In the final decades of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth, hundreds of young American women and men, nearly all of them college educated and many from wealthy families, made a seemingly curious decision to take up residence in the slums of the nation’s largest cities, including working-class sections of Greenwich Village. The pioneering generation of American settlement house activists took inspiration from the example of a group of idealistic young Britons, students at Oxford and Cambridge, who in the 1880s had gone to live among the London poor in order to observe the conditions of urban slum life firsthand and, as a historian of the movement put it, to “make their settlement in the slums an outpost of education and culture.” Like their British counterparts, American settlement house reformers were concerned about the enormous social problems spawned by the growth of modern industrial cities, by the increasing gulf between rich and poor, and by the increasing ignorance of and, worse yet, hostility toward workers on the part of the middle and upper classes. Moving to a working-class neighborhood was seen as a direct, personal act that privileged Americans could make toward fostering cross-class communication, bringing (as the authors of a New York settlement’s constitution described it) “men and women of education into closer relations with the laboring classes to their mutual benefit.”

Settlements everywhere in the United States adopted much the same
program in pursuit of their mission to working-class city dwellers. Settlements typically offered classes in subjects ranging from English, civics, and debate to sewing, carpentry, and basket weaving, and they provided organized social activities for both adults and children through settlement clubs. These forms of neighborly outreach were soon supplemented by civic and political initiatives. Settlement workers lobbied city authorities to improve the quality of schools, sanitation, streets, and parks in the neighborhood, and in a further effort to bring these reforms to fruition, many settlement house residents campaigned to elect sympathetic candidates to office. Finally, most settlements conducted fact-finding surveys of local conditions in the belief that well-researched reports would convince the public and the politicians that slum environments seriously inhibited the tenement dwellers’ ability to improve themselves.

By the end of the 1890s social settlements were found in most New York City neighborhoods from midtown Manhattan south to the Battery, but the greatest concentration was in Lower East Side tenement districts, which were populated primarily by recently arrived East European Jews. Of the settlements active among this population, three were particularly significant. College Settlement, established in 1889 by seven graduates of elite New England women’s colleges, was located on Rivington Street. Less than three blocks away, at 185 Eldridge Street, was the University Settlement Society, organized under that name in 1891 as the successor to the Neighborhood Guild, the first settlement in the United States. The third major Lower East Side settlement house was Henry Street Settlement, founded as Nurses’ Settlement in 1893 by Lillian D. Wald, who was still its guiding spirit in 1900.

As of January 1900 there were still no settlements in Greenwich Village, principally because for most of the nineteenth century the neighborhood had not been considered a tenement house district. However, this perception had begun to change in the 1890s as more and more tenements were built south and west of Washington Square. At the turn of the new century, settlement house activists with prior experience among East Side slum dwellers became convinced that the new tenement sections of the Village were promising locales for settlement work. In rapid succession two settlement houses opened their doors for business, one in the south Village in 1900, another in the west Village in 1902.

**West Side Branch**

In March 1900 James B. Reynolds, the headworker of University Settlement on the Lower East Side, urged his organization’s governing council
to establish a branch in the southern part of Greenwich Village, just west of University Settlement’s traditional area of operation. Reynolds argued that the rapid growth of the West Side Italian immigrant enclave and the economic achievements of its residents—many of whom were moving out of unskilled jobs such as “railroad digger or street shoveler” into trades like barbering—required a supportive response from University Settlement activists. The council agreed, and in June it appropriated $2,500 to organize West Side Branch, a name chosen over the main alternative, Italian Branch, because council members wanted to make it clear that the new branch was open to everyone in the neighborhood.²

Reynolds went right to work. Within a short time he recruited Edith Thomas to be the new branch’s head resident. The daughter of a New Hampshire judge, she was married to Bond Thomas, a businessman, and had recently been doing volunteer work for University Settlement’s legal aid division. To assist her at West Side Branch, Reynolds hired Dorothy Drake, a graduate of Smith College. He leased a house at 38 King Street, which Edith Thomas later described as “a quiet side street” that was “only a stone’s throw away from the crowded tenement-house districts” of Bleecker, Thompson, and Sullivan, a south Village neighborhood in which fully 60 percent of the school-age children were Italian.³

Although Reynolds had made his case for opening West Side Branch by stressing the growing importance of Italians to Lower Manhattan’s economy, political considerations also figured significantly in his thinking. Reynolds had been very active in anti-Tammany politics. In 1894 he served on the Committee of Seventy that successfully backed William Strong’s mayoral campaign, and in 1896, excited by the benefits of a reform administration for tenement dwellers (cleaner streets, stronger housing regulations, and less police corruption), he urged settlement activists to follow his example and go into politics. “Be earnest, practical, and be active,” he urged. “Political reform is the great moral opportunity of our day.” The following year Reynolds helped convince his friend Seth Low to run as the Citizens’ Union candidate for mayor, and he served as Low’s informal campaign manager during the 1897 election. Although the Croker-led Tammany Democrats won in 1897, Reynolds immediately began to look ahead to the next mayoral campaign. Tammany, he believed, had gained an advantage with downtown Italian voters by backing a prominent Italian businessman, Antonio Zucca, for Coroner of the Borough of Manhattan. Eager to have south Village Italians associate reformers with their best interests, Reynolds wanted to have the West Side Branch up and running before the 1901 municipal elections.⁴

West Side Branch got off to a fast start. An opening reception in December 1900 featured speeches in English by Reynolds and others and in Italian
by prominent representatives of the Italian community. These included Luigi Fugazy, described by Edith Thomas as “one of the best-known Italian bankers in this city” and equally admire in the south Village as the indefatigable patron of New York’s Italian mutual aid societies. By March 1901 Thomas and three other women residents had launched a program that was attracting many participants, about a third of them Italians from the tenement district east of the house and the others from the various ethnic groups that lived to the west. Thirty children were enrolled in the West Side Branch kindergarten, and nearly five hundred youngsters had joined the settlement’s several dozen clubs and classes, with sewing, debating, singing, drawing, dancing, and gymnastics among the available activities (fig. 9). A brick stable behind the settlement house had been converted into a gym that was used for “dancing-classes, entertainments, musical afternoons and large mothers’ meetings,” and the settlement’s main building housed a circulating library and a penny savings bank. Thomas took it upon herself to plant a large flower garden intended especially for the enjoyment of the local children. Writing in March, she said she was looking forward to spring, when tulips and daffodils could “be picked freely by the chubby little hands which never have been able before to gather growing flowers.”

