

Form No. 10-300 (Rev. 10-74)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

FIRST HOUSES

AND/OR COMMON

**2 LOCATION**

112-114, 118-120, 124-126, 130-132, 136-138 E. 3rd St.,  
STREET & NUMBER 21, 31, 33-35, 37, 39, 44 Avenue A

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

CITY, TOWN

New York

VICINITY OF

17

STATE

New York

CODE

036

COUNTY

New York

CODE

061

**3 CLASSIFICATION****CATEGORY**

\_\_DISTRICT  
☒ BUILDING(S)  
\_\_STRUCTURE  
\_\_SITE  
\_\_OBJECT

**OWNERSHIP**

☒ PUBLIC  
\_\_PRIVATE  
\_\_BOTH

**PUBLIC ACQUISITION**

\_\_IN PROCESS  
\_\_BEING CONSIDERED

**STATUS**

☒ OCCUPIED  
\_\_UNOCCUPIED  
\_\_WORK IN PROGRESS  
**ACCESSIBLE**  
\_\_YES: RESTRICTED  
☒ YES: UNRESTRICTED  
\_\_NO

**PRESENT USE**

\_\_AGRICULTURE \_\_MUSEUM  
\_\_COMMERCIAL \_\_PARK  
\_\_EDUCATIONAL ☒ PRIVATE RESIDENCE  
\_\_ENTERTAINMENT \_\_RELIGIOUS  
\_\_GOVERNMENT \_\_SCIENTIFIC  
\_\_INDUSTRIAL \_\_TRANSPORTATION  
\_\_MILITARY \_\_OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

New York City Housing Authority

STREET &amp; NUMBER

250 Broadway

CITY, TOWN

New York

VICINITY OF

STATE

New York

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

New York County Register's Office

STREET &amp; NUMBER

31 Chambers Street

CITY, TOWN

New York

STATE

New York

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

Landmarks Preservation Commission

LP-0876

DATE

November, 1974

\_\_FEDERAL \_\_STATE \_\_COUNTY ☒ LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Landmarks Preservation Commission 305 Broadway

CITY, TOWN

New York

New York

STATE

**7 DESCRIPTION****7 DESCRIPTION****CONDITION**☐ EXCELLENT☒ GOOD☐ FAIR☐ DETERIORATED☐ RUINS☐ UNEXPOSED**CHECK ONE**☐ UNALTERED☒ ALTERED**CHECK ONE**☒ ORIGINAL SITE☐ MOVED DATE \_\_\_\_\_**DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE**

The First Houses municipal housing project, on the lower east side of Manhattan, consists of eight brick buildings laid out in an L-shaped plan around an inner landscaped courtyard. The three buildings facing Avenue A are four stories high, while the five units on Third Street are five-story buildings separated by open access courts. Entrance to the buildings is gained through the access courts rather than from the streets.

The houses are solidly constructed of red brick and the windows originally had six-over-six sash. The windows, changed in 1974 to allow air conditioning units to be added, retain the effect of six-over-six sash. The chief ornament on the street fronts of the seven wide double units consists of three raised brick courses above the two top corner windows of each building, halfway between the top of the windows and the coping of the roof parapet. In addition, four small, square, recessed panels appear above the top four center windows. At 29 Avenue A, the same decoration is adapted to the narrower building. This ornament is a simplification of the angular, stylized motifs of the Art Deco period.

In the paved courtyard, the scene is enlivened by free-standing and applied animal sculpture, designed by artists associated with the Federal Artists Program, which has delisted several generations of children. A large dolphin dominates the rectangular area behind No. 130-132 East Third Street. Smaller scaled horses here reappear at two corners of the pool area, behind No. 136-138, in addition to a bear and a dog, all rather worn from use. The one-story parapet wall, which separates the yard from the Second Street side of the block, is charmingly decorated with round concrete molds set into the brick, depicting eight varieties of animals and birds which are repeated: seagull, gazelle, turkey, rabbit, pigeon, goat, fox and cat--all contributing, with the wall itself, to the feeling of apartness from the life of the city.

First Houses was a small project, originally planned for 120 to 122 families. All apartments had steam heat and hot water, and were equipped with the modern amenities usual in middle-class housing. A typical floor plan, which remains the same today, consisted of four apartments per floor, opening off a common stair hall.

