

THE POWER OF LAW



Courtesy of the LBJ Presidential Library

WORDS TO KNOW

advocacy

antisemitism

Fair Housing Act

**13th, 14th, and
15th Amendments**

**Japanese American
Citizens League**

profiteering

**National Association
for the Advancement of
Colored People**

Civil Rights Act of 1964

defamation

Anti-Defamation League

Voting Rights Act of 1965

THINK BEFORE YOU READ

Does law have the power to end discrimination?

What role do courts and policy makers play in housing discrimination?

What does success in fair housing look like?

Cover: President Lyndon Baines Johnson at the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Clarence Mitchell, Patricia Roberts Harris, and other civil rights leaders.
Courtesy of the LBJ Presidential Library

In 1937, seven-year-old Lorraine Hansberry moved with her family to Woodlawn, a Chicago neighborhood. Her father, a Black real estate developer, had purchased a house with a racially restrictive covenant on the deed. White neighbors made threats, and Hansberry was beaten up at school. One night a “howling mob” surrounded the house and threw a brick through a window, almost hitting Hansberry in the head. But the Hansberry family stood firm in their determination to stay in their home.

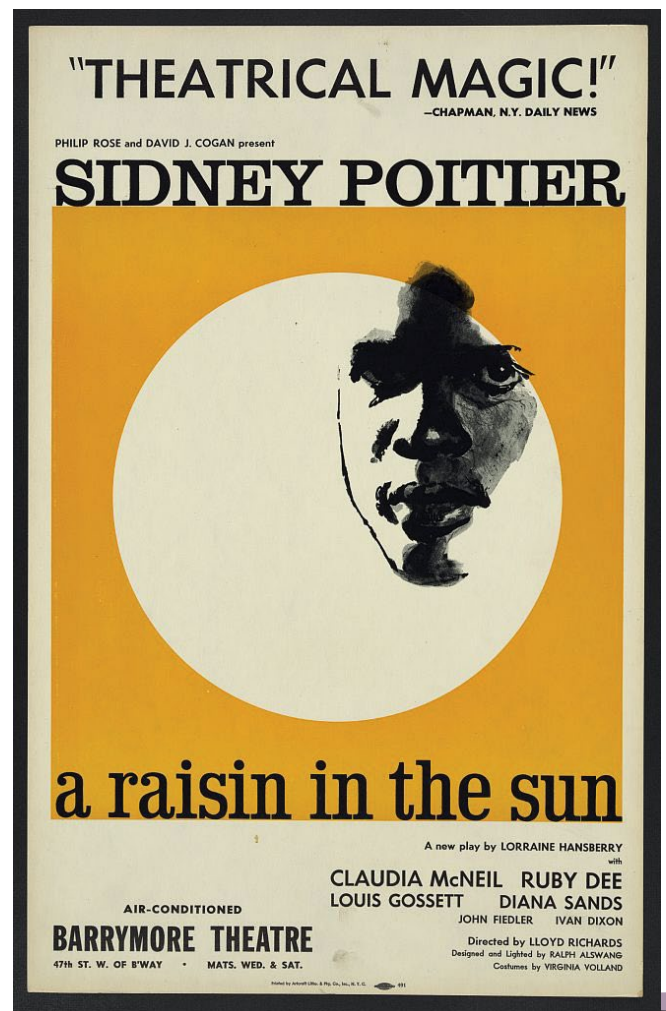
White neighbors, members of the Woodlawn Property Association, sued the Hansberrys for breaking the racially restrictive covenant. Hansberry’s parents and the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** (NAACP) took the case to the U.S. Supreme Court. The verdict allowed the Hansberrys to keep their home but did so without eliminating the restrictive covenant. As she grew up, Hansberry became a civil rights activist and successful playwright. She captured her family’s story in her 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*.

JOINING FORCES

Like the Hansberrys, Americans targeted by discrimination often worked with organizations to use their collective power for **advocacy**. The NAACP formed in 1908, after White mobs terrorized Black neighborhoods in Springfield, Illinois. Sparked by a false rumor of assault, the fighting surged for two days, leaving 16 people dead, dozens of homes burned down, and 40 Black families without homes. In response, leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell and concerned White citizens met in New York City and launched the NAACP. The organization set political and educational goals to protect rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution’s **13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments**. By 1919, the NAACP had more than 300 local branches and 90,000 members.

In 1915, the **Anti-Defamation League** (ADL) formed after the lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish man convicted of murder in Atlanta, Georgia, during an unfair trial. Recognizing the role of **antisemitism** in this and other incidents, the ADL formed to fight discrimination by using the law, education, and protest. The ADL challenged housing discrimination in court and joined in Northern and Midwestern marches for fair housing in the 1960s.

On the West Coast, after decades of violence, intimidation, and legal discrimination, Japanese Americans formed the **Japanese American Citizens League** (JACL) in 1927. It advocated for access to citizenship for Japanese Americans and an end to laws that prevented them from owning homes and land.



Poster for “A Raisin in the Sun,” one of the most important plays in American theater. It tells the story of three generations of the Younger family and their dreams. The title refers to a line in Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem.”
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE FAIR HOUSING ACT

By 1965, the focus of civil rights groups turned to the North, where housing discrimination and poor living conditions were widespread. In Chicago, one of the nation's most racially segregated cities, leaders of the Chicago Freedom Movement invited Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to join their efforts. In 1966, King moved with his family to Chicago's West Side to campaign for fair housing and job opportunities. During an open housing march in Marquette Park, White Chicagoans threw bottles and bricks, hitting him in the head with a rock. On "Freedom Sunday" (July 10, 1966) King spoke before a crowd of 30,000 people. The South's Jim Crow laws had been defeated, he said, but "the Negro in the north [is] increasingly pressed down by the cruel weight of vicious and discriminatory forces." King called out issues such as mortgage loan denial, dilapidated housing, high rents, and real estate profiteering. Supporters of the Chicago Freedom Movement were among those who helped push through the Civil Rights Act of 1968, also known as the **Fair Housing Act**.

The Fair Housing Act was the last law passed during the 1960s civil rights movement. The bill had been stalled in Congress for years, but the assassination of Dr. King in 1968 sparked uprisings and spurred legislators into action. The act prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin in the sale or rental of dwelling units. In 1974, an amendment added sex to the protected categories, and in 1988 another amendment prevented discrimination based on physical disability or families with children.

To enforce the Fair Housing Act, Congress set up the Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity within the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Fair Housing Act was both a major victory for the civil rights movement and a result of compromise made by office-holders eager to move on from the turbulence of the 1960s.



President Lyndon Baines Johnson at the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Clarence Mitchell, Patricia Roberts Harris, and other civil rights leaders. Courtesy of the LBJ Presidential Library



Chicago Freedom March down South Kedzie Avenue,
Chicago, Illinois, 1966.
Courtesy of Bernard Kleina



At the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom protesters carry signs demanding decent housing, integrated schools, civil rights, freedom, and an end to bias. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How did organizing into groups like the NAACP, ADL, and JACL help people fight for fair housing?
- What do you think would have happened to the Fair Housing Act if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had not been assassinated?
- Can you think of any groups working to change laws today?

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