

The New York Times

'Collyers' Mansion' Is Code for Firefighters' Nightmare

By [ANDY NEWMAN](#)

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On the West Coast, some firefighters call it a "Habitrail house." In the Midwest, it is often a "packer house." In parts of Nevada, it is a "multiple waiting to happen," meaning a multiple-alarm fire.

But in New York City, and along much of the East Coast, a dwelling jammed rafter-high with junk is referred to by rescue personnel, with dismay and no small degree of respect, as a "Collyers' Mansion." As in, primary searches delayed because of Collyers' Mansion conditions. The phrase, as many New York history buffs know, refers to the legendary booby-trapped brownstone in Harlem in which the brothers Homer and Langley Collyer were found dead in 1947 amid more than 100 tons of stockpiled possessions, including stacks of phone books, newspapers, tin cans, clocks and a fake two-headed baby in formaldehyde.

The Collyer Mansion is not just a slice of urban lore and a monument to what psychologists now recognize as obsessive-compulsive disorder. It is, in New York, an official term of art, taught in the Fire Academy to cadets learning the potential dangers that can await in burning buildings. So, on Monday, after 14 firefighters were injured putting out a three-alarm apartment fire in Sunnyside, Queens, Deputy Chief John Acerno described the scene this way: "They tried to open the door, and they couldn't get it open because of all the debris that was behind the door. In Fire Department jargon, we call that a Collyers' Mansion. There was debris from the floor to the ceiling throughout the entire apartment."

The apartment's tenant, Vycheslav Nekrasov, was in critical condition last night at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell hospital.

The Breaking News Network, a service run by scanner hounds that some news outlets subscribe to, has sent out reports of "Collyers' Mansion conditions" at least 10 times in the past three months.

Once upon a time, the Collyers were routinely invoked by frustrated parents. "Every time my room was a mess when I was a kid, my mom would say, 'My God, this looks like the Collyer brothers' house,'" said John Miller, the head spokesman for the [F.B.I.](#), who said he heard the phrase sometimes when he worked for the New York Police Department as a deputy commissioner.

But as 1947 recedes ever further into the past, the facts behind the lingo are fading. A spokesman for the Fire Department, Allan Shaw, who has been a firefighter for eight years, recalled learning about Collyer conditions at the academy, but punted when quizzed on just what the Collyers' Mansion was. "Collyer, I believe, was one of those people who, I guess, at some point, had a house like that," he offered.

However widespread knowledge of its origins may be, the term itself continues to spread. An Internet search turned up references to Collyers' Mansions in news and fire department sites in Manassas, Va.; Clinton, Md.; and Cochranton, Pa. The Fire Department Web site in Clearwater, Fla., nearly 1,200 miles from Harlem, noted that at a trailer and house fire this past April, "Companies inside were experiencing Collyers' Mansion conditions as the fire intensified."



Photo: Charles Hoff, Ed Jackson



Image by Bettmann CORBIS



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[Thomas Von Essen](#), a former New York City fire commissioner, said that the term communicated crucial information to new firefighters. "What's dangerous is that all this stuff could fall down," he said. "Or it could weaken the floors, and when you put water on it you could have a collapse. You could fall into it and then you have a hard time getting out. You could get caught behind it; your mask could get tangled. I could guarantee you that people have gotten hurt in those kinds of situations."

Calls to about a dozen fire departments across the country yesterday yielded a few regional variants on the Collyers' Mansion, though most department officials said they knew of no special phrases.

Carl Kietzke of Seattle, the president of the International Fire Buffs Associates, said that up and down the West Coast he had heard the phrase "Habitrail house," referring to buildings there that firefighters have likened to rambling, unkempt rodent cages.

Firefighter Scott Salman, a spokesman for the Boston Fire Department, said that while the official term for excessive clutter was "heavy debris," firefighters privately refer to "pack rat" conditions.

By whatever name, said Jeff Cianza, an emergency medical technician in Queens who moonlights at the Breaking News Network, Collyers' Mansions lurk behind many more doors than the average civilian would suspect.

