

# The Improvement of Housing Conditions in Philadelphia

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Philadelphia, like other large cities, has its housing problem. It is fortunate in that it has no large dumbbell tenement-houses, that its density of population is comparatively low, and that the working people who are above the class of the unskilled laborer are better housed than in most other large cities. The modern sections of Philadelphia are conspicuous for the two story dwelling houses in which thousands of the people of moderate means enjoy comfortable homes which they either own or rent. The supply of houses or apartments of this class appears to be ample for the demand, so that families which can afford to avail themselves of the transportation facilities and pay a moderate rental need have no difficulty in being satisfactorily housed. For this class of people Philadelphia presents no serious housing problem.

There is, however, in Philadelphia a large class of working people, mostly foreigners and negroes, who can not avail themselves of these homes for which Philadelphia is famous. They must live near their places of work because they can not afford either the time or the car-fare necessary to live in the modern sections, and they can not as a rule pay a rental of more than \$10 or \$12 per month. They must live in what may be termed "Old Philadelphia." Here the large city blocks are covered with a mass of two and three story brick and frame dwellings situated on the minor streets, in alleys and in courts. The latter have but one entrance, and this consists of a narrow passage or hallway sometimes but three or four feet wide.

## The Poorer Districts Neglected

While the minor streets and alleys in these sections are public highways, and therefore receive occasional attention from the street cleaning department, the courts are isolated, and the filth which accumulates there remains indefinitely. Surface drain-

age is quite common in these courts, and occasionally is also found in the minor streets and alleys; and, as these are usually poorly paved and not properly graded, the waste water seeps through the soil into the cellars or gathers in foul stagnant pools, where it remains for days before the doors and windows of the dwellings and in the passageways where the people walk, where the women do their washing and where the children must play.

To aggravate this insanitary condition the ashes, rubbish and garbage must be placed on the streets in order to be collected by the employees of the city contractors. The collectors will not go into the yards and courts. Instead of using metal cans for this refuse the people use any receptacles that may be available, including cardboard boxes, old hats and even newspapers. The collections in the poorer sections are not made with sufficient regularity, and the refuse deposited in the streets in these frail receptacles is often scattered about on the streets, in the gutters and on the sidewalks long before the collectors make their appearance. As the latter are not required to gather the refuse after it has left the receptacle, and as the street cleaners are scarce in these neglected sections, the garbage and other filth remains on the streets and in the alleys until it is dried up and blown about as dust, or washed by the rain into the sewers.

But the worst institution that still exists in Philadelphia is that disease-breeding relic of ancient times, the open, undrained privy vault. These filthy receptacles are still quite common in the interior courts of "Old Philadelphia," often at the very doors and windows of the family dwellings. Cases have been found where such a vault, accommodating the inhabitants of an entire court, occupied the first floor of a house, while the second and third stories were used for dwelling purposes.



A COURT CONTAINING 3 WATER CLOSETS AND 2 HYDRANTS, USED BY 13 FAMILIES COMPRISING ABOUT 60 PERSONS

#### Tenement-Houses Now Under Control

The dwellings in the poorer sections of the city are mostly one and two family houses, although, according to the last census report, over 4,000 buildings in Philadelphia were tenanted by three or more families each. A tenement-house is defined by law as a "building occupied by three or more families living independently of each other and doing their cooking upon the premises."

The tenement-houses in the old sections were originally the houses of the wealthy people of Philadelphia. Before the enactment of the Tenement-House Inspection Law of June 7th, 1907, which requires the registration and licensing of all tenement-houses, it was customary for these houses, when abandoned as the residences of the original owners, to be rented to tenants who in turn would sublet them to as many families as they could crowd into them, without making any of the structural or sanitary changes in the buildings that would fit them for use as tenement houses. In the absence of a tenement-house law there was no authority of the city government which had any control over the conditions that resulted from these changes.

Now they are specially regulated by law, and are inspected by the Tenement-House Division of the Department of Health and Charities. Until a few months ago there was but one visiting inspector for the entire city. Now there are five.

