Neighbors and Strangers

In the summer of 1898 Neith Boyce, a young journalist who worked for the New York Commercial Advertiser, lived in a tiny room in the Judson Hotel, an economical boardinghouse on the south side of Greenwich Village’s Washington Square (map 2). Coming home from work, Boyce would take the Sixth Avenue elevated train uptown to the Bleecker Street station and walk three blocks to her hotel. Once there, she often stopped in at the room of one of two other Judson residents who, like herself, were young women who had begun careers in the overwhelmingly male profession of newspaper journalism. Boyce and her friends—Marie Manning, author of the New York Evening Journal’s immensely popular Beatrice Fairfax advice column, and Olivia Dunbar of the New York World—would have a cigarette together (a symbol of their status as emancipated women) and laugh and talk about their day’s work. Not infrequently that summer, these pleasant tête-à-têtes were cut short when Boyce excused herself to get ready to go out to dinner with her suitor, Hutchins Hapgood.

Hapgood, also a writer for the Commercial Advertiser, but older and better established in the profession than Boyce, had been courting her for almost six months. A self-described “intellectual and esthetic adventurer,” Hapgood enjoyed introducing Boyce to his favorite haunts south and east of Washington Square: Yiddish theaters on the Lower East Side, puppet shows in Little Italy, and tough Bowery dives such as Chuck Connor’s. Tonight,
however, the next day in this hypothetical account being a workday, they content themselves with dinner at the Black Cat, a nearby Bleecker Street bohemian hangout.¹

On leaving the restaurant after dinner, Boyce and Hapgood stroll through the immigrant and working-class parts of the Village near the restaurant. They are rewarded with sights and sounds that reflect the variety of ethnic communities to be found within a few minutes’ walk from Washington Square. From their starting point at the Black Cat, they proceed west on Bleecker, a south Village street that even at this evening hour is crowded with vendors and pedestrians, most of them Italian immigrants. Three blocks west of the restaurant they cross MacDougal and begin to see increasing numbers of black Villagers, most of them African Americans but some West Indians too, who live on Minetta Street, Minetta Lane, or nearby. After another two blocks they reach Carmine Street, near the southern terminus of Sixth Avenue (it was extended farther south in the 1920s).

At this point they enter the edge of the west Village, an area occupied by various ethnic groups of European extraction but dominated by the Irish. Just ahead to their left is the east end of Leroy Street, whose Irish residents include representatives of every wave of immigration from the Emerald Isle to New York City over the past seventy years. Some are families whose older members came to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century and whose ownership of handsome row houses on a one-block section of Leroy, known as St. Luke’s Place, offer clear testimony to their inhabitants’ rise to substantial middle-class status. West of St. Luke’s Place, however, are several blocks of tenement houses whose occupants are mainly working-class Irish, many of whom have only recently arrived in the States from their native land. But Boyce and Hapgood do not have time this evening to explore more of the Irish west Village; instead they turn right on Cornelia and then east on West Fourth Street, a route that sets them on their way back to the Judson. Their round-trip walk of barely ten blocks has taken them through a succession of ethnic enclaves representative of the Village’s diverse population.

Neith Boyce and Hutch Hapgood were eager observers of the richly varied ethnic life of Lower Manhattan’s immigrant districts, which include the south and west parts of the Village. Although their relatively high educational and occupational status meant that they had very little in common with working-class Villagers, the two journalists (Hapgood in particular) were deeply interested in the lives of Italian, Irish, and black Villagers whom they passed daily on the streets. Most working-class Villagers, however, did not share this cosmopolitan outlook toward neighbors outside their own respective ethnic group. Such contact did take place—on blocks
Map 2.
Important Villages Sites
Chapters 1–2

Chapter One
1. Judson Hotel ..................................... 53 Washington Square South
2. The Minettas ......................................
3. Abyssinian Baptist Church ............ 166 Waverly Place
4. Zion A. M. E. Church .................. 351 Bleecker Street
5. Our Lady of Pompei ...................... 210 Bleecker Street
6. Walker home to 1886 .................. 110 Leroy Street
8. St. Joseph’s Church ...................... Sixth Avenue
9. Jackson Square ..............................
10. Abingdon Square ............................

Chapter Two
11. West Side Branch ......................... 38 King Street
12. Richmond Hill House ................ 28 MacDougal Street
13. Greenwich House ...................... 26 Jones Street
14. Greenwich House Men’s Annex ...... 88 Grove Street
15. West Side Rookery ...................... 133R Washington Place
or in buildings that had residents from diverse ethnic backgrounds, in mixed-race saloons, in occasional attempts at political cooperation, and, most intimately, in mixed marriages—but it was the exception rather than the rule. Generally speaking, Italian, Irish, and black Villagers congregated in blocks and buildings where most residents were members of their particular ethnic group. Segregation along ethnic lines was also reflected in such important social relations as religious practice: Among Village Catholics, the west Village Irish attended Mass at St. Joseph’s on Sixth Avenue, and the south Village Italians worshiped at Our Lady of Pompei on Bleecker. White Protestants belonged to white churches, and African American Protestants formed black Methodist and black Baptist congregations. And these lines of religious separation had parallels in every other sphere of daily life. Thus it was that at the turn of the twentieth century, members of the south and west Village’s major ethnic groups were both neighbors and, for the most part, strangers.

**The Heart of Little Africa**

In 1898 the Village was home to one of the largest African American communities in the city. Blacks had lived in the Village ever since the Dutch colonial period, when former slaves first settled in the area. By the mid-1800s there were so many blacks in Greenwich Village that the section where they were concentrated was known as “Little Africa.” Throughout much of the late nineteenth century, the total number of blacks in the Village changed little, but this relative numerical stability masked significant demographic shifts taking place the area. From the late 1860s on, many black Villagers moved out of the neighborhood to new residential districts that were becoming available farther uptown, mainly between Fourteenth and Thirty-seventh streets. But the number of African American Villagers was sustained by the arrival of black migrants from the former Confederate states, especially Virginia, and did not immediately show a sharp decline.²

Little Africa was only rarely mentioned in the popular literature of the late nineteenth century, and the few writers who did discuss it focused almost exclusively on the area’s negative features, mainly squalor and criminality. The newspaperman and housing reformer Jacob Riis, who included a chapter titled “The Color Line in New York” in his best-selling book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), regarded the Village’s Little Africa as the social “bottom” of the narrow corridor on the West Side of Manhattan (the “top” was then at Thirty-second Street) where landlords were willing to rent to blacks. Riis described the dwellings that African Americans occupied
on Thompson Street in the south Village as “vile rookeries” that inevitably debased their inhabitants. 3

Riis was equally critical of an institution found throughout Little Africa’s slums: the “black-and-tan saloon,” a type of drinking establishment with a mixed-race clientele of poor whites, blacks, and tans (mulattos). “The moral turpitude of Thompson Street,” Riis declared, “has been notorious for years, and the mingling of the three elements does not seem to have wrought any change for the better.” Riis saw the black-and-tan saloon as a gathering place for the “utterly depraved of both sexes, white and black,” which attracted, as he put it, “all the lawbreakers and all the human wrecks within reach” (fig. 1). Although much of the rest of Riis’s chapter on black New Yorkers was devoted to praising the virtues of African Americans in other parts of the city, he left the impression that debauchery was the rule rather than the exception among black Villagers. 4

The young novelist and reporter Stephen Crane also visited Little Africa in the 1890s. Crane was on the lookout for colorful stories, and he found the neighborhood’s unsavory reputation perfect for his purposes. He concentrated his attention on two narrow streets, Minetta Lane and Minetta Street, each of which was only a very short city block in length.

Crane exploited to the fullest the Minettas’ notoriety as a dangerous and immoral locale. He wrote with relish about the black toughs—men and women known only by their nicknames, “No-Toe Charley,” “Bloodthirsty,” “Black-Cat,” and “Apple Mag”—whose deeds had contributed to the Minettas’ bad reputation. “Bloodthirsty” was a murderer, a large and “very hideous” man, “particularly eloquent when drunk,” who wielded a wicked razor. “Black-Cat” was a “famous bandit.” “Apple Mag” was a quarrelsome woman who reinforced her verbal assaults with “paving stones, carving knives and bricks.” Other denizens of the Minettas such as Pop Babcock and Mammy Ross, old-timers whom Crane used as informants, lived a marginal existence. Mammy Ross passed her final days in a tiny kitchen at the end of a dark hallway in “an old and tottering frame house.” Pop Babcock ran a squalid restaurant in a poorly lit room so small that its sparse furnishings—a cooking stove, a table, a bench, and two chairs—scarcely fit in the available space. On the occasion of Crane’s visit there, three down-and-out loners were spending the night, one stretched out on the two chairs, a second asleep on the bench, and the third sprawled “on the floor behind the stove.” 5

Murders, knifings, muggings, and other violent acts were commonplace occurrences in the Minettas until the mid-1890s. At that point a reform administration came to power, and the new police commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt, replaced the police captain formerly in command of the local precinct with a hard-nosed law-and-order cop. A crackdown followed and
the Minettas calmed down considerably, prompting one old-time Minetta Lane resident to tell Crane: “Why, disher’ Lane ain't nohow like what it uster be—no indeed, it ain't. No, sir! My—my, dem times was diff'rent!” Though quieter in 1896 when Crane wrote his sketch, the Minettas were still an impoverished and unsavory place in which a modicum of order was maintained, according to Crane, only through police vigilance: “There is probably no street in New York where the police keep closer watch than they do in Minetta Lane” (fig. 2).

