On the north side of Washington Square, on the square itself and on streets adjacent to lower Fifth Avenue, were the homes of the upper-class Villagers. These patricians were Protestants of Dutch, English, and French stock, some of them heirs to old wealth and to the handsome residences that their parents or grandparents had built before the Civil War.

Culturally, religiously, and politically, the north Village gentry had little in common with most of their near neighbors, the working-class and immigrant Villagers who lived south and west of the square. Italian immigrants and Irish Americans worshipped at Catholic churches, while the gentry attended Sunday services at Protestant edifices along lower Fifth Avenue, elite congregations such as the First Presbyterian Church and the Episcopal Church of the Ascension. Irish, Italian, and African American Villagers gathered to drink and socialize in the numerous working-class saloons of the west and south Village, while the Protestant elite socialized in the elegant drawing rooms of their homes. These cultural and class contrasts were reflected in political rivalries, especially between the Irish Villagers loyal to the Democratic machine and the patrician Villagers who deeply distrusted Tammany rule. Again and again the Village gentry, whether they were Republicans, Independents, or Democrats, organized to challenge Tammany’s control of the city.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the future of this upper-class north
Village enclave seemed increasingly uncertain. Tenement housing and Italian immigrants were invading the Village from the south, and commercial buildings were encroaching on the square from the east. The novelist Henry James, a famous native son who in 1904 and 1905 visited his youthful haunts in the Village after more than twenty years’ absence, found to his dismay that his “birth-house” had been, as he put it, “ruthlessly suppressed,” torn down to make way for a ten-story loft building, “a high, square, impersonal structure.” The sight of a few familiar places north of Washington Square brightened his mood, and upon venturing into the Church of the Ascension on Fifth Avenue, he declared himself “hushed to admiration before a great religious picture,” John La Farge’s representation of Christ’s ascension. Still, his account of his visit repeatedly returned to his sense of disquietude at the relentless way that urban progress “amputated” all signs of the past and replaced them with towering structures dedicated solely to “mere economic convenience.”

Well before James’s visit changes in the neighborhood and the attraction of newer elite residential districts farther uptown had led many of the old gentry to abandon their north Village homes. Nevertheless, a substantial number of patrician Villagers remained devoted to the neighborhood, and their continuing presence had the practical effect of slowing the expansion of tenements, factories, and commercial buildings north of Washington Square. Moreover, the patrician Villagers’ response to the changing times—particularly to the invasion of the Village by immigrant and working-class New Yorkers—was not entirely passive, a matter of simply staying put. On the contrary, in the waning years of the nineteenth century and first years of the twentieth, Village patricians pursued a variety of cultural and political initiatives in an effort to affirm values that the gentry held dear and to preserve, if possible, the north Village as an elegant residential district.

The North Villagers

A visitor to Washington Square on Saturday, April 28, 1900, could scarcely have failed to be charmed by the scene. A light breeze stirred the leaves of the giant elms in the middle of the square, and bright sunlight filtered through the luminous green canopy of leaves to fall on the pedestrians strolling below. Washington Arch, only five years old, its marble still fresh and white, dominated the north side of the park. Although the era of horse-drawn vehicles was entering its final years, only a few automobiles passed through the square. April 28 was a Saturday, but the city’s commerce moved briskly, with trucks, delivery wagons, and small carts everywhere in evidence. Now and then a handsome carriage owned by one of the patri-
cian families made its appearance. Driven by coachmen in formal attire, complete with top hats, these fine turnouts—“the barouches, victorias or coupes, the shining horses, sometimes even a four-in-hand”—emerged from their stables in the alleys behind the mansions facing Washington Square. The high-stepping horses proceeded to the front of their owners’ homes, stopped, and stood alertly, waiting for well-dressed patricians to come down the front steps and climb in the carriages.²

Of the twenty-five fine homes that remained of the twenty-eight that had once graced Washington Square North, at least four were still occupied in 1900 by the original owner’s children or grandchildren. The most venerable resident of these four was Serena Rhinelander, who lived in number 14, the mansion on the west corner of Fifth Avenue that had been built for her father in 1839–40. A descendant of early Dutch settlers, William C. Rhinelander was able, through judicious investments (mainly in real estate), to leave each of his three daughters an inheritance of more than a million dollars. His daughter Serena became a formidable figure in New York society and used her considerable fortune to promote high-minded causes. A member of Reverend Percy Stickney Grant’s Church of the Ascension nearby on Fifth Avenue, she contributed substantial sums to a remodeling project that included the commission of John La Farge’s mural “The Ascension,” a grand and harmonious work that reflected the aesthetic and religious sensibilities of the late-nineteenth-century elite (map 3).

Miss Rhinelander was equally lavish in her support of patriotic events. The old New York elite, she believed, had an obligation to demonstrate its allegiance to old republican virtues—simplicity, honesty, and hard work—of which she feared later immigrants might be ignorant. To encourage participation in the Washington Centennial held in May 1889 to mark the hundredth anniversary of the U.S. Constitution, Miss Rhinelander had a private viewing stand of “terraced seats” erected on the Washington Square and Fifth Avenue sides of her mansion. Eight hundred guests, more than half of them children from poor families and local Sunday schools, viewed the huge parade that passed by on Fifth Avenue.³

Serena Rhinelander’s nephew, William Rhinelander Stewart, lived a few doors down the block at 17 Washington Square North. With a comfortable income derived from inherited wealth, Stewart was free to devote most of his time to civic causes. In the late 1890s he was president of the New York State Board of Charities and admired for his efforts to improve the quality of the state’s institutions for poor women and children and the physically or mentally impaired. A prominent Episcopal layman, he served for many years as a vestryman of Grace Church, an upper-class parish located at Broadway and East 10th Street, the outermost edge of the patrician Village of Stewart’s day. A Republican, he generally remained aloof from local party
Chapter Three
1. Serena Rhinelander’s.......................... 14 Washington Square North
2. Grace Church.................................. Broadway & East Tenth Street
3. Washington Memorial Arch
4. Cooper Union.................................. Fourth Avenue & East Seventh St.
5. Richard Watson Gilder’s.................... 13 East Eighth Street
6. Robert and Emily de Forest’s............ 7 Washington Square North
7. C.O.S. District Office (1903–)............ 59 Morton Street
8. Church of the Ascension................... Fifth Avenue & West Tenth Street
9. Chapel of the Comforter.................... 10 Horatio Street
10. Eighth Street Station....................... Sixth Avenue Elevated
11. 16th Police Precinct Station............. 253 Mercer Street

Chapter Four
12. Sheridan Square
13. NYU Academic Building.................. Washington Square East
14. Mary & Bert Vorse’s....................... 210 West Fourth Street
15. A Club............................................. 3 Fifth Avenue
16. Doty-Rauh-Eastman’s..................... 12 Charles Street
17. Triangle Shirtwaist Company............ Asch Building, Washington Place
18. Jefferson Market Courthouse............. Sixth Avenue near West Tenth St.
battles, the chief exception being his membership on the Committee of Seventy, the ad hoc panel of prominent New Yorkers who spearheaded a successful anti-Tammany campaign in 1894. On May 5, 1895, Stewart doubtless felt great personal satisfaction as he handed the keys to one of his pet projects, the Washington Memorial Arch, to the very mayor, William L. Strong, whom his efforts had helped elect to office (fig. 16).

Stewart’s involvement in the Washington Arch project dated from the Washington Centennial celebration for which his aunt had built the huge private viewing stand. At that time a temporary wooden arch had been built astride Fifth Avenue directly across from Washington Square for the May 1889 ceremony. Inspired by the success of the centennial celebration, Stewart proposed that a permanent marble arch be constructed with funds from private donors. Stewart’s patrician neighbors endorsed the plan, and a site
on the northern edge of Washington Square was selected. The architect chosen to design the arch was Stanford White, a native of the Village and a man to whom the New York elite often turned for their public projects. In the Village he was responsible for the Church of the Ascension’s redesigned chancel in 1888 and for the Washington Arch and the Judson Memorial Church in the 1890s.

Every step of the Washington Arch’s construction was marked by a ceremony: laying the cornerstone (May 1890), placing the capstone (April 1892), and dedicating the completed arch (May 1895). At each ceremony representatives of the elite described the project’s rationale, which was rooted in the north Village gentry’s conviction that moral virtues could be inculcated through public art. At the cornerstone ceremony in 1890 the principal speaker was George William Curtis, the editor of *Harper’s Weekly* and a man whose public addresses epitomized the elite’s ideal of oratory. Curtis quoted words attributed to George Washington—“Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair”—and applied them to the enterprise at hand, suggesting that raising a beautiful piece of public art would also raise the moral and aesthetic standards of the general public that viewed it. Five years later, at the dedication of the completed arch, the featured address was given by a Civil War veteran, General Horace Porter, who, echoing Curtis’s sentiments, succinctly summarized the thinking that lay behind patricians’ arch project. “There is nothing,” he asserted, “which cultivates a more refined taste in a community than the public display of deserving artistic structures. They speak a universal language and impart a lasting pleasure to all. They appeal to our highest senses and awaken our noblest emotions.”

But why an appeal to “our noblest emotions” at this particular time and place? Precisely because the elite’s ideal of what Porter called “a universal language” was almost daily being called into question in local and national affairs. Conflict, not unity, was everywhere in evidence in the early 1890s: bloody clashes between labor and capital, a depression that left 25 percent of the industrial workforce unemployed and angry, and the swift growth of urban slums whose immigrant inhabitants had only a limited familiarity with the language and culture of their adopted land. In introducing Curtis at the cornerstone ceremony in 1890, Henry Marquand, a wealthy philanthropist and patron of the arts, made a direct connection between the working-class tenements that were gradually closing in on Washington Square and the aesthetic and civic purpose of the Washington Arch:

The spot has been aptly chosen, and not a valid objection can be urged against it. It is true some one has remarked that ‘the neighborhood in a few years will
be all tenement houses. Even should this prove true, no stronger reason could be given for the arch being placed here. Have the occupants of tenement houses no sense of beauty? Have they no patriotism? Have they no right to good architecture? Happily there is no monopoly of the appreciation of things that are excellent any more than there is of fresh air, and in our minds’ eye we can see many a family which cannot afford ten cents to go to... [Central Park]ark taking great pleasure under the shadow of the arch.

