

---

# Jane Addams

**BORN:** September 6, 1860 • Cedarville, Illinois

**DIED:** May 21, 1935 • Chicago, Illinois

*American reformer; social worker*



“America’s future will be determined by the home and the school. The child becomes largely what he is taught, hence we must watch what we teach, and how we live.”

**J**ane Addams devoted much of her life to helping the poor in the United States. One of the first women in the nation to achieve widespread fame as an activist, Addams founded Hull-House in Chicago, Illinois, in 1889. This “settlement house,” as it was called, was one of the first community help centers of its kind in America. Both its fame and Addams’s reputation reached heroic proportions in the years to follow. In 1931 she became the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

## Uncertain future

Laura Jane Addams was born on September 6, 1860, and grew up in the town of Cedarville in north-central Illinois. Her parents were among the first permanent European-heritage settlers in the area, and her father became a prominent figure in Cedarville politics and business. His wealth

could not protect his family from the hardships of the era, however. Three of Addams's siblings died from cholera, an infectious disease spread by contaminated drinking water, before she was born. When Addams was two, her mother, pregnant again, collapsed and later died. Addams recalled this sad time as one of her earliest memories in life.

The Addamses were devout Quakers, also known as the Religious Society of Friends. After fleeing religious discrimination in Great Britain, a large number of Quakers had settled in what would become the United States and took active roles in their local communities. They were also committed to social justice as an expression of their religious faith. Many Quakers in northern states, for example, worked to abolish slavery in the era before the American Civil War (1861–65), a war fought between the North, which was opposed to slavery, and the South, which was in favor of slavery. Like other Quaker children, Addams was raised to respect the principles of equality, peace, and justice in her home and in the larger world.

Addams's father, who owned Cedarville's sawmill and gristmill, was a friend of future U.S. president Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865; served 1861–65). The two had served together in the Illinois state senate. Her father encouraged her interest in academics, but would not permit her to attend one of the new women's colleges in the New England states (Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Vermont, and Rhode Island). These same-sex schools were the first to grant four-year degrees for women. The academic standards at Smith College in Massachusetts, Addams's first choice, were rigorous and challenging.

Instead, Addams was sent to nearby Rockford Women's Seminary, where her father was a trustee. It was the same school that her older sisters had attended. She graduated first in her class in 1881, and she spent the next several years either at home in Cedarville or traveling, with a brief period of study at the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Poor health as well as her family's disapproval of her plan to become a doctor ended her studies, however. She suffered from back problems and may have also had chronic fatigue syndrome, which involves debilitating fatigue and flu-like symptoms. Historians believe some of Addams's health issues may have been due to both her situation as a single woman and her prospects for the future. She was uninterested in marriage, and there were few options available for women at the time other than becoming a wife and mother. She was educated and goal-oriented, but society offered few, if any, outlets for those talents.

## Helping Chicago's poor

In 1888 Addams went to Europe with her friend from Rockford Women's Seminary, Ellen Gates Starr (1859–1940), for several months. They stayed in London to visit Toynbee Hall, a new settlement house. It was the first of its kind in the world. Toynbee Hall was located in Whitechapel, an area of London known for its miserable housing conditions, unsafe streets, and even violent crime. The same year of Addams's visit, Whitechapel was terrorized by a serial killer who targeted prostitutes (those who perform sex acts for money) and signed his notes "Jack the Ripper."

The settlement house movement featured volunteers who lived and worked in poor neighborhoods to help provide social services for those in need. The movement was intended to help the poor obtain necessary services while giving the volunteers a chance to learn more about the root causes of poverty. By studying poverty, volunteers might find solutions to the problem. Toynbee Hall was run by a progressive-minded Protestant minister. Its volunteer staff was made up of socially conscious students from Oxford University. They believed that only by living among the poor as true neighbors could they provide the most effective help. Addams was so moved by the visit that she left London determined to create the same kind of refuge in Chicago.

Returning to the United States, Addams and Starr moved to the city—where Starr had worked as a teacher for a few years—and began meeting with local church groups and philanthropists, those who donate substantial amounts of money for charities. Addams found an old mansion for rent located at the intersection of Halsted and Polk streets. The neighborhood had recently become a slum—a crowded, impoverished, and neglected area of a city. The once-grand mansion was now surrounded by ramshackle, overcrowded houses. The area, infamous for its filth and danger, was usually avoided by most Chicagoans, who could afford to live elsewhere. Few of the homes had indoor plumbing, garbage was rarely picked up, and rats ran freely across the sea of mud that served as a street after it rained. Sometimes a cargo-pulling horse dropped over in the street from old age and exhaustion, and its dead body would be left to rot.

