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NEWS FROM THE **NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN HOUSING**

A H O M E O F O U R O W N

The Long Road Home

African American Housing in America

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*“From quarters to community land trusts —
a people’s unfinished journey toward home.”*

A P I C T O R I A L A N D N A R R A T I V E H I S T O R Y

1619 · 1865 · 1910s · 1940s · 1968 · Today •

As the United States marks 250 years of declared freedom,
the promise of equal housing remains unfulfilled.

Celebrating 30 Years of Advocacy

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN HOUSING

NOAAH 2026



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National Organization of African Americans in Housing
Begins its 30th Year ·

P U B L I S H E R ' S N O T E

The Long Road Home

This publication was born from a simple, stubborn belief: that every family deserves a place to call home — not as charity, not as policy, but as a birthright. For more than four centuries, African American families have built that home anyway, under conditions no people should ever face. This pictorial is their record.

We begin in 1619, in the slave quarters — structures built by enslaved hands, on stolen land, designed to **diminish(to diminish what)**, yet transformed from within sanctuaries of spirit, story, and song. We pass through the sharecropper's shack, the tenement kitchenette, the red-lined block, the high-rise tower, and the foreclosed street. Each turn, the story is the same: a **people refused safety (what does this mean?)**, yet refusing to disappear.

In 2026, as the United States prepares to celebrate two hundred and fifty years of declared freedom, we must hold those words against the evidence of these pages. The promise was written. The deed was not delivered. The gap between the ideal and the lived reality remains as wide as the highway that was plowed through the heart of every Black Metropolis in the name of “renewal.”

“We do not tell this story to wound. We tell it because knowing the truth is the first act of building something better.”

Unknown

And yet — hope is not naive here. The community land trusts taking root across this country, the organizers and elders and young architects of new Black spaces tell us that the arc is still bending. As NOAAH begins its 30th year this winter, this book stands as both witness and testament. It is dedicated to everyone who holds a key.

Published by

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The Slave Quarters

1619–1865



The architecture of the slave quarters was a physical manifestation of the attempt to strip away human dignity. Most structures were built by the enslaved people themselves using whatever materials were discarded by the plantation owner, such as logs, mud for “chinking” cracks, and straw. These dwellings were intentionally kept rudimentary to reinforce the social hierarchy, often lacking windows or proper flooring, which left occupants vulnerable to the elements and disease. Inside these cramped spaces, however, a resilient culture was formed.

Despite the lack of privacy and the constant threat of surveillance from the “big house,” the quarters became a sanctuary for family life, storytelling, and spiritual practice. At night, after grueling days of forced labor, these rooms were transformed into spaces where heritage was preserved through oral traditions and where the first seeds of the Black church were sown in secret “hush harbors.”

The layout of these quarters was often dictated by the master’s need for control. On many plantations, cabins were arranged in straight rows along a “street” that was easily visible from the overseer’s house. This spatial arrangement meant that even the most private moments of an enslaved person’s life were subject to the gaze of their oppressors, making the simple act of maintaining a clean home or a small personal garden an act of quiet but profound resistance.

Freedmen's Bureau & Reconstruction

1865–1877



In the immediate wake of the Civil War, the housing situation for the “Freedmen” was defined by a desperate search for autonomy. Families who had been separated by sale traveled hundreds of miles to reunite, often building temporary settlements near Union Army camps or Freedmen’s Bureau outposts.

These early communities represented the first time in generations that Black families could choose who they lived with and how they organized their domestic lives. The Freedmen’s Bureau played a pivotal role in negotiating labor contracts that included housing, though these were often exploitative. More significantly, the Bureau helped establish the first Black schools and hospitals, which became the anchors for new Black townships.

For many, the ultimate goal was “forty acres and a mule”—the hope for landed independence that would provide a permanent escape from the housing insecurity of the past. However, this era of hope was short-lived. As federal troops withdrew and the Bureau was dismantled, the promise of land reform evaporated. White supremacist groups used the burning of homes and schools as a primary tool of terror to prevent Black land ownership.

This period marked the beginning of a long struggle where the safety of a Black home was constantly threatened by political and social violence intended to maintain the old racial order.

Sharecropper Shacks & Jim Crow



1877–1915

The sharecropping system replaced the physical chains of slavery with the economic chains of debt, and the housing reflected this stagnation. Most sharecroppers lived in “tenant houses” that were essentially the same dilapidated cabins used during the era of slavery. These shacks were usually located in the middle of cotton or tobacco fields, far from town centers, ensuring that the labor force remained isolated and dependent on the landowner for every necessity.

