

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

1. Name of Property

historic name John W. Jones Court

other names/site number Elmira Housing Project 17B

2. Location

street & number 603-657 Dickinson Street

N/A

 not for publication

city or town Elmira

N/A

 vicinity

state New York code NY county Chemung code 015 zip code 14901

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

national statewide local

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official Date

Title State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register determined eligible for the National Register

determined not eligible for the National Register removed from the National Register

other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Category of Property
(Check only **one** box.)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	private
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Federal

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

VACANT

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT

foundation: CONCRETE
walls: BRICK

roof: EPDM
other: _____

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Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

The John W. Jones Court is a large, mid-twentieth century former public housing apartment building occupying an entire city block. The long rectangular building consists of a central three-story section that extends the length of the site and nine rectangular pavilions that branch to the north and south at regular intervals. The building is three stories tall, of brick and concrete construction, with a flat roof. Essentially, the building is a long central core running north to south with alternating three-story projecting sections on both sides. Five of these projecting sections are on the west and four are on the east. Although each unit is independent, a full basement runs the length of the building, connecting all sections. Common areas were located in the basement, which was the only level that provided access between sections.

The building is situated in the east central section of Elmira, New York, two blocks north of the downtown business district in what was formerly Elmira's historic African-American neighborhood known as Slabtown. Built in 1950-1952 under the auspices of the Elmira Housing Authority, Jones Court was the second large-scale housing project constructed to alleviate a housing shortage and replace what was determined as substandard housing stock. The project was designed by the Elmira architectural firm of Haskell, Considine and Haskell, with site planning and landscape design by Buffalo landscape architect William E. Harries. The local firm of Streeter & Associates served as the general contractor.

In 1999, the building was closed as a public housing complex and has been vacant since 2003. In spite of neglect and some deterioration, the building has maintained a high degree of integrity, especially on the exterior. Interior divisions of apartments, common spaces, stairwells are still extant. The John W. Jones Court building is the only building on the site, which also contains large lawns, paved parking and some paved walkways that were part of the original landscaping plan.

Narrative Description

Overview and Setting

Occupying an entire city block, the John W. Jones Court apartment building is located in the northeast section of the city of Elmira, Chemung County, New York. The north side of the city was historically divided east and west by large railroad yards and the Chemung Canal. This area is now occupied by some small industries and a four-lane road that is part of State Route 14. The area immediately to the east was historically the location

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for small industries and Slabtown, a largely African American neighborhood of residences, churches and at least one school. Construction of the apartment complex required in the removal of numerous residences and two churches between Baldwin and Dickinson Streets and extended from East Clinton Street nearly to East Fifth Street, resulting in the eventual decline of the Slabtown neighborhood.

The building is centered in a parallelogram-shaped lot that derived its configuration from Lake Street, the east boundary of Slabtown, which ran at an angle between East Clinton and East Washington Streets. The John W. Jones Court lot is bounded by Dickinson Street to the east, Baldwin Street to the west; and East Clinton Street to the south, which covers a total of ± 2.7 acres. It is surrounded by a mixed use area composed of industrial, recreational, religious, educational, and social service organization buildings. Most notable are the Economic Opportunity Program complex to the north; the former Ernie Davis Middle School (c. 1913) on the east; the three-story brick 1890s International Harvester building to the west; and the single story Monumental Baptist Church to the south.

General Building Description

John W. Jones Court is a large, three-unit multifamily apartment building, reflecting the post-World War II Modern Movement. It is a load bearing, full concrete and masonry fireproof structure, clad in fired brick with a flat roof. The building stands three-stories in height along the main axis and two stories in the north-south transepts, all with a full basement. Structurally, the building is an excellent example of the ascending platform construction technique, consisting of slabs with integral perimeter joists resting on the basement foundation and on each successive floor's CMU wall rims. Support is provided by reinforced concrete pillars that are spaced central to the axial and radial spans of the floor platform and repeats to the third floor roof deck, which is then surmounted by a thick parapet wall. Two non-historic emergency stairwell units are installed on the north end exterior and at least four original exterior metal and glass lamps are still extant on the corners. A cornerstone with the date 1951 is located on the east side of the building, south of the breezeway in Unit 3.

Composed of five distinct sections, the footprint is set on a north-south oriented main axis in a transept garden bay plan. The central section, known as Unit 3, is T-shaped with an annex projecting outward from the rear (west). The remaining two units on either end of the central unit contain two sections each, and form an offset double cruciform footprint. Each unit and its residential sections are self-contained, lacking an internal connection to the other sectional units except at the basement level. Vertical circulation is provided by five internal stairwells, each opening to a vestibule hall that contains individual apartment entry doors and utility closets. Two breezeway corridors allow pedestrian circulation through the central axis of the complex. The building lacks elevators, making the internal stairs the only access between floors. Central Unit 3 is flanked on

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both sides by Units 1&2 and Units 3&4, which are exact mirrors of each other in design and features. As built, the complex provided for 84 apartments, ranging from one to four bedrooms, and a number of common spaces, storage, recreational, and utility areas at the basement level.

