

# How the Housing Problem Has Been Solved in An American City

By Dr. W. J. DONALD, Secretary Niagara Falls (N. Y.)  
Chamber of Commerce.

Dr Donald who is no stranger to our readers as more than one article from his pen have appeared in these columns, was until recently Professor of Economics in McMaster University, Toronto, and the following article is written for the benefit of those Canadian communities that have yet to solve their housing problems.

American and Canadian cities might well be classified as follows:

- a. Cities so dead that they have no housing problem.
- b. Cities so dead that they don't know that they have a housing problem.
- c. Cities that are doing nothing to solve the problem of which they are aware.
- d. Cities that are pinning their faith on one plan of solution.
- e. Cities that are studying the question and experimenting with more than one plan.

It is in the latter class that Niagara Falls belongs. Already two hundred and five Government houses have been constructed and are actually occupied, and a half million dollar mortgage corporation has been established and a housing survey carefully prepared.

## The Decade Old Problem.

The Wartime housing shortage gave more than one community its first insight into the relation of housing to labor supply, labor turnover and industrial progress generally. The housing question began to be recognized as an economic as well as social question and shortly the energies and funds of manufacturers could be enlisted on the side of better housing.

For years Niagara Falls had been aware of the unsatisfactory condition of affairs on the East Side, especially in a small section called "Tunneltown." To her citizens housing was a moral and social problem and its industrial significance was not apparent. There was always more or less congestion ever since the beginning of modern electrical power development in the early nineties but to Niagarans it seemed merely a comfortable evidence of prosperity. People know that something should be done, but somehow they knew that it was better to do nothing than to increase congestion by merely tearing down undesirable buildings. Evidently it is not enough to control the housing situation negatively by setting minimum health standards. It seemed more important to deal with the problem constructively. A housing there had been however for two of three decades. The war merely stressed the issue and gave the impulse to action.

## Thorough Study First.

When housing became an industrial problem it began to receive serious analytical attention. Niagara Falls is full of engineers, civil, electrical, mechanical and chemical. To engineers nothing would appear more natural than a "survey." The idea belongs to their profession—they live by it. The manufacturing chemists are too analytical and their experience too great to try experiments without first making a careful study of the question. They are not in the habit of putting chemicals into retorts just to see what will happen. Being manufacturing chemists they usually have some definite aim to achieve. Similarly they didn't decide to put dollars into houses until they knew what was needed. During the summer and autumn of 1917 a survey of the actual situation in Niagara Falls was conducted under the direction of the Niagara Falls Housing Committee. The survey proved that there was a shortage of about 2000 houses—enough to take care of about 10,000 people. Plans were laid for a housing corporation capable of building houses for rent and sale. The first plan was to build houses in three groups in sections of the city nearest to the industries.

## Government Housing.

Early in 1918 it began to appear, however, that the Federal Government would adopt a war time housing policy. The manufacturers of Niagara Falls were among the anxious but ready waiters. A corporation had already been formed and nearly \$100,000 was tentatively subscribed. The manufacturers who had been ready to make progress alone were soon ready to go into partnership, with the Government. The Government too was favorable and final arrangements had almost been completed when suddenly the Housing Bureau decided that it would have no

partners. This was disappointing to Niagara Falls especially as it seemed that the key industries of Niagara Falls would not be considered. Persistent and courageous effort on the part of the Chamber of Commerce, organized during April of 1918, brought the project through to completion and two hundred and five Government houses were added to the industrial equipment of the growing city.

## Adjusting Local Difficulties.

The process of carrying through the project was not without the difficulties. Once the Government had decided to spend its \$100,000,000 appropriation itself, the Housing Bureau was under the necessity of curtailing its operations and the project for Niagara Falls was again placed on a defensive.

Effective presentation of the claims of Niagara Falls became an art during the summer and autumn months of 1918. Detailed and technical statements of the actual situation and of the basic importance of Niagara Falls industries were prepared for the use of the Chamber of Commerce and its war work committees. That the arguments used were valid was proven by the fact that the U. S. Housing Corporation decided on a project of 400 houses for Niagara Falls. Too much cannot be said in favor of the men who gave their time, energy and money to the proper and effective presentation of the facts in favor of Government Houses for this war pressed city.

## Local Opposition Eliminated.

Even during the war there was local opposition to the Government program. It came particularly from certain local architects, contractors and supply houses. Of course houses were not being built otherwise owing to the war time costs and the uncertainty of the situation, but it was difficult to convince business interests that such was the case and those which had bid on the housing contract felt particularly bitter on the issue of "local work for home people."

On two occasions this local opposition assumed such serious proportions and reached the ears of Washington so effectively that cancellation of the project seemed certain. Hurriedly called conferences of all elements and groups soon ironed out the difficulty and the whole city was lined up behind the project. The readiness of the opposition to support the project when they had learned the facts and the serious relation of the housing situation to labor shortage and consequently to the prosecution of the war, excited the admiration of many and merited the commendation of all. For once at least all of Niagara Falls seemed united in favor of a such needed project.

## Local Cooperation Given.

Just before the signing of the Armistice the project was in jeopardy again owing to the lack of labor. Another conference of manufacturers analysed the difficulty and found the solution. The contractor had utterly failed to provide facilities for his labor. This became an acute question when autumn rains made the work very unattractive. A committee of manufacturers practically took charge of and reorganized the contractors employment department, provided the men with necessary equipment and called for volunteers throughout the plants. Men who had never been known to cooperate in anything before gained a new experience and the city demonstrated a new capacity for cooperation.

## After the Armistice.

Indeed it was this cooperation afforded by the manufacturers which largely helped the project to weather the next storm. When the armistice was signed only one of the three parts of the housing project had been begun and it was less than seventy-five per cent complete. Congress soon began to attack the plans to continue the projects under way and many of them were abandoned in their early stages. Local opposition in Niagara Falls almost prevented the completion of that part of the housing project already started but the cooperation previously afforded encouraged the Housing Bureau to complete 205 houses

all of which are now occupied to the satisfaction of the tenants.

## The Dwellings.

The dwelling are of five different styles, so arranged as  
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