



# HARLEM RIVER HOUSES

FEDERAL EMERGENCY ADMINISTRATION OF PUBLIC WORKS



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HARLEM RIVER HOUSES  
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FEDERAL EMERGENCY ADMINISTRATION OF PUBLIC WORKS  
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Housing Division . . . Howard A. Gray, Director  
With the Cooperation of  
The New York City Housing Authority . . . F. H. LaGuardia, Mayor





## HARLEM RIVER HOUSES

Harlem River Houses, modern low-rent housing community, is a practical result of President Roosevelt's determination to aid the one-third of our citizens who because of limited income do not know the American standard of living.

This community is of particular significance to Negroes who constitute 90 percent of Harlem's population. Their number has grown 10 times since 1910, until now there are more than 250,000. Yet 84 percent of Harlem's homes were built more than 35 years ago; and very few indeed are new since the war. Harlem needs good housing.

Harlem River Houses is one of a total of 51 similar communities being erected by the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration in 36 cities. It has been carried to completion by the Federal Government, with the cooperation of the New York City Housing Authority. As part of the first public housing program of the United States, it points the Nation's way to better housing for all of its people.





# WHAT THE CAMERA SEES

Many studies of Harlem housing have been made. They all come to the same conclusion . . . that much of it was bad to begin with; that it has been leaping with accelerated pace downhill, and is now bogged in an almost hopeless slough. It is almost utopian to expect that its typical residents, industrious and ambitious though they may be, can extract themselves by their own efforts.

The record of the great mass of Negroes in Harlem is one of pitiless exploitation, abetted by inelastic supply within narrowly circumscribed limits, and a relentlessly ballooning demand. At times when average city rents may rise 10 percent, Negroes are forced to pay drastic increases. When other families are constrained to abandon a tenement because of extreme decay, Negroes pay premiums for the privilege of huddling within it.

The casual wayfarer through Harlem streets sees buildings no worse than those he has accepted as essential parts of the New York scene. But hazard a look or two behind the scenes.

Nowhere in America have people received less for their money, in the way of housing, than have many of the residents of Harlem. Dilapidation and overcrowding are the visual causes which spawn juvenile delinquency, crime, disease, high mortality rates. The city, which means the citizens, has poured into it enormous annual subsidies in the form of excessive police and fire protection,





public health and welfare services. Doctoring symptoms!

Slum dwellings in Harlem are usually walk-up tenements of four to six stories, with narrow courts or air shafts, small back yards, dark and frequently insanitary cellars, dark hallways, and dirty, common hall toilets. If water is connected to the apartment, it is most often in one cold-water tap.

To a pronounced degree, housing in Harlem is of the old-law tenement type, with all this means in lack of air, light, and sanitation. Many of the rooms have plenty of space for sleeping bunks, because their walls are punctuated by no windows whatsoever. These dank grottoes effectively propagate, among other crops, the sturdier germs of ravaging disease.

The most characteristic factor of Negro housing, as distinguished from white, is the relatively huge proportion of income which rent extorts. The theoretical ideal proportion of rent to income, of 20 to 25 percent, means nothing to these people who are forced to spend up to even 50 percent of normal earnings for shelter.

How do residents cope with these conditions? They double and redouble up. One family shrinks into one-room space; or several may combine into an apartment. Lodgers offer an obvious relief from the grinding force of rental pressure, though they produce compensating evils of another sort. Many parts of the district show more lodgers than there are families. Sometimes the "hot bed" practice is adopted, by which a bed is rented continuously day and night, often in 8-hour shifts.

But Negro standards of living are not essentially different from those of any other persons in similar income groups. So when they desire to improve their living conditions, even though their incomes do not permit, they often do so by taking in lodgers. Without the extra income they probably would never get to the point of improvement of any kind.

Harlem River Houses is a demonstration of how better homes can be offered to ameliorate these conditions.



# HISTORY IN CAPSULE FORM

## 4 HOUSING STAGES IN 4 BLOCKS

Within only a moderately hefty stone's throw of one another in the blocks adjacent to Harlem River Houses stand typical representatives of the four stages which epitomize a century of New York Housing history.

