

The 6,000 Houses that Levitt Built

Eric Larrabee

Introduction

When World War II ended in 1945, the United States faced a severe housing shortage and a rapidly expanding middle-class. After a decade of depression and war, Americans embraced consumerism even more than the 1920s¹. The generation who grew up during the Great Depression welcomed the prosperity and consumerism of the late 1940s and 1950s. Young people married and had children in record numbers². New suburbs filled with modern ranch style houses and reimagined Cape Cod houses³, replacing the earlier bungalows found in 1920s suburbs⁴.

William Levitt was the son of a successful real-estate developer on Long Island, just outside of New York City. Because of his real-estate training, he secured a contract to build housing for defense workers in Norfolk, Virginia during WWII, which gave him a sense of the desperate need for affordable housing. After the end of WWII, he inherited the family business, Levitt & Sons. In 1947, Levitt used his connections to purchase 1,200 acres of land in Long Island, formally a potato field. Using Henry Ford's assembly line (inspired by Frederick Winslow Taylor's program of "scientific management"), Levitt built over 17,800 houses between 1947 and 1951. At a time when the average contractor built only five houses a year. Levitt's workers completed 36 houses a day.

Levitt broke the construction process into twenty-seven steps, each with a specialized team of workers responsible for a particular component of the house.

¹ Consumption and prosperity during the 1950s far exceeded the 1920s.

² Those born between 1948 and 1964 are the baby boomers, the largest generation in American History. Second largest? Millennials, who along with the Gen Xers (one of the smallest generations of the twentieth century), well outnumber the baby boomers right now. Generation Z is closer to Gen X in numbers, but all three generations combined – Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z – have considerably more voters than the boomers. If you want to put "ok boomer" into action: VOTE.

³ Cape Cods were prevalent in New England before the 1950s. In fact, the basic design dates back to colonial settlement. Traditionally, Cape Cods have two stories but lack an open floor plan. Levitt adopted the Cape Cod two-story design, adding an open floor plan on the first floor. Ranch houses emerged after WWII, primarily in the West. Typically, ranch houses are one-story and take an "L" or "U" shape. By the 1960s and 70s, Raised Ranch homes were also common. Raised Ranches are two stories, with the kitchen, living room, and bedrooms on the second floor, and a family room (or den), laundry room, and multi-purpose rooms on the bottom floor. There are always stairs to the front door of a raised ranch, and you enter on the landing between the stairs up to the first floor and the stairs to the bottom floor.

⁴ As we discussed in class, if you are looking for late nineteenth century Victorian homes, go to Victorian Village and Worthington. Grandview, Clintonville, and the University District are the 1920s bungalows. Ranch houses dominate neighborhoods and suburbs built after WWII: North Linden, Northland, most of Upper Arlington, most of Hilliard, most of Westerville, and all of Gahanna and New Albany.

Using Henry Ford's assembly line production of the utilitarian Model T, Levitt standardized the houses as much as possible. They may have all looked the same, but they offered the promise of an ideal middle-class home. The houses came with the most advanced appliances, including refrigerators, electric stoves, washing machines, and most importantly, a television built into the living room wall.

Levitt received massive housing subsidies from the Federal Housing Administration allowing him to sell the houses for as little as \$8,000 (about \$90,000 today). The G.I. Bill guaranteed mortgages for veterans and their families, reducing the down payment on a Levittown house to about \$400 (about \$4,200 today). Monthly mortgage payment hovered around \$55 a month (about \$600 today).

When Levittown opened in 1947, couples lined up around the block to buy one of the new houses using their low-interest loans guaranteed by the FHA. Levitt streamlined the process of buying a house as well. He boasted that it took two hours to purchase the house and sign the deed. 4,000 houses sold in the first three hours of opening.

Levitt's methods, government loans, federal tax deductions for mortgage interest, and automobiles fueled the phenomenal growth of white, middle-class suburbs. Like most of the suburbs created in the 1920s and the 1950s, Levittown was also segregated. Racial covenants barred African Americans, Latinx, and Asian people from living in the neighborhood. Despite being Jewish himself, Levitt also barred Jews from purchasing homes.

Eric Larrabee was an influential journalist, writer, and advocate for arts and humanities⁵. Larrabee was editor of Harper's Magazine when he visited Levittown and interviewed its namesake, Bill Levitt, published in 1947⁶.

⁵ In a speech given in 1966, Larrabee offered a profound warning: *"Think first of the ultimate nightmare, of the world in which no songs were sung, in which joy was forbidden, in which a gray drabness was made compulsory -- the world, in effect, of Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four,' no theaters, no symphonies, no operas, no museums, and also no dancers, no painters, no poets, no one to teach us how to be human."* In other words, the Humanities.

⁶ Eric Larrabee, *The 6,000 Houses that Levitt Built*, Harper's. 197:1180 (1948). 79-83. See also this [newsreel about the construction of Levittown](#) with some pretty interesting footage showing how the houses were built.

⁷ Robert R. Young headed the New York Central Railroad during the 1950s, known for modernizing railroad operations, particularly the first use of computerized scheduling.

Primary Source

Follow link to read [*The Six Thousand Houses That Levitt Built*](#).

This work by Jennifer Nardone at Columbus State Community College is licensed under [CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0](#), except where otherwise indicated.

⁸ Chintz refers to a brightly colored flowery design usually associated with upholstered furniture. You see chintz everywhere but don't think about it. Here is a by-word for the furniture style in middle class homes, clearly the sphere of housewives.

⁹ Vernacular for "cottage." Cape Cods

¹⁰ Charlie Chaplin was one of the most influential writers, directors, and actors of the twentieth century. Most of his movies were made before films had sound reels. In other words, silent films. One of Chaplin's most enduring characters was known simply as "The Tramp," intended to represent an average working-class American man. In his 1936 film, *Modern Times*, The Tramp is fired from his industrial job (it is the middle of the Great Depression after all) and falls on hard times. Without recounting the whole movie, The Tramp and his girlfriend find steady work and a decent place to live for a while. It doesn't last, but you have to watch the movie to see how it ends.