The Riis–Crane portrait of Little Africa was colorful but incomplete. Poverty and wretchedness were abundantly present within Little Africa’s borders, yet an exclusive emphasis on those features of the neighborhood produced a seriously distorted picture of life there. Riis, in particular, by focusing on the debauchery he associated with black-and-tan saloons, reinforced a widespread prejudice of the time, which held that racial mixing always had a deleterious effect on both races and was a sign as well as a source of social decay. But there was more to Little Africa than saloons, or murder and mayhem in the Minettas. At the turn of the twentieth century, approximately twelve hundred blacks lived on west Village streets and alleys near and along lower Sixth Avenue, or on south Village streets in or adjacent to the Minettas. This large aggregation of black Villagers included many sober and industrious individuals and families, and many of these individuals were associated with well established, prosperous African American churches. Conspicuously absent from the Riis–Crane portrait of Little Africa, these individuals and institutions also displayed a stability and ambition that ran counter to the era’s popular prejudices about life inside a mixed-race neighborhood.

Had Riis wanted to tell a story about family stability among Little Africa’s inhabitants, he might have written about the Morgan J. Austins. This large family not only lived in Riis’s black-and-tan district but was itself racially mixed. The family’s patriarch, Morgan J. Austin, was an African American born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1851. The matriarch, Annie Austin, was a native of Pennsylvania, born in 1865, the daughter of Irish immigrants. Her maiden name was Annie McCormick. Morgan and Annie were married in 1883, probably in New York, since all their children were born there. In 1900, after seventeen years of marriage, Annie had borne ten children, of whom eight, four boys and four girls, had survived and were living with their parents. The eldest was fifteen, the youngest barely eighteen months.

In 1900 the Austins were renting an apartment at 101 MacDougal Street, a five-story tenement on the west side of the street midway between Bleecker Street and Minetta Lane. The census taker listed thirteen house-
holds at the address: eleven of them had from three to five members each, one household had six members, and the Austins had ten. Other than the Austins, only one was a black family. The rest were headed by Italians, a majority of whom had immigrated to the United States in the last five years.

The Morgan J. Austins appear to have had a higher family income than that of most (if not all) of the Italian Americans in the building. Most of the male heads of the Italian households were day laborers, the least skilled type of work available and consequently the least well paid. A contemporary social worker’s survey of working-class incomes in Greenwich Village, Louise Bolard More’s Wage-Earners’ Budgets (1907), listed eight examples of families headed by “casual laborers,” only one of whom earned more than $700 in the survey year, while the average income of the remaining seven was barely $450. By contrast, Morgan J. Austin was employed as a waiter, a service job that generally paid much better than unskilled day labor. More’s survey listed three black waiters (one of whom, like Austin, had a white wife) who earned $734, $774, and $1,134 respectively.8

Although Morgan and Annie Austin had many mouths to feed, a large

1. Thompson Street black-and-tan saloon, photographed by Jacob Riis, ca. 1890. Museum of the City of New York, Jacob A. Riis Collection.
family was not necessarily a liability if some or all of the children were old enough to enter the work force. Such was the case with the Austins. In 1900 their oldest child, the fifteen-year-old boy, had already taken a job in a laundry and was thus making a small contribution to the family’s income. Sometime during the next ten years the Austins moved to Minetta Lane.
In 1910 their household comprised seventeen individuals from four generations: Annie's mother, Annie and Morgan, all eight of their surviving children, two sons-in-law, three grandchildren, and a lodger. Not only had the family stayed together, but its combined efforts could now mobilize a significant amount of earning power. In addition to Morgan Austin and the young male lodger, four of Morgan and Annie's children and both the sons-in-law were holding down jobs. 9

Looking more generally at other Minetta Lane residents listed in the census, even in 1900, ten years before the Austins show up at a Minetta Lane address, the census takers’ inquiries produced quite a different picture from the one Crane had sketched only four years earlier. Gone in 1900—either dead or moved away—were Pop Babcock and Mammy Ross. Murderers and bandits, of course, would not have identified themselves as such and therefore are impossible to identify in the census, and Crane’s homeless loners, if they were still part of the scene, also were not enumerated. But certain other features of life in the Minettas do come into bold relief in the census records: the racially mixed character of the local populace, the family ties that many residents maintained, and the common history that the area’s black population often shared as recent migrants from southern cities to the North’s greatest metropolis.

The attraction of cheap housing had brought a kaleidoscopic array of ethnic groups into close proximity. This fact is readily apparent from a quick look at who lived in the buildings on Minetta Lane’s north side, eight residences and a large livery stable. Most occupants of the residences were either Italians or African Americans, but there were also whites from Germany, Russia, Belgium, and France, and blacks born in Africa, Bermuda, and Barbados. Racial mixing was the order of the day in most of the buildings and some of the households. Of eight houses or tenements, all but two—the tiny, two-story number 22, where a black couple lived, and number 16, home to a large Italian American family—had both black and white occupants. Number 24, the tallest building on the block, was a five-story tenement containing eleven households; nine were Italian and two were African American families. Number 2 Minetta Lane, though only three stories tall and on a smaller lot than number 24, was divided into twelve apartments, four occupied by Italian immigrants, six by African Americans, and two by mixed-race couples. Three other mixed-race couples lived on the block: two in number 18 and one in number 26.10

Information collected by census takers indicated that the mixed-race and black families of Minetta Lane laid claim to a significant degree of stability in their marital relationships. Of seven Minetta Lane blacks who listed Richmond, Virginia, as their birthplace, all reported that they were married
and living with their spouses in 1900. Except for Mary Clayton of 2 Minetta Lane, who had recently married for the second time, these individuals were partners in first marriages that had lasted for many years—no less than nine and as many as twenty-seven. Half of these couples had children living with them, a family configuration that was also found among most of their neighbors of all races in the Minettas. Even though family ties were no sure protection against poverty and despair, it seems fair to say that familial relationships were an important source of mutual aid on which many residents of Minetta Lane relied.11

Another fact that census data documents about Minetta Lane blacks in 1900 is that a majority of them were native southerners who had joined in a post–Civil War exodus of African Americans from the former Confederacy. As the seven Richmond, Virginia–born individuals mentioned above illustrate, many of these migrants were from urban rather than farm backgrounds. (At least fifteen more “Richmond Negroes,” the label a contemporary scholar gave these blacks once they reached New York City, are listed in the 1900 census at addresses within one block of Minetta Lane.) Using the birthdates of the New York–born children of Minetta Lane’s seven “Richmond Negroes” to estimate when their parents left Virginia, it appears that most of them emigrated to the North in the late 1860s or early 1870s, just after emancipation made it possible for former slaves to travel freely. Later in the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth, southern blacks by the tens of thousands followed in the footsteps of these early migrants, creating a mass movement called the Great Migration. Precisely what impact this shared experience had on relationships among Minetta Lane’s Richmond-born blacks is not known. However, the large role that friendships and family connections played in the Great Migration is well documented. Undoubtedly, many of the twenty-two Richmond natives residing on or close to Minetta Lane in 1900 were aware of their neighbors’ life histories and formed (or, more likely, preserved) bonds of friendship based on that shared past.12

Quite a lot is known about Richmond-born blacks in New York City before World War I because they were the subjects of research projects conducted by three Columbia University graduate students working under the direction of Professor Franklin H. Giddings, a distinguished sociologist. None of Giddings’s protégés studied Greenwich Village’s Richmond-born blacks, but their findings regarding African Americans living farther north on Manhattan’s West Side mesh so well with what is known about Minetta Lane’s residents that the data may be taken as representative of them as well. For example, Giddings’s students reported that the vast majority of Richmond-born blacks worked at unskilled or semiskilled jobs,
largely as a consequence of limited educational opportunities and occupational discrimination that excluded blacks from most highly paid work. Six of the former Richmond residents living on Minetta Lane in 1900 clearly conformed to this occupational profile: Annetta Jackson and Lizzie Doran were cooks, William Jackson a domestic servant, Lewis Hamlin a common laborer, Mary Clayton a laundress, and John Young an employee in a laundry. The only possible exception was George Brown, who was the proprietor of a restaurant in the basement of the same run-down, two-story house where Pop Babcock once cooked oysters for derelicts and drifters. Given what is known about Babcock’s operation, Brown’s entrepreneurial efforts may have given him only marginally higher occupational status than his working-class neighbors.13

With regard to the reasons why Richmond-born blacks had moved to New York City, the young Columbia sociologists found that the most frequently cited motivation was hope of economic betterment: the cost of living was higher in New York City, but wages were higher as well. The next most frequently mentioned reason for migrating was the wish to join relatives who had already settled in the city. (A number of informants said that family connections had become even more important to them in New York than they had been in Virginia.) A smaller, though significant, number of Richmond-born blacks indicated that they had been drawn to New York by the city’s reputation as a glamorous and exciting place. Finally, several informants said they had left Virginia to escape constant reminders of the state’s slave past and that, despite the many racial barriers they encountered in the North, they felt they had more personal freedom in New York than in the South.14

Both the positive and negative aspects of the Richmond blacks’ experience in New York are evident in the fragmentary information available about Mary Clayton of number 2 Minetta Lane. Forty-eight years old in 1900, she had been born in the last years of the slave era, and during her childbearing years she had given birth to at least twelve children, only three of whom had survived childhood. Although all three were grown to adulthood by 1900 (the youngest boy was nineteen), they lived with Mary and her second husband, their stepfather, Griffen Clayton. Mary’s eldest, a twenty-six-year-old daughter, Maria Gumby, had been married for six years and had a son who also lived with the Claytons, although the boy’s father was not part of the household. Similarly, both of Mary’s sons, William and Norman Blum, were listed as married, but their wives were not living with them. Whatever this may suggest about difficulties in the Clayton children’s marriages, a look ahead to the 1910 census reveals that family ties were sustained across the generations; as of 1910 Mary and Griffen Clayton were
still sharing their apartment with Mary’s son William and two of her daughter’s children, George and Deliah Gumby.  

