

# Garden City Utopia

Oak Hill Park:  
Post-War Housing in Newton



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Junior Thesis  
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## **Acknowledgements**

When it came time for my Newton North Junior Thesis, I was looking for a subject that was interesting, local to the Boston area, and not well known. My mother, who saves everything, showed me a 1995 article from The Boston Globe about five utopian communities in and around Boston. To my astonishment, one of these communities was Oak Hill Park, in Newton.

I have lived in suburbs for all of my life, as have most of my friends. How were these suburbs built? Who built them? What were they thinking? A study of Oak Hill Park seemed like a good way to find out, using original documents available right here in Newton.

My search for original material began at the Jackson Homestead, which keeps files on Oak Hill Park available to anyone who is interested. Susan Abele was extremely helpful, showing me through the files, letting me take copies of whatever I needed, and sharing her own personal knowledge. Lara Kritzer of the Newton Historical Commission was also very helpful.

The Newton Free Library was a rich source of original material. I scanned through week after week of The Newton Graphic and The Newton Villager on microfiche, searching for articles relevant to Oak Hill Park among the Lion's Club minutes, wedding announcements and refrigerator ads. The Newton Free Library also has a scrapbook from the Oak Hill Park Women's Association, which provided welcome amusement and insight regarding daily life in the community.

Books about postwar culture, the history of suburbia in general and Levittown in particular, helped place the Oak Hill Park community in its historical and cultural context. Finally, Oak Hill Park itself remains in place and available to be studied and enjoyed.

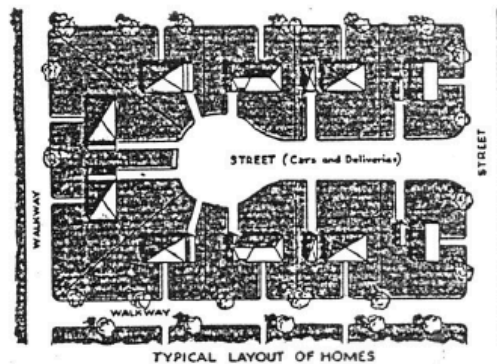
My teacher, Ms. Deborah Holman, and the head of the History and Social Studies department at Newton North, Mr. Ned Rossiter, also gave me great editorial assistance and advice. I hope you enjoy reading this paper as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Julia Werb  
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*The City of Newton has completed a unique plan to provide homes for Newton veterans and their families.*

Site of the development is the Oak Hill section, where the City and the Veterans' Housing Department of Newton have made available sufficient land for 412 well-planned, soundly-built, low-cost homes; with a business area, school and playground. Sidewalks, roads, and all public utilities are now being completed according to the latest community planning techniques and *without cost to the future occupants*. It has been estimated that this contribution of land and improvements is the equivalent of one-fifth the total cost of any comparable home, reflecting a substantial saving in the final cost to the veteran.

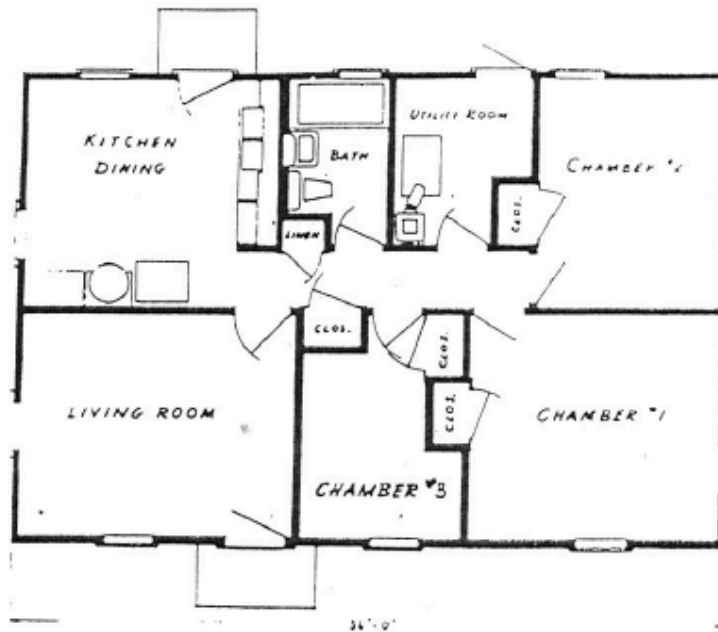


From the archives of the Newton Historical Society

# VETERANS HOUSING DEPARTMENT

## CITY OF NEWTON

### OAK HILL VETERANS HOUSING COMMUNITY



FLOOR PLAN—With Five BASIC Variations In Exterior Design

Living Room	12'0" x 14'6"	Kitchen - Dinette	12'0" x 13'6"
Chamber No. 1	12'0" x 12'5"	Chamber No. 2	9'9" x 12'0"
Chamber No. 3	8'6" x 12'0"	Bath	5'5" x 8'10"
Utility Room	7'4" x 8'10"	Porch	8'0" x 10'0"
Garage	11'0" x 20'0"		

The BASIC House	\$7,820	With Porch	\$8,145
With Breezeway Garage	9,070	With Garage	8,745

With Clap-Boards—add \$247.00 With Cedar Shingles—add \$319.00

ALL PRICES INCLUDE RADIANT HEAT

*Designed and To Be Built by*

**THE KELLY CORPORATION . . . . Arlington, Mass.**

From the archives of the Newton Historical Society



*“Big ice box, 7 by 17 feet, [which] could be fixed up to live in.”*  
Omaha newspaper advertisement

At the end of World War II, millions of American veterans returned home to a housing crisis of unprecedented proportions. The homebuilding industry, which had been devastated by the Great Depression and then displaced by war production, was unable to provide affordable housing for these young heroes. Having risked their lives to preserve the American Dream, many veterans married, started families – and moved in with their parents. Federal programs were launched to help these young families purchase their first homes, but affordable homes were not available. Local governments around the country tried to find ways to address this unique challenge. In Newton, Massachusetts, the citizens mobilized to create a unique suburban utopian community in Oak Hill Park. Oak Hill Park was a successful joint public-private venture that brought critically needed affordable housing and that reflected the post-war idea of good government as the solution to society’s problems.

After the Japanese surrender, millions of victorious soldiers from World War II returned home to the United States in 1945-1946. These veterans began to reestablish lives for themselves, picking up where they left off before the war, marrying their sweethearts and having children. They held low-paying jobs because many had very little education, and had been unable to finish college or even high school before they were called up for military service. Even for educated veterans, well-paying jobs were scarce. Finding affordable housing for millions of new families became a national crisis. Houses were on the market for \$18,000, and houses rented for \$120 a month, but the average veteran earned about \$58 a week, and had to live with relatives or friends.

By 1947, six million people were living with relatives.

