

Post-War Suburbanization: Homogenization or the American Dream?

<Introduction & History Standards>

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Grade Level: High

Duration of lesson: 1 period

Overview:

The years after World War Two saw a massive movement of people into new suburbs. The growth of suburbs resulted from several historical forces, including the social legacy of the Depression, mass demobilization after the War (and the consequent “baby boom”), greater government involvement in housing and development, the mass marketing of the automobile, and a dramatic change in demographics. As families began moving from farms and cities into new suburbs, American culture underwent a major transformation. Race and class dynamics began to shift; the longer distance between home and work generated a highway and housing construction boom; and older community institutions began to disappear as the family turned inward.

In this lesson, students will critically evaluate primary and secondary sources of the period, in order to discern the causes for suburban development after the Second World War. They will determine whether this cultural trend created more opportunity for living the “American Dream,” or whether suburbanization led to the homogenization of American culture and political life. In exploring the extent to which certain historical trends were inevitable, students will learn that historical interpretations are tentative and often competitive.

Related [National History Standards](#):

Content Standards:

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

Standard 1: The economic boom and social transformation of postwar United States

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 1: Chronological Thinking

F. Reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

C. Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations.

D. Consider multiple perspectives.

E. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas, and the role of chance.

F. Challenge arguments of historical inevitability.

G. Compare competing historical narratives.

- H. Hold interpretations of history as tentative.
- I. Evaluate major debates among historians.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will identify factors that promoted rapid post-war suburbanization.
- Students will contrast various interpretations of the impact of post-war suburbanization.
- Students will assess the degree to which post-war suburbanization impacted American life.

Topic Background

Population movement has been a defining characteristic of the human experience since the emergence of modern humanity. The American experience is replete with examples of people moving from one location to another to alter their economic, political, or social circumstances. The Great Migration of African Americans from the south to northern and western urban centers, the movement of Dust Bowl victims to California, and the movement off of farms into cities during the early 20th century all serve as examples of populations moving in the United States. This phenomenon manifested itself again at the conclusion of the Second World War, when an increased number of Americans moved from the cities and rural areas to the suburbs, exacerbating a process that had its antecedents in the pre-war world but found its greatest expression in the post-war climate of demobilization and economic growth that followed V-E and V-J Days. In fact “eighteen of the nation’s top twenty-five cities suffered a net loss of population between 1950 and 1970,” with suburban population “doubling from 37 to 74 million people” during the same time period (Jackson 283). These new population centers came to redefine American life and presented new challenges for America’s commitment to equality and opportunity. Causality for the massive movement of people into the suburbs at the conclusion of World War Two cannot be attributed to one singular factor. It was instead the confluence of the legacy of the Depression and the Second World War, a housing shortage exacerbated by post-war demobilization, involvement of the federal government, the growth of technology, and a dramatic change in demographics that led to the dramatic population shift that still impacts America today.

The Great Depression and the Second World War altered the economic perspective of many Americans. The realities of the prolonged economic downturn that defined American life from 1929 until 1941 forced many Americans out of work and into sacrificing numerous consumer goods to which they had grown accustomed to in the 1920s. The advent of global war enabled most Americans to find work, either in the military or the private sector catering to military needs. In addition, wages and savings increased during the war, but consumer spending did not. The rationing of cars, appliances, food, clothing, and other goods restricted the ability of most Americans to spend the hard earned wages they received during the war. Late 1945, after V-E Day and V-J Day, Americans were freed from both economic depression and the majority of

the war time spending constraints. Although some shortages and rationing continued into 1946, Americans found an outlet for their pent-up consumerism and looked to take advantage of this new found economic freedom by spending on many consumer items, most notably automobiles, homes, and the remarkable number of new babies being brought into the world.

