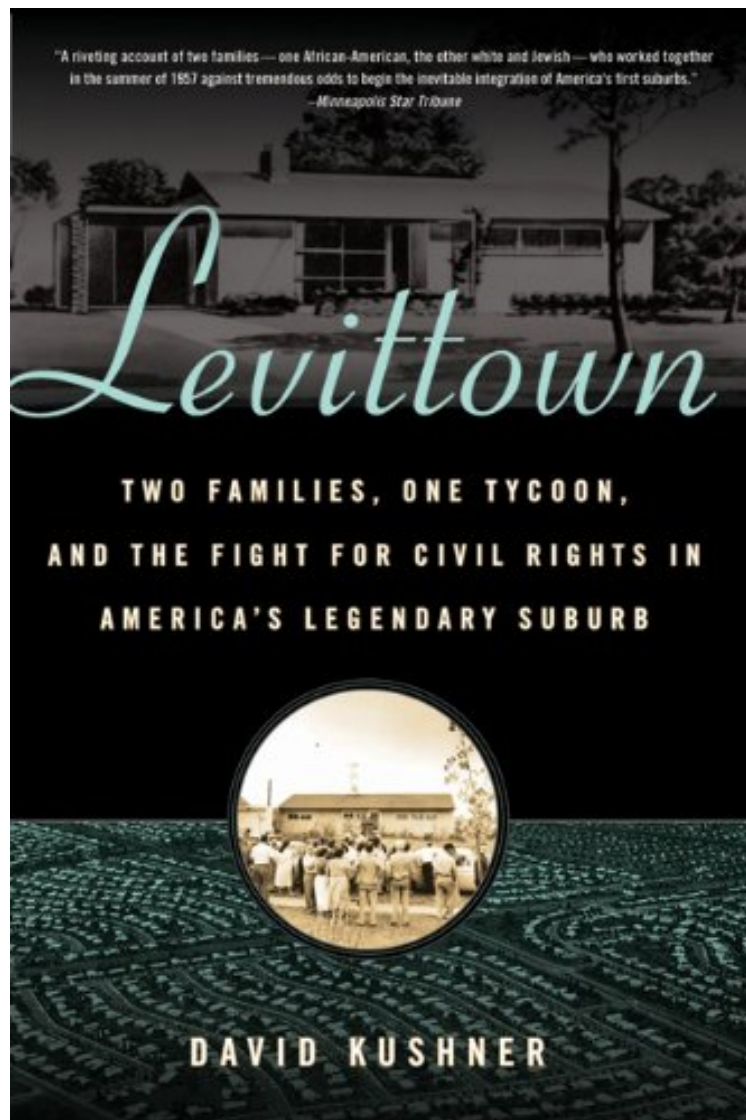


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Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb

David Kushner

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David Kushner : Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Levittown is Several Stories in OneBy Edward SavelaDavid

