

Summer Field Homes

HABS No. MN-160

Bounded by Olson Memorial Highway

on the south, North Eleventh Avenue on the north,

North Emerson Avenue on the west, and

the I-94 corridor on the east

Minneapolis

Hennepin County

Minnesota

HABS  
MINN  
27-MINAP,  
34-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
Great Lakes Systems Office  
1709 Jackson Street  
Omaha, Nebraska 68102-2571

**HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY**

**SUMNER FIELD HOMES**

HABS  
MINN  
27-MINAP  
34-  
HABS No. MN-160

- Location:** Bounded by Olson Memorial Highway on the south, North Eleventh Avenue on the north, North Emerson Avenue on the west, and the Interstate 94 corridor on the east  
Minneapolis, Hennepin County, Minnesota
- Quad:** Minneapolis South, Minnesota
- UTM:** 15:477110.4981540      15:476950.4981190  
15:477190.4981450      15:476950.4981080  
15:477190.4981270      15:476840.4981070  
15:477080.4981270      15:476840.4981540  
15:477070.4981190
- Present Owner:** Minneapolis Public Housing Authority
- Present Use:** Vacant
- Significance:** Sumner Field Homes was Minnesota's first low-income public housing project, and the only one in the state that was built during the Great Depression. The project was an integral part of the Public Works Administration's demonstration public housing program which influenced American public housing practices for at least the next 30 years. Sumner Field Homes embodied the major characteristics of PWA Housing Division design, such as garden apartment massing, low site coverage, and the use of PWA-approved standardized unit plans.
- Historians:** Christine A. Curran, Jeffrey A. Hess, and Charlene K. Roise, Hess, Roise and Company, Minneapolis, Minnesota; September 1997

## **PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION.<sup>1</sup>**

### **A. Physical History:**

1. **Date of erection:** The ground-breaking ceremony took place in June 1936. Construction was halted three months later when the Public Works Administration (PWA) decided that bids for superstructure work exceeded the budget. Construction resumed in July 1937 after architects revised the project's layout. The Sumner Field Homes project was completed and ready for occupancy by December 1938.
2. **Architects:** A city-appointed design committee prepared drawings for the Sumner Field Homes based on the federal Housing Division's codified design principles and sample unit plans. The group of four designers was known as the Associated Architects and consisted of local architects Edwin H. Hewitt, Robert T. Jones, Gottlieb R. Magney, and Wilbur F. Tusler.
3. **Original and subsequent owners:** The Sumner Field Homes community was one of a total of fifty-nine public housing demonstration projects built across the country by the federal Housing Division of the PWA during the New Deal years. While the Sumner Field project was still under construction in 1937, Congress phased out the PWA demonstration housing program and replaced it with the United States Housing Authority (USHA). The USHA managed Sumner Field Homes until 1958, when ownership was transferred to the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority (MHRA). The title to Sumner Field Homes was ceded again in 1990 when the MHRA was dissolved and replaced by the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority.
4. **Builders, contractors, suppliers:** Johnson, Drake and Piper of Minneapolis served as the foundation contractor, with Butler Construction Company of St. Paul as the superstructure contractor. Ralph Hamlin was the consulting structural engineer, William Kyle Robertson was the mechanical engineer, and Hugh Vincent Feehan served as the landscape architect.

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<sup>1</sup> The following draws heavily from an earlier report written by Jeffrey A. Hess entitled "An Evaluation of the National Register Eligibility of Sumner Field Homes in Minneapolis," prepared by Hess Roise and Company for the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, December 1991. Site and architectural information were obtained from site visits by Christine A. Curran on 9 May 1997 and 19 May 1997; from a series of original plans dating from 1936-1937 prepared for the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration; and from a series of renovation plans dating from 1983 prepared by TKDA and Associates, St. Paul, and Tyson Associates, Minneapolis, for the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority.

5. **Original plans and construction:** Original drawings include site plans, elevations, sections and details drafted and signed by the Associated Architects, 1936-1937. There were originally forty-eight residential buildings at Sumner Field: forty-four were two-story row houses containing between seven and twenty units each; the remaining four were three-story apartment buildings containing thirty units each. Two of the row houses had a U-shaped configuration; the other forty-two represented variations on a strip plan, all but one with abbreviated ends of various lengths. The row houses were constructed of wood with red-brick veneer walls and flat roofs. The apartment buildings had walls of structural clay tile covered with red-brick veneer, concrete floors and flat roofs. In addition to the residential buildings at Sumner Field, there was a steam plant, a multi-story structure built of concrete, steel, and brick in 1938. (See Figure 1)
  