Standard apartments still consist today of three rooms, i.e., living room, bedroom and kitchen, plus a bathroom. There are three two-room apartments, seven of four rooms, and one five-room apartment. Today, because of the conversion of the former nursery and of the synagogue, there are 126 apartments. Room sizes are quite adequate, with living rooms averaging 12 ft. X 15 ft. (some are 12 ft. X 18 ft.) and bedrooms 11 ft. X 12 ft. Kitchens are generally large enough to serve as dinettes, and each was originally equipped with such items as an electric refrigerator, high-oven four-burner stove and overhead laundry dryer. There were no windowless rooms: bathrooms and kitchens have one window; other rooms have two and some corner apartments even have three, providing cross-ventilation. A community laundry room, with electric washing machine, was provided for each of the eight units, as were incinerators, now replaced by compactors. There were a nursery and a synagogue originally, a community meeting room and a unit of the City's Public Health Service on the premises.

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CONTINUATION SHEET FIRST HOUSES ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 2

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In 1966, chess tables and flower tubs were installed in the courtyard behind Nos. 29, 31 and 33 Avenue A by the City's Mobilization for Youth. At present there are still eight stores at street level which provide a variety of services for the project and the neighborhood. The coffee shop at 37 Avenue A was always a restaurant, but the other stores have replaced the original businesses.

**8 SIGNIFICANCE****8 SIGNIFICANCE**

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 2-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1935-36

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Frederick L. Ackerman

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

First Houses is both historically and architecturally significant as the first public, low-income housing project in the nation! It was the first project undertaken by the newly established New York City Housing Authority, and was the first municipally sponsored and operated project which endeavored to deal with housing problems of the Lower East Side. It was unusual in that it began as an experimental program in partial demolition and rehabilitation of existing tenements on the site. Financed in part by the issuance of Housing Authority bonds, labor and materials were furnished under the "work-relief" program of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. In addition, a lawsuit resulting from condemnation by the Authority of two tenements on the site established the power of eminent domain of a city housing agency. The low height of the buildings lend a human scale to the project and encourage a feeling of neighborliness, while the landscaped courtyard, a modification of the garden apartment concept, provides an oasis for residents of the project. First Houses continues to serve the needs of its present tenants, and is a significant example of the experimental approach of the period of the New Deal.

First Houses, a municipal housing project, was begun early in 1935 and completed in mid-1936. Approval for the project was granted by Mayor LaGuardia on November 21, 1934. It began as a rehabilitation program, an experiment by the City in partial demolition of existing tenements on the site, in cooperation with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in a "work-relief" program.

First Houses was also significant as the first municipally sponsored and operated project which endeavored to deal with the acute and long-standing problems of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the area of the greatest concentration of slums in the City. It was originally planned for 122 families, with an average monthly rental of \$6.05 per room, which included all basic amenities. Eligibility was determined in part by a family income of no more than five times the rent. The only other existing project on the Lower East Side was Knickerbocker Village, a twelve-story, two-building model housing project for middle-income tenants erected by the Fred F. French Company and financed by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). The average rent of \$12.50 per room was far too high, in the middle of the Depression, for low-income residents of the neighborhood.

First Houses was a bold innovation in planning which began as an experiment in partial demolition of existing tenements on the site. It was originally planned to raze every third house, in order to open up the block to air and light, and then to

1. The text of this report was taken almost in its entirety from the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission Designation Report, First Houses (LP-0867), November, 1974, by Ellen Kramer.

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remodel the remaining houses. This practice had been successful in England and had been recommended in 1920 by Clarence Stein, Chairman of Governor Smith's Reconstruction Committee, as a practical and economical way to deal with urban renewal on the Lower East Side. Furthermore, in order to comply with the terms of Federal financing, First Houses had to be a slum renovation project. Demolition of the existing tenements on the site began on March 1, 1935, in accordance with plans submitted to the City's Department of Buildings on February 11. As work proceeded, it became apparent that the mid-19th century buildings left standing, structurally deficient from the outset, were dangerously weakened by the removal of the adjoining tenements. As a result, five of the present buildings were entirely rebuilt from the ground up, and the remaining three were almost entirely new throughout, reinforced by structural steel for center support of all spans and for main staircases. New twenty-year roofs were installed, walls were made soundproof, and doors were fireproofed. The reuse of bricks from demolished buildings on this and other sites provided a saving in construction costs and was a source of income for the Authority for several years.

