

Concord Park, Open Housing, and the Lost Promise of Civil Rights in the North

By Thomas J. Sugrue



Neighbors Mrs. Beatrice Dickerson and Mr. and Mrs. David Purdon in Concord Park, from “Democracy Comes to the Suburbs,” *Ebony*, Feb. 1957. Morris Milgram Papers.

Our histories of civil rights tend to focus on the South—on the dramatic struggles to desegregate public transportation, lunch counters, and schools in places like Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, Alabama; Atlanta and Albany, Georgia; Jackson and Philadelphia, Mississippi. But the struggle for civil rights was just as consequential north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

And few places were more important than Pennsylvania. The state had a long history of grassroots black activism. It was the birthplace of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a bastion of abolitionism, and home to two of the most influential black newspapers in the country—the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Philadelphia Tribune*. Pittsburgh and Philadelphia had some of the nation’s most active chapters of such civil rights groups as the National Negro Congress, the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Urban League. And throughout the 20th century black Pennsylvanians and their mostly white allies joined in the struggle for racial equality in schools, nondiscriminatory workplaces, and desegregated hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, and swimming pools.

Of all of the civil rights battles that played out in the North, few were more consequential than the battle against discrimination and

segregation in housing in greater Philadelphia. The city and its suburbs comprised one of the most racially segregated regions in the United States. Housing in Pennsylvania was racially separate and unequal because of persistent housing discrimination, beginning in the 1920s, when realtors put racial restrictions on new housing, continuing in the 1930s, when massive federal homeownership programs excluded nearly all African Americans, and accelerating in the 1940s and 1950s, when whites engaged in a mass exodus to the suburbs.

The statistics were grim, especially during the great post-World War II building boom. In metropolitan Philadelphia, between 1946 and 1953, only 347 of 120,000 new homes built were open to blacks. And throughout the postwar years, when blacks attempted to move into predominantly white communities they often faced hostility. In 1957, when William and Daisy Myers and their three children became the first black residents in Buck County's Levittown, they suffered weeks of harassment. Angry whites gathered on the streets, clashed with the police, vandalized property, and held mass meetings to protest. Whites clashed, too, with black newcomers in city neighborhoods like Kensington, and they rioted in suburban Folcroft. In wealthier communities resistance to blacks took a politer form. In the mid-1950s, for example, whites in Swarthmore successfully rebuffed a developer who proposed to build a racially mixed, single-family housing development. In postwar America, politicians and pundits celebrated America's "free market" system. But for African Americans, there was little freedom of choice in the housing market. Racial exclusion, which created a vast gap between supply and demand, plus federally backed mortgages that made low-interest mortgages available for whites but not for blacks, meant that blacks paid more for housing on average than did whites, despite the fact that they were concentrated in the oldest, most rundown housing in the region.

But black Pennsylvanians and their allies did not passively accept the racial segregation of the state's housing. Groups like the NAACP lobbied for local and state laws that forbade discrimination in housing; religious groups used the pulpit to argue that discrimination was a violation of God's law; and the American Friends Service Committee (the activist arm of the Society of Friends) spearheaded a national campaign against segregated housing. Together, these efforts made Philadelphia one of the nation's centers of what was called the "open housing movement." Although that movement met with few conspicuous successes (even in the early 21st century, greater Philadelphia ranked among the nation's most racially segregated metropolitan areas), it also broke new ground.

No Pennsylvania open housing effort garnered more national attention than Concord Park, in Lower Bucks County. Just a few miles away from Levittown, Concord Park was carved out of a 50-acre farm in a rapidly suburbanizing area just northeast of Philadelphia. Concord Park was meant to be an interracial Levittown, with 139 modest-sized single-family houses affordable to middle-class homebuyers, regardless of race. It

