1930s–1940s REFORM

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

When the stock market crashed in 1929, triggering an economic downturn of unprecedented magnitude, it was brutally shocking for the entire nation but particularly for communities that had already struggled with economic security. The Great Depression blanketed the nation with fear and despair for a decade.

The Depression was a national crisis: American unemployment rose to over 20 percent. But, the Depression was also a story of local problems. On the Lower East Side—where the average yearly income per capita was already the lowest in Manhattan, and living conditions were already poor and declining, the prospect of hard times was especially worrisome.

The Depression would bring about a search for new, national solutions to multiple social problems. Social action, tamped down during the conservatism of the 1920s, re-emerged as a potent force on a national stage. In the 1930s, New York settlement workers would use their experiences on the Lower East Side to influence government approaches to pressing problems. Drawing on their experiences during the Progressive Era, they would help shape federal and state laws on welfare, housing, labor relations, and public health.

The retirement of Henry Street Settlement founder Lillian Wald in 1933 came in a watershed year in American history. As the Depression worsened, Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office as president of the United States. His New Deal—an innovative set of programs designed to promote economic recovery and social reform—was about to spawn the modern American federal welfare system. The work that Henry Street and other settlements had been doing on a local level for decades would play an important role in Roosevelt’s work.

With the rise of Fascism abroad, many Americans recognized the fragility of democracy and felt immense fear about the future. For many people, New Deal reforms promised security, a sense of belonging to their country, and a new relationship to a democratic government.
During the Depression, a shortage of affordable, decent housing continued to plague the Lower East Side. At the turn of the century, Settlement director Lillian Wald had advocated for improving tenement life, part of the larger Progressive Era reform movement that sought to improve conditions in the workplace, school, and community as well as in the individual home. Now, Henry Street Settlement director Helen Hall would take advantage of a new initiative: the $500 million Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937. Through it, the federal government would provide subsidies to public housing agencies with the express goal of creating better housing for low-income families.

The City Housing Authority adopted a new approach. It would combine mass clearance of aging tenement housing (referred to as “slum clearance”) with the creation of new low-cost housing. It sought sites that were 1) suitable for building large-scale housing, 2) would result in eradicating the largest stretches of substandard housing, and 3) were accessible to industry and/or mass transit.

One of the proposed locations was along the East River on the Lower East Side, in an area that had been known since colonial times as Corlears Hook. It was Helen Hall who made the argument that this stretch of Lower East Side land was a good place for public housing. Hall knew, as her predecessors in settlement work did, the value of published studies as a way to draw attention to social issues, and she knew how to write a compelling report. Henry Street established the Survey Department, which produced the report A Dutchman's Farm: Three Hundred and One Years at Corlears Hook, 1638–1939. It notes, “...Henry Street Settlement was able to demonstrate to Mayor LaGuardia that the land costs on the site....were low enough to be used for public housing—and Vladeck Houses were the final result.”

“Slum clearance” and new public housing efforts had complicated results. These early public housing projects, many built in a modernist style, afforded residents the latest amenities such as electric refrigerators, coin-operated laundry machines, and toilets inside the apartments. But as many New Deal reforms were implemented—through a complicated web of government policies, political compromises, local customs, and enduring discrimination—some community members, mainly people of color and the lowest-income residents, did not have the same access to these programs. In retrospect, some historians lament the displacement of some of the poorest tenement residents who were not able to move into the new public housing buildings.

The Vladeck Houses, completed in 1940 and named for the manager of The Forward socialist newspaper and a member of the New York City Council and Housing Authority, was one of the country’s earliest public housing projects.

1. Below are photographs of the Corlears Hook area before and after the Vladeck Houses were built in 1940. What changes do you notice between the before-and-after photos?

BEFORE:

To the right is a photo of the intersection at Scammel and Monroe streets (facing north) in 1935. Before the late 1930s, when 18 acres were cleared to build the Vladeck Houses, the streets were lined with rows of old tenement buildings. Scammel Street is now a pathway in the Vladeck Houses.

*Scammel Street at Monroe Street, looking north.* Museum of the City of New York, X2010.11.3248.
AFTER:

Below is a photo of the intersection at Scammel and Madison streets (facing east), a few blocks from the photo above, taken in 1941.

