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Real Estate, Racial Change, and Bloomfield Schools in the 1960s and '70s

Bloomfield, a town in the metropolitan Hartford region of Connecticut, is one of several suburbs surrounding the central city. Differing from other surrounding towns, the history behind the demographics of Bloomfield is particularly unique. In the 1950's Bloomfield had a very small black population. But during the 1960s and '70s, Bloomfield experienced a significant increase in the black population that was partly due to racially biased real estate practices. The racial transformation of the town is significant because the racial change of Bloomfield schools happened faster than the racial change of the town. Although Bloomfield was honored with an "All American City" award for racial integration in 1970, the reputation of Bloomfield Public Schools declined in part due to traditional white values, which equated the quality of a school with the increasingly black racial composition of its students. While some Bloomfield residents made attempts to change biased real estate practices, resistance was not always effective in stopping "forced" racial change in Bloomfield. Based on knowledge concerning the changing population of this town, I have investigated two questions: How have real estate markets affected the racial transformation of Bloomfield? And what relation do these changes have on its public schools? While this research focused on the influence of real estate practices on racial change in Bloomfield, it is important to acknowledge that other factors that may have also impacted this town's population.

Contemporary studies have revealed that biased real estate practices were not isolated to Bloomfield. Edmondson Village a community located in West Baltimore also experienced a racial transformation less than a decade due the real estate market.¹ Also, Kevin Fox Gotham examines the contribution of the real estate industry in influencing the racial change in schools and neighborhoods.²

Studying Bloomfield also required the use of secondary sources relating directly to this town. Amongst these materials was Everett C. Ladd's *Ideology in America*, which described the racial change in Bloomfield, but contained limited information on the real estate market and schools.³ In addition, *From Wintonbury to Bloomfield*, written by the Wintonbury Historical Society, provided information on the history of Bloomfield while it contained brief information on racial change.

Additional research methods included the investigation of primary sources. Amongst these sources were newspaper clippings that allowed the relationship between racial turnover and lawsuits against realtors. The Bloomfield Town Council Minutes allowed real estate controversies to be understood through accounts of racial turnover on certain streets. In Bloomfield Board of Education Minutes, allowed for the examination of how school board members responded to the racial imbalance in Bloomfield Schools.

Research on Bloomfield also required conducting oral history interviews with individuals residing in Bloomfield during the 60's and 70's and people who played active roles in the town during this time. There were four different categorizations for the interview candidates. These categories include *key historical actors*, who were town

¹ Orser, W. Edward. *Blockbusting in Baltimore*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994

² Gotham, Kevin Fox Gotham. *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development: Kansas City From 1900 to 2000*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002

³ Ladd, Jr. Everett Carroll. *Ideology in America: Change in Response in a City, a Suburb, and a Small Town*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969.

officials and special interest leaders (i.e. Mayor, Human Relations Commission), *Bloomfield educators* who were administrators and school officials, *residents living on selected streets*, people living on streets identified as experiencing racial turnover, and *real estate agents*, realtors and specific agencies who sold property in Bloomfield. These individuals were contacted through the use of City-Suburban Directories from the 1970's to the present.

Street-level analysis was also conducted where market values and assessed values were collected from property cards. Additional information taken from these cards also included the purchase prices of homes and when they were sold. Names of the homeowners between the 60's and 70's were also recorded. This information was used to determine the turnover of certain neighborhoods. Streets mentioned in archival documents because they were suspected of experiencing block-busting (an illegal real estate practice where residents are persuaded to move because of racial fears against people moving into a neighborhood) were compared with other streets located on the southeastern section of Bloomfield. Altogether, the comparison of 13 streets in the southern section of Bloomfield altogether revealed that there was no significant difference between those that were identified as racial transitional and those that were not.

