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## Housing in Holyoke and Its effects on Family Life, 1860-1910

Paul N. Dubovik

In the first few decades of the 19th century, the early industrialists decided to expand into such interior settlements as Holyoke. The advent of the railroads enabled the mills to receive raw materials and ship finished products to the eastern market.<sup>1</sup> Boston investors became interested in Holyoke because of the great power potential of the Connecticut River. In 1847, the Hadley Falls Company was incorporated and was to play a major role in planning the dam, canals, mills, and even the tenements which housed the factory workers.

Holyoke, like most industrial cities of the day, was poorly-planned. The town was exploited by wealthy investors who were unwilling to spend money on community development. That was especially the case if one considers the fact that the investors were largely absent from Holyoke while they profited from freight, real estate, power, and manufacturing. Originally, the tenements which were built to house the workers were well-constructed and in some cases ahead of their time. "The company tenements were models for their day. The harmonious proportions of the brick rows and the pine panelling in the foreman's houses were unusually fine."<sup>2</sup> The *Holyoke Transcript* described a block in South Holyoke as "having a handsome front of pressed brick, double circular windows, three stories high with French roof, and twenty-eight rooms with a dining room, pantries, a kitchen, with most of the rooms finished in oak graining...."<sup>3</sup>

Articles appearing in the *Holyoke Transcript* outlined the problems of the young town: "During the last few years the progress of the town has been steady and without check, and yet its yearly advance is a continual surprise to some minds; its continuance is a question involving grave doubts."<sup>4</sup> Another problem came about because the price of real estate was often "aimed against the general prosperity, affecting the credit as a place of manufacturing or business center...."<sup>5</sup>

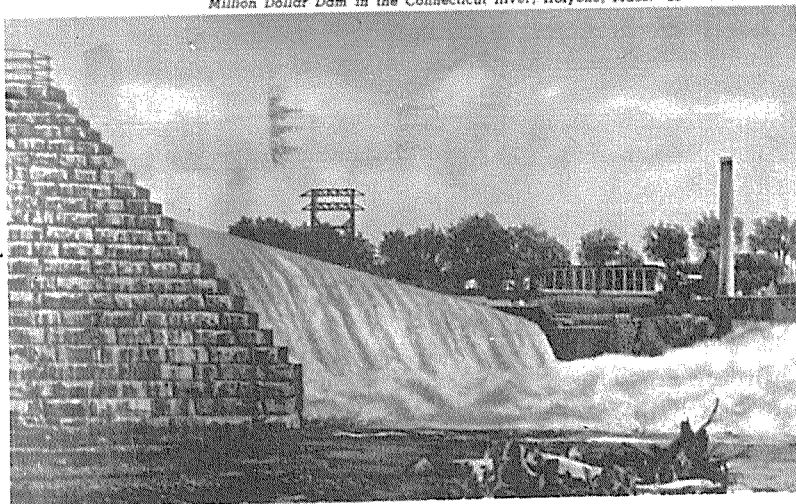
The manufacturing companies, under the direction of the Boston investors, discouraged small business by holding their property for higher prices; the result was to prevent the growth of a viable middle class.<sup>6</sup> Absentee owners living in Boston were only concerned with the economic potential of Holyoke;

for many years Holyoke's political and social growth was stunted. Unfortunately for the citizens of Holyoke, the absentee owners did not experience the offensive sanitary or housing conditions and the inadequate political structure. The housing situation in Holyoke generally reflected the unwise planning; soon the well-built tenements were turned into crowded, unhealthy living quarters unfit for human beings.

