

# *The “Problem” of the Black Middle Class: Morris Milgram’s Concord Park and Residential Integration in Philadelphia’s Postwar Suburbs*

SEPTEMBER 15, 2000, would have been a bittersweet day for Morris Milgram had he lived to see it. It was on that day that Warren and Betsy Swartzbeck—the last original white residents of Milgram’s pioneering Concord Park development in Trevose, Pennsylvania—moved out of the home into which they had first moved forty-six years earlier. Morris Milgram’s Concord Park was one of the first of its kind in the United States—a suburban development dedicated to achieving racial integration. During its early years, Concord Park proved wrong the many skeptics—including most of the era’s real estate industry—who claimed that whites and blacks could not live together without strife, rapid racial turnover, or a precipitous decline in property values. For many of its early residents—Warren and Betsy Swartzbeck included—Concord Park was not simply a nice place to live, but a grand experiment. Its interracial character was made all the more significant because it stood just eight miles from the most famous of America’s postwar suburban developments, Levittown. Indeed, as Milgram later acknowledged, Levittown was Concord Park’s “major . . . competitor.”<sup>1</sup> In terms of size and design, the houses of Concord Park and Levittown were virtually identical; yet, despite quite tangible similarities, Levittown remained an all-white community. In 1957, when a stone-throwing mob threatened Levittown’s first black family (Bill and Daisy Myers and their children), the marked social variance between the two communities was made acutely manifest, as Concord Park’s residents sent a biracial contingent to Levittown to guard

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who read and provided important criticism of earlier versions of this article. I would especially like to thank Steven Conn, whose counsel and criticism were invaluable in the conceptualization of the project that this article became.

<sup>1</sup> Morris Milgram, *Good Neighbors: The Challenge of Open Housing* (New York, 1977).

the Myers's home.<sup>2</sup>

However, Concord Park's existence as "the beloved community," a living witness to injustice in an all-white Levittown, was rather short-lived. Morris Milgram found it increasingly difficult to maintain the development's interracial character. When the original residents began to move out, many more blacks than whites were eager to buy. Into the 1960s, Concord Park remained one of the very few places where black families could find new housing in the Philadelphia suburbs; conversely, white buyers could choose from a plethora of new developments. As Warren Swartzbeck recalled, Milgram "kept a map of all the houses on his wall. . . . [He] used pins, red and blue, to represent whites and blacks. . . . Wherever . . . there might be a liberal who might have a friend who might be interested in integrated housing," Milgram would try to search him or her out. Yet by 1968, when Congress passed the Fair Housing Act, the law of supply and demand had prevailed: Concord Park was majority black. Today, 95 percent of its residents are African American.<sup>3</sup>

Although Concord Park demonstrates that racial integration did occur as a part of the process of postwar suburbanization in the Philadelphia metropolitan area, the fact remains that African Americans were largely shut out of the region's suburban boom—in integrated settings and otherwise. As builders like William Levitt rapidly made the American dream of homeownership on the suburban periphery of the nation's major urban centers a reality for many white Americans, African Americans often remained in the decaying core. The topic of racial discrimination and housing is one that historians have examined in some depth. Starting with Kenneth Jackson's landmark study *Crabgrass Frontiers*, scholars have ably demonstrated the degree to which federal housing policy and private real estate practices combined to critically limit the availability of housing to African Americans during the postwar boom years.<sup>4</sup>

This essay explores this now familiar story from a different angle—

<sup>2</sup> Matthew P. Blanchard, "A Vision of Suburban Racial Utopia Blurs: Neighbors Who Lived in Harmony Feel a Loss: The Last Original White Homeowners Have Left," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct. 9, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontiers: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2004); and Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ, 2005).

that of a privately developed community designed explicitly to overcome the institutional forces that worked to create a segregated and unequal landscape in the American postwar metropolis. The story of Concord Park demonstrates just how difficult it was to achieve such a goal. While a good deal of individual sentiment in favor of interracial suburban development did exist, the aggregate of prointegration sentiment was still too weak to alter significantly the institutional structures favoring residential segregation. This asymmetry was apparent at every stage in Concord Park's development. First, its developers faced significant difficulties finding adequate land and financing; second, they had trouble attracting and maintaining a truly interracial clientele; and finally, they had to combat a generalized ideological conflation of whiteness, middle-class identity, and suburban homeownership. Only because Concord Park was conceived and built by individuals with an unusual ideological commitment to the goal of interracial living was the development able to achieve its original aim. Even then, however, it did so only on a small scale and only for a relatively short period of time.