"I see it every day in E.M.S.," Mr. Cianza said. "It's a wonder more people aren't injured in those places."

Correction: July 7, 2006

An article on Wednesday about the phrase "Collyers' Mansion," used to refer to a dangerously cluttered dwelling, misstated the authenticity of an artifact found in the Collyer brothers' Harlem brownstone, the jam-packed building that spawned the term now often used by firefighters. Although some of the artifacts recovered, like musical instruments, were determined to be fakes, a two-headed baby in a jar of formaldehyde found in the house was actually real.

Correction: July 14, 2006

A picture caption on July 5 about the cluttered Harlem brownstone in which the brothers Homer and Langley Collyer were found dead in 1947 misstated the departmental affiliation of an unidentified inspector shown pointing to a stairway piled high with boxes and newspapers. He worked for the Police Department, not the Fire Department. The inspector was identified when the same picture was published on Dec. 31, 2003, with an article in some copies about the pathology of compulsive hoarders. But the caption with that picture misspelled his surname. He was Thomas V. Boylan, not Boyland.

And then this from Wikipedia

Homer Lusk Collyer (November 6, 1881 – March 21, 1947) and **Langley Wakeman Collyer** (October 3, 1885 – [c.](#) March 9, 1947), known as the **Collyer brothers**, were two American brothers who became famous because of their bizarre natures and [compulsive hoarding](#). For decades, the two lived in seclusion in their [Harlem brownstone](#) at 2078 [Fifth Avenue](#) (at the corner of 128th Street) where they obsessively collected books, furniture, musical instruments, and many other items, with [booby traps](#) set up in corridors and doorways to ensnare intruders. In March 1947, both were found dead in their home surrounded by over 140 tons of collected items that they had amassed over several decades.

Both Homer and Langley attended [Columbia University](#), which had just relocated to its present-day [Morningside Heights](#) campus. Homer obtained a degree in [admiralty law](#), while Langley studied [engineering](#) and chemistry. Langley was also an accomplished concert pianist; he played

professionally for a time and performed at [Carnegie Hall](#). Langley was also a [layman](#) of the [Trinity Church](#) where the family had been [parishioners](#) since 1697.

In 1909, Dr. Herman Collyer moved the family into a four-story brownstone in Harlem at 2078 Fifth Avenue. Dr. Collyer was known to be eccentric himself, and was said to frequently paddle down the [East River](#) in a canoe to the City Hospital on [Blackwell's Island](#), where he occasionally worked, and then to carry the canoe back to his home in Harlem after he came ashore on Manhattan Island. Around 1919, Dr. Collyer and Susie Collyer separated. Dr. Collyer moved to a new home at 153 West 77th Street while Susie Collyer stayed in the Harlem brownstone. Homer and Langley, who had never married or lived on their own, chose to remain with their mother. Dr. Collyer died in 1923 leaving his sons all of his possessions, including items from his medical practice, which they brought to their home in Harlem. Susie Collyer died in 1929 leaving the brothers all her possessions and the Harlem brownstone.

After their parents' deaths, the Collyer brothers continued to live together in the Harlem brownstone they inherited from their mother. They socialized and left their home on a regular basis. Homer continued to practice law while Langley worked as a piano dealer. Both also taught Sunday school at the Trinity Church.

In 1933, Homer lost his eyesight due to [hemorrhages](#) in the back of his eyes. Langley quit his job to care for his brother and the two began to withdraw from society. As time progressed, the brothers became fearful due to demographic changes in the neighborhood; the largely white, upper-class neighborhood went into decline during the [Great Depression](#) as crime and poverty rates increased and more [African Americans](#) moved into the once empty apartment houses that were built near a projected subway route. When later asked why the two chose to shut themselves off from the world, Langley Collyer replied, "We don't want to be bothered." As rumors about the brothers' unconventional lifestyle spread throughout Harlem, crowds began to congregate outside their home. The attention caused the brothers' fears to increase along with their eccentricities. After teenagers threw rocks at their windows they boarded them up and wired the doors shut. After a number of attempted burglaries due to unfounded rumors that the brothers' home contained valuables and large sums of money, Langley set about using his engineering skills to set up booby traps and tunnels among the collection of items and trash that filled the house. The house soon became a maze of boxes, complicated tunnel systems consisting of junk and trash rigged with trip wires. Homer and Langley Collyer lived in "nests" created amongst the debris that was piled to the ceiling.