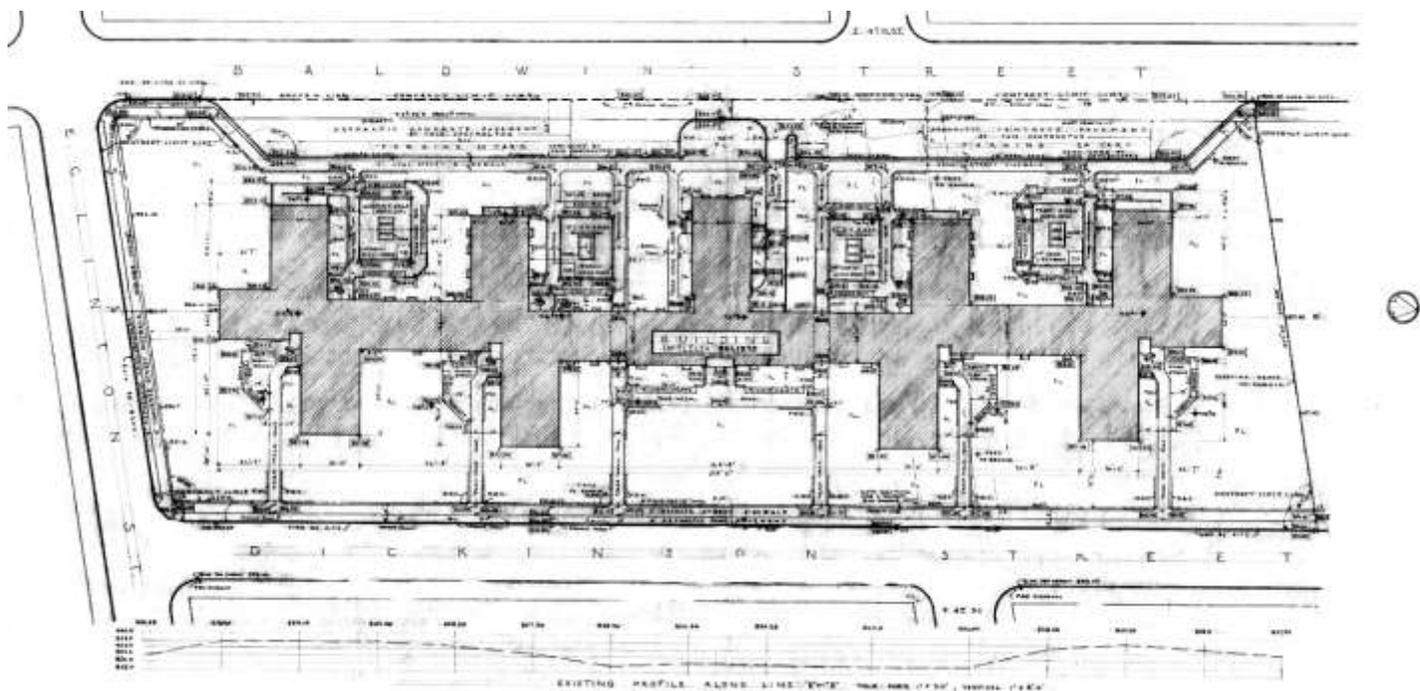


Figure 7-1. Footprint and Historic landscape plan of John W. Jones Court

Exterior

Each unit exterior wall follows the same pattern of brick, fenestration and detailing. All main exterior elevations are clad in a veneer of reddish-brown multi-toned brick overlaid on a load bearing concrete block (CMU) wall up to the roof deck level, except for the axial ends and transepts of the building, where a decorative architectural curtain of brick overlays a concrete partition block wall in order to achieve a recess in the curtain. The parapet walls rising above the roof deck are a continuation of the veneer, with additional interior brick instead of the CMU load bearing wall, which terminates at the roof deck. Due to the fact that the roof and the parapet walls are subject to temperature variations and snow accumulation, numerous half-inch vertical control joints of 26 inches in length are seen evenly spaced along the entire parapet of the building.

At ground level, the wall rests on an approximately twelve-inch concrete base that is the exposed portion of the concrete basement foundation. The wall is a nine-course, common American bond that ends with a water table. It is punctuated along the eastern perimeter by fully revealed six-light steel frame casement windows over a lower single light and larger similar windows surrounded by concrete window wells and protected by steel grid well grates. Smaller ventilation grids are placed along the unexcavated basement sections of the

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eastern transept units of the building. Figure 7-2 demonstrates this window arrangement. The remaining wall elevation is set in a common American bond with sixth course headers. Each elevation of the central axis and transept ends feature wide, recessed curtains of decorative brickwork. This is presented as horizontal columns of alternating stretcher and header brick on the outside runs of the recess and a center column between windows. Between windows are spandrel wall sections of brick run in a soldier course bond, as seen in Figure 7-3.



Figure 7-2. *Window/wall arrangement.*

Figure 7-3. *Detail of articulation on end faces.*

Fenestration throughout the building exterior is plain and devoid of any elaboration. Window units are a selection of casement-mount steel frames over lower larger lights that are either two-over-one lights, two-over-three, two-over-four or three-over-four, depending on size. In all except those used for the basement, windows feature the casements in the upper section over a ventilation hopper which tilts into the interior. All steel window frames, mullions and muntins are formed from heavy channel stock set with glazing to hold the glass, and use a single handle compression lock for closure. All window openings are internally fitted on the sides and top of the masonry opening with a wide wooden interior surface casement frame. At the bottom of the openings, there is a simple thin concrete slab sill which projects slightly from the exterior brick wall. Although a number of windows are boarded, the majority of the window frames and lights are still extant.

Entry and service doorways are plain commercial steel casement types with a flush panel and half-light design. Doors are set into a box channel casement frame that lacks trim or elaboration and is set into the masonry lip of the openings. A set of concrete steps with steel handrail provides access to a small concrete landing platform. Entry doors are offset into the inside corners and each has a covering of a polygonal designed cast concrete roof slab set into the brick façade. On straight wall entries this slab is rectangular, and the function of both is to provide basic storm protection for the landing.

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Interior

Basement and Mechanical

As previously stated, the foundation and basement level of John W. Jones court is the only level that interconnects the five units of the apartment complex. The space was primarily for housing the mechanical systems for the complex, but also offered utilitarian spaces for tenants, such as storage and shared laundry facilities, as indicated in Figure 7-4. The basement encompasses the total axial length and width of the building (515 by 26 feet), plus the five lateral bays on the western side of the axis (four at 30 by 44 feet, and one mechanical bay at 30 by 58 feet). The lateral transepts of the eastern elevation are constructed over unexcavated space, supported by load bearing footer walls and a pier system. In the excavated sections, the basement level is formed by poured and reinforced concrete walls set on a foundation slab. Walls rise 88 inches above the finished floor level.

Long, sheltered pedestrian ramps are at each western transept face on either end of the building (units 1 & 5) that provide access to the basement. These feed directly into 'perambulator' rooms that were originally intended for storage of bicycles, baby carriages, and enclosed play for children during inclement weather. Moving along the central hallway, a number of rooms were provided for laundry & air clothes drying rooms (units 1 & 2); a craft room (unit 2); storage room (unit 3); recreation room (unit 4); kitchen area (unit 4); four restrooms (units 2 & 4; and, four multipurpose rooms (units 1, 4 & 5). These areas are currently open, empty rooms with visible square concrete support posts, poured concrete floors, concrete CMU walls and small rectangular windows for lighting. In addition to the ramps, further circulation access is via the enclosed concrete steps at the rear of the laundry room (unit 2) and recreation room (unit 4). Due to increasing security concerns, heavy grated steel security gates were installed in the 1980s on all basement entry portals, limiting direct access to the basement level except through internal circulation stairwells. Vertical circulation to the upper floors is provided through five central stairwells, one serving each sectional unit.

The bulk of the basement in Unit 3 is reserved for mechanical systems and building maintenance. This section contains a maintenance worker locker room, paint and service shop rooms, and the boiler room. The latter room measures 30 by 58 feet, with a 20-foot high ceiling. A hot water radiant heating plant is located here for recirculating potable water, as are the supply boiler, line main electrical control system, and central plumbing (water & sewerage) control systems. All mechanical and electrical systems throughout the basement are exposed at the ceiling level, and walls are unadorned except for an application of enamel paint. Unit 3 also has restrooms near the common kitchen. Additional rooms in the basement are five incinerator rooms, one in each sectional unit. As built, each upper floor residential vestibule hall contained a waste chute that connected to

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the incinerator rooms for burning and disposal of trash. These incinerator units are vented through brick flue stacks that rise above the roof.



Figure 7-4. Basement floor plan and utilization key.

Residential Floors

John W. Jones Court was designed and built to provide 84 apartment units in 1 to 4 bedroom configurations, on three residential floors. Structurally each floor and roof deck is of one-way reinforced, solid slab platform type construction with incorporated concrete beams for lateral support. A series of square, rebar reinforced concrete columns running from the foundation floor to the roof deck support and divide the center of the central slab load on all levels, combined with a number of load-bearing 16 by 8 by 6 inch concrete block interior partition walls and stairwell shafts. As with the basement level, all mechanical and electrical systems are exposed unless routed through a service shaft or chase. Figure 7-5 shows the construction and structural components of the residential superstructure.