The story of Concord Park really begins with the massive population shifts that occurred during World War II as Americans moved throughout the country in search of newly created wartime job opportunities.<sup>5</sup> The Philadelphia area was a recipient of many wartime migrants, particularly northward-bound African Americans. Indeed, Philadelphia's African American population increased by 50 percent between 1940 and 1950, while its white population increased only 0.8 percent.<sup>6</sup> This rapid in-migration caused Philadelphia's population to reach its historical peak in the 1950 census with a total of 2,071,605 residents.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, a lack of suitable housing became a major problem. According to a 1948 Philadelphia Housing Authority report, several decades of difficulties plagued the home-building industry and were the cause of the housing

<sup>5</sup> Some examples of scholarship dealing with the domestic effect of World War II in the United States include: John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York, 1976); Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York, 1982); Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York, 1993); Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, 1995); David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York, 1999); and James Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> "A Report on the Housing of Negro Philadelphia," Commission on Human Relations, the City of Philadelphia, June 1953, 4, accession 148.4, box A-620, Philadelphia City Archives.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

shortage. There had been inadequate construction since the building boom of the twenties, as the effects of the Great Depression essentially put an end to the construction of any kind of housing during the 1930s. The economic boom triggered by massive wartime mobilization did little to remedy this shortage, as the mobilization effort directed resources away from the home-building industry. Consequently, by 1946, 17 percent of all residential units (ninety thousand units) in Philadelphia were substandard, sixty-five thousand families were living "doubled up" (two families living in space intended for one), and the vacancy rate of dwellings available for sale or rent was between 0.5 percent and 1 percent.<sup>8</sup>

The need for new housing was clear, but it remained to be seen where the construction would take place. In fact, much undeveloped land existed within Philadelphia's municipal boundaries. The section known as Northeast Philadelphia, constituting over one-quarter of the city's area, was still largely rural at the end of World War II, while the six counties contiguous to the city's boundaries also offered ample space for new residential development. Ultimately, the crisis was not one of too little space but rather one of *who* would be allowed to occupy *which* spaces. From 1946 to 1953, approximately 140,000 new homes were constructed in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Of this number, only 1,044, or less than 1 percent, were available for purchase by African Americans.<sup>9</sup> Racism in Philadelphia's real estate and financial communities, buttressed by the pernicious effects of federally sponsored "redlining" policies, denied African Americans the freedom to purchase homes in neighborhoods of their choosing. Ultimately, this created a Philadelphia where a large majority of the area's African American residents became more or less confined to several inner-city ghettos, while a significant portion of the city's white population relocated to the suburban periphery.

Concord Park promised to rectify the lack of quality housing available to African Americans. If there was one person in the Philadelphia area who possessed the characteristics needed to make Concord Park a reality, that person was Morris Milgram. The youngest child of a Russian Jewish peddler, Milgram imbibed the socialist principles that heavily pervaded the Lower East Side Manhattan neighborhood of his youth. Expelled from New York's City College in 1934 for opposing a reception for young

<sup>8</sup> "Housing Facts and Figures—Philadelphia, 1948," Philadelphia Housing Authority, July 1948, 1, accession 152.1, box A-622, Philadelphia City Archives.

<sup>9</sup> "Report on the Housing of Negro Philadelphia," 7.

Italian Fascists, in 1939 Milgram received his bachelor's degree from Dana College in Newark, New Jersey (today, the Newark campus of Rutgers University). He then worked for the Workers Defense League, a civil rights organization founded by liberals and socialists designed primarily to aid southern sharecroppers. By the time he had become the WDL's national secretary, Milgram also inherited his father-in-law's real estate firm in 1947.<sup>10</sup> Despite his new career path, Milgram remained closely involved with organizations that advocated social justice. He served on the boards of Fellowship House, Fellowship Fund, and the Philadelphia branch of Americans for Democratic Action. Additionally, he was an active member of Philadelphia's branch of the NAACP and the board of the National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practice Commission.<sup>11</sup>

Milgram's background made him a unique figure in the real estate business. His real passion was social activism, and he had entered the field almost accidentally. Accordingly, unlike the vast majority of builders and speculators, Milgram was willing to sacrifice profit margins to achieve a social goal. Still, during the first five years of his stewardship of Smelo-Milgram, Inc., Milgram built houses exclusively for whites. However, by 1952 he decided that he would no longer construct houses unless they could be sold to "all people."<sup>12</sup> This decision would ultimately culminate in the construction and successful integration of Concord Park.

