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How Cincinnati got segregated

In 1850, blacks lived in every ward

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When historian Henry Louis Taylor Jr. set out to study Cincinnati's black ghettos before the Civil War, what he found challenged his entire notion of how American cities became segregated.

There were no ghettos.

In 1850, when Cincinnati was the second-most densely populated city in the country, census records showed African-Americans lived in every ward in the city - and that they often lived alongside, behind or on top of white households.

• http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Avis=AB&Dato=20080714&Kategori=NEWS01&Lopenr=807140807&Ref=PH">Photos: Obama speaks to NAACP
• http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?Dato=20080714&Kategori=VIDEO&Lopenr=80714016&Ref=AR" target="_blank">Video: Highlights of Obama's speech
• http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080714/NEWS0108/305250001/1055" target="_blank">Text of Obama's speech

Even though there were clusters of free blacks in two neighborhoods - Bucktown (on the eastern edge of downtown) and Little Africa (on the western riverfront) - those neighborhoods got their names more from the concentration of African-American institutions than from their residents, Taylor found.

"Cincinnati - and, I would argue, most American cities - were integrated places for a longer period of time than they were segregated places," said Taylor, now a professor of urban history at the University of Buffalo.

So how did Cincinnati become the city of white and black neighborhoods it is today?

Those changes didn't come until well into the 20th century, when transportation improvements, homeownership policies and a vast migration of Southern blacks into the city changed the map.

• http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Avis=AB&Dato=20080715&Kategori=NEWS01&Lopenr=807150805&Ref=PH" target="_new">Photos: NAACP forums continue
• http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Avis=AB&Dato=20080713&Kategori=PHOTO01&Lopenr=807130803&Ref=PH" target="_new">Photos: NAACP convention
• http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Avis=AB&Dato=20080712&Kategori=NEWS01&Lopenr=807120802&Ref=PH" target="_new">Photos: Convention kicks off

After the Revolutionary War, northern Ohio was settled by New Englanders, and central Ohio by

Pennsylvanians. But a westward movement of Virginians settled southern Ohio, bringing with them a slave-owning culture.

Even if antebellum Cincinnati wasn't segregated by neighborhood, civil rights and most professions were off limits to blacks.

"We were damned, if you will, right off the boat," said Carl Westmoreland, a Lockland native and senior adviser at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. "Cincinnati was born with a rigid pattern of class and race, which was only reinforced by later migration.

"There was a newspaper called The Cincinnati Enquirer. A few days after the Civil War, it predicted that Cincinnati would be inundated by a great black flood, and people began to hunker down, and it's continued to this day," Westmoreland said.

• http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=naacp" target="_new">More convention coverage
• http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/artikkel?Dato=20080713&Kategori=NEWS01&Lopenr=307130003&Ref=AR" target="_new">Interactive: From segregation to mayor's office
• http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/artikkel?Dato=20080713&Kategori=CINCI01&Lopenr=307130021&Ref=AR" target="_new">Interactive: Area black history

The black flood didn't reach its peak until the early 20th century, when an industrial boom created a demand for menial labor. Between 1910 and 1930, the city's African-American population grew from 19,639 to 47,818.

The newcomers moved into Cincinnati's lower Mill Creek basin - the neighborhoods of downtown and the West End - which white Cincinnatians were abandoning even faster than new residents could move in. From 1910 to 1940, the white population of the basin declined by two-thirds.

The basin was becoming an increasingly unpleasant place to live, with floods, open sewers and thick industrial smoke.

Those who could afford to move took the newly built inclines and trolleys to the suburbs - places like Clifton Heights, Fairmount and Mount Auburn.

To cope with that growth, Cincinnati's leaders - pioneers in the urban-planning movement - emphasized a city based on homeownership and stable neighborhoods.

Those policies - zoning laws, building codes and subdivision regulations - segmented single-family housing from rental units and commercial and industrial areas, protecting owner-occupied neighborhoods.

"The city leaders created a money map that sifted and sorted people into communities based on the amount of money that they had," Taylor said. "Race itself doesn't become a factor of any consequence until homeownership enters the equation."

Protection of homeownership led to discriminatory practices in the real-estate market, in which blacks were steered to lower-income neighborhoods and whites were led to neighborhoods with "good schools."

Until they were ruled unconstitutional in 1948, restrictive covenants in deeds ensured that white-owned properties would never be sold to non-whites.

Civil-rights laws and fair-housing group Housing Opportunities Made Equal helped fight

discrimination, and the demolition of housing projects and emphasis on subsidized housing vouchers has helped move African-Americans into neighborhoods that used to be predominately white - especially on the West Side and inner-ring suburbs.

But the white exodus out of the city continues.

In the last half of the 20th century, the white population of Cincinnati plummeted 425,313 to 175,492. At the same time, the black population increased 82 percent, to 142,176.

If those trends continue, Cincinnati may well be a majority African-American city by the 2010 census.
