The Origins of Philadelphia's Octavia Hill Association: Social Reform in the "Contented" City

In recent years, historians have offered modifications to Philadelphia's turn-of-the-century image as a "corrupt and contented" city. The Quaker City may have been as corrupt as any other large urban center, but abundant evidence indicates that thousands of its blacks, immigrants, and working-class citizens were anything but contented. However historians have continued to portray Philadelphia's middle- and upper-class reformers as a "contented" lot—content, that is, to seek efficient, good-government solutions by tinkering with the political machinery, while ignoring serious social issues like housing, health, and sanitation. Nevertheless, some social reformers did have visions of a cleaner, healthier Philadelphia with an improved quality of life. Their paternalism and some of their methods may appear outmoded by modern standards, but their lonely struggle against middle-class contentment deserves recognition. The Octavia Hill Association was one such organization of social reformers.

Both Philadelphians and visitors frequently justified the city's

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1 I wish to express my deep appreciation to Mr. William Jeanes and the members of the Octavia Hill Association for making available to me the papers of the Association, and to Professors Allen F. Davis and Herbert J. Bass for their valuable suggestions.


contentment by contrasting its urban condition with that of other cities. Throughout the country it was known as the City of Homes. The New York reformer Lawrence Veiller praised Philadelphia where “the tenement house system . . . is practically unknown.” Jacob Riis “always thought of Philadelphia as the one city where the problem of housing the poor had been solved in the only natural and right way—that of scattering the crowds.” From Chicago, Jane Addams contrasted “the happy condition of Philadelphia” with her own city’s habit of “shoving disagreeable problems into the future.” One writer loftily proclaimed that it was better to be known as a City of Homes than a “Windy City, or a Monumental City, or the Hub of the Universe, or indeed a City of Churches.” Another, during the terrible depression of 1893, wrote an article entitled “The City of Homes” without giving the slightest impression that Philadelphia contained anything but impressive mansions and “a paradise of small houses, where every laboring-man is a landed proprietor and every woman the mistress of her own house.”

Geography was one reason for this optimism. Unlike New York, Philadelphia’s boundaries could expand in three directions, permitting horizontal, rather than high-rise, vertical expansion. As a result, her dwellings, including the slums, were of two and three stories. Frequently, however, the slums were located in back lots; since they were less visible, it was difficult for reformers to convince people of their existence. An early investigation warned that “The complacency which prevails here is dangerous; and the conditions are generally unknown.” A housing reformer decried “the mistaken idea of conditions in our city being as perfect as generally imagined.” In 1904, the Philadelphia Society for Organizing Charity declared: “Philadelphia is known as ‘the city of homes,’ and has so long deserved this title that many of her citizens do not dream what rapid changes for the worse are going on in the southeastern part of the city.” Thus Philadelphia’s reformers confronted not only fear

and ignorance, but apathy and complacency as well. Concern over these problems increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when immigrants from southern and eastern Europe began moving into South Philadelphia.⁵

These immigrants, primarily Italians and Jews, did not settle as heavily in Philadelphia as they did in cities like New York and Chicago. At no time between 1860 and 1910 did foreign-born exceed 27 per cent of the city's population. In 1910 Philadelphia's foreign-born population was 25 per cent, compared to 41 per cent for New York and 36 per cent for Chicago and Boston. Nevertheless, new arrivals did alter the city's demographic character. Between 1870 and 1910 Philadelphia's Russian-born population increased from 94 to 90,696, while the figures for Italian-born climbed from 516 to 45,308. These immigrants moved into the city's unhealthy southern wards. Italians settled heavily in the second, third, and twenty-sixth wards, while Russians concentrated in wards one through five and the thirty-ninth ward. At the same time, black migrants from the South moved from the third, fourth, and fifth wards into the seventh ward.⁶

The neighborhoods into which these immigrants came were different from New York's famous high-rise tenement districts. Row houses usually faced the major thoroughfares. However, generations of landlords had filled in the back yards with rear dwellings typified by the bandbox, or "father, son, and holy ghost" houses. This development facilitated the proliferation of invisible rear courts and alleys which were usually unpaved, unsewered, and serviced by court hydrants and foul, rotting privies. In 1911, approximately 61,000 properties were still using the privy. Many of these conditions existed in South Philadelphia, especially in the notorious


“Alaska District,” a network of courts and alleys, bounded by Fifth and Ninth Streets and by Christian and Pine, which cut across wards two through five. Housing blacks, Russian Jews, Irish, Italians and Poles, this district had long been infamous as a center of riot, disease, and poverty.\(^7\)

The inhabitants of these alleys were rarely protected by legislation. In 1895, after two years of agitation, the state legislature passed a tenement house law for Philadelphia. Its prohibitively expensive requirements concerning yard space, light, sanitation, water supply and fire protection effectively precluded the invasion of the city by the high-rise tenements with narrow air shafts which characterized New York. Philadelphians had always compared their urban condition favorably with their east coast neighbor, and they now joyfully drew the contrast between their City of Homes and New York’s high-rise slums. Few stopped to consider that this preventive legislation did nothing about the thousands of ancient, poorly constructed small houses which were the real source of Philadelphia’s slums.\(^8\)

In effect, the law was a response to New York’s problems rather than Philadelphia’s slum conditions. It made no provision for periodic inspection, nor did it restrict overcrowding. Proud citizens might boast of their City of Homes, but the rotting bandboxes, row houses, and the miles of alleys and courts remained. The law’s minimal requirements for future tenements were of little comfort to the immigrants who were crowded in thousands of previously constructed shanties. In order to assist these citizens, a group of concerned ladies founded the Octavia Hill Association (O. H. A.) in 1896.\(^9\)


\(^8\) Laws Pa., 1895, No. 110, 178; Hector McIntosh to Committee of Legislature, Hector McIntosh Scrapbook, O.H.A.; McIntosh to Joseph Krauskopf, June 4, 1897, Krauskopf papers; McIntosh to Helen Parrish, Mar. 18, 1902, O.H.A.