### 1 Old-Law

Construction of this type of low-rent housing was forbidden in 1901, yet New York still treasures 67,000 such buildings with 524,000 apartments. Rooms with windows open on slot-like courts, with all that means in scarcity of light and foulness of air; but more than half the rooms have no windows at all. Old-law tenements have a much higher death rate than better houses. Fires in old-law tenements brought 33 fatalities in 1 year, with none in new-law tenements.

### 2 New-Law

These tenements are much better. They possess inner courts not less than 12 by 24 feet, and yards at the rear of all lots to provide better ventilation. Every room has a window, and every apartment running water and a toilet. About 53,000 tenements, containing 904,000 apartments, have been erected under the 36-year-old new law in New York. But they are generally too expensive for low-income families; and only 1¼ percent of those built in Manhattan for 5 years prior to 1933 rent for less than \$12.50 per room per month.

### 3 Dunbar Apartments

With excellent ventilation because they are only two rooms deep, the buildings are grouped about garden courts which occupy one-half the block area. Club-rooms and other community features make this development highly desirable. A privately sponsored development, it is so far ahead of new-law tenements as to be in a different class. Unfortunately the costs are too great for average low-income families.

### 4 Harlem River Houses

Typical of the low-rent housing erected by the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration, this new completely fireproof community is constructed on extremely simple yet substantial lines. Here tenants will enjoy that standard of living of which America, often unjustifiably, boasts. But with all the economies of large-scale construction, and the benefits of low-cost financing which PWA enjoys, Harlem River Houses is only further proof that even modest low-rent housing for low-income families requires assistance in some form from Government.







**HARLEM RIVER HOUSES**

**DUNBAR APTS.**

**D-LAW**

**NEW-LAW**

# HOW HARLEM RIVER HOUSES CAME TO BE



Harlem River Houses is the result of conscious and conscientious planning. It has been made possible because of the zealous cooperation between the Public Works Administration and the city of New York. Had it not been for the resources and leadership of the Federal Government and the determination of the city to improve the lot of its citizens, the creation of the new community might have been impossible.

The plans for this project were not approved until the Public Works Administration's Housing Division, the New York City Housing Authority, and a group of architects working under its direction, had made thorough studies of Harlem living needs. This has resulted in the community facilities which are such prominent features of the community. They include a large and well-equipped nursery school with opportunities for both outdoor and indoor supervised play, a complete health clinic, social rooms for the use of tenants, and a protected playground.

Many families in Harlem are headed by the mother, who is the breadwinner. Employment for Negro women is still largely in domestic and personal service, and in factories. Thus women workers are away from home long hours, consequently their children are left on the streets. In Harlem River Houses space for a nursery school has been provided, where, if the tenants desire, adequate care for their children can be arranged with the cooperation of the management. The playground along the Harlem River will afford older children a place for healthy recreation away from the hazard of traffic.

The value of a completely equipped and adequately staffed clinic, to be maintained by the Department of Health, is obvious to everyone who knows public health conditions in Harlem. The clinic will serve, in large measure, to alleviate further overworking the hospitals of the section.

The inclusion of social rooms for the use of tenants is important. These larger rooms will be available for group activities impossible in their own dwellings.

In February of 1934 Mayor LaGuardia appointed the New York City Housing Authority to coordinate the city's housing program. For the first time the Federal Government was thus given a continuing official local body with which it was enabled to plan the beginnings of New York slum rehabilitation. Much preliminary work had been done, however, by the Slum Clearance



Committee formed in 1933, which was responsible for obtaining State legislation setting up the first Housing Authority in the United States in January of 1934.

Analysis of various possible sites in Harlem was immediately undertaken, and choice was narrowed down to four. In May 1935, an appraiser was appointed to determine the value of the site which Harlem River Houses now occupies; and about the same time preliminary architectural studies were commenced. When the general plan had been approved, and the city of New York through the Housing Authority had agreed to protect the future of the project . . . in such matters as the development of the river frontage and closing of interior streets . . . the Housing Division of PWA reached a decision to accept the location as the best available site for the project. President Roosevelt made an allotment of funds in June 1935.

