

# HISTORY OF HOUSING IN OAK PARK *NOW IS YOUR TIME IN HISTORY TO SHAPE OAK PARK*



Progress has always been a community effort. Time and again, residents and local leaders have stepped up with bold ideas and values-driven policy to shape our shared future — building a village that honors its history, culture, and architecture while defending every person’s fundamental right to belong and thrive. Let’s take a look back at how Oak Park became a village that shaped its own story.

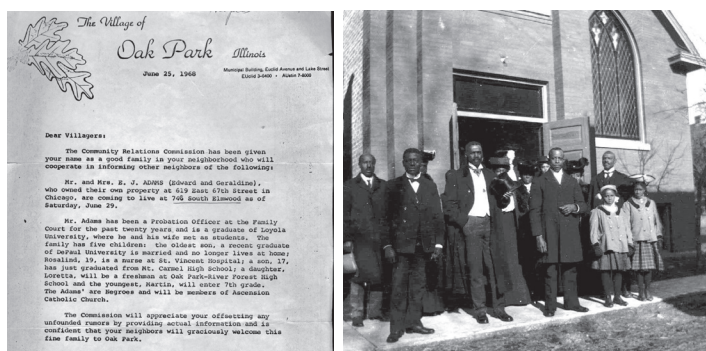


Unidentified African-American man driving a delivery wagon on Lake Street. [Oak Park River Forest Museum]

## 1902: CHOOSING OUR OWN PATH

At the turn of the twentieth century, Oak Park stood at a crossroads: remain part of Cicero Township, annex to Chicago, or chart a new course. The Village had already built a strong community with urban amenities — a library, schools, social clubs, clean water supply, and urban amenities—and frankly, didn’t want to be part of Chicago or overlooked by neighboring township officials.

With a shared vision for independence and after a lengthy legal battle, Oak Park became a self-governing municipality on January 2, 1902. It was the first of many bold choices residents would make to shape their community.



From left to right: Home of Dr. Percy L. Julian, scientist and resident; Move In Memo from Village of Oak Park to neighbors of incoming African-American families; Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, one of the first African-American owned churches in Oak Park. [Oak Park River Forest Museum]

## 1950S - 1960S: A VILLAGE AT ANOTHER CROSSROADS

By the mid-twentieth century, Oak Park was home to progressive thinkers—architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and scientists like Dr. Percy L. Julian. As the Great Migration brought African Americans from the rigidly segregated South of the United States seeking equality and opportunity, they often still faced housing discrimination in northern regions, including Oak Park.

By the 1960s, only a small percentage of Oak Park’s population identified as Black. While African American residents had cemented their place in Oak Park – establishing churches like, Mt. Carmel Baptist, and owning their homes and businesses, the discriminatory laws, policies, and common practices spearheaded by building owners, realtors, and bankers disproportionately affected them.

Oak Park remained a progressive village that invited speakers who shared new ideas and championed the arts and culture. Watching neighboring communities struggle with racial division, facing the devastating costs of segregation, and risking white flight to outlying suburbs – Oak Park leaders and residents asked themselves a defining question:

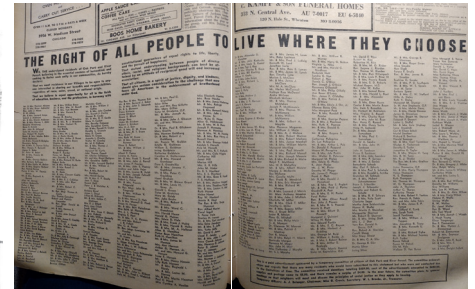
## *WHO DO WE WANT OAK PARK TO BE?*

## 1963: A SPARK THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

In 1963, Carol Anderson—a twenty-three-year-old violinist and graduate of the Boston Conservatory of Music—was initially blocked from practicing with the Symphony. Her exclusion drew national attention and community pressure resulted in her being featured in a concert, beginning the racial integration of that institution. The incident garnered national attention and became the spark that ignited action on integration, open housing, and fair housing policy.

The “Symphony Incident” led to the creation of public and private groups, including the Citizens Committee for Human Rights, Village of Oak Park Human Relations Commission, all working toward building an integrated Oak Park. Members and friends affiliated with the newly formed Citizens Committee for Human Rights took out a full-page spread in the Oak Park Leaves newspaper, with prominent community figures speaking out about housing discrimination.

By unanimous vote, the Village also created the Commission on Human Relations—a significant moment when Oak Park decided to take control of its own story and a definitive declaration that Oak Park would be a welcoming place for all.

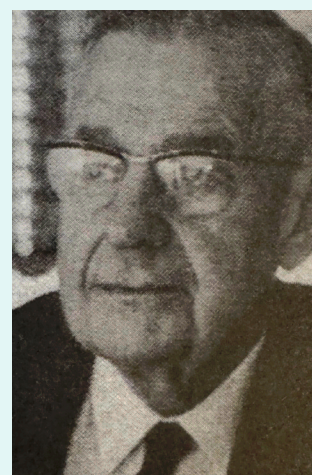


From left to right: Carol Anderson congratulated by Milton Preves, retiring conductor; Oak Park Housing marches in Spring and Summer of 1966; ‘The Right of All People to Live Where They Choose’ full-page spread in the Oak Park Leaves [Oak Park River Forest Museum]

## 1968: TURNING VALUES INTO ACTION

With community outcry surrounding the Symphony incident, and other unfair policies and practices, housing became a heavily debated topic of the Oak Park Village Board for more than a year. Protests and disagreements from both sides of the public led to heated debates and protests. In 1968, during a period of national upheaval that included the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Oak Park Village Board put its full support behind an open housing ordinance and drafted a comprehensive proposal for fair housing. While met with some opposition, there was also a loud show of support from leaders who made sure all people felt welcome and supported.

