# 'HORROR HOUSES'

## THE WAR AGAINST SLUMLORDS

By MAGGIE BELLOWS

Snow blowing through rotting window jams, rats scuttling across the floors in the dark, hunks of plaster crashing down, four kids huddled in a bed, hugging each other against the cold and fright.

This is the scene in a slum apartment anywhere. America — in a tenement condemned by the city four decades ago because it has neither light, nor air, nor sanitation — a building ravaged by time and neglect and greed.

### 41,000

There are more than 41,000 old law (built before the turn of the century) tenements in New York City alone, housing more than a million human beings.

The worst of them — about 10,000 — are "horror houses," says Charles G. Moerdler, commissioner of buildings for New York City. "Many of the worst are owned by slumlords who hide behind corporate masks and make fortunes on human misery by abusing and milking these buildings."

Until recently the tenants, in a city with a desperate housing shortage, were helpless; the buildings department frustrated.

Tenants could complain, if they knew which of 20 bureaus to call (call Health Department for contaminated but not rusty water; buildings for rusty but not contaminated pipes; health for strange odor in water, department of water supply for no water at all).

### Red tape

Officials could fine the landlord or the corporation; or reduce rents after lengthy red tape. But complaints were massive (on the first freezing weekend in December they numbered 5,000 anguished calls for heat). And the machinery slow and tangled.

Phantom landlords paid the fines (slaps on the wrists which averaged out $1 a violation), and the victims continued to suffer.

### 30 ladies

Today — thanks largely to 30 scrapping ladies who organized under "call for action," and a civic-minded radio station (WMCA) which backed and financed their crusade — New York has a new law and a shillelagh that can knock off those corporate "veils" and whack the slumlords into repairing tenements that have been legally declared "public nuisances" because they are "dangerous to human life or detrimental to health."

The law, unique in the country and revolutionary in concept, is aimed at the hardcore landlords, the "big operators" who traffic in slum housing behind a maze of dummy corporations. Some of these (one was traced to ownership of 150 buildings) have ducked around the laws for years.

### Civil Suits

Armed with this law, the buildings department can now flush these people out — and make them personally liable to civil suit if tenants are injured or made ill by unrepaired hazards.

The law went into effect last July. Commissioner Moerdler's staff went right to work, winnowed out 660 buildings which had more than 75 violations on record (no heat, no hot water, falling plaster, exposed wiring, collapsing stairs, rats).

Letters went out — and owners of about 300 came in voluntarily, signed contracts to make repairs immediately or face criminal action.

Already 90 buildings have been declared public nuisances.

New York's landmark law had its beginnings in February, 1963, when a housewife, Ellen Sulzberger Straus had toured slums with the civic-action Citizens Committee for Children.

### 40 families

Horrified when she saw 40 families who had been living without water or heat for weeks in freezing weather, she asked her husband, Peter, president of the rock 'n' roll station WMCA, to help.

Peter, son of the first United States Housing commissioner, Nathan Straus Jr., threw his station behind his wife and 30 of her friends. They manned five telephones, took 20,000 calls from desperate tenants who could not get repairs, could not find their ways through the maze of city agencies and mountains of pink slips.

The station publicized hundreds of "case histories." Finally the city put in a single phone number to handle complaints 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

### 500

In the meantime, the ladies followed up 500 complaints with personal visits. Too often the "owner" was a corporation. The ladies turned detectives, searched the dusty files of City Hall to track down owners.

On the other side of the picture of falling plaster, broken plumbing, rotting stairs, stinking hallways and children bitten by rats, they found another picture: a nest of owners who, by intricate machinations of dummy corporations, shuffled mortgages, forced bankruptcies, manipulated loans and rent increases, had bilked fortunes out of rotting buildings.

### Convicted

They were able to track some of the worst; the Federal Grand Jury indicted four. When one, convicted of breaking laws 200 times, skipped the country, the station followed him abroad, got a taped interview and used it in an expose.

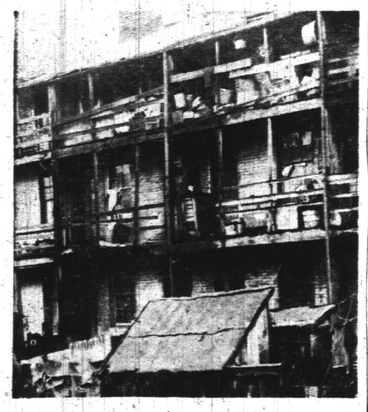
When the government charged one syndicate with making $1,646,000 in two years, the public flare-up set the stage for the amendment to the multiple dwelling law.

### $1.5 billion

Commissioner Moerdler does not expect the new law to cure New York's housing crisis. "We will have to rehabilitate thousands of buildings, build at the rate of $1.5 billion a year for the next six years, and crack down on code enforcement to provide half-way decent housing," he says.

