Hundreds of deeds for homes on the North Shore contain racist language or covenants, prohibiting the properties from being transferred to specific ethnic groups, according to recent research spearheaded by housing activists and a local NAACP chapter.

Discriminatory restrictions in real estate deeds are illegal now, and the old language voided by the state Land Court.

But those deeds are still held today, and the community organizations that spearheaded the research said the legacy of this discrimination lives on.

“This is one piece of the real tapestry of policy that was used to achieve the effect of ultimate thing is how explicit this practice was, even in a place that we typically like to think of as a traditionally liberal region.”

The research, conducted with the University of Minnesota's Mapping Prejudice project, found nearly 400 properties across 10 communities have deeds banning the homes from being occupied by or sold to Blacks — and, in some cases, also excluded Jews, Italians, Greeks or Armenians.
In total, researchers identified 559 deeds with the racist language in these Essex County cities and towns: Beverly, Danvers, Gloucester, Haverhill, Lynn, Lynnfield, Marblehead, Nahant, Peabody and Saugus. The deeds found were written between roughly 1917 and the late 1940s.

In one deed from Beverly, the property carried this restriction: “Said premises shall not be conveyed to or occupied by a colored persons.”

Another one from Nahant stated, “The premises ... shall not be owned or occupied by any person of Negro, Jewish, Italian, Greek, Polish or Armenian blood.”

Putting discriminatory language in deeds was once a prolific practice across the country.

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A NAHANT DEED

Amy Dain, a Boston-area housing policy expert, said such covenants paved the way for exclusionary zoning policies enacted nationwide in the decades after World War II.

“It’s a huge legacy that’s now embedded into zoning policy that really segregated regions by economics,” Dain said. “There was an understanding in the American setting that race and ethnicity often correlated with class and wealth income issues. As they adopted zoning, it became a system of great concentration of privilege and also [places] where disadvantage has been concentrated.”

Black people in the United States continue to lag far behind whites in homeownership. In 2021, nearly three-quarters of white people in the United States owned homes — but, for Black people, it was just 44%, according to national real estate data.

Kenann McKenzie-DeFranza, president of the North Shore NAACP and a professor at Gordon College, said the racist deeds’ covenants also contributed to current lower rates of homeownership and generational wealth among people of color.

“Communities continue to dig out from underneath inequities that have piled on because of being placed in substandard locations, of being denied access to healthier locations, more productive ways of engaging ... whether that's access to work or healthy green spaces, access to the water, to the ocean,” she said. “These are all things that affect not only health determinants, it affects your quality of life, it affects educational opportunities.”

A GBH News investigation last year, Barriers at the Beach, highlighted the role of racist covenants in creating unequal access to coastal beaches in Massachusetts, often along racial and ethnic lines. The Registry of Deeds on Martha's Vineyard held several deeds banning ownership and any occupation of properties to non-whites. Those homes also carried access to exclusive nearby beaches.
Among the nearly dozen towns where deeds were surveyed, higher numbers of racist covenants were discovered in Lynnfield with 122 properties, in Danvers with 82 and Nahant with 51. Today, those three towns are about 90% white and with median house prices between $635,000 and $960,000.

Lynnfield resident Linda Duchin is a member of local group called Lynnfield for Love that hopes to foster a more inclusive future for the town.

“I’m saddened to hear [the data on Lynnfield’s exclusionary deeds]. It’s just yet another example that there was blatant racism,” she said. “I do feel it’s good to shed the light on it and show people this is what was in effect. I want to live in a community that is inclusive and diverse.”

Harborlight, the housing nonprofit, is offering to help homeowners find out if their deeds contain racist language and go through the state Land Court to formally remove those prohibited restrictions from the deed.