The regulations governing tenement-houses are adequate and the Tenement-House Division is well organized. Were the inspection force sufficient to cope with the situation, and the power of the Tenement-House Division adequate to secure the complete enforcement of the regulations, the tenement-house problem in Philadelphia would be practically solved. It is obvious, however, that five tenement inspectors can not properly inspect over 4,000 tenement-houses, and also see that all their orders are promptly complied with. As to the power of the Tenement-House Division to enforce its orders, that matter has not yet been fairly tested as the division is too recent a creation.

#### Where the Law is Inadequate

The tenement-houses in Philadelphia, however, constitute but a comparatively small part of the dwellings of the unskilled laborers. A majority of that class



A TYPICAL NARROW COURT

of people live in one and two family houses which are outside the scope of the tenement-house law. It is these houses which constitute the most serious housing problem at the present time. As no new dwelling houses are permitted to be built in interior courts or on new streets or alleys less than thirty feet wide, the immense population which must crowd into the existing alleys and courts is compelled to live in the old dilapidated houses which existed at the time when the law was enacted, and which are therefore permitted to remain. A common form of house of this character is three stories in height, one room to a story, with dark stairs leading from room to room.

One family usually lives in each house, but it is not uncommon for the tenant who rents it to sublet one or two rooms either furnished or unfurnished to as many persons as he can crowd into them. Often no regard is paid to the mixing of sexes or of children and adults, and the effect upon the morals of the overcrowded inhabitants can well be imagined. In the Italian section it is a common practice for the men without families to rent a house and crowd



**NARROW COURT BETWEEN DWELLING-HOUSES**  
The court or alley is little more than 4 feet wide, and there were 7 houses (with 42 tenants) facing it when the photograph was taken.



**DILAPIDATED HOUSES AND YARD CONDITIONS**

into it collectively, or for one Italian to rent a house and put as many of his countrymen into the rooms as they will hold. Sometimes an enterprising Hebrew or Italian who has accumulated a few hundred dollars will purchase a building, make a first payment on it, and then depend for the other payments upon the income which he derives from his tenants. He must necessarily crowd as many people as possible into his house in order to secure sufficient revenue to meet his notes. Naturally he will expend little or nothing on improvements or repairs.

While the regulations made under the tenement-house law prohibit overcrowding in houses which come within its scope, and the tenement-house inspectors are giving as much attention to this matter as they can, there is apparently no regulation which prohibits, or at any rate which prevents the overcrowding in the one and two family houses where a large number of individuals board or sleep, where any number of families may live who do not maintain more than two separate households.



A COURT BEFORE BEING IMPROVED BY THE OCTAVIA HILL ASSOCIATION

#### Breeding-Places of Disease

The one and two family court and alley houses have all the objectionable features of the tenement-houses. The people share the use of the court and of the narrow passageway. The houses, usually three stories high, are ranged in solid blocks side by side and often back to back, from four to seven in a row. The doors and windows face the narrow courts which offer the only ingress of light and air. Often the court has but one hydrant which serves all the families which live in the two rows of houses facing it. One undrained privy vault with a few toilet compartments serves for the entire court population. Sometimes the lining of the vault is defective, and the contents will seep through the soil to the cellars, and remain stagnant there.

The houses that are situated in the narrow alleys and minor streets often have no yards, and the conditions with regard to light and ventilation are almost as bad as in the closed courts.

When it is considered that many of these houses are from fifty to a hundred years old; that some are built of frame, and are more or less in a condition of decay; that the roofs and roof drains leak and dampen the walls and ceilings; that some of the people live in basements and cellars; that the dwellings are often in close proximity to unclean stables; that the occupations carried on in them often cause the accumulation of foul and putrid animal and vegetable matter, and breed insects and vermin; it is not surprising that the death rate is high, that many children are physically and mentally defective, and that the women are slovenly and the men intemperate.

#### The Death Rate Tells the Story

The general death rate in Philadelphia is low when compared with that of other cities. During the year 1908 it was but 17.16 per thousand. The official vital statistics are not shown for smaller geographical divisions than wards. Unfortunately these divisions are not small enough to



THE SAME COURT AFTER ITS IMPROVEMENT BY THE OCTAVIA HILL ASSOCIATION

cover in any case only such sections as are described above, and it is therefore impossible to show the actual death rate among their inhabitants. Notwithstanding the fact, however, that in every ward a considerable portion of the inhabitants live under fairly good sanitary conditions, the death rate is great enough in the congested sections to have a very appreciable effect upon the general death rate of the ward of which they form a part. Thus, while in some of the outlying wards of the city the death rate last year was 9.22, 12.46, etc., per thousand, the rate in some of the wards containing congested areas was 26.39, 23.59, etc., per thousand, respectively.

