

# THE OTHER CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: INTEGRATING LEVITTOWN

**GRADE LEVEL:** 9-12

## INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the State Museum of Pennsylvania mounted an exhibit to mark Levittown, Pennsylvania's fiftieth anniversary. The show uses photographs, drawings, film, advertisements, and maps to describe the town's creation and lifestyle in a largely complementary fashion. Using primary sources, students will uncover an alternative story that this exhibit ignores. Levittown, like many northern suburbs in the middle of the twentieth century, excluded African Americans, a fact only briefly mentioned in the exhibit. In 1957, Daisy and Bill Myers desegregated Levittown. Their presence illustrated both opposition to racial equality and growing support for equal rights in that community. Working in teams, students use newspaper articles, letters, photographs, newsreels, and short excerpts written by scholars to determine where and how to integrate the Myers's story into the exhibit. This exercise will illustrate that racial discrimination and the Civil Rights Movement were not confined to the south, but instead were national phenomena the consequences of which we still live with today.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Most U.S. history textbooks tell a classic tale of the Civil Rights Movement, which begins in 1954, with *Brown vs. Board of Education*, climaxes in 1965 with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and then unravels in 1968, with the twin assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the rise of the separatist Black Power Movement and U.S. engagement in Vietnam, and the election of Richard Nixon to the presidency. This traditional narrative places racial discrimination and the movement against it in the south, emphasizes Martin Luther King's leadership in the movement, and portrays him as struggling for a color-blind society. It does not, however, emphasize more radical redistribution of socio-economic resources.

Recent scholarship, in contrast, argues that the Civil Rights Movement was a longer, more complicated phenomenon than that traditional narrative implies. Such scholars focus on racial tensions and *de facto* segregation that existed in the industrial North concerning job discrimination, schooling, busing, housing, and affirmative action.

The desegregation of Levittown in Bucks County, Pennsylvania well illustrates this story. Following the policy of its developer Bill Levitt, Levittown, PA was built in 1952 as an exclusively white suburb (population size: 60,000). This was not unusual at the time. Between 1935 and 1960, dozens of postwar suburbs kept out African Americans. Although the Supreme Court ruled racial covenants to be unconstitutional in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), federal housing policies subsidizing housing construction and new mortgages, private neighborhood agreements, and real estate agents kept *de facto* racial exclusions in place at a time when suburbs were rapidly expanding. Such racially based divisions had -- and continue to have -- profound

consequences, since where people live affects their educational options, work opportunities, and quality of life.

On August 14, 1957, just two weeks before the Little Rock Nine tried to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, William Myers, a World War II veteran and refrigeration technician, moved with his wife Daisy, who was a school teacher, and their three young children into 43 Deepgreen Lane to desegregate Levittown, PA. Like the Little Rock Nine, the Myers family faced sharp opposition and constant harassment. Anti-segregationists, who feared a loss of property values and expressed broader racist sentiments regularly paraded outside the Myers's home and burned crosses on their lawn. They even sprayed "KKK" on the home of the Myers's Jewish neighbors, Lewis and Bea Wechsler, committed racial integrationists who supported the Myers's move. When local police initially failed to enforce a court order that no more than three people congregate near the Myers's home at one time, Attorney General Thomas D. McBride sent in the State Police to protect the Myers.

The Myers family's move to Levittown, PA highlighted both northerners' racism as well as their growing struggles for civil rights. Just as anti-integrationists secured a house next door to the Myers to use as headquarters to harass the black family (they even hung a Confederate flag from their building), civil rights activists within the community worked with local Quaker and human rights groups, including the Human Relations Council of Bucks County, to aid the Myers. The Myers took to court the racist mob leaders who were harassing them and won the case. Levitt officially integrated his communities in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey in 1960, after the New Jersey Supreme Court declared unconstitutional Levitt's policy of excluding blacks in a charge brought against the developer by a black officer named W.R. James who sought to move into Willingboro, New Jersey's equivalent of Levittown, built in 1958.

