COLLAPSED OWNER-OCUPIED DWELLING,
1009 WEST JEFFERSON STREET

Courtesy Urban Archives Center, Temple University
LONG before the St. Louis, Missouri, Pruitt-Igoe housing project epitomized the frailty of man’s best laid plans, the scarred hulks of America’s maiden federal housing project cast grim shadows upon the nation’s cityscape. An important clue illuminating the untoward consequence of the once heralded experiment of American public housing can be found in the New Deal, especially in the history linking housing to the black community.

Philadelphia affords an interesting case study of this racial factor in public housing. During World War I and the decade following, Northern cities such as Philadelphia faced an avalanche of black migration. In Philadelphia, as elsewhere, the migrants wrought a harvest of racial bitterness, stiffening segregation patterns, grinding poverty, and social debasement. Everywhere in the urban North where poor blacks jammed into aged hovels and seedy flats there emerged in the 1920s an urban blotch rife with deadening anomie and recognizable as the “dark ghetto.” Accordingly, the Great Depression of the 1930s found urban America gripped not only by a general decay of urban real estate, but more particularly by an expanding core of decrepit black housing. Each city shaped a distinctive black ghetto out of indigenous socio-political weaves. Recent studies by Bruce Stave of New Deal politics in Pittsburgh, Robert Trout of Boston’s New Deal, and Robert Weaver’s earlier comprehensive study of *The Negro Ghetto* (1947) suggest that the Philadelphia experience with black housing in the 1930s was, perchance, not atypical.¹

¹The author is a Professor in the Social Science Department at California State College/Pennsylvania.
Block after block of overcrowded bandbox tenements and
nests of back alley and rear court houses scarred the Philadelphia
cityscape in the late 1920s; but the depression brought worse.
The depression left a pall of joblessness and deadening poverty
hanging oppressively over America's cities. Like a cancer,
blighted housing spread rapidly, leaving inner cities sapped of
vitality and burdened by cankerous blight. Spurred by reformers
such as Edith Elmer Wood and Catherine Bauer, who had for a
decade questioned the ability of private builders to serve the hous-
ing needs of the working class, and by the raspish demands of or-
ganized labor on behalf of the distressed building trades, Frank-
lin Roosevelt's New Deal embraced the idea of public housing.
In fact one of the first actions of Roosevelt's new Public Works
Administration was to inaugurate a program for slum clearance
and low cost housing construction.

Until 1939 only two projects marked Philadelphia's share of the
New Deal housing boom. The first of these projects, the Carl
Mackley houses, was the city's only PWA limited-dividend proj-
et. In this pioneer federal housing project the PWA extended
low interest funds to the American Federation of Full Fashioned
Hosiery Workers Union to build an attractive park-ringed hous-
ing complex for the city's hosiery workers. An equally bucolic
setting complemented a second PWA housing project, the Hill
Creek homes, which opened for occupancy in 1936. Albeit, both
the Carl Mackley and the Hill Creek homes housed only white
families; and to the dismay of planners and the vindication of
finger-wagging critics cognizant of America's sad history of model
housing, most of the project residents were middle rather than
low income families.

Part of the lax pace of the housing program in Philadelphia
was attributable to a recalcitrant anti-New Deal mayor, J. Hamp-
ton Moore, who from 1933 to 1935 waged an obstructionist war
against all New Deal programs. Then, too, by 1934 the housing
program skittered along on dwindling funds until the Wagner-
April 7, 1972; Bruce Stave, *The New Deal and the Last Hurrah: Pittsburgh
Machine Politics* (Pittsburgh, 1970), passim. On the black migration and
its impact on urban America see Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of
a Ghetto* (New York, 1967); Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a
Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1967); Robert Weaver, *The Negro
Ghetto* (New York, 1949); and St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton,
*Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York,
1945).
Steagall Act revived federal housing activity in 1937. A final fact looms large or larger than Moore or bureaucratic lethargy in explaining the shortcoming of Philadelphia's housing program: racial considerations significantly slowed the pace of housing progress in Philadelphia. In fact, race was a seed of destruction mortared into the very foundations of the housing program.2

According to W. E. B. DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro*, in 1890 almost 40,000 Negroes lived in the city, approximately one-fourth in the century old black neighborhood around Lombard and South streets. By 1910 Philadelphia's black population had climbed above 84,000 people, an increase attributed largely to the northward drift of black migrants abandoning their marginal existence and social debasement in the South's farm tenant and sharecropping system. But this pre-1910 migration marked only the advance guard; the “Great Migration” associated with World War I began in the spring of 1916, and until 1918 an average of 150 Negroes a month moved into the city. The migration peaked in the spring of 1918 when between eight and ten thousand blacks entered the city. By the time the flood tide subsided in the

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fall of 1918 over forty thousand migrants had been lured to the city by the prospect of wartime jobs in the Pennsylvania Railroad camps, Midvale Steel, the Atlantic Refinery, Disston Saw, and the Eddystone Munitions Company. Peace in November, 1918, slowed but did not stay the influx, for the 1920 census recorded over 134,000 blacks in the city. By 1930 Philadelphia's black population had risen to 219,599—almost 13 percent of the city population.