Langley spent the majority of his time tinkering with various inventions, such as a device to vacuum the insides of pianos and a [Model T Ford](#) adapted to generate electricity. He also cared for his brother Homer. Langley later told a reporter that he fed and bathed his brother, read him classic literature as he could no longer see and played [piano sonatas](#) for him. He also tended to Homer's health and was determined to cure his brother's physical ailments through "diet and rest". Langley concocted a diet for his brother consisting of one hundred oranges a week, [black bread](#), and peanut butter, claiming that this regimen was curing Homer's blindness. After Homer became paralyzed due to inflammatory [rheumatism](#), he refused to seek professional medical treatment because both brothers distrusted doctors. The brothers feared that if Homer sought medical attention, doctors would cut his [optic nerve](#), leaving him permanently blind, and give him drugs that would certainly hasten his death. Langley Collyer later told a reporter, "You must remember that we are the sons of a doctor. We have a medical library of 15,000 books in the house. We decided we would not call in any doctors. You see, we knew too much about medicine."

Langley began venturing out of the house only after midnight and would walk miles all over the city to get food, sometimes going as far as [Williamsburg, Brooklyn](#) to buy as little as a loaf of bread. He would also pick food out of the garbage and collect food that was going to be thrown out by grocers and butchers to bring back to his brother Homer. He also collected countless pieces of abandoned items and trash that aroused his interest.



Homer Collyer, 1939, arguing with police officers

By the early 1930s, the Collyer brothers' brownstone had fallen into disrepair. Their telephone was disconnected in 1917 and never reconnected as the brothers said they had no one to talk to. Because the brothers failed to pay their bills, the electricity, water, and gas were turned off in 1928. The brothers took to warming the large house using only a small [kerosene](#) heater. For a time, Langley attempted to generate electricity by means of a car engine. Langley would fetch their water from a pump in nearby parks. Their only link to the outside world was via a [crystal radio](#) that Langley made.

Neighbors and shopkeepers in the area described Langley Collyer as a generally polite and rational man but added that he was "crazy". A reporter who interviewed Langley in 1942 described him as a "soft spoken old gentleman with a liking for privacy" who spoke in a "low, polite and cultivated voice." His appearance was disheveled; he sported a droopy mustache, wore a 1910 boating cap and his tattered clothes were held together by pins. While Langley Collyer ventured out of the home and occasionally interacted with other people, Homer had not been seen or heard from since he went blind and retreated from the world in 1933. Langley was fiercely protective of Homer and would not allow anyone to see or speak to him. When he caught neighbors attempting to peek into their windows from a neighboring home, Langley bought the property for \$7,500 cash. When a small fire broke out in the home in 1941, Langley refused to let fireman who put out the fire to see or speak to his brother.

Public scrutiny

In 1932, shortly before Homer Collyer went blind, he purchased the property across the street from their house at 2077 Fifth Avenue, with the intent of developing it by putting up an apartment building. But after the onset of his blindness, any plans of profit from the real estate venture ended. Since the Collyer brothers never paid any of their bills and stopped paying income taxes in 1931, the property was repossessed by the City of New York in 1943 to pay the \$1,900 in back income taxes that the Collyers owed the city. Langley protested the repossession of their property, saying that since they had no income, they should not have to pay income taxes. While rumors and legends abounded in Harlem about the brothers, they came to wider attention when, in 1938, a story about their refusal to sell their home to a real estate agent for \$125,000 appeared in [The New York Times](#). The Times repeated information about the brothers' hoarding and also repeated neighborhood rumors that the brothers lived in some sort of "[Orientalist](#) splendor" and were sitting on vast piles of cash, afraid to deposit it in a bank. Neither rumor was true; the brothers were certainly not broke, although eventually they would have been, since neither of them had worked for decades.