The basic struggle to make ends meet probably played a large role in the decisions the Claytons made to live together. Griffen apparently had trouble finding a steady job. Unemployed in July 1900, he later found work as an express wagon driver, but he was frequently laid off when business was slow. Mary’s earnings from taking in laundry helped a little, but laundresses typically earned no more than three dollars a week, a sum on which no family could survive for long. Mary’s children had to help and did. In 1900, Maria was working as a chambermaid and William as a musician. The family members relied on each other, pooling their meager resources to obtain the bare necessities. For the Claytons, as for many other poor black Villagers, the family unit was the first line of defense to which they turned in order to make their way in a society that consigned most African Americans to marginal status economically.

For many Greenwich Village blacks a second institution, the African American church, served, as did the family, as a haven in a hostile world. Although there were other significant expressions of black cultural vitality in turn-of-the-century New York City—for example, the New York Age (a weekly newspaper), the black nightclubs and theaters of the San Juan Hill district in the West Fifties and Sixties, and a succession of popular black professional baseball teams—churches were the only large institutions inside Greenwich Village that blacks could truly call their own. These black congregations, several of which had upward of one thousand members, had come to the neighborhood in the mid–nineteenth century at a time when Greenwich Village had one of the largest populations of blacks in the city. But during the last decades of the century many members of these congregations left the Village for new homes above Fourteenth Street, and consequently in the 1890s two of Little Africa’s black churches, Bethel A. M. E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church and the Roman Catholic parish of St. Benedict the Moor, decided to abandon their south Village addresses and follow their parishioners to locations further north on Manhattan’s West Side. However, two other prestigious black congregations, the Abyssinian Baptist Church and Zion A. M. E. Church, remained active in Greenwich Village at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their histories reveal that piety, respectability, economic and social achievement, and successful institution building were important features of African American life in turn-of-the-century Greenwich Village.

The Abyssinian Baptist Church was located at 166 Waverly Place, two blocks west of Washington Square (fig. 3). This congregation’s history dated back to 1808, when a handful of free blacks withdrew from the First
Baptist Church of New York in protest against the practice of segregating blacks in what was called a “slave loft.” Several of the protesters were Africans, natives of Ethiopia, then known as Abyssinia. By founding a new congregation and naming it the Abyssinian Baptist Church, these black men and women affirmed their African heritage and proudly called attention to the antiquity of Christian traditions in Abyssinia. Over the next few decades these black Baptists worshipped at a variety of sites in Lower Manhattan. Then in 1856, under a charismatic leader, Reverend William Spellman, the church bought the Waverly Place property. During Spellman’s twenty-nine-year tenure the church prospered, gaining a reputation as one of the richest black churches in the city. 

In the 1880s the church experienced internal conflicts so severe that the trustees demanded Spellman’s resignation. Forced out in 1885, he gathered a splinter group around himself that included some of the old congrega-

3. The Abyssinian Baptist Church on Waverly Place. Abyssinian Baptist Church.
tion's wealthier members and established a new church on West Twenty-sixth Street that won recognition from the Southern New York Baptist Association as the legitimate claimant to the name Abyssinian Baptist Church. The Waverly Place church, led by a new minister, Reverend Robert D. Wynn, fought to preserve its title to the congregation's Greenwich Village property. Suits and countersuits eventually produced several court rulings in 1890 that favored Wynn and his followers, but many issues remained in dispute until Spellman, the secessionists' leader, died in the early 1890s and the Southern New York Baptist Association finally, in 1896, conceded that both the name "Abyssinian" and the church property belonged to the Waverly Place faction. In a curious twist, the victorious Reverend Wynn himself then became a source of disharmony by proposing that the church move from Waverly Place to Harlem, a suggestion vociferously opposed by many in his flock.

Despite these debilitating squabbles, the Abyssinian Baptist Church remained fundamentally strong. In 1900, the fifteenth year of Reverend Wynn's tenure, the congregation claimed to have more than one thousand members. Its choir was admired as one of the best in the city, and the congregation underwrote a wide variety of charitable activities, including aid to its indigent members and contributions to city missions and bible societies. As the new century began and the church's centennial year (1908) approached, the Abyssinian Baptists could point with pride to their accomplishments as institution builders.

Zion A. M. E. Church, the other great black church that remained in Greenwich Village as of 1900, had been organized in 1796 by a group of approximately twenty African American men and women who had broken with a white Methodist congregation because it discriminated against black worshipers. Zion's founders soon built a frame church on Orange (now Baxter) Street, and when this property was sold at a large profit in 1850, half the $90,000 sale price went to purchase a vacant Dutch Reformed Church at 351 Bleecker Street, on the corner of West Tenth. The rest of the money was invested in other city properties to provide income for the congregation's needs. Affectionately known as "Mother Zion," the church was the oldest congregation in the group that had joined together in the 1820s to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Such was the success of this denomination that in 1896, the centennial of Mother Zion's founding, it was proudly reported that the national A. M. E. Zion organization "has grown until it has church property valued at $3,687,351, including 1,615 church buildings, seven colleges, and ten other institutions."18

But institutional success was only one measure of Zion's significance for its members. Zion and the other black churches of Little Africa gave their
members clear moral guidelines to follow, provided believers with a social community, and, most important of all, fed their souls.

After interviewing fifty blacks, William F. Ogburn, one of the Columbia University graduate students who researched the lives of black New Yorkers before World War I, concluded that they divided themselves into two main types based on lifestyle, with deeply committed churchgoers in one camp and totally unchurched blacks in the other. Although Ogburn’s informants felt that most black New Yorkers fell somewhere between the extremes, they distinguished very clearly between the two types. Nonchurchgoers, they said, were associated with the pursuit of the “sporting” life and “fast pleasures,” while churchgoers were described as being, on the whole, respectable, law-abiding people who shunned those pursuits.19

Gospel churches were the center of a religious black’s social life and were open nearly every night for one activity or another. For example, at Zion’s sister congregation, Bethel A. M. E. Church, Monday was concert night. Various club and class meetings were held on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Thursday was reserved for “an entertainment” consisting of “literary activities, reciting, and singing.” Church-sponsored evenings such as these were so popular among blacks that thirty of Ogburn’s fifty informants said they had attended at least one such event in the recent past. Friday was the night for prayer meetings, and choir rehearsal was held on Saturday. Sunday was the busiest day, with activities in the morning, afternoon, and evening.20

On weekends black churchgoers donned their Sunday best. Although most were working-class people, even the poorest managed to scrimp and save enough to buy at least one fine quality outfit. By contrast with African Americans who pursued a faster lifestyle and who favored, according to one observer, flashy and even “fantastic and garish” attire, churchgoing black men wore conservative dark suits, “black derbies, black or dark brown or dark grey overcoats, and in many cases they carried canes.” Churchgoing black men emulated the latest styles worn by white women, but they gave those fashions a distinctive African American touch. A *New York Times* reporter described the colorful crowd that packed Carnegie Hall the last night of Mother Zion’s centennial celebration in 1896. “The boxes were as brilliant as upon the night of a Paderewski recital—perhaps more so,” he wrote, observing that there “were more bright dresses in primary colors.”21

The communal life of gospel churches was rooted in a deep spirituality, and religious services at Zion and its sister churches were occasions for fervent expressions of that spirituality. When, for instance, Reverend Martin R. Franklin, Zion’s leader in the late 1890s and early 1900s, ministered to his flock from the pulpit, he expected his parishioners to answer him openly and often in the familiar pattern known as “call and response.” If many
minutes passed without his message eliciting a vocal response from those assembled, the good reverend would prompt the worshippers by asking whether they loved their Jesus. Voices would respond with a resounding “Yes, Lord!” or loud “Amen!” Further words of testimony and inspiration from Franklin would provoke shouts of “Hallelujah!” and “Praise be!” Cries of “Hallelujah!” “Glory to God!” and “Amen!” would follow his next impassioned utterance. Back and forth the exchange would go, building to a climax that would leave few unmoved and many with tears running down their cheeks.22

Every Sunday service at Mother Zion produced many expressions of intense religious feeling, and special occasions such as Mother Zion’s one hundred and third anniversary celebration on Sunday, November 27, 1899, produced even more. Reverend Franklin and several guest ministers presided over a program of social and religious activities that began at 9 a.m. with a service of prayer and praise that the New York Tribune reporter called “a love feast.” The regular morning worship service followed at eleven. At three in the afternoon a reunion of past Sunday School classes was addressed by one of the guest ministers, and that evening at six-thirty the Christian Endeavor Society held a special prayer meeting. Finally, at seven-thirty the regular evening service, as always the best attended of the day, featured a sermon by another visiting minister.23

Zion A. M. E.’s health as a congregation depended on the practical efforts of many devoted members, and no individual played that sort of role in the church over a longer period than James Chase, Zion’s sexton. In 1900 Chase lived with his wife and their youngest daughter at 18 Jones Street, a small tenement five blocks from the church. As sexton, he was responsible for seeing that Zion’s property and buildings were well maintained and for insuring that the church was open for all scheduled events and safely locked at the end of every day. Chase filled the role of sexton for almost thirty years, from the mid-1880s into the 1910s.

