

Teaching with Covenants

This guide suggests ways that teachers can use Mapping Prejudice in the classroom. It provides both context and a list of resources that are available online.

**“These are the practices,
which if endured for another decade,
will reap for Minneapolis a sorry harvest.”**

— J. T. Wardlaw, head of the Minneapolis Urban League, December 23, 1944

Mapping Prejudice is focused on tracing the history of racial covenants, legal clauses embedded in property deeds that were used to bar people who were not white from owning or occupying property. These primary sources can provide a common starting point for discussions about the history of discriminatory housing practices and their contemporary legacies.

The racially-discriminatory property deeds unearthed by this project are deeply disturbing. They need to be used with care. But they are valuable for teachers because they open a window onto urban history. They can help students understand the roots of contemporary racial inequities. The activities detailed here could stretch over several class periods. They will work with classes of various sizes and learning levels.



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Reckoning with Racism

Mapping Prejudice is focused on identifying and mapping racial covenants. These were legal clauses embedded in property deeds that were used to bar people who were not white from owning or occupying property. Covenants are powerful teaching tools because they articulate an unvarnished racism. When these restrictions are shown on a map, they provide irrefutable evidence of the way that racist ideology shaped cities, determining where people could live. As material manifestations of white supremacy, covenants provide tangible examples of structural racism. These primary sources offer an opportunity to understand how racism has worked over time in American cities. They demonstrate how race shapes access to resources. They show how racial prejudice snakes into the most intimate of spaces, including the family home. And they illuminate how discriminatory practices reverberate through generations.

Mapping Prejudice provides a framework for understanding how contemporary racial disparities were created through the practices of private industry and the policies of government regulators during the twentieth century. But the project also gives people the chance to read these discriminatory deeds for themselves. The language of these deeds is stark and disturbing. One common restriction embedded in Hennepin County property deeds declared that the “premises shall not at any time be conveyed, mortgaged or leased to any person or persons of Chinese, Japanese, Moorish, Turkish, Negro, Mongolian or African blood or descent.” Before the Minnesota legislature banned these restrictions in 1962, and the federal government followed suit in 1968, developers inserted these legal clauses into millions of property deeds across the United States. While they have been illegal for more than 50 years, exhuming these covenants from the deed books of county recorders has great educational value.

Covenants provide valuable insights for those who have not personally experienced racial discrimination. A close examination of these documents is also validating for students of color who know how discriminatory practices cascade through their lives, erecting barriers that limit access to housing, credit, education, and wealth. Restrictive deeds were just one of the mechanisms that prevented African Americans from securing stable and affordable housing; covenants worked in tandem with other practices like redlining and white violence to undermine the housing stability of people of color in the urban north.

learn more

“A Sorry Harvest”

Today, the legacies of these practices are clear. Covenants brought residential segregation to Minneapolis. And the city--like many other northern cities--remains segregated today.

Over the last hundred years, racial segregation has shaped our lives in ways large and small. For generations, **new arrivals in Minneapolis had to figure out where they would be welcome**. And even after racial covenants were made illegal, **it was still a struggle for African Americans to secure housing in white neighborhoods**. Racial boundaries first established by covenants are still in place. Breaching those boundaries **can still be dangerous today**, more than fifty years after the Fair Housing Act made covenants illegal in the United States.

Physical segregation undergirds contemporary racial disparities, which are **particularly acute in the Twin Cities**. Place of residence determines **access to community assets**. Majority white neighborhoods have more parks and more generous tree cover. Communities of color have more **environmental hazards like landfills and highways**. This makes air quality poor, **rendering residents more vulnerable to chronic conditions like asthma and respiratory viruses like COVID-19**. They have less access to medical care, which translates into **higher rates of infant mortality and premature births**. Inferior housing stock makes it harder to weather public health emergencies **like heat waves** or the coronavirus pandemic. Schools in these neighborhoods usually have **fewer resources and fewer experienced teachers**.

Covenants did more than hinder Black mobility and steer people to certain neighborhoods. They also determined who could buy property and amass wealth. “Prospective Negro purchasers are sometimes told of restrictive covenants, or that the owner will not sell to Negroes, or that the neighbors would object,” J.T. Wardlaw explained to the readers of the *Minneapolis Star* in a letter published on December 23, 1944. The head

of the Minneapolis Urban League expounded further, asserting that these practices pushed people of color into areas that were redlined, which made it almost impossible to acquire affordable financing to buy property. And once they identified a home, “the already inflated price is made

higher for Negro prospects,” Wardlaw wrote. These “are the tools used to depress homeownership among Negroes,” he explained. “These are the practices which during the past decade have come to be regarded as expedient and profitable. These are also the practices which if endured for another decade will reap for Minneapolis a sorry harvest.” Wardlaw’s declaration was prophetic.

