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# View from The Overlook

THE JOURNAL OF THE CLEVELAND HEIGHTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



NO. 15 • SUMMER 2008

WWW.CHISTORY.ORG

## The Struggle for Fair Housing in Cleveland Heights: The St. Ann Audit

By Sven H. Dubie

*Editor's Note: This is the first of a two-part series on the historic initiatives to sustain an equitable, open and diverse community in Cleveland Heights.*

Only in the 1960s did the United States begin seriously coming to terms with some of its institutionalized racial inequities. As part of this process, Congress passed several pieces of landmark legislation designed to eliminate racial discrimination in key areas of daily life, including access to public accommodations, employment, education and voting. One such law, the Civil Rights Act of 1968—commonly known as the Fair Housing Act—specifically banned discrimination based on race and several other categories with respect to the sale, rental, or financing of a home.

The City of Cleveland Heights is not often thought of as a proving ground for civil rights reform. In fact, in the early decades of the 20th Century, racially biased deed restrictions were fairly common in Cleveland Heights. And it is only in the last 20-30 years that

the community has come to pride itself on being open and welcoming to people of all colors, countries and creeds. The passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968 provided an opportunity to examine the extent to which citizens of Cleveland Heights were genuinely committed to the idea of open housing. The driving force was inauspicious: As more and more prospective minority homeowners sought to buy properties in suburban Cleveland in the 1960s and 1970s, rumors abounded that they were being steered toward certain communities and away from others. In 1972, to investigate these allegations and ensure compliance with the Fair Housing Act, the St. Ann Catholic Church in Cleveland Heights sponsored what came to be known as the St. Ann Audit of Real Estate Practices. Charged with the task of systematically examining and documenting the experiences of minority homebuyers in Cleveland Heights, the St. Ann Audit would prove to be one of

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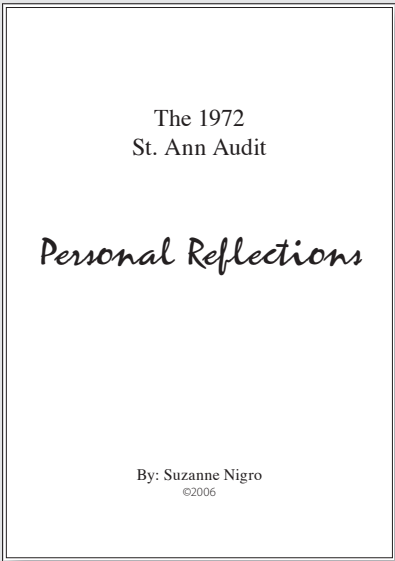
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*Our Mission*  
The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights.

As a community-based historic organization, the Society encourages and facilitates greater knowledge, understanding and awareness of the heritage of Cleveland Heights.



## Celebrate 40 Years of Fair Housing

In celebration of the 40th Anniversary of The Civil Rights Act of 1968, Heights Community Congress has a special gift to offer with your membership contribution of \$40 or more.

You will receive a copy of **The 1972 St. Ann Audit: Personal Reflections**, by Suzanne M. Nigro, which gives the history of the first fair housing sales audit performed in the Greater Cleveland metropolitan area, and shares the history of the formation of Heights Community Congress.

Call HCC at (216) 321-6775 for more information.



Heights Community Congress

# The St. Ann Audit

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the most important, if at times unsettling, exercises in social justice in the history of our community.

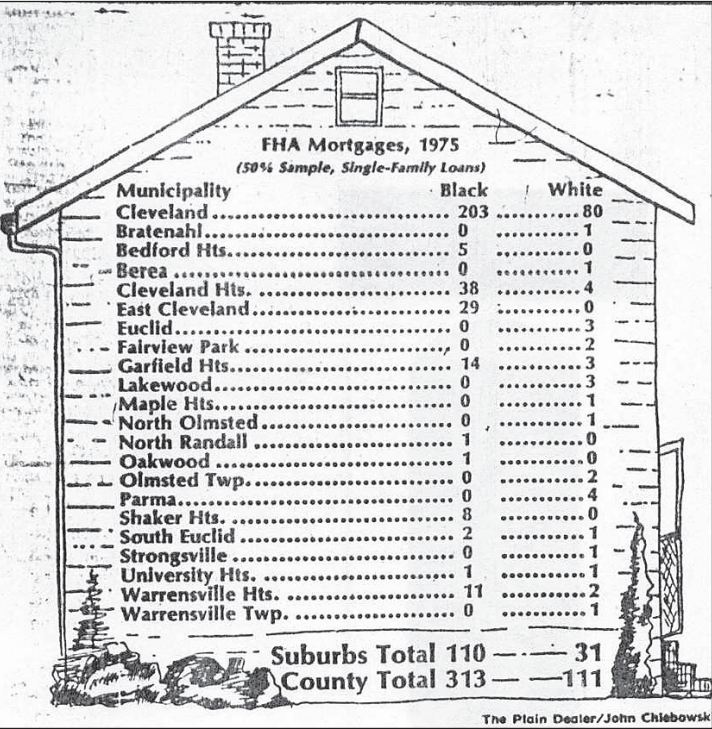
## Volatile Roots

The St. Ann Audit occurred against a backdrop of striking racial transformation in large metropolitan communities like Cleveland. Through the early part of the twentieth century, the black population in most northern cities was relatively small, and it was even more limited in emerging suburbs like Cleveland Heights. However, that began to change when thousands of blacks left the South, seeking greater economic opportunity and a less oppressive racial environment in the industrial centers of the North. Never before, and never again, were employment opportunities as extensive—sparked primarily by the blossoming of the auto industry and the highly restrictive immigration laws that characterized the 1920s.

