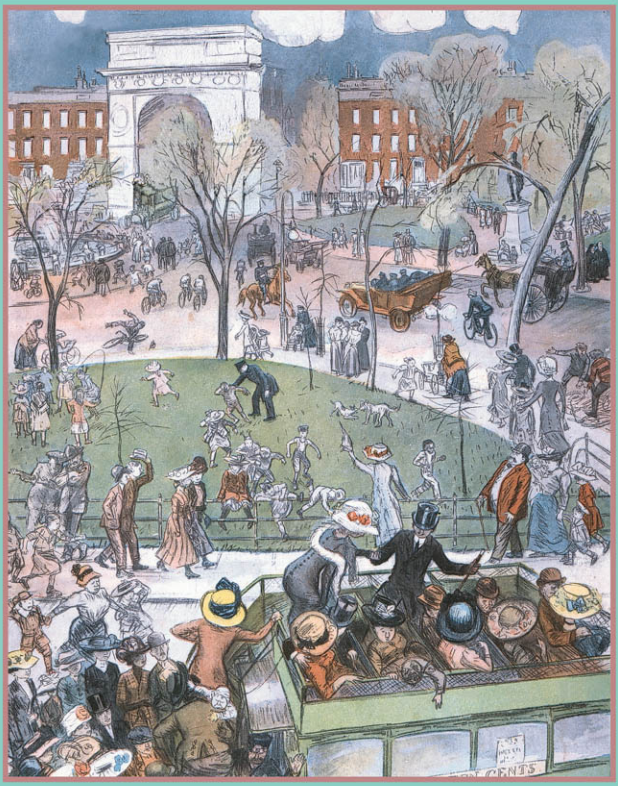
Inside Greenwich Village

A NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOOD, 1898–1918



Gerald W. McFarland

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Gerald W. McFarland

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With Appreciation To

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PREFACE

Most books about twentieth-century Greenwich Village history focus on the artists, writers, and cultural radicals whose activities brought the Village international fame as America's bohemia. Other residents of the Village, if mentioned at all, are discussed only in relation to the bohemian Villagers. This book reverses those priorities. Although the artists, writers, and radicals who lived in the Village between the turn of the century and World War I are described in some detail, the bulk of the text explores the lives of the nonbohemian Villagers.

I came to this contrarian focus out of a combination of curiosity and expediency. I have for some time now enjoyed researching topics that were well rooted in places that are, to some extent, still visible to the present-day visitor, and Greenwich Village suited my purposes because, for all the changes in its social geography, many streets, buildings, and institutions survive to the present. I was also drawn to the topic by the great diversity of the Village's population—a diversity largely invisible in studies that begin and end with the story of the tiny group of cultural radicals who lived in the neighborhood. I wondered how neighbors from such diverse classes and ethnic groups coexisted in a relatively small geographical area.

The practical or expedient aspect of my choice of topic arose from my hunch (which proved to be accurate) that the Village's long existence as an identifiable entity meant that I could find ample primary source material

on its history. Indeed, a treasure trove of largely unexplored sources came to my attention: records of community groups (the Washington Square Association, Charity Organization Society, People's Institute), the papers of Village social settlements (Greenwich House and Richmond Hill House), church archives (mainly the Church of the Ascension, Our Lady of Pompei, and St. Joseph's), and materials on African American Villagers. I also did extensive research in the manuscript collections of well-known Villagers who were part of *The Masses*, Liberal Club, and Dodge Salon circles, and while giving those famous Villagers their due, I made it my goal to provide a more inclusive portrait of life inside Greenwich Village than had any previous history of the neighborhood in the early twentieth century.

I am grateful for the support I received from institutions and individuals. A Samuel F. Conti Faculty Fellowship Award from the University of Massachusetts Research Council gave me a year-long leave and got my project off to a good start in 1992–1993, and a research grant from the American Philosophical Society helped me in the project's final phase. I received invaluable suggestions from Lois Banner, James Boylan, Daniel Czitrom, Dorothy McFarland, Lois Rudnick, and Jack Tager, who read the entire manuscript, and Steven Watson, who read the later sections. The final product is immensely better for their advice to me. Kate Blackmer did splendid work in designing and producing maps for the book.

