# UNFINISHED REVOLUTION


## THE ROOTS OF DIVERSITY:

Fair Housing and the End of Racial Exclusion in Montgomery County

By Bennett Miller

MONTGOMERY HISTORY

MoCo 250 1776-2026

Montgomery County, Maryland marks its 250th anniversary on September 6, 2026. To commemorate the occasion, Montgomery History presents *Unfinished Revolution*, a project to share important stories from our past that combine to tell a more complete and inclusive history of this county. The numerous authors commissioned for this project explore topics related to the history of Montgomery County that either address events that took place from the 1960s forward or fill in gaps by addressing subjects that have been underrepresented or left out of the existing published historical narrative. In embracing the theme of an "Unfinished Revolution," we bring focus to the still-unmet promise of 1776 while rotating its vision to align with our shared journey toward the future.

Montgomery History—the county's historical society—has been serving residents and the region through its research library, adult programs, educational activities, publications, exhibits, and conferences since the organization was founded in 1944. Its mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and share the histories of all county residents and communities.




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Diversity defines modern Montgomery County. Almost no other place in America includes such a dazzling variety of people. County residents come from different cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, but they share a single community. They work together, attend school together, relax in parks together, and mingle in vibrant public spaces like Rio and Downtown Silver Spring. One 2025 study even named Gaithersburg, Silver Spring, and Germantown as the nation's three most diverse cities, with Rockville close behind.[1]

The irony, though, is that Montgomery County was never designed to bring lots of different people together. The developers, politicians, and residents who initially built its suburbs had the opposite goal in mind. During the first half of the 20th century, most white Americans believed that successful communities needed to be homogeneous. As new subdivisions sprawled across the county after 1920, that meant welcoming affluent white families and keeping out African Americans (who made up nearly all of the D.C. area's non-white population). The county's discriminatory housing market refused to allow Black people to buy or rent suburban homes, excluding them from the new schools and professional-class jobs that white residents enjoyed. By 1960, Montgomery was the richest U.S. county by median income and 96 percent white.[2] Most of the county's neighborhoods were entirely segregated, with Black residents living primarily in rural areas or in isolated enclaves cut off from white suburbia.

So what changed? How did a community premised on exclusion become one of the most cosmopolitan places in the U.S.? The demographic answer is simple. Thousands of non-white people moved in. After Congress loosened immigration restrictions in 1965, new Americans from all over the world began arriving in Montgomery County. African Americans moved to the suburbs too, chasing visions of equality opened by the sixties' civil rights revolution.[3] But crucially, these newcomers could join the county because of a deeper structural change: the real estate market finally stopped excluding them. Old forms of housing discrimination—and the fear of diversity they reflected—gave way to an open market and a new belief that homogeneity was not so essential after all.

The shift from segregation holds the key to understanding Montgomery County's inclusive rebirth, and the fair housing movement made it happen. As the color line that divided metropolitan Washington began to crack in the late 1950s, thousands of county residents mobilized to fight against racial exclusion. In 1962, they formed Suburban Maryland Fair Housing (SMFH), a grassroots organization dedicated to opening county neighborhoods to families of all races. SMFH members came from liberal churches and synagogues, progressive activist circles, and Montgomery's then-small Black population. Together, they worked to create a community with the same stellar educational and professional opportunities, but without the stain of segregation. SMFH volunteers found homes for Black families and lobbied white

residents to accept their new neighbors peacefully. Within a few years, the group cracked the color line in almost every formerly all-white neighborhood in the county. In 1968, SMFH's work culminated in one of the nation's strongest fair housing laws, which prohibited housing discrimination and gave county government new power to enforce the ban.

But fair housing was not an easy sell. Suburban Montgomery County emerged and prospered in a world that treated segregation as common sense. Rejecting racial exclusion meant rejecting a system that promised white homeowners wealth and stability, values which meant everything to a generation that came of age amid depression and world war. Even white residents who were sympathetic to civil rights worried that integration might cause chaos if their neighbors refused to tolerate Black families. "I feel sorry for the Negroes, but not that sorry," one man told an SMFH canvasser. "I'm concerned about the value of my property."[4] Fair housing activists believed that ending segregation was morally necessary, but their ethical arguments alone were not enough to override white residents' attachment to segregation.

To break through this barrier, SMFH fused morality to a practical critique of segregation. The group argued that racial exclusion was not only unethical, but that it actually made county neighborhoods more precarious. By trying to contain African Americans, the housing market created pent-up demand that could only flow through sudden ruptures in the color line, which occurred constantly within Washington during the fifties. Because most residents and realtors remained fixated on homogeneity, these ruptures sparked panic, destabilized property values, and drove white families to flee the city. SMFH warned that the same process would take place in Montgomery County unless residents rejected discrimination and built an open housing market. "To confine people to a racial ghetto is immoral," SMFH's organizing memo declared. "It is also bad business."[5] Instead, SMFH argued that it was smarter to be accepting. An integrated community would be free from the risks of panic and flight that jeopardized the suburban good life. In essence, the group routed white people's self-interest in a new direction, reframing diversity from a threat into an asset.

Nationwide, most white suburbs resisted integration during the sixties, but Montgomery County was one of many well-off communities that followed a different path.[6] In Oak Park, Illinois near Chicago, residents mirrored SMFH by championing desegregation in the name of stability. They passed a strict fair housing law days before Montgomery did. Similar efforts occurred in well-off towns like Greenwich, Connecticut; Teaneck and South Orange, New Jersey; and Boston's Route 128 suburbs. These places ranked among the biggest beneficiaries of the racialized housing market, but they were some of the only white communities willing to upset its racist logic.[7] They did not embrace fair housing because they were especially liberal, but because they recognized that desegregation offered material advantages. Fair housing helped secure the privileges that affluent suburbs enjoyed, even as it made them available to non-white groups too. Blended with civil rights activism, this form of white self-interest produced a new kind of American community: affluent, inclusive, and increasingly liberal.

Of course, fair housing alone did not transform Montgomery County. At first, it only opened neighborhoods to high-earning Black families. No one at the time predicted that so many more ethnically and economically diverse people would start arriving in the late sixties, a process that sparked different struggles for inclusion and belonging. But by upending Montgomery's racial logic, fair housing made future change possible. It ratified the ideals of diversity and racial liberalism—that people of all backgrounds deserve equal rights and that local government must advance them. The community we recognize today grew from this seed.

# Race and the Rise of Montgomery County

Racial divisions have a long history in Montgomery County. They stretch back through centuries of slavery and through years of violence that continued to afflict African Americans after emancipation. The story of housing segregation, however, revolves around the more recent process of suburbanization, which reshaped the county in the decades before and after World War II. Like the D.C. area at large, Montgomery's population surged during these years, forming a newer and much larger community atop old foundations. But it took more than bricks to build suburbia. The county grew around a particular set of ideas and assumptions about race, which by the mid-20th century helped define it as an affluent but rigidly segregated place.

Kensington Railway streetcar stopped in front of the B&O railroad station, circa 1924 (Montgomery History)

In 1920, about 35,000 people lived in Montgomery County. Most resided in rural communities, some white and some Black, where agriculture shaped the rhythms of life as it had for generations. A few thousand residents filled Chevy Chase and Takoma Park, small streetcar suburbs near Washington, but they were the exception to an agrarian norm.[8]