Each of the compartmentalized units has four to six apartments distributed among the three floors in the main axis and the two floors of the transepts. Across the entire building, eight one-bedroom apartments were limited to the second and third floors. The majority of apartments were two-bedrooms and fairly distributed among all three floors (fifty in all), as were twenty three-bedroom apartments and six four-bedroom apartments. The building contains twenty-six first floor apartments, thirty second floor apartments and twenty-eight third floor apartments, for a total of eighty-four apartments. All apartments retain their original configurations, although most of the built-in cabinetry and plumbing fixtures have been vandalized or removed. Second and third floor access in each unit is limited to internal stairways, due to the lack of elevator systems. Two external emergency fire stairwells were added on the east side of units 4 and 5 in 2000 when this portion of the building was used as an emergency homeless shelter.

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Figure 7-5. *Construction photograph, ca. 1952.*

Main access and circulation to the first floor apartments is through angled exterior doors set in the east and west garden bay corner facades, with one front and back set for each unit. These doors and the stairwells from the basement and upper levels open into a rectangular vestibule hallway that is surrounded by apartment doors, a large central window, and service closets. Both the stairwell shafts and the vestibule are finished with rectangular ceramic subway tile, which is glazed in a golden mustard color tone, a signature interior design element of the entire residential superstructure. Metal stair, handrail, window frame and doorway casements in the building are extant and were painted a contrasting green.

Apartment entry and utility service doorways are plain commercial steel casement types in slab panel design without architrave, trim, or other elaboration. Box channel casement frames are set into the masonry lip of the openings, trimmed flush to the subway tiled wall surface. Each apartment group hallway vestibule has a utility closet containing a wall mounted, enameled cast iron service and mop sink. Nearby is a trash chute for sending household rubbish down to one of the five basement incinerator rooms for disposal. All floor treatments are an application of dark grey 9 by 9 inch commercial grade asphalt tile.

All three floors of the end volumes are identical in floor plan and apartment size. Variation exists in the central volume, where the first floor contains a smaller vestibule lobby and the second floor contains apartments which are built out over the service annex building. The apartments feature a simple utilitarian design, each

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with a small kitchenette and a bathroom with a wall inset enamel glazed tub. Extant bathroom finishes consist of glossy white ceramic tile and smooth plaster. A renovation in the early 1980s replaced a majority of the original cabinetry units in the bathrooms and kitchenettes and now most of these are missing or damaged due to vandalism.

Most of the plumbing and hot water heat lines are exposed along the walls and ceiling—electrical and telephone wiring is primarily routed inside the interior partition walls. These walls are channel steel framing, anchored in horizontal bases and header channels. Interior partition stud walls and exterior block walls are covered with an expanded diamond mesh metal lath system and finished in a traditional two-coat plaster system, much of which still survives. Interior finishes still show the two-coat plaster walls and painted concrete ceilings that were formed from the platform slab construction. Interior doors to the bathrooms, bedrooms, and some closets are varnished two panel wooden styles, some with the original brass hardware. Freestanding cast-iron hot water heat radiators were located in the living room and bedroom areas, many of them missing/removed. Several of the closets in the units are open units with no doors. All floor treatments are identical to the vestibule areas—dark grey 9 x 9 inch commercial grade asphalt tiles.

Floor plans differed slightly dependent upon apartment size configuration. All configurations had the entry door opening into a full width combination living room and dining area containing a large window. In the smaller units, a long hallway runs along the interior partition wall providing access to the kitchen, bathroom and bedrooms, all located on one side of the rectangular footprint. For the larger bedroom units, the hallway runs center to the width of the unit, with a larger living room area and functional rooms on either side of the hall. These configurations are still extant throughout the building.

Roof Deck

The roof deck is nominally level and is presently covered with a sheet type EPDM roofing membrane and reglet flashed into mortar joint chases on the parapet walls. A false deck frame overlays the concrete roof deck, and insulation board is underplayed between a dry-in felt and an EPDM membrane. As built in 1952, the roof was multi-ply felt overlay under a coal tar roofing pitch surface layer, which was then graveled. The deck is engineered to eliminate water retention through a series of roofing drains connected to waste pipes. Parapet walls rise above the deck and are capped with glazed ceramic coping tile set in mortar. Multiple waste line vents punctuate the roof deck along with five brick flue stacks for the basement incinerators.

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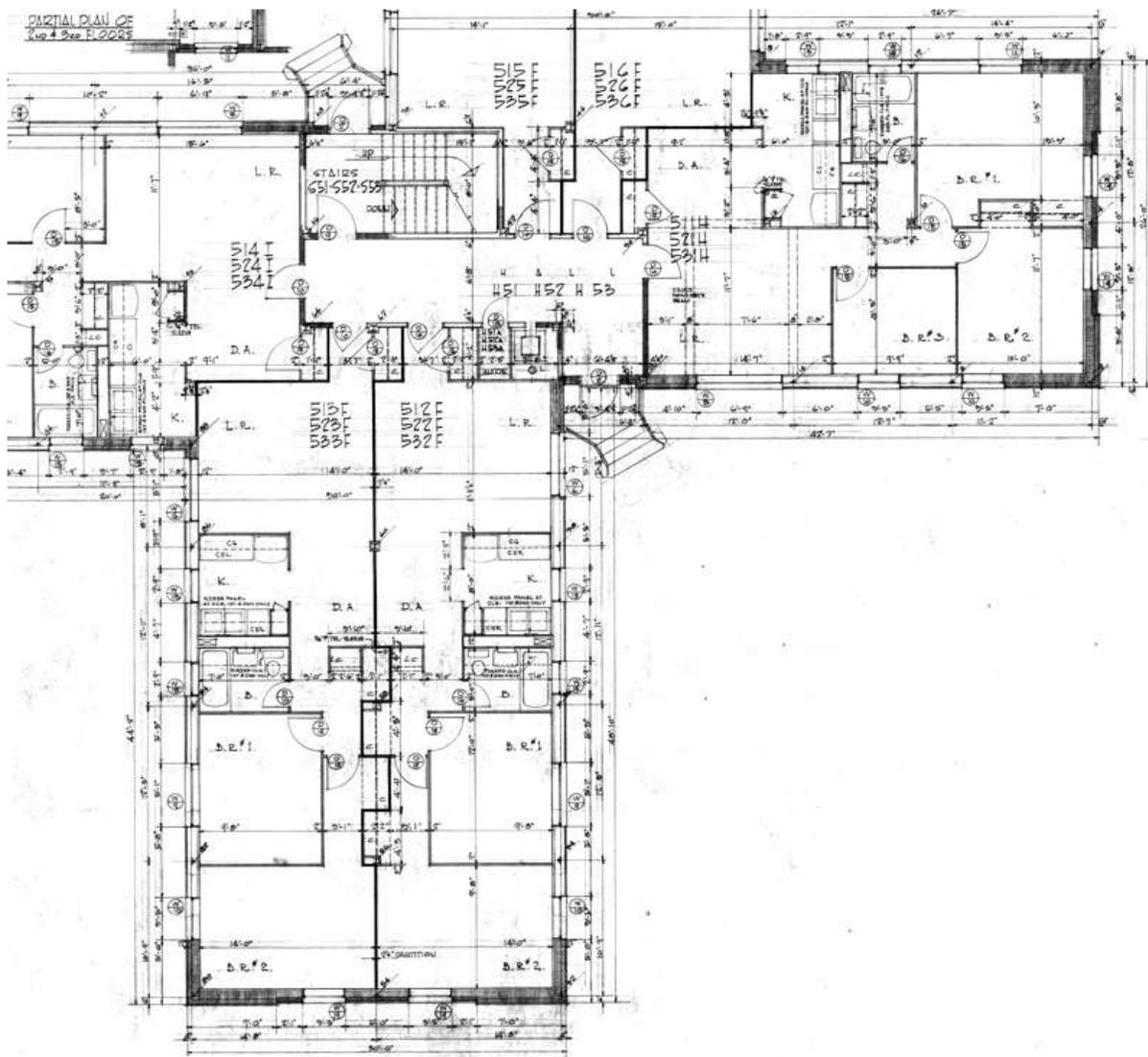


