BEVERLY — The deeds of several hundred properties in southern Essex County contain language that at one time prohibited the homes from being sold to people of color or certain ethnic groups, according to a research project.

A total 559 racially restrictive covenants, as they are known, have been found in 10 communities, including Beverly, Danvers, Gloucester, Haverhill, Lynn, Lynnfield, Marblehead, Nahant, Peabody and Saugus.

Examples include a deed in Beverly that says the property “shall not be conveyed to or occupied by a colored person,” and one in Nahant stating that the premises “shall not be owned or occupied by an person of Negro, Jewish, Italian, Greek, Polish or Armenian blood.”

The restrictive covenants were discovered as part of the “Dirty Deeds Project,” a collaboration between Harborlight Homes, a Beverly-based affordable housing nonprofit, and the North Shore NAACP.

Racial covenants are a legacy of discrimination against African Americans, and at times also named poor European migrants. The covenants are no longer legally enforceable. But Harborlight Homes and the North Shore NAACP say they want to raise awareness of the covenants’ existence and the effect they have to this day on where people live.
The racially restrictive covenants played a crucial role in the creation of modern-day zoning laws that still have the effect of excluding people of color, said Jean Michael Fana, the advocacy and education manager for Harborlight Homes.

“Just because this practice is banned, it does not go away,” he said. “There are other methods to achieve racially exclusionary neighborhoods.”

Harborlight Homes and the NAACP were able to find the racial covenants on the North Shore with the help of the Mapping Prejudice Project based at the University of Minnesota Libraries.

In 2019, Harborlight provided the Mapping Prejudice Project with property records from the Southern Essex County Registry of Deeds. Mapping Prejudice used its then-experimental algorithm, optical character recognition and a list of terms commonly used in racial covenants to flag potential ‘hits’ in the deeds.

The search found a total of 559 deeds with racial covenants — 204 in Lynnfield, 90 in Nahant, 83 in Danvers, 62 in Saugus, 41 in Gloucester, 32 in Beverly, 22 in Haverhill, 18 in Peabody, six in Lynn, and one in Marblehead.

The number is likely higher, because not all records are digitized, Fana said.

Local volunteers are now going through the deeds to see if the language still exists in the current or most recent deeds for the properties. Harborlight and the NAACP said they will assist homeowners who want to erase the language from their deeds.

The organizations are teaming up with a company called Precision GIS to map the locations of the racial covenant deeds and cross-reference them with modern zoning laws and racial makeups.

Racial covenants often correlate with areas that are now zoned for single-family homes. He said single-family zones make it difficult for low-income people to access housing, Fana said.

“It’s an economic segregation,” he said. “It hits more people of color, but it hits poor whites too.”

Kenann McKenzie-DeFranza, president of the North Shore Branch NAACP, said addressing the legacy of racial covenants is “essential in our ongoing fight for racial justice and equality.”

“By partnering with Harborlight Homes, we are taking concrete actions to ensure that these discriminatory practices are consigned to the past and that our communities can move forward united in fairness and opportunity,” she said in a news release.

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