6. **Alterations and additions:** The heating plant received a one-story brick addition in 1958. In the 1970s, two row house buildings on the project's east side were demolished to make room for the I-94 corridor. In the early 1980s, Sumner Field Homes underwent extensive alterations. End segments of four row house buildings were demolished as part of a project to stabilize the buildings' foundations. After demolition, the buildings' ends were sealed by a brick-and-concrete facade. In the same modification effort, dwelling units in many of the buildings were consolidated to create units with more bedrooms. In addition to the interior remodeling, the consolidation entailed the in-filling of many unit entrances. Infrastructure modernization followed, with the demolition of the original steam-heat piping system and a subsequent project-wide conversion to a hot-water heating system. (See Figure 2)

## B. Historical Context<sup>2</sup>

Before the emergence of Roosevelt's New Deal in 1933, the United States had virtually no experience in planning, building, or administering public housing projects. During World War I, the federal government had built some civilian housing near munitions plants to ensure an adequate work force, but these dwellings were quickly sold off after the Armistice, reflecting the Harding Administration's desire for a "return to normalcy."<sup>3</sup> In the immediate post-war period, most observers agreed that housing

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<sup>2</sup> The following is excerpted from Hess, "Sumner Field Homes."

<sup>3</sup> Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 124-126.

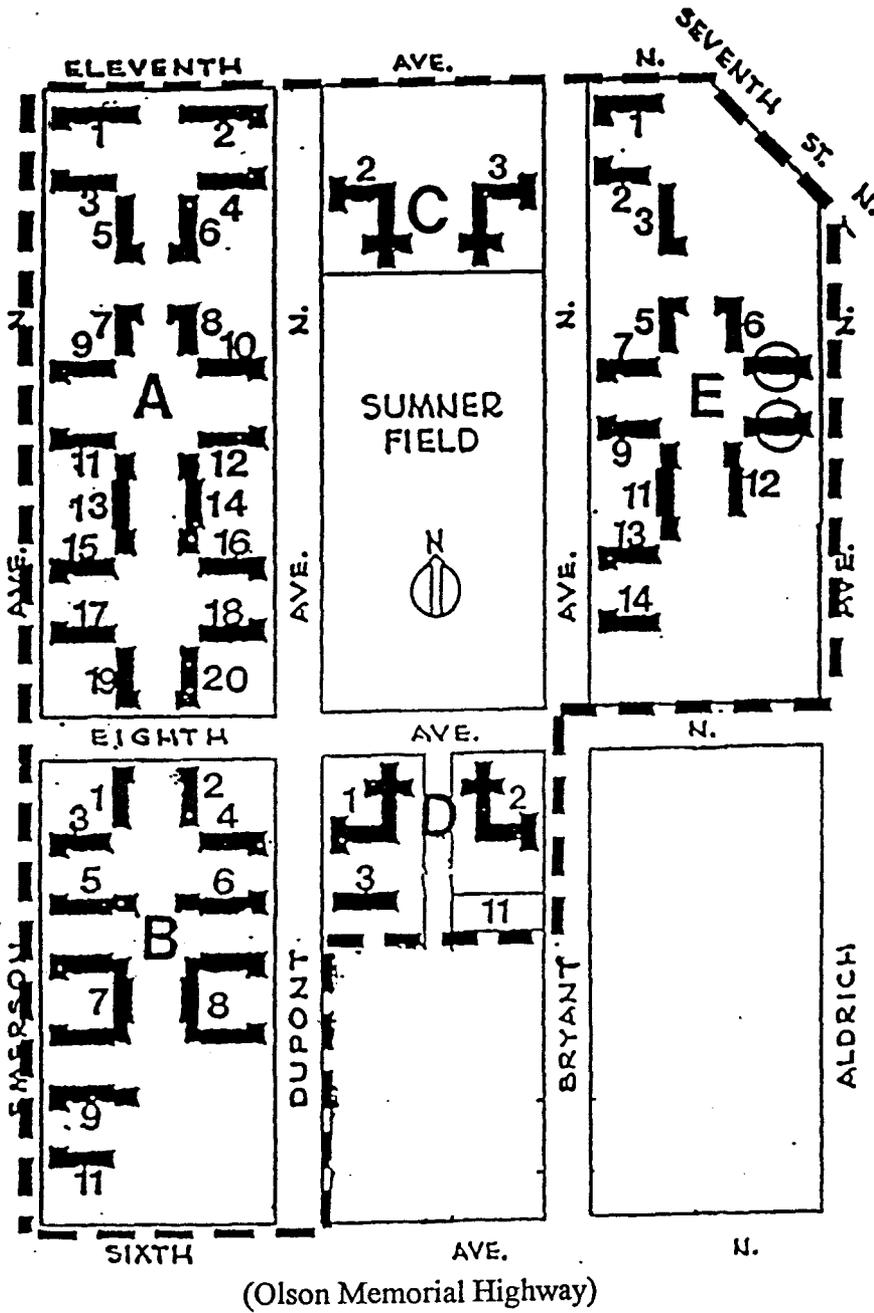


Figure 1 – Sumner Field Site Plan Before Alterations

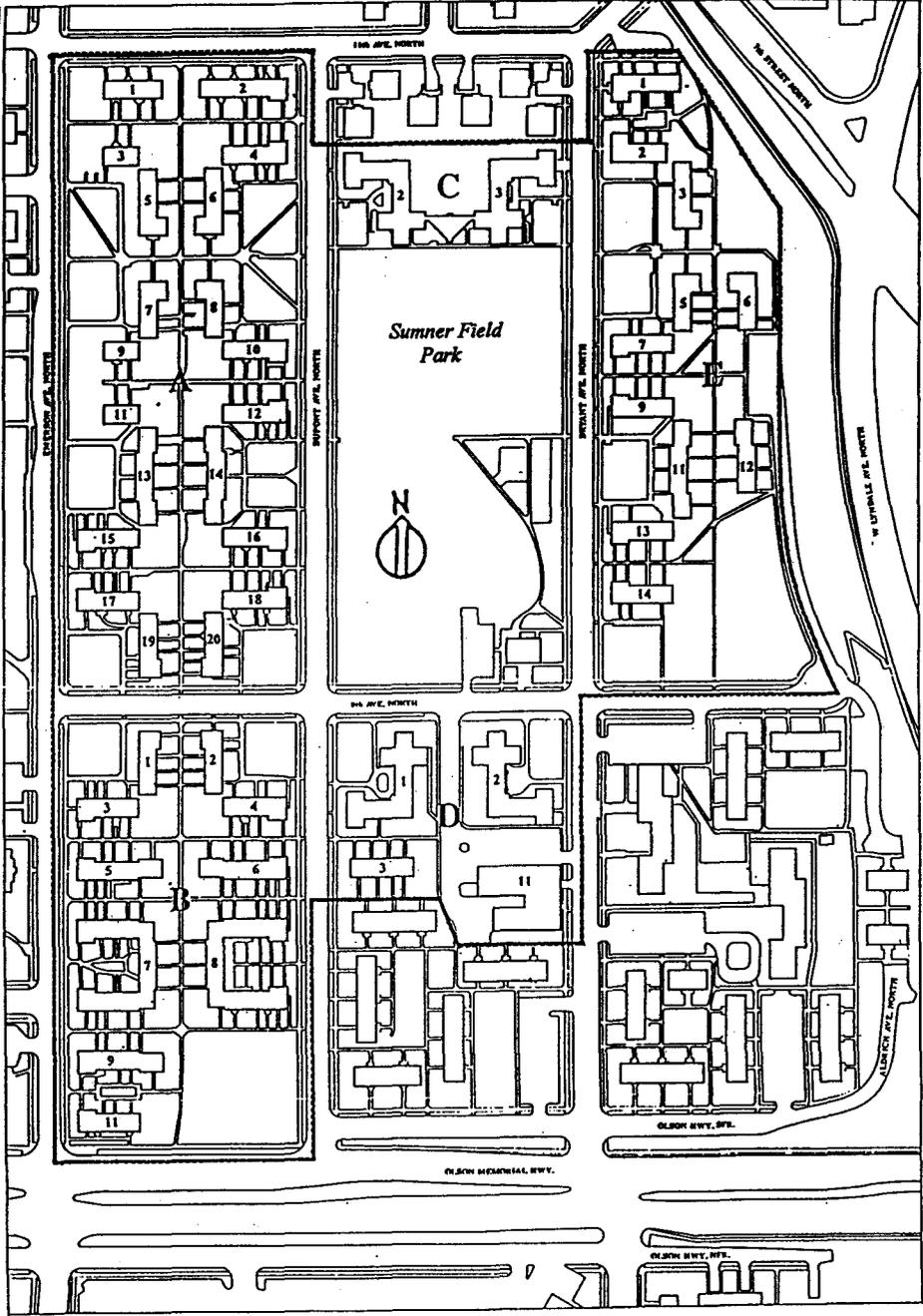


Figure 2 – Sumner Field Site Plan After Alterations

conditions were far from normal -- or at least far from adequate. By suspending civilian construction, the war had created a serious housing shortage, which was exacerbated by an economic downturn in 1921. Although real estate developers and builders eventually rushed into residential construction later in the decade, their market was a relatively small segment of society, consisting primarily of middle-class families in search of single-family homes in newly developed urban or suburban neighborhoods. For urban working-class families, housing conditions simply got worse. While Northern Europe tackled its housing shortage by constructing more than four million units of low-cost, government-subsidized