CHAPTER 8

Henry Street: Where Health Became a Public Issue

During the Progressive Era New York evolved a scholar-activist network of interlocking academic and social reform organizations and individuals intent on linking theory and practice and making the laboratory concept a reality for the City. Schools involved were the School of Political Science at Columbia University, the New School for Social Research, the Rand School, and the New York School of Social Philanthropy. Some of the most influential organizations included the New York Charities Organization Society, the National Child Labor Committee, and the National Consumers’ League as well as various settlement houses, labor unions, and some women’s groups. Goldmark described “well-known figures” in the Charities Building at Twenty-second Street and Fourth Avenue where some of the key participants in New York’s scholar-activist network were officed or tended to collect:

Edward T. Devine, the head of the Charity Organization Society, whose vision led to the extension of relief into constructive tenement house reform and tuberculosis work; Lawrence Veiller, then head of these new divisions of the Charity Organization Society; Samuel McCune Lindsay and Owen Lovejoy of the new National Child Labor Committee; George Hall of the recent New York Child Labor Committee; Mrs. [Florence] Kelley and others of the national and state consumers’ leagues; Paul and Arthur Kellogg of the Survey and Survey Graphic... (1953:68).

Settlement house leaders such as Lillian Wald and Florence Kelley of Henry Street were important network actors in this “time of intellectual and educational ferment” (Goldmark 1953:68). What began as a Nurses’ Station became New York City’s fourth settlement, founded in 1893 by Lillian Wald and Mary Brewster. Unlike many other settlement founders, the two young women were not familiar with Toynbee Hall and the settlement movement in England or the US and did not set out to found a settlement house. However, Wald and Brewster had in common with other early female pioneers their search for a meaningful role in life. Before finding their first location for a nursing station, Wald and Brewster were assisted by workers in two other settlements. Charles Stover and Edward King of University Settlement escorted the two women around the neighborhood and assisted them in finding a suitable tenement, on one occasion steering them away from what might have otherwise been suitable rooms in the red-light district. Stover and King also took the two women...
to the College Settlement on Rivington Street where Jane Robbins was head resident and where, as Wald recalled, several young women had “taken a house...for something like my purpose.” The women at College Settlement suggested that Wald and Brewster live there temporarily until “finding satisfactory quarters” [and] “during July and August, we were ‘residents’ in stimulating comradeship with serious women, who were also the fortunate possessors of a saving sense of humor” (Wald [1915]1991:10). Wald and Brewster actually began offering their visiting nurses’ services when living at the College Settlement while they searched for a place appropriate for treating those who came to them as well as a station for nurse-visitor. By September of 1893, Wald reported that they found two rooms and a hall bathroom, in a tenement on Jefferson Street ([1915]1991:10). No doubt because their work began and functioned for several months as a visiting nurses service within the College Settlement, the groundwork was laid for future networking and friendships among residents and headworkers of these New York settlements. In the beginning, and for many years to come, the primary benefactor for the nurses’ work was New York banker and philanthropist Jacob Schiff and his mother-in-law, Betty Loeb. For the first year, these two guaranteed the nurses $120 per month for living expenses and supplies (Siegel 1983:28). In April of 1895, Schiff bought a house on Henry Street and arranged for its repair and furnishing to be used as a permanent nurses’ center. The neighborhood was comprised primarily of immigrants, the largest groups Italian and Irish Catholics and Russian and German Jews. Wald, who was only 28 years of age, soon realized that the badly needed visiting nurses service was not enough to meet the needs of the community. In 1903 she reorganized and renamed the Nurses Settlement as the Henry Street Settlement. Its expanded programs began with club activities for the children in the neighborhood and soon included a full range of social services, social research, and reform activities, the latter two sometimes in cooperation with University and College Settlements. As Wald recalled their expansion,

I do not know who originated the idea of a “club” as a means of guidance and instruction for the young. Our inducement to organize socially came from a group of small boys in the summer of 1895, our first in the Henry Street house. We had already acquired a large circle of juvenile friends.... When these boys of eleven and twelve years of age...called to ask if they could see me sometime when I ‘wasn't busy', I made an appointment with them for the next Saturday evening, whereupon the club was organized ([1915]1991:179–180).

Although the primary focus of Henry Street remained nursing, Wald acknowledged, with her early expansion of programs, that the health of her neighbors