Upon understanding the process of Bloomfield's racial change, it is important to understand its geological relation to Hartford. The southeastern section of Bloomfield borders Hartford. This particular section of Bloomfield had a run-down appearance while other sections of Bloomfield were economically stable. During the 1950's, small population changes occurred, however, these changes did not affect the town's ability to

maintain a predominantly white population. Starting in 1950, the population of the town had changed by 4%, to 6% in 1960 and 13% by 1967.⁴

The racial change that occurred in Bloomfield during the 1960's and 70's was due largely to illegal real estate practices where realtors influenced the choices of homeowners and homebuyers through illegal housing practices. Among these practices was blockbusting where realtors played on the racial fears of white homeowners and persuaded them to move out of their neighborhoods due to the increasing black population. The occurrence of block-busting can be evidenced by the happenings on one particular street in Bloomfield located on the southeastern section of Bloomfield. Alexander Road was stable and integrated in 1969. By 1973, residents of Alexander suspected that block-busting was occurring on their street. According to a comparison of city directories in 1970 and 1975, this neighborhood experienced a turnover of 41%. While this number alone cannot verify racial change, what is interesting is that in the early 70's white Alexander Road residents reported receiving phone calls and solicitations from realtors urging them to move. In 1974, the courant reported statements made by Roy Litchfield, a white resident of 18 Alexander Road who said, "He has received phone calls from agents since he bought his home in 1968. The white panic since then, which he says fed by real estatesmen has made Litchfield part of the white minority on the street."⁵ White concerns about racial changes in Bloomfield were expressed at Town Council meetings. In 1974 Town Council meeting, one white woman expressed her concern with the racial change in her neighborhood. "Block-busting...within the last year and a half on West Eggleston Street we've had about 7

⁴ Ladd, Jr. Everett Caroll. *Ideology in America: Change in Response in a City, a Suburb, and a Small Town*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p.109

⁵ 2 Feb 1974. *Bloomfield Residents Score Real Estate Sales Practices*. Hartford Courant.

homes sold, and out of that 7 homes, 6 of them sold to black families.”⁶ In addition, Robert Shumsky of Old Village Road, shared his experience with his white neighbors insistence on not selling his home to a white family; “...the majority of the people that were brought to our house were black. We didn’t mind selling at all to white, black, gray, or whatever. We did sell to a white family; and I think our neighbors were relieved; they were all set out to say to us ‘please don’t sell to blacks.’”⁷

Realtors were also involved in another illegal housing practice, racial steering, where homebuyers were steered from purchasing homes in racially mixed neighborhoods and encouraged to purchase homes in predominantly white locations instead. In Bloomfield, white homebuyers were persuaded to move to surrounding suburbs. In 1974, John Keever, a white homebuyer reported that a realtor attempted to discourage him from purchasing a home in Bloomfield. Keever reports, “The salesman offered elaborate descriptions of West Hartford, Avon and other towns, but provided negative information about Bloomfield.”⁸ In addition Norma LeFebvre an outspoken Bloomfield resident and active member of the town’s school board reports that a realtor also attempted to detour a friend from purchasing a home in Bloomfield. “The realtor told my friend ‘I can show you a house just like this in Windsor’.”⁹

Many Bloomfield residents moved as a result of the changing racial populations in their neighborhoods while other Bloomfield residents remained and resisted against the illegal housing practices that influenced racial composition on certain streets. Organized resistance took place in many forms. Amongst them were efforts by the Human Relations

⁶ 15 May 1973, Town Council Minutes.

⁷ 13 Feb 1973, Town Council Minutes.

⁸ 24 Feb 1974. *Bloomfield Residents Lead Fight To Keep Town’s Housing Open*. Hartford Courant.

⁹ Norma LeFebvre, interview with Aleesha Young, August 11, 2005.

