

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HOUSING MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

BY ROBERT W. DE FOREST,

President, National Housing Association, New York.

Housing reform in America began in the city of New York. This was not because of any particular virtue in that city. Nor was it because of any superior foresight in city planning. The subject was forced upon the attention of the city of New York by overcrowding incident to its being the initial port of entry for foreign immigration, and by unsanitary conditions created as the result of attempting to house immigrants in old houses not originally intended for such occupation. It was also forced by the lamentable unsanitary conditions of the earlier types of tenement houses. Slum conditions existed in New York, just as they existed, though in less degree, in other cities in which the increase of population was not so sudden and unexpected, but it was tenement conditions in New York which first drew public attention to the need of housing regulation, and it was many years after New York began to legislate on this subject that other cities began to feel the same necessity and to look for a remedy on the same lines. The first tenement law regulation in America was enacted for New York City in 1867. Agitation for tenement regulation had long preceded this law. This agitation began seriously in 1842, when Dr. John H. Griscom, the city inspector of the board of health, called attention to existing conditions in his annual report to the board of aldermen. The pamphlet which Dr. Griscom submitted, entitled "A Brief Review of the Sanitary Condition of the City," contains a vivid description of the condition in New York at the time. It appears that there were 1,459 cellars, or underground rooms, then used as places of residence by 7,196 persons, and that there were as many as 6,618 different families living in courts or in rear buildings. These conditions had apparently developed largely by reason of the sudden increase of the city's population by immigration.

Mr. Robert M. Hartley, one of the most enlightened philanthropists New York has ever produced, and secretary of the then

recently organized Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, in 1853, made a report on housing conditions of the city which again called attention to the necessity for regulation. His report was based upon a careful examination of the city. According to this report there were in 1850, 18,456 persons crowded together in 3,742 cellars, which were "always damp, badly ventilated, generally filthy, and beds of pestilence and disease." The state legislature in 1856 appointed a committee of their own numbers "to make an examination of the manner in which tenement houses are constructed in the city of New York, and report the same to the legislature, and also what legislation, if any, is requisite and necessary in order to remedy the evils and offer every protection to the lives and health of the occupants of such buildings." This committee made a report recommending legislation but no legislation followed.

It was not until the so-called "Council of Hygiene and Public Health" was organized in 1864, to improve the sanitary condition of the city, that any action was taken. Under its leadership the metropolitan board of health was established in 1866, and a year later, in 1867, the first tenement house law was enacted. There were at that time about 15,000 tenement houses in the city, all of which had been built without any legal regulation whatsoever. This law remedied some defects and improved to some extent existing tenement houses, but it did not secure any good types of new buildings.

Little attention seems to have been given to this subject from that time until 1877, when Mr. Alfred T. White, of Brooklyn, determined to benefit the working people of his city by providing them with decent and comfortable homes. He then built his well known "Home Buildings," in Brooklyn, and a year later he erected an entire block of model tenements, with a large park or courtyard in the center. Mr. White's tenements were popular from the start and earned 7½ per cent during the first year of their existence. This was an object lesson of the first importance. It demonstrated that good housing was appreciated and that good housing accommodations were commercially profitable. Wide publicity was given to Mr. White's successful experiment, and public attention was again called to this subject, so important for the city of New York. A mayor's committee was appointed at a public meeting held in Cooper Union to devise measures to carry tenement house reform into effect. Capital

was raised for improved dwellings in old New York to follow Mr. White's Brooklyn example, and a new tenement house law was enacted in 1879, which for the first time limited the percentage of lot to be occupied by a new tenement.

Meantime the movement for tenement reform in New York grew in force. The experience gained by different efforts, successful and unsuccessful, pointed the way, and the movement finally culminated in the New York state law for cities of the first class, passed in 1901, which made an epoch in tenement regulation, not only in the provisions of the law itself but also in placing the enforcement of the law under the jurisdiction of a new city department called the tenement house department. The successive steps by which this result was accomplished included a legislative commission in 1884, of which Dr. Felix Adler was chairman, the amendments of the law in 1887 as a result of the recommendations of this commission, another legislative commission in 1894, of which the late Richard Watson Gilder was chairman, some of the recommendations of which were enacted into law in 1895, and the state tenement commission of 1900, of which the author was chairman, which drafted the tenement house law of 1901, now in force, and the amendments to the New York City charter under which the tenement house department was created.

Wide publicity had been given throughout the country to the movement for housing reform in New York, which resulted in the law of 1901, and the first fruit of that legislation was the tenement house law of the adjacent state of New Jersey. Jersey City and Hoboken, in New Jersey, separated only by the Hudson River from New York, were practically suburbs of New York. In a less intimate sense the same was true of Newark. The same tenement evils which developed in New York had been duplicated in Jersey City. It was quite natural, therefore, that the New Jersey law should follow closely our New York law. The New Jersey law was passed in March, 1904.

