

# Washington D.C. in the 20th Century: A History of Housing and Environmental Injustice

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## Housing Covenants and Blockbusting

As developers built up Washington, D.C., they included racially restrictive housing covenants in their properties that were passed down from owner to owner. These covenants most often stopped Black people from buying homes from White people, which led to limited housing availability.

After these covenants were banned in 1948, real estate agents continued these discriminatory practices in the form of "blockbusting." When a Black family bought a home in a predominantly White neighborhood, real estate agents would call White neighbors, stating that they should sell their homes immediately or risk their property values lowering. By using this tactic, real estate agents profited off of racism and residential segregation in Washington, D.C. Some neighbors formed groups to help and educate their community on the fear-mongering tactics used by these real estate agents, most effectively in neighborhoods where most people were of a comparable socio-economic status but blockbusting continued well into the 1970s.

These policies have shaped Washington, D.C. to this day. Neighborhoods that are historically predominantly Black have been denied the privileges that wealthier predominantly white neighborhoods enjoy. Environmental inequality is one of many ways that racial and economic disparities exist in D.C., as is true nationwide.



## Proximity to the Federal Government

Washington, D.C. is unique in its proximity to the United States Government, but this proximity is not always a benefit. One clear example of this is the Capitol Power Plant. Built in 1910, it remains the only coal burning power plant in the city and is the largest single source of carbon emissions. Despite being in a residential area, it only provides power to the federal government, meaning residents do not benefit from its presence. The power plant is surrounded by several predominately Black neighborhoods.

## Waste Transfer Stations

Waste transfer stations are one clear example of how environmental inequality and housing inequality are connected in D.C. today. All five of the district's waste transfer stations are located in predominately Black neighborhoods in Northeast D.C. These waste transfer stations are a major source of air and noise pollution, and the city has not cleaned them up despite making environmental improvements in gentrifying neighborhoods.



## Methodology

Because I grew up in Washington, D.C., as I look through primary and secondary sources I have been trying to situate myself, my family, and my neighborhood in this history as well. In one secondary source I found, my neighborhood, Shepherd Park, was used as an example of a neighborhood where integration worked—but only due to the fact that neighbors were able to connect because most residents were middle class and college educated. Many neighbors still fought against affordable housing and low-income families moving in.

Isolating individual neighborhoods like Shepherd Park during a point in history through primary and secondary sources has been key to my research. This project, which will culminate in my senior thesis in the History department, will make a connection between housing inequality and environmental injustice at specific moments and in specific neighborhoods.

## Works Cited

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