

Blockbusting in Washington D.C. Migration and Home Sale Patterns

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Abstract

After the disbandment of racially restrictive covenants post 1948, Washington D.C. experienced events of “blockbusting”. These events influenced a racial turnover known as “white flight”. This study aims to analyze blockbusting by mapping migration and home sale patterns from 1948 to 1971 within 8 blocks and a total of 454 lots in Petworth, Washington D.C. (census tract 21.02). Using a thirteen-statement inquiry, housing deeds from the District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds were examined to capture migration and home sale patterns of blockbusting. 59 out of 454 lots were sampled, with a total of 118 resales, which demonstrated that the sample resembled similar migration and home sale patterns. Two real estate institutions, Ralph D Cohn INC (RDCI) and Sindler Realty Corporation (SRC), appeared numerous times in the sample and were investigated, which revealed historical archives, newspapers and lawsuits related to blockbusting and racial turnover practices.

Key Words: Blockbusting, Racial Covenant & White Flight

Blockbusting in Washington D.C. Migration and Home Sale Patterns

In 1948 racially restrictive covenants were legally dismantled, allowing populations of color to live in pre-dominantly white neighborhoods. Soon after this disbandment, Neighborhoods in Petworth, Washington D.C. (census tract 21.02) experienced events of blockbusting from the 1950s to 1960s. Blockbusting is a racially restrictive, fear-based method used by real estate agents and investors to migrate white higher income homeowners out of a community due to a lower income population of color migrating in (Golash Boza, 2021) (Cherkasky & Shoenfeld, 2021) (Orser, 1994). I argue that blockbusting is responsible for influencing a racial turnover (white flight) in Petworth, Washington D.C. between the years of 1950 and 1960.

As a collective group, investors and real estate agents in Washington D.C. would inform white homeowners that black families were moving in, that property values would drop due to this event and were advised to relocate to the suburbs. Investors saw an opportunity to sell these homes for a profitable price to people of color (Golash-Boza 2021). Excavated work from Neighbors Inc Historical Archive, an activist group that was against racially segregating practices, depicts reports and narratives describing instances of blockbusting from white homeowners. Neighbors Inc was against racist real estate methods, such as blockbusting, due to its discriminatory effects on black communities and vouched for housing equality. Neighbor's Inc advocated for the 1962 report entitled, "Civil Rights U.S.A/Housing in Washington D.C. and contributed to the Fair Housing Act of 1968. These events and effects of blockbusting influenced a racial turnover known as "white flight" in Petworth, Washington D.C. (Golash-Boza 2021) (Cherkasky & Shoenfeld 2021).

Migration and Home Sale Patterns

Fig A.

Image of Neighbors Inc (Cherkasky & Shoefeld 2021).



Fig B.

Narrative Describing Blockbusting from Neighbor's Inc Historical Archive (Cherkasky & Shoefeld 2021).

On Wednesday evening, April 6, 1960, I received a telephone call from a man who represented himself as an agent of Paul Stone, Realtor. He said that he had information that we were trying to sell our house. When I asked who had told him, he said that he didn't know the name, but that Mr. Stone's office had heard it.

He then said that Mr. Stone was particularly interested and expert in the problems of the Greewood area. I mentioned that I had not known this designation, and he remarked that I must be fairly new in Washington. I said I was.

The man went on to say that although I was new to Washington, I was probably already aware of "the situation here." I asked what he meant. He said that Negroes are moving into this neighborhood, that many people are trying to sell houses quickly, and that Paul Stone would attempt, in this situation, to get the best price that could be gotten for us. When I didn't answer immediately, he went on to say that property values are going down rapidly, and again, Mr. Stone would be able to help us.

I asked to know a little more about the neighborhood problems, and he said that the colored families who are moving in are bringing children with them, who are entering the neighborhood schools, and this is causing the move.

Then I asked about the other houses on this street. The man said that he had been in contact with almost all of the houses on this street, and indicated that many were going up for sale. I asked which ones specifically, and he mentioned 1639, I believe, or 1637. 1637 is occupied by a couple who have grown children, and who have been considering moving for over a year now. The real estate man said that he had spoken with people who were "definitely going to sell."