Other parts of Chicago looked like this, too. As a result of advances in transportation, manufacturing, and food processing, the city had grown quickly in the years following the devastating Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Ten years later, it was America's second largest city, but it

## Michael Harrington and *The Other America*

Michael Harrington followed in Jane Addams's footsteps as one of the country's most outspoken advocates for the poor. Harrington lived and worked in a much different time and political climate than Addams did, but both shared the belief that America could never truly achieve greatness as a nation unless all its citizens lived in safe, healthy communities and homes. Harrington is best remembered for his groundbreaking 1962 study *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*.

Born Edward Michael Harrington in 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, Harrington grew up in an Irish American, Roman Catholic household. A gifted speaker from an early age, he attended Catholic schools and colleges before studying at Yale Law School and the University of Chicago. At college he became increasingly active in leftist (liberal) political movements, and he joined the Catholic Worker movement for a time. Based in New York City and led by Dorothy Day (1897–1980), the group was committed to working with the poor as a way to demonstrate their commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ (4? BCE–29? CE). Harrington served as editor of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in the early 1950s, but eventually turned away from organized religion.

Active in the Socialist Party of America, Harrington also wrote and lectured on socio-economic issues before achieving widespread acclaim for *The Other America* in 1962. The book came at a time when most Americans believed their country was enjoying great prosperity. Advances in technology and a booming business economy in the United States following World War II (1939–45) had led to what appeared to be solid economic stability and opportunities for all. Unemployment was low, wages were high, and many American families, headed by just one working parent, were able to become homeowners.

Harrington's book examined the lives of the "invisible Americans," as he called them, who had not benefited from the economic boom years. Using figures provided by the U.S. Commerce Department and the Federal Reserve Board, Harrington argued that some 50 million Americans lived in poverty. Few middle-class Americans saw this poverty, he noted, because they rarely went into the urban slums or poor rural communities where such struggling families lived. "Until these facts shame us," he wrote, "until they stir us to action, the other America will continue to exist, a monstrous example of needless suffering in the most advanced society in the world."

A 40-page essay on Harrington and the book appeared in the *New Yorker* and made it a must-read for intellectuals, college students, and liberal Americans. It was considered one of the most important books of the year and helped push the U.S. government into taking a more active role in closing the gap between the rich and poor. President Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973; served 1963–69) launched his "War on Poverty" two years later. This effort included funding for programs like Head Start, the preschool program for children from financially disadvantaged households. Johnson even invited Harrington to Washington to serve as an adviser for the program.