One of the first necessities sought after by Americans was housing. By late 1945 and early 1946 the housing crisis was acute. Veterans and other Americans demobilized from wartime production desired housing but were met with a lack of supply. Demand for housing was so serious that the city of Chicago, in 1945, sold 250 old streetcars as possible homes. In addition, Omaha saw a newspaper advertisement that offered a 7X17 icebox that "could be fixed up to live in" (*Who Built America*, 592). To stimulate the growth of the housing market and reduce the financial constraints such as ten year mortgages, and the need for eighty percent down payments, the federal government instructed the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) to allow thirty year mortgages and approve mortgages with only ten percent down (Patterson, 72). With greater access to loans, the possibility of affording housing increased for millions of Americans. Complimenting this effort was the federal government's response to the demands of Veterans by passing a groundbreaking piece of legislation.

Led by the American Legion, and memories of issues facing demobilized World War One veterans, the United States Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. Dubbed the G.I. Bill, this path-breaking federal legislation opened numerous opportunities for veterans to smoothly transition from wartime service to peacetime civilian life. Central to the legislation were provisions to address education, housing, and employment. The bill subsidized tuition, fees, books, and educational materials for veterans desiring to attend college. In addition, it assisted in the living expenses incurred during the pursuit of a degree. The connection to the growth of the suburbs is found in the provision providing low interest loans to veterans for the purchase of single family homes (Bennett, 249-259). With access to cheap money veterans and their growing families sought relief from the housing shortages by moving into the growing suburbs accessible only by the ownership of an automobile and connected to their workplaces by the growing network of roads.

To access suburban housing Americans needed transportation. This practical need was quickly satisfied because of the American love affair with automobiles and the efforts of varying groups to accelerate the construction of a system of highways. Although automobiles were a factor before the war, it was after World War Two that they became the new "necessity" for Americans. Freed up from rationing that severely limited the supply of automobiles Americans used some of their surplus money to purchase a family car. The growth of automobiles in turn provided another impetus to move out of the city. With access to a personal form of transportation families could live a distance from work and still be able to travel to and from work without much problem. Many of the impacts automobiles had on suburbanization can be traced to lobbying efforts of auto makers, construction companies, and cement contractors (Jackson, 234-235) In 1956 road construction exploded, and access to the suburbs expanded greatly, due to the passage of the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act. This act, which extended the highway construction inaugurated in the 1944 Federal Aid-Highway Act, provided massive federal funding, over 90% of the projected costs, for the

construction of 41,000 miles of interstate highways (www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=88, and Jackson, 235). This act facilitated a continual movement of people to the suburbs and enabled many Americans to raise their growing families in localities farther and farther from American cities.

Between 1946 and 1964 the United States witnessed the “baby boom.” Each year the number of babies born in the United States averaged 4.6 million. One of many notable impacts that this generation had on the United States was the need for new homes to be constructed for them to live in. In addition, the dramatic increase in population spurred a boom in the consumption of consumer goods. Toys, diapers, educational supplies, and other necessities of raising children positively impacted consumer spending and aided in the quick rebound of the American post-war economy. Essential for many new families was housing which was more frequently to be found not in cities, but in the suburbs emerging farther and farther from the center of major metropolitan centers.

With the release of pent up consumer spending, the explosion of population, opportunities provided by the G.I. Bill and the changes stemming from the automobile the opportunity was ripe for the suburbs. Emblematic of those that took advantage of this new market were the Levitt brothers, William and Alfred. Although building houses prior to the war, it was the occasion to receive a contract to construct military homes in Norfolk, Virginia, which allowed the Levitts to realize the benefits of mass-producing homes. When the war ended the Levitts purchased land once used to grow potatoes and constructed in Hempstead Long Island the first of three Levittowns. The Long Island, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey developments were to provide residents with affordable housing and all of the amenities that they had come to expect from living in the city. The construction process was vertically integrated to reduce costs. The Levitts owned the forest where the lumber was forested, the mill in Oregon where the lumber was manufactured, made their own nails, and cement, and prefabricated the structures used to construct homes (Patterson, 72). In addition, they controlled prices for appliances by purchasing directly from the manufacturers. Well paid, but non-union labor also aided in the construction of the homes. Production was broken down into twenty-seven discrete steps, which at one point enabled the Levitts to construct a house in a matter of minutes. Once the houses were constructed the Levitts added baseball fields, swimming pools, shopping centers, schools, parks, and churches to their neighborhoods. The Levitts remained the largest home builders in the United States throughout much of the 1950s, and initiated a trend towards rapid suburbanization that continues today (Jackson; Patterson, Oakley).

