

Where  
the past  
is present

# DETROIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## TEACHER RESOURCE LESSON PLAN

### DETROIT AND THE SUBURBS

#### INTRODUCTION

This lesson was originally published in *Telling Detroit's Story: Historic Past, Proud People, Shining Future* curriculum unit developed by the Detroit 300 Commission in 2001.

Through this lesson, students in grades nine through twelve gain a better understanding and a deeper knowledge of how a city or cities and suburbs rely on each other.

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Collect and analyze data about the movement of people to and from Detroit.
- Develop an understanding of the interrelationships of various governmental units in the metropolitan Detroit area.
- Hypothesize various solutions to the problems of the metropolitan Detroit area, including schools, crime, provisions for health care, fire and police protection.

#### MATERIALS USED

- Reading: "Detroit and the Suburbs"
- Case Study: "Detroit Water and Sewerage Department"
- Oral History Questionnaire: "Suggested Questions for Interview"
- Reading: "Suburbanization"

#### LESSON SEQUENCE

##### Opening the Activity:

1. Brainstorming session: Have students list the reasons why people moved from Detroit to the suburbs after the 1950s. List the responses on a

chalkboard. What generalizations can be made from the responses?

2. Have students read "Suburbanization." Discuss:
  - What are the implications, from this reading, for the city of Detroit?
  - What changes have occurred as a consequence of suburbanization on the manufacturing and business activities in metropolitan Detroit?
  - Do you think that the suburbs can exist without Detroit? Why or why not?
  - Can Detroit exist without suburbs? Explain.
3. Have the students read the following excerpt from Willis F. Dunbar's *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, page 714:

"The growth of population and the increasing proportion of people living in urban areas have created critical problems for local governments [such as Detroit.] These have been compounded by the move away from the central cities to the suburbs which has been underway since the 1920s, but which accelerated greatly after the Second World War...., the most dramatic effects were seen in Detroit, whose population dropped from approximately 1,850,000 in 1950 to only slightly more than 1,500,000 by 1970. Not only people but manufacturing industries and retail stores began to move out. In 1954, Detroit's J.L. Hudson's department store pioneered in developing a huge new shopping center, Northland, in the Detroit suburb of Southfield...In the following years, Hudson's and other developers established additional shopping centers in other suburbs of Detroit..."

4. Discuss: What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in Detroit? In the suburbs? What problems are caused by these

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movements?

5. How can a suburban community provide for the need of municipal services, such as a fire department, police protection, water, and others?
6. Possible responses during the discussion –
  - Annexation to Detroit.
  - Purchase of a particular service from Detroit.
  - Agreement to share certain services such as police protection and others.

## Developing the Activity

1. “By the 1950s the decay of urban centers was becoming a common phenomenon for Detroit and for many other cities in the United States.”
  - What are some ways that Detroit has been able to cope with these problems: of declining assessed valuation of properties; of inefficient governmental structures?
2. Invite a city official to speak to the class about the ways in which Detroit has had to cope with these problems. Also, a speaker from business or an industry in Detroit might be invited to speak about what they are doing to try to solve some problems of big cities today (the Renaissance Center, Focus Hope, the Detroit Symphony, Belle Isle.)
3. Class discussion:
  - How are the suburbs dependent upon Detroit?
  - How is Detroit dependent upon the suburbs?
  - Where do people in Detroit work?
  - Where do people from the suburbs work?
4. Have students read and complete the Case Study: “Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.” Plan a class debate on this topic. Invite a member of the Detroit Board of Water Commissioners to speak to the class on this topic.
5. Oral History assignment: Assign students to interview a senior citizen – a member of their family or an individual at a nearby retirement home. Discuss how to conduct the interview and the type of questions to ask. Encourage students to use tape recorders after they have secured permission from the person being interviewed. As an interviewer, they should ask

questions relevant to the topic being expressed. Then they should listen carefully.

## Concluding the Activity

1. Student assignment: Have each student prepare a chart showing the movement of his/her family as far back in time as he/she can. The chart can include:
  - Map showing where their family moved to and from.
  - Names and possibly photographs of family members and places they resided.
  - Briefly stated reasons for moves.
  - If family members were homeowners, their duplicated deeds to property addresses and locations of family homes.
2. Class discussion:
  - Were the students surprised at the amount of movement in their families? Why or why not?
  - What kind of research did they have to do to get the information?
  - What conclusions can they draw about the reasons for movement in their family? Explain.
  - The chart can be an excellent record to share with the family.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Students may study the movement for regionalization in other areas such as health, welfare, police protection, etc.
- Students may study, in depth, the growth and development of particular suburbs such as Sterling Heights, Warren, and others.
- Students may study, in depth, the importance of the automobile industry in the growth and development of suburbs surrounding Detroit.

## ASSESSING THE LEARNING

- Students will write an essay discussing at least two advantages and two disadvantages, at least one core democratic value which is involved, and their position on whether health and hospital facilities, police protection, or fire protection should be regionalized in the Detroit metropolitan area.

## READING: DETROIT AND THE SUBURBS

Rapid growth of cities during the latter part of the 1800s provided no time for planning and implementation of a plan. Therefore, this lack of pre-planning produced poorly organized political units, poverty, congestion, epidemics, and great fires. Generally, for persons of moderate income, housing was available since building costs were low and there was much cheap labor. These families tended to settle on the edge of cities and new suburbs. The breadwinner of the family took the commuter train “downtown.” For families of great wealth, they found large, spacious homes in the heart of the city. However, most urban residents were poor. They had no choice but to rent accommodations, usually substandard, in the city. The demand for housing by the poor was high and space was limited; therefore, they had little bargaining power with the homeowners.