Commission, a group created by the Town Council and Board of Education. Members of the Human Relations are representative of individuals who have involvements with community services of the town, such involvements include, and superintendents of schools, people were working for the youth task forces and recreational programs in Bloomfield. The Humans Relations Commission was formed as a means to continue to provide services to Bloomfield residents.¹⁰ In 1973, in response to accounts and suspicions of block-busting and incidents of racial steering, the Human Relations Commission worked to pass an ordinance prohibiting real estate solicitation. They battled of illegal real estate practices by the Human Relations Commission also reached the regional officials of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD attempted to help the Commission deal with this issue.¹¹ Under this new ordinance, it was illegal for realtors to call or persistently persuade residents to move out of Bloomfield or steer residents to other towns on the basis of race. In 1976, the Human Relations Commission ensued more restrictions on realtors. Realtors working in Bloomfield had to abide by limitations that required all ‘for sale’ signs having to be the same size and could only be obtained by the town. In addition, there were also limitations on the time periods for which these signs could be displayed.¹² Two years later in 1978, the Human Relations Commission also established a Regional Task Force for Real Estate Auditing and Testing. The testing would focus on investigating real estate firms in the Greater Hartford area. It was decided that the committee would focus on the 7 largest firms in the area and attempt to conduct 3 tests per local office to reach a goal of testing 42 real estate tests per

¹⁰ 12 Sept 1978, Town Council Minutes.

¹¹ 12 Oct 1973. *HUD Officials To Visit, Hear Complaints of Bias*. Hartford Courant.

¹² 11 Feb 1976, Human Relations Commission.

month.¹³ According to Adelle Wright, Chairperson of the Human Relations Commission, “...we set up teams of a black couple and a white couple...whether or not they were shown something of a similar price in some place besides Bloomfield –that was critical.”¹⁴ Louis Schiavone, also a member of the Humans Relations Commission and active faculty member in Bloomfield schools, also shared further detail in the real estate testing. “Steering...home steering, we would actually go into homes and ask realtors why they sold to black or white or whatever it might have been. Some of the answers were hair raising.”¹⁵ Much of the organized group resistance required lengthy committee meetings and the involvement of dedicated committee members disappointed with the residential injustices of their town.

While group resistance battled real estate practices, there were also key historical actors who attempted to use their positions in the town to implement change. One of these prominent actors in the town was Lewis Rome, Bloomfield’s mayor in 1970 who attempted to use his role to oppose biased real estate practices. He saw his position in the Capitol Region Council of governments, a voluntary association of municipal governments serving Hartford and surrounding communities, as a way to convince the Chamber of Commerce, an industry whose purpose is to serve businesses throughout the Greater Hartford area to promote the right to see properties any where regardless of color, race, and creed.”¹⁶ While his efforts were praised by other political leaders of the town, it was difficult to obtain meaningful support from leaders of the town who had power to promote effective change.

¹³ 9 Jan 1978, Human Relations Commission.

¹⁴ Adelle Wright interview with Meredith Murphy and Aleesha Young, April 11, 2005

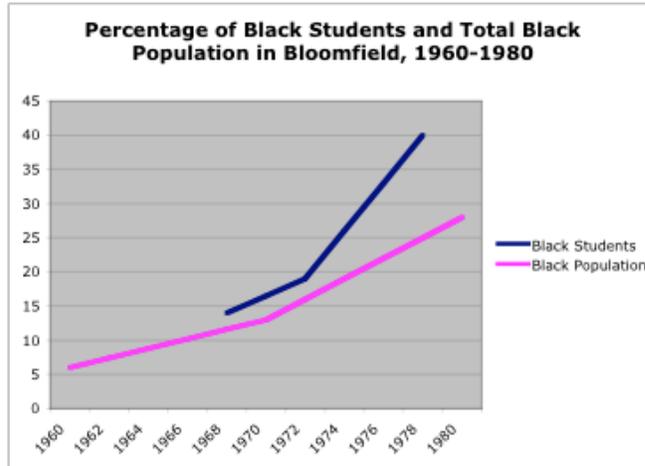
¹⁵ Louis Schiavone interview with Aleesha Young, August 22, 2005