Figure 7-6. Typical hall alignment and apartment floor plan

All of the five sections across the three volumes have individual roof egress cabin enclosures, accessible via the stairwell in each section. These are constructed of a thick brick wall set with a concrete slab roof. The egress cabins open to the roof via a single, two-panel frame type wooden door with an upper three-over-three light divided window.

Landscape

Landscape architect William E. Harries of Buffalo, New York was selected to conduct the overall site analysis and design the grounds and courtyard areas of the John W. Jones Court project. It was his intent to provide as much interaction and circulation within the grounds of the building as possible, based upon his previous

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experience with several large public housing projects in Buffalo. His plan provided for installation of adequate pedestrian access and safety and is still evident. A concrete sidewalk abuts the interior curb of Dickinson, Clinton, and Baldwin Streets, offering circulation at the perimeter on three sides of the lot. Two asphalt parking aprons are at the western rear of the building directly along Baldwin Street, providing straight-in parking for approximately 50 vehicles and access to an interior asphalt service apron for maintenance and supply vehicles. Six paved walks emerge laterally from the perimeter sidewalk at the eastern front of the complex to facilitate circulation to and from the entry doors and breezeway corridors of the building. In the central entrance bay, a cross walk went between the two breezeway corridor walks. The remainder of the ground in the garden bays and surrounding lot are covered in grass. At the rear of the building (west) a similar series of eight walks extend from the perimeter sidewalk fronting the parking aprons.

By 1950, the property used for Jones Court was an older residential neighborhood well populated with mature shade trees. Demolition of the existing houses for excavation and construction also included removal of the majority of the trees on the site. Initial planting and subsequent replanting over the past six decades resulted in a well-spaced and manageable tree pattern. No other ornamental plantings original to the landscape design are extant.

Conclusion

The John W. Jones Court apartment complex remains an excellent example of post-World War II modernist architecture that was designed to be cost efficient for the owner (in this case the Elmira Housing Authority) and affordable for the tenant, most of them being the displaced residents of Slabtown. The building's clean, simple lines and the use of technological advances in concrete construction resulted in a well-built masonry building with space for 84 apartments and related services. Although the building has been vandalized and has had some water damage, it is still largely intact from when constructed. Doors and windows on the first level are boarded to preserve existing elements and limit the amount of intrusion. Like many public housing projects of the period, apartments followed the pattern of economic use of space with small bathrooms, galley style kitchens and efficient layouts/configurations, still visible in the Jones Court complex. Landscaping from the period has long since disappeared; however, the complex is adjacent to the large open lawn and playground that often accompany post-war housing projects adding to its original garden apartment atmosphere.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMUNITY PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

ETHNIC HERITAGE/African American

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1950-1953

Significant Dates

1950, 1953

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Haskell, Considine and Haskell, (Architects)

William E. Harries (Landscape Architect);

Streeter & Associates (General Contractor)

Period of Significance (justification)

The period of significance for John W. Jones Court begins in 1950 with the initiation of construction and ends with its opening for occupancy in 1953.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary) N/A

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

John W. Jones Court is significant as a distinctive intact example of a mid-twentieth century post-war public housing project in Elmira built exclusively for African Americans, whose community was then destroyed by the construction of the building. For this reason, Jones Court is significant under Criterion A in the areas of ethnic history and community planning and development for its effect on the African American neighborhood of Slabtown. Deliberately selected as a blighted area by the local housing authority, Slabtown was actually the cultural heart of Elmira's African American community. Jones Court was first proposed as one of two projects planned to alleviate a serious housing shortage in the city during World War II; however, it was delayed first due to wartime regulations and later due to resolving issues with cost overruns and negotiating with the affected residents. Actual construction began in 1950-1952. Jones Court was the second major city-sponsored public housing project for Elmira and the first geared specifically toward the its African American community as low income housing. Unfortunately, project planners failed to take into account that the site selected for the new housing was the location of numerous vibrant and historic African American-owned individual properties, business, churches and other cultural institutions, all of which were demolished to building the new apartments. Construction of the Jones Court thus became the primary factor in the eventual disappearance of the Slabtown neighborhood, its culture, and its collective identity.

The John W. Jones Court apartments are also architecturally significant under Criterion C as an example of a post-war large-scale public housing project in the city of Elmira that followed earlier trends of low- scale buildings with landscaping rather than moving toward the use of large-scale high rise buildings. This was largely due to its initial planning date of 1942 and the intent to make it similar in scale and design to the other earlier planned housing project known as Hathorn Court. After the war, a need to provide affordable rents required that the architects for Jones Court, Haskell, Considine and Haskell, revise the plans to be more cost effective, resulting in the use of scaled back, minimalist treatments such as simpler facades, standard repetitive forms, flat roofs and uniform windows. They also reduced the number of units from 125 to 83. The building remained in active use as public housing from 1953 through 1999 when the process began of relocating tenants to other facilities. A portion of the building was briefly used as a homeless shelter, but the building currently stands vacant. Plans are underway to return the building to use as low cost housing.

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Postwar Housing in Elmira

In the 1940s, Elmira faced a housing shortage common to urban centers across the United States that was largely a result of the expansion of the war defense industry and the need to house the ever growing number of workers. The Elmira Housing Authority formed as a corporation in early 1942 by resolution of the Elmira City Council to address the need for new housing, seen as critical by the city council, given the rapid growth of major war supply defense contractors in Elmira such as Eclipse-Bendix, Remington-Rand and American LaFrance. From January 1940 to January 1943, employment at Remington-Rand alone grew from a workforce of 715 to 8,594 employees.¹ Companies expanded hiring rosters to meet production quotas and were rapidly exhausting Elmira's available affordable housing stock.²

State and federal housing regulations enacted during the 1930s required the cooperation of federal, state and local governments, resulting in the establishment of local housing authorities working with oversight and funding from state and federal housing agencies. Federal legislation passed in the 1940s placed public housing responsibilities with United States Housing Administration and under the National Defense Act, additional legislation eliminated the requirement that local authorities contribute 10 percent of a project's costs. This allowed subsequent war defense housing to be fully funded by the federal government, which gave total control over housing allocations to the government. For Elmira and a number of communities across the state, the new local housing authorities could now partner with the state's division of housing to develop, finance, and manage new construction.

