

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

TENEMENT BUILDING AT 97 ORCHARD STREET

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: TENEMENT BUILDING AT 97 ORCHARD STREET

Other Name/Site Number: N/A

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 97 Orchard Street

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: New York

Vicinity: N/A

State: NY

County: New York

Code: 061

Zip Code: 10002

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: \_\_\_

Public-State: \_\_\_

Public-Federal: \_\_\_

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: \_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_

Structure: \_\_\_

Object: \_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

1

Noncontributing

\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_ objects

\_\_\_ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- \_\_\_\_ Entered in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Determined eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

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**Page 3****6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Domestic Commerce/Trade Sub: Multiple Dwelling Specialty Store

Current: Recreation & Culture Vacant/Not-In-Use Sub: Museum

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: LATE VICTORIAN/Italianate

## MATERIALS:

Foundation: Stone  
Walls: Brick  
Roof: Tar  
Other: N/A

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is located in a building at 97 Orchard Street, New York County, New York, erected in 1863-4. The building is located on the west side of Orchard Street between Delancey and Broome streets in the neighborhood historically known as the Lower East Side. The street is built up entirely with nineteenth and early twentieth-century, five- and six-story tenements, all with stores at street level. At the rear, the building faces onto Allen Street. Originally, other tenements, facing onto Allen Street, were located to the rear, but these were demolished when Allen Street was widened during the 1930s. With the exception of the shops on the first floor and basement levels, 97 Orchard Street has been vacant since the 1930s and is in a deteriorated condition. This nomination contains one contributing building.

The tenement at 97 Orchard Street is typical of tenements erected on the Lower East Side during the 1860s. The building is a five-story and raised basement structure with cellar. The facade of the building is faced in red brick. It is a simple example of a building designed in the Italianate style. Apparently the building originally had two stores on the basement level; early cast-iron pilasters are visible behind later storefronts. The cellar of the building, which can be entered only from the north basement store, has rubble stone walls and exposed wooden beams.

The tenement apartments were originally entered via a centrally-located stone stoop with iron railing that led to a segmental-arched brownstone entrance enframing. The stoop was replaced with a metal stair and the stone enframing removed in 1905. The first floor was originally articulated by a single large segmental-arched window set to either side of the entrance. These windows were removed when the entire first floor facade was replaced by a wood and glass storefront in 1905. This storefront, consisting of cast-iron columns, slender wooden colonnettes, and plate-glass shopfronts, is largely extant.

The upper four floors retain much of their original character. Each floor of the brick facade is articulated by four segmental-arched windows. Each window originally had a slightly projecting brownstone lintel and sill; these have been shaved back flush with the facade. The windows are now boarded up, and most of the original double-hung sash has been removed. The windows probably originally had 4-by-4 sash, although by 1939, these had been replaced by 1-by-1 sash. The building is crowned by a bracketed Italianate-style galvanized-iron cornice. The building originally had a fire escape on the front elevation stretching in front of the two central windows on each of the upper floors. The fire escape, which has been removed, contained iron balconies connected by vertical ladders rather than the more common stairs. Reformers considered this type of fire escape to be unsafe since children and older people would have trouble using them.

The rear elevation is even simpler than the front. It is faced with a lesser quality brick that was typically used for the side and rear elevations of buildings in New York. There is a door on the first floor of this facade. Originally a wooden stair led from this door to the backyard. A basement door, no longer visible, also originally opened to the rear yard. With the exception of the two basement windows, all of the windows on this elevation have also been boarded up. Still remaining on the back of the tenement are a fire escape with vertical ladders outside of the apartments on the south side. The rear apartments on the north have what were known as "party-wall balconies". In case of a fire in 97 Orchard Street, the residents would have climbed onto the balcony and escaped by entering the adjoining apartment in 99 Orchard Street.

There are five doors on Orchard Street leading into the building; two lead to the basement stores, two lead to the first floor stores, and a central door leads into the tenement's outer vestibule. This vestibule has a tile floor and marble wainscot that probably date from 1905. A door separates the outer vestibule from the hall. The simple Italianate forms seen on the

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exterior continued into the public hall of the first floor where a plaster round arch supported by foliate brackets separates the narrow entrance hall from the stairway. The hall has a tile floor and tin ceiling, both probably dating from 1905, and a wooden floor and wainscot of unknown date. The plaster walls are covered with burlap that has been varnished and decorated with three-dimensional plaster ornament applied *in situ*. This wall covering, probably applied in 1905, also contains a pair of roundels painted with pastoral scenes. On either side of the entrance to the hall are doors leading to the first floor stores. The paneled door to the north appears to be the only intact original door in the building. There are additional store entrances at the rear of the hall.

In the center of the hall, on the south side, are two toilets added in 1905. Similar pairs of toilets are located on each of the upper floors. Each toilet compartment had a porcelain toilet (many original toilets are extant) that was flushed from a wooden water tank (several are extant). Each toilet door has a translucent glass panel, and each compartment is ventilated by a window with translucent glass that faces onto a small fireproof shaft. The toilets and shaft were constructed in 1905.

An original wooden stair with later iron tread guards rises from the hall to the upper floors and is crowned by a skylight (presently blacked out). The second through fifth floors each contain a central hall with wooden floor, two toilet compartments, and four apartments.