Below is a bird’s-eye view of the 18-acre Vladeck complex.

Below is a photo from 1941 of a playground among the Vladeck buildings.


“Vladeck House aerial view.” New York State Archives.

2. Individually or in pairs, read the excerpt from the Henry Street research study *A Dutchman’s Farm: Three Hundred and One Years at Corlears Hook, 1638–1939*.

Access the excerpt here: [A Dutchman’s Farm excerpt, pages 39-44](#).

**Information about this document to aid your conversation:**

- Corlears Hook is the area in Lower Manhattan where the Vladeck Houses now stand.
- This report compiled research done by the Survey Department of Henry Street Settlement on the 11-block area that makes up Corlears Hook. The research was conducted first in 1933-34 and again in 1934-35. The report was published in 1939.
- The aim of the report was to make the case to the government that Corlears Hook was a prime area in which to build public housing.
- The entire report (which can be accessed [here](#)) addresses:
  - The history of Corlears Hook from 1638 to 1939
  - Shifts in demographics (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion) of people living in the area
  - Statistics on employment of the population living in the area
  - Descriptions and statistics on housing conditions of the tenement apartment buildings in the area (prior to the public housing being built)
  - Potential solutions for improving housing conditions.

3. **Suggested prompts for group discussion:**

**Document analysis:**

- Looking at the before-and-after photos of the Corlears Hook area, what are the major changes you notice?
- How do you imagine the construction of the Vladeck Houses changed daily life for neighborhood residents?
- On page 38 of *A Dutchman’s Farm*, there is a chart that details the results of modernizing, renovating, and repairing old apartment buildings. What are some of the downsides?
- In what ways was Henry Street Settlement involved with the construction of the Vladeck Houses? Why did Settlement director Helen Hall advocate for public housing to be built on the Lower East Side?
- Starting on page 40, there is a description of the new public housing by a former Lower East Side tenement resident. In what ways did her life change after she moved into her new home?

**Connecting to your own life:**

- Would you advocate to tear down aging housing and build new housing, or to renovate existing buildings? What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of either scenario?
- If you were designing affordable housing or public housing today, what factors would you consider? Consider how the apartment buildings look from the outside and what amenities the apartments include.
Activity #2

What Role Should the Government Play in Providing Assistance to Families in Need?

In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt put in place a council of prominent public representatives to advise his Committee for Economic Security, naming Henry Street Settlement director Helen Hall to the 23-member group. Hall was now on the cutting edge of welfare reform in the single most crucial decade of the 20th century. With advice from the advisory council, the Committee on Economic Security drafted Social Security legislation—which provided monetary assistance to families in need—and established the federal government’s role as a welfare provider on a permanent basis.

Years later, Helen Hall reflected on the important role that settlement houses had played in making Social Security a reality, singling out in particular the research they had conducted, which secured their status as valued sources of information. “The social settlement, here and abroad,” she wrote, “has from the beginning been an instrument of social reform, using first-hand knowledge to bring about changes in living conditions....” Part of their value, she said, was the information they had compiled on unemployment. The Social Security Act, passed in August 1935, laid down basic welfare structures that still exist today.


Access the excerpt here: [Unfinished Business by Helen Hall, pages 53-58](#).

2. Individually or in pairs, complete the worksheet below, which corresponds with the chapter from *Unfinished Business*. 

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Access the excerpt here:
Directions: Read *Unfinished Business* (pages 53-58) and answer the questions below.

1. Helen Hall says that a group was assembled to advise President Roosevelt on creating Social Security legislation. What were some of the advisors’ backgrounds? What were their perspectives?

2. What important type of benefit was not included in the Social Security legislation, according to Hall? Why was this component not included?

3. Why did Hall believe the federal government (instead of individual states) should handle unemployment insurance?
Activity #3

Can Art Make a Difference in Social Problems?

As the Settlement looked for creative ways to address the Depression, arts and social action intersected in Henry Street’s theater programs. To “put problems on the stage” was the essence of the “Living Newspapers,” theater productions about pressing social issues that were mounted by the Henry Street Playhouse. Developed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Theater Project, the plays were intended to entertain and instruct.