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Plenty of kitchen cabinets, plus work space topped with colorful FORMICA.
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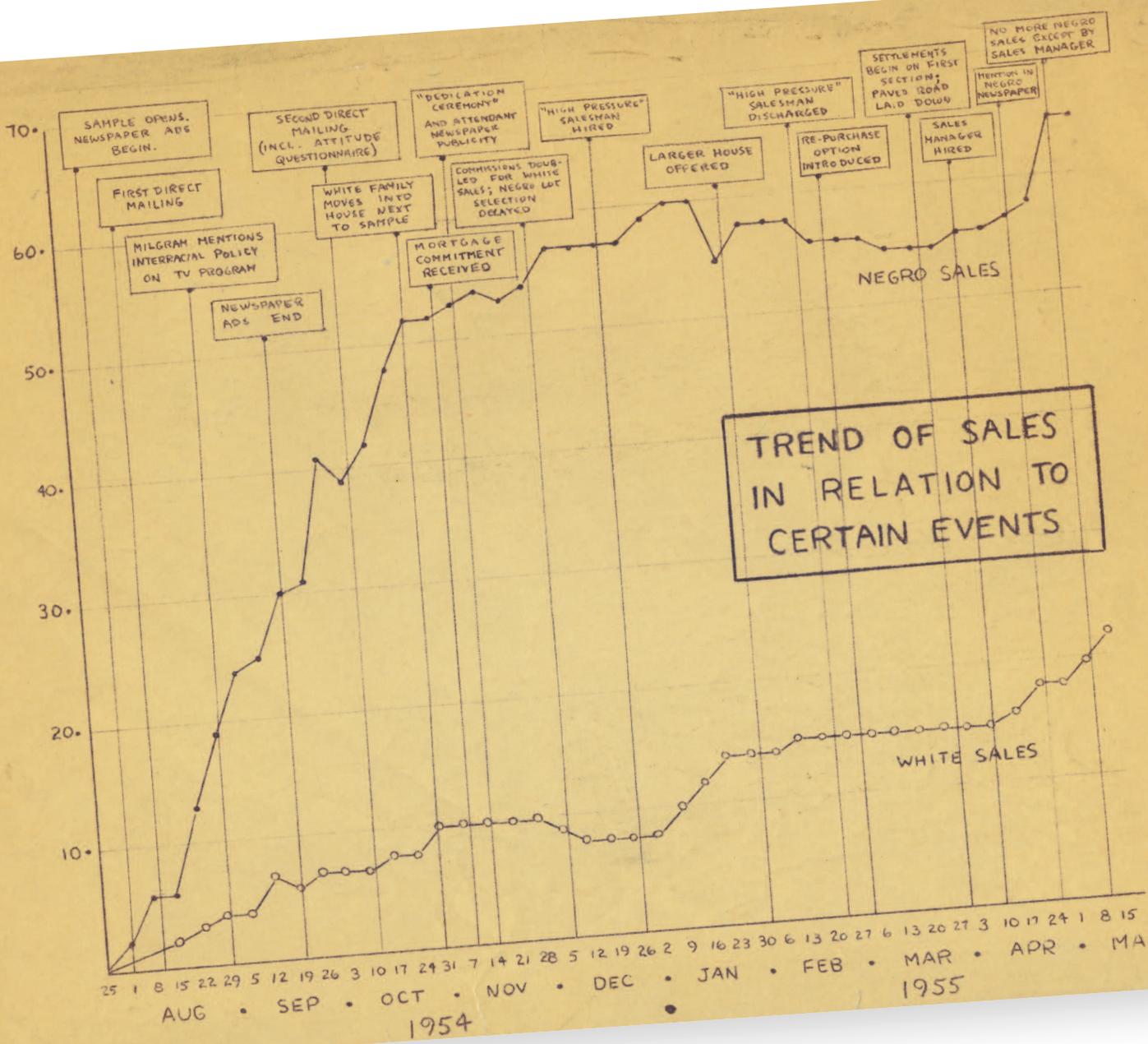
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Concord Park brochure. Morris Milgram Papers.

looked just like any other cookie-cutter suburban development of the 1950s. Its first model house—"the Arizona"—had three bedrooms, a living room-dining room combination, and a one-car garage, all for \$11,990. There was nothing in the least bit urban about the place.

