

Washington History in the Classroom

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“Teachable Moment” essays start with a document, map, or image, that invites close analysis to understand its deeper lessons. The features are also windows into how their historian/authors analyze and interpret primary sources to discover layers of context and meaning.

“**Washington History** magazine is an essential teaching tool,” says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. “In the 19 years I’ve been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They’ve grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.**”



Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.

Washington History is the only scholarly journal devoted exclusively to the history of our nation’s capital. It succeeds the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, first published in 1897. *Washington History* is filled with scholarly articles, reviews, and a rich array of images and is written and edited by distinguished historians and journalists. **Washington History** authors explore D.C. from the earliest days of the city to 20 years ago, covering neighborhoods, heroes and she-roes, businesses, health, arts and culture, architecture, immigration, city planning, and compelling issues that unite us and divide us.

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Teachable Moment

“Blockbusting” and Racial Turnover in Mid-Century D.C.

BY SARAH JANE SHOENFELD

In June 1964 a white divorcée named Dorothy Simon sold her two-story house at 1328 Hemlock Street NW to Wilma E. and Melvin K. Prince, an African American couple. Constructed in 1927 by L.E. Breuninger & Sons, the house sat in Shepherd Park, a neighborhood in upper Northwest Washington that remained largely white even as D.C.’s white population had declined dramatically over the previous decade. The sale prompted swift action. An interracial group of residents of the 1300 block of Hemlock Street sent a letter to their neighbors urging them to remain in the neighborhood and to ignore calls from “blockbusting” real estate agents hoping to cash in by instilling panic in white homeowners that African Americans were moving to Shepherd Park.¹

This letter, reproduced on the following pages, can be found in the records of Neighbors, Inc. (NI), a community organization established in 1958 largely to help stem white outmigration from the District. The papers are held in the Washingtoniana Collection of Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial Library. The letter was included among numerous exhibits that NI submitted to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in September 1962 following a series of hearings on housing discrimination. Two months later, the commission released a report, *Civil Rights, U.S.A.*, that outlined the myriad barriers to housing faced by black Washingtonians.²

The letter reveals how real estate agents fueled white flight from the city. In much of Washington, especially north of Florida Avenue and east of the Anacostia River, houses had racially restrictive covenants included in their deeds of sale. Houses on and around the 1300 block of Hemlock Street were no exception. The signed agreements had long served as both a legal mechanism for enforcing residential segregation and, many believed, as a means of ensuring future property values. (Another covenant stated “that only one house, to be detached, to cost not less than \$10,000 to build, and to be not less than Two (2) full stories in height, shall be erected on said lot.” Prior to residential zoning, such covenants dictated the density as well as the size and cost of housing in developing neighborhoods.) By the time the Supreme Court ruled in *Hurd v. Hodge* (1948) that enforcing such covenants was unconstitutional, the association of race with property values was inextricable, and real estate brokers used it to their advantage. “Blockbusting is an offspring of restricted occupancy,” noted the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. “The blockbuster enters a white area, sells a few homes to Negroes, and then stimulates panic selling by other residents. He relies

upon underlying racial prejudice which he intensifies and distorts for his own use. . . . Homeowners have been assailed with junk mail, phone calls and door-to-door solicitations asking them to sell.”³

Because racial covenants had long constricted the housing supply in a city with a substantial black middle class (housing in Shepherd Park and the rest of today’s Ward 4 was almost entirely off-limits to black buyers until 1948), real estate agents stood to clear huge profits in selling to African Americans. Pent-up demand led black homebuyers to pay artificially high prices. One couple told the *Washington Post* in 1962 that they had purchased their “dream house” in Shepherd Park, which they described as “built for white people,” but later discovered they had been overcharged about \$2,000. “At another house,” the article reported, “a white neighbor overheard the agent jacking the price by that amount to a Negro prospect.”⁴ As a result, home values in Shepherd Park increased significantly in the period most associated with white flight from the District.

