

The Riddle of Fourteenth Street

By SIDNEY J. ABELSON

Fourteenth Street is not the ideal route for a rubberneck tour of New York. Except for the subway kiosks and whatever a wayward glance north or south at avenue intersections might reveal in the way of skyscrapers, you would hardly recognize it as an important metropolitan thoroughfare.

True enough, you will find on it the headquarters of the Salvation Army—a sure sign, of course, that big town poverty exists not too far away. One or two large buildings, a concentration of movie houses on one block and of sizable stores in another section, are also symbolical reminders; yet strangely, these concentrations have the flavor of a down-in-the-heel Main Street rather than the class of Gotham. Except for the living models parading in the second-floor window of a cloak house—a bit of "showmanship" that, I take it, could happen only in New York—Fourteenth Street is decidedly fourth or fifth or fourteenth rate. No, this is not the spot to show your out-of-town friends when they come to see the sights.

If, however, your visitor is a student of economic problems, he may not begrudge the experience of seeing how land speculation works—or, rather, how it prevents work—in the very heart of the world's most ambitious city. But seeing the effects would not be enough, for that would not necessarily prove the point. Fourteenth Street's untidiness, its uneven development, its lack of decent industrial, mercantile and residential improvement, despite the teeming tens of thousands who daily jam its sidewalks literally to overflowing—these observations do not show why such a thoroughfare athwart the flow of life in a great metropolis stands out as a relic of small town backwardness.

Fourteenth Street may be small-townish in appearance, but by no means is it anything less than a super-metropolis in transit facilities—one of the most favored measures of desirability in the mind of a New

The accompanying article is based upon research done by Mr. Daniel Goodman, instructor at the Henry George School of Social Science.

Yorker. The sons and daughters of Father Knickerbocker like to go places and do things—in a hurry. And Fourteenth Street, as much as any other section with the exception of the Times Square-Grand Central Station zone, offers them superb opportunities to come and go with a minimum expenditure of time and carfare.

This recital of transit facilities may bore the blasé Gothamite, but it will interest the socially conscious visitor; for his benefit let it be noted that the Fourth Avenue, the Seventh Avenue, the Eighth Avenue, and the Broadway subways all have express stops at Fourteenth Street. The Sixth Avenue line, nearing completion, will soon join this goodly company. Fourteenth Street also boasts a crosstown subway line which continues on to Brooklyn Borough via an East River Tube. Fourteenth Street further enjoys a direct rapid transit connection with Jersey City and Newark by means of the Hudson-Manhattan Railroad which parallels the Sixth Avenue tracks. Three elevated lines, the Second Avenue, the Third Avenue and the Ninth Avenue, complete this grand array of rapid, five cent* transportation means. Crosstown busses and north and south busses on every intersecting avenue fill out the facilities so that whoever wants to get to Fourteenth Street from anywhere can do so quickly and inexpensively.

According to the city assessor's office the land on Fourteenth Street, from the East River to the Hudson, is worth \$24,039,800.** This tidy sum betokens a high productive ca-

* The fare is five cents for a continuous trip of any length on all these lines except the Hudson and Manhattan.

** 1937 figures. All figures given in this article are as of 1937, the latest available for this research.

capacity, and one would conclude that only acts of God could prevent a group of sites so generously favored by transit facilities from being the scene of a determined effort to bring forth its maximum possibilities. But what are the facts? And wherein lies the explanation for them?

First of all, you could show your visitor one—just one—interesting statistic so dramatically significant to the trained mind as to call forth psychic gasps of astonishment. On \$24,039,800 worth of land there stands but \$3,914,800 worth of construction! Whole sections of Fourteenth Street are "improved" with ancient shanties, "taxpayers," "re-conditioned" buildings held up by seemingly death-defying rules of engineering, or left vacant altogether.

What acts of God have stunted Fourteenth Street? What calamities have nullified Father Knickerbocker's efforts to make this thoroughfare the site of a great establishment for the satisfaction of human desires? What happens to the values daily reestablished by the hordes of men and women who take advantage of Fourteenth Street's cheap and convenient transit facilities?

Fourteenth Street is a "low-priced" shopping center. It is the lure of bargains which draws to it these armies, in the hope that they can make meager earnings do a bigger job in the way of filling their needs. Custom has inured people to a false way of thinking; they confuse thrift with niggardliness, they mistake scrimping for saving. The story of Fourteenth Street is a striking example of how our customs prevent the possibility for real saving and force millions to resort to scrimping. Fourteenth Street, ironically enough, could be the site of a major production effort, for its "improvement" value is hardly more than one third of its land value, while in New York as a whole improvement and land valuations are about the same. Instead the Street is relegated to the function of a last resort for the underpaid, a final hope for those who

have little with which to shop for their needs and must make that little go far.