Yet, it should be noted that while Milgram's task would prove difficult to achieve, significant sentiment in favor of integration did exist in the Philadelphia area. As historian Matthew Countryman notes, the region had seen an upsurge in civil rights activity in the years prior to Milgram's decision to build Concord Park, a process that would create potentially important resources from which his project could draw. The strength of the Philadelphia NAACP, the existence of area-specific organizations like the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), and the region's Quaker legacy and its institutional manifestation, the American Friends

<sup>10</sup> Eunice Grier and George Grier, "Concord Park: A Pioneer Attempt at Privately-Built Sales Housing for Interracial Occupancy," Philadelphia Community Relations Program, Jan. 1955, 3, American Section, 1955, Community Relations Administration—Housing box, Concord Park folder, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia; Lawrence Van Gelder, "Morris Milgram, 81; Built Interracial Housing," *New York Times*, June 26, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> "Progress Report on Open Occupancy Housing Projects Concord Homes, Inc. and Greenbelt Knoll, Inc.," Smelo-Milgram, Inc., Nov. 6, 1953, NAACP, Philadelphia Branch, Executive Secretary's Files, URB 6/1/254, box 13, folder 254, Urban Archives, Temple University.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Service Committee (AFSC), resulted in significant civil rights progress in the immediate postwar years. Together these groups constituted the Fellowship Commission, which worked successfully for the establishment of a new city charter in 1951 that contained a Human Relations Commission designed to enforce antidiscrimination laws.<sup>13</sup>

Further evidence of the depth of integrationist sentiment in the Philadelphia area could be found in nearby Levittown. In the face of the community's notorious resistance to African American homeownership, Philadelphia's civil rights organizations provided enough support to enable the Myerses'—Levittown's first African American couple—to remain residents there, despite the sustained harassment they endured. Groups like the Citizen's Committee for Levittown, headed by the Reverend Ray Harwick of Levittown's Evangelical and Reformed Church of the Reformation, provided the Myers family with moral support. In addition, two hundred Levittown residents later attended a "Leaders Conference" and declared their "shame" for the actions of their neighbors as well as a desire to "make amends."<sup>14</sup> Orchestrating the whole process was the American Friends Service Committee, which had instituted a program of purchasing unoccupied houses in all-white communities and then searching out potential African American buyers as part of a broader effort to facilitate the integration of previously all-white developments. The Myerses themselves were members of the Philadelphia NAACP and first became aware of the Levittown house owned by the AFSC because of their participation in a Human Relations Commission discussion.<sup>15</sup>

As an active participant in some of these organizations (the NAACP, his work in favor of fair employment legislation), Morris Milgram was clearly able to draw upon the same networks that had fought for many civil rights advances in the Philadelphia area during the immediate postwar era. These contacts would prove important, as Milgram eventually tapped the financial resources of the Quaker community to make

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia Metropolitan Housing Program, log #11 Sept. 16 to Oct. 25, 1958, and log #10, July 1 to Aug. 12, 1958, American Section, 1958, Community Relations Housing Program, Indian Program, Rights of Conscience Program box, Housing Program Reports folder, American Friends Service Committee Archives; J. D. Mullane, "Bucks Community Mirrors South in the '50s," *Bucks County Intelligencer*, Aug. 18, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Anderson, "Seller of Levittown Home Needs Police Protection," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 24, 1957.

Concord Park a reality. In his effort to accumulate the capital needed to purchase a piece of land and to finance the construction of housing upon it, Milgram initially approached a large mortgage company (left anonymous in subsequent reporting of the episode) with which he had worked in the past to finance all-white developments. At first, this mortgage company expressed some interest in financing Milgram's proposal, but it demanded that he demonstrate that a sizeable and reliable black population existed for the kind of housing he was proposing. Milgram devoted considerable effort to producing such evidence. He even went so far as to presell twelve houses—seven to whites and five to blacks—to prove the commercial viability of his venture. Nevertheless, in December 1952, after nine months of work, the mortgage company flatly refused financing for Milgram's development.<sup>16</sup>

"Disillusioned but not crushed," Milgram persevered.<sup>17</sup> He approached almost every other mortgage-financing agency in the Philadelphia area, only to be met with rejection everywhere he went. Next, he unsuccessfully tried tapping several wealthy individuals known to have "progressive" views on the "race question." Finally, Milgram settled on the idea of creating his own equity fund to accumulate enough venture capital to finance his project independently of major financial institutions. A nationwide stock subscription drive financed this equity fund and had collected fourteen thousand dollars by May 1953.<sup>18</sup> Although far short of the amount his venture ultimately needed, this drive attracted the interest of Bucks County businessman George Otto. Milgram's introduction to Otto would prove to be his venture's turning point.