Founded in 1958 by an interracial group of Manor Park residents after their neighborhood citizens association refused to admit black members, Neighbors, Inc., opposed blockbusting and sought to foster stable, integrated, middle-class neighborhoods mainly located east of Rock Creek Park. NI established a Housing Information Service that worked especially to attract white home-seekers to neighborhoods where the group was active. The organization was credited with bringing “60 or more white families” to Shepherd Park in 1960-1963, a time when white residence District-wide was in significant decline.⁵ It challenged racially discriminatory lending and real estate practices through education. It also collected evidence of racial steering. A February 1959 eviction notice to white tenants in Petworth, for example, explained, “in view of the nature of the neighborhood . . . the owner has decided to convert the building to colored occupancy.” A white couple reported that an agent refused to show them a house in predominantly African American Adams Morgan. White homeowners in Columbia Heights, Takoma, and Woodridge documented the rejection of loan applications on the grounds that the neighborhoods were declining in value due to racial change.⁶

Neighbors, Inc., was one among several D.C.-area organizations that promoted integrated neighborhoods and advocated for changes in housing policy, including Northwest Washington Fair Housing, Suburban Maryland Fair Housing,

MAP OF THE NEIGHBORS, INC. AREA

Boundaries: Ingraham Street, N. W.
 on the south; Blair Road on the east;
 Maryland-D. C. line on the north;
 and Rock Creek Park on the west.
 (Four neighborhoods: Brightwood,
 Manor Park, Shepherd Park and
 Takoma, D. C.)

