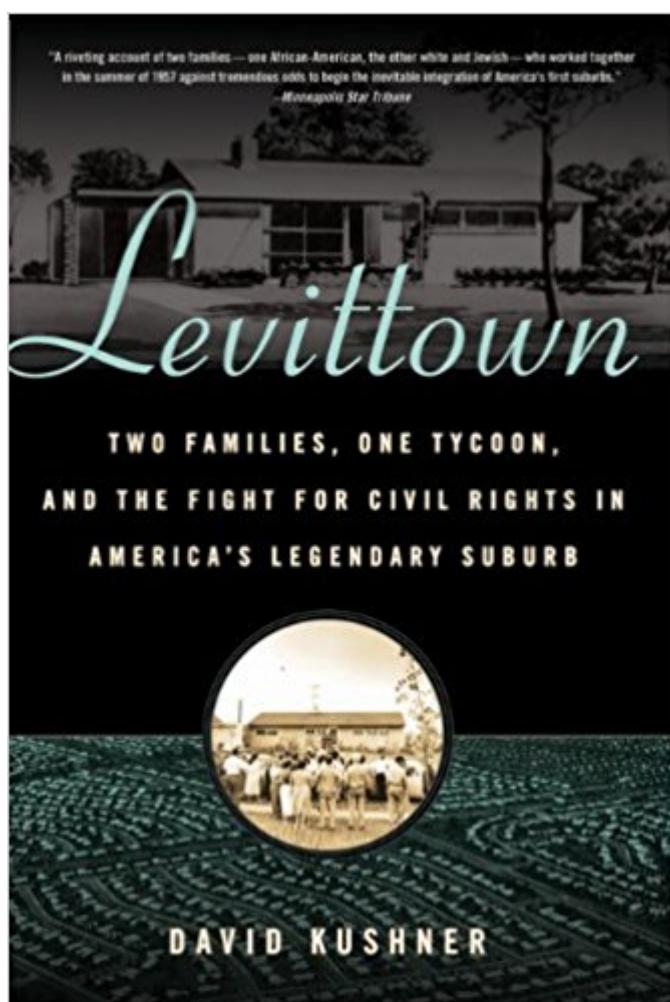


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# Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, And The Fight For Civil Rights In America's Legendary Suburb



## **Synopsis**

In the decade after World War II, real estate developer Levitt & Sons helped thousands of people buy into the American dream of owning a home. They laid out the welcome mat, but not to everyone. Levittown had a whites-only policy. The events that unfolded in Levittown, Pennsylvania, in the unseasonably hot summer of 1957 would rock the community. There, a white Jewish family secretly arranged for a black family to buy the pink house next door. The explosive reaction would transform their lives, and the nation, leading to the downfall of a titan and the integration of the most famous suburb in the world.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Migration to suburbia has long been an American ambition, but its allure was never stronger than in the post-WWII years, when the fantasy of a dream house played to the imagination of millions of Americans, especially returning veterans. Already waiting for many of them was a model community on the North Shore of Long Island called Levittown, the brainchild of Abraham Levitt and his sons, William and Alfred, the nations first real estate tycoons. But Levittown came with its own set of requirements: perfectly manicured lawns, no fences and no black families. In 1957, as the Levitts "by now massively successful and nationally lauded" had already expanded to a second model city, two families challenged the segregationist policy: one, a white Jewish Communist family, secretly arranged for the other, a black family, to buy the house next door. In an entertaining round-robin format, Kushner relays each party's story in the leadup to a combustible summer when

the integration of Americas most famous suburb caused the downfall of a titan and transformed the nation. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Adult/High Schoolâ "In 1957, Levittown, PA, was known as a remarkable suburb. It was built by the innovative Abe Levitt & Sons, who used the new mass-production techniques for a planned community that could be constructed quickly, included comfortable homes with state-of-the-art appliances, and was affordable for returning veterans. The covenants, however, implied that the community was for whites only, and this policy was backed up by Home Owners Loan Corporation. When Lew and Bea Wechsler, disillusioned Communists and civil rights advocates, decided to challenge this policy and help a black couple, Daisy and Bill Myers, move next door, mob violence immediately occurred, some of which was instigated by outsiders who were members of the KKK. This account centers on the background of the two families and their growing friendship as they endured vicious attacks by their neighbors and the apathetic protection of the police. It is also the story of the Levitt family: Abe, the brilliant and enterprising father; Bill, the egotistical, power-hungry, and controlling son; and his brother, Alfred, the gifted and unconventional architect. This story of a conflicted, fearful neighborhood is told against the wider background of the Civil Rights Movement and the fallout from McCarthyism. Students may know of Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges and the students of Little Rock, AR. This courageous story is also one that should be heard.â "Jackie Gropman, formerly at Fairfax County Public Library System, Fairfax, VA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