Today the Twin Cities metropolitan area has the **lowest African-American homeownership rate in the country**. And since most families amass wealth through property ownership, this homeownership gap continues to feed our contemporary racial wealth gap. Thanks in part to the racial biases that have been baked into the real estate market over the last century, **the average white household in the United States has ten times as much wealth as the average black household**.

The racial wealth gap makes it hard to erode residential segregation. And it contributes in every way to the racial disparities in education, health outcomes and employment facing our community today. To hear more about this history and its connection to contemporary inequities, listen to this **TEDx talk** by Mapping Prejudice co-founder Kevin Ehrman.

Key Resources:

- Kevin Ehrman-Solberg’s TEDx talk
- Covenants created segregation and racialized boundaries with dangerous repercussions today.
- The Twin Cities have the lowest African-American homeownership rate in the country
- Average US white household has 10x wealth as the average black household

“Jim Crow of the North”

Suggestions for
encouraging
active learning
through film

Filmmaker Dan Bergin was the creative force behind this [TPT documentary](#), which offers a concise primer on the complex history of discriminatory housing policies and their impact on urban America. The film details how racial boundaries were drawn in Minneapolis during the first decades of the twentieth century, explaining how racial covenants came to the city. But it does more than recount the outrages of white supremacy. It highlights the stories of resistance, giving agency to the people who struggled for justice. “Jim Crow of the North” has become a vehicle for education, conversation, and transformative policymaking.

This Emmy-award winning film was first aired in February 2019. It has been seen by several hundred thousand people, who have gathered to watch the film in classrooms and community organizations across the Minnesota.

These articles provide a sampling of some of the conversations prompted by “Jim Crow of the North”:

- [Affordable housing summit in St. Paul](#)
- [The premiere of “Jim Crow of the North”](#)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What aspects of the film did you find most surprising?
- Why do you think that it’s important to tell this story through film?
- How would you explain the rise and proliferation of restrictive covenants within the Twin Cities?
- What other policies and decisions helped to accelerate the process of housing segregation?
- What roles did the federal government, private industry, and white citizens each play in that story?
- What do you think is the film’s primary lesson?
- Does this research/film help explain realities in the Twin Cities that you have noticed or personally experienced?
- Racial covenants have been illegal for more than 50 years. Why should we care about them today?
- Why do you think the history of racial covenants and redlining in the North is not more widely known?
- What should be the political implications of this history for the present?
- In what ways were many white Minnesotans the beneficiaries of these segregation policies, both directly and indirectly?
- How might current racial disparities in wealth, education, health, or quality of life be traceable to these policies?
- What might be other parts of our community and everyday lives that have been affected by housing segregation?
- How does housing determine the ability to be safe during a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic? Or a heat wave?

Working With Primary Texts:

Read racial covenants in property deeds

Mapping Prejudice makes it possible for students to read racial covenants for themselves. There are two ways to access racially-restrictive deeds from the Twin Cities:

- Use the online crowdsourcing platform employed by Mapping Prejudice. These transcriptions will feed the map of covenants in Ramsey County. Students will have the satisfaction of contributing to an ongoing research project. For detailed instructions, go to the [“get involved” tab of the website](#).
- Download analog worksheets that can be downloaded from this [Google drive folder](#). This option is good for younger students. Folder contains two versions of the covenant documents. There is one set of covenants is highlighted to provide more guidance to readers.

Some tips

- Transcribe 5-20 deeds for the greatest impact
- Go through the first deed together, to provide students with the support necessary to navigate these challenging primary sources
- Provide a framework for gathering observations as they work
- Require them to contribute to a group reflection, craft a journal entry or write reflection paper

Reflection prompts

- What do these deeds say?
- What strikes you about these documents?
- Are you surprised in any way by what you see?
- The covenants were recorded at different times. Do you see any change over time?
- What groups were restricted? What kind of language did the covenants use to exclude people of color?
- How is reading these deeds different from hearing about history from other sources, like Jim Crow of the North?