Despite West Side Branch’s impressive start, all was not well. Although
Thomas was the branch’s chief administrator, she was still an employee of its parent organization, the University Settlement Society, and a subordinate of James B. Reynolds, an ambitious man who showed little patience for anyone who did not come up to his expectations. Unfortunately for Edith Thomas, Reynolds soon became dissatisfied with her performance. The precise cause of his disenchantment was never explicit, but some possible causes can be surmised. Thomas had no previous experience in managing an organization the size of West Side Branch and she sometimes dithered over details, turning to Reynolds for advice on small matters that he may have felt she should have handled on her own. He also may have viewed some of her activities, the flower garden in particular, as frivolous, a poor use of her time. In any event, by early March, less than five months into Thomas’s term as headworker, Reynolds had begun to search for a replacement.

Reynolds described the type of upper-middle or upper-class woman he hoped to recruit for the post in a letter he sent to Mary Simkhovitch, the headworker of Friendly Aid House settlement on East Thirty-fourth Street. Although Reynolds may have intended to be ironic or witty, a disdainful tone underlies his words. The new head resident at West Side Branch, he wrote, should be “neither too young, too handsome, nor too stylish, but a fair amount of all these qualities will not be an objection.” She should, moreover, “be someone who has for some time been devoted to good works but would like to continue that devotion at sweat shop wages.” Given what he called Simkhovitch’s “extended acquaintance with the decayed aristocracy,” Reynolds wondered if she could suggest a suitable candidate.  

When she was informed of Reynolds’s decision to replace her, Edith Thomas was devastated. Under great strain owing to obligations that included teaching classes nearly every morning, afternoon, and evening, and despondent over her failure to win Reynolds’s approval, she collapsed from “nervous prostration” on three different occasions in March, April, and May. The consulting physician’s only suggestion was that she reduce her workload, something she was unwilling to do. Her husband, Bond Thomas, seems to have been of little help during this crisis, in part because he was regularly away on business, returning to the city only every other week.

Around six in the evening of Tuesday, May 14, 1901, Reynolds was talking with Bond Thomas in a first-floor room at the settlement house when they heard a shot, followed by a scream and a heavy thump. The two men rushed upstairs to find Edith, a revolver in her hand, lying on the floor of her bedroom, bleeding profusely from a self-inflicted chest wound. Reynolds phoned a doctor, but she died before he arrived.

The following day the major New York dailies carried stories about Edith
Thomas’s life and death. The *New York World*’s headline read: “Lived to Aid Others, Dies by Her Own Hand” (fig. 10). “Childless herself,” the *World* article said, Thomas “sought for years to advance the children of the poor.” Reynolds, who was doubtless appalled at the bad publicity and fearful that he would be blamed for Thomas’s suicide, refused to respond to press inquiries. His coworkers followed suit, leading one paper to comment that “the utmost reticence was observed as to the cause of the suicide” by “everyone connected with the settlement.” Lack of information, however, did not hinder speculation, and Democratic papers leaped at the chance to connect leading anti-Tammany reformers with a scandal. The *New York Sun* hinted most directly at Reynolds’s role in the affair. “A rumor was afloat,” the *Sun* reported, “that Mrs. Thomas took her life because the management expressed dissatisfaction with her work, but this was hotly denied by Mr. Reynolds through a messenger.”

Reynolds moved quickly to stabilize the situation at West Side Branch by recruiting a new headworker to take over in the fall of 1901. In Susan W. FitzGerald he found an able individual who during the previous year had held a position at Barnard College that later carried the title Dean of Students.

Approximately six months later FitzGerald reported that West Side Branch’s staff and programs were prospering. Where, under Edith Thomas, there had been only four residents, the residential staff now consisted of ten full-time and four part-time workers. The kindergarten’s enrollment had grown to fifty, requiring division into two classes. The monthly circulation of library books was nearly one thousand, four times the previous level, and the penny savings bank was attracting depositors in unprecedented numbers. A vacant lot on Houston had been converted to a playground with facilities for basketball and baseball, games that were popular with the local boys. Classes and clubs were packed. The place was humming with activity.

It was, however, disappointing to the staff that many more American-born and Irish immigrant residents of the area were participating in the settlement’s programs than were the recent immigrants from Italy. Part of the explanation may simply have been that the earlier immigrant groups, especially English speakers like the Irish, had become sufficiently acculturated after many years in the United States to feel unthreatened by Americanizing aspects of the settlement’s programs. Some Italian newcomers may have stayed away initially because they sensed and were offended by a cultural chauvinism in the settlement’s staff that was reflected in FitzGerald’s description of south Village Italians as “strangely isolated on account of their foreign tongue and equally foreign ideas and way of living.” Whatever the case, as late as 1902, the settlement’s programs were still attracting...
nearly twice as many non-Italian as Italian participants. This situation, however, like the neighborhood itself, soon changed. By 1907, the continued influx of Italian immigrants had made the surrounding neighborhood “entirely Italian,” and most of the settlement’s clients were by then also Italian.11

But how well fulfilled was the cherished hope of settlement activists that
their working-class neighbors would view them less as representatives of an impersonal social service agency than as well-educated friends who happened to live at West Side Branch? Reading between the lines of FitzGerald’s 1902 account, it is clear that the services relationship was stronger than the informal neighborly ties, though the latter were not absent. The settlement’s clubs and classes were often oversubscribed, and other services were eagerly sought even though they duplicated similar ones available through older institutions within the immigrant community: for example, the settlement’s savings bank, which competed with the Italian padrone’s traditional role as banker to the poor, and the legal aid society, which competed with the Tammany district leaders’ practice of offering legal assistance to constituents. Still, FitzGerald and her coworkers longed for informal friendly exchanges with their neighbors and were delighted when a few began to drop by simply to chat. Every such informal visit, FitzGerald wrote, “makes us feel that we have been accepted frankly as belonging to the neighborhood.”