He then went back to the question of "lowered property values" and many house sales on this block.

I informed him that, since we bought our house less than a year ago, we were not interested in selling it, and could not understand where he had gotten his information.

This closed the conversation.

Mrs. Audrey McFritman
April 7, 1960

- Washington D.C. resident states she received call from a Paul Stone real estate agent inquiring about selling her home.
- Paul Stone real estate agent states that white families are migrating out and that black families are migrating in.
- Real estate agent states that property values are going to drop due to populations of color migrating in the neighborhoods.
- Document shows fear based racial tactics

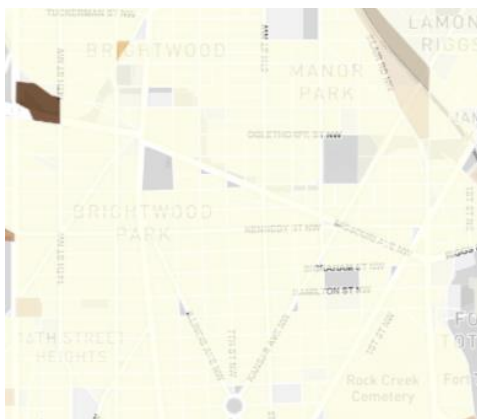
Migration and Home Sale Patterns

Implications of White flight in Washington D.C.

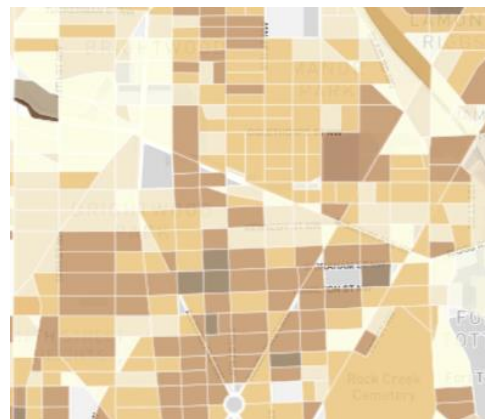
White flight is defined as a racial turnover which involves white higher income populations migrating out of their neighborhoods due to lower income populations of color migrating in (Orser, 1994). As a result, the white populations migrate out of the community, taking community economic wealth and resources with them. Blockbusting in Washington D.C. is a main factor in this racial turnover (Golash-Boza, 2021). According to census data, the neighborhoods within Petworth, Washington D.C. (census tract 21.02) were predominantly white neighborhoods in 1950. However, by 1960, these same neighborhoods experienced events of blockbusting and a racial turnover. These neighborhoods shifted from a pre-dominantly white neighborhood to a pre-dominantly black neighborhood (Cherkasky & Shoenfeld 2021). The effects of a racial turnover and residential segregation are still prevalent in contemporary Washington D.C. (Golash-Boza, 2021).

Fig C.

Visual of Racial Turnover “White Flight” in Petworth (census tract 21.02), Washington D.C Between 1950 and 1960 Census Tracts. (Cherkasky & Shoenfeld, 2021).



1950 Census



1960 Census

Methods

To capture migration and home sale patterns of blockbusting, housing deeds from the District of Columbia, Recorder of Deeds were analyzed. They revealed a total of 8 squares/blocks (3257,3261,3300, 3331, 3388, 3394,3395, 3398) and 454 lots within Petworth, Washington D.C. (census tract 21.02). Housing deeds contain records of home sale histories and identifies when an individual bought and sold a home and during what date(s). A 13-statement questionnaire was created from a qualitative analysis of racial covenants, blockbusting, and white flight from 1948-1971 in Washington D.C. to capture migration and home sale patterns. Out of the 454 lots, 162 lots were distinguished by a middle person, who represents an individual that appears in a lot’s resale history multiple times in less than 6 months. Out of the 162 lots distinguished by a middle person, 59 of those lots were sold 4 times or more and thoroughly examined. From the sample of 59 lots, a chart was created to document what middle persons were present and identifies what square they resold in. 20 middle persons were documented with 17 individuals and 3 institutions reselling all 59 lots. In total there are 118 resales.