Philadelphia's Negro population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not ghettoized in the way that Gilbert Osofsky, Allan Spear, Robert Weaver, and Kenneth Clark described the black city of the 1950s and 1960s—focalized and walled off by de jure and de facto patterns of segregation. In fact in the 1890s black households, rather than concentrating in a single sector, were found dotting almost every ward, and nowhere did Negroes comprise a majority of a ward's residents. The rising tide of black migration into Philadelphia widened the range of black settlement. By 1913 a black social worker observed that while "the Negro population (in Philadelphia) has a very large nucleus[,] . . . it has increasingly spread in large numbers over two-thirds of the city."1


4 For quote see John T. Emlen, secretary and treasurer of the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, who in an article, "The Movement for the Betterment of the Negro in Philadelphia," notes that "In 1910 the Negro population has, to some extent, shifted and spread. In the central 5th and 8th wards, it is very much smaller than in 1890, and, while the 7th is larger by about 2,700, it has not increased in proportion to the increase in some other parts of the city. The 30th ward, to the southwest of the
The large nucleus of black population was located in the south central section of the inner city, comprising the 4th, 5th, 7th, 8th, 11th, and 13th wards. Blacks clustered thickly in the decayed dwellings along 5th, 6th, and 7th streets between Lombard and South streets. It was in the dark nooks and alleys off these streets that in the 1880s and 1890s such observers as DuBois and Helen Parish, the latter the "friendly rent collector" of the philanthropic Octavia Hill Society, discovered sink holes of black poverty, ignorance, and powerlessness. While DuBois and Parish expressed concern at the wretched and the "vicious" among the black population, they repeatedly incanted the virtue of the "seventy percent" who were hardworking common laborers and domestic servants.

This was the hardworking segment that escaped the cellars and dark alleys and lived on the typical inner city blocks of row houses which included two or three black families who shared a working-class poverty in common with many Irish, Jewish, or Italian neighbors. Negroes in 1910 lived in virtually every ward in the city, and by 1923 over 20 percent of black Philadelphia had a white neighbor living next door.6

However, the migration of poor, uneducated, rural blacks exerted extraordinary pressures on the city's existing black population. What the historian of Black Chicago, Allan Spear, observed in Chicago was also true in Philadelphia. The continued influx of thousands of new settlers constituted a demographic

7th, has increased over five-fold; and further to the south, in the 26th ward, and to the west in various parts of West Philadelphia, and to the north in the 14th, 15th, 20th, 47th and 32nd, and in Germantown, the increase has been very great. The Negro population, therefore, has a very large concentrated nucleus, but has increasingly spread in large numbers over two-thirds of the city,” The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, XLIX (September, 1913), 84. Armstrong Association, Annual Report for 1933; Newman, “Philadelphia Negro Population,” in T. J. Woofter and Madge Headley Priest, Negro Housing in Philadelphia, pamphlet (Friends Committee on Interests of the Colored Race, Whittier Center Housing Corporation, 1927), 5, 14-15.

revolution which disrupted the ecological order of the old community. Black newcomers, who crammed the old central city wards, drove middle-class Negroes into the old but better housing of North Philadelphia, Germantown, and West Philadelphia. By 1930 a burgeoning community of some 26,539 blacks stretched along Broad Street, spilling into the smaller streets surrounding Temple University beyond Columbia Avenue.

Still the largest black population huddled in the old central city wards. During the early 1920s, at a time when more than ten thousand black newcomers settled in the city annually, Philadelphia, like the rest of urban America, faced a severe housing shortage. Although the shortage abated after 1923, housing for Negroes remained scarce. Most new housing in Philadelphia sold for between four and five thousand dollars, a price well beyond the reach of the average black home buyer. Housing studies disclosed that, of the 20,885 new dwellings built in the city between 1923 and 1925, a scant fifty reached the Negro market; equally alarming, 30 percent of the houses razed in the decade from 1923 to 1933 had formerly housed black residents.⁶

Out of necessity newly-arrived migrants in the city “doubled and tripled up” in a dwindling supply of horribly substandard housing. Every room of these rickety structures was usually converted into dingy quarters for migrant families. Six-room houses in the dense 30th ward accommodated nine black families; and this overcrowding, which suffocated black life, enriched landlords. For example, a house, which rented for $14 a month in 1914, after conversion to a three-room apartment in the 1920s brought $100 a month.

The migration, which congested central city wards with Negro peasantry and sent middle-class Negroes searching for better housing, obliterated the black-white accord whereby city wards had

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been sprinkled with black settlements. By 1924 white homeowners, fearful of engulfment by a black tidal wave, reacted violently to the encroaching Negro community. Real estate agents colluded with white improvement societies. Where restrictive covenants failed to stay the black drift, stone tossing demonstrators subjected new black neighbors to a hostile reception.

Consequently, in the 1920s blacks were increasingly restricted to well defined areas. As Sam Bass Warner observed in *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth*, by 1930 Negroes had become segregated by income and ethnicity in contrast to the occupational clustering of the nineteenth century. "The result," states Warner, "was a core city of poverty, low skills, and low status surrounded by a ring of working-class homes." The Philadelphia Negro in 1930 subsisted on the margins of the city's economy. The flicker of hope that the Philadelphia Negro would preserve some of the economic gains of the war years faded as depression eclipsed "Normalcy." As early as 1927 the city's entire economy based on textiles and metal manufacturing faltered, sending the city's economy skidding into the depression.7

The depression, by exacerbating Negro economic woes, magnified the housing dilemma. During the twenties black Philadelphia in concert with white had burned with the fever of home ownership, so that by 1929 sixty-three Negro building and loan companies negotiated precarious second and third mortgages. The depression hacked unsparingly at these black mortgages. Sheriff writs bedecked thousands of Philadelphia doorways in the 1930s, almost 19,000 in 1932 alone. Many of these lost homes belonged to Negroes. However, unlike white Philadelphia, the typical Negro was a tenant, and in 1932 half of this black renting public lived in the shadow of eviction. Dumped onto the

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streets by writ of sheriff or constable, displaced black families only herded more tightly into the city’s already bulging roosts, thereby compounding the housing crisis.⁸

Conditions were at their worst in the south central district (the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 7th, and 30th wards) where in 1936, thirty-two of the nearly ninety-three thousand inhabitants were black. Families here occupied mouldering bandbox tenements—old three-room structures where each sweltering 11’ by 11’ cubicle sat “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” one on another. If not bandboxes, poor blacks inhabited miserable shacks or nested in decrepit houses honeycombed with families. Sixty-six percent of these ramshackle tenement structures were nearly a century old. In fact, 11 percent dated from the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Unbelievably, some residents still bucketed their water from yard hydrants and still poked about in murky rooms dimly lit by kerosene or oil lamps and unevenly warmed by dangerous wood stoves. Over one-quarter of the black occupants used foul smelling outdoor water closets, a sanitary artifact frequently shared by three or four families.

