

## Immigrant Evictions

Evictions in the Lower East Side were rampant in the beginning of the twentieth century. Fierce rent wars waged between tenants and landlords, who kept increasing the prices of rent. Most immigrants were poor and worked menial labor jobs to support their family, usually in the garment industry on the Lower East Side. With rent averaging between 10 and 20 dollars per month and wages as little as 50 cents per day, many immigrants could not make the rent payments and still afford to put food on the table. Additionally, many immigrants were trying to save money to send to loved ones back home in Europe or to purchase steamship tickets for them to travel to America.

It was common to provide renters with two weeks' free rent, which for many poor families meant moving regularly. A Jewish immigrant, Samuel Green, reported that as a child when coming home from school, "I could never be sure if we'd still be living at the same address." Immigrant Martha Dolinko echoed Green's sentiment recalling, "I used to come home from school or work, sometimes I didn't know where we lived. The neighbors had to tell me."

The **Tenement House Act of 1901** required landlords to upgrade their tenements to include lighted hallways and indoor plumbing. These changes proved costly, so to compensate, tenants' rent was increased. Landlords and tenement builders alike were particularly merciless in their approach to tenants. They sought to maximize their profit at the expense of the welfare of the tenants. Builders

constructed tenements cheaply on densely packed on plots of land, while many landlords insisted on collecting rent in advance, with failure to do so resulting in eviction. Perhaps what made the situation even more shameless was that many landlords were older immigrants preying on the newer immigrants.

Newspapers of the day were packed full of eviction stories. The *New York Times* headline of April 5, 1904 read, "Many evictions on East Side Threatened." The article states that, "Nearly 800 evictions are impending on the east side because of the advance in rents." The following day, the *New York Times* headline read "Two Thousand Warrants for East Side Tenants." The article states, "It required no extraordinary power of perception to see that the indignation aroused by the evictions following the wholesale raising of rents on the lower east side of this

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*New York Times*, 1904 Apr 05

city yesterday was at a high pitch. The City Marshalls were busy all day serving dispossess papers, and they say that never in their career have they been called on to undertake so stupendous a task as at present." Again on the next day, April 7, the *New York Times* ran an article that illustrated the magnitude of the evictions affirming, "Last year there were over 60,000 evictions in this city and you may judge for yourselves how many evictions there will be during the coming twelve months."

Everett Shinn was responding to these rent wars and immigrant life when he created *Eviction* in that same year in 1904. The artist empathized with the evicted immigrants he observed on the Lower East Side, writing in the accompanying note to this drawing, "The Eviction on Hester Street: This, I saw and felt. I was then two months in arrears with my own rent. I saw the cop as he might be serving me, sunk in a clutter of canvases waiting to be flushed along to the city dump." Shinn had planned to publish a book of these drawings illustrating the plight of the immigrant poor on the Lower East Side, but the publication never came to fruition.

## **Glossary**

**Tenement House Act of 1901:** a New York State Progressive Era law which outlawed the construction of the dumbbell-shaped style tenement housing and set minimum size requirements for tenement housing. It also mandated the installation of lighting, better ventilation, and indoor bathrooms.