housing after the war, the American urban poor remained quartered in deteriorating, over-crowded tenements that had been built well before the turn of the century. In one of the most conservative eras in American history, few politicians were willing to risk their careers by suggesting that government might assume some responsibility for sheltering its less fortunate citizens. The only state in the Union to attempt a subsidized, low-income housing program was New York, which in 1926 granted developers certain tax exemptions for constructing low-rental projects.<sup>4</sup>

As American unemployment skyrocketed during the Great Depression, the issue of affordable housing acquired greater political appeal. Nevertheless, Roosevelt was reluctant during his first term in office to support openly a public housing program, for fear of offending an entrenched and powerful real estate lobby. When early New Deal programs did build homes at public expense, administration spokesmen generally justified the projects as a means of putting construction workers back on the job. They also pointed out that the government would eventually recoup much of the cost from mortgage or rental payments.<sup>5</sup>

Two New Deal programs constructed government-subsidized housing in Minnesota. Both were authorized by the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and administered by the Public Works Administration (PWA), which owed its own existence to the same piece of legislation. Although both programs aimed at improving the quality of urban life, their methods were quite different. One hoped to clear the American city of its slums; the other intended to relieve the city of its people. The latter was the more fanciful. Organized as the Subsistence Homestead Division (SHD) of the PWA, it embodied a romantic back-to-the-land ideology that was popular among many of

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<sup>4</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 193-214; Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935), 119-128; "Public Housing," *Architectural Forum* 68 (May 1938): 346.

<sup>5</sup> "Public Housing," 348.

Roosevelt's advisors, including his Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace. The SHD planned to decentralize American industry and reduce the congestion of the nation's cities by relocating unemployed urban families to rural or suburban areas where they would grow their own food and engage in light cooperative manufacturing.