Gerald W. McFarland
Leverett, Massachusetts

Inside Greenwich Village

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INTRODUCTION

The Latter Days of the Sixth Village

For most of its early history, Greenwich Village was physically separate from New York City, the metropolis that now surrounds and merges with it on all sides except on its western boundary, the Hudson River. During its long evolution from a separate settlement to a twentieth-century urban neighborhood, the Village went through a series of distinct phases. Each phase was so distinctive that the writer Floyd Dell, who lived in the neighborhood in the mid-1910s, identified seven historical Villages, each of which had been, like the "ancient cities which Schliemann dug up" at Troy, superimposed on its predecessors. The first four villages on Dell's list were those that had stood some distance north of the early city: the Indian settlement of Sappocanican, the Dutch farming district of Bossen Bouwerie, the English colonial village of Green Wich, and the American suburb of Greenwich, which in the early nineteenth century still had a buffer of open fields and scattered farms between itself and the rapidly advancing northern outskirts of the city's thickly settled parts.[1]

During the fifth of Dell's archaeological epochs, the Washington Square era, dense urban settlement reached the Village and, in a process that took several decades, roughly from the 1830s through the 1850s, began to surround it. Having lost its separate status, the Village became a West Side neighborhood bounded by the Hudson River, on the north by Fourteenth Street, on the east by University Place and West Broadway, and to the south

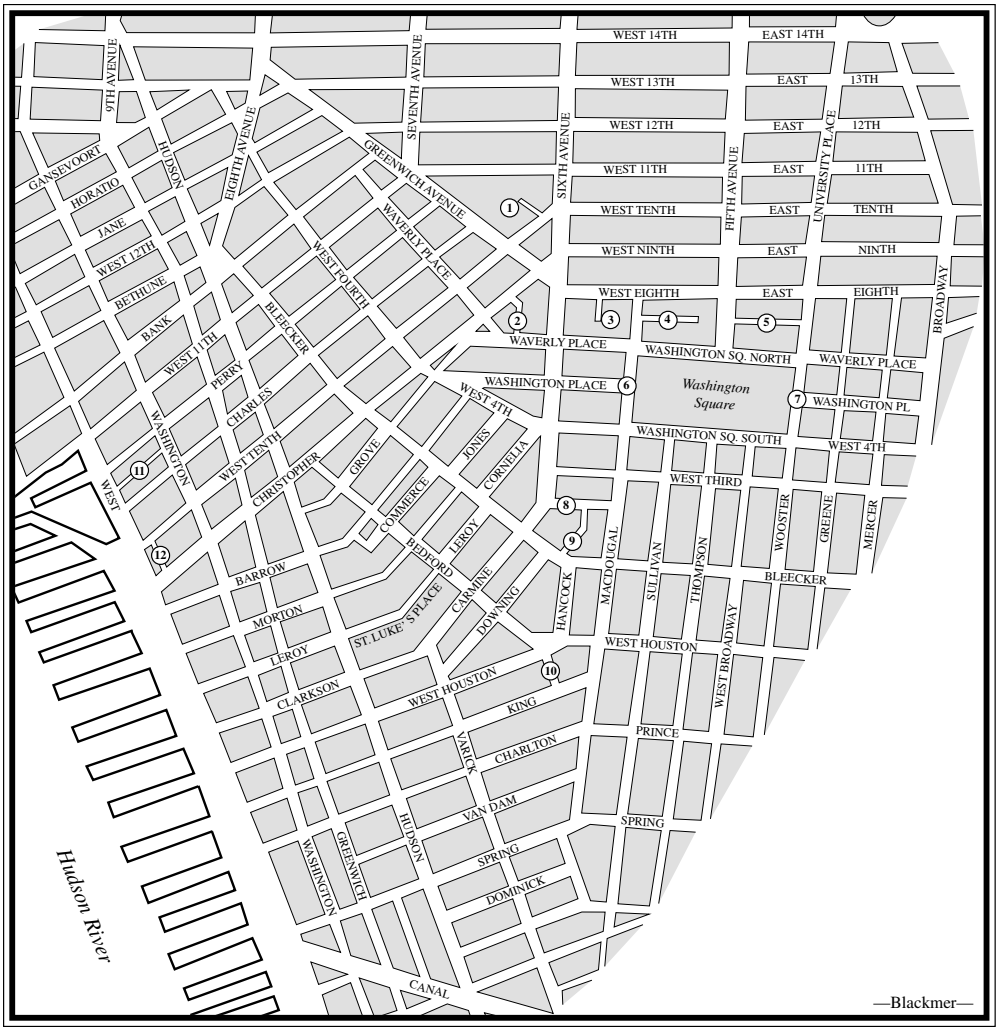
below Houston Street by Charlton and Prince (map 1). In the pre–Civil War period the Washington Square section of the Village became a prime location for handsome houses occupied by some of the city's wealthiest families. The greater part of the Village, however, was home to thousands of working- and middle-class New Yorkers.[2]

The class and ethnic heterogeneity of Greenwich Village's population became even more pronounced during the sixth of Dell's Villages, which lasted from the 1860s to the early 1910s. Dell, an intellectual and a cultural radical, was interested primarily in his beloved Seventh Village, the bohemian enclave to which he moved in 1913 (the first full year of its preeminence), and he had almost nothing to say of its immediate predecessor. The Sixth Village era he dismissed in a single phrase as a time when the neighborhood was "left to decay into a picturesque twentieth-century slum."[3]