Having praised the monument for its aesthetic virtues, Marquand went on to invoke its potential as a force for unifying the neighborhood socially: “This is,” he said, “the arch of peace and good will to men. It will bring the rich and poor together in one common bond of patriotic feeling.”

Five years later, at the May 1895 dedication of the completed arch, the invocation, given by Reverend Henry C. Potter, Episcopal bishop of New York and a resident of Washington Square North, alluded to the social turmoil that was daily grabbing headlines: “Save us from violence, discord, and confusion, from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way,” Bishop Potter prayed. He then echoed Henry Marquand’s earlier sentiments as he prayed that “the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues” might be fashioned “into one happy people.”

The gentry’s goal of reducing social conflict was closely intertwined with their commitment to anti-Tammany politics. In the public rhetoric of the time, when the gentry’s representatives spoke of educating the public to patriotic ideals, they were making coded references to virtues felt to be lacking in Tammany-controlled regimes. If, the thinking went, patricians succeeded in educating slum dwellers (especially recent immigrants) to the gentry’s version of high-minded civic virtue, then working-class New Yorkers would cease to back the Irish-led Democratic machine.

One individual in whom the social and political strands of patrician civic activism were combined was Edward Cooper. His mansion at 12 Washington Square North stood just across Fifth Avenue from Serena Rhinelander’s residence. Cooper was a member of the platform party at the dedication of the arch in 1895, both in recognition of his long-standing support of the project and because he was esteemed as a former mayor of New York City. A Democrat but an opponent of the party’s Tammany wing, he ran as the candidate of a coalition of Republicans and Democrats and was swept into office in 1879, benefiting in part from the aftermath of revelations of the notorious Tweed Ring’s corruption. However, by the time the next election came around, anti-Tammany fervor had faded, and Cooper did not win a second term.

After his failed reelection campaign, Cooper remained a prominent public figure in New York City, less because of his one term as mayor than
because he was a multimillionaire philanthropist. Alone among the Washington Square elite—all the rest of whom had made their fortunes in banking, retailing, real estate, and, in some instances in the younger generation, the professions—Cooper derived his wealth from manufacturing. His father, Peter Cooper, had been an industrialist who amassed a huge fortune making iron and glue.7

Once he had earned it, the elder Cooper used his wealth to support worthy civic causes. Chief among these was the construction of Cooper Union, a large meeting hall and classroom building completed in 1859 at Astor Place, a few blocks east of Washington Square. Cooper Union became, in the words of one modern commentator, “the nation’s first free nonsectarian coeducational college.” Classes and public lectures were offered free of charge to make education accessible to all, particularly to workers who, as Peter Cooper and his son Edward saw it, were being demoralized by the impact of rapid industrialization. Especially at risk, the Coopers believed, were craftsmen whose skills were becoming obsolete as the old manufacturing system based on small shops owned by master craftsmen was being replaced by an industrial economy in which semiskilled laborers tended machines in huge factories. Self-help in the form of educational opportunities, the Coopers hoped, would enable workers to ride out the wave of change. Such was the rapidity of change, however, that by the early 1890s the workers about whom the patrician speakers and their Washington Square audiences worried most were no longer the embattled traditional American craftsmen but the throngs of southern and eastern European immigrants who were swarming into the city. In response to this new challenge, Cooper Union targeted Lower East Side immigrant masses with new programs intended to introduce them to the basics of American political and social thought.8

Despite their support for the Washington Arch project and Cooper Union’s educational mission, most Village patricians had little direct personal contact with the non-English-speaking newcomers they hoped to reach. The Village elite, however, did have daily and intimate contact with another group of working-class people—the butlers, chefs, grooms, coachmen, lady’s maids, chambermaids, and kitchenmaids who lived and worked in their homes. Ex-mayor Cooper’s household in 1900 consisted of Cooper, his daughter, her husband, three grandchildren, and sixteen servants. Although this was the largest staff of servants in any Washington Square North household, it was not extraordinary. William Rhinelander Stewart employed twelve servants, and his aunt Serena Rhinelander had eight house servants plus a groom and a coachman who lived in the carriage house in back of the Rhinelander mansion.9
At the turn of the century the typical servant in the Village gentry’s households was a young, foreign-born woman. Nearly half of the servants employed by Washington Square patricians in 1900 were in their twenties, and barely one in six was more than forty years old. Only one member of the Washington Square North elite, Mrs. Sarah Livingston of number 20, still employed African American servants, although before the Civil War blacks would have been the preferred choice of many patrician employers. By 1900 blacks had been replaced by white servants, all but a handful of them born abroad, half of them in Ireland. Immigrants from other northern European countries (England, Germany, Sweden, France, and Finland) filled most of the remaining positions in the patricians’ households. Only one servant in 1900 was Italian, and none were East Europeans, a reflection of the fact that women from these so-called new immigrant groups generally did not seek employment as domestic servants. Still, many of the gentry’s servants were quite recent arrivals, approximately 60 percent of them having been in the United States ten years or less. Moreover, with the exception of males employed as butlers, grooms, and coachmen, Washington Square servants were nearly all female, testifying to the fact that household service was by far the largest job category for young foreign-born women at the turn of the century.10

Two doors down from Cooper’s sixteen-servant household was Reverend Henry C. Potter’s residence at 10 Washington Square. Its occupants consisted of Potter, his wife, their six children, and four female servants, two from Sweden and two from Ireland. The family had moved to the Greenwich Village area in 1868, when Potter had become rector of Grace Church. After fifteen years he had been named assistant bishop of New York and soon thereafter bishop. As the leader of an old-line Protestant denomination from 1888 to 1908, Potter faced many challenges. Not the least of these arose from the fact that the Episcopal church had a strong following among the city’s upper class but little appeal to a broader public in an era when most working-class New Yorkers were Catholic or Jewish immigrants. Potter’s response was to adopt a broad church approach, reaching out to both the upper- and lower-class constituencies in his diocese. He energetically supported the elite’s ambitious project of constructing the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. At the same time he insisted that privileged Episcopalians had an obligation to contribute generously to social programs that benefited the working-class poor, a viewpoint that won him a reputation as a friend of New York’s workers and led them to accept him as an arbitrator in labor disputes.

An articulate and thoughtful man, Potter was a welcome guest at a Village institution that represented turn-of-the-century elite culture at its best.
This was the literary salon hosted by Richard Watson Gilder and his wife, Helena de Kay Gilder. Both of the Gilders were well known in artistic and literary circles, she as a painter who helped found the Art Student’s League of New York, he as a poet who, since 1881, had edited *Century Magazine*, which under his leadership became one of the great American magazines of the day, a bastion from which high moral and literary standards were tenaciously defended.\(^{11}\)

Every Friday evening the Gilders opened the drawing rooms of their handsome East Eighth Street home to guests who constituted, as a young writer later recalled, “one of the most civilized and cosmopolitan groups in the city.” Although the Gilders fostered a relaxed, homey atmosphere by having their daughters distribute modest refreshments (tea, coffee, chocolates, and small cakes) to guests, there was nothing modest about the reputations of many who attended. Among the luminaries were the sculptor August Saint-Gaudens, the naturalist John Burroughs, and the architect Stanford White, who, incidentally, had designed a mantlepiece for the Gilders’ drawing room. Moreover, the evenings were not limited to conversation; well-known artists were invited to perform, creating particularly memorable evenings. On one such occasion, Jan Paderewski played a grand piano that the Steinway Company had loaned for the evening. On another Friday, Helena Modjeska, a leading actress, recited parts she had made famous.\(^{12}\)

Richard Watson Gilder’s commitment to setting standards was not limited to trying to influence what the public read. He also attempted to shape public policy. His first venture into politics came in 1884 as a Mugwump, one of the Republicans who voted for the Democratic presidential candidate, Grover Cleveland, on the grounds that his own party’s standard-bearer, James G. Blaine, had betrayed the public’s trust by using his office for personal financial gain. During Cleveland’s two terms as president (1885–1889, 1893–1897) Gilder remained his admirer and became his friend as well. But Gilder did not entirely share Cleveland’s unwavering laissez-faire conservatism and in the 1890s came to believe that city and state governments needed to pass regulatory laws to protect citizens against some of the worst effects of industrialization.\(^{13}\)

The most dramatic example of Gilder’s support for regulatory laws came in 1894 after his appointment as chair of a New York State Tenement House Commission charged with investigating housing conditions in New York City. Determined to observe for himself the conditions faced by the slum dwellers, he asked the city’s fire department to notify him whenever they answered an alarm from a tenement district so that he could follow fire trucks to the blaze. He also showed a flare for publicizing the commission’s
findings when he singled out tenements owned by Trinity Church, one of the city’s wealthiest and most prestigious Episcopal parishes, as examples of poorly ventilated, unsanitary, and unsafe housing. Several of the most noxious rookeries owned by Trinity were located on Hudson and Charlton streets in the southernmost part of Greenwich Village. Convinced by personal observation that urban poverty was not, as laissez-faire theorists maintained, simply the result of individual laziness or immorality, Gilder came to believe that poor people were often victimized by slum conditions that could be ameliorated through legislation. With this in mind he helped to draft and press through the state legislature a new housing law that corrected some glaring deficiencies in the previous building code and set the stage for passage of much tougher and more comprehensive regulations that were part of the Tenement House Act of 1901.14