¹⁶ Lewis Rome interview with Aleesha Young, August 15, 2005

In addition to racial changes occurring in the town, similar racial transformation was also occurring in Bloomfield schools. The representations of the school were becoming increasingly black. This change was disturbing to many people of the town where traditional white perceptions are the most dominant. The dominant white perceptions represent negative associations of black people. Blacks are often viewed as drug dealers, welfare abusers, engaging in criminal activity, and have low socioeconomic statuses. Thus, the reputation of Bloomfield schools declined because traditional white views of school quality are based on racial composition of schools. “White families discriminate against non-white schools, not necessarily out of blatant prejudice against non-white, but because they perceive schools enrolling unusually large numbers of non-white students to be inferior and which to place their children in more ethnically homogeneous schools which they perceive to be inferior.”¹⁷ Not only had the racial composition of schools changed, but more significantly, the racial composition of the schools happened faster than the town. Perhaps the reason for this was because people have less control over the population of a town, whereas they could decide where their children attended school. In 1972, the black town population was 20% to the schools 30% black population. These percentages grew in 1980 to a 40% black population in schools to the 25% black population of the town.¹⁸

¹⁷ Jackson, Kenneth T, *Crabgrass Frontiers*. New York: Oxford University Press 1985, p.238

¹⁸ *Dist of Minority Pupils and Staff in the Public Schools CSDE*, 1960, 1970, 1980



(Dist. Of Minority Pupils and Staff in the Public Schools CSDE, 1960, 1970, 1980)

In Bloomfield, during the 60's and 70's as the population changes occurred, school board members, parents, and town officials became concerned with the racial imbalance of the town's public schools. Because there was only one high school, the primary concern was the racial imbalance in the elementary schools. There were five elementary schools in Bloomfield; Metacomet, Laurel, J.P Vincent, the Wintonbury School, and the Blue Hills School. Laurel and J.P Vincent received the most concern given their mostly white population, while the Blue Hills School also received attention since it had a large black student population.

In 1966, the concern of Board of Education members was the increasing black population of the Blue Hills School. Many believe that the influence of the influx of blacks was partly due to it's location at the southeastern section of Bloomfield seeing that this part of the town borders Hartford, a city of predominantly black residents. At a Board of Education meeting, one member stated, "The Blue Hills School contains most of the elementary school children residing in this community. We have strong evidence that this factor effected the housing situation in the Pershing Park section of town."¹⁹ Because

¹⁹ 7 Jun 1966. *Intergroup Unit Urges Board to Approve School Census*. Hartford Times

racial change was occurring so rapidly in schools, discussions among the Board of Education regarding this issue were held during the early 60's. This time is much earlier than when concerns about block-busting and racial steering developed in the late 60's and early 70's.

Upon implementing voluntary school busing, Board of Education Members worked to identify new school zone boundaries. Most members of the Board were opposed to this redistricting because it placed emphasis on race. However, a white parent and a vocal member of the Board of Education, Norma LeFebvre argued that a racial census should be taken. "On my first term I made a motion that we conduct a count of whites versus blacks in the schools so that each school would be representative of the town."²⁰ She felt that the Board of education should take on a leadership role in the de facto segregation of the Blue Hills School. Through much heated debate, the Board of Education members decided that a racial census would be conducted. In 1966 a motion was passed to determine the racial representation of the Blue Hills School. These reports revealed that the school was 42% non-white.²¹

1967 reports from the Board of Education revealed the growing black population of the Blue Hills. The report revealed that the elementary school had a population of 42.7% in contrast to lower non-white populations in the other elementary schools; the non-white numbers were 1.5% at Vincent, 1.7% at Laurel, 8.2% at Wintonbury, and 10.2% at Metacomet.²² By 1969, there were black population at the Blue Hills elementary school changed once again. "The Blue Hills School was presently 51% non-white. The Board requested the citizens committee to intensify the program to get more children to

²⁰ Norma LeFebvre, interview with Aleesha Young, August 11, 2005

²¹ 17 Apr 1967, Board of Education Minutes

²² 17 Apr 1967, Board of Education Minutes

bus out of the Blue Hills School.”²³ The also requested that other figures are taken from previous racial censuses. Although the white and non-white population of the Blue Hills School was nearly equal, school officials recognized this as a racial imbalance. Some members of the Board proposed the construction of a new school that would help the desegregation of the Blue Hills School. However, they turned away from that idea and saw voluntary busing as a solution to this ‘problem.’