Concord Park was the vision of Morris Milgram, a most unlikely suburban housing developer. The son of Jewish garment workers from New York's Lower East Side, Milgram's path to Concord Park began with the campus radicalism of the 1930s. An ardent antifascist and peace activist, Milgram was expelled from the City College of New York in 1934 after leading protests against a visiting delegation of fascist students. In the late 1930s, Milgram served as New Jersey executive secretary of the Workers' Defense League (WDL) and then became the national secretary during World War II. The WDL had a long record of supporting racial equality, which it saw as inseparable from "labor's rights." Milgram pledged to turn the WDL into "a new abolitionist agency to abolish all forms of racial discrimination," with special attention on housing.

Milgram's growing interest in housing led him to a career shift. Quitting the WDL in 1947, Milgram joined his father-in-law's construction firm in suburban Philadelphia. Milgram asked his father-in-law if he would be able to build for buyers regardless of their racial and ethnic background. His father-in-law was both bemused and skeptical: "We builders build for whites; that's just the way it is." Milgram did not have much business experience,



Graph showing trends in sales of Concord Park homes to black and white buyers in relations to specific events. Morris Milgram Papers.

but he learned the ropes quickly, mastering the intricacies of marketing, the tax code, zoning laws, and construction finance. For four and a half years, under his father-in-law's supervision, he built new housing for whites in suburban Philadelphia. "My conscience hurt," he recalled of his short stint as a developer of segregated suburban housing. Gradually, Milgram gained the experience and the capital to begin an experiment in what he called "open occupancy" housing.

When his father-in-law died, Milgram moved forward with a plan for an interracial alternative to Levittown. Beginning in the early 1950s, Milgram launched an effort to create a community whose demographics reflected the racial mix of Philadelphia—about 80 percent white and 20 percent black. The main problem he faced was financial. Banks and investors were unwilling to take a risk on an integrated housing project. In his first year of fundraising, Milgram collected a mere \$14,000. Finally, Milgram found an ally in George Otto, a suburban builder and a Quaker, who chaired the Philadelphia Friends Social Order Committee. Together, Milgram and Otto formed a corporation and raised

\$150,000 in venture capital. Milgram made his sales pitch in moral terms: "Put your money where your heart is." Milgram found that "Quakers and Socialists were the easiest to get as investors"; in fact more than half of Concord Park's capital came from Quakers. But obtaining mortgage financing for the project turned out to be more difficult. More than 20 financial institutions turned Milgram down. Most banks had little or no experience with mortgages for blacks. No one had ever heard of a planned interracial community. It was a canon of actuarial science that blacks lowered property values. Finally, one New York-based bank with experience lending to blacks broke the ice. Its support pulled Concord Park from the "brink of financial ruin."

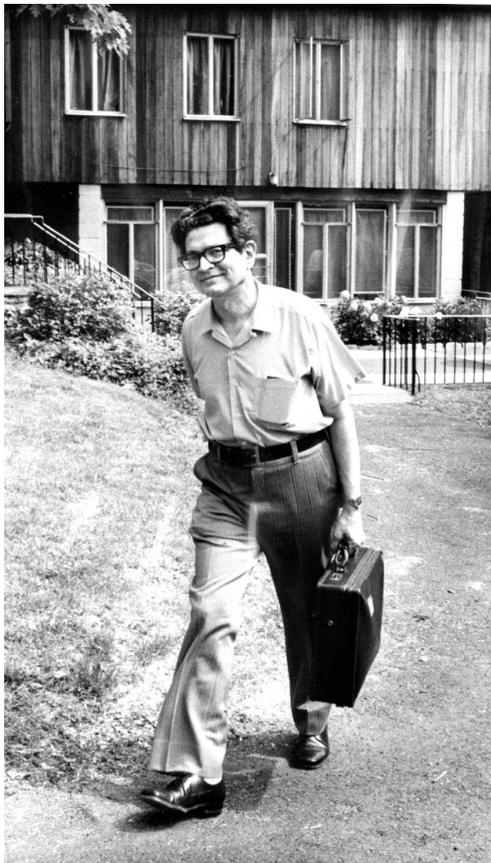
Milgram had no intention of creating a left-wing utopia. Although many of his comrades had advocated interracial cooperatives as an alternative to mainstream America, Milgram set his sights on the broad middle class. The novelty of Concord Park created a buzz. More than 25,000 visitors came through Concord Park's model home—decorated by Levittown's own interior designer—when it opened in 1954. Most of those visitors