The apartments on the north side of the building retain their original configuration. Each apartment consists of three small rooms—a living room or parlor, central kitchen, and inner bedroom. The largest room, the living room or parlor located at the front or rear of the floor with windows looking onto the street or yard, measures about 11 feet by 12 feet 6 inches (about 138 square feet), while the inner bedrooms are about 8 feet 6 inches square (about 67 square feet). Each apartment totaled about 325 square feet. The apartments on the south side of each floor are somewhat smaller since the toilets and shaft were constructed in what had been inner bedrooms. All of the partitions within these apartments were moved when the toilets were built in 1905, thus changing the room sizes.

Each apartment is entered through a wooden door into which a translucent glass panel or pair of panels was inserted early in the twentieth century. The rooms have wooden floors and plaster walls and ceilings. Many of the floors have one or more layers of linoleum and the wall and ceiling surfaces are layered with paint and/or wallpaper. There are mantles in the kitchen and living room of many apartments and holes in many of the walls indicating where stove pipes once vented. Most apartments also have built-in wooden cupboards (many in deteriorated condition) and shelves. Large slate slop sinks, each with two compartments, survive in many apartments. These sinks, which were never hooked into the water supply system, appear to be original. Porcelain sinks of varying design were added to the kitchens when plumbing was installed, probably in 1905. Double-hung sash windows have been cut into the inner partitions in each apartment. There are also windows, with translucent glass, cut into the wall between the inner bedroom and the hall.

Each apartment on the north side of the building is connected to its neighbor by an original narrow door in the inner bedroom. These doors were constructed in response to a fire law first passed by the State Legislature in 1860. The doors were planned to allow egress through either the front or rear in case of fire. The doors in the apartments to the south were removed when the toilets were constructed.

Since the apartments were lived in for about seventy years and have been vacant for over fifty years, no single apartment contains all of its original features. Changes have occurred in many apartments and various elements remain in varying states of repair. In general, however, elements of the exterior and interior of the tenement at 97 Orchard Street reflect either the original design and layout of the building or reflect changes that were instituted as a result of laws that sought to improve life for tenement dwellers.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:  
Nationally: X Statewide: \_\_\_ Locally: \_\_\_

Applicable National Register Criteria:        A X B \_\_\_ C X D \_\_\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):        A \_\_\_ B \_\_\_ C \_\_\_ D \_\_\_ E \_\_\_ F \_\_\_ G \_\_\_

NHL Criteria:            1

NHL Theme(s):        XXX. AMERICAN WAYS OF LIFE  
                              D.     Urban Life  
                              E.     Ethnic Communities (including the Immigration Phenomenon)

                              XXXI. SOCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN MOVEMENTS  
                              J.     Poverty Relief and Urban Social Reform

Areas of Significance:    Architecture  
                                  Ethnic Heritage  
                                  Social History

Period(s) of Significance: 1863–mid-1930s

Significant Dates:        1863, 1901-1905

Significant Person(s):    N/A

Cultural Affiliation:      N/A

Architect/Builder:        Unknown

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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.****SUMMARY**

A modest building by any standard, the six-story brick tenement at 97 Orchard Street is an outstanding survivor of the vast number of humble buildings that housed immigrants to New York during the greatest wave of immigration in American history. Erected in 1863-64, it constitutes part of the first rush of tenement building in New York City. Between 1880 and 1921, millions of immigrants flooded New York, most passing through Ellis Island. New York City and, in particular, the neighborhood of the Lower East Side are significant within the history of immigration simply because of the scale of the phenomenon as it occurred there, which far outweighed that in any other city in the United States. The 97 Orchard Street tenement represents the critical transition stage in which newly-arrived immigrants secured their first foothold in America and launched their struggle for a better life. As such, it is closely related thematically to Ellis Island, a National Monument.

Although from the exterior it looks like other old tenements which line Orchard Street, No. 97 is remarkable. While two lower floors continued to operate as commercial space, the top four floors were sealed from the mid-1930s until 1988, when the building was "discovered" by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. With rooms, wallpaper, plumbing, and lighting preserved as they were left almost 60 years ago, 97 Orchard Street is something of an urban time machine. Due in part to its exceptional degree of integrity, the building is able to convey a vivid sense of the deplorable living conditions experienced by its tenants, which, during its 72-year tenure as housing, may have numbered as many as 10,000.

Within the context of its immediate neighborhood, which preserves much of the appearance it had during the period of peak immigration and retains its character as an ethnic working-class neighborhood for newcomers to the United States, 97 Orchard Street forms a vital part of the backdrop against which the drama of assimilation was played out. This story, which lies at the core of the immigrant experience, is one of the broad national patterns of United States history, and one which helps define a distinctive American identity. Immigration and its consequent toleration of diversity, while frequently controversial, constitutes one of the great ideals of the American people.

First occupied in 1864, 97 Orchard Street exhibits the cramped, unhealthy quarters prevalent throughout the district which led to the housing reform movement at the turn of the century. Under the leadership of Lawrence Veiller, the reform campaign began in New York City and became a model for the nation. Veiller gained his experience on the Lower East Side, in tenements such as 97 Orchard Street. Like an archeological site, this building reveals in successive layers the direct physical consequences of reform laws, particularly the New York Tenement House Act of 1901. In the following two decades, 11 states and 40 cities enacted new tenement house codes patterned after laws Veiller had helped formulate—the act of 1901 and his *Model Tenement House Law*.