“Hundreds of Newton’s fine old houses put the attic to use for the first time in years. A coat of paint covered the cracks in the walls, and Mr. and Mrs. Veteran moved back into their parents’ home to wait for the prices to drop. It was fun for a while; but it became increasingly difficult as one year and two years went by.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Here Is The Story Of A Typical Family Living In Oak Hill Park.” *The Newton Villager* 18 May 1950: 11.

Veterans were desperate for alternatives. In Omaha, an ad printed in the newspaper advertised a “Big ice box, 7 by 17 feet, [which] could be fixed up to live in.”<sup>2</sup> In 1947, 500,000 families were living in Quonset huts, an inexpensive and undesirable type of housing used by the navy during the war.<sup>3</sup> The City of Chicago sold 250 trolley cars as inexpensive housing.<sup>4</sup> The dream of a “House Beautiful” suburban home was quickly fading for many.

The housing shortage was mainly due to the stagnant housing industry of the 1930’s and 1940’s. The Great Depression of the 1930’s affected every industry including housing. In the 1940’s, with many of the young men gone off to war, a major housing market had been lost. Additionally, due to the severe lack of materials, with metal and other raw materials going to the war effort, homebuilding became inordinately difficult and expensive. Before the Great Depression, one million houses were produced a year, but by the end of WWII only 100,000 were being produced.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the immediate postwar period the infrastructure to provide affordable housing did not exist, despite unprecedented housing demand.

Federal interest in the national housing crisis began during the Depression, and reflected Roosevelt’s ideal of “the need to find through government the instrument of our united purpose to solve for the individual the ever-rising problems of a complex civilization.”<sup>6</sup> Congress passed the National Housing Act on June 27, 1934, creating the Federal Housing Association (FHA). This act addressed a desire to stimulate building without using government subsidies. The FHA relied on private enterprise for the funding of new housing. In the midst of the Great Depression, this federal agency sought to encourage independent entrepreneurs to reduce unemployment by creating jobs in the construction industry.<sup>7</sup> Ten years later, towards the end of World War II, the FHA passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, otherwise known as the G.I. Bill. This bill

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford Press, 1985: 232.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Halberstam, David. *The Fifties*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993: 134.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Second Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1937.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson, 203.

enabled 16 million soldiers and sailors to purchase homes by means of a long-term, fixed-rate FHA-insured mortgage. “Even the working classes could apply for ownership”<sup>8</sup> with these bills. Veterans could buy houses with a seven percent down payment and low monthly mortgage payments, making it less expensive to buy a house than to rent an apartment. Thus the FHA created a powerful incentive for builders such as William Levitt to construct inexpensive suburban housing.

While many believed that prefabricated homes might provide the best value, developer William J. Levitt brought Henry Ford’s techniques of mass production to on-site home building. In 1941 he and his brother, Alfred, won a government contract to build 2,350 war workers’ homes in Norfolk, Virginia. To meet their deadlines, the Levitts analyzed the construction process and broke it into 27 discrete steps. Even with an acute labor shortage, unskilled workers were able to master at least one of the 27 steps; this approach also sped up the entire process.<sup>9</sup> In this and in subsequent wartime projects, Levitt became renowned for his ability to build military housing on very tight deadlines, and in the process built a team of managers who could help address the post-war housing crisis.

During the war, Levitt clearly foresaw the extent and severity of the post-war housing crisis and its potential for personal profit. By 1946, the Levitt family had quietly acquired thousands of acres of land near Hempstead, Long Island, and in that year the Levitts pushed ahead with Bill Levitt’s dream of creating the largest suburban housing project in American history. The basic house, built using mass-production techniques, had four and a half rooms and sold for an affordable \$7,990. The building filled only 12 percent of the lot, leaving plenty of space for expansion. Because all the houses were similar, if not exactly the same, construction did not require highly skilled workers and, once running smoothly, could produce 36 houses a day, compared to the less than five houses a year produced by other contracting companies.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Levitt did not stop at just building houses. He built whole communities, with a school, shopping center and many

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>9</sup> Halberstam, 132.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 136.

other amenities needed by self-sufficient societies. While the first Levitt home was not sold until 1949, Levittown was well known to people in the homebuilding industry, and probably influenced the 1948 design of Oak Hill Park, in the southeastern corner of Newton, Massachusetts.<sup>11</sup>

As Newton's war veterans began to return from overseas, few houses were available to them in which they could live and raise their families. Many veterans were forced to live with in-laws or friends. In Newton, the housing shortage was so acute that there were not even apartments for veterans to rent, renting being the preferable solution for some veterans who were not established as to where they wanted to be permanently located.<sup>12</sup> Due to the immense housing shortage, veterans began to leave Newton for other towns and even other states where extra housing was created for veterans. Mothers were outraged that their sons could not live close to them and wrote numerous letters to the editor of the *Newton Graphic* demanding that the city take action. "Let Newton get down to 'brass tacks'"<sup>13</sup> read one letter to the editor urging that Newton start building affordable housing for war veterans. Another letter from "H.G.S" states:

When is this fair city of Newton going to do something about housing its veterans? They are receiving a poor welcome home. Other towns and cities have found ways and means to ease the situation with bank aid and the enthusiasm of patriotic citizens. But not Newton! It is evident that Newton does not wish its young men to settle here. Many of them are unable to pay large rents and the type of dwelling that they require would perhaps be too plebian for Newton. The city fathers will not even temporarily alter the zoning laws so that many large unoccupied houses could be put into service. Landlords are holding vacant apartments for speculative purposes. The Garden Clubs are going to enhance the value of property alongside Commonwealth Ave by planting some trees as a living memorial. It's too bad the veterans and their families can't roost in them.<sup>14</sup>

The League of Women Voters published an article in the *Newton Graphic* on June 20, 1946, demanding action. They wrote that, although there were only some sixty homeless veterans now, there would soon be as many as 1,200 veterans returning from the war and that earlier returnees would get evicted from their apartments. The Citizens Advisory Commission for Returning Veterans sent out a survey asking what were the most urgent and solvable problems facing veterans. The two answers were eviction and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 132-135.

<sup>12</sup> "Veterans Want to Rent." *The Newton Graphic* 9 May 1946: 2.

