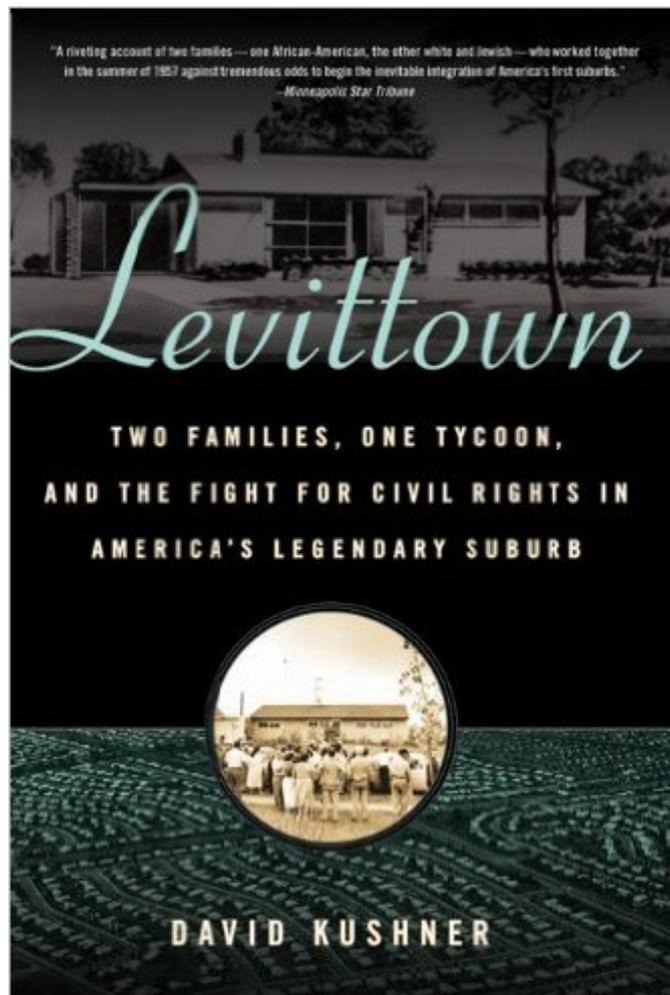


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Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, And The Fight For Civil Rights In America's Legendary Suburb



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

Passion words like riveting, remarkable and even shocking come to mind when you think about describing this book. But Levittown is far too good to use such canned vocabulary. I was born in Willingboro, New Jersey in 1970 - while our nation and that area of the U.S. were still on the cusp of dealing with racial divides. My Mother moved into Levittown during the Summer of 1960, her family trying to escape to suburbia from the city of Philadelphia and what her family perceived as an area heightening in crime and diminishing in a quality place to raise children. This story struck me on levels I am both ashamed and proud to speak of. Reading the language and racial slurs in this book were difficult. It was difficult because you can't imagine that just a mere 50 - 60 years ago people (old and young) felt so strongly about other human beings all because of the color of their skin. Page after page is punctuated with the 'N'-word and it just hangs there in the air and pierces your

moral fiber. My shock is juxtaposed by having grown up with family members who then, and to this day, still say that word - I like to think it's merely a generational thing because I know the people saying this word are kind and wonderful. But they grew up in a time of ignorance and closed-mindedness and some people just don't shirk those feelings. As shocking as the story of Levittown is, I couldn't help but ponder a message that defines the generations and races of even today: (nearly) everyone has a dream they hope to attain. Bill Levitt, in the eyes of the (white) nation and Levittown residents was living the American dream: huge house, gorgeous wives, big boat and he was (viewed as) generous.

David Kushner's *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.

To some, the name "Levittown" conjures up images of crushing conformity spread out in row upon row of soulless Cape Cod "boxes." To others, it represents the ingenious entrepreneurial spirit of Levitt & Sons, the dynamic homebuilder embodied in the person of William Levitt, who enabled the wave of World War II veterans to purchase comfortable, if modest (two bedrooms, a living room,

kitchen and bathroom) mass-produced dwellings for less than \$8,000. Without question, the story of Levittown reflects fundamental elements of America's post-war ethos. Whether it was *Brown v. Board of Education's* challenge to the segregated classrooms of Topeka, Kansas, or the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, the 1950s likewise brought forth the first determined statements of the modern civil rights movement in America. In his stirring new book, David Kushner weaves these strands with Levitt's story to illuminate a lesser known but no less dramatic event in those tumultuous years --- the struggle to integrate the whites-only community of Levittown, Pennsylvania. In 1957, Daisy and William Myers, an unassuming African-American couple living in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, dreamed the simple dream of millions of Americans of their generation: a new home in a good neighborhood in which to raise their growing family. That spring, their wish coincided with the political agenda of a group of Levittown residents led by Communist-leaning, Jewish political activists Bea and Lew Wechsler, who sought to shatter the racial barriers of the community. When the Wechslers' next door neighbor's house went on the market, they approached the Myerses about moving in.

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