After *The New York Times* story ran, Helen Worden, a reporter from [New York World-Telegram](#), became interested in the brothers and interviewed Langley Collyer (Worden would release a

book about the brothers in 1954). Langley told Worden that he stopped playing piano professionally after performing at Carnegie Hall because, "[Paderewski](#) followed me. He got better notices than I. What was the use of going on?" Langley explained that he dressed in shabby clothing because, "They would rob me if I didn't."

The Collyer brothers made the news again when, in 1939, workers from [Consolidated Edison](#) forced their way into the house to remove two gas meters that had been shut off in 1928. The incident reportedly drew a crowd of a thousand curious onlookers. The brothers drew media attention again in August 1942 when the [Bowery Savings Bank](#) threatened to evict the Collyers for failing to pay their mortgage for three years. That same year, the [New York Herald Tribune](#) interviewed Langley. In response to a query about the bundles of newspapers that were kept in the brothers' home, Langley replied, "I am saving newspapers for Homer, so that when he regains his sight he can catch up on the news."

In November 1942, the Bowery Savings Bank began eviction procedures and sent a cleanup crew to the home. Langley began yelling at the workers prompting the neighbors to summon the police. When the police attempted to force their way into the home by smashing down the front door, they were stymied by a sheer wall of junk piled from floor to ceiling. They found Langley Collyer in a clearing he had made in the middle of the debris. Without comment, Langley made out a check for \$6,700 (2015 equivalent of \$96,707), paying off the mortgage in full in a single payment. He then ordered everyone off the premises, and withdrew from outside scrutiny once more, emerging only at night when he wanted to file criminal complaints against intruders, get food or collect items that piqued his interest.

Homer Collyer's death



View of interior

On March 21, 1947, an anonymous tipster who identified himself only as "Charles Smith" phoned the 122nd Police Precinct and insisted there was a dead body in the house. The caller claimed that the smell of decomposition was emanating from the house. As the police were used to calls from neighbors about the Collyer brothers' home, a patrol officer was dispatched. The responding officer initially had a difficult time getting into the house. There was no doorbell or telephone and the doors were locked; and though the basement windows were broken, they were

protected by iron [grillwork](#). An emergency squad of seven men eventually had no choice but to begin pulling out all of the junk that was blocking their way and throwing it out onto the street below. The brownstone's foyer was packed solid by a wall of old newspapers, folding beds and chairs, half a sewing machine, boxes, parts of a wine press, and numerous other pieces of junk. A patrolman finally broke in through a window into a second-story bedroom. Behind this window lay, among other things, more packages and newspaper bundles, empty cardboard boxes lashed together with rope, the frame of a baby carriage, a rake, and old umbrellas tied together. After five hours of digging, Homer Collyer's body was found in an alcove surrounded by filled boxes and newspapers that were piled to the ceiling. Homer was wearing a tattered blue-and-white bathrobe, his matted, grey hair reached his shoulders, and his head was resting on his knees. The medical examiner confirmed Homer's identity and said that the elder brother had been dead for approximately ten hours. According to the medical examiner, Homer died from [starvation](#) and [heart disease](#). Police initially suspected that Langley Collyer was the man who phoned in the anonymous tip regarding his brother's death and theorized that he fled the house before police arrived (it was later discovered that a neighbor called police based on a rumor he heard). A police officer was posted outside the home to wait for Langley but he never arrived. Police began to suspect that Langley was dead when he failed to attend Homer's funeral held on April 1.

