

3000 FAMILIES MOVE

TO MAKE WAY FOR STUYVESANT TOWN

A story of

TENANT RELOCATION BUREAU, INC.

by Rosamond G. Roberts

James Felt & Company Inc. 362 - 5th Avenue New York City



IN THE fall of 1945 bulldozers and steam shovels went to work on New York City's notorious Gas House District, the area between 14th and 20th Streets, east of First Avenue. Stuyvesant Town, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company's vast housing development will soon rise in place of these 72 acres of slums. Yet, nine months before the bulldozers came on the scene, 3000 families lived here. Before their homes could be razed and the site prepared, 3000 families had to be moved.

Here was the fabled melting pot in real life: Italians, Hungarians, Russians, Poles, foreign born who spoke no English. Here also were families rooted in the area for generations, whose cousins, grandparents, nieces and nephews all lived in the same block. Here were aged couples who remembered the days when gangsters ruled the district. Many lived here alone; for them home meant two tiny rooms at \$10 a month. Young families were here, on their way up in the world, with the father in a good war job and the children the first in the family to go to college. — All had to

move and establish their roots elsewhere.

Unprecedented Mass Removal

Never before had a housing development required 11,000 people to move at one time — never before had there been such a housing shortage in New York City. Yet the building of Stuyvesant Town was urgent, its timing important, and its construction schedule minutely planned. Only by asking the tenants to move during the war could the project help provide immediate post-war employment and aid in relieving the acute housing shortage.

Stuyvesant Town is made possible by the Redevelopment Companies Law as amended by the New York State Legislature in 1943. The purpose of the Law is to replace old, rundown, obsolete areas with modern housing developments through the cooperation of the city and private investors. The city approves the area to be rehabilitated, condemns the site and re-

arranges the street system. In order to allow apartments in the project to be rented at moderate rates, the city also grants tax exemption on the improvements for up to 25 years. During this period, the redevelopment company pays full taxes on the assessed valuation of the land and buildings at the time of acquisition. As a result of this cooperation, the slum area is replaced by a well-planned community, the credit of the city is strengthened, and tenants are afforded modern quarters at reasonable rentals.