Life in these shacks was a constant battle against poverty. Because the tenants did not own the land or the house, there was little incentive for the owners to make repairs. Roofs leaked, and the lack of insulation made the homes stifling in the summer and freezing in the winter.

The “company store” further drained any potential savings, ensuring that families could never afford to move to better housing or purchase their own land. Despite these conditions, the sharecropper’s home remained a center of community strength.

In the rural South, these homes often hosted traveling preachers or organizers from early civil rights groups. The porches of these shacks became vital social spaces where neighbors would gather to share news and support one another, maintaining a communal bond that would eventually fuel the Great Migration as families pooled resources to send members North.

The Great Migration & Urban Arrivals



1910–1940

When African Americans arrived in Northern cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York, they found that while the “Colored” signs were gone, the walls of segregation were higher than ever. Migrants were funneled into specific, overcrowded sections of the city. Because they were barred from living elsewhere, landlords often subdivided single-family apartments into tiny “kitchenette” units, charging exorbitant rents for spaces that lacked proper heat, plumbing, or light.

The arrival in the city was a sensory shock. Families used to the wide-open spaces of the rural South were suddenly packed into multi-story brick tenements. The transition required a radical reimagining of “home.” Basements and attics were converted into living quarters, and the “lodger” system became common, where new arrivals would rent a bed for a few hours a day from a family that had arrived just months before.

Despite the physical decay of the buildings, the sheer density of the population created a powerful political and economic engine. The arrival of so many people in a concentrated area meant that for the first time, Black Americans could elect their own representatives and support their own businesses. The “urban arrival” was not just a change of address; it was the birth of the modern Black political block, housed within the very tenements designed to contain them.

Black Metropolis: Bronzeville & Beyond

1920s–1940s



The “Black Metropolis” was the response to being locked out of the wider city. In neighborhoods like Chicago’s Bronzeville or Harlem in New York, a self-sustaining ecosystem emerged. Grand boulevards were lined with Black-owned banks, insurance companies, and theaters.

The housing in these areas ranged from elegant Greystones owned by the elite to the modest apartments of the working class, all sharing the same few square miles. This era represented a peak of Black urban sophistication. Housing was more than just shelter; it was a stage for the Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Black Renaissance. Intellectuals, musicians, and artists lived side-by-side with laborers, creating a cross-pollination of ideas that redefined American culture.

The “Metropolis” proved that even within the constraints of segregation, Black communities could build a world of beauty and institutional power. However, the beauty of the Black Metropolis masked a growing crisis. Because the population continued to swell but the boundaries of the neighborhood were fixed by white violence and restrictive laws, the housing stock was being pushed to its breaking point. This pressure would eventually be used as a justification by city planners to declare these vibrant neighborhoods “slums,” setting the stage for the destructive “Urban Renewal” projects of the following decades.

