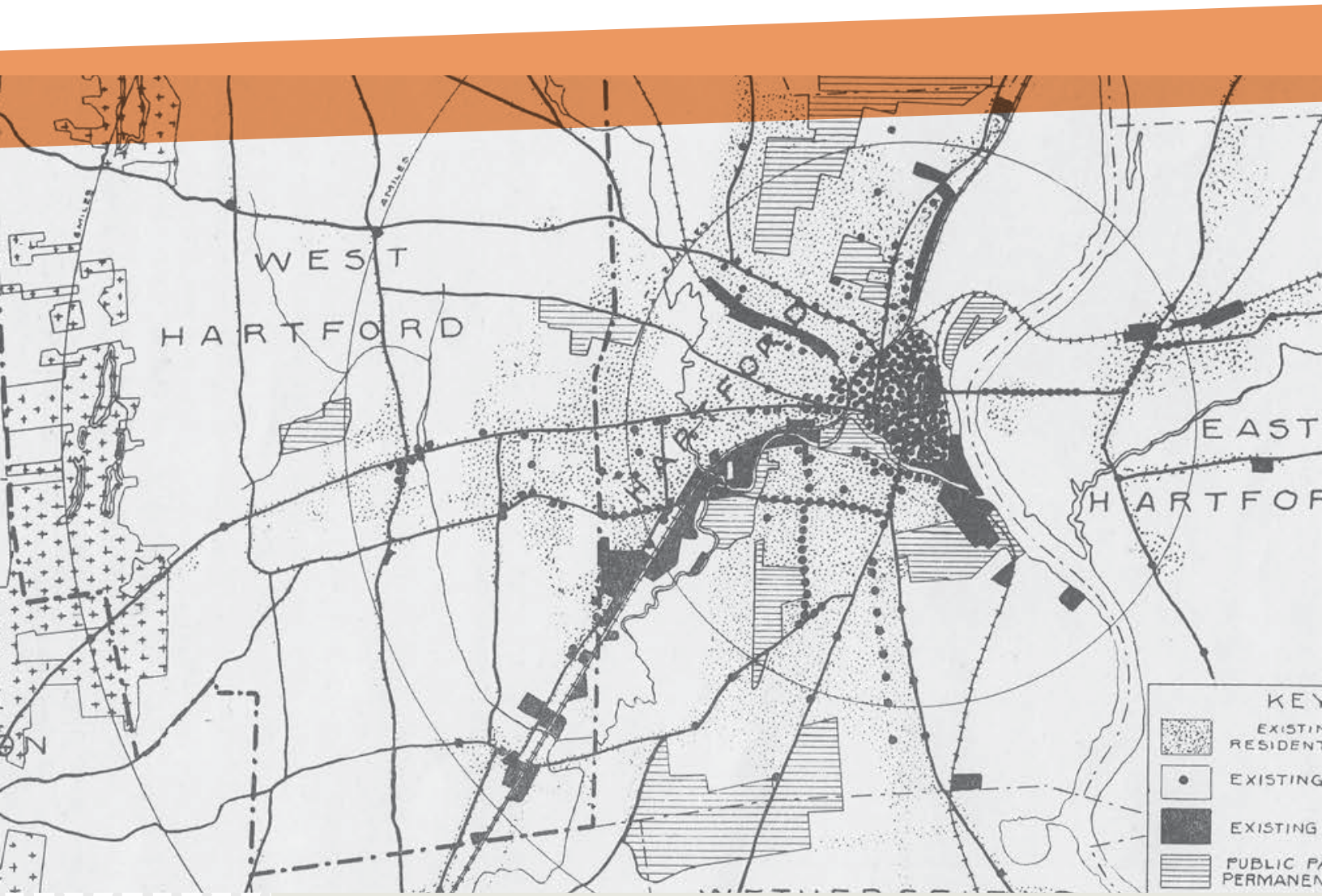


STUDENT ARTICLE LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

WEST HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT



Courtesy of the Connecticut State Library

WORDS TO KNOW

inharmonious

zoning

redlining

restrictive covenants

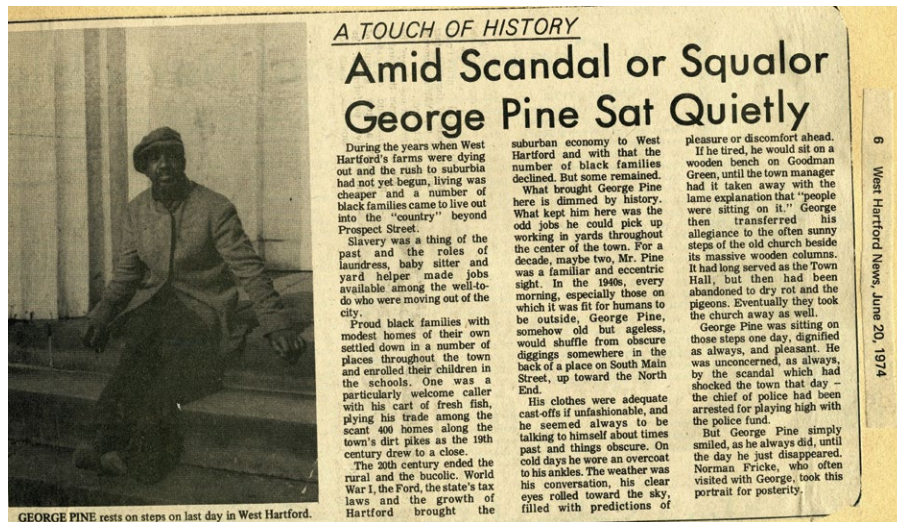
domestic laborers

restrictive covenants

steering

discriminatory zoning

Shelley v. Kraemer



This newspaper story shares how George Pine was unable to remain a West Hartford resident as changes came to the city. *West Hartford News*, June 20, 1974.

Courtesy of the Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society

Cover: West Hartford's first zoning map, created in 1924, aimed to prevent "an undue concentration of population." It required minimum house lot sizes and separated apartment buildings and multi-family dwellings from single-family homes. Courtesy of the Connecticut State Library

DISCRIMINATION BY DESIGN

Discriminatory real estate practices played a defining role in the growth of West Hartford, Connecticut. Local practices based in racism and religious prejudice included the use of **restrictive covenants**, **steering**, and **discriminatory zoning** that resulted in separate neighborhoods for Jewish and Christian residents and the almost total exclusion of Black people.

In the 1890s, the City of Hartford was bursting out of its limits. Wealthier residents, many in the insurance industry, moved to the east end of the adjacent town of West Hartford. An electric trolley line connecting the East End to downtown Hartford made it easy to travel to the city for work. Over time, local farmers sold nearby land for expanding residential development.

Black people had been in West Hartford since its founding in 1679, when they mainly arrived by force in enslavement or servitude. Throughout the 1800s, a few Black families lived in West Hartford, and some eventually owned property. During the first two decades of the 20th century, Black residents mostly lived in White households where they worked as **domestic laborers**. In 1930, nearly 130 Black people lived in West Hartford. Of these, only 30 lived in a household headed by a Black person.

