

Suburban Erasure: How the Suburbs Ended the Civil Rights Movement in New Jersey**Walter David Greason****Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013****236 pages****\$41.99 (paper)****ISBN: 978-1611477290****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i2.93>**

By 1920, more than half of the population of the United States lived in or directly around urban areas. Many of these city dwellers were Black migrants who came north seeking employment and escape from Jim Crow laws. In the early 1930s, when construction dramatically decreased and half of all home mortgages were in default, the government intervened to ameliorate the housing crisis. Between the creation of the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), which protected homeowners from foreclosure by refinancing loans, and the rampant practice of redlining, which downgraded areas of the city based on socioeconomic and racial assumptions, white flight of the middle-class was inevitable. The narrative of subsequent slum clearance and under-funded public housing projects has perpetuated a polarized version of history as it is often taught: the Black story is found in cities, and the White story is found in suburbs. In *Suburban Erasure*, Walter David Greason presents a vastly different narrative.

Most people assume, myself included, that NAACP fights against segregation in schools and housing originated in large cities. The real history of the reconstruction of democracy (which is still ongoing), as presented by Greason, took shape in rural Black communities. *Suburban Erasure* examines the African-American experience in the 'rural corridor' of New Jersey in the twentieth century, and shows how the institutions of family, church, and school worked to provide the courage and impetus to overcome local racial barriers, which then fueled larger movements for legal change at the regional and state level.

It is a beautiful sentiment by the author that the pursuit of racial equality and an end to de facto segregation began with the family unit. After all, freedom from White oppression was a dream passed down from one generation of African Americans to the next— from parents to children. Those who originally migrated from the South found only slightly better race relations in the North, and as Greason aptly points out, they had no delusions that they would see significant change in their lifetime. In New Jersey, African Americans that found jobs outside the urban centers found them in agricultural production or resort-based services, the latter of which meant *total* dependency on white employers and clientele. However, they found solace in community life. According to Greason, “churches taught purpose, schools taught methods,” but ideologies were also disseminated by local newspapers, educational programs, and YMCAs which served as social centers for Black activism. In many towns, schools remained segregated by choice. This was a surprise to me, but it became clear that segregation in schools, church, and even spaces for recreation, was outright necessary to build a strong foundation for a movement of racial integration built slowly from the bottom-up.

While state laws against discrimination in 1945 and 1947 were major victories for the Civil Rights movement, it was far from the end of racial discrimination. This book identifies a shift that followed towards underhanded strategies using legal loopholes in the housing market, business lending, and policing that maintained the tradition of white privilege. This led to what the author calls ‘uneven development’ throughout the suburbs of New Jersey (places like Asbury Park, Long Branch, and Red Bank). The real tragedy, as he points out, occurred after 1970 as crime, poverty, and unemployment resulted in even more oppressive isolation of these suburbs, the effects of which are still felt today.

Suburban Erasure is an impressive work of cultural history. Greason compliments his obviously extensive knowledge about American history and the Civil Rights movement with statistics from local sources and oral histories. The book's greatest strength is that the author illustrates the daily struggles and small victories of individuals with detailed stories, and then references those stories throughout the book as evidence to support his larger point. While his methodology is admirable, I am longing for the visual evidence that would help me better understand what Black life was like in everyday rural New Jersey. Photographs of home life, church events, classrooms, and YMCA meetings would have enriched the experience of this book tremendously. Reading those images as primary sources could have also helped inform the backstage role of women.

Walter Greason's book will no doubt make a significant impact in the fields of American history and African-American studies. I am equally convinced of its importance for urban historians, such as myself, who may have been teaching an over-simplified version of the urban-suburban/black-white narrative to students. The truth is complicated, but the extraordinary commitment of Black rural communities in the flight towards racial equality is a story that begs to be told.

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