Segregating the Suburbs: New Rochelle in Black and White, 1900-1970

Here lies a map of New Rochelle, an inner-ring suburb, located just north of New York City in the prototypically suburban Westchester County. Sixty years ago, the suburb was renowned nationwide for being the "Queen City of the Sound," a place immortalized in the 1961 *Dick Van Dyke Show* as a haven for rich, white New Yorkers desirous of glamorous summer homes overlooking the Sound Shore. With the advent of the 1961 *Taylor v. Board of Education* school desegregation case, however, came a new reputation for being the "Little Rock of the North," one that drove the suburb's whites to flee from its central area to wealthier, whiter suburban communities elsewhere in the county, resulting in the creation of a deeply segregated community. Its four northern-most census tracts, as of the 2010 Federal Census, hold 46.7% of the suburb's whites, but only an eighth of its Blacks and 6% of its Hispanics; tracts 60 through 65, by contrast, contain around 60% of its Black and Hispanics, but merely 22% of its whites.[i]

How did this situation come about? To be sure, historians like Arnold R. Hirsch and Thomas Sugrue have brilliantly explained how whites, fearful of a "black menace" they believed would depress property values, fled, and thus segregated, inner cities after World War II; others, including Becky M. Nicolaides, have unveiled how white backlash unfolds in individual suburbs. Yet, little has been written on how inter-suburban processes influence suburban segregation, creating a gap in the literature which New Rochelle's experiences help fill. Indeed, the segregation of New Rochelle did not occur solely because whites fled the suburb's center during the 1960s; just as important were Scarsdale's efforts to expand its racially and economically-exclusive realty practices into New Rochelle's North End, the creation of which elucidates how suburbs segregate not merely themselves, but also each other.

Of course, the demographic and economic factors that enabled Scarsdale's realtors to develop New Rochelle's North End before the suburb's own realtors were deeply rooted, dating back to the suburb's incorporation as a city in 1899, when the Town of New Rochelle and the Village of Rochelle merged into a single entity. At this point, the southern two-thirds of New Rochelle were all New Rochelle was; and realtors constructed a series of residential parks (essentially suburbs-within-a-suburb) for rich whites throughout, each one farther north than the last. However, they were unable to expand into New Rochelle's very northern reaches, which, as Plate 28 of the 1910 Westchester County Atlas shows, consisted almost entirely of undeveloped farming estates that were separated from the rest of the suburb by sheer geographical distance, making the region's development a difficult prospect. The New York, Westchester, and Boston line's 1913 construction did drive Francis Stratton to develop the Quaker Ridge community, but no other New Rochelle realtors followed his lead, and the line's 1937 closure left the North End just as – if not more – geographically isolated from the rest of the suburb than it was before.

Such a situation perfectly presaged Scarsdale's entry into New Rochelle, beginning with Harmon National Insurance Company's 1928 Scarsdale Downs complexes. Erected right where New Rochelle "wedges" into Scarsdale, Chester R. Nichols' survey maps for the developments designate them as residing in both communities simultaneously, and for good reason; though technically located in New Rochelle, Scarsdale realtors and businesses were involved in every aspect of Scarsdale Downs' construction. Harmon Burke, Harmon National's president, hailed from Scarsdale, as did Max Goldsmith's Appleton Estates Co., from whom Burke bought the land he built the Scarsdale Downs Morris Lane Environments upon; the Scarsdale National Bank and Trust Company, likewise, owned mortgages in the area.[ii] Similarly, just as Scarsdale realtors, historian Barbara Troetel notes, limited "construction almost entirely to one-family

homes on large lots" to ensure a "white, Protestant, nonethnic, affluent character," Harmon National's restrictive covenants for Scarsdale Downs guaranteed a wealthy, mostly-white populace.[iii] Indeed, covenants for the Morris Lane Environments section precluded buyers from erecting buildings worth less than $25,000, effectively pricing out most of New Rochelle – its median house value, according to the 1930 census, was only $16,972 – in ways Harmon National's 1935 revisions, which stipulated that houses had to occupy at least 45,000 cubic feet, did little to change.[iv]