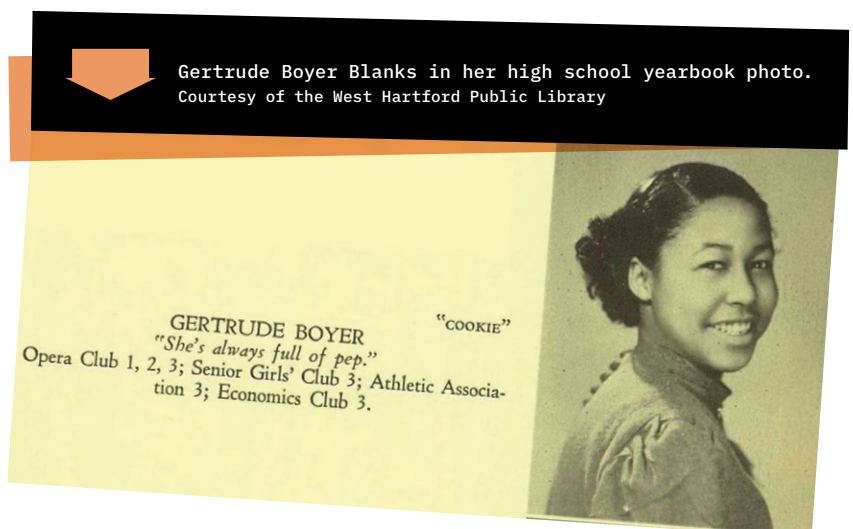
EXCLUSIONARY ZONING

George Augustus Pine, born in West Hartford in 1876, was a resident who lived in the house his family owned at the corner of North Main Street and Fern Street. After his mother died in the 1920s, Pine lost the family home.

Pine's loss coincided with zoning regulations enacted in 1924, the first of their kind in Connecticut. The town was divided into sections with restrictions on land use and lot size. Along with these changes came higher property tax rates. The new zoning plans made homeownership for lower-income families virtually impossible. Combined with other tools of exclusion such as **redlining** and restrictive covenants, these regulations caused loss of property for some residents and prevented new Black residents from moving in.

BEING ONE OF THE FIRST

When she was three years old, Gertrude Boyer Blanks moved with her mother and grandparents from Baltimore to West Hartford. Her mother worked as a live-in maid for a wealthy couple, and Blanks had to stay quiet and out of their sight. She used the back stairs and back door to get into the home and never went into the dining or living rooms. Blanks never missed a day of school, though she later said she "felt every bitter step" toward school, knowing she would be harassed by classmates.



There was one family down the street that had a little piece of [a] car. When they passed by me, they always laughed and stuck out their tongues at me...I don't care if it was hailing, snowing. Whenever they passed, they never picked me up.

Her mother's employer insisted that Blanks be able to attend West Hartford's Hall High School and used his influence to get her in. She became the school's first Black graduate in 1938. Blanks went on to become a library outreach specialist, storyteller, and beloved member of her church and local community.