George Otto brought much needed business sense, as well as important connections, to Milgram's project. Otto was a Quaker from nearby Morrisville, Pennsylvania, who, due in part to his religious convictions and institutional associations, was intrigued by Milgram's idealism. Otto was chairman of the Friends Social Order Committee, treasurer of the Friends General Conference, vice president of the Bucks County Community Chest, and past president of the Newtown Rotary Club. In particular, the Quaker organizations of which Otto was a member had been seriously debating whether they were being faithful to their heritage

<sup>16</sup> Grier and Grier, "Concord Park," 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.



of a commitment to racial justice, a conversation that inevitably included equal access to housing.<sup>19</sup> With Quaker beliefs providing the impetus, Otto decided to bring his financial expertise to bear. He quickly decided that Milgram's equity-fund approach was inadequate and unwieldy, and accordingly, he worked to reorganize its financial details. Otto transformed Milgram's equity fund into a stock corporation—with Otto as president and Milgram as vice president—limited just to the Concord Park project. Additionally, Otto's presence brought with it many Quaker business associates who invested substantially in the Concord Park corporation. By April 1954, the full \$150,000 in stock options had been subscribed.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Otto and Milgram secured the purchase of the land on which Concord Park would be built. The fifty-acre site was located in Trevose, Bucks County, at the intersection of the Old Lincoln Highway and Pennsylvania State Route 132. They chose the site because of its proximity to major transportation routes and "phenomenal industrial development," most notably the new U.S. Steel plant in nearby Fairless Hills. It was also adjacent to a Pennsylvania Turnpike interchange under construction, half a mile from the Trevose train station, and on a Philadelphia Transit Corporation (PTC) bus route that would connect Concord Park residents to Philadelphia's elevated railroad.<sup>21</sup>

Still, the problem of mortgage financing remained unsolved. Again, Milgram made the rounds of area mortgage and banking institutions, this time in both Philadelphia and New York. Like before, the firms universally rejected him. Then, Milgram turned to progressive institutions like labor unions and religious organizations not usually involved in the real estate business, but they too refused him.<sup>22</sup> "In all," wrote open-housing advocates and Concord Park residents George and Eunice Grier, "over two score financial institutions turned him down over the course of a year

<sup>19</sup> Untitled document, Concord Park Homes, Inc., Nov. 15, 1954, Housing Association of the Delaware Valley Collection, URB 3/V/518, box 115, folder 518, Urban Archives.

<sup>20</sup> Grier and Grier, "Concord Park," 5.

<sup>21</sup> "Open Occupancy: The Concord—Greenbelt Plan," Concord Park Homes, Inc., Feb. 8, 1954, 3, Housing Association of the Delaware Valley Collection, URB 3/V/518, box 115, folder 518, Urban Archives.

<sup>22</sup> "Summary of Remarks by Morris Milgram," National Urban League Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Sept. 8, 1955, American Section, 1955, Community Relations Administration—Housing box, Concord Park folder, American Friends Service Committee Archives.



and a half.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, Bowery Savings Bank of New York agreed to finance the development's first thirty mortgages. After Bowery firmly committed to Concord Park, two previously reluctant Philadelphia-area financial institutions—Peoples National Bank of Langhorne and Central Penn National Bank of Philadelphia—followed suit, providing the balance of the necessary financial support.<sup>24</sup>

With financial backing secured, Milgram then faced the problem of attracting both white and black buyers. Achieving the desired racial balance would prove a challenging task. For one, there were disagreements among Concord Park's various backers and staff members about the goals towards which the development should be working. On the one hand, there were those who coalesced around Morris Milgram and believed that Concord Park's primary purpose was to serve as an example to the rest of the country and prove that integrated housing in a suburban community could be successful. On the other hand, there were those—chief among them Concord Park Homes' president George Otto—who believed the development's main function was not to be a social “experiment” but simply to provide good housing to a group of people (Philadelphia's African American community) who desperately needed it. This conflict manifested itself at a July 1, 1954, meeting held at the Sylvania Hotel in Philadelphia. Milgram opened proceedings by suggesting that “for the first 30 houses [sold] . . . there should not be more than 4 or 5 Negroes among the residents. Later on the proportion could [be] increased to not more than 20 per cent.”<sup>25</sup> The conference report noted that “George Otto expressed very strong opposition to much of what Milgram had suggested” and “in effect forbade him to guarantee an occupancy ratio.” Eventually, those in attendance reached a fairly vague agreement that “for a period of 60 or 90 days a genuine effort should be made to secure the kind of occupancy ratio that will lead to stability and integration.”<sup>26</sup> However, they did not adopt any specific measures to help Concord Park achieve these goals.

<sup>23</sup> Grier and Grier, “Concord Park,” 5.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Blanshard, “County's New Concord Homes Project May Dispel Fancied Fears about Mixed Housing,” unpublished article, Housing Association of the Delaware Valley Collection, URB 3/V/518, box 115, folder 518, Urban Archives.

