

US History
Social & Economic History of the 1950s

Learning Target:

I can examine the role the growth of housing had on 1950s society and economy.

5. The Growth of Housing

The Growth of the Suburbs –

Why move to the suburbs?

1. Country like setting with urban advantages –
 - Less noise, congestion, & crime
 - Have all the advantages of the city (culture, sports, malls) but none of the problems
2. Privacy –
 - Detached homes instead of apartment
 - Own property and lawn
3. Community of like-minded people –
 - Same race – white
 - Same socio-economic status – middle class with similar values
 - Same age group – Young families
 - People won't admit it but they like their cliques

The Growth of the Suburbs –

-William J. Levitt –

- Pioneer in suburb home building
- The Henry Ford of housing – mass production of homes

-Levittown –

- The first and most famous planned, postwar community
- 1946 bought a 1200-acre potato farm on Long Island, 30 miles east of New York City

Style of homes –

- Cape Cod style homes; 2 bedrooms, kitchen, living room, and a bath

Construction Methods at Levittown –

- Used specialized workers for each phase of construction
- Cut costs and increased efficiency
- A new home was completed every 15 minutes
- 36 homes per day were assembled on site
- By 1951, Levittown, New York contained 17,500 homes

Typical Day of Construction at Levittown –

1. Bulldozers level the land
2. Streets are paved
3. Concrete slabs are poured
4. Sides and roof are built ahead off site
5. Houses are then assembled

“As one historian described the process: ‘Convoys of trucks moved over the hardened pavements, tossing out prefabricated sidings at 8 am, toilets at 9:30 am, sinks and tubs at 10, sheetrock at 10:45, flooring at eleven.’
Within days several hundred identical houses were ready for occupancy.”

Response to Levittown–

- Levitt did not even advertise at first
- Word of mouth spread so fast that when the sales office opened on March 7, 1949 more than a thousand young couples, some of whom had been waiting for four days, were already in line

Price of a home at Levittown –

- \$7,990 with kitchen and appliances, landscaping and bank charges included
- Whole package less than \$10,000

Certain restrictions placed on homeowners –

- No picket fences
- Lawn had to be cut on a regular basis
- Laundry could dry on the line only on Mondays
- Door signals had to be chimes, no buzzer or bells
- All eventually were lifted
- By 1960 homes were selling for two and three times their original cost, and the community had a varied and attractive look

Conclusions –

Positive –

- Levitt enabled many Americans to live the American dream of the 50's.

“The dream included a safe place for children to play, good schools, and friendly neighbors. Levitt and his imitators made it a reality for millions. Their customers did not seem to care that their daily commuting to the city took an hour or so each way, or that lawn care consumed much of their leisure time. The dream was worth it.”

Negative –

1. Many Americans could not participate in the dream
2. Conformity – reaction of young in the 1960's