RESTRICTIVE COVENANTS

In the 1940s, five West Hartford developments placed racially restrictive covenants into their property deeds. All featured the same clause: "No persons of any race except the white race shall use or occupy any building on any lot except that this covenant shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race employed by an owner or tenant." Until the U.S. Supreme Court case **Shelley v. Kraemer** (1948) made restrictive covenants legally unenforceable, White residents of neighborhoods had the right to sue for the removal of Black, Asian, Jewish, or other renters or homebuyers.



Oakwood Acres, built as temporary housing for World War II workers, 1954. Courtesy of the Hartford History Center, Hartford Public Library

OAKWOOD ACRES

The story of Oakwood Acres spotlighted the racism in West Hartford. When the town received government funds during World War II to build housing for war workers and their families, residents and officials were concerned about who would live there. Officials agreed to the construction only after being assured that the housing would be temporary, only for the duration of the war. Homeowners near Oakwood Acres were quoted in the news as "alarmed" and "horrified" at the idea of Black workers living in their neighborhood. The paper called the situation "an infiltration" and reported that the feeling among nearby homeowners was "We don't want them here."

Federal officials stepped in to prevent the exclusion of Black residents at Oakwood Acres. But local officials found a loophole: they accepted only Black workers already employed in essential West Hartford industries. Only six Black families were eligible. Knowing they were



Homeowners living near Oakwood Acres were quoted in a 1943 issue of *The Metropolitan News* as being "alarmed" and "horrified" at the idea of "Negroes" living in their neighborhood. The paper itself described the situation in harsh, racist language, calling it an "infiltration," and reported the prevailing sentiment among community homeowners as being: "We don't want them here."

Courtesy of the West Hartford Public Library

not welcome, none of the approved families tried to move into Oakwood Acres. That effectively made the new housing a “Whites-only” development.

During a time of intense need for workforce housing, only 20 of Oakwood Acres’ 300 units were occupied.

White West Hartford residents wanted Oakwood Acres taken down at the end of the war. But returning veterans faced a lack of affordable housing, so these units remained in use. There were long waiting lists to get in. By 1951, there was a new push to demolish the dilapidated developments. Oakwood Acres was demolished in 1956.

THREATS AND DECEPTIONS

Some West Hartford residents encountered acts of hate, prejudice, and racism. Olivia Shelton moved to West Hartford with her husband and two sons in 1959. Shortly after settling in, she found a note in her mailbox telling her family to get out of West Hartford “while you still can.” Recalling this threat at the age of 87, Shelton was happy she saw the note before her sons did. Shelton added that real estate agents were known to steer Black homebuyers away from certain neighborhoods by falsely claiming that there was a termite problem or water in the basement. Shelton was so upset by the injustices that she sometimes attended real estate open houses with her family “just for meanness and devilment ... to scare the people.”



Olivia Shelton and her family received threats on their lives after moving to West Hartford. Courtesy of The McAuley, West Hartford, Connecticut

Increasingly, realtors steered potential Black residents north toward the adjoining town of Bloomfield, Connecticut. Jewish residents were also manipulated by steering. There had long been a small enclave of Jewish residents in the city. After World War II, more Jewish families began moving to West Hartford as part of White flight from Hartford. Realtors directed Jewish homebuyers to certain neighborhoods and Christians to others. In a 1993 newspaper article, Linda Hirsh, a former staff writer for the *Hartford Courant* newspaper, described her family’s experience looking for a house in the 1970s:

A realtor helping my family find a home in West Hartford spread a map of the town on the floor. He proceeded to outline the Duffy School neighborhood with a Day-Glo green felt pen and adorned it with a crucifix. His hand crossed Farmington Avenue and found a section... Within its borders, he drew a Star of David. ‘You would be more comfortable here,’ he said.

Rabbi Stanley Kessler of Beth El Temple called steering “un-American.” He confronted real estate agents known to use the practice and even spoke with the ministers of their churches.

WEST HARTFORD TODAY

West Hartford’s ongoing dialogue about affordable housing and equity show that there is work yet to be done. Certain sections remain exclusive. Less than 8% of the town’s rental units are affordable. Zoning regulations favor single-family homes that are too costly for many. Although West Hartford champions diversity in many ways, displays of racism—both individual and institutional—indicate systemic problems that still need to be solved.



Whitewood Farms
IN WEST HARTFORD



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A 1994 political cartoon mocks "anti-integrationists" in West Hartford with the suggestion that they dress as Ku Klux Klan members.

Courtesy of the Noah Webster House & West Hartford Historical Society

A 1959 ad for Whitewood Farms is aimed at Catholics, noting the new homes are a short drive from St. Timothy Parish and Parochial School. This ad shows the subtlety of steering, encouraging Catholic buyers to look at the community and not Jewish people or people of color.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What role did transportation play in West Hartford's suburban growth? How did it go from a farming community to a suburban community?
- The debate over Oakwood Acres pitted the federal government and war workers against residents and town officials. What was the outcome? What might have happened if the federal government had forced West Hartford to allow Black workers to live there?
- What might make you choose to live somewhere despite threats and deceptions?

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