The initial impulse for the Association seems to have come from a speech delivered to the Social Science Department of the Civic Club by Dr. Frances Van Gasken, an inspector for the Bureau of Health. Dr. Van Gasken described conditions in the fourth and fifth wards and suggested the formation of a trust company to assist prospective landlords in purchasing slum properties. Following purchase, the company would manage and improve the properties, utilizing the services of “friendly rent collectors.” The idea attracted the interest of two Civic Club members, Hannah Fox and Mrs. William F. Jenks. Together they founded a new organization which was incorporated as the Octavia Hill Association of Philadelphia in June, 1896. Miss Fox and her close friend and distant cousin, Helen Parrish, were for a quarter of a century the two most important figures in the Association which had its roots in the work of Octavia Hill in London.  

Octavia Hill was a diminutive, unobtrusive and rather sickly English woman. Through her mother, Miss Hill had come under the influence of the Christian Socialists and had taught at their Working Men’s College. In 1864 she encouraged the artist and social reformer John Ruskin to purchase three houses in London, which she then managed and rented to lower-class Londoners at reduced rents. She restricted her profits to 5 per cent, thus earning a small return without exploiting the tenants. Ultimately, she managed an entire neighborhood in the east end of London. Miss Hill combined sympathy for her tenants with a severe application of middle-class values, enforcing rigid rules of behavior. She insisted upon the prompt payment of rent, and she frequently evicted tenants who failed to make payments when they were due. An important aspect of Miss Hill’s program was the training of “friendly rent collectors,” who would, in addition to their primary function, offer counsel on homemaking and child rearing. She provided playgrounds, gardens, and libraries in addition to home improvements, but only gradually as the tenants conformed to her standards. Obviously she tried to

10 Press, Mar. 12, 1895; Third Annual Address by Mrs. Cornelius Stevenson, President of the Civic Club, Jan. 9, 1897; Octavia Hill to Hannah Fox, Dec. 11, 1897, O.H.A.; Civic Club of Philadelphia, General Meeting Minutes, Apr. 4, 1896, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (H.S.P.).
instil her own values, but she also sought to protect poor tenants from profit-hungry landlords.\textsuperscript{11}

Hannah Fox and Helen Parrish learned of Octavia Hill from Helen’s Aunt Susanna Wharton and her daughter, Susan Parrish Wharton. The Parrish-Wharton family had a long record of social reform. Ann Parrish, founder of the Philadelphia House of Industry, was an ancestor. Helen’s grandfather, Dr. Joseph Parrish, had been a surgeon at the Pennsylvania Alms House Hospital, and he also gave one hour a day to the free treatment of the poor. He was an opponent of capital punishment, a member of the Friends Yearly Meeting Committee on Indian Affairs, and a supporter of improved care for the insane, but he was best known as an abolitionist. Susanna Wharton could remember her adventures as a young girl when her father’s house was a way station on the underground railroad. Joseph Parrish had opposed the disfranchisement of Pennsylvania Negroes, and he served as president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery until his death.\textsuperscript{12}

Susanna Wharton herself served in the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War and was active in organizations devoted to Indians and alcoholics. She was a friend of Octavia Hill and a founding member of Philadelphia’s Children’s Aid Society, always encouraging her daughter Susan to bring home less fortunate children from the neighboring alleys. After graduating from Vassar, Susan worked with Theodore Starr, a philanthropist who was managing low-rent homes in St. Mary (now Rodman) Street in the fifth ward. Hannah Fox’s reform impulses are less clear. Her parents were very wealthy. Her father had speculated in the early oil ventures in western Pennsylvania and had made a fortune. However, both Hannah and Helen continued the Parrish-Wharton


reform tradition. In 1882 Helen Parrish taught in Theodore Starr's kindergarten and industrial school in St. Mary Street. Then in 1884, she and Hannah Fox joined Susan Wharton, who had recently established the St. Mary Street Library.\(^{13}\)

The original impetus for the Library was the women's concern "that a low class of literature was being circulated in the neighborhood, even among the children." Following Starr's death in 1884, the activities of St. Mary Street needed coordination, and the new library served this purpose. In addition to book lending, the activities included classes in music, carpentry, and cooking, a savings bank and coal club, and medical facilities. The library also became involved in educational reform through participation in local politics. For example, the James Forten School on Sixth and Lombard Streets was a major problem for the neighborhood youth. Populated primarily by blacks, the school was run by an indifferent administration and faculty, and by 1890 several parents had refused to send their children to it. In that year, the neighborhood social workers successfully campaigned for the election of Miss Anna Hallowell to the central school board. She persuaded her colleagues on the board to assume control of the school in order to make it meet the needs of the black and Russian Jewish children in the neighborhood. In 1892, all of the functions of the St. Mary Street Library were reorganized as the College Settlement of Philadelphia.\(^{14}\)

Despite their wholehearted support of the Library, Miss Fox and Miss Parrish were dissatisfied; they wanted to do something more fundamental to change the environment of the neighborhood. To accomplish this purpose, Hannah decided to purchase some houses and manage them according to Octavia Hill's methods of housing reform. In 1888, after considerable difficulty, she purchased two six-room houses previously leased to "Mom" Hewitt, an Irish


woman who had operated a lodging house and hash shop. Hannah repaired these properties, and then rented them to blacks at low rents.