97 Orchard Street is an excellent surviving example of a distinct housing type associated with a way of life that is significant in American history. This tenement's early form and rare preserved fabric dating from the peak immigration period distinguish it from other surviving structures, most of which date from later periods or have been upgraded to meet more modern standards. However, paradoxically, 97 Orchard Street is perhaps most valuable because of its lack of particular historical associations. As an essentially anonymous building, it is well suited to represent a profound social movement involving great numbers of unexceptional but courageous people.

**I. 97 ORCHARD STREET WITHIN THE HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION**



**TENEMENT BUILDING AT 97 ORCHARD STREET**

Immigration to the United States, the most substantial part of a great migration of peoples to the Western Hemisphere, was (and continues to be) an extraordinary phenomenon in human history.<sup>1</sup> During the peak period, between 1880 and 1921, over 23,500,000 people took advantage of America's lenient immigration policies to seek new opportunity in this country. To help put this figure in perspective, the population of the United States in 1880 was about 50,000,000. There is no precedent in modern history for such an immense voluntary movement of people, or for a great nation voluntarily opening its gates to a mass of impoverished immigrants of varied origins. Immigration, and the resulting diversity of cultural influences, has been—and remains—one of the central characteristics of American history and a key factor in defining an American identity.

The popular perception of New York City as a city of immigrants and the city in which immigrant culture reached its fullest development has a solid statistical base. Of the 23,500,000 immigrants who arrived in America during the peak period, some 17,000,000 entered through the port of New York.<sup>2</sup> Immigration to New York City was of an order of magnitude some five times greater than that to Philadelphia or Chicago and eight or nine times that to Boston, and the resultant social crisis was in proportion.<sup>3</sup> It has been calculated that about 100,000,000 present-day Americans have an ancestor who passed through the immigration station on Ellis Island even though Ellis processed only some 12,000,000 of the New York total during its period of operation.<sup>4</sup>

At least a third of the great mass of humanity who arrived in New York City lived in the city for at least a brief period.<sup>5</sup> New York City had a reputation for diversity extending back to its origins as New Amsterdam, and this characteristic was greatly enhanced during the period of massive immigration. In a familiar quote, Danish-born housing reformer Jacob Riis wrote of Manhattan's ethnic map having "more stripes than a zebra and more colors than any rainbow."<sup>6</sup> As a result, in 1900 the foreign-born and their children accounted for more than three-fourths of the city's population.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The best general surveys of American immigration are Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (1951); Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (1982); Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of North America: An Introduction* (1986); and John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (1985).

<sup>2</sup> Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921*. (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Telephone interview with Professor James P. Shenton, Columbia University, November 1, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Based on calculations by the National Geographic Society under the auspices of the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Lower East Side Tenement Museum: Statement of Significance* for National Park Service, 3rd draft, 1993, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1890), pp. 18-19, cited in Jackson, *Lower East Side Tenement Museum*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Kessner, *The Immigrant Ghetto as Symbol and Community* (paper, City University of New York, 1993,) p. 10.

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Within the city, the Lower East Side was (and remains) the neighborhood especially identified with immigrant life.<sup>8</sup> While immigration was a widespread phenomenon, no single identifiable neighborhood in the United States absorbed anything approaching a comparable number of immigrants. If immigration as a social phenomenon is to be studied and depicted anywhere in the United States, New York's Lower East Side is the most appropriate and meaningful setting.

These broad trends are manifested at 97 Orchard Street. The building was erected in 1863-64, during a period of heavy immigration. Between 1840 and 1850, the population of New York City had increased by more than 60%, from 312,710 to 515,547, and by 1860, had grown another 58% to 813,669.<sup>9</sup> By then, the population of foreign-born and their children in New York substantially outnumbered members of the "old stock" nationalities.<sup>10</sup>

Immigration occurred in waves, varying not only from year to year, but by ethnic composition. The first wave of immigration, encompassing generally the 1840s through the 1860s, is associated primarily with the Irish and Germans, who replaced the Dutch, French Huguenot, English, and African American residents of the area. This trend expressed itself at 97 Orchard Street, which was one of three adjoining tenements built by German immigrants. (The three combined to purchase the property, then subdivided it into separate lots, one of which became No. 97.) These three tenements were the first on that blockfront of Orchard Street. Testifying to the changing population of the neighborhood, the land had previously been owned by a succession of three churches which represented denominations with old-stock associations that would have had little appeal to the new arrivals.<sup>11</sup>

This illustrates the characteristic phenomenon of displacement which has been associated with immigration. When first developed, in the early 19th century, the Lower East Side was a neighborhood of middle-class row houses resembling areas in eastern cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore. Although poorly adapted for multi-family use, many of these houses were converted for that purpose. As the housing stock aged and the neighborhood became more congested, the older residents left, many moving farther uptown (north) in Manhattan. The uptown march of settlement in Manhattan was a dominant trend in 19th-century New York.<sup>12</sup>

By 1880, another displacement was well underway as Eastern European Jewish immigrants gradually replaced the Germans. This trend, pervasive throughout the Lower East Side, was clearly evident in the population makeup of 97 Orchard Street. In 1890, the population of that tenement was entirely Jewish and remained so, or nearly so, into the 1920s.<sup>13</sup> After