At this point the Housing Authority, acting in the interests of PWA, instituted condemnation proceedings to acquire the property from the owner and to assure clear title. Such condemnation was obtained in July 1935. Completion of plans permitted the final approval of the project by Administrator Harold L. Ickes on October 3. Title was transferred to the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration in November.

Bids for excavation and for the construction of foundations were advertised in October. As soon as weather permitted excavations were started, and the work was completed in June 1936. Erection of the buildings began soon after.

Interest in the new community on the part of Harlem residents has been keen from its very inception. Cordial cooperation has been forthcoming from local organizations of every kind, the Harlem Advisory Committee taking the lead. Long before it was possible to estimate final rentals, registrations of prospective tenants flooded the project offices, reaching the phenomenal total of more than 15,000 families for the 574 available apartments.

Companion to Harlem River Houses will be the great Williamsburg Houses community in Brooklyn, a PWA slum-clearance project which cleaned out 12 city blocks of congested slums to make way for a spacious modern housing development providing 1,622 dwellings. Although both projects were created by the Public Works Administration, it was the underlying intention of PWA to turn over the completed projects to the municipality for operation and management, thereby achieving local regulation and control.

Arrangements have therefore been made between the Public Works Administration and the New York City Housing Authority for the latter to take over the operation of both communities as they are completed. The authority will have complete responsibility for selection of tenants, and for future management and operation.



# THE NEW COMMUNITY

Harlem River Houses comprises four- and five-story fireproof apartment buildings, in three groups containing 574 dwelling units and 1,940 rooms. Every apartment has electric lighting; contains a completely equipped bathroom, with tub, lavatory, and toilet; and a kitchen provided with gas stove and electric refrigerator. Both have hot and cold running water. Apartments vary chiefly in number of bedrooms. Heating is by steam from three group plants.

The community occupies about 9 acres, of which only one-fourth is occupied by buildings. Every room is an outside one, thus assuring good ventilation with direct sunlight in each unit. The greater part of the area is simply landscaped, or devoted to play space including a children's wading pool and a small natural amphitheater.

Community features of Harlem River Houses include four social units for adults, four rooms for occupational use and children's inside play, a nursery school which can accommodate as many as 60 children, well-equipped laundries, and a health clinic. Twenty-four stores will be available.

The city of New York will maintain a park and playground area adjoining Harlem River Houses and bordering on the river.

## TENANTS

Harlem River Houses is designed for the accommodation exclusively of low-income families who are unable elsewhere to find homes of at least a minimum standard of decency, safety, and convenience within their means. They must come from substandard housing conditions . . . which means homes lacking such necessities as plumbing or heating, or without adequate ventilation, or in an unsafe condition or overcrowded. Thorough investigation is made of every applicant.

Limitations on income are also set by the law under which PWA housing projects operate. Incomes of families may not exceed five times the gross rent of an apartment. Rent in this connection includes not only the cost of shelter but of the utilities, such as electricity and gas, as well. At the lower end of the income scale, the authority requires that a family have sufficient income to pay the rent and provide for other living expenses.



Maximum family sizes for each type of apartment are restricted, for the purpose of preventing the overcrowding which characterizes slums. No more than three persons can be admitted, for example, to a three-room apartment. The rule is two persons per bedroom plus, if necessary, one per living room. Children under 2 years of age, however, are not counted. Only families . . . no lodgers . . . can occupy units in the community.

Many more families meet these requirements than can be accommodated in the 574 units. Such families are graded according to their need for housing, and the most eligible admitted as tenants.

The New York City Housing Authority is in charge of the selection of tenants, in accordance with the requirements of the George-Healey Act, which is in substance outlined here.

## RENTS

Rents in Harlem River Houses are fixed as required by law, under which 45 percent of the total cost of the project is a grant by the Housing Division of PWA. The remaining 55 percent will be amortized and repaid to the Government over a period of 60 years. Rents must pay for this portion of the capital cost with interest, plus operating and maintenance charges.

