

Shooting site once segregated neighborhood

Maplewood Park was in whites-only enclave

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Maplewood Park is known in wider Rochester as a good place to have a picnic. Yet it is also known for once being part of a whites-only suburban enclave.

Segregated neighborhoods in Maplewood, Charlotte, the southeast quadrant and the developing suburbs were coded green or blue, the safest for investment, on national loan maps in the 1930s. Most of the city was coded yellow, or “definitely declining.”

This was a way to prevent Black and brown people from getting a home loan. Instead, they were redlined into areas marked as problematic and forced to rent.

This week, Maplewood Park is in the news for a tragic fatal shooting.

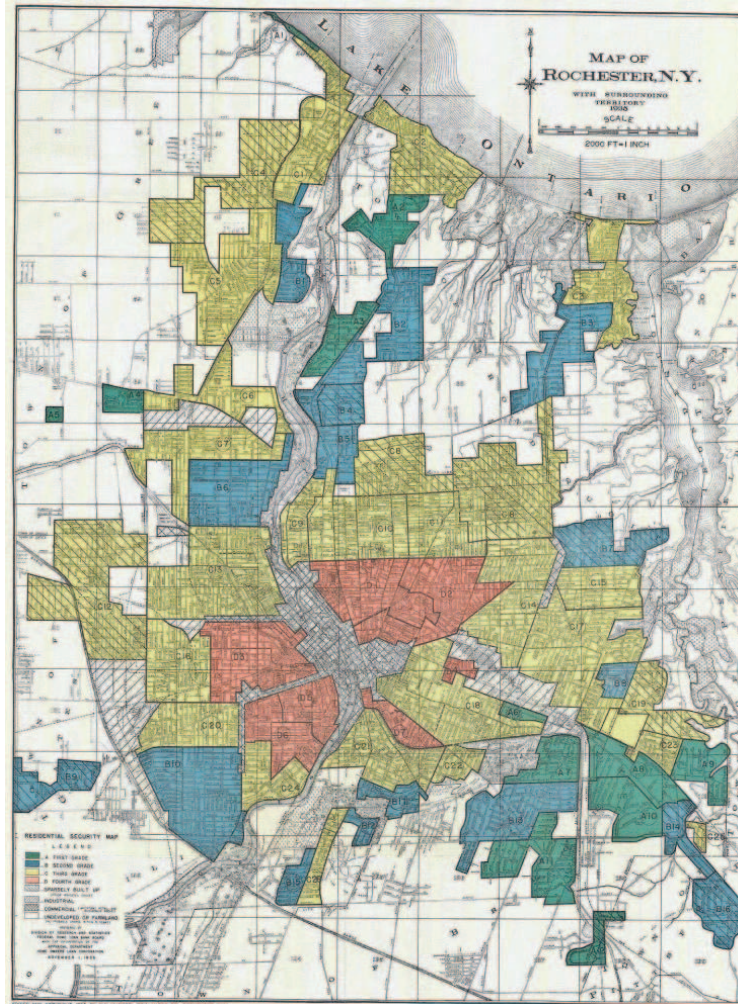
Feds helped restrict ‘adverse influences’

The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation was established in 1933 to save Depression-era homeowners from foreclosure; the Federal Housing Administration was established one year later to insure bank mortgages. In both instances, and later in appraising home loans for the Veterans Administration, local appraisers were engaged to rate properties in terms of loan advisability.

They received guidance from the FHA Underwriting Manual, which stressed the need for vigilance against “adverse influences” upon a neighborhood’s stability.

“Generally, a high rating should be given only where adequate and enforced zoning regulations exist or where effective restrictive covenants are recorded against the entire tract, since these provide the surest protection against undesirable encroachment and inharmonious use,” the manual instructed. “Restrictions should (prohibit) ... the occupancy of properties except by the race for which they are intended.”

The brightly colored maps that HOLC appraisers produced stand as striking visual documentation of federal partici-



Rochester redline map, dated Nov. 1, 1938. PROVIDED BY HOME OWNERS LOAN CORP.

ipation in housing segregation. In Rochester, Maplewood was shown as a place that was safest for investment.

Then the racism became a norm

William Jacob Knox was a Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology-educated chemist who had been instrumental in the top-secret Manhattan Project. He came to Rochester in 1945 as a research scientist with Kodak.

When he sought a house for his family, a real estate agent offered only an abandoned brothel on Joseph Avenue in the heart of the growing Black ghetto. Knox eventually succeeded in purchasing a house in a middle-class neighborhood after giving power of attorney to a white Kodak colleague.

Eventually, the forces opposing quality housing for Black people translated into a social norm. It didn’t particularly matter whether the sale of a certain

Racism in Rochester-area housing

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property might be blocked by a restrictive covenant, a real estate agent or a bank. Black people knew better than to go house-shopping in the Maplewood or Highland Park neighborhoods in the first place.

Black people renting but not owning in Rochester

Black families were thus penned into an artificially restricted, systematically neglected geographical area — a ghetto — at the same time the Black population was booming, particularly in the Seventh Ward around Joseph Avenue. The only way to accommodate the new arrivals was to subdivide the existing housing stock, even as buildings and neighborhoods deteriorated through overcrowding.

Olga Edwards was born in New Orleans and arrived in Rochester with her husband in January 1960. After having numerous doors closed in their faces, they realized they would not be able to purchase a decent house. Instead they ended up renting an apartment on Jefferson Avenue.

“The conditions were slightly awful, or should I say, terribly awful,” Edwards said. “The whites in that area at the time started moving out and turning their one-family houses into small apartments that housed four or five families. Some had only one room with everyone using one kitchen and one bath. It was a deplorable condition and there was nowhere to go.”

— Justin Murphy is a veteran reporter at the Democrat and Chronicle and author of “Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger: School Segregation in Rochester, New York.” Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/CitizenMurphy or contact him at jmurphy7@gannett.com.