The first white settlers in Southwest Philadelphia were Swedes, who arrived before 1640. Except in small number, blacks did not begin to settle there until the 1960s.

In the last 20 years, racial frictions periodically have flared into turf wars along a sliding front where diminishing white neighborhoods abut black ones. "Southwest Philadelphia has had a history of racial tension," including eruptions of violence, said Larry Rawles, deputy director of the city's Crisis Intervention Network.

But recently, he said, tensions had seemed to be waning. He said he had been encouraged by signs that a once rapidly changing neighborhood was coming to terms with itself.

"Things have been pretty smooth the last couple of years in terms of the intensity of problems," he said. "I think that there has been a nucleus of people, whites and blacks, working out there to keep things calm. . . . That's why I'm so concerned."

His concern is how to deal with the suddenly awakened tensions brought on Wednesday night, when 400 whites demonstrated outside the home of a black couple who had moved onto an otherwise all-white block on South 61st Street.

The next night, 200 whites did the same thing on Buist Avenue outside a house occupied by an interracial couple.

The neighborhood was quiet yesterday.

The two incidents prompted Mayor Goode - who said "it is time for the city to assume control of the streets in that neighborhood" - to declare a state of emergency in the neighborhood south and west of Woodland Avenue.

The demonstrations were noisy, but peaceful, and no arrests were made. But, Rawles said, "this situation is so dangerous - not just because of the two families that are affected, but because of the history of tensions in Southwest
Philadelphia."

Others agreed.

"It's very dangerous; but I just find it hard to believe that, in 1985, we're having this kind of situation," said state Rep. James R. Roebuck, a black Democrat who represents a chunk of the sprawling but somewhat geographically isolated area west of the Schuylkill and south of Baltimore Avenue that is Southwest Philadelphia.

Black or white, the old sections in that area are in economic distress. For 30 years, property values have been going down, not up, when adjusted for inflation. The last census showed whole sections in which more than one-fifth of residents were living in poverty.

"Economically, it's fairly much the same whether you're speaking of white families or black families," Roebuck said. "The tragedy is, you have people who should have very similar interests who are in conflict."

It is precisely the area's economic distress that has rubbed residents raw, said Ernest Brambilla, long a Republican Party leader in the 40th Ward of Southwest Philadelphia.

"There are problems out here - severe problems," Brambilla said. "Our neighborhood is deteriorating. Homes are being boarded up. Things are happening. . . . I have white divisions, and I have black divisions, and it's the same. This is one of the few neighborhoods left in Philadelphia where you can buy a home for about $15,000. Both black and white - this is their last chance. Where are we going to go?"

Brambilla, who is white and was not present at the demonstrations, said he understood the white residents' feelings, and he added, "It is not a racial issue. . . . No, I don't think so."

Whites, he said, were angered by the rumored circumstances of the sale of the house on South 61st Street to the black couple. Residents believed, he said, that the couple had bid less for the house than whites in the area.

They were upset by the way the Veterans Administration, which had repossessed the house from a previous owner, conducted the sale, he said. And he said they were doubly angered by reports, now being investigated by the Human Relations Commission, that real estate agents had then canvassed the block, urging white residents to sell out.

"It was fairness, not race," Brambilla said. "If it's fair, I'm with you; but if it's something for nothing, forget it. . . . A lot of people feel there is preferable treatment given to certain people."
A Veterans Administration official said Friday that there was nothing improper about the sale and that the black couple had not received favored treatment.

Leaders of the Southwest Task Force, formed by the city in 1980 to deal with racial tensions in the area, joined last week in decrying the way the sale was handled.

"There were definitely some things done wrong," said Bobby Malone, acting executive director of the task force.

Bennie Swans, director of the Crisis Intervention Network, said he had heard white leaders of the demonstrations say again and again last week that race was not the issue.

"They did not want this to come out as a racist issue," said Swans, who is black. "I know - I talked to them. But they could not cover it. They could not hide it."

His job, he says, is to try to quell tensions before they explode, as they have in the past.

Dennis Clark, former housing director of the Commission on Human Relations, recalled racial tensions beginning as early as the 1950s, when the first, small movement of black population into the area occurred.

He said he remembered a white barber, who had refused to cut the hair of blacks, chasing him from his shop on Woodland Avenue with a straight razor.