In March 1942, a permanent Elmira Housing Authority committee was established consisting of five members with varying terms, ranging from one to five years.³ Immediately, the authority considered its options with the New York State Division of Housing and began planning two projects in September 1942.⁴ These came with agreements of capital financing from the state in 1943 in the amount of \$2.23 million. The larger of the two was the Elmira Housing Project 17A, also known as Hathorn Court, planned with 250 units of apartments on relatively open land located in the Davis Street and Woodlawn Avenue area near Woodlawn Cemetery. The second project, Elmira Housing Project 17B (later John W. Jones Court apartments), was planned with 125 units and was to be located in the predominantly African American neighborhood of Elmira known as "Slabtown." The local architectural firm of Haskell, Considine & Haskell was chosen to design both projects, having experience with government funded projects during the 1930s. It was an established well-respected firm, very active in the city and region and known for large scale works that included schools, hospitals and

¹Thomas E. Byrne, *Chemung County 1890-1975* (Elmira, NY: Chemung County Historical Society, 1976), 90-99.

²"Housing Situation Acute, 3,000 Units to Be Needed Soon." *Elmira Star-Gazette*. November 15, 1942.

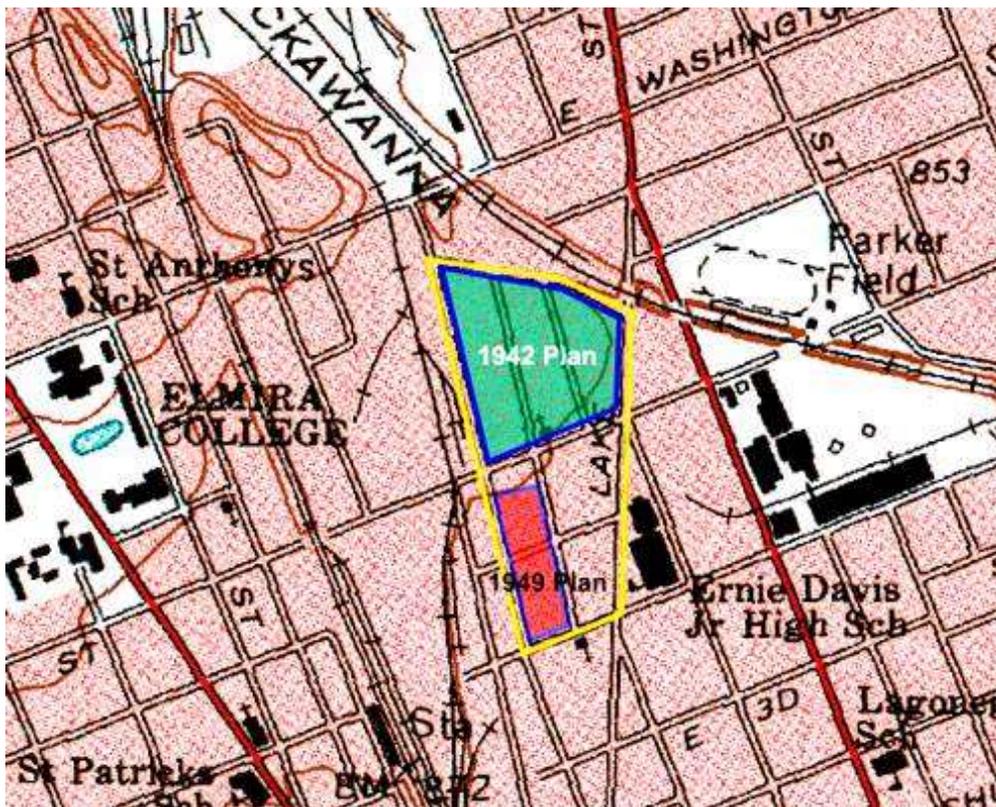
³"Elmira Housing Authority Named with Crispin Head; Fours Others Appointed," *Elmira-Star Gazette*, 24 March 1942, 8.

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several buildings for Elmira College. Hathorn Court was completed in 1944 and although the newspapers reported that it was open to all, priority was given to defense workers and, later, veterans. When Jones Court was finally completed and leasing began, it was mostly rented out to African Americans with priority given to those displaced by the project.



Planned in 1942, the Jones Court project was delayed until after the war due to wartime regulations banning the razing of houses fit for occupancy, effectively halting wholesale slum clearance in communities across the country. An estimated 50 properties would require demolition and the housing authority decided to raze only the uninhabitable buildings and repair others, as allowed by the regulations.⁵ After the war, the city could once again turn its attention to Elmira Housing Project 17B for low income residents. Approximately \$830,000 of the original \$2.23 million in capital loan funding generated in 1943 remained in reserve accounts for the Elmira Housing Authority. When local planning resumed in early 1947, it became clear that post-war construction costs escalated from the \$5,900 per unit expended on Hathorn Court in 1943, to an estimated cost of \$14,000 per unit for new construction alone, without factoring in the costs of property acquisition, demolition, or site preparation.⁶ By prior agreement, the Elmira Housing Authority was obligated to engage in slum clearance as

⁴ Collectively, these were referred to as Elmira Housing Project 17 (17A & 17B).

⁵ "City Housing Authority Asks 2 Million Loan. Plan Contemplates Immediate Building of 250 Home Units," *Elmira Star-Gazette*, 11 August 1942, 5.

⁶ "Million Dollar Baby: Money's Ready for Slum Clearance; Where to Build is Vexing Problem." *Elmira Sunday Telegram*. June 22, 1947.

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a component of construction for Project 17B and a smaller site was selected in the African American Slabtown neighborhood in order to meet costs and provide affordable rents.

Slabtown

Slabtown had its origins in the mid nineteenth century, when Elmira's location as a transportation center attracted growing numbers of free African Americans and freedom seekers, especially after 1827, when slavery was abolished in New York State. The Elmira area attracted farmers, tradesmen, shopkeepers, professionals, and those catering to the agricultural economy of the area, many of them traveling from Pennsylvania and downstate to the area by the Susquehanna and Chemung Rivers. As routes to destinations in Pennsylvania became more passable, moving goods, materials and commodities to and from points further north was much more difficult. One solution was the completion of the Chemung Canal in 1833 that linked Elmira to Seneca Lake. With the advent of the railroad, Elmira grew into a transportation hub for all points especially north. Fugitive slaves would periodically appear, with the majority headed onward to Canada, but a small number stayed and became part of the larger community, finding work along the canal, railroad and other businesses.