Much of the credit for the latter law must go to another Village patrician, Robert W. de Forest. De Forest and his wife, Emily Johnston de Forest, lived at 7 Washington Square North. Like many north Village patricians, the de Forests and Johnstons associated themselves with “Old New York,” a term that referred to life in the city before the Civil War and to the families, many of them with colonial era roots, who set the tone of prewar society. Robert de Forest’s ancestors were French Huguenot exiles who emigrated to New Amsterdam in 1636. A native of Greenwich Village, Robert had fond memories of his childhood years in the 1850s on Charles Street in the west Village. His father was a successful lawyer, and Robert entered the same profession, doing his undergraduate work at Yale and graduating from Columbia Law School in 1872. Later that year he married Emily Johnston, forming a connection with a family that may have lacked the de Forests’ colonial roots but was, on the whole, much wealthier.15

Emily’s grandfather, John Johnston, had been born in Scotland and had come to the United States in 1804. He made a fortune as an importer and had the house at 7 Washington Square built for himself and his family in the early 1830s (fig. 17). His son, John Taylor Johnston, graduated from New York University (which his father had helped found in 1831) and trained in the law; he chose not to practice, devoting himself instead to investing in railroads. A lover of fine art, he amassed a collection that was regarded as one of the best in the city and put it on display one day a week in a refurbished stable behind his house at 8 Fifth Avenue. Subsequently he became a founder and the first president (1870–1889) of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A firm believer that works of art could have a civilizing influence on those who viewed them, he donated most of his personal holdings to the new museum.16

The de Forests and the Johnstons subscribed to an Old New York ethic
that held public service, discreet behavior, and family ties in high regard. Robert and Emily de Forest were well known for their ongoing and generous contributions to charitable and cultural institutions. They scrupulously guarded their privacy, conducting themselves so that personal and family matters would not become subjects for gossip or, worse yet, newspaper stories. Emily, the family historian and genealogist, only occasionally revealed a glimpse of what life was like inside 7 Washington Square North, and when she did, she said nothing about her own generation but spoke of her grandmother, Mrs. John Johnston, describing her elaborate dinner parties, her exchange of social visits with women friends, and her house’s several parlors, each of which had “stiff rows of damask-covered chairs and sofas around the walls, and marble-topped tables in the middle.”

Many of the social rituals of Mrs. Johnston’s mid-nineteenth century world were still in force among the Old New York patricians who lived on Washington Square North in Emily de Forest’s day. The practice of gentlemen exchanging New Year’s Day calls was gradually dying out, but the genteel women of the neighborhood still faithfully devoted large parts of one
day each week (in the Village that day was Friday) to making formal calls on one another. Hamilton Fish Armstrong, a boy of seven in 1900 and the youngest child of a well-connected Old New York family that lived on West Tenth Street, fondly remembered learning “the geography of polite neighborhoods” while accompanying his mother on such calls. Although food and drink were offered at each stop—“tea and hot chocolate in the dining room, as well as bouillon in a silver urn, also glazed importés and other little cakes from Dean’s and such very small, very thin watercress sandwiches that they hardly seemed worth the trouble of eating”—the point of such visits was not to linger over the refreshments but to call at as many homes as possible on the allotted day.18

Family was the foundation of Old New York society, and loyalty to family ties often included loyalty to an ancestral home. Such was the case with the de Forest clan. Although Emily and Robert owned a spacious estate at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, they spent most of the year at the Washington Square mansion Emily’s father had given them as a wedding gift. Emily’s siblings also continued to live in the Greenwich Village district to which their grandfather had moved his family seventy years earlier. In 1900, Emily’s sister Frances (Mrs. Pierre Mali) still occupied their father’s white marble house at 8 Fifth Avenue, and her sister Eva (Mrs. Henry E. Coe) lived two blocks north at 5 East Tenth Street. Before the end of the decade their brother, John J. H. Johnston, moved into 18 Washington Square North (once the residence of Henry James’s grandmother) and Emily’s daughter Frances (Mrs. William Stewart) set up housekeeping at 1 Washington Square North, remaining at that address from 1906 to 1935.19

By 1900, Emily’s father, John Taylor Johnston, had been dead seven years, and Robert de Forest had long been the principal manager of the Johnston–de Forest clan’s investments and the most conspicuous public spokesman for the family’s philanthropic interests. The process by which the mantle of family leadership shifted to Robert’s shoulders dated back to at least 1889, when poor health forced Johnston to resign as trustee and president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and de Forest took his father-in-law’s place on the museum’s board. (Later, in 1913, de Forest would be elected the fifth president of the museum, his immediate predecessor being J. P. Morgan.) An able corporate lawyer and shrewd investor, de Forest also succeeded his father-in-law as president of the Central Railroad of New Jersey, which Johnston had founded before the Civil War. Quite separate from such inherited roles, de Forest helped organize the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York, and in 1888 he became its president, holding that post until his death in 1931. By that time the major civic organizations he had served as an officer or board member numbered in the
dozens. On two occasions he accepted political appointments. One was the chair of the New York State Tenement House Commission that produced the Tenement House Act of 1901, and the other was the post of New York City Tenement House Commissioner charged with administering the new law. Before de Forest could be offered (and accept) these posts, however, three broad developments had to take place: the emergence of the so-called scientific charity movement, an upsurge in support for urban housing reform, and a renewed assault on Tammany Hall’s control of New York City politics.20

De Forest’s involvement with the scientific charity movement dated from 1882, when he helped a wealthy young widow, Josephine Shaw Lowell, establish the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York. The organization’s goal was to replace “unscientific” charity (that is, impulse giving) with a system of assistance that coordinated the efforts of the city’s public and private relief agencies. Based on interviews with prospective aid recipients and a centralized list of all names currently on the rolls of local charitable agencies, the C.O.S. made recommendations regarding who should receive aid and which agencies could best assist them. In its early years the society took the traditional stance of trying to differentiate between the morally “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, but in 1896 its leaders voted to abandon this old-fashioned vocabulary. After de Forest became president in 1888, the C.O.S. modernized its programs in other ways as well, making a major contribution to the emergence of social work as a profession through its sponsorship of the Columbia School of Social Work and through the society’s journal, Charities Review (which after several name changes became The Survey).21

For a time in the 1890s, the Charity Organization Society’s supporters and partisans of the settlement house movement tended to regard each other as rivals and to be critical of each other’s methods. Settlement house residents tended to dismiss alms-giving as patronizing and elitist: patronizing because it implied that the benefactor was superior to the beneficiary, and elitist because it required no direct contact with the impoverished recipient. Charity workers, for their part, initially derided the settlement house residents’ belief that college-educated individuals could help the poor by living in slum districts. A pat on the back and a sympathetic word from a well-off neighbor, the charity workers charged, was of little practical use to a jobless tenement dweller. In time, the less doctrinaire adherents of each movement began to see that they could function as allies who pursued somewhat distinct, though by no means mutually exclusive, strategies for dealing with urban social problems.

By the late 1890s, the end of de Forest’s first decade as its president, the
C.O.S., which earlier had depended almost exclusively on volunteer labor, had professionalized its ranks. The organization had a rapidly expanding central office staff and more than a dozen district offices, each employing a head agent, an assistant agent, and a stenographer. The Greenwich district, whose borders varied over the years but generally included the West Side south of Fourteenth Street to at least Canal, was a major operation, dealing in any given year with hundreds of active cases. Each of these required an initial interview, follow-up visits to the applicant’s home address, and correspondence with relevant agencies. People who knew de Forest only in his later years sometimes formed the false impression that he had no personal dealings with poor people. For instance, an interviewer reported that a former administrative assistant of de Forest’s who had worked for him in the 1920s, when he was a very reserved man in his seventies, said that “she never knew him to come into direct contact with the poor.” During the 1880s, however, de Forest served on several district committees, members of which were responsible for doing follow-up interviews with recent applicants. In the course of such interviews, de Forest certainly gained firsthand knowledge of how working-class Villagers lived.22

De Forest did not have to go many blocks from his Washington Square mansion to find the homes of the poor. At the turn of the century the sections of the Village under the C.O.S. Greenwich district office’s jurisdiction had more than 3,600 tenement buildings occupied by nearly 95,000 Villagers. Even the blocks just south and west of de Forest’s home, an area still not considered a dense tenement district, had more than 500 buildings and a population of almost 16,000.23

Despite the publicity that Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* and Richard Watson Gilder’s tenement house investigation had brought to dangerous and degrading housing conditions in the city, the movement for housing reform stalled in the late 1890s. The Greater New York charter, which consolidated Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Richmond into a single metropolis, required the new city government to draw up a unified building code for all five boroughs. However, in the 1897 municipal elections—the first under the new charter—the Tammany Democratic ticket headed by Robert Van Wyck won. With the new mayor’s backing, the Tammany-dominated Board of Aldermen first proposed and then in the fall of 1899 passed a weak building code that, according to housing reformers, offered little protection for tenement dwellers.

De Forest used his position as president of the Charity Organization Society to promote a reform alternative. When he was approached by Lawrence Veiller, a twenty-six-year-old housing activist who was regarded as a radical innovator, de Forest did not hesitate to place resources at the young
man’s disposal. In December 1898 a special C.O.S. Tenement House Committee was established with Veiller as its chairman. Less than a year later Veiller’s committee was ready with recommendations for a comprehensive reform of the city’s housing laws.

Since the city government was controlled by a Tammany regime committed to its own housing code, de Forest and Veiller appealed to Governor Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican, for help. Roosevelt appointed a New York State Tenement House Commission to investigate housing conditions in New York City and to propose remedial state legislation. With de Forest as its chair and Veiller as his assistant in charge of most details, the commission soon produced a draft of a new state housing code that the legislature used as the basis for the Tenement House Act of 1901.

As for the results of the new law, no simple generalization can accurately sum up its impact on literally millions of New York City tenement residents. Critics note that the law’s higher standards raised construction costs, leading some builders to drop out of the low-end market and exacerbating a shortage in low-cost housing that drove rents up prior to World War I. Consequently, the poorest of the poor continued to be housed in tenements built before the new law. Nevertheless, the New York Tenement House Act of 1901 was landmark legislation, widely copied by other states as representing the best thinking on housing reform at the time. It led to some upgrades in older tenements and required major improvements in the physical features—light, air, sanitation, and fireproofing—of tenements built after its passage. A recent history of New York City housing concluded that “for the general public, [the new law] radically improved the quality of tenement housing.”

