



New public housing units in the “Black Belt” on the South Side; photo: City of Chicago

HOUSING SEGREGATION IN 1950S SOUTH SIDE CHICAGO

Already experiencing a population boom after Reconstruction, Chicago was a popular destination for African Americans moving from the South to the North in the early 20th century. In the twenty years from 1890 to 1910, Chicago’s African-American population increased from 15,000 to approximately 40,000 due to the Great Migration. The majority of African-American Chicago residents settled in the South Side neighborhood and, due to discriminatory real estate practices and threats of violence in white neighborhoods, one almost entirely black section of the South Side came to be referred to as the Black Belt. By the mid-20th century, three-quarters of Chicago’s African-American population lived in this area. As new African-American inhabitants moved in, the descendants of prior, mostly Irish, immigrants moved out to the suburbs or relocated to other parts of the city.

Following the Great Depression, new housing structures were rapidly added in Chicago. Most of these were built on the South Side, and many were quite small and overcrowded. These generally included bungalows (small, generally one floor houses), studio apartments, and kitchenette buildings that featured units such as *A Raisin in the Sun*’s apartment setting. These spaces offered little access to natural sunlight and required the residents on a floor to share a single bathroom. In the late 1940s,

the Chicago Housing Authority began to build high-rise public housing units on the South Side after white residents objected to an earlier proposal to add the units in less congested parts of the city.

For much of the 20th century, the neighborhood was very racially segregated. During the 1920s and Lorraine Hansberry’s childhood in the 1930s, white home owners banded together to create racially restrictive housing covenants, which stated that residents must be of a particular race in order to live in that neighborhood. The Hansberry family faced one of these covenants in 1938 when they moved into Washington Park, a white section of the South Side. Due to the existing covenant agreed to by the



Woodlawn Property Owners Association, a state court ordered the Hansberrys to vacate. When they refused, a signatory of the covenant, Anna Lee, sued Lorraine's father, Carl Hansberry, and Harry H. Pace, an African-American lawyer who had recently purchased a building nearby. A circuit court ruled against Hansberry and Pace, but they pursued their case to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled in Hansberry's favor on a legal technicality, saying that the number of signatories the covenant required to make it valid had not been met. The United States Supreme Court would not rule racially restrictive covenants unconstitutional until 1948. However, even this did not alleviate the challenges African Americans faced in trying to find affordable housing in Chicago as white neighborhood associations discouraged their members from selling to black families. The struggles faced by her family and other African Americans in Chicago had profound impact on Lorraine Hansberry, and clearly inspired her to write *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Questions:

- African-Americans migrated from the South to the North in search of better opportunities. What types of work did they find in Chicago? How did economic challenges impact African Americans' ability to secure better quality housing? How is the Youngers' housing situation at the beginning of the play tied to their economic status?
- Study the ethnic composition of your region. Historically, are there particular communities where immigrants of specific backgrounds have tended to settle? Why did they choose to live in that area?
- Research contemporary housing laws in your city and state. What types of housing are available in your area? What are the criteria for receiving public housing assistance?
- Research the history of Boston's neighborhoods. Which ethnicities occupied which neighborhoods and when? What cultural events or rationales encouraged movement out of Boston to the suburbs?
- How did your family come to live where they do today? Ask your parents and grandparents about your family's own migration story.

In the early 1950s, Mark Satter opened his law practice in the Chicago suburb of Lawndale, but his life's work really began in 1957, the day a black couple, Albert and Sallie Bolton, walked through his doors needing a stay on an eviction from a home they had just purchased. Satter uncovered a citywide scheme, in which landlords sold African-Americans overpriced homes, keeping the titles until black homeowners paid them off, while charging excessive interest rates to insure they never could.