The St. Mary Street neighborhood, in the northern part of the Alaska District, was a center of black migration. Philadelphia’s Negro population gradually climbed from 31,699 in 1870 to 84,459 or 5.5 per cent of the total population in 1910. The blacks were primarily poor migrants from the upper South. They settled throughout the city, but the poorest of them concentrated in the core city. By 1900, under the pressure of Russian immigration, they were moving from the fifth to the seventh and thirtieth wards. The upper fifth and lower seventh wards were regions of abject poverty, inhabited by recent migrants from the rural South who had no preparation for urban life. It was in this section of the Alaska District that Hannah Fox and Helen Parrish began their careers as friendly landlords.\[15\]

Although Miss Fox forced “Mom” Hewitt and her followers out, she did not search for “respectable” poor people to occupy her houses. Instead, she and her assistant, Helen Parrish, rented to the inhabitants of St. Mary Street. Indeed, when applicants of a higher station in life appeared, Helen Parrish often tried to discourage them. She accepted them only if they could not find accommodations elsewhere, or if she felt that “respectable poverty would be interesting” for a change. The houses were not luxurious, even after repairs. The only inside plumbing consisted of one sink in each hallway, and outside privies were still used. Nevertheless, by enforcing strict rules and insisting on cleanliness, the two women made their houses better than most in the surrounding neighborhood. Miss Fox and Miss Parrish continued their work in the Library, encouraged tenant participation in the activities, provided assistance in periods of illness and death, and worked for civic improvements, such as public water fountains and street repair.\[16\]

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In December, 1888, Helen Parrish went to England for six months and studied under Miss Hill. However, a strict application of Octavia Hill’s principles was impossible in St. Mary Street. If the two women had insisted upon regular rent collections, most of their rooms would have been vacant. Consequently, they let rents slide, and sometimes accepted work around the houses as a substitute. They seldom evicted a tenant for failure to pay. Helen Parrish differed from Miss Hill in another respect. Octavia Hill had refrained from interfering with the private lives of her tenants; Miss Parrish broke into their homes to impose her own middle-class values of thrift, sobriety, and cleanliness. Yet she could be kind and generous. She provided medical care to the sick and dying and loaned money to assist tenants in recovering pawned items. On the other hand, she was extremely perplexed by the tenants’ morals. If they were well behaved, Miss Parrish occasionally overlooked illicit affairs. However, on one occasion she evicted an unmarried couple, although she was aware that the man could not obtain work and that the couple would move to another, probably worse, neighborhood. She also evicted a black man who married a white woman, and she thought nothing of invading an apartment to remove liquor bottles.\(^{17}\)

Helen’s Aunt Susanna disapprovingly lectured her against such invasions of privacy, and Helen herself was plagued by self-doubts. She engaged in intense arguments with herself concerning her actions. However, her desire to adapt a transient, rural population to the routine of urban, middle-class life was too great. She complained that her tenants showed little interest in the library and did not accept the virtues of thrift. (“Oh! I wish I knew how to make them save.”) Miss Parrish tried to teach them proper sanitary habits and the use of public medical facilities, although the hospital had often meant indifferent treatment or death to the Negro. Helen accepted the predominant racial stereotypes of the eighties, occasionally referred to her tenants as “darkies,” and considered her task unique because of race rather than social and economic factors. However, her attitudes were typical, even among those who considered themselves friends of the Negro in the last two racist decades of the century.

\(^{17}\) Parrish, Diary, *passim*; Octavia Hill to Parrish, May 10, 1889; Miranda Hill to Parrish, Aug. 10, 1889, Dec. 19, 1889, O.H.A.
Helen Parrish’s views were actually similar in some respects to those of the eminent black sociologist, W. E. B. DuBois, author of *The Philadelphia Negro*. Of middle-class background himself, DuBois referred to the recent migrants as “barbarians,” and he noted their extravagance, their unwillingness to save, and their fear of doctors and hospitals. Helen Parrish and Hannah Fox were, like many nineteenth-century reformers, mixtures of compassion and prejudice. Their early work formed the attitudes and philosophy which would represent both the strengths and weaknesses of the Octavia Hill Association.\(^1\)

The Association exceeded Dr. Van Gasken’s recommendations. It not only managed properties for absentee landlords, collecting a percentage of the rent for its services, but it also capitalized itself at $10,000 and sold shares at twenty-five dollars each. The Association then purchased old properties, repaired them, and rented them at low rates to poor families. Most of the early tenants were Negroes and Jews, but there were also Irish, Italians, and Poles. The O. H. A. destroyed some of its hopelessly decayed buildings, and replaced them with two-story houses. This was in keeping with its firm belief that Philadelphia could and should avoid large tenement houses. A friendly rent collector was hired who had been trained in London by Octavia Hill, and her services were supplemented by volunteers. Helen Parrish joined the O. H. A.’s Board of Directors in 1898. From then until her death in 1942, she was in charge of the collectors, and in emergencies she served as a rent collector herself. Her letters to fellow workers in the United States and abroad kept a flow of information moving between the O. H. A. and similar movements elsewhere.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Parrish, *Diary*, passim; DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 10–11, 163, 178, 184–192, 355. Helen Parrish never seems to have lost her paternalism and dictatorial interference. A co-worker recalls her invading tenants’ homes on Sundays in the 1930s and admonishing them for being at home drinking beer instead of going to church. Interview with Mrs. Ruth L. Wright, Mar. 26, 1969.