<sup>13</sup> "What Prices for War Veterans?" *The Newton Graphic* 7 February 1946: 2.

the expectation of a child. The results from the survey also found that veteran families could afford to spend between \$35 and \$75 on housing per month. The League of Women Voters suggested that the city give itself a time constraint of five years to solve the problem, that Newton's big old houses be converted into apartments or multi-family homes, and that the government continue to be actively involved in finding a solution that "lets [us] see action and keep faith with our returned veterans."<sup>15</sup>

However, not all citizens of Newton wanted the city to get into the business of building housing for veterans, preferring that development be left to free enterprise. Many worried that the city government's hiring of outside, low-bid contractors would take business away from local contractors. Additionally, the opposition argued that a veterans' housing advisory committee would not have the experience or organization to produce houses as effectively as local contractors and that the post-war shortage of building materials throughout the country would be as big a problem for city government as it was for the local contractors, who were always struggling to get supplies for their projects. Opponents also argued against the use of prefabricated houses, which were becoming a popular solution in the country at this time, asserting that such houses were not suitable for families and "would require expensive alterations to make them so."<sup>16</sup>

After appealing to the federal government without response and in the face of local opposition to municipal government intervention in the housing crisis, Newton's mayor, Paul Goddard, took cautious first steps in 1946. Under the federal acts of 1946, chapter 599, he established the American Veterans Committee (AVC) to recommend solutions to the housing crisis to make information about housing options available to veterans. In 1946, the AVC immediately proposed that the veterans be given preference in purchasing city-owned land to "build for themselves on such land,"<sup>17</sup> but this was not ratified because the city would not benefit financially from the venture. The mayor resolved that the veterans be given preference in the purchase of real estate, such as houses and apartments, but not specifically land. The local government would also give

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<sup>14</sup> "Letter to the Editor." *The Newton Graphic* 30 January 1947: 2.

<sup>15</sup> "League of Women Voters." *The Newton Graphic* 20 June 1946: 1.

<sup>16</sup> "Amendment to Building Code to Aid Veteran Housing." *The Newton Graphic* 22 August 1946: 1.

up to \$2000 in loans with no down payments to purchasing veterans. However, neither of these solutions proved effective because there were no houses for veterans to purchase even if they had the money.

At the same time, a promising and specific proposal presented to the Board of Alderman by the AVC was rejected. This proposal would have involved the sale of city-owned land in Oak Hill Park to Arnold Hortmann, a developer, at a price far below its true value. Hortmann would then have built inexpensive houses on this large portion of land. The Board of Alderman rejected this plan by a unanimous vote of 17 to 0. Another proposal that was denied that day was one to develop a section of Oak Hill Park as a playground.<sup>18</sup> However, that same day the Alderman did approve a proposal for a Shell Oil Company two-car lubricator at 1200 Washington Street, the twelfth gasoline station in West Newton Square, along with other proposals that increased Newton's tax base or home values. The Board of Alderman only ratified proposals that benefited the city financially, without considering the development of Newton socially or the immediate needs of Newton's citizens. Future AVC proposals would emphasize that new veteran housing would expand the tax base.

Undaunted, the AVC's next proposal was to purchase twenty-five used Quonset huts for veterans and set these up on the Albemarle Park. These huts would cost the city a total of \$5625, a fraction of the \$52,000 being spent to widen the streets and create off street parking.<sup>19</sup> However, this proposal was withdrawn when AVC Commissioner Edmund Dungan found these huts in poor repair, and that it would cost more than they were worth to make them livable. Furthermore, a sealed bid for the purchase of the huts would have to be submitted, and it was possible that only a few of them would be allotted to Newton.<sup>20</sup> While the Newton press treated this proposal seriously, it seems likely that its primary purpose was to draw attention to the housing crisis and to set the stage for more serious proposals to follow.

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<sup>17</sup> "Veterans Want to Rent." *The Newton Graphic* 9 May 1946: 2.

<sup>18</sup> "A.V.C. Petition for Housing Authority Here." *The Newton Graphic* 27 June 1946: 1.

<sup>19</sup> "Mayor Asks Funds To Buy Quonsets for Housing Veterans." *The Newton Graphic* 20 March 1947: 1.

<sup>20</sup> "Aldermen Approve Budget Proposed by Finance Com." *The Newton Graphic* 27 March 1947: 1.

In early 1947, the City of Newton requested that the State Housing Board declare a state of emergency in order to enable the city to sell land for veterans' housing. An "emergency" was defined by Section 7 Chapter 372 of the 1946 FHA acts as "an acute housing shortage that can not be relieved through normal building channels." According to section 6 of these acts this emergency must be reported to the State Housing Board.<sup>21</sup> Here was the first sign that Newton's government truly acknowledged the crisis and sought to take action. The local government, as it turned out, became the main source of funding for the Oak Hill project.

After the state declared a state of emergency, a workable solution began to take form as Oak Hill Park. At Newton City Hall in November 1947, an exhibit showed an imaginative plan to create 367 single-family residences "prepared and serviced by the city."<sup>22</sup> Willard Pratt, Newton Director of Public Works, had two main objectives in the creation of Oak Hill Park. First, he wished to build a neighborhood in which there would be no traffic hazards for children. Second, he wanted convenient access to a school and a shopping center. The houses were to be three bedroom bungalows with radiant heat. Hot water would run through copper tubes in the foundation and through all the walls in the house. Each home was to have a living room, kitchen, dinette, a utility room, a bathroom with a bathtub and a shower as well as ample closet space. These houses would not be pre-fabricated but would be built using conventional construction methods.

A challenge facing Oak Hill Park's planner was to avoid the potential monotony of houses all created by the same company in relatively the same price range. The danger of such conformity was highlighted by critics as varied as the makers of the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and Lewis Mumford, who denigrated the post-war suburbs as:

"... a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances inhabited by people of the same income, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, conforming in every outward and inward respect to the common mold manufactured in the same metropolis... a low grade uniform environment from which escape was impossible."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> "Veterans' Housing Exhibit at City Hall Attracts Wide Attention." *The Newton Graphic* 4 December 1947: 1.

<sup>23</sup> Halberstam, 140.

Although the floor plan of the homes was essentially identical, Pratt avoided monotony by varying their exterior appearance. Thus, he engineered five various housing plans with three different types of siding. In addition, the lots varied in size and shape and each house was built on a lot that the engineer believed best fit that particular house design. A wide variety of color was used in order to brighten the park and establish each home as unique. Optional features that could be added for an additional price were venetian blinds, window boxes, doorknocker chimes, a built-in ironing board, a garage, and fluorescent kitchen lighting.<sup>24</sup>

Edmund Dungan was at the City Hall exhibit to answer any of the veteran's questions.<sup>25</sup> In addition, a survey was distributed asking the veterans what they wanted in a house, what they needed, and what they were willing to pay for.<sup>26</sup> This eliminated any guesswork on the part of the city. For example, instead of assuming that veterans wanted features such as a garage, the planners could look at the surveys and gain a general understanding of the needs and necessities for the veteran housing. The exhibit was very popular, with over 700 veterans applying for a home, and the mayor was ready to go forward with the construction arrangements.

The design of Oak Hill Park was apparently modeled on the town of Greenbelt, Maryland, a model community built by the federal government in 1935 under the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act. Homes in Greenbelt, MD were grouped in superblocks, with a system of interior walkways permitting residents to go from home to town center without crossing a major street. Pedestrian and vehicular traffic were carefully separated, and a system of walkways encouraged an exceptional sense of community.<sup>27</sup> The front door faced the street, but the back door opened into a long, wide pedestrian greenway, a car-free park in the middle of the superblock was the neighborhood center.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Foundations for First Vets Homes at Oak Hill Poured." *The Newton Graphic* 8 July 1948: 1.