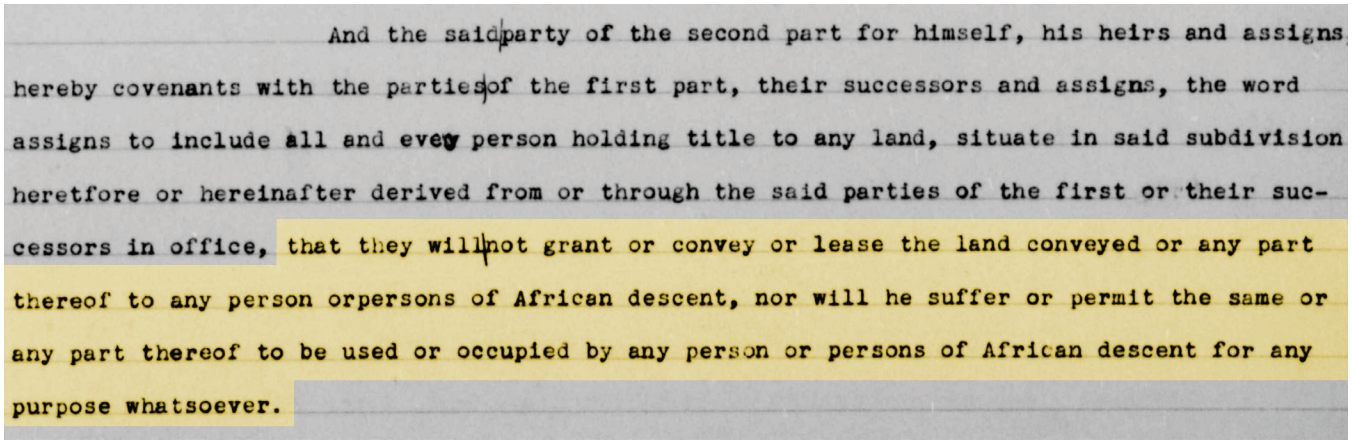
Dairy farm near Sandy Spring, Maryland, circa 1910 (Montgomery History)

The growth of the modern federal government, however, transformed the D.C. area and suburbanized Montgomery County. After the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, Washington's population grew nearly 50 percent as workers arrived to staff the wartime state.[9] They drove new housing demand, which developers met by building rapidly across Washington and the land just beyond it. In Montgomery, developers created an ever-deeper ring of suburbs around the District line. In the west, Bethesda and Chevy Chase projected out from the posh D.C. neighborhoods beyond Rock Creek Park. Further east, subdivisions sprawled from Silver Spring and Takoma Park into the county's farther reaches. Growth slowed during the Great Depression, but the New Deal brought another wave of migrants to Washington and restored the building boom. By 1935 new housing construction in Montgomery passed its 1920s peak and only accelerated from there.[10]

By regulating development, Montgomery's leaders created a deliberately affluent community. The county's early suburbs catered chiefly to the capital's elite, a pattern that local planners tried to sustain. Agencies like the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission encouraged expensive construction through exacting zoning laws and building codes. Planners used tax revenue from pricey homes to fund schools and infrastructure, which then fueled more high-end development.[11] As new suburbanites moved in, they embraced this model and lobbied against any perceived threats to the county's class status. In 1941, for instance, Bethesda residents blocked construction of a home made from cottonwood, which they called a "value-destroying" material.[12]

But more than any grain of wood, the quest for affluence hinged on racial apartheid. As happened nationwide, developers, realtors, and lenders around Washington believed that white Americans did not want to live around Black people. They assumed that race-mixing inevitably harmed property values and social stability. Experiences within D.C. seemed to substantiate this theory, especially among the high-income residents that Montgomery County hoped to attract. In a 1929 study of Washington, Black sociologist William Henry Jones observed that "white people with considerable social and economic status...do not prefer to live in culturally heterogenous communities," instead using their resources to live as far from Black residents as possible. To meet this apparent preference, Washington's real estate industry embraced the color line. Its real estate board, like others, required members to agree that "no property in a white section should ever be sold, rented, advertised, or offered to colored people." The federal government adopted the same philosophy when financing new developments and guaranteeing mortgages, helping institutionalize prejudice as the foundation of the U.S. housing market.[13]

Accordingly, Montgomery County's new neighborhoods excluded Black families. As early as 1904, local developers inscribed the deeds of many suburban homes with racial covenants—legal clauses which required that properties only be sold to white buyers. Race restrictions proliferated during the 1920s and 1930s, with advertisements touting them as a guarantee that new homes would offer stable investments. E. Brooke Lee, the county's leading developer and political figure, made covenants a staple of the subdivisions he platted across Silver Spring. Some covenants targeted non-Black groups too, including Jewish, Asian, and Middle Eastern people, but by the late 1930s the county's racial lines had largely simplified to a white-Black binary. Not all developments imposed covenants, but no county builders sold homes to Black families. No county realtors helped them buy existing houses either.[14]



And the said party of the second part for himself, his heirs and assigns hereby covenants with the parties of the first part, their successors and assigns, the word assigns to include all and every person holding title to any land, situate in said subdivision heretfore or hereinafter derived from or through the said parties of the first or their successors in office, that they will not grant or convey or lease the land conveyed or any part thereof to any person orpersons of African descent, nor will he suffer or permit the same or any part thereof to be used or occupied by any person or persons of African descent for any purpose whatsoever.

1936 deed including a restrictive covenant for a home in West End Park, Rockville. (Montgomery History)

The broader racism that shaped life in Montgomery County also ensured that few African Americans considered moving there anyway. The county's segregated Black schools were vastly inferior to Washington's, lacking indoor plumbing well into the thirties. Few of its jobs or parks were open to non-white people either. For Black families, D.C. was a better place to live—and thanks to racial exclusion, it was their only choice regardless.[15]

Aligned with the housing market's racial logic, Montgomery County blossomed into an unprecedentedly prosperous place after World War II. As the federal workforce almost tripled between 1940 and 1960, the Washington region became the country's fastest growing metro area outside of Texas or California.[16] Montgomery reaped much of this growth. Its population doubled in the forties, then again in the fifties. By 1960, the county neared 350,000 residents, ten times more than it had just forty years earlier. Voters poured most of the county's budget into building one of the best-regarded school systems in the nation, and they funded parks that were "unequaled by any other growing suburb."[17] Through these investments, Montgomery attracted nearly one-third of the region's high-income white families, more than lived in D.C. or all of Northern Virginia.[18]

As affluent residents arrived, white-collar industry followed. The county's economy revolved around federal jobs in Washington, but most postwar growth took place in the suburbs. The federal government itself led this charge. Beginning with the National Institutes of Health in 1938, federal agencies flocked to Montgomery County. Both the Atomic Energy Commission and the Bureau of Standards opened enormous suburban campuses, which they hoped would be safe from a nuclear attack on Washington. Private employers invested too, driving 70 percent of county job growth during the fifties. IBM based its Federal Systems Division in Rockville in 1959. Companies like GE, Booz Allen Hamilton, and RCA opened offices too, building a modern knowledge economy rooted in well-paying government and science jobs.[19]

The county's professional-class population developed into an ideologically varied community. Many of the white-collar workers who arrived in the county skewed liberal, having come to the D.C. area to serve federal agencies, unions, think tanks, and other pieces of the New Deal state. In fact, Bethesda and Chevy Chase housed most of Washington's leading liberals, from future vice presidents Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale to the powerful AFL-CIO president George Meany.[20] But conservative groups inhabited the county too: both its old Upper South elite and newcomers who aligned with the nascent New Right. They infused local politics with strident anti-communism, including a 1956 purge of "subversive" textbooks from county classrooms.[21] But despite their differences, no white bloc seriously challenged the county's racial or class makeup.

Meanwhile, Montgomery's small Black population became a world apart. County planners ignored historic Black communities when mapping streets and sewers, turning them into isolated pockets. In Lyttonsville, also known as Linden, Black families watched Silver Spring's modern subdivisions sprawl around them while their community subsisted on dirt roads and hand-pumped wells. Similar conditions plagued Scotland, the Black settlement engulfed by development near Bethesda. White neighborhoods could access private and federal funding to build and improve their homes, but the real estate industry rejected Black communities as hopelessly antiquated. A 1937 Federal Housing Administration (FHA) report called them the "worst of heterogenous developments" and recommended they be razed. Though not demolished, the county's Black enclaves became more alien as the white suburbs prospered. In Silver Spring, white children dubbed Lyttonsville "Deepest Darkest," suggesting an awful and altogether foreign place. As one sociologist put it, Black county residents "*in* the suburbs were not *of* the suburbs," stranded on the wrong side of a color line that snaked around them.[22]

Street view within the community of Scotland, 1968 (Montgomery History, photo by Alan Siegel)