By the time FitzGerald submitted her report in early 1902, major changes were underway at the main University Settlement house on Eldridge Street. The previous fall James B. Reynolds had again campaigned for Seth Low, and following Low’s victory, Reynolds had been rewarded with an appointment as the mayor’s personal secretary. To fill the now-vacant position of headworker, the University Settlement hired Robert Hunter, a wealthy young Indiana University graduate who had six years’ experience in administrative work for the Chicago Board of Charities and who had for the past three years lived at Hull House, the highly regarded Chicago settlement led by Jane Addams. Hunter subsequently recruited a group of talented young men to be his coworkers on New York’s Lower East Side. Prominent among these were Ernest Poole, a Princeton graduate and aspiring writer, and two socially progressive individuals with Hull House experience, William English Walling, a University of Chicago graduate, and Leroy Scott, who, like Hunter, had attended Indiana University. These new staff members soon formed lasting friendships with several University Settlement colleagues who were holdovers from the Reynolds period: J. G. Phelps Stokes, a Yale graduate and scion of one of the wealthiest and most socially prestigious New York families, and Miriam Finn, a non-resident staff member in charge of programs for Lower East Side girls.

The young idealists in Hunter’s circle came from backgrounds that closely mirrored those of most turn-of-the-century settlement activists, as sketched in a composite portrait by Allen Davis, a modern scholar of the movement. Except for Miriam Finn, a Russian-born Jew, all the rest, like the vast majority of Davis’s sample, were college-educated, old stock Protestants born in the Northeast or Midwest. The men, like most settlement
workers, came from upper-middle- or upper-class backgrounds, with Stokes, Walling, and Hunter being from exceptionally wealthy families. Also like most contemporary social settlement workers, the University Settlement group was young. Stokes turned thirty in 1902, and the others were still in their twenties. All were unmarried, and most made only a short-term commitment to settlement house life, joining the movement for two or three years and then going on to other pursuits.\footnote{14}

Hunter and his coworkers were also typical of the movement in that they became leading advocates of progressive social reform legislation. Shortly after he arrived at University Settlement in 1902, Hunter tapped the city’s network of social settlement folk to organize a New York Child Labor Committee that included himself and Stokes from University Settlement, Mary Simkhovitch from Friendly Aid House, and Lillian Wald from Henry Street Settlement. Many social progressives who were not residents of settlement houses endorsed the committee’s call for stronger state child labor laws, but the campaign’s core group was composed of headworkers and other settlement folk. Leroy Scott and Ernest Poole of University Settlement contributed newspaper and magazine articles in support of the cause. From her outpost in the Village Susan FitzGerald of West Side Branch took responsibility for tracking the progress of the committee’s bills in the state legislature. The reformers’ concerted efforts were rewarded in the spring of 1903 when the legislature passed four regulatory measures that, though less stringent than the reformers wanted, were among the most rigorous in the nation at the time.\footnote{15}

In an unrelated decision taken shortly after the child labor laws passed, University Settlement’s council voted to discontinue its West Side branch. The official announcement cited budgetary concerns and the council’s belief that money spent on West Side Branch could be put to better use on projects at the settlement’s Lower East Side center. To soften the blow, the council agreed to continue paying rent on the branch’s buildings into 1904, a gesture intended to give West Side Branch supporters some breathing room while they tried to reorganize on an independent basis. In September 1903, the successor organization opened its doors as Richmond Hill House, a name derived from the historic mansion that had once occupied a site nearby in the Village. Susan FitzGerald stayed on as headworker, and J. G. Phelps Stokes joined the newly formed board of directors. The main settlement house remained at the same location it had occupied for the past year, a building at 28 MacDougal that was slightly closer to the heart of the south Village Italian tenement district than the West Side Branch’s previous address had been. The old location on King Street continued to be used by Richmond Hill House as a residence for its staff.\footnote{16}

Although West Side Branch was on the southernmost edge of the Village
and had a very short existence, the impact of University Settlement and its Italian branch on Greenwich Village history was not insignificant. Part of that legacy was bequeathed through the careers of individuals who came to University Settlement in the Reynolds-Hunter era and subsequently became residents of the Village. By early 1905 most of the members of Hunter’s circle were ready to move on, either to marry or to launch their post-settlement work careers. Moreover, by that point in time all of them were becoming increasingly involved in socialist causes, either as members of the Socialist Party or as intellectuals who promoted socialist ideas. Moving to the Village, as nearly every member of the Hunter circle did within a year or two of leaving the settlement, proved an amiable way of maintaining friendships and of facilitating mutual political and intellectual projects. Though few in number, this group of settlement house veterans brought to the Village an invigorating mix of talent, energy, ambition, and political passion that had a substantial influence on Village life between 1906 and the mid-1910s.

West Side Branch’s institutional legacy in the Village was also substantial. Richmond Hill House pursued the Italian branch idea with considerable success, and in the early 1910s, when the Russell Sage Foundation sponsored a major study of Italian women in industry, Richmond Hill House not only supplied a majority of the survey’s informants but served as home base for several of the principal investigators. Institutionally, West Side Branch had blazed a trail by being the first settlement opened in Greenwich Village. The collegial spirit in the movement was such that University Settlement folk never claimed that their pioneering effort gave them anything like exclusive rights over any or all settlement work on the lower West Side. When Mary Simkhovitch of Friendly Aid House made inquiries in 1902 about the possibility of establishing a second Greenwich Village settlement, she received nothing but encouragement from her colleagues at University Settlement. Robert Hunter, having consulted with Susan FitzGerald of West Side Branch, observed that there was “much work to be done in this neighborhood,” and concluded that “if affected at all, we should be benefited by their coming into this district.” Having received the blessing of University Settlement’s leadership, Greenwich House, which was to have a long and illustrious history, opened for business on Jones Street in the west Village in November 1902.17

Greenwich House

Residents of West Side Branch and Greenwich House were, like their settlement colleagues throughout the United States, optimists. Far from
being disheartened by the social problems associated with conditions in America’s industrial cities—sprawling slums, huge numbers of non-English-speaking immigrants, corrupt municipal governments, crime, and working-class unrest—settlement workers preferred to see the opportunities inherent in the urban scene. From this perspective no city offered greater challenges or more promise than New York, a metropolis that was rapidly becoming not just the nation’s largest urban center but its financial and cultural capital as well. Mary Simkhovitch spoke for many of her contemporaries when she observed that upon arriving on the Lower East Side in the late 1890s, she had experienced a “vivid sense of a new and overpowering vitality” that exceeded anything she had encountered in Boston and London slums. Life in New York’s tenement districts was heady stuff, and certain that she wanted more than just a taste, Simkhovitch in 1898 launched her career as a New York City social worker.18