Redlining & Restrictive Covenants



1934–1968

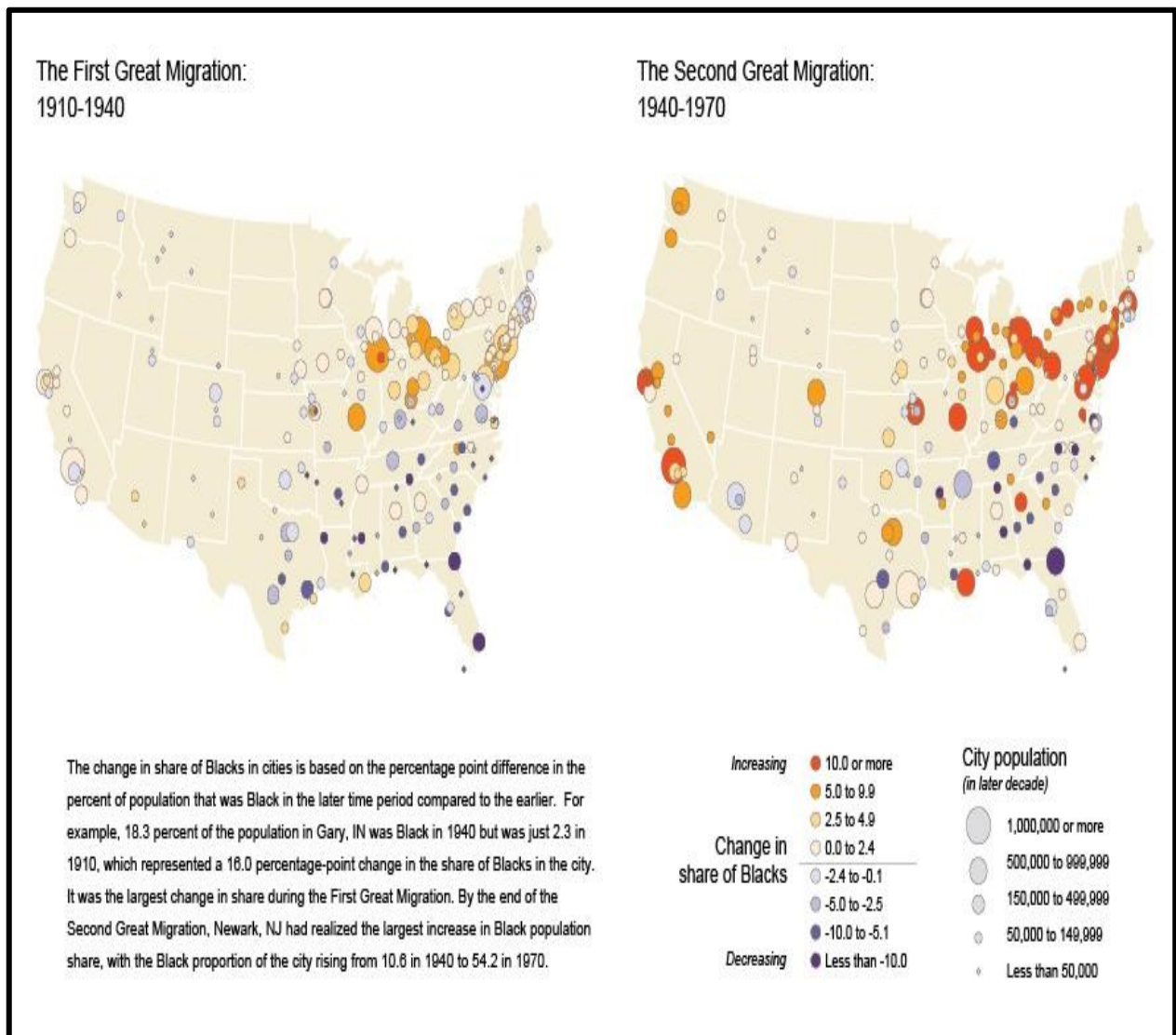
Redlining was a clinical, bureaucratic form of racism that changed the map of America. By color-coding neighborhoods, the government and banks ensured that capital would never flow into Black communities.

“D” rated areas, marked in red, were deemed “hazardous” for investment solely because of the race of the inhabitants. This meant Black families could not get mortgages to buy homes or loans to repair the ones they had, leading to a forced cycle of disinvestment. In the suburbs, restrictive covenants were the “invisible fences” of the North. These were clauses written into property deeds that legally forbade the owner from selling or renting to anyone who was not Caucasian. These covenants were upheld by the courts for decades, ensuring that the massive wealth generated by the post-WWII housing boom—the greatest creator of the American middle class—was almost entirely reserved for white families.

The legacy of this era is found in the “wealth gap” that exists today. While white families were able to build equity in their homes and pass it down to their children, Black families were trapped in a rental market or forced into “contract buying,” a predatory practice where one missed payment meant losing the home and all the money invested in it. This period turned housing into a tool for the systematic extraction of Black wealth.

Urban Renewal: ‘Negro Removal’

1949–1970s



Urban Renewal was sold to “modernize” cities, but for Black communities, it was a catastrophe. Armed with the power of eminent domain, city governments declared thriving Black neighborhoods “blighted” to make way for highways that would allow white suburbanites to commute to downtown jobs. In the process, the intricate social fabrics of the “Black Metropolises” were shredded, and thousands of businesses were shuttered forever.

The term “Negro Removal” was coined by activists like James Baldwin to describe the reality of these projects. Families were often given only a few weeks’ notice before the bulldozers arrived. They were frequently relocated into public housing projects that were poorly designed and intentionally placed in isolated areas, effectively destroying the economic and social networks that had taken decades to build.

The physical scars of Urban Renewal are still visible in almost every major American city today. Massive concrete highways often serve as the literal “tracks” that divide wealthy white neighborhoods from impoverished Black ones. The destruction of these homes didn’t just remove buildings; it removed the physical evidence of Black achievement and self-sufficiency, replacing it with the sterile, managed environments of the public housing era.

Public Housing & the High-Rise Era

1950s–1990s



The high-rise era of public housing, exemplified by projects like Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis or Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, began with the promise of “towers in a park.” These buildings were originally designed to provide modern amenities—indoor plumbing, elevators, and central heated thousands of families.

In the beginning, there were long waiting lists, and the buildings were seen as a step up from the decaying tenements they replaced. However, the “dream” quickly turned into a nightmare due to intentional policy choices. The federal government provided money to build the towers but gave almost nothing for their maintenance. As the buildings aged, elevators broke down, heating systems failed, and trash was left uncollected.