Discovery of Langley Collyer



Langley Collyer (right) with attorney, 1946

On March 30, false rumors circulated that Langley had been seen aboard a bus heading for [Atlantic City](#). A manhunt along the [New Jersey](#) shore turned up nothing. Reports of Langley sightings led police to a total of nine states. The police continued searching the house two days later, removing 3,000 books, several outdated phone books, a horse's jawbone, a [Steinway](#) piano, an early [X-ray machine](#), and more bundles of newspapers. More than nineteen tons of junk was removed from the ground floor of the brownstone. The police continued to clear away the brothers' stockpile for another week, removing another eighty-four tons of rubbish from the house. Although a good deal of the junk came from their father's medical practice, a considerable portion was discarded items collected by Langley over the years. Approximately 2,000 people stood outside the home to watch the clean up effort.

On April 8, 1947, a workman found the body of Langley Collyer ten feet from where Homer had died. Langley was found in a two-foot wide tunnel lined with rusty bed springs and a chest of drawers. His decomposing body, which was the actual source of the smell reported by the anonymous tipster, had been partially eaten by rats and was covered by a suitcase, bundles of newspapers and three metal bread boxes. The medical examiner determined that Langley had died around March 9. Police theorized that Langley was crawling through the tunnel to bring food to his paralyzed brother when he inadvertently tripped a booby trap he had created and was crushed by debris. His cause of death was attributed to [asphyxiation](#).

Both brothers were buried next to their parents in unmarked graves at [Cypress Hills Cemetery, Brooklyn](#).

House contents

Police and workmen removed approximately 120 tons of debris and junk from the Collyer brownstone. Items were removed from the house such as baby carriages, a doll carriage, rusted bicycles, old food, potato peelers, a collection of guns, glass chandeliers, bowling balls, camera equipment, the folding top of a horse-drawn carriage, a [sawhorse](#), three dressmaking dummies, painted portraits, photos of [pinup girls](#) from the early 1900s, plaster busts, Mrs. Collyer's [hope chests](#), rusty bed springs, the kerosene stove, a child's chair (the brothers were lifelong bachelors and childless), more than 25,000 books (including thousands about medicine and engineering and more than 2,500 on [law](#)), human organs pickled in jars, eight live cats, the chassis of the old Model T with which Langley had been tinkering, tapestries, hundreds of yards of unused silks and other fabrics, clocks, fourteen pianos (both [grand](#) and [upright](#)), a [clavichord](#), two organs, banjos, violins, bugles, accordions, a gramophone and records, and countless bundles of newspapers and magazines, some of them decades old, and thousands of bottles and tin cans and a great deal of garbage. Near the spot where Homer had died, police also found 34 bank account [passbooks](#), with a total of \$3,007 (about \$36,366 as of 2015).

Some of the more unusual items found in the home were exhibited at Hubert's [Dime Museum](#), where they were featured alongside Human Marvels and sideshow performers. The centerpiece of this display was the chair in which Homer Collyer had died. The Collyer chair passed into the hands of private collectors upon being removed from public exhibit in 1956.

The house itself, having long gone without maintenance, was decaying: the roof leaked and some walls had caved in, showering bricks and mortar on the rooms below. The house was deemed "unsafe and [a] fire hazard" in July 1947 and was razed later that month.

Most of the items found in the Collyer brothers' house were deemed worthless and were disposed of. The salvageable items fetched less than \$2,000 at auction; the cumulative estate of the Collyer brothers was valued at \$91,000 (about \$1,100,541 as of 2015), of which \$20,000 worth was personal property (jewelry, cash, securities, and the like). Fifty six people, mostly first and second cousins, made claims for the estate. A Pittsburgh woman named Ella Davis claimed to be the long lost sister of the Collyers'. Davis' claim was dismissed after she failed to provide a birth certificate to prove her identity (Years earlier, Davis claimed she was the widow of Peter Liebach, another wealthy recluse, from Pittsburgh, who was found murdered in 1937). In October 1952, the [New York County](#) court decided that twenty-three of the claimants were to split the estate equally.

And a park remains today where the house once stood



Type	Pocket Park
Location	2078 Fifth Avenue
Nearest city	New York, New York
Area	1,500 square feet