In these public Board of Education meetings, white parents of the town voiced their opposition to redistricting on the basis that they did not want their children being bused to other schools. Many parents were concerned with the long bus ride. Norma LeFebvre commented, “A lot of the kids were on the bus a long time. They lived over on the west side and they went to Vincent School [Vincent is located in the north part of Bloomfield].”²⁴

Much of the reason, the Board of Education decided on voluntary busing, had to a lot to do with the disagreement among other board members and parents to forcefully redistrict. “Voluntary busing would permit those parents in the two elementary schools with a white racial imbalance, namely Laurel and Vincent Schools to volunteer to transfer their children to the Blue Hills School; it would permit parents of non-white children to Laurel or Vincent.”²⁵ Despite attempts to voluntary busing, was an opportunity that many people took advantage of in 1969. While 84 black students agreed to leave the Blue Hills School and the 9 white students who volunteered to leave Laurel and Vincent, these numbers were not significant enough to create significant change. Around 1970 a new middle school was built so that children in grades 5, 6, and 7 would attend the same

²³ 9 Sept 1969, Board of Education Minutes

²⁴ Norma LeFebvre, interview with Aleesha Young, August 11, 2005

²⁵ 1 Jun 1967. *Voluntary Busing Asked to Gain Racial Balance*. Hartford Times

school whether they were from Blue Hills Avenue or Park, two physical ends of the town.

Around the 1970's, the idea of redistricting resurfaced. An Advisory Committee for Redistricting Guidelines developed. The committee attempted to develop redistricting strategies. However due to the new housing developments in 1973 it was it was decided that redistricting would not occur that year. In 1974, the matter of redistricting was discussed, this time with further progress as to how this task would be executed. The town was divided into residential locations from, which it was decided which elementary schools children in those areas would attend. While redistricting eventually occurred, the location of school zone boundaries remains unclear.

While concerns of racial imbalance were an issue in the lower grade levels, fears of racial violence was a fundamental problem at high school. Howard Wetstone, a member of the Board of education in the 1960's mentioned, "People said that blacks would form gangs in BHS"²⁶ White perceptions regarding Bloomfield Public Schools have steadily declined. According to Norma LeFebvre, people took their children out of Bloomfield Schools during the 60's because, "they didn't want them dating blacks and they didn't think they could get into good schools coming from Bloomfield. I know a lot of people moved to Simsbury in particular."²⁷ Negative perceptions with the schools influenced parents to send their children to private or suburban schools with better reputations. Peter Marsele, another white resident of Bloomfield stated that he sent his children to private schools during the 60's and 70's in particular because he wanted a

²⁶ Howard Wetstone, interview with Aleesha Young, August 12, 2005

²⁷ Norma LeFebvre, interview with Aleesha Young, August 11, 2005

disciplined education that he did not feel confident Bloomfield schools could provide.²⁸ It was thought by both black and white parents that black students were not being disciplined effectively. The issue often surfaced that faculty were afraid to reprimanding black students.²⁹ This uneasiness about not controlling the black student body also contributed to negative views of Bloomfield Schools.

Resistance from key historical actors and residents of Bloomfield challenged the illegal real estate practice that occurred in this town. Although these illegal practices were confronted, real estate market succeeded in influencing racial change. The impact of the real estate market in Bloomfield and its schools is evident seeing that the black population in the town and the schools steadily increased during the 60's and 70's.

In 2000 reports reveal that about half of Bloomfield's citizens are black, while the schools continue to be predominantly black. Up to this point, it appears while there is no longer a racial imbalance in the town; Bloomfield's School system has not recovered from its damaged reputation.

²⁸ Peter Marsele, interview with Aleesha Young, August 23, 2005

²⁹ 15 Feb 1971, *Residents Say School Officials 'Afraid to Discipline Black Students.'* Hartford Courant