As above mentioned, there is no division of the city government which especially concerns itself with the housing conditions in dwellings other than those technically described as tenement-houses. Even if there were such a municipal office it would need a very large force of inspectors to

discover all the bad conditions, and to enforce their removal. In view of the fact that it required an enormous amount of work and many years of determined effort on the part of a group of earnest philanthropists and social workers to secure the enactment of the tenement-house law and the appointment of five inspectors, the prospect of securing, in the near future, the legislation necessary to deal with the entire housing problem does not appear to be a bright one.

#### An Aggressive Campaign Outlined

The forces, however, which have already accomplished much are still actively at work, and during the past few months the housing situation has attracted more public attention than ever before. This public interest resulted in the creation on September 8th of the Philadelphia Housing Commission, of which Dr. Joseph S. Neff, Director of Public Health and Charities of Philadelphia, is the President. It con-

sists of the representatives of about forty organizations engaged in various lines of social work in Philadelphia.

Its object, as expressed in the plan of work recently adopted by the Executive Committee is as follows:

1.—To aid the public authorities in the enforcement of existing laws affecting the housing conditions of the people:

(a) By having all the participating organizations report insanitary conditions that come under their observation in the course of their work.

(b) By placing the information secured from time to time before the proper authorities.

(c) By keeping a record of all reports of insanitary conditions and the action taken thereon by the public officials, this record to be used in efforts to secure necessary laws and appropriations and for other purposes.

2.—To secure the enactment of such laws and ordinances as may be deemed necessary to improve the housing conditions in Philadelphia:

(a) By examining existing laws and regulations relating to housing conditions in Philadelphia and drafting such additional laws and ordinances as may be deemed necessary for the City of Philadelphia.

(b) By securing the active coöperation of the officers and members of the participating organizations and of the individual members of the Commission in bringing about the enactment of such legislation as may be approved by the Commission.

3.—To coöperate in every way possible in the development of wholesome surroundings and proper home conditions throughout the city and especially in the most neglected neighborhoods.

The Commission has already begun its work. A card has been prepared by the Investigation Committee on which are enumerated such insanitary housing conditions as are regarded as most worthy of notice. These cards have been distributed by the participating organizations among several hundred of their workers and visitors. Whenever in the course of their work these people discover any of the conditions enumerated they will check them on the cards and transmit the letter through the proper official channels to the Secretary of the Commission. The latter will use the data so obtained as bases for complaints to be submitted to the proper city officials. If the latter fail to correct the conditions complained of, either on account of absence of

legal authority or of lack of the necessary funds to enforce the existing laws, these facts will be accumulated to be used by the Commission as evidence when its Committee on Legislation begins its activities for additional regulations. Provision has also been made, through a Committee on Publicity, to keep up the public interest in the housing situation by keeping in touch with the press of the city, arranging for stereopticon lectures in public gatherings whenever possible, and distributing literature.

#### Charity that Pays Dividends

An article on the housing conditions in Philadelphia would not be complete without mentioning an organization which has existed for over twelve years, and which has quietly but effectively worked for the improvement of the housing conditions.

The Octavia Hill Association of Philadelphia was organized in 1896 as a stock company which has paid an annual dividend of four per cent. It buys old properties in the poorer sections, which it repairs and provides with proper plumbing, drainage, light and ventilation. It also acts as agent for owners who desire to have their properties maintained in a sanitary condition. By employing experienced social workers as rent collectors and friendly visitors, who give advice to the tenants and require care and cleanliness in the use of the premises, it is exerting a powerful influence in raising the standard of living among these people. Since its organization it has been active in securing the enactment of legislation for improving the housing conditions, notably the Tenement-House Inspection Act of 1907, and has insisted upon the enforcement by the public officials of the existing sanitary and building regulations.

With this strong Association still actively at work, and with all the leading social institutions of the city coöperating in a united effort through the Philadelphia Housing Commission, it looks as though the movement for improved housing has gained a momentum which is irresistible, and which will continue until Philadelphia will again be in the front rank as a "city of homes."