

Greenwich House: The House that Mary Built

Like College Settlements, Greenwich House began with an organization, the Cooperative Social Settlement Society, founded in 1901 by Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch. Unlike the all-female CSA, however, founding members, except for Simkhovitch, were all men: Bishop Henry C. Porter, Judge Eugene Philbin, Carl Schurz, Jacob Riis, Felix Adler, and Robert Fulton Cutting. Those who joined with Kingsbury to found Greenwich House were well known, well-connected, and assured a sound beginning for the settlement. The first donation, for example, came from Mrs. J. Pierpont Morgan (Kraus 1980:102). The aim of the founders was to establish and maintain “a Social Settlement or Social Settlements in the City of New York, as centers for social, educational, and civic improvements, to be carried on in conjunction and association with the people residing in the neighborhoods where such Settlement or Social Settlements may be situated” (Simkhovitch 1938:88). Greenwich House was actually the only settlement founded by this Society and opened its doors on Thanksgiving Day, 1902 at 26 Jones Street in the most densely populated block on New York’s lower west side in what is today known as Greenwich Village, with Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch as head resident. The building had previously been a tenement and the Anarchist’s Society once had its headquarters in what was to become the Greenwich House dining room (Briggs 2008:33). The primary ethnic populations in the area were Italian and Irish and African American migrants from the South although at the time the African Americans were moving out, replaced largely by Italian immigrants. Over the first two decades of the settlement the Irish became the dominant group but by the end of the First World War, they were outnumbered by the Italians in the eastern part of the Village. Greenwich House worked with blacks in its early years, although in deference to public sentiment, most activities were segregated. Later the settlement opened a facility on Cornelia Street so that blacks would have a place to meet without controversy (Briggs 2008: 42). Work among African Americans became more intense and more organized when Mary White Ovington arrived at Greenwich House in 1904.

In its first year, Greenwich House had nine residents to move in, 17 the following year, and a waiting list was developed. As in most settlements, residents were required to pay their own room and board and to participate in the social investigations and programs offered. For example, residents were expected to attend Tuesday evening meetings of the Social Reform Club founded by Edmund Kelly, a disciple of Tolstoy, who presided over discussions of issues

and problems as well as proposed solutions (Simkhovitch 1938:71). Greenwich House initially occupied only one building at 26 Jones Street but in 1905 expanded to occupy additional buildings at 18, 20 and 28 Jones Street. In 1916, the Board authorized the construction of a new Greenwich House at 27 Barrow Street. Some of the old buildings were retained for special programs but two were sold to a group of residents who formed the first Cooperative Housing Society in New York (Simkhovitch 1938:179). Over the years the settlement was supported by many influential and wealthy individuals and families, names such as Vanderbilt, Whitney, Roosevelt, Carnegie, Phipps, Prentice, and Harriman. Despite loyal and influential supporters, however, there were times when national economic trends impacted Greenwich House and it faced the threat of mortgage foreclosure and the necessity of program reductions (Briggs 2008). Although always reliant on support from the upper classes, Greenwich House, nevertheless, maintained its grass roots involvement by means of a neighborhood council with direct input to the Board and to the Director (GHR: B23, F138).

Although Simkhovitch herself seems to have maintained a public profile somewhat more conservative than some other settlement workers, Greenwich House began with a socialist philosophy that led to attacking the structural causes of social problems and engaging in reform activities of a reconstructive nature. Above all else, Greenwich House stood for a better life for workers and toward that end marshaled efforts to achieve better health, wages, housing, recreation, and working conditions. Greenwich House saw many well-known personalities and public figures pass through its doors and some even took up residence. Classes and clubs heard lectures by the likes of Emily Balch and Elsie Hill on the subject of suffrage and women's rights. The future first lady Eleanor Roosevelt was a frequent visitor. Paul Kellogg, director of the Pittsburg survey and later editor of the *Survey*, was a resident for a time and after that a regular visitor as was early sociologist-anthropologist and feminist Elsie Clews Parsons. Frances Perkins who became Secretary of Labor under Franklin Roosevelt and the first female cabinet member lived at Greenwich House while a student at Columbia. The fact that such personalities lived in or visited Greenwich House may be reason for Crystal Eastman as a young resident to write her brother, Max,¹ "they are all cranks and reformers, and sooner or later

1 Crystal Eastman and brother, Max, were socialist-leaning and from a liberal and activist family where both parents were Congregational ministers. Crystal (1881–1928) was a lawyer, feminist, antimilitarist, and journalist who had worked for Paul Kellogg on the Pittsburg survey. She was one of the founders of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Max (1883–1969) was a Greenwich Village activist while a student at Columbia where he earned a doctorate in philosophy with John Dewey. He was a writer, philosopher, and poet,