Simultaneously, the loss of manufacturing jobs in the cities left the residents of these towers with few economic opportunities, turning the high rises into islands of concentrated poverty. By the 1980s and 90s, the high-rise had become a symbol of “failed” social policy in the public imagination, often used to stigmatize the people living inside them. The residents, however, fought to maintain their dignity, forming tenant unions and community gardens.

Despite their efforts, the government’s eventual solution was “Hope VI”—a program that demolished the high-rises but often failed to provide adequate replacement housing, leading to another wave of displacement.

Fair Housing Act & Its Aftermath

1968–1990s



The 1968 Fair Housing Act was a landmark achievement of the Civil Rights Movement, making it illegal to discriminate in the sale or rental of housing. It was passed in a moment of national crisis, following the riots that erupted after the death of Martin Luther King Jr.

For many Black families, it finally opened the door to the “American Dream” of suburban homeownership and better schools. Yet, the law lacked “teeth” for decades. Real estate agents practiced “steering”—showing Black family’s homes only in certain areas—and banks continued to use subtle methods to deny loans. When Black families did manage to move into white neighborhoods, they often faced “white flight,” where white neighbors would sell their homes leading to a rapid drop in property values and a re-segregation of the area. This era saw the rise of the “Black Suburb,” but even these areas were often undervalued by the market. The systemic bias of the appraisal industry meant that a home in a Black neighborhood was often worth significantly less than an identical home in a white one.

The Fair Housing Act changed the rules on paper, but it could not easily undo the centuries of spatial racism that had already been built into the geography of the country.

The Foreclosure Crisis & Predatory Lending

2007–2012



The foreclosure crisis of 2008 was a targeted strike against Black wealth. In the years leading up to the crash, banks flooded Black neighborhoods with “exploding” subprime mortgages. Even Black borrowers with high credit scores were often steered into these high-interest, risky loans. The goal was no longer to help people own homes, but to “strip” the equity that families had spent generations building.

When the housing bubble burst, the impact on Black communities was devastating. Some neighborhoods saw half of their homes go into foreclosure. Streets that had been stable for decades were suddenly filled with boarded-up windows and overgrown lawns. This wasn’t just a loss of shelter; it was the largest loss of wealth for people of color in modern history, setting back the progress made since the 1960s by decades.

The aftermath of the crisis saw “vulture capitalists” buying up these foreclosed homes at a discount and turning them into rental properties. This shifted many Black neighborhoods from areas of high homeownership to areas of high tenancy. The crisis proved that even when Black families managed to “play by the rules” of the housing market, the system remained rigged against their long-term stability.

Gentrification & Displacement

2000–2020



Gentrification is the modern “urban renewal,” driven by private capital rather than government bulldozers. As young, mostly white professionals moved back into city centers, historically Black neighborhoods became “trendy.” Property values skyrocketed, and with them, property taxes.

For many Black homeowners, especially seniors on fixed incomes, this meant they could no longer afford the taxes on homes they had owned for fifty years. For renters, gentrification meant “no-cause” evictions and astronomical rent hikes. Small Black-owned businesses that had served the community for decades were replaced by high-end boutiques and coffee shops that the original residents could not afford.

The “culture” of the neighborhood—the music, the street life, the social networks—was often packaged and sold as a commodity, even as the people who created that culture were being pushed out. The psychological toll of gentrification is immense. Residents describe a feeling of “rootlessness” even while they are still in their homes, as they watch their surroundings change beyond recognition.

This era is defined by the struggle for the “right to the city”—the idea that long-term residents should have a say in the development of their neighborhoods and a share in the prosperity that development brings.

Community Land Trusts & Black Homeownership Today

2020–2026



In response to centuries of housing instability, a new movement is taking root: the Community Land Trust (CLT). In a CLT, the community owns the land collectively, while individuals own the homes on top of it. This model removes the land from the speculative market, ensuring that homes remain affordable for the next generation. It is a return to a more communal way of living that prioritizes people over profit.

Black-led CLTs are now emerging in cities across the country, from Oakland to Atlanta. These organizations are not just about buildings; they are about “sovereignty.” By controlling the land, Black communities can decide for themselves what their neighborhoods need—whether it’s affordable housing, grocery stores, or green spaces. This represents a proactive shift from resisting displacement to building permanent, protected Black spaces. Looking toward 2026, the focus is on scaling these models.

Technology and new policy tools are being used to identify vacant land and return it to community hands. The goal of this modern era is to finally break the cycle of “extraction” that has defined Black housing history. By combining the lessons of the past with innovative ownership models, the dream of a safe, stable, and self-determined home is becoming a reality for a new generation.