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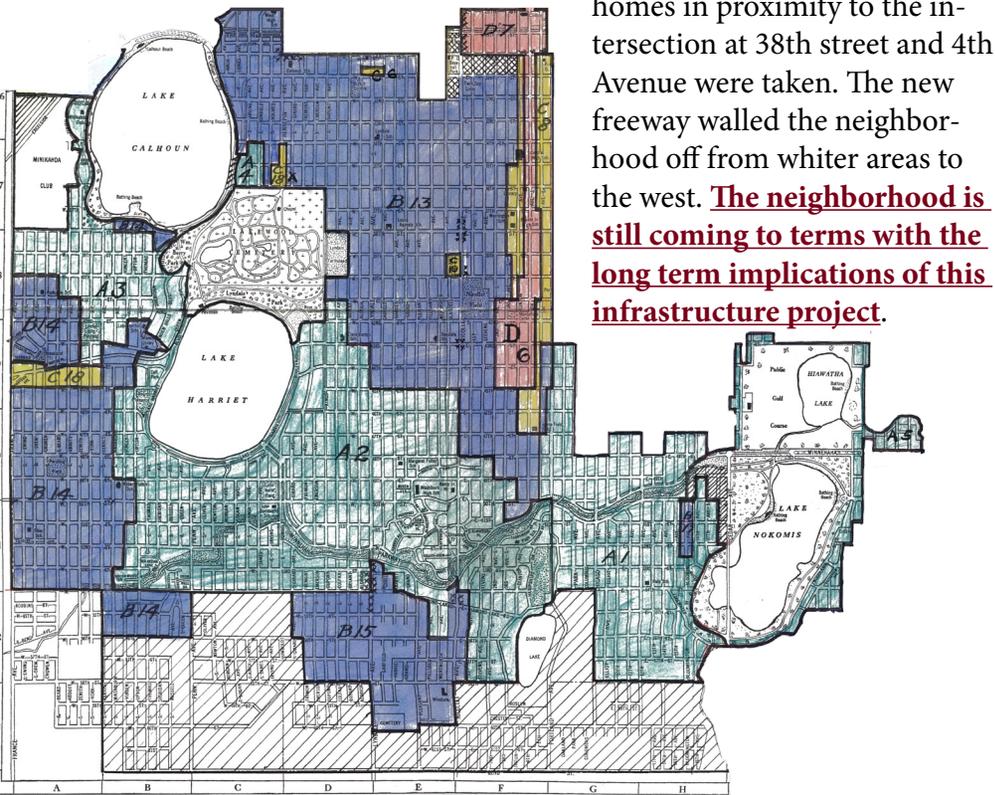
The Legacy of Covenants

Redlining

Connect this deep dive into racial covenants with an exploration of **redlining**, which was the practice of refusing to extend credit to the neighborhoods where neighborhoods that Black people called home.

Have students look at the redlining maps for [Minneapolis](#) and [St. Paul](#). What neighborhoods were deemed too “hazardous” for federally-backed investment? Read the area descriptions. What criteria for ranking did appraisers use? What language did they use?

The construction of 35W left the business district of the Old Southside neighborhood in South Minneapolis intact. But many of the homes in proximity to the intersection at 38th street and 4th Avenue were taken. The new freeway walled the neighborhood off from whiter areas to the west. **The neighborhood is still coming to terms with the long term implications of this infrastructure project.**



The Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul was one of thousands of African-American neighborhoods that were first redlined and then flattened by the construction of the federal highway system. Here are some resources to learn more:

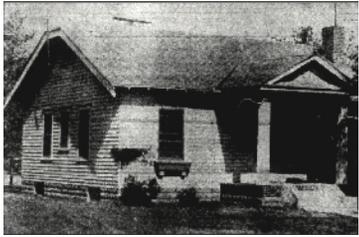
- This [MNopedia entry](#) provides an overview of this history
- Local high school students have recorded some voices from this neighborhood [in this film](#)
- Other community members have reflected on the contemporary implications of this history [during this panel](#)
- Students can read [transcripts of oral history interviews with former residents of Rondo here](#)

These resources provide a jumping off point for an exploration of redlining and reparations:

- The Mapping Inequality Project at the University of Richmond produced this educator's guide
- The Zinn Education Project used Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law* as the foundation for this lesson
- And this lesson plan is designed to help students think about reparations as a response to the damage wrought by covenants and redlining
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” demonstrates the need to move from awareness of this history to action
- Episode 3 of the documentary “Race: The Power of an Illusion” provides additional background on this topic
- “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth” is a fantastic film introducing the complexities of urban renewal

Learning Through Place:

Pay a virtual visit to the Lee House



Lee home circa 1931

A commemorative marker sits at the corner of 46th and Columbus Avenue in south Minneapolis. It identifies the home of Edith and Arthur Lee, who were the targets of a race riot that stretched on for months after they moved into the tiny white bungalow in July, 1931. The Lees were African American; their

decision to buy a home on this all-white block enraged neighbors, who threatened to kill them if they refused to vacate the property.

The metal and stone marker was installed at a neighborhood ceremony that drew 440 people in 2011. It was created at the request of neighborhood residents led by Stearline Rucker, who wanted the neighborhood to reckon with the legacy of this racial violence. It features the words of Arthur Lee, a veteran of World War I who felt that his military service should ensure he would enjoy the rights of full citizenship, regardless of race. “Nobody asked me to move out when I was in France fighting in mud and water for this country,” he declared. “I came out here to make this house my home. I have a right to establish a home!”