David Kushner's Levittown is several stories in one. It tells us about racial discrimination in housing in the North, the postwar housing shortage, the expansion of residential development in the suburbs, and about Bill Levitt and his company, Levitt & Sons. The stories center on an African American couple, Bill and Daisy Myers, who sought to own a home in one of the popular postwar suburbs, and the racial hatred they encountered and overcame. But the book also interweaves the entrepreneurial prowess of the Levitt family, its eccentricities, and its bold pitchman, Bill Levitt. Kushner combines all of this into a very readable narrative. In August 1957, as Bill and Daisy Myers attempted to move into their newly acquired home on Deepgreen Lane, they immediately encountered racially bigoted neighbors with a dogged determination to keep the first African American family out of their all white Levittown, Pennsylvania, neighborhood. Their Jewish next door

neighbors and political activists Lew and Bea Wechsler, quickly became good friends in this neighborhood where they had few. On the day the Myers' moved in, informal clusters of curious neighbors formed around their home. Soon verbal harassment and telephone threats began, and as days and weeks went by, the harassment intensified. Some neighbors tried to maintain neutrality and a few even openly offered their support, but the activities of the most visible racists rivaled those in the Jim Crow South. They soon evolved into a, perhaps inappropriately named, Levittown Betterment Committee. Cars and motorcycles, honking horns and bearing Confederate flags, circled the Myers' home regularly, hateful statements shouted, and stones broke through the Myers' windows. The local police did little to quell the hateful activity that eventually escalated to cross burnings in the yards of supporters, the Wechsler's and the Myers'. Moreover, the Ku Klux Klan began to form a local chapter in Levittown. Abe Levitt, born to desperately poor Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn, worked his way to earning a law degree and running his own law firm. Abe was an inspiration to his two sons, Bill and Alfred. After some initial success speculating in real estate development, Abe and his two sons established Levitt & Sons, and the company sold its first house just before the stock market crash in 1929. All three lent their unique talents to the company, but Bill emerged as the leader. As an entrepreneur, Bill was bold and determined. At nineteen years old, one remembers Bill saying, "I wanted to make a lot of money. I wanted a big car and a lot of clothes." (5) He had a gift for marketing and was not afraid to defy authority if necessary to get his way. The company prospered with Alfred's self-taught architectural talent and Bill's keen marketing and management skills. At the end of World War II, Levitt & Sons was poised to master the demand for new housing and was soon propelled to the realm of empire. Housing development in the United States had been stagnant for the two decades preceding the end of the war. The war years energized economic growth and innovation. With its end, vast numbers of returning veterans needed a home. New marriages and the new families they created—the baby boom generation was being hatched—further exacerbated America's housing shortage. The newly enacted GI bill and the New Deal's FHA loans made financing readily available. Bill Levitt and his company seized the moment. They bought up 3,500 acres of potato fields in the community of Island Trees on Long Island, and Levitt and Sons built thousands of houses. In a display of his ego and determination, Bill insisted that the community rename Island Trees to Levittown, New York. Next Bill Levitt launched another Levittown in a former 5,000 acre broccoli and spinach field in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The demand was for housing remained strong and the Levitts, by then making a fortune, regarded

as captains of the home building industry. By the mid-fifties, these "Levittowns" had established a sense of community. Levitt & Sons had promulgated authoritarian rules governing sales, leasing, and maintaining the community. If a homeowner did not maintain his lawn properly, for example, Levitt & Sons would send over a landscape crew, and then send the homeowner a bill. A typical white Levittown homeowner not only enjoyed a sense of community pride, but could delight in knowing that his initial \$8,000 investment had grown in value. A more foreboding rule, and one that presumably protected the value of a Levittown home, was the active exclusion of sales and rentals of Levittown homes to African Americans. The standard Levittown lease read, in capital letters: "THE TENANT AGREES NOT TO PERMIT THE PREMISES TO BE USED OR OCCUPIED BY ANY PERSON OTHER THAN MEMBERS OF THE CAUCASIAN RACE."