SYMBOLS

Church



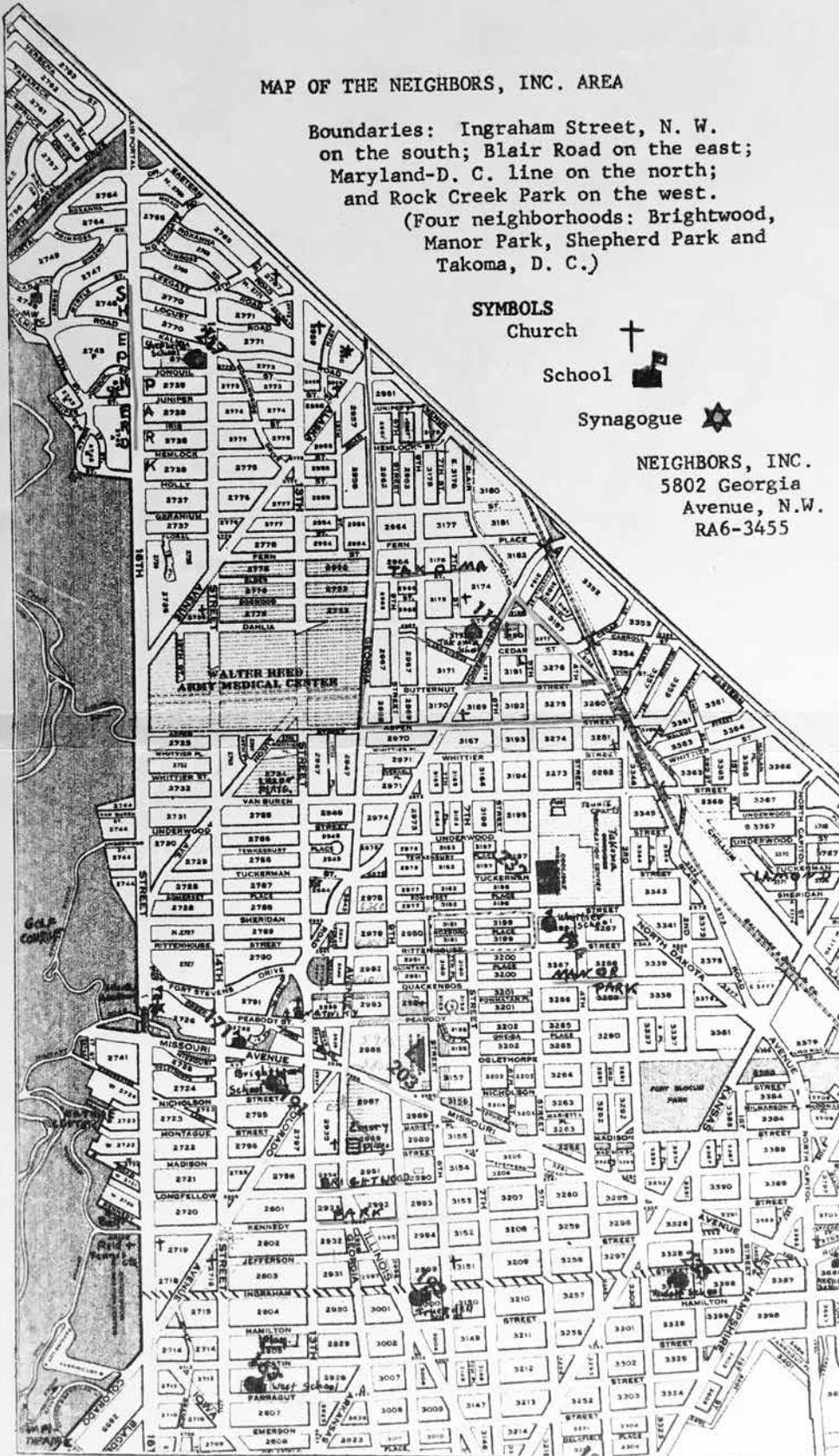
School



Synagogue



NEIGHBORS, INC.
 5802 Georgia
 Avenue, N.W.
 RA6-3455



This undated map shows the original boundaries of Neighbors, Inc.'s work. Courtesy, DC Public Library

Prince George's County Fair Housing, and Northern Virginia Fair Housing. The American Friends Service Committee reported in 1964 that thanks to its partnership with these groups, "between 35 and 40 minority group families were able to buy or rent suburban homes between January and July."⁷ Established social justice organizations such as the NAACP, CORE, the Washington Urban League, the American Veterans Committee, the AFL-CIO, and others also demanded black access to housing and opposed policies that would lead to resegregation.

The impact of Neighbors, Inc., and other groups was initially hampered by the delayed passage of D.C.'s fair housing ordinance. Once it took effect in January 1964, the ordinance was poorly enforced, and without similar legislation in surrounding jurisdictions, the impact of the fair housing groups was limited. In the nine months after the D.C. law took effect, NI documented ongoing discrimination. Real estate agents withdrew



This sign was produced in response to unwelcome solicitations by blockbusters. *Courtesy, DC Public Library*

houses from the market, quoted higher, non-negotiable prices to black home-seekers, and required black buyers to offer contracts with "no conditions whatever"—not even the customary termite and financing clauses. Some notified lenders that their clients were black, resulting in difficulties qualifying for a mortgage and worse credit terms. Some refused to submit bids for black clients, or to inform them of counter-bids. Some placed newspaper ads for the purpose of racial screening (showing black clients houses that differed from those advertised). Agents also sold unlisted properties to white buyers while telling prospective black clients they had nothing available, and refused to share listings with agents who took black clients.⁸

At this time, neighboring Montgomery County, Maryland, had no fair housing law and many longtime black county residents had been pushed into the District as racially restricted subdivisions were built. As a result, in 1960, 90 percent of D.C.-area suburbanites

1. Myrtle Gibson Thomas and William C. Thomas purchased 1346 Hemlock Street NW in 1930 from its builders, Lewis and Henry Breuninger. As was common, the deed stated it was "subject to the covenants of record." When this and other nearby lots were sold to builders, a covenant prohibited conveying the property to "any Negro or Colored person." Mrs. Thomas died in 1947, while Mr. Thomas owned the house until 2004.¹¹
2. In October 1961, the *Washington Post* described Ted Lingo Realty Co. as "one of the largest in Montgomery County, Maryland."¹²
3. Paul T. Hannan had been active in real estate since the 1930s.
4. Just a week earlier, the *Washington Post* reported that property values in Shepherd Park had "risen about 10 per cent in the last four years," as compared to six percent citywide in 1950-1960. Shepherd Park had "gone from 2 to about 20 per cent Negro," since 1958.¹³ Values continued to rise. The *Washington Post* reported in 1969 that integrated neighborhoods such as Shepherd Park were so rare that they commanded higher values than almost anywhere else, including "virtually all-white American University Park."¹⁴
5. African Americans routinely paid more for housing than whites did. Real estate investor Murray Levine turned a 30 percent profit on 1412 Geranium Street NW by buying it from the Owens, a white family who had lived there for 30 years, and selling it three months later to a black couple, Dorothy and Joseph Dual.¹⁵
6. As of 1960, about .03 percent of black residents lived west of Rock Creek Park.¹⁶ Despite high hopes for the legislation, D.C.'s fair housing law did not significantly reduce barriers to African American settlement there or in the suburbs.
7. The *Washington Post* reported in October 1963 that "some 20 Negro families have moved into formerly all-white . . . [Montgomery] County in that many months."
8. Mary K. and John H. Averill bought 1325 Hemlock in August 1962. Mrs. Averill remained an owner until 2003.¹⁷
9. Louis E. Martin was a "minority specialist" and deputy chairman for the Democratic National Committee in 1965. As an aide to John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign, he was credited with helping win the black vote. In 1970 Martin co-founded what is now the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. His wife, Gertrude Martin, was honored by the National Council of Negro Women in December 1967. The Martins bought 1326 Hemlock in April 1962 and sold the house four years later.¹⁸
10. Catharina M. and Benjamin Mehlman bought 1329 Hemlock in 1958 and remained owners until at least 1973.¹⁹
11. Cleo and Michael Sydorko bought 1332 Hemlock in December 1959. Mrs. Sydorko remained an owner in 2011.²⁰