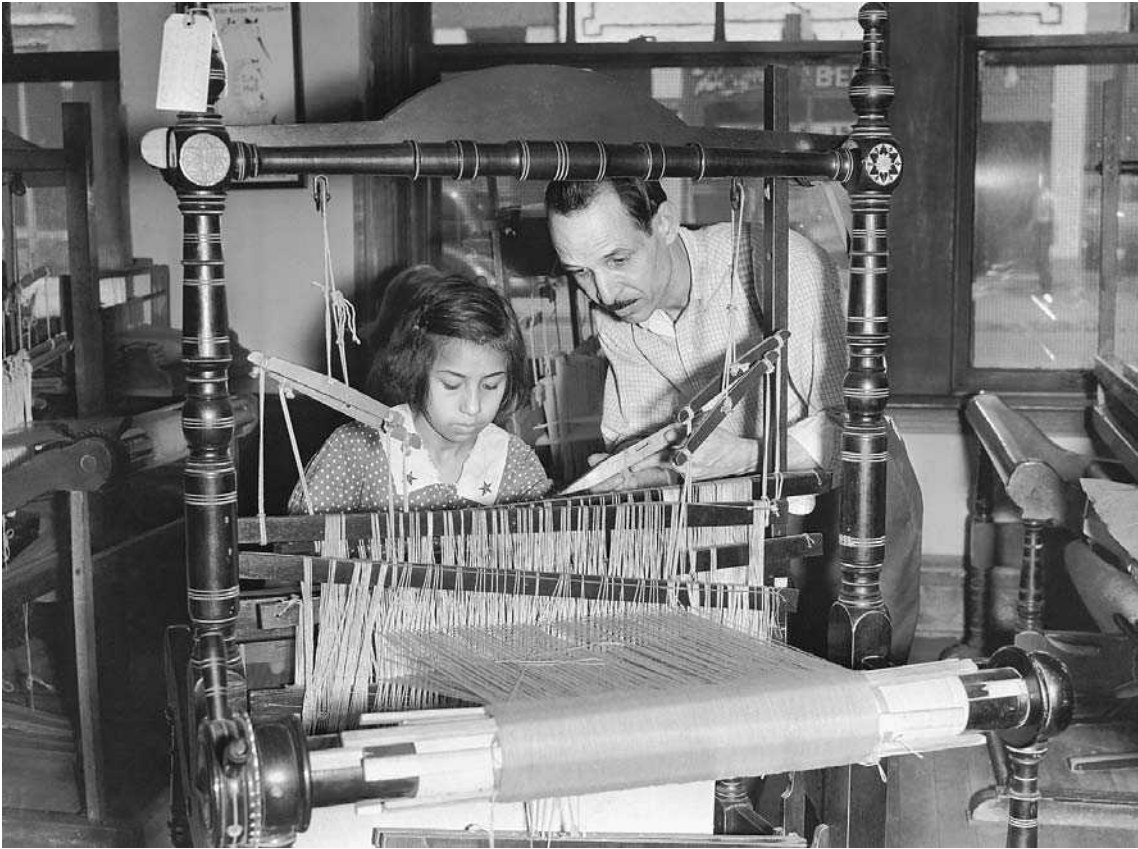
During the next twenty-five years, Harrington lectured and appeared on television. His speaking engagements attracted large crowds, and his arguments were so forceful and convincing that people have said he did more than any other American to convert others to the socialist cause. Socialism is a political philosophy based on the idea of a cooperative government that works toward serving the good of the entire population. Harrington went on to write eleven other books. He died of cancer in July 1989.

had also grown wildly and haphazardly. Immigrants from Europe and young people from Midwestern farms had flocked to the city for jobs, but the number of housing units had not kept up with the demand. The poorest arrivals lived in badly constructed homes or tenement houses—buildings divided up into many small apartments. They spent most of their waking hours in ten- or twelve-hour shifts inside the giant meatpacking plants in Chicago, trying to make a living. Trains carried hundreds of live cattle and pigs into the city, and the animals waited for slaughter in immense, foul, open-air pens known as the stockyards on Chicago's South Side. Companies such as Swift and Armour operated the meatpacking plants, which shipped out hundreds of pounds of canned meat products to the rest of the nation. Wages were very low, and working conditions were unsafe and sometimes even deadly.

### **Poverty breeds more poverty**

Addams was determined to improve conditions in the city for its poorest residents. She was part of the first wave of American social reformers who believed, and set out to prove, that it was the capitalist system and urbanization that caused the miseries of poverty, not the poor themselves. (Capitalism is an economic system based on supply and demand that is used in the United States.) At the time, it was commonly believed that poverty resulted from an individual's personal failings, but Addams was instrumental in showing that social and economic conditions played a major role. She and her fellow progressive thinkers of the day also argued that poverty would only increase over time, with newer generations finding it impossible to move up the economic ladder. Addams believed that poverty could only end when people helped the poor live in a stable community setting and enjoy healthy households. Hull-House, she contended, would be the first step.

Addams spent \$5,000 of her savings to renovate Hull-House, and she and Starr opened its doors in September 1889. Neighbors were initially suspicious of the two educated and wealthy women who were the street's newest residents. They did not begin showing up daily on the doorstep for help, as Addams had planned. Instead, the children who played nearby all day did come inside, and they eventually brought their parents. During that era, school attendance was not mandatory in many places and rarely enforced in others.



*A young girl learns how to weave on a loom at the Hull-House in Chicago, Illinois.* © BETTMANN/CORBIS.

Hull-House offered a number of services. Its kitchen served a hot lunch and its kindergarten and day care center were the first in the city. Children and adults came for night-school English lessons, arts and crafts classes, and trades-skills seminars. There was a job placement office and a library. Funds that Addams and her volunteers collected helped build the city's first public playground. Hull-House also offered the first citizenship preparation classes for immigrants in the United States.

### **Respected American reformer**

Addams's idea was a tremendous success and helped hundreds of families every year. It also made her famous. She was the subject of national newspaper and magazine articles. Prosperous, educated women came

from Chicago and around the country to work at Hull-House. Some of them went on to establish settlement houses or community centers elsewhere or had notable careers in other social reform efforts or even in government service. Addams's fame seemed to encourage a substantial number of hardworking, well-spoken women reformers in America. Many of them were the first generation of graduates from Smith and the other four-year colleges for women. They became active in organized labor, health care, education, and other social issues.