As black families became more prosperous during the economic boom of the 1940s and 1950s, they, like many urban whites, migrated out of Cleveland to communities on the city's eastern periphery like East Cleveland, Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights. Here they could aspire to own their own homes, have a bit of property and send their children to excellent and less crowded schools.

Still, as late as 1960, African-Americans constituted only one percent of the population of Cleveland Heights. However, as more and more blacks sought to establish residences in the community, more than a few people sought to halt the racial transformation. Over the course of the 1960s, there were a series of violent incidents designed to intimidate new and prospective black residents. Vandals attacked several properties occupied by blacks; there were bombings of black-owned homes and businesses that caused substantial

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Cleveland-area realtors weren't the era's only housing-discrimination culprits. On February 28, 1977, The Plain Dealer announced that "Study Indicts FHA (Federal Housing Administration) for Segregation," alleging (as shown in the graphic) that FHA loans were disbursed largely on the basis of a particular area's racial makeup.





In 1967 this home on East Overlook, owned by J. Newton Hill, was bombed. (Cleveland Press Collection.)

## The St. Ann Audit

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damage (but, fortunately, no loss of life); and there was at least one shooting that was clearly racially motivated. As disturbing as these incidents were, it was some of the more subtle practices designed to promote residential re-segregation, as well as lessons drawn from the dramatic transformation of neighboring East Cleveland, that ultimately prompted the St. Ann's Audit.

East Cleveland in the 1960s experienced an influx of black residents looking to avail themselves of the many assets the city had to offer. The racial transition of the city occurred rapidly as unscrupulous real estate agents employed practices such as steering, red-lining and block-busting to capitalize on racial fears. East Cleveland, already buffeted by a decline in manufacturing, experienced a precipitous drop in the value of its homes as panicked white residents were induced to sell well below market value. Properties were then sold to less affluent black buyers at inflated rates or divided up into multifamily units, often owned by absentee landlords. These factors combined to undermine the quality of housing stock and intensify the exodus of whites.

### *Aggressive Action*

Determined to prevent what had occurred in East Cleveland from happening in their community, citizens in Cleveland Heights mobilized to face the challenges of integration. As early as 1964, a grassroots organization called Heights Citizens for Human Rights was formed to promote racial justice and the peaceful integration of the

community. Two separate initiatives then were launched in the early 1970s, both of which sought to promote non-discrimination in housing. The first of these was a series of meetings by prominent religious leaders held at the Carmelite Monastery. The "Carmelite Group," as the participants came to be known, provided a forum for addressing problems related to race relations and for developing a means to promote interracial harmony in Cleveland Heights. It was from this group that the vital organization known as the Heights Community Congress would be formed.

The second undertaking was started in response to an ongoing initiative within the Cleveland Catholic Diocese known as "Action for a Change," sponsored by the Commission on Catholic Community Action. Action for a Change amounted to an intensive seminar on contemporary social justice issues and was designed to nurture in its participants a passion and commitment to advance the cause of social justice. Individuals were charged with identifying an area of social injustice in their community and taking concrete steps to address the problem. Accordingly, a group of five women parishioners—working mothers and homemakers—took it upon themselves to address the problem of housing discrimination in the Heights. Under the auspices of the St. Ann Parish in Cleveland Heights, these women formed the St. Ann Social Action Housing Committee—better known simply as the St. Ann Committee—in 1971.

Led by Suzanne Nigro, these women were drawn to this issue not simply because they were aware of the hostility that some black Americans were forced to endure

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# The St. Ann Audit

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when they tried to establish residency in Cleveland Heights, but because several of them had experienced first-hand the practice of real estate steering. As Nigro would later recall, upon arriving here in the early 1960s she and her husband were subtly discouraged by their real estate agent from considering purchasing a home in the Heights. Instead, they were directed toward properties in other communities. However, because the methods of steering and other manifestations of discrimination in the real estate industry were not overt or readily apparent, the central challenge of the St. Ann's Committee would be to prove that, in fact, discriminatory practices did exist.

After looking at how other communities were responding to allegations of housing discrimination and monitoring compliance with the Fair Housing Act, the Committee learned that some cities were experimenting with a new practice that involved conducting "undercover" audits of real estate practices to determine whether there was discrimination. As it turned out, one such audit was underway in nearby Akron, Ohio. In this scenario, prospective renters (one black couple and one white couple) known informally as "checkers," made separate inquiries about renting the same

piece of property. The backgrounds of the checkers were virtually identical in every respect except race, so the logical inference one could make was that any difference in the treatment they received must be the result of racial discrimination. Inspired by this model, the St. Ann's Committee developed a plan to conduct a similar audit of real estate practices in Cleveland Heights. In the spring and



Two Heights Housing Service "escorts" with Suzanne Nigro, March, 1974.

summer of 1972, what came to be known as the St. Ann Audit was undertaken. Like the Akron audit, it called for numerous pairs of black and white checkers with similar backgrounds and interests to make inquiries about property listings with the approximately ten real estate companies active at that point in the city.

When the audits were

complete, the collected data were compiled in a report set to be released in early September 1972. The controversial findings of the St. Ann Audit Report sent shock waves through Cleveland Heights and the reverberations from the report are still in evidence to this day.

*(To be continued in the next issue of View From the Overlook)*

*Note: Information for this article was drawn from several important sources on this topic including W. Dennis Keating's study of suburban housing integration, The Suburban Racial Dilemma (1994); Marian J. Morton's Cleveland Heights: The Making of an Urban Suburb (2002), and Suzanne M. Nigro's The 1972 St. Ann Audit: Person Reflections (2006), issued by the Heights Community Congress.*

## "Old School"

Look for a feature on the history of Cleveland Heights schools later in the year...



Fairfax School, c. 1923.



Cedar at Kildare, 1930s, view from Heights High.



Coventry School upper playground, 1958.