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, *Lower East Side Tenement Museum*, p. 4-5. During the period of peak immigration, the Lower East Side was defined as extending from Chambers Street north to 14th Street and from the East River west to the Bowery.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew S. Dolkart, *97 Orchard St. and Tenement Reform*. (paper, 1992,) p. 4. His population figures are derived from Ira Rosenwaike, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Kessner, *Immigrant Ghetto*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Lockwood, *Manhattan Moves Uptown*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> James P. Shenton, *97 Orchard Street: The Biography of a Tenement*, paper for the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, 1993, p. 10. Shenton determines

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1886, the owners of the building have names that appear to be Jewish, illustrating the fact that tenement ownership or leasing was an avenue of upward mobility for immigrants.<sup>14</sup>

Characteristically, each new immigrant nationality clung together in ethnic enclaves, a trend that persists strongly today. Although the peak of German and Irish immigration was approximately contemporaneous and although many Germans, like most of the Irish immigrants, were Roman Catholic, they remained quite separate. Of 71 residents at 97 Orchard Street enumerated in 1870, 40 were born in German states (the unified German Empire not being formed until 1871). Only one individual was a native of Ireland.<sup>15</sup> This pattern was even more strongly marked in the Italian neighborhoods, where blocks were sometimes occupied according to province or even city of origin.<sup>16</sup> Beginning in 1875, Chinese immigrants established an enclave on the fringes of the Lower East Side. This compact "Chinatown" embodied ethnic separation to an even greater degree and thus, had relatively little direct impact on the surrounding communities.

When the second and predominantly eastern and southern European wave of immigration appeared, the process of displacement was not entirely random. Italians often filled formerly Irish neighborhoods, while the Eastern European Jews displaced Germans. Among the possible reasons are the fact that the Italians and Irish shared the Catholic faith, some of the earlier German immigrants were Jews, and Yiddish (the native language of the Eastern European Jews) and German were mutually intelligible in their spoken form.

While the ethnic character of neighborhoods, and particular buildings like No. 97, remained constant for several decades, this appearance disguises an enormous turnover of population. As many as 10,000 people may have lived in 97 Orchard Street during its active period. Hundreds of families passed through the tenement, captured as in a snapshot only by the federal decennial censuses and the intermediate state censuses. These returns show that

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Jewishness by a combination of factors, depending on census data: a somewhat intuitive analysis of names, especially in family groupings; country of origin; and (beginning in 1900) language fluency. The Jews described as Eastern European came predominantly from the Pale of Settlement (the region in which Jews were permitted to reside in the western provinces of the Russian Empire,) and from adjacent portions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, particularly Galicia. Much of historic Poland and all of Lithuania were part of the Russian Empire until World War I, but were sometimes listed separately for statistical purposes. Romania, the source of heavy Jewish emigration, is a partial anomaly as it lies in both southern and eastern Europe. Romanian Jewish emigration coincided generally with that from Russia, and since the groups shared a cultural and linguistic affinity the Romanians are usually included in the definition of Eastern European.

<sup>14</sup> This theme is elaborated, at least with respect to the Jewish immigrants, in Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976,) p. 164. "First they become lessees. By constant saving the East Sider gets together \$200 or \$300, with which, as security, he gets a four or five years' lease of a house...." More research needs to be done, but the process described here was probably visible at 97 Orchard Street.

<sup>15</sup> Shenton, *97 Orchard Street*, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Limmer, *Walking in History: A Heritage Guide to the Lower East Side, Italian Heritage Trail*. (Manuscript in preparation, under the auspices of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, 1993).

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from 1900 to 1925 only three families appeared in more than one count.<sup>17</sup>

Examining the country of origin provides further evidence of this changing flow of humanity. Although the population of 97 Orchard Street was Jewish over an extended period, these residents had different origins. In 1900, Jews born in the Russian Empire far outnumbered all other residents, but in 1925, Russian-born Jews were considerably outnumbered by those from the southern European countries of Turkey, Greece, and Spain.<sup>18</sup>

This obvious tendency to huddle together in a hostile environment points up the significance of tenements like No. 97 in the overall immigration movement. It was a place of first settlement, where the new arrivals first gained a foothold in the new country.<sup>19</sup> If they were "tempest-tost" in the words of Emma Lazarus, this is where they came to earth in America. In human terms, the Lower East Side is thus something of an urban frontier. There is a parallel between the members of an ethnic group who first entered a new neighborhood and the people who opened a wilderness frontier: the later arrivals in each case shared individual difficulties of adjustment. While the immediate physical dangers of settling the Lower East Side may have been less severe, like a wilderness frontier, it held the promise and adventure of life in a new land and represented the period of greatest stress and risk of failure to the participants.

Perhaps the clearest proof that 97 Orchard Street was regarded as a stopping place, or a transition, is its declining population in the 1920s. When the restrictive immigration laws of 1921 and 1924 took effect and relieved the external pressure of new immigrants, the number of residents of the tenement dropped precipitously.<sup>20</sup> By the mid-1930s, the residential

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<sup>17</sup> Shenton, *97 Orchard Street*, *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> Shenton, *97 Orchard Street*, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Kessner, *Immigrant Ghetto*, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Shenton, *97 Orchard Street*, p. 24.

floors were vacant as most of the former residents had bettered themselves sufficiently to move elsewhere. In the closing years of occupancy, some Italian families resided in the building, indicating the weakening of the formerly homogeneous Jewish neighborhood.<sup>21</sup>

Most of the Lower East Side was not affected by the skyrocketing land values of other portions of Manhattan. It was apparently feasible to maintain the building at 97 Orchard Street on the rents provided by its commercial occupants, while the upper four floors remained sealed. In 1988, the building was "discovered" by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum which was searching for a site in which the history of tenement life and the immigrant experience could be illustrated. Having been largely unaltered for nearly 60 years, 97 Orchard Street was found to be something of a time machine in which its exceptional physical integrity made it appropriate for illustrating a larger social phenomenon.