**OAK PARK DIDN'T JUST PASS A LAW—  
THEY BACKED THEIR VALUES WITH CONCRETE ACTION:**



Oak Park Police Chief Fremont Nestor [Oak Park River Forest Museum]

### A SAFE PLACE FOR ALL

When Black residents feared support and services from the police, Oak Park’s Police Chief, Fremont Nestor, made a personal and public commitment: the police would protect all residents equally. He personally assured new Black residents that officers would be there for them and reminded white residents to welcome their new neighbors.

### FAIR HOUSING

With the Fair Housing Act of 1968, Oak Park established protections that went beyond federal law, prohibiting housing quotas and residential segregation to ensure equitable distribution of residents throughout the community. Today, the village’s local fair housing law now extends protection to an extensive range of classes, including race, sex, color, religion, national origin, veteran status, sexual orientation, age, marital status, familial status, disability, source of income, and gender identity.

### ONGOING ACCOUNTABILITY

To enforce these protections, Oak Park requires all rental property owners and managers to complete annual fair housing training as part of their licensing requirements and actively works with local organizations to test for discrimination. The Human Relations Commission was established to oversee and enforce these ordinances, which continue to be updated and expanded to maintain Oak Park’s commitment to fair and inclusive housing practices.

### INVESTOR RESPONSIBILITY

Leadership and policies encouraged increased investment by developers in all privately-owned rental and multi-unit properties. This ensured that no properties would become blighted or fall into disrepair.



### TODAY: YOUR OAK PARK

In many ways, Oak Park's character was shaped by its commitment to integration which started with Fair Housing. Oak Park succeeded because residents and leaders backed Fair Housing with concrete action—changing laws, investing in communities, and encouraging property maintenance across all neighborhoods. The result? Oak Park has become nationally recognized as a leader in integration, historic preservation, and culture, while remaining a beautiful and thriving community.



## Oak Park faces a new challenge.

Just as Oak Park faced pivotal moments in 1902 and 1968, today we find ourselves at another crossroads. Housing costs are rising faster than incomes, making it harder for teachers, small business owners, young families, and long-time residents to afford living here. Everything that makes Oak Park unique comes from residents who take a stand and share their voice.

Once again, residents are being called to Shape Oak Park.

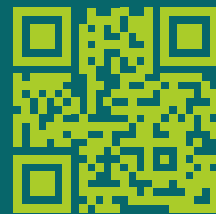
Just as residents in 1902 chose independence and residents in 1968 chose integration, you're being asked to make a choice that will define Oak Park's future:

How could we update the zoning to allow for more missing middle housing—duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, and townhomes—so that we can help more people afford to live in our community while preserving the character and neighborhoods we love?

## YOUR VOICE MATTERS. YOUR CHOICE SHAPES OUR FUTURE

To learn more about some of the stories mentioned here, visit **Oak Park River Forest Museum** and its exhibit **Open House: The Legacy of Fair Housing**, Wednesdays-Saturdays, 1 to 5 p.m. or purchase *Suburban Promised Land* at the museum or via [oprfmuseum.org](http://oprfmuseum.org)

Images courtesy of Oak Park River Forest Museum, [oprfmuseum.org](http://oprfmuseum.org) or 708-848-6755



## LET'S SHAPE OAK PARK

Shape Oak Park is a zoning code update that invites residents to guide Oak Park's evolution while creating more housing choices. Through year-long engagement—surveys, conversations, and workshops—residents will explore how missing middle housing (duplexes, townhomes, and small-scale buildings) can expand opportunities for all to live here, all while preserving the neighborhood character that makes Oak Park special. It's about ensuring future generations can write their own Oak Park story by aligning our zoning with our community values of equity, inclusion, sustainability, and affordability.

## WHAT IS ZONING & WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Think of zoning as the rules that determine *what* can be built *where* in our community. These regulations decide whether a lot can have a business, public space or residence. If it is a residence, then the rules will determine whether it is a single-family home, a duplex or a small apartment building. They set requirements for parking, building height and lot coverage. While zoning might sound technical, it directly shapes who can afford to live in Oak Park, what housing choices are available and how our neighborhoods evolve.



Zoning codes don't always align with their community's current needs, wants or values. That's where this strategic update to key zoning standards comes in—we're refining these rules to create more housing opportunities while preserving Oak Park's cherished character, walkability and scale.

## WHAT IS MISSING MIDDLE HOUSING?

Missing Middle Housing is a range of buildings with multiple units compatible in scale and form with detached single-family homes and located in existing neighborhoods. These buildings support walkability, locally-serving retail and public transportation options. They provide solutions along a spectrum of affordability to address the mismatch between the available housing stock and shifting demographics combined with the growing demand for walkability.