Fig D.

Housing Deed Excavated From the District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds.

NAME	OTHER NAME	DOC TYPE	RECORDED	ROLL/FRAME
D J DUNIGAN INC	GE SILVER MORRIS	DEED	03/23/1936	6975/571
SILVER MARY	GE O'CONNOR ANNIE M	DEED	04/27/1937	7103/110
J J DUNIGAN INC	GE TIFFEY JOHN B	DEED	08/09/1937	7138/513
TIFFEY JOHN B	GE D J DUNIGAN INC	DEED	08/09/1937	7138/515
TIFFEY JOHN B	GE D J DUNIGAN INC	DEED	03/23/1938	7208/559
O'CONNOR ANNIE M	GE MENAGH CHARLES S	DEED	10/31/1940	7539/268
MENAGH CHARLES S	GE GARNER MARGARET L	DEED	01/13/1949	8902/246
GARNER MARGARET L	GE MENAGH CHARLES S	DEED	08/31/1950	9286/469
MENAGH CHARLES S	GE COHN FRANCES W	DEED	11/26/1958	11151/600
COHN FRANCES W	GE DOUGLAS EVELYN S	DEED	01/29/1959	11183/507
DOUGLAS EVELYN S	GE RALPH D COHN INC	DEED	10/10/1961	11682/291
RALPH D COHN INC	GE BOWIE ELIZABETH	DEED	10/18/1961	11688/089
BOWIE ELIZABETH	GE WOOD MATTIE	DEED	02/17/1965	12364/202
COLEMAN IDA D	GE COLEMAN IDA D	DEED	06/19/1978	281/

This deed represents Square 3398 Lot 1. Deed shows who bought, sold and resold the lot as early as 1936 up until 1978.

Migration and Home Sale Patterns

Fig E.

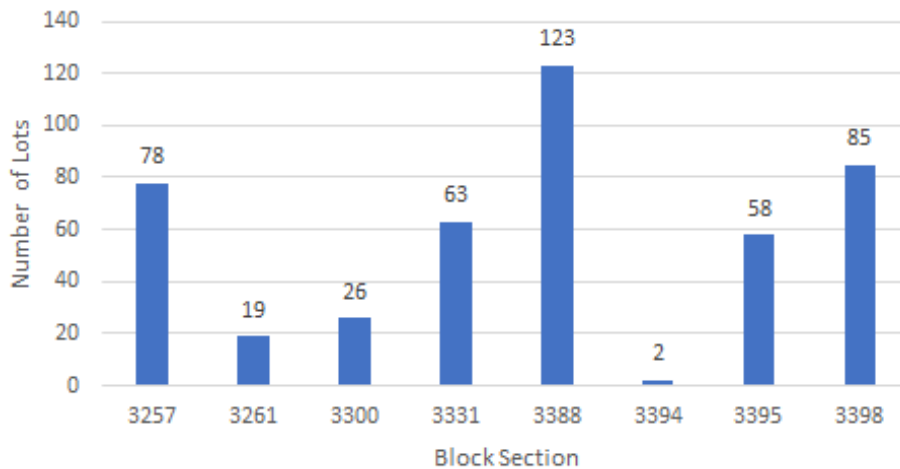
Example of How Deeds Were Analyzed With 13 Statement Inquiry for Square 3398 Lots 1-5.

Square/Lot	Year first sold	Times sold before 1971	Resold in less than 6 months post 5/3/1948?		Resale date 1	Resale date 2	Days between sales	Middle person	Date pre-1948 owner moved	Resale to previous owner	Lot exists today	Address today	Second Middle person (if applicable)
			Yes	No									
339801	1936	13	Yes		10/10/1961	10/18/1961		RALPH D 8 COHN INC	01/13/1949	Yes	Yes	5101 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVE	
339802	1936	5	No						04/26/1973	No	Yes	5103 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE NW	
339803	1936	5	Yes		01/30/1958	01/30/1958		DUNKELMA N LAWRENCE	01/30/1958	No	Yes	5105 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE NW	
339804	1936	4	Yes		09/27/1960	09/27/1960		0 THE SINDLER	09/27/1960	No	Yes	5107 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE NW	
339805	1936	4	No						09/26/1952	No	Yes	5109 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE NW	

13 statement inquiry consist of: square/lot; year first sold; times sold before 1971; resold in less than 6 months; resale date 1; resale date 2; days between sales; middle person; date pre-1948 owner moved; resale to previous owner; lot exists today; address today; second middle person. This 13 statement Inquiry was used for all 8 blocks and 454 lots to capture migration and home sale patterns of blockbusting.