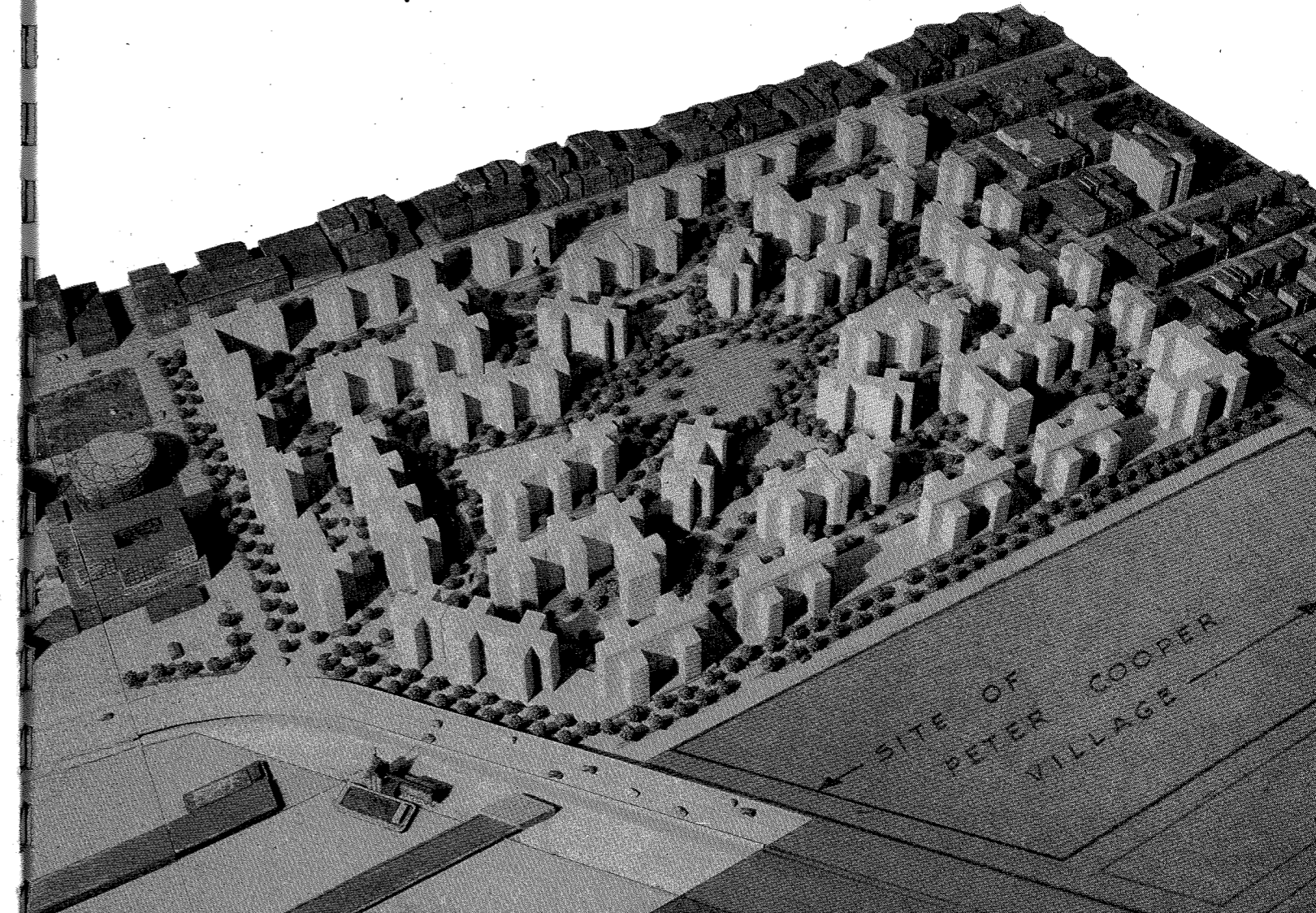
Neighborhood History Turns a Page

This Law permits a metamorphosis in the 72 acres of slums. Several hundred old tenements, now crowded on the site, will

yield to Stuyvesant Town's 35 modern, fire-proof buildings, which will cover only 25% of the land. The grid-iron pattern of streets and hemmed-in yards will give way to winding walks, parks and playgrounds. Some 8800 families will live there in attractive, spacious apartments, of three and four rooms for the most part. These will be equipped with all conveniences and rent for about \$14 a room a month.

This is not the first time that man has disturbed the existing pattern of the area. In 1805 the widow of Petrus Stuyvesant III was upset to discover that the city was planning to cut First Avenue right through the garden of Petersfield Farm, a part of the estate that the famous old Governor Petrus Stuyvesant had started to assemble

W H Y T H E R E L O C A T I O N



in 1651. Her concern was justified. The pleasant, rolling countryside she and her forebears had known was soon to disappear. Having completed its survey in 1811, the city began levelling the ground and laying out the monotonous grid-iron street arrangement that has continued unchanged to this day.

The 19th century saw the character of the area take definite shape. Waves of immigrants followed each other in rapid succession, first German and Irish, later Italians and Slavs. In 1842 the first huge gas tank was built in the area, tagging it with the familiar, if unlovely, title of the "Gas House District." Later, as the city's shopping center moved north from 14th Street, the area gradually deteriorated, with further encroachments by industry and practically no new residential building.

Site had Many Signs of Blight

Long before 1944, when the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company acquired the 18 block Stuyvesant Town site, the area showed definite signs of blight.

- Buildings were old — three fourths of them had been built prior to 1900.
- Population was dropping, — it fell from 23,000 in 1910 to about 12,000 in 1940. Many tenements and stores were boarded up; others had been pulled down, leaving the ugly scars of littered vacant lots.
- Improvements were few — three-fourths of the buildings had no central heat, two-thirds had makeshift baths in the kitchen, one-fifth had hall toilets.
- Commercial and industrial buildings were interspersed — 150 were scattered through the area, more than a third of the number of residential structures.
- Rents were low — nearly 50% of the families paid less than \$20 a month, over