At a minimum, each family was to receive a new single-family house on a few acres of land, and, after a trial rental period, a 30-year mortgage to repay the government for the cost of the homestead. By 1935, the SHD had approved about fifty pilot projects across the country, including a forty-four-dwelling community known as Austin Acres on the outskirts of Austin, Minnesota, and an eighty-four-dwelling community known as the Jackson Project in Hermantown near Duluth. Although the Duluth project appears to have been the more successful in promoting a sense of community spirit, neither seems to have developed an industrial base. The houses in both communities eventually became private property and apparently are still standing.<sup>6</sup>

The other New Deal housing program in Minnesota was sponsored by the Housing Division of the PWA, which constructed a total of fifty-nine low-rental, demonstration projects across the country. To make the idea of government subsidy more palatable to the business community, the Housing Division tied its pilot program to slum clearance, which theoretically would increase property values in the vicinity of the government projects. Despite this sugar coating, the public housing pill was difficult for landlords and developers to swallow. The real estate lobby was particularly successful in Minnesota, which was one of only nine states before World War II that refused to pass enabling legislation permitting cities to administer public housing projects.<sup>7</sup>

Real estate interests also succeeded in keeping a PWA demonstration project out of St. Paul. In Minneapolis, however, Mayor William A. Anderson, and his successor Mayor A. G. Bainbridge, brought together a broadly based coalition of civic, business,

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<sup>6</sup> On the Homestead Subsistence Division, see James S. Olson, *Historical Dictionary of the New Deal* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985, 477-478; Henry A. Wallace, "Unemployment and Subsistence Farming," *Architectural Record* 77 (January 1935): 5-8; Bruce L. Melvin, "Housing Standards for Subsistence Homesteads," *Architectural Record* 77 (January 1935): 9-15; Wright, 222-223. The two Minnesota communities are described in Coleman Woodbury, ed., *Housing Yearbook 1938* (Chicago: National Association of Housing Officials, n.d.), 76, 126; Mark Stodghill, "History in Hermantown," *Duluth News Tribune and Herald*, 4 October 1987, "Federal Dictation Hit at Austin Acres," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 9 August 1936.