## II. 97 ORCHARD STREET AS REPRESENTATIVE OF IMMIGRANT LIFE

When 97 Orchard Street was built, it probably represented an improvement over the aging row houses of the neighborhood. It was clearly intended as a money-making proposition, but also had some pretense of respectability. This is indicated by the fact that the owner, Lucas Glockner, an ambitious man who went on to build or own additional tenements, lived there with his family.<sup>22</sup> In fact, members of the family remained in residence there until 1886.

In erecting a tenement, Glockner was participating in a trend characteristic of New York. The first building that fits the description of a tenement dates to 1833.<sup>23</sup> By 1864, when 97 Orchard Street was completed, there were 15,500 of these buildings in New York City. This number increased to 35,000 in 1890. In 1900, there were 43,000 tenements in Manhattan and another 34,000 in Brooklyn, which had been merged into Greater New York in 1898.<sup>24</sup>

Tenements like 97 Orchard Street were the characteristic worker housing of New York, comparable to the ubiquitous triple-deckers of southern New England or the row houses of Baltimore. In 1903, about two-thirds of the city's 3.4 million inhabitants lived in tenement buildings. More than any other American city, New York was a city of renters. In 1890, 94% of New Yorkers were renters, compared to 77% nationally.<sup>25</sup>

New York's characteristic tenements were an economic response to the substantially higher value of land. As such, they achieved economic viability by crowding the greatest number of people into the smallest possible space. The result of these pressures was an extraordinary and appalling population density in 97 Orchard Street and its neighborhood. In 1900, 111 people lived in this one tenement (assuming that all residents were actually found by the census enumerator).<sup>26</sup> In the 1890s, with further increases in density still

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<sup>21</sup> Information on file at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

<sup>22</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Jackson, *Lower East Side Tenement Museum*, p. 9, from a Ph.D. dissertation by Edward Lubitz, "The Tenement Problem in New York City and the Movement for Its Reform, 1856-1867," (New York University, 1970).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Kraut, *Huddled Masses*, p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> Shenton, *97 Orchard Street*, p. 12.

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ahead, the Lower East Side as a whole contained 290,000 people per square mile. Under such pressure, the pretense of separate functional designations of rooms broke down and all space often became space for sleeping or working.

In 1903, the block containing 97 Orchard Street, with 2223 people on its 2.04 acres, was not only the single most crowded block in the 10th Ward, which in turn was the most crowded in New York City, but presumably anywhere on earth. New York City's Tenement House Department searched the world but could find no equivalent, even in a notorious district of Bombay, India.<sup>27</sup> At the level of density of that one block (1089 per acre), the entire population of the United States could easily have been accommodated within the limits of New York City.

At 97 Orchard Street, this crowding coincided with the gradual physical deterioration of the building and the obsolescence of its facilities. The direct result was the kind of hardship and squalor that scandalized reformers such as Jacob Riis. Here, the deprivation associated with immigrant life was carried to an extreme. In 97 Orchard Street, 40 of the 60 rooms had no external source of light.<sup>28</sup> The halls lacked ventilation, with effects now difficult to imagine. For at least four decades, there were no toilets at No. 97. Privy sinks, or "school sinks," which were outdoor, in-ground privies which connected with the city sewer system, replaced backyard privies around 1888, but were only a marginal improvement.<sup>29</sup> Even the indoor toilets, two per floor installed around 1905, hardly provided an ideal solution. Each was used by an average of 20 people; frequent use and inadequate maintenance led to rapid deterioration. There were never any showers or bathtubs at 97 Orchard Street—by no means an exceptional situation on the Lower East Side, even in a period when indoor plumbing was widely available. In consequence, residents resorted to the public baths, one of the characteristic features of Lower East Side existence.

Compounding the problem was the practice of taking "lodgers" or "boarders"—single people, often relatives or individuals from the same district, who needed a temporary place to alight. The income they provided was often vital in helping the host family make ends meet. This custom seems to have been particularly prevalent in the Jewish areas, where it inspired a rich but ambivalent literature.<sup>30</sup> Census data show numerous lodgers were present at 97 Orchard Street—13 in 1900 and 19 in 1915.<sup>31</sup> Another economic necessity that exacerbated already deplorable conditions was the practice of working at home, or "sweating," often carried on far into the night by dim light. Most of this work was in the garment trades and usually involved all members of the family. There is poignant evidence of this at No. 97, where lists of clothing items are crudely pencilled on the walls: "75 trousers, 50 vests, 60 shirts...."

There is a huge literature of outrage describing the atrocious conditions in the tenements. The details are correct, but the authors, usually outsiders, overlook certain fundamental characteristics of the Lower East Side. Most of the new arrivals went there by choice, and

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<sup>27</sup> First Report of the Tenement House Department of the City of New York, cited in Jackson, *Lower East Side Tenement Museum*, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> See Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 178.

<sup>31</sup> Shenton, *97 Orchard Street*, pp. 13, 22. There is good reason to suspect that the number of lodgers was understated because their presence was often an embarrassment to the family.