The Settlement’s “Sunday Night at Nine” Committee promoted the development of productions on social issues. In 1938, in a memo to director Helen Hall, the committee wrote that Henry Street workers noticed “a need in the community for articulation of social problems.” The memo concluded that performance was “an ideal medium for satisfying this need” and that Henry Street had “an available theatre.” With participation by groups affected by the problems the Playhouse sought to address, its non-traditional theater offerings served as much a social-action purpose as they did an artistic one.

As the committee put it, “Our audience does not come to watch a play but to participate, literally and practically, in producing it: to choose its subject matter, write it, stage it and criticize the results.” The committee recounted how the theater had already hosted several presentations—about peace, healthy food and drugs, and credit unions.

1. To the left is a poster from the 1930s made by the WPA, advertising arts classes at Henry Street Settlement. During the Great Depression, Henry Street continued to invest in its arts programs, believing arts were essential to well-being.

2. Individually or in pairs, read the 1930 document “The Real Problems in Our Neighborhood” about creating socially relevant art at the Henry Street Settlement Playhouse.


3. Suggested prompts for group discussion:

• In “The Real Problems in Our Neighborhood,” there is a line that reads: “Could we put these problems on the stage? And perhaps, in the process of dramatizing them, we could somehow bring them into focus for ourselves and other people; get a clearer idea of what we might do to help solve them.” Do you believe that art can help solve societal problems? Why or why not?

• The last line of the “Real Problems in Our Neighborhood” document reads: “But if our actors and audience carry the subject of the play away with them from the Playhouse we may feel we have done a decent job.” Do you agree with this statement? What do you believe is the goal of art that reflects society's problems?

• In the midst of the worst economic depression to date, the Settlement continued to invest in arts programming, believing the arts were essential to well-being and happiness. Do you agree with this idea? Why or why not?

• Is arts education a “want” or a “need” of a society? Why do you think so?

• What is a modern-day example of art (e.g., music, film, TV show, or visual art) that is about or comments on a societal issue?
The Great Depression came to an end partially due to American involvement in World War II. In 1939, war broke out in Europe. Henry Street dealt with many immediate impacts of the conflict, ranging from nursing shortages to staff and neighbor departures to fight in the war to rationing and civil defense. Following the war, the National Federation of Settlements organized a series of postwar planning conversations around the country. Through that initiative would come discussions and meetings around New York City as well as a new group at Henry Street for neighbors interested in discussing postwar society and creating a new world organization for promoting peace and human rights.

Composed of members of various Henry Street clubs, the new group, called World Center Workshop, met at the Settlement, where it created exhibitions and held discussions. After the war ended and the United Nations became a reality, the workshop helped the community understand the U.N.’s purpose and role. “As those war years wore on,” said Hall, “it was good to have people thinking of something positive, because families were so caught in tragedy and uncertainty that it was hard to find a home completely untouched—and many of them were touched forever.”

On March 19, 1945, Hall addressed the Lower East Side Inter-Settlement Planning Committee with words for the future. Anticipating the return of troops, she said that the “only fitting memorial which we can build for our war heroes is a better world.” She announced a conference divided into four meetings for Lower East Side residents to be held in the Seward Park High School auditorium, called “A New World Organization Based on Human Rights.”

1. Below are posters for the April 1945 human rights conference organized by 12 New York City settlement houses.
“New World Organization Based on Human Rights”

FOUR MEETINGS

Auspices: LOWER EAST SIDE CITIZENS COMMITTEE ON WORLD ORGANIZATION

THE SEWARD PARK HIGH SCHOOL, 8:30 P.M.

APRIL 5—“THEY FIGHT—WE WORK”

MRS. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Co-Chairmen—Helen Hall, Sarah Gelberg

APRIL 12—“FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND WANT”

J. RAYMOND WALSH—JAMES MARSHALL

Co-Chairmen—Mildred Gutwillig, Rebecca Rakoff

APRIL 19—“THE NEW RULES OF THE GAME”

RABBI STEPHEN S. WISE—HON. HERBERT E. GASTON

Co-Chairmen—Dora Tannenbaum, Esther Taber Fox

APRIL 25—“THE WILL OF THE PEOPLES”

LISA SERGIO—ALBERT RHY S WILLIAMS

Co-Chairmen—Samuel Fishzohn, Miriam Rosenkrantz

Music by the Seward Park Orchestra, Band and Chorus, and the Jefferson Chorus

SPONSORS:

Christodora House
Church of All Nations
Educational Alliance
Grand Street Settlement

Hamilton House
Henry Street Settlement
Jacob A. Riis Settlement
Jewish Settlement House

Madison House
Recreation Rooms and Settlement
University Settlement
Vaudeck Tenants League

Lower East Side Citizens Committee on World Organization

Chairman—SARAH GELBERG

Vice-Chairman—SOPHIE TERRY

Bella Altschuler
Herbert Biele
Thelma Burdick
Charles Cook
Susan Devaney
Anna DiFazio
Beatrice Doverman
Sadie Fagen
Tillie Fisher
Samuel Fishzohn
Dora Giordana
Harold Gold
Sadie Guralnick
Helen Greenbaum

Rebecca Greenbaum
Minnie Grossman
Dorothy Gumpel
Mildred Gutwillig
Helen Hall
Clara Hirshhorn
John Huen
Celia Jacobs
Celia Kamelman
Essie Kaufman
Samuel Kessler
Hazel Laughton
Ida Levine
Ida Luftschitz
Ann Mendell

Sol Mercurio
Helene B. Nelson
Carmine Pecora
Josephine Peters
Fred Presti
Rebecca Rakoff
Minnie Robinson
Miriam Rosenkrantz
Carlo Scarlata
Sylvia Schantz
Harry Sherman
Matilda Silver
Sadie Solomes
Daisy Straubing
Eva Sufkin
Dora Tannenbaum
Catherine Tantiño
Mary Terranova
Max Tobias
Betty Trager
Sally Troy
Jennie Vertlieh
Sally Vinette
Anne Wilson
Sarah Werbelowitz
Esther Yagoda
Harriet Young
Frances Yules

“The only fitting memorial we can build for our war heroes is a better world.” We must understand the new world we are building through the United Nations Conferences—study the forms of organization—express our convictions to those responsible—work hard that we the citizens may not fail in our duty.

HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT
Consultants: Esther Taber Fox

WORLD CENTER WORKSHOP
Consultants: Thomas L. Cotton

ADMISSION BY TICKET ONLY

CHILDREN UNDER 16 NOT ADMITTED

Courtesy of the Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries
Information about the “Four Meetings” documents to aid your conversation:

- The conference was meant to raise awareness of the United Nations and to promote diplomacy as a solution.

- Helen Hall stated in her autobiography, *Unfinished Business*, “adults were harder to educate, since they had been brought up in a war-accepting world.”

- The “four meetings” conference was held in April 1945 at Seward Park High School (350 Grand Street on the Lower East Side). Seward Park High School no longer exists although the building, built in 1929, still stands. Today the building is referred to as Seward Park Campus and hosts five separate high schools.

- The press release for the event noted that “Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt will lead off at 8:30 PM April 5th”—the first of four meetings—with an address titled “They Fight, We Work.”

- The second meeting (April 12, 1945) was held on the day of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s death. The organizers considered canceling it but decided to move forward in honor of Roosevelt.

- J. Raymond Walsh, who spoke at the April 12 meeting, was a progressive radio host who reported on local, national, and international news in the 1940s. He was an educator, economist, and union activist.

- The speakers at the April 19 meeting were Rabbi Stephen A. Wise, a Progressive Era reformer and Reform rabbi, and labor organizer Herbert E. Gaston.

- Lisa Sergio, who spoke at the April 25 meeting, was an anti-Fascist radio journalist in Italy under Mussolini.

2. **The four meetings were planned at a moment of transition after World War II to promote peace and to educate New York City residents on national and international issues. If you were organizing a conference today about local, national, and international issues, what would you put on the agenda? Below is a worksheet to help you plan. After you complete the worksheet, share your answers with the class.**
**Name:**

**Directions:** Imagine that you are organizing a four-meeting conference about issues affecting your local, national, or international community.

1. **What is the goal of the conference?**

2. **Where would you host the conference?**

3. **Which individuals and/or organizations would you invite to plan the conference? Why?**
4. What subtopics would the four meetings cover?

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**Whom would you invite to speak?**

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**What would you like to learn about this topic?**

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**What would you like to learn about this topic?**

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