

Hooverville

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Huts and unemployed in West Houston and Mercer St by Berenice Abbott in Manhattan in 1935



A Hooverville near [Portland, Oregon](#)

A "**Hooverville**" is the popular name for [shanty towns](#) built by homeless people during the [Great Depression](#). They were named after [Herbert Hoover](#), who was [President of the United States](#) during the onset of the Depression and widely blamed for it. The term was coined by Charles Michelson, publicity chief of the [Democratic National Committee](#).^[1] There were hundreds of Hoovervilles across the country during the 1930s and hundreds of thousands of people lived in these [slums](#).^[2]



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Background[edit]

Homelessness was present before the Great Depression, and [hobos](#) and [tramps](#) were common sights before 1929. Most large cities built municipal lodging houses for them, but the depression exponentially increased demand. The homeless clustered in shanty towns close to free soup kitchens. These settlements were often formed on empty land and generally consisted of tents and small shacks. Authorities did not officially recognize these Hoovervilles and occasionally removed the occupants for trespassing on private lands, but they were frequently tolerated or ignored out of necessity. The [New Deal](#) enacted special relief programs aimed at the homeless under the Federal Transient Service (FTS), which operated from 1933–35.^[3]

Some of the men who were forced to live in these conditions possessed construction skills and were able to build their houses out of stone. Most people, however, resorted to building their residences out of wood from crates, cardboard, scraps of metal, or whatever materials were available to them. They usually had a small stove, bedding and a couple of simple cooking implements.^[4]

Most of these unemployed residents of the Hoovervilles used [public charities](#) or [begged](#) for food from those who had housing during this era. They blamed President Hoover for this, and named the town after him. Democrats coined other terms,^[5] such as "Hoover blanket" (old newspaper used as blanketing) and "Hoover flag" (an empty pocket turned inside out). "Hoover leather" was cardboard used to line a shoe when the sole wore through. A "Hoover wagon" was an automobile with horses hitched to it because the owner could not afford fuel; in Canada, these were known as [Bennett buggies](#), after the Prime Minister at the time.

After 1940 the economy recovered, unemployment fell, and shanty eradication programs destroyed all the Hoovervilles.^[6]

Notable Hoovervilles[edit]

There were hundreds of Hoovervilles across the U.S. during the 1930s (dozens in Washington State alone).^[7] By 1932 millions of people were living outside their homes and

hundreds of thousands were living on the streets.[8]



Bonus Army marchers confront the police

- The **Bonus Army**, a group of **World War I** veterans seeking expedited benefits, established a Hooverville in **Anacostia** in the **District of Columbia** in 1932. At its maximum there were 15,000 people living there.[9] The camp was demolished by units of the U.S. Army, commanded by **Gen. Douglas MacArthur**.
- **Central Park, New York City**: Scores of homeless families camped out at the **Great Lawn** at Central Park, then an empty reservoir.[10]
- **Riverside Park, New York City**: A shantytown occupied Riverside Park at 72nd Street during the depression.[11]
- **Seattle** had 8 Hoovervilles during the 1930s.[12] Its largest Hooverville on the **tidal flats** adjacent to the **Port of Seattle** that lasted from 1932 to 1941.[13]
- **St. Louis** in 1930 had the largest Hooverville in America. It consisted of four distinct sectors. St. Louis's racially integrated Hooverville depended upon private **philanthropy**, had an unofficial mayor, created its own churches and other social institutions, and remained a viable community until 1936, when the federal **Works Progress Administration** allocated slum clearance funds for the area.[14]

In popular culture[edit]

Hoovervilles have often features in the popular culture, and still appear in editorial cartoons. [15] Movies like *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) sometimes sentimentalized Hooverville life.[16]

- ***Man's Castle***, a 1933 film directed by **Frank Borzage**, focuses on a number of down-and-out characters living in New York City Hooverville; the main characters (played by **Spencer Tracy** and **Loretta Young**) are lovers who cohabit in a shanty outfitted with a skylight.
- In 1936 screwball comedy ***My Man Godfrey***, "Forgotten man" Godfrey Smith (played by **William Powell**) is living in a Hooverville when he is patronised and "adopted" by Irene (**Carole Lombard**).
- In ***Sullivan's Travels***, a 1941 comedy film written and directed by **Preston Sturges**, John L. Sullivan, a wanderlust movie director, played by Joel McCrea, visits a Hooverville and accidentally becomes a genuine tramp.[17]
- The musical ***Annie***, has a song called "We'd Like to Thank You, Herbert Hoover," which takes place in a Hooverville beneath the **59th Street Bridge**. In the song, the chorus sings of the

hardships they now suffer because of the Great Depression and their contempt for the former president.^[18]

- In 1987, the Liverpool group [The Christians](#) had a British hit with the song "Hooverville (And They Promised Us The World)".¹¹
- In the [Series 3](#) episodes of *Doctor Who* – [Daleks in Manhattan](#) and [Evolution of the Daleks – The Doctor](#) and his companion [Martha Jones](#) travel back in time to [New York City](#) during the 1930s and visit the Hooverville in [Central Park](#) to investigate several mysterious disappearances of its inhabitants. In the episodes, it is stated that [a] Hooverville is "a place for anyone who has no where else to go." In the episode, people from Hooverville were being used as cheap labor for construction of the [Empire State Building](#).
- During a temporary housing crisis,^[19] the comic strip [Piled Higher and Deeper](#) referred to a fictional solution to the resulting housing crisis at [Stanford University](#) as "Hooverville" due to its proximity to Stanford's [Hoover Tower](#).^[20]
- The 2005 version of *King Kong*, directed by Peter Jackson, depicts the Hooverville in New York's [Central Park](#) at the beginning of the film.
- The 2005 movie *Cinderella Man* also referenced the Central Park encampment.
- In the novel *Bud, Not Buddy*, set during the Great Depression, an early scene involves the police dismantling a Hooverville. Bud calls it "Hooperville".^[21]
- In Nelson Algren's *A Walk on the Wild Side (novel)*, the main character Dove Linkhorn is described as descending from "Forest solitaires spare and swart, left landless as ever in sandland and Hooverville now the time of the forests have passed."
- In John Steinbeck's famous novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family briefly settles into a Hooverville in California.^[22]
- In [Harry Turtledove's](#) "Timeline-191" series of books, the equivalent of Hoovervilles in the United States and [Confederate States](#) are called Blackfordburghs and Mitcheltowns, respectively, after fictional Presidents Hosea Blackford of the US and Burton Mitchel of the CS.
- Hoovervilles are part of [James Lincoln Collier's](#) 2000 novel *The Worst of Times: A Story of the Great Depression*.

See also[[edit](#)]

- [New Deal](#)

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External links[[edit](#)]



Wikimedia Commons has media related to *Shanty towns*.

- [Photos of a new father figure in Hooverville in Portland, Oregon, near the Ross Island Bridge](#), from a [Library of Congress](#) website
- [Hoovervilles and Homelessness from the Great Depression in Washington State Project](#), including photographs, paintings, maps, essays and first-hand accounts of life in Seattle's Hoovervilles.
- [Photos and details of a Hooverville in Seattle, Washington](#), from a [King County, Washington](#) website
- [Photographs of California Hoovervilles \(Sacramento, Kern County\)](#), via [Calisphere](#), California Digital Library
- [Missouri Hooverville Photographs collections](#) at the [University of Missouri–St. Louis](#)
- [Yael Schacher, "Homelessness"](#)

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Herbert Hoover

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