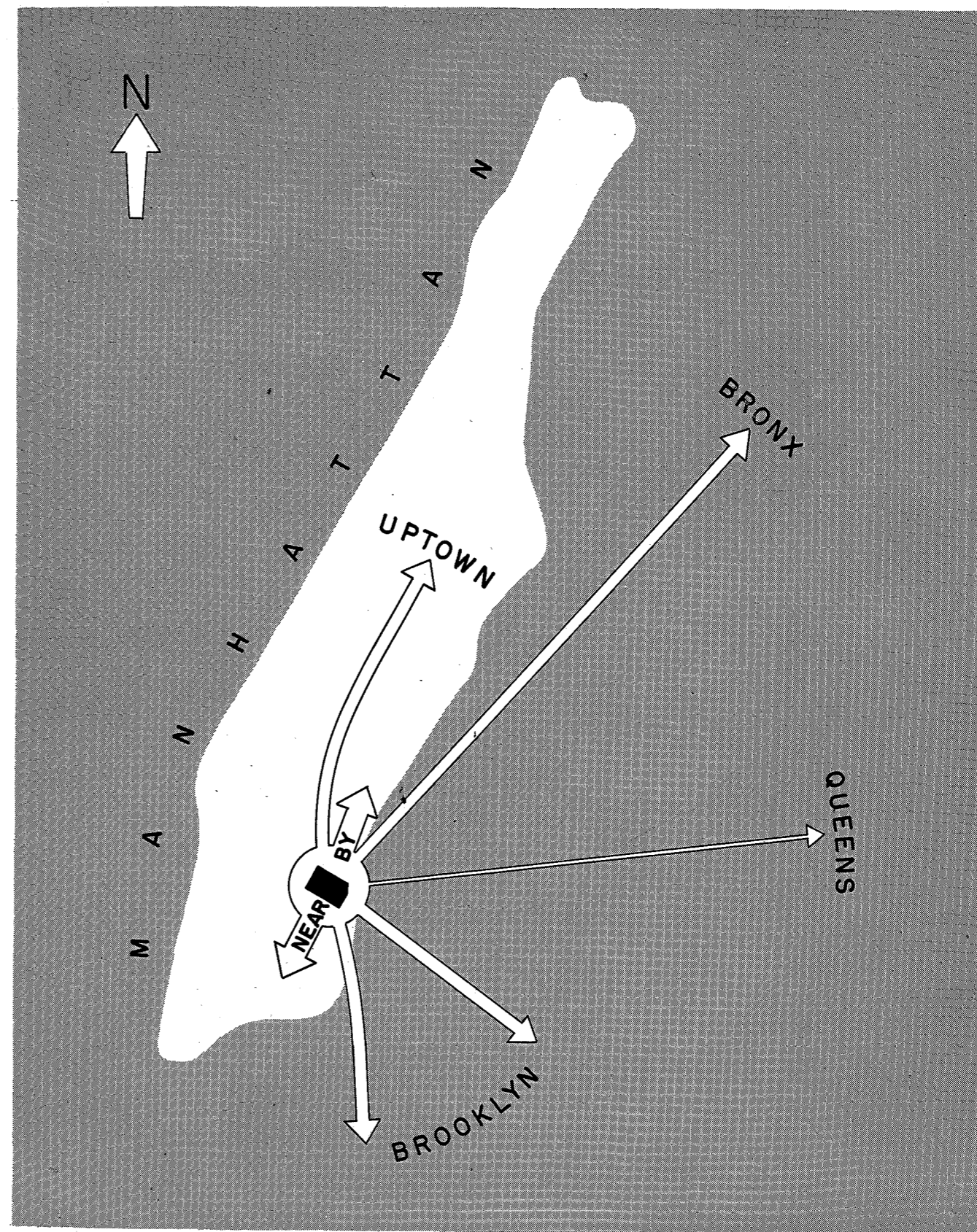
- 90%, less than \$35 a month.
- Tax delinquencies were high — over \$200,000 was due the city in back taxes, a good portion of which were uncollectible.

The Metropolitan acquired the site gradually, but by September, 1944, it controlled the entire area. Management of the site was divided among three real estate firms, except for about 40 buildings which were leased back temporarily to the former owners at their urgent request. No commitments had been made as to the time when the site should be cleared, but in the fall of 1944, with the war in Europe progressing favorably, the Metropolitan felt that preparation for demolition was warranted.

Plans for Clearing the Site Arouse Interest

As the clearance of the site became imminent, many groups evidenced grave concern for the families who had to move. Site tenants, housing organizations, public officials, district political leaders and social agencies were all interested in the problems of relocating 3000 families during an increasingly serious housing shortage. Tenants on the site organized the Stuyvesant Tenants' League to voice their protest, and many throughout the city favored postponing the project until sometime after the war. While the Metropolitan continued with their plans, tension in the city mounted; for all those interested in urban redevelopment, Stuyvesant Town became one of the most important issues of the day.