The Levittowns of Hempstead, Bucks County, and Willingboro symbolized a process taking place across the nation. In addition to the Levittowns a series of neighborhoods with bucolic names like Elmwood Park, Rolling Meadows, Highland Hills, Woodlawn, Hidden Hills, Rolling Hills, Parkville, and Oak Park emerged on the outskirts of most major American cities. These suburban neighborhoods provided the safe, clean, and racially segregated environments that many Americans sought. Concomitantly, the new suburbs initiated the erosion of traditional hallmarks of urban life. “Churches, women’s clubs, fraternal organizations, taverns,” and political clubs all suffered as distances separated people from each other and work and home were located in two

distinct areas (Patterson, 338-241). In addition to eroding traditional city functions, the move to the suburbs exacerbated the segregation of the races.

World War Two provided an impetus for the push for civil rights for African Americans. The successful push for considerations when hiring at wartime factories, the creation of the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, and the attention drawn to racism in the United States by the “Double-V” campaign all pushed forward the movement for equality regardless of race. Nonetheless, as the number of African Americans found in northern cities increased due to the continued Great Migration of southern blacks north during the Second World War, many whites fled to the suburbs to avoid integrated schools and neighborhoods (Franklin, 419-420). Restrictive racial covenants, which prevented owners from selling their property to members of various racial groups, were declared unconstitutional in the 1940s, thus putting a stop to de jure segregation in most major cities. De facto segregation, enforced by practice rather than through the enforcement of laws, was often achieved in cities through both violent and nonviolent methods. In many instances when African Americans moved into predominately white neighborhoods they were met with hostility and violence. Death threats, destruction of property, and physical attacks were employed at various times and in various cities in an attempt to stop the integration of neighborhoods (Franklin, 420). As whites moved to the suburbs and African Americans were increasingly confined to the decaying economic infrastructure found in northern inner cities, they found themselves unable to move to the suburbs, not because of legal restrictions, but of the lack of access to high paying jobs, transportation that would allow them to live outside the city and commute in to work, and the fact that many suburban neighborhoods, including the Levittown in Long Island, simply refused to sell homes to African Americans. The suburbs became another arena where de facto discrimination made it difficult for African Americans to secure their own piece of the American dream—home ownership.

The suburbs though were not without their critics. In fact many authors, sociologists, and economist overtly questioned the benefits of suburban growth. Social critic John Keats encapsulated this analysis with the publication of *The Crack in The Picture Window* in 1956. More contemporary social commentary than historical investigation, Keats nonetheless made a firm argument about the suburbanization of the United States. Satirical in nature, Keats argued that suburban life destroys the distinctiveness of both personal relationships, and community. Keats traces the origins of suburban growth back to the G.I. Bill and the economic incentives this provided for both consumer and developer. Keats then argues that this change homogenizes architecture, individuals, thought, and action. Sociologists David Reisman and Nathan Glazer authored *The Lonely Crowd*, and focused their criticism on the erosive capacity of suburbanization. “The Lonely Crowd,” according to the authors referred to Americans whose behavior was driven by competition for material goods rather than the “inner-directed” motivations of family, religion, and morality.

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith, in *The Affluent Society*, argued that suburbanization, and the acquisition of material goods that it represented, undermined traditional American values (Patterson 338-341). Despite these criticisms the expansion of suburban America was criticized for exactly what it did: it altered American political, social, and economic life in a substantial manner so that life after this change was

substantially different than life after. Historian James Patterson points out in his overview of post-war America, *Grand Expectations*, that:

Those who lambasted suburbia...tended to ignore several basic facts: the boom in building energized important sectors of the economy, providing a good deal of employment; it lessened the housing shortage that had diminished the lives of millions during the Depression and war; and it enabled people to enjoy conveniences, such as modern bathrooms and kitchens, that they had not before (340).

