



# Civil Rights in Pennsylvania

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"The Henry Patterson Collection"

Background Information

## Henry Patterson

Henry Patterson, although an active member of the Republican Party, demonstrated the faith in government-led solutions typical of New Deal liberals. In 1954, he wrote a series of letters to persuade the venerable members of the President's Committee on Government Contracts (including Vice President Richard Nixon and Cabinet Secretary Maxwell Rabb) to use their collective authority to prevent the builders of Levittown, Pennsylvania, from creating an all-white suburban development. Patterson obtained the names of the committee members from Undersecretary of the Navy Thomas S. Gates Jr., a Philadelphia native and son of the former president of the University of Pennsylvania. Patterson included an American Friends Service Committee report on residential segregation with his letters, and he encouraged the recipients to pay particular attention to the federal role in creating and maintaining segregation. In spite of Patterson's diligence and apparent optimism, the responses he received offered him little encouragement. One respondent even included the text of the executive order establishing the Committee on Government Contracts to show Patterson that prohibiting racial exclusion in private development did not fall within the group's mandate. Patterson's noble letter-writing campaign apparently had no significant impact on Levittown's racial composition.

As Thomas Sugrue describes in *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (2008), the developers of Levittown unabashedly sought to maintain racial homogeneity. When a respectable, middle-class black family moved to the neighborhood in 1957, there was strong, sometimes violent resistance from many white residents. Patterson's collection includes the text of a 1958 speech given at the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing conference in Philadelphia in which the speaker compares the reaction of residents of Levittown to that of the people in Little Rock, Arkansas, who, during the same time period, sought to keep black students out of Central High School.