Although his long and devoted service to the church gave him a secure and honorable place in his world, Chase, like most members of Zion A. M. E. Church, was relatively poor. His economic status may be accurately assessed through research done by Louise Bolard More, a social worker who lived on Jones Street in 1903 and who used interviews with two hundred of the neighborhood’s working-class families to develop a statistical profile of their incomes and expenses. Chase’s salary of about nine dollars a week, $450 annually, placed him above the lowest-paid workers (who earned less than $250 annually), but still left him in the bottom 15 percent of More’s informants. A family in this bracket, More reported, spent about half its income on food, a quarter on rent, and most of the
rest for light, fuel, and insurance. Only a pittance would have been left for discretionary spending, and most of that would have been used for two priorities dictated by the family’s commitment to respectability: home furnishings and a set of good Sunday clothes. However, according to William F. Ogburn, the Columbia University sociologist, only one room, the parlor, had to be, in his words, “profusely decorated.” Indeed, Ogburn reported that no matter how plain the decor of other rooms in black New Yorkers’ apartments might be, their parlors were furnished with the clutter of objects prescribed by the fashions of the day: “There are,” Ogburn wrote, “coloured table covers and carpets, gilded mats and picture frames, and pictures that are rarely monotone. There is a great profusion of articles of decoration on the mantel, on the table, and on the walls.”

One object sure to be found in the Chase’s parlor was the Bible, a visible symbol of the centrality of faith in the lives of these African American citizens. Chase would need all the security the rock of his faith could provide to meet challenges that he and his fellow African Americans would face in the years just after Mother Zion’s 1896 centennial jubilee. Over the next decade the black community of Little Africa experienced many losses. The proportion of African Americans in the south Village dropped slowly as blacks left the Village for homes farther uptown and large numbers of Italian immigrants moved into newly built tenements on Thompson, Sullivan, Bleecker, and adjacent streets that had once been the heart of the Little Africa enclave.

It might seem that the Italians’ arrival in and the blacks’ departure from the south Village was a straightforward case of the Italians pushing blacks out. But the process was not that simple. Blacks were, indeed, leaving throughout the late nineteenth century, but the number of blacks in Little Africa’s core area actually increased between 1870 and 1890 because departing African Americans were being replaced by newcomers from the South. And the bulk of the black departures was determined less by the growth of the neighborhood’s Italian population than by individual and group aspirations among Little Africa’s black residents. One knowledgeable contemporary observer in the early twentieth century summed up this process in one sentence: “The ambitious Negro has moved uptown.” The cumulative effect of these departures, however, greatly weakened the Little Africa community, and, as noted earlier, the African American churches that had been the institutional bulwarks of black Village life soon followed their parishioners uptown. Bethel A. M. E. Church and St. Benedict the Moor (Roman Catholic) led the way in the 1890s. The Abyssinian Baptist Church and Zion A. M. E. joined the exodus in 1904 and 1905.

As these major demographic and institutional changes were taking place,
Mary White Ovington, a white social worker whose commitment to black civil rights led her to play a crucial role in the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was at work on a study of New York City’s African Americans. The result was a book titled *Half a Man*, published in 1911, in which she devoted most of her text to conditions of black New Yorkers in the newer African American districts north of Fourteenth Street. What little she did say of Village blacks reflected the unfortunate side effects of the departure of many of the most ambitious residents from the neighborhood. The blacks who remained, she wrote, were “widowed and deserted women and degenerates” and “men and women who, unsuccessful in their struggle with city life, have been left behind in these old forgotten streets.” But even though degeneracy, failure, and victimization were all evident in the lives of Little Africa’s residents, it would be misleading to leave the impression that such phenomena summed up everything there is to know about black Villagers in the early years of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1918 there were in Little Africa also many stories of courage, hope, and social stability, as attested to by the family loyalty of the James Chases and Morgan J. Austins, the economic aspirations of Richmond-born blacks, and the dignity and piety of hundreds of churchgoing black Villagers.26

**AN IMMIGRANT CHURCH**

From a trickle in the mid-1800s, the numbers of Italians reaching New York City swelled to a flood in the last two decades of the century. In 1880 there were only 44,230 foreign-born Italians in the United States. From 1881 to 1890, 307,309 more came; twice again as many (651,893) arrived in the 1890s, and the largest influx ever (2,135,877) came during the first decade of the twentieth century. Although some Italian immigrants eventually returned to Italy or moved on to other countries, many stayed, and most of those who stayed in the United States settled in East Coast cities, with New York City by far the most popular destination.27

The large influx of Italians immediately made itself felt in the Catholic church. As the largest non-English-speaking ethnic group in the church, Italian immigrants posed a significant challenge for an American hierarchy and clergy that was largely Irish. In New York City, first thousands and later tens of thousands of Italians took up residence in Lower Manhattan neighborhoods, and by the 1860s an Italian enclave had developed in the southernmost part of Greenwich Village between Canal and Houston streets. New York’s diocesan leaders, lacking Italian-speaking priests to
minister to this population in their native tongue, initially tried a hybrid solution: it combined their preferred form, a “territorial” parish led by English-speaking priests, usually Irish, with a “national” parish that provided non-English-speaking Catholics with a priest of the same nationality. St. Anthony of Padua on Sullivan Street was organized on this hybrid basis in the late 1860s under the leadership of Italian Franciscans. Initially, Irish Catholics outnumbered Italians in this ethnically mixed neighborhood, and Irish communicants were the main source of the parish’s income. Even after their numbers surpassed those of the Irish in the 1890s, Italians were still forced to hold their Italian-language services in the church basement while Irish parishioners attended Mass in the main sanctuary upstairs. In practice, therefore, the solution of combining a territorial and a national parish tended to relegate Italians to second-class status.28

By the 1890s it was increasingly apparent to Catholic leaders in both Italy and the United States that new measures had to be taken to meet the needs of New York City’s Italian Catholic immigrants. The plight of the Italian newcomers in the south Village was representative. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, block after block along Bleecker and on adjacent streets between Thompson Street and Sixth Avenue had become filled with Italians as they spilled out of Italian neighborhoods just to the south (fig. 4). Yet despite their numbers, the south Village Italians had no parish they could truly call their own. At this juncture, Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, the Bishop of Piacenza, took a special interest in the fate of Italian emigrants and, with encouragement from the Vatican, founded a missionary order to minister to Italians abroad. In the early 1890s, several Scalabrinian Fathers were posted to New York City, and one of these, seeing what needed to be done among Italians in the south Village, appealed to Archbishop Michael A. Corrigan for help. Corrigan, deeply troubled by the widespread religious apathy displayed by nominally Catholic Italian immigrants, approved the founding of an Italian-language parish, Our Lady of Pompei, in 1892. Unlike St. Anthony of Padua a few blocks to the south, Our Lady of Pompei was an “ethnically homogeneous congregation” and as such grew swiftly, serving an Italian immigrant population of nearly ten thousand by the end of the century.29

In April 1895, the Italian Catholics of Our Lady of Pompei parish moved their services to a church building at 214 Sullivan Street in the block just south of West Third Street. This red brick structure had been purchased from Bethel Methodist Church, a congregation of “colored” (i.e., African American) Protestants who had owned the site since 1842. They, in turn, had bought the property from African American Baptists who had constructed the first church at that address in 1810.30
The Italian Catholics’ tenure at 214 Sullivan was brief and marked by misfortune. In July of 1897 the small brick church was badly damaged by a gas explosion and fire, and less than a year later Our Lady of Pompei relocated again, this time to a Greek Revival church three blocks away at 210 Bleecker Street. The parish’s new church was also a hand-me-down. It had originally been built for a congregation of white Unitarian Universalists and had been occupied more recently, from 1883 to 1898, by an African American Catholic parish named for Saint Benedict the Moor. 31

On May 8, 1898, Our Lady of Pompei’s parishioners formally completed the move from their former place of worship on Sullivan Street to their newly acquired church building on Bleecker Street. The weather that Sunday was dreadful, and the reporter who covered the dedication for one of New York’s major Italian-language newspapers, Il Progresso Italo-Americano, described conditions as “eccezionalmente pervers[e] per la stagione” (exceptionally perverse for the season). High winds, driving rain, thunder and lightning, hail, and temperatures in the low- to mid-forties made the journey to the church a struggle. Outside the church, the Italian and American flags mounted on the building’s face snapped like rifle shots as they were whipped about by gale force winds, but once participants got inside the church a spirit of camaraderie, pride, and delight prevailed. 32

The day’s festivities opened with a solemn high Mass. Despite the inclement weather, the sanctuary, which could accommodate upwards of eight hundred people, was full almost to capacity. Two guests of honor took the lead. Monsignor Giovanni P. Bandinelli, Provincial of the Passionist Fathers, was the principal celebrant, and Dr. Gherardo Ferrante, a member of Archbishop Corrigan’s personal staff, gave the homily, the main point of which was that all present should view Catholicism and Italian patriotism as complementary forces for good in their community. After Mass, these worthies and other distinguished guests braved the elements to cross the street to the rectory for a banquet.

A round of speeches, all but one of them in Italian, followed dinner. The only address in English was made by a Catholic high school principal who spoke of the importance of developing good schools for Italian youngsters. Monsignor Bandinelli, speaking in Italian, professed that the happy occasion had left him with amiable feelings of being “above all Italian and Genovese.” Dr. Ferrante followed and eloquently reiterated his homily’s theme that the Italian heritage was a unique blend of national pride and Catholic piety. Father Francesco Zaboglio, the Scalabrinian missionary who was the parish’s senior priest, rose to second this sentiment by invoking the phrase “L’Unione fa la Forza” (Unity makes Strength), adding, lest anyone mistake his meaning, that he was referring to the union of patriotism and religion.
Shortly before the gathering broke up, another priest proposed a toast to Pope Leo XIII, a gesture that was enthusiastically received. 33

A number of details from the scene described above, when placed in historical context, serve to define major features of Greenwich Village’s Italian community as the nineteenth century drew to a close: the use of both Italian and American flags in decorating the church, the emphasis placed by Dr. Ferrante on how Roman Catholicism and Italian nationalism complemented each other, the reference made by Monsignor Bandinelli to feeling Italian and Genovese, and the ties of Father Zaboglio to the Scalabrinian order.