Fig F.

Total Number of Lots Sold Within a Block.



Bar graph of 8 blocks (3257, 3261, 3300, 3331, 3388, 3394, 3395, 3398) and total of 454 lots existing within Petworth, Washington D.C. (census tract 21.02).

Fig G.

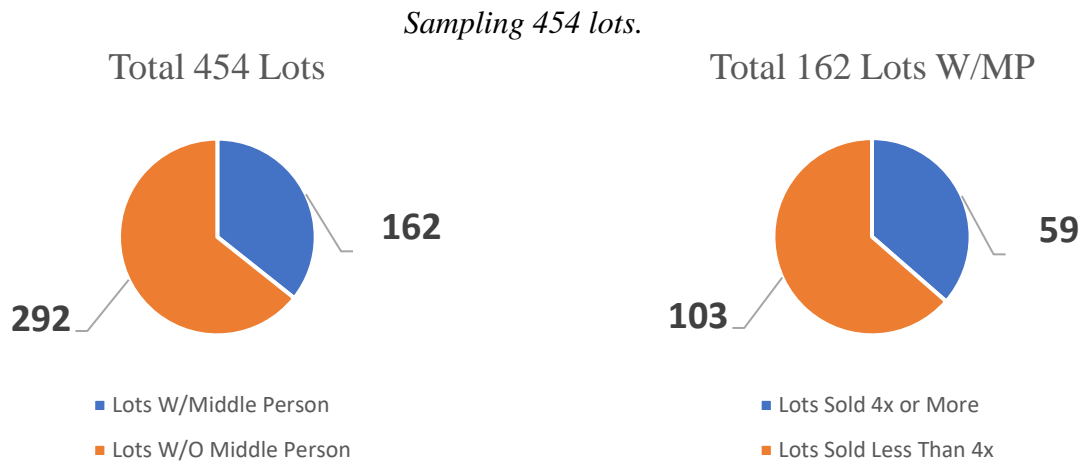
Visual of lots Excavated from Petworth, Washington D.C. (Census Tract 21.02).



Red lots were analyzed by the 13 statement Inquiry and represent a house that may have experienced blockbusting in Petworth Washington D.C. (Census Tract 21.02). 8 blocks (3257, 3261, 3300, 3331, 3388, 3394, 3395, 3398) and 454 lots exist in this census tract.

Lots exist within the neighborhoods of Brightwood Park and Manor Park.

Fig H.



Out of 454 lots, 162 lots were identified to have a middle person. Out of those 162 lots, 59 of them were sold 4 times or more. The sample of 59 lots was analyzed to capture migration and home sale patterns of blockbusting.

Fig I.

Sample of 59 Lots W/Middle Person & Sold 4x or More.

