

## Housing Segregation in Milwaukee in the 1950s and 1960s

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### 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:

1. Map of Milwaukee's Black neighborhood, 1940, from "Milwaukee's Negro Community." Citizens' Governmental Research Bureau. (Milwaukee: The Bureau, 1946): page 2.  
<http://wihist.org/11r0hkh>
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>

1. Map of Milwaukee's Black neighborhood, 1940, from "Milwaukee's Negro Community," Citizens' Governmental Research Bureau, 1946.  
<http://wihist.org/11r0hkh>

Race Restrictive Covenants

Mr. George Brawley, a Milwaukee attorney, has recently completed a study of the race restrictive covenants contained in plats filed with the

Register of Deeds office of Milwaukee County. He estimates that 90% of subdivisions which have been platted in the City of Milwaukee since 1910 contain some type of covenant which has the effect of prohibiting the sale of the property to Negroes.

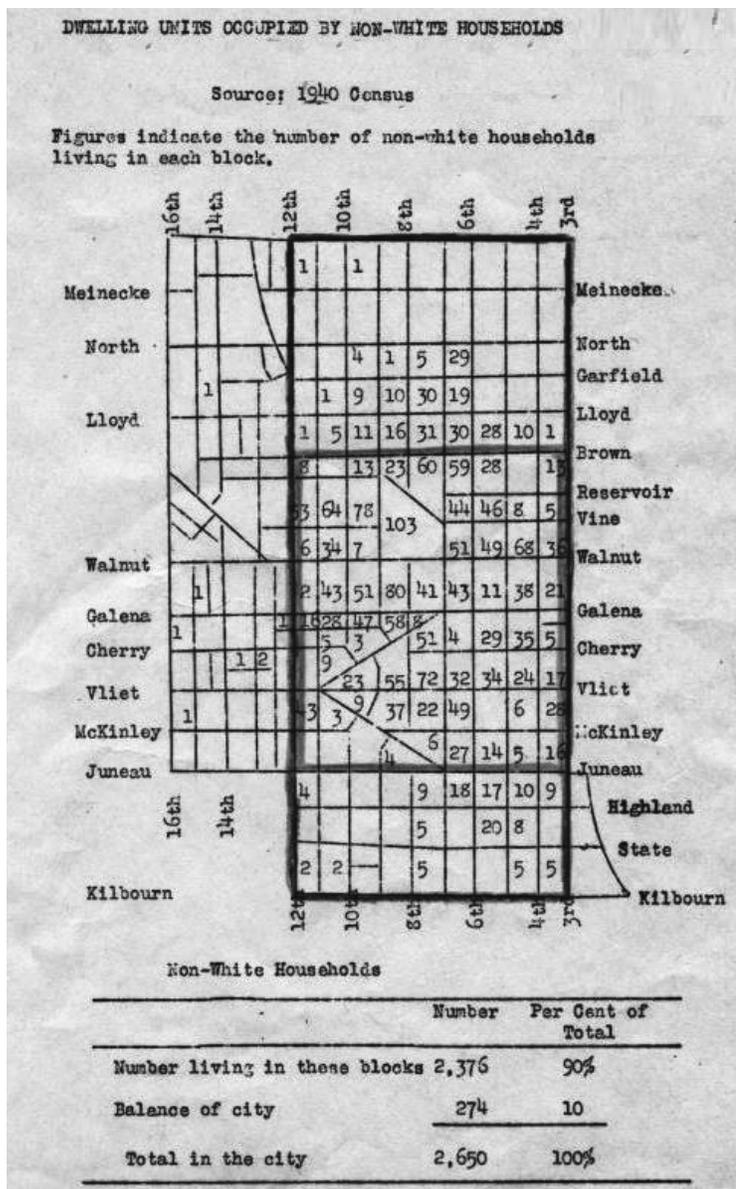
He states that in other parts of the city there are "gentlemen's agreements" not to sell or rent property to Negroes except within the area bounded by W. North, W. Juneau, N. 3rd, and N. 12th Streets.

**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





Document 2: News clip of Father James Groppi talking about fair housing on Sept. 20, 1967.  
<http://wihist.org/1zSvSXW>

Map Timeline Key Terms 1940s-1960s

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**News film clip of Father Groppi at the Unitarian Church West summarizing the struggle for open housing in Milwaukee, September 20, 1967**

View Description



## Questions

Document 2: News clip of Father James Groppi, Sept. 20, 1967.

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?