In the end the movement towards the suburbs is an historical phenomenon in the United States that is still occurring. Questions of oil dependency, de facto racial segregation, urban renewal, and the commercialization and homogenization of American culture, all stem in some part to the massive construction of, and movement to, the suburbs.

Annotated Bibliography:

Jackson, Kenneth. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Jackson's focus is more on the evolution of suburbanization than post-war suburbanization, focusing on this trend beginning in 1815. Where he does address the post-World War two phenomenon, his analysis places central responsibility for this change on the low interest loans made available by the federal government, the demand generated by the baby boom and their parents, and the technological changes that facilitated the growth of suburbia. Jackson addresses some of the early communities, such as Levittown, as well as the multiplier effect that suburban growth had in creating motels, rest stops, interstate highways, service stations, malls, and shopping centers. Jackson also provides an overview of the movement to the suburbs and its impact on city life, diversity of population, and the alterations in American work patterns.

Keats, John C. *The Crack in the Picture Window*. New York, Houghton Mifflin, Company, 1956.

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Oakley, Ronald. *God's Country: America in the Fifties*. New York: Dembner Books, 1986.

In his chapter titled, "Home, Sweet Home," Oakley addresses the causes and impacts of post-war suburbanization. Not cutting any new territory, Oakley provides a quick overview of the impact that population growth had on suburbanization, the experiments in the Levittowns, and both the positive and negative results of this shift in population. The chapter serves as a nice stepping off point for research but does not provide any context for suburbanization prior to the 1950s nor its long term impacts.

Patterson, James. *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1996.

A massive overview of American History from the end of the Second World War until the Watergate and Vietnam issues, Patterson presents a readable synthesis of the scholarship of this time period. His treatment of suburbanization, its causes and impacts is spread throughout the book, rather than receiving focused treatment in one chapter. As a result Patterson is able to discuss the connections between the growth of the suburbs and civil rights, consumerism, social protest, economic change, and technological advancement.

Vocabulary

Suburbanization: The process of lower-density residential, commercial, and industrial development beyond the central city.

Homogenization: The act of making something uniform in its composition.

"White Flight": The demographic trend of upper and middle class American Whites moving away from (predominantly non-white) inner cities, finding new homes in nearby suburbs.

Teaching Procedures

Materials Needed:

- Malvina Reynolds CD with copy of the song "Little Boxes"
 - Computer with Internet Access and projector
1. As a motivational activity Initiate student investigation by playing the song "Little Boxes" by Malvina Reynolds. Focus students' attention on the song by displaying Resource Sheet #1, "Little Boxes" and asking students to read along as they listen. Distribute Resource Sheet #2, "Post-War Suburbanization: Homogenization or the American Dream," and have students record information about Reynold's view of suburbanization in the left-hand column. Extend student's understanding of the song by asking:

What is the subject of the Malvina Reynolds song?

What lines in the song indicate that this is the subject of the song?

What is the author's attitude about post-war suburbanization?

What lines in the song indicate this attitude?

Why would the songwriter stress the sameness of the houses and the people that live there?

What does the term homogenization mean?

Is the song intended for public or private consumption?

As an historical source, is there any reason to question the reliability of Malvina Reynold's view of suburbanization?

2. Extend student understanding of the factors that promoted post-war suburbanization by reviewing the factors on the top of Resource Sheet #3, "Post-War Suburbanization: Causes and Interpretations" that should be assigned as homework the night before the lesson. Consult the Content Narrative for details and discuss the impact of the G.I Bill, Interstate Highway and Defense Act, the Baby Boom, FHA Loans, and "White Flight." Display Resource Sheet #4, "Left High and Dry," Resource Sheet #5, "Straight to Suburbia," Resource Sheet #6, "The Federal Highway System," and Resource Sheet #7, "Levittown Arial View," to focus students on the causes of suburbanization and to introduce the Levittown phenomenon.
3. Contrast the view that post-war suburbanization resulted in the homogenization of American culture by projecting the 1953 documentary film found at <http://www.fandm.edu/levittown/two/k.html>. Focus students' analysis by asking them to list the view the film presents about post-war suburbanization on Resource Sheet #2. De-process student analysis of the documentary footage by asking:

What benefits of suburbanization does the film stress?