She was well prepared for what was ahead. Born Mary Kingsbury in Chestnut Hill outside of Boston, she was the daughter of a politically active Civil War veteran and a mother she described as more intellectual than domestic. While an undergraduate at Boston University, she was influenced by social gospel Protestants who were committed to Christian-inspired social reform. She also met individuals who were active in the settlement house movement, one of whom, Wellesley College economics professor Emily Balch, became a mentor and friend. After graduation Kingsbury taught high school Latin for two years, did a year of graduate work in sociology and economics at Radcliffe College, and received a fellowship to continue her studies in Berlin. Although her mother insisted on accompanying her, Kingsbury nevertheless found her year abroad an eye-opener in ways both small (seeing a woman smoking a cigarette) and large (attending, with Emily Balch as her guide, the London International Socialist Trade Union Congress of 1896). Upon her return to the United States, Kingsbury enrolled in graduate courses in sociology and political economy at Columbia University, sharing an East Side apartment on Irving Place with another Boston University alumna, Anne O’Hagan, a reporter for the New York World.19

In September 1897 Kingsbury became a resident at College Settlement on the Lower East Side and soon thereafter assumed the post of headworker. With characteristic thoroughness, she had prepared for living in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood by studying Yiddish. She quickly established friendly relations with the residents of nearby University Settlement. James B. Reynolds, the headworker there, became a trusted colleague, although she never completely shared his hostility toward Tammany Hall’s influence in the neighborhood. Kingsbury felt that Tammany politicos such as the local ward boss, Big Tim Sullivan, provided their constit-
uents with many services for which anti-Tammany crusaders, bent simply on throwing the rascals out, offered few substantial substitutes.

In December 1898 Kingsbury left College Settlement to become headworker at Friendly Aid House, a settlement located in the East Thirties; a month later, on January 7, 1899, she married Vladimir G. Simkhovitch, a Russian-born political economist she had met while both were students in Berlin. She stayed at Friendly Aid House for three and a half years, but her experience there was not entirely satisfactory. The settlement was funded by rich Unitarian philanthropists and viewed by them as a charitable activity in which they gave and others received, quite different from the credo of reciprocity between the classes to which Simkhovitch subscribed. Moreover, the most influential contributor was a staunch Republican, whose refusal to allow the premises to be used for any program critical of his party provoked an unpleasant confrontation with Simkhovitch, who had arranged for and then had to cancel a speech at the house by an opponent of McKinley’s foreign policy. These philosophical spats, however, helped Simkhovitch sharpen her thinking about what a settlement should or should not be. It should not, she concluded, simply be an avenue for the wealthy few to demonstrate their altruism. Rather it ought to be an enterprise in which settlement residents and working-class neighbors joined forces in “a cooperative effort for social betterment.”

By early 1902 Simkhovitch was ready to test her ideas at a settlement that she would found and lead, and she asked Paul Kennaday, a coworker at Friendly Aid House, to scout Greenwich Village for a site for her new enterprise. Kennaday was typical of the well-educated young men who set aside promising professional careers to devote themselves for a time to the settlement house movement. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1873, Kennaday grew up in a family that was deeply committed to academic pursuits, public life, and the urban scene. His father was a lawyer who served in both the New York State Assembly and Senate. His mother had taken some college courses without completing a degree. The younger Kennaday graduated from Yale in 1895 and completed a Bachelor of Law degree at New York Law School in 1897. For the next six years he practiced law in the city; however, his first love was social work, and in pursuit of that interest he had joined the staff at Friendly Aid House.

From May to early July 1902 Kennaday, often accompanied by another settlement worker, Mary Sherman, canvassed the Greenwich Village area to find a suitable location for Simkhovitch’s settlement house. He finally heard about a building at 26 Jones Street that seemed perfect. Anything farther south in the Village would have been too close to West Side Branch and its Italian enclave. East of Sixth Avenue was too middle-class, north of
Washington Square too upper-class; and the Village west of Hudson Street too cluttered with the many factories and warehouses near the Hudson River docks. Jones Street, however, was in a working-class neighborhood, and the three-story house at number 26, though run-down and filthy, was not only just the right size but available to lease in the fall. Mary Simkho-vitch, vacationing in Maine with her husband and their first child, made a quick trip to the city and put her stamp of approval on Kennaday’s find (fig. 11).

Bounded on the south by Bleecker and the north by West Fourth, Jones Street was only one block long. This meant that the street had the kind of manageable proportions that might help settlement residents develop friendly relations with their neighbors. The nightly visits of the man who lit the gas lamps that were still in use and the regular passage of horse-drawn streetcars on the Bleecker and West Fourth lines at either end of Jones gave the street a pleasant old-fashioned ambience, but the buildings that lined both sides of the block were a mix of old and new, a hodgepodge of architectural styles and residential and commercial uses. About half of
the buildings were older three-story structures like number 26, but the rest were five- or six-story tenements, several with walls flush to those of the adjacent building, a form of construction that left interior rooms without direct access to light or fresh air. Although most were apartment houses or boardinghouses, there were five saloons on the block. Another building just two doors down from number 26 was in active use as a box factory.22

Nowhere were the features of a modern industrial city more apparent than in the mixed ethnic composition of the street’s population. At the beginning of the century the largest ethnic group on Jones Street was made up of Irish Americans, who comprised about 40 percent of the whole. Another 25 percent of the block’s residents came from other western European countries, mainly Germany, France, and England. African Americans and Italians, the latter an advance guard of the most rapidly expanding nationality in the neighborhood, were found in almost equal numbers, about 12 percent each. The remaining 10 percent or so of Jones Streeter’s were either third-generation Americans or immigrants from scattered locations around the globe: Liberia, Algeria, Hungary, Turkey, Russia, China, and the West Indies. That there was little neighborly communication across ethnic lines was one of the urban social problems that Simkhovitch and her coworkers intended to address.23

Naming her settlement Greenwich House, Simkhovitch guided every step of its organizational phase with great care. To fill the largely honorific role of signing the settlement’s incorporation papers, she chose distinguished individuals from varied ethnic and religious backgrounds—Felix Adler, a German-born Jew who founded the Society for Ethical Culture, Bishop Henry C. Potter of the Episcopal church, Judge Eugene Philbin, a prominent Roman Catholic, and Jacob Riis, the newspaper man and housing reformer—to indicate that Greenwich House was a nonsectarian organization open to all its neighbors regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity.