<sup>25</sup> "Exhibit of Proposed Veterans Housing Project at City Hall." *The Newton Graphic* 27 November 1947: 1.

<sup>26</sup> "Veterans Housing Exhibit at City Hall Attracts Wide Attention." *The Newton Graphic* 4 December 1947: 1.

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.ci.greenbelt.md.us/About\\_Greenbelt/history.htm](http://www.ci.greenbelt.md.us/About_Greenbelt/history.htm). Greenbelt website.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell, Robert. "Forgotten Utopias." *The Boston Sunday Globe Magazine* 21 May 1995: 59.



There were two original proposals for Oak Hill Park's layout. One was the traditional grid street pattern with the houses facing onto a street. The second was a masterful layout of cul-de-sacs and pathways with the houses facing onto pathways. The engineer, Willard Pratt, favored the second design for numerous reasons. Because the families moving into Oak Hill Park would primarily be families with young children, a common interest would be the safety, recreation and welfare of these children. The city School Department planned to create a school in Oak Hill Park; the pathway system enabled children to walk to school and to stores without crossing any intersections. The mile and a half of eight-foot-wide walkways were ideal for roller-skates and tricycles. In marked contrast to most suburban homes in New England, the houses in Oak Hill Park would face onto the walkways instead of onto the streets, and cars would approach houses from the "rear", an arrangement Pratt believed would heighten community spirit.

Pratt also claimed that the Greenbelt-style design had financial advantages. The network of cul-de-sacs reduced street and sewer mileage. With the cul-de-sacs, the majority of the driveways would be on service roads, facilitating plowing on the main roads and decreasing maintenance costs considerably. The sewer system was considered ideal for many reasons. Pratt stated, "These factors controlled our decisions and planning, and as the development unfolded, comments received have more than justified our decision."<sup>29</sup>

Just a year before the approval of the Oak Hill Park project, the Newton Board of Alderman had rejected proposals that did not maximize the short-term financial gain to the city. Thus, in an attempt to gain approval for Oak Hill Park, the AVC presented the project as an investment that would benefit the city's finances by increasing the tax base. In this context, the creation of Oak Hill Park gained national attention as a model for public-private partnership. In September 1948, *The Wall Street Journal* printed an article praising Newton's public-private partnership, emphasizing that the city's investment in Oak Hill Park would be recovered through increased tax revenues. The city would break even in twenty years, regaining its \$1,250,000 city-issued bond, through the property

taxes collected in Oak Hill Park. Not only that, but after two decades the venture will help keep Newton's taxes down, cutting each citizen's annual property tax by \$4.30. The new mayor, Theodore Lockwood, "likes to stress the fact that all this has been accomplished without one penny of aid from the federal government or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." *The Wall Street Journal* used Newton's Oak Hill Park housing development as an example to support the idea that a community can provide a low-cost housing development for its veterans and "make money on the deal."<sup>30</sup>

But not all Newtonites were convinced. *The Wall Street Journal* article did not persuade the Newton's Taxpayers Association (NTA), who countered in *The Newton Villager*, "Till now that kind of talk has seemed so patently fallacious that the Association has not felt public refutation to be necessary."<sup>31</sup> Contrary to the assumption that the project would pay for itself, the NTA believed that during the twenty-year period before all the bonds had been repaid, the citizens of Newton who were not in Oak Hill Park would bear the brunt of the taxes. Even after the bonds were retired, the projected \$100,000 annual tax revenues from Oak Hill Park would equal the expenditure on city services that Oak Hill Park would require. This would also have been the case if Oak Hill Park had been a private venture. Nonetheless, the Newton Taxpayers Association supported the development as a concrete effort to help our veterans and to ease the housing shortage, while cautioning "it also asserts that one should not be misled into thinking that there will be no resulting and continuing cost to the city as a whole."<sup>32</sup>

The hearing to approve the Oak Hill Park project was held at City Hall on January 28, 1948. By the time that the hearing began all the standing room was full, stragglers were still entering, and hallways were lined with veterans, their wives and their supporters. The Aldermen presented models of the new community, demonstrating how

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<sup>29</sup> Pratt, Willard S. "Official Describes Plan of "Campus-Type Community." *The Boston Daily Globe*: 38. Undated article, Newton Historical Society.

<sup>30</sup> Booraem, Fletcher. "Newton Housing Attracts Nation-Wide Interest." *The Wall Street Journal*. Article reprinted by *The Newton Villager* 23 September 1948: 2.

<sup>31</sup> "Taxpayers Association Restates Stand on Veteran's Housing Project." *The Newton Villager*, September 1948: 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

the project would be effective. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts merely stated that the project did not go far enough, and presented a proposal to build 84 apartments. The Aldermen won the hearing allowing the building proposals to proceed. This hearing generated great public interest and demonstrated the widespread support for the project among the citizens. As one reporter foretold, “Oak Hill will be very proud in the years to come that it was their privilege to have the new housing development located in their vicinity.”<sup>33</sup>

Once the project had gained state and local approval, funding was the next issue. Citizens raised \$315,000 through fund-raising dinners at Newton High School as well as other community events. “Thermometers” in strategic city locations were “painted twice weekly to show the total percentage of the Newton goal” and Dr. Joshua Liebman, the Rabbi at Temple Israel in Newton, spoke of the “great debt that we owe God,” and proclaimed that giving to the Oak Hill housing development would help repay that debt.<sup>34</sup> The city of Newton reached the fund-raising goal; but the majority of the money for Oak Hill came from a 1.25 million dollar city bond issue. The city planned to assume this sum within five years. To accomplish this, the city was forced to raise property taxes. For perhaps the first and last time in Newton’s history, tax increases were accepted without apparent contention.

The frequently stated number of \$1,250,000 was only part of the cost of building Oak Hill Park. In addition to \$315,000 produced through fund-raisers, a second bond issue added an additional \$109,000 for Oak Hill Housing Project.<sup>35</sup> Together, these public contributions add up to \$1,674,000 or \$4,063.11 per home; each home sold for a base price of \$7,800. The equivalent in year 2000 dollars would be a public contribution of \$29,000 per home.<sup>36</sup> It is no wonder that there were few public-private partnerships of this scope in New England.

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<sup>33</sup> “The Housing Hearing.” *The Newton Graphic* 29 January 1948: 2.

<sup>34</sup> “Dr. Liebman Delivers Stirring Address at Community Fund Dinner.” *The Newton Graphic* 30 October 1947:1.

