

You're listening to *A People's Anthology*. Produced by Boston Review, this is a new podcast that highlights and explore key texts from US history, with our first six episodes surfacing a few important documents related to the urban rebellions of the 1960s and 70s.

This is episode three, on Jesse Gray's 1964 speech, *The Black Revolution: A Struggle for Political Power*, introduced by Roberta Gold and read by Phillip Agnew.

Harlem during the 1960s was densely populated, its tenement housing subdivided and overcrowded. Conditions were poor. There was a massive shortage of decent affordable units for low-income families, and while many people were financially eligible for public housing, the wait lists were long. And even though the city was the first place where it became illegal to discriminate against tenants by race, in reality this played out very differently.

There was a lot of de facto residential segregation and that meant that black and Puerto Rican tenants, for the most part were stuck in black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods such as Harlem and parts of Brooklyn and the Lower East Side and increasingly the Bronx. So what that meant for them as tenants was that they were a captive market — if they wanted to rent housing they were restricted to the neighborhoods where blacks and Puerto Ricans were accepted as tenants.

That meant that the landlords in those areas could get away with poor maintenance and charging higher rents than similar sized apartments would set elsewhere because the tenants could not take their business elsewhere. There was a lot of deteriorated housing, there were a lot of there a lot of overcrowding — people doubled up. There was poor fire safety because of the poor maintenance. So the housing situation was grim.

But New York also had a strong radical history, and a longer-standing tenants rights movement than anywhere else in the country going back to the work of the Communist Party in the Bronx and Harlem in the 20s and 30s.

New York's left survived better than in other places. Part of the reason was that New York leftists carried on their work through tenant organizations. So there were still some left wing tenant groups in Harlem and other parts of the city and they increased their activity in the mid and late 50s especially in response to urban renewal.

So in short in the late 50s and early 60s in Harlem there was both a severe urgency for better rental housing and a kind of organizational infrastructure — you know there was a black community and a history of Black Organizing.

This was the situation when an activist named Jesse Gray arrived on the scene — and for those of you who have listened to episode 2 on Jack O'Dell, you'll notice that their paths are quite similar.

Jack O'Dell and Jesse Gray met as young adults. They both went to Xavier University so they were schoolmates, they joined the Communist Party and they both were merchant mariners and they sailed together and they went among many other places to Glasgow, Scotland, where they encountered a very organized tenant movement that had elected a tenant representative to Parliament.

That example in Glasgow had impressed them both. I don't know exactly what year he came to Harlem. He shipped in and out and eventually settled in Harlem in the 50s and started being involved in tenant actions. By the late 1950s he and Jack O'Dell together founded a tenant council that they called the lower Harlem Tenants Council.

The council's work included protesting the eviction of a woman in a wheelchair, and organizing housewives to picket 4 Harlem tenements; handing out leaflets declaring they had gone “on strike” against rat infestation.

Fast forward to 1963, and Jesse Gray was still doing tenant work and gearing up for the biggest fight of his life. After a summer of picketing the health department and marching on city hall to bring attention to Harlem's housing problems, in the last week of October an official rent strike began, featuring 13 Harlem families who began to withhold rent.

They did pickets that got press and they started bringing legal actions over bad housing conditions.

And by December, as the winter got colder and the lack of heat mobilized more people, hundreds more tenants had joined the strike and filled Harlem's Millbank Center to demand

repairs, extermination, and more public housing. By the end of the month, things were ramping up even further.

The most attention-grabbing public action that they did was bringing rats into housing court hidden under their coats and handbags.

The families facing eviction for non-payment of rent even brought live rats hidden in shoeboxes, and revealed them to the courtroom at particularly dramatic moments. This was one of the tenants biggest complaints, that quote “rats as big as cats” were able to open their refrigerators.

The rats became Kind of an emblem of the bad conditions that these tenants were fighting although the rats were not the only bad conditions actually lack of heat was an equally big problem... but in a way that a coat hanger became a symbol of the abortion rights movement the rat became a symbol of these rent strikes.

In January of 64, after a four year old boy was found dead in his crib with rat bites on his body, Gray organized a “Rats to Rockefeller” campaign, where he encouraged tenants to send plastic rats in the mail to the governor. The next month, Gray organized a “Rat March on Albany” that turned out more than 3,000 protestors despite the freezing rain and snow.

Although official numbers are hard to come by, Jesse Gray claimed that the strike involved more than 500 buildings by March of 64. One historian argues the number was probably closer to 115 buildings — still an impressive count.

But as the months got warmer, and as the mayor made several symbolic gestures—including jailing one landlord, reducing rents, and putting several buildings under city control—the rent strike began to fizzle out.

The strikes took off in the fall of 63 and then as the winter got colder in December and January and February 4 continue to be a very active time and this strikes - then you know the summer of 64 was it was no longer the height of rent strikes but it was still a time of great rebelliousness in Harlem.

Other issues were peaking in the summer of 64 and it wasn't just a housing struggle. It was really the three main inequities were housing schooling and policing

After a teenager was shot dead by police in July, 1964, Harlem erupted into six consecutive nights of rioting with more than 100 of the 4,000 protestors beaten severely by the NYPD. These experiences of the strikes and the riots led Gray to help found the Federation for Independent Political Action, a new militant black political group, similar to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. It was at their founding conference in December 1964 that Jesse Gray gave the following keynote address: *The Black Revolution - A Struggle for Political Power*. Found in the archives at the Schomburg Center, this is the first time the speech has been reproduced in full.

[For rights reasons, we are currently unable to reproduce the text in print. Please [reach out to Rosie](#) with any inquiries.]

You've been listening to episode three of *A People's Anthology*, featuring Jesse Gray's speech "The Black Revolution: A Struggle for Political Power".

The text was read by Phillip Agnew, an activist and organizer who co-founded the Dream Defenders and Smoke Signals Studio. It was introduced by Roberta Gold, historian and author of *When Tenants Claimed the City: The Struggle for Citizenship in New York City Housing*. Our theme music is by Marisa Anderson.

A People's Anthology is a production from Boston Review, a political and literary magazine both online and in print since 1975. Visit us at Bostonreview.net.