To speak of Our Lady of Pompei’s parishioners as Italians is accurate enough from a contemporary American perspective, but it probably does not reflect the way many recent immigrants from Italy thought of themselves in the 1890s. The political unification of Italy had been completed only recently (in 1870), and for many natives of Italy long-standing regional and local loyalties remained more important than a national identity. At the very least, many were sensitive to a distinction between northerners and southerners, with the former generally considered more modern and the latter often scorned as backward. This prejudice was one, along with many, that a contemporary social worker encountered among her working-class informants in Greenwich Village. “The Irish,” she wrote, “hate the Italians (‘Dagos’) and negroes (‘niggers’), and the North Italians despise the Sicilians.” Large numbers of both groups came to New York City, with northerners dominating the first wave of Italian immigration and southerners prevailing by an overwhelming margin, almost six to one, by the 1890s. 34

In practice, the north-south distinction, though strongly felt, was often not nearly as significant as the identification Italian immigrants felt with the province or village where they had been born. “The focal point of solidarity for the [Italian] immigrant,” one scholar has written, “was the group of fellow townsmen. Immigrants who knew each other in the village often emigrated together and settled in the same neighborhood.” As a result, on many streets in New York’s Little Italy districts, natives of particular provinces, cities, or villages could be found clustered together, dominating the residential, social, and business life of the neighborhood. Before 1900, most Greenwich Village Italians were from a variety of northern provinces—Lombardy, Venice, Piedmont, Emilia, and Liguria—with natives of Genoa, a major seaport and the capital of Liguria, present in particularly large numbers (fig. 5). 35

Genovese were also well represented among Our Lady of Pompei’s parishioners. A survey of Pompei’s early baptismal records found that many recipients’ parents were from the Genoa area, specifically the nearby town
of Chiavari. An awareness of this large Genovese presence was reflected in Monsignor Bandinelli’s comment at the church dedication in 1898 that the occasion left him feeling “above all Italian and Genovese,” and in the practice, widespread in the early 1900s, of referring to Pompei as “the church of the Genovese.” Still, the Genovese were not the only northern Italians in the parish. Father Pio Parolin, a priest who served the parish from 1904 to 1914, criticized the use of the term “la Chiesa dei Genovesi,” insisting that Italians from many northern provinces, not just the Genoa area, worshipped at Our Lady of Pompei during his tenure there. Moreover, the number of southern Italians in the area grew rapidly from the late 1890s onward. In 1893 more than ninety percent of the couples who registered to marry at Pompei were northerners, but that percentage dropped to fifty-one by 1903 and to thirty-three by 1908.

Practically speaking, it could not have been otherwise. A parish serving nearly ten thousand Italian immigrants in the heart of a diverse Italian enclave was simply too large to draw its constituency from only one Italian locale. South Village Italians continued to feel strongly about old regional and local ties, but the process of building an Italian-language parish led former strangers to cooperate in a common enterprise and prompted what
one scholar has called a “breakthrough to a wider solidarity” based on being Italian, not just Genovese, Piedmontese, or Tuscan. 37

Long-standing political prejudices would also have to give way if Our Lady of Pompei’s parishioners were to embrace the message that Dr. Ferrante and Father Zaboglio proclaimed about the compatibility of Italian nationalism and Catholicism. During the Italian unification movement of the 1850s and sixties, bitter disputes arose between the Vatican hierarchy and Italian patriots. Zealous unifiers viewed the Vatican’s commitment to preserving its temporal power over the Papal State as an obstacle to unification, and they were right. Popes, recognizing the threat to papal power inherent in the nationalist program of patriots such as Giuseppe Garibaldi (who lived briefly near the Village on Irving Place as a political exile in the early 1850s), used their armies and their diplomatic influence, often with considerable success, to impede unification. When the nationalists triumphed in 1870 and stripped the papacy of its temporal power, the rivals remained hostile toward each other: the unifiers were angry about the Church’s role in retarding unification, and conservative Catholics were unforgiving toward the radicals for dismantling the Papal State and making Rome Italy’s capital city.

But twenty-eight years later at Our Lady of Pompei, Dr. Ferrante and Father Zaboglio sought to transcend this decades-old quarrel by arguing that Catholicism and nationalism were twins that together defined Italian identity. At the same time parish leaders, by decorating the front of the church with Italian and American flags, affirmed a belief that Italians were a patriotic people, loyal both to their country of origin and to their new homeland. Thus, in the liberal spirit that prevailed among participants in the 1898 dedication ceremony, three sentiments that often seemed to be at odds with each other—devout Catholicism, Italian nationalism, and American patriotism—were, rhetorically at least, juxtaposed as entirely compatible.

During Our Lady of Pompei’s early years a small group of lay leaders made a major contribution to the fledgling church’s success. All of these men were middle-class individuals and most had come to the United States before the great surge of Italian immigration began in the 1890s. By 1898 they had become owners of small businesses that served the south Village Italian community: Angelo Cuneo ran a fruit stand, Michael Pepe was a real estate agent, Giuseppe Miele a tailor, Joseph Personeni a druggist, and Edward Bergonzi and Andrea Sabini grocers. These were the men who gave dollars when most parishioners could scarcely give pennies, and who formed the backbone of such key parish organizations as the St. Joseph’s Society and the Parish Finance Committee. They also sponsored and even
performed in parish fundraisers, such as a highly successful variety show in 1900 (fig. 6).  

Luigi V. Fugazy, one of the parish’s first trustees and a major financial contributor, held a loftier position in New York’s Italian community. An 1896 New York Times article on “Papa” Fugazy, as he was called, portrayed him as a father figure to thousands of Italian immigrants. As such, he was an example of a well-known social type in Italian communities, the padrone, an individual who played a paternal role in relation to others, giving them advice, assistance, and protection. In the United States, one popular image of the padrone—accurate in all too many cases—depicted him as exploiting his immigrant dependents, for whom he found jobs only to take nearly all their wages, with the result that the newcomers remained in an impoverished and servile condition.  

Fugazy used his considerable influence in much more benign ways. Born in San Stefano, a suburb of Genoa, he was a hero of the Italian unification movement. Emigrating to New York City in the late 1860s, he established himself as a banker and notary public. In 1900, Fugazy’s offices were located at 147 Bleecker Street, the very heart of the south Village Italian neighborhood. Poor Italians came to those offices to deposit tiny sums that they feared might otherwise be lost to robbers or con artists. Italians of all classes availed themselves of his notary services, bringing wills, contracts, and mortgages for his endorsement. In the course of such transactions, Fugazy was always ready to be the good “Papa,” offering his clients advice on all sorts of legal and personal matters, including how to steer safely through the alien territory of the American legal system. Fugazy was also admired for his charitable activities. He was the guiding light of more than one hundred mutual aid societies and the chief promoter of a citywide federation of these societies. He urged all the individual societies, most of which were organized around highly parochial village-based ties, to develop allegiances to a broader Italian American community by affiliating with the citywide organization. Finally, Fugazy served as a political power broker, representing the interests of New York’s Italians to the Tammany Democratic machine, with which he had long-standing ties. Clearly, the scope of Fugazy’s activities was too broad for him to devote a great deal of time specifically to Our Lady of Pompei; still, his friendship was eagerly sought and generously returned.  

Despite the impressive success of a Luigi Fugazy, Italians were still on the fringe of mainstream American society, which regarded the newcomers with either hostility or indifference. Although the elder Fugazy was the subject of an occasional article in the New York Times, even the most important occasions in the life of Our Lady of Pompei parish went unreported by
mainstream English-language newspapers. Pompei’s dedication in 1898 was covered by a correspondent from an important Italian paper, Rome’s *Tribuna*, and by representatives of New York City’s Italian-language press, but the major New York dailies ignored the event and instead covered Archbishop Corrigan’s presence that same Sunday at the dedication of a Staten Island church. When Bishop Scalabrini came to the United States in 1901, his arrival in New York was noted in the city’s major English-language papers, but the rest of his activities while in the city, including two visits to Our Lady of Pompei, received almost no newspaper attention in the secular press.⁴¹

By the time Bishop Scalabrini journeyed to New York in 1901, Our Lady of Pompei had been under the leadership of Father Antonio Demo for slightly more than two years. Demo’s predecessor, Father Zaboglio, had had to abandon the post because of the lasting effects of injuries he had sustained in the church fire of 1897. He and two other men had gone to the church basement to investigate a gas leak, lit a match, and caused an explosion that killed his companions and left him in poor health. After Zaboglio’s resignation in mid-1899, Demo took over. Only twenty-nine at the time, Demo was a native of Vicenza province in northern Italy, an army veteran, and a Scalabrinian ordained by the order’s bishop-founder in 1896 (fig. 7).⁴²

The parish that Demo took over in 1899 and Scalabrini visited in 1901 was still in every sense an immigrant church that served the needs of the Italian immigrant enclave and had minimal contact with the surrounding host society. Before his appointment to Our Lady of Pompei, Father Demo had served a Scalabrinian mission in Boston for nearly two years without acquiring much facility in English. He hadn’t needed it there, and initially he didn’t need to be fluent in English in New York either. Italian was the common idiom used in the homes and shops of the south Village. Anacleto Sermolino, an Italian who arrived in the early 1890s, later recalled that after standing on the corner of Bleecker and Sullivan for the first time and seeing pushcarts loaded with Italian cheeses, pasta, and vegetables and hearing women shoppers conversing in Italian, he had told his wife: “This is not a strange land we have come to, but a little piece of Italy.” Given this environment, Father Demo at first conducted the church’s business in Italian. Only later, when his pastoral duties required him to deal more often with Pompei’s English-speaking neighbors, did he learn to speak and write English well.⁴³

Even in Pompei’s first decade of 1892–1902, however, south Village Italians were never completely isolated from or unnoticed by English-speaking Americans and their institutions. The nearby Irish parish, St. Joseph’s, let Pompei use its meeting hall for early musical events and fundraisers, and
Our Lady of Pompei also benefited enormously from the generosity of a wealthy heiress, Annie Leary. “Miss Leary,” as she was popularly known, was in her early fifties in 1896 when she decided to become the struggling Italian parish’s guardian angel. She paid all the parish’s outstanding debts, funded repairs and improvements to its Sullivan Street building, and played a crucial role in reassuring Archbishop Corrigan that Pompei’s purchase of its Bleecker Street church would work out financially. Father Zaboglio, Demo’s immediate predecessor at Pompei, credited Annie Leary with nothing less than having enabled the parish to survive. “If it had not been for her,” Zaboglio asserted, “our church of the Madonna of the Rosary of Pompei would have closed.”