Rents average \$5.20 per *week* for a typical three-room dwelling unit, including heat and hot and cold water. The cost of electricity for lighting and refrigeration, and gas for cooking, averages \$4.64 per *month* for this typical apartment. Rents for the various apartments are:

<i>Size</i>	<i>Number of units</i>	<i>Rent per week</i>
Two rooms . . . . .	60	\$4.45 to \$4.95
Three rooms . . . . .	259	4.90 to 5.45
Four rooms . . . . .	232	5.45 to 6.55
Five rooms . . . . .	23	6.15 to 7.25
	574	

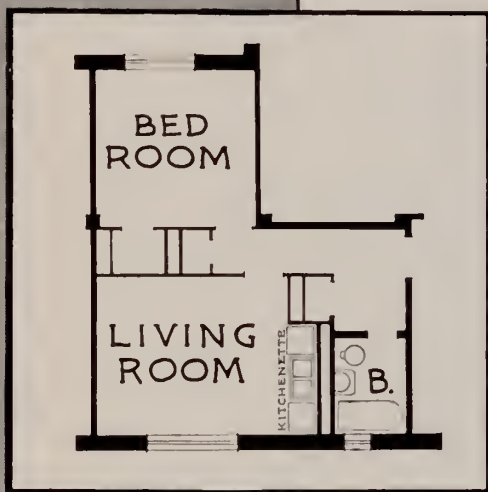
A small charge is added to the rent for utilities (electricity for refrigeration and lighting; gas for cooking) so that the total rent payment covers all operating expenses of the household, making a distinct saving for the tenants.

*Murals for the Nursery School contributed by Treasury Art Projects*



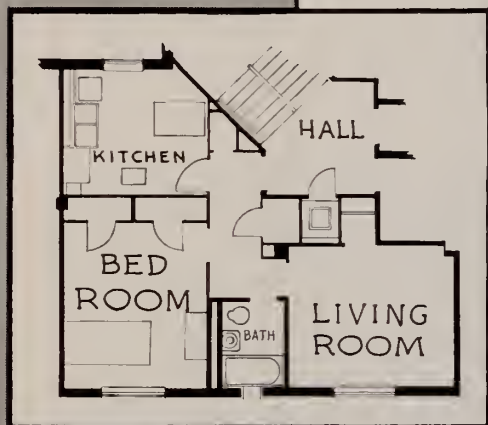
# WHAT YOU WILL FIND

All apartments in the four- and five-story buildings of Harlem River Houses are of fireproof construction. Dwelling units consist of two, three, four, and five rooms, each with bath and kitchen. Every room is an outside room, and every unit has through or cross ventilation. Many of them face courts wider than the usual street.



## TWO ROOMS

A typical two-room apartment consists of a living room and a bedroom, with full-sized bath. A compact strip kitchen or kitchenette, with the same equipment as in full kitchens, makes it a complete and convenient housekeeping unit.

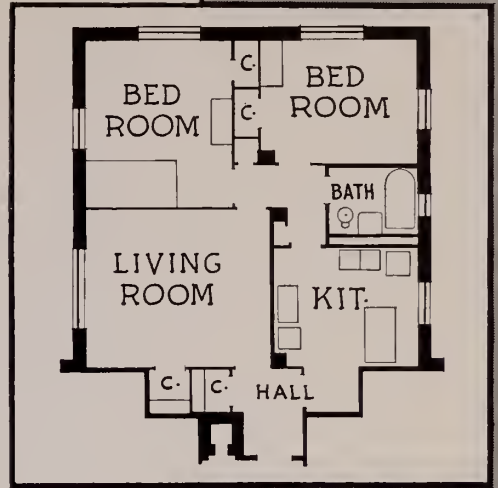


## THREE ROOMS

Three-room apartments consist of living room, bedroom, and kitchen, plus bath. A feature which housekeepers will appreciate is the number of closets provided in this, as in all, Harlem River Houses apartments. Other arrangements of three-room apartments occur.