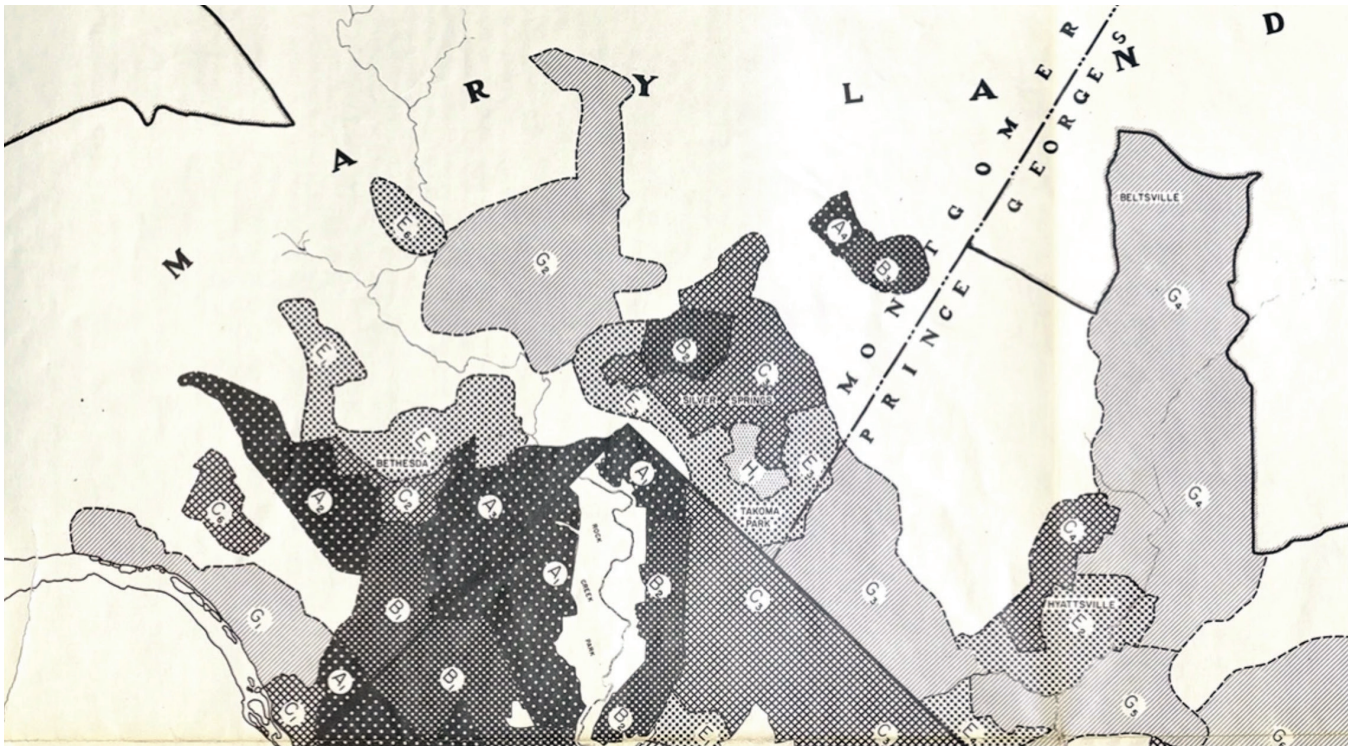
White liberals and Black builders tried to develop housing for African Americans, but neither could overcome the barriers designed to stop them. In the early fifties, local white activists—including future federal urban renewal commissioner William Slayton—explored the possibility of developing racially mixed housing. They failed, however, to find anyone willing to sell them land or any builder willing to develop it.[23] When the county's integrated teachers' union looked to construct apartments for retired members a few years later, it faced zoning challenges wherever it sought to build.[24] Plans for all-Black housing fared no better. Lenders scorned projects that would bring Black families anywhere near white neighborhoods. In 1953, Clarence Mitchell Jr. of the NAACP called Montgomery "the hardest place in the world to try to get any kind of FHA approval on [Black] housing construction." The color line, strictly enforced and rendered as common sense, reserved Montgomery's prosperity for white residents only.[25]

# The Crisis of the Color Line

Residential apartheid reigned across the D.C. area because it seemed to do its job. Segregated white communities grew ever more prosperous, which lent the color line legitimacy that Black activists and their allies could not unsettle. But during the 1950s, the region's housing market became increasingly unstable, ensnared by the destructive implications of its own racial logic. As exclusion began to break down in Washington and then in its suburbs, liberal groups began to advance an inclusive alternative that could address segregation's negative consequences.

Problems arose because of Black population growth. Washington already had one of the largest Black communities in the U.S., including a thriving middle class anchored by institutions like Howard University. But as the New Deal state grew, so did the number of federal jobs available to Black workers, whose ranks quadrupled in the first three years of World War II alone. Federal agencies were still rife with discrimination, but their stable working-class and professional-class jobs brought more and more Black families to Washington.[26] The area's Black population tripled from 1930 to 1960, hovering at around 25 percent of regional population. Most newcomers arrived from the South with little more than hope, but a sizable share brought college degrees and purchasing power. In 1960, close to 30 percent of Black households in and around D.C. earned at least $7,000 a year (about $77,000 in 2025 dollars). They formed 11 percent of metropolitan Washington's middle class, almost twice their share in the New York metro area and seven times higher than Boston.[27]

But as in other cities, the housing market's racial logic prevented Washington from peaceably incorporating new Black residents. The real estate industry remained committed to exclusion and fought to keep most of the city (not to mention the suburbs) segregated. Of 30,700 new homes under construction in D.C. in the mid-1940s, only 200 were available to Black buyers. Realtors honored their pledge not to desegregate existing neighborhoods, and the city's lenders maintained similar devotion to the color line. In 1962 the Mortgage Bankers Association of Metropolitan Washington acknowledged that "applications from minority groups are not generally considered in areas that are not recognized as being racially mixed, on the premise that such an investment would not be stable." Industry efforts to preserve segregation in D.C. were so thorough that the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights called them a violation of antitrust law.[28]




Detail of a 1937 map of the Metropolitan Area of Washington, D.C., showing residential areas graded by racial occupancy. The darkest sections called "Type A" are the "highest grade" representing the "best protection from adverse influences." The lowest grade in Montgomery County, "Type G," described as "scattered and uncontrolled developments," was classified as the lowest grade acceptable "for use of white persons." (Federal Housing Administration)

But Black Washingtonians had to live somewhere. As their population and desperation grew, they created market pressure that stressed and stretched the color line. D.C. became rife with "blockbusting," a process in which realtors created panic in white neighborhoods to free up units that could be folded into an expanding Black ghetto. Targeting areas near Black communities, blockbusters used fear that integration would hurt property values to convince white residents to flee to the suburbs. Apartment owners used similar tactics, raising rents to push out white tenants in favor of Black ones.[29] Racial turnover became easier in 1948, when the Supreme Court made racial covenants unenforceable.[30] In the next decade, one-third of Washington's white population left the city. In 1957, it became the country's first majority-Black metropolis.

By trying to maintain segregation, the housing market wound up disrupting the neighborhoods and property values it was supposed to stabilize. Black families, charged exorbitant prices for scarce housing, suffered the most, but the chaos caused by racial turnover affected the entire urban community. White families often felt coerced into leaving their neighborhoods, and with them their churches, schools, and friendships.[31] In departing, white residents took tax revenue too, bolstering the suburbs but starving D.C. of resources. The housing market created two distinct communities: an increasingly Black and depleted Washington and a surrounding ring of suburbs that pundits called the city's "white noose."[32]

As segregation created harmful outcomes, some white residents began to push back against its racial logic. Many middle-class white homeowners did not want to leave D.C., so they tried to prove that integrated communities were viable by making them work. When the advancing color line reached white neighborhoods just south of Montgomery County in 1958, white and Black Washingtonians formed an organization called Neighbors Inc. The group aimed to convince white homeowners to accept Black neighbors and to break the devastating cycle of turnover. "We were sure there had to be a more sensible alternative to the prevailing pattern of entrance, panic, and flight," recalled Marvin Caplan, an AFL-CIO lobbyist who co-founded the group. Putting this theory to work, Neighbors Inc. stifled several efforts to induce panic sales and lobbied the FHA to reverse a finding that their community was an unstable "transition" area. Similar associations formed in neighborhoods like Lamond-Riggs and Mount Pleasant, all framing racial inclusion as the solution to market dynamics that menaced their communities.[33]