The New York City Housing Authority was established on February 20, 1934, following the enactment of Chapter 4 of the Laws of 1934 of the State of New York. Among its provisions, this law made it possible for the new agency to apply for Federal aid. This enabling legislation, the Mandelbaum bill -- which authorized the creation of local housing authorities throughout New York State, with power to issue their own bonds--passed both houses of the State Legislature late in January 1934, after having suffered two defeats the previous year. It was immediately signed into law on January 31 by Governor Lehman. Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia appointed Langdon W. Post, the former Tenement House Commissioner, to the post of chairman of the new agency. The first members of the Housing Authority were Louis I. Pink, B. Charney Vladeck, the Rev. E. Roberts Moore and Mrs. Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, all long-time advocates of housing reform and slum clearance.

Most of the old tenements on the site of First Houses were acquired from Vincent Astor and, indeed, the undertaking was known until shortly before its dedication as "the Astor project" or as the Housing Authority's "Experiment No. 1." In March 1934, immediately after the establishment of the Authority, Mr. Astor offered Commissioner Post thirty-eight parcels on the Lower East Side, which were earning less than 3% on investment, at substantially less than their assessed valuation. Vincent Astor, who had inherited the properties from his grandfather, John Jacob Astor, expressed his "...desire to do anything within reason to help clear these slums..." Underscoring the fact that private capital was unable to cope with such a vast problem, he urged other property owners to cooperate with Federal and municipal authorities in their new slum clearance program. On December 20, 1934 the New York City Housing Authority, having the approval

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of the Board of Estimate, acquired the property from Mr. Astor for \$189,281.31, a figure which represented less than half the assessed valuation. The purchase was made possible by the issuance of a tax-free, sixty-six year purchase money mortgage, to be paid up by the year 2000 at 1-3/4% interest for the first six months and 3-1/2% per annum thereafter. This Housing Authority bond established the credit of the New York City Housing Authority.

Labor and materials for the demolition of the old tenements, and for subsequent reconstruction, were furnished under the "work-relief" program of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) through the State Temporary Emergency Relief Administration. The use of the labor forces of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) was an experiment by the Authority. It raised serious friction between union labor and the relief workers and was the prime cause of a turbulent demonstration of 1500 people at the "Astor project" on September 13, 1935.

Two tenements at 130 and 132 East Third Street, separating the Astor properties, belonged to Andrew Muller who not only refused to sell at the price offered, but sought an injunction restraining the Authority from proceeding with demolition of the adjoining properties and challenged the constitutionality of condemnation proceedings initiated by the Authority in March 1935. A year later, on March 17, 1936, the New York State Court of Appeals handed down a major decision in the case of NYCHA vs. Muller which confirmed the right of condemnation. It was adjudged that the use of the power of eminent domain by the City was for the public benefit, namely the remedy of slum conditions which were beyond the scope of private enterprise. This building, on the site of the two Muller tenements, was financed by a Housing Authority Bond accepted by financier Bernard S. Baruch. The building was ready for the last initial group of tenants in mid-June 1936, six months after the first tenants had moved into First Houses.

The dedication of First Houses, originally set for October 1, 1935 but delayed by the changes in plans, legal problems and labor troubles, took place on December 3, 1935. The proceedings were broadcast on a national radio hookup. First came the reading of the congratulatory telegram from President Franklin D. Roosevelt, under whose leadership the Public Works Emergency Housing Corporation had been established in October 1933 and the National Housing Act passed in mid-1934. This was followed by the dedication of First Houses by Mrs. Roosevelt. Among other speakers were Governor Lehman, Mayor LaGuardia, Housing Commissioner Post, Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, Corrington Gill, Assistant WPA Administrator, and Victor Ridder, Administrator of the WPA in the City.

Following the dedication of First Houses, an "Abolish the Slums" luncheon was held,

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sponsored by the National Public Housing Conference. The role of the NPHC cannot be overemphasized. Since its first meeting in March 1932, under the leadership of Mary K. Simkhovitch, the well-known social worker and former director of Greenwich House, the group had urged a full program for public housing, including the creation of a municipal housing agency with enabling legislation and powers similar to the Port Authority. Among the speakers at the luncheon, presided over by Herbert Bayard Swope, were Mrs. Roosevelt, Senator Robert F. Wagner and A. R. Clas, Director of the Housing Division of the WPA, in addition to others previously mentioned.

On July 2, 1936, First Houses was formally turned over to the City. Victor Ridder, the local WPA Administrator, presented the key to the project to Housing Commissioner Post. Harry Hopkins, who had come from Washington for the occasion, spoke in defense of the project, as did Mayor LaGuardia. The Mayor unveiled a tablet describing First Houses, which is still affixed to the building at 112-114 East Third Street. It proudly proclaims: "These Houses Were Erected by the New York City Housing Authority as an Initial Step in the Program for Slum Clearance and Low-Cost Housing."