In the 1830s, a number of prominent citizens of Elmira were part of the abolitionist movement and actively assisted freedom seekers traveling through the area. Among them were Simeon Benjamin, John M. Robinson, Ariel Thurston, and Jervis Langdon. Among the freedom seekers was John W. Jones, an escaped slave from Virginia who arrived in Elmira in 1844. He became the caretaker of a local church and eventually the local cemetery (Woodlawn Cemetery, NR listed 2004) and active in assisting other freedom seekers. Between 1850 and 1865, he assisted over 800 former slaves find their way north to Canada. At the same time, the African American population of Slabtown grew from 60 to over 200.

After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, assistance was literally driven underground and Elmira became a prominent station on the Underground Railroad. Former slaves who elected to remain in Elmira settled near places of employment, many of these opportunities being along the canals or railroads. One of these areas was an area to the north of East Third Street, bounded by the canal to the east and Lake Street to the west. Since many of the houses were constructed of inexpensive wide rough boards (known as slabs) bought from the local sawmills, the community became known as "Slabtown." By 1842, the Slabtown population grew large enough for the residents to establish a church, the African Union Methodist Episcopal Church, with services held in a barn on Baldwin Street until a building could be constructed in 1852. It soon became known as "The Freedom Church" for its members' active role in Elmira's Underground Railroad.

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When freedom seekers chose to remain in Elmira, the congregation assisted by providing housing, clothing, and helping to find employment. By 1865, the Slabtown neighborhood was firmly established as Elmira's preeminent African American neighborhood.

In late 1868, a national conference of Union M.E. churches in Washington, D.C. voted to change the national church structure, resulting in a majority of the members of the Elmira church withdrawing their affiliation with the Union M.E. national society. In 1870, they reorganized as an AME Zion Church, and after a contentious legal battle for ownership of the church property between the Union and AME factions, the AME Zion faction left, first holding services in the Temperance Hall next to the Union church building and finally building a new church on the lot directly across from the original church on Fourth Street. A new church was built on the lot in 1871. Over the years, both groups replaced their buildings. The Union M.E. Church built a new structure on the same site in 1879, and the AME Zion Church replaced the 1871 building with a brick structure in 1896. In 1885, Union ME changed its name to Bethel African M.E. Church. In 1906, AME Zion changed its name to Frederick Douglass Memorial Zion A.M.E. Church—in honor of Douglass and of his many visits to Elmira and the church. Both structures were demolished in 1950 for the construction of John W. Jones Court.

Another important Slabtown organization was the Neighborhood House, a settlement house, located near the churches at the corner of Fifth Street and Dickinson. It was an outgrowth of the Elmira temperance movement that evolved into an industrial training school for the poor and immigrants and later extended social and support services to the Slabtown residents. In 1912, the house hired a full-time settlement worker from Boston. At its peak, the house offered a number of services, including sewing and vocational training, meals and daycare for children, and educational classes for children and adults. In 1950, Neighborhood House was demolished along with both church buildings and 35 other structures in the two blocks between Dickinson and Baldwin to make way for the construction of Jones Court.

When planning resumed in 1947 for the Jones Court project, the Frederick Douglass Memorial AME Zion Church took an active role as the liaison between the neighborhood and the Elmira Housing Authority, hosting community resident meetings and serving as a housing coordination center for those residents who were faced displacement during the demolition and construction phases of the project (1950-1952).⁷ Although the church was also demolished, it relocated some distance away outside of the informal boundaries of Slabtown, resulting in a loss of community influence and a decrease in membership.

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Jones Court

Most houses in Slabtown slated for demolition were between 50 and 100 years of age and the area was considered blighted and a slum. Location of the buildings near valuable commercial and industrial properties pushed land values higher, resulting in debates over which section to clear for the Jones Court project. In addition to the land discussion, African American leaders and residents from the community questioned the long delay of the project during the war, many feeling that their needs were being ignored by the state and local housing authorities. Wartime migration of blacks to Elmira had nearly doubled the population in Slabtown to over 1,300 from its pre-war population of 850, creating intense internal pressures in the community. When the project was revived, concerns shifted to costs and temporary housing for displaced residents. By 1947, the state exhausted the initial lending cap of \$300 million established in 1938, leaving insufficient reserves for acquisition and demolition, let alone the construction of the proposed 125 units of new housing. With consideration of escalated development costs and property considerations, the size of the project was scaled down from 125 units in multiple buildings to a low-rise three-story, single structure building of 84 units. As Elmira Housing Project Number 17B, the first major contracts for site analysis and architectural design were again given to the architectural firm of Haskell, Considine, and Haskell.

In 1949, the New York State Legislature raised the original statewide public housing lending cap to \$735 million, allowing project planning to begin again, but construction was once again delayed to deal with legal issues in clearing the site and the lack of available housing for displaced home owners. Early in 1949, petitions circulated protesting the mass demolition of "good houses" and that there were other areas in Elmira that were more blighted than the Dickinson Street area.⁸ Negotiations with property owners further delayed the project when the housing authority failed to provide acceptable terms for compensation. Court hearings were opened in July 1950 and by September the city began accepting bids for clearing the site. Planned construction was delayed by contract costs and another lawsuit, this time from the company that was the low bidder for construction. The company claimed that they made a \$90,000 error and asked that the contract be voided. The Elmira Chapter of the NAACP requested that the authority proceed with awarding subcontract work despite pending litigation, which was done and a new construction contract was issued one month later to the local firm of Streeter and Associates.⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "3 Petitions Protest Housing Plan," *Elmira-Star Gazette*, 26 February 1949, 12.

⁹ "Half-Million Added to Jones Court Grant," *Elmira-Star Gazette*, 21 July 1951, 12.

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As properties were acquired by the housing authority, buildings were demolished until the entire western section of Slabtown along Dickinson to Lake Street was cleared for the project. This included two churches along with residential buildings north of Fifth Street on Baldwin, Dickinson, and Benjamin Streets. This area was the heart of the original Slabtown neighborhood, which, in addition to the houses and churches, contained shops and businesses, such as Green Pastures (jazz club) and Snowden's Confectionary & Soda Bottling. Literally at its core was the Frederick Douglass Memorial AME Zion Church, providing the main spiritual, political and social identity of Slabtown. As a product of the demolition, the collective identity instilled by this church was erased from Slabtown.

In the period 1950-1952, former residents of the two-block area were displaced while the demolition and construction of John W. Jones Court was undertaken. Some doubled up in the homes of relatives and friends, while others left the community permanently to make homes in other small African American neighborhoods in the city. Throughout the 1950s, longtime residents and property owners began to move out of the neighborhood or rent their properties, leading to a decline in the area. The only growth that occurred during this period was in commercial and small industrial businesses along Dickinson and Benjamin streets.

In 1953, the housing authority began accepting applications, and the lack of qualified applicants gave rise to fears that several units would be vacant. In March 1953, the local paper reported that 37 units, mostly two-bedrooms, were still available.¹⁰ Much of this was largely due to income restrictions on applicants established by New York State, pushing out working class tenants as they exceeded residency minimum incomes and no longer qualified for rent subsidies. By 1960, a waiting list for apartments outpaced the availability for Jones Court. African American community leaders and activists waged a successful campaign to open up the older Hathorn Court and Hoffman Plaza projects to blacks, but it would be several more years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 actually made this a reality.