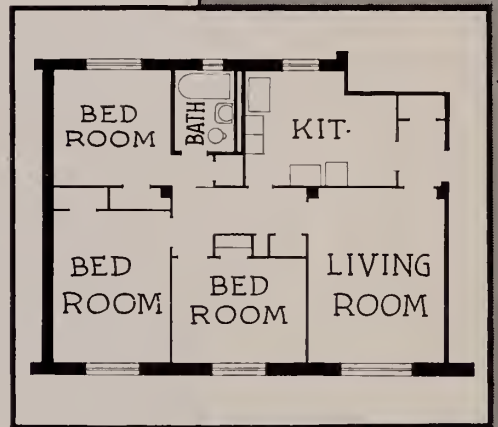
## FOUR ROOMS

Four-room apartments are similarly simple in plan, with the addition of a second bedroom. Permissible families for this size of unit are no larger than five persons, two for each bedroom and one to sleep in the living room. Children under 2 years of age are not counted.



## FIVE ROOMS

Five-room units are the largest in the community, having three bedrooms in addition to the living room. Families as large as seven, not including children under 2 years, may live in this suite.



## NURSERY SCHOOL

In many housing communities the most popular feature is the nursery school. In Harlem River Houses it is anticipated that mothers will organize such a play school for young children. Not only will the children be safe from dangers of street life, but their play can be supervised and their health watched.

## HEALTH CLINIC

Tenants of Harlem River Houses and other residents of the neighborhood make use of this city-maintained clinic. Ounces of prevention weigh heavily in the scales of health; and this clinic is counted on to reinforce the vastly improved living conditions in the new community.

# HARLEM RIVER HOUSES

Harlem River houses in Manhattan and Williamsburg houses in Brooklyn are the two projects constructed by the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration in New York. The entire list of 51 follows:

<i>City</i>	<i>Name of project</i>	<i>Number of dwelling units</i>
Atlanta, Ga	Techwood Homes	604
	University Homes	675
Atlantic City, N. J.	Stanley S. Holmes Village	277
Birmingham, Ala	Smithfield Court	544
Boston, Mass.	Old Harbor Village	1016
Buffalo, N. Y.	Kenfield	658
Cambridge, Mass.	New Towne Court	294
Camden, N. J.	Westfield Acres	515
Charleston, S. C.	Cooper River Court	
	Meeting Street Manor	212
Chicago, Ill.	Jane Addams Houses	1027
	Julia C. Lathrop Homes	925
	Trumbull Park Homes	462
Cincinnati, Ohio	Laurel Homes	1039
Cleveland, Ohio	Cedar-Central Apartments	650
	Lakeview Terrace	620
	Outhwaite Homes	579
Columbia, S. C.	University Terrace	122
Dallas, Tex.	Cedar Springs Place	181
Detroit, Mich.	Brewster	701
	Parkside	785
Enid, Okla.	Cherokee Terrace	80
Evansville, Ind.	Lincoln Gardens	191
Indianapolis, Ind.	Lockefield Garden Apartments	748
Jacksonville, Fla.	Durkeeville	215
Lackawanna, N. Y.	Baker Homes	276
Lexington, Ky.	Aspendale	
	Bluc Grass Park	286
Louisville, Ky.	College Court	125
	LaSalle Place	210
Memphis, Tenn.	Dixie Homes	633
	Lauderdale Courts	449
Miami, Fla.	Liberty Square	243
Milwaukee, Wis.	Parklawn	518
Minneapolis, Minn.	Sumner Field Homes	464
Montgomery, Ala.	Riverside Heights	100
	Wm. B. Paterson Courts	156
Nashville, Tenn.	Andrew Jackson Courts	398
	Cheatham Place	314
New York, N. Y.	Harlem River Houses	574
	Williamsburg Houses	1622
Oklahoma City, Okla.	Will Rogers Courts	354
Omaha, Nebr.	Logan Fontenelle Homes	284
Philadelphia, Pa.	Hill Creek	258
Caguas, P. R.	Caserio La Granja	75
San Juan, P. R.	Caserio Mirapalmeras	131
Schenectady, N. Y.	Schonowee Village	219
Stamford, Conn.	Fairfield Court	146
Toledo, Ohio	Brand Whitlock Homes	264
Christiansted, St. Croix Island, V. I.	Bassin Triangle	30
Frederiksted, St. Croix Island, V. I.	Marley Homes	38
St. Thomas, St. Thomas Island, V. I.	H. H. Berg Homes	58
Washington, D. C.	Langston	274
Wayne, Pa.	Highland Homes	50

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