<sup>25</sup> “Luncheon Meeting of Otto-Milgram Board, Sylvania Hotel, Phila.” Reinheimer Report for the American Friends Service Committee, July 9, 1954, American Section, 1954, Community Relations—Housing box, Morris Milgram folder, American Friends Service Committee Archives.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Shortly after the sales process began, it became fairly clear to all involved that many more blacks than whites were interested in purchasing homes. This was surprising to many observers at the time, including those with “progressive” views. However, an analysis of then-available data highlights a demand for suburban housing by African Americans that was stymied. Statistics in Milgram’s initial proposal to create an equity fund bear this out. Milgram’s plan cited the Philadelphia Veterans Administration’s claim that an income of \$3,000 a year was adequate to finance the mortgage of a small home valued at \$9,000. According to this standard, Milgram presented 1950 census data demonstrating that approximately 30,800 nonwhites (in the Philadelphia area at this time, a population almost entirely composed of African Americans) in the city had the necessary income levels to finance a mortgage at this value. Admittedly, the census data Milgram presented also showed that a large portion of this 30,800 made little more than \$3,000 annually: 11,500 nonwhites had an annual income between \$3,000 and \$3,499, 6,468 nonwhites had an annual income between \$3,500 and \$3,999. Yet, over 13,000 nonwhite families made more than \$4,000 and over 5,000 earned more than \$5,000 annually.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, according to the Philadelphia VA guidelines, over 30,000 nonwhites in the Philadelphia area would have been able to afford William Levitt’s standard “Rancher” model, which was valued at \$8,490 in 1953.<sup>28</sup> Considering that only forty-five of the new private homes built between 1946 and 1953 in the Philadelphia area (none of them in Bucks County) were available for purchase by African Americans, the interest garnered by the commencement of the sales process at Concord Park should not have been unexpected.<sup>29</sup>

The disproportionately large number of interested black buyers presented Milgram and Otto with an interesting dilemma. By the winter of 1954, with just over half of the development’s units sold, sixty of the sales had been made to blacks and only twelve to whites, with several of the white sales reported as “shaky.”<sup>30</sup> Although Milgram had favored some kind of sales quota from the outset, he desired one that reflected the ratio

<sup>27</sup> “Proposal for Organization of Community Developers, Inc.,” Smelo-Milgram, Inc., May 11, 1953, American Section, 1953, Community Relations—Housing and Indians box, Morris Milgram folder, American Friends Service Committee Archives.

<sup>28</sup> “First of New ‘Budget’ Homes Goes on Display at Levittown,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, May 30, 1953.

<sup>29</sup> Untitled document, Concord Park Homes, Inc., Nov. 15, 1954.

<sup>30</sup> Grier and Grier, “Concord Park,” 7.

of white to black residents in the Philadelphia area as a whole, which was eighty-seven to thirteen in 1950. Accordingly, Milgram suggested a ratio of residency at Concord Park of 80 percent white to 20 percent black.<sup>31</sup> George Otto, on the other hand, had opposed a sales quota from the start as fundamentally antidemocratic and antithetical to what he believed was Concord Park's primary purposes—to provide housing to an underserved minority and turn a profit in the process. However, by early 1955 even Otto realized that the trajectory of sales complicated Concord Park's future. As a result, the principals in the Concord Park corporation reached a consensus that no more than half of the development's final homeowners would be black.

However, the corporation's decision to implement a sales quota was only a reaction to the fundamentally illiberal structures that controlled the supposedly free and voluntaristic real estate market within which developers like William Levitt and Morris Milgram operated. To put it more precisely, the decision to exclude blacks from most suburban developments was simply a matter of personal "prejudice": the federal government had set up its generous system of mortgage guarantees in such a way as to encourage this exclusion. Likewise, Milgram and Otto found it necessary to employ their own microscopic version of the federal government's illiberal market controls to fight the very effects of the government's policies in the first place.

Obviously, this newly instituted sales policy necessitated a shift in the way the corporation had pitched Concord Park's homes up until that point. It offered special incentives to salesmen who signed up white prospects, and it hired a new salesman whose sole duty was to focus on potential white buyers. Still, even before this shift, the Concord Park corporation had directed *all* of its paid publicity to the white market. It had already spent over four thousand dollars on advertising in local newspapers; it sent over twenty thousand pieces of direct mail stressing Concord Park's interracial policy to members of various "liberal" organizations.<sup>32</sup> Yet, despite the emphasis of Concord Park's publicity campaign, prospective black buyers flocked to view the development's model house and decided to become buyers at a rate five times higher than whites did. Word-of-mouth alone was enough to attract black interest. In the Griers'

<sup>31</sup> Eunice Grier and George Grier, *Privately Developed Interracial Housing: An Analysis of Experience* (Berkeley, CA, 1960), 66–67.