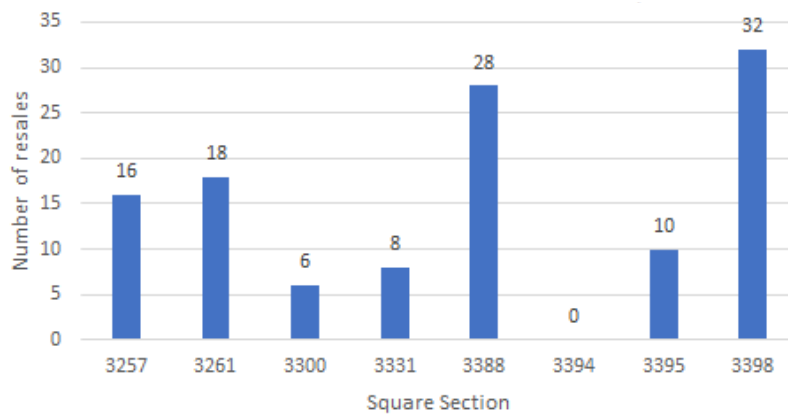
Block Sections

	3257	3261	3300	3331	3388	3394	3395	3398	Total Resales
Frances	4			2				2	8
Pararas		6			2				8
Friedman		4		2					6
Sindler		4	2				4	14	24
Ralph Cohn Inc			4					4	8
Mason				2				2	4
F. Cohn								4	4
Tsintolas	6								6
Brawner	4								4
Cates		4							4
Glengar Corporation					4				4
Blanken	2				2				4
Clarke					4				4
Marcellino				2			2		4
Sugarman					4				4
Inscoe					4				4
Sutton					4				4
Iskow					4				4
Press							4		4
Levine								6	6
Total #	16	18	6	8	28	0	10	32	118

Graph shows all the existing middle persons (17 individuals and 3 institutions) within the sample of 59 lots. It was identified which squares the middle persons sold in. The total resales were identified by square and middle person.

Fig 1.

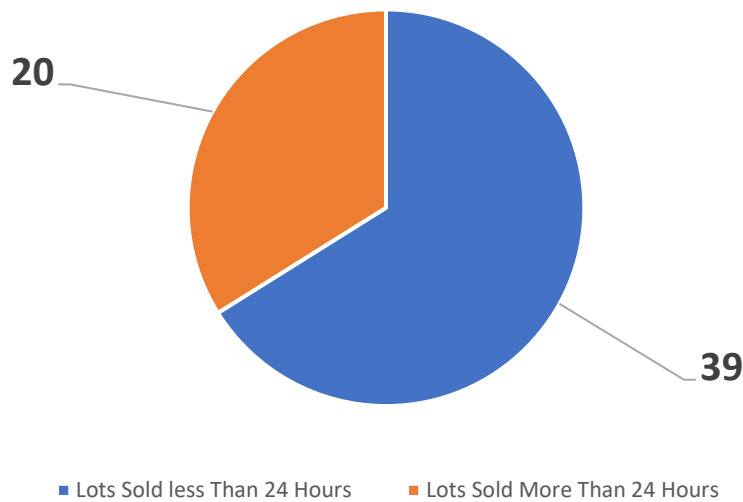
Total Number of Resales Within a Square.



The total number of resales for 59 lots w/middle person across 7/8 squares is 118 resales. The average is 15 resales. Square 3398 had the highest resales at 32 resales. Meanwhile, square 3394 had no significant resales.

Fig 2.

39/59 Lots W/Middle Person Were Bought and Sold in Less Than 24 hours.



This finding regarding home sales is congruent with blockbusting methods due to the fast pace that homes were being resold at in a large collective effort. This reflects that large migrations were occurring (Cherkasky & Shoenfeld 2021).

Fig 3.

Timeline of Lots Sold by Middle Persons.

