

Atchison Village, A Critical Part of Richmond's History

Even in the midst of the housing bubble, Atchison Village Mutual Homes Corporation remained an oasis of affordable housing. The Village is made up of a six-block complex of 450 one-, two- and three-bedroom units grouped in duplexes and fourplexes. Many of these cluster around courtyards with common space in front and yards or common space behind. At the center of the site lies a public park, and an office/community building that also houses the Atchison Village Credit Union. Today the 30-acre complex bordered by West Macdonald Avenue and the Richmond Parkway is as much a mini-melting pot as the city that surrounds it. Its residents include blue-collar workers, recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America, professionals who fled the sky-high home prices of San Francisco and Berkeley in the early 2000s, and even a handful of the children and grandchildren of World War II shipyard workers. They enjoy the stability of affordable housing thanks to Atchison Village's unique history, one bound up with the history of the City of Richmond itself.

Atchison Village is part of the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park, which was established by an Act of Congress in 2000. On June 19, 2001, the Richmond City Council designated Atchison Village as a historical resource for Richmond, and on May 30, 2003, the Village was also entered into the National Register of Historic Places because of its important role in the home front effort during World War II. The Federal Public Housing Authority built the complex in 1941 to accommodate Kaiser shipyard workers building ships for the U.S. to "lend-lease" to Great Britain. After the U.S. entered World War II, the defense industries boomed in Richmond, and people flocked here from all over the country to become part of the home front endeavor.

The federal government also built a number of other housing projects in Richmond, but after the war, most of them were torn down and their residents relocated. In the early 1950s, when the federal government was unloading public housing projects, the Richmond Housing Authority proposed converting Atchison Village and the adjoining Annex to permanent low-income rental housing. "But in November 1954, the elected officials of the Richmond City Council resolved 7 to 2 that there was no need for Atchison Village and Annex to serve as low-rent public housing, declaring there was enough available in the City. It was decided that the supply of such housing in Richmond was already adequate, and the City withdrew its offer." ("A Home of Our Own: the Stories of Atchison Village's Longtime Residents," winner of a 2010 Richmond Historic Preservation Award).

Two years later, when the government threatened to tear the Village down, the residents demonstrated a strong communitarian spirit by banding together to establish Atchison Village Mutual Homes Corporation as a nonprofit entity to purchase and run the property, and they raised the \$50,000 initial payment in just two-and-a-half months. The charter members of the corporation set up an elected, all-volunteer Board of Directors to run it, and wrote strict rules to prevent speculation.

Since its creation, Atchison Village has enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with the City of Richmond as evidenced by the City Council minutes throughout the 1940s and '50s. In 1945 the Federal Public Housing Authority deeded the streets within Atchison Village to the City for their maintenance, and the City has honored that obligation for many years. As well, shortly after the Atchison Village Quitclaim Deed was signed in February 1957, the park at the center of the Village was deeded to the City, which soon began improving it into the multi-use resource it still is today.

Lauded as cutting-edge worker housing when it was built, Atchison Village is still a pleasant place to live, although its members now face the intense challenges of maintaining its 70-year-old buildings and infrastructure, and of finding ways to keep alive the indomitable spirit of the corporation's founders. Current residents still celebrate Community Day, commemorating the momentous occasion when their forebears signed the Deed, officially cementing their commitment to preserving Atchison Village as an affordable, owner-occupied mutual housing corporation.