The exclusionary roots of our current housing crisis, and its separation into the haves and have-nots, can be traced back decades.

The racism is easy to spot because no one was shy about it. There were no subdued backroom whispers. There was no quiet rejection of those looking for homes. Rather, it was all there in black and white, in hundreds of deeds across Essex County.

The so-called racial covenants baked into those legal documents were designed to ensure property would remain in the hands of the wealthy and the white and the Protestant – in perpetuity.

A total of 559 such covenants were discovered in Essex County deeds during a research project conducted by Harborlight Homes and the North Shore NAACP. The offending deeds were found in Beverly, Danvers, Gloucester, Haverhill, Lynn, Lynnfield, Marblehead, Nahant, Peabody and Saugus. There are likely more, as many deeds have yet to be digitized, and weren’t subject to the software used by the groups for their “Dirty Deeds” project.

The covenants are not subtle. One Beverly deed, for example, says the property “shall not be conveyed to or occupied by a colored person.” Another in Nahant says the home “shall not be owned or occupied by a person of Negro, Jewish, Italian, Greek, Polish or Armenian blood.” Dozens limit property ownership to “no persons other than the Caucasian race.”

Many of those covenants survive today, even as the properties they cover have changed hands. Volunteers from the project will be reaching out to property owners to help them cleanse their deeds of the offending lines.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled the covenants unenforceable in 1948, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 outlawed them altogether. But the damage was done, and it lingers to this day. It echoes in modern-day zoning laws, and in claims that building affordable housing would “change the character” of primarily white, middle- and upper-class neighborhoods.

“Just because this practice is banned, it does not go away,” Jean Michael Fana, advocacy and education manager for Harborlight Homes, told reporter Paul Leighton. “There are other methods to achieve racially exclusionary neighborhoods.”

One such method is redlining, or the withholding of credit from minority borrowers to deny them the chance to buy a home at all, no matter the location. Locally, those methods include fighting tooth-and-nail against any effort to update municipal zoning laws to allow for more housing to be built. And the effects are real. From 2017-2012, 70% of white residents of Essex County owned their homes, according to data from the Essex County Community Foundation. That’s significantly higher than Black (38%) or Hispanic (31%) residents.

“Communities continue to dig out from underneath inequities that have been 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, the ocean,” Kenann McKenzie-DeFranza, president of the North Shore NAACP, told WGBH. “These are all things that affect not only health determinants, it affects your quality of life, it affects your educational opportunities.”

Fana said racial covenants often correlate with areas that are now zoned for single-family homes, and such zones make it difficult for low-income families to find housing they can afford. “It’s an economic segregation,” he said. “It hits more people of color, but it hits poor whites too.”

Removing the remaining racial covenants from Essex County deeds is a worthy and necessary goal. But we will not erase the stain of their existence until we come to grips with their continued influence and act accordingly, ensuring equal access to housing for all.