Despite Robert de Forest’s role in securing the new law’s passage, his name would never have received serious consideration for the post of Tenement House Commissioner established under the law had not its passage coincided with the election of Seth Low, the Citizens’ Union candidate, in the 1901 mayoral election. One month after his victory at the polls, the mayor-elect announced de Forest’s appointment as his administration’s Tenement House Commissioner. Initially very reluctant to accept the post, de Forest was eventually persuaded to take it by his fellow patrician, Josephine Shaw Lowell, who in a manner worthy of a character in a Henry James novel said little but conveyed much when she met de Forest at a gathering and spoke four words only: “Mr. de Forest, please do.” Lawrence Veiller, who had wanted the post and thought it should have been his, was angry, but he accepted de Forest’s invitation to be his deputy.

Reporters who sought the new commissioner out at his Washington Square residence on the day of the announcement were treated to a typical
de Forest performance. He had been hesitant to accept, he said, but had
de decid that it was, as he put it, his “duty to do so,” even though “acceptance
involved some sacrifice” of time from other commitments, including his
work as C.O.S. president. When asked how he would administer the new
law, de Forest displayed the moderation that Low so valued in him. He
promised to meet with opponents of the law to see whether their complaints
could be met without undermining its overall intent. And what was that?
According to the new commissioner, simply to “secure to the tenement
dwellers, who number more than one-half of the population of Greater
New York, more light, better ventilation, and better sanitation.”26

De Forest’s reference to one-half of the city’s population quite rightly
placed his duties in a citywide frame of reference, but housing reform also
had ramifications for his own neighborhood. De Forest and Veiller had
written in 1900 that “in former years” the area near Washington Square
“was not distinctively a tenement house district (fig. 18). It has, however,
recently become so, and this tendency is fast increasing.” This statement
about the number of tenements in one part of the neighborhood also re-
flected trends in the Village as a whole. In the first decade of the twentieth
century, however, the pace of new construction varied greatly from year to
year. A building boom in 1903 and 1904 added nearly 1,200 apartments to
the neighborhood’s housing stock, but from 1905 to 1910 only about 200
apartments were built annually, a slow pace that reflected the citywide drop-
off in tenement construction.27

The north Village elite’s response to the changing demography of the
neighborhood had begun well before de Forest and Veiller wrote their ap-
praisal in 1900. Throughout the late nineteenth century, members of the
north Village gentry, believing that their privileged status obligated them
to assist their less fortunate neighbors, had involved themselves in many
philanthropic and civic activities. Although their civic activism had con-
servative origins in that it sought to blunt social unrest, reform-minded
patrician Villagers were not reactionaries who lacked sympathy for their
working-class neighbors. De Forest’s efforts to help the poor through the
Charity Organization Society programs, the gentry’s campaigns to improve
housing conditions for tenement dwellers, Bishop Potter’s work as a labor
arbitrator, and ex-mayor Cooper’s commitment to providing Lower East
Side immigrants with free access to educational opportunities: these late
nineteenth-century actions produced very real benefits for lower-class Vil-
lagers.

As the neighborhood continued to change in the first decade of the twen-
tieth century, the north Village patricians’ response to the neighborhood’s
transformation also evolved. Two innovative responses received significant
backing from Village gentry between 1907 and 1910—Ascension Forum, sponsored by an elite Protestant church, and the Washington Square Association, a group organized by north Village taxpayers. Neither initiative had entirely satisfactory results for either the north Village elite or working-class Villagers, but the very fact that patrician Villagers sought new ways of responding indicates that they realized that in a time of change the goal of preserving a bit of Old New York required that they, the Village gentry, change too.

**Ascension Forum**

During its heyday, October 1907 to June 1910, Ascension Forum caused quite a stir. Contemporary observers were astonished when the Church of the Ascension, a fashionable Fifth Avenue Episcopal church whose leading parishioners included some of the wealthiest Villagers, proposed to open its doors every Sunday night to a motley crowd of street people, socialists, cranks, and laborers, many of whom were Jewish or Catholic immigrants. Given the social and economic gulf that existed between the city’s Protestant elite and the working class, it was perhaps even more remarkable that the Ascension Forum actually got off the ground. (That it eventually foun- dered surprised people less.) Nevertheless, during its three-year existence Ascension Forum provided a practical test of how patrician Villagers would respond to several pressing issues: the yawning social gap between upper- and working-class Villagers, the growth of socialist sentiment among workers, and the future of old-line Protestant denominations in neighborhoods like the Village where the proportion of working-class residents was rising.

The question of how a Protestant religious institution whose members were drawn from the upper-middle and upper classes could survive in the Village was a subject of great concern to the Church of the Ascension’s leaders. When the parish had dedicated its church at Fifth Avenue and Tenth Street in 1841, the surrounding Washington Square and lower Fifth Avenue district had been well on the way to becoming the exclusive residential neighborhood it would remain for many decades. By the end of the century, however, many of the area’s patrician families were departing for newer elite districts above Fourteenth Street, and this fact, coupled with the encroachment of industrial buildings and working-class tenements east and south of Washington Square, forced several north Village Episcopal and Dutch Reformed churches to close their doors between 1890 and 1910. Although the Church of the Ascension also felt the impact of these changes, at the turn of the century it remained, in the words of its principal historian,
“a rich, fashionable parish.” As late as 1916, the year the church celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the completion of its Fifth Avenue building, nearly 20 percent of the 1,064 individuals on the parish rolls were named in the Social Register for New York City. 28

Ascension met the challenge of the times through a process of internal reform that was led by its rector, the Reverend Percy Stickney Grant. A graduate of Harvard College (1883) and the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1886), Grant came to Ascension in 1893 with strong opinions about what the parish needed to do. As a condition of his acceptance of the rectorship, he insisted that Ascension abandon its policy of having pews owned as the private property of individuals and families. Though this practice was still the norm in New York’s elite parishes, Grant argued that it was an anachronism that made Ascension seem unwelcoming to newcomers and guests alike. Critics responded by warning that Grant’s goals of openness and democratization might bankrupt the church, already in trouble financially as a result of the depression of the 1890s. Grant plunged ahead anyway, and for years thereafter his annual reports usually included at least a brief comment on the growth of contributions that had come with the introduction of the free pew system. 29

At Grant’s urging, Ascension also expanded its charitable activities among the Village’s poor. Practically speaking, the growth of the neighborhood’s immigrant and working-class population was sufficient to justify devoting more resources to local philanthropic causes, but for Grant the religious rationale for doing so was even stronger. Charitable enterprises, he argued, were the deeds by which Christians worked to make God’s kingdom of love and justice into an earthly reality. This interpretation of Christian responsibility, widely known at the time as the social gospel, had emerged in American churches in response to the injustices and inequities brought about by rapid industrialization. At Ascension, putting the social gospel into practice meant launching or enhancing a wide variety of parish social services: material assistance (cash, clothing, coal purchases, food, and rent), support for institutions for the poor (hospitals and nursery schools), education (especially vocational training for children), holiday gifts (particularly Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners), and even pensions for aged or infirm individuals. Grant’s views on some aspects of Christian charity evolved dramatically between 1905 and 1907. During that period he began to urge the parish to follow the lead of the Charity Organization Society and other major New York social agencies by adopting a more professionalized approach to philanthropy. Simple “kindheartedness,” he suggested, needed to be supplemented by techniques—community surveys and careful record keeping—
drawn from the emerging field of “trained philanthropy.” To help educate the church’s charity agents in these methods, Grant invited leaders from local social agencies (e.g., Greenwich House and the C.O.S.) to Ascension for annual conferences on emerging trends in social work.30

An even more radical shift in Grant’s thinking was evident in 1906–1907 when he announced that Ascension’s response to urban poverty should no longer be limited to philanthropy. The problem with charity, he argued, was that it kept the poor at arm’s length rather than inviting them to become participants in parish life. The Chapel of the Comforter, Ascension’s mission for workers, was located on Horatio Street in the west Village. Although this building was only eight blocks from Ascension’s main church on Fifth Avenue, the social distance between the Chapel’s working-class clientele and Ascension’s elite parishioners was much greater. The appropriate response to the gulf between the classes, Grant argued, was for Ascension to pursue a bold policy of “inclusion.” What he proposed was that Ascension’s regular Sunday evening service be redesigned specifically to attract working-class New Yorkers to the church’s Fifth Avenue location. The format for these gatherings, to be known as Ascension Forum, would be a brief prayer service and homily in the main chapel followed immediately by a lecture and discussion meeting in the parish hall.31

Grant’s plan was not without precedent. The most notable example of a similar program was People’s Institute, the brainchild of a public-spirited retired Columbia University professor, Charles Sprague Smith. People’s Institute had been in operation since the late 1890s at Cooper Union. From a relatively modest beginning of twice-weekly lectures on Fridays and Sundays, it gradually expanded its offerings until classes and lectures were scheduled nearly every day of the week all year. Various labeled by contemporaries as “A Practical School of Democracy” and “An East Side ‘College.’” People’s Institute aimed to attract the largest possible audience of Lower East Side residents and then, as one newspaper put it, “teach the masses correct social and economic views.” “Correct” in this context meant the anti-Tammany political perspective favored by Smith and the north Village patricians.32

Although People’s Institute was very popular, attracting more than 100,000 participants annually, it was a secular organization with a mainly political focus. Grant and other religious leaders might speak to People’s Institute audiences, but there was a major difference between occasional addresses given at People’s Institute and an effort to draw workers into parish life at Ascension on a regular basis. Moreover, the chief focus of Ascension’s program would not be on weaning workers from Tammany but putting into practice the church’s teachings about brotherly love.33
Grant’s pursuit of his plan to transform Ascension’s evening service into a working-people’s forum enabled him to play one of his favorite roles, that of the liberal gadfly whose proposals were meant to prod parish traditionalists into rethinking their conservative views. In the context of 1907, a depression year during which many working-class Villagers were unemployed, Grant urged his parishioners to see that their church had a unique opportunity to dispel laborers’ distrust of Christianity in general and Ascension in particular. The simple act of opening Ascension’s doors invitingly to the poor, he insisted, would convey in no uncertain terms the message, as Grant put it, “that the Church is not a rich man’s club” that sought to exclude workers. Moreover, he hoped that candid dialogues at Ascension would show that cross-class fellowship and understanding was possible, proving “that some of the most serious present-day problems which seem to involve class bitterness and conflict can be solved by bringing together men who differ, and letting them discover the sincerity and good will of their supposed antagonists.”