Although one in eight of Jones Street’s residents were blacks, and many more lived on nearby streets, no African American was included among the incorporators or, for that matter, on any other board of the fledgling settlement. Nevertheless, the omission of blacks did not reflect any antipathy on Simkhovitch’s part toward the settlement’s black neighbors. With blacks, as with Villagers of every ethnic background, she drew a distinction between good neighbors and bad neighbors. She expressed admiration for the “dignified manners” of the African American “ministers from the South” who lodged at a boardinghouse across the street from Greenwich House, and she described the black residents of Jones, Cornelia, Gay, and West Third streets as “for the most part highly respected and law-abiding citizens.” But almost from the first she waged a campaign to “wipe out the
Minettas Street, Lane, and Court” by razing run-down buildings that housed “lawless and shiftless” blacks and building a park on the site. In 1904, she encouraged the settlement’s Committee on Social Investigations to provide Mary White Ovington, a young social worker friend who was eager to launch what became a lifelong career working for racial justice, with seed money to start researching her book, *Half a Man*, on New York City’s blacks. Moreover, in the second year of its existence, Greenwich House rented a room on Cornelia Street for local blacks to use as a social center and library. No rationale was given for not using a room at the main settlement, but it seems likely that Simkhovitch, though wishing to establish friendly relations with black neighbors, was not willing to challenge directly the conviction strongly held by Americans of all classes, including most of the settlement’s working-class clientele, that racial segregation should prevail in the social sphere.24

In choosing Greenwich House’s governing board, Simkhovitch rejected the practice followed by most contemporary settlements of having boards and councils that were composed almost exclusively of wealthy individuals who had little if any direct contact with the day-to-day work of the settlement. Remembering her unhappy experience with just such a governing system at Friendly Aid House, Simkhovitch insisted that Greenwich House must be a “Cooperative Social Settlement Society” that included resident workers on its policymaking council. Consistent with this principle, the members of Greenwich House’s first Board of Managers were a representative mix of young residents—Paul Kennaday, Louise Egvert, and Annie Noyes—and wealthy contributors, two of whom, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Frieda S. Warburg, remained loyal supporters of the settlement for many years to come.25

The house at 26 Jones Street needed a thorough cleaning, interior painting, repairs, and the services of a pest exterminator before it was ready for occupancy in November 1902. Simkhovitch had recruited a staff of fifteen residents, eight women and seven men. Since the main building could not house everyone, she made a virtue of necessity by distributing the overflow to three nearby addresses, describing them as “little colonies” of college graduates in a working-class neighborhood. She, her family, and five women residents moved into 26 Jones, with the young women assigned small bedrooms on the building’s third floor. A visitor during the first year reported that each woman was provided with the bare necessities (a chair, a table, a chiffonier, a bed, and bedding) and encouraged to supplement these items with “pictures, rugs, hangings, desks, etc.” acquired on her own. The visitor added that none of the idealistic young residents complained about these conditions.26
Five of the seven male residents rented rooms in a house about a block and a half away at 88 Grove Street. This handsome Greek Revival home, like its twin next door at 90 Grove, dated from the 1820s and had had distinguished owners. In 1902, number 88 belonged to Ferruccio Vitale, a well-known landscape architect and friend of Greenwich House. Number 90 was the property of Robert Blum, an artist whose studio occupied the back of the lot. Vitale’s five Greenwich House tenants—two lawyers, a banker, a stockbroker, and a jeweler—were only the first among many well-to-do social progressives to occupy either 88 or 90 Grove Street over the next decade.27

During the first year of the settlement’s history, the five Greenwich House men used their rented rooms at 88 Grove mainly as places to sleep. Much of their workday was spent at 26 Jones, including their morning and evening meals. Thinking back to the first of these communal meals, which was on Thanksgiving Day, 1902, Simkhovitch remembered the mood of excitement that prevailed. “We felt,” she recalled, “somehow born again. We were all young together. Everything was ahead of us. Full of enthusiasm and zest, we plunged into the life of Jones Street.”28

Settlement work on Jones Street had a threefold focus: sociability, services, and surveys. Informal socializing began within the community of Greenwich House and played a crucial role in building a strong esprit de corps in its ranks. The daily ritual of taking meals together, especially the less hurried evening meal at 6:30 every night, provided an opportunity to exchange ideas with coworkers and guests, to share stories from the day’s activities, and to plan what needed to be done next. Lasting friendships and even marriages were byproducts of these collegial exchanges, but the broadest impact was educational. A veteran settlement activist spoke for herself and many colleagues when she wrote that these contacts with like-minded women and men opened to her “new worlds of thought and understanding.”29

Greenwich House residents gradually established trusting relationships with their neighbors, even though success on that score was not universal. Things got off to a positive start the day the settlement opened when Mary Simkhovitch arrived, pushing the carriage with her firstborn in it and six months pregnant with her second child. Wary Jones Streeters, who had been wondering why these upper-middle-class people wanted to live on a working-class street, dropped their guard a bit at the unthreatening sight of a mother and her baby. Several neighbors soon became friendly: Mrs. King, an Irish woman with a large brood of her own, Mr. Zimmerman, the owner of a Bleecker Street delicatessen, and Mr. Kelley, who ran a respectable saloon (no drinking to excess and no unaccompanied women allowed) at the West Fourth Street end of the block.30
Even so, conflicting cultural assumptions occasionally led to misunderstandings between the settlement folk and their neighbors. When Simkhovitch, acting on the best contemporary public health advice about the benefits of fresh air, put her baby, warmly wrapped and in a bassinet, out on the fire escape at 26 Jones, the young women box makers in the factory next door were appalled, convinced that Simkhovitch was a neglectful mother. Similarly, on hearing the screams of a woman being beaten by her husband, a young female resident called the police to have him arrested. The wife was indignant and refused to press charges. In a jibe aimed at the settlement worker, the woman declared, “Sure I’m going back to my husband. She ain’t got any, and don’t know.”