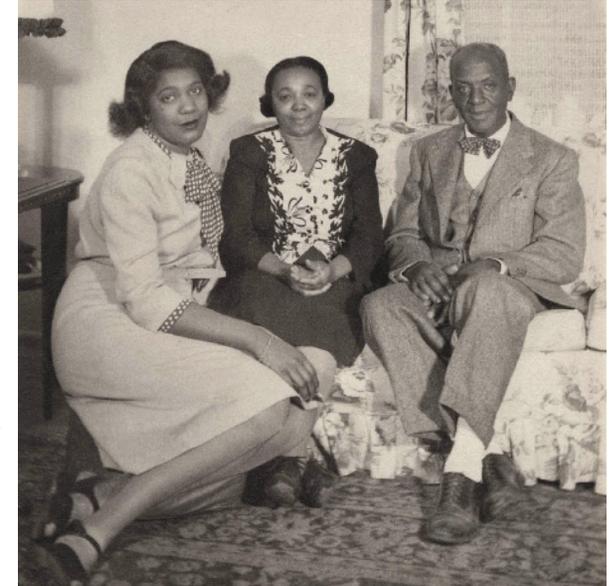
The Lee house at 4600 Columbus Avenue South (2015). The historic marker is visible in the lower right hand corner of the photo.

*Photo credit:
Morgan Sheff*

During the dedication of the marker, Robert Arthur Lee Forman **remembered the ordeal endured by his grandparents and his mother**, who started kindergarten several weeks after her parents purchased the house. “The crowds grew to thousands,” Forman continued. “They threw stones. They threw black paint. They killed my mother’s dog, Buster. They poisoned him.”

In 2014, the Lee house was placed in the **National Register of Historic Places**, which is the official list of the nation's historic places worthy of preservation. At the time of its designation, the Lee House was only the ninth property in the National Register associated with Black history in the entire state of Minnesota. Most historical designations are celebratory in nature.

This site is notable because it acknowledges this history of racial prejudice, discrimination and white violence. The house has also been named a **Minneapolis City Landmark**, to ensure that it will be preserved in the future. It remains a privately owned, single-family home.



Arthur and Edith Lee with daughter Mary (Courtesy of Robert A. L. Forman and James T. Morris Jr.)

When the Lees bought their house in 1931, their new neighbors worried that more African Americans would follow their example. One of the largest concentrations of African Americans in Minneapolis was just a few blocks to the north of the Lee home in the **Old Southside**. The commercial center of the Old Southside was the intersection of 38th Street and 4th Avenue, which is still home to many institutions and businesses vital to the Black community. These include the **Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder**, the oldest Black-owned newspaper in the state. White residents of the Field neighborhood were worried that the Old Southside would expand, encroaching on their all-white neighborhood. The attack on the Lee family was an effort to defend the racial boundaries they had established.



Crowd of people (mob) in front of 4600 Columbus Ave South (The Crisis, October 1931)

A few years after the Lees took up residence on Columbus Avenue, the newly created Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) declared the Old Southside to be a “hazardous” area for mortgage lending. This New Deal-era Federal agency colored the neighborhood red on their residential security maps, which made it almost impossible to obtain loans for homes or businesses in this neighborhood. “Redlining” occurred in communities all over the country. This practice depressed business development and home prices in areas inhabited by people who were not considered to be white. This fueled the racial wealth gap that we have today.

There are several ways to explore this historic site, even when it is impossible to travel to the corner of 46th and Columbus:

- Use Google maps to pay a virtual visit to the house and the marker.
- Listen to Robert Forman describe the ordeal of his mother and his grandparents.
- Take a virtual tour of “The Right to Establish a Home,” an award-winning exhibit created by Greg Donofrio, Laurel Fritz, and Sterline Rucker about the race riot at the Lee House.
- Read a description of the race riot at the Lee House.
- Read the description of the Old Southside on the HOLC “redlining” map of Minneapolis.
- Read this article by Ann Juergens about Lena Olive Smith, the NAACP President who fought to keep the Lees in their home on Columbus Avenue.
- Look at this map of historic landmarks in the city of Minneapolis. What do you learn? What landmarks have been identified in your neighborhood? What story of the past do they tell?
- Read the National Register of Historic Places report for the Lee House.

CREDITS

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Kirsten Delegard is one of the co-founders of the [Mapping Prejudice Project](#). Delegard has spent the last decade unearthing the complex past of her hometown, pushing Minneapolitans to grapple with the structural racism of their progressive metropolis. This examination of racial covenants grew out of her earlier work with the [Historyapolis Project](#), which Delegard also founded.

Marguerite Mills



[Marguerite Mills](#) is a graduate student at the University of Minnesota studying GIS and sociology. Since joining Mapping Prejudice in 2018, she has visited dozens of classrooms [developing lessons on structural racism using Mapping Prejudice](#). A cartographer and webdesigner, Mills also led the graphic design of this guide.