The Octavia Hill Association believed that slums were the major cause of the erosion of middle-class values; therefore, its primary goal was neighborhood rehabilitation. It preferred to buy many buildings at a time—entire blocks if possible. In this manner, it could begin the social reconstruction of primary group ties such as family and school. Like the New York reformer Jacob Riis, the O. H. A. saw the slum as a way of life. These reformers had great faith in environmental change, but they realized that the planting of one good home in the middle of a slum would not suffice. However, the O. H. A. rejected the theory that the slums could be rehabilitated by razing buildings to the ground, dispelling the inhabitants, or building large, impersonal model tenements. Instead it favored the more personal approach of neighborliness and education.20

The interconnection between the O. H. A. and the social settlement movement is clearly evident in this concern for neighborhood rehabilitation. Indeed the College Settlement and the O. H. A. worked closely together. In 1892, Hannah Fox had donated her two houses for the nucleus of the new settlement. For years the O. H. A. maintained an office in the settlement house. College Settlement furnished volunteer rent collectors for the Association. Once, in order to prevent the erection of a large tenement adjoining the settlement's Christian Street house, the O. H. A. purchased the property and managed it for the settlement. The profits were put into a fund which was used to build gyms, auditoriums, and the new Settlement Music School. The O. H. A. also invited the settlement, as well as other organizations, to maintain clubs and nurseries in its buildings. Such efforts are further indications of the O. H. A.'s belief that improving the total quality of life was the key to neighborhood rejuvenation. Helen Parrish believed that the landlord should ideally be a settlement worker, and she identified the O. H. A. with settlement values.

By their influence with, and efforts to enforce, municipal privileges and rights, by their co-operation in any needed reforms, by their wisdom in

20 Hannah Fox, "The Octavia Hill Association," The Commons, IX (1904), 564-570; Parrish, Rough Draft of an Address Talked, not Read, before the Civic Federation, Washington, January, 1913, O.H.A.
dealing with special cases of sickness or emergency, by their work among the children, and by their guilds and classes and above all by the centre that they form as a living model to their neighbors of what a home should be, surely in all these ways the settlement can be said to be supplementing and filling out the great idea of what a landlord should really be. They may not collect the rents but they may, and must, by the very fact of their being, do much of the work that those who are really the landlords ought to do.\textsuperscript{21}

The O. H. A.'s League Street properties exemplify the Association's commitment to neighborhood reconstruction and social elevation. Purchased in 1899, these properties contained seventeen rundown, five-room houses. The living conditions were marked by yard hydrants, surface drainage, alleys, privies, rotted roofs and filthy cellars. Liquor shops and gambling dens disturbed the ladies' middle-class values of propriety, as did the hard-drinking, hard-living Irish longshoremen and their families. The O. H. A. forced only a very few people to leave and made no effort to import a "better" class. It viewed the neighborhood as a self-contained community. After carefully repairing the houses, the Association built a clubhouse and organized a kindergarten, mothers' club, and playground. It successfully petitioned the city for a sewer, and the houses were underdrained. A salaried worker directed the playground activities which included summer classes and concerts. Finally, the O. H. A. founded the Southwark Settlement to serve the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{22}

The Association conducted similar activities in its other properties. When one of its members, Dr. George Woodward, built a model tenement in the second ward, the O. H. A. managed it for him, and conducted all the activities of the League Street properties as well as a medical clinic and a child care center. However, the O. H. A. discouraged model tenements in favor of small homes. In 1914, it


finally entered the model home construction business. Yet its homes, located in Kensington, were not tenements, but two-story houses. Again, the neighborhood concept was paramount. The superiority of these efforts over model tenements is documented by the fact that many of these properties are still inhabited and well managed today.23

The O. H. A.'s commitment to neighborliness and friendly visiting was strengthened by Helen Parrish's friendship with Mary Richmond, who served as executive secretary of the Philadelphia Society for Organizing Charity (S. O. C.) from 1900 to 1910. According to Miss Richmond, it was Miss Parrish who persuaded her to come to Philadelphia from Baltimore. The two became close friends, and Miss Richmond boarded with Susan Wharton. The S. O. C. had degenerated into an impersonal office which doled out dimes and quarters to the poor. Mary Richmond infused the Society with humanity and compassion, established standards for case work, and founded a training school for case-workers. Her course of lectures at the University of Pennsylvania ultimately evolved into that institution's School of Social Work.24

Mary Richmond believed that friendly visiting was a reciprocal process; the middle-class volunteer should learn from her association with the people whom she was assisting. She deplored the condescension of some case-workers and the indifference of others. Miss Richmond believed that friendly visiting should be a democratic relationship between two neighbors rather than the patronizing and demoralizing relationship of a benefactor and a poor person. A transitional figure in social work theory, she viewed the professionalization of case-work with misgivings, because she doubted that professionals would maintain the tradition of friendliness which she had established. Nevertheless her insistence upon personal contact was


24 Joanna C. Colcord and Ruth Z. S. Mann, eds., The Long View: Papers and Addresses by Mary E. Richmond (New York, 1930), 175-185; Parrish to Richmond, Feb. 23, 1900, Mary E. Richmond Archives, New York School of Social Work, Columbia University, Part I, Box 3, Folder 50; interview between either Joanna Colcord and Ruth Mann and Helen Parrish, Feb. 26, 1930, Richmond Archives, Part I, Box 7, Folder 135; Richmond to Parrish, Mar. 3, June 27, 1900; Parrish to Mrs. George B. Wood, Oct. 9, 1928, O.H.A.
a welcome influence upon an era which had overemphasized efficiency and economy in charity. In the words of one scholar, "If Mary Richmond belongs to the tradition of case work as social investigation, she consciously sought to reform that tradition by moving away from a restricted concern for a grudging society's purse strings toward the humanitarian concern for the liberation of the individual's personality."25