Though the Great Depression temporarily halted housing construction in New Rochelle, its decisive conclusion during World War II sparked the erection of further developments in the North End, swiftly transforming it into New Rochelle's richest, fastest-growing region. As per the 1960 Federal Census, 10,360 of New Rochelle's 17,087 new arrivals in the previous decade lived in New Rochelle's four northern-most census tracts, 66, 67, 68A, and 68B, the latter three of which had median incomes of than $16,000; the median incomes of the two wealthiest census tracts outside the North End, 57A and 57B, were only half that.[v] Yet, realtors had long connected wealth with whiteness, and the North End was no exception to this. When Wilmot Acres Inc.'s restrictive covenants for their 1941 Wilmot Acres development specified that the community's subdivisions could only contain single-family dwellings for use by no "persons other than [sic] of the Caucasian race," for instance, they explicated the racial ideology at the North End's core, one that created a neighborhood which resembled Scarsdale more than it did New Rochelle.[vi]

It was this fact that would grant the North End's residents disproportionate influence over municipal politics, ossifying the suburb's racial boundaries in the process. In a place where "89 percent of the municipal tax burden" was "on homes," as Merrill Folsom wrote in 1958 for The

New York Times, the North End provided a useful tax base for a City Council eyeing ambitious expansion plans, leading it to prioritize the North End's needs at the rest of the suburb's expense.[vii] When the City Council rejected a zoning change that would have enabled Lord and Taylor, a prominent department store, to move into the Quaker Ridge area in 1945, for instance, it did so at the behest of North End residents who argued that the store's presence would depress property values. Though the decision, which led Lord and Taylor to settle in the nearby municipality of White Plains, would drive the Council to begin an urban renewal project, the Westchester Terminal Plaza, that ultimately hastened the flight of whites and businesses from the suburb's central area, the North End remained unaffected. After all, it was barely part of New Rochelle to begin with; the Westchester's termination severed the North End from the rest of New Rochelle, and its "nearest important shopping area," the Council of New Rochelle Neighborhood and Civic Associations wrote in 1964, is Scarsdale's "Heathcote Five Corners Section."[viii] Thusly insulated from the effects of their actions through geographic isolation, the North End's citizens could act to preserve their whiteness (and thus wealth), and the rest of New Rochelle would pay the price.

Of course, the North End was not the sole driver of New Rochelle's segregated state; the suburb's municipal government, which clustered their Black residents along the suburb's western reaches, also played a significant role. Yet, its mere existence perfectly encapsulates the nature of suburban segregation, which manifests not only within suburbs, but between them, as a 1969 New York State Education Department's Division of Research study illustrates. Westchester County, they noted, had the second largest "nonwhite" population in New York State (behind only New York City), but Yonkers, New Rochelle, and Mount Vernon, three inner-ring suburbs with racially-mixed populations, contained 55% of it, with another 34% living in eight nearby

municipalities; the remaining 11% was split between thirty-three municipalities. It is a huge discrepancy by any measure, one that, like the suburb that most reflects it, shows how inadequate the study of individual suburbs truly is for understanding the segregation of the whole.[ix]

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[i] U.S. Census Bureau. Race, 2010. Prepared by Social Explorer. http://www.socialexplorer.com/tables/C2010/R11356561?ReportId=R11356561. Accessed February 28th, 2017.
[ii] *Westchester County Deeds, Liber 2986* (White Plains: Westchester County Clerk's Office, October 22nd, 1928), 40; *Westchester County Deeds, Liber 2900* (White Plains: Westchester County Clerk's Office, October 1st, 1928), 262-263; for an example of a document describing said mortgages' terms, see *Westchester County Deeds, Liber 3107* (White Plains: Westchester County Clerk's Office, December 11th, 1930), 21.
[iii] Barbara Troetel, "Suburban Transportation Redefined: America's First Parkway," in *Westchester: The American Suburb* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), ed. by Roger Panetta, 259.
[iv] *Westchester County Deeds, Liber 3507* (White Plains: Westchester County Clerk's Office, July 24th, 1935), 398.
[v] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Censuses of Population and Housing: 1960. Census Tracts* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1962). Final Report PHC(1)-104, Part 2, Table P-1, 48-49; "Demographic Survey of New Rochelle," chap. 11 in *A Survey of Library Resources* (New Rochelle: New Rochelle Public Library, 1964), 430.
[vi] *Westchester County Deeds, Liber 3938* (White Plains: Westchester County Clerk's Office, March 17th, 1941), 216 & 219.
[vii] Merrill Folsom, "Slum Drive Gains in New Rochelle," The New York Times, June 16th, 1958, 25.
[viii] "Demographic Survey of New Rochelle," chap. 11 in *A Survey of Library Resources*, 420.
[ix] Division of Research, New York State Education Department, *Racial and Social Class Isolation in the Schools: A Report to the Board of Regents of the State University of New York* (New York: University of New York, 1969), 61.