

Title: Blockbusting: Social and Economic Change through Real Estate

Author: Joshua Kukowski, Franklin High School & Nicholas Ricks, Western School for Technology and Environmental Sciences, Baltimore County Public Schools

Grade Level: High

Duration of lesson: One 90-minute period or Two 45- minute periods

After World War Two, Baltimore experienced a shortage of houses and jobs. With fewer jobs available, city neighborhoods lost much of their economic stability and reliable social services. In these deteriorating conditions, many urban black families sought to move to predominantly-white suburban neighborhoods, like Edmondson Village, which had better schools and housing. The unethical tactic of “blockbusting” was employed by some real estate operatives, who played on the racial fears of whites and the home-ownership aspirations of African Americans. By invoking a scenario of black encroachment, blockbusters persuaded white families to sell their homes at a loss, and then, in turn, sold the same houses for a high price to African-American buyers. In this lesson, students will examine the practice of blockbusting to determine the degree to which it promoted and held back social, economic, and political change in the middle- to late-20th century.

National History Standard:

Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)

Standard 4A: The student understands the “Second Reconstruction” and its advancement of civil rights.

Evaluate the agendas, strategies, and effectiveness of various African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans, as well as the disabled, in the quest for civil rights and equal opportunities. [Explain historical continuity and change]

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

- C. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.
- F. Appreciate historical perspectives.
- G. Draw upon data in historical maps.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- C. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, and the influence of ideas.
- J. Hypothesize the influence of the past.

Objective:

Students will analyze the process of blockbusting in order to determine the degree to which it promoted and held back social, economic, and political change during the middle and late 20th Century.

Maryland State Department of Education Voluntary State Curriculum (VSC) –

U.S. History High School: http://mdk12.org/instruction/hsvsc/us_history/standard5.html

Objective:

Define blockbusting

Assess the short and long term consequences of blockbusting

Historical Background:

Before the Civil War, Baltimore was home to the largest urban free African American population in the country. These free blacks relied on manufacturing jobs, domestic positions and work associated with port trade. They worked as barbers, blacksmiths, laundresses, maids and day laborers.¹ These types of employment became abundant in early 19th century Baltimore. Even unskilled laborers and domestic servants could enjoy steady work as Baltimore employers preferred the free labor system to slavery because they deemed the former more profitable. With steady employment, workers could more easily unite for better economic and social opportunities as well as develop their own stable neighborhoods. Thanks to relative economic security, this population created a stable neighborhood and fostered a history of working to better their community condition despite co-existing with a substantial slave population.

By the 1820's, thanks to steady work, many members of the free black community were literate, owned property and held skilled jobs. Unfortunately, the community's luck did not last. During the 1820's and 1830's Maryland's economy experienced a recession, at the same time as a surge of immigrants from Ireland and Germany started to compete with free blacks for jobs. Because many white employers preferred hiring European immigrants, the free black population lost the steady employment which had made mass economic and social gains possible. Unlike their enslaved counterparts, free blacks still had to feed, house and clothe themselves during economic downturns. However, by the mid-19th century, this community still could rely on its social organizations, such as its churches, for economic aid and to fight for more opportunities.² These organizations and networks would prove instrumental in supporting the community into the 20th century.

During the early 20th century, African-American sharecroppers left the rural South in the hope of finding better-paying industrial jobs in northern cities. Historians have termed this mass movement of African Americans, The Great Migration. By World War I, the increased need for workers to fill manufacturing jobs along with southern cotton crop failures, caused thousands of African Americans to migrate into northern cities.³ As white workers left their jobs to fight and the war momentarily halted European immigration, blacks were poised to fill the factory jobs. Life for southern blacks offered little social or economic mobility. Southern blacks lived under Jim Crow laws and the threat of lynching. Along with better employment opportunities, black families hoped that northern cities would bring them better social and educational opportunities. However, white Americans and recent immigrants did not willingly accept the increased job competition.⁴ While Jim Crow laws created de jure segregation in the South, black families discovered de facto segregation existed in the North. As a border city

¹ Rockman, Seth. *Scraping By*. Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2009, 50, 123, 130.

² Laura Crogan Kamoie, review of *Freedom's Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860*, by Christopher Phillips, *H-Net Reviews: H-SHEAR*, (August 1998), 1-4.

³ Herman, Max Arthur. *Fighting in the Streets: Ethnic Successions and Urban Unrest in Twentieth-Century America*. New York, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005, 3.