No matter how good Grant’s rationale for starting a people’s forum might be, his plan would not succeed if laborers refused to participate. As a first step toward winning laborers’ confidence, Grant sought to recruit an assistant minister who was well regarded by working-class people. He found his man in the person of a street evangelist and Socialist named Alexander Irvine. During the spring of 1907 Irvine had conducted several services at Ascension’s West Side mission, the Chapel of the Comforter, and his particular approach, preaching first and then soliciting comments from his audience (“an incipient People’s Forum,” Grant later called it), had been very well received.

One source of Irvine’s common touch was his ability to speak eloquently from personal experience. Born in Northern Ireland, the son of impoverished parents, Irvine told heartrending stories of a childhood spent “shoeless, hatless, and in rags.” At the age of nineteen, after working at a variety of low-paying jobs, he joined the British navy, fought in several campaigns in the eastern Mediterranean, and returned on furlough to England, where he attended classes for a brief time at Oxford and, once his furlough ended, continued his studies at various military schools. He emigrated to the United States in 1888. For a couple of years he flitted from job to job—elevator operator, milk-wagon driver, warehouse worker, and editorial assistant at a publishing company—all the while pursuing his primary interest: honing his skills as an evangelist by preaching from streetcorners to down-and-outers in the Bowery slums. His success as an urban missionary launched him on a career in religion that led in fairly rapid succession to ordination as a Congregational minister, brief stints as a pastor in Iowa and
Ohio, several years of study at Yale, and finally his return to New York City, where he resumed his activities as an evangelist preaching from streetcorners and at homeless shelters.\textsuperscript{36}

Grant and Irvine conducted Ascension Forum as a team. Grant took responsibility for readings from the prayerbook and the benediction, Irvine for the sermon. After the chapel service ended, attendees adjourned to the parish hall where, after brief remarks from Irvine, the session was thrown open to comments from the floor. At the early meetings in October 1907 the audience numbered only thirty or so, but it soon grew to the hundreds, crowding the parish hall to capacity (fig. 19). Workers came in large numbers, but the audience also included some of Irvine’s Bowery followers, a sprinkling of middle-class social workers, writers, and artists, and even a few well-to-do Wall Street businessmen. The vast majority of the participants were men, although according to Grant, who couldn’t resist a chance to take a swipe at traditional prohibitions against letting women speak in church, “Women are heard in and after the meetings, St. Paul to the contrary.”\textsuperscript{37}

The “after meetings,” as Grant called the parish hall sessions, were as
volatile as they were popular. Grant tried to impose a rule that everyone who wished to speak would get a chance to and would be listened to respectfully, and for the most part the rule was observed, despite the eagerness of many to take the floor. However, a few participants were, in Grant’s words, “rampant individualists, not so eager to learn as to teach, hot headed, fiery tongued and impatient of control, no matter how tactfully exerted.” Irvine’s skills in dealing with crowds, developed through years of experience with the rough-and-tumble of street meetings, enabled him to squelch most speakers who did not want to yield to others. At least twice during the forum’s first year, though, meetings ended in disarray because of disruptions caused by a few “fanatics and egotists,” as Grant called them. These were probably the same sessions to which the local precinct station had to send a small squad to remove particularly obdurate members of the audience.38

The year’s best documented meeting took place on March 29, 1908. It was orderly, even though it was held immediately after a nasty incident involving police brutality toward working-class New Yorkers. The previous day a large crowd of unemployed workers and their sympathizers had assembled at Union Square (five blocks north of Ascension) to protest the authorities’ failure to alleviate working-class misery during the depression of 1907–1908. But as Irvine and others who had been at Union Square reported to Ascension Forum the next evening, the rally had scarcely begun when police moved in to break it up, swinging clubs and knocking onlookers to the ground. When the March 29 forum assembled, working-class participants were still seething about the incident, and a sometimes heated debate continued for more than an hour and a half. Nevertheless, according to a middle-class observer, Madge Jenison, the “meeting was the most effective one of the winter” because a consensus was reached between wealthy and working-class members on the point that “free institutions can be preserved only by free speech.”39

Toward the end of Ascension Forum’s first year, Grant reviewed his project’s progress. Except for the few occasions when chaos had reigned, he felt that everything had gone to his satisfaction. Having earlier identified American laborers’ alienation from Christianity as one of the most serious problems faced by mainstream denominations, he was especially pleased to report that many workers who “had not been inside the portals of a church for many years” had come to Ascension Forum. He was also glad to note that regular members of the parish showed up too. The large crowds at forum meetings, the “catholicity” of the audience’s composition, and the fact that popular demand often kept the sessions going long past the appointed ten o’clock closing hour—all of these, he felt, testified to the success of the Sunday evening service’s new format.40
Not all of Grant’s parishioners shared his enthusiasm. Neither the negative attention caused by the disorderly meetings nor the reports that Irvine and his radical followers espoused socialist ideas sat well with a conservative core group in the parish. In a bold attempt to reply both to newspaper criticism and his grumbling parishioners, Grant allowed himself to be interviewed by the *New York Sun* and then reprinted the article in the parish *Year Book* for 1908.

Early in the interview Grant went to the heart of the matter, stating unequivocally: “I am not a Socialist [and] the Sunday night meetings at the Church of the Ascension on Fifth Avenue are not Socialist meetings, nor is any attempt made at Socialistic propaganda.” Grant conceded that socialist views were often expressed during forum meetings, but this, he contended, was simply a natural consequence of the presence of many workers who, like workers in every American industrial city, had in recent years shown an increasing interest in socialism. Moreover, he insisted that openness to everyone’s opinions was crucial if members from different classes were to learn from one another. Pressing this point further, he used himself as an example. Before participating in Ascension Forum, he said, he had been as ignorant about socialism as most of his critics apparently were, having thought of it as “a dangerous, doctrinaire and revolutionary propaganda.” However, in the course of forum sessions he had learned that quite the opposite was true, that American socialism was, as he put it, “a peaceful and evolutionary program . . . [founded on a] social ideal which is one of cooperation rather than conflict.”

Notwithstanding his stout defense of Ascension Forum, the good reverend was in fact a bit chastened by the attacks on his project. In an effort to blunt further criticism, Grant modified the format of the forum’s sessions during their second year. Greater reliance was placed on invited speakers, who were described as “distinguished specialists in sociological matters.” Most of the forum’s “after meetings” now opened with a formal address by one of the guest experts, a structured approach calculated to prevent the sessions from moving immediately into the free-for-all debates that had sometimes caused trouble in 1907–1908. Without exception the speakers were middle- or upper-class men and women rather than workers. Politically, all the guests represented some variety of reformist or progressive thought, mostly well to the left of center. Two reform-minded speakers, Arthur Bullard and Rheta Childe Dorr (one a Socialist and the other soon to be) spoke on Russia and on child labor. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a radical feminist and social critic, gave an address titled “The Social Conscience.” E. R. L. Gould, an economist, devoted his talk on model tenements to the proposition that socially conscientious individuals could both
make a profit and improve workers’ lives by investing in tenements built to high standards.42

Ascension Forum’s second and third years passed without the turmoil of the first, but conservative parishioners who found any connection with socialism an embarrassment remained restive. Their discontent finally coalesced in the form of an attack on Irvine by Ascension’s vestrymen, members of a twenty-four-man body that included many of the church’s wealthiest individuals, among them August Belmont, the banker-financier, John Claf- lin and Edwin N. Tailer, dry-goods merchants who lived on Washington Square North, and John H. Flagler, an industrialist, all of them millionaires. Precisely which vestrymen spearheaded the attack is unknown, but in the spring of 1910 the parish’s disgruntled lay leaders made their move and demanded Irvine’s resignation. Stung by the implicit rebuke to his leadership of the parish, Grant made a fervent appeal to the vestrymen to reconsider; however, having started on a course of action they knew their minister would oppose, the vestrymen did not back down. Irvine, who was convinced that his job couldn’t be saved and that continuing the controversy would only hurt Grant’s standing with Ascension parishioners, resigned at the end of June 1910.43

Irvine’s admirers responded by denouncing Ascension’s vestrymen. On June 24, the Friday night before his last scheduled pulpit appearance at Ascension, Irvine was the guest of honor at a dinner attended by 250 of his supporters. The after-dinner speakers expressed anger and disappointment at the conservative political thinking that had led to Irvine’s dismissal. Master of ceremonies Robert Brue`re, a Socialist and social worker, lamented the decision: “It is a terrible pity that the first church to open its door to the broader Democracy . . . should now be the first church to close that door.” Sol Fieldman, described in New York Times reports as a “Socialist agitator” and “the son of a Jewish rabbi,” asserted that no one should have been surprised by the vestrymen’s power play given the fact that “the [Episcopal] Church is owned by the ruling classes, and . . . a church in Fifth Avenue cannot be an exception to the rule.”44

The evening’s main speaker was Lincoln Steffens, best known as a muck-raking journalist but introduced on this occasion as the president of the Liberal Club, a debating society he and Grant had organized for left-of-center intellectuals and opinion leaders. Steffens was no less caustic in his remarks about organized Christianity. Of “the Church” (a generic term he used for all major denominations), he said, “It has been corrupt. It has voiced the desires of a part of the people only. It belongs to the same people who control our Government and our politics. . . . We know there is a social crisis approaching, but the Church does not. It sees the viewpoint of only part of the people.”45
Irvine got off a few parting shots of his own. On Sunday evening, June 26, 1910, Ascension’s chapel was jammed to near overflowing with his friends. During the hymns and prayers that preceded Irvine’s sermon, the radicals in attendance, unfamiliar with the order of service, struggled gamely but awkwardly to follow along. Then Irvine rose to speak. Taking as his text the biblical injunction that “ye cannot serve God and Mammon,” he assailed his critics, answering their charge that his work had been “too sociological and not spiritual enough” by reminding his listeners that “Jesus himself was sociological, and his greatest sermons teemed with economic truth.” In America, he thundered, Mammon was “a slimy beast called Money, that ruled the land” from the White House and the New York legislature’s chambers right down to the pulpit at Ascension. Those who had voted to remove him from that pulpit because of his Socialist views, Irvine charged, failed to acknowledge that money, not socialism, was “the force that is driving us into warring factions and splitting the country into rival camps.” After expressing his appreciation of Grant for having invited him to serve at Ascension, Irvine, the happy warrior for socialism, closed with a promise to continue to fight the good fight for his cause.  