The friendship between Mary Richmond and Helen Parrish influenced the latter's social views. One Philadelphian later recalled: "Miss Parrish was much more intelligent on civic questions after Miss Richmond left than before she came." Helen Parrish's views concerning friendly rent collecting paralleled those of her friend. One of her earliest decisions was to employ paid friendly rent collectors. She accepted the need for professionals reluctantly, but, like Miss Richmond, she discovered that dependence upon volunteers was becoming less satisfactory as social work became more specialized. She began with one paid professional, and by 1911 she was employing five. Helen Parrish believed with Miss Richmond in the reciprocal value of social work. She was a stern supervisor; if the tenants feared her, so did her rent collectors. She always required that they dress plainly and modestly, so that differences in affluence would be less apparent to the tenants. She insisted upon punctual rent payment, although she rarely evicted for failure to pay. The O. H. A. printed rules in various languages, and Miss Parrish, keenly aware of the isolation of a non-English speaking housewife, sought volunteers who spoke foreign tongues. In return for prompt rent payment and proper upkeep, the friendly visitors fulfilled requests for repairs. However, the picture of total neighborly friendship is illusory. Class differences raised a barrier which was never effectively overcome.26


Middle-class respectability represented both the goal and the limitations of the Octavia Hill Association. Neighborhood rehabilitation implied a measure of social control which resulted in eviction for gambling, drunkenness, or illicit sexual affairs. Destructive tenants were not tolerated. Therefore, there existed a portion of the lower class, suffering from social and emotional problems, which was not adequately housed, even by groups like the O. H. A. Miss Parrish never lost her authoritarianism, and was paternalistic toward immigrants as well as blacks. She was delighted that one of her rent collectors was so popular with her Italian tenants that they "turn to her and trust to her like children." The high cost of destructive tenants illustrates the limitations of private efforts at reform and the dangers of a rigid belief in the salutary effects of environmental change. However, one housing expert took issue with the O. H. A.'s paternalism as well. She admitted that it might have some temporary value in dealing with non-English speaking immigrants who were unaccustomed to life in American cities. However, she warned that:

To link it up with housing reform in general would be most unfortunate. The relationship it seeks to establish save for the exceptional classes mentioned, would be undemocratic, unAmerican, and certain to be resented in proportion to the intelligence and independence of the tenant.²⁷

The Association's middle-class rigidity was alleviated by compassion. In solving quarrels, providing medical care, securing assistance from the Board of Health, offering picnics and parties, and in just being good listeners, the friendly visitors provided welcome diversion and real service. The health clinics, day nurseries, and kindergartens served vital community needs. Furthermore, in times of distress the O. H. A. gave financial assistance which sometimes meant the difference between survival and disaster. In the Panic of 1907, it allowed rents to go unpaid. The O. H. A. established loan funds for tenants in financial need, provided work on its properties, and through its employment bureau assisted tenants in finding jobs. It never viewed its tenants as simply sources of rent. House, landlord, and tenant were each part of a social unit.

Three inseparable factors were included in its proposed working plan: the house, the friendly rent-collector or agent, and the tenant. The house was never to be considered apart from the tenant and the kind offices of the agent; in fact, the three were to form practically a unit—the house existing to be rented by the agent to, and for the use of the tenant, never for rent value alone. The agent was to be the guardian, as it were, of the rights and the well-being of tenant, house, and landlord, between whose trebly distinct yet united interests there could, in a most important sense, be no division.28

The Octavia Hill Association was far too complex to be written off as merely one more example of Victorian benevolence. Its agents were not absentee benefactresses, but full-time neighborhood workers. Its officials deplored with Mary Richmond the fact that Americans were “finding it more and more easy to hold and express the most approved views about poverty without maintaining any personal relations with poor people whatever.”29 Certainly the O. H. A., with all its limitations, helped to soften the impact of its tenants’ confrontation with the urban world.

Its members belonged to that generation of reformers known as the “factual generation.” College students in almost every northern city were living in settlements and conducting investigations. They believed, sometimes naively, that the American public would react once it was confronted with the harsh facts of urban poverty. Reason, moral suasion, exposure—these were the tools of the reformers. Journalists took to muckraking, while settlement and social workers usually preferred the less sensational scientific investigations. The optimism which holds that public confrontation with evil results in reform is a miscalculation which has plagued reformers throughout the twentieth century; nevertheless, tangible improvement did occasionally follow the publication of these investigations. The most famous example was Lawrence Veiller’s New York tenement investigation of 1900 which resulted in legislation preventing the future construction of dumbbell tenements. Veiller’s influence extended to other cities, and his own bill went further than Philadel-

29 Quoted in, Colcord and Mann, eds., The Long View, 255.
Philadelphia's 1895 law. It included the creation of a tenement house department with inspection authority. This aspect of the New York law had a major effect upon Philadelphia.\(^{30}\)

It was not immediately apparent that the Octavia Hill Association would become an activist investigative organization. Nothing in the O. H. A.'s original by-laws suggests anything other than landlordship. However, the Association evidently assisted Lawrence Veiller in his New York tenement exhibition in 1900. In that same year, Hannah Fox suggested that the O. H. A. should begin investigating Philadelphia's slums. Furthermore, Hector McIntosh, a drafter of the 1895 law, became President of the O. H. A., and in 1903 assisted Pittsburgh in forming a similar group and in passing a tenement house act for cities of the second class. This act went beyond the 1895 bill, because it provided specifically for a team of tenement house inspectors. This was an important factor in stimulating efforts to strengthen Philadelphia's law.\(^{31}\)