<sup>32</sup> Grier and Grier, "Concord Park," 7.

words, “word-of-mouth publicity . . . may be impossible to curb under these conditions when control is most needed—when the product meets a strong unfilled need.”<sup>33</sup> As a result, the social context of the development meant that Concord Park had to turn away many qualified black buyers to ensure the development’s interracial character.

Consequently, Milgram’s original vision ultimately became a reality, although in a slightly altered form. Concord Park’s developers eventually settled on a fifty-five to forty-five white to black ownership ratio, meaning that the venture would be substantively integrated. But more importantly, Concord Park’s integration was more than a statistical abstraction. For example, in 1957, the Institute for Urban Studies of the University of Pennsylvania conducted interviews with more than 90 percent of Concord Park’s white residents. Of the residents interviewed, 75 percent expressed “unqualified approval” of their neighbors, while another 11 percent expressed “general approval” with “some qualifications.” Survey participants mentioned only one person by name as being disliked, and this person was white. In fact, two of the white families interviewed stated that their black neighbors were generally superior to Concord Park’s whites. Other respondents remarked more generally about the overall neighborly feel of the development. “People who don’t even know you, wave because you live here, too,” stated one resident. “I wonder if that is true in an all-white development?” Another resident’s comments shed light on the widely held perception that blacks could not maintain property: “There was one family here that didn’t hang curtains for the longest time; it passed through my head that that must be a colored family, but you know what it was white. People think Negroes don’t keep their places up as well, but they’re wrong.”<sup>34</sup>

The evidence produced in the 1957 survey is borne out by the recollection of Concord Park’s original residents forty-three years later. In 2000, original black resident Joyce Hadley described Concord Park’s racial harmony. She recalled her family’s relationship with Werner Knaack, a German man brought to the United States by a Quaker charity. “He used to come over and stand on our kitchen table playing accordion,” remembered Hadley. “We’d all sing along. We’d eat purple cabbage and the puffed pastries and the bad-smelling cheese. . . . That was the point of Concord Park. You learned to be tolerant. You absorbed each person

<sup>33</sup> Grier and Grier, *Privately Developed Interracial Housing*, 67.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 197–98.

individually." In a similar vein, Warren Swartzbeck recalled the early days as "our dream . . . our little effort to heal the nation." White and black children played together. Their mothers and fathers socialized as equals, forming various social groups, both political and nonpolitical in nature. They shopped and even boycotted together, protesting Woolworth's racist lunch-counter policy.<sup>35</sup>

But despite these fond memories, Concord Park did not remain a substantially integrated community. "White flight" from Concord Park was not something that occurred in short order. Actually, the first of the original families to move out—a black family—sold its home to a white family. The next two families to move out were both white: one sold its home to another white family, the other to a black family. The near-herculean efforts of Morris Milgram were a large reason for Concord Park's initial ability to continue to attract white buyers despite the greater black demand. Milgram searched tirelessly for potential white buyers, but he also maintained a quota system to achieve racial balance. Milgram employed a technique that other developments used to *prevent* racial integration. The Griers observed that, "At the time of settlement, both Negro and white buyers [were] presented with a resale agreement in which the buyer agrees to give the builder first option to buy back his house in the event he wishes to resell."<sup>36</sup> All-white developments had employed such policies to prevent individual homeowners from selling to African Americans and to maintain racial homogeneity. In the case of Concord Park, the development used this covenant to prevent new black buyers (or at least an excess of new black buyers) from moving in in order to maintain racial *heterogeneity*.

Nevertheless, Morris Milgram could not overcome the deeply institutionalized racism present in the real estate industry. Concord Park had become a majority-black community by 1968 and was nearly 100 percent black by the 1990s. In retrospect, Milgram's "defeat" seems inevitable. Simply put, there were many more new houses available in the Philadelphia area for white purchase than there were for black purchase. Accordingly, Milgram's efforts succeeded as a short-term stopgap, but they were unable to address or change the underlying structural factors of the real estate market. In *Race and Residence*, published in 1960, Davis McEntire observed:

<sup>35</sup> Blanchard, "Vision of Suburban Racial Utopia Blurs."

<sup>36</sup> Grier and Grier, *Privately Developed Interracial Housing*, 208.