As the housing shortage grew worse, the tenants more bitterly opposed to moving, and public opinion more pessimistic about the possibility of relocating these 3000 families, the Metropolitan decided to un-



dertake an experiment unique in the history of private housing. It assumed the responsibility of helping tenants find other homes, even though the Law contained no such requirement. Late in December the Metropolitan advised with James Felt, president of one of the three real estate firms managing the site; their talks resulted in his establishment of Tenant Relocation Bureau, Inc. Representatives of the other two firms served as consultants.

A Challenging Task

① The Bureau had two functions. The first was to direct tenants to suitable apartments. The second was to initiate and encourage the rehabilitation of closed buildings in order to increase the available supply of vacant dwelling units. No charge for these services was made to either tenants or building owners, the Metropolitan paying all expenses.

② Several immediate and challenging tasks confronted the Bureau. It had to find apartments despite the scarcity of vacancies. It had to learn what types of new apartments the tenants would accept, even though they did not want to move. Because so many people were ready to pounce at its first sign of failure, it had to be sensitive to public opinion and it had to succeed. Moreover, with time an important factor, procedures had to be formulated, an office established and a staff hired without delay.

The Bureau met the challenge. Without waiting for a formal contract to be signed, it went ahead and opened its doors, ready for business, on January 22, 1945. Carefully planned forms and procedures facilitated speedy action, for within another month, more than 6000 vacant apartments had been listed, 375 families had registered, and 250 tenants had moved.

Public Investigations of Relocation

The early days of the Bureau were both hectic and stormy because those who opposed the timing of the project continued their resistance. In February a bill was introduced into the Legislature at Albany to force postponement of the project until after the war. This was followed by a tenants' mass meeting which also sought ways to block the project. Then OPA intervened and investigated the effectiveness of the Bureau. On March 12 hearings were held before a legislative subcommittee to determine whether or not it was advisable to proceed with the relocation. After duly considering the views of all interested

TENANT RELOCATION BUREAU, INC.

groups, the Committee gave a majority opinion favoring its continuation. Complaints that the Bureau was directing tenants to unlivable quarters led to the final inquiry into its work. In April an inspection by a representative of the Mayor revealed that their new apartments compared favorably with those they had vacated.

The statistics gathered by the Bureau gave the investigators a clear picture of the situation on and off the site, and work went ahead. Once this period of uncertainty and public investigation was passed, the Bureau was able to concentrate all its efforts on helping the tenants move. The job of relocating the families was not easy, but despite all the difficulties, it was completed. By November 1, 1945, all but 77 of the 3000 families had moved, without the necessity for a single eviction.

These nine months saw the end of the war, and thanks to the relocation of the families from the site of Stuyvesant Town, New York City's major postwar project was ready to go ahead.



THE OFFICE of the Bureau was planned to be as convenient as possible for the tenants. Right on the site at 14th Street and Avenue A, it was simple, spacious and attractive. To accommodate those who worked during the day, it remained open until 8 P.M. on week-days, 6 P.M. on Saturdays, and for several hours on Sundays.

The staff of the Bureau reached a total of 30 at its peak and included:

- The Management — experienced Real Estate men who contacted the sources of available apartment listings, worked on plans of rehabilitation, and kept the statistical data.
- Inspectors — Real Estate men who inspected the listings.
- Interviewers — women with some community service experience who worked directly with the tenants.

Some staff members knew Italian and the Slavic languages which were spoken by the major foreign groups. In addition, there were the secretary, file clerks, and a driver for the station-wagon.

1 The office of Tenant Relocation Bureau, Inc., was quickly converted from two stores on the site. Spacious and attractively decorated, it was easily accessible to tenants.

2 Most of the interviewers had had some social service experience. They worked with the tenants, finding out their needs, submitting listings of vacancies, and checking on any problems which delayed their moving.

Apartment listings were furnished by real estate boards, owners, agents, banks and trust companies. They all owned, controlled or managed residential property and submitted information about vacancies on forms furnished by the Bureau. In connection with rehabilitation prospects, the Bureau worked on plans with owners and architects and suggested methods of financing.

