Segregation and Public Housing Development in Cherry Hill and Westport: Historical Background

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Cherry Hill is historically significant as the nation's first, largest (and likely the only) planned suburban-style community for African Americans.

The history of the development of public housing on the Middle Branch is one of the most striking examples of deliberate residential racial segregation in any city. It is also a story of a minority community knowingly exposed to adverse environmental conditions.

The strengths and spirit that you see in this community have been created and sustained despite these public policies.
The Roots Of Baltimore’s Ghetto

- Prior to 1900, Baltimore did not have a geographic racial “ghetto.”
- Public policies played a major role in creating a segregated housing market and spatial separation.
- Enacted first “racial zoning” ordinance in US in 1910
- In 1918 Mayor Preston appointed a Commission on Segregation
- City promoted use of racially restrictive covenants.
- Used public projects to clear black “slum” areas and harden boundaries
After the Supreme Court struck down racial zoning, the City promoted the use of racial covenants to protect white neighborhoods.
Reflecting white opinion in 1918 the Baltimore Sun endorsed a “fair and permanent [segregation] policy” under which conditions in “colored” areas would be improved, while blacks would “respect… the sensibilities and prejudices of the white people.”
By the 1930’s distinct “ghetto” neighborhoods had emerged west and east of downtown with small African American enclaves in other parts of the City, including Mt. Winans. Blacks comprised 20% of the population but were confined to about 2% of the City’s land area.
Selection of sites for slum clearance and housing projects used to reinforce residential segregation

- McCulloh Homes: First “Negro” housing project, was planned to “offer a splendid barrier against the encroachment of colored” into an adjacent “good white residential neighborhood.” (Bolton Hill)

- Perkins Homes: “This area…from a point of view of City wide balance of racial areas should be occupied by white families, probably largely foreign born. It is not naturally a negro area but has…been partly repopulated with Negroes…The Negro inhabitants which would be evacuated from this area should form part of a similar development in a more desirable location.”

- Cherry Hill Homes: After white opposition to every proposed site, the isolated Cherry Hill peninsula was deemed the only site outside the ghetto that was “politically acceptable” for the introduction of permanent Negro war housing.
• From the inception of the public housing program sites were selected and projects were designed for “white housing” or “Negro housing.”

• The original Negro housing projects were all built on slum clearance sites in the central city where the black population had come to be concentrated. They destroyed more housing than they created. One result was that blacks paid higher rents than whites for housing that was often in worse condition.

• Although almost all of those displaced by slum clearance were black, half of the new units were reserved for whites, resulting in a net gain in housing and land area for whites. Some white housing projects, including Westport Homes, were built on vacant land on the outskirts of the City, which was more economical than slum clearance.
War Time Housing Crisis for African American Defense Workers

- Severe war time housing shortage in Baltimore due to influx of workers to defense plants and shipyards.

- Especially severe for African Americans due to segregation.

- Ever larger numbers of people forced into constrained space in the “black belt.”
- Crisis deemed threat to war effort.
- State Commission appointed to look for solutions to crisis.
- Commission endorsed use of temporary barracks in public parks as an emergency measure.
- Director of Baltimore Urban League said restrictive racial covenants "played havoc with any orderly solution." He urged dissolution of covenants "in order to provide orderly and necessary expansion in critical areas adjacent to the Negro population." The Commission declined.
Sites proposed for construction of housing for Negro war workers all met with white community opposition.

Whites in Lakeland, Morrell Park and English Consul threatened to go to Washington to fight a plan to build Negro war housing in Mt. Winans.

Sites in Southeast Baltimore and Eastern Baltimore County were also abandoned after meeting strident opposition from whites.

Each time federal and city officials yielded to opposition.
In 1943, federal and city officials finally settled on a site for Negro war housing on farm land in the Herring Run area of NE Baltimore. A firestorm of opposition resulted, lead by clergy and elected officials. Opponents framed arguments in overtly racial terms, claiming that the area was nearly 100% white and that “traditionally people in Maryland have known their places.”
The Struggle for Democracy on the Home Front

• One pastor opposed to the Herring Run site said it was alright for colored people to fight for democracy abroad but that “this is not the time to try to break down barriers at home.”