Of five thousand black residential structures in the area, fully three thousand had neither bathtub nor shower, and close to two thousand lacked electricity. Many houses were similar to an aged three-and-one-half story row dwelling on Lombard Street which had been divided into twenty-three apartments; here eighteen families shared twelve sinks, and twenty families used seven water closets.

Housing conditions in North Philadelphia were almost as severe. In a red-brick warren in the 47th ward, which teemed with black families, some 90 percent of the 3,000 homes were of Civil War vintage; more than 65 percent needed repair, and 300 needed indoor bathroom facilities. But none of these statistics captures the shabbiness of black quarters. Negroes frequently dwelled in a single room with flaking plaster walls and buckling ceiling. Picture sparse furnishings, an ancient wood stove, rust stained sink, and battered table and chairs. Cardboard patched windows were the commonplace, and the plumbing, where

As the tide of black migration crested in the mid-twenties, more and more of the black elite—physicians, merchants, teachers, social workers—withdraw from the old black central city neighborhoods and moved to West Philadelphia. Aloof, feeling incapable of identifying with the Negro peasant, these black families blamed the migrant for the moral and physical disintegration of black society. Philadelphia's Armstrong Association and the local NAACP best articulated the qualms of the black middle class. Both organizations urged the newcomer to seek job training and moral rearmament while in the same breath flayed his crudeness and slothfulness.

The depression, however, struck not only the penniless migrant but threatened to equally impoverish the entire black community. A recent scholar of Philadelphia's black community has noted that while the recognition of a common plight forced outcroppings here and there of a race consciousness, at the same time one set of beliefs bound all segments of the distressed black community—a common hatred of discrimination and the convictions that the best society would be integrated.

Despite this hatred of segregation, separate racial organizations—black churches, black lodges, black YMCA's—had long been justifiable as "voluntary segregation" compelled by social ostracism from white institutions. Yet the existence of separate black organizations never detracted from the integrationist goal; on the contrary, according to their spokesmen, they supplied the vitally necessary leverage to lift the lower black classes into a condition of respectability.

Understandably then, what interest there was in housing appeared prior to 1936 principally among the ranks of these middle-class organizations. Like middle-class whites, bourgeois blacks

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fully subscribed to a housing rhetoric which identified disease, crime, delinquency, and every other imaginable social pathology with the evil of crowded, substandard housing. To follow the argument, a bounty of decent housing would benefit an ill-housed, segregated race; but more importantly, it would expand the pitifully limited supply of good housing for the striving middle class and protect better neighborhoods like West Philadelphia from the disaster of encroaching blight.¹⁰

Accordingly, the PWA's first housing program, granting federal loans for limited dividend projects, had hardly been announced in November, 1933, when Cheyney State College president, Leslie Pinckney Hill, Wayne Hopkins of the Armstrong Association (affiliated with the National Urban League), and Robert G. Taylor, the white Quaker president of the Whittier Center Housing Corporation, trooped into Secretary of Commerce Daniel Roper's office and extracted Roper's promise that the PWA would not only ignore racial lines in granting housing loans but also "not support local efforts to segregate Negroes or any foreign group." Shortly thereafter, Clark Foreman, Harold Ickes's racial watchdog, commissioned Taylor to establish a "Committee on DeSlumming," which in Foreman's words "would meet the needs of all Philadelphia." Taylor immediately compiled and included among the committee members such distinguished city blacks as Attorney Raymond Pace Alexander, his wife, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, and Wayne Hopkins.

Taylor's Committee on DeSlumming produced a spate of housing proposals, a number of which were sponsored by black leaders and aimed at arresting blight in West Philadelphia. One of the most celebrated proposals was the Park Court apartments designed by black architect Homer Jefferson. The Park Court Plan envisioned a modern 14-unit complex to be located in West Philadelphia on a slum tract which, in Wayne Hopkins's words, "was inhabited by a poor class of people who lived in broken down shacks . . . (and created) an eyesore to the surrounding

¹⁰ See Nelson, "Race and Class Consciousness," 2-15, 17-18, 95-99, 349-350. On activities of the black middle class and organizations such as Armstrong Association see reports of Donald Wyatt, secretary of Industrial and Research Department of Armstrong Association, to board of managers of Armstrong Association, 1933 and December, 1935, to January, 1936, mimeographed, Armstrong Association Papers, TUA. See also William N. Blakeney of Equitable Housing Company to Bernard Newman, October 6, 1933, Housing Association Papers, TUA.
neighborhood near the new Martha Washington public school for colored children."

Neither Park Court, Jefferson Terrace, nor the plans of the Blakiston Housing Corporation and the Whittier Center—all for housing in West Philadelphia—were ever implemented. At the very moment these projects were being conceived, the PWA was phasing out its limited dividend program. In fact, by early 1934 Ickes had replaced this program with a plan designed to grant to state and local governments up to 30 percent of the cost of slum clearance and housing projects and make low interest loans on the balance.\footnote{On the PWA racial policy and the origins of the Committee on Deslumming see Robert Gray Taylor to Bernard Newman, February 3, 1934, Housing Association Papers, TUA; and Taylor to Francis Shunk Brown, president, Philadelphia Board of City Trusts, February 8, 1934, Housing Association Papers, TUA. On limited dividend applications to PWA for black projects see limited dividend applications for Park Court Housing Corporation, Jefferson Terrace, and Whittier Center Housing Corporation, R.G. 196, File H-3000, Housing Division Records, NA. See in particular Henry Homer Jefferson to Horatio B. Hackett, PWA Director of Housing, May 2, 1935, R.G. 196, H-3000.09, Housing Division Records, NA.}