In 1847, Holyoke was primarily a stable agricultural community; therefore the massive movement of Irish immigrants into the town upset traditional relationships. One major problem was the massive flow of immigrants into a town which needed them economically but was not at all prepared to provide for them.<sup>7</sup>

The Irish who worked on the construction of Holyoke built a village of small shanties, known as "The Patch," on the area around Prospect Park. The Irish lived in shanties which were constructed by putting in four upright posts, to which rough boards were nailed. A roof of overlapping boards was then put on top, places were cut for a door and for two or three small half-windows; finally turf was cut and piled up to the eaves.<sup>8</sup> It was said that a man would come into town in the morning, buy a thousand feet of hemlock boards, and have his shanty up by night. The next morning he would be ready to go to work on the dam, and perhaps to take boarders.<sup>9</sup>

*Million Dollar Dam in the Connecticut River, Holyoke, Mass. 20*



"Illustrations in this article courtesy of the Holyoke Public Library"

Inside the shanty, the newly-arrived Irishman would smooth the earth and put down a rude floor of boards. A little hole was dug for a cellar and a trap door cut in the boards for access to it. A hole was sawed in the roof, tin placed around the opening, and then a stovepipe was run through it. Under the "V" of the roof was a loft, reached by a ladder; there the boarders usually slept on straw, like "sardines in a box." The lower room was separated by a partition of boards. One side was a sleeping compartment, while the other was the kitchen. Board was three dollars per week. Most of the shanties were small but there was one forty feet long which held thirty boarders.<sup>10</sup>

The houses were arranged along irregular and narrow streets where the hogs, hens, and goats roamed at will picking up refuse. These animals were kept in small hovels behind the houses, although in some cases they slept inside with the family.<sup>11</sup> The women often went barefoot along with the children especially during mild weather. The Irish who lived in "The Patch" were the ones who had just arrived to work in construction. After the dam was completed, some began to establish themselves in the community and move out of the shanties into the residential area. The prospering Irishman usually invested in a plot of land as soon as he could. He constantly improved his house and land. According to reports everyone was friendly with one another in "The Patch," which resulted in the development of neighborhood spirit. Families would share pumps, ovens, and other necessities.<sup>12</sup> Firewood, which was taken from the riverbed in the spring, was divided equally; household items were shared by all. In time of illness or trouble, families would unite for self-protection.

The shanties in "The Patch" had no large windows for ventilation, and plumbing was virtually nonexistent; sewers were not extended to "The Patch" until 1873. As the Irish in "The Patch" were squatters, the Hadley Falls Company assumed no responsibility for their living conditions.<sup>13</sup> Irish immigrants living in "The Patch" had only "an occasional cistern" and for many years the outhouses drained directly into the river not far from the pipes through which water filled the reservoir.<sup>14</sup> The Irish, usually uneducated, were unaware of elementary hygiene. One fellow described "The Patch" in 1854: "I was through here pedalling maple sugar at that time I stopped at one of the shanties to sell some sugar. First, the man and woman came out of the door, then six children came out, then a cow came out, and then a sow and ten pigs came out, all from the same door."<sup>15</sup> A pigsty was often built at the rear of the shanty, especially as the family grew more wealthy.

Another problem which exacerbated the housing conditions was the financial condition of the Hadley Falls Company and economic recession. The Hadley Falls Company had invested unwisely in real estate which was not selling and it would not change its policies even though they were economically unsound.<sup>16</sup> The decade of the 1850's was not a prosperous one for Holyoke;

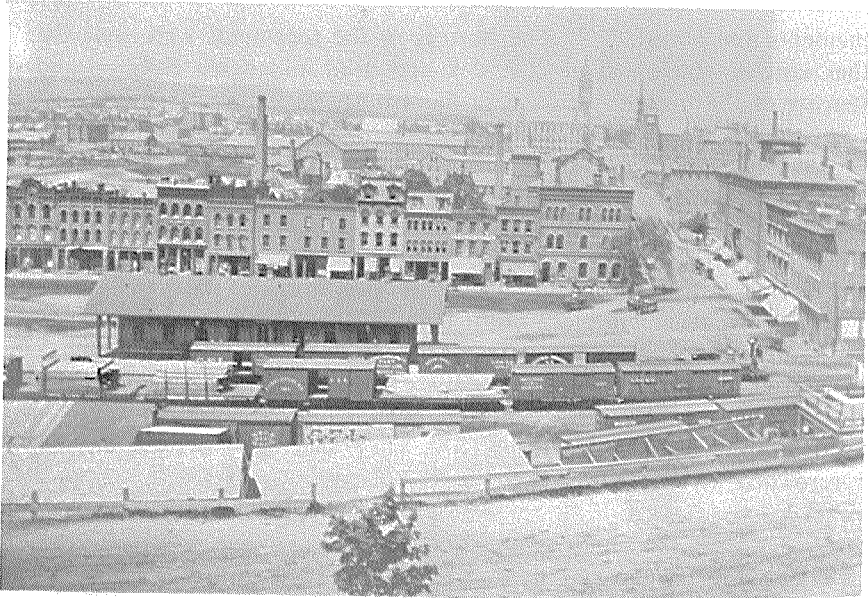
unemployment spread and eventually the Hadley Falls Company sold out to a group from Connecticut who re-named it the Holyoke Water Power Company.<sup>17</sup>

