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Willingboro: a half century of suburbia

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When construction began in 1958, there were 4,900 acres of hill and dale -- orchards and farms with roots that could be traced back as far as 1688, when Quaker settlers established the Constabulary of Willingborow.

When the last nail was hammered in 1972, the land was covered with 11,000 houses and rural Willingboro had morphed into a suburb of 47,000 people. With the houses came schools, churches, community pools, shops and, as old-timers recall, thousands of children on bicycles.

This year, Willingboro, now the largest town in Burlington County, is recognizing the 50th anniversary of its transformation as the nation's third "Levittown," a Baby Boom-era housing development that helped change forever the face of American suburbia.

Builder William J. Levitt offered cookie-cutter but shockingly affordable two- and four-bedroom Cape Cods, Colonials and ranchers for \$8,900 to \$14,500.

Couples -- many of the men veterans of the Korean War and World War II -- waited in lines that curved around the block to buy.

"Only five or six people moved in that first day," recalled Jack Culkin, 78, of Mount Holly, who moved with his wife and kids into an \$11,990 four-bedroom Cape Cod that came with kitchen and laundry appliances. "Willingboro was a very young community. We were children of the Depression. We grew up poor in the '30s."

Levitt built his houses in an assembly-line style, with one non-union crew setting a foundation and moving on, another raising the walls, another adding the roof. Like his other post-war mass housing projects on Long Island and in Bucks County, Pa., he named it Levittown. (When residents voted overwhelmingly in 1963 to change the name to Willingboro, the developer was irate and quit funding school construction.)

"Levitt was always trying to build for people who were getting their first house. He aimed for the lowest-priced housing," said Herbert J. Gans, 78, a retired Columbia University sociologist who bought the 25th available house at Willingboro in 1958 so he could study new suburbia firsthand. "He really built decent housing for a lot of people who otherwise could not have been homeowners. He was very good at affordable housing."

Gans' study became the subject of his 1967 book "The Levittowners" that found middle-class people shared the same living standards, values and religious beliefs. Gans called the new residents the "cement of a stable society" and the "epitome of the traditional values." But he also pointed out that the experiment initially ignored blacks.

"I was there at the very beginning and watched a bunch of strangers making a community," he said. "The bad thing was that it was lily white."

Levitt refused to sell to black buyers until ordered by the state Supreme Court in 1960 as the climax to an anti-discrimination lawsuit. Willingboro is now 67 percent black.

A half century after Willingboro's affordable housing rose from the countryside, officials say they doubt such a feat can be repeated in New Jersey, even as Gov. Jon Corzine pledges to add 100,000 decently priced houses and apartments in a decade.

One reason is land -- there simply aren't as many big chunks of acreage available as in 1958. And back then, it was easier to quietly buy big tracts.

"Builders who built big subdivisions like Levittown did not go around offering to buy land," Gans said. "They had people do it for them. No one knew until the last minute."

Dianne R. Brake, president of PlanSmart NJ, a Trenton-based nonprofit civic action group, said towns are leery of major housing developments because of potential increased school costs and a desire to preserve open space.

"Levittown began as racist and exclusionary," she said. "It depended on the automobile and mothers staying at home with the kids. That is not relevant to what we need today. While there is a need for affordable housing, it needs to be in a pattern of what is not Levittown."

Public policy on housing changed after a state Supreme Court decision about Mount Laurel, a town just seven miles from Willingboro. It said every community should have some affordable housing, and the state now favors developments mixing housing for residents of different income levels.

The Hills, a major development in Bedminster and Bernards, for example, includes a wide mix of housing prices.

State Community Affairs Commissioner Joseph V. Doria foresees mixed-income communities rising around commuter transit hubs, where low- and moderate-income residents could grab trains to work.

"The whole idea is to integrate affordable housing ... so you don't have all the people of the same income class," said Doria, who oversees the Council on Affordable Housing. "The sociology outlook and the planning process has changed dramatically since Levittown."

The suburban pioneers, however, say they still have warm feelings for what was New Jersey's Levittown.

"It's a very nice town, very well maintained," said Culkin, a retired pharmacist. "People kid about Willingboro, but when I drive by my old house, it's still in pretty good shape years later."

On moving day back then, newspaper, milk and bread delivery people knocked on Culkin's door even as he and his family were lugging boxes into the house. He was so busy getting settled, he gave up a chance at history.

Culkin said he declined when a Levitt representative asked him to pose with the famous developer for news photographers. Instead, Culkin pointed out new neighbors, Leo and Joan Mount, who agreed to meet the builder. In a newspaper the next day, Levitt was pictured declaring the Mounts the first residents of his new Levittown.

"After that they always got to ride in the convertible at the head of the parade as the town's first citizens," he said with a laugh.

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