The PWA now earmarked $15,000,000 for its housing program in Philadelphia and in March, 1934, authorized the city to form an Advisory Committee on Housing to “express preference for projects in certain sections of the city . . . and reach conclusions by considering the social and economic problems of each.” The committee which met for the first time in October, 1934, embraced a who’s who of Philadelphia civic luminaries, including James McDevitt, prominent city labor leader; J. David Stern, editor of the Philadelphia Record; Dr. Bossard, a distinguished professor of economics at the University of Pennsylvania; and Bernard Newman of the Philadelphia Housing Association. Despite the PWA’s commitment to racial objectivity, Philadelphia’s Advisory Committee lacked a delegate from the city’s conspicuously ill-housed black community.\footnote{On the PWA and the creation of the Philadelphia Advisory Committee on Housing see Robert Kohn, Housing Administrator of PWA Emergency Committee on Housing, to Morris L. Cooke, March 29, 1934, R.G. 196, File H-3000.703, Housing Division Records, NA; and Kohn to W. Logan MacCoy, April 28, 1934, R.G. 196, File H-3000.703, Housing Division Records, NA. See also Kohn to Harold Ickes, April 12, 1934, R.G. 196, File H-3000.703, Housing Division Records, NA.}

In the spring of 1935 only negligible progress occurred toward remedying the city’s housing problems. The city’s mayor, J.
Hampton Moore, stubbornly opposed Washington's overtures to fund housing and other public works projects. In June Moore infuriated the city's housing fraternity by announcing before an American Legion Convention that Philadelphia "is too proud to have slums. Of course, there are cases of two or more families living in one house. There are houses fronting on alleys. There may be some dilapidated houses. . . . That does not constitute slums. People are merely living within their means."

Moore's obstructionism raised one seemingly insurmountable obstacle to better housing; the PWA, itself, added another. The PWA established criteria for projects which practically excluded action on inner city housing. For example, projects could not be "influenced detrimentally by surrounding conditions" and had to be built on cheap land costing not in excess of $1.50 a square foot. These rules and an adverse federal court ruling in Cincinnati, prohibiting Washington from condemning land for housing purposes, practically mandated that projects be built, as was the Hill Creek project, on the white fringes beyond the central city. Then, too, when the nation's economy started sagging in late 1934, FDR decided to buttress federal relief operations with Housing Division funds, slowing Ickes's cautiously plodding public housing program to a crawl.13

Housing progress was therefore nearly at a standstill in March, 1935, when the Philadelphia Tribune and the Independent, the city's two black newspapers, launched a series of scathing exposes of black housing conditions. Pictures of dangerously dilapidated tenements, children playing in debris-strewn courtyards, and ceilings threatening collapse dramatized abominations which, according to the Tribune, both the federal government and the city heartlessly tolerated. Such squalid surroundings, charged the Tribune, encouraged black residents to pillage vacant buildings for firewood, a depression-born practice which rankled bourgeois blacks and whites alike.14

13 On J. Hampton Moore's attitude toward slums and federal projects see Bauman, "The City, The Depression, and Relief," 233-234. On criteria for project sites see Newman to Colonel Horatio Hackett, October 5, 1934, R.G. 196, File H-3000.703, Housing Division Records, NA.

The Tribune's campaign for black housing exhausted the rhetoric of a century of housing reform. Good housing, to follow the Tribune's line, was a key to social control. Raze the slums, build decent park-ringed housing units, and crime, disease, alcoholism, and other hazards of slum living would vanish. Yet, "decent housing" did not necessarily mean "low cost housing." Elitist Philadelphia blacks, who spoke of "really significant neighborhood developments" for Negroes, generally had in mind "fashionable housing" modeled after Harlem's Paul Lawrence Dunbar apartments, an attractive Negro housing development constructed in the 1920s by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

At least some poor black families on the relief rolls understood these nuances of black housing rhetoric. A group of women employed on the WPA sewing projects testified that while they could see the advantages of such a "high-classed colored neighborhood as the Dunbar project," they staunchly opposed "segregation like they have in Baltimore." However, asserted the women, "Negroes in Philadelphia still need better houses made available." Whatever the motive, this simple consensus on the need for improved housing undergirded the first housing campaign.13

Philadelphia's settlement houses and agencies, like the Armstrong Association, enlisted the black press to lead the campaign to rouse action on housing. The Southwest Belmont YWCA, located in the heart of the city's worst black neighborhood, hosted several meetings protesting firetrap houses. Prodded by activist settlement workers, a number of slum residents, black and white, bombarded Harold Ickes and Roosevelt with letters and telegrams deploping their ramshackle housing and beseeching federal aid. These letters were singular in the starkness of their often crudely scrawled descriptions. One black woman, for example,
pleaded that conditions in her neighborhood were so bad “we would be very glad if there would be my way for better houses for us to live in we has damp wall and water in the cellar and the toilet on the outside (sic).”  

Despite the settlements and their letter writing activities, the black housing campaign was rooted in Negro professional, fraternal, and social welfare organizations, not the masses. Individuals like architect Homer Jefferson or accountant Cornelius Garlick worked closely with the site selection committee of the Philadelphia Advisory Committee on Housing. Another large contingent of black clergymen and other professionals concerned with housing fought the Negro housing battle as the Committee of One Hundred. The Allied Housing and Slum Clearance Committee helped firm the housing ramparts for Dr. John K. Rice’s militant North Philadelphia Civic Club, a group composed of delegates from many fraternal and social welfare groups and closely identified with the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign. Not to be pre-empted in a worthy cause, the NAACP entered the lists with a slum clearance committee whose membership consisted exclusively of doctors, lawyers, clergy, teachers, contractors, and other professionals.