The Water Power Company offered three classes of real estate: mill property, business sites, and dwelling house lots. At first it intended to offer mill property at reasonable rates in order to attract industry but a great deal of profit was made from the other two classes.<sup>18</sup> The idea was that by fixing a low price upon the water power and mill property, they would encourage enough industry to attract a sizable population.<sup>19</sup>

Congestion soon became a problem because of the lack of good transportation; the stores had to be located near the dwellings of the operatives and "nothing but positively prohibitive prices will drive people from these natural or established centers."<sup>20</sup> Beyond the limits of the business property, much of the land was set aside for residences but little of this land was occupied. As the selling price of this unoccupied land was very high, the congestion of the inner town could not be relieved; only a handful of people could afford to buy land on the outskirts.<sup>21</sup>

Taxes on manufacturing buildings were low and insignificant because the land on which the mills were built was cheap while the value of the products produced and the company's stock was very high and not heavily taxed.<sup>22</sup> The lower classes could not hope to buy stock and gain some influence in the company. The high price of the land above High Street drove the lower classes to the cheaper land of Ervingville and Depot Hill where the growth in population had been retarded by the lack of water. Yet, when water was brought in, the value of the property increased and the land was coveted by investors and the middle and lower classes.<sup>23</sup> Investors would profit by building cheaper structures to serve as residences in the remote sections of town. This served to enlarge the center of trade so that the stores which were located around High Street now were encroaching upon the residences of Maple and other streets.<sup>24</sup>

Just prior to the Civil War, industry began to flourish in Holyoke. There was a boom until the summer of 1862 when the cotton supply was cut off and the cotton mills were forced to close. The following year, the town received a boost because of the demand for uniforms for the Union Army and at the same time the paper industry was growing because of ample water power, easy credit, and the large supply of chemically pure water.<sup>25</sup> Soon, machine shops and textile mills began to appear along with businesses to supply these factories; in 1873 "the spirit of hustle and bustle pervaded the busy town".<sup>26</sup>