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were white. But what Milgram had not anticipated was that the vast majority of interested purchasers would be African Americans. Blacks had hardly any housing options in the suburbs. Their pent-up demand was simply overwhelming. Of the first 60 applicants for housing in Concord Park, 50 were black. Milgram recalled his trepidation at the prospect of an all-black suburb. “I woke up one night in a cold sweat and said to myself, ‘Morris, you s.o.b, you’re building a ghetto.’” White buyers were nervous that they would be moving into a majority black community. “Well, you know how Negroes depreciate the value of property,” demurred one white visitor. Others worried about the social risks of living in a racially mixed community. “My parents would never get over it,” claimed one white woman. A white lawyer worried that he would “lose face with his clients” if word got out that he lived with blacks. Milgram had unwittingly bumped against the limits of racial tolerance. As Milgram recalled, the “hardest task was to secure the first ten or twenty white sales.” Concord Park needed a critical mass of whites to attract other white buyers.

How could Concord Park succeed as a model integrated community if whites would not buy? The question generated an intense debate among Milgram’s handpicked interracial board. Several board members felt obliged to meet the unanticipated black demand for suburban housing, even if that meant putting integration on hold. Should deserving black homebuyers be turned away, left in the ghetto, in service of a well-meaning experiment in racial integration? George Otto, more hardheaded about financial matters than Milgram, feared that the investors would lose money if they waited for whites to move in. Milgram counseled patience.

In mid-1955, Concord Park’s board came up with an ingenious—if controversial—solution. After a contentious meeting, it decided to establish a “controlled occupancy pattern,” namely a quota of home sales to blacks and whites: 45 percent of the community’s homes would be set aside for blacks, 55 percent for whites. The very notion of quotas rankled many board members. Weren’t they just another form of racial discrimination? A prominent black civil rights activist who feared that Concord Park would “just be another ghetto” if it were not deliberately integrated nonetheless



Morris Milgram outside his home in Greenbelt Knoll, Pennsylvania, another of his “open housing” communities. Courtesy of McDowell Bulletin Collection, Urban Archives, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia.

instinctively recoiled at the notion. By a narrow margin, the board approved the plan. So long as whites were prejudiced and blacks had limited options on the “open” market, integration would be difficult to achieve without some drastic intervention. But quotas—which in the case of Concord Park meant singling out blacks and keeping them at bay—sat uneasily with many activists.

Attracting whites was hard work. At first, sales agents were given bonuses for recruiting white families. By spring 1955, Concord Park hired a white broker who agreed to move into the community and speak from his own experience to reassure nervous whites. Milgram directed nearly all of the advertising to the white market. Concord Park brochures went to 20,000 “liberal” households. Ads appeared in Quaker publications and, later, in liberal magazines with a national circulation. Milgram tirelessly traveled around speaking to church groups, synagogues, and liberal organizations—anyone who would give him a platform. Back in his office, Milgram nervously kept a map of the entire community on a bulletin board, with red and blue pins to represent blacks and whites.

By 1958, the development was completed, all of its houses were sold, and the racial quota had been met. One white resident described her neighbors as “nonconformists, especially on the racial

issue.” A handful of Communist families made Concord Park their home. Several interracial couples—unwelcome in almost all white neighborhoods—bought houses there. Milgram celebrated the triumph of Concord Park as a “democratic” alternative to the “un-American type of housing” that Levitt built.

What was noteworthy about Concord Park and Milgram’s subsequent developments around the Northeast was how little overt resistance they generated. Angry whites did not rise up and thwart the developments. “Here is proof,” wrote activist Paul Blanshard, “that we Americans can throw off the fears and misunderstandings behind housing segregation. Here is proof that whites will rise to the opportunity of democracy in housing if given a chance.” Nearly every journalistic observer of Concord Park celebrated the spirit of cooperation between black and white neighbors. Blacks and whites played bridge together, joined the same bowling, photography, and sewing clubs, and formed a babysitting cooperative. Every stereotype of the suburban world of

joiners was confirmed in Concord Park, with the new twist of black and white faces together. To the news media, hungry for examples of racial cooperation in the world of intensifying conflict, Milgram's story was proof positive of the willingness of whites to drop their irrational prejudices.