<sup>7</sup> Seven of the fifty-nine projects were built by limited-dividend corporations under PWA guidance, the remainder were built directly by the PWA; see C.W. Short and R. Stanley-Brown, *Public Buildings* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 654. On the linkage of slum clearance to public housing, see "Public Housing," 348. On the lobbying of Minnesota real estate interests, see *Housing Yearbook 1938*, 76-77; "The Housing Project Fiasco," *Property Owner* 3 (July 1935): 1.

and professional groups that convinced PWA officials that, no matter how backward St. Paul might be, their city at least was progressive enough to welcome a pilot project. The preferred site, located about one mile north of the central business district, was a run-down commercial and residential district surrounding a municipal park and play area known as Sumner Field.<sup>8</sup>

In the early 1920s, the City Planning Commission had investigated "the deterioration of the [Sumner Field] district's housing accommodations," and subsequent studies had only confirmed that "the Sumner Field area was considered the most undesirable housing area in this city." Although the neighborhood included a poor white population, it largely served as a ghetto for low-income Black and Jewish families -- a fact fully exploited by the local real estate brokers' association, when it warned property owners of an impending epidemic of "juvenile delinquency, crime, arson, rats, mice, lice and whatnot" because the federal government "intend[ed] to unhouse 400 families in that district and scatter them lock, stock, and baggage in other sections of our fair City."<sup>9</sup>

To represent its interests in the Sumner Field project, the city approved a design committee consisting of architects Robert T. Jones, Gottlieb R. Magney, Wilbur F. Tusler, and Edwin H. Hewitt. Whether intentionally or not, the committee represented three distinct areas of practice. Jones was a professor of architecture at the University of Minnesota and a long-time student of low-cost, single-family housing. Magney and Tusler were, as the local press might have said, "men of practical experience." As principals in a firm of the same name, they catered to the local corporate community and were responsible for the city's most imposing commercial building, the Foshay Tower. Hewitt, by all accounts, was the reigning architect of "good society." Trained at the Ecole des Beaux Artes in Paris, Hewitt had married into one of the wealthy flour-milling families that made up the city's social elite. His commissions included the Minneapolis Club, the Minneapolis School of Art, St. Mark's Episcopal Church,

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<sup>8</sup> The defeat of the St. Paul housing project is noted by George H. Herrold, who was St. Paul city planner at the time, in his unpublished manuscript, "The Story of Planning in St. Paul," n.d., 92, Herrold Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. The successful Minneapolis campaign for a PWA demonstration project is chronicled in detail in "History of the Sumner Field Homes," unpublished report prepared by the City Planning Commission, 1936, 1-13, in Minneapolis History Collection, Minneapolis Public Library.

<sup>9</sup> "The Housing Project Fiasco," *Property Owner* 3 (July 1935): 1-2. The neighborhoods racial composition is discussed in F. Stuart Chapin, "The Effects of Slum Clearance and Rehousing on Family and Community Relationships in Minneapolis," *American Journal of Sociology* 63 (March 1938): 744-745. Chapin's research indicated that most of the dispossessed families relocated within a mile of their former homes.

and the Minikahda Club.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary newspaper accounts identified Magney and Tusler as the leaders of the design committee, and according to architect Elizabeth Close, who joined the Magney and Tusler staff in 1936, the Sumner Field project was definitely handled by their office. Close, however, is uncertain as to who in the firm was responsible for the actual design work. She recalls only that major design issues had already been settled when she came on board to do working drawings.<sup>11</sup> The anonymity of the project's designer probably has more to do with the federal Housing Division's policies than with any defect in Close's memory. Although the Housing Division prided itself on working with local architects, it gave them relatively little freedom in crafting a design.

The very first project approved by the Housing Division revealed the basic design features that were to govern virtually all of the demonstration projects. Planned for the Boston area in 1933, this prototype project was a garden apartment complex with buildings covering only about twenty percent of the site. The remainder of the site was given over to lawns and walkways, with provisions for only limited through traffic. Residential units were no more than two rooms deep, ensuring adequate light and ventilation.<sup>12</sup>

By the beginning of 1935, the Housing Division had officially codified its design principles into what it called "a system of measurement" based on "an intensive study . . . of every conceivable element which might concern the successful development of a low-rent housing venture." The result was a set of standardized floor plans, with prescribed minimum square footages, for "three types of dwelling units, namely those in apartment houses, row houses, and flats." The Housing Division also prepared sample "unit" plans, showing how to group the individual floor plans into four economical, interlocking configurations: strip, tee, cross, and corner. Having essentially dictated the basic geometries of the design, the federal planners felt free to encourage local architects to experiment with design alternatives by clustering wooden

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<sup>10</sup> On the formation of the design committee, see "History of the Sumner Field Homes," 7-9. For further information on the four architects, including lists of commissions, see their biography files in the Northwest Architectural Archives of the University of Minnesota.