The First Houses project originally comprised a total area of 1.37 acres (now 1.23)† land coverage was deliberately limited to 41.6% (now 43.4%). This allowed for air and sunshine for each apartment and for an outdoor seating area for the residents.

The plan was generally consistent with the guidelines set by Federal agencies of the time, notably the Federal Emergency Housing Administration, with regard to the following: residential zoning; neighborhood location, which emphasized a site on a quiet street, provision of a landscaped play area, access to schools, churches, stores, entertainment and transportation to places of employment; and orientation to the sun and wind--all cited in a special issue on "Housing" in the March 1935 issue of the Architectural Record. These standards applied to new construction, but the degree to which they were applied to an alteration of existing tenements on the site showed ingenuity and imagination on the part of the architect in charge of the planning and development of First Houses, Frederick L. Ackerman. Plans and specifications, signed by both the architect and Commissioner Langdon W. Post, were filed at the Buildings Department in two stages: on February 11, 1935, with reference to Nos. 106-128 East Third Street, a portion of which is now part of Village View Houses; and on July 30, 1935, which applied to the buildings on Third Street toward Avenue A and to Nos. 29-41 Avenue A.

Frederick L. Ackerman (1878-1950) was a well-known architect and city planner,

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a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and a member of the American Institute of Planners. His 1917 study of housing and planning in England and his service as Chief of the Division of Housing and Town Planning for the U. S. Shipping Board made him especially valuable to the housing and planning movement in this country during the 1920s and still more in the thirties. Among the best known community planning and low-income housing projects on which he worked, in close association with Clarence Stein, were Radburn, N. J., and Sunnyside Gardens in Queens. Ackerman also drew up the specifications for the competition sponsored by the City Housing Authority in June 1934 for which 277 designs were submitted. In his memorial tribute to Ackerman, published in the A.I.A. Journal in December 1950, Lewis Mumford, the distinguished social critic, identified him as a follower of Thorsten Veblen, "...ready to practice economy and avoid the frivolities of conspicuous waste.... He dreamed of a society free from privilege and of rights conferred by property... of a civilization where people would work cooperatively with honesty and integrity..." Ackerman's work at First Houses, and his other projects for various housing authorities during the 1930s, notably in Washington, D. C., New York State and New York City, enabled him to put his theories into practice.

First Houses was repeatedly attacked as "a boondoggle" and "a million dollar extravaganza." While the cost of necessary new construction had roughly tripled the original estimate of \$350,000 which had been figured on the basis of demolition and renovation only, the achievement of the project was summarized by James Ford in his authoritative study, Slums and Housing (1936), in these words: "...though definitely not a solution of the problems of public housing, First Houses may be recorded as one of the more significant experiments worthy of the effort and cost involved." First Houses should be understood as an integral part of the period of the Depression and the New Deal, and of the mood of a people determined to alleviate the suffering of that one-third of a nation which Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his Second Inaugural Address, described as "ill-housed, ill-clad, (and) ill-nourished."



**9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES****9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

See continuation sheet

**10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 1.23 acres

UTM REFERENCES

A	1, 8	5, 8, 5, 6, 4, 0	4, 5, 0, 8, 3, 8	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 430, Lot 10

See attached map

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

**11 FORM PREPARED BY** Virginia Kurshan, Research ConsultantNAME/TITLE Contact: Elizabeth Spencer-Ralph, Div. for Historic Preservation  
For Joan R. Olshansky, National Register Coordinator 518-474-0479

ORGANIZATION

Landmarks Preservation Commission

DATE

July, 1979

STREET &amp; NUMBER

305 Broadway

TELEPHONE

566-7577

CITY OR TOWN

New York

STATE

New York

**12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION**

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL X

STATE \_\_\_\_\_

LOCAL \_\_\_\_\_

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

TITLE Director, Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau

DATE

10/12/79

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

DATE

EST:

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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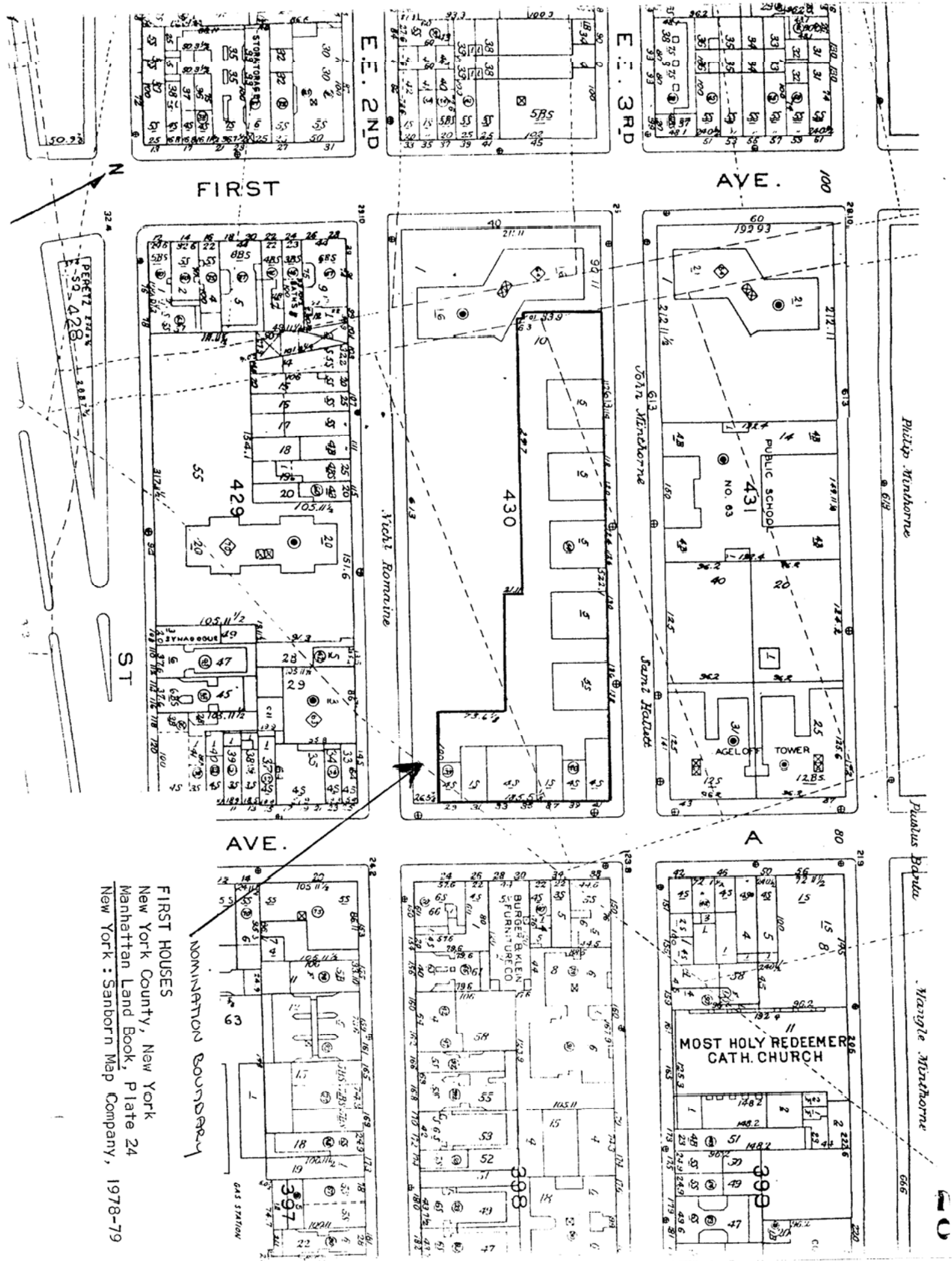
A more complete bibliography may be found in the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission research file: First Houses.

"Decision of the New York State Court of Appeals," The Architectural Forum, Vol. 64 (April, 1936), 142.

Mumford, Lewis. "Frederick Lee Ackerman, F.A.I.A., 1878-1950," Journal of the American Institute of Architects, XIV (December, 1950), 249-254.

"\$6.05 Per Room in Manhattan," The Architectural Forum, Vol. 64 (January, 1936), 67-68.

Strickland, Roy & Sanders, James. "The First Houses - Where It All Began," The Livable City, No. 5/1 (March, 1978), 4-5.