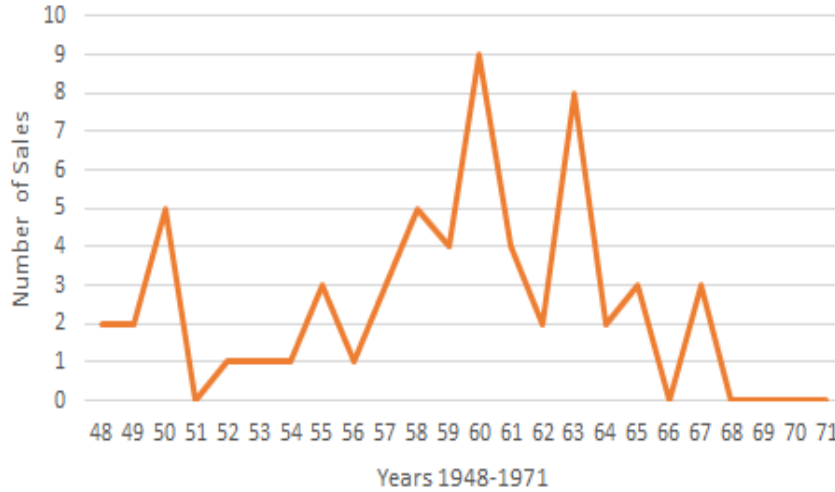
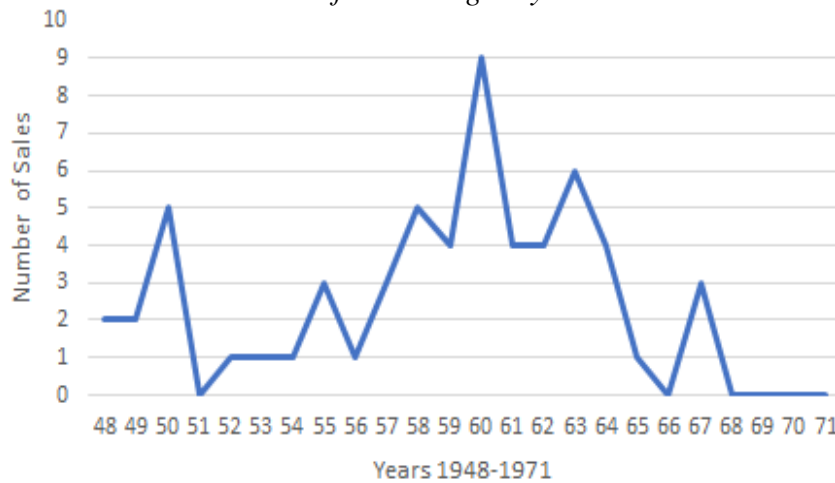


Fig 4.

Timeline of Lots Bought by Middle Persons.



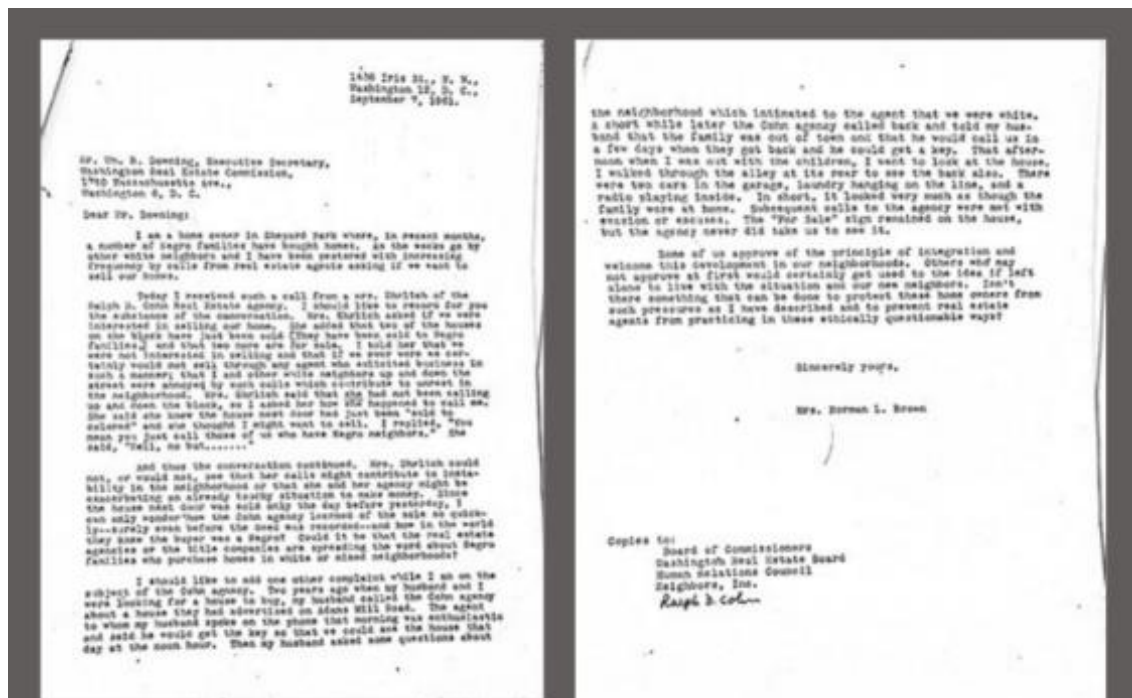
The rate at which houses are bought and sold between Fig 3 and Fig 4 increases consistently from 48' to 61' with the peak being 60". According to census data, a racial turnover has occurred in Petworth Washington D.C. (census tract 21.02) by 1960 and lots are being resold at an all-time high. The 2 timelines show persistent blockbusting and racial turnover (white flight) practices through the decade from 1950 – 1960 due to an increased rate of resales. (Cherkasky & Shoenfeld, 2021) (Golash-Boza, 2021) After 61' we see a decrease in lots being sold and bought in Fig. 4. However, the rate at which houses are being sold is higher than the rate at which houses are being bought in Fig 3.