But the peace at Concord Park was less the result of northern liberality on race than it was of Milgram's careful planning. Milgram carefully chose the sites of his projects. Concord Park was in the white-dominated suburbs, but it was bordered by a small black suburban enclave and cut off from nearby white housing by a railroad line, the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and a cemetery. In Northeast Philadelphia, where Milgram built another development—Greenbelt Knoll—with 19 architect-designed modernist houses (where Milgram himself settled), nearby white neighborhood groups were assuaged by the isolation of the site, surrounded by a heavily forested park and a train line. To prevent racial clashes at city pools, Milgram constructed a private swim club for Greenbelt Knoll residents. He recognized that, in the segregated world of the metropolitan North, the vast

majority of whites simply would not accept sharing their neighborhoods, their schools, and their pools with blacks, no matter how open-minded they professed to be.

Even with careful planning, however, Concord Park proved to be a fragile and short-lived experiment. Because metropolitan Philadelphia remained so racially segregated and because there were so few suburban housing developments that were nondiscriminatory, there remained great pent-up demand for its houses among blacks. By the 1960s, blacks, eager to live in a racially mixed suburban community began purchasing houses from whites who were retiring or moving out. In addition, by the 1960s and 1970s, suburban tract ranch houses fell out of favor among the young, liberal whites whom Milgram had targeted. Concord Park's little ranchers, which looked just like Levittown's mass-produced homes, did not have the cachet among white leftists and counterculturalists, who were attracted instead to gentrifying urban neighborhoods. But the unwillingness of whites to live in racially mixed neighborhoods remained the biggest obstacle to long-term racial integration. Most Philadelphia-area whites were not attracted



Victory in Pennsylvania

Governor David L. Lawrence signs the fair housing law, surrounded by officers and members of the Pennsylvania Equal Rights Council. *Seated, left to right:* Roland Sawyer, United Steelworkers; Governor Lawrence, Marguerite Hofer, Pittsburgh Presbytery. *Standing, left to right:* Murray Friedman, American Jewish Committee; Walter Gay, NAACP; Darlington Hooper, Reading Race Relations Council; Nathan Agran, Philadelphia Fellowship Commission; the Rev. George Evans, Jr., State Council of Churches; James Rowland, NAACP; Harry Boyer, Pennsylvania AFL-CIO.

Governor Lawrence signing Pennsylvania's Human Relations Act in 1961, from Fair Employment Practices Commission brochure.

Thelma McDaniel Collection.

Pennsylvania Human Relations Act of 1961, excerpt

The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania hereby enacts as follows: . . .

SECTION 2. FINDINGS AND DECLARATION OF POLICY.—

- (a) The practice or policy of discrimination against individuals or groups by reason of their race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin is a matter of concern of the Commonwealth. Such discrimination foments domestic strife and unrest, threatens the rights and privileges of the inhabitants of the Commonwealth, and undermines the

foundations of the free democratic state. The denial of *equal employment, housing and public accommodation* opportunities because of such discrimination, and the consequent failure to utilize the productive capacities of individuals to their fullest extent, deprives large segments of the population of the Commonwealth of earnings necessary to maintain decent standards of living, necessitates their resort to public relief and intensifies group conflicts, thereby resulting in grave injury to the public health and welfare, compels many individuals to *live in dwellings which are substandard, unhealthful and overcrowded, resulting in racial segregation in public schools and other community facilities, juvenile delinquency and other evils, thereby threatening the peace, health, safety and general welfare of the Commonwealth and its inhabitants. . . .*

SECTION 3. RIGHT TO FREEDOM FROM DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT, *Housing and Places of Public Accommodation.*—

The opportunity for an individual to obtain employment for which he is qualified, *and to obtain all the accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of any place of public accommodation and of commercial housing* without discrimination because of race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin [is] *are* hereby recognized as and declared to be [a civil right] *civil rights* which shall be enforceable [only] as set forth in this act.