<sup>35</sup> “Aldermen Favor \$1¼ Million Dollar Bond Issue for Oak Hill Housing Project.” *The Newton Graphic* 29 January 1948: 1.

<sup>36</sup> <http://stats.bls.gov/cpihome.htm>. Inflation Calculator on the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics website.

The proposed 412 houses in Oak Hill Park comprised the largest single-family housing development project in New England at that time. Joseph Kelly, the president of the Kelly Corporation of Arlington, Massachusetts, signed a contract with Mayor Lockwood for the creation of 412 houses, along with landscaping, a school, and a shopping center. The creation of Oak Hill Park was unique in that the city did much of the site utility work.<sup>37</sup> Both Lockwood and Kelly were confident that “Newton’s veteran housing project is not only the state’s but the country’s number one housing development [for] the protection of veterans’ interests.”<sup>38</sup>

The builders strove to create one the most beautiful places in Newton and one of the most beautiful suburbs.<sup>39</sup> With the creation of Oak Hill Park, the city was not only creating physical structures to house the veterans and their families; the city was creating a whole community according to a post-war utopian ideal. The design of Oak Hill Park reflected the concept of community in the Cold War era, in which the Jeffersonian link between property ownership and responsible citizenship was reiterated. As William Levitt believed, “No man who owns his own home can be a Communist. He has too much to do.”<sup>40</sup>

A response to the housing crisis at the city government level was beneficial in many ways. The local city government designed Oak Hill Park specifically for a target group – its veterans – eliminating any guesswork or delay by federal officials who were remote from Newton. The homes created in Oak Hill Park were only available to veterans who had been pre-war Newton residents. Even with this somewhat limited pool of possible applicants, the houses were hotly contested, as described by a veteran.

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<sup>37</sup> “Mayor Signs Contract with Kelly Corp. for building of 415 Homes for Veterans in Oak Hill Park.” *The Newton Graphic* 15 April 1948: 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> “To Hold Interviews with Certified Applicants For Oak Hill Vets Homes Soon.” *The Newton Graphic* 24 June 1948: 1.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, 231.

It has often taken me longer to pick out a tie than to pick out that house of mine! But I'm satisfied. There were about forty of us in a room at City Hall. Blueprints of the development were mounted on boards, and officials were there to explain them. Some lots on the maps were already with a red 'X.' Those had been taken at the previous meetings. Some lots had breezeways; some didn't. We were briefed on how to select ours; then a man said, "Now!" My wife and I rushed up to the master blueprint. She said, "How about that one?" I said, "Okay." We showed it to the man with the crayon. He marked it with a red 'X,' and we had ourselves a house.<sup>41</sup>

There was no attempt to attract a diverse population into Oak Hill Park from the greater Boston area. To the contrary, Oak Hill Park was formed specifically to prevent young Newton families from moving out of the community. While there was no direct evidence that any ethnic selection occurred in the application process, photographs from the period show an all-white population. The 1950 Oak Hill Park Women's Association membership list shows a mix of ethnicity, including many Jewish and Irish names. Nonetheless, as the homes were only available to current Newton residents, the population of Oak Hill Park largely reflected the pre-war population patterns of Newton at large.

At the time that Oak Hill Park was under construction, William Levitt's developments in Long Island actively discriminated against African-Americans, and would continue to do so for another ten years.<sup>42</sup> This issue became highly publicized in the late 1950's when Levitt stated at a press conference that he would not sell to African-Americans in a new Levittown in New Jersey. Two African-American families who had not been permitted to purchase homes brought suit against Levitt in the state courts, arguing that availability of FHA mortgage insurance constituted government support, and therefore it was illegal for Levitt to deny them housing. In addition to legal challenges, the Levitt firm faced pressure from Jewish groups to desegregate. But the firm decided that desegregation would hurt its sales.

"Our firm is liberal and progressive, but we don't want to be singled out or used as the firm which should start the other builders off. If there is no other builder who can keep Negroes out, we will not do so either ... but we don't want to lose millions by being the first."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Berry, Jean. "What Oak Hill Park Meant to the Vet Families Seeking Homes." *The Newton Progress*. Article reprinted in the *Newton Villager* 18 May 1950: 11.

<sup>42</sup> Gans, Herbert. *The Levittowners*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967: 371-375.

<sup>43</sup> Levitt Executive, *Ibid*, 372.

In a 1959 survey of buyers in Levittown, New Jersey, it was found that one percent of the buyers gave race as their main reason for leaving their former residence, and nine percent of the buyers listed it as an important reason.<sup>44</sup>

The Levitt firm ultimately decided that desegregation was the lesser of two evils, partly due to a public relations disaster in Levittown, Pennsylvania. In 1957, an African-American family bought a home from a “Levittowner” and was greeted by a crowd of about five hundred angry neighbors. According to Herbert Gans, a sociologist who lived in and studied the Levittown communities, “Although there was no violence and only two stones were thrown, the disturbance was thereafter described as a stone-throwing riot, giving Levittown [Pennsylvania] a worldwide reputation as a riot-torn community.”<sup>45</sup> The Levitt firm did not wish to repeat this scenario in their new Levittown, New Jersey community.

Levitt voluntarily desegregated Levittown, New Jersey, in anticipation of losing its suit in state Supreme Court. This decision was announced to the community on Sunday morning, March 29, 1960. All of the ministers simultaneously explained that desegregation was unavoidable, and asked the community to prepare itself to welcome its new African-American neighbors. The community reluctantly accepted the decision, perhaps because of church support. Levitt also hired outside experts who effectively trained Levitt employees on how to manage the inevitable, in an initiative informally named “Operation Hothead”.<sup>46</sup> The transition to an integrated neighborhood was uneventful. As described by Herbert Gans, “The (few) Negroes who came were clearly and visibly middle class people, with more education, better jobs, and higher family incomes than most whites...”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 375.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 380-381.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 383.

In 1966, William Levitt testified enthusiastically before Congress in favor of an open-occupancy clause in the 1966 Civil Rights Act, arguing that no builder will voluntarily desegregate unless all builders are required to do so.<sup>48</sup>

In early 1949, ten years before the integration of Levittown, the first residents moved into Oak Hill Park. “At some of its Oak Hill Park Association meetings an outsider might guess that this was a giant reunion for the classes of 1935 through 1945 at Newton High School.”<sup>49</sup> One third of the 447 children in the community were born in 1946 or 1947.<sup>50</sup>

The women of Oak Hill Park created a Women’s Club with a capacity for 170 “matrons all intensely concerned with the civic and social welfare of the community.”<sup>51</sup> This club was very active, volunteering at Newton Wellesley Hospital, hosting activities such as “Kiddies’ Play Day,” and beautifying the neighborhood by planting bulbs at the Oak Hill School. The Club hosted a lecture by Congressman John F. Kennedy on February 14, 1951. Some of the other lectures sponsored by the Women’s Club included “Fabrics Begin with Fashion – scads of information on fabrics that will delight your eye” and “How to make Christmas and Floral Arrangements – the inside secrets of how to make our own wreaths, swags etc., for Christmas, and inexpensive use of flowers at home.”<sup>52</sup> A women’s main role was that of the busy housewife, whose sole occupation was taking care of the children and the home. Due to the suburban migration, women were physically separated from the workplace. In Oak Hill, most families had one car. Women were isolated in a world of “mothers, children and station wagons.”<sup>53</sup>

In the postwar period, a suburban woman’s role was very much limited to her domestic duties: having and raising children as well as keeping house. During World War II, women took the vacant jobs in offices and factories that the male soldiers had left behind. Yet, when the men returned, women were forced to give these positions back to

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 406.

