Housing Segregation in Milwaukee in the 1950s and 1960s

Goals
Students examine a map, a statistical table, and a video clip of Father James Groppi to understand the origins of segregated neighborhoods and why fair housing became an important community issue.

Central Questions
Where did neighborhood segregation come from? Why was fair housing such an important issue?

Background Information
Until the 1960s, discriminatory laws and lending practices forced nearly all African Americans to live in a single neighborhood just north and northwest of downtown. Ninety percent of Milwaukee's subdivisions had been laid out with covenants prohibiting the sale of property to people of color, and informal agreements among realtors, lenders, and landlords reinforced those restrictions. These practices were not considered illegal until 1968; many, if not most, US cities were similarly segregated.

Black residents who tried to move out of the central city faced landlords who refused to rent to them or banks that wouldn't write mortgages. Landlords told African Americans seeking housing that vacant apartments had suddenly been rented to others, or prices and rents were much higher than had been publicly advertised.

In 1962, alderwoman Vel Phillips introduced the first ordinance in the Milwaukee Common Council to reverse this sort of discrimination. The ordinance was defeated 18-1, her vote being the only one in favor. Similar votes occurred three more times over the next six years. Finally, in 1967 and 1968, Milwaukee's NAACP Youth Council picketed the homes of alders and marched for 200 consecutive nights to demand a fair housing law. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Congress passed a national fair housing law. On April 30, 1968, the Milwaukee Common Council followed with its own ordinance. See the lesson plan, “Segregation in Milwaukee Today,” (page 43) for related content.

Documents Used in This Lesson:
2. News clip of Father James Groppi summarizing the fight for open housing, September 20, 1967. Six minutes long. This is raw footage, abruptly edited in places. http://wihist.org/1zSvSXW
http://wihist.org/11r0hkh

Covenant: a legal rule
Plat: the official map of a neighborhood
Subdivision: neighborhood
Gentlemen's Agreement: promise within a private group to work together to achieve a goal
Questions

Document 1: Map of Milwaukee’s Black neighborhood, 1940.

With a partner, answer these questions.

1. Look at the map closely. Can you find where I-94 is today, or I-43, or Marquette University, or the Bradley Center, or the Milwaukee Public Museum?

2. What percent of the nonwhite (African American) households in Milwaukee lived in this neighborhood? (Hint: look at the table below the map)
http://wihist.org/1zSvSXW
Questions


Watch the six-minute video clip of Father Groppi and discuss the following questions in small groups. (Because the film is unedited raw footage, it skips around a little, especially in the second half.)

1. How does Father Groppi explain the necessity of holding marches and demonstrations in Milwaukee?

2. What happened when the small group of demonstrators reached the all-white neighborhood near South 10th and Lincoln?

3. How did construction of the freeways and urban renewal projects affect 1,000 Black families in the central city?

4. Why does Father Groppi bring up police dogs at the end of the film clip? How is his proposed response to dogs different from that of other civil rights protesters? Do you agree or disagree with what he says about nonviolence?