

Tenement Landlord Assignment

1. What is the ratio of rooms to people is in your house? _____ rooms to _____ people
 - a. Did you know that oftentimes tenements had 10 people in one, two, or three rooms?
2. Visiting New York City's tenements:
 - a. Go to www.tenement.org
 - b. Go to "Play" and click on "Virtual Tour"
 - c. Take the virtual tour through all 4 tenement apartments. Learn about the conditions of the tenement housing, read the excerpts, and view the pictures.



Tenement Life

By Deanna McFadden

Dirt and desolation reign in the wide hall-way, and danger lurks on the stairs.

— **Jacob Riis**

There are social, economic and geographic reasons behind the rise of the tenement house as a major fixture in the landscape of New York City in the nineteenth century. Socially, the tenement became a fundamental aspect of life in a city as crowded as New York. The population surged and there was simply not enough housing for the number of people streaming into the city on a yearly basis. Economically, tenement houses were the only option for those entrenched in poverty, beaten by alcoholism or newly arrived in New York. They were crowded, filthy and unhygienic conditions, but without options to live elsewhere - many stayed put. Geographically, the neighborhoods that developed around the tenement houses ended up in the poorest sections of town, where necessity overwhelmed want in terms of material gain.

As immigration increased, landlords started renting out portions of their property to families by dividing old wooden structures into apartments, each to house a single family, and with a retail space generally occupying the first floor. Soon, landowners started recognizing the inherent value of these buildings and taller, brick structures were erected, where instead of two and a half stories, became four to six-story 'tenant' houses, which soon became known as 'tenement houses.' Now, buildings were crowded with as many tenants as possible, and the enterprising landlords moved uptown and out of the neighbourhood where they owned the property.

Sweltering hot in the summer and unbearably cold in the winter hardly begins to describe the days and nights of tenement life. By the 1850s, tenements were ridiculously overcrowded, dirty and disease-ridden cesspools. Without proper sewage, without proper ventilation and without proper legislation, death rates soared in neighborhoods like the Five Points. The squalid living conditions ensured that outbreaks of devastating diseases like cholera spread like wildfire through the overcrowded tenement communities.

In the centre of the Five Points sat the Old Brewery. The building was erected in 1797, and was a successful brewery until its viable business was abandoned in the years after Five Points ceased to be a centre of industry. It

was converted into one the worst tenements ever to exist. The long, dark, dank hallways of the building lead to windowless apartments where only the poorest people without other options lived. Purchased by the Five Points Mission, the Old Brewery was torn down in 1852.

Not satisfied with the ability to make excellent profits from single tenement buildings, landlords often erected 'rear' tenements, smaller buildings set on the back area of a lot. This meant that those residents had even less light than the primarily windowless front buildings. As many as half of the apartments in Five Points had as many as six people living in a typical two-room unit, but more often than not, each unit housed more than eight people. With rent to pay, many of the primary tenants actually rented out space in their already over-crowded apartments to boarders (who received meals) and lodgers (who just needed a place to sleep).

Sanitation systems were unheard of, and many of the buildings were not even hooked up to the newly developing sewage system. The privy-system for both buildings was revolting, and the smells coming from the bathroom encouraged people to use indoor chamber pots, which were often emptied out of windows or down the airshafts of later buildings.

The tenements were not properly ventilated, and the foul smell of the inhabitants, unable to bathe on a regular basis, or even wash their clothes with any frequency, contributed to an overwhelming putrid atmosphere that would most certainly choke our modern sensibilities. Not to mention the fact that the shabby buildings were ultimately poorly constructed, and with the crowded conditions of each interior unit, noise was also an unhappy reality.



Water would have been available from pumps in the front of buildings. But those residents on the fifth floors, where hallways were not lit and undeniably dangerous, were not always willing to risk life and limb for a pail of water. Not that life was any easier for those living in the boardinghouses located in the cellars, where any rainfall would inevitably mean sewage and over-flowing privy waste flooding into the sleeping areas.

Legislation regarding the quality of life within the tenements was finally exacted in 1879, with the Tenement House Law, which required bedrooms to have windows facing to the outside, enacted building specifications for new structures and employed the use of air-shafts. While these new regulations ended up creating new problems, they at least began to revise the unspeakable horror many of the city's poorest inhabitants of New York lived in. Tenement life would continue to define the life of New York's working class men and women well into the next century. As Jacob Riis noted in 1890, 'The endless panorama of the tenements, rows upon rows, between stony streets, stretches to the north, to the south, and to the west as far as the eye reaches.'

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Why do you think conditions in the tenements were allowed to be so bad?

Homework:

Because of a governmental crackdown on immigration, many immigrants arriving at Ellis Island are turned away and sent back to their native countries. As a landlord for one of the tenement apartment buildings, you are looking to rent your tenements. Write an advertisement for one of the tenement apartments. Make sure to include details in your advertisement so that the person reading the ad knows what to expect from the tenements.

Be creative!

Your advertisement should include the following:

- Details on the space (number of bedrooms/rooms, amenities included, access to bathrooms, nearby facilities, etc.)
- Contact information for the landlord
- Price per month
- Color and creativity (your ad should be colorful and be as creative as possible. Consider how one might sell a less-desirable product. Channel your inner salesman!)