Two blocks of cleared land opposite John W. Jones Court was deeded back to the City of Elmira, and in January 1973 it became Ernie Davis Park. By this time, the only reminders of the Slabtown community were John W. Jones Court and a few historic monuments/markers in the park. Eventually, Jones Court closed, plagued by years of financial deficits, mismanagement, and crime. In 1999, it was decommissioned with the support of the NYS Department of Homes and Community Renewal, citing the costs of needed repairs and a consistent 20 percent vacancy rate, and the remaining tenants were moved to other public housing.

¹⁰ "Jones Court Housing Project Completed; Report 37 Vacancies," *Elmira-Star Gazette*, 25 March 1953, 19.

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Haskell, Considine, and Haskell

Haskell, Considine, and Haskell was a well-known local firm, founded in 1928. The firm as an outgrowth of the firm established by Joseph H. Considine (1867-1917) when he opened a practice in Elmira in 1889 after a number of years studying architecture with Pierce & Dockstader, a prominent local architectural firm. In 1904 he was joined by Harry M. Haskell (1885-1957), who worked for Considine as a draftsman before becoming a full partner in 1913. After Considine's death in 1917, it became a sole practice until 1928, when Joseph's son, Leo E. Considine (1897-1964), joined the practice, bringing a new level of expertise to the firm. He earned degrees in architecture from Carnegie Institute of Technology (1923) and Harvard University (1927) and spent a number of years studying design in Europe and Britain. In 1941, Harry Haskell's son, Howard A. Haskell (1931-2008), joined as a partner. He was a graduate of Cornell University (1936) and took a leave of absence during World War II to serve in the U. S. Navy, rejoining the firm in 1946.

This firm gained a strong regional reputation for its specialization in large institutional buildings of stone or brick. Most notable in the decade leading up to the John W. Jones Court project were the Edward Dunn Memorial stadium (1930), St. Joseph's Hospital (1935); Our Lady of Lourdes Church (1941), George Washington School (1939), an Art Deco design of steel-clad brick and stone; and J. Sloat Fassett Elementary School (1948), another Modernist design. The firm's first venture into public housing was Hathorn Court (1942) a neocolonial rowhouse community of 250 units and the first half of the Elmira Housing Project 17 development.¹¹

Another member of the design team was William E. Harries (1888-1972), a principal of the Buffalo landscape architecture firm of Harries, Hall, and Kruse, who was selected to conduct the site analysis of the project and to provide the landscape design for the John W. Jones Court. Harries earned his landscape architecture degree from Cornell University in 1908 and after graduation traveled to Europe, where he worked for two years under the direction of the prominent British landscape architect Thomas H. Mawson. In 1911, he became superintendent of the New York State Reservation at Niagara Falls, where he oversaw the restoration of Goat Island at the American Falls. From 1919 until 1922 he planned and supervised the landscaping of many of Buffalo's parks and public spaces. He also developed the landscaping for Kenfield Homes (1938), Willert Park Court (1939) and Dante Place (1951), three public housing projects in Buffalo. Unfortunately, his designs for Jones Court are no longer intact.

¹¹ Byrne, *Chemung County 1890-1975*, 361.

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As previously mentioned, the general construction contract went to Streeter Associates, Inc., of Elmira. Founded by Henry W. Streeter in 1933, the firm worked on a number of large scale institutional and public projects and maintained an important presence in the greater New York State construction industry. One of the principals in the firm was James A. Norris Sr., a civil engineering graduate from Cornell University who assumed the presidency of Streeter Associates in 1949. He also served for in the late 1950s and 1960s as president of the Empire State Chambers of Commerce and the General Building Contractors of New York State. Among the firm's projects were the Newtown Towers and Southport Towers senior housing buildings in Elmira, the Eclipse Bendix manufacturing plant (1938) and the Elmira Savings Bank building.¹²

Haskell, Considine and Haskell's design for John W. Jones Court reflected a more conservative design in public housing that was influenced by the row house style of Federal Housing Authority and Public Works Administration seen in smaller cities in the 1930s to adaptations of larger post-WWII urban projects that were determined more by economics, resulting in multi-story apartments.¹³ Public housing design models of the early New Deal were geared more toward the human scale, favoring cluster arrangements of low-rise rowhouses, with such units containing anywhere from four to eight apartments per unit. This design could be executed as single floor apartments or split level townhouses, using a simple adaptation of a Neoclassical or Georgian design order, as seen in Techwood Homes, and early public housing project in Atlanta, Georgia.¹⁴

In the mid-1930s, American architecture was increasingly inspired the Bauhaus, especially after many of the Bauhaus leaders fled to America, which continued to strongly influence national design ideologies for public housing.¹⁵ By 1938, the size and scale of projects increased and minimalist elements of modern design were preferred, incorporating the simple, clean lines and repeated use of similar cost effective features. The final design for the John W. Jones Court apartments was a long spine of attached units with alternating projections on either side of the spine. Each unit was actually independent but the entire complex was interconnected via a full basement that included common areas such as play rooms, laundry and common social rooms. Jones Court was limited to three-stories and followed the Modernist design trend of limiting exterior design elements to patterned brickwork around windows in the endwalls, subway tile for interior corridors and common areas, and using similar casement and hopper windows throughout the building. The complex was a contrast to their design for the 1943 Hathorn Court (Elmira Housing Project 17A) housing project in Elmira, which was a grouping of similar rowhouses with Colonial Revival style entrances.

¹² Ibid, 357.

¹³ Eric J. Sandeen, "The Design of Public Housing in the New Deal: Oskar Stonorov and the Carl Mackley Houses." *American Quarterly* 37, Winter 1985. Pp. 646-653; and National Housing Agency—Federal Public Housing Authority. *Public Housing Design: A Review of Experience in Low-Rent Housing*. Washington DC. Government Printing Office. 1946.

¹⁴ Richard Pommer. "The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* #37. December, 1978, 235-264.

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Conclusion

John W. Jones Court was built as a solution to a housing crisis, first brought on by overcrowding during World War II and later by the need to provide what the Elmira Housing Authority saw as decent housing for residents of a blighted area in the city. What they overlooked or, at least subconsciously denied, was that the Jones Court project effectively destroyed a longstanding African American community by dispersing its residents, churches and businesses to other parts of the city while confining many of the displaced residents into one city block in apartments after removing them from single family homes. Elmira lost a connection to its role in the Underground Railroad and in the ethnic cultural heritage of Slabtown that only survives in the collective cultural memory of the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of its former residents. The site of John W. Jones Court is significant in documenting this loss as well as the public housing that replaced it. It illustrates the attempt to create a new community based solely on shared living space.