Philadelphia’s black elite no less dominated the city’s chapter of the National Negro Congress. The NNC emerged following a May, 1935, conference at Howard University convoked to discuss the “Position of the Negro in the Present Economic Crisis.” At that meeting the 250 delegates determined to enlist the mass of the black community behind such demands as decent wages, the right to join trade unions, relief and security for every needy Negro family, the right of tenants to bargain collectively, equal education, and adequate housing.

While the Congress invited the support of the Communist
Party USA and black Socialists such as A. Phillip Randolph (Randolph, in fact, became the first president of the NNC), most of the delegates believed that through picketing, demonstrations, petitioning, and other mass action progress was possible within the present socio-economic framework.

Under the leadership of black sociologist Arthur Huff Fauset Philadelphia Negroes actively fostered the aims of the NNC. By 1937, when Philadelphia hosted the annual convention of the NNC, the city was regarded as a center of NNC activity, and through the Philadelphia chapter's housing committee a significant portion of that activity concerned the problem of black housing.

It was the letter writing campaigns and site selection activities of the NNC and these other groups which kept interest in housing simmering into 1936. In March, 1936, the Association of Philadelphia Settlements assembled 500 tenants to petition Washington for a government slum clearance project. Then in October the Philadelphia chapter of the National Negro Congress visited Washington to demand action on housing. But the pleas of the NNC delegation, just as those plaintive letters of past years, fell upon a New Deal badgered by a budget-wary Congress. An Ickes form letter mirrored the climate of retrenchment: "There is at present no money; if Congress extends the Housing Division appropriation, black housing conditions in Philadelphia will be improved. For now, the administration can offer nothing."17

Yet, the black housing campaign, no matter how narrow its

base or how weak Washington's reaction, registered an impact. Washington at last was alerted to black Philadelphia's enormous stake in the housing movement. Not that Democratic pundits overlooked the boost given by formerly Republican black voters to Democratic candidates in Pennsylvania's 1934 elections. The housing issue, in fact, offered an opportunity for the Democratic New Deal to respond to its newest constituency. Evidence of the administration's heightened sensitivity emerged following the January, 1935, resignation of J. David Stern from his post on the Philadelphia Advisory Committee on Housing. In March, about the time of the letter writing campaign, Washington began insisting that Stern's place be filled by a black representative. Bernard Newman was scarcely evasive about the absence of a black man on the committee. He forthrightly confessed that the committee had not seen need for a black member since a black project had not been considered. Newman's politically volatile candor notwithstanding, Washington was goaded to act promptly. A high PWA official in Philadelphia, Hyman Cunin, hurriedly instructed Newman's advisory committee on its "entirely new enlarged function." Cunin apologized that "the thought had not originally been given to a Negro project when the committee was selected." However, implied Cunin, "now that it most certainly was[,] a site selection for such a project will probably be most difficult"; and this, figured Cunin, "warrants the inclusions of at least two Negroes among the advisory committee membership."

To fill Stern's place, Ickes assigned his advisor on Negro affairs, Robert C. Weaver, to compile a list of Philadelphia Negroes suitable for the post. From that list the committee on April 22, 1935, appointed Crystal Bird Fauset, field secretary of the YWCA, and wife of Arthur Huff Fauset, black sociologist, and chairperson of the Philadelphia area NNC. A month later at Newman's behest, the committee chose a second black member, eighty-year-old Major R. R. Wright, a past president of Georgia State Agriculture and Industrial College, once a special agent.

in the Department of Interior, and at the time president of the Citizens and Southern Bank and Trust Company. Although Wright's name had been absent from Weaver's list, Newman pressed for its inclusion, believing naively that the eighty-year-old Wright would appease the older, more established Booker T. Washington faction as opposed to the younger DuBois element of the black community.¹⁰

As the summer of 1936 turned to fall, however, there was every indication that the black leadership expected more than two blacks on a stalled housing committee. After 1932 the resuscitation of a two-party system in Philadelphia moved the black community to assert itself politically. In 1934 city blacks elected a Negro, Marshall Shepard, to the state legislature. Basking in a modicum of newly found political independence, blacks demanded and won a more generous slice of both the city and state patronage pie. Even greater black expectations were aroused when in 1935 black Philadelphia helped elect S. Davis Wilson mayor. Wilson had campaigned on a platform promising improved conditions for city blacks, including better housing.

However, by late 1936 all housing promises looked grossly specious. The flush of initial interest that Fauset and Wright displayed in the housing committee in 1935 quickly lapsed. Possibly disillusioned by both the inactivity of the committee as well as by its cavalier treatment of black housing needs, Fauset and Wright recorded a very disappointing attendance record at the PACH sessions. After the first two meetings their services, in Newman's words, were "practically nil."

Toward the fall of 1936 the undercurrent of restiveness with the sluggish pace of housing progress, which coursed beneath the black community, began surfacing. The September meeting of the Philadelphia area National Negro Congress listed housing at the top of its bill, and the meeting closed with a sharply

worded petition to Ickes, demanding at least $10,000,000 to re-house city Negroes. A reinvigorated letter writing campaign flared up in November which underscored the NNC's multi-million dollar housing demand.\textsuperscript{20}

Then in several horrifying minutes the black housing problem erupted into a grand cause in Philadelphia. Just before midnight on the 19th of December, 1936, Mrs. Alberta Richardson, a 28-year-old housewife, found the tenement she lived in trembling. Then with a crackling sound, huge chunks of plaster loosened from the ceiling and crashed to the floor; within moments came a dreadful rumble, followed by a deafening roar as the walls teetered and the floor collapsed. In seconds the Richardson dwelling and the adjoining bandbox tenement crumbled into fiery rubble. Mrs. Richardson survived, but the tragedy took the lives of seven Negroes including four children.