Despite such legal rulings, black buyers did not flood into Levittown communities. A second family moved into Levittown, PA in 1958, but the Myers left the following year exhausted by their struggles to integrate the community. Despite an increased openness to integrated housing among homeowners in the North East, government loan policies, real estate agents' practices, and divisions within municipal governments maintained northern segregation. As whites increasingly moved to the suburbs, blacks found themselves in racially isolated inner cities that were, by the 1970s, losing capital, jobs, businesses, public services, and a tax base to white suburbs, small towns, and eventually the sunbelt and then abroad. Despite the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968 prohibiting discrimination in the sale of houses, realtors continue to this day to steer white potential homeowners to predominantly white neighborhoods and African Americans to mainly black or transitional areas. Such discriminatory practices affect blacks whether they are rich, poor, or in between. The continued racial segregation of Levittown, PA illustrates the persistence of such discrimination. In 1990, only 1% of Levittown, PA's population was white.

**THEMES:** racial discrimination, segregation, Civil Rights Movement, social justice, production of knowledge

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Following this activity, students will be able to:

1. Describe the integration of Levittown, PA and communal responses to it.
2. Recognize that racial discrimination occurred in the North as well as the South.
3. Understand that the Civil Rights Movement was a national phenomenon.
4. Comprehend how the stories we tell and those we ignore about the past shape our current understandings.

## NEW JERSEY STANDARDS

STANDARD 6.2.12.A (Social Studies): Evaluate current issues, events, or themes and trace their evolution through historical periods.

STANDARD 6.2.12.A (Social Studies): Gather, analyze, and reconcile information from primary and secondary sources to support or reject hypotheses.

STANDARD 6.4.12.K (History): Explain changes in the post war society of the United States and New Jersey, including the impact of television, the interstate highway system, the growth of the suburbs, and the democratization of education.

## MATERIALS

- A computer lab with Internet access
- Appendix A: Will Counts, AP Photo, Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957
- Appendix B: Crowds Gathering around the Myers House, August 1957 in *The First Stone: A Memoir of the Racial Integration of Levittown, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Grounds for Growth press, 2004), 25.
- Appendix C: “The First Stone” in Lewis Lechsler, *The First Stone*, 5.
- Appendix D: Lewis Wechsler with the KKK Written on his Home in Levittown, PA (September, 1957) in *The First Stone*, 66.
- Appendix E: Attorney General Thomas D. McBride to Bristol Township (Letter) in *The Inquirer*, October 9, 1957 in *The First Stone*, 92-93.
- Appendix F: D.C.M. to Lewis Weschsler (letter), Dec. 1957 in *The First Stone*, 118.
- Appendix G: Letter to Pennsylvania Governor Leader Regarding the Police Action in Protecting the Myers’ Family, N.D.
- Appendix H: Concord Park Civic Association, “In Levittown” in *The First Stone*, 124.
- Appendix I: Lower Bucks County Council of Churches, “Statement Concerning Fair Housing Practices.”
- Appendix J: Richard W. Reichard to Governor George M. Leader, August 19, 1957.
- Appendix K: “Crisis in Levittown, Pennsylvania,” documentary film produced by Lee Bobker and Lester Becker as part of “A Series on Changing Neighborhoods,” Dynamic Films (1957) (available online at [http://www.archive.org/details/crisis\\_in\\_levittown\\_1957](http://www.archive.org/details/crisis_in_levittown_1957)), (31 min.):

- Appendix L: “Race and Gender: An Ideal Community?” *Electronic New Jersey: A Digital History of New Jersey* (2004) (available online at <http://www2.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/MassConsumerism/Suburb/Race.htm>)

## DETAILS OF ACTIVITY

If possible, ask students to read/explore/view all or part of the following sources before class:

- “Levittown, PA: Building the Suburban Dream,” an on-line exhibit created by the State Museum of Pennsylvania in 2003 (located at <http://web1.fandm.edu/levittown/one/a.html>).
- Appendices B-L.

### **Part 1: The Other Civil Rights Movement (20 min.):**

Introduce students to the idea that the Civil Rights Movement was a national phenomenon by showing them a photograph of Elizabeth Eckford of the Little Rock Nine desegregating Central High School (Appendix A). Do not include any text with the image. Ask students the following questions:

1. What is going on in this scene? What is the main tension?
2. What do you think the white woman in the center of the frame is saying?
3. What do you think the black woman in the foreground is thinking?
4. When and where do you think this photo was taken?