Caught in a no man’s land between the vestrymen and Socialists, Grant scrambled to minimize the damage done to his relationships with the rival camps. Initially he worried most about losing credibility with laborers, and in addresses made to working-class audiences he described himself as sorely disappointed by the vestry’s actions. However, he soon tried to smooth things over with his conservative parishioners. “I must also make public record,” he wrote in his parish report for 1910, “of my happiness in my personal relations with the vestrymen of the Church of the Ascension,” who, he added, had for many years raised fifty to sixty thousand dollars a year for church projects. He also expressed gratitude to the vestry for having always allowed him “untrammeled freedom of expression,” and if the phrasing rang a bit hollow in the aftermath of Irvine’s forced resignation, Grant was determined to show that his freedom was real. Specifically, he followed through on a pledge made to Irvine’s Socialist friends in 1910 by continuing to sponsor a weekly Sunday night “People’s Forum” at Ascension through the early 1910s.  

Ascension Forum’s history in the Irvine era was just one small episode in a larger drama being played out in the United States during the early 1900s. Massive immigration from southern and eastern Europe and the harsh working conditions these new immigrants encountered in the nation’s industrial cities exposed inequities in American capitalist society that greatly heightened class tensions. An increasingly visible Socialist Party voiced the workers’ discontents and, aided and abetted by caustic attacks on the status quo by middle- and upper-class intellectuals, the party grew by leaps and
bounds. Nationally, the Socialist presidential vote rose nearly fourfold from 1900 to 1908. Over the next two years the growth of electoral support for Socialists was even more impressive locally in New York City, where the vote cast for the party’s gubernatorial candidates nearly doubled from 1908 to 1910. It was perfectly obvious to the Village patricians who comprised the core of Ascension parish’s membership that the old American elite’s standing in society was being challenged by working-class radicals, some of whom were Ascension’s near neighbors from the south Village and the Lower East Side.  

Given this background of class tension, Grant was being exceedingly optimistic in hoping that his experiment in cross-class communication could succeed and that he could make both the “conservative classes” and the “radicals” (as he called the two groups) feel welcome at Ascension. With Irvine at his side, Grant had a reasonable chance of attracting working-class participants to Ascension Forum, but even with Irvine’s help he had no assurance that he could keep them coming to a north Village church they distrusted on both religious and class grounds. Meanwhile, his regular parishioners, the middle- and upper-class worshipers who filled the pews at Ascension on Sunday mornings, were also a problem. Ascension’s wealthy vestrymen did not like anticapitalist sentiments when spoken at street-corner rallies or printed in Socialist papers such as the New York Call, but they found it even harder to bear when their own church’s sanctuary was the site of such pronouncements. The strain of playing host to Irvine and his radical friends was severe from the very first.

Eventually the strain became too great. For three years Ascension’s lay leaders and ordinary parishioners had hosted a people’s forum and even participated in its meetings—behavior at odds with any glib characterization of them as uniformly hostile to their less privileged neighbors’ views. Working-class men and women had come to Ascension Forum and kept coming in large numbers to the very end. They not only showed up; they enjoyed themselves, some because the forums offered an opportunity to bait the wealthy face to face, and others because they were eager to learn what they could from the meetings. Regardless of whether they came to denounce or to learn, these participants were products of a working-class culture in which ideas were taken very seriously, and even though many radicals were skeptical about the sincerity of Grant’s invitation, they treated it as worthy of being put to the test. In the end Ascension Forum’s wealthy hosts ceased to welcome their radical guests, and these guests were naturally displeased. Grant was at least half right, however, when on the Sunday of Irvine’s last pulpit appearance he declared, “I cannot think of this termination of our experiment here as a failure.”
The Washington Square Association

The Washington Square Association, a neighborhood taxpayers’ organization sponsored by and for north Village patricians, was established in 1907. It differed in many respects from its older counterpart, the Greenwich Village Improvement Society, which had been the first neighborhood association in the city. Generally, the society’s geographical focus was on the middle- and working-class areas south and west of Washington Square, while the newer association concentrated its attention on the north Village district in which its members lived. Of even greater significance in distinguishing between the two groups was the difference in their philosophies with regard to which neighborhood interests they should represent. The society’s founders, led by Mary Simkhovitch of Greenwich House, embraced their neighborhood’s diversity and attempted to reflect it by recruiting representatives from every major local ethnic group (except African Americans) for its governing board. By contrast, the Washington Square Association’s membership was composed exclusively of north Village patricians who made no effort to admit non-elite neighbors to their ranks. As a result, though both the Greenwich Village Improvement Society and the Washington Square Association acted as neighborhood advocacy groups seeking to improve the quality of streets, lighting, public services, and the like, the Washington Square Association’s projects placed primary emphasis on the Village gentry’s interests, which frequently clashed with the interests of working-class Villagers.

The Washington Square Association’s membership list reads like a roll call of the north Village’s most prominent citizens. Among those who lived on Washington Square North were a millionaire drygoods merchant, John Claflin; a banker, Eugene Delano; and Robert W. de Forest, the president of the Charity Organization Society. The members who lived on Fifth Avenue included one of de Forest’s brothers-in-law, Pierre Mali; a wealthy investor, Amos F. Eno; and the nationally known financier and Democratic Party power broker Thomas Fortune Ryan. Nearly every side street off Fifth Avenue north to Twelfth Street had at least one representative in the organization. East Tenth was home to several lawyers, among them Joseph Auerbach and Henry E. Coe (another de Forest brother-in-law). Another lawyer, Joseph L. Delafeld, who served for many years as the group’s corresponding secretary, lived on West Twelfth. All these men were well-to-do and several (Claflin, de Forest, Eno, and Ryan) were millionaires. Politically, the association’s members were fairly evenly divided between those like de Forest, Ryan, and Auerbach who were anti-Tammany Democrats and those like John Claflin and Henry E. Coe who were Independent Republicans.
Moving in the same upper-class circles, these north Villagers belonged to such elite social clubs as the Union League, Union Club, and University Club and supported such major civic institutions as the Metropolitan Museum of Art.51

The Washington Square Association’s first bulletin, issued in February 1907, announced that the organization’s goal was to “maintain and improve the character of the neighborhood.” The association’s main modus operandi was to send letters to city officials: the Manhattan Borough President, the commissioners who headed the Department of Health and the Department of Street Cleaning, and the police captain in charge of the Sixteenth Precinct, which was located at 253 Mercer Street, a block southeast of Washington Square. During the association’s first year most letters addressed matters of safety or the neighborhood’s physical appearance. Officials were urged to fill potholes, restore sidewalks promptly after construction projects were completed, remove loafers from the area, enforce laws against spitting in public places, and require manufacturers and merchants to keep sidewalks clear of commercial debris. Apparently some progress was made. The association’s final bulletin for 1907 included a self-congratulatory note claiming that “the great and visible improvement in the conditions of the streets” was traceable to the association’s efforts.52

These physical improvements in the neighborhood’s streets presumably benefited all local residents, poor and wealthy alike. So, too, did the association’s demand for better traffic movement, to which the police responded by adding patrolmen at congested intersections. The association’s secretary applauded such action as proof that police could be “alert, intelligent and efficient” when properly motivated. But he went on to complain that the police did not act energetically on other matters of concern to the Village gentry. Police, he wrote, “behave as if they were half-witted and half-blind” when they encountered cases of littering or of children breaking the city ordinance against using streets as playgrounds.53

Competing values came into high relief in June 1908, when the association launched an initiative against street vendors and pushcart merchants of every type: bootblacks and newspaper vendors whose semipermanent stands had established locations, pushcart operators who moved into place daily, and the even more temporary and more mobile holiday peddlers who were allowed to set up booths or tables during the Easter and Christmas seasons. According to the association’s spokesmen, street merchants took business away from the more established local stores. Sidewalk booths inhibited easy access to shops along major thoroughfares, and the booths’ shabby appearance discouraged wealthier patrons from shopping in the neighborhood. The street vendors also enjoyed an unfair competitive ad-
vantage over store owners, who had to charge higher prices to cover the cost of property taxes that street merchants did not have to pay. On top of everything else, many sidewalk stands were operating illegally, taking up space in excess of that allowed under their permits.

