

Twenty Years at Hull-House

Jane Addams

Introduction

Jane Addams, born in 1860 (the year before the Civil War began) and grew up in an affluent middle-class family outside of Chicago. She graduated from Rockford Female Seminary (now Rockford University) in 1881 and moved to Philadelphia to attend the Women's Medical College at the University of Pennsylvania. When her own health issues prevented her from finishing her medical degree, Addams turned her attention to social activism. In 1889, Addams and her friend Ellen Gates Starr visited one of the first settlement houses, Toynbee Hall, located in London's Eastend, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city.

Before the Progressive Era, churches were the only place poor, destitute people could turn to for relief. Settlement Houses marked a new type of poor relief, offering housing, food, education, healthcare, and other services for the poorer classes. In 1889, Addams and Starr opened their own settlement house in an abandoned mansion built by industrialist Charles Hull in 1856. By the 1880s, the once affluent Westside neighborhood was filled with immigrants and industrial workers from the stockyards and meatpacking plants. Jurgis and Ona lived on the Westside, not far from Hull House. By the 1890s, Hull House encompassed 13 buildings and offered comprehensive services to residents and new arrivals on the Westside. Hull House operated one of the first kindergartens in the country and one of the first to build a playground for the neighborhood children. They offered free daycare, a 24-hour soup kitchen, laundry facilities, and free classes in English, cooking, music, art, and crafts (textiles, pottery, etc). Ellen Gates Starr opened one of the first prenatal clinics in the country and tirelessly advocated for more comprehensive – and affordable – health care for everyone, but most especially women and children. Addams and Starr also fought to criminalize domestic violence at a time when most people believed men had the right to do as they pleased in their own homes.

Addams, Starr, and other staff lived at Hull House and embedded themselves in the community, which quickly became known as the “Hull House neighborhood.” Appalled by the unsanitary and dangerous living conditions in the neighborhood, Addams ran for City Council and lobbied politicians for improved infrastructure and social services in blighted neighborhoods like the Westside. Young reformers from all over the world flocked to Hull House to receive training and inspiration. Addams and her associates were also heavily involved in campaigns for the prohibition of child labor, sanitation, and workers' rights. The following excerpt comes from Addams' autobiography, “Twenty Years at Hull House,” published in 1910¹.

¹ Jane Addams, [*Twenty Years at Hull House*](#), 1910, believed to be in the public domain.

Primary Source

It is easy for even the most conscientious citizen of Chicago to forget the foul smells of the stockyards and the garbage dumps, when he is living so far from them that he is only occasionally made conscious of their existence, but the residents of a Settlement are perforce constantly surrounded by them. During our first three years on Halsted Street, we had established a small incinerator at Hull-House and we had many times reported the untoward conditions of the ward to the city hall. We had also arranged many talks for the immigrants, pointing out that although a woman may sweep her own doorway in her native village and allow the refuse to innocently decay in the open air and sunshine, in a crowded city quarter, if the garbage is not properly collected and destroyed, a tenement house mother may see her children sicken and die, and that the immigrants must therefore not only keep their own houses clean, but must also help the authorities to keep the city clean. Possibly our efforts slightly modified the worst conditions, but they still remained intolerable, and the fourth summer the situation became for me absolutely desperate when I realized in a moment of panic that my delicate little nephew for whom I was guardian, could not be with me at Hull-House at all unless the sickening odors were reduced. I may well be ashamed that other delicate children who were torn from their families, not into boarding school but into eternity, had not long before driven me to effective action. Under the direction of the first man who came as a resident to Hull-House² we began a systematic investigation of the city system of garbage collection, both as to its efficiency in other wards and its possible connection with the death rate in the various wards of the city...

During August and September, the substantiated reports of violations of the law sent in from Hull-House to the health department, were one thousand and thirty-seven...

Still the death rate remained high and the condition seemed little improved throughout the next winter. In sheer desperation, the following spring when the city contracts were awarded for the removal of garbage, with the backing of two well-known business men, I put in a bid for the garbage removal of the nineteenth ward. My paper was thrown out on a technicality but the incident induced the mayor to appoint me the garbage inspector of the ward. The salary was a thousand dollars a year, and the loss of that political "plum" made a great stir among the politicians. The position was no sinecure³ whether regarded from the point of view of getting up at six in the morning to see that the men were early at work; or of following the loaded wagons, uneasily dropping their contents at intervals, to their dreary destination at the dump...