District officials also pinned hopes for stability on deracializing the housing market, specifically through an urban renewal program that aimed to create modern, integrated communities. Starting in 1954, Washington's Redevelopment Land Agency leveled Southwest D.C., the city's poorest majority-Black area. Private firms filled it with new homes and marketed them on a nondiscriminatory basis. On its simplest terms, the plan worked. White and Black buyers moved in and formed stable neighborhoods. Black activist and future secretary of Housing and Urban Development Robert Weaver called Southwest a "dramatic and successful example of racially integrated housing" which demonstrated that different races could "live together in harmony." But this symbolic victory came at great cost: thousands of units removed from a Black housing market that had none to spare. Displaced families searched for homes elsewhere in the city, and as the real estate industry remained unconvinced about integration, their dispersion fueled more turnover. Ensuing market pressure doomed Neighbors Inc.'s effort to stabilize the neighborhoods of Manor Park and Brightwood, where hounding by blockbusters drove out most white residents by 1960.[34]

Urban renewal's failure indicated that the Washington housing market could never stabilize if its suburbs stayed segregated. Marvin Caplan admired Neighbors Inc.'s success in slowing turnover, but he admitted that it could only resist pressure created by Black housing demand to a point. "Unless other sections of Metropolitan Washington begin to open to everyone," he said, "we're simply a holding action." Robert Weaver agreed. "Until suburban areas are also opened up to all elements of the population, we will continue to suffer from too great concentrations of ethnic groups in too small a sector of the total metropolitan area." In fact, by the late 1950s the frontier of racial transition crossed into Prince George's County, Maryland, where homes were generally less expensive than in Montgomery and closer to existing Black areas. As they had across D.C., thousands of white residents in Prince George's panicked and fled, leaving new ghettoized neighborhoods behind them. This latest transition cycle confirmed what Caplan and Weaver suspected: only widespread integration could stop the color line's destructive advance.[35]

Charles A. Horsky (at right) at the swearing-in ceremony for his appointment as Advisor for National Capital Affairs, September 28, 1962. Left to right: Margaret Ellen Horsky, Barbara Egleston Horsky, President John F. Kennedy, Charles A. Horsky (JFK Presidential Library and Museum)

Sensing a need and an opportunity, liberals around Washington began planning to confront suburban exclusion. Silver Spring resident Charles Horsky led the effort. A protégé of Democratic statesman Dean Acheson, Horsky was one of the region's leading left-wing activists, best known for arguing against Japanese internment in the Supreme Court case *Korematsu v. U.S.* In 1959 he contacted groups across the area about forming a new organization to consider suburban desegregation. Horsky convened neighborhood associations, the NAACP, union locals, and faith groups like the Catholic Interracial Council to form the "National Capital Clearing House for Neighborhood Democracy." He imagined the clearing house as a venue more for discussion than advocacy, but he hoped it would offer a platform for future action.[36]

However humble, Horsky's group provoked instant backlash from those who saw integration as an intrinsic threat to Montgomery County's well-being. In a scathing editorial, the conservative *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Tribune* warned that any effort to dismantle the suburban color line would imperil "our families, our homes, our schools, our businesses, our pocketbooks, our attitudes, and even our entire way of life." To their eyes, Horsky was little different than a blockbuster. Segregation in Montgomery remained intact and seemingly effective, so instigating racial change seemed to risk property values for the unnecessary goal of stabilizing Washington. The *Tribune* called on "citizens who have a real stake in this fine County of ours…those who do their own social planning and nobody else's" to reject integration and the "onslaught of the social planners." But there was no onslaught. Horsky's "clearing house" lacked the resources to drive integration, or any vision for overcoming the political and market forces pushing against it.[37]

But as housing remained scarce for Black home seekers in Washington, some began testing Montgomery's color line on their own. James Roberts worked as a surgeon at Howard University, but he could not find anywhere decent to live in D.C. In 1960, his broker alerted him to a home in White Oak whose owner wanted to sell to a Black buyer, specifically to make his neighbors mad. Roberts seized the chance. Predictably, the bank that had offered him financing ruled the suburbs "out of line" and pulled their loan, but Roberts found support from a Black-run bank in North Carolina instead. Many of his would-be neighbors opposed the sale, but they failed to outbid him for the house. Meanwhile, a minister living a few doors down from Roberts' new home rallied the Silver Spring Ministerial Alliance to defend him, sending clergy to persuade residents that a Black neighbor would not ruin their property values provided they stayed calm. Roberts moved in, and opposition faded.[38]

Other Black newcomers faced more hostility. In 1960, Adolph Williams opened a dental office in Rockville, near where his wife, Mary, taught for Montgomery County Public Schools. The couple spent months commuting from Washington but eventually found a seller willing to contract with them without a realtor. Within a day of moving in, however, the Williamses found a noose draped over their car. The next day, July 4, 1961, they returned from getting ice cream to find a flaming cross that a neighbor had just dislodged from their porch. Threatening letters and calls followed. But Adolph and Mary stayed put, and ultimately, no panic-selling resulted.[39]

By late 1962, four other Black families made their way into Montgomery County. They were not the first—a scattered few found homes in the forties and fifties—but their growing numbers signaled a real rupture in the county's color line. For those sympathetic to desegregation, this change inspired both fear and hope. On the one hand, local responses to the Roberts and Williams move-ins each verged on serious violence. As more Black buyers inevitably arrived, white homeowners might flee as they had in Washington. George and Eunice Grier, the nation's leading housing integration experts, predicted that without intervention the less wealthy neighborhoods of Silver Spring would become "extensions of present segregated patterns" in D.C. [40] But the move-ins also proved that the housing market's racial barriers were surmountable, and that non-white families could live in county neighborhoods without causing chaos. Integration, if done right, could defuse the threat of turnover while pushing Montgomery toward the kind of inclusive community that progressive activists, clergy, and new Black residents desired.

Civil rights breakthroughs also buoyed liberal hopes. In 1961, Montgomery County finished desegregating its schools. The Board of Education took seven years to implement *Brown v. Board*, moving at what the local NAACP called a "snail's pace," but it did produce the state's first integrated system. A few Black students could now access the educational opportunities that made Montgomery so appealing to white homebuyers.[41] Local activists also struck against segregated businesses. In 1960, the NAACP successfully boycotted white-only restaurants, while Howard students picketed the segregated Hiser Theater in Bethesda and broke the color line at Glen Echo amusement park.[42] In response, the County Council created a Human Relations Commission to manage race relations, and in 1962 banned discrimination in public accommodations like restaurants and hotels. Though the county's law was rife with exemptions, it signaled that local government would defend the civil rights of Black residents—if they could move in.[43]


John Hiser did not allow Black patrons in his Bethesda movie theater, thought to be the only theater in the county that continued to discriminate at this time. After four men were arrested for "trespassing" on the property in late July, 1960, demonstrators from the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) set up a 100-hour consecutive protest. Each hour marked a year that had passed since the Emancipation Proclamation that was announced in September 1862—protestors added an extra two hours. John Hiser sold the theater in September 1960 rather than desegregate. (Reprinted with permission of the DC Public Library, Star Collection © Washington Post)

# Forging a Fair Housing Movement

Beginning in 1962, liberals in Montgomery County mobilized to transform the racialized housing market before it collapsed on them and their neighbors. In a sense, the task was simple: help Black families reach the suburbs, convince white residents to stay put, and eventually persuade realtors to accept customers without regard for race. But even as segregation frayed, it remained central to how white suburbanites saw their communities and how realtors understood their profession. To overcome these beliefs, liberals built a fair housing movement around self-interested arguments for inclusion, which gradually displaced the county's exclusionary logic.