Bureau Inspects Apartments

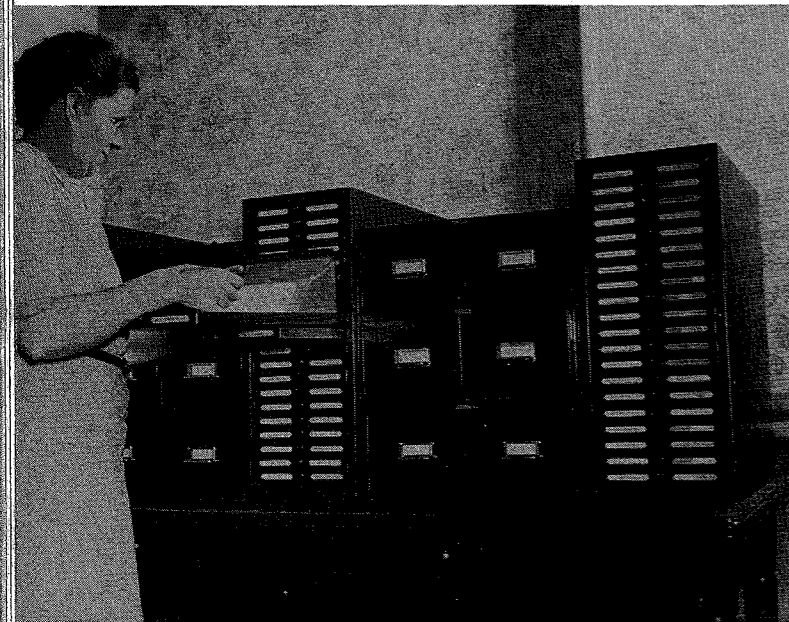
Apartments were offered to the tenants by the Bureau only after they had been

3



3 When tenants came into the office, the interviewers would look up their registration cards and then check the file for any listings that seemed suitable.

5 Listings of vacant apartments were classified in the file according to size, type, and location. They had to be checked constantly to keep the file up to date.