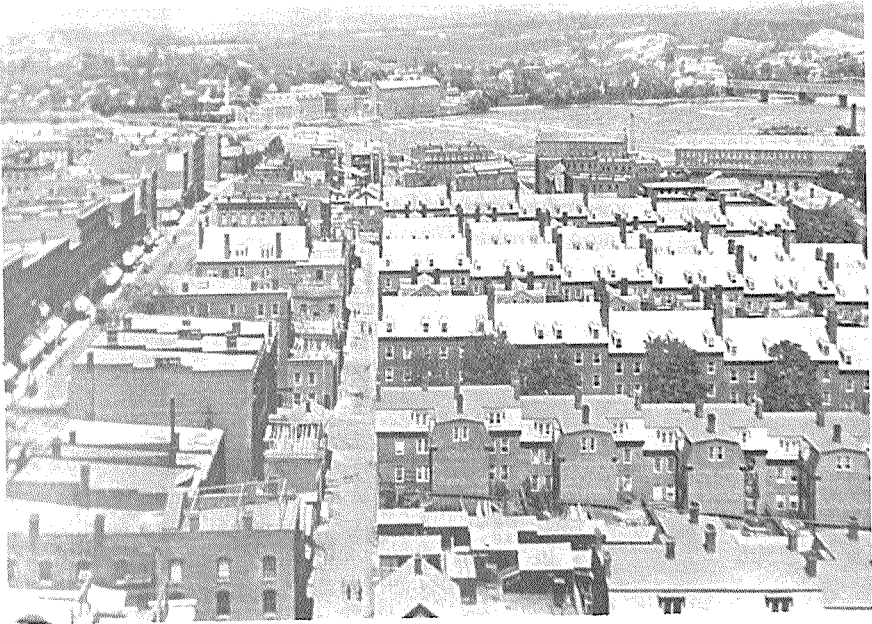
Immigrants flooded into the town while tenements could not be built fast enough. The tenements had to be located near the factories because of the lack of adequate transportation. Promoters insisted that the land around the factories and canals was precious and they said that "adjacent tenement sites must be used with economy and be closely built upon."<sup>27</sup> In 1854, the town treasurer said that "the want of houses and consequent difficulty of placing work people in Holyoke is probably one obstacle in the way of determining the settling there of persons who are engaged in various mechanical business and to whom a cheap and unfailing water power is necessary."<sup>28</sup> People crowded into tenements, sometimes ten to twelve families in a house which was meant for two or three. By 1874, the death rate in Holyoke was higher than any other town in the state except Fall River. Indeed, two years earlier, in 1872 the mortality rate in Holyoke was 31 per thousand while in Springfield it was only 18.<sup>29</sup> The Boston industrialists had turned a small rural community into a town filled with poverty and disease.

In July of 1872, the *Transcript* reported that "the filth has been allowed to accumulate in our streets, our alleys, open lots, in our highways, and its foul exhalations have brought to us their own harvest of sickness and sorrow and death. While we pencil these words we can look from our open windows down upon a black mass of semi-fluid corruption from which there is no escape except the already overburdened air".<sup>30</sup>

The newspaper described the alleys behind the tenements as "reeking with decayed refuse varied of the table and kitchen pitched from the roofs of upper

tenements and lower:..."<sup>31</sup> The horrors of the tenements were described in other articles which told of "the sick and dead and dying children and the intensity of the preoccupation with mere business interests."<sup>32</sup>

Living conditions in Holyoke were unhealthy, like most manufacturing towns, and generally the dwellings of the workers were terrible places to live. Two hundred eighty buildings, many containing several tenements, were built during the period from 1870 to 1873.<sup>33</sup> In one week, forty tenement buildings were being constructed, including the extensive blocks of the Newton Brothers and the twelve tenement block of the Lyman Mills Corporation. The prevailing type of architecture was a square frame four to six stories high surmounted by a French roof and accommodating from six to twelve families.<sup>34</sup> Tenements that were described in 1860 as "compact, commodious, and comfortable" were turned into congested barracks by 1873. These tenements became increasingly overcrowded as the town grew.



Holyoke has more and worse large tenement houses than any manufacturing town of textile fabrics in the state, and built in such a manner that there is very little means of escape in case of fire. The sanitary arrangements are very imperfect, and in many cases, there is no provision made for carrying the slops from the sinks, but they are allowed to run wherever they can make their way. Portions of yards are covered with filth and green slime, and within twenty feet, people are living in basements of houses three feet below the level of the yard. One large block, four stories

high, and basement, has eighteen tenements, with ninety rooms, occupied by nearly two hundred people; and yet there are only two 3-foot doorways on the front, and none in the back, with an alleyway at back only six feet in width. At present there is some spare room at the front, but it is uncertain how long it will remain so. There are also quite a number of six and eight tenement houses, with only one door at front and none at back, over-crowded, dirty and necessarily unhealthy. Our agents visited some tenements having bedrooms into which neither air nor light can penetrate, as there were no windows and no means of ventilation, and some of them were actually filthy. It is no wonder that the death rate, in 1872, was greater in Holyoke than in any large town in Massachusetts excepting Fall River, and if an epidemic should visit them now, in the state they are in, its ravages would be great.<sup>35</sup>

