

This Day in History... September 6, 1860

Birth of Jane Addams

Social worker Jane Addams was born on September 6, 1860, in Cedarville, Illinois.

The eighth of nine children, Addams was the daughter of a local political leader, Civil War officer, and friend of Abraham Lincoln. She graduated from the Rockford Female Seminary as valedictorian in 1881.

Addams went on to study medicine, but she eventually abandoned that due to poor health, being admitted to the hospital several times. When she was well, Addams spent nearly two years in Europe studying and considering what she wanted to do with her future. On a second trip to Europe when she was 27, Addams and her friend Ellen Starr visited the Toynbee Hall Settlement House in London's East End. This visit inspired her to open a similar home for the needy in Chicago.

In 1889, Addams and Starr leased a house owned by Charles Hull on the corner of Halsted and Polk Streets. Their goal was "to provide a center for a higher civic and social life; to institute and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises, and to investigate and improve the conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago."

Addams and Starr began a large-scale campaign to raise support for their project. They delivered speeches about the importance of helping the neighborhood, raised money, and encouraged wealthy young women to volunteer to help. By their second year in operation, Hull House served about 2,000 people every week. They offered kindergarten classes, clubs for older children, and courses for adults in the evenings, effectively offering a night school. Hull House quickly began to expand. It included an art gallery, a second kitchen, a coffee house, a gym, an art studio, a music school, a library, an employment office, and a labor museum.

Addams became well known for her efforts with Hull House, which led her to additional prominent positions. She was selected to serve as chairman of the School Management Committee of the Chicago Board of Education. She helped found the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy. Additionally, she served as the first female president of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections. She also received the first honorary degree given to a woman from Yale University in 1910.

Addams often spoke on how women played a major role in cleaning up their communities. She also argued that to be effective and make lasting change, they should have the right to vote. Addams opposed America's entry into World War I and was chairman of the Women's Peace Party. Following the armistice, she assisted Herbert Hoover and his American Relief Administration (ARA). The ARA collected food and supplies for the people of Europe, including in countries that were former enemies.

Addams suffered a heart attack in 1926, after which her health never fully recovered. On December 10, 1931, she became the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. She is often considered the founder of the profession of social work in America. Addams died on May 21, 1935.



Addams stamp from the Famous Americans Series



Alice Hamilton was a long-time volunteer at Hull House.

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