5

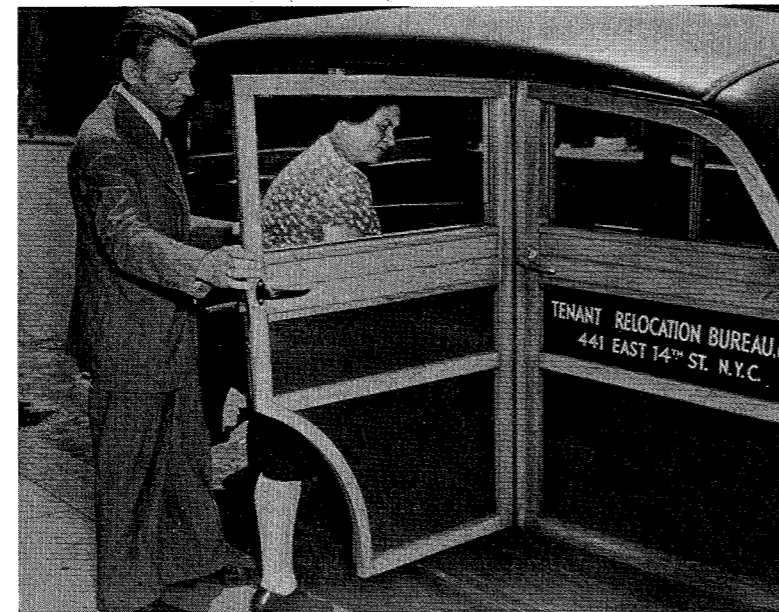
8

4



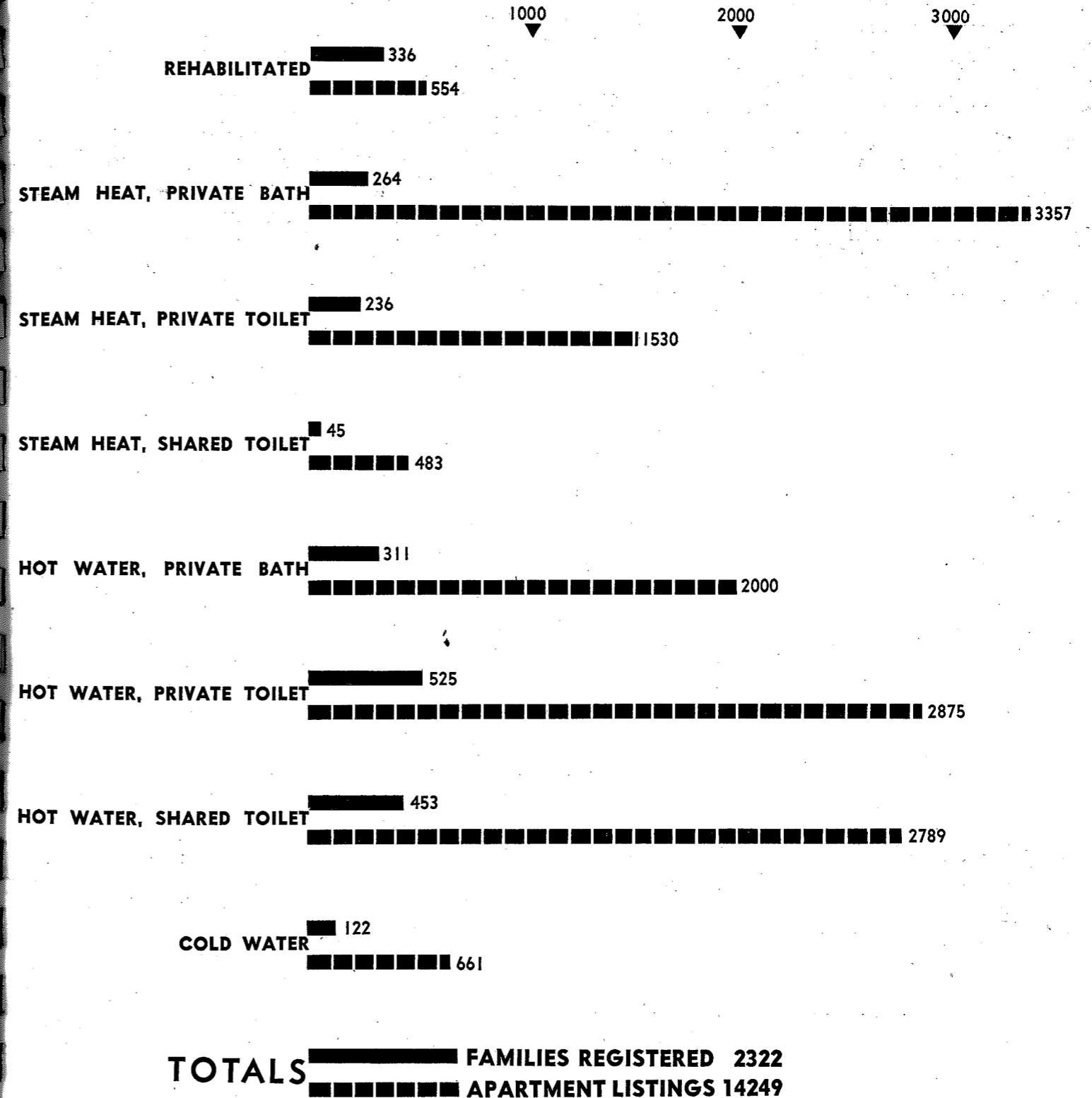
4 Interviewers also made home visits in order to reach all the tenants in the area and to become more familiar with their individual problems.

6 The station wagon was a great asset to the work of the Bureau. It took tenants to vacant apartments and acquainted them with new neighborhoods.



6

REGISTRANTS ██████████ IN THE SITE (80% OF ALL FAMILIES) LISTINGS ██████████ OUTSIDE (AS OF AUGUST 31, 1945)



9

inspected and approved. Inspectors checked listings which were sent into the office as well as vacant apartments they discovered by combing street after street. They rapidly developed a sixth sense for spotting empty windows and a gift for persuading recalcitrant superintendents to reveal their vacancies.

Inspectors collected enough data to give an accurate description of each vacant apartment. Location, size, rent, condition and improvements were noted on special forms. With this data as a basis, apartments were given a rating of good, fair, or poor. Unless there was a special request, no apartments were submitted which were marked "poor" or which lacked private toilets or hot water. In answer to the tenants' questions, the inspectors made additional remarks on the predominant occupancy in each building, the type of neighborhood, the nearest transportation, and the whereabouts of the all too elusive superintendents.