The close ties to College Settlement also propelled the O. H. A. into investigative work. The settlement's second headworker, Anna Davies, was herself a social activist. She complained of the inactivity of Philadelphia's settlements, fearing that "the deadly miasm [sic] of indifference and inertia so prevalent in state and city politics may be too pervasive to counteract, belonging to the climate and in a sense a normal local evil." Miss Davies fought this apathy using the Settlement's scholarships to attract young social workers to study Philadelphia's slums. One such study of a block in South Philadelphia in the winter of 1901-02 discovered eighty single dwellings which were serviced by court hydrants. The block contained three bathtubs, only one of which was used for its original purpose. Courts were filled with garbage and ashes, and sewerage leaked into the houses. The O. H. A. must have been encouraged when the presentation of these facts to the landlords and the Board


\(^{31}\) Eliza B. Kirkbride, Diary, entry for Nov. 6, 1899, Temple University Urban Archives. For the Pittsburgh law, see letters between Hector McIntosh and Lucy Iams and Mary Bakewell in McIntosh Scrapbook, O.H.A.; O.H.A., Minutes, I, April, 1900.
of Health resulted in repairs. The Association was gradually becoming a watchdog agency for the city's lower-class neighborhoods.32

From 1902 to 1904, the O. H. A. conducted two investigations of Philadelphia's black and immigrant neighborhoods. The first one, written by Helen Parrish, took the form of a report to the American Academy of Political and Social Science in 1902. This study offered stark contrasts to the city's image as a City of Homes. Helen Parrish charged that Philadelphia's reputation had blinded the public to serious housing problems. The city's Health and Building departments were too understaffed, and too many Philadelphians lived in converted tenements or in small unsanitary row houses. These invisible back buildings resulted in "little communitys whose existence one has not imagined." She noted that the city contained 419 miles of unpaved and 613 of unsewered streets. Miss Parrish became more vocal after this study and argued that the city's worst housing problems could "be checked by inspection that was systematic and efficient and by the exercise of greater power on the city's part to regulate and control." The O. H. A. planned more extensive investigation with the long-range view of seeking better restrictive legislation.33

In 1903, the O. H. A. employed Emily Dinwiddie, a New York social worker, to investigate an Italian block in the second ward; a mixed Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, Polish and Irish block in the eleventh ward; and a black block in the seventh ward. Her findings supported previous studies. Sixty-two per cent of the eleventh ward houses were rear dwellings. Of the houses investigated in the Italian district, nearly 25 per cent were tenements according to the 1895 law—"every building which, or a partition of which, is occupied or is to be occupied as a residence of three or more families, living independently of each other and doing their cooking on the premises." Examples of overcrowded one-room apartments, poor drainage, offensive privies, and inadequate water supply were numer-


ous. Following this study, the O. H. A. decided to seek corrective legislation from the state.\textsuperscript{34}

The social activism of 1905-07 must be examined within the political climate of the period. In 1903, the muckraker Lincoln Steffens came to Philadelphia and scathingly described the city as “corrupt and contented.” And indeed, both Philadelphia and Pennsylvania had been governed for some years by a series of smooth-running, Republican machines. In 1905, Republican Senator Boies Penrose controlled the state, and the city was supposedly the bailiwick of State Insurance Commissioner and seventh ward power Israel Durham. However, in the spring of 1905, Durham and his allies in Councils overstepped themselves. They extended the short-term gas lease to the United Gas Improvement Company for a period of seventy-five years. In return the U. G. I. would pay the city a paltry $25,000,000 over a three-year period. The citizenry, led by Edward Van Valkenburg of the \textit{North American}, reacted angrily. Van Valkenburg was joined by the Committee of Seventy, an independent reform organization. As a result of the hue and cry, Mayor John Weaver, ostensibly an organization politician, vetoed the bill. A spasm of reform, extending into 1906, followed. In that year the state legislature approved a uniform primary law, a voter registration bill, and a civil service bill. Much of the reform was illusory; for example, the new registration commission remained safely in the hands of the local machine. Furthermore, the Committee of Seventy sought only political reforms, while ignoring pressing social problems. Nevertheless, some social workers picked up the reform spirit and applied it to urban conditions.\textsuperscript{35}

The local atmosphere seemed appropriate for an attack upon the tenement problem. Nevertheless, the O. H. A.’s first effort in 1905 failed. In 1907, however, the O. H. A. persuaded the legislature to pass a housing law. This law at least partially dealt with Philadelphia’s housing problems. It provided for the registration, licensing, and quarterly inspection of all tenements. It also included a blanket

\textsuperscript{34} Dinwiddie, \textit{Housing Conditions in Philadelphia}.

provision for adapted tenement houses and those built before 1895. However the bill fell short of many of the reformers' goals. An examination of the failure of 1905 and the partial success of 1907 illustrates both the role, and limitations, of the social activists, and the tensions between good government reform and social reform.

