Ellen Gates Starr

Born March 19, 1859 (Laona, Illinois)
Died February 10, 1940 (Suffern, New York)

Labor activist
Teacher

Ellen Gates Starr did not achieve the same kind of fame enjoyed by her close colleague, Jane Addams (1860–1935; see entry), but Starr did play an important role in the founding of Hull House in Chicago, Illinois, in 1889. Starr and Addams established the pioneering settlement house in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods, where thousands lived in unhealthy, overcrowded conditions. Hull House was founded on the principle that to help the poor one must live among them, and the two single, well-educated women from wealthy families astonished many in the city by doing just that. Starr stayed with Hull House for much of her life and took an active role in Chicago’s early labor union movement.

Family influence
Starr was born in March 1859, in Laona, Illinois. She came from an old New England family, and legend held that her great-grandfather, who fought in the American Revolutionary War (1775–83; the American colonists’ fight for independence from England), walked home barefoot from the battle site at

“After we have been there long enough and people see that we don’t catch diseases . . . there are at least a half dozen girls in the city who will be glad to come and stay a while.”
Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to his hometown of Ipswich, Massachusetts. Starr’s father, Caleb, was a former sea captain, a politically involved farmer, and an occasional writer and book lover who read to his three children nightly. He settled in Illinois when he married Starr’s mother, Susan Gates Childs, in 1848.

Caleb Starr was active in the Grange movement, a nationwide organization of farmers formed to protest the high rates railroads charged to ship produce and grain. He was also a supporter of women’s rights and the suffrage movement to win a constitutional amendment that would allow women to vote in national elections. He was committed to working for social justice and taking an active role in helping those less fortunate, and these beliefs had a strong influence on his daughter.

Caleb’s sister, Eliza Allen Starr, would also serve as an important role model for the young Ellen. Eliza was an art historian and writer and was active in Roman Catholic circles, although the family was Presbyterian. From her Starr inherited a passion for the arts, particularly European painting and sculpture, and she would later convert to Roman Catholicism also. She began to study Renaissance Italian art in 1877 after she entered the Rockford Female Seminary, an Illinois school that served as a kind of junior college for women from well-to-do families. It was there that she first met Jane Addams, who was from another Illinois town, Cedarville.

**Starr and Addams**

While at Rockford Starr wrote articles for the school magazine on poetry and the art treasures of Florence, Italy. Caleb had struggled financially over the years, however, and could only afford to send her to Rockford for one year. After that he was forced to sell his farm and move the family to Durand, a town near the Wisconsin border. There he opened a pharmacy, but it failed.

After leaving Rockford Starr went to work as a teacher. Her first job was at a school in Mount Morris, Illinois. She and Addams wrote each other regularly, and she would occasionally visit Addams at her family’s Cedarville home. In 1879, when Starr was twenty years old, she moved to Chicago to take a
teaching job there. The Kirkland School for Girls was a private school on Chicago’s North Side that served the wealthy families of the neighborhood. Starr taught English and art appreciation, and the contacts she made there would play an important role in the fundraising efforts for Hull House some years later.

Starr took some time off from teaching to tour Europe with Addams in 1887. They went with a third friend, Sarah Anderson, and occasionally split off while each pursued her own interests. During the winter they spent in Rome, Starr studied the Renaissance art she loved, and in the spring the three went on to Spain. She then went on to Paris to take a job as chaperone for two American girls while Addams and Anderson went to London to visit Toynbee Hall. This was the first so-called settlement house, located in the city’s poverty-stricken East End. Founded by a minister and staffed by Oxford University students, Toynbee Hall offered a variety of social services designed to help the poor. Addams wanted to establish a settlement house like this in Chicago, and when she and Starr returned to the United States, they began eagerly making plans. In January 1889 they moved into a boardinghouse for women on Washington Place in downtown Chicago. They spent their days calling on civic leaders, ministers, and wealthy citizens who were known to support charities, telling them about their plans for what would become Hull House.

A rough neighborhood

The American economy had undergone rapid changes in the years since Starr and Addams were born. Vast amounts of people had moved from rural areas to urban ones as new manufacturing and commercial enterprises sprang up and farming became increasingly unprofitable. The new factories required a large labor force, and young men and women from rural villages flocked to Chicago, which had become the second-largest U.S. city and a major railway transportation hub. Still others came by ship from various European lands to escape religious persecution or political unrest. The factory jobs offered steady wages, but the newcomers quickly discovered that housing and food costs in the city were very high.

Housing was a particular problem during this era. Chicago had rebuilt quickly since a massive fire in 1871 had destroyed
large sections of the city, but the available shelter could not keep up with the growing population. Cheap housing was built in the areas surrounding the factories, manufacturing enterprises, and even the meatpacking houses where cattle and pigs were slaughtered. The smell from the nearby stockyards was said to be unbearable.

Addams found a shabby mansion on Halsted and Polk streets, in the center of one of Chicago’s worst slums, or severely overcrowded urban areas characterized by the most extreme conditions of poverty, run-down housing, and crime. She spent nearly $5,000 of her own money on repairs, and she and Starr moved into Hull House in September 1889. They were alone there except for a housekeeper they had hired. At first their neighbors considered the two women to be somewhat odd; few could understand why anyone would choose to live in that neighborhood if they had better options.

