

How the Early Dutch Legislators Dealt with the Housing Shortage

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THE problem presented by the current over-crowding of the population of the City of New York is usually viewed as a development beginning with the increased immigration to this country in 1846 as a result of the Irish famine, and thereafter intensified by the surge of immigration from Central Europe. It should be pointed out that this over-crowding is not a matter of comparative recency nor is it a problem which necessarily arises only with the concentration of great masses of people.

Relating this problem to the present, it could reasonably be supposed that if the population were reduced to a point where but 1,000 persons remained on the island, there would be no over-crowding. It is not necessary to conjure with this thought by way of suppositions, since an investigation of the situation on Manhattan Island at a time when the population numbered 1,000 persons can readily be made. It will be recalled that Manhattan was purchased from the Indians in 1626, at which time the Dutch colony consisted of less than 200 persons. Forty-two years later, the population had increased to a point where the colonists numbered about a thousand people. Despite this small population the Dutch were confronted with the problem of over-crowding. This situation is amazing when it is considered that the Dutch were settled at the very gateway to the vast reaches of the New World frontier. What is most illuminating, however, is the method adopted by the Dutch to combat the problem. The Governing Council of New Amsterdam adopted an astonishingly simple and direct method for dealing with the situation. The Council ordered all owners of vacant lands either to improve them, pay a special tax to retain them unimproved, or surrender them to the city for public sale (Record of New Amsterdam 36-37).

That current methods, though highly purposed, are inadequate to solve the problem of over-crowding is manifest from the fact that the condition is not only still evident but is becoming increasingly acute. Unfortunately, the Dutch legislation was not long in effect, since a few years later saw the colony surrendered to the British. It would seem that the present Governing Council of the City of New York might very well revive this legislation as a most effective weapon in the present situation. All other proposed remedies have not solved the problem.