Subsequent historians have filled in the picture somewhat, and several have suggested, without much elaboration, that the nearly half-century of the Sixth Village's existence can be divided into two fairly distinct phases: an "American Ward" period from the 1860s to 1890 and a "Real Village" era (1890–1910). During the first phase Greenwich Village was called the "American Ward" because it had the highest percentage of native-born citizens of any ward in the city. Although factually accurate, this description implies much more ethnic homogeneity among Village residents than actually existed. Even in 1875, the midpoint of the American Ward era, approximately one-third of Villagers were foreign-born, and many others were second generation Americans, the children of immigrants from various western European countries.[4]

In the second half of the Sixth Village's existence, between 1890 and the early 1910s, the neighborhood's foreign-born population increased dramatically. Italian immigrants arrived by the thousands and crowded into the five- and six-story tenement buildings that were rapidly replacing the older one- and two-family homes south of Washington Square. Concurrent with the arrival of Italian immigrants was an invasion of the Village from the south and east by industrial and commercial establishments. Block after block that had once been exclusively residential was now occupied by factories that produced clothing, boxes, candy, and artificial flowers.

In the large body of literature available on Greenwich Village, almost no accounts have focused exclusively on the Sixth Village era. More often, the Sixth Village is mentioned only in relation to one of two other subjects, either the emergence of the bohemian Village or the history of some ethnic or class subgroup within the neighborhood. The first approach, by far the most popular, resembles Dell's in subordinating everything else to the story of how the Seventh Village came into being. Within this rise-of-bohemia



Map 1. Greater Greenwich Village, 1900.

1. Patchin Place
2. Gay Street
3. Clinton Court
4. MacDougal Alley
5. Washington Mews
6. Washington Square West
7. Washington Square East
8. Minetta Lane
9. Minetta Street
10. Congress Street
11. Charles Lane
12. Weehawken Street

framework, little is said about the prebohemian Village except that it was a shabby, mixed-ethnic district whose quaint old houses, irregular street patterns, and cheap rental properties attracted artists and writers to the neighborhood. The strength of this approach is its tightly focused and dramatic story line; its weakness lies in its failure to provide a satisfactory description of the nonbohemian Villagers, who are treated as largely irrelevant to the history of cultural radicalism's rise and fall.[5]

A second source of information about the Sixth Village may be found in sociological studies that give extensive attention to the nonbohemian Villagers. Most such works are limited in scope, analyzing the history of a single ethnic or class subgroup within the Village. A more inclusive approach is evident in *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, an anthology edited by Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz that contains essays on Villagers, bohemians and nonbohemians alike, from colonial times to the present. Although much useful information about the Sixth Village can be gleaned from this anthology, the fact remains that, like most histories of Greenwich Village, it does not attempt to outline in a systematic way the Sixth Village's central features. Only one book—Caroline Ware's justly acclaimed 1935 classic, *Greenwich Village, 1920–1930: A Comment on American Civilization in the Post-War Years*—takes as its sole focus a comprehensive description of Villagers from all classes and ethnic groups in the early twentieth century. Even Ware's book, however, falls short as a source on the Sixth Village era. As Ware's subtitle indicates, her principle concern was to analyze Village life in the 1920s. For that reason the pre–World War I Village figures mainly as a prelude to the Jazz Age Village, a topical focus that necessarily limits its usefulness as a portrait of the prewar Village.

The last years of the Sixth Village deserve more attention. The history of both the place and the time raises compelling questions. Here was a place where diverse class and ethnic groups lived in close proximity. How did these Villagers—working- and middle-class blacks, Italians, and Irish; middle-class social workers, artists, and writers; and upper-class Protestants—relate to one another in the neighborhood they shared? Moreover, what impact did the period (the so-called Progressive Era) and the extraordinary changes it brought in the American urban scene have on the neighborhood and its diverse inhabitants?

Nearly all scholars who have applied the two traditional approaches to the pre–World War I Village recognize that the neighborhood's population was very diverse. Most, however, devote little effort to investigating either how the neighborhood was changing just before the bohemian era began or how the Sixth Village's various ethnic and class subgroups related to one another. The rise-of-bohemia approach is particularly deficient in this re-

spect, as its practitioners mention the existence of many class and ethnic groups within the Village without devoting significant attention to any group except the cultural radicals. This leaves it unclear what the vast majority of the Villagers were doing during a period of tumultuous change early in the twentieth century. Specialized studies of nonbohemian Villagers (most often of south Village Italians or of Washington Square North patricians) have filled in some gaps, though usually without any discussion of how members of each group related to neighbors from other ethnic and class backgrounds.

