

The American Settlement House Movement

Among the many issues that animated Progressive Era American reformers, and which prompted them to take decisive action, was the plight of the nation's urban poor. In particular, they found the squalid, unsanitary conditions in which the urban poor lived to be cause for concern, not only because such conditions threatened the health of a given city's entire population, but because poverty and discontent tended to fuel anti-democratic sentiments -- most notably a loyalty to corrupt political "machines," which pandered to poor immigrants in exchange for votes, but also to labor organizers and anarchists -- that were deemed by many to be a threat to traditional American civic life. Progressives thus moved to establish "social settlements" in urban tenement neighborhoods, the purpose of which was to provide residents with health care, vocational education, recreational opportunities, and other hard to come by services, as well as to help defuse "dangerous" political movements at their source, before they had a chance to take root.

The settlement house concept actually originated in England, a nation that had, by the late nineteenth century, long-since grappled with the ill effects of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. More specifically, the idea was the brainchild of Anglican curate Samuel Barnett who, along with his wife Henrietta, saw it as his Christian duty to provide education, fellowship, and social services to the citizens of London's squalid, crime-ridden Whitechapel neighborhood. In 1884, Canon Barnett opened the doors of his mission, Toynbee Hall, to affluent Oxford University students. His goal in doing so was to provide England's young social/economic "elite" an opportunity to live and work among London's urban immigrant poor, the hope being that they would take what they had learned and become activists on behalf of the less fortunate. Needless to say, Toynbee, with its radical notions of wealth, poverty, and social obligation,

proved an irresistible beacon to young, Progressive Era American idealists. Among those who spent time there, and who later served as pioneers in the American Settlement House Movement, were Stanton Coit, founder of the New York's Neighborhood Guild (1886); Vida Scudder, Jean Fine, and Helen Rand, founders of the College Settlement Association (1887); and Jane Addams founder of Chicago's Hull House (1889). Of these pioneers, let us focus briefly on Addams, for although she was only one among many American settlement workers, she was the most well-known of them all.

Like many of the college educated women of her generation, Jane Addams struggled after graduation to find her place in the world. And for good reason: Progressive Era Americans, for all their talk of reform and change, clung to traditional, one might even say "Victorian," gender roles. Simply put, men were encouraged to have careers and engage in political activity, while women, if they worked at all, were expected to engage in such "nurturing" endeavors as nursing or teaching. In most cases, it was deemed vastly preferable for women to forego professional careers altogether, marry, and then devote their energy to raising upstanding, democratically-minded children.

For an ambitious, educated woman such as Addams, however, a life spent performing domestic tasks was not only unappealing -- it was tantamount to intellectual and vocational failure. But there were few options available to her, or at least none that would provide her with the leadership opportunities and civic/political involvement that her education had taught her to crave. The untimely death of her father in 1881 served only to worsen matters, for it robbed young Jane of her primary confidant and source of intellectual encouragement. The once-vibrant Addams soon fell into a state of despondency, becoming, in her own words, "an unhappy woman, whose vitality [was] consumed by vain regrets and desires."

Fortunately, a trip to Toynbee Hall in 1888 provided Addams with a solution to her quandary. For unlike medicine or law, which required specific professional training that was often closed to nineteenth-century American women, social settlement work was more or less “free from professional doing good’.” More importantly, it offered Addams an opportunity to engage in socially-meaningful work -- in this case, helping the urban immigrant poor -- without forcing her to step outside the accepted women’s vocational role of nurturer or “bread giver” (a role that Addams actually embraced). And so, infused with a new sense of purpose, a jubilant Addams wrote to her close friend Ellen Gates Starr from London, beseeching her to consider founding a settlement house similar to Toynbee in an urban American neighborhood. Starr agreed to do so, and in 1889, the two opened Hull House in Chicago, Illinois’s squalid Nineteenth Ward.

At first, Addams and Starr offered cultural “uplift” programs to the immigrants who patronized Hull House, such as reading aloud to them from books or showing them slideshows of famous paintings. But these activities were eventually set aside as impractical, for they failed to address the true problems of urban immigrant life. What the poor needed was education, suitable health care services, better homes, and an advocate in their struggle to secure safe working conditions; “cultural uplift,” important though it may have been, was of dubious immediate value to struggling working-class families. With this in mind, Addams and Starr adopted a more pragmatic approach in their relationship to the community, allowing the needs of their clients, rather than their own perceptions of what their clients needed, shape Hull House policy. In this they were aided by reformer Julia Lathrop, a trained lawyer, who worked tirelessly to curb the ills of industrial capitalism. They also benefited from the advice of such luminaries as John Dewey (among the foremost pioneers of American public education) and W. I. Thompson (a

renowned Progressive Era sociologist), both of whom served on the faculty of the University of Chicago and both of whom made periodic forays to Hull House.

In time, and with a great deal of work, Hull House developed into a truly remarkable institution. Using their own funds, as well as those donated by wealthy Chicago philanthropists, Addams and Starr provided a kindergarten for the children of working mothers; social clubs for boys and girls; a coffee house; an art gallery; a movie theatre; and the nation's first indoor gymnasium. The Hull House staff also encouraged immigrant workers to unionize and seek better working conditions, despite the fact that this position, which was viewed as dangerous and radical by many Americans, served to drive a wedge between the settlement and some of its patrons.

Taking a cue from Addams, and from other settlement house pioneers such as Lillian Wald, who founded New York's Henry Street Settlement in 1893, American women flocked to the social settlement movement. There were, by 1900, an estimated one hundred settlement houses scattered throughout the nation's largest cities, most of which were similar to Hull House in terms of goals and infrastructure, and all of which were staffed primarily by unwed, college educated women.

Eventually, as early twentieth-century American civic governments took a more active role in tackling the problems associated with industrial life, the need for urban social settlements began to wane. And yet, the settlement house spirit lived on, for there were vast regions of the United States -- most notably the Southern Appalachian Mountains -- that had been passed over by the perceived benefits of Progressive Era American life. For approximately four decades beginning in the late 1880s, American Progressives migrated to the Appalachian South, founding an archipelago of social settlement and vocational schools. Among them was the Pi Beta Phi

Settlement School, which opened its doors in the hamlet of Gatlinburg, Tennessee in February 1912.