

The Tollivers Move to Brighton

In 1960, the town of Brighton had few if any people of color among its residents, let alone among its homeowners. Years of systematic restrictions and red-lining had insured that only Caucasian people lived within its boundaries. This situation was not unique to Brighton.

Richard Rothstein has stated: *“Racial segregation in housing was not merely a project of southerners in the former slaveholding Confederacy. It was a nation-wide project of the federal government in the twentieth century, designed and implemented by its most liberal leaders. Our system of official segregation was not the result of a single law that consigned African Americans to designated neighborhoods. Rather, scores of racially explicit laws, regulation, and government practices combined to create a nationwide system of urban ghettos, surrounded by white suburbs.”* (*The Color of Law: a Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, by Richard Rothstein, Liveright Publishing Corp., 2017, p. xii)

The developers of many of Brighton's early 20th century neighborhoods included a list of covenants or restrictions that were to run with the land. These usually included rules pertaining to setback, minimal cost of dwelling, the making and/or selling of spirituous beverages, location of chicken coops, and garages. Some included specific statements as to who could purchase a house in the development; the language in others was more subtle. According to Rothstein, in order to obtain federal loans to develop a subdivision, corporations had to include deed restrictions regarding race.

The restrictions contained in the deeds of the early twentieth century do not continue in deeds for Brighton post-World War II housing boom. In 1947 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Shelley v. Kraemer* that restrictive covenants were not enforceable.

The Bel Air neighborhood's “uniform plan of restrictions” does not include any rules regarding race or ethnicity yet Peter and Yvonne Tolliver were met with opposition from some residents of that neighborhood when they attempted to purchase a house on Varinna Drive in the Bel Air neighborhood in August of 1960.

Bel Air's developers had not placed restrictive racial covenants in the deeds but some people who lived there assumed that Bel Air was a “white” neighborhood and acted to thwart the Tolliver's purchase. A housing activist, Peter Tolliver stood firm and, with the help of family, friends, local officials, and some sympathetic Bel Air neighbors, successfully moved into the house in which he and Yvonne lived for the next fifty-seven years.

Peter Tolliver continued his work to eliminate housing bias as a member of CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), serving as its housing chairman. In 1963 he participated in a series of programs sponsored by WOKR Channel 13 called “Negro Housing in Rochester – 100 Years After.” In succeeding years, Peter Tolliver continued his community service as president of the Rochester Rehabilitation Center's board of trustees. In 1981 and 1983, he ran for Brighton Town Supervisor and, as such, is believed to have been the first Black man outside the city to run for elected office.

Peter Tolliver earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in physics at Fisk University. After teaching positions at Fisk and Tennessee A & I, he went to the University of Michigan for his Ph.D. A position at Stromberg-Carlson brought him to Rochester in the 1950s. Subsequent positions at Sybron and Xerox utilized his skills as a physicist and enabled him to patent several devices. As stated in the cultural resources survey for the Varinna Drive house, “Peter's ceaseless curiosity, problem-solving skills, and belief that ‘there's got to be a better way’ led to multiple patented inventions from the 1960s through the 2010s that focused on improving various aspects of his and other's lives...” (Historic Resource Inventory form, Christopher Brandt, 20 January 2022).

Yvonne Tolliver, an Eastman School of Music alumna, was active in the local arts community, serving on the boards of the Rochester Opera Company, the Women's Council of the Memorial Art Gallery, and the Rochester Philharmonic League. A private piano teacher, she also served as a professional accompanist well into the 21st century.

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