For two weeks the city seethed with indignation. Thunderings against slums and slumlords monopolized the political spotlight. Heartened by the great public outrage, the \textit{Tribune} pleaded that “the indignation over the tragedy” not be allowed to die down and summoned persons of all faiths to “rid the city of this menace to health, life, and property.”\textsuperscript{21}

Philadelphia’s flamboyant mayor, S. Davis Wilson, beat his breasts and gnashed his teeth with the best and promised publicly to wreak full vengeance on slum housing. Overnight Wilson created a mayor’s housing committee which included the well respected black physician, Dr. Harry W. Barnes, who had handled Wilson’s mayoralty campaign among black Philadelphians. Furthermore, Wilson announced a spectacular assault on unfit housing, which involved the immediate demolition of five


thousand slum houses. To dramatize his determination, the mayor appeared two days later, crowbar in hand, to help demolish the first house.

Unlike "proper" Philadelphia, the ire of the city’s tenement inhabitants was too ablaze to be easily assuaged by crowbar gimmickry. Days after the tragedy, with passions aflame, the National Negro Congress summoned hundreds of mourners to the Wesley AME Church to memorialize the disaster victims and plot war against the slums. It was in the wake of this gathering that a group of slum dwellers who lived in the shadow of the bandbox collapse formed the Tenant’s League. A little more than a week after the collapse the league held the first of many protest meetings at the Southwest Belmont YWCA. Present were representatives of the National Negro Congress, the Workers Alliance—an activist organization of the unemployed—and the Communist backed International Labor Defense. The protesters demanded that slum housing be razed forthwith and those families displaced be adequately housed at no added expense to the tenant; however, the murmuring crowd angrily denounced Wilson’s offer to accommodate the homeless families in the city’s National Guard Armories.

Soon after the Tenant’s League protest, the NNC convoked a city-wide forum on housing where speaker after speaker decried the impotence of city housing ordinances and housing inspectors. Those gathered demanded that the city enact stronger ordinances with teeth sharp enough to coerce landlords into making desperately needed repairs. To bolster the denunciation of slum housing and city negligence, Mayor Wilson was deluged with letters and petitions demanding low cost housing and a list of housing vacancies for slum families frightened from their creaking homes or evicted by the mayor’s crowbar.22

Tenant strikes, housing meetings, and protests punctuated the year 1937. The Tenant’s League always stood well in the vanguard of organizations which actively battled for better housing conditions in Philadelphia. Unlike the housing committees and con-

ferences of pre-bandbox tragedy Philadelphia, the league boasted a grass roots membership. Employing much militancy, the league crusaded for "decent homes at low rent," while stridently opposing Jim Crow practices in housing and the blacklisting of relief tenants. Street demonstrations, flyers, and protest meetings were among the league's repertoire of tactics leveled against belligerent landlords and in behalf of better inner-city housing.

The Tenant's League was not alone in the campaign for better housing. On the first anniversary of the bandbox collapse, a council of housing groups hosted a city-wide conference where speaker after speaker, including Catherine Bauer and Langdon Post, the latter the head of the New York Housing Authority, belabored the evils of slum housing. In commenting on this meeting, and all the others of 1937, the Tribune contended that a year after the collapse, despite talk and petitions, the same housing menace existed; the city's black population still lived 121 persons to an acre in crumbling rookeries.23

However, 1938 promised improvements; at the end of 1937 the new Wagner-Steagall Act authorized $20,000,000 in housing funds for Philadelphia. The act also inaugurated the United States Housing Authority under which a city housing authority was established whose main function was to champion the cause of housing in Philadelphia.

From the first, Philadelphia's Housing Authority included a black representative, namely, Dr. Harry Barnes, surgeon, president of the black National Medical Association, and member of Mayor Wilson's housing committee. While Barnes was suspect by some for his overzealous support of Wilson and clearly spoke for the conservative black elite, he was widely respected and had a sincere interest in Negro housing.

Blacks like Barnes and Robert Weaver considered the new public housing program the high point of the New Deal. Stand-

ing before the 1938 meeting of the National Negro Congress, Robert Weaver portrayed the USHA as ushering in a new era for black housing; black Americans, exhorted Weaver, were the real heirs of the program. Previously, charged Weaver, the "very existence of segregated areas in which most of us are compelled to live . . . perilously circumscribed" black America's opportunity for decent housing. Several years earlier W. E. B. DuBois in a different vein seized upon statistics on slums, poverty, and criminality to spice Crisis editorials which preached the wisdom of voluntary segregation. While Weaver spoke for housing opportunity—never segregation, it is hard to believe that he could not foresee that housing for Negroes could easily be read black housing.24

Yet, the mission of Philadelphia's new housing authority was black housing; it was the unfinished business of the now defunct advisory committee which had for three years grappled unsuccessfully with the problem. Actually, as early as 1935 the committee and others interested in public housing had proposed a "Negro project." Understandably, in light of the burgeoning segregation patterns of the 1920s, many white Philadelphians in the 1930s counseled public housing for Negroes—not necessarily for humanitarian motives—but as a more effective device than restrictive covenants or improvement associations for controlling the expansion of the black community.

In 1935 Walter Thomas of the City Planning Commission briefed Housing Division head A. R. Clas on the possibility of low-cost housing for Negroes on slum-cleared land. According to Thomas, the area east of Broad Street around Girard Avenue was "heavily Negro and should remain so." He recommended, therefore, the development of a Negro area having a physical outlet

into Fairmont Avenue, and Girard Avenue, and Broad Street and the Girard Avenue Business Area.” Such a defined Negro area would contribute to the stabilization of the area, and, continued Thomas, “will have a wholesome effect on the values of Girard Avenue west of Broad Street.”