In these tenements, light and ventilation were very poor and there were few sanitary conveniences. Holyoke was certainly not a paradise for cleanliness. People were described by the *Transcript* as pitching refuse and rubbish into the alleys because there was no handy receptacle.<sup>36</sup> Rubbish and dirt of all kinds appeared in the alleys behind the tenements and health officials had trouble making the residents remove the garbage because of all the "red tape" involved.<sup>37</sup> The *Transcript* continued to expose these unhealthy conditions: "Diseases are created and blood is poisoned by the gases and stenches arising by decaying piles of offal and rubbish."<sup>38</sup> These alleys were health hazards and it was noted that the back alleys lying north of Hampden Street and the thickly-crowded blocks between High, Maple, and Chestnut Streets were particularly bad. One local physician remarked: "It is no use to fight the fever in such locality as that—the doctors might as well stay home with the evils of imperfect drainage, foul and noxious sinks and drains sending their vile odor into the air, unventilated houses and these filthy conditions."<sup>39</sup>

Overcrowding, filth, and a lack of privacy were complicated by a growing tendency to build multi-storied tenements, to construct more rear houses back to back with other buildings, thus encroaching further upon courts and alleys.<sup>40</sup> The plans, construction, and management of these houses were left almost exclusively to men whose sole aim was to make a profit without regard to the tenants' welfare. The air was impure and offensive because of bad drainage often having no connection with a sewer. The privies were often full and overflowing and they were inadequate in number. The basements were often entirely below ground, and the ceiling was often a foot or two below the level of the street, thus making cellars dark, damp, and badly ventilated.<sup>41</sup> The cellars, when unoccupied, frequently contained several inches of stagnant water in which there was garbage, excrement, and other refuse.

Many families were huddled into low, damp and filthy cellars, and others in attics which were but little if any better, with scarcely a particle of what might be called air to sustain life. And it is only a wonder (to say nothing of health) that life can dwell in such apartments...."<sup>42</sup>



The halls and stairways were usually filthy and dark; the walls and banisters often foul and damp. The rooms were too small for the number of occupants and some of the bedrooms were more like closets without light or ventilation.<sup>43</sup>

The wages of the workers were very low while their rent was relatively high. Tenants would also pay more than expected for such poor housing.<sup>44</sup> The helplessness of the tenant was made worse by the landlord who often was simultaneously involved in manufacturing. The "company house system" prevailed, under which an industrial worker was compelled to live in a house owned by the company.<sup>45</sup> If the worker insisted on a better dwelling, he would be fired.

The townspeople gradually became aware of the exploitation of the poor. In Chicopee, small houses were often built while in Holyoke brick blocks three and four stories high were the only available housing, and rent was higher and accommodations inferior when compared to those in Chicopee.<sup>46</sup>

The crowded and unsanitary tenement conditions had been known since the creation of the Board of Health in 1856, and the Board investigated the conditions and adopted regulations. Their annual published reports provided information from which citizens might have drawn an accurate picture of conditions. The townspeople read of the removal of a few of the worst old buildings but forgot about the ones which remained while new tenements no better than the old were being constructed to house the steadily growing population.<sup>47</sup>

The first public awakening came in 1908 when a visiting physician made a survey and compared the conditions in Holyoke with those of other American cities. Over thirty cities existed with a population of over 100,000, and of these only eleven of the cities had proportionately more tenements than Holyoke, with its 55,000 inhabitants.<sup>48</sup> The crowding in the poorer sections of the city was worse in 1910 than it had been in 1900; 11.9 persons per dwelling made Holyoke one of the worst cities in the country for housing, surpassed only by Hoboken and New York City.<sup>49</sup> In 1915, Holyoke's Ward Two still averaged 22.3 persons in each dwelling which was "unfit for human habitation." In 1910, eighty-six percent of the city's infant mortality occurred in Wards One, Two, and Four where housing was deplorable, and according to the Board of Health fifty percent of the cases of tuberculosis in 1912 were caused by unsanitary housing conditions.<sup>50</sup>

After 1910, citizens of Holyoke wanted action against these deplorable conditions and some demanded more careful sanitary inspection and improved building ordinances. The evils were attributed to a lack of proper

planning—streets were not wide enough, there was not ample land set aside for housing, and residential districts were not away from commercial ones. There were few building laws which specified lot size, height of the building, size of the rooms, and other factors which determine congestion.<sup>51</sup> Gradually, these laws were enacted and enforced, but public opinion in 1912 was still not strong enough to force upon the city ordinances which would result in the elimination of unsanitary tenements.