One partial exception is Ware's *Greenwich Village*. Although her focus is mainly on Village life in the 1920s, she ventures some provocative comparative statements about the distinctly different way Villagers of various types related to one another in the prewar and postwar periods. She asserts that the Jazz Age Village had, by 1930, "ceased to be a 'neighborhood' in anything but name." The prewar Sixth Village had been characterized by more community spirit and more social intimacy among Village residents.[6]

The stark contrast Ware draws between the Jazz Age Village and the prewar Sixth Village needs to be tested against the facts of neighborhood life before World War I. For a significant degree of social intimacy to have existed between neighbors as diverse as south Village blacks and Italians, west Village Irish, and north Village patricians (to name four of the most numerically prominent groups in the population of the turn-of-the-century Village), huge barriers posed by ethnic and class differences would have had to be overcome. Ware, who was deeply dismayed by what she viewed as the fragmenting impact of modern urban conditions on family and neighborhood cohesion, was impressed by the stories some old-timers among her informants told of earlier times when a spirit of easygoing neighborliness had existed in the Village. But what social realities underlay that remembered past?

An analysis of the Village's heterogeneous population, interesting in its own right, is also relevant to current debates about the strengths and weaknesses of America's multicultural society. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a larger influx of immigrants to the United States than any time since the pre–World War I period, and many of the newcomers were nonwhites. Conservative social critics responded with cries of alarm, asserting that America's increasingly diverse population was likely to do irreparable harm to the nation's social fabric. Yet these jeremiads largely ignored the country's long experience as a multicultural society. The percentage of foreign-born residents in the United States was much higher just before World War I than in the 1990s, but the nation and its ethnically heterogeneous cities somehow survived and even flourished under those conditions in the early

1900s. As possibly the most socially heterogeneous neighborhood in a socially diverse metropolis, the Sixth Village is a veritable laboratory for investigating how a culturally diverse neighborhood functioned early in the twentieth century.

The evolution of class and ethnic relations within the Sixth Village was strongly influenced by progressivism, as the reformist spirit of the time was called. Progressivism expressed itself in diverse and at times seemingly contradictory ways. Progressive reformers responded in conservative, coercive ways to the moral issues raised by prostitution, Sunday consumption of alcoholic beverages, new and more sensual dance styles, and movies that had sexually explicit or unpatriotic content. Typically, these attempts to shape public morality were campaigns in which the mostly middle- and upper-class (and often Protestant) reformers set out to impose social controls on working-class Catholics and Jews, many of them recent immigrants, who engaged in activities that the reformers regarded as vices.

Many progressives, however, including some of the same individuals who supported anti-vice crusades, also believed that the new century brought with it tremendous opportunities for social peace and economic prosperity if only Americans would reach out to each other across class and ethnic lines. In Greenwich Village this socially progressive credo led some middle- and upper-class Villagers to devote themselves to trying to improve the lot of their less privileged neighbors. Although the precise nature of these cross-class initiatives differed from case to case, their extraordinary variety—social settlement reform, feminism, socialism, labor unionism, and housing reform, among others—reflect the expansive spirit with which many early twentieth-century Americans pursued the cause of social betterment.

Even those Villagers who did not consciously align themselves with specific reform causes—and there were many—could scarcely avoid the impact of broader social and economic changes that were transforming American life at the turn of the century. The Villagers of 1898 still lived in the age of the horse, but by the mid-1910s automobiles were a commonplace sight in the neighborhood's streets. Women's suffrage had received almost no public attention from Villagers in late 1890s, but from 1910 onward pro-suffrage paraders by the thousands regularly launched their votes-for-women marches up Fifth Avenue from Washington Square. Few Villagers concerned themselves much with U.S. foreign policy in 1900, despite a recent minor war with Spain, but American participation in World War I, though of relatively brief duration (April 1917–November 1918), touched Villagers much more deeply, with some playing notable roles in opposing the war and a larger number supporting it.

Between 1898 and 1918, ragtime dances replaced the waltz in popularity, the first World Series and the first Rose Bowl game were played, a black boxer became the U.S. heavyweight champion, Stanford White was murdered by a jealous husband, the Titanic sank while the band played on, the Wright brothers launched their heavier-than-air machine at Kitty Hawk, Theodore Roosevelt used the presidency as a bully pulpit from which to name the muckrakers and then to condemn muckraking journalism, a new constitutional amendment authorized a federal income tax, the Socialist Party's candidate won nearly six percent of the vote in a presidential election, and Freudianism and Cubism arrived in America. The cumulative impact of these events on life inside Greenwich Village was nothing short of profound.