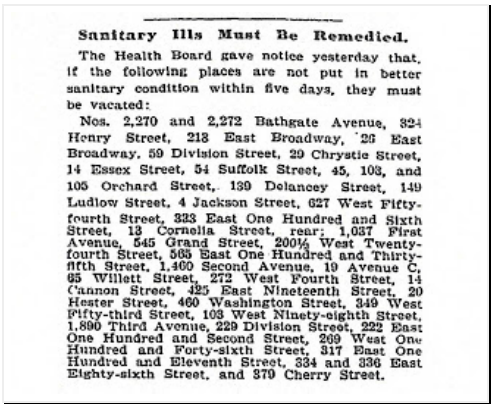
TENEMENT MUSEUM

Friday, October 16, 2009

History of 103 Orchard Street

Standing across the street from the corner tenement at 103 Orchard today, there is little evidence suggestive of the immense changes it has undergone since it was erected in the late 19th century. In 1888, the wood-frame dwellings at 103, 105, and 107 Orchard were replaced by three separate, individual dumbbell tenements, each 25 feet wide by 88.6 feet deep, each with 18 individual apartments.

Commissioned by Michael Fay and William Stacom, and constructed by architects Rentz and Lange for the sum of $25,000, these three tenements were built according to requirements of the 1879 Tenement House Act, known also as the "old law."



Sanitary Ills Must Be Remedied.

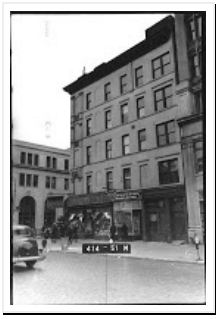
The Health Board gave notice yesterday that, if the following places are not put in better sanitary condition within five days, they must be vacated:

Nos. 2,270 and 2,272 Bathgate Avenue, 324 Henry Street, 213 East Broadway, 26 East Broadway, 59 Division Street, 29 Chrystie Street, 14 Essex Street, 54 Suffolk Street, 45, 103, and 105 Orchard Street, 139 Delancey Street, 149 Ludlow Street, 4 Jackson Street, 627 West Fifty-fourth Street, 323 East One Hundred and Sixth Street, 13 Cornelia Street, rear; 1,037 First Avenue, 545 Grand Street, 200½ West Twenty-fourth Street, 555 East One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street, 1,460 Second Avenue, 19 Avenue C, 65 Willett Street, 272 West Fourth Street, 14 Cannon Street, 425 East Nineteenth Street, 20 Hester Street, 460 Washington Street, 349 West Fifty-third Street, 103 West Ninety-eighth Street, 1,890 Third Avenue, 229 Division Street, 222 East One Hundred and Second Street, 269 West One Hundred and Forty-sixth Street, 317 East One Hundred and Eleventh Street, 334 and 336 East Eighty-sixth Street, and 379 Cherry Street.

The light and air requirements of the Act were physically manifested in the form of the dumbbell tenement, with its characteristic airshaft. Though the new design was intended to ameliorate the dark, dank interior rooms of pre-old law tenements (like 97 Orchard), they too soon became burdened with their own problems. Just eight years after being built, 105 Orchard Street was mentioned in a September 1895 New York Times article as a building the Board of Health would forcibly vacate if "not put in better sanitary condition within five days."

In 1903, Delancey Street was widened as an approach to the newly built Williamsburg Bridge. In this widening, the tenements at 109, 111, and 113 Orchard Streets were demolished and cleared. The corner building at 83 Delancey Street was cleared as well. For about three years, the Delancey Street end of the block probably looked as if something was missing—the end of the street just shorn off. In 1906, the tenements at 103, 105, and 107 Orchard Street were purchased by Joseph Marcus, founder and president of the Bank of the United States. He completed major alterations that turned 107 Orchard into a corner building. Total cost: about $10,000.

The 1906 alteration was only the first of a series of changes that occurred at 103, 105, and 107 Orchard during the first decades of the 20th century. Undoubtedly the most far-reaching of these occurred in 1913. According to this Tenement House Department "Application to Alter a Tenement House," 103, 105, and 107 Orchard were combined to create one building.



The description of alterations reads, "Rear part of all the buildings and southerly building to be removed; lots to be reapportioned and buildings altered so as to make one corner building. All stairs to be removed and new fireproof stairs erected. Partitions to be altered and bathrooms installed."

Before completion, these major alterations were met with some concern by the Tenement House Department. In this series of memoranda from July 1913, Acting Commissioner Abbot notes his opinion that "the three original buildings have been so

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changed in form, occupancy and location that the portion of the structure remaining when alterations are completed constituted so different a type of structure that existed originally that I feel the Department would have to treat the alteration of such a gigantic nature requiring the filing of the application form for a new law tenement..."

The old dumbbell tenements were altered to create one, single new law tenement. While each of the original buildings had 18 apartments, for a total of 54, the new building at 103 Orchard Street had a total of only 16 individual apartments, or four apartments on each of the second, third, fourth, and fifth floors. No residential units existed on the first or ground floor after 1913, as this level was dedicated commercial space. Sometime between 1913 and 1917, one apartment on the second floor was turned into a dentist's office. In 1938, another apartment on the second floor was discontinued and used for storage. From 1938 to the present, 103 Orchard Street has had a total of 14 individual residential apartments.

103 Orchard Street photo courtesy Municipal Archives.

Posted by Tenement Museum at 3:00 PM
Labels: 103 Orchard Street, building histories, lower east side history, tenement building
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