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Tenements

Tenement is a term that originally referred to any rented accommodation.

Dictionary.com defines tenement as a run-down and often overcrowded apartment house, especially in a poor section of a large city; also called a tenement house. The New York State legislature defined it in the Tenement House Act of 1867 as *any house, building, or portion thereof, which is rented, leased, let or hired out to be occupied or is occupied, as the home or residence of more than three families living independently of one another and doing their own cooking upon the premises, or by more than two families upon a floor, so living and cooking and having a common right in the halls, stairways, yards, water-closets, or privies, or some of them.*

During the 19th century, many people immigrated to America's large cities seeking a better life than the one they left behind. The population in New York City was increasing at an extremely rapid rate, doubling every decade from 1800-1880. Buildings that were once single family homes of affluent families were now being divided into multiple unit dwellings. By 1900, more than 80,000 tenements had been built in New York City and they housed a population of 2.3 million people. This was approximately two-thirds of the city's entire population.

A typical tenement building was five to seven stories and nearly occupied the entire lot it was built upon. Lots were usually 25 feet by 100 feet. Often homes that were originally a single family dwelling, were built on top of to add additional stories. If there was a need for additional housing, owners would build more housing in the little space that was left on the lot, leaving only about a foot of space between buildings.

Tenement housing was less than desirable being built with nearly no amenities. During the time of their construction, there were few laws regulating tenement construction. There was little light, poor or no ventilation, inner rooms without windows. Many tenements, especially those on upper levels, did not have running water. Backyards housed privies, which quickly became unsanitary pits of human waste with the large number of people using them. Garbage

and other waste was thrown into boxes in the streets affecting the sanitary conditions of the city. Tenements were often constructed out of cheap material and by taking construction shortcuts, making the buildings highly unsafe. The close proximity between tenements and closed off space inside of them also increased the risk of fire hazards. New York's Lower East Side's tenement situation became dreadful when a cholera epidemic killed nearly 5,000 people in 1849. There was a 10% death rate for children due to the poor living circumstances. The conditions that these immigrants were living in were dangerous and less than desirable. I am sure that many immigrants questioned whether America would truly provide the better lifestyle that they left their home countries seeking.

By 1863 immigrants living in the these conditions had had enough. Rioters tore the city apart protesting the unbearable conditions in which they were living. The Tenement House Act of 1867 legally defined a tenement, as stated at the beginning of this paper, and set construction regulations. For example, one new rule was that there had to be one toilet for every 20 people. If this is an improvement, things must have been terrible.

Works Cited

- history.com/topics/tenements/print
- newyorklookingback.blogspot.com
- www.tenement.org - This is a GREAT website with many resources and lesson plans ready to use!