⁴ Herman, *Fighting in the Streets*, 3.

with southern sympathies, Baltimore had both de jure and de facto segregation. For example, de facto segregation gave white residents confidence that their neighborhoods would remain all-white although there were no laws that guaranteed certain housing would only be sold to other white residents.⁵ In fact, de jure segregation existed in city schools until the 1950's.⁶

As they had during the Great Migration, southern African Americans migrated in waves during the mid-20th century. Like their predecessors, these new arrivals hoped to find better economic and social opportunities in northern cities. Baltimore's factories had an abundance of unskilled but high-paying jobs during the Second World War. However, after the War's end, while factories no longer offered many of these high-paying skilled and jobs, the influx of African American migrants continued, causing Baltimore factory workers to compete for fewer jobs. As in the early 20th century, first and second generation European immigrants resented the job competition.

In the mid-20th century Baltimore again had a well-organized African-American population who sought to improve the condition of its people. Baltimore's African Americans joined national organizations such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The NAACP pressured law makers to enact legislation guaranteeing equal economic, social and political opportunities for African Americans, such as the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" movement. The Baltimore chapter, the NAACP's second largest branch, had successfully pressured city leaders to pass numerous anti-segregation laws, including equal employment laws. These laws helped African Americans find steady work in the port, domestic and manufacturing jobs they had enjoyed during the 19th century.

By the mid-20th century, ethnic neighborhoods were well established. White residents segregated themselves into German, Irish, Italian and traditional white sections. Black residents too resided in traditional black neighborhoods like, "Old West Baltimore" (north of Baltimore Street up to Eutaw Place) and East Baltimore (north of Orleans up to Harford Road). With such a system in place, Irish Catholics could feel confident that they would not live next to Irish Protestants, Jews, African Americans, or other non-Irish Catholics despite their close proximity. Even new white neighborhoods, such as Guilford and Roland Park, relied on residential covenants to keep their neighborhoods all-white.

After World War II, returning soldiers took advantage of the G.I. Bill by buying new homes in the suburbs. With the post-war population boom, additional housing was needed to accommodate this increasing population. As many whites moved out of their traditional ethnic neighborhoods, black families started to move into these neighborhoods. Like white families, they too were experiencing a housing shortage. Also these black families wanted better social services and housing available in these neighborhoods and felt empowered to move thanks in part to the "Double V" campaign.⁷ The Double V sought a dual American victory, one against the Axis Power and the other against American racism.

As white families moved to suburbs, southern black families continued to migrate into northern cities. Unfortunately the only available and affordable housing for newly arriving blacks were in already blighted areas. Like the city's white residents, they too became frustrated by job competition and the housing situation. As whites left for the outlying suburbs,

⁵ Orser, Edward. *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994, 4-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷ Risen, Clay. *A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of King Assassination*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2009, 169-171.

black residents who remained in the city found themselves with fewer social services and economic opportunities despite their efforts to level the playing field and the promises their service in WWII offered. As the city's traditional white neighborhoods continued to lose their economic stability, city factories offered fewer unskilled jobs. In addition, businesses and realtors practiced redlining with the city's remaining population. These businesses literally took maps and outlined areas where they would not invest their services or money. Redlining increased the cost or limited social services to black families; it also restricted neighborhoods where black families could buy or rent homes. Often banks would not give black families mortgages in "redlined" neighborhoods. Finally, city life had become more dangerous: "between 1965 and 1970, burglaries tripled and robberies quintupled. Between 1961 and 1968, the murder rate rose 106 percent, more than double the national average."⁸ Living in deteriorating conditions, many blacks insisted that they be let into all-white neighborhoods, like Edmondson Village, which had better schools and housing. In contrast, many whites who moved to these suburban areas hoped that the neighborhoods would remain all-white.⁹

Blockbusting and Social Reactions in the mid-1960s

Real Estate agents played upon black peoples' hopes of moving into a predominately white neighborhood and white families' fears of their succeeding. One tactic was "blockbusting," in which real estate operatives attempted to settle an African American household in an all-white neighborhood in order to provoke white flight. The operatives hoped to buy low from white families while selling high to black families wanting to move into the neighborhood.¹⁰ These realtors would convince a few white families to sell their homes quickly at an increased price and then persuade other families to sell their homes at below-market value after convincing this second group that their neighborhood was becoming all-black. In turn, the realtors would sell the same homes to black families at or above market value. Realtors convinced these black families that they were moving into a mostly white stable neighborhood. This process occurred nationwide as many neighborhoods that had been "all-white" in 1950 became "all-black" by 1970. Baltimore's Edmondson Village became just one of the many neighborhoods to experience this change. Despite the passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Bill, which prohibited blockbusting and redlining, the practice continued due to poor enforcement.¹¹

Politicians and social reformers also played upon white people's hopes and fears: In 1966, George Mahoney ran for governor of Maryland on an anti-civil rights platform and almost won with 71% of the white vote. His "Your Home is your Castle" slogan addressed the concerns of white property owners. By the mid-1960s, white city leaders had listened to the civil rights backlash and had refused to pass legislation that would completely ban segregation. In response, social reform groups like SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and the NAACP encouraged their followers to demand change, especially after they were unable to get their desired legislation passed. Feeling empowered, some blacks followers took to the streets demanding change.¹² Some organizations, like the Black Panthers, even

⁸ Ibid., 177.