Starr and Addams spent their first months visiting their neighbors, and for this the custom of the day required them to take one of the young men or ministers who worked with Hull House along as a chaperone. They introduced themselves and invited the neighbors and their children to visit Hull House. The mansion was soon hosting a number of clubs and classes. Starr gave lectures in literature, art, history, and English as a second language. Women she had taught at the Kirkland School came to help, and their husbands or parents donated funds to the struggling enterprise.

A shift in priorities

Art remained Starr’s passion during her Hull House years. She convinced Edward Butler, a wealthy Chicago patron of the arts, to give them $5,000 to establish an art gallery in 1891. This became the first building associated with Hull House that was not on the immediate property. Starr knew from her travels in Europe and her interest in art that many of the European immigrants who came to Chicago and other American cities quickly forgot the handicrafts that had been passed down to them from generation to generation in their native countries. Woodworking, decorative embroidery, and other artisan traditions were often dismissed by art historians, but Starr knew that the skill needed for such tasks, and the appreciation for
color and form they taught, gave even the poorest people a sense of satisfaction and a way to beautify their humble homes.

At Hull House Starr was determined to help keep such traditions alive. She wrote about the subject in a chapter titled “Art and Labor,” which appeared in her 1895 book *Hull-House Maps and Papers: A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in a Congested District of Chicago, Together with Comments and Essays on Problems Growing Out of the Social Conditions*. She discussed what she called “the fatal mistake of our modern civilization,” asserting that “we have believed that we could force men to live without beauty in their own lives, and still compel them to make for us the beautiful things in which we have denied them any part.”

Over time Starr’s interests shifted from art to the labor movement, and this helped change the direction of Hull House, too, as its women associates became more active in the organized labor movement along with her. In the early twentieth century there were almost no laws protecting workers, and child labor was commonplace. Injuries and even deaths from poorly maintained equipment or unsafe working conditions occurred frequently. The neighborhood surrounding Hull House was home to a number of sweatshops, or factories in which workers work long hours in poor conditions for very low wages. The women of Hull House called attention to such conditions, and public awareness eventually forced state lawmakers to enact laws that regulated working conditions for women and children in the state.

**The labor movement**

As the labor movement became stronger in Chicago, Starr raised money to help striking workers and their families and even joined the picket lines herself. (A strike is a work stoppage by employees to protest conditions or make demands of their employer.) Most low-wage workers suffered various abuses on the job, but women workers were particularly vulnerable to harassment by male supervisors in the garment factories. Organizing them into labor unions, or organizations of workers formed to protect and further their mutual interests by bargaining as a group with their employers over wages, working conditions, and benefits, and urging
them to stand up for their rights was especially difficult, because many lived on their own in boardinghouses and faced immediate homelessness if they could not pay their rent. They could also be easily replaced by other workers, or even by children, who were willing enough to accept a wage of seven or eight cents an hour.

Starr did not just speak in support of the unions, she joined them. She was a founding member of the Chicago chapter of the Women’s Trade Union League, a labor group organized in 1903 that played a significant role in the formation of both the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, two early and important unions in American labor history. When the Chicago local chapter of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers went on strike in late 1915, Starr wrote about it in an article that appeared in the *New Review* the following year.

In Chicago and elsewhere, picket lines often erupted into violent clashes between strikers and the police, and Starr was even arrested once during a 1914 restaurant workers’ strike. She faced charges of disorderly conduct, and her defense attorney was a young labor lawyer named Harold Ickes (1874–1952), who would go on to serve in the cabinet of U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945; served 1933–45). The courtroom was filled with laughter when the arresting officer testified that the tiny, almost frail Starr attacked him. She was released, but her increasing labor activism made some of the more conservative donors to Hull House uneasy.

Over time Starr and the women of Hull House—Addams, Florence Kelley (1859–1932; see entry), and the others who came there to live, teach, and work to improve conditions for Chicago’s poor—grew apart. The friendship between her and Addams, in particular, cooled as Starr grew increasingly religious in her later years. She had converted to the Episcopalian faith in 1883, but around 1910 she became dismayed at the wealth of the congregations in Chicago’s churches of that denomination. She started to attend services at the Roman Catholic parishes near the Hull House neighborhood, which served a largely working-class and immigrant population, and eventually converted to the faith herself.
Beloved Mr. Dodge

Starr was also a bit eccentric and had a temper that flared occasionally. For a time she wore only purple, and for many years she wore a raincoat she had named Mr. Dodge. It had been left to her by an elderly man, a retired machinist, who came to Hull House to find chess partners. Starr found him a few worthy opponents, and when he died he willed his estate, worth some $3,000, to her. After 1916 she was less active at Hull House but remained committed to other causes. She was a member of the Socialist Party of Chicago. (Socialism is an economic system in which the means of production and distribution is owned collectively by all the workers and there is no private property or social classes.) She also gave lectures in which she urged others to work at solving the social problems caused by rapid industrialization.

In 1929 Starr underwent surgery for a spinal abscess (a collection of pus surrounded by hot, painful tissue) and was left partially paralyzed from it. She spent her last years at the Convent of the Holy Child in Suffern, New York, cared for by Benedictine nuns. She herself was an oblate, or person who entered Roman Catholic monastic life without taking full religious vows. She died there in 1940. In her early years at Hull House, she had founded a program with the local elementary school to expose schoolchildren to the art she loved so much. Her idea was for a lending library of prints and sculpture that rotated through the Chicago schools, and it eventually became the Public School Art Society. It was still in operation in Chicago more than a century later as Art Resources in Teaching (ART).

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