Social reformers are often portrayed as unwilling to cooperate with political machines, but this was not true of either Helen Parrish or Hannah Fox. In January, 1905, an unnamed politician informed Helen Parrish that Israel Durham could order the bill's death or survival. Helen Parrish and other O. H. A. ladies repeatedly tried to see the seventh ward boss without success. Yet Durham's secretary promised that he had been instructed to look after the bill's progress, and Miss Parrish accepted this as a statement of good will. However the bill remained bottled up in the Committee on Municipal Corporations for two months. In March, the O. H. A. learned that opposition from "the organization" and "powerful interests" was killing the bill and that only Durham's intervention could get it released from committee. The committee finally permitted Helen Parrish and others to testify at a perfunctory hearing which lasted for only half an hour. A few days later the legislature adjourned. The O. H. A. had fallen victim to a simple method of killing legislation—their bill was smothered in committee.86

The bill also encountered difficulty from an unexpected source. Both the reform-oriented Public Ledger and North American praised certain features of the bill, but they warned that its enactment could result in potential blackmail. They referred to the problem of padded assessors' lists. In 1895 the legislature had passed a law requiring the licensing of lodging houses. "Since then the keepers of such houses have been terrorized by the police and division leaders to permit the registration of fictitious names, which are noted at every election, under threats of having their licenses revoked." The newspapers feared that tenement licensing would present the same problem. This was a disastrous blow to the O.H.A.'s bill. The incident illustrates the sometimes divergent aims of

86 [Helen Parrish], Account of the Act of 1905 and of its Fate in the Legislature of 1905, O.H.A.; Parrish to J. Clayton Erb, Feb. 4, 1905; Parrish to Israel Durham, n.d., 1905; James Clarency to E. Spencer Miller, Feb. 28, 1905; Clarency to Parrish, Mar. 1, 1905, O.H.A., Legislative File no. 1.
political and social reform. The O. H. A. found itself trapped between the reformers and the organization.\(^\text{37}\)

Finally, the city’s Republican organization could have felt no great compulsion to aid the O. H. A. Two of the Association’s most influential members, Dr. George Woodward and Theodore J. Lewis, the current President, belonged to the Committee of Seventy, and Lewis had run for Common Council on the reform-minded City Party’s ticket. Furthermore, Woodward had actively sought reform of the padded lists. Members of the O. H. A., especially George Woodward, continued to support the City Party in the fall elections of 1905–06. They distributed City Party flags (with minimal success) to tenants of O. H. A. properties. The Association also handed out several reform Yiddish newspapers to offset the organization controlled Yiddish paper. These actions would lead another boss, the powerful tenth ward contractor and state senator, James (“Sunny Jim”) McNichol, to oppose the next bill because, in the words of one O. H. A. supporter, he was “trying to show our good women who have been in sympathy with the City Party that they must never work against the organization again.” Clearly the clash of political and social reform ideals combined with a lack of pressure upon the organization to ensure failure of the bill.\(^\text{38}\)

The Octavia Hill Association finally succeeded in 1907. This time it displayed greater sophistication than in 1905. The Association chose a member of the Committee on Municipal Corporations to introduce the bill. It also retained a Harrisburg attorney to oversee the bill’s progress. The District Attorney, at least one local judge,

\(^{37}\) Public Ledger, Jan. 18, 1905; North American, Jan. 18, 1905. Ironically, the machine feared that licensing under a reform mayor might interfere with the padding of the assessors’ lists. See Parrish, Account of Act, and E. Spencer Miller to Parrish, n.d., 1905, O.H.A., Legislative File no. 1.

and the Director of Public Health and Charities endorsed the bill. The O. H. A. also secured the support of other interested agencies, such as the Civic Betterment Association, the County Medical Society, College Settlement, and the Society for Organizing Charity. The Association constantly published letters of support from various social and civic agencies, and conducted a letter-writing campaign to senators and representatives in Harrisburg.\(^{39}\)

This intensified publicity was a hallmark of the 1907 campaign. In December, 1906, the Pennsylvania Child Labor Committee, the Consumers League, and other social agencies sponsored an eight-day Industrial Exhibit in Philadelphia. The O. H. A. took full advantage of this opportunity for free publicity and prepared an exhibit of maps, models, and photographs. Hannah Fox’s accompanying lecture berated Philadelphia’s middle class for its complacency and apathy, accused landlords of exploitation, and urged support for the forthcoming bill. “Can we wonder if ‘the foreigners are so dirty’” asked Miss Fox? “Is it not we who are ‘dirty’ when we give them no better chance? Many a landlord won’t do it unless he is made to and it is the city who must make him—these foreigners cannot. We ask [them] to come here—If they spread disease and vice, it is not they who are responsible, but we.”\(^{40}\)

The publicity was partially successful. A major victory occurred when Dr. Richard Harte, a sympathetic member of City Councils, persuaded the Council’s Committee on Legislation to endorse the bill. This was not a “reform” councils. City Party candidates had failed to win one seat in the February elections. The endorsement reflects the O. H. A.’s massive publicity campaign. On March 26 a committee of six O. H. A. members testified in Harrisburg in favor of the bill. Even then, it was initially defeated in the Senate. On

\(^{39}\) O.H.A., Minutes, II, Jan. 10, Feb. 14, 1907; Civic Club, General Meeting Minutes, Feb. 26, 1907; Robert Deardon to Hannah Fox, Jan. 21, 23, 1907; Dr. Joseph S. Neff to Fox, Mar. 9, 1907; Judge Abraham M. Beitler to Parrish, Jan. 25, 1907, O.H.A., Legislative File, no. 2. See also in same file several letters to senators and representatives.