The services Greenwich House offered its neighbors were similar to those found at most contemporary settlements. Within the first two weeks of operation, Greenwich House residents organized a wide array of clubs and classes, the clubs mostly social in character and the classes ranging from practical (cooking) to recreational (dancing) to academic (New York City history) (fig. 12). A kindergarten was opened for preschoolers, and school-age youngsters were invited to borrow books from a children’s reading room. A Penny Provident Bank was established to take deposits of sums too small to be accepted by regular savings banks, and twice-weekly hot lunches were served to women workers from the box factory next door. Simkhovitch firmly believed that in an ideal world Jones Streeters would have either organized such programs themselves or taken the initiative in asking public or private agencies to help them do so; but the reality, she wrote, was that “there are so many neighborhood needs which no one else can or will undertake except neighborhood houses such as Settlements” (fig. 13).

By the end of Greenwich House’s first year Simkhovitch was confident that the services then in place were meeting many of the neighborhood’s immediate needs, and she was ready to move forward toward her long-range objective, which, in her words, was nothing less than “to make Jones Street one of the most desirable streets to live on in New York.” To find out what it would take to reach this ambitious goal, she needed precise information about the neighborhood, and this was where the third leg of the settlement triad of sociability, services, and surveys came into play. Systematic investigations of carefully targeted subjects could, Simkhovitch felt, document local conditions and stimulate discussion of what, if any, ameliorative action needed to be taken. The surveys had another largely unanticipated result, which was to give later generations of readers some insight into the lives of otherwise anonymous working-class Villagers. However, since settlement workers generally judged their neighbors’ behavior as good or bad based on middle-class standards that working-class Villagers did not always share, these surveys need to be read for what they reveal about the survey takers,
as well as for what they reveal about the lives and values of the workers being surveyed.33

Two such surveys were conducted by Greenwich House researchers during the settlement’s second and third years (1903–1905). The first was Wage-Earners’ Budgets, a detailed report on the incomes and expenditures of two hundred working-class families in the Village. This survey was conducted between November 1903 and September 1905, with Louise Bolard as principal investigator. Bolard had come to New York City after graduating from Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, and had worked with Simkhovitch at Friendly Aid House before becoming a member of Greenwich House’s first group of residents. Shortly before her monograph came into print, she married Charles H. More and chose to use her married name, Louise Bolard More, on the title page.

More’s study contains a wealth of information about ordinary Villagers. After describing her methodology, More echoed an observation that Simkhovitch had made in her first annual report, namely that the occupational profile of Greenwich Village workers was significantly more diverse than
that found among Lower East Side residents. “There is [in the Village],” More wrote, “no one highly concentrated industry as that of the garment-makers of the East Side, but a great diversity of trades and occupations.” Virtually every type of unskilled and skilled labor was represented, including jobs in “candy, paper-box, and artificial-flower factories” and many occupations related to the Hudson River docks: longshoremen, warehouse workers, and truck drivers. The heads of More’s two hundred families divided almost equally between American-born and foreign-born individuals. Income depended on many factors, but larger families tended to have higher annual incomes, mainly because of the contributions made by older children who had part- or full-time jobs.

More limited her survey to working families, leaving the study of entirely destitute Villagers for other researchers. She found that the incomes of her two hundred working households, and consequently the quality of their lives, varied greatly. A small number, only 5.5 percent of the whole, earned what she called “a pitifully small amount” ($400 or less annually) and en-

dured great hardships. Those with relatively high incomes (14.5 percent earned $1,200 or more per year) generally lived very well. The large middle group, which was very diverse, included a significant number (ca. 25 percent of the total sample) whose annual incomes were within one hundred dollars of the average figure for all families, $851.38. On this sum, More reported, “some families live comfortably, other suffer privations,” and since the wife was responsible for most of the family’s ordinary expenditures, the difference between comfort and privation, according to More, “depends upon whether the mother is a good manager or not.” She added, however, that husbands could also affect the family’s standard of living for good or ill. Those who drank heavily often spent so much at local saloons that, in More’s opinion, they significantly injured their family’s quality of life.35

More’s findings clearly delineated what workers spent on basic items. The most basic, and most expensive, were housing and food. On average, More’s families paid about twenty percent of their income for housing. Rents ranged from $7 to $32 a month ($84–$384 annually), with the average family paying about $13.50 a month for a three- or four-room unfurnished apartment. Food costs were the biggest budget item, comprising 42.3 percent of an average family’s expenses. Family size, of course, was a major variable, and many of More’s respondents explained that, as a general rule, they needed $1 per week for each family member’s food (i.e., $5 to $6 a week for an average sized family). After spending close to two-thirds of their income for food and shelter, families used a large part of what was left for three other relatively big budget items: clothing (10.6 percent), fuel and light (5.1 percent), and life insurance (3.9 percent). Only tiny sums, if anything, went for church contributions, a fact that seems to bear out More’s contention that most families in her sample displayed massive indifference toward organized religion, except, perhaps, for the religious education of their children. A few high-income families spent freely for recreation, especially theater, but most working-class budgets showed almost no expenditures for commercial entertainments. The main locales for the leisure time activities of the workers with low and middling incomes were places that did not charge admission, and within that general category the available choices were further restricted along age and gender lines. “Men,” More reported, “have saloons, political clubs, trade-unions, or lodges for their recreation.” Children played street games (fig. 14). But, More added, “mothers have almost no recreation, only a dreary round of work, day after day, with occasionally a door-step gossip to vary the monotony of their lives.”36

In the second half of her book, More included a chapter on twelve typical
families to illustrate how representative households from different income
groups lived. Although More scrupulously tried to protect the anonymity
of her informants by referring to them by the initials of their surnames only
(e.g., “Mr. and Mrs. B.”), her account includes so many details that a mod-
ern researcher can readily identify some of her families in the 1900 census
and add full names to her stories about these working-class Villagers.37

Frank and Katherine Brodrick of 25 Jones Street were members of More’s
high-income group, workers who made $1,200 or more annually. In 1905
Frank was fifty years old and Katherine thirty-eight. Katherine described
herself to Greenwich House investigators as a second wife who was much
younger than her husband. Frank was a native New Yorker, the son of Irish
immigrants. Katherine had been born in Ireland and had been brought to
the United States when she was eleven. She married Frank four years later
and bore him their first child at the age of sixteen. The Brodricks had seven
children, ranging in age from three to twenty.38