Tell students that this photograph was taken in September 1957, three years after the Supreme Court declared racially segregated education to be unconstitutional. It illustrates Elizabeth Eckford, one of the nine black teenagers who desegregated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Explain that the students faced hecklers, including the white woman pictured here, and that the Arkansas National Guardsmen did not allow them into the school until Eisenhower federalized them and ordered them to protect the teenagers who were desegregating the school.

Show students photographs of the mob that gathered around the Myers house in August 1957 (Appendix B). Again, do not include text and ask students what is happening in these images, and what the police officer is thinking. Ask them where and when they think the photo was taken. Tell students that this image was taken in Levittown, PA in Bucks County when a black family, Bill and Daisy Myers and their three small children, desegregated the community. Give a brief background of Levittown and the movement to integrate it. Explain that racial discrimination and the Civil Rights Movement were national phenomena.

### **Part 2: Levittown Turns Fifty (20 min.)**

Have students explore “Levittown, PA: Building the Suburban Dream,” an on-line exhibit created by the State Museum of Pennsylvania in 2003 located at <http://web1.fandm.edu/levittown/one/a.html>. Ask them to look for how the exhibit addresses the

issue of racial and ethnic diversity. As they try to understand why the exhibit glosses over segregation, have them click on the “Exhibit Contributors” to see who helped to create the exhibit. In particular, point out the presence of the Levittown 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee and ask how they might have influenced the exhibit’s inclusions and exclusions.

**Part 3: Integrating Levittown (20 min.)**

Divide the class into groups. Drawing on the newspaper articles, letters, photographs, newsreels, and short excerpts written by scholars in appendices B-L that document Levittown’s desegregation, each group should discuss how they would incorporate that story into the exhibit. Where would they add it? Which sources would they include? How would they annotate them?

**Part 4: Concluding Discussion (20 min.)**

Groups should share their ideas and then discuss as a whole what affect this inclusion would have on the exhibit as a whole.

**Follow-up Activity #1:**

Working in the same teams, students should create alternative exhibits that integrate the story of Levittown’s desegregation and that might also explore the experiences of women in suburbs in greater depth than the State Museum of Philadelphia’s show does. Students should select and annotate photographs, texts, and artifacts and literally put their shows on the wall. After students have viewed one another’s version of the exhibit, they should discuss how including the story of Levittown’s desegregation affects the show’s general message.

**Folow-up Activity #2: Reviewing Levittown**

Students should write a review of “Levittown, PA: Building the Suburban Dream” in which they try to explain why the exhibit excluded the Myers’s story, how the exhibit might incorporate the story, and whether it matters if the exhibit includes or excludes the story. They should further comment on how Levittown’s racial exclusions and efforts to integrate the community affect their understanding of racial inequality and the Civil Rights Movement.

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**REFERENCES and WEBSITES:**

Matt Bell, et. al. “Desegregation and Little Rock” Teaching American History Project, 2009, [http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/currentprojects/TAHv3/Curricula/2009\\_Units/Desegregation\\_LittleRock\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/currentprojects/TAHv3/Curricula/2009_Units/Desegregation_LittleRock_Guide.pdf).

“Crisis in Levittown, Pennsylvania,” documentary film produced by Lee Bobker and Lester Becker as part of “A Series on Changing Neighborhoods,” Dynamic Films (1957), available online at [http://www.archive.org/details/crisis\\_in\\_levittown\\_1957](http://www.archive.org/details/crisis_in_levittown_1957).

David Kushner, *Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb*. New York: Walker and Company, 2009.

“Levittown, PA: Building the Suburban Dream,” *The State Museum of Pennsylvania* (2003), <http://web1.fandm.edu/levittown/one/default.html>.

Eric Ledell Smith and Kenneth C. Wolensky, "The Civil Rights Movement in Pennsylvania" *Historic Pennsylvania Leaflet No. 46* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 2004). *Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission* (2010). [http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/events/4279/civil\\_rights\\_movement/532945](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/events/4279/civil_rights_movement/532945).

Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*. New York: Random House, 2008, especially ch. 7.

Lewis Wechsler *The First Stone: A Memoir of the Racial Integration of Levittown, Pennsylvania*. Chicago: Grounds for Growth press, 2004.

Appendix A: Will Counts, AP Photo, Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957.