Interviewers Found Out Tenants' Wants

The interviewers worked directly with the tenants. In order to know what they wanted, the Bureau inquired about the size of their family, what rent they were paying and how much they would pay, what improvements they had and what they hoped to get, where they worked, and what other preferences they had in relation to their new apartments. Once the tenants' requirements were recorded on their registration cards, the interviewers would check the file for listings and suggest any that seemed suitable.

At first the interviewers just registered tenants who came into the office in answer to cards that had been sent out, but when the office had become firmly established,

all the tenants were visited in their homes and each case followed up individually. As the interviewers came to know the families better, they were able to direct listings more effectively and to uncover any difficult cases that needed special handling.

One of the most important functions of the interviewers was acting as a liaison between the tenants and the various groups interested in their relocation. In addition to daily meetings with the Bureau's inspectors, they cooperated with social agencies and worked closely with both the managing agents on the site and the lawyers handling the legal aspects of site clearance.

The File and the Station Wagon were Invaluable Aids

The effectiveness of the interviewers depended largely on the file, where listings of vacant apartments were classified ac-

ording to location, size, and improvements. As 14,000 listings passed through the Bureau, to keep the file current was a continuous struggle. One member of the staff had the full time assignment of checking with owners and agents by telephone, to find out what apartments had been rented and what others had become vacant.

The station-wagon was a great asset to the work of the Bureau. It took tenants to see available apartments and to show them other sections of the city. Somehow the prospect of looking at an apartment or visiting a strange neighborhood did not seem nearly so frightening when the trip could be made in the station-wagon. As its attendant was familiar with low-rent housing, he could help tenants with the details of renting.

THE BUREAU adapted its methods to the needs of the tenants in the area and to the exigencies of the overall vacancy situation. With 3000 different families to be moved, there were 3000 different problems to be solved. The Bureau could not solve them all, but by working closely with the tenants, it could at least sift the problems and work toward their solution by whatever methods were called for. While the fundamental organization of the Bureau was set, its role in the community and the jobs of inspector and interviewer were shaped by the variety of situations that arose.

Interviewers Develop Personal Relationship with Tenants

Gradually the interviewers developed a close personal relationship with the tenants by meeting them informally. They timed their visits so as not to bother the mother

as she was sending her children off to school, nor disturb the father who worked on a night shift. As the tenants were neighborly and often visited together, interviewers frequently found their calls turning into group discussions.

Domestic affairs of tenants and attitudes of superintendents often influenced the approach of the interviewers. They avoided being drawn into family quarrels although, in a few cases, moving seemed to precipitate impending separations and the Bureau had to act firmly to keep from becoming a court of domestic relations. Most of the superintendents assisted the interviewers by delivering messages, but a few were more hindrance than help.

As the interviewers gradually won the confidence of the tenants, the hostility and scepticism of the early weeks wore off.

3 0 0 0 P R O B L E M S T O B E S O L V E D

I WANT TO MOVE NEAR BY

- "I came right to this block from the boat."
- "I've raised and buried my family here."
- "I have always walked to work."
- "I must be in and out of my store all day."
- "All my friends are in this neighborhood."
- "My child goes to school just a few blocks away."
- "I have always worshipped at the same church."
- "Who would want to live on the West Side?"

I WANT A FIRST OR SECOND FLOOR

- "My child has heart trouble, she can't climb."
- "The doctor told me to avoid stairs."
- "I've lived on the top floor all my life, never again."
- "I've never lived high up and I don't intend to start now."
- "When you're old, you can't, you know."
- "When you have young children, it's heavy carrying them up."

I WANT TO BETTER MYSELF

- "If I am going to move, I am going to take a step up!"
- "I just stayed here because of my folks, now that I have to move, I am going to get a place I really like."
- "Our family is on the way up in the world, we'll pay more rent."
- "They may call these slums, but the vacant apartments we see aren't fit for humans."
- "My children are growing up, no more baths in the kitchen for us."
- "My place is clean and sunny. If I'm going to have to give that up, I'm at least going to get a place with steam."

I WANT TO MOVE WITH MY KIND OF PEOPLE

- "We have to be able to buy our kind of food in the stores."
- "How do I know there will be a church for us?"
- "I can't leave the missus where she can't talk with the neighbors."
- "I wouldn't live among those _____!"