The Brodricks’ annual income in the survey year was $1,500. The eldest
children, Mary (20) and Frank Jr. (15), contributed $9 a week as factory
workers. (In 1900 Mary, then sixteen, is listed in the census as a box maker,
hers age, gender, and marital status typical of the nine box makers who lived
on Jones Street that year, eight of them teenagers, and all of them unmar-
mied women living with their parents.) Frank Sr. was an oysterman whose
job was to sort and select oysters for market, seasonal labor that brought in
as much as $75 a week from September to February but required him to
work as a watchman and at other odd jobs during slack times. The family’s
expenditures rose and fell with the seasons as well, and More noted disap-
provingly that Katherine Brodrick was willing to go into debt each summer,
counting on paying off the loans when her husband was making “big
money” again in the fall and early winter.39

The nine Brodricks occupied a four-room apartment on the top floor of
an old tenement, the two interior rooms of which were windowless bed-
rooms. This was low-quality housing for a family with such a high income,
and, in fact, the Brodricks moved to a larger place in 1906. During the survey
period, however, they lived under very cramped conditions. Meals were
taken in the kitchen at an oilcloth-covered table that could not seat all nine
family members at once. Although Katherine Brodrick was described as “a
good manager,” Greenwich House investigators expressed surprise at some
of her budgetary choices. The family obviously skimped on rent, and Mrs.
Brodrick also cut corners on food, serving mainly bread, butter, potatoes,
milk, coffee, tea, and little meat, a diet that More described as “wholesome
and sufficient, but monotonous.” Although she pinched pennies elsewhere,
Katherine Brodrick did not stint on clothes for herself, explaining that she
was determined to “look well and dress well even [though she had] seven children.” Since she did not sew, her outfits were bought ready-made or from a dressmaker, an “extravagant” expense, in More’s opinion. However, Katherine Brodrick doubtless would have been pleased by More’s observation that when the oysterman’s wife went out for a walk, “no one would imagine that her home was on [Jones] Street.” Modest expenses for fuel, light, insurance, furnishings, and recreation filled out the Brodricks’ budget.40

Joseph and Annie Bailey, a young couple who lived downstairs from the Brodricks at 25 Jones Street, had an annual income of $850, almost exactly the average for families in More’s sample. Joseph, a native New Yorker, was thirty-one, and his Irish-born wife was twenty-five. They had two children, ages four and one. For the past seven years Joseph had worked as a draftsman for the same company, earning a salary of $15 a week that he supplemented by doing odd jobs for his firm and other customers. The Baileys’ apartment consisted of three dark, cramped rooms. Their bedroom had just one window, which looked out into an interior hallway. The small kitchen’s only window opened into an air shaft, and their two parlor windows faced a Barrow Street factory at the rear of the building. The Baileys’ monthly rent of $13 was just below the average for More’s families.41

Joseph and Annie Bailey spent nothing for union dues, church donations, or furniture during the reporting year, but their outlays for food and entertainment were considerably higher than the norm for working-class families with middling incomes. By the rule of thumb that decreed food should cost $1 a week per family member, Annie’s expenditures should have been only $4 a week, but hers ran closer to $7, a sum that More said let the Baileys eat “extremely well for a family of four” and to have “more fruit and pastry than most families of their class.” For entertainment Joseph liked to read penny dailies and to take Annie to the theater once a week in winter-time. Annie liked to dance, so she and Joseph went to six or seven balls that year at a cost of fifty cents each. The Baileys also took their children for trolley rides twice a week, occasionally visited Coney Island, and splurged on a two-week summer vacation at Far Rockaway Beach, where they rented rooms for $9. Although the Baileys were disappointed to have saved only $7 by the end of the year, they had done better in this respect than nearly 80 percent of the families in More’s sample.42

In 1900, another of More’s families, John and Annie Harron, had lived at 15 Jones, just five doors down from the Brodricks and Baileys; however, the very next year they found a nicer place in the neighborhood, a four-room apartment on the third floor of a well-maintained rear house. Although the Harrons’ annual income of $870 was nearly the same as the Baileys’ $850, John and Annie Harron had to struggle to make ends meet because by 1905
they had eight children, ages six months to thirteen years. They paid the same rent, $13, for their four rooms that the Baileys paid for their three, but the Harrons were definitely more crowded in their apartment than the Baileys were in theirs. Like the Brodrick family, the Harrons could not sit down to a meal together in the space available. The family’s income came mainly from John’s work as a harness cleaner at a local stable. He made $14 a week, and his oldest son, Charles, added $2 a week to the family’s income from his earnings delivering laundry. In a short time, of course, Charles, then thirteen, and his brother Robert, age twelve, would have full-time jobs, and the Harrons’ income would predictably increase.  

John and Annie Harron were natives of Ireland who had immigrated to the United States in the 1880s. Greenwich House investigators were favorably impressed with both, particularly Annie, whom they described as “a most attractive Irishwoman, bright, capable, neat, and a splendid manager with so large a family.” Her food budget was kept under tight control, averaging only $8.50 a week for a ten-person household. She also made all the children’s clothes, as definite a plus mark for her as Katherine Brodrick’s and Annie Bailey’s failure to sew had been, in the settlement workers’ view, marks against them. This thrifty family stretched its limited resources in many ways. John abstained from alcohol; Annie saved on food and clothing; and the family spent almost nothing on recreation, budgeting about $5 annually for carfare to send the older boys to a park where they played baseball on Sundays in summertime. The only unusual expense was $8 given annually to the local Catholic church, St. Joseph’s. This relatively large amount, and the fact that the Harrons tried to be “good Catholics,” distinguished them from many neighbors who maintained, at best, a lukewarm attitude toward religious practice. The Harrons were doing all right and would continue to do so as long as John Harron kept his steady job; however, More observed of the Harrons that “if the man should be taken ill or lose his employment, they would be forced to become dependent upon charity.”  

If workers with middling incomes were economically vulnerable, those who made below $400 a year were even more so. “They are,” More wrote, “under-fed, poorly clothed, wretchedly housed, and have the barest necessities of life.” To illustrate these generalizations, More chose several examples, one of which was the Schumacher family. The head of this family, Anna Schumacher, was a German-born widow whose husband had died at the beginning of the survey period, leaving her with four young children to support: daughters age twelve and eight, sons age eleven and four. The family’s annual income in the period after Mr. Schumacher’s death was barely $300; of this Anna contributed about $5 a week as a washerwoman and her
older children perhaps $1 a week doing odd jobs. Rent for two rooms in a
shabby house was a rock-bottom $7.50 a month, yet this took nearly one-
third of the family’s income. With little left for everything else, Anna tried
to feed herself and four youngsters on $2.25 a week, less than half the nor-
mal expenditure for a family of five. Greenwich House investigators de-
scribed the Schumachers’ diet—mainly bread, milk, and vegetables, and
nothing in large amounts—as “wholesome, but not adequate in quantity.”