• The Afro-American responded that opponents were more concerned with the skin color of a war worker than whether he was helping to win the war effort.
Herring Run Opponents propose Cherry Hill and Turners’ Station as alternative sites.

The NAACP, Urban League, CPHA and Afro urge Mayor McKeldin to “stick to his guns,” on Herring Run, and asserted that the Cherry Hill and Turners’ Station sites were “unsuitable.”

- Surrounding industrial uses, polluted water and environmental hazards, including city incinerator in Cherry Hill;
- Isolation of the sites from community facilities;
- Water and other barriers limit future expansion possibilities.
Federal and city officials dropped the Herring Run site and agreed on the Cherry Hill and Turners’ Station sites as a “compromise.” Temporary sites for Negro war workers were also approved for Fairfield and Holabird Avenue.
Cherry Hill was to become the nation’s first (and last) planned “Negro Suburb.” The Sun termed it a “model Negro village” and compared the street layout with Homeland and Guilford.

The Urban League wasn’t so sure, predicting that the site was destined to become a slum and that African Americans would be blamed for it.
Controversy erupts again in 1950 over plans to build public housing on three vacant land sites:

- Strong opposition to sites for white projects in Violetville and Belair-Edison.
- Those locations are quickly abandoned in favor of sites next to existing white projects, Westport Homes (Westport Extension) and Armistead Gardens (Claremont Homes).
- Little controversy over plans to build another “Negro” project in Cherry Hill (Cherry Hill Extension I).
CPHA and other “housers” pushed for City Council adoption of the plan.
This time, opposition was framed in less racial terms. Opponents claimed public housing would lower property values and said it should be confined to “slum areas.” CPHA and civil rights groups contended slum clearance projects destroyed more housing than were rebuilt and that access to undeveloped land was needed to make a dent in the post-war housing shortage, especially acute for African Americans.
The racial nature of the controversy was made clear as rumors spread that Negroes would be allowed in to the Claremont Homes project on Sinclair Lane and Westport Extension.
The 1950 compromise

- After assurances from the Mayor that Claremont and Westport Extension would be open to whites only, the City Council approved an ordinance that allowed the three “vacant land” projects to proceed.

- But all future public housing would require City Council approval, giving the Council a veto over HABC site selection…

- And all future public housing would be limited to “slum sites.”

- This ordinance remained in place in 1968 and is still in place today.
Public Housing and Areas of Minority Concentration, 1950

Project Racial Designation, 1954

Family Projects

- Negro Projects
  2  McCulloh
  4  Poe
  5  Douglass
  6  Gilmor
  10  Somerset
  11  Cherry Hill
  12  Cherry Hill Ext. 1
  20  Fairfield

- White Projects
  1  Latrobe
  3  Perkins
  9  O'Donnell Hts.
  14  Claremont
  21  Brooklyn
  22  Westport

Census Tract % Negro, 1950

- 90% - 100%
- 50% - 89.9%
- 10% - 49.9%
- 0% - 9.9%
Post-War Housing Boom

- 1950’s: FHA fueled a boom in rental housing and homeownership…for whites.
- FHA market reports note a plentiful supply of land in Baltimore and its suburbs for development of housing for white occupancy.
- But “a very definite shortage of land for non-white occupancy…”
- “Opposition to changing land use…makes it difficult to secure sufficient land to meet the needs of the rapidly growing non-white population.”
Instead of expanding areas open to African American occupancy, a plan to raze black areas and build higher density public housing to contain “slum dwellers” was first announced in 1945. The plan was intended to arrest “racial and group movements within the city” and prevent “very violent neighborhood resistance to any in-migration of Negroes.”

