

The Tenements

During 1850 to 1920, people immigrating to America needed a place to live. Many were poor and needed jobs. The jobs people found paid low wages so many people had to live together. Therefore, tenements were the only places new immigrants could afford. Tenements were small three room apartments with many people living in it. About 2,905,125 Jewish and Italian immigrants lived in the tenements on the Lower East Side. Jews lived on Lower East Side from Rivington Street to Division Street and Bowery to Norfolk street. This was where they started lives in America. Between 1881 to 1910 1,562,000 Jews came to America from Eastern Europe. Italians, Irish, Mexicans, and Chinese also immigrated. People came to America because there was poverty where they lived. They also came to America because there was no religious freedom and anti-semitism. Jews in Europe were not allowed to own or rent land outside towns and cities. There were violent attacks, pogroms, killed Jews in Russia and ruined their homes. There were many different reasons that immigrants came to America but in the early 1900's most came with nothing and moved into tenements to start new lives.

Starting in the 1850s, the tenements were where people lived when they immigrated to New York City. Tenements were 4 - 6 story buildings with little air and no sun light in rooms. They were located in rows of apartment buildings in busy areas of the city. For instance, many were above clothing factories so people could hear the whirr of the machines.

Due to the little amount of space, the living conditions in tenements were bad. Many people shared small 3 room apartments in tenements. Since there were 4 apartments per floor there were 5 to 6 families per floor. There was no electricity until after 1918. Since the apartments had no ventilation, sickness spread quickly. In the tenements, it was dangerously hot inside. The only window was for fire escapes. Some of the illnesses were smallpox , typhoid fever, and tuberculosis. Due to the fact all of these very contagious and dangerous, many people died. This was made worse because toilets were in the hallways since bathrooms were not inside until 1905.

Even though immigrants felt happy when they got to New York City life was very challenging. Life was a lot of work for the people who lived in the tenements. They paid full rent of \$20 each month (about \$1,300 dollars today) to their landlord so everyone had to work very hard. There were as many as 9 people living in a 3 room apartment. Higher floors were cheaper because they walked up many stairs. Some people made money by renting one of the rooms to a boarder (a nonfamily member). The kids got jobs like, shoe shiner, delivery boy or girl and housekeeper. They worked long hours and on weekends. For example, they also helped their parents make crafts at home, like flowers for hats. By 1900, NY has 80,000 factories employing 50,000 to 75,000 kids. Only 35 % of children went to school. As a result; the Compulsory Education Law of 1874 was made so children had to go to school. Even though kids did not like working and parents did not like working long hours, they had to in order to pay the rent to live in their tenement apartments.

Adults worked very hard to earn their money. Some of the jobs they had were tailors - in factories or even in their homes. Sweatshops were factories that were unhealthy and dangerous conditions. Construction workers built buildings. Some people sold fruit and vegetables on the streets. There were also waiters in hotels. Adults from the Lower East Side worked long hard hours so they could pay for food and housing.

People had to work close to their homes which made the tenement housing area even more crowded. There were no subways or buses yet so people had to live near their work. If there were no jobs or no money left from rent, they had to dig through the garbage for food. Kids played games outside and in public spaces near the East River. They played in market places, roofs, and fire escapes. The kids played jump rope, marbles, hopscotch, baseball or other team games. They made up games like jump over a can. People gathered in streets because no one wanted to be inside of their apartments. It was too hot and too small. People sat on stoops or sidewalks.

With so many people living in tenements and getting sick from the bad conditions, people started to demand changes. This brought about changes in the requirements for landlords of the tenement housing. The Tenement House Law of 1901 was that the landlord required hall lights,

install 1 indoor toilet for every 2 families, fire safety. Buildings could only be 6 stories high. The Tenement House Department was created to check on these new regulations. In 1904, landlords raised the rent and tenants protested which led to reforms. These laws made landlords repair the tenement so they were a lot safer.

The tenements were small apartments where immigrants lived. It took the whole family to pay the rent. The living conditions were terrible and unsafe. Today apartments like these are not allowed. There are rules about how many people can live in an apartment and unsanitary conditions like having kitchens in bathrooms combined. The tenements were important to New York City because immigrants were able to start a new life and many became successful.