But in the meantime, he stresses, the law now "puts very solid power into the hands of slum tenants to help them assert their rights."

NOT FIT for human habitation



DO PEOPLE really live here?

BREEDING PLACE for rats . . .

**"While thousands of both black and white Americans are living in the filth and grime of utter poverty, thousands of others are living in the luxury of wealth acquired by renting houses and apartments, such as those on this page, to the poor at outrageous amounts."**





THIS IS HISTORY WEEK

# Mighty Frederick Douglass

## Pioneer Freedom Fighter Sounded 'Black Power' Battlecry 95 Long Years Ago...

By CLIFF MACKAY

If your are one of those who have been thinking that the term "black power" originated with one Stokely Carmichael while marching on a dusty road in Mississippi last year, you're in for a surprise.

### Black power

The annual observance of History Week provides no more suitable time to get the record straight.

The man who first uttered the two words that have caused so much turmoil in the body politic today was the nation's number one Freedom Fighter, Frederick Douglass.

The scene was the National Convention of Colored Men. The place was New Orleans, La. And the date was 95 years ago in April, 1872.

**The mighty Frederick Douglass, elected as permanent chairman, sounded the battle cry in his opening address. He urged the assembled delegates to make full use of their "black moral and political power" to right the wrongs that afflict their people.**

He was introduced by Lieutenant Governor Pinchback of Louisiana, one of the early fruits of black political power, who was later to serve as governor during the Reconstruction.

STOKELY CARMICHAEL SNCC chairman describes the controversial term: "Black Power" as "massive voter registration and uncompromising unity in voting as a means of attaining true democratic freedom."

### Introduced

Lt. Gov. Pinchback, in turning the chair over to Douglass said it was "a fit place in that very hall, where so many colored men had been murdered for opinion's sake, for him who stands head and shoulders above all of his race, for him who has done so much through so many weary years to elevate and ameliorate the condition of his people, to preside over the assembled representatives of those who love and honor him."

Douglass was generally recognized as one of the world's great orators.

The most moving description of him was made by an unidentified clergyman who heard him speak in Boston's Faneuil Hall in the 1870's.

**"There he stood, over six feet in height, erect, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, with massive, well-formed head, covered with thick, bushy hair, about half gray. I judged him then to be midway of his fifties. His face, strongly leonine, was clean shaved, except mustache, while those eyes, that even in the seventies could flash fire, lighted up the whole countenance, and made the general effect such as not to be easily forgotten by a young man. There stood the orator and the man, and never since have I seen the two in such exquisite combination. . . ."**

What Frederick Douglass said of the "white backlash" of 1894, with but a slight variation in wording would be applicable to the "white blacklash" of 1964.

### Backlash

Roared Mr. Douglass:

"The pit of hell is said to be bottomless. Principles which we all thought to have been firmly and permanently settled by the late (Civil) war have been boldly assaulted and overthrown.

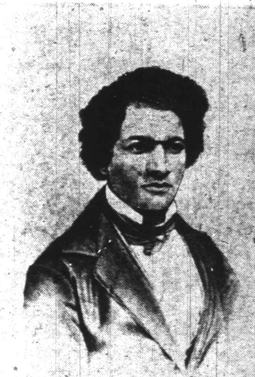
"Rebel rule is now nearly complete in many states, and it is gradually capturing the nation's Congress. The cause lost in the war is the cause regained in peace, and the cause gained in war is the cause lost in peace."

Mr. Douglass, 100 years ago, had the explanation for those who today say they cannot understand why so many big city ghettoes suddenly explode in violence.

**"Who can blame the black man if," asked Douglass, "he is compelled to live in rags and wretchedness, and his wages held down by fraud, denied a fair trial when accused of crime, he shall imitate the example of other oppressed classes and invoke some terrible explosive power as a means of bringing his oppressors to their senses, and making them respect the claims of justice?"**

And the militant abolitionist who conducted the nation's first sit-in at Rochester, N. Y., 102 years ago, had this sombre warning for segregationists of today:

"No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man, without at last finding the other end of it fastened about his own neck."



The young FREDERICK DOUGLASS

### Formula

Douglass had a formula for racial peace that is as valid today as it was a century ago.

**He pleaded with white Americans:**

**"Put away your race prejudice. Banish the idea that one class must rule over another. Recognize the fact that the rights of the humblest citizens are as worthy of protection as are those of the highest and your problem will be solved."**

History textbooks used in the nation's public schools do not do justice to the tremendous contribution Frederick Douglass made to his people and his country.

Fortunately, the eminent historian, Dr. Philip S. Foner, has written a four-volume tome, "The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass" which fills in the glaring gaps.

No serious student of American history should be without it.

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THE AFRO-AMERICAN
BALTIMORE AFRO-AMERICAN
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COMING: SHE'S A BUG COP