The point was made much clearer in a letter from a Philadelphia attorney to Bernard Newman. The writer was “delighted” to read that Newman was “contemplating the establishment of a Harlem section for Philadelphia. . . . I have lived in this city my entire lifetime, and I have been shocked to observe . . . great belts of what used to be fine residential sections, now densely populated by colored people. This is a serious situation, and ought to be corrected, as it is resulting in large depreciation in the value of real estate in those sections.”

Newman was blunt himself. When asked in 1935 about the city’s plans for housing racial and ethnic minorities, the head of PACH argued that “we are ignoring racial matters entirely in our slum clearance program, except, of course, we are seeking to promote a separate slum clearance in a Negro district, the new housing in which will be for Negroes.” A few months earlier Newman wrote that “opposition of certain Negroes toward anything which appears to be segregated, is unfortunate.”

In harmony with such thinking the Philadelphia Housing Authority, as did its predecessor—PACH, followed a simple formula for determining whether a project would be white or black. According to the housing authority, the racial composition of a project must conform to the prevailing racial composition of the surrounding neighborhood. Therefore, a black project was a matter of site location, and criteria for locating a project was crucial.

Even with “Harlemization” as a goal, the city’s housing officialdom had wrestled vainly for years to determine a site. The 1935

25 Walter Thomas and Samuel Wetherhill, both of City Planning Commission, to A. R. Clas, May 28, 1935, R.G. 196, File H-3000 (.2), Housing Division Records, NA.
Cincinnati decision, mentioned earlier, forbade the federal government from condemning land for housing purposes and greatly encouraged the use of vacant parcels. Furthermore, housing officials declared that a Negro project must be surrounded by a cordon of black or blight, lest property values be toppled.

The above two considerations forced the committee to find vacant sites for black housing on inner-city land. At the very first meeting of the then all-white Advisory Committee on Housing in October, 1934, the members recommended clearing out a black slum and building “houses for Negroes with the hope of providing an area of good housing for such groups”; but, they added, “values in Negro districts are high.”

Despite the high cost of slum tracts, in the advisory committee’s view, no alternative existed. In exasperation Newman wrote in 1935 that “we (PACH) are finding great difficulty in locating an area suitable for Negro housing, our handicap being that we cannot recommend a Negro housing site in the heart of a white district.” He might very well have inserted “near a white district,” for when the committee suggested the Glenwood Cemetery site (a large triangular shaped graveyard in North Philadelphia skirted on one side by railroad tracks, and bordered on the remaining sides by a black neighborhood), an incensed Philadelphia architect protested that such a project would be “a great blow to West Philadelphia.” The site, he argued, “could be used for white housing and not jeopardize adjacent institutions like the University of Pennsylvania, and Convention Hall. The site is too valuable for black housing as it might engender a feeling that anything is good enough for Negro housing.”

Every site proposed for a black project met with some objection. One likely location, the historic Pennsylvania Hospital tract in the heart of the south Philadelphia ghetto, was too costly. A vacant field near the city’s baseball stadium was too near an unblighted white middle-class neighborhood. The advisory committee finally selected the aforementioned twenty-acre Glenwood site covering the ground of an abandoned cemetery whose 27,000 spectral residents had no objection to black housing. But this Glenwood proposal came too late; federal housing was stalled in 1936.

On PACH’s problems locating black housing sites see Philadelphia Committee on Public Affairs, “The Public Housing Program in Philad-
The New Philadelphia Housing Authority turned elsewhere in 1937 to locate a black housing project and considered at first the infamous south Philadelphia bandbox area. Regrettably for the city, Washington insisted that the first demonstration project be on vacant land and that the cost per unit of housing should not exceed a $6,000 mark. Washington’s stiff requirements clinched the defeat of slum clearance. Consequently, the Glenwood proposal was dusted off and found ideal for the first black project.

Great pomp and circumstance attended the May, 1939, groundbreaking for a housing project named in honor of the black playwright and author, James Weldon Johnson. The decor for the ceremony was unmistakably black. Neither the white police and firemen’s band, USHA head Nathan Straus, nor a scattering of white officials could mellow the distinct blackness of the occasion. Virginia Lewis, described as a “young, colored soprano,” sang the Star Spangled Banner; the Rev. D. W. Haywood of the black Mt. Carmel Baptist Church offered prayer; and surrounded by a crowd of black parents and gleeful black school children specially released from class to be present, Dr. Harry Barnes and Charles Lewis, president of the NNC, helped Straus turn the first spadeful of earth. When the $3,000,000 housing complex opened October 1, 1940, eighteen hundred people—well over 95 percent black—were housed in 535 units.

Work had no sooner begun at the Glenwood site when plans were unveiled for a second black project to be called the Richard Allen homes. Unlike the Glenwood cemetery site, the Allen site necessitated clearing twenty-seven acres of ramshackle slums from around Fairmount and Poplar streets—a heavily populated black area just below Temple University. In late October, 1941, the first of 5,386 tenants moved into this project, and, like the James Weldon Johnson homes, when all the residents had been counted, over 95 percent were black.28


28 On Philadelphia Housing Authority’s search for black housing sites see Philadelphia Housing Authority, Minutes (H. A. Minutes), February 12, 1938, found in Philadelphia Housing Authority offices, Philadelphia; H. A. Min-
It was not until 1941 that Barnes questioned the housing authority's policy of isolating blacks in all Negro projects; and although Washington sent Robert Weaver to investigate, the federal government ultimately accepted the city's neighborhood formula. By this time Philadelphia's housing program for all intents and purposes had ended. In 1940 Mayor Robert E. Lam-
berton had refused further cooperation with a housing program he considered "a great public experiment whose value had not been proven." More importantly, by 1941 defense housing rather than public housing had become the major concern.20

By 1960 the James Weldon Johnson homes and the Richard Allen homes were shabby hulks as blighted as the red brick warrens that surrounded them; their doom being sealed in their misguided purpose. To begin, the architects of America’s federal housing never planned the projects for their present occupants. Public housing, whether for black or white, had originally been framed for the hard working low paid worker, the same individual who benefited from Social Security.