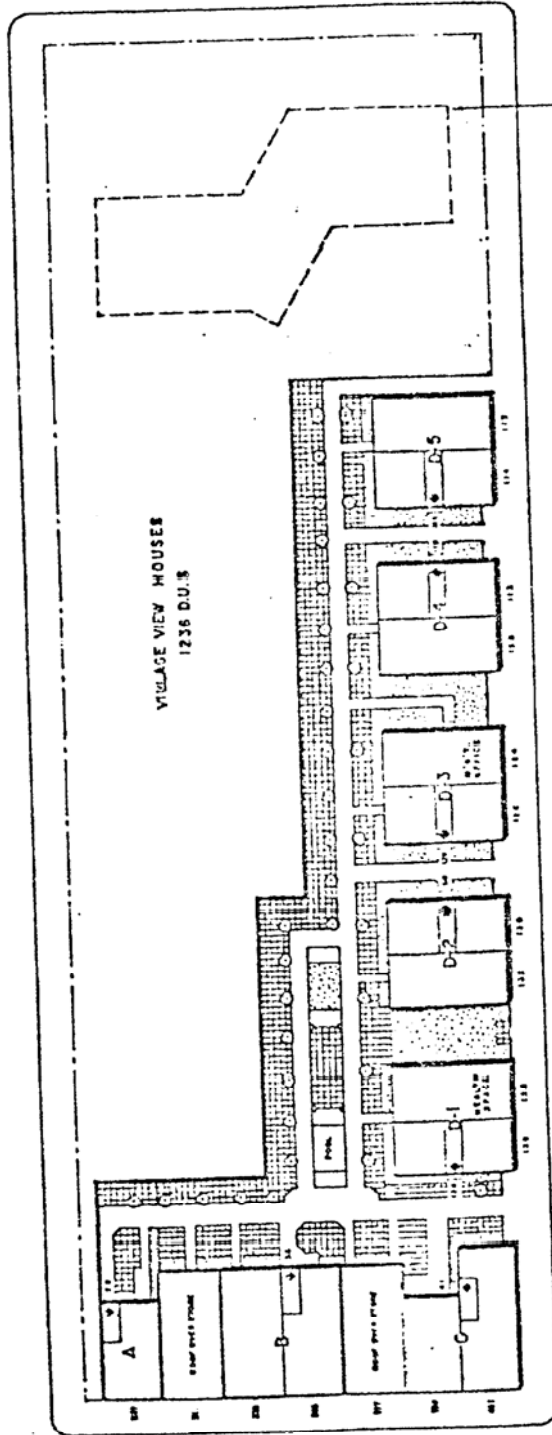
FIRST HOUSES  
New York County, New York  
Manhattan Land Book, Plate 24  
New York : Sanborn Map Company, 1978-79

First Houses  
New York  
New York County

23 1974974

Landmarks Preservation  
Commission

EAST SECOND STREET



VILLAGE VIEW HOUSES  
1236 D.U.'S

AVENUE

FIRST HOUSES  
MANHATTAN  
(CITY)

EAST THIRD STREET

VILLAGE VIEW  
HOUSES

SCALE IN FEET

BUILDINGS A, B, AND C ARE FOUR STORIES  
BUILDINGS D-1, D-2, D-3, D-4 AND D-5 ARE FIVE STORIES

- A. TOTAL AREA --- 53,349 SQ. FT. (123 ACRES)
- B. NET HOUSING AREA --- 53,349 SQ. FT. (123 ACRES)
- C. AREA COVERED BY DWELLING BLDGS. --- 21,334 SQ. FT. (492 ACRES)
- D. AREA COVERED BY NON-DWELLING BLDGS. (STORES) --- 3,206 SQ. FT.
- E. COVERAGE (C+D+A) --- 414 %
- F. DESIGN DENSITY (PERSONS PER ACRE) --- 216
- G. NO. OF DWELLING BUILDINGS --- 2
- H. NO. OF STORES --- 173
- I. FLOOR AREA RATIO (AS PER M.C.H.A.) --- 208
- J. FLOOR AREA RATIO (AS PER ZONING) --- 208

PERSONS PER APARTMENT	2	3	4	5	TOTAL
ROOMS PER APARTMENT	2	3	4	5	
NUMBER OF APARTMENTS	3	115	7	1	126
NUMBER OF CONST. ROOMS	6	345	28	5	384
% TYPE APTS.	2.4	91.3	8.3	0.9	100 %

KEY PLAN

NEW YORK CITY HOUSING AUTHORITY

(W. F.  
61651 SE  
(WEEHAWKEN)

UNITED STATES  
UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY



First Houses  
New York, New York County  
UTM Reference:  
18/ 58564 / 450838

Brooklyn Quay

Glendale Fire Sch