St. Joseph’s priests and Annie Leary were not the only non-Italians to respond to the presence of Italians in the south Village. In the 1890s a diverse group of literary and artistic types discovered the joys of “Spaghetti Hour” at Maria’s, a MacDougal Street restaurant that offered generous portions at budget prices. In the same period the founders of Judson Church, a Baptist congregation that had established itself on Washington Square South in 1892, attempted to proselytize Italian Catholics by offering services in their native tongue. Toward the end of the 1890s the explosive growth of the south Village Italian enclave led the Charity Organization
Society, a body organized to coordinate the efforts of all the city’s public and private charitable agencies, to set up a special committee to develop programs aimed specifically at local Italian-speaking people. Finally, in 1900 the University Settlement Society established a West Side Branch, later called Richmond Hill House, on King Street for the express purpose of providing social services to south Village Italians.45

Despite these varied forms of outreach, for most south Village Italians contact with their non-Italian neighbors at the beginning of the twentieth century remained quite limited. Once Our Lady of Pompei had a hall of its own that could house major parish events, it no longer turned to St. Joseph’s to provide a site for those occasions. Miss Leary’s attentiveness to Pompei’s needs lessened noticeably after a tiff with Father Demo; the strong-willed heiress was used to doing things without consulting her beneficiaries, and the rather stiff-necked Italian priest objected that she was disregarding his prerogatives as Pompei’s leader. Judson Church’s effort to evangelize south Village Italians was a disappointment to its sponsors; like similar Protestant initiatives elsewhere in the city, Judson’s program failed to attract even 2 percent of local Italian Catholics into the Protestant fold. The University Settlement Society’s West Side Branch got off to a slow start and remained small, and the Charity Organization Society’s committee on Italian immigrants, set up in 1899, had little practical effect locally until 1906, when the C.O.S.’s Greenwich district office finally hired an Italian stenographer to record interviews with Italian-speaking applicants. Spaghetti Hour at Maria’s remained popular with English-speaking patrons for at least a decade, but the restaurant’s non-Italian diners were themselves outside the American mainstream, artists and writers who liked red wine, pasta, and the restaurant’s MacDougal Street locale precisely because the combination made for an exotic foreign ambience.46

**The Green in Greenwich**

As Italians moved into the Village in the late nineteenth century, the newcomers took up residence on blocks that had once been occupied by other ethnic groups, primarily blacks and the Irish. By 1898 Italians were the dominant presence in the Village south of Washington Square on Bleecker, Thompson, Sullivan, and adjacent streets, but in the Village west of Sixth Avenue, especially from Leroy north to West Fourteenth Street, Irish immigrants and their children and grandchildren still set the neighborhood’s tone. Though the west Village’s diverse population included many residents of German, French, English, Dutch, and African backgrounds, the Irish
were the largest single subgroup in the area. As one social worker who knew the neighborhood well observed, “The population, while varied, was, when I came to [Jones Street] in 1902, mainly Irish-American, that is, of parentage born in Ireland with a plentiful sprinkling of relations and friends still coming from Ireland.”

The Irish had first come to the Village as domestic servants and construction workers in the 1820s and 1830s, during the early years of the Washington Square era. A Catholic parish, St. Joseph’s, was founded in the west Village in 1829 to serve the spiritual needs of these working-class immigrants. By 1898 most of this first generation of Irish Villagers had died off or moved on; however, Irish migration to the Village had continued at a substantial rate from the 1830s through the rest of the century. The later waves of Irish migrants to the west Village fell into two broad generations: an older group that had left Ireland during the famine years of the 1840s and 1850s, and a group of newer Irish Villagers who began arriving in the neighborhood after the American Civil War.

William H. Walker can serve as an example of the older generation of Irish Villagers. He was born in Ireland in 1850. Still just a boy when he immigrated to the United States, Billy Walker joined the household of an Irish friend in the west Village, became a communicant at St. Joseph’s Church on Sixth Avenue, and earned his living as a carpenter. At Mass he met and fell in love with Ellen Roon, the pretty daughter of James Roon, owner of a Village saloon. Convinced that the formidable Mr. Roon would never give them permission to marry, the young couple contrived to be wed in a neighboring parish. They then set up housekeeping in an apartment on Leroy Street, two and a half blocks from the Hudson River docks. Ellen Walker was soon pregnant with a son whom the Walkers named William Junior. More pregnancies followed, but of the nine babies she bore (including two sets of twins), only four of Ellen’s children—three boys and a girl—survived infancy.

Billy Walker was ambitious and energetic, and like many members of the famine Irish generation, he achieved significant economic and social mobility. His carpentry work expanded into a construction business, and with profits from those endeavors, he opened a lumberyard. His business successes also enhanced the family’s social status. In the late 1880s, he purchased a handsome row house at 6 St. Luke’s Place. This was less than two blocks east on Leroy Street from the family’s old apartment, but their new neighbors were nearly all members of the solid middle class—families headed by small businessmen, real estate agents, and a few professional men—and most were second-generation Americans of Irish or German descent. By contrast, the residents of the 100 block where the Walkers once
lived were primarily working-class. In 1900, for instance, the old Walker residence, a four-story tenement at 110 Leroy, was occupied by four Irish American families, the heads of which were listed as a truckman, a truck driver, a blacksmith, and a clerk in a flour milling company.  

Many of the residents who lived on the three blocks of Leroy between St. Luke’s Place and the waterfront were members of the newest generation of Irish Villagers, immigrants who had arrived in the United States since the early 1880s. Typically, the newcomers worked at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Women from this group were seamstresses, washerwomen, factory workers, and domestic servants employed by middle- and upper-class Villagers. As a north Village patrician whose family recruited its staff of servants from the ranks of the newest of the Irish newcomers observed: “There were plenty of Irish girls arriving by every boat and looking for a place to start; they had to be shown how to light the gas and use a coal stove, but they were good-natured and willing to learn.” Like their female counterparts, men from this generation of recent Irish immigrants were employed in entry-level jobs. Manual labor was the rule, with numerous day laborers (one of the era’s lowest-paying occupations), and others earning their way as factory workers, janitors, truck drivers, and the like. All of these were jobs that Irish newcomers might find in practically any part of the city. But among the Leroy Street Irish who lived nearest the waterfront, many also worked as longshoremen, an occupation more particular to the west Village. The nearby Hudson River docks were used by some of the era’s leading passenger and shipping companies, and these firms employed hundreds of Irishmen and many Villagers of other national backgrounds as well.  

It might seem that the Walker family’s move from 110 Leroy to 6 St. Luke’s Place—that is, from a working-class tenement to a middle-class row house—signified a decisive separation between the upwardly mobile Walkers and their still struggling Irish neighbors. This, however, was not the case. Powerful cultural bonds connected all the west Village Irish, regardless of when they had arrived in the Village or the class status they had achieved once there. Three institutions were particularly instrumental in fostering ethnic solidarity among the west Village Irish: Irish county societies, the Catholic church, and the Tammany Hall Democratic party organization.  

County societies—social and political clubs organized according to the Irish county of their members’ origins—were a popular means of maintaining old country ties (fig. 8). Several Irish counties were particularly well represented in the west Village. Natives of County Antrim clustered in the neighborhood’s northwestern corner around Jackson Square. Sons
and daughters of County Clare were even more numerous. One historian observed that “no neighborhood at the turn of the century was as closely identified with a specific county as was County Clare with the western section of Greenwich Village,” and researchers for Caroline Ware’s Greenwich Village study in the early 1930s found that one major west Village thoroughfare (probably Hudson Street) had been nicknamed “County Clare Street.”52

Villagers from County Clare organized a variety of county societies in the decades immediately before the turn of the century, among them a County Clare Men’s Association, which was active from the 1880s into the
1910s, and a shorter-lived County Clare Ladies’ Association. In theory membership in these organizations was open to any man or woman with the appropriate old country background, but in practice their ranks were drawn mainly from among middle-class Irish Villagers who were businessmen, owners of homes, and parents able to pay to educate their children for the professions. Men of this sort served as officers of the County Clare Men’s Association and organized, in 1909, the County Claremen’s Evicted Tenants Protective and Industrial Association, a society for giving moral and economic aid to old country Irish tenants driven from their land by English landlords. The latter association’s first meeting was held at Crotty’s Hall, Peter J. Crotty’s wholesale liquor establishment at 420 Hudson. Crotty was named a trustee of the new organization. Other Irish Villagers served as president of the older Clare Men’s organization: Peter J. McInerney, the owner of a Hudson Street tavern, held the office from 1899 to 1908; his successor was William Crowley, a highly successful west Village businessman who was the proprietor of another Hudson Street saloon and the owner of a cigar manufacturing company whose most popular brand sold under the name Na Bocklish (Gaelic for “Don’t mention it”).