Atlee Shidler, seen here as a young graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, leveraged his activist connections across the D.C. area to lay the groundwork for launching Suburban Maryland Fair Housing. (Johns Hopkins University)

Charles Horsky ignited the fair housing campaign in spring 1962. Through the National Capital Clearing House for Neighborhood Democracy, Horsky gathered progressive activists who wanted to capitalize on Montgomery's shifting racial landscape. He formed a planning team with Neighbors Inc.'s executive director, housing experts George and Eunice Grier, and Atlee Shidler, a researcher from Garrett Park who worked for Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies.[44] The group soon learned that other activists shared their ambitions. In Philadelphia, the Quaker-run American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) was readying its own campaign in metropolitan Washington, imagined as the centerpiece of a national push for housing integration. The D.C. region, wrote AFSC executive Barbara Moffett, posed "an extreme case of what is happening demographically in almost every other metropolitan area." However, it also featured groups like Neighbors Inc. that were testing inclusive solutions and activists eager to bring that same struggle to the suburbs. Given these assets, Moffett saw "unusual opportunities to make an impact on one of the nation's most critical problems and in a setting of highest symbolic importance." Working with Horsky's team, she secured funds to seed a grassroots campaign in Montgomery and to send organizers to D.C. to support Black families moving to the suburbs.[45]

The Reverend Dr. John Wiley Prugh came to Rockville in 1959 to establish St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in the Twinbrook area. He immediately became active in social issues in Rockville and the larger community, including Suburban Maryland Fair Housing, for which he served as president in the early 1960s. (Montgomery History)

For their part, the Montgomery team began forming a group to facilitate moves and prevent panic. Horsky left the project to join the Kennedy White House, but Atlee Shidler filled his shoes and enlisted a cadre of local activists. Most were graduate-educated professionals from the Democratic Party's left wing, driven by ideological and religious faith. Shidler, for instance, came from a pacifist sect and had refused to register for the draft because he opposed the Cold War. He recruited other progressives like Reginald Zalles, secretary of Americans for Democratic Action, and John deBeers, an economist purged from the Treasury Department in 1955 because of his left-wing connections.

Shidler's milieu worried about being seen as radical outsiders, so they connected with Montgomery's civic and religious leaders. They bestowed their nascent group's presidency on J. Wiley Prugh, a Presbyterian minister who had aided Black moves in Rockville. They filled its board with leaders from neighborhood associations to lend it a respectable civic patina. Shidler also recruited Black suburbanites like Mary Williams, who had fought off racial attacks to move into the county a year before. On November 19, 1962, Shidler's budding coalition met at a Cedar Lane Unitarian Church in Bethesda to introduce their new organization. They named it "Suburban Maryland Fair Housing."[46]

The individuals who formed SMFH committed themselves to building an open housing market free from discrimination. Uniformly, SMFH members saw segregation as a moral wrong, an affront to the American creed and their own social ethic. However, they framed their project around community stabilization. Fair housing was the right thing to do, but also the only way to mitigate the threat posed by the bursting color line. In his inaugural speech, Wiley Prugh blended these motivations together. Montgomery's citizens, he argued, had a duty to "witness for human dignity and equal rights," but an equal obligation to "strengthen and stabilize our community." The first SMFH membership invitation echoed his vision. It asked residents to "move toward a free housing market without neighborhood disruption or panic-inspired price fluctuations, and with pride in the fact that American principles have been further advanced in this National Capital."[47]

To remake the housing market, SMFH planned a voluntary integration campaign. Since realtors would not offer suburban homes to Black households, activists would do it themselves. SMFH would compile sellers willing to work with Black families and then help those families find homes. Its members would also conduct ongoing work to prepare white residents for integration, holding local gatherings to pitch "the positive values that can flow from accepting residents without regards to color." Ultimately, SMFH leaders hoped that by simulating a nondiscriminatory market and proving it could function successfully, realtors would embrace desegregation. "Rather than pushing them into free market practices," Atlee Shidler said, "our present approach is to pave a road that we hope they will feel safe to travel."[48]

SMFH found vocal allies in local newspapers. Days after the group launched, the *Montgomery County Sentinel* and *The Washington Post* wrote editorials encouraging residents to accept integration in service of stability. Adopting SMFH's fusion of morals and practicality, the *Post* wrote that desegregation "serves the interest not only of social justice, but of economic welfare as well. Suburban Maryland will be a better and more prosperous neighborhood if this group succeeds."[49] More surprising support came from the *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Tribune*, which had trashed Charles Horsky's integration plans as a threat to the suburban way of life just four years earlier. The paper now praised desegregation as a proper response to racial shifts that were already underway. "Times are changing," the *Tribune* conceded. "It's pretty inevitable that the residential complex of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase community and other Montgomery County areas is going to change along with them, whether we approve or disapprove." The *Tribune* celebrated that change would be managed by "the highly-respected men" of SMFH and not "agitators," ironically ignoring that these respectable leaders were largely the same people they had condemned in 1959. The *Tribune* signaled that even conservatives might accept desegregation if it was framed as a necessary, self-interested step and not a do-gooder crusade.[50]

But if editorial endorsements made SMFH's project seem viable, the 1962 midterms sent an opposing message. Just before SMFH launched, Montgomery voters went to the polls and rejected liberal candidates up and down the ballot. Though liberals performed well nationally, they lost every seat on the County Council. The new council consisted entirely of politicians backed by the conservative County Above Party coalition, which had red-baited liberal incumbents as "extremists" hell-bent on a "totally planned society." The victors included John Henry Hiser, an avowed segregationist whose theater had been picketed by civil rights activists in 1960. Shidler and other SMFH leaders shelved their disappointment at the kickoff meeting, but the elections darkened their hopes for a climate that could sustain desegregation. Sensing growing despondence, the AFSC's Helen Baker told her bosses that if SMFH's organizing meeting "had been held two weeks later it might not have been the success it was." Shidler, she reported, "got in just under the line."[51]

Despite the political headwinds, SMFH launched its home listing and community relations efforts at the start of 1963. The task of finding properties fell to Mary Lou Munts, a University of Chicago-trained economist married to an AFL-CIO lawyer. While raising four kids in Bethesda, Munts assembled a database of sellers willing to market their homes without regard to race. She also built a team of volunteers to help Black buyers house hunt. Within a year, the "Housing Information Service" found homes for fifteen professional-class Black families, including professors, teachers, and federal employees. Meanwhile, other SMFH members stitched together a network of sympathetic residents to ready communities to accept black neighbors. By the end of 1963, their community relations organization included 1,000 members across thirty neighborhood groups, which held meetings to sell an open housing market. This grassroots mobilization rested on highly educated women like Munts, most of them housewives, who leveraged their professional training and social networks to manage an increasingly complex activist operation.[52]

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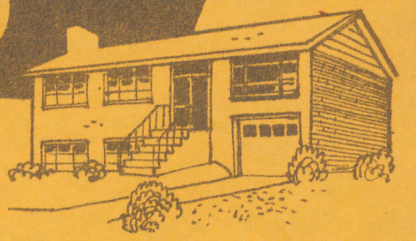
# YOU ARE INVITED

## to a neighborhood forum ON OPEN HOUSING



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The Rev. Harry B. Miles, Jr.
The Rev. Dr. Carl R. Pritchett
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**UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE SUBURBAN MARYLAND FAIR HOUSING**

**WHAT IS SMFH? WHAT ARE ITS GOALS? HOW DOES IT WORK?**

**TUESDAY, NOV. 24 8 PM**
**CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**
10010 FERNWOOD ROAD, BETHESDA, MD.

**"WHY EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN HOUSING HERE"**
REV. J. WILEY PRUGH, PAST PRES. SMFH

**"WHAT VOLUNTEER SMFH DOES"**
*MRS RAYMOND MUNTS*, BOARD MEMBER AND HOUSING INFORMATION SERVICE VOLUNTEER

*MRS THOMAS D. SCOTT*, CHAIRMAN COMMUNITY RELATIONS COMMITTEE

*LAWRENCE D. BURKE*, NEW NEIGHBOR

*THOMAS J. SCHWAB*, MEMBER SMFH REAL ESTATE - INDUSTRY COMMITTEE

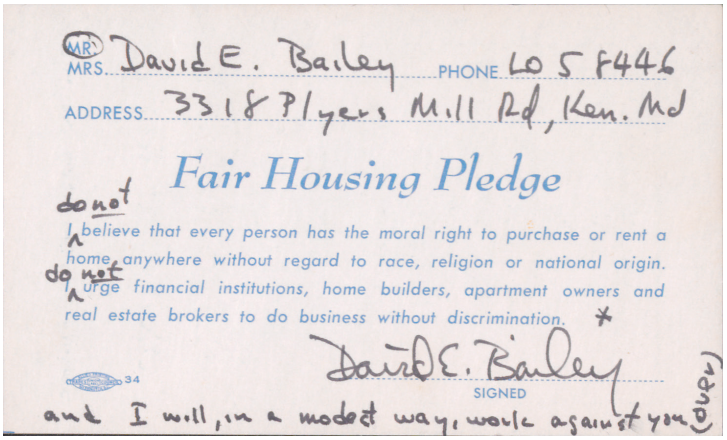
**DISCUSSION • REFRESHMENTS**

**SMFH OFFICE•** 9601 CEDAR LANE
PHONE 949-9040

This flyer from November 1964 advertised one of SMFH's community relations events, which aimed to convince white county residents to accept Black neighbors. Speakers included Larry Burke, a Black scientist at NIH who moved to Twinbrook with his wife Anne and their three young children. (University of Maryland)

