IN 1889, TWO YOUNG middle-class, college-educated women, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, rented a dilapidated mansion on Chicago’s Near West Side. The mansion, which had once belonged to real estate developer Charles J. Hull, had been built in 1856 in the middle of open fields. By the time Addams and Starr moved into it, it was surrounded by factories and slums crowded around an open market on South Halstead Street. The people living in the area were ethnically diverse, consisting of Irish and Germans, Greeks and Italians, Eastern European Jews, and African Americans. Addams and Starr planned to live among them, hoping to learn from their neighbors how they might be helpful to them in some practical ways. Over time, the help that they offered became known as social work, and the place where they offered it Hull House.

Friends of Addams and Starr soon heard about Hull House and came to participate in the experiment. Among them were women who would later achieve national reputations in social reform—Julia Lathrop, first head of the U.S. Children’s Bureau; Florence Kelley, later head of the National Consumers’ League; and Alice Hamilton, founder of the field of industrial medicine, to name but a few. Other residents later applied to live at Hull House, defraying their own expenses (some received fellowships supplied by wealthy benefactors). Volunteers could stay from six weeks to six months, depending on the services they could offer. During Hull House’s first three years, all of its residents were women, but nonresident men also volunteered in its programs, which included nurseries and kindergartens, soup kitchens, clubs for all ages, and classes in art, crafts, drama, cooking, and the English language.

Impressed with this practical approach to social welfare, many wealthy benefactors supported Hull House programs. Intellectuals, reformers, and political figures came to speak to Hull House residents and neighbors, as well as to learn from their experiences. Hull House soon became a lively center for the exchange of ideas about modern city problems. One of its earliest achievements was the 1895 publication of Hull-House Maps and Papers: A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in a Congested District of Chicago, the first systematic investigation of a working-class neighborhood in an American city. Commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor, the book argued that poverty is not the result of an individual’s laziness or failure to save money but the result of circumstances that have overwhelmed human powers of self-help. This became a founding idea of Progressive Era reform.

Eventually, Jane Addams and her associates bought or built additional structures. Only a year and a half after the founding of Hull House, they built
Butler Gallery, a cheap two-story building that offered a supplementary living room, lecture room, branch library, and rooms for male residents. In 1895, they built a Children’s House for clubs, a nursery, kindergarten, and music classes. A brick building known as the Jane Club provided housing for working women. Ultimately, Hull House encompassed 13 buildings, each offering a different aspect of the settlement’s programs. The original Hull mansion and the settlement’s dining hall are now Registered National Historic Landmarks.

SEE ALSO
Addams, Jane; Kelley, Florence; Settlement-house movement; Social work

FURTHER READING

Immigration

THE UNITED STATES has always been a nation of immigrants and descendants of immigrants. In every census taken throughout the country’s history, the foreign-born have accounted for at least 6 to 14 percent of the population. During the late 19th century, the nature of immigration to the United States began to change. Formerly a destination for people from northern and western Europe—British, Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians—the United States became host to an increasing number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe—Italians, Greeks, Slavs, Poles, eastern European and Russian Jews, and Armenians.

Despite legal restraints on their immigration, newcomers also entered from a variety of Asian countries. Mexicans and Central Americans freely crossed the southern border, not even tallied as immigrants until 1907 and without being stopped by border patrols until 1924. French Canadians from rural Quebec abandoned their marginal farms and moved into New England, supplying much of the labor for factories and textile mills.

Between 1870 and 1920, nearly 29 million immigrants came to the United States. The peak decade was from 1900 to 1910, when the census recorded 8,795,386 new immigrants. This wave of immigration slowed with the advent of World War I and ended with the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, which established quotas on the immigration of certain nationalities. But generally speaking, the “golden door,” as Emma Lazarus called the entryway to America, stood wide open for white people. During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, there were almost no limits on the number of people who could try to make new lives for themselves in the United States.

Immigrants left their native lands for a variety of reasons—lack of work, scarcity of land, evictions, political turmoil, revolutionary violence, even famine. On the Italian peninsula, most young men could not acquire either farmland or industrial jobs. Some immigrants, despised minorities in their homelands, suffered physical and social persecution. Jews, for example, met anti-Semitism everywhere, but they encountered particularly severe persecution in Russia and other central European countries, where soldiers and government authorities drove