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there is evidence that Jewish aid organizations directed immigrants to that neighborhood.<sup>32</sup> They did so because, despite its blatantly visible defects, the Lower East Side provided a viable community that could sustain immigrants during the stressful period of transition.<sup>33</sup> Also, the area was attractive in part because immigrants could work close to home and save transportation costs and time.<sup>34</sup> During the period of peak immigration, New York was the leading manufacturing city in the nation. Much of this was light industry and was concentrated in and near the Lower East Side.

The supportive characteristic of the neighborhood was evident when it was predominantly German and has remained true for the successive ethnic groups that have occupied it. During the German period, 97 Orchard Street was a residential element within a compact district that filled the varied needs of an immigrant community. In addition to a saloon that for a time in the 1870s flourished on the street level of the tenement itself, assorted clubs, cafes, schools, theaters, restaurants, and banks, all catering to a German clientele, were located within walking distance of 97 Orchard Street. As a result, this self-contained neighborhood was commonly known as "Kleindeutschland" (Little Germany).

The phenomenon persisted during the Jewish period. 97 Orchard Street lay at the core of a vibrant neighborhood that supplied the needs of the inhabitants. Orchard Street itself was a center of the pushcart economy, with perhaps the highest density of these "startup" businesses of any street in Manhattan. Within walking distance of No. 97 was found an array of synagogues, schools, social halls, labor organizations, coffee houses, banks, and theaters. Many occupied only temporary space in storefronts, but a large number of non-residential buildings that figured in both the German and Jewish immigrant experience still

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<sup>32</sup> Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914*. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1962,) p. 79.

<sup>33</sup> Howe and other students of the subject emphasize that, despite its glaring physical unpleasantness, the Lower East Side was less disorienting and more accommodating to newcomers in the early 1900s than it had been in the 1880s and 1890s. In part this was due to a stronger national economy, but the existence of an established community with organized support mechanisms was a contributing factor.

<sup>34</sup> Jackson, *Lower East Side Tenement Museum*, p. 5.

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survive, unexpected in view of New York City's reputation for rapid replacement of buildings.<sup>35</sup> In many cases, these buildings have gone on to perform similar functions for later waves of immigrants.<sup>36</sup>

Other institutions, especially schools and libraries, were points of contact between the immigrants and the larger society. Indeed, one of the central characteristics of the Lower East Side was its role as an arena where the forces of tradition and assimilation battled for supremacy. Usually the issue expressed itself as the inter-generational conflict that has provided the theme of countless novels.

In large measure, this pulling in opposite directions has been characteristic of every immigrant group and continues with great emotional intensity to this day. A similar struggle can be seen among the French Canadians who had preserved their identity in an English-dominated culture for more than a century and sought to continue the process in the United States under the banner of *survivance*. Among the various ethnic groups that have passed through the Lower East Side, the Eastern European Jews seem to present a particularly clear illustration of this critical issue in the immigrant experience. These newcomers were a people who had preserved themselves for nearly two millennia in a generally hostile environment by clinging to a distinctive set of beliefs and customs. Among such people, the crisis of assimilation was brought into sharp relief.

Ultimately, the forces of assimilation almost always prevailed. This points out another feature of tenement life that the critics, with their emphasis on the squalid details, often neglected. While the tenements were continuously inhabited, the families residing in them constantly changed. The great majority of residents of 97 Orchard Street, if they were anything like the other residents of the Lower East Side, ultimately succeeded in America. They surmounted the undeniable hardships and obstacles they faced.

It may be useful to think of the process by which immigrants and their descendents became Americanized as taking place in four stages. First was the journey to America, culminating in processing at Ellis Island or its predecessors. Next came the difficult period of first settlement. This was followed (in most cases) by movement to outlying ethnic neighborhoods. Finally, usually only in succeeding generations, came dispersal into the

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<sup>35</sup> The Lower East Side Tenement Museum conducts walking tours which highlight buildings or sites that figured prominently in the experience of Irish, German, Italian, Jewish and Chinese immigrants and African Americans. This information is being combined in a forthcoming publication by Ruth Limmer under the auspices of the Tenement Museum, *Walking in History: A Heritage Guide to the Lower East Side*. Prominent among surviving structures are the landmarked Henry Street Settlement, and Schuyler Mansion, and Register properties such as the Eldridge Street Synagogue, Old St. Patrick's Cathedral, and the Bowery Savings Bank.

<sup>36</sup> The potential for adaptation of structures as the neighborhood has changed exists because the area remains essentially what it has been for the last 140 years: an ethnic, working-class neighborhood for newcomers to the United States. Today's inhabitants include a reduced Jewish population, with Hispanics and Asians figuring prominently. A striking example of conversion is the former *Jewish Daily Forward* newspaper building to a Buddhist church. The Public Baths on Allen Street will soon have Buddhist associations also. Religious institutions often changed hands (e.g., St. Teresa's Church, originally German Lutheran). Some Jewish houses of worship, most of which were originally Christian churches themselves, today welcome Hispanic or Asian congregations.



general population. This final stage is not always carried to absolute absorption and assimilation. Many Americans with identifiable ethnic backgrounds choose to live among others of similar heritage. As a result, many communities or regions retain an ethnic flavor derived from the presence of a particular group in proportions much beyond their representation in the national population.