Up to this time the movement for housing reform and the enactment of housing regulation had taken the form of tenement regulation, using that word in its legal sense, as applicable to all multiple houses in which three or more families lived independently. The tenement evils, however, existed in comparatively few cities outside of New York and its suburbs. The development in other cities had

been largely that of the small house, frequently the small frame house, and the more acute problems in other cities related rather to slum conditions than to the evils of multiple dwellings. Housing reform in other cities had, not unnaturally, imitated in greater or less degree, the New York regulations affecting tenements. Among the cities which have framed their housing codes to meet their own special conditions may be mentioned Columbus, by way of illustration. Its housing code regulates the building, alteration and maintenance of single family houses as well as tenements.

The growing national interest in this subject led in 1910 to the organization of the National Housing Association. The board of directors of this association was constituted by representative men and women from all parts of the United States as well as Canada.

As illustrating the progress of the movement toward better housing conditions, at the time this association was organized, less than four years ago, there were not ten cities outside the states of New York and New Jersey in which there was any housing regulation or any serious effort to secure such regulation. A year ago, when the author had occasion to obtain statistical information on this subject, there was state legislation applicable generally to certain classes of cities in the states of New York, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Wisconsin. There was regulation either by state law or by ordinance in the following cities outside of the states named: Baltimore, Md.; Chicago, Ill.; Cincinnati, O.; Cleveland, O.; Columbus, O.; Louisville, Ky., and St. Louis, Mo. Within the past twelve months (I am speaking as of November 1, 1913) the following additional progress has been made: Boston Mass., by a state law applicable only to this city, has changed the definition of a tenement house from the four-family house to the three-family house. Under the previous law, in force a year ago, there had been about 7,500 houses subject to regulation in Boston. At the present time, by this change of the law and by the construction of the year, about 35,000 tenement houses have come under this jurisdiction. In California a new tenement house law has been enacted, marking a needed advance in wise regulation. In Cincinnati, O., added powers have been given to the tenement house inspectors. Cleveland, O., is at the moment drafting a new tenement house code. Columbus, O., is regulating the construction of single-family and two-family houses as well as tenements. The state

of Connecticut has enacted more advanced legislation. The state of Indiana has passed a new law applicable to all cities of over 10,000 inhabitants. Louisville, Ky., has now a law based on the model tenement house code. Thirteen towns of Massachusetts have adopted the provisions of the state tenement house law. Pennsylvania has passed a new law applicable to Philadelphia, its only city of the first class, marking a notable advance. Pittsburgh, Pa., a city of the second class, has assembled its ordinances and passed new ones, the whole forming a housing code considerably in advance of the general state law applicable to such cities. St. Louis, Mo., has passed a new ordinance, dealing chiefly with sanitation and aimed to abolish gradually privies in tenement houses. The state of New York has enacted a tenement house law for cities of the second class, applicable to a number of important cities, including Syracuse and Albany, a notable step forward. Seattle, Wash., has adopted ordinances intended to improve tenement conditions. Duluth, Minn., has adopted a well-framed ordinance regulating its tenements. The state of Indiana has adopted a new tenement house law by overwhelming majorities in both houses of its legislature.

While all these laws and ordinances are not ideal, and are not adequate from the point of view of those who are best acquainted with this subject, they are all steps in the right direction. The widespread national interest in this movement, which has borne fruit in legal regulation, is further illustrated by the fact that at the present time, including the cities named and the cities in states which have state regulation applicable to them, there are known to be 87 cities in America, of which 82 are in the United States and 5 in Canada, in which public attention is directed to housing reform. In many of these cities the movement is still in embryo; in others regulation more or less satisfactory is in force. The following is a list of these cities, classified by states:

	<i>Alabama</i>		<i>Connecticut</i>
Birmingham		New Britain	
		New Haven	
	<i>California</i>	Hartford	
Los Angeles		Stamford	
Oakland		Waterbury	
Pasadena			
Sacramento			<i>District of Columbia</i>
San Francisco		Washington	

	<i>Georgia</i>	Wenham	
Atlanta		Weston	
Savannah		Weymouth	
		Winthrop	
	<i>Illinois</i>	Worcester	
Chicago			<i>Michigan</i>
Springfield		Detroit	
	<i>Indiana</i>	Grand Rapids	
Evansville			<i>Minnesota</i>
Indianapolis		Duluth	
South Bend			<i>Missouri</i>
Terre Haute		Kansas City	
	<i>Kentucky</i>		<i>New Jersey</i>
Louisville		Newark	
	<i>Louisiana</i>		<i>New York</i>
New Orleans		Albany	
	<i>Maryland</i>	Brooklyn	
Baltimore		Buffalo	
	<i>Massachusetts</i>	Elmira	
Arlington		Mt. Vernon	
Belmont		Newburgh	
Boston		New York City	
Braintree		Rochester	
Brockton		Schenectady	
Brookline		Syracuse	
Cambridge		Troy	
Fall River		Utica	
Haverhill		Yonkers	
Lawrence			<i>Ohio</i>
Lexington		Cincinnati	
Lowell		Cleveland	
Lynn		Columbus	
Milton		Youngstown	
Newburyport			<i>Oregon</i>
North Andover		Portland	
Salem			<i>Pennsylvania</i>
Springfield		Erie	
Stoneham		Harrisburg	
Taunton		Philadelphia	
Wakefield		Pittsburgh	
Walpole			
Watertown			

	<i>Rhode Island</i>		<i>Virginia</i>
Newport		Richmond	
Providence			<i>Wisconsin</i>
Pawtucket		Milwaukee	
Woonsocket			<i>Canada</i>
	<i>Tennessee</i>	Hamilton, Ontario	
Nashville		Montreal, Quebec	
		Ottawa, Ontario	
	<i>Texas</i>	Toronto, Ontario	
Dallas		Winnipeg, Manitoba	

This list is by no means complete. There are undoubtedly other cities not named which should be added. I am simply using the latest statistics which I have at hand. That so much progress has been made in so brief a time argues well for the progress we have a right to expect in the future.