Kushshers Levittown is several stories in one. It tells us about racial discrimination in housing in the North, the postwar housing shortage, the expansion of residential development in the suburbs, and about Bill Levitt and his company, Levitt Sons. The stories center on an African American couple, Bill and Daisy Myers, who sought to own a home in one of the popular postwar suburbs, and the racial hatred they encountered and overcame. But the book also interweaves the entrepreneurial prowess of the Levitt family, its eccentricities, and its bold pitchman, Bill Levitt. Kushner combines all of this into a very readable narrative. In August 1957, as Bill and Daisy Myers attempted to move into their newly acquired home on Deepgreen Lane, they immediately encountered racially bigoted neighbors with a dogged determination to keep the first African American family out of their all white Levittown, Pennsylvania, neighborhood. Their Jewish next door neighbors and political activists Lew and Bea Wechsler, quickly became good friends in this neighborhood where they had few. On the day the Myers moved in, informal clusters of curious neighbors formed around their home. Soon verbal harassment and telephone threats began, and as days and weeks went by, the harassment intensified. Some neighbors tried to maintain neutrality and a few even openly offered their support, but the activities of the most visible racists rivaled those in the Jim Crow South. They soon evolved into a, perhaps inappropriately named, Levittown Betterment Committee. Cars and motorcycles, honking horns and bearing Confederate flags, circled the Myers home regularly, hateful statements shouted, and stones broke through the Myers windows. The local police did little to quell the hateful activity that eventually escalated to cross burnings in the yards of supporters, the Wechslers and the Myers. Moreover, the Ku Klux Klan began to form a local chapter in Levittown. Abe Levitt, born to desperately poor Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn, worked his way to earning a law degree and running his own law firm. Abe was an inspiration to his two sons, Bill and Alfred. After some initial success speculating in real estate development, Abe and his two sons established Levitt Sons, and the company sold its first house just before the stock market crash in 1929. All three lent their unique talents to the company, but Bill emerged as the leader. As an entrepreneur, Bill was bold and determined. At nineteen years old, one remembers Bill saying, I wanted to make a lot of money. I wanted a big car and a lot of clothes. (5) He had a gift for marketing and was not afraid to defy authority if necessary to get his way. The company prospered with Alfreds self-taught architectural talent and Bills keen marketing and management skills. At the end of World War II, Levitt Sons was poised to master the demand for new housing and was soon propelled to the realm of empire. Housing development in the United States had been stagnant for the two decades preceding the end of the war. The war years energized economic growth and innovation. With its end, vast numbers of returning veterans needed a home. New marriages and the new families they created the baby boom generation was being hatched further exacerbated Americas housing shortage. The newly enacted GI bill and the New Deals FHA loans made financing readily available. Bill Levitt and his company seized the moment. They bought up 3,500 acres of potato fields in the community of Island Trees on Long Island, and Levitt and Sons built thousands of houses. In a display of his ego and determination, Bill insisted that the community rename Island Trees to Levittown, New York. Next Bill Levitt launched another Levittown in a former 5,000 acre broccoli and spinach field in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The demand for housing remained strong and the Levitts, by then making a fortune, regarded as captains of the home building industry. By the mid-fifties, these Levittowns had established a sense of community. Levitt Sons had promulgated authoritarian rules governing sales, leasing, and maintaining the community. If a homeowner did not maintain his lawn properly, for example, Levitt Sons would send over a landscape crew, and then send the homeowner a bill. A typical white Levittown homeowner not only enjoyed a sense of community pride, but could delight in knowing that his initial \$8,000 investment had grown in value. A more foreboding rule, and one that presumably protected the value of a Levittown home, was the active exclusion of sales and rentals of Levittown homes to African Americans. The standard Levittown lease read, in capital letters: THE TENANT AGREES NOT TO PERMIT THE PREMISES TO BE USED OR OCCUPIED BY ANY PERSON OTHER THAN MEMBERS OF THE CAUCASIAN RACE. (43) As the author states, Many of them [Levittown homeowners] made it clear that they had come to Levittown because Bill Levitt had promoted it as [for] whites-only. Levitt promised!...He should get them out even if he has to buy them out! (91) A 1948 U.S. Supreme Court ruled against such discriminatory policies. However, Bill Levitt brazenly defied the ruling stating, The policy that has prevailed in the past is exactly the same policy that prevails today. it is entirely in the discretion and judgment of Levitt Sons as to whom it will rent or sell. (43) In the late summer and fall of 1957, the Myers and the Wechslers lived in constant fear for their lives, and the lives of their children. Around the clock police protection could not prevent cross burnings and other threats. Finally, after appealing to Pennsylvania Attorney General, Thomas McBride, their predicament began to improve. McBride brought legal action against the ringleaders, dubbed the Levittown 7 who were eventually found guilty in August 1958 about a year after the Myers first moved to their home on Deepgreen Lane in Levittown. David Kushner is an excellent story teller. That may be because he is a journalist and not a historian. His book dashes along like a fast moving novel. Kushner does a good job introducing and developing his characters, too. Abraham Levitt entertains his two boys with fantastic tales of Captain Kidd. Daisy Dailey is introduced as a protected youth in Jackson Ward, Virginia. Later, as she marries Bill Myers and moves to the North, she questions her feelings about Jim Crow laws. In the end, Daisy is much the same person even as she meets Martin Luther King, Jr., and is referred to as the Rosa Parks of the North. (191) And too, the rise and fall of William Levitt this

