

**TENEMENT HOUSE
REFORM IN NEW
YORK, 1834-1900**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649296767

Tenement House Reform in New York, 1834-1900 by Lawrence Veiller

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LAWRENCE VEILLER

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REFORM IN NEW
YORK, 1834-1900**

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TENEMENT HOUSE REFORM IN
NEW YORK, 1834-1900.

PREPARED FOR

The Tenement House Commission of 1900

BY

LAWRENCE VEILLER, Secretary,

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NEW YORK:
THE EVENING POST JOB PRINTING HOUSE, 156 FULTON STREET,
(EVENING POST BUILDING.)

1900.

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105 EAST 22D STREET, NEW YORK CITY,
MAY 8, 1900.

Mr. ROBERT W. de FOREST, *Chairman*,
Tenement House Commission.

DEAR SIR,—In accordance with the resolution of the
Tenement House Commission, of April 26th, I beg to
transmit herewith a history of the movement for tene-
ment house reform in New York.

Respectfully submitted,

LAWRENCE VEILLER,
Secretary,
Tenement House Commission.

TENEMENT HOUSE REFORM IN NEW YORK. 1834-1900.

The movement for housing reform in New York dates back as far as 1834, when Gerrett Forbes, the City Inspector of the Board of Health, in his annual report giving the record of burials or deaths, called attention to the condition of the tenement houses at that time.

The first attempt, however, to give any comprehensive idea of the condition of the dwellings of the poorer classes in New York City was not made until 1842, when Dr. John H. Griscom, the City Inspector of the Board of Health, called attention to the existing conditions. Prior to this time, the City Inspector had contented himself with simply reporting the various statistics available as to the number of deaths occurring during the year, their causes, and the ages of the people among whom the deaths occurred, with a few brief remarks explanatory of the statistics. Dr. Griscom, however, in addition to this formal report submitted a pamphlet of eighteen printed pages entitled "A Brief View of the Sanitary Condition of the City." In it he calls attention to the great increase of population in the city in 1810 and again in 1838, by a horde of ignorant immigrants who arrived here generally penniless, and who brought with them disease and misery. To this sudden increase of the city's population and the subsequent herding of these people in large numbers in the poorer quarters of the city was largely due the beginning of bad housing conditions in New York.

Dr. Griscom's report dwells upon the crowded condition, and the insufficient ventilation of a great number of the dwellings in the city, also the fact that a large part of the population lived in cellars and basements, and in courts and alleys, he pointing out that there were then 1,459 cellars being used as places of residence by 7,196 persons, and

that there were as many as 6,618 different families living in courts or rear buildings. The grave-moral evils resulting from the indiscriminate mingling of the sexes in the same room are dwelt upon, as well as the fact that the causes of uncleanliness, poverty and sickness were not so much to be found in the "innate depravity" of the people as in the environment in which they were compelled to live.

He urged that the City Legislature should prohibit the use of cellars as dwellings, and that the owner or lessee of every tenement house should be required to keep the outdoor and indoor premises free and clean from everything likely to prove injurious to health, and that an immediate stop should be put to the practice of crowding so many human beings in such limited spaces, arguing that if there were any propriety in the law requiring ocean vessels to carry only a certain number of people, there was equal propriety in requiring that only a certain number of persons should occupy houses of this kind; and that, if a law regulating the construction of buildings in reference to fire was justifiable, one respecting the protection of the inmates from the influences of badly arranged houses and apartments should be enacted.

In 1846 the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, a charitable society organized in 1843, took up the question of the housing of the poor people of the city, maintaining that bad housing was the main cause of most of the poverty and sickness that existed.

In 1853 they appointed a special committee "to inquire into the sanitary condition of the laboring classes, and the practicability of devising measures for the comfort and healthfulness of their habitations." This Committee rendered a report of thirty-two printed pages in the fall of 1853, which was published in the annual report of the Association for that year. The state of affairs disclosed by their investigations was one which called for prompt and effective remedies, and its effect on the public mind should have been great, for it brought to light the gravest social evils.

The Committee, after making an examination of most of the tenement houses in all the different wards of the city, came to the conclusion that "the dwellings of the industrious class in New York were not adapted to the wants of human beings nor compatible with the health or social or moral improvement of the occupants."

Among the evils which, in their opinion, were responsible for the prevalence of bad conditions were the following:

1. The crowded condition of the dwellings in which the poor were compelled to live.
2. Too great density of population in certain districts.
3. Neglect of ventilation—a prevailing cause of ill-health.

Nothing contained in the report of this Committee is of greater value than the demonstration of the principle that "*the number of persons on a given area of soil cannot be increased beyond a certain limit without endangering health.*"

Considerable attention was paid to underground dwellings by the Committee, it being pointed out that in 1850 there were 18,456 persons crowded together in 3,742 cellars, which "were always damp, badly ventilated, generally filthy, and beds of pestilence and disease." As a remedy for all these evils the Committee recommended that capitalists and owners of real estate should build model tenements; and also called attention to the necessity for legislative intervention, stating that "these crying evils cannot be remedied or essentially diminished without special legislative action. Pure air, light and water being indispensable to health and life, if tenements are so badly constructed as to preclude a proper supply of these essential elements, the law should interpose for the protection of the sufferers, and either close up such dwellings or cause them to be so remodeled as to be fit for human habitation."

In the following year the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor made a sociological study of tene-