As volunteers organized in white neighborhoods, they encountered more support than they expected. Many liberal suburbanites embraced fair housing ideologically, but most seemed "concerned with property values as much as with moral values." Yet within this self-interested frame, residents largely accepted the idea that integration offered the safest response to an "inescapable change in the patterns of race and housing." Most felt committed to the privileged life they enjoyed in the county and were open-minded about strategies for maintaining it. Often, faith that fair housing would protect property values even trumped personal bigotry. After a meeting in Takoma Park, an SMFH member reported that multiple speakers "said they were prejudiced, but that they didn't want to move and wouldn't move if no one else did." Some white residents even put on a show of welcoming new Black families, signaling to their neighbors and to the market that desegregation would not destabilize their communities. One Black mother said she received so many meals and visitors after moving that she "didn't get to cook for a week and could scarcely find time to unpack." Spurning flight or violence, a critical mass of white residents began constructing a racially inclusive community on the terms SMFH presented.[53]

Not all residents shared their neighbors' enthusiasm. Formal citizens' groups did not fight Black move-ins, but individuals could be hostile. Black families did not often face violence as severe as what the Williamses endured in 1961, but they still confronted harassment from dedicated racists. And though few residents resisted outright, support for fair housing as a principle remained limited. When SMFH led a pledge drive in 1964, asking residents to stand against housing discrimination, only 40 percent of those surveyed agreed. By comparison, drives in other affluent white suburbs earned broad support, like the 80 percent of households in Brookline, Massachusetts who signed pledges in 1962. Some county residents rejected the idea that fair housing would protect property values, while others—especially southern transplants—opposed race mixing on its own. "I'm from Tennessee," one resident told an SMFH volunteer who tried to sell her on desegregation's practical value. "I agree intellectually but not emotionally."[54]


MR. MRS. David E. Bailey PHONE LO 5-F446
ADDRESS 3318 Plyers Mill Rd, Ken. Md
Fair Housing Pledge
do not
I believe that every person has the moral right to purchase or rent a home anywhere without regard to race, religion or national origin.
do not
I urge financial institutions, home builders, apartment owners and real estate brokers to do business without discrimination. *
David E. Bailey
SIGNED
and I will, in a modest way, work against you (over)

Annotated pledge card, 1964. Many white suburbanites did not support SMFH's neighborhood organizing efforts. David Bailey, a white resident of Kensington, annotated this fair housing pledge card to express his opposition to even voluntary desegregation. *(University of Maryland Libraries)*

But SMFH organizers contained opposition by keeping personal fears from spreading into the overall housing market. "It's not one family moving in," Wiley Prugh argued, "it's the 10 families moving out that create the problem." Prugh and his colleagues came to understand that most white residents would only flee if they worried about property values falling, which would only happen if other residents started selling all at once. To prevent this feedback loop from forming, the SMFH community relations team created a "fire brigade" that tracked rumors and leaned on those responsible to bite their tongue. In July 1963, for instance, the team traced a wave of panic in Bethesda to a local egg delivery man, who shared his fears about a new Black neighbor at every house on his route. With help from the AFSC, SMFH contacted "the egg man's minister" to quiet him down. Not infrequently, homeowners did sell to avoid Black neighbors, but SMFH kept these cases from metastasizing into wider flight.[55]

Local media supported this effort by sustaining a positive narrative about fair housing. Having endorsed integration, every area newspaper presented SMFH as an unqualified success. Articles acknowledged opposition to desegregation, but they framed it as trivial and never once specified where any harassment or white move-outs occurred. Reporters even rewrote the past to make resistance seem less serious. In 1965, *The Post* described the 1961 attack on the Williams home—reported as a cross burning at the time—as involving just "a piece of wood vaguely resembling a crude cross." When Montgomery residents opened their papers, all they saw were arguments that fair housing and its racially liberal vision were working as promised.[56]

SMFH focused on framing fair housing as a fix for the housing market, but their platform took on more significance as racial changes and conflicts accelerated nationwide. Beginning in 1964, urban uprisings tore through the nation's Black ghettoes, which strained amid the poverty that the housing market concentrated within them. The Watts riots in particular shocked the nation as they devastated Los Angeles in 1965. In response, liberals increasingly described housing segregation as the cause of violence. Rabbi Edwin Friedman, an SMFH member, warned that the racialized housing market would spark a "cataclysmic Washington Watts" unless suburbanites accepted desegregation. "Wherever there is no fair housing," wrote another Bethesda resident, "there will be a ghetto, and wherever there are ghettoes there is a breeding ground for riots." In actuality, SMFH did little to prevent violence. The few Black professionals it helped move to the suburbs were hardly enough to ease segregation in Washington. But however loose the logic, fear of riots undermined faith in the metropolitan status quo in ways fair housing activists could exploit. [57]

SMFH also benefited from civil rights advances that altered white-collar hiring patterns. The federal agencies and contractors who dominated Montgomery's economy had been required to hire without discrimination since the 1940s, but the Civil Rights Act of 1964 heightened pressure to follow the law. Washington's professional-class remained overwhelmingly white, but more companies began relying on Black workers. In Rockville, a 1964 survey found that only 5 percent of white-collar employees were Black, but 75 percent of employers had at least one Black employee.[58] However, housing discrimination made hiring Black workers difficult, since they struggled to commute to suburban offices far from the urban neighborhoods open to them. When federal agencies like the Atomic Energy Commission moved to the suburbs, they lost hundreds of Black employees who could not live close enough to their jobs to keep them.[59] To address the problem, federal officials and firms like IBM began collaborating with SMFH to find homes for Black staff.[60]

As their incentives to hire Black workers grew, employers started advocating for fair housing in their own right. The county's leading corporate integrationist was Frank Wall, the former president of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce and the community relations director for IBM's Federal Services Division. Wall hoped to make Mongomery a business mecca, but he recognized that housing discrimination stymied job growth. "I often get calls from companies that are thinking about locating in Montgomery County," he told the chamber in 1965, "and one of the first questions they ask me concerns the availability of housing—and that means housing for Negroes and whites." Wall pointed out that modern firms employ "Negro doctors, scientists, and other officials." If Montgomery could not house them, companies would invest elsewhere. For the benefit of IBM and the wider business community, Wall lobbied county government to treat fair housing like schools and sewers: as critical infrastructure for growth. [61]

By late 1965, SMFH and its growing coalition had shown that desegregation could work in Montgomery County's suburbs. The group reached its third anniversary as the count of Black families in formerly all-white county neighborhoods passed 150. "In the heavily populated section of Montgomery County," the *Post* reported, "leaders of the fair housing movement note with pride that there is hardly a square mile that doesn't contain at least one Negro family." These were modest breakthroughs, but they shredded the idea that white residents would never accept any Black neighbors. When lawyer Thomas Schwab took charge of SMFH in June 1965, he declared victory over panic and flight. "The supposed danger is past," he said. "It never materialized."[62]

But although SMFH kept neighborhoods stable, it could not convince the real estate industry to change its racist practices. Atlee Shidler and others had hoped that as Black families moved in peacefully, realtors would acknowledge that discrimination was unnecessary.[63] But instead they remained committed to exclusion, much like Washington realtors who had dismissed integration in Southwest D.C. SMFH wrote letter after letter to the Montgomery County Board of Realtors, which rejected them out of hand. "If these groups could make some contribution we'd be willing to talk with them," said board president C. Windsor Miller. "But since they probably have nothing to offer constructively, there's no sense sitting down and listening to all that chatter." The board did respond, though, by purging several realtors who assisted SMFH from the county's Multiple Listing Service. A few agents supported Black buyers, but not enough to sustain an open market. "Many of them have told us it would be 'professional suicide' if they'd cooperate on something like this," noted SMFH organizer Lee Lindman. "It's a matter of no one wanting to be first."[64] Realtors' attitudes mirrored those of many county retailers who had opposed the 1961 ban on discrimination in public accommodations.