The general rule is that development for nonwhite occupancy must be located within or adjacent to areas where nonwhites are already living, or if elsewhere, in areas that are not wanted for white residential development. . . . [T]he available sites are usually of poor quality for residential development because of intrinsic features, presence of blighting influences, remote locations, or other drawbacks.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, at that time, many white Americans interpreted an interracial development as signifying a “Negro” development. For example, the Griers noted in their 1960 study that, “For many persons . . . the concept of a new community which is voluntarily inhabited by both Negroes and whites may be difficult to grasp.” As such, whites living in the general vicinity referred to Concord Park as “that colored development.”<sup>38</sup>

The implications of this perception were great, and again, the example of Concord Park is instructive. According to McEntire, the Concord Park corporation was able to choose the site it did because, at the time, the area remained spatially isolated. After the project’s initial success, Milgram attempted to expand Concord Park by buying adjacent farmland. At first, the land’s owner was willing to sell, but backed off after local businessmen became concerned that Concord Park’s growth would frighten prospective developers and investors who wanted to avoid a “Negro” enclave. Many in the area were not thrilled with Concord Park’s presence in the first place. They had become resigned to its existence, but were willing to do anything in their power to prevent its “encroachment” on still valuable land.<sup>39</sup>

The aversion to an African American presence—of *any* type—in the newly forming suburban landscape of the 1950s had deep historical roots. Historian Andrew Wiese argues that prior to World War II the process of African American suburbanization, in both the North and the South, was led by working-class African Americans. Many moved to unincorporated, frequently unregulated, land on the outskirts of the nation’s cities, often building their own homes on plots of land purchased at very low prices or perhaps not purchased at all. These homes constituted a suburban landscape far from the elitist bucolic retreat of popular imag-

<sup>37</sup> Davis McEntire, *Race and Residence: Final and Comprehensive Report to the Commission on Race and Housing* (Berkeley, CA, 1960), 187.

<sup>38</sup> Grier and Grier, *Privately Developed Interracial Housing*, 209, 213.

<sup>39</sup> McEntire, *Race and Residence*, 206.

ination.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, as Wiese notes, the African American suburbanization in the first half of the twentieth century often replicated rural patterns of life, with the home and its surrounding property often serving as an important site of economic production. Homeowners frequently used their plots of land to grow vegetables, keep animals, and take in boarders as a means of making ends meet.

This kind of pattern existed in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. As Wiese describes, a 1915 survey:

documented African American communities in forty-one suburbs within a twenty-five mile radius of city hall. These included the "thickly settled" black community of 5,000 people in Chester on the Delaware River as well as hamlets of a dozen or more families in Haddonfield, Merchantville, and Willow Grove Heights. . . . It included enclaves of black service workers in tony suburbs such as Darby and Ardmore, neighborhoods of steelworkers near the mills at Manayunk and Coatesville, and the independent black municipality of Lawnside, New Jersey, established by freed slaves before the Civil War.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, numbers from the 1950 census confirm the patterns observed in the 1915 survey. For example, Chester County had a nonwhite population of 9.5 percent; Delaware County, 7.1 percent; Montgomery County, 4.3 percent; Burlington County, New Jersey, 8.2 percent; and Camden County, New Jersey, 7.6 percent. Interestingly, however, Bucks County's nonwhite population was considerably lower, constituting only 1.8 percent of its total. In fact, the percentage of nonwhites had actually declined as the twentieth century progressed—the opposite of what occurred in Philadelphia's other suburban counties.<sup>42</sup>

As Wiese notes, the character of African American suburbanization shifted markedly after World War II and became primarily a middle-class phenomenon. Clearly, Concord Park is evidence of this change. In Wiese's view, this new, predominantly middle-class process of suburbanization created considerably more conflict than the earlier working-class

<sup>40</sup> There is much scholarship of suburbia which tends to reaffirm this rather specific notion of what suburbia is and has been. For example, see Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontiers*; and Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York, 1987).

<sup>41</sup> Wiese, *Places of Their Own*, 20–21.

<sup>42</sup> "Facts on Philadelphia's Negro Population and Its Housing," prepared by the Philadelphia Housing Association for the Commission on Human Relations, Oct. 1953, accession 148.1, box A-620, Philadelphia City Archives.



phenomenon. As Wiese argues—as have scholars like George Lipsitz and Gary Gerstle—the postwar suburban boom was a process closely related to the formation of white, middle-class identity.<sup>43</sup> Through cultural discourse and public policy, many whites came to believe that the “coming of African Americans threatened their efforts to rise in status and stability.”<sup>44</sup> In the pre-World War II period, when suburban development was less advanced and its image in popular culture less concrete, African American suburban settlements received less critical scrutiny and generated less social conflict. In other words, whites found it acceptable for African Americans to live in isolated settlements on unincorporated lands or in special sections of towns designated for the domestic workers of well-to-do white suburbanites; these living patterns did not challenge their assumptions about racial and class hierarchies in the way that a suburb like Concord Park would.