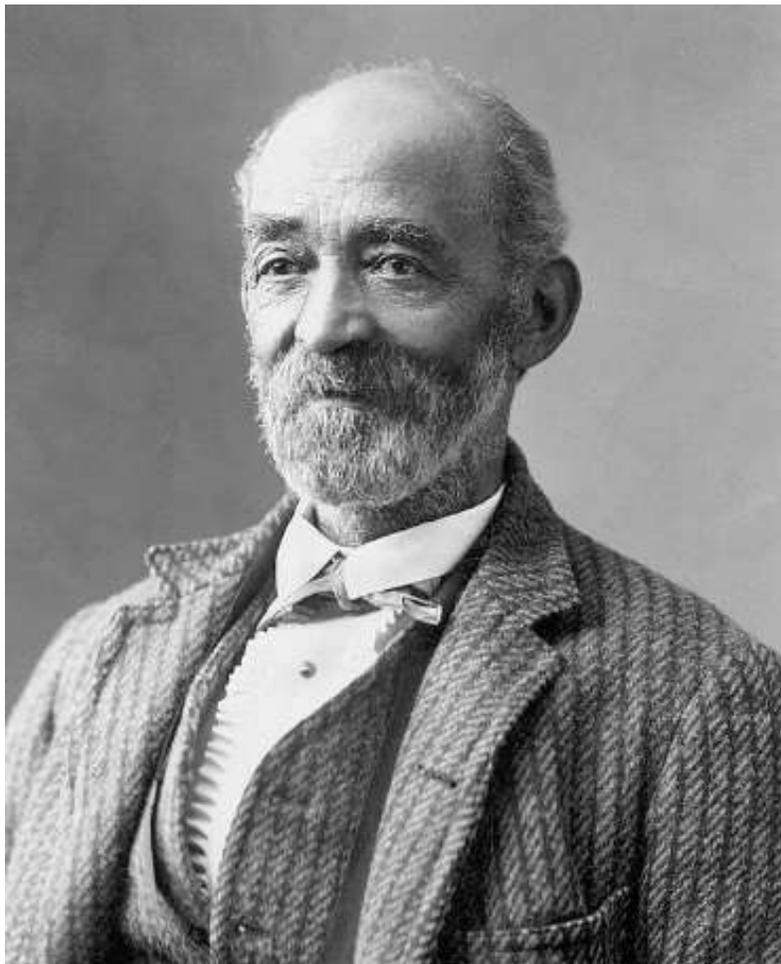
Planning and development of John W. Jones Court was rooted in the social reform policies of the 1930s and 1940s and the desire to remove blighted areas from cities while improving the lives of low income citizens. It also represented a departure in the established design work of the regionally important architectural firm of Haskell, Considine and Haskell from their previous public housing design experience, as evidenced by their move toward a Modern Movement design for low rise public residential complex. The project contains similar design elements characterizing their work with institutional, medical and educational projects, such as the subtle variation of brick tones, integrated themes of decorative brick pattern articulation; the extensive use of institutional interior finishes such as subway tile and industrial grade window fenestration. Jones Court remains as this firm's sole extant example of the low rise, Modern approach to public housing in the Southern Tier region of New York State.

¹⁵ Sandeen, *The Design of Public Housing in the New Deal*, 646-653.

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John W. Jones, in whose honor the Jones Court Apartments was named.

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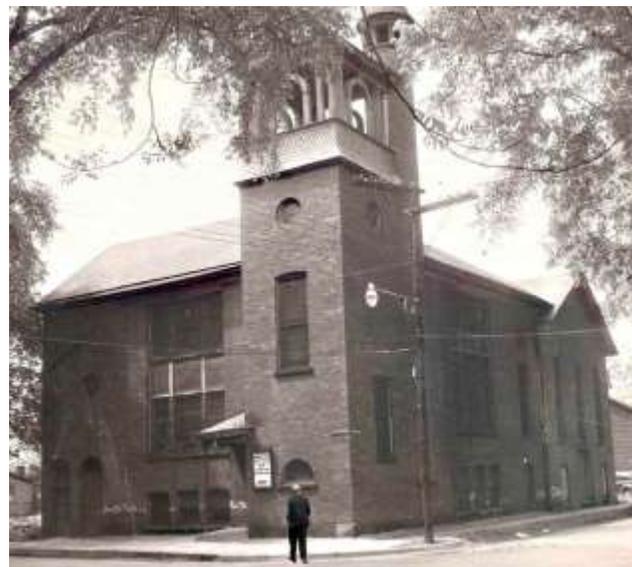
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View circa 1885 looking northwest along Dickinson Street at the intersection of Fourth Street. From the left, the 1871 AME Zion Church building, the 1879 African Union M.E. Church building, the circa 1840s Temperance Hall. All structures were demolished for the Jones Court site.



African Union ME Church. Circa 1930



Zion AME Church. Circa 1940

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Demolition of Zion AME Church, Slabtown block, 1951.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
 previously listed in the National Register
 previously determined eligible by the National Register
 designated a National Historic Landmark
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
 recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University
 Other

Name of repository: Chemung County Historical Society

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property ±2.7 acres
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>18</u> Zone	<u> </u> Easting	<u> </u> Northing	3	<u>18</u> Zone	<u> </u> Easting	<u> </u> Northing
2	<u>18</u> Zone	<u> </u> Easting	<u> </u> Northing	4	<u>18</u> Zone	<u> </u> Easting	<u> </u> Northing

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary is indicated by a heavy line on the enclosed map with scale.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary encompasses the entire area historically associated with John W. Jones Court and is the same as for the period of significance.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Patrick Thrush, MHP (edited by Virginia L. Bartos, PH.D.—DHP-NYS OPRHP)
organization SystemsChange.Org date September 2016
street & number P.O. Box 243 telephone (607) 438-3400
city or town Bath state NY zip code 14810
e-mail patrick@systemschange.org

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: John W. Jones Court

City or Vicinity: Elmira

John W. Jones Court **DRAFT**
Name of Property

Chemung County, NY
County and State

County: Chemung State: New York

Photographer: Patrick Thrush, MHP

Date Photographed: 5/30/2015; 6/16/2015; 4/17/2016

Description of Photographs and number: See attached pages

Property Owner:

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name 600 Baldwin LLC c/o Gross & Gross LLP
street & number 371 Merrick Rd Suite 303 telephone N/A
city or town Rockville Centre State NY zip 11570

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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East elevation (façade) (camera looking west) frontal extent of the complex.



West elevation (camera looking southeast) rear extent of the complex.



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North elevation, looking south).



South elevation looking north.



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East breezeway corridor, courtyard, service core entry—units 3 & 4, looking east.



Transept end showing brick pattern and variations, access ramp & historic light (unit 5) looking east)



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Interior view of basement perambulator room—unit 1, camera angle from axial hallway



Axial basement hallway corridor—unit 5, camera angle facing south



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Recreation room, basement kitchen—unit 4, camera angle from west exterior entry door



Craft room, basement area—unit 3, camera angle south from rear wall



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Detail of basement maintenance worker locker room—unit 3, camera angle facing north



Apartment view from entry door—unit 2, rm. 225-F, second floor two bedroom



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Vestibule hallway to unit floor apartments—unit 2, first floor, camera angle to the south