The incorporation of the Holyoke Street Railway in 1884 relieved overcrowding in areas close to the mills by opening up new sections of the city to the lower classes who built small houses in the Highlands, and south and west of the manufacturing district, and in Willimansett after 1890 when the bridge was constructed.

The effects of inadequate and unsanitary housing on family life was ominous. The high rent was often the source of crime. Many tenants had to take in boarders in order to pay the rent; the boarders shared the family rooms which were already overcrowded; this had a debasing effect upon family life. The high rent made it necessary to restrict the purchase of fuel, food, clothing, and other necessities. According to some observers, housing was also related to intemperance; many men wasted their meager salaries on whiskey, thus depriving their families of the necessities of life. A writer for the *Holyoke Transcript* stated in 1873 that "Rum drinking is the chief cause of so much pauperism which is principally among the foreign part of the population. Grog shops seem to be plentiful enough where the poorest and most miserable man and woman can squander the last cent of their earnings, leaving their children to starve or be cared for by the town."<sup>52</sup>

Other effects on family life caused by improper housing were high sickness and mortality rates. Families were often decimated by epidemics which swept through towns and cities, making life sorrowful and miserable. "A callousness to suffering and misery was often produced by the frequent visits of the doctor, the many deaths, and the daily funeral, especially of the young. These are disheartening influences before the sight of those whose turn many not be so far off."<sup>53</sup>

Tenements were often so crowded that daily quarrels, fights, and brawls were common. The effect of the crowded conditions on an anonymous family was described by members of the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics:

A common pump and a common cesspool for a dozen families... . A little girl goes to fetch water, or throw away slops. A stout girl thrusts her aside. The mother of the little one flies to the rescue, and the mother of the big one rushes to the defense. The fathers speed out to do battle for

their loved ones, and directly war sounding its dead alarm with furious heal, the friends of the several champions take sides in a mired scrimmage, and, and free fight of fisticuffs—water, and slops all forgotten in the general hurly-burly..., then steps in the constable, then the lawyer, then comes prosecutions for assault and battery, and then fines and jails as recompense for broken bones and cracked skulls.<sup>54</sup>

The Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 1871:

Now the barrack system of tenement houses, wherein families are packed like sardines in a drum has an additional objection in the loss of all individuality and all that sense of home, its sheltering, and its attendant virtues. Habits of neatness, cleanliness, and sobriety, are not likely to be improved by hourly contamination by the unclean, the untidy, and the unsober. Among families thus packed together, there will not fail to be sickness, with unwanted frequency, drunkenness, licentiousness, moral turpitude of the darkest strain, with unyielding despair, the bad infest and putrify the good, and you then have a whole colony deadened by despondency, and rushing into drunkenness and debauchery to rid itself of gloomy forebodings, thus risking the horrors of despair. All motives and all ambition dead, gazing with callous eye and soul upon disheartening surroundings, careless and unmoved at consequences. They gradually... sink down and are absorbed into the ranks of pauperism, and thence into those of crime."<sup>55</sup>

Tenement life also had its effects on women who often worked in factories to help support the family. Housekeeping was boring and useless in such surroundings and consisted of "beating carpets, crashing crockery, losing temper, and catching cold all in the same breath." Many mothers were described as weary and worn out, shop poisoned, and dying for lack of outdoor air.

Holyoke was planned as an industrial community, a community motivated by profit and spoiled by absentee manufacturers. Like other towns of its day, it was flooded with job-seeking immigrants. Housing in Holyoke was entirely inadequate and in many cases unhealthy and repulsive. One must conclude that the crowded tenements were for the manufacturers and investors the most economical way to house a work force which was underpaid, exploited, and unable to bring about change.

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