The frequency with which the names of saloon owners appeared as leaders of the county societies was no accident. Saloons were one of the first businesses into which ambitious members of the older generation of Irish immigrants could move. This was no less true of Billy Walker’s imposing father-in-law, James Roon, than it was of Peter J. Crotty and William Crowley. With credit from a brewer and only a small amount of capital, a man of modest means could open a saloon for business. Little wonder, then, that saloons occupied many streetcorners and mid-block storefronts throughout the west Village. Jones Street, though only one block long, had no less than five saloons on it at the beginning of the century.

The west Village’s Irish saloons served many functions in their patrons’ lives. Laborers went to saloons to drink and socialize after work and on weekends. Politicians found them a convenient place to meet voters; as an old-time Village Democrat recalled, “In those days a great deal of canvassing was done in saloons.” Saloons were also prime locales for affirming one’s Irishness, whether that took the form of a county society meeting or the reportedly widespread practice of defending the neighborhood’s Irish saloons as places “where only an Irishman was allowed in.”

The Catholic church was another important bulwark of Irish American solidarity. Throughout the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants were the targets of much verbal abuse and many physical assaults by anti-Catholic bigots. A nasty example of nativist mob violence took place in the Village on July 4, 1853. An Independence Day parade that was sponsored by the
Ancient Order of Hibernians and whose participants wore green scarves and badges was assaulted at Abingdon Square (in the northwestern corner of the Village) by a mob of red-shirted nativists who shouted, “Kill the Catholic sons of bitches!” Dozens of Hibernian marchers were injured, and their parade broken up.56

Incidents of this sort, together with widespread anti-Catholic feeling throughout the United States, led many Irish Catholics to develop a bunker mentality. They looked to the church to be a buffer between Irish Catholics and the Protestant host society in which they found themselves. This defensive outlook was shared by the conservative Irish clerics who led the New York diocese and who were sincerely convinced that American culture at large was inimical to Catholicism and Irishness. There was, however, an articulate minority of Catholic priests and lay people who challenged these attitudes and formulated what came to be called the liberal Catholic position. These liberals, some of them associated with St. Joseph’s parish in Greenwich Village, rejected the conservatives’ defensive posture and argued that the church should take positive steps to create “working alliances with non-Catholic elements” in the United States.57

St. Joseph’s parish had a long and distinguished history. Founded in 1829, it is one of the oldest Catholic parishes still active in the city. Its present church building, which is the original structure dedicated in 1834, has a Greek revival exterior and an interior graced by a handsome fresco of the Transfiguration in the chancel. Several priests who later figured prominently in the local diocese—the conservative Father John McCloskey, who became the first American cardinal, and Father Edward McGlynn, one of McCloskey’s most vociferous liberal critics—served the parish in its early years. From 1857 to 1880, St. Joseph’s pastor was another liberal, Father Thomas Farrell, a native of Ireland who was ordained at St. John’s College (later Fordham) in the Bronx in 1848. During the Civil War, when Irish prejudice against blacks erupted in violent attacks on African Americans during the New York City draft riot of 1863, Farrell was staunchly pro-black. He supported Lincoln’s emancipation policy and urged that freed slaves be given political rights. He continued to befriend blacks all his life; his will included a $5,000 bequest for establishing a new parish to serve African American Catholics, and this legacy enabled the Church of St. Benedict the Moor to open its doors on Bleecker Street in 1883.

Farrell was also a strong admirer of America’s democratic institutions, and he was forward-looking and optimistic about the ways in which the relationship between Irish Catholics and Protestant Americans might evolve. In the late 1860s he and a small circle of like-minded priests gathered regularly for discussion sessions at St. Joseph’s. Though they differed on details,
members of this group, which took “the Accademia” as its name, shared a liberal outlook. They believed that a new culture was in the process of emerging, born of the mix of old stock Protestant Americans and new immigrants, and they hoped to leaven that new culture by bringing to it the truths of the church. In addition, they felt that Catholics should open themselves to the democratic society around them and should foster their children’s Americanization by sending them to public schools. With regard to the church itself, these liberals urged the modification or abandonment of such traditional Catholic practices as priestly celibacy and the Latin liturgy. Reforms of this sort, they argued, would make the church more effective among its own communicants and also weaken the grounds that Protestant critics had for charging that the church was undemocratic and reactionary and therefore un-American. 58

Little is known about how much (if any) of Father Farrell’s openness to American society at large figured in the thinking of St. Joseph’s clerical and lay leaders in the years immediately after Farrell’s death in 1880. However, Father Dennis O’Flynn, who was St. Joseph’s pastor from 1892 to 1906, seems to have been relatively open to relationships with non-Catholic institutions in the neighborhood. A case in point was his response to the social workers who moved to the neighborhood in 1902 to take up residence in a Jones Street building less than two blocks from St. Joseph’s Church. A Catholic clergyman had good reason to be suspicious of non-Catholic philanthropic and social agencies whose Protestant employees often displayed some degree of insensitivity to, if not outright hostility toward, the Catholic faith. Father O’Flynn, however, did not foreclose the possibility of friendly relations with St. Joseph’s new neighbors, and once he was confident that the residents of the Jones Street settlement house had no covert religious agenda, he welcomed them as a benign influence in the west Village. 59

Father O’Flynn was a native of Ireland who had received his education in Ireland, France, and Belgium. A big man physically, of whom it was reportedly said that “his heart was in proportion to the size of his body,” he had become rector of St. Joseph’s in 1892, after having served in several New York parishes and one in the Bahamas. All the available evidence about Father O’Flynn’s nearly fifteen-year tenure at St. Joseph’s indicates that the parish flourished under his leadership. He oversaw the construction of a new rectory on Waverly Place, just north of the church, and in September 1897, the sixth year of his pastorate, St. Joseph’s opened a large parochial school at 109–111 Washington Place. This modern school building, capable of serving up to a thousand students, also became, from 1902 onward, home to a parish Boys’ Club that featured training in a variety of athletic activities: wrestling, boxing, gymnastics, and bowling. Thus did the Irish-
born rector of St. Joseph’s contribute to the distinguished history of an institution in which west Village Irish Catholics could justly take pride.60

Along with Irish county societies and the Catholic church, the third pillar of Irish ethnic solidarity was the Democratic Party. In response to anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant prejudice that came at first mainly from Whigs and later from the Know-Nothings and Republicans, the mass of poor Irish who arrived in East Coast cities gravitated toward the Democratic Party. Democrats solidified that loyalty in the middle of the nineteenth century by giving immigrants material aid and opposing nativist and anti-Catholic programs. By the Civil War era, Irish were beginning to move up in the party’s ranks, which in New York City meant taking leadership roles in Tammany Hall. Under John Kelly, the first Irish Catholic to serve as its Grand Sachem, Tammany in the 1870s and early 1880s became a highly organized urban political machine. After Kelly’s death in 1886, another Irish boss, Richard Croker, took over as Grand Sachem and retained that position until 1902.

The organizational structure that Kelly put in place was highly effective; district leaders oversaw each election ward and precinct captains helped the ward boss keep the mass of ordinary voters in the fold. Kelly’s system carried the Irish-led machine to victory after victory. Nevertheless, coalitions of Republicans, Independents, and disaffected Democrats occasionally managed to win control of the city’s administration. Two such successes happened on Croker’s watch. The first was the so-called Committee of Seventy campaign in 1894 that resulted in the election of a reform administration led by the Republican businessman William L. Strong. Tammany won the next round, the mayoral election in 1897, the first in which the five boroughs were unified as Greater New York City. But anti-Tammany forces made an immediate comeback in 1901, when a ticket sponsored by Citizens’ Union, an independent municipal reform party, made Seth Low (president of Columbia University and former mayor of Brooklyn) Greater New York’s mayor. Although the period of Croker’s leadership had been marred by major scandals in city affairs, he was deposed as party chief in 1902 less because Tammany insiders were troubled by evidence of corrupt conduct on his part than because he had failed to lead the Democracy to victory in two out of the last three elections.61

Tammany’s formula for success required contributions from many loyal partisans: enterprising ward leaders, attractive candidates, and loyal campaign workers. In the west Village in the early twentieth century the individual most responsible for building and maintaining the local Democratic organization was Charles Culkin, the Tammany district leader. Born in Greenwich Village in 1872, he was of Irish descent, the son of a wholesale
liquor dealer who was a long-time Village resident. The elder Culkin died when Charles was only fifteen. Forced at an early age to begin managing the family business, the son proved equal to the task, but his first love was always politics. A diligent worker for Tammany’s interests, Culkin was rewarded in 1897 when local party leaders named him their candidate for city alderman in a west Village district that nearly always went Democratic by a wide margin. Victorious in this, his first try for office, Culkin served three terms, resigning in 1905 to accept an appointment as Clerk of the Court of Special Sessions, a municipal post and patronage job that guaranteed him a tidy salary of $4,000 a year.62

Culkin’s official positions as alderman and court clerk were, on the whole, less politically significant than his long service as the west Village Democratic Party’s district leader, a party post with no official standing in American law that he assumed in 1902 when Richard Croker was ousted as Grand Sachem. Tammany’s success in elections was in large part due to district leaders who labored literally day and night to win voter loyalty to the Democracy’s cause. The classic method of achieving this result was to extend a helping hand to working-class constituents who needed assistance finding jobs, dealing with city agencies and the courts, or surviving personal disasters: a fire that destroyed a family’s belongings, sickness that forced the chief breadwinner out of work, or a death in the family. “I found from experience,” Culkin said, “that you cannot be too zealous in the interests of these poor people.” Culkin was nothing if not zealous. He was reportedly “found almost daily at his headquarters” at the Jefferson Club office on West Twelfth Street, and in order to keep track of who lived in his district and what they might need from him, he kept a card file of information that he constantly updated. According to one admiring report, “at a glance he could tell an inquirer just where a Jim Smith or John Jones stood as to employment and if out of work the cause of it.”63

As Tammany district leader, Culkin also made sure that west Village voters associated the Democratic organization with good times. He sent families food and presents at Christmas, provided free entertainments such as dances, picnics, and boat excursions, and paid to send local kids to summer camp. Many of the beneficiaries of this largesse were Irish Villagers, but one secret to Tammany success (and continued Irish control of most of the top spots in the organization) was that ethnicity was no bar to being a recipient of Tammany handouts. Villagers of every kind—Italian, African American, and the rest—were all potential voters, and by assiduous attention to the needs of all of his working-class neighbors, many of whom had little money for recreation and no cushion to fall back on when disaster struck, Culkin insured a good turnout for Tammany’s candidates at election time.
As one old-time Tammany alderman put it, “Look out for the poor people of [your] district. That’s all. Look out for ’em all the time—jobs, favors, rent, food, outings—anything they want, give it to ’em. Then in November you get the votes and get elected.”