April 30, Hannah Fox returned to the capital and somehow persuaded the legislators to reconsider the bill. It passed and was signed by the Governor on June 7, 1907. Two-years’ effort had finally resulted in a tenement inspection bill for Philadelphia.⁴¹

There is no record of Miss Fox’s last-minute negotiations in Harrisburg. However, the bill in its final form reveals what happened. In a post card to Miss Parrish, she wrote: “Half a loaf is better truly!” That is precisely what she got. Sections five through twelve of the original bill, which stated minimum physical requirements, were removed. Only the provisions providing for the registration, licensing, and quarterly inspection of all tenements remained. In other words, there were no rules for the inspectors to enforce. The entire responsibility for setting minimum requirements therefore devolved upon the local Board of Health, and the strictness and degree of enforcement of these rules would always depend upon the Board’s Director. Furthermore, those small houses which did not contain three families living and cooking on the premises were exempt and could be inspected only upon complaint. Finally the bill provided for only two inspectors for the entire city. At that, the O. H. A.’s bill was fortunate compared to other social legislation in 1907. A sweatshop bill and a child-labor bill failed. Reformers agreed that such results, despite the publicity of the Industrial Exhibit, entitled Philadelphia to the title, “a graveyard for social legislation.” Philadelphia’s second tenement law, like its first, was inadequate.⁴²

An evaluation of the housing reformers during this period produces ambivalent conclusions. Their good-government values often conflicted with their goals for social reform and jeopardized their legislation. They discussed immigrants and slums with moral overtones; tenements harbored a “bad class of tenants,” while good housing would “cater to the needs of a better class” and would “foster the conservative, contented and law-abiding spirit of [the] community.” They would have agreed with Franklin S. Edmonds of Philadelphia who said: “it is the spirit of Lincoln rather than that of

⁴¹ See letters from City Council members to Dr. Richard Harte, all dated Feb. 20, 1907, in O.H.A., Legislative File no. 2; Public Ledger, Mar. 20, 25, 1907; North American, Mar. 25, May 8, 1907.

⁴² Florence L. Sanville, “Pennsylvania: A Graveyard for Social Legislation,” Charities and the Commons, XVIII (1907), 247–248. Compare copies of the bill as presented to the legislature and as finally passed in O.H.A., Legislative File no. 2; Fox to Parrish, Apr. 30, 1907.
William Lloyd Garrison which has been moving in our midst.” Fear probably guided the reformers as much as altruism, and Owen Wister undoubtedly spoke for them when he warned that indifference to the slums would result in a citizenry “made up largely of untrained, illiterate savages, who will help to turn government by the people, for the people, into government by the mob, for the mob.”43

Yet this discussion presents a one-sided picture of the housing reformers. They may have been paternalistic; however, they believed that environment was a greater cause of poverty than moral degradation. Hannah Fox’s apportionment of blame to an indifferent society shows a sensitivity to the causes of urban blight which precludes charges of indifference and nativism. The Association’s dealings with Durham’s machine reflect both realism and naiveté, but the fact remains that Miss Parrish and Miss Fox set ideology aside in an effort to better the conditions of the slums. Their second attempt showed a sophisticated awareness of the power of public opinion and the use of the media. As a result, an organization Councils endorsed their tenement bill, and an organization legislature passed it. Following the bill’s passage, the O. H. A. helped the Department of Public Health and Charities write meaningful rules and regulations, and appointed the new inspectors.44

The corrective should not be overdrawn, however. Hannah Fox and Helen Parrish were probably the most advanced of a basically conservative group. The major weaknesses of their bill were its restriction to tenements and its appointment of only two inspectors.

43 This evaluation generally conforms with Richard Hofstadter’s discussion of Progressivism in The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York, 1955). Oscar Handlin supports this view in The Uprooted (New York, 1951). Opponents of this view are those who have distinguished between “good government” or “structural” Progressives, and “social” Progressives whose close contact with the slums resulted in greater compassion. See Allen F. Davis, Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and The Progressive Movement, 1880–1914 (New York, 1967), xii–xiii, 148–169; and Melvin G. Holli, Reform in Detroit: Hazen S. Pingree and Urban Politics (New York, 1969), 157–181. I think these authors would accept my housing reformers as social progressives, although they would undoubtedly place them in the conservative wing of this group.

44 Fox, Address Before the Industrial Exhibit. For similar instances of social workers who either co-existed with machines or adopted their methods, see Arthur Mann, Yankee Reformers in the Urban Age: Social Reform in Boston, 1880–1900 (New York, 1966), 120–121; and Davis, Spearheads for Reform, 148–169.
Not once in the entire decade did they suggest public housing; restrictive legislation marked the limits of the O. H. A.’s reform. These reformers did not tinker with the social and economic structure to which they belonged. However, they were more advanced than some of their more prestigious counterparts. The Committee of Seventy, composed of older reformers from the Mugwump era, restricted itself to good-government reform. The O. H. A. at least recognized that more than efficient government was necessary to alleviate the city’s problems.

Indeed, some of the O. H. A.’s values appear to have been rediscovered. Few would want to return to the paternalism of friendly visiting, but after decades of disillusionment with both private and public attempts at slum eradication, reformers are returning to the concept of house reconstruction and neighborhood rehabilitation. The much maligned though underfinanced model cities program was one such example; the current urban homestead project is another. In many respects we are still asking the questions of the 1880s, and the solutions appear to be no more clearly in sight.46

The 1907 bill represented the high-water mark of the Octavia Hill Association’s reform efforts. Recognizing its limited effectiveness as both landlord and reformer, the O. H. A. in 1909 created a new watchdog reform agency, the Philadelphia Housing Commission (now the Housing Association of Delaware Valley).46 Despite its limited effectiveness, the O. H. A.’s achievements were beneficial. The reformers had set an example by their houses. They had added to the knowledge of housing investigation and had encouraged the formation of similar groups elsewhere. They had helped secure legislation for Pittsburgh as well as Philadelphia. Finally, the Association had relentlessly battered away at the wall of contentment surrounding Philadelphia’s comfortable middle classes.

Manchester (Conn.) Community College  JOHN F. SUTHERLAND


46 For the early years of this organization, see Sutherland, “A City of Homes,” 157–196.