Both feared that desegregation would drive away prejudiced customers, a belief that even clear evidence to the contrary could not refute.[65]

Because realtors kept discriminating, Montgomery's housing market stayed racialized and precarious. Even as SMFH prevented white neighborhoods from panicking, the real estate industry's insistence on seeing integration as a threat ensured that residents would still fear it too. Shidler conceded that SMFH remained "overtaxed by community relations problems that require sustained and specialized attention," and which would persist as long as the logic of apartheid persisted in the market. Making matters worse, SMFH observed that realtors were starting to steer Black families into already-integrated neighborhoods, raising fears about resegregation. "After participating in this game of 'friendly persuasion' for two years," a volunteer complained, "I am very disheartened about the prospects for significant social change." To secure the county's budding, fragile inclusivity, SMFH needed a new approach.[66]

# Legislating an Open Housing Market

In 1966, the focus of Montgomery County's fair housing struggle shifted from voluntary integration to legislation. Sensing the limits of their existing work, the SMFH board concluded that making "meaningful progress within a reasonable time" required a law. Nothing else could compel the real estate industry to accept desegregation.[67] SMFH's shift reflected a consistent goal: dismantling discrimination by making integration seem like obvious self-interest. But by trying to marshal county government, SMFH triggered a more bitter fight over the role of government in shaping the future of suburban life—a fight they would win.

As a fair housing strategy, legislation was nothing new. Starting in 1957, dozens of cities and states around the U.S. outlawed housing discrimination, some more comprehensively than others.[68] SMFH had even called for legislation before, but political solutions seemed impossible while conservatives dominated county government. At a 1963 meeting, Charles Horsky noted that despite fair housing laws emerging across the country, "there is no comparable hope for legislation in the [Montgomery] suburbs"[69] But SMFH decided to try anyway. If white residents could be convinced that they were best served by integration, maybe their representatives could be convinced to enforce it.

SMFH began its push for a law through the county's Human Relations Commission. Created in 1960, the commission had been neutered by the conservative County Council, which packed it with obstructionists and overt racists. But amid criticism from various civil rights groups, the council appointed less-hostile members in March 1966, including IBM's fair housing champion Frank Wall.[70] In June, Wall helped convene commission hearings to discuss fair housing. SMFH flooded the room with sympathetic voices. Thomas Schwab spoke for the group, calling legislation the "most efficient means" of creating the open housing market that Montgomery needed. Dozens of congregations, civic groups, and Black suburbanites backed him up. Over the first four nights of hearings, eighty-five people spoke in favor of legislation and only two against.[71] Fair housing opponents argued, quite reasonably, that the overwhelming number of SMFH-aligned speakers did not reflect equivalent support across the county. A skeptical commissioner complained that "the great unorganized majority who read their papers and sit at home and watch television" were being left out.[72] But within the commission chamber, SMFH demonstrated how many county residents wanted their government to finish off a racial model that no longer reflected their interests, or in many cases, their values.


On June 15, 1966, more than 400 people marched to the council building in Rockville to show their support for fair housing ahead of the third public hearing on the proposed legislation. This image was featured in the *Gazette* in a 1998 article called Race Relations, and attributed to the *Sentinel*.

Demands for legislation also came from the federal government. Eight federal agencies sent representatives to the commission hearings. They voiced the Johnson administration's support for integration, but more importantly, they stressed their own need to find housing for Black staff. "The government's quest for quality can be difficult enough without any complicating factors," explained Assistant Postmaster General Richard Murphy. Without private sector salaries to offer, his agency struggled to attract talent, and suburban segregation made things worse. Murphy remarked that when Black postal workers failed to find homes in the county, "the government's embarrassment is acute and our recruiting problems intensify." Envoys from the Atomic Energy Commission and departments like Commerce and Labor echoed his point. They lectured the commission about the practical costs of racial exclusion, making an implicit ultimatum that federal investment in the county required reform. Moved by these appeals and those of SMFH, the commission ended the hearings by endorsing a fair housing law.[73]

The 1966 hearings consolidated support for legislation, but they also incited conservative backlash. Other than the real estate industry, no organized group had opposed voluntary integration, but the push for a law activated right-wing residents who saw it as an outrage to property rights. "If this ordinance is passed, there will be one more freedom sacrificed and one more step taken along the road to totalitarianism," said Dr. Austin Rohrbaugh, who joined other professional-class conservatives in forming a "Committee to Defend Property Rights." Critics like Rohrbaugh framed their opposition in terms of natural rights, but others attacked integration on explicitly racist terms. Commissioner William Adams, a supporter of Alabama's segregationist governor George Wallace, warned that creating an open housing market would allow Black people to sweep into Montgomery "like the hordes of Genghis Khan."[74]

Many of the loudest voices denouncing fair housing legislation came from the county's old elite. To them, desegregation represented the ultimate rebuke of the exclusive community they had worked so hard to build. Through a stream of op-ed pieces, the aging developer E. Brooke Lee denounced fair housing as "anti-white legislation" and warned that it would turn Rockville and various downcounty areas into a "Negro ghetto."[75] Former County Council member John Henry Hiser struck a similar tone. In public testimony, he fumed at "Johnny-come-lately" liberals who jeopardized the obviously successful model of suburbia he helped create. Hiser had opened the county's first movie theater and founded its first library before many SMFH activists were even born, and he resented that they now wanted "to tell us how to run our county."[76] Crucially, though, no conservative critiques addressed the basic problems that SMFH said fair housing would solve: demographic pressures in the housing market and the need to house Black workers. Conservatives distrusted SMFH's racial liberalism, but they did not offer an alternative that could match its practical promise.

The debate over fair housing legislation spilled into the county's 1966 elections. Both parties fractured into liberal and conservative camps, with fair housing emerging as a key fault line between them. SMFH's most politically active board members, Democrat Rose Kramer and centrist Republican David Scull, ran for council on slates endorsing legislation. Their opponents hammered it as a leftist imposition. A major conservative mailing denounced "forced open housing regulations" which would "restrict YOUR rights in the sale or rental of your home." But this attack was less successful than previous red-baiting efforts in local elections, largely because SMFH had recast integration as a self-interested project. In November, fair housing supporters achieved a narrow victory. Republicans won four of seven council seats, but Scull, Kramer, and two other Democrats formed a tenuous, cross-partisan majority sympathetic to legislation.[77]

Wasting no time, SMFH and its allies on the Human Relations Commission drafted a fair housing ordinance. The proposed bill banned all housing discrimination, excepting only religious institutions and individual rooms in people's homes. The ban applied to real estate professionals and residents selling homes without an agent. It also barred blockbusting, making it illegal for realtors to even mention topics like "lowering of property values" or "decline in the quality of the schools." Perhaps most essentially, the bill directed complaints not to slow-moving courts, but to a new three-person committee within the Human Relations Commission. It would investigate, impose fines, and issue injunctions to stop the sale or rental of properties denied to non-white people. The commission's chair—now Frank Wall—would lead the committee, and SMFH hoped to fill other seats with its own leaders. In all, the bill would commit Montgomery to enforcing a racially inclusive housing market and hopefully make SMFH a "semi-official adjunct" of county government.[78]

