neighborhood would stay intact,” but unfortunately Roosevelt’s Tax base disappeared, the public schools slipped into a decline, and the area became a “dumping ground for welfare families.”<sup>15</sup>

Roosevelt, however, did not need to become disenfranchised. There were two establishments that contributed to the development of both Levittown and Roosevelt. The Federal Government and the Real Estate industry assisted in widening the wealth gap between white and Black families. Levittown was built in the early 1950s so for about twenty years, it was legal to discriminate on the basis of race in housing contracts. This was outlined explicitly in Clause 25 of the Levitt house contracts. This whites-only rule was not only representative of Levittown, but of the entire country’s views on integration.

Because Levittown had been built for World War II veterans, Black veterans came back from the war hoping that there would be affordable housing available. They were wrong, discontented, and Levittown then became a “microcosm of that frustration.”<sup>16</sup> Although Black veterans were denied housing in Levittown, that did not stop Levitt from selling a house to one former German U-boat sailor.<sup>17</sup> A community of World War II veterans believed that it was acceptable to live next to the very enemy many of them had fought against, but that it was not acceptable to sell a neighboring house to Black people who had fought alongside them. Still, this discrimination was defended by Levitt who stated over and over that he himself was not racist, but that he was just following the social customs of the time. Levitt maintained his position saying,

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.<sup>18</sup>

Mr. Burnett, the Black veteran who was turned away from Levittown, details his conversation with the white salesman who 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.”<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Burnett echoed her husband’s sentiments and expressed her frustration with the fact that the government allowed this policy saying, “I can understand an individual, depending on his environment or his family or whatever, being racist, but for your country to sanction it, to give him the tools to do that, there’s something definitely wrong there.”<sup>20</sup>

The government, while not overtly racist, sanctioned the racist practice of redlining. Redlining is the process in which the government would rate neighborhoods by colors, determining whether they would offer a loan to a family who lived there. Financially stable neighborhoods would be marked as green and areas deemed to be financially poor or at risk, were lined in red. Unfortunately, the practice of redlining was racist. In the 1930s, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) warned banks that “the presence of even one or two non-white families could undermine the real estate values of a neighborhoods.”<sup>21</sup> That meant that if a neighborhood had only one Black family in it, the area would be marked as red, and loans would not be distributed to those who live there or those who wanted to move there. Since those loans then poured into mostly white or “green” neighborhoods, the houses in those areas became more affordable and FHA subsidized mortgages made it easier for home values to increase. These

loans then helped influence how the real estate industry went about moving many white people into white neighborhoods. The G.I. Bill, like redlining, helped provide loans to those families that the government deemed low-risk in letting borrow money. This almost never included Black families. The G.I. Bill also helped many white veteran families enter the middle class while continuing to disenfranchise Black veterans.<sup>22</sup>

In 1969, the Federal Housing Act mandated that racial language be removed from all housing contracts. While this ended sanctioned discrimination, underlying racial biases still existed, especially in real estate. Since Black families were barred from getting government loans or mortgages, they were “steered into all Black communities.”<sup>23</sup> White families were also directed, but it was out of places that real estate agents thought were becoming Black. The process of encouraging white families to leave their neighborhoods to move into white communities is called blockbusting. Blockbusting occurred when real estate agents played on the fear that whites had of integrating races, encouraging them to sell their houses quickly and for less than market value. These houses were then resold to Black families at higher prices. In these instances, it was not Black families moving in that caused housing values to go down, it was white families moving out.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, middle- and working-class Black families moved from New York City to south shore towns on Long Island like Roosevelt and neighboring Freeport.<sup>24</sup> Real estate agents and blockbusting continued to drive up white flight and Roosevelt resident Diana Coleman articulated how it felt to see blockbusting in action, saying “You wouldn’t even see the real estate sign—people just sold in the middle of the night.”<sup>25</sup> Coleman described it as “the greatest white flight ever.”<sup>26</sup> It truly was an enormous shift in the demographic of Roosevelt, as in 1960 the Black population was about 20% and by 1980 Roosevelt was nearly 90% Black.<sup>27</sup> Blockbusting and white flight did not only shift the demographics of Roosevelt but they also shifted the tax base. Since no banks were willing to lend money to Black families especially in a place like Roosevelt, the communities had to deal with dwindling resources and declining schools.<sup>28</sup> Ms. Frisby, whose family moved from Queens to Roosevelt, said “I am forever conscious and aware of my loss by staying here, but it’s my home.”<sup>29</sup> Frisby then explained how her house would sell for considerably more if it was in the neighboring town, Merrick. The one thing that separates Roosevelt and Merrick, the Meadowbrook Parkway, was one of the reasons that the towns were able to remain so segregated. The Meadowbrook Parkway was designed by Robert Moses in his system of parkways that connected all of Long Island. Moses helped facilitate the racial divide between many towns by putting up permanent barriers between them.