<sup>11</sup> "Housing Plans May Also Take Lyndale Areas," *Minneapolis Star*, 13 July 1935; "U.S. Will Go Ahead on Sumner Project With Revised Plans," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 1 February 1937; author's interview with Elizabeth Close, 11 November 1991.

<sup>12</sup> "First Housing Projects Approved by Public Works Administration," *Architectural Record* 74 (September 1933).

blocks of the four recommended shapes on a site model.<sup>13</sup>

As approved by the federal Housing Division in the summer of 1935, initial plans for the Sumner Field project envisioned the expenditure of four to five million dollars for replacing about fifty acres of "slum dwellings and unsanitary structures" with "model living quarters" for 1,067 low-income families. In the fall of 1935, the PWA re-evaluated its funding priorities and cut the allocation for Sumner Field to about three-and-one-half million dollars, necessitating a forty-percent reduction in the project's original scope. Basic funding arrangements, however, remained the same. As approved by Congress, the PWA would finance the housing project by means of a grant for forty-five percent of the total cost, with a supplemental loan covering the balance. The loan was to be amortized over sixty years by rental receipts from the project.<sup>14</sup>

In December 1935, the PWA awarded demolition contracts for clearing the Sumner Field site, and formal groundbreaking ceremonies for foundation work took place the following June. But activity abruptly came to a halt in the fall of 1936, when the PWA decided that bids for superstructure work exceeded the budget. Over the winter, Magney and Tusler revised the project's layout to the PWA's satisfaction, and in the spring of 1937, they secured an acceptable bid from Butler Construction Company, an old-line St. Paul contracting firm. Finally, in July 1937, work began again on what the *Minneapolis Tribune* called "the largest single housing project in Minneapolis history." According to newspaper estimates, the construction work would employ 3,000 Minneapolis men before its scheduled completion in the fall of 1938.<sup>15</sup>

In December 1938, the new government housing project known as Sumner Field Homes officially opened for occupancy. Containing approximately thirty acres, the complex was bounded by North Emerson Avenue on the west, North Eleventh Avenue

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<sup>13</sup> Alfred Fellheimer, "Planning American Standards for Low-Rent Housing," *American Architect* 146 (February 1935): 10-28; "Standards for Low-Rent Housing," *Architectural Record* 77 (March 1935): 182-192; Plunz, 226.

<sup>14</sup> "City Slum Clearing to Be One of Biggest in Nation," *Minneapolis Journal*, 7 April 1935; "Housing Plan in Court Here," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 3 August 1935; "City's Housing Allotment Cut by \$2,500,000," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 27 September 1935. See also "History of the Sumner Field Homes," 11-16.

<sup>15</sup> "U.S. Will Go Ahead on Sumner Project with Revised Plans," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 1 February 1937; "New Housing Plan Nears Completion," *Minneapolis Star*, 18 March 1937; "North Side Housing Bids Called Today," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 21 April 1937; "Sumner Field Bid Accepted," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 16 June 1937; "Sumner Homes to Start Rising," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 8 July 1937; "North Side Housing Project Under Way," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 13 July 1937. See also "History of the Sumner Field Homes," 18-21.

on the north, North Aldrich Avenue on the east, and North Sixth Avenue (later Floyd B. Olson Memorial Highway) on the south. At the project's center was the original Sumner Field park, now encircled by five blocks of low-income public housing. There were forty-nine buildings in total – forty-eight residential structures and one central steam-heating plant. For administrative purposes, the PWA assigned each building a combined alphabetical-numerical designation, where the letter (A through E) represented a particular block and the number (one to a maximum of twenty, in ascending order north to south) indicated the building's approximate location on the block.

All buildings in Sumner Field Homes had flat roofs and red-brick exteriors. From the very beginning, the project's local architects had promised a "utilitarian" design, and they kept their word.<sup>16</sup> There were none of the Art Deco or historical revival flourishes commonly found on other PWA demonstration housing projects. Even the use of two contrasting colors of brick was rejected as too extravagant. There was an indication, however, that the project's stripped-down utilitarianism might legitimately be interpreted as modernism. It was the cantilevered rectangular canopy over each residential entrance, an early well-known signature of the modern movement.<sup>17</sup>

Of the forty-nine residences, four were three-story apartment houses, while the other forty-five were two-story row houses. Two of the row houses were U-shaped in plan; the remaining forty-three were of basic strip configuration, all except one having an abbreviated ell at one end. Reflecting the PWA's garden apartment ideal, most residential buildings were set back from the street in L- and U-shaped clusters, sharing a common front lawn and an extended backyard that formed a central spine for each block. Site coverage was about twenty percent. In site plan, building types, and materials, Sumner Field Homes closely resembled at least seven other PWA demonstration housing projects.<sup>18</sup>

Sumner Field Homes originally contained 464 dwelling units, ranging in size from two-room flats to six-room, two-story row house apartments with three bedrooms. In

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<sup>16</sup> "History of the Sumner Field Homes," 12.