97 Orchard Street is a largely intact and remarkably effective representative of the second stage, when the struggle and turmoil associated with the immigrant experience existed in its most intense form. This one representative of the thousands of tenements is especially suited to convey this experience because the upper floors have been unoccupied since the mid-1930s. In its gloomy upstairs apartments, data such as the fact that as many as ten people occupied each tiny, 3-room apartment, or that each apartment totals only about 325 square feet are converted from abstractions to tangible reality. By freezing time near the point at which living conditions of working-class immigrants were at their worst—and avoiding the gradual evolution characteristic of most inhabited buildings—the 97 Orchard Street tenement depicts the hardships of immigrant life in its starkest terms. The period of greatest immigration has come to symbolize the entire immigration phenomenon to this country; similarly, the adversity represented by 97 Orchard Street symbolizes the ordeal experienced by all immigrants to American cities.

Paradoxically, 97 Orchard Street is perhaps most valuable because no important events are known to have occurred there, nor are any famous individuals known to have lived there. As an essentially anonymous building, preserved partly through neglect, it is well suited to represent a profound social movement involving great numbers of unexceptional but courageous people.

### **III. 97 ORCHARD STREET AS AN EXAMPLE OF URBAN HOUSING REFORM**

During the 19th Century, New York City was the fastest growing city in the world and by 1900, had become the second largest metropolis. In the 80 years from 1840 to 1920, the city's population increased 15-fold, creating unanticipated strain upon city services and facilities.<sup>37</sup> Transportation, housing, sanitation, and health facilities constructed in a pre-industrial age for smaller populations proved inadequate to meet the needs of a burgeoning urban population.

Ultimately, conditions became so deplorable that they could no longer be ignored, despite the long American tradition of non-interference by government in matters of housing. New York, where the scale of the problem far exceeded that of any other American city, became a pioneer in regulating housing. When these limited measures proved inadequate, New York became the setting for an active reform movement. Many of the resultant regulations had effects that are still visible in the fabric of 97 Orchard Street.

By the 1840s, expressions of concern were already being heard in New York, then in the early stages of grappling with a proliferation of multi-family housing. In 1862, the New York state legislature established the Department of Building. Although this act did not specifically deal with tenements, it was the first law to mandate minimum standards for building construction. All buildings erected after May 1, 1862 had to adhere to such basic requirements as party walls of stone, brick, or iron, use of quality mortar, minimum thickness for walls, minimum size for structural members, and standards for doors, windows, and cornices.<sup>38</sup> These provisions directly influenced the construction of 97 Orchard Street and may be responsible in large measure for the building's survival to the

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<sup>37</sup> Kraut, *Huddled Masses*, p. 68.

<sup>38</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 7.

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present.

Two years after the formation of the Department of Building, a group of leading New Yorkers organized the Citizens' Association "for the purpose of taking steps to improve the sanitary condition of the city."<sup>39</sup> The Association formed a subcommittee known as the Council of Hygiene and Public Health, which undertook the first survey of housing and sanitary conditions in New York City. The Council's report, issued in January 1865, shocked prosperous New Yorkers, resulting in the formation of the Metropolitan Board of Health.

By coincidence, the Council's survey was undertaken in the same year 97 Orchard Street was completed, thus placing the building in a larger context of housing in New York City. 97 Orchard Street was then one of more than 15,000 "tenant-houses" in the city.<sup>40</sup> In some respects, conditions there were substandard even by the minimal expectations of the time. For example, fresh water, provided by the Croton Aqueduct, was available, and water pipes had been laid along Orchard Street. Many of the new tenements in the neighborhood were connected to this public water supply, but 97 Orchard Street was not one of them.<sup>41</sup>

The 1865 Council report had a major impact on housing reform, leading to passage of the Tenement House Act of 1867. Even more important than the actual provisions of this law, many of which were ignored, the bill established a precedent for government regulation of conditions in tenement houses. The idea of government intervention as a force for change in housing was now recognized.

Prior to the passage of the 1867 law, indeed for the first three centuries of urban settlement in America, the provision of shelter was not regarded as a proper responsibility of government. A partial exception was the passage of laws by local governments intended to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires. One such law, passed by the New York state legislature in 1860, appears to be responsible for a curious feature of 97 Orchard Street. Among other provisions, this law stated that all rooms on each floor "shall connect by doors from front to rear," and such doorways are still extant on the north side of 97 Orchard Street.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 17.

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The first law that had any effect on pre-existing buildings such as 97 Orchard Street was the Tenement House Act of 1867. Among the requirements of this law were the provision that one toilet or privy be provided for every twenty people, that privies be connected to sewers where these were available, and that all interior bedrooms be provided with a three-foot-square transom over the door. Since the 1867 law was not strictly enforced, it is not possible to determine whether Lucas Glockner made the required improvements. There are no transoms over the doors to the interior bedrooms at 97 Orchard Street; the inner bedrooms are, however, ventilated by casement windows that open onto the hall. These windows appear to be original.<sup>43</sup>

Demands for stronger laws governing the design of tenements continued in the 1870s, culminating in the Tenement House Act of 1879. This law had little effect on pre-existing tenements, but outlawed the construction of buildings such as 97 Orchard Street which contained interior rooms with no windows.

In response to a law passed in 1887 and amended in subsequent years, the backyard privies at 97 Orchard Street were replaced with privy sinks commonly known as "school sinks." These were privies connected with the city sewer system and "provided with an ostensible means of flushing." Six of these sinks were installed at 97 Orchard Street, although the exact date cannot be determined.<sup>44</sup> They were, however, only a marginal improvement over the former conditions.