It helped, of course, to have solid candidates such as the aforementioned Billy Walker of St. Luke’s Place. Like nearly all Irish Villagers, Billy Walker was a staunch Democrat. He was active in both the district Jefferson Club and the Tammany Society, and when he ran for office, as he did quite often in the 1880s and nineties, he brought to the task a personable nature that appealed to Villagers of many types. Popular with middle-class Irish Villagers who, like himself, had gotten ahead in the world materially, he also was blessed with a nice common touch. Although he was a teetotaler, which might have set him apart from the average Irishmen who frequented west Village saloons, he handled this potentially damaging trait in a creative way. When, as was customary, he made campaign visits to local saloons, he simply told the bartender, “Give me a milk punch,” which in reality was nothing but milk and seltzer water. He also had an open-minded temperament that led him to make many friends outside the Irish community, among others the head of a Greenwich Village settlement house (Mary Simkhovitch) and a Democrat of old Dutch stock, John R. Voorhis, who lived on Greenwich Street and who, like Walker, had been a carpenter, had held office under Tammany administrations, and was willing, on occasion, to split with the Tammany organization.

Billy Walker won more campaigns than he lost. In the late 1880s he was elected to the Board of Aldermen and served four terms. In 1892 and 1893 he represented the district as its state assemblyman. The only hitch in this otherwise unbroken string of electoral victories came in 1894, when he announced that he was going to vote for William Strong, the Committee of Seventy’s anti-Tammany mayoral candidate. This act of apostasy cost him in two ways: anti-Tammany candidates carried Walker’s district, preventing him from being reelected to the State Assembly; then, as punishment for his having backed Strong, the Richard Croker–led Democratic machine denied Walker further public preferment. His political career remained in limbo until Croker was ousted and Croker’s successor, Charles F. Murphy, in an effort to revitalize Tammany by reaching out to Democrats who had shown some independence of the machine, backed Walker’s appointment as Superintendent of Public Buildings for the Borough of Manhattan.

District leaders like Culkin and candidates like Walker all depended on loyal rank-and-file Democrats to perform a variety of chores at election time. Most such individuals remain forever anonymous; however, something is known about the campaign activities of Billy Walker’s son Jimmy,
whose career as the city’s mayor in the late 1920s set biographers scrambling for information about his childhood. And, as they found, in the 1890s Jimmy Walker was simply an Irish American Villager distinguished from his young friends only by his relation to his father, the candidate.

Jimmy Walker received a thorough grounding in the practical art of ward-level electioneering during his father’s many campaigns for office. At election time Jimmy, his brothers, and their best friends (two sets of Higgins brothers who lived down the block from the Walkers’ home) supplemented their usual recreational activities—baseball and football, pranks and fisticuffs—with the varied entertainments that party battles offered. The boys gathered wood and combustibles and used them to start the bonfires that illuminated nighttime campaign rallies. On election day they loafed around local polling places, which at the turn of the century were located at such quintessentially male hangouts as barber shops and cigar stores, and listened as Tammany orators harangued voters going to cast their ballots. That evening, if things went as they usually did in the west Village, the boys joined in the revels as Tammany’s partisans celebrated yet another victory for the district’s Democrats.

Like his father, Jimmy Walker was comfortable rubbing shoulders with ordinary Villagers, but Jimmy had developed this capacity in quite a different way. Billy Walker had been a poor boy when he immigrated to the United States, and had acquired a direct knowledge of the laboring man’s life during his years as a carpenter. By contrast, his son had been fairly well-off as a youth and had acquired his common touch through participation in the urban mass entertainments of the time. As a boy, he played football in the fall, and in the spring and summer he joined other west Village men and boys every Saturday near the West Street docks for baseball games that determined who could claim bragging rights in the neighborhood. He was a fan of boxing, and as a young man in his twenties, he sometimes refereed fights at Peter J. Crotty’s wholesale liquor house on Hudson Street, less than a block from the Walker residence.

Jimmy was also fond of vaudeville shows and Broadway musicals, and for a time he had dreamed of pursuing a career as a songwriter. He had begun to write lyrics early in the 1900s and succeeded in getting a few of his songs published. His activity as a lyricist reached its peak in 1905 in a cooperative venture with Ernest R. Ball, a prolific composer whose gift for creating popular melodies is apparent in his Irish American ballads “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” and “Mother Machree.” A collaborative piece, “Will You Love Me in December as You Do in May,” words by J. J. Walker, music by Ernest R. Ball, became a best-seller in 1905.

Jimmy Walker’s playboy lifestyle in the 1920s and the fact that scandals
forced him to resign as mayor have led most scholars to treat Walker’s connections with pre–World War I popular entertainments as little more than examples of an early predisposition to frivolity. Yet Walker’s wish to be a songwriter and his zest for cheap amusements, as mass market entertainments were called at the turn of the century, were entirely congruent with his west Village Irish milieu. Among Irish Democrats, egalitarian politics and popular culture went hand in hand. Tammany’s political ethic of befriending the poor had its parallel in an affinity shared by both the Tammany leadership and its rank-and-file members for popular amusements. “Big Tim” Sullivan, the most powerful Tammany district leader of the century’s first decade, owned several theaters, and he was renowned for the spirited annual balls and lavish summer excursions to which he treated his Lower East Side constituents. In the same years the Tammany Times, official mouthpiece for the Democratic machine, featured a section labeled “Amusements” with numerous advertisements for dances, theater productions, and vaudeville shows. Perhaps fittingly, the first-floor occupant of Tammany’s main headquarters building on Fourteenth Street was Tony Pastor’s variety show theater, one of the most boisterous and popular vaudeville establishments in the city. Through his love of commercial entertainments, Jimmy Walker identified himself with one of the most powerful cultural trends of his time.69

Anyone, even someone of Irish background, who challenged the political and cultural loyalties that united turn-of-the-century Irish neighborhoods was asking for trouble. This was a lesson that Henry H. Curran, a young lawyer, learned quite forcefully in 1903. Curran was an Independent Democrat who usually voted for Republicans in municipal elections, and he had volunteered to speak in support of reelecting Mayor Seth Low, the Citizens’ Union (i.e., anti-Tammany) candidate who had been voted into office in 1901. It was to be Curran’s first-ever campaign speech.

On the appointed night a horse-drawn wagon with three occupants—a driver, a man assigned to introduce Curran, and another man whose job was to start a bonfire to draw a crowd—picked Curran up and took him to the tough Lower West Side location near the riverfront where he was to speak. The fire-builder soon produced an impressive blaze and a small group of curious onlookers gathered. The man making the introduction did his job, ending with a rhetorical flourish in which he presented Curran as “that great Irish-American orator.”70

No one in the mainly Irish crowd was fooled for a moment. Curran, regardless of his ethnic background, was a representative of the enemy camp, the good-government, kid-glove snobs who were going to vote for Seth Low. Curran had barely gotten to his feet and cleared his throat when
the first projectile, a turnip, was hurled in his direction by someone just beyond the circle of light made by the fire. A cabbage, a rotten tomato, part of a cobblestone, and a dirt clod followed, several missiles passing close to Curran’s head and one of them striking the fire-builder on the neck. Being a prudent fellow, Curran shouted to the driver, “Whip up, Bill!” and, spurred by the lash, the old horse broke into an awkward canter that carried the Low contingent safely out of range.71

Irish Democrats not only chased Curran off, but Tammany defeated Low and recaptured control of the city’s administration in the 1903 election. From the perspective of most Irish Villagers it probably seemed that their hegemony in the neighborhood was still firmly in place. From alderman to congressman, with a single exception every elected official whose district included the west Village was a Democrat. (The lone man out was a Republican state assemblyman from a district whose core was the silk-stocking Washington Square North part of the neighborhood.) Moreover, the Irish county societies were flourishing, and old St. Joseph’s was in the midst of a highly successful building campaign.

But change was in the air. Anti-Tammany candidates had won two out of the last four mayoral elections. Tammany’s leaders needed strong support from working-class voters to prevent future defeats, but most of the immigrants who were arriving in unprecedented numbers at the turn of the century were not Irish, and though non-Irish laborers often backed Tammany candidates, they were not so dependably Democratic as Irishmen. Inside Greenwich Village, the impact of these developments was such that by 1900 Italians outnumbered Irish in the Village as a whole by approximately two to one, and Italian immigrants were rapidly taking over parts of the west Village that had once been mainly Irish. If these demographic trends continued, the west Village Irish would soon find themselves in a social and political landscape very different from the one that the Walkers, Culkins, Roons, and other Irish worthies had known at the end of the nineteenth century.72