With the two or three residents who nobly stood by, we set up six of those doleful incinerators which are supposed to bum garbage with the fuel collected in the alley itself. The one factory in town which could utilize old tin cans was a window weight factory, and we deluged that with ten times as many tin cans as it could use-much less would pay for. We made desperate attempts to

² The first male resident at Hull House, Edward Burchard, was not an immigrant, but the son of a Congressman from Illinois. Burchard moved to Hull House in 1891 after hearing a public lecture by Jane Addams. He worked with Addams on a number of civic improvement projects, and later served as the executive secretary of the Chicago Recreation Commission.

³ Job that requires little or no work.

have the dead animals removed by the contractor who was paid most liberally by the city for that purpose but who, we slowly discovered, always made the police ambulances do the work...

Nevertheless many evils constantly arise in Chicago from congested housing which wiser cities forestall and prevent; the inevitable boarders crowded into a dark tenement already too small for the use of the immigrant family occupying it; the surprisingly large number of delinquent girls who have become criminally involved with their own fathers and uncles; the school children who cannot find a quiet spot in which to read or study and who perforce go into the streets each evening; the tuberculosis superinduced and fostered by the inadequate rooms and breathing spaces...

It is these subtle evils of wretched and inadequate housing which are often the most disastrous. In the summer of 1902 during an epidemic of typhoid fever in which our ward, although containing but one thirty-sixth of the population of the city, registered one sixth of the total number of deaths, two of the Hull-House residents made an investigation of the methods of plumbing in the houses adjacent to conspicuous groups of fever cases...

The careful information collected concerning the juxtaposition of the typhoid cases to the various systems of plumbing and non-plumbing was made the basis of a bacteriological study by another resident, Dr. Alice Hamilton⁴, as to the possibility of the infection having been carried by flies. Her researches were so convincing that they have been incorporated into the body of Scientific data supporting that theory, but there were also practical results from the investigation. It was discovered that the wretched sanitary appliances through which alone the infection could have become so widely spread, would not have been permitted to remain, unless the city inspector had either been criminally careless or open to the arguments of favored landlords. The agitation finally resulted in a long and stirring trial before the civil service board of half of the employees in the Sanitary Bureau, with the final discharge of eleven out of the entire force of twenty-four...

We were amazed at the commercial ramifications which graft in the city hall involved and at the indignation which interference with it produced. Hull-House lost some large subscriptions as the result of this investigation, a loss which, if not easy to bear, was at least comprehensible. We also uncovered unexpected graft in connection with the plumbers' unions, and but for the fearless testimony of one of their members, could never have brought the trial to a successful issue. Inevitable misunderstanding also developed in connection with the attempt on the part of Hull-House residents to prohibit the sale of cocaine to minors, which brought us into sharp conflict with many druggists...

For many years we have administered a branch station of the federal post office at Hull-House, which we applied for in the first instance because our neighbors lost such a large percentage of the money they sent to Europe, through the commissions to middle men... We find increasingly,

⁴ Dr. Alice Hamilton was the first woman appointed to the faculty at Harvard University, although unlike the male faculty, she was never granted tenure, promoted, allowed to walk with the male professors during Commencement, allowed in the Faculty Lounge, or given season tickets to the football games. After graduating from the University of Michigan School of Medicine, Hamilton moved to Hull House to work with Addams and Starr. Hamilton spent her career researching the impact of toxic substances in public and work spaces, making her one of the first medical professionals to talk about "public health."

however, that the best results are to be obtained in investigations as in other undertakings, by combining our researches with those of other public bodies or with the State itself...

The investigations of Hull-House thus tend to be merged with those of larger organizations, from the investigation of the social value of saloons made for the Committee of Fifty in 1896, to the one on infant mortality in relation to nationality, made for the American Academy of Science in 1909...

I have always objected to the phrase "sociological laboratory" applied to us, because Settlements should be something much more human and spontaneous than such a phrase connotes, and yet it is inevitable that the residents should know their own neighborhoods more thoroughly than any other, and that their experiences there should affect their convictions.