Despite the piecemeal efforts at amelioration, conditions in the tenement district continued to appall middle-class reformers. New York City's problems were not only of a greater order of magnitude but were more visible. New York was already a center of the nation's communication industry, and the Lower East Side was located within walking distance of the city's numerous and fiercely competitive newspapers, as well as its municipal government offices.

The prevailing attitude of the city's opinion-shapers was summarized in a New York *Times* editorial of November 29, 1896:

The chief objections to the old-style tenements are contracted quarters, lack of family privacy, and promiscuous toilet arrangements, inviting moral deterioration; lack of light and air, and of sanitary accommodations, insuring a large death rate, and danger from fire—that ever-present tenement horror. All of these are wickedly cruel when such houses are new; when they become old, dilapidated, infested with vermin and infected with disease germs, they are a disgrace to humanity and a menace, not only to the health of the unfortunate residents therein, but to the health of the whole community.

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<sup>43</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 21.

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Under the leadership of Lawrence Veiller, a high-minded man of upper-class origins, and the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York, the movement to improve tenement conditions broadened.<sup>45</sup> Veiller, like most reformers somewhat obsessive about their chosen issue, wrote that "bad tenement house conditions were the cause of most of the problems in our modern cities." Their work culminated in the passage of the Tenement House Act of 1901, the legislation that was to have the greatest impact on the physical character of 97 Orchard Street.<sup>46</sup>

The 1901 act, the most far-reaching of all the tenement reform bills, not only set standards for new construction but mandated major changes in existing buildings. These regulations, passed and enforced against often strenuous opposition by some landlords and builders, emphasized improvement in lighting, ventilation, and sanitation facilities. Numerous physical changes resulting from this legislation are visible at 97 Orchard Street, notably the insertion of glass panels, gas jets, a ventilating skylight, windows to admit light to interior rooms, and a fire escape.<sup>47</sup>

The most important and by far the most controversial change required by the 1901 law was the removal of all school sinks from tenement yards. At 97 Orchard Street, two water closets were constructed on each floor in space that had been part of the inner bedrooms of some apartments. Two fireproof air shafts were cut into the building to ventilate the water closets. This work was conducted by Otto Reissmann, an architect from the vicinity who seemed to specialize in tenement renovations. At the same time, Reissmann also added new fronts to the commercial establishments on the first floor, making changes that are still evident.<sup>48</sup>

These changes, the first relatively costly improvements made to 97 Orchard Street, indicate that it was still economically feasible to improve old tenements that already might have been considered outdated. Replacement of old residential buildings was relatively uncommon, perhaps because considerable open land suitable for new construction still existed within New York City. After 1905, the only major physical change to occur at 97 Orchard Street was the installation of electricity some time after 1918.

The tangible alterations evident at 97 Orchard Street are a manifestation of what became a successful national movement to reform housing. Lawrence Veiller, America's first professional housing reformer, not only changed the course of New York City's housing development, but influenced the housing history of states and cities throughout the nation in the first two decades of this century.<sup>49</sup> The housing reformers were an integral part of the

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<sup>45</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, pp. 28-30.

<sup>48</sup> Dolkart, *97 Orchard St.*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>49</sup> Jackson, *Lower East Side Tenement Museum*, p. 19.

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larger reform movement of the Progressive era, allied with those who sought trust-busting, railroad regulation, and pure food and drug laws by a common belief that government intervention was required to restrain a predatory capitalism.

Veiller, who had gained his knowledge of tenement housing on the Lower East Side, became the first secretary of the New York State Tenement House Commission. This body, the first of its kind in the country, was appointed by Governor Theodore Roosevelt in 1900, just months before he went to Washington as Vice President. The Tenement House Commission, soon swamped with requests for information and assistance from all over the country, became in practice a national housing bureau.<sup>50</sup> By 1912, at least 38 other American cities had housing reform associations.

Through Lawrence Veiller in particular, New York's struggle for better housing became the foundation for a national crusade. Veiller contributed several papers to the National Conference on City Planning in 1901 and helped found the American City Planning Institute. In 1910, he became director of the National Housing Association, an organization whose principal role was to review proposed housing laws of other cities. In the same year, as a culmination to his prolonged study of the problem, Veiller published his *Model Tenement House Law*. In the next decade, 11 states and 40 cities enacted new tenement house codes patterned after laws Veiller had helped formulate—the New York statute of 1901 or his *Model*. Veiller assisted directly in the formulation of these laws, or they were adapted from the 1901 New York law. As one representative of a larger phenomenon, the 97 Orchard Street tenement testifies to the potential of the American system to reform abuses.

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<sup>50</sup> Roy Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slum: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962,) p. 143.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

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## Primary Location of Additional Data:

 State Historic Preservation Office Other State Agency Federal Agency Local Government University Other (Specify Repository): Lower East Side Tenement Museum  
97 Orchard Street  
New York, New York 10002**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: Less than one (1) acre

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing  
A 18 4507800 585220

## Verbal Boundary Description:

The nomination includes the entire tax lot on which 97 Orchard Street stands. 97 Orchard Street is designated as Lot 56 on Tax Map Block 414, Zoning Map #12C. The lot is 24'-10½" wide and 88'-6" deep. The building is as wide as the lot and extends 68'-6" from the front property line. The rear property line fronts Allen Street.

## Boundary Justification:

The nomination boundary encompasses the original building lot of this property.

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

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