Addams herself was forced to take a more active role in finding help for the poor once Hull-House began bustling with activity. Requests for help came from every corner of the neighborhood and beyond. Once Addams began to know the area residents personally, she quickly saw how often needless tragedies visited their households. In 1894 a typhoid epidemic swept through one section of town called the 19th Ward. Typhoid is a highly infectious disease caused by bacteria that travel from person to person through human waste. The bacteria live in food and water that are contaminated with the waste of an infected person. An overcrowded neighborhood with inadequate sewage disposal, like the 19th Ward, was an easy breeding ground for this deadly epidemic.

At the time city politics and the 19th Ward's leadership were notoriously corrupt. Political patronage (a government job received as "payment" for political support) was the rule. The 19th Ward actually had a garbage collector, but it was a man who took the funds set aside by the city but never bothered to hire anyone to pick up the garbage. This was typical of how the political system worked in Chicago, and no one attempted to do anything about it—until Addams. She submitted her own bid to the city council for garbage collection in her ward. It was rejected, but her move gained a great deal of press. The mayor appointed her as the ward's garbage collection supervisor. She was the first woman in Chicago to hold the job.

Addams became involved in dozens of other reform issues. She campaigned against child labor in factories and supported the right of workers to organize. The idea of organizing was a radical concept at the time and was violently opposed by most business owners. However, eventually federal and state laws were passed which allowed workers to unite in order to negotiate collectively for better wages and working conditions with greater power and strength. This concept was very important to the formation of labor unions in the United States, which later helped millions of factory workers and tradespeople achieve



*Jane Addams sits with some of the children she helped through various programs at the Hull-  
House.* © UNDERWOOD &  
UNDERWOOD/CORBIS.

a comfortable, and even middle-class standard of living in the twentieth century. Addams also worked to force county authorities to establish a separate juvenile justice system. Chicago's Cook County juvenile court was the first of its kind in the country. It was a direct result of Addams and her fellow reformers demonstrating that treating underage lawbreakers as adults, and housing them with tougher and potentially more dangerous criminals, generally only led such youths into a lifetime of crime.



## Addams's legacy

Not all of Hull-House's community improvements were the work of Addams. In many cases the women that came to work with her went on to become committed social reformers themselves. Starr, for example, worked to end the practice of tenement workshops, where entire families sewed garments at home for pennies. Florence Kelley (1859–1932), another leader at Hull-House, was named Illinois's first inspector of factories and helped draft the Illinois Factory Act of 1893. This was a historic piece of legislation that regulated working hours for women and children. Another Hull-House volunteer, Julia Clifford Lathrop (1858–1932), went on to head the U.S. Children's Bureau as its first director in 1912. She later wrote some portions of the U.S. Social Security Act that provided welfare benefits known until the 1990s as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC).

Later in her life Addams was active in Progressive Party politics and was a delegate, or representative, to the 1912 party convention that nominated former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919; served 1901–09) as its White House candidate. Addams remained committed to her Quaker roots. Like many others of the faith, she opposed America's entry into World War I (1914–18). She served for many years as president of the International Congress of Women, later known as the Women's International Peace League for Peace and Freedom. For this work she shared the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize with Nicholas Murray Butler (1862–1947), a prominent educator and longtime president of Columbia University in New York City.

Addams died of cancer on May 21, 1935, but Hull-House endured for another thirty years. In the 1960s, the neighborhood surrounding the settlement house was torn down to make way for the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois, but Hull-House was preserved as a museum. Two other community centers in Chicago carry on its mission in the city.

## For More Information

### BOOKS

Addams, Jane. *Twenty Years at Hull-House, with Autobiographical Notes*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912.

Elshstain, Jean Bethke. *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Harrington, Michael. *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. New York: Macmillan, 1962.

## Jane Addams

Linn, James Weber. *Jane Addams: A Biography*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

### PERIODICALS

Dorrien, Gary. "The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington." *Christian Century* (October 11, 2000): p. 1002.

### WEB SITES

"Urban Experience in Chicago: Hull-House and Its Neighborhoods, 1889–1963." *College of Architecture and the Arts, University of Illinois at Chicago*. <http://www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/urbanexp/contents.htm> (accessed on June 25, 2006).