<sup>49</sup> “What is Meant,” *The Newton Villager* 18 May 1950: 11.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “Club Life in Newton” *The Newton Transcript* 8 December 1949: 1.

<sup>52</sup> “Program for 1950-1951 Season.” *The Oak Hill Park Newsletter*, June-July, 1950.

<sup>53</sup> Halberstam, 143.

the veterans. Feminists watched helplessly as their earlier gains vanished virtually overnight. One female professor of English at the University of Illinois, who was born in 1885, expressed her disgust with women's regression, "I think that I was confident that the will [of women to succeed] was there – I knew that the capacity was. But I was mistaken about the will."<sup>54</sup> College advisors were encouraging their female students to take courses that would foster their domestic aspirations. They encouraged women to attend college for the sole purpose of finding a husband and to become interesting companions. Respondents to a survey question, "Is college education wasted on women?" in the *Ladies' Home Journal* answered that college was good for women only if they found husbands there.<sup>55</sup>

The higher education system was preparing women, not for careers, but for motherhood, domesticity, and a comfortable suburban household. Some women were horrified by this state of affairs. "What the universities are offering is an education designed to turn out efficient little suburban housewives with minor marketable skill so that they can enrich their children's lives and not disgrace themselves in front of husband's business associates."<sup>56</sup> But this was very much a minority view, and it was decades before a large group of feminists successfully and actively voiced their opinions that life limited to home, husband and children at the end of a cul-de-sac might be an intellectual kind of cul-de-sac.

The traditional view of a woman's role is articulately preserved in a profile of the Frank and Madeleine Joyce family, printed in *The Newton Villager* in 1950 as part of 24-page special edition devoted to Oak Hill Park. Frank Joyce was a 1935 graduate of Newton High School. As an air force test pilot he met Belgian nurse Madeleine Remience in Europe, and they married after an eight-month courtship. They had two children by the time they moved into Oak Hill Park, and a third when the story was written.

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<sup>54</sup> May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1988: 81.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 140-141.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 83.



The Joyce family has lived in their white house at the end of Antonellis circle for a year and a half. They have built a barbecue in their back yard and have planted a vegetable garden. Last winter they painted Victoria and Suzanne's bedroom blue and they have finished painting the ceiling in Dennis's room. Madeleine is studying the decorating magazines now for a living room color scheme and her next project is a slipcover for the sofa.

In their small home, she and Frank have found, as have most of the young couples in the Park, that the hours in a week and the time requirements of a lawn, garden, and five rooms are not in proportion. For most of them, too, the social amenities of living in a close knit community like Oak Hill Park are delightfully exacting. How can you stay indoors on spring afternoons to finish painting two chests for the bedroom when four of her neighbors have brought their coffee cups outdoors and are sitting on the lawn chatting and watching the children play?

When asked what they like Oak Hill Park, the Joyces, with broad smiles, reply "Love it." And Madeleine's answer to the question of what she likes best about the United States is, "my house, my husband, and my children."<sup>57</sup>

A current day visitor to Oak Park is struck by a sense having stepped into a time machine, as the pedestrian walks and vehicular cul-de-sacs remain intact. About forty percent of the houses appear virtually unchanged from their original design while many have had massive additions on their generous lots, making the original designs almost unrecognizable. Promenading down one of the concrete paths named for the fallen veterans, the placid and connected air of the community is palpable. Two girls stroll closely together down one of the paths giggling and gossiping about the latest news, before entering a one-story ranch that appears essentially unchanged since 1949. According to a current resident, "Today, Oak Hill Park still remains a 'neighborhood' in an age when many have disappeared. Its residents comprise a congenial mixture of ethnic and economic background, ages, vocations, interests, and talents."<sup>58</sup>

In 1995, Robert Campbell, the architectural critic for *The Boston Globe*, cited Oak Hill Park as one of his two favorite "Forgotten Utopias" in the Greater Boston area. He describes communities such as Oak Hill Park as "model neighborhoods," each planned and designed in an era that believed in the ability of brains and good intentions to make a better world. "They were made by people who hoped to perfect life by leaving some of it out."<sup>59</sup> Campbell is particularly fond of the way Oak Hill Park is organized around

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<sup>57</sup>"Here Is the Story Of A Typical Family Living In Oak Hill Park." *The Newton Villager* 18 May 1950: 9.

<sup>58</sup> "Built for Veterans, Oak Hill Park Still Thrives." Unattributed, undated, article, Newton Historical Society.

<sup>59</sup> Campbell, Robert. "Forgotten Utopias." *The Boston Globe Magazine* 21 May 1995: 18.