On September 2, 1957, three years after the Supreme Court declared racially segregated education to be unconstitutional, nine black teenagers including Elizabeth Eckford pictured here, tried to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. They were met by hecklers and the Arkansas National Guardsmen, who followed the instructions of Governor Orval Faubus rather than federal court orders to turn away Eckford and her classmates. On September 25th, President Eisenhower sent the 10th Airborne to Little Rock and federalized the Arkansas National Guard to protect the Little Rock Nine as they desegregated Central High. They continued to face harassment by fellow students throughout their time at Central High. Central High was not fully integrated until 1972.

Appendix B: Crowds Gathering around the Myers House, August 1957 in *The First Stone: A Memoir of the Racial Integration of Levittown, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Grounds for Growth press, 2004), 25.



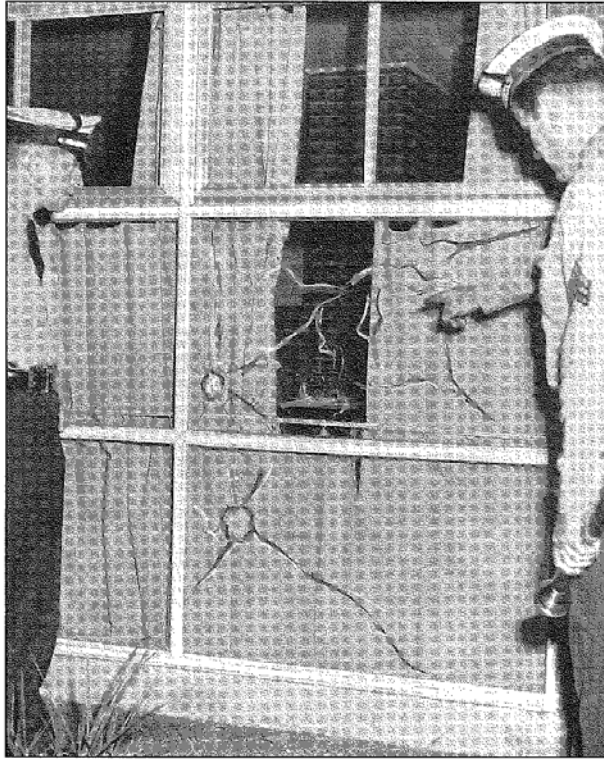
*Protests during the day . . .*



*Turned into a mob by night.*



Appendix C: “The First Stone” in Lewis Lechsler, *The First Stone*, 5.



*The first stone*

On August 14, 1957, the night after an African American family known as the Myers moved into the all white community of Levittown, PA, a group of teenagers gathered outside of the house and throw stones at it. Six stones hit the house and broke the window. The police arrived and arrested five people.

Appendix D: Lewis Wechsler with the KKK Written on his Home in Levittown, PA (September, 1957) in *The First Stone*, 66.



Appendix E: Attorney General Thomas D. McBride to Bristol Township (Letter) in *The Inquirer*, October 9, 1957 in *The First Stone*, 92-93.

“Myers and his family have been insulted personally by the occupants of passing cars and over the telephone, despite the fact that the telephone was unlisted. . . . Many persons had congregated in the vicinity of his home, and on one occasion a firecracker had been exploded on his lawn. He was informed that the next time it might not be merely a firecracker. On one occasion,” the Attorney General recalled, “a fiery cross was burned nearby, as a gesture of defiance, even while State Police were in the vicinity, and the infamous letters, KKK, were painted during the night on the house next door. I thought it to be of tremendous importance for this situation to be solved by local action, and that if it was so solved, you would take pride in the accomplishment. Nevertheless, I cannot, even if I would, avoid the obligation that falls on me as the chief law-enforcement officer of the Commonwealth; nor, in assuming my burden, does the responsibility fall from you of living up to yours. My recollection is that . . . [I said no State Police would be sent in] unless I felt that the police or those in authority would be unwilling or unable to see to it that full protection was given. I am convinced that your police force did not do all that could have been expected of it.”

Appendix F: D.C.M. to Lewis Weschsler (letter), Dec. 1957 in  
*The First Stone*, 118.

Winter Park, Fla.