⁹ Ibid., 171-172.

¹⁰ Orser, *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story*, 4.

¹¹ Orser, *Blockbusting in Baltimore*, 9.

¹² Risen, *A Nation on Fire*, 170.

demanded aggressive methods.¹³ Many social reform organizations traveled from city to city holding rallies in an effort to raise awareness and increase public support. Popular stops included cities like Baltimore between Washington, D.C and Harlem.¹⁴ Such rallies added to racial tensions. With tensions high, all that was needed was a match to light the powder keg.

King Assassination and Aftermath in Baltimore

On April 4, 1968 drifter James Earl Ray assassinated civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee. Three hours after the shooting President Johnson addressed the nation via television. He urged Americans, both black and white, to join together in mourning King's death and continue King's fight for equality.¹⁵ Unfortunately many black and white Americans did not react in a peaceful manner nor did they join together in a fight for racial equality.

In the 1960s, rioting occurred in 128 cities, with the majority of riots occurring the week after King's death. Throughout the nation, black rioters targeted white businesses in majority-black neighborhoods. Historically city rioters targeted members of certain racial or ethnic groups but participants of the 1968 riots mainly targeted property. Still law enforcement officers targeted looters, in hopes of protecting property.¹⁶

In urban black communities such as Washington D.C., New York and Baltimore, frustrations had reached their boiling point. By Saturday afternoon on April 6th, widespread looting started on Gay Street. Within two hours of its start Baltimore's looting was in full force. In response, Mayor Thomas "Tommy" D'Alesandro III called all off-duty police officers and the National Guard to stop the riots.¹⁷ On this first night, Baltimore suffered 250 fires, 273 citizens arrests and 3 deaths.¹⁸

Unfortunately, the rioting continued throughout the next week spreading over a thousand square blocks. At Gassinger's Furniture, located in Baltimore's Old Town neighborhood, looters managed to steal the entire inventory within one night. In response to the lawlessness, some fearful white residents resorted to arming themselves and to patrolling their rooftops. Americans throughout the nation watched these events unfold on the nightly news. Such attacks reconfirmed whites' fears that the black community was a problem which now threatened national security. These riots also reassured whites that their exodus to the suburbs was the safe choice.¹⁹ Black residents had their own collective thinking. Many black looters ignored police attempts to stop them; much of their defiance towards police stemmed from increased police brutality and harassment towards them.²⁰

As in other burned-out cities, Baltimore suffered from the federal government's unwillingness to provide large-scale aid to rebuild businesses and homes. Instead, the federal government gave \$400 million to the states for police equipment and riot training. While

¹³ Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Race, Space, and Riots: in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 22.

¹⁴ Mumford, Kevin. *Newark: A History of Race, Rights and Riots in America*. New York, New York: New York University Press, 2007, 110-111.

¹⁵ Risen, *A Nation on Fire*, 38, 42.

¹⁶ Herman, *Fighting in the Streets*, 75.

¹⁷ Risen. *A Nation on Fire*, 178.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 186-189.

²⁰ Herman, *Fighting in the Streets*, 79-80.

properties were left in ruins, Baltimore and other cities could claim that they were now more prepared for future rioting. Even though the city was more prepared, Baltimore experienced no more mass riots.²¹ Suffering continued in the inner-cities and by the 1970s residents faced “shrinking federal funds, increasingly oppressive police action, rising crime, welfare dependency, and the crack epidemic.”²² Many inner-city residents are still plagued with these problems and still live among burned-out buildings.

Vocabulary:

- **blockbusting**- A business practice used by realtors and land developers that encouraged white homeowners to sell their homes at below-market prices by preying on their fears that African Americans would move into their racially segregated community; these same homes would then be offered to African Americans at or above market value to turn a profit
- **redlining** – A business practice where companies would unfairly deny or greatly increase the cost of services to certain groups usually based upon race.
- **Fair Housing Act 1968** – A federal civil rights law passed to ban discrimination – including blockbusting and redlining – in the sale and rental of homes. Landlords or realtors could only deny sale or rental due to legitimate business reasons. Despite the act’s intent, it has suffered through periods of poor enforcement, and even weakening due to Congressional action.
- **de Jure Segregation** – The spatial and social separation of populations that occurs as a consequence of legal measures.
- **de Facto Segregation** – The spatial and social separation of populations that occurs without legal sanction.
- **demographics** – Statistical data related to the population of a neighborhood, city, region, etc.

Materials: Primary Sources; Digital Story *Blockbustin*’ accessed at <http://aspl.umbc.edu/newmedia/sites/chetah/player.cfm?media=4>.