ostentatious and indulgent life-style, his bold and confident defiance, and then his financial collapse provides the reader with a tragic background story of the once arrogant and egotistical icon. The making of Levittown is an interesting story too. A few years ago, Kushners mother-in-law suggested that he talk to one of her neighbors, Bea Wechsler. Bea was willing to talk about her experiences in Levittown many years ago, and her friends the Myers. Bea had a small dusty cardboard box full of clippings, photos, and letters. Next, the author met with Daisy Myers who agreed to talk as well and had more materials to share. And so the book Levittown emerged from this cornucopia of primary sources and oral histories. Kushner makes good use of these sources. The only criticism of the book is a minor one. The book has endnotes by chapter that reference the page number, but the corresponding references cannot be found on the page; unusual, but definitely a minor problem. Levittown is an outstanding book for those interested in postwar housing discrimination, urban development during this era, Levitt Sons, or the civil rights movement.³ of 3 people found the following review helpful. Like a Levittown house By parallel Nothing fancy but well-written, complete and compact with a few pleasant surprises. The author is able to make the life of Levittown and the incident come to life. The Myers moving to Levittown and the bigotry of Bill Levitt is a piece of history long neglected probably because it wasn't as sensational as what was occurring down south. However, this book demonstrates the power of prejudice and how virally it spread in the suburb of the American Dream. Fortunately, Kushner also refuses to allow this to be a one-sided account of white intolerance and instead gives equal time to those who fought to defend the Myers' right to live in Levittown.⁰ of 0 people found the following review helpful. I am impressed by the research of the author, ...By John GI am impressed by the research of the author, the interviews really made this book come alive. I know a fair amount about African American suburbanization, the Levitt story, etc. but the additional details on the day to day lives of the victims of discrimination and harassment is well written and necessary to tell a complete narrative.

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

From Publishers Weekly Migration to suburbia has long been an American ambition, but its allure was never stronger than in the post-WWII years, when the fantasy of a dream house played to the imagination of millions of Americans, especially returning veterans. Already waiting for many of them was a model community on the North Shore of Long Island called Levittown, the brainchild of Abraham Levitt and his sons, William and Alfred, the nation's first real estate tycoons. But Levittown came with its own set of requirements: perfectly manicured lawns, no fences and no black families. In 1957, as the Levitts by now massively successful and nationally lauded had already expanded to a second model city, two families challenged the segregationist policy: one, a white Jewish Communist family, secretly arranged for the other, a black family, to buy the house next door. In an entertaining round-robin format, Kushner relays each party's story in the leadup to a combustible summer when the integration of America's most famous suburb caused the downfall of a titan and transformed the nation. (Feb.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From School Library Journal Adult/High School In 1957, Levittown, PA, was known as a remarkable suburb. It was built by the innovative Abe Levitt Sons, who used the new mass-production techniques for a planned community that could be constructed quickly, included comfortable homes with state-of-the-art appliances, and was affordable for returning veterans. The covenants, however, implied that the community was for whites only, and this policy was backed up by Home Owners Loan Corporation. When Lew and Bea Wechsler, disillusioned Communists and civil rights advocates, decided to challenge this policy and help a black couple, Daisy and Bill Myers, move next door, mob violence immediately occurred, some of which was instigated by outsiders who were members of the KKK. This account centers on the background of the two families and their growing friendship as they endured vicious attacks by their neighbors and the apathetic protection of the police. It is also the story of the Levitt family: Abe, the brilliant and enterprising father; Bill, the egotistical, power-hungry, and controlling son; and his brother, Alfred, the gifted and unconventional architect. This story of a conflicted, fearful neighborhood is told against the wider background of the Civil Rights Movement and the fallout from McCarthyism. Students may know of Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges and the students of Little Rock, AR. This courageous story is also one that should be heard. Jackie Gropman, formerly at Fairfax County Public Library System, Fairfax, VA Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist The Levittown developments occupy a space in American culture as an icon of suburban life away from overcrowded cities. The Levitt family, a father and two sons, gained wealth and renown for building low-cost single-family homes for veterans returning from World War II. Though they were descended from a rabbi, they had not resisted the custom to exclude certain ethnicities and races. In early suburban developments, they excluded Jews; in Levittown, they excluded blacks. First hiding behind federal mortgage and insurance programs and later in defiance of changes in federal policy, the Levitts continued to refuse to

rent or sell to black families. After years of protests by some residents, the NAACP, and others, a Jewish family secretly arranged to sell the house next door to them to a black family. The sale set off a lawsuit challenging the restrictive covenants that had forbidden such a transaction. Kushner relies on memoirs, transcripts, interviews, and newspaper accounts to bring to life the 1957 legal challenge to discriminatory housing practices and the individuals whose lives were affected. --Vanessa Bush