(43) As the author states, "Many of them [Levittown homeowners] made it clear that they had come to Levittown because Bill Levitt had promoted it as [for] whites-only. "Levitt promised!...He should get them out even if he has to buy them out!" (91) A 1948 U.S. Supreme Court ruled against such discriminatory policies. However, Bill Levitt brazenly defied the ruling stating, "The policy that has prevailed in the past is exactly the same policy that prevails today".it is entirely in the discretion and judgment of Levitt & Sons as to whom it will rent or sell. (43) In the late summer and fall of 1957, the Myers and the Wechslers lived in constant fear for their lives, and the lives of their children. Around the clock police protection could not prevent cross burnings and other threats. Finally, after appealing to Pennsylvania Attorney General, Thomas McBride, their predicament began to improve. McBride brought legal action against the ringleaders, dubbed the "Levittown 7" who were eventually found guilty in August 1958"about a year after the Myers first moved to their home on Deepgreen Lane in Levittown. David Kushner is an excellent story teller. That may be because he is a journalist and not a historian. His book dashes along like a fast moving novel. Kushner does a good job introducing and developing his characters, too. Abraham Levitt entertains his two boys with fantastic tales of Captain Kidd. Daisy Dailey is introduced as a protected youth in Jackson Ward, Virginia. Later, as she marries Bill Myers and moves to the North, she questions her feelings about Jim Crow laws. In the end, Daisy is much the same person even as she meets Martin Luther King, Jr., and is referred to as "the Rosa Parks of the North." (191) And too, the rise and fall of William Levitt"his ostentatious and indulgent life-style, his bold and confident defiance, and then his financial collapse"provides the reader with a tragic background story of the once arrogant and egotistical icon. The making of Levittown is an interesting story too. A few years ago, Kushner's mother-in-law suggested that he talk to one of her neighbors, Bea Wechsler.

Bea was willing to talk about her experiences in Levittown many years ago, and her friends the Myers' s. Bea had a small dusty cardboard box full of clippings, photos, and letters. Next, the author met with Daisy Myers who agreed to talk as well and had more materials to share. And so the book Levittown emerged from this cornucopia of primary sources and oral histories. Kushner makes good use of these sources. The only criticism of the book is a minor one. The book has endnotes by chapter that reference the page number, but the corresponding references cannot be found on the page; unusual, but definitely a minor problem. Levittown is an outstanding book for those interested in postwar housing discrimination, urban development during this era, Levitt & Sons, or the civil rights movement.

Nothing fancy but well-written, complete and compact with a few pleasant surprises. The author is able to make the life of Levittown and the incident come to life. The Myers moving to Levittown and the bigotry of Bill Levitt is a piece of history long neglected probably because it wasn't as sensational as what was occurring down south. However, this book demonstrates the power of prejudice and how virally it spread in the suburb of the American Dream. Fortunately, Kushner also refuses to allow this to be a one-sided account of white intolerance and instead gives equal time to those who fought to defend the Myers' right to live in Levittown.

I am impressed by the research of the author, the interviews really made this book come alive. I know a fair amount about African American suburbanization, the Levitt story, etc. but the additional details on the day to day lives of the victims of discrimination and harassment is well written and necessary to tell a complete narrative.

Pass© words like riveting, remarkable and even shocking come to mind when you think about describing this book. But Levittown is far too good to use such canned vocabulary. I was born in Willingboro, New Jersey in 1970 - while our nation and that area of the U.S. were still on the cusp of dealing with racial divides. My Mother moved into Levittown during the Summer of 1960, her family trying to escape to suburbia from the city of Philadelphia and what her family perceived as an area heightening in crime and diminishing in a quality place to raise children. This story struck me on levels I am both ashamed and proud to speak of. Reading the language and racial slurs in this book were difficult. It was difficult because you can't imagine that just a mere 50 - 60 years ago people (old and young) felt so strongly about other human beings all because of the color of their skin. Page after page is punctuated with the 'N'-word and it just hangs there in the air and pierces your

moral fiber. My shock is juxtaposed by having grown up with family members who then, and to this day, still say that word - I like to think it's merely a generational thing because I know the people saying this word are kind and wonderful. But they grew up in a time of ignorance and closed-mindedness and some people just don't shirk those feelings. As shocking as the story of Levittown is, I couldn't help but ponder a message that defines the generations and races of even today: (nearly) everyone has a dream they hope to attain. Bill Levitt, in the eyes of the (white) nation and Levittown residents was living the American dream: huge house, gorgeous wives, big boat and he was (viewed as) generous. Bill Myers and his family sought the American dream as they saw it: to own property and live freely. Levitt reflected the times of that period in America. Yet, consider how individual groups think of their American dream today - think of it in terms of black and white - it almost makes you wonder how far we have not come. That's the one thing I really loved about this book: it made me think.

interesting

Its a good read for anyone in the building business. I'm reading it for the building story, not so much the social aspects of it.

A true story about Levittown, Pa. I grew up here and did not know about the racial tensions that had occurred prior to our family moving in. Well written and informative history of Levittown.

Fast shipping and good quality

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