Nor is the advance in housing reform confined to cities or to statutory regulation. Many large employers of labor, notably corporations which need accommodation for their operatives or employees, are giving enlightened attention to this subject. The United States Steel Corporation has made careful plans for housing its workers at its new plant in Duluth, and is studying the question even more thoroughly before making plans for its projected plant at Ojibway. In many of the smaller towns and country districts, industrial villages have sprung into existence that owe not only their being but also their form to the enlightened management of the works to which they are appurtenant. The Goodrich Tire and Rubber Company, of Akron, and the American Rolling Mills at Middletown, O., illustrate this phase of the movement. The same may be said of many New England communities.

Nor should the garden city movement in America be unmentioned, a notable example of which, intended for the middle rather than the working classes, is that of the Russell Sage Foundation at Forest Hills, L. I. To more than mention this movement would extend this article beyond its allotted space.

Meanwhile the work of reform has steadily gone on in the city of New York, where it originated. The New York law has been amended from time to time to meet practical conditions. It has been strengthened where it was found to be weak; it has been relaxed where it could be relaxed without detriment to the principles in-

volved and the ends to be attained. A notable expression of popular approval of the law occurred in 1912 (less than two years ago), when a decision of the New York court of appeals, on technical grounds, threatened to destroy the tenement house law of 1901, which had been on the statute books for over eleven years and which had found almost universal acceptance. An appeal was made to the governor of the state for an emergency message, which alone made prompt legislation possible under legislative rules, and the technical defect was remedied by legislative action within a few days after the decision was handed down.

As illustrative of the degree in which this law has been enforced in the city of New York, and the result of its enforcement, the following facts are pertinent. At the time of its enactment there were in the city of New York fruitful sources of disease in the shape of more than 9,000 "school sinks" or privy vaults, located in tenement house yards. These "school sinks" were practically open privies for the common use of all the inmates of the houses to which they were appurtenant, flushed occasionally into the sewers with water. The law required the abolition of these "school sinks" and the substitution for them of toilets in the houses, and prescribed that no toilet should furnish accommodation for more than two apartments. It also prescribed that these toilets should open to the outer air. At the present time only 375 "school sinks" exist in the city of New York, most of which are in outlying sections of the city, where sewers have not yet been installed. At the time this law was enacted there were over 350,000 dark rooms in the city of New York; that is, rooms which had no opening to the outer air. The law made the ventilation of these rooms to the outer air obligatory. At the present time there remain in the city of New York only about 76,324 such rooms. During the first eleven years that the new tenement house law had been in operation, that is from 1902 to 1912, inclusive, 22,925 tenement houses were built, of an estimated cost of \$708,983,-489, containing 248,815 apartments, accommodating, on an average of five persons to each family, 1,244,075 persons. While there is no obligatory provision in the law with regard to baths, it should be noted that more than 87 per cent of these new-law tenements have a bath in each apartment; more than 4 per cent have baths in the houses but not in each apartment, and only about 9 per cent have no baths at all. Improvement of the sanitary conditions of old

tenements, and the improved sanitary regulations with regard to new-law tenements in New York City, have been only two of several causes favorably affecting the death rate. That they have been an important factor in this result is self-evident. The death rate in New York City for 1900, before this new cause began to operate, was 20.057 in the thousand. This has gradually decreased, until the death rate in 1912 was only 14.11 in the thousand. Translating this into human lives, based on a population of 5,000,000, it means an annual saving of nearly 30,000. Translating it into immunity from sickness would give much larger figures.

No history of housing reform in America would be complete without the mention of two names—Jacob A. Riis and Lawrence Veiller. Jacob A. Riis began to write on this subject more than thirty years ago. His voice at first was like the voice of one “crying in the wilderness.” But it caught the listening ear. His many magazine articles and books, notably *How the Other Half Lives*, produced a profound impression on the country and did much to create the popular sentiment on which any successful reform must be based. Lawrence Veiller initiated the tenement house exhibition of 1900, which preceded the New York state commission of that year. He became secretary of this commission, and when the new tenement house department of New York City was organized became the first deputy commissioner. His books on the subject, published by the Russell Sage Foundation, entitled *Housing Reform—A Handbook for use in American Cities*, and *A Model Tenement House Law*, constitute the best literature on this subject, and should be in the hands of all who are seeking to inform themselves about it and to promote its cause by intelligent regulation.