SECTION 4. DEFINITIONS.—AS USED IN THIS ACT UNLESS A DIFFERENT MEANING CLEARLY APPEARS FROM THE CONTEXT:

- (a) The term “person” includes one or more individuals, partnerships, associations, organizations, corporations, legal representatives, trustees in bankruptcy or receivers. *It also includes, but is not limited to, any owner, lessor, assignor, builder, manager, broker, salesman, agent, employe, lending institution and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and all political subdivisions, authorities, boards and commissions thereof. . . .*

to neighborhoods with even a small black population: they continued to move in overwhelming numbers to all-white communities that became, as Philadelphia mayor Richardson Dilworth put it, a “white noose” surrounding the city.

The result was that from the 1960s forward, Concord Park grew increasingly less diverse. In the early 1990s, the last white family moved out. Concord Park had offered a temporary refuge from segregated America in the 1950s and 1960s, but it fell victim to larger patterns that Milgram and open housing activists could not control. So long as the housing market remained unfree—so long as whites had a myriad of choices about where to live and so long as blacks did not—places like Concord Park would remain few and far between, a reminder of the promise and the lost opportunities of the northern struggle for civil rights. ■

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Morris Milgram and visitor in front of Concord Park sign, from Concord Park flyer. Morris Milgram Papers.

- (i) *The term “housing accommodations” includes (1) any building or structure or portion thereof which is used or occupied or is intended, arranged or designed to be used or occupied as the home residence or sleeping place of one or more individuals, groups or families whether or not living independently of each other; and (2) any vacant land offered for sale or lease for commercial housing.*
- (j) *The term “commercial housing” means housing accommodations held or offered for sale or rent (1) by a real estate broker, salesman or agent, or by any other person pursuant to authorization of the owner; (2) by the owner himself; or (3) by legal representatives, but shall not include any personal residence offered for sale or rent by the owner or by his broker, salesman, agent or employe.*
- (k) *The term “personal residence” means a building or structure containing living quarters occupied or intended to be occupied by no more than two individuals, two groups or two families living independently of each other and used by the owner thereof as a bona fide residence for himself and any members of his family forming his household. . . .*

SECTION 5. UNLAWFUL [EMPLOYMENT] Discriminatory Practices.— . . .

- (h) *For any person to:*
 - (1) *Refuse to sell, lease, finance or otherwise to deny or withhold commercial housing from any person because of the race, color, religious creed, ancestry or national origin or any prospective owner, occupant or user of such commercial housing.*
 - (2) *Refuse to lend money, whether or not secured by mortgage or otherwise for the acquisition, construction, rehabilitation, repair or maintenance of commercial housing or otherwise withhold financing of commercial housing from any person because of the race, color, religious creed, ancestry or national origin of any present or prospective owner, occupant or user of such commercial housing.*
 - (3) *Discriminate against any person in the terms or*

conditions of selling or leasing any commercial housing or in furnishing facilities, services or privileges in connection with the ownership, occupancy or use of any commercial housing because of the race, color, religious creed, ancestry or national origin of any present or prospective owner, occupant or user of such commercial housing.

- (4) *Discriminate against any person in the terms or conditions of any loan of money, whether or not secured by mortgage or otherwise for the acquisition, construction, rehabilitation, repair or maintenance of commercial housing because of the race, color, religious creed, ancestry or national origin of any present or prospective owner, occupant or user of such commercial housing.*
- (5) *Print, publish or circulate any statement or advertisement relating to the sale, lease or acquisition of any commercial housing or the loan of money, whether or not secured by mortgage, or otherwise for the acquisition, construction, rehabilitation, repair or maintenance of commercial housing which indicates any preference, limitation, specification, or discrimination based upon race, color, religious creed, ancestry or national origin.*
- (6) *Make any inquiry, elicit any information, make or keep any record or use any form of application, containing questions or entries concerning race, color, religious creed, ancestry or national origin in connection with the sale or lease of any commercial housing or loan of any money, whether or not secured by mortgage or otherwise for the acquisition, construction, rehabilitation, repair or maintenance of commercial housing. . . .*

APPROVED—The 28th day of February, A. D. 1961.

DAVID L. LAWRENCE

Source: *Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Passed at the Session of 1961 . . .* (Harrisburg, PA, 1961), no. 19, pp. 47–57. Bracketed text represents text from 1955 Fair Employment Practices Law that is amended with this new act. The new wording is rendered in italics.