July 25, 1964

1. Mr. Wm. C. Thom
1346 Hemlock Street, N.W.
Washington 12, D. C.

2. As you are probably aware, a house on our block (1328 Hemlock Street) was sold about four weeks ago to a Negro family through the Lingo Realty Agency. Since that time we and many of our neighbors have been contacted by agents of that same real estate agency and also by a Mr. Burke of the Hannan Realty Company, who urge us to sell our homes.

3. These agents have never mentioned the race of our new neighbors. Their sales pitch, however, always includes the information that that house has just been sold, that they can get for us a specific amount for our homes if we sell now, and that they may not be able to do "as well" for us at a future date. This looks to us like a deliberate campaign on the part of the real estate agents to change our neighborhood for their own profit. You could call it a form of the technique known as "block busting."

4. If you were not heretofore considering selling your house, we urge you not to do so now just because of the advice of any real estate agent, for several reasons. First, the average selling price of houses in the Shepherd Park area has risen 22% in the last ten years, while the increase for Washington as a whole during the same period was only 6%. This large increase in property values in our neighborhood has taken place during the same period that integration has been underway, contrary to what many real estate agents would have us believe. Our homes will probably continue to increase in value in the coming years.

5. Second, if you sell in a hurry, you probably stand to lose money on your home. We offer you only one example of the dozens that are available at the D. C. Recorders Office: On Febr. 2, 1964, a house at 1417 Geranium Street was purchased by Real Estate Agent Murray Levine for \$24,000. He sold it three months later for \$28,450 -- a profit of \$4,450 for Mr. Levine, not for the original owner of the house.

6. Third, until recently our neighborhood was one of very few in the Washington area where a Negro family could buy a decent home, but this is no longer true. Since the promulgation by the District Commissioners of the Fair Housing Ordinance in January, 1964, Negroes and members of other minority groups can now purchase homes anywhere in Washington and significant numbers have already done so in previously all-white areas west of Rock Creek Park.

7. Also, about 40 Negro families have moved into previously all-white sections of nearby Maryland in the last two years.

- 2 -

We welcome into our neighborhood all people of good character regardless of race or creed, but we do not believe that real estate agents should be allowed to pressure us and our neighbors into selling because of what they think is going to happen in our neighborhood. We live here and we know what a fine neighborhood it is. We hope that you join us in this affirmation and that you will stay and make this example of neighborhood democracy work.

Sincerely, your neighbors:

8. Mr. and Mrs. John H. Averill
1325 Hemlock St

9. Mr. and Mrs. Louis E. Martin
1326 Hemlock St

10. Mr. and Mrs. B. Mehlman
1329 Hemlock St

11. Mr. and Mrs. M. Sydorko
1332 Hemlock St

lived in census tracts that were 90 percent white. However barriers to black settlement remained significant throughout much of the metropolitan area. Although many black Washingtonians eventually were able to buy homes in Prince George's County, Maryland, the suburbs would remain largely off-limits to African Americans even after the federal Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968.