But equally important, careful screening of the applicants for public housing assured that families selected should profit from the experience. Places like the Johnson project were designed to facilitate social adjustment; they were remedial centers for those temporarily sidetracked from the path of upward mobility. Accordingly, the housing units were deliberately stark, bare inside and without even a trace of what cautious planners espied as costly frills. The housing authority forbade the use of ceramic tile; curtains replaced closet doors. Only at the last minute a Philadelphia appliance dealer and housing authority member, Raymond Rosen, ordered the project units equipped with a small 3.5 cubic foot refrigerator which supplanted the icebox included in the original project proposal.

Spartan living, however, was only one aspect of the James Weldon Johnson project regimen. Units were laid out so each family could learn responsibility and self-reliance by maintaining an assigned area. A workshop enabled the residents to practice frugality by decorating their units with salvage furniture. Project centers taught civic spirit, and project government promoted citizenship. Unseemly behavior, such as gambling on the premises, even for pennies, was strictly forbidden. It was the hope that those who successfully profited from the experience

20 On Housing Authority racial policy see HA, Report, 1939-1941, 28. On demise of housing program see "Statement of Mayor Lamberton to Press," mimeographed, May 13, 1940, Housing Authority Papers, TUA; and Nathan Straus, "Statement before Members of the Philadelphia Housing Authority, 2:30 P.M., Monday," July 1, 1940, mimeographed, ibid.; Roland Randall, chairman of Philadelphia Housing Authority, to president of City Council Bernard Samuel, June 17, 1940, ibid.
would outgrow the project and find respectable accommodations elsewhere.30

But the black experience differed sharply from the expected pattern. The ghetto circumscribed black life. What is more, the Philadelphia experience suggests that public housing was a deliberate effort to further delimit the housing opportunities of the city's black population. Segregation itself effectively eroded economic opportunity, making joblessness and not the touted ideal of the work-a-day routine epitomize the black city. In fact in 1939 Negroes comprised 60 percent of Philadelphians eligible for either public assistance or work relief. It was this burgeoning class of unskilled, often jobless blacks, that public housing failed to reach. What is more, Edith Elmer Wood in 1939 announced in no uncertain terms that public housing should not foster "colonies of dependents." No less tolerant of sluggards or failures, middle-class blacks shared Wood's concern, viewing public housing as a healthy tree to bear luxuriant fruit rather than a receptacle for sickly human specimens to be nourished. In this accord, an enlarged supply of decent housing broadened class opportunities for housing. That is, while the bandbox collapse of December, 1939, ignited racial concern, the spate of housing interest in its wake vindicated class not race objectives. And what is more lamentable, the segregative consequence of a black housing policy was obfuscated by the very magnitude of the burning concern over miserable black housing. Not surprisingly, the first black residents in the James Weldon Johnson projects were the middle class, employees of the board of education,

30 On the design and objectivity of public housing projects see especially U. S. Housing Authority, Design of Low Rent Housing Projects: Planning Site (Washington, D. C., 1939), 7-14; H. A. Minutes, December 31, 1939; Lawrence M. Friedman, Government and Slum Housing: A Century of Frustration (Chicago, 1968), 106; and Mabel Walker, Urban Blight and Slums (Cambridge, Mass., 1938), 320-349. The average monthly rent at the Glenwood and Richard Allen homes was $18.94 including utilities. Since public housing was restricted to families whose net income did not exceed five times the rental value of their unit, most clients were respectable, working-class people with incomes under $1,000 a year. See H. A. Minutes, April 8, June 24, 1940. On absence of frills and project regimentation see H. A. Minutes, September 6, 25, 1939, and March 4, 1939. See also Edith Elmer Wood, "One Third of a Nation," Survey Graphic (February, 1940), 84-89; Dorothy Canfield, "I Visit a Housing Project," Survey Graphic (February, 1940), 89-90; and Catherine Bauer and Jacob Crane, "What Every Family Should Have," Survey Graphic (February, 1940), 64-65.
hairdressers, and public health workers. Less than 12 percent of the residents were on relief.31

Surely there is some irony as well as pathos in the history of these black projects. Projects which black Philadelphians in the 1930s eagerly sought as havens—ideal environments for child rearing and schools of good citizenship—in the 1950s and 1960s were rife with narcotics addiction and gang warfare.

The James Weldon Johnson and the Richard Allen homes were inevitably victims of their misconceived purpose. Situated deliberately in the center of the city’s black district, surrounded by crowded substandard dwellings, the first easing of requirements for admission, which occurred in 1949, brought a new clientele, a group who viewed the projects as anything but a way station. To these residents, the projects became just another sterile, lackluster place to live in the heart of the black ghetto.

31 On the first residents of the James Weldon Johnson homes see Philadelphia Tribune, July 18, 1940, 1. The H. A. Minutes, April 8, June 24, 1940, contained good information on tenant selection criteria. Both the increased concentration of blacks in Philadelphia and the deterioration of their housing conditions are clearly portrayed in several studies. A simple analysis of census tracts for the decennial years 1930 and 1940 show, for example, that in census tract A of the 30th ward the black population rose from 90 percent of the tract in 1960 to over 96 percent in 1940; and in census tract B of the 20th ward the black population climbed from 64 percent of the tract in 1930 to 85 percent in 1940. See also Philadelphia Housing Association, “Housing for Negroes in Philadelphia,” December 29, 1944, mimeographed, Housing Authority Papers, TUA; Philadelphia Housing Association, “Negro Housing,” May, 1948, mimeographed, ibid.; and Statement of the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, “Testimony before the Joint Committee on Housing of the Congress of the United States,” January 8, 1948, mimeographed, Armstrong Association Papers, TUA; and Pennsylvania State Temporary Committee on the Urban Colored Population, Preliminary Report, May 1941, mimeographed, TUA.