The first targets of the clear-the-sidewalks campaign were two concession stands operating at the exits to the Sixth Avenue Elevated line’s Eighth Street station. On the northeast corner of the intersection stood a newsstand owned by Charles Gordon and a three-chair bootblack stand run by Antonio Mastrino. According to the Washington Square Association, both booths were positioned in such a way as to nearly block the sidewalks at the base of the station’s stairways. Initially, the association’s letters to the Manhattan Borough President and the Commissioner of Public Works did not ask that Gordon and Mastrino be deprived of their licenses to do business, only that they be required to modify the dimensions of their stands or move them to new locations so as to cause less inconvenience to pedestrian traffic and to shoppers who wanted access to nearby stores.\(^{54}\)

It might seem that the balance of power in the battle between the Village gentry and the street vendors greatly favored the Washington Square Association. Not only were its ranks filled with wealthy members of the city’s social elite, but they had some support from storefront merchants who believed they were losing business. In addition, when the association began its campaign in mid-1908, the mayor of the city, George B. McClellan Jr., was a neighborhood resident, living at 8 Washington Square North (next door to the de Forests).\(^{55}\)

The vendors, on the other hand, were mainly lower-middle-class immigrants. Antonio Mastrino, known to his friends and customers as “Tony,” was thirty-one years old, an Italian immigrant brought by his parents to the United States in 1888. Before entering the shoeshine business, he had worked as a hotel bellhop. He and his wife of four years lived in a small flat on West Eighth Street between MacDougal and Sixth Avenue, where north Village residents of modest means clustered. Charles Gordon, the newsstand owner, was a thirty-year-old Russian Jew who had come to New York City in 1899. In 1908 he and his wife, Minnie, and three young children lived on West Eighth, a few doors down from the Mastrinos; income from his stand soon enabled him to move his family to a large West Fourth Street apartment house whose occupants were a mix of small entrepreneurs and lower-class wage earners.\(^{56}\)

In June 1908, Joseph L. Delafield, the lawyer who served as the Washington Square Association’s corresponding secretary, launched the organization’s campaign against street concessionaires by writing Manhattan Borough President John F. Ahern to ask that something be done about the
Gordon and Mastrino stands at the Sixth Avenue elevated line’s Eighth Street station. Over the next year he pursued the matter through correspondence with the Commissioner of Public Works, the New York City Police Commissioner, the local police precinct’s captain, the Bureau of Licenses, and the city’s Assistant Corporation Counsel. Despite this barrage of complaints, at the end of 1910, a year and a half into the campaign, Mastrino and Gordon were still doing business as usual at their old locations.\(^{57}\)

Three sources of resistance frustrated the village gentry’s efforts to tidy up the neighborhood by controlling the activities of street merchants. Bureaucratic inertia and red tape constantly delayed decisive action. Many city officials simply did not regard placing restrictions on street vendors as a high priority; others, though apparently sympathetic with the association’s overall goals, stressed the fact that nothing could be done at the double-quick pace the association expected. For example, an administrative assistant in the borough president’s office wrote Delafield to say that even if some street stands were in violation of regulations prohibiting “obstructions outside stoop lines,” these transgressions could not be corrected except through a fairly elaborate procedure. Stands said to be in violation of their licenses had to be visited by a city inspector, issued a citation if something was amiss, given a reasonable period to correct violations, and then inspected a second time—all this before legal proceedings could begin. Many street vendors simply moved to different locations, or made slight changes to existing stands that, even if they were not judged satisfactory, nevertheless required a whole new round of citations, waiting periods, and reinspections. Perhaps, one official suggested, a more direct route to cracking down on street vendor violations would be to ask the police to intervene.\(^{58}\)

Police action struck the Washington Square Association’s members as a viable alternative to the License Bureau’s cumbersome procedures, and Delafield’s initial correspondence with high-ranking Police Department officials produced seemingly helpful offers to have cops on the beat serve notices to stands that were in violation of municipal regulations. In April 1909, Police Commissioner Thomas Bingham wrote Delafield that patrolmen in the Sixteenth Precinct had begun to issue citations, and in June a group of approximately sixty vendors were summoned to hearings in municipal court.\(^{59}\)

The trouble was that ordinary patrolmen and municipal court judges—both groups more beholden to the Democratic machine than to reform-minded Village gentry—showed considerable sympathy to the beleaguered vendors. When the first sixty cases were reviewed, one judge immediately ruled that no vendors’ licenses could be revoked nor their holders fined.
without giving the defendants ample time to correct deficiencies. As for those caught operating without a license, they were simply instructed to apply for one. And when hearings were held on citations given for stands that exceeded legal size limits, police proved to be totally unhelpful as witnesses. In several instances the judge dismissed cases after patrolmen said they could not properly identify the defendant as the licensee, and others were dismissed because the officer who served the notice admitted that although the stand had appeared too large, he had not actually measured it. By way of explanation one such policeman told the court that he had had “no yard stick with which to measure” the booth. Reading between the lines, it appears that police went through the motions of carrying out their superiors’ orders to enforce regulations, but did so in such a way that they knew the vendors would not lose their licenses.60

Even as they moved ahead with the process of taking vendors to court, patrician Villagers pursued another method of curbing the presence of street merchants in the neighborhood. By long-standing practice, permits for activities or structures that might encumber sidewalks—shoeshine booths and newsstands, peddler’s carts and tables, barbershop poles, cigar store Indians, and sandwich board advertisements—were subject to a two-stage approval process. Applicants first got a permit from the city licensing bureau, and then took it to the alderman of the district in which the activity or structure would be located for his endorsement. Though cumbersome, the system embodied an old-fashioned form of direct democracy in which aldermen identified themselves with their constituents by providing them with valuable personal services. Under this system, however, aldermen could be caught in double binds. Applicants whose requests were approved went away inclined to repay the favor by voting for the man who had helped them, but it wasn’t possible to please all the people all the time. Many applications were rejected because objections were raised in a convincing fashion by other valued constituents—existing license holders opposed to additional competition, or property owners objecting to a potential eyesore near their homes or stores. As one alderman who served the Washington Square district recalled, “Sometimes the pressure from the two forces [the applicants and the property owners] felt like a giant pair of scissors closing about my neck.”61

Starting in March 1909, the Village gentry applied increased pressure with the blade of the scissors that they controlled. They began to make a particular issue of their alderman’s biannual approval of thirty-day licenses for vendors who hawked flowers, chestnuts, candied apples, trinkets, and the like from pushcarts and tables on the neighborhood’s busiest commercial streets—Sixth Avenue, Fourteenth Street, and Broadway—during the
Easter and Christmas seasons (fig. 20). In general, these holiday street vendors were economically much more marginal than businessmen like Antonio Mastrino and Charles Gordon who operated year-round from fixed locations; however, as remembered by one north Villager, the small-time street merchants contributed local color to the neighborhood scene at holiday time:

In Christmas week, all Sixth Avenue from Macy’s at Fourteenth Street to Siegel-Cooper’s at Eighteenth was lined solidly with little stalls lit by kerosene lamps. Most were trimmed with greens and all were piled with useless gifts like brass paperweights, miniature Statues of Liberty or huge glittering gems pinned to cards, while the wires above were hung with necklaces and handkerchiefs and rows of striped peppermint canes. The hawkers called out their last-minute bargains, the smell of scorched holly and roasting chestnuts hung deliciously on the frosty air, and even the most garish objects seemed desirable in the flickering light.62

Although the street vendors were a well-established feature of the holiday season, two circumstances gave the Washington Square Association’s members reason to think that the vendors could be removed. Holiday peddlers had to reapply each Easter and Christmas, which enabled the Washington Square Association to renew its appeals to the alderman twice a year. The Twenty-fifth aldermanic district, in which the north Village gentry resided, was also an unusual Lower Manhattan ward in that it generally voted Republican, and in 1909 it was represented by a Republican, Tristam Johnson. Tammany’s police department and municipal courts might be slow to defend the Village gentry’s interests, but surely, the association believed, Johnson would respond sympathetically to its pleas.

Any hopes that Johnson would simply do the gentry’s bidding were doomed to disappointment, however. In an exchange that became a biannual ritual, Delafield sent Johnson the association’s request that he cease to approve licenses for holiday peddlers, and Johnson answered with a carefully worded reply. He understood the concerns expressed by the association’s members, he said, and he wanted them to know that he kept the number of approvals down in a variety of ways. He refused to approve license applications from individuals who lived outside the district, and, as they were welcome to observe if they would visit him at his district Republican club office, he turned down many requests from new applicants. However, he was not about to abandon altogether the long-standing custom of granting licenses to holiday street vendors, especially those who had held the licenses in previous years.63

Johnson’s successor as the district’s alderman was Henry H. Curran, the same Curran who had made his debut as a public speaker campaigning for
Seth Low during the 1903 mayoral election. A critic of Tammany rule, a Yale graduate, and a prosperous lawyer, Curran might also have been expected to side with the Washington Square gentry and against the immigrant vendors who did business from shabby sidewalk stands, pushcarts, and folding tables. But Curran proved no more willing than Johnson to drive the small vendors from the neighborhood’s streets. He had populist inclinations, derived from political activities that had made him aware of and sympathetic to the needs of his grass-roots constituents: several years spent as a district Republican organizer for Johnson, a vigorous but futile campaign for Congress in 1910, the beginning of his alderman career when he was appointed in March 1911 to fill the vacancy created by Johnson’s resignation, and his successful campaign for reelection as alderman in fall 1911.64

20. Everett Shinn’s *Sixth Avenue Shoppers* shows the crowds that jammed north Village sidewalks during the Christmas and Easter seasons. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Sterling Morton to the Preston Morton Collection.
Curran’s memoirs contain a section on what he called the “trouble” associated with the alderman’s duty to endorse licenses for the approximately three hundred fruit, soda water, shoeshine, and newspaper stands in his district. He was well aware that store owners resented the competition and home owners disliked having the street vendors’ “dirty little shanties” near their property, and he knew that the arrival of even more peddlers each Easter and Christmas season only exacerbated the property owners’ bad feelings. However, he was unwilling, as he wrote Delafield, to “put out of business the immigrant family that could not yet do anything in this strange new world but run a little sidewalk stand,” since to do so would condemn them to “starvation.”