<sup>17</sup> According to architect Elizabeth Close, the canopies were a modernist statement that reflected the sentiments of younger staff in the Magney and Tusler office, including herself; author's interview, 11 November 1991.

<sup>18</sup> The similar projects are Kenfield Housing, Buffalo; Old Harbor Village, Boston; Fairfield Court, Stamford, CT; Brand Whitlock Homes, Toledo; Julia C. Lathrop Homes, Chicago; Techwood Homes, Atlanta; Outhwaite Homes, Cleveland; see "Public Housing," *Architectural Forum* 68 (May 1938): 345-424.

designing the complex, the local architects employed nine standard "unit plans" derived from PWA Housing Department models. Accounting for about one-third of all dwellings in the complex, the most common unit plan was a two-story, row house, strip design that placed a bi-level, three-bedroom apartment next to a bi-level, two-bedroom apartment. The most common dwelling size, however, was a three-room, one-bedroom residence, designed as a flat in both the two-story row houses and the three-story apartment buildings.<sup>19</sup>

While the Sumner Field housing project was still under construction in 1937, Congress had phased out the PWA demonstration housing program and had created the United States Housing Authority (USHA) to financially assist local housing authorities with future low-income public housing projects. The USHA also took over the management of PWA housing projects in cities, such as Minneapolis, which did not have local housing authorities. At Sumner Field, the agency's monthly rental rates initially averaged about \$4.40 per room, which was considered to be within the reach of low-income non-relief families. All applicants had to satisfy minimum and maximum income requirements, though preference was given to families currently living in substandard housing. According to a tally in 1939, only 104 of the 400 families dispossessed by the housing project became residents.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> According to as-built plans in possession of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, the nine unit plans were alphabetically designated as follows:

- A: Two-story row house with two bi-level dwellings (one two-bedroom, one three-bedroom); strip configuration. See photograph HABS No. MN-160-23.
- B: Two-story row house with one bi-level dwelling (two-bedroom); strip configuration. See photograph HABS No. MN-160-23.
- CL: Two-story row house with two flats on each level (all one-bedroom); strip configuration. See photograph HABS No. MN-160-23.
- CS: Two-story row house with two flats on each level (two efficiencies and two two-bedroom); strip configuration.
- D: Two-story row house with one bi-level dwelling (three-bedroom); strip configuration. See photograph HABS No. MN-160-23.
- E: Three-story apartment building with three flats on each floor (all one-bedroom); T configuration. See photograph HABS No. MN-160-24.
- G: Three-story apartment building with three flats on each floor (all one-bedroom); corner configuration. See photograph HABS No. MN-160-25.
- H: Three-story apartment building with three flats on each floor (all two-bedroom); cross configuration. See photograph HABS No. MN-160-26.
- J: Two-story row house with one flat on each level (both two-bedroom); strip configuration. See photograph HABS No. MN-160-27.

<sup>20</sup> "Public Housing," *Architectural Forum*, 349; "Sumner Field Rents Average \$4.40 a Room," *Minneapolis Journal*, 24 October 1938; "125 Families to Move Into New Sumner Field Homes," *Minneapolis Star*, 26 November 1938; "Points to Need of Families in Lower Brackets of Income," *Minneapolis Journal*, 10 March 1939.

In 1947, the Minnesota legislature finally enacted legislation permitting the state's cities to establish housing authorities, and Minneapolis exercised its right shortly afterwards. In 1952, the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority completed its first low-income housing project on an eleven-acre site in Prospect Park.<sup>21</sup> Although the two-story "garden" row houses were linear descendants of the PWA's demonstration housing projects, there is no need to seek a direct influence in Sumner Field Homes. By the early 1950s, the PWA's public housing style had become part of the nation's standard architectural vocabulary. Sumner Field itself remained in federal ownership until 1958, when the property was transferred to the newly authorized Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority (MHRA).