These permanent barriers have only increased the racial wealth gap today. Even after 50 years of the Fair Housing Act, “Black Americans and other minorities are still waiting for the protection of full citizenship under the law, and in everyday life.”<sup>30</sup> Today, people are discovering solutions to reduce the wealth gap like subsidizing mortgages and providing extra services to low-income Black families. Raj Chetty, an Indian-American economist, spoke with Ezra Klein on a podcast about the American dream and the process of moving low-income families to areas that will help them gain wealth.<sup>31</sup> Chetty discussed the Creating Moves to Opportunity Project (CMO), a study done in Seattle that ran a randomized trial of about 500 families who applied for housing vouchers.<sup>32</sup> These families usually received housing vouchers around \$1,500 a month, but would still rent an apartment in a “high-poverty, low-opportunity area.”<sup>33</sup> Chetty’s study found that when those families received “search assistance” they were much more likely to move to high-opportunity communities.<sup>34</sup> The assistance provided was a

counselor who “spends time with them, helps them find units that might work for their families in high-opportunity areas, helps contact landlords in order to identify suitable units, and also provides some financial assistance averaging about \$1,000 per family to pay deposits or initial bills.”<sup>35</sup> This simple task of assigning a counselor to a family helped increase the percentage of families moving to high-opportunity areas from 18% to about 60%.<sup>36</sup> An over 40% increase was an incredible amount of support for the idea of the study; that helping families put subsidized loans to work in beneficial ways was more impactful than just throwing money at the families.

However, for these policies and ideas to be enacted, the government must represent the people who need this help. For Roosevelt, representation in its local government is challenging as it is not a town or village. Designated as an unincorporated hamlet within the Town of Hempstead, Roosevelt has almost no local leaders who actually live in Roosevelt neighborhoods. Roosevelt is still dependent on both the Town of Hempstead and Nassau County to mend many of its problems, but many of the remedies for these problems have not been successful since the town and county are both controlled by affluent whites.<sup>37</sup> Sheldon Parrish, a Roosevelt resident, described this lack of representation and said, “We’re not an incorporated village so many of the decisions that are made about this place are made by other people, and we have to live by them.”<sup>38</sup> More problems in government arise when discussing ways to help fund Roosevelt because of something president of ERASE Racism, Elaine Gross calls “government fragmentation.”<sup>39</sup> Long Island, aside from having many different counties, towns, and villages, also has an unusually high number of school districts.<sup>40</sup> The public school system and funds get stretched thin. Schools are another area where lessening the differences between districts like Levittown and Roosevelt could help close the racial wealth gap. These school systems, while not overtly racist are still fairly segregated. This is a problem because research has shown that “integration is still one of the most effective tools that we have for achieving racial equity.”<sup>41</sup> Simple actions like fully integrating schools and representation in government could go a long way in helping close the racial wealth gap.

Levittown and Roosevelt are the prime example of how racist policies in the past are still affecting the Black community today. The explicit racism exhibited by Levitt, Robert Moses, and white real estate agents had directly led to many of the wealth inequalities between white and Black families seen today. Levittown and Roosevelt are two places which show the long-lasting effects of racism today, but also have the potential to show that these inequalities have solutions that once put in place, will help many low-income Black families.

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