"In the 1960s and 1970s, every summer they had serious problems - shootings and stabbings, grim stuff," he said.

Census data from 1930 to 1950 showed virtually no racial change; the population was 95 percent white, 5 percent black. But then whites, many the sons and daughters of people who had moved into the area between the first and second World Wars, began to seek the suburbs.

And the homes they left behind, many of them, were taken by blacks.

During the 1960s, the area west and north of Woodland Avenue "underwent racial transition at a fairly rapid rate," said William Yancey, director of Temple University's Institute for Public Policy Studies.

The black population in that area, which had been 15 percent in 1960, grew to 55 percent in 1970 and, in 1980, to 84 percent.

"There's no such thing as integration - it's an evolution from all white to all black," said one white man, who had lived in the same Kingsessing rowhouse for 50 years.
His comment wasn’t made last week, but in 1971, when the tiny lawns on Kingsessing Avenue displayed a forest of for-sale signs as whites fled the neighborhood.

That was the era of rapid white flight, when whole neighborhoods seemed to change overnight. Real estate companies, for a time, agreed to refrain from even soliciting sales.

Later, as the black population began to grow in pockets south and east of Woodland Avenue, there was tension there, too. That area, 9.5 percent black in 1960, had become 29 percent black by 1980.

"It’s not a salt-and-pepper situation," Yancey said, "but well-defined areas of black and white. There’s not racial integration taking place."

He said the changing racial patterns in that part of Southwest Philadelphia were not as rapid or as extensive as many residents believed.

As early as the late 1960s, blacks and whites together had sought to find a solution to the rise in tensions. Among them was Wilson Goode, then director of the Philadelphia Council for Community Relations.

But terrible violence came anyway.

In the early 1970s, Myers Recreation Center at 58th and Kingsessing and other playgrounds became battlegrounds for black youths and the Dirty Annies, a white gang.

On April 9, 1971, Russell Peed, a 14-year-old black honor student, was struck on the head with a broomstick and killed. A white youth, also 14, admitted to the killing.

On May 10, Tyrone Dunbar, 20, a black, was stabbed to death by four white youths. Police said the assailants were members of the Dirty Annies. Said one black, age 16: "I think we - the whites and the blacks - should just go into Cobbs Creek Park and have it out, barehanded."

In March 1972, 15-year-old David Marrone was stabbed to death when he and another white boy were attacked at 59th and Trinity Streets. Four black youths were arrested.

Then, for a time, the violence calmed, but it grew again later in the decade as the areas of conflict shifted.

One Sunday night in June 1979, three black teenagers were struck down by sniper fire from the roof of a cardboard factory at 60th Street and Springfield Avenue. One of them, Tracey Chambers, 13, later died of multiple gunshot
wounds from a .22-caliber rifle.

About four hours after the shooting, a white teenager boarded a trolley and was attacked and beaten by black youths. Then came the beating of a 57-year-old white man who had stopped his car at a traffic light in the area.

The incidents forced the closing of Bartram High School and Tilden Middle School, both on Elmwood Avenue between 66th and 67th Streets, a week before the end of the regular term.

A few nights later, 300 black youths spilled out of a Southwest Philadelphia church and engaged in a bottle-throwing, traffic-stopping protest. The same night, a mile away, two white youths were pulled off their bicycles and clubbed by six black youths carrying baseball bats. In yet another incident, white youths wielding pipes smashed the car windows of a black man waiting at a traffic light.

Civic leaders were able to restore calm. But tensions flared again in April 1980 when another 14-year-old, this time white, was stabbed repeatedly and killed at the J. Francis Finnegan Playground at 69th Street and Grovers Avenue.

The boy, Steven Sears, and two white companions had been chased into the playground by 25 to 30 black youths carrying baseball bats and golf clubs. The playground, ironically, had been named after a crusader against juvenile delinquency.

A few days later, a black man was stabbed by four white youths as he waited for a trolley about 10 blocks away.

"That was a bad time," Swans, the Crisis Intervention Network director, recalled Friday.

This time around, in the wake of last week's demonstrations, officials are keeping their fingers crossed as they work to ease the frictions.

Said Swans' colleague Rawles: "I think this situation definitely has the potential to escalate tensions and feelings in that neighborhood."

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