Milgram’s difficulties in maintaining and expanding his settlement demonstrate that many in government and the real estate industry could only understand or accept Concord Park as an isolated “Negro” enclave reminiscent of early twentieth-century patterns of African American suburbanization. Thus, Milgram’s goal of creating a truly integrated suburban development within the normative assumptions of 1950s middle-class suburbia were frustrated by the entrenched public and private institutional assumptions about appropriate racial and class hierarchies and their spatial manifestations.

Thus as the landscape surrounding cities like Philadelphia began to “suburbanize” in the immediate postwar years, it became increasingly difficult for the small number of committed idealists like Morris Milgram to find space to build their housing “experiments.” The developer committed to constructing open-occupancy housing was left with several kinds of spaces upon which he could build, none of which were likely to result in a truly interracial community. The developer could choose land that was either in or adjacent to all-black areas, land that was adjacent to undesirable properties like garbage dumps or polluting factories, or land that was very remote from any other new development. In the case of land in or near all-black areas—because this land was most likely situated in built-up areas characterized by older, decaying housing and infrastructure—

<sup>43</sup> Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); George Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the ‘White’ Problem in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 47 (1995): 369–87.

<sup>44</sup> Wiese, *Places of Their Own*, 98.

developers would have trouble attracting white residents, no matter how “liberal” they were; the white buyer had many other options in more spacious and modern locales. This was also true for land in undesirable locations. In the case of land distant from other development, the developer would have trouble attracting *any* buyers. Such land was almost certainly far from business and industrial centers (and thus the majority of jobs in a given metropolitan area) and also from convenient transportation routes. Furthermore, potential black buyers, who were generally willing to move to any development where they could purchase new, affordable housing, would be discouraged from purchasing a house in a remote locale that isolated them from important African American social centers.

The story of Concord Park suggests that a fair amount of genuine support for racial integration existed in the Philadelphia area. Nevertheless, this prointegration sentiment was able to do little to affect the trajectory of Philadelphia’s post-1945 racial landscape. Ultimately, the institutionalized racism of the real estate industry was too powerful. The scales were always loaded against an individual white citizen’s willingness to buy in an integrated setting. The “liberal” white citizen would have to make considerable sacrifices if he or she wished to live up to his or her ideals because housing developments open to African Americans had to be located in the most undesirable locations.

Furthermore, the consequences of the real estate industry’s institutionalized racism during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s would be felt long after practices like “redlining” were formally outlawed by the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Indeed, such racist policies solidified the connection between whiteness, middle-class status, and homeownership that had justified racially exclusive policies in the first place.<sup>45</sup> As a result, even after a much greater portion of the Philadelphia area’s housing stock became available—at least formally—to African American buyers, the regional landscape would remain segregated to a much greater degree than would have been the case had the market functioned in a truly race-blind manner. Because whiteness continued to carry with it the assumption of middle-class identity even after housing policies that helped create this connection were prohibited, the appearance of African Americans (especially if more than

<sup>45</sup> For a book-length treatment of the relationship between whiteness, property ownership, and public policy, see David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago, 2007).

a token number) in a previously all-white neighborhood continued to bring with it a sense of neighborhood “decline” in the eyes of many whites. This conflating of whiteness with class status helps explain why the kind of racial “tipping” Concord Park experienced in the 1960s would continue in locations throughout the Philadelphia area in subsequent decades despite a decline in overt racism and the elimination of the kind of institutional barriers that had made Concord Park so difficult to build.

Concord Park’s history can tell us much about the development of metropolitan Philadelphia in the aftermath of World War II. Many hoped that private developers—with the support of the government—could provide comfortable and affordable housing for all. Unfortunately, both private developers and public agencies operated under the assumption that racial integration was incompatible with the goal of widely available housing. “Either you could solve a racial problem or a housing problem,” as William Levitt once claimed, but not both together. The racial assumptions of the institutions most instrumental in the construction of Philadelphia’s (and, indeed, America’s) postwar residential landscape made it very difficult for builders like Morris Milgram to achieve their goals. Whether one was trying to build truly interracial communities—like Morris Milgram—or simply trying to be the first black family to move into an all-white neighborhood, any attempt to provide truly integrated housing was an uphill battle against entrenched institutional arrangements that perpetuated racial separatism and placed African Americans at a disadvantage. In the end, the considerable amount of individual and organizational sentiment in favor of racial integration in the Philadelphia area was unable to overcome these arrangements.

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