Mr. Lewis Wechsler,

You should be ashamed before our heavenly father for encouraging Colored people to move into your community. ...I was foolish enough when living in Penna. through gross ignorance to be in favor of integration. I was here in Florida only a very few weeks when I got my eyes opened... when the races mix socially there is bound to be race mixing. Most people are dominated by animal nature. We need segregation because most people are dominated by their fleshy desires.

Lovingly in his services, D.C.M.

## Appendix G: Letter to Pennsylvania Governor Leader Regarding the Police Action in Protecting the Myers' Family, N.D.

Gov Leader, Dear Sir,

I think your handling of the Levittown situation is brutal and does not show good judgment on the part of one who is suppose to be Governor of our state. If you had ever lived near those savages, then you would know why people object to their moving into Levittown. Pardon me for not signing my name for it has reached the point where people like I are not free to express their opinions, thanks to people like you. See you at the Polls.

Appendix H: Concord Park Civic Association, "In Levittown" in *The First Stone*, 124.

## **IN LEVITTOWN**

To date five original buyers have reluctantly sold their homes, due to job relocation or other personal reasons. Each of these homes has been re-sold at an average of \$600 above the purchase price.

We believe that the fear of loss of value of homes, the fear of neighborhoods turning into unkept slums merely because of the race of the homeowners is groundless.

Many of us have young children. We expect to raise our children here and feel quite strongly that they will grow up healthy, normal Americans JUST BECAUSE they have lived and played among members of many races and religions.

We believe that our own experience so close to your own homes may be of value to you in deciding what to do about the first Negro family to move into Levittown.

We believe on the basis of our own experience that there is only one thing to do and that is to welcome this family as you would any other family, and especially to refrain from action which undermines the good and democratic name of your community.

## **CONCORD PARK CIVIC ASSOCIATION**

**BY VOLUNTARY CONTRIBUTIONS FROM A GROUP OF RESIDENTS OF CONCORD PARK.)**

Appendix I: Lower Bucks County Council of Churches, "Statement Concerning Fair Housing Practices."

# STATEMENT CONCERNING FAIR HOUSING PRACTICES

## LOWER BUCKS COUNTY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

The Christian Church has always held as part of its basic belief that all men are God's creatures, made in His image and likeness, that Christ died for all men, and, therefore, that "there is neither Jew nor Greek . . . bond nor free . . . male nor female," for we are "all one in Christ Jesus."

The Christian Church has also maintained that its articles of belief have little or no value if they are not carried out in the life of each and every person who calls himself Christian.

Therefore, we, the Lower Bucks County Council of Churches, believe that every individual of any race, creed, or color should have equal opportunities of housing, schooling, and employment. We also believe that no Christian can tolerate a situation in which this equality of opportunity is denied to any person because of his race, creed, or color.

We believe, therefore, that every person should do his utmost to welcome all new people into our area and do everything in his power to make all newcomers feel accepted into our several communities in every way.

We of the Lower Bucks County Council of Churches will do all we can to bring it about that our communities and our Churches reflect the highest ideals of Christian fellowship and democratic living, and will welcome into our midst—wherever they may choose to live and worship—all who come to us of any nationality, racial or religious group. As Christians we believe that we can do nothing less.

*Jan 8/16 C.T.*

(adopted by the Lower Bucks County Council of Churches)

Appendix J: Richard W. Reichard to Governor George M. Leader, August 19, 1957.

2139 Allen Street  
Allentown, Pennsylvania  
August 19, 1957

Governor George M. Leader  
Governor of Pennsylvania  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

My dear Governor:

I want to congratulate you for having taken prompt action in helping to stop the disgraceful action of mobs against the citizen who wanted to move into his home in Levittown. Pennsylvania has a noble history in this respect, as a center for the Underground Railway, as the home of Thaddeus Stevens and it is shameful that a handful of people are attempting to mar it. I urge you to take the strongest action possible against those who would stir up racial antagonisms in this way.