Curran used several individuals to exemplify all the immigrant entrepreneurs who sought and received his endorsement on their vendor’s licenses. One was an old Italian whom Curran nicknamed Garibaldi. The old man ran what Curran described as “the most gypsylike looking stand of them all,” and had but a few words of English to communicate with patrons at his umbrella repair booth. However, Garibaldi had eight children (and an uncountable number of relatives and friends in the district), and Curran knew that an alderman who turned down such license-seekers would be perceived as an enemy of the common folk. Curran surely had constituents like Garibaldi in mind when he replied to one of Delafield’s appeals. “I have your annual letter about Christmas booths,” Curran wrote. “As you know, I consider myself subject in this matter to the will of the people in the neighborhood”—by which Curran obviously meant the ordinary folk, not the Village gentry. Aware that its anti-vendor campaign had not succeeded in driving the unsightly stands and pushcarts from the streets, the association had to be content with claiming that at least it had prevented them from proliferating.

A parallel effort by the association to control the use of Greenwich Village’s largest open public space, Washington Square, also produced inconclusive results. As in the street vendor controversy, the debate over the square’s present and future use was shaped by the unusual circumstance that, as one contemporary put it, “the Washington Square neighborhood contains . . . a small first-class residential district contiguous to a large proletarian neighborhood.” Lying as it did between the upper- and working-class parts of the Village, the square itself could legitimately be claimed by both patrician and proletarian Villagers as their turf—and both did claim it, for largely incompatible purposes. Occupants of the fine homes north of Washington Square wanted it to be a tranquil haven from the bustling commerce of the city, a park where visitors sat on benches or strolled quietly along well-marked paths, finding respite amid attractive lawns, tidy flower
beds, and well-cared-for greenery. Working-class Villagers, many of whom lived in tenements south of the square, saw it as a scarce commodity: the largest of the few open public spaces in the neighborhood, a patch of green amidst the concrete, a place where their children could play and where they might picnic, nap, and even, on hot summer nights, sleep outdoors on a lawn.67

Park or playground? On behalf of the Washington Square Association, Joseph Delafield expressed dismay at behavior in Washington Square that violated the gentry’s notion of what was proper in a well-ordered park. Some of his complaints were directed at adult users—the drunks, both men and women, who slept on park benches, and the working-class Villagers who lunched or picnicked on the lawns and left unsightly litter behind: discarded newspapers, fruit peels, glass shards, pieces of cardboard. However, the majority of his grievances concerned “tough horse-play and rowdyism” by children, especially boys. As he put it to Park Commissioner Charles B. Stover in March 1911: “[with spring’s arrival] the boys take advantage of the lawn, especially on the south side of the Park, for the purpose of playing ball and other games.” Two months later his pleasant stroll through the park with his wife and their child was disturbed by an annoying sight: “Boys and girls romped over the lawns, digging here and there.” In July 1911 he wrote Mayor Gaynor to complain that the practice of allowing tenement dwellers open access to the park’s grassy areas on hot nights had the effect of giving “free reign to the rowdy element to play ball and rough it on the lawns.” More letters in the same vein, requesting that city officials crack down on the “crowd of rough boys” who roller-skated on the square’s walkways and played baseball on its lawns, followed in 1912.68

Several factors explain why the Washington Square Association’s protect-the-park campaign gathered momentum in 1910. By that summer the war on street vendors was making little headway, and Delafield apparently felt that a new focus was needed to reenergize the association’s effort to impose genteel standards of public decorum. Summer was also the season during which the park was most likely to be used (or abused, depending on one’s viewpoint) as a playground. In addition, the new city administration was led by Mayor William Gaynor, a Democrat elected with Tammany backing but somewhat independent of Tammany control, and a number of newly elected officials—Manhattan Borough President George McAneny and John Purroy Mitchel, the president of the Board of Aldermen—were so-called Fusionists, reform Democrats who had Republican backing in running against Tammany’s regular slate in 1909. The anti-Tammany politics of these leaders may have encouraged the Village gentry to believe that their views would now be more favorably received.69
The association’s hopes were only partly realized. It seemed that every time a city official responded positively to the association’s program, a related action was taken or opinion expressed that alarmed the Village gentry. On the positive side, Park Commissioner Charles B. Stover ordered a variety of renovations at Washington Square: reseeded lawns, extensive landscaping, and the installation of a new drinking fountain, all of which North Village patricians applauded. But even as he secured these improvements, Stover, a former resident of University Settlement, revealed a soft spot for working-class children by suggesting that specified sections of municipal parks should be set aside for baseball games and organized play (fig. 21). Similarly, although Lieutenant John Shay, commander of the Sixteenth Precinct, seemed eager to assure Delafield that his officers did and would vigilantly patrol Washington Square, he added that as far as he knew there was “no evidence of torn sod or misuse” resulting from the practice of opening the park’s lawns to tenement dwellers on hot nights. In March 1911, Delafield and his patrician neighbors were encouraged by reports that a sympathetic mayor and his police commissioner were going to crack down on baseball games, but it soon became obvious that cops on the beat were doing little to prevent ball playing in Washington Square.70

During 1911–1912, the peak years of the Washington Square Association’s preserve-the-park campaign, it became clear that the association’s members faced both practical and ideological obstacles to achieving their goals. Given the park’s location near rapidly expanding tenement districts, Washington Square was inevitably going to be used by the neighborhood’s working-class residents for relaxation and recreation. This was a fact of life recognized by Alexander H. Spencer of the City Club, a civic watchdog group whose members boasted impeccable upper-class credentials, when he urged the Washington Square Association to take what he called “a charitable approach” to the needs of Village tenement dwellers. Acknowledging that the gentry’s desire to keep “a handsome park well preserved” was completely understandable, he asked them to give serious consideration to the question of what was to be done for “the hoi polloi and their children who must overflow somewhere.”71

As Spencer’s remarks suggest, the Washington Square controversy was not simply a confrontation between patrician and proletarian Villagers and their political allies. An ideological divide also existed among middle- and upper-class New Yorkers over whether the city’s open spaces, especially those in or near slum neighborhoods, should be used primarily as parks or as playgrounds. By advocating a pristine park, the Washington Square Association identified itself with an ideal articulated by the renowned nineteenth-century landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of
New York City’s Central Park. Olmsted and his allies held to a romantic view of nature, one in which the beauty and serenity of natural landscapes, set aside as parks in cities, would provide, as the historian Paul Boyer has termed it, “a ‘natural’ counterweight to the morally destructive pressures of urban life.” Progressive Era urban designers updated Olmsted’s approach by insisting that truly modern parks needed aggressive management through the provision of highly structured experiences (plays, concerts, and talks by naturalists) to interpret and reinforce nature’s uplifting qualities.  

In the early 1900s, both of these versions of the park ideal were challenged by a second group of progressives, supporters of the playground movement. Their alternative program for using open spaces in industrial cities as children’s play areas had the backing of most leading members of the social settlement house community, including Mary Simkhovitch of Greenwich House. A member of the Parks and Playgrounds Association of New York City’s board of directors, Simkhovitch argued that directed play activities would not only enhance the physical health of slum children but also inculcate in them moral values essential to a democratic society: team play, respect for others, and self-control.

A March 1912 incident in Washington Square brought these competing ideas into sharp focus. A woman social worker employed by the Parks and Playgrounds Association had gathered a small group of working-class children in the park and was leading them in organized games. A prosperous looking man approached, reproved her, and then enlisted the aid of a passing policeman to prevent the games from continuing. According to Eugene A. Philbin, the Parks and Playgrounds Association’s president, the gentleman also told the play leader that “children of the Sullivan Street district should not be encouraged to come to Washington Square Park,” and suggested that “she confine her work to the children accompanied by nurses.”

A prickly exchange followed between Philbin and Delafield. Delafield denied that the man who had objected to the games was a member of the Washington Square Association, but he acknowledged that the association’s members shared some of the man’s views. Although they did not dispute the need for a playground for working-class children from the south Village, they strenuously objected to designating Washington Square as that space. To do so, he insisted, would “needlessly destroy the traditional character” of Washington Square and would lead to a “general removal” of the better class of people from the neighborhood. Philbin responded that the area had already changed radically and that some concessions regarding the use of the park needed to be made “by both the old residents and the new.”

In the end, the only common ground the two sides found was agreement
that more playground space was needed in the Village for working-class youngsters. Unable to achieve its original goal of a total prohibition on games in Washington Square, the association gradually adopted the view that the best way to preserve the square as a park would be to help find alternative locations for a playground. This newfound pragmatism became most apparent in 1913–1914, when the association backed a proposal from Mary Simkhovitch and the Greenwich Village Improvement Society that city authorities raze several tenement blocks in the Minettas to provide play space for south Village children.75

In the same years that the Washington Square Association pursued its largely inconclusive campaigns to rid the north Village of street vendors and Washington Square of unruly youngsters, the organization enjoyed considerable success in its ongoing effort to bring improved public services to the neighborhood. Local streets were upgraded in response to persistent demands that potholes be filled, broken sidewalks repaired, abandoned horsecar tracks removed, stone block pavement replaced by asphalt, missing street signs restored, and new trees planted on residential streets. Police took positive action on requests for better traffic management and for suppression of late-night noise. Ambulance and fire truck traffic was, when possible, redirected away from residential side streets; the clock in the Jefferson Market Courthouse tower was repaired; companies engaged in construction projects or industrial activities were forced to move quickly to eliminate unsightly rubbish piles or sources of noxious odors; and, in general, the collection of ashes, garbage, and dead animal carcasses was dealt with more efficiently by the responsible city departments. After five years of existence, the association had good reason to express satisfaction regarding its achievements. “We feel justified,” the March 1912 Bulletin declared, “in assuming that the general conditions [in the neighborhood] have never been better.”76

The features that distinguished the association’s successful projects from its failures provide clues into the way political and group relations operated inside Greenwich Village in the early years of the century. When the Washington Square Association campaigned for such goals as cleaner, safer, and more attractive streets that served the interests of a majority of the area’s residents, city officials usually acted quickly to secure the requested improvements. By contrast, when the interests of working-class Villagers were threatened by the association’s campaigns to impose controls on street vendors and park-goers, those initiatives achieved minimal results. The relationship between the Village gentry and their working-class neighbors remained basically adversarial. Nevertheless, the association’s campaigns, by preserving and even enhancing the quality of the neighborhood’s physical environment, produced substantial benefits for both groups.