During and after the 1950s, after World War II, many city dwellers moved to the suburbs. People who had stayed home and worked in the defense plants saved money to buy a home. Men and women who served in the armed forces returned to civilian life and found homes in the suburbs reasonably priced because of innovations in home building. Credit was available for those who needed financial help; and credit cards were just being introduced. Many of these people could not afford the larger homes in the cities.

They placed great value on home ownership and family life and believed that the suburbs would provide that type of environment. Furthermore, they could purchase a larger home at a cheaper price in the suburbs. They could raise larger numbers of children and be provided with greater privacy and better schools than in a crowded urban center. They believed the environment in the suburbs was less noisy, more healthful, and less dangerous – a better place to raise a family. Also, they needed space for the new consumer goods that they wanted, such as appliances, cars, and many other things which were being advertised on television, radio, and billboards. Most of the suburbs were restricted to white inhabitants only. Although, by the end of the twentieth century, many middle class African Americans, Asians, and Middle Easterners were moving to the suburbs for the same reasons.

As factories, businesses, and people leave Detroit, the city is confronted with problems such as declining value of property, abandoned properties, crime, and others. There have been public and private projects (Comerica Park and the Renaissance Center) to lure people and business back to Detroit, and in some cases, they have been successful.



**Aerial Photographs of the Intersection of Featherstone Road and I-75 (1963, 1980 & 1995)**  
*Courtesy of Oakland County Planning Commission*

# CASE STUDY: DETROIT WATER AND SEWERAGE DEPARTMENT

One of the many problems confronting Detroit and the suburbs is who should control the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.

Detroit is presently in control of the water and sewerage system for over a hundred southeastern Michigan communities. The Detroit Board of Water Commissioners, which includes 7 members – four Detroiters and three suburban representatives from Macomb, Oakland and Wayne Counties, oversee the Water and Sewerage Department and determine the cost of water and sewerage services. Many suburbanites believe that through regionalization, the water and sewerage services would be handled more efficiently and the cost would be more equitable. However, it is interesting to note that Detroit has been known nationally to operate the Water and Sewerage Department as an efficient, productive, low-cost service for their customers.

A bill in Michigan's legislature would replace the current Board with a regional authority of four suburban representatives and three Detroit members. The control would then shift to the suburbs.

## **Answer the following question:**

Do you agree that the Detroit Board of Water Commissioners should be replaced by a regional Water and Sewer Authority? Why or why not?

# ORAL HISTORY QUESTIONNAIRE: SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

1. What is your name? In what city or town do you live?
2. Why did you move to the Detroit metropolitan area? Did you come from another part of Michigan or another part of the United States, or are you an immigrant from another country?
3. Were you able to satisfy your personal and career goals in moving to Detroit or to the suburbs? Why or why not?
4. Did you leave Detroit for the suburbs? Why or why not?
5. Do you have fond memories of Detroit? Could you describe a few of them?
6. If you live in Detroit, do you often go to the suburbs? Why or why not?
7. What were two things you liked best about living in Detroit? Living in the suburbs?
8. Other questions:



## READING: SUBURBANIZATION

Economic causes have been even more important [than racial prejudice] in the suburbanization of the United States. Contrary to popular impression, the real cost of American houses has been relatively low and affordable over the past century and a half, especially in comparison with other nations of the world. There are essentially five reasons for this. The first has been per-capita wealth. With its vast middle class, the United States was the first society in history in which the distribution of wealth did not resemble a pyramid. As a “people of plenty,” Americans could afford the wastefulness of low-density housing on the metropolitan fringe.

The second component of low cost has been inexpensive land. Building lots in North America have typically been priced from one-fourth to one-half of comparably sized parcels in Europe and about one-tenth of those in Japan. This is largely because the United States is a land of spaciousness and openness in contrast to its industrial rivals. Abundant land has meant cheap land.

The third component has been inexpensive transport, which has brought home sites within easy commuting range of workplaces. Although the omnibus, the steam railroad, the subway, and the automobile were all developed first in Europe, it was in the United States that they were most enthusiastically adopted and where they most immediately affected the lives of ordinary citizens. Especially before World War I, the subways, commuter railroads, elevated trains, and electric trolleys of American cities were faster, more frequent, most efficient, and more cost-effective than transportation options elsewhere in the world. The mass production of automobiles reinforced the pattern because for the first seventy years of the twentieth century the real price of both cars and fuel fell. Even in 1990, the cost of operating an automobile remained cheaper in the United States than in other advanced nations.

The fourth component of low cost has been the balloon-frame house. The development of an inexpensive and peculiarly American method of building houses with two-by-four inch wooden studs simplified construction and brought the price of private dwelling within the reach of most citizens. Whether the exterior material is brick, stucco, or clapboard, more than 90 percent of all single-family homes are made of wood at their core. Such structures are uncommon in other countries, in part because their citizens regard the balloon frame as flimsy, and in part because they lack the timber resources of the heavily forested United States.

And finally, government, particularly at the federal level, has played a central role in promoting affordability. Particularly important has been the unusual American practice of allowing taxpayers to deduct mortgage interest and property taxes from taxable income. The size of this subsidy to homeownership is staggering and typically exceeds by five or six times all the direct expenditures Congress grants to housing. Simply put, the Internal Revenue Code finances the continued growth of suburbia. Similarly, FHA and VA mortgage insurance, the highway system, the financing of sewers, the placement of public housing at the center to ghetto neighborhoods, and the locational decisions of federal agencies, to name only the most obvious examples, have encourage scattered development into the open countryside.

These economic factors, combined with racial prejudice and a pervasive fondness for grass and solitude, have made private detached houses affordable and desirable to the middle class. They have produced a suburban pattern of work, residents, and consumption that has thus far been more pronounced in the United States than elsewhere.