Technology utilized (if appropriate): DVD Player; Chalk/whiteboard; Overhead/Digital Projector

Introduction:

1. Initiate the lesson by posing the following question:

- What would cause 40,000 people in a 40-block radius to change residences in 10 years?

²¹ Risen, *A Nation on Fire*, 235-236.

²² *Ibid.*, 237.

Focus student responses by asking them about the positives of living in a community and the impact of changes to a community. Display the maps found on **Resource Sheet #1**, and ask:

- What demographic changes are shown in the maps?
- In what ways might these changes impact life in West Baltimore?

General Procedures:

Introduce students to the term **blockbusting** and inform them that they will be evaluating the causes and consequences of this process. Refer to the content background for information on blockbusting and Baltimore during the time period.

2. Clarify students' understanding of the process of blockbusting by displaying **Resource Sheets# 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5** and working through the steps that comprised the practice of blockbusting. Make sure that students understand that while the process involved movements of large numbers of people, the individual choice to move was often very personal and also began to build momentum, as a few families moving provided the example and further motivation for others to follow them.

3. Investigate the consequences of blockbusting by distributing copies of **Resource Sheet #6** to all students. Read the directions as they include some necessary background information. Student will work individually or in pairs to defend the statement they agree with the most. They will use the documents found on **Resource Sheets# 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5** to support or refute their statements.

4. Discuss students' hypotheses regarding the short and long term impacts of blockbusting.

5. Show the digital story, "Blockbustin'," in its entirety (10 minutes). Focus student analysis by asking:

- According to Dr. Orser, what were the benefits of blockbusting and who benefitted from the practice? What were the drawbacks and for whom?
- How does the video seek to explain blockbusting?
- How does the Edmondson Village Shopping Center change during blockbusting?
- Before you saw the video, what did you know about Edmondson Village, if anything? Does this video affirm what you know? Were you surprised to know that Edmondson Village was a very different community prior to blockbusting?
- How does the video compare to your individual assessment of the long and short term impacts of blockbusting?

Assessment:

6. Assess student understanding of the causes and consequences of blockbusting by distributing copies of **Resource Sheet #7** and having students complete the activity.

Primary Source Annotations

- **Resource Sheet # 1** - "Census Tracts and Edmondson Village Maps." The census is rich with information about employment, ethnicity, income, and home values in

specific locations. The rapid and dramatic change shown in the Edmondson Village census tracts helps to explain blockbusting within the context of changing demographics. Courtesy of W. Edward Orser from his book, *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story* (1994).

- **Resource Sheet # 2** - “Protest in Front of Morris Goldseker's Office.” *The Baltimore Sun*, August 9, 1969. Reprinted with the permission of the Baltimore Sun Media Group, All Rights Reserved. Controversial real estate developer Morris Goldseker was considered by many to be an instigator of blockbusting in Edmondson Village area during the 1950s. While many attempts were made to prosecute Goldseker after the passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, he eluded trial. This image of a fair-housing practices protest took place in front of his downtown Baltimore office in 1969.
- **Resource Sheets #3 and #4** - “Oral History Interviews.” Oral history interviews provide a human context for data on controversial subjects like blockbusting. Though anecdotal, oral histories can be used to affirm or reject trends. These interviews are from Ed Orser's book *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story* (1994). All names, except for Parren Mitchell, are pseudonyms.
- **Resource Sheet # 5** - “Baltimore Sun Real Estate Advertisements.” *The Baltimore Sun*. Real Estate Listings. May 3, 1945. Reprinted with permission of the Baltimore Sun Media Group, All Rights Reserved. These advertisements from the real estate section in *The Baltimore Sun* show the racial delineation of housing stock and neighborhoods in the city.
- **Media Resource** - The digital story, “Blockbustin’,” was written, directed, and produced by Joshua Kukowski, Jennifer Decker, and Nicholas Ricks, all teachers in Baltimore County Public Schools, with the assistance of Dr. Elizabeth Nix, of the University of Baltimore. Other resources were provided by Dr. W. Edward Orser, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC); “Baltimore ’68: Riots and Rebirth” <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/index.htm> (University of Baltimore); “Rosemont Community,” Baltimore Heritage Collection, Langsdale Library Special Collections, University of Baltimore; and State Library Resource Center, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore. The image, “Hess Monkey Town” (2004), is courtesy of Charlene Clark, www.charleneclarkstudio.com. Production assistance was provided by Paul Iwancio and Bill Shewbridge, UMBC New Media Studio.

Useful Websites

University of Baltimore, “Baltimore ’68: Riots & Rebirth” Project <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/>

Maryland State Archives, “Archives of Maryland Online”
<http://www.aomol.net/html/index.html>

Maryland State Archives, “Teaching American History in Maryland Documents for the Classroom” www.teachingamericanhistorymd.net