Why would the producers of the film stress these elements?

How does this interpretation of post-war suburbs compare and contrast with Malvina Reynolds' view?

Was this source created for public or private consumption?

As an historical source, is there any reason to question the reliability of Malvina Reynolds' view of suburbanization?

4. Facilitate student comprehension of the various views of post-war suburbanization by reviewing part two of their homework found on project a copy of Resource Sheet #3 and solicit student volunteers to identify if the quotes are positive or negative about the impact of post-war suburbs. Discuss each decision and identify specific elements in each quote that support the positive or negative view of the suburbs. Extend student analysis of the quotes by asking:

What evidence is presented to demonstrate that post-war suburbanization was necessary and beneficial?

Is creating uniformity a negative or positive?

In what ways could the suburbs be considered an inevitable process?

What challenges does rapid suburbanization present?

5. Conduct a full class discussion on the various interpretations of post-war suburbanization. Contrast the short-term benefits with the long-term changes and challenges generated by the movement of population to the suburbs.
6. Close the lesson with students indicating their feelings regarding the impacts of post-war suburbanization by raising thumbs up for positive, thumbs down for negative and thumbs sideways for in the middle. Call on random students to justify their decision with facts and examples. Have students complete the third portion of Resource Sheet #2.
7. Assess student understanding of the causes, impacts, and interpretations of post-war suburbanization by distributing Resource Sheet 8, "A Sales Pitch" and have students complete the sales pitch for the sale of a post-war suburban neighborhood. Be sure to focus students on the criteria for the assignment.
8. Possible extension activities include the following:
 - Have students examine the resources found at the State Museum of Pennsylvania's Levittown, PA: Building the Suburban Dream web page at <http://www.fandm.edu/levittown/default.html>. Ask students to write a short paper that explains the reasons for building the town, and life in the town.
 - Have students read "The Suburbs: The New American Dream" by Harry Henderson and "The Suburbs: The New American Nightmare" by John C.

Keats, found in *Viewpoints in American History: Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, pages, 273-282. Have students complete a Venn Diagram that compares the views of the two authors.

- Have students research the development of the neighborhoods they live in. Determine the date the homes were built, where residents lived prior to moving to the area, and where they work.

Primary Source Annotation:

Reynolds, Malvana. 1962. Little Boxes. On *Ear to the Ground*. Smithsonian Folkways. (2000).

The Malvina Reynolds' song, "Little Boxes," was recorded in 1962 when she encountered a suburb outside of San Francisco, California. Malvina Reynolds was a committed social activist and writer of protest songs. "Little Boxes" was a political statement about the lifelessness and homogeneity Reynolds believed was spawned by the development of suburbs. The song used in this lesson is taken from the CD,

The 1953 documentary film, "A City is Born," is taken from the State Museum of Pennsylvania's Levittown, PA: Building the Suburban Dream web page found at <http://www.fandm.edu/levittown/default.html>. The site compiles a series of resources and text that describe the construction and living conditions in one of the more famous post war suburbs, Levittown, Pennsylvania. The film is one from the "March of Time" documentary series that began as a radio broadcast and jumped mediums in the late 1940s. The March of Time, which ran on the Columbia Broadcasting Network (CBS), covered a variety of social, political, and economic issues that impacted the United States in the 1950s.

The series of quotes utilized in the lesson come from a variety of secondary and a few primary sources. Journalist David Halberstam contributes several quotes from his popular history of the 1950s entitled creatively, *The Fifties*. In addition, contemporary interpretations of suburbanization and Levittown are provided in excerpts from articles in *Esquire*, *Time*, and *Fortune* magazines. Many of these quotes have been liberally extracted from <http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njh/MassConsumerism/Suburb/Levittown%20pro%20con.htm>, a web page maintained by Rutgers University.