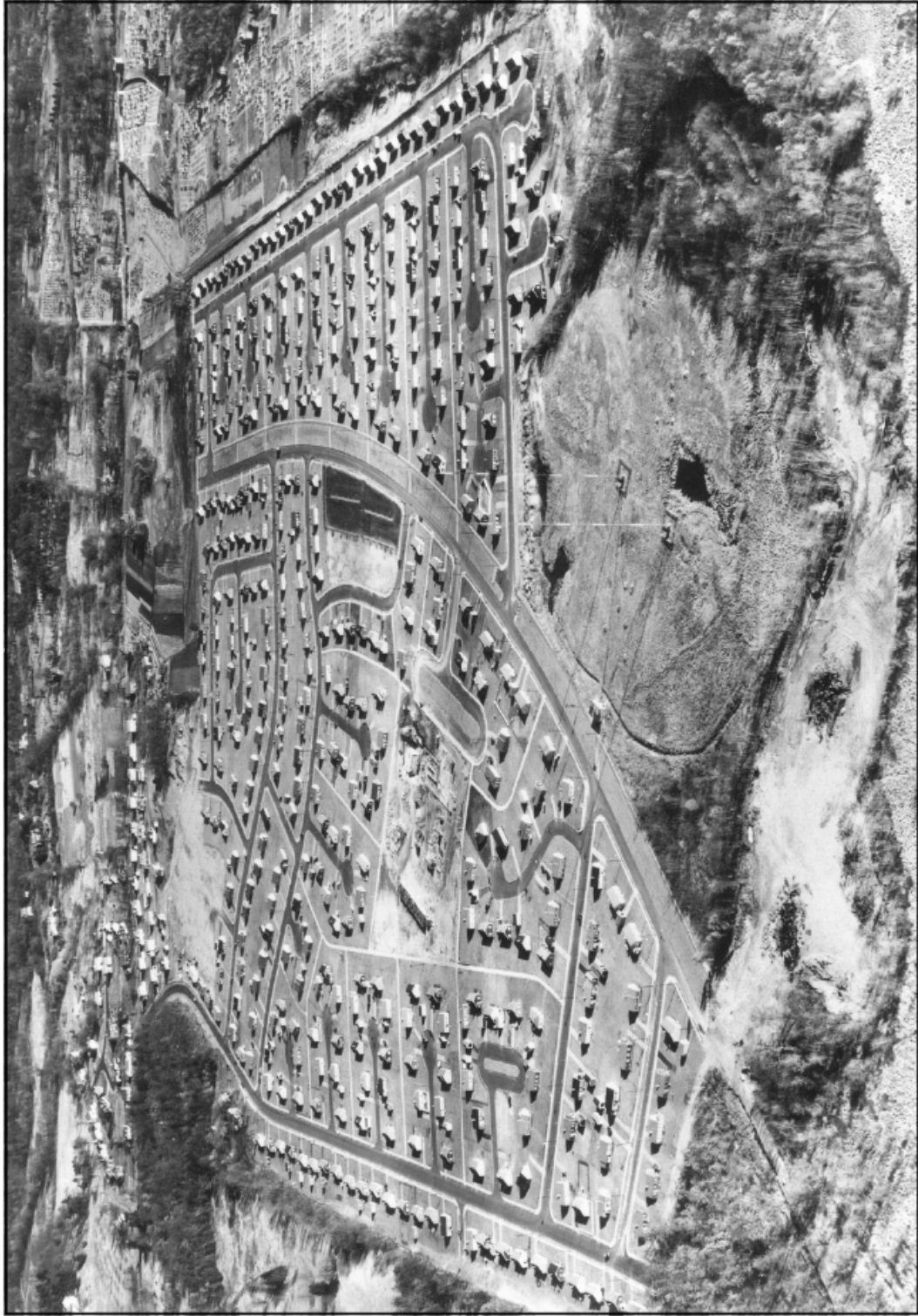
pathways, and identifies it as the only “greenbelt” community in Massachusetts. “So far as a visitor can judge, life still goes on here much as it went on in 1949.”<sup>60</sup>

Even today, fifty years after Newton created Oak Hill Park, the need for affordable housing is still being addressed within the context of the desire for cities and towns to control their character and ambiance. Many communities have Community Development Block Grants to create affordable housing. The city of Boston has also created a policy of funding housing with linkage payments. The city of Newton continues to work on its own-targeted housing solutions, not through direct subsidy, but through the sale of excess property, such as closed school buildings. For example, in 1986 Newton converted the Claflin Elementary School into limited-equity housing aimed at artists. The federal government today continues to provide mortgage assistance, through a program called Fannie Mae, and the home ownership rate has just reached an all time high of 67.7%.

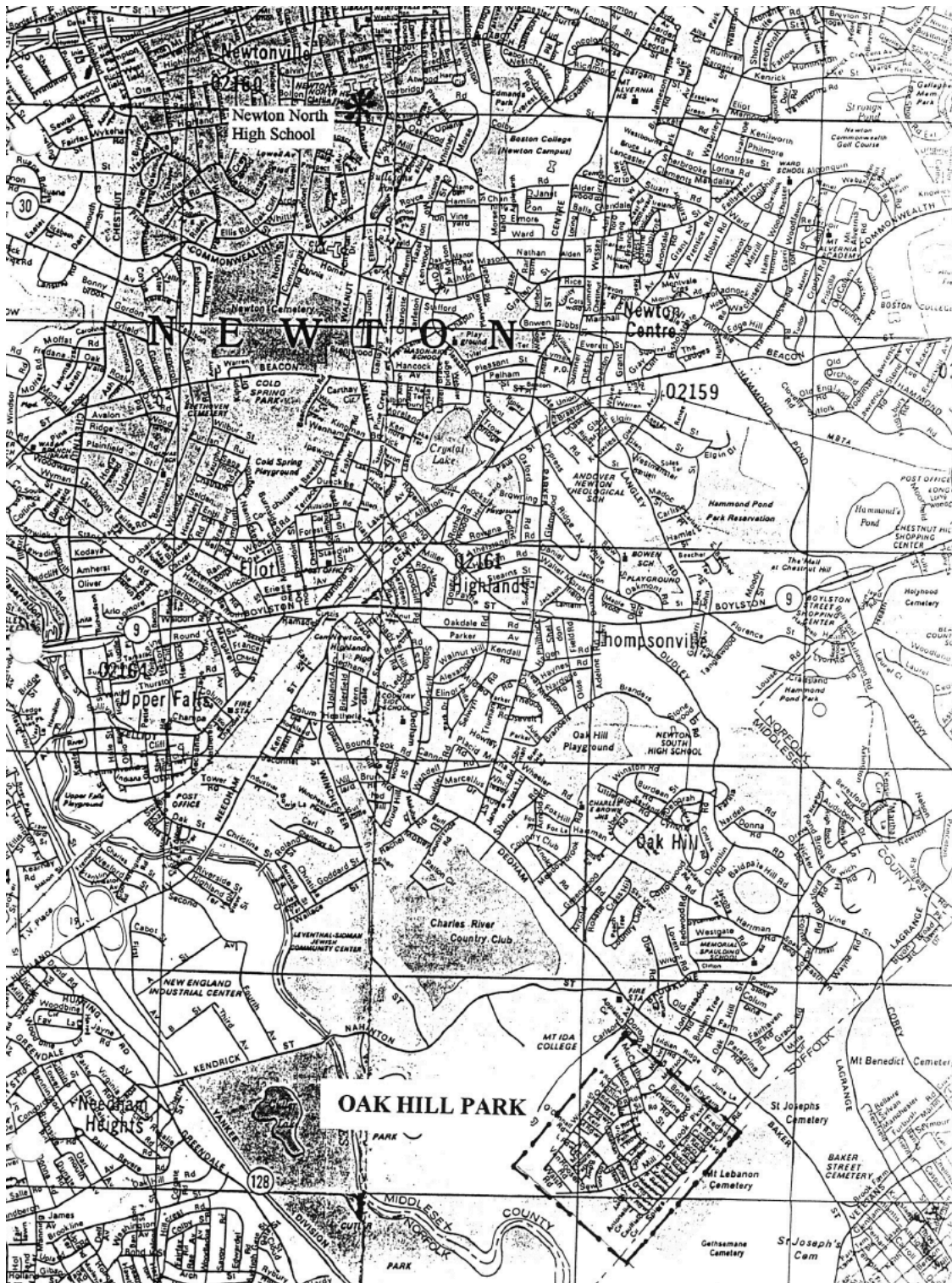
Today, Oak Hill Park stands as an eloquent testimonial to the postwar American Dream. Tiny detached homes provided independence for young families taking control of rebuilding their lives after economic depression and a terrible world war. Generous lots symbolized the dreams of these families to expand their homes and their economic horizons, and extensive renovations of many of the homes demonstrate the achievement of those dreams. The fact that the community exists at all bears witness to the extraordinary commitment of the City of Newton to its servicemen, and is a fitting memorial to the veterans and their families.