Faced with formidable challenges owing to their inadequate income and
the squalor of their immediate surroundings, Anna Schumacher’s family
coped better than most did under similar circumstances. Much of the credit
belonged, More believed, to the mother’s indomitable spirit. Anna Schu-
macher set high standards for herself and insisted on the same from her
children. “Mrs. S.,” More wrote, “is a very neat, quiet, nice-appearing
woman, and the children are pretty and well-behaved.” The children were
also a resourceful lot. To keep the family’s fuel bills down, the boys scav-
genged the neighborhood for discarded wood, and the older children earned
petty cash by doing errands. Anna Schumacher refused most charity, even
from the church the family attended, but she accepted used clothing and
skillfully altered these items for her children’s use. As a consequence, More
and her coworkers described the children as “well dressed.”

The Schumachers were positive thinkers. Their apartment’s rear window
overlooked a garden behind 88 Grove Street, the Greenwich House men’s
annex in 1902–1903. Even though they had no access to this yard except
visually, the Schumacher children referred to it as “their park” and took
delight in watching the flowers bloom each spring, and each summer, when
the garden’s well-to-do owners left for the country to escape the city’s heat,
the youngsters entertained themselves with fantasies about how their
mother could become the garden’s “caretaker.” Thus, in spite of the family’s
marginal present circumstances, More was optimistic about the Schumach-
ers’ future, especially since, as she observed, “the two older children, who
are both industrious and ambitious,” would soon get jobs that would raise
the family’s income to a more satisfactory level.

More’s positive prognosis, accurate though it apparently was (five years
later the family had a new address and three children were working), seems
even more remarkable after reading the second Greenwich House survey,
_A West Side Rookery_, an investigation conducted by Elsa Herzfeld in 1904–
1905. Herzfeld, a resident of Hartley House, another West Side settlement,
had just completed _Family Monographs_ (1905), a study of twenty-four
working-class families who lived near Hartley House in the West Forties,
when Mary Simkhovitch invited her to do research on substandard housing
in Greenwich Village. As it happened, the place Herzfeld singled out for
study was a cluster of run-down houses in an alley off Washington Place, about a block from Greenwich House. One building in “The Alley,” as Herzfeld called it, was 133R Washington Place, the rear tenement in which the Schumachers lived in 1905. Museum of the City of New York, Jacob A. Riis Collection #75.

To reach 133R Washington Place, visitors had to squeeze through a narrow passageway between two buildings that faced the street. The first glimpse of number 133R, the dilapidated three-story wooden house in which the Schumachers lived, came as one emerged into the narrowest part of The Alley, a courtyard that measured about twelve by thirty feet at ground level but gave the impression of being smaller because the second stories of several neighboring buildings overhung the open space. Number 133R itself was divided into five apartments, each with two rooms. There
were no bathing facilities on the premises, and the only access four apartments had to running water was at two leaky sinks in a narrow hallway. “Eight broken and unsanitary water-closets” that were used by the residents of all five buildings around the Alley’s courtyard were located outdoors. For these filthy, drafty, foul-smelling accommodations, the Schumachers and other tenants were paying $8 a month in 1905, the rent having gone up fifty cents a month since More’s earlier survey.49

The seaminess of life on The Alley rivaled that of the notorious Minettas. Obscene shouts and the sounds of drunken quarrels were frequently heard at night coming from the courtyard, and on the occasions when Anna Schumacher had to go out, her frightened children locked the door and barricaded it with pieces of furniture. The occupants of the other four apartments were something less than model citizens. “Nellie” (her real first name) claimed to be a waitress and lived with a man who said he was her husband, although Nellie told investigators that she was married to “Dub,” another man who showed up from time to time. Nellie’s sister Mary lived with a fellow who listed his occupation as “bartender”; however, neighbors believed that Mary, Nellie, and a third woman who lived on the first floor were prostitutes whose male companions “lived by the women.”50

Yet a third Canswell sister (Herzfeld used fictitious surnames, but the sisters’ mother was listed as Annie A. Canswell, an Irish American widow, in the 1900 census) occupied an apartment on the top floor with a man named “Flaherty” (Herzfeld’s invention), who had recently been arrested for stealing a diamond ring. Flaherty abused their six-month-old baby boy, beating him until he went into convulsions. Greenwich House residents, responding to the mother’s pleas, arranged for the boy to be examined by doctors at Bellevue Hospital, where he was found to have “thirty-seven bruises, a broken collar-bone, two blackened eyes and blackened cheeks.” In March 1905 Greenwich House asked the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to intervene, but by the time officers arrived to arrest Flaherty, he had fled to New Jersey. Two months later, without ever having been released from the hospital, the boy died. When Flaherty returned to his wife in December, Greenwich House notified the S.P.C.C., which had him arrested, but his wife refused to testify against him, and a judge ruled that the evidence against Flaherty was therefore insufficient to warrant pursuing the case.51

Herzfeld closed *A West Side Rookery* with a brief section titled “What Can Be Done?” Her answer, one doubtless endorsed by her coworkers at Greenwich House, was that the city’s government had to do more for the neighborhood, providing better schools and expanding local services: public libraries, public baths, and recreational piers. Mary Simkhovitch, Herz-
feld's mentor during the survey period, certainly agreed, but had she written the conclusion, she would have strengthened it by spelling out how the neighborhood's needs could best be presented to municipal officials. The settlement's surveys were only the first step in that direction. The next step required an organization that envisioned a more inclusive neighborhood than did the traditional community interest groups, most of which were based on ethnic ties or party affiliations.

To promote a new spirit of inclusive neighborliness, Simkhovitch in 1903 took the lead in organizing the Greenwich Village Improvement Society, the first neighborhood association in New York City. From its formation onward, the society tried to recruit members from all local constituencies: Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, Democrats and Republicans, and every major ethnic group. Although the society's most active and productive years did not come until the early 1910s, the vision of a new neighborhood that it represented had begun to take shape much earlier. The starting point was the thinking of Mary Simkhovitch and other college-educated women and men who, in the process of living and working on Jones Street, themselves became, for a time, Greenwich Villagers.