The proposed law surpassed what the council seemed willing to accept. Four of its members endorsed fair housing legislation, but not even Kramer or Scull ran on regulating all housing. In March 1967, *The Evening Star* surveyed councilmembers and found "no support" for a bill so broad, though many members endorsed a fair housing law that would just cover apartments or new construction. But activists refused to compromise. Morally, SMFH insisted that any carveouts legitimized discrimination. As always, though, the group also stressed a practical critique. Covering only some housing, like apartments, would concentrate Black newcomers there and create new ghettoes. "There is no better way to create incipient concentrations of Negroes," one speaker said, "than by limiting open occupancy to specified kinds of housing." When the council held hearings in July 1967, SMFH rallied 100-plus groups and individuals to demand a broad law. Not one endorsed exceptions, and their unanimity was persuasive. "I've become convinced that exempting all single-family homes would not solve the problem," a Democratic member admitted. Anything less "just will not open up enough of the housing market."[79]

David Scull (seated) seen signing a council document, circa 1967. Behind him stands his wife Betty, herself a prominent champion of the fair housing cause. (Montgomery History)

But SMFH could not sway David Scull. The Republican believed in desegregation, and he had even backed efforts in the early fifties to build multiracial housing in the county. But experience convinced him that white suburbanites were simply terrified of Black neighbors. "The fears come from ignorance," Scull said, "but they are as real as a child's nightmares." He worried that residents would flee before Black newcomers and leave suburban ghettoes in their wake. To stop this, Scull proposed what he called a "presumption of non-violation" clause. Realtors accused of racial bias would be presumed innocent if 10 percent of people in the neighborhood or building in question were non-white. Fair housing law would still apply there, but under an almost unmeetable burden of proof. Essentially, Scull's clause offered an alternative solution to the problems SMFH described. It would open some housing to accommodate Black professionals but authorize discrimination to halt racial change at a level white residents could tolerate.

Scull hoped his alternative would land as a fair compromise, but everyone in the fair housing debate loathed it. SMFH called the clause "odious" for sanctioning discrimination and suggesting that white residents would never truly accept integration. Meanwhile, conservatives and the real estate industry opposed any fair housing law, qualified or otherwise. Scull's own poll found that barely 20 percent of county voters supported it, compared to the narrow majority who now supported a comprehensive bill. But Scull insisted, and needing his vote, the Democrats caved. On July 20, 1967, the council added the clause to SMFH's proposed bill and passed it.[80]

Conservatives did not concede. Groups like the right-wing Citizens' League chafed at this "socialistic legislation" that undermined what they saw as a basic right to dispose of property freely. They also resented the institutional power afforded to liberal activists, especially after SMFH leaders Thomas Schwab and Larry Burke, a Black scientist from NIH, joined the Human Relations Commission. The *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Tribune* became the main forum for their views. Though the paper had endorsed SMFH's voluntary integration efforts, it chafed at using government to enforce fair housing and railed against the law in biting editorials. Other county stakeholders expressed their frustration more violently. David Scull faced a constant stream of harassment from residents infuriated by his decisive vote. In September, Scull arrived at his office to find a bullet hole piercing the window.[81]

In autumn 1967, conservatives mobilized with remarkable success to challenge the new fair housing regime. The *Tribune* organized a petition to bring the new law to referendum. Backed by realtors and the Citizens' League, it gathered 10,000 signatures in a week. The council refused to accept them, arguing that the fair housing ordinance was immune from petition. The Citizens' League sued, and in December a Maryland court sided with them, ruling that the council would have to reenact the fair housing bill as a law that could be brought before voters. But before the council could act, David Scull suffered a fatal heart attack. The council's liberal majority died with him. The GOP filled Scull's seat with former Richard Nixon aide Jim Gleason, whom one Republican called "farther right than Goldwater." Though Gleason kept his fair housing views vague, he had opposed the Civil Rights Act and showed no love for the county's sweeping bill. Five years of struggle for an open housing market seemed to evaporate.[82]

But just as fair housing hopes flagged in Montgomery County, chaos in Washington revived them. On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. When news reached D.C., many Black residents took their grief and rage out on the city. Two days of rioting left thirteen people dead. President Johnson sent 13,000 troops to restore order, the largest deployment in any postwar urban uprising. In the suburbs, Montgomery officials worked desperately to avoid violence, suspending sales of guns and alcohol. Soldiers guarded all roads leading into or out of D.C. Excluding a few small firebombings, the riots themselves did not reach the county, but their smoke did, wafting into the suburban canopy. When offices downtown reopened the next week, Montgomery commuters drove past peaks of rubble and the charred husks of homes and stores. This was the "Washington Watts" that Edwin Friedman had imagined.[83]

The terror evoked by the riots made SMFH's comprehensive bill viable again. The GOP-led council had planned to pass some narrow law, but the violence gave new weight to SMFH's argument that opening some kinds of housing but not others would create suburban ghettoes, which now seemed unthinkably dangerous. County conservatives condemned Black "agitators" for causing the riots, but they also grudgingly accepted the need for broad legislation. SMFH encouraged this mindset. The group's latest president, Arthur Levin, told councilmembers that they had to decide "whether this metropolitan area…is to become polarized into Black and white hostile camps or whether we have the will to achieve peaceful and orderly integration." Levin made the consequences of inaction seem too great to ignore, and fair housing the only solution.

In June, the council repassed its original law without the presumption of non-violation clause. Jim Gleason voted for it, as did one of the Republicans who had voted against it in 1967. The *Tribune* launched another petition campaign but fell far short of the signatures needed for a referendum. The real estate industry conceded too. By summer's end, Montgomery County had as open a housing market as existed anywhere in the nation. Racial inclusion was now official community policy.[84]

# Conclusion

When federal enumerators arrived in Montgomery County to compile the 1970 Census, the community did not look dramatically different than it did ten years earlier, at least on the surface. Despite fair housing breakthroughs, Montgomery remained nearly 95 percent white. White children sat in classrooms where most other students looked like them, and they returned home to streets where most of their neighbors did too. But these continuities masked the beginnings of major demographic change. The 1970 Census counted 21,511 Black county residents—over 10,000 more than in 1960. Thousands now lived in suburban neighborhoods where they could access houses, schools, and

jobs long denied to them. Meanwhile, Montgomery now included over 7,000 residents who identified as neither white nor Black, four times more than in 1960. Almost all of these non-white newcomers arrived in the last few years of the sixties, after SMFH and the fair housing law finally cracked the color line.

Over the next thirty years, the demographic changes set in motion by the fair housing movement reshaped Montgomery County. Its white population continued to grow, but within a broader community that featured more diverse people. In 2000, Black county residents numbered over 132,000, having increased at an even faster rate than the county's white population did during the suburban boom years from 1920 to 1960. Asian and Hispanic residents also made up over 10 percent of the county in 2000, shares which have only grown since. By the end of the millennium, no one could mistake Montgomery County and its multicultural mosaic for the fundamentally segregated place it had been barely a generation earlier.

The fair housing movement set these population transformations in motion, but it also defined how Montgomery residents and policymakers reacted to them. The consensus reached in the late sixties—that the county benefited from diversity and that local government should take action to secure it—continued to shape the community's response to demographic changes. In the early seventies, for instance, many lower-income non-white people clustered in the county's limited affordable housing, which was concentrated in Silver Spring and Takoma Park. Local residents worried that a lack of cheap homes would produce new racialized ghettoes in the few places lower-income families could afford. To solve the problem, they challenged the county's economic exclusivity just as the fair housing movement had challenged its racial exclusivity. Groups like SMFH and the League of Women Voters championed a 1973 law creating the county's Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit (MPDU) program, which required builders to construct affordable homes in every new development.[85] A similar dynamic played out in county schools. MCPS reacted to demographic changes in the seventies by adopting a busing program that sent students to different schools to promote racial balance. The program relied on the same logic as fair housing and the MPDU law, using government policy to mix people together and address concerns about resegregation and white flight in the process.[86]

Ultimately, the logic of diversity, cultivated in the fair housing struggle, turned Montgomery County into a new and distinct form of community. Nationwide, most other historically white suburbs clung to the racialized housing market. They viewed racial and economic integration as a threat rather than an opportunity. Even when the federal Fair Housing Act outlawed housing discrimination in 1968 (at least on paper), localities rarely implemented its vision in practice.[87] But in Montgomery County, community members snapped the ideological cords that tied prosperity to exclusivity. A critical mass of white county residents, despite opposition, accepted that preserving the lives they enjoyed depended on inclusion. Thousands of non-white people bought into this vision too, staking their own claims to the county's good life. From the roots of fair housing, a new kind of suburban America emerged.

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