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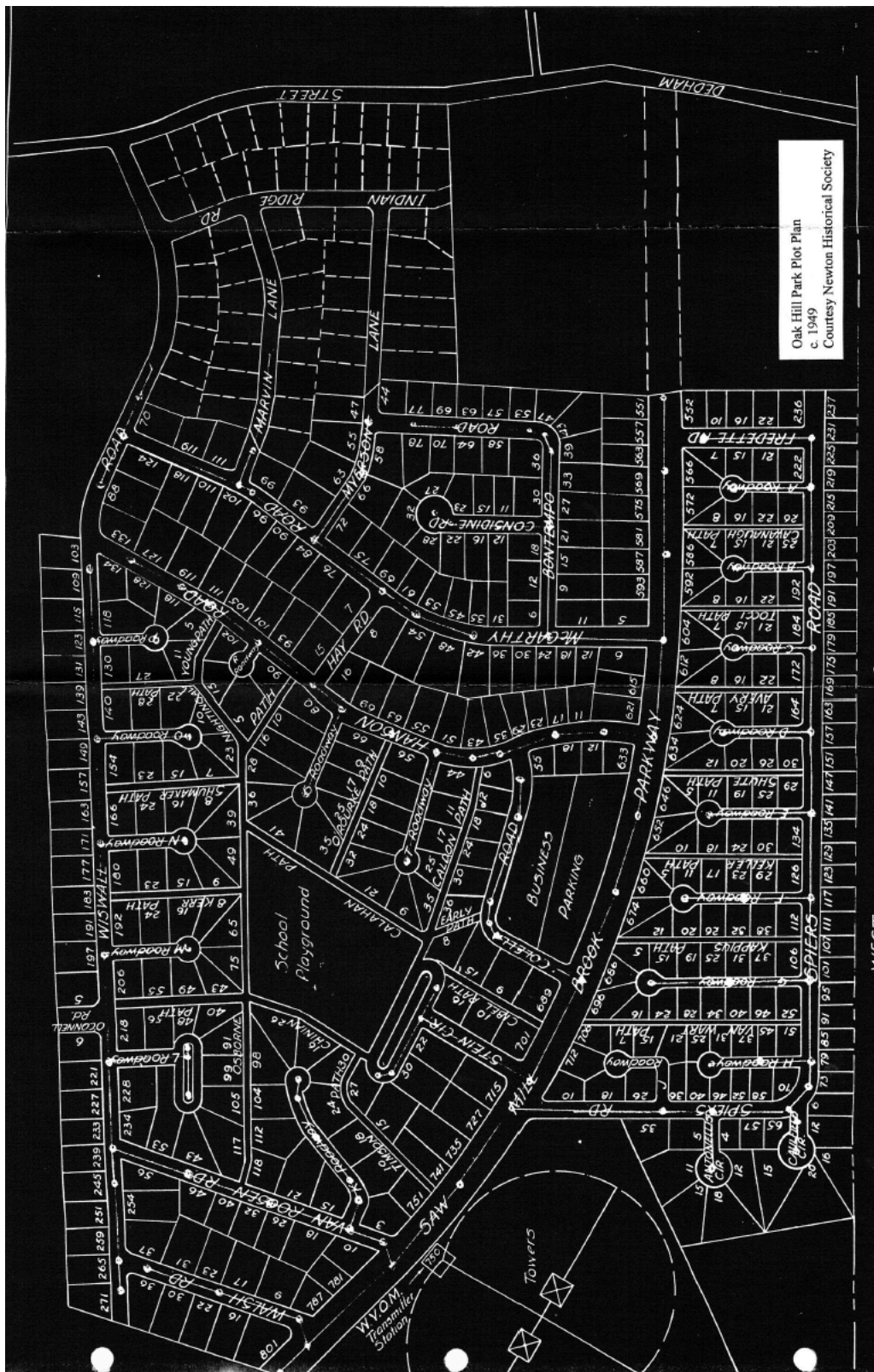
<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 59.

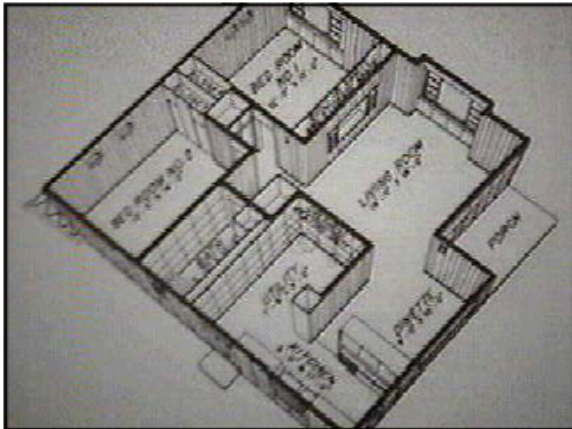


Aerial view of Oak Hill Park, circa 1950. Photograph courtesy of Newton Historical Society.









About 2,500 Lustron all-metal prefabricated homes were manufactured 1947-1950. Brochures from Standlund family website, <http://members.tripod.com/~Strandlund>



Quonset huts, hot in the summer and cold in the winter, were used as military barracks in World War II. Thousands of families desperate for housing lived in them after the war. Photograph from Engines of Our Ingenuity website, John H. Lienhard, <http://www.uh.edu/engines/epi1278.htm>

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Advertisements printed in the Newton Villager to congratulate the new veteran homeowners, May 18, 1950.



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Suburbanites relied upon the automobile for commuting, shopping, and other activities.

Advertisements printed in the Newton Villager special Oak Hill Park edition, May 18, 1950





Oak Hill Park homes face onto pedestrian pathways named for fallen Newton World War II veterans. Photographs by author, November 2000.



Oak Hill homes were simple and affordable. Extras such as a breezeway or one-car garage were available at additional cost. Photographs by the author, November 2000.



Some Oak Park homes stand virtually unchanged since their original construction in 1949. Photographs by the author, November 2000.





Many homes in Oak Hill are almost unrecognizable, with second stories, garages, porches, added over the years. Some homes appear to have been entirely replaced. Photographs by the author, November 2000.

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