Migration and Home Sale Patterns

Two real estate institutions were examined due to having high frequencies of resales in multiple blocks, Ralph D Cohn INC (RDCI) and Sindler Realty Corporation (SRC). RDCI can be seen mentioned in a historical document from Neighbor's Inc historical archive. This document describes implications of blockbusting and is signed from RDCI (Cherkasky & Shoenfeld, 2021).

Fig J.

Narrative and Implications of Blockbusting Regarding RDCI from Neighbor's Inc Historical Archive.



- Resident, Norman L Brown, states as black families move in, she and her white residents are receiving calls from real estate agents inquiring about selling their homes.
- Resident states that she received a call from Mrs. Ehrlich from RDCI.
- States neighbor's home was resold less than 24 hours.

Discussion: Sindler Strip

Searching SRC presented newspapers containing information about “Sindler Strip”. The Sindler Strip depicts houses being sold by the Sindler Realty Corporation. The Sindler Strip displays a lot that appeared in the data. 5121 New Hampshire Avenue N.W is represented under square 3398 lot 11. Abraham Sindler is documented as the middle person, who sold this lot on December 17, 1959 and held it for 29 days before reselling it on March 18, 1959. However The newspaper suggests that the lot was being sold by Sindler as early as February 8, 1959 (Evening Star, 1959). Furthermore, the columns on the right of the Sindler Strip contain racially restrictive real estate methods targeted towards black communities (Cherkasky & Shoenfeld, 2021). The lots distinguish by the title “colored” are houses that don not hold racially covenant regulations against black communities and are marketed towards black communities. This could suggest that lots being sold without the “colored” title is enforcing a racial covenant towards black communities despite racial covenants being dismantled in 1948. Real estate practices like this contributes to the segregation of black communities.

Fig K.

Sindler Strip Newspaper.



The highlighted section in yellow on the document above shows when this issue of the “Evening Star” was released (February 8, 1959).

Future Works: Real Estate Institutions, Lawsuits and Newspapers

I argue that blockbusting is responsible for influencing a racial turnover in Petworth, Washington D.C. (census tract 21.02) otherwise known as white flight. The findings of this study suggest that there is evidence of blockbusting and racial turnover (white flight) practices, as seen through migration and home sale patterns. Furthermore, lawsuits were found constructing a timeline of events regarding fraud, racial covenants, housing segregation and disinvestment in Washington D.C. from 1947-1980. RDCI, SRC, the lawsuits and newspapers are suggested to be further analyzed in the future. A total of seven lawsuits were found either against RDCI and SRC or related to their cases. Future research can further analyze how these lawsuits to contribute to the preexisting qualitative pool data on racially restrictive real estate methods such as blockbusting and racial covenants. In addition, analyzing these lawsuits will provide more information of Sindler Realty Corporation and Ralph D Cohn Inc real estate practices. Lawsuits include: Mitchell v. Ralph D Cohn, Inc (1947), Drayson v. Height (1951), Slater v. Cannon (1952), Savage v. Parks (1953), Brodsky v. Linder (1955), Surratt v. Cohn (1957), and Sindler v. Batleman (1980). In addition, various newspaper issues and volumes from the “Evening Star” from 1950 to 1960 depict racially restrictive real estate methods and racist imagery that could be analyzed further (Evening Star, 1854 – 1972). Ultimately, historical documents concerning RDCI and SRC should be located to construct an in-depth historical analysis of these real estate institutions and their relationship to blockbusting.

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