The MHRA was reorganized in 1990 to create the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA). In 1991, the MPHA initiated efforts to demolish Sumner Field Homes. Over the course of sixty years, unstable soil conditions at the Sumner Field site had caused irreparable damage to the building foundations and infrastructure. To mitigate its actions, the MPHA retained Hess Roise and Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota, to prepare documentation of the Sumner Field Homes for the Historic American Buildings Survey. Charlene K. Roise served as the Principal Investigator, Christine A. Curran as Project Historian, and Jerry Mathiason as Project Photographer. In addition, this report relies heavily on research completed by Jeffrey A. Hess.

To avoid redundancies, eight buildings were selected to represent each building configuration. Together, these buildings contained the nine interior unit plans used at Sumner Field. Buildings were chosen whose historic integrity was least compromised by alterations and deterioration.

## **PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION**

### **A. General Statement:**

- 1. Architectural character:** The utilitarian, stripped-down style of the Sumner Field row houses and apartment buildings reflects the emphasis placed on economy by the federal Housing Division. Before the Housing Division had even approved the Sumner Field project, it was clear that fiscal priorities would dictate the architectural program. Supporters responsible for presenting the Sumner Field site to the federal government outlined the following scheme for the Housing Division's consideration:

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<sup>21</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, 12 October 1952.

The proposed housing buildings will be constructed as economically as possible of fireproof materials. They will be built for utilitarian purposes with the primary object of obtaining the lowest cost per room per month possible both as to first cost and upkeep.<sup>22</sup>

**B. Site:**

- 1. General setting and orientation:** Sumner Field Homes is located one mile north of downtown Minneapolis. Covering approximately 30 acres, the housing project occupies most of the five city blocks between Olson Memorial Highway, North Eleventh Avenue, North Emerson Avenue and the I-94 corridor. One of the blocks also contains a municipal park known as Sumner Field. The forty-nine buildings that comprise the housing development surround the park. The buildings are arranged on each block in L- and U-shaped clusters. Three of the five blocks have a wide "street" of common lawn that runs north/south down the center of the blocks. A network of concrete footpaths connects the buildings. See Figure 1 for site plan.
- 2. Historic landscape design:** Landscape was an integral design component of virtually all the federal Housing Division's demonstration projects. One of the most fundamental principles behind the housing program was to provide for children those essentials that life in the slums could not: adequate light, ventilation, and safe places to play. In Minneapolis, landscape architect Hugh Vincent Feehan provided local input to a standardized plan for the grounds at Sumner Field. A program from the ground-breaking ceremony described the basic scheme:

Every building will be surrounded by open spaces improved by plantings and lawns or devoted to individual family gardens or play spaces for the smaller children of the project. Only 25% of the total space is to be occupied by buildings and 75% of the total space will be open area, thus assuring a maximum of sunlight, breezes, and ventilation.<sup>23</sup>

A concrete sidewalk defines the perimeter of each block of the housing project. Anchored by a central spine that runs north/south down the length of most of the blocks, a network of concrete footpaths interrupts large, open spans of lawn between buildings. When the buildings were occupied, the wide grassy lane bisecting the blocks acted as a kind of village green, unrestricted by fences,

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<sup>22</sup> "History of the Sumner Field Homes," 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

which provided pedestrian access to family gardens, outdoor laundry lines, play areas, and building entrances.

The grassy blocks are peppered with large shade trees and foundation plantings. According to original site plans, selected trees were preserved during site clearance and project construction. Therefore, it appears that some of the elm and oak trees that remain pre-date the existence of the housing development.

### **PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

#### **A. Architectural drawings:**

Original linen construction drawings, 1936-1937. Located at the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, Minneapolis.

Renovation drawings by TKDA and Associates, St. Paul, and Tyson Associates, Minneapolis, 1983. Located at the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, Minneapolis.

#### **B. Early views:**

Photograph of the slum neighborhood that was cleared to become the site for the Sumner Field Homes project, early 1930s. Print on loan to the Design Center for American Urban Landscape, Minneapolis, from the city of Minneapolis, City Hall.

Aerial photograph of the Sumner Field Homes Project, 1938. Print on loan to the Design Center for American Urban Landscape, Minneapolis, from the city of Minneapolis, City Hall.

Overview photograph of the recently completed Sumner Field Homes Project, 1937. Print on loan to the Design Center for American Urban Landscape, Minneapolis, from the city of Minneapolis, City Hall.

#### **C. Interviews:**

Close, Elizabeth. Interview by Jeffrey A. Hess, 11 November 1991.

#### **D. Bibliography:**

##### **1. Primary and unpublished sources:**

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