In the 1950’s public housing became a major source of relocation housing for the poorest of those displaced by urban renewal.
1950: Baltimore City Council approves first urban renewal projects in the nation over African American objections

Urban League objects that Hopkins-Broadway and Waverly projects “...give official sanction to segregation in the name of redevelopment.”

- Clarence Mitchell, Jr. and NAACP ask the federal urban renewal agency to withdraw federal funds from Baltimore because its “slum clearance and redevelopment program...places the full strength of the Federal government behind a policy of rigid segregation in that city...”

- Federal Racial Relations Office warns the Baltimore urban renewal projects will effect a “triple threat:”
  1. Negro clearance,
  2. Conversion of a racially flexible area to one of racial exclusion;
  3. Reduction of land areas available to Negro residence.
Displacement and Loss of Housing

- 1950-1964: 25,000 Baltimoreans are displaced by urban renewal, public-housing construction and school construction.
- 90% of those displaced are African-American.
- Officials contend that displaced households moved to better housing but admit that their housing costs increased.
- Officials also admit that fewer housing units open to black occupancy are built than are torn down.
Displaced families were forced into a highly segregated housing market. Rental ads designate housing as "colored" or "white."

From the Baltimore Sun, 1961
1951: HABC rules out 39 alternative locations because Cherry Hill remains the only politically acceptable vacant land site for Negro housing.

“Any other sites would either be highly undesirable from a planning point of view or would precipitate a major political controversy.”

HABC builds Cherry Hill Extension II (known as Cherry Hill 17).

Families displaced by Broadway/Hopkins urban renewal project and Russell Street expressway relocated to Cherry Hill.
Conversion of Fairfield Homes to black occupancy

- 1954: Before Brown decision, HABC plans conversion of Fairfield white war housing project to Negro public housing occupancy. Change is designed to produce more Negro housing to meet urgent relocation housing need.
- Fairfield selected because adjacent to black enclave and deemed undesirable to whites.

This report is a preliminary survey prepared for the purpose of assembling in one place certain pertinent basic data regarding the disposition of Fairfield Homes War Housing Project. These findings are not intended to be conclusive, as no attempt is made to prove that one plan of disposition is more practical than any other. Rather, factual data has been drawn together which was secured by means of personal visits to the area, studying accumulated statistics and by interviews with representatives of the Department of Education, the Staff of the Planning Commission, and staff members of the Housing Authority. Care has been exercised in all personal contacts to emphasize that any possible proposals regarding the future of the project should be treated with the utmost discretion. There is every reason to believe that such requests will be respected by all concerned.

As further progress is made toward disposition, it is anticipated that this preliminary report will need supplementation and answers developed for specific questions or supporting information secured to lend weight to proposed courses of action.
After Brown decision, HABC announces “desegregation” policy.

Fairfield, Latrobe, Perkins and Westport, white projects located next to black areas, were selected for implementation of the new policy. They quickly changed from all white to all black. This provided urgently needed housing for blacks while avoiding the controversy of finding sites for black-occupied housing.

Brooklyn, Claremont and O’Donnell, all located in white areas, remained all white until 1967, when civil rights activists demanded they be integrated. As of 1995, they were still 60% white, despite a waiting list that was more than 90% black.

No attempt was ever made to integrate Cherry Hill and other de jure Negro projects.
• In 1981 HABC purchased a distressed FHA property, Patapsco Park Apartments and renamed it Charles K. Anderson Village.

• With this addition to the inventory, the number of public housing units in Cherry Hill climbed above 1,700.

• It has been said that this is the largest concentration of public housing east of Chicago.
• In 1987, HABC began relocating residents from Fairfield Homes due to environmental hazards.
• In 1997, HABC began relocating families from public housing in Cherry Hill.
• 432 units have been demolished in Cherry Hill Extensions I and II and Charles K. Anderson over the objections of the Cherry Hill Homes Tenant Council.
• A major justification cited for demolition is the excessive density of public housing units in the community.