Sincerely yours,



Richard W. Reichard



Appendix K: “Crisis in Levittown, Pennsylvania,” documentary film produced by Lee Bobker and Lester Becker as part of “A Series on Changing Neighborhoods,” Dynamic Films (1957) (available online at [http://www.archive.org/details/crisis\\_in\\_levittown\\_1957](http://www.archive.org/details/crisis_in_levittown_1957)) (31 min.):

A powerful and brief documentary about the arrival in August 1957 of the Myers, a college educated and professionally aspiring black family into the all-white middle class community of Levittown, Pennsylvania. Through interviews with community members, the film portrays the range of responses to the Myers. Several hundred hostile white neighbors harassed the young family, burned a cross on their lawn, and smashed their windows, yet others organized to defend the new family. The free film is a powerful case study of racism and resistance to discrimination in the United States.

Appendix L: “Race and Gender: An Ideal Community?”  
*Electronic New Jersey: A Digital History of New Jersey* (2004)

(available online at

<http://www2.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/MassConsumerism/Suburb/Race.htm>)

<b>RACE</b>	<b>GENDER</b>
<p>Bill Levitt, the designer of Levittown, refused to sell to blacks for almost two decades. He feared that the popularity and the value of Levittown property would be greatly reduced if he sold to blacks. Read and react to Levitt's reasons. Though Levittown is just one example of suburb development in the 1950s, segregation was and is a problem that still exists in suburban America. Some of America's most segregated states are states with large suburban populations (i.e. New Jersey). Through high property values and the covert practice of not selling to minority groups many of these communities practice de facto segregation.</p>	<p>Women had made some great strides during W.W.II. Women assisted on the homefront and worked in the factories that the men had abandoned to fight the war. It was during this time that the image of "Rosie the Riveter" was burned into the pages of American history. However, once the war was over there was a movement for women to return to their traditional roles. These roles were highlighted in popular 1950s sitcoms such as <i>Leave it to Beaver</i> and <i>Father Knows Best</i>. In addition, women complained that the enormous growth of the suburbs slowed their progress toward equality. Read the quotes below and react to their situation.</p>
<p>"Levitt initially would not sell to blacks. 'The Negroes in America,' he said, 'are trying to do in four hundred years what the Jews in the world have not wholly accomplished in six thousand. 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 ninety to ninety-five percent of our white customers will not buy into the community. That 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.'"</p>	<p>"Interviewed in the 1950s, women in Levittown and other mass-produced communities complained of boredom and loneliness. When they were asked whom they missed most, they answered, 'My mother.' Many, of course, became mothers. Pregnancy became known as the 'Levittown look.'"</p> <p><small>(Rosenbaum, Ron. "The House that Levitt Built." <i>Esquire</i> December 1983: 391.)</small></p> <p>The following is a satirical book about living in the suburbs. Notice the wife's name:</p>

(Rosenbaum, Ron. "The House that Levitt Built." Esquire December 1983: 391)

"A suit by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People against the Federal mortgaging agencies involved, filed in behalf of six Negroes prevented from buying homes in Levittown, Pennsylvania, was dismissed by the Philadelphia Federal District Court in March 1955. The court ruled that neither the Federal Housing Administration nor the Veterans Administration, although guaranteeing the mortgages, had been charged by Congress with the duty of preventing discrimination in home sales."

(Lander, Marjorie Dent ed. Current Biography 1956. New York, NYC: H.W. Wilson & Co., 1956. Page 375.)

Levitt finally decided to desegregate in late 1959 when the State Court of Pennsylvania threatened to hold public hearings about the issue. Fearful of the negative press, Levitt promised to desegregate in order to avoid the bad press.

(Gans, Herbert J. The Levittowners Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community. New York, NY: Pantheon Books., 1967. page 55.)

"In Mary Drones's case, her young husband-like other development husbands-hadn't the vaguest clue that everyday monotony was crushing Mary's spirit ... In fact, the women didn't know it themselves. Romances in the ladies' magazines, in movies, advertisements and novels all had conditioned the ladies to think marriage meant children, homes of their own, and happiness."

(Keats, John. The Crack in the Picture Window. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956. Page 63.)

"It (Levittown) would change the very nature of American society; families often became less connected to their relatives and seldom shared living space with them as they had in the past. The move to the suburbs also temporarily interrupted the progress women had been making before the war in the workplace; for the new suburbs separated women physically from the workplace, leaving them, at least for a while, isolated in a world of other mothers, children and station wagons."

(Halberstam, David. The Fifties. New York: Fawcett Columbine., 1994. Page 142-3.)