To explain this situation to your visiting friend you would have to consult the assessment records of New York. Among other things you would find that on Fourteenth Street the John Jacob Astor Estate owns two parcels of real estate assessed in total at \$340,000 for the land and \$120,000 for the improvements. Under our present tax system the Astors can well afford to keep title to this property indefinitely, for the tax load is no doubt well provided for by the income derived from the comparatively small improvement. How inadequate this improvement is, from the point of view of potential productivity of the site, is made plain enough by the fact that on this same block (adjoining the Astor property) the National Biscuit Company has a \$507,000 plant standing on a plot worth \$158,000.†

Now take your friend from the Biscuit factory between 9th and 10th Avenues to the Spingler-Van Buren Estate which occupies three whole blocks in the very heart of Fourteenth Street, from Union Square to Sixth Avenue. You will be well repaid for your three or four block journey—if you are looking for facts that show how speculative withholding of land from productive use thwarts economic progress, forces out the margin of production, depresses employment and wages and all but compels the abandonment of sites favored by nature and by society's restless activity.

These particular blocks included in the Spingler-Van Buren holdings are especially favored by New York's

† The National Biscuit Company also owns two adjoining plots valued at \$108,000 and \$158,000, having improvements assessed respectively at \$15,000 and \$77,000. If the National Biscuit Company's holdings are taken as a unit they total up to \$424,000 worth of land and \$599,000 worth of buildings, a proportion which is quite satisfactory in view of New York's general average. Why a \$507,000 improvement has to be crowded onto a \$158,000 site while another adjoining site of comparable value in possession of the same owner bears but a \$15,000 structure is a separate subject for investigation. The point worth noting here is that on the whole, the Biscuit Company is using its land holdings productively and thus bears a fair share of the city's budget burden.

great rapid transit system. They lie at or within a stone's throw of the convergence of three subway lines, adjoin a fourth, are but a block or two away from a fifth and two or three blocks away from a sixth. Yet the Spingler-Van Buren properties are among the least developed of all on Fourteenth Street—and Fourteenth Street itself represents one of the lowest points of development in the city!

One parcel of land in this group is valued at \$280,000—and bears on it not one penny's worth of improvement. A \$170,000 plot has on it a structure valued at \$15,000. A \$40,000 plot is "improved" to the extent of \$2,500. A \$230,000 site supports a \$40,000 building. The total land holdings of the Estate (on Fourteenth Street) add up to \$3,894,500; the total improvements, to \$799,000.

The New York City general average of improvement value to land value is about 1 to 1.

The Fourteenth Street general average of improvement value to land value is 1 to 3.

The Spingler-Van Buren ratio of improvement value to land value (on Fourteenth Street) is 1 to 5!

Our system of speculative land holding has served to choke progress, first on the Spingler-Van Buren acres; then, since these are at the very heart of Fourteenth Street, on the Street as a whole; and finally, it has had its deadening effect on the entire city.

But since unproductive city people are poor customers for farm products, the farmer too is going to feel the effect of this system which permits the Astors, the Spinglers and Van Burens to withhold land from use at the pleasure or convenience of their checkbooks. And so a vicious cycle is established, a cycle which begins anywhere that land is being held out of full production and ends on the same spot, encircling in its course, as in a ring of steel, a thousand evil effects on the social body.

Your visitor has now had a first hand view of the Riddle of Fourteenth Street—which is also the Riddle of the Whole Economic World. But he has had the Riddle solved for him, not merely in logic but in

startling, unanswerable fact.

Should your visitor continue on his way, seeking to vary a vacation journey with changing scenes, ferreting out the unknown or unfamiliar, the bizarre, the strange and the sensational, he may speed on to the far north or the far south, the east, the near east or the Levant, he may view a hundred different peoples and as many markedly different ways of life—but wherever he should stop to investigate the reason for poverty existing amidst plenty or amidst plentiful resources there would rise up before him this same Riddle of Fourteenth Street. Fortunately, the Secret has been penetrated. The Riddle has been solved. No marmoreal, Sphinx-like silence need entomb the Answer. George stated it forthrightly: "Make land common property."