Ongoing white resistance also undermined efforts to promote integrated neighborhoods. Not all white residents who lived in areas served by NI welcomed African Americans. Mignon Wilson—whose husband directed a center for foreign students at Howard University—remarked of the white neighbors on her block in Manor Park that “one hardly speaks [to me] and the other never does. My block is integrated, but what does this mean?” Unwilling to confront racism, many black families chose not to move to historically white areas. Sociologist George Grier testified to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission that he had frequently been told, “I don't want to pioneer. I want a nice house and a pleasant neighborhood, but I don't care to break any racial barriers in doing it. I just want to be left alone. I want to be in peace. I don't want my children to be hurt.”⁹

Yet many residents in integrated neighborhoods—especially those who joined Neighbors, Inc.—bonded cross-racially over shared backgrounds and interests. “All of us have about the same educational background, and our children play together,” said one black resident of Manor Park in July 1964. NI co-founder Marvin Caplan later confirmed, with some regret for the group's behavior toward less desirable

neighbors, that “class homogeneity helped keep us together.” NI's mission also inadvertently reinforced the valuation of neighborhoods by racial makeup, with the underlying assumption that an area would decline if it became too black. Nevertheless Shepherd Park and Takoma were the only neighborhoods within NI's original boundaries—which extended south of Missouri Avenue—that remained more than 30 percent white in 1983. In fact Shepherd Park Elementary was the only school in the area to remain integrated; most white families sent their children to out-of-boundary or private schools, especially for middle and high school.¹⁰

Although Neighbors, Inc., ultimately did not fully achieve its goals, the group's most important legacy for historians is its massive collection of documents. This letter and other evidence from the collection show that mid-century white flight was not caused solely by the desegregation of D.C.'s schools and the ensuing disinvestment that precipitated the 1968 uprising. It also was driven by real estate agents seeking to stimulate the market. Bringing attention to the essential role of the real estate industry in facilitating racial change is especially important in light of the demographic transformation currently underway in the city. Real estate investment continues to drive public policy and racial change, and its impact should be examined critically.

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NOTES

1. DC Recorder of Deeds, sq 2775, lot 46; “R.J. Simon, 62, Stockbroker, Owned Real Estate Firms,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 18, 1979; “The State of Real Estate,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 11, 1951; “Ex-Employee at State Dept.,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 3, 1973.
2. *Civil Rights U.S.A.: Housing in Washington, D.C.* (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Sept. 1962, law.umaryland.edu/marshall/usccr/documents/cr11963a.pdf).
3. *Civil Rights U.S.A.*, 13.
4. Stephen S. Rosenfeld, “Interracial Group Tries to Make Living Easier in Changing NW Neighborhood,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 18, 1962.
5. Draft of article submitted to the *National Capital Area Realtor* in early 1964, Racially Mixed Housing Articles (1963), Box 11, Neighbors, Inc. Records, DC Public Library.
6. Marvin Caplan, *Farther Along: A Civil Rights Memoir* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 161-63; Real Estate Report of Activities (1959-1962), Box 11, NI Records.
7. “‘Fair Housing’ Groups Breach Racial Barriers in More Communities,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 8, 1964.
8. Interim Working Paper, Sept. 30, 1964, Fair Housing, General (1955-1964), Box 11, NI Records.
9. *Civil Rights U.S.A.*, 7.
10. Susanna McBee, “Integrated Neighborhood Loses Self-Consciousness about Race,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 1964; Caplan, *Farther Along*, 173; Jim Bryant, “Neighbors Inc., at 25, Still Tackles Local Problems,” *Washington Post*, June 29, 1983.
11. E.g. Lynchburg Investment Corp. to Arthur C. Block, sq 2775, lot 2, Jan. 24, 1923, DC Recorder of Deeds; DC Recorder of Deeds, sq 2775, lot 23.
12. “The State of Real Estate,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 28, 1961.
13. McBee, “Integrated Neighborhood,” July 17, 1964.
14. Susan Jacoby, “D.C. Only for Rich and Poor,” *Washington Post*, June 1, 1969.
15. DC Recorder of Deeds, sq 2737, lot 18; U.S. Census, 1940; findagrave.com/memorial/27768861/Joseph-F-Dual
16. *Civil Rights, U.S.A.*, 2-3.
17. DC Recorder of Deeds, sq W2774, lot 20.
18. Paul Hope, “Negroes Shift Emphasis to Politics,” *Evening Star*, Dec. 24, 1965; “Democrats Brief Negro Leaders,” *Evening Star*, Apr. 22, 1965; Bart Barnes, “Louis E. Martin Dies at 84; A Leader in Black Politics,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 29, 1997; “Council of Women Re-Elects Dr. Height,” *Afro-American*, Dec. 